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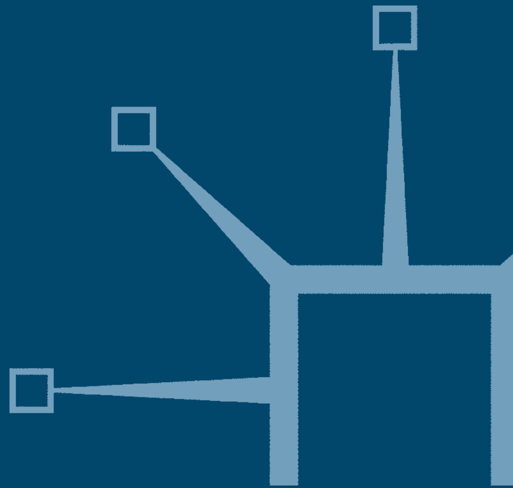
Gender and Interpersonal Violence

Language, Action and Representation

Edited by

Karen Throsby and Flora Alexander



Gender and Interpersonal Violence

Also by Karen Throsby

WHEN IVF FAILS
Feminism, Infertility and the Negotiation of Normality

Also by Flora Alexander

CONTEMPORARY WOMEN NOVELISTS

Gender and Interpersonal Violence

Language, Action and Representation

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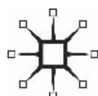

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Introduction

Karen Throsby and Flora Alexander

This edited collection has its roots in the 2005 conference of the Feminist and Women's Studies Association (UK and Ireland) (FWSA), held in Aberdeen, on the theme of *Gender and Violence*. Almost 90 papers across six strands – domestic abuse; war, politics and history; literary representations; media responses; violence and sexuality; and cultural practices – were presented at the conference. The papers included here are drawn predominantly from this conference, with the exceptions of those by Jane Kilby, Bipasha Ahmed, Paula Reavey and Anamika Majumdar, whose contributions were added later. The papers were all purposefully selected in relation to two core ideas: first, the diversity of ways in which interpersonal violence, and its gendering, is conceptualised, interpreted, resisted and embraced in different contexts and disciplines; and secondly, the role of language in facilitating and constraining the 'speakability' of interpersonal violence. The focus of the book, therefore, is the complexity of violence as it is lived, represented and (re)defined in the context of gendered norms and practices. We draw on research from both the humanities and the social sciences, including contributions from sociology, history, psychology, film studies and media studies, offering a range of perspectives that collectively constitute what we hope is an original contribution to the literature addressing issues of gender and violence. Our aim is to challenge accepted understandings of violence both within and outside of feminism and to identify emerging sites and forms of resistance to violence.

There are four related themes which run through the chapters. First, the authors disrupt the boundaries of the familiar categories of victim and perpetrator – for example, by focusing on woman-to-woman violence, female violence against men or female combatants. This also includes

new categories of victimhood such as those who become caught up in sexual trafficking. The second theme is the appropriation/subversion of discourses of violence in film, theatre and literature in ways which challenge the easy assumption of links between cultural representations of violence *as* violence in and of itself. The third theme is the persistence of gendered norms in relation to the understanding and experience of violence – for example, in discourses of aggression and passivity in the talk of school children about domestic violence or in media representations of the perpetrators of child abuse. The final theme, in close relation to the preceding three, is the role of language in the definition and construction of violence, and the pernicious (un)speakability of some forms of violence in particular contexts. This can be seen explicitly, for example, in Barnes' paper in the absence of an intelligible lexicon to account for woman-to-woman partner abuse, but is also evident across the papers in the attempts by research interviewees, playwrights, film-makers, journalists, commentators and the authors themselves to search for ways to articulate violence in ways that reflect its complexity. Violence, in this context, is always gendered, not in the sense of its perpetration by one gender against another, but in terms of the gendered discourses and practices through which violence comes to be understood.

The book is divided into two parts: the first is organised around the theme of 'Lived Experience', and the second, 'Representations'. The content of these two parts is described in the remainder of this Introduction. However, these categorisations should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Indeed, the orientation of the collection as a whole is to resist simplistic dichotomous categorisations of violence (for example, victim/perpetrator). The pragmatic separation of representation from lived experience as a means of giving the collection structure, therefore, should not be allowed to obscure the obvious (and less obvious) connections between the two.

Part I: Lived experience

The first section of this book opens with Juliette Pattinson's chapter on women combatants in the Second World War taking part in clandestine, and often violent, operations for the Special Operations Executive. Drawing on oral history interviews, official records, film and autobiographical sources, the chapter explores the ways in which the women, as well as those training and commanding them, negotiated normative understandings of violence and combat as fundamentally incompatible with femininity. The experiences of women challenge

conventional understandings of female biology as rendering women incapable of violence, and the chapter explores the ways in which those same normative discourses were mobilised by women to account for those experiences in the face of cultural unease about women as combatants. This opening chapter highlights the problematic nature of attempts to map the categories of female and male onto those of victim and perpetrator, whilst demonstrating the impossibility of accounting for those categorical shifts outside of discourses of gender.

The second chapter, by Rebecca Barnes, focuses on another example of women as perpetrators of violence: female-on-female partner violence. However, while the preceding chapter focuses on the perpetrators of violence, this chapter explores the difficulties encountered by those women who are victims of violence inflicted on them by their female partners. In particular, Rebecca Barnes highlights the absence of an appropriate language on the part of victims of domestic violence to articulate and make sense of their own experiences of female-on-female partner violence, both to themselves and others. Barnes highlights the ways in which domestic violence remains conceptualised in heterosexual terms of male violence against women. This can lead women's accounts of violence inflicted by other women to be disbelieved, especially when gendered assumptions (for example, on the part of police officers) of 'butch'/'femme' identities fail to map cleanly onto perpetrators and victims. The problems of articulating violence – its 'unspeakability' – are at the core of the chapter, and provide a central theme throughout the collection.

Chapter 3 provides a further challenge to conventional understandings of the categories through which violence is articulated, particularly in relation to the public/private domains, and gendered and familial power relations. Focusing on the experiences of South Asian women in the United Kingdom who have experienced domestic violence, Bipasha Ahmed, Paula Reavey and Anamika Majumdar argue that for these women, prevailing understandings of violence as perpetrated by a man against a woman in the 'private' context of the home are inadequate in accounting for the very 'public' nature of their own experiences. Their interview research shows that the marital relationship is lived in a very public context by many South Asian women, with family members and the wider community often facilitating violence against the woman, either by inaction, active pressure for the woman not to bring shame on the family by leaving, or even by participating in violent acts. In particular, they highlight the role of older female family members in facilitating (and in some cases, enacting) violence against younger women, raising a significant challenge to conventional assumptions

about gendered power relations and familial dynamics in cases of domestic violence. They argue that these familial dynamics can create a situation where it is very difficult for a woman to seek help.

Alison Jobe's chapter focuses on a very different example of the problems of seeking help to escape violence: the difficulties of trying to negotiate the UK asylum system in order to escape sexual trafficking. Jobe argues that in order to be believed by decision-makers within the asylum system, women have to offer a narrative that fits with the dominant 'sexual trafficking story'. This places women in a very tenuous position of having to demonstrate some agency (for example, by having tried to escape), but not too much (for example, by continuing to work as a prostitute after escaping traffickers). She argues that the dominant story is governed by profoundly gendered, heteronormative assumptions about what constitutes sexual violence against women and that this fails to grasp the complexity of the experience of sexual trafficking. She argues that this dominant sexual trafficking story increases the likelihood of asylum claims being granted for those whose story fits, but renders incredible those whose experiences cannot be articulated in those terms.

Karen Throsby's chapter also explores contested claims of victimhood, focusing on a controversial medical technology: obesity surgery. In this chapter, it is not the 'facts' of having undergone surgery that are contested, but rather, the meanings attached to that decision. For some, obesity surgery constitutes a risky, but life-saving, intervention. However, it is also resisted by both those who see surgery as a moral failure to perform the bodily work of diet and exercise and those who see surgery as a profoundly gendered form of fat-phobic bodily mutilation. Throsby argues that both of these modes of resistance mobilise discourses of blame and responsibility, victim and perpetrator, in ways which end up blaming the individual. She argues that these discourses have to be negotiated, and ultimately, repudiated, by those undergoing surgery, effectively precluding a more politicised discussion of the ideology of the 'war on obesity'.

The final chapter in this section is by Jane Kilby, who presents an analysis of attempts to articulate in written form the experience of sexual violence. Drawing on the work of Roberta Culbertson, Ann Cvetkovich and Cathy Caruth, Kilby argues that attempts to articulate experience as fundamentally belonging to the body, as in Culbertson's work, risk romanticising it as a sublime experience which has the potential to provide insight into ourselves. Cvetkovich, on the other hand, offers a sex-positive account of her own experience of sexual violence, which

is explored specifically in terms of sex, and especially, lesbian sex. While Kilby initially sees this as a promising strategy for queering the experience of sexual violence, she ultimately argues that this approach falls equally foul of the romanticisation of Culbertson's account. Following Caruth, Kilby concludes that rather than treating trauma as an excess of stimulation that results from a threat to life, it betrays both the body and the mind by catching the individual unawares. This analysis highlights the difficulties of knowing, understanding and articulating the experience of violence and provides a strong link between this first section on 'Lived Experience' and the second section 'Representations'.

Part II: Representations

Following from Kilby's exploration of the difficulty of understanding and articulating the experience of violence, Nancy Lombard in Chapter 7, 'It's wrong to hit a girl because the girl might cry', presents another aspect of the unspeakability of such experience. Her research deals with the issue at a fundamental level by investigating attitudes to domestic violence in children aged 10 and 11. She works with children by prompting discussion of stories in the form of vignettes. This form of representation enables participants to talk about sensitive topics in a way which is not threatening to them, because the vignette is detached from their personal situations, and the discussion is framed so that there is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer. A striking feature of this investigation lies in the fact that a majority of the schools approached refused to take part in the research, on the grounds that the young people were not mature enough to engage with such material. Lombard challenges this view, and her chapter illustrates that young people are in fact capable of addressing these issues. She shows that by failing to give young people a space in which to talk about male violence against women, we collude in the idea that this is a private matter, and she argues that the silence thus created helps to normalise a problem that must be addressed.

Jenny Kitzinger's chapter, 'Images of abusers: stranger-danger, the media, and the social currency of everyday knowledge', presents an analysis, based on discussions with 275 participants in small focus groups, of the factors which combine to obstruct public understanding of abuse of children. She locates the techniques by means of which the mainstream media obscure the gendered nature of sexual violence, rather than disclosing it. Pointing out that sexual violence is perpetrated largely by men and that abuse is carried out more frequently by a man known to the child than by a stranger, she illustrates how media, in

order to satisfy perceived demand, select stories that are acceptable or that attract attention by virtue of their sensational nature. She makes clear how they find it easier to rely on a concept of supernatural 'evil' than to bring attention to bear on the social processes that shape crime, and draws attention to distortions that bias reporting, like the use of 'straight' and 'paedophile' as mutually exclusive categories, so that attention is diverted from heterosexual abuse. Her demonstration that, in spite of the ordinary nature of the crime, most of the interviewees in her research project were confident that they could not possibly be acquainted with any child abusers, and that if they were to encounter such a person, they would instantly recognise them as evil, is an important insight.

In Chapter 9, Jarmila Mildorf applies a detailed critical discourse analysis and a sociolinguistic analysis to two narratives, derived from very different sources, of female-on-male violence. A newspaper account of young women who assault their boyfriends and a highly coloured anecdote related by a general medical practitioner both present a sensational impression of partner violence, and Mildorf draws attention to the danger that such stories may command disproportionate attention and render less visible the much more prevalent standard form of domestic violence, where women are the objects of violent behaviour. Her account of the formation of a 'popular imagination' interacts fruitfully with Kitzinger's observation that the routine exchange of information between friends and neighbours is important in structuring knowledge. A process of distortion is exposed as Mildorf points to a slippage between the thought that a woman may act violently in defence of herself or her children and an idea of women casually assaulting male partners; further she highlights how statistics expressed in percentages can be manipulated to give currency to a concept which attracts by virtue of its sensational nature but has virtually no meaningful basis. Her demonstration of how a professional like a GP may draw on popular imagination rather than on academic research to support an opinion on domestic violence gives further weight to her chapter.

Creative representations of violence frequently meet a negative critical response, often based on the very simple assumption that to present an imitation of violent behaviour amounts to disseminating a pattern to be copied. The last four chapters of this book all show the value of nuanced, informed readings of written and performance texts which depict brutal action. Rich Bryan employs a combination of sociolinguistics and social psychology in his approach to Rebecca Prichard's play *Fair Game*, a drama about rape, which provoked controversy when first performed

in 1997 at the Royal Court Theatre in London with a cast of adolescent actors. The play is a 'free adaptation' of an earlier play by Edna Mazya, which was itself a free adaptation of the actual gang rape of an Israeli girl by a group of her peers. Prichard's drama approaches this story with an interest in the environmental and psychological pressures on the aggressors, and Bryan's close analysis of her sensitive dramatic writing brings out the complex nature of what initially appears to be a straightforward situation. While clearly the pressures within the male group do not in any way excuse the rape, this detailed exploration of the dynamics in a group of young people advances understanding of the processes by which violence is generated.

Ian McEwan's fiction has continuously since the late 1970s carried a strong focus on violent action with a sexual element. Fiona Tolan in Chapter 11, working in literary studies, offers a sophisticated analysis of the status of the feminine in McEwan's work over more than 20 years. Paying close attention to elements in his narratives such as the relation between power and the gendered gaze, and showing how gender boundaries are disrupted, she finds a pattern in which, over time, women are increasingly removed from the nexus of violence and desire which dominates these texts. She argues that for McEwan hope lies in balance and harmony between male and female principles and that ultimately violence is to be seen as a consequence of rejecting the conventionally 'feminine' values of empathy and sensitivity.

Alex Tate's progressive feminist reading of Ridley Scott's 1991 film *Thelma and Louise* is supported by film theory and by a close textual analysis of the use of cinematic codes. She disputes the easy assumption of a direct correlation between the representation of violence and its enactment. Her chapter explores the (un)speakability of violence, demonstrating that, contrary to the view of critics who have found fault with the film for evading the social reality of gendered oppression, it actually carries powerful significance about social realism and fantasy. She illustrates the working of the interface between aesthetic excess and realism, and the weight of narrative choices as to what is disclosed and what is purposefully not disclosed. She argues that in this text apparently obvious victim/aggressor positions are meaningfully disrupted, stressing that the final image constructs the two women as mythical heroines in an iconic representation which remains politically resonant.

The book's final chapter is a critique by Jenny O'Connor, again based on both theory and examination of the use of cinematic codes, of films by Pedro Almodóvar and Quentin Tarantino, both directors who challenge the traditional linkage of violent imagery with violent acts in reality. She

demonstrates in their work a comic undermining of film conventions which position the male as dominant and the female as the passive object of desire. She identifies in their work ways of looking at violence, gender and desire that shock but at the same time provoke thought. A rape scene in *Matador* appears to be a case of victimisation of women, but may be read alternatively as an exposure of the ineptitude of men. In the depiction of the castrating female who reaches orgasm through her victim's death, Almodóvar may be offering not so much sensational exploitation, as an exploration of an alternative to phallic law and the homosocial nexus. Thus, she suggests, the power of cinematic violence is not to destroy or corrupt, but to create a space in which our most primal instincts may be explored without danger, and we can laugh at damaging social, sexual and gender systems.

Conclusion

No single text could begin to do justice to the multi-faceted nature of gender and violence across the many contexts in which is it manifest. Indeed, one of the most challenging aspects of compiling an edited collection is the decisions that have to be made about what is to be included and what is to be left out. There was much that could not be included in this book. There is little here on children as the victims/perpetrators of violence, although Nancy Lombard's chapter on young children's understandings of gendered violence reflects the ways in which interpersonal violence affects both adults and children. In addition, the research presented here is focuses on the western industrialised countries, to the exclusion of large parts of the world where gendered interpersonal violence remains a pressing contemporary issue. However, it is disciplinary, rather than geographical, diversity that defines the logic of the collection, and which provides the basis for its analytical goal of exploring the complex multidimensionality and the (un)speakability of interpersonal violence in the context of gender. This disciplinary eclecticism is designed to draw out links between disciplines rather than to exaggerate their divisions. This reflects closely the aims of the FWSA, which aims to build connections and relationships between students, researchers, academics and activists not only within women's and gender studies, but also including all of those conducting feminist research within other departments.

Part I
Lived Experience

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1

'Turning a Pretty Girl into a Killer': Women, Violence and Clandestine Operations during the Second World War

Juliette Pattinson

Nancy Wake, a clandestine agent who during the Second World War worked with the French Resistance, asserted, 'I hate wars and violence but if they come then I don't see why we women should just wave our men a proud goodbye and then knit them balaclavas' (Grice, 1994). Wake rejected conventional understandings of feminine patriotism, believing that women's wartime roles should not be restricted to keeping the home fires burning. Active participation, she felt, was crucial, even if it entailed fighting. Yet the taboo on women killing remains a potent one. Popular understandings about women's peace-loving, compassionate, caring 'nature', strengthened by their biological ability to bear children which is seen to be at odds with terminating life, are destabilised by the woman who commits violent acts. Violence is inextricably bound up with masculinity and is perceived as a key differentiator between men and women. Men are thought to have a natural predisposition towards violence, with male hormones causing aggression, and such thinking bolsters the way boys are brought up to be competitive and bellicose. Even weapons are gendered: guns, notes Deborah Homsher, an American author and novelist, are usually associated with masculinity, and more specifically with penises: 'they point, they ejaculate, they penetrate, they can be shocking when exposed and they usually can be found adorning men' (Homsher, 2001, p. 31). Women, on the other hand, are more commonly cast as the victim of violent behaviour, not the aggressor. When women do kill, they are doubly deviant, breaking legal laws as well as natural ones.

This incomprehension as to why women might kill has led to oversimplified binary explanations: either they are 'bad', like 'Moors Murderer' Myra Hindley (who with partner Ian Brady killed five children and buried them on Saddleworth Moor during the mid-1960s) or 'House of Horrors' killer Rose West (who with husband Fred between the 1970s and early 1990s killed at least 12 women including their own daughter and then concealed some of the bodies in their home), or they are 'mad', like 'Angel of Death' Beverley Allitt (a paediatric nurse who killed four children and hurt five others in 1991 and was thought to have Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy). These women, who have been the subjects of books, television documentaries and works of art, demonstrate that the woman who kills holds a special place in the cultural imagination. We concurrently condemn and are fascinated by their transgression. Similarly, terrorists such as Leila Khaled (a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine who hijacked a plane in 1969) and Ulrike Meinhof (co-founder of the militant left-wing German group *Rote Armee Fraktion* in 1970) became cultural icons precisely because they were women and upset conventional gender norms. The recent phenomenon of the female suicide bomber has also gripped the public imagination. We can no longer dismiss female violence as an aberration. The female suicide bomber, like the female serial killer, not to mention the increasing number, and escalating violence, of girl gangs, forces us to question powerful cultural stereotypes that women are inherently non-aggressive.

It is this cultural construction of women as 'the gentle sex' that has, historically, precluded them from undertaking combatant roles in wartime. A potent gender divide characterises most wars, with combatant men fighting to defend non-combatant women. The masculinisation of the protector role results in the feminisation of the one who is in need of protection. Consequently, women tend to be viewed as 'victims' in war (for example, as the vulnerable sexual prey of soldiers, as innocent bomb casualties) rather than as active agents. There has been a cultural inability to acknowledge women as combatants because femininity and soldiering are seen as fundamentally incompatible: women's presumed physical weakness, their capacity to reproduce, their association with the domestic sphere and the popular myth that women are innately pacifistic have resulted in women being relegated to the 'home front'. Boudicca, the first-century queen of the Iceni, fifteenth-century French martyr Joan of Arc and Flora Sandes, a combatant with the Serbian Army in the First World War, may have succeeded in placing themselves on the battlefield, but they

are household names precisely because they are the exceptions which prove the rule.

Despite this essentialist thinking about women's 'nature', the Second World War witnessed a hitherto unseen level of female mobilisation. The circumstances of this total war necessitated the inclusion of women in both civilian and military organisations. Almost half a million British women joined the auxiliary services. Research suggests that despite their mobilisation, combat remained an exclusively masculine role as servicewomen were prohibited from flying planes, serving aboard ships and accompanying regiments in combat situations (DeGroot, 1997; Rosenzweig, 1993; Stone, 1999; Summerfield, 1998). A potent combat taboo was in operation which prevented women from firing weapons. Women who staffed the anti-aircraft batteries, for example, were permitted to calibrate the height and range finders but were prohibited from pulling the trigger, thereby sustaining the illusion that they were not killing. Thus, despite their incursions into the military, British women did not engage in violence against the enemy. In being positioned far from combat situations, women's marginalisation highlighted their status as non-combatants and maintained war's gendered nature.

However, one organisation, the Special Operations Executive (SOE), trained women like Nancy Wake in silent killing techniques and both armed and unarmed combat, and utilised them in a secret war against the enemy in which they were given a fifty-fifty chance of survival. The inclusion of women in this paramilitary organisation raises interesting questions, not only about the roles that it is appropriate for women to undertake in wartime, but also about the capacity of these women to inflict violence and possibly kill. Like the female murderer, terrorist and suicide bomber, the woman agent has been the subject of books, films and television programmes. But unlike them, female SOE agents have not been subject to opprobrium, but instead have been eulogised by the British media and public: two of the agents have been the subject of the British television programme 'This Is Your Life'.

While a prominent feature of female agents' narratives is the accounts of the ways in which non-violent strategies, such as knowingly employing femininity, were adopted to disarm German soldiers, an overlooked aspect is their references to violence. This chapter aims to address this lacuna in the literature by examining the various attitudes towards killing that emerge from the testimonies of female agents. It utilises oral history interviews, auto/biographical sources, official records, newspapers, radio script and film in order to examine female combatants' perceptions of their capacity for violence. Personal testimonies in particular offer

remarkably rich material for the historian. In addition to consulting the transcripts of interviews conducted by media companies for various television documentaries, reading excerpts of first-hand accounts within secondary works and listening to the tapes held at the Imperial War Museum Sound Archive (IWMSA) in London, I have conducted 72 interviews with male and female SOE veterans. Undertaking my own oral history interviews enabled me to ask specific questions about the relevance of gender to their experiences. Oral history developed alongside feminism, women's history and socialist history in Britain and North America and the development of feminist theory has contributed to its growth. The focus on subjectivity and the recovery of 'hidden voices' to create new histories within both oral history and feminism illustrate their compatibility. My research, an interdisciplinary study informed by socio-cultural history and feminism, is located primarily within this field. Although oral history has been criticised for its reliance upon personal memory which can lack precision and become 'culturally contaminated' during the temporal gap between the experience and the reconstruction of the experience in the interview (Riley, 1988), practitioners recognise that interviewees are not reproducing the experience as it happened but rather constructing a representation of it (Summerfield, 1998; Thomson, 1994). Thus, the fragility of memory becomes less significant. Understanding *why* someone represents the past in particular ways may be as important as the details of the narrative recounted. Personal memory elicits material of great richness and complexity because it enables interviewees to reflect upon the past in the present. What emerges are not unmediated accounts of a remembered past but rather interpretations which are bound to have been influenced by cultural attitudes developed during the intervening years. Excerpts from oral history interviews are used extensively in this chapter.

In the remainder of the chapter, I introduce the SOE, then proceed to an analysis of female recruits' motivations for joining an organisation committed to sabotage and subversion, the training they received in combat techniques and their experiences in Occupied France, in order to consider the diverse ways in which the potential for violence was either resisted or embraced by female clandestine agents. In so doing, it seeks to provide new understandings about the relationship between women and violence in order to go beyond simple explanations of biological determinism which attribute women with a maternal, rather than a killer, instinct. It draws on three of the key themes of this collection: by focusing upon female combatants, the chapter questions accepted notions of 'female victim' and 'male perpetrator', while simultaneously

recognising the persistence of gendered norms in explanations for the repudiation or adoption of violence and, in particular, the language of gender difference that is utilised by some women. While providing a case study from the Second World War, there is a clear resonance with contemporary events which suggests that the arguments as to why women take up arms go beyond specific cultural references to different societies.

The new War Cabinet under Winston Churchill agreed to afford a higher priority to acts of sabotage and subversion and established the SOE in July 1940. It was organised according to territories, with each country having its own section and staff. In 1942, the British-led French Section appointed a new recruiting officer who was willing to disregard the cultural taboo on women's involvement in combat. Selwyn Jepson recollected:

> I was responsible for recruiting women for the work in the face of a good deal of opposition from the powers that be who said that women, under the Geneva Convention, were not allowed to take combatant duties which they regarded resistance work in France as being...There was a good deal of opposition from various quarters until it went up to Churchill.
>
> (Jepson, 1986)

Vera Atkins, the French Section's Intelligence Officer, remembered 'the heated discussions which took place when the idea was first put forward' (Gleeson, 1950). Resistance to Jepson's initiative is evidence of the potency of a cultural prohibition concerning women's involvement in combat situations. Despite Jepson's avowal that the ban on women's use of arms is codified in the Geneva Conventions, it had no legal foundations. Rather, there was a deeply entrenched notion that women should not use arms. The taboo is found in most cultures, but is easily abandoned or modified if there is a need for women as fighters. The SOE did require women and consequently modified, if not ever entirely abandoned, the combat taboo by allowing women to be recruited. The French Section infiltrated 39 women along with 441 men. In addition, the French-led Gaullist Section sent 11 women into France, the Dutch office infiltrated three women into Holland and the Belgian Section had two female operatives. While only an extremely small number of women were employed as agents, the decision to involve women in this paramilitary organisation challenged conventional wartime gender roles.

When Jepson became aware of individuals who could speak French fluently, they were invited for an interview. His revelation that they might be able to assist France's liberation was likely to have been particularly surprising for female candidates considering the taboo on women participating in combat. The women that accepted the invitation to join a paramilitary organisation were ordinary civilians: shop assistants, secretaries and housewives. They were motivated by hatred of Nazi policies, patriotism and the need to escape from the mundane work generally assigned to women in wartime. Pearl Witherington recollected her rage at the German occupation:

> There's this question of being so mad with the Germans. . . . I didn't like the Germans. I never did. I'm a baby of the 14–18 war. . . . There was the question of trying to do something useful for the war. But it was also, the biggest part of it was, I think, this fury that I had against the Germans cos I really was mad with them.
>
> (Cornioley, née Witherington, 1988)

Women were as susceptible to patriotic rhetoric as men, and Witherington was able to channel her indignation by joining the organisation to help defeat Nazism. For her, and many other female agents, her gender was irrelevant. Jos Mulder-Gemmeke, who was recruited to work in Holland, remarked: 'you didn't think about being a woman at that time. That was not important . . . they needed people and I wanted to help, I couldn't do anything else' (Mulder-Gemmeke, 1983).

There were other factors, such as the death of a husband in the war, which motivated several women to accept Jepson's invitation to join the organisation. With the death of a husband, the traditional male role of fighting to protect wife and children was vacated and wives could step into the vacuum. Yvonne Cormeau was prompted to join in order to assume the place of her husband who had been killed in the Blitz: 'I think this was something my husband would have liked to do and as he was no longer there to do it, I thought it was time for me to do it' (Cormeau, 1984). Similarly, in response to an officer who begged her to withdraw, Violette Szabo claimed: 'it is my job. My husband has been killed. I am going to get my own back somehow' (*Daily Graphic*, 1946). Szabo had been robbed of the future she had planned with her new husband and wanted to take up arms to avenge his death. Some women, therefore, were prepared to put themselves in dangerous situations where there was the possibility of both engaging in violence and having violence inflicted upon them in order to assume the mantle of their

dead husbands. Both women were mothers of young children whom they risked orphaning. Although motherhood and combat are viewed as mutually exclusive, since one is seen as conferring life and the other as taking it, motherhood was not a barrier to these women's involvement and did not automatically preclude them. Rather, it provided a major impetus for their involvement: in their husbands' absence, they fought for a secure future for their children.

Being a single mother also motivated French-born Odette Sansom (née Brailly and later Churchill and then Hallowes) who was separated from her British husband:

> I used to say, well, I've got children and they come first. It's easy enough to go on thinking that way. But I was tormented…Am I going to be satisfied to accept this like that, that other people are going to suffer, get killed, die because of this war and trying to get freedom for my own children. Let's face it. So am I supposed to accept all this sacrifice that other people are making without lifting a finger in any way?
> (Hallowes, 1986)

She felt torn between her immediate maternal responsibilities and her patriotic duty but was prompted into involvement through her desire to liberate her home country for her three young daughters. W. N. Maxwell, an amateur psychologist writing in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, noted that many women would have been prepared to fight 'under the sway of the maternal instinct, with its protective impulse and its tender emotion, which had been roused by the sight of the wounded or the stories of outrage' (Bourke, 1999, p. 322). He noted that although women may have lacked the 'killer instinct' which compels men to fight, many had a protective, maternal quality which would enable them to kill to safeguard their young. Rather than preventing women from killing, the maternal instinct was considered to transform them into formidable killers. Consequently, traditional notions of femininity were not undermined by women's recruitment into the SOE precisely because of the assumption that the urge to kill is oriented to motherly love. The potential tumult that women's involvement in combatant situations entailed was thus both mediated and enflamed by their maternal duties: mothers could be motivated to fight which was considered noble and just, but their involvement was simultaneously regarded as controversial given the risk of orphaning children. Hence, motherly love could be equally a motivation for engaging in war as for pursuing peace. These women perceived no contradiction in their

determination to enter a masculine world of violence in order to fulfil their most fundamental roles as women.

Those who successfully passed the recruitment interview embarked upon a succession of intensive training courses. The instruction might be considered to be a form of commando training as much emphasis was placed upon improving the recruits' fitness, demonstrating sabotage techniques and teaching them how to use various weapons. Standing targets were used initially and were replaced by life-size 'pop-up' silhouettes as the recruits became more proficient at firing instinctively. They were shown the various parts of the body which were susceptible to attack and trained in unarmed combat and knife-fighting as Yvonne Baseden in her article for the *Sunday Express* newspaper in 1952 makes clear:

> I had to blow up some railway lines. I was rather fond of explosives and did it effectively. Then there was weapons training. We handled everything from anti-tank guns to Continental automatics. At the end of the course I had developed a great affection and a lot of skill with grenades, the Bren gun, and the Colt .45 revolver. But there was one bad moment for me. The instructor gave me a long, black-handled commando knife. I had to learn to use it. In a glade among the fir trees were three dummy men, which the instructor manipulated by wires. I had to learn to stab them and kill. 'Stab upwards, stab upwards' was the order repeated over and over again. I hated it. I hated it so much I never did use a knife in France. Then came unarmed combat training with a tough Commando sergeant-major. By the time I returned to London I had learned a lot of ways of killing.
>
> (Baseden, 1952)

A crucial part was teaching the law-abiding civilians to ignore the limits they normally placed on the use of violence so that in certain circumstances they would be able to kill the enemy. In *Carve Her Name with Pride* (1958), the film chronicling the wartime experiences of Violette Szabo, a member of the SOE's headquarters staff notes: 'it takes time to turn a pretty girl into a killer'. This was certainly the case with Odette Sansom who when asked by her instructor how she would handle an assailant responded by saying she would run and, if he pursued and caught her, would pinch him and pull his hair. Her instructor retorts: 'Ladies, it will be my unwelcome and embarrassing duty to teach you other and less refined methods of disabling would-be aggressors.... I have never before had to teach such things to ladies' (Tickell, 1949, p. 103).

'Real life agent' Jacqueline Nearne in the 1944 semi-documentary film *School for Danger* (released in 1947 as *Now It Can Be Told*) about the recruitment, training and operational missions of SOE agents. Photograph (MH24434) courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London.

While male recruits may have undergone previous military training, this was the first occasion in which these women were given instruction in combat. Understandably, some of the women were clearly apprehensive about using firearms as instructors' reports held at the National Archives make evident: Noor Inayat Khan was 'pretty scared of weapons' (HS 9/836/5) and Madeleine Damerment was 'lacking in aggressiveness' (HS 9/1654). While some struggled to impress the instructors with their belligerence, others were assessed more positively: Vera Leigh was noted as being 'confident and capable with all weapons' (HS 9/910/3) and Francine Agazarian was 'by no means timid or gun shy…never nervous with weapons' (HS 9/10/2). Retrospective personal accounts also indicate that some female agents relished the opportunity to handle firearms: Claire Everett told me, 'I loved the weapons training and the shooting. How to dismantle and put back together in so many seconds. When we were waiting to go in [to France], we used to go to the underground shooting galleries in London to practice' (Everett, 2002). She was keen to maintain the skills she had been taught in preparation for her clandestine mission in France.

Despite the fact that the women were trained extensively in sabotage and weapons handling, the organisation did not envisage them using this new-found expertise. A gendered division of labour was in operation in the SOE: the roles of arms instructor and saboteur, as well as that of organiser, were considered unsuitable for women who were assigned the gender-specific tasks of courier and wireless operator. That Paddy

O'Sullivan had been extensively trained in weapons, while her security training and wireless instruction had been cut short, annoyed her organiser Percy Mayer as his debriefing report makes clear:

> Miss O'Sullivan spent six weeks in Scotland on demolition and weapon training. I suggest that this time could have been more profitably spent at a security and radio school, or simply learning to ride a cycle. The requirements for a radio operator are not that she should be able to shoot straight or even shoot at all, but that she should know how to use a W/T set properly. Her means of defence should be to know how to baffle the Gestapo rather than to know how to shoot them.
>
> (HS 6/585)

Some women were unconcerned by the gendered allocation of tasks: when I asked Claire Everett if she recalled feeling aggrieved, she exclaimed: 'Good lord, no. No, no' (Everett, 2002) and Yvonne Baseden asserted that 'it didn't occur to me' (Baseden, 2000). However, one woman was not only conscious of gendered role allocation, but was also eager to have it documented that there were some roles from which women were deliberately excluded. Yvonne Cormeau, who was trained as a wireless operator, was frustrated that only men were assigned the role of organiser: 'I was rather annoyed to discover men only were used as group leaders. There was real discrimination there' (Cormeau, 1984). Her comment is particularly remarkable given that her interviewer was asking her a general question concerning the training, rather than a specific question about gender relations (as I had posed to Everett and Baseden). Yet despite her dissatisfaction that women were not assigned the role of organiser, Cormeau expresses relief that women were not expected to become saboteurs and arms instructors in two separate interviews: 'Luckily, men only as saboteurs' (Cormeau, 1983) and 'Well, that I was quite glad of' (Cormeau, 1984). Unfortunately, neither interviewer asked her why she appreciated this exclusion. However, we can speculate that she might have wanted to avoid killing. Noor Inayat Khan, a Muslim Sufi, was a pacifist and it was against her philosophical beliefs to kill. She disliked weapons training (which may explain her poor report cited above) and intentionally left her pistol in Britain. Similarly, Pearl Witherington did not want to engage in any violent acts against the enemy, asserting: 'I don't think it's a woman's role to kill' (Rossiter, 1986, p. 180). Women's biological ability to bear children was seen by Witherington to be at odds with terminating life:

> I didn't go out and fight with a gun. I don't think it's a woman's job that you know. We're made to give life, not take it away. I don't think I could have stood up and coldly shot somebody....I didn't actually go in for full blowing up, I didn't use explosives, neither did I use arms and neither did I kill people....The last thing I felt like was a terrorist.
> (Cornioley, 1983)

Witherington articulates a belief that violence does not come naturally to women. It clashes with both women's biological role as mothers and their culturally constructed one as carers. Female resisters' testimonies are replete with such sentiments and even those who killed were haunted by the belief that they were going against nature: 'Women have babies, and I thought maybe I wouldn't be able to pull the trigger' (Saywell, 1986, pp. 112–113); 'they say that women have babies and so don't kill' (ibid., p. 85). That women whose actions directly or indirectly resulted in death espouse essentialist arguments illustrates the strength of gender differences. Witherington, who was sent as a courier, took on a leadership role following the arrest of her organiser, instructed locally recruited men on the use of arms and explosives and equipped them with weapons to enable them to conduct sabotage operations. Her debriefing report notes the damage her men inflicted: 'German losses over five months, 1000; the wounded can be counted in thousands' (Binney, 2002, p. 200). At the heart of her account is a contradiction in that while she evokes gender distinctions central to discourses of that period, she undermines them by participating in combatant work. Conventional gender norms were thus simultaneously disturbed and defended.

By using gender as an explanation, these women were justifying their non-violence in ways that were different to those available to male agents. While some of their male colleagues may have wanted to avoid the unpleasant task of hand-to-hand fighting, they did not have a discourse available to them. Instead, male agents had something at stake in claiming an enjoyment of learning the techniques of fieldcraft, explosives and unarmed combat and putting them into practice against the German occupiers. A desire for action and daredevil masculine bravado were evident in my interview with Bob Maloubier, who recollected that his aptitude for wireless operating during his training meant that he would be assigned that role: 'So my skill just left me all of a sudden! I wanted more excitement. Definitely, more excitement. I wanted to see action, not to be confined. So I was made a saboteur. I enjoyed blowing things up, power and industrial plants, railway lines and bridges by the dozen' (Maloubier, 2002). Similarly, Roger Landes concluded that his

wartime experiences were 'the best years of my life...made me a man' (Landes, 1999). In their testimonies, male agents recollect relishing the opportunity to engage in combat, partly because they are investing in a discourse of hegemonic masculinity. One exception, however, was Denis Rake, a flamboyant homosexual whose autobiography brims with examples of his phobia of weapons and violence:

> I am scared to deaths of bangs. I am not exaggerating, but the very thought of being near a bang, let alone making one, makes me feel physically sick...I refused to have anything to do with explosives... I also refused to handle firearms...They petrify me...I won't kill anybody.
>
> (Rake, 1968, pp. 54–55)

Rake's sexuality, like the female agents' gender, offered a space in which he could articulate an objection to using weapons and taking life which was not available to heterosexual male operatives.

The association of women with giving, not taking, life might explain why Cormeau, who was a mother, was relieved that only men were allotted the role of saboteur. She, however, does not speak for all of the women recruited. When I asked Yvonne Baseden if she would have been prepared to shoot someone in the field, she replied abruptly and decisively: 'Oh yes. Yes, absolutely. I don't know whether I would be prepared to knife them because we were trained to do that as well. Oh yes, certainly I would. It was part of the training and a job to be done' (Baseden, 2000). Baseden was prepared to kill using a gun because she regarded it as part of the role that she had been trained to undertake. Similarly, Yvonne Rudellat, a 45-year-old grandmother who strapped a pistol to her leg, was prepared to kill if the necessity arose:

> If a German or anyone else stops me and tries to search me, there is only one thing to do. I will have to shoot him. I don't want to do that. It would be difficult to bury him. The ground is so hard...If it happens, I hope it is near an asparagus bed where the earth is soft and sandy.
>
> (King, 1989, p. 287)

Her only concern at killing appears to have been the inconvenience of concealing the body. Rudellat was also receptive to the idea of sending explosive parcels to known collaborators (ibid.). Although they were prepared to act violently, most female agents did not get the opportunity

and their work as couriers and wireless operators did not undermine conventional gender norms.

Some female agents, however, did kill. Derrick Baynham spoke of several occasions when his courier 'Angel' killed German soldiers and informers:

> She saved my life actually... I wouldn't have lasted six hours if it hadn't been for Angel. After we landed, we hid up in the woods. I was caught on a [wireless] transmitter. Angel shot the chap who tried to arrest me and his companion... Angel's attitude to killing people, she seemed rather pleased to be doing it really [Laughs].
>
> (Baynham, 1999)

Similarly, Violette Szabo's determination to fight was noted by many of her colleagues and during her training she allegedly commented: 'I only want to have some Germans to fight and I should die happy if I could take some of them with me' (Minney, 1956, p. 76). The film *Carve Her Name with Pride* shows her shooting five soldiers after she and a fellow resister are ambushed by a division of Schutzstaffel (SS) crack troops. Even when she is wounded, she still manages to fire accurately, killing another before her ammunition runs out and she gives herself up. A smiling, high-ranking officer congratulates her performance: 'You put up a good fight, Mademoiselle. Cigarette?' Female agents, both in reality and in filmic representations, did shoot German soldiers in order to defend themselves and their colleagues, and could derive pleasure from doing so.

There was also one female agent who not only killed the enemy when she was ambushed but sought proactively to kill as many as she could as she 'longed to break their fucking necks' (Fitzsimons, 2002, p. 239). Nancy Wake's autobiography as well as the interview I conducted with her and two biographies written about her are each replete with tales of her violence. Yet Wake had not always been so belligerent: 'There had been nothing violent about my nature before the war yet the years would see a great change' (Wake, 1985, p. 142). She begins her autobiography by stating, 'this is the story of a naïve and rather sensitive young Australasian romantic who arrived in Paris in 1934 determined not to be uncouth, and of how her experiences made her the woman who K. O'd a waiter with her bare fist in a Paris club in 1945' (ibid., p. 1).

While other female agents worked as couriers and wireless operators in cities, towns and rural villages, Wake lived among 7000 male comrades in the hills, arranging parachute drops and equipping local groups with

weapons. She wore army boots and khaki trousers, shirt, tie and beret but every night Wake asserted her feminine self by changing into a satin nightgown and putting on her face cream. She proudly told me that the maquis leader with whom she worked, Henri Tardivat, said:

> 'She is the most feminine woman I have ever met in my life, but in battle she's worth ten men.' So I changed. I was feminine, but fighting. All I wanted to do was to kill Germans. I didn't give a bugger about them, to kill Germans. Didn't care about it. I hated, I loathed the Germans. I loathed them. As far as I was concerned, the only good one was a dead one and I don't care what anybody thinks of me. A dead German!
>
> (Wake, 1999)

Wake recognised the apparent contradiction in being 'feminine but fighting' and by attacking conventional notions of femininity she reveals new self-concepts. She dispels the myth that women are innately pacifist by asserting that she relished killing German soldiers, experiencing no remorse for doing so. Her admission of hatred for the Germans and the manner in which it was said were quite startling. Wake spoke without passion, in a cool, calculated manner, and the short, emphatic 'a dead German!' at the end of this statement was accompanied by a decisive nod of the head. She appears to have had no moral compunction about ending the lives of dozens of soldiers and states that other people's assessment of her ruthlessness had no effect upon her.

Wake's talk about violence and killing is not bombastic and rhetorical. She did use weapons, killing German soldiers both at a distance, impersonally, and at close hand. She often ambushed German convoys using home-made bombs which would result in the deaths of 20 or 30 soldiers. She shot dead four German officers at point-blank range, fought her way out of roadblocks and went into battle with German troops on numerous occasions when the camps were attacked: 'I loved fighting with them' (Fitzsimons, 2002, p. 247). She attacked the local Gestapo Headquarters with hand grenades: '[S]everal dozen Germans did not lunch that day, nor any other day for that matter' (Wake, 1985, p. 148). When sabotaging a munitions store, she was challenged by a sentry and delivered a karate-like chop to his neck: 'I did not weep for that sentry. It was him or me, and by that time I had the attitude anyway that the only good German was a dead one' (Fitzsimons, 2002, p. 270). Wake also offered to shoot a female German spy when her male colleagues felt qualms about killing a woman. Her resolve shamed the men into accomplishing the task. After recalling these instances, Wake posed the

question, 'How had I become so aggressive?' (Wake, 1985, pp. 142–143). She concluded that it was witnessing anti-Semitic actions in Vienna, observing a seven-month pregnant Frenchwoman being bayoneted in the stomach and hearing about a colleague who had been beheaded that had toughened her up, fuelled her loathing for the Nazis and desensitised her to the violence of war.

While resisters such as Pearl Witherington rationalised their non-violence in gender-specific ways, Wake, in order to make her violence socially acceptable, felt compelled to justify her actions. In contrast, none of the male agents felt obliged to do this, perhaps because men are culturally conditioned into violence and perceived that their wartime behaviour would be regarded as normative. Derrick Baynham, for example, recalled that 'hunting out informers was my big thing, assassinating people. Too many and some mistakes. I just got on with it. I didn't kill women. I didn't have any reason to. I just did as I was told to. I probably would have done' (Baynham, 1999). Roger Landes recollected one incident in which he discovered that his group had been penetrated by a double agent. Following a three-hour 'trial', it was decided that the informer and his wife would be shot, and as no one volunteered to kill her, Landes, as leader, felt it was his responsibility:

> I took my pistol from my pocket and put behind the head of the woman, and it was a Colt .45. The bullet went through the head and came out over the head and there was a jet of blood about a yard long. It must have gone through one of the arteries and of course she collapsed, she was dead.
>
> (Landes, 1999)

When questioned about the impact killing had upon them, Landes admitted that 'for a week I didn't sleep after that' and Baynham noted, 'I'd rather keep that to myself' (ibid.; Baynham, 1999). Killing is not a natural activity for men either, but they, unlike women, have a discourse available to them in which they can articulate their experiences of violence which does not substantially trouble public sensibilities. While male agents referred to violent actions without explanation or justification, Wake felt compelled to explain her behaviour within her autobiography and to both her biographers and me, perhaps because she recognised that as a woman, her violence was deemed less palatable and she risked exposing herself to condemnation if she did not. During her time in the SOE, Wake was not trying to change the gender tags of war or strike a blow for women's rights. Instead, she sought to undertake

a role which she enjoyed, provided her with a sense of fulfilment and helped rid France of its German occupiers.

The evidence reviewed here indicates that women who belonged to a paramilitary organisation which trained them in the use of firearms and close combat techniques had varied reactions to using weapons and engaging in violence. The SOE offered women the opportunity to fight the Nazis and some seized it wholeheartedly. Several recruits were motivated by the desire to inflict violence upon the enemy and developed considerable expertise during their training, while others struggled to achieve the level of aggression that the instructors demanded. Some women felt a profound sense of unease and wanted to have no role in the killing of German soldiers as it seemed to go against their own sense of themselves as women as well as contravene the dominant discourse of femininity. The cultural unease generated by the woman who engages in violence is so pervasive that some felt that their biology rendered them inappropriate for some aspects of warfare. Thus assumptions about war being antithetical to women's biological role of bearing and rearing children remain unchallenged by some of the women involved in combatant work: traditional notions of femininity were upheld by the very women who had the potential to contest them. Not all female agents felt like this however: others were prepared to kill, regarding it as part of the job that they had been trained to undertake and a small minority proved themselves to be formidable fighters. In constructing their narratives, these female agents dispel the myth that women are inherently peace-loving because of their life-giving capacity and recognise that femininity could also be belligerent. These women compel us to re-evaluate widely held assumptions about the essential nature of women and to accept that women have the same potential for violence as men. And yet the SOE women have *not* stimulated a transformation of cultural constructions surrounding femininity. Established Western traditional divisions of male and female tasks in war and stereotypical notions of femininity remain largely intact, unscathed by women's militarisation in the SOE. A 1945 article in the *Sunday Express* claimed: 'The interesting thing about these girls is that they are not hearty and horsey young women with masculine chins. They are pretty young girls who would look demure and sweet in crinoline' (Simpson, 1945). Heterosexual conventions were fairly systematically reinforced following demobilisation, with female agents generally assuming more traditional roles by returning to the home as wives and mothers. Newspaper articles revelled in the irony of women trained as killers who slipped into quiet domesticity. In an article headlined 'Mrs Smith: Train-wrecker, Spy and Nazi-killer', Peggy Smith is

photographed playing with her two children. She asserts: 'I like a good fight, whether it's with a gun in your hand or whether it's just against circumstances, but I honestly think my present job as a housewife is more exacting' (Rodin, 1948). Presented in this way, any possible concerns that the public may have had about the use of women to fight the Nazis behind enemy lines were pre-empted. These women may have been paramilitary agents, but the public were reassured in the tabloid press that they were not masculine in appearance and they had returned to conventional womanly roles after their wartime adventures.

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2
'I Still Sort of Flounder Around in a Sea of Non-Language': The Constraints of Language and Labels in Women's Accounts of Woman-to-Woman Partner Abuse

Rebecca Barnes

Introduction

One of the key achievements of the feminist movement against violence against women has been to create and disseminate names for forms of violence (Kelly, 1988; Kelly *et al.*, 1996; Schechter, 1982). The importance of finding words to name and describe violence and abuse can be contextualized within more general understandings of the significance of language both for individual sense-making and for social interaction. As feminist writer Ellen DuBois states,

> the power of naming is at least two-fold: naming defines the quality and value of that which is named – and it also denies reality and value to that which is never named, never uttered. That which has no name, that for which we have no words or concepts, is rendered mute and invisible.
>
> (DuBois, 1983, p. 108 cited in Lempert, 1996a, p. 16)

Applied to violence and abuse, DuBois' assertion suggests that without names, forms of violence and abuse lie outside of public existence, and thus escape recognition. Violence-against-women activists have long emphasized the importance of language in bringing forms of violence and abuse into public consciousness, emphasizing that whilst abuses such as 'domestic violence', 'wife-beating' and 'rape' were little heard

of prior to the 1970s, it was not because they did not exist (Kelly, 1988; Loseke, 1992). Kelly *et al*. state,

> It is through naming different forms of victimization, and extending the limited definitions encoded in the law, medicine and research that feminist work has challenged dominant discourses on sexual violence.
>
> (Kelly *et al*., 1996, p. 78)

Significant progress has been made in creating a vocabulary for male violence, but an area which has received scant attention is women's violence, whether towards men, women or children. In many respects, this lesser attention to women's violence is not surprising, given that the vast majority of violent crime in the United Kingdom is perpetrated by men. As the 2002/2003 British Crime Survey (BCS) has found, in four out of five cases of violent crime (including domestic, acquaintance and stranger violence), the perpetrator was male (Smith and Allen, 2004). Further, official statistics show that women account for a very small minority of perpetrators of sexual offences (Home Office, 2003; Office for National Statistics, 2006). This evidence strongly indicates that women's violence is quantitatively less of a social problem than men's violence. However, for those who experience violence from a woman, particular problems may be experienced because of the marginalized and largely hidden nature of women's violence.

In this chapter, I focus upon violence and abuse in women's same-sex intimate relationships. This is an area of domestic violence research which is in its infancy, compared to the dominant and far more established emphasis upon men's violence towards women in heterosexual relationships. In spite of the marginalization of women's violence, the last two decades have witnessed the growth of a body of literature about woman-to-woman partner abuse. This literature mainly originates from the United States, and largely comprises relatively small-scale quantitative studies aimed at ascertaining prevalence (Brand and Kidd, 1986; Lie and Gentlewarrier, 1991; Lockhart *et al*., 1994; Scherzer, 1998; Turell, 2000; Waldner-Haugrud *et al*., 1997). These surveys have collectively found widespread reporting of violence and abuse from current or previous same-sex partners; for example, Turell found that half of the women in her sample reported experiences of physical abuse; 83 per cent reported emotional abuse; and 12 per cent reported sexual abuse (Turell, 2000).[1] The UK additions to this body of empirical literature have followed much more recently. Both Henderson

(2003) and Donovan *et al*. (2006) have carried out British surveys of men and women who have same-sex relationships. In relation to the female sub-sections of both the samples, Henderson found that just over one in five women reported having experienced any physical, sexual or emotional abuse (Henderson, 2003). Donovan *et al*. found that 40 per cent of their sample self-defined as having experienced domestic abuse from a same-sex partner, including physical, emotional or sexual abuse (Donovan *et al*., 2006).

Whilst there is now a considerable body of research which indicates that woman-to-woman partner abuse affects a considerable proportion of relationships, qualitative studies of woman-to-woman partner abuse have been slower to emerge. Consequently, there have been few micro-level analyses of how women negotiate and make sense of their experience of violence and abuse from a same-sex partner (although for exceptions, see Giorgio, 2002; Girshick, 2002 in particular). This chapter contributes towards addressing this gap.

In the remainder of this chapter, I examine the ways in which the existing language or vocabulary for domestic and sexual violence marginalizes woman-to-woman violence. Moreover, I analyse dominant constructions of different forms of violence and abuse and the implications of these constructions or stereotypes for women who seek to name and communicate the abuse which they have experienced. After introducing my study, I offer a general overview of some of the difficulties which women experience with respect to language. I then consider three factors which make problematic women's articulation of their experiences: the constraints of narrow definitions of domestic and sexual violence; the implications of heteronormativity in language; and gendered constructions of 'victims' and 'perpetrators'.

The study

The study from which this analysis derives is one of the first British studies of violence and abuse in woman-to-woman relationships. I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 40 women, all of whom self-identified as having been abused by a previous female partner. Interviews took place across England and parts of Wales. Participants were primarily recruited through the gay and lesbian press, Internet messageboards and mailings of leaflets and posters to domestic violence organizations, women's organizations, and services and venues which are mainly used by lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) women. The sample was aged between 21 and 70 years old, with almost two-thirds of the participants

aged 30–49 years. All but four participants were white. Women reported relationships which had lasted between four months and ten years, with the modal group being two to three years. Ten women reported experiencing more than one abusive same-sex relationship.

Interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 3 hours, with the typical duration being an hour and a half. In all interviews, I invited participants to offer accounts of their experiences of abuse before asking them to elaborate on aspects of their accounts or to share their views on broader topics such as the adequacy of existing support services. All interviews were tape-recorded with the participants' consent, and were subsequently transcribed. A thematic analysis was carried out, assisted by the use of the qualitative data software package, NVivo. This type of analysis was chosen for its flexibility, since it is not restricted to one particular theoretical perspective (Braun and Clarke, 2006). By employing a thematic analysis, I was able to examine themes which had interested me from the outset of the research, in addition to others which became evident to me either during the fieldwork or whilst coding the interview transcripts.

The absence of a recognizable language for woman-to-woman partner abuse

The quotation in the title of this chapter is taken from an interview which I conducted with Julie, a lesbian woman in her mid-40s. Julie talked about a relationship which lasted approximately six months, and which had ended 18 years ago. The main issue which Julie spoke about was an incident of forced sexual penetration by her partner, which Julie understood to be punishment for speaking to another woman at a social gathering. Julie's assertion, 'I still sort of flounder around in a sea of non-language', vividly expresses her continued struggle to find words to describe what happened to her. This ongoing struggle is particularly significant since this incident took place so long ago, and the lack of language which Julie identifies can be seen to play an important role in inhibiting her from coming to terms with the abuse. As Julie also expressed,

> It really threw me because you know I'd trusted her and I just felt very, that she hadn't trusted me, and it was very hard for me to find a language for what she'd done. And at that time, no women were talking about women abuse, women-to-women abuse: there was absolutely nothing, and I couldn't speak about it.
>
> (Julie, 46, white lesbian woman)

Julie later added that it was not until several years after this incident that she had the opportunity to talk to somebody about her experiences, and thus the invisibility of woman-to-woman partner abuse within her peer group denied Julie the opportunity to talk through and make sense of her experiences.

For some women, language was reported to be less of an issue at the time of the interview, but rather a barrier to understanding what they were experiencing at the time of the relationship. The problems caused by the lack of terminology for experiences of abuse from a female partner are illustrated by Colette, who says of her relationship,

> I knew it wasn't right, I knew that I shouldn't feel shaky all the time and I knew that it wasn't acceptable behaviour, but I wouldn't have known it was lesbian battering (laughs lightly). I wouldn't have called it that, I didn't know erm really what was happening.
>
> (Colette, 40, white bisexual woman)

Colette describes being at a complete loss as to what was happening to her, and one of the key issues which she identified as preventing her from identifying her partner's behaviour as abusive was a lack of language, and consequently, as she describes elsewhere, the feeling that she was the only person going through this experience. Thus, for both Julie and Colette, the lack of an available linguistic framework which they could locate their experiences within was or continues to be the source of much confusion and ambivalence about the nature of what they experienced. I next consider some specific constraints upon women's use and interpretation of language, beginning with an examination of narrow definitions of violence.

The constraints of narrow definitions of domestic and sexual violence

One of the main contributors to discussions about language in relation to interpersonal violence is Liz Kelly. Kelly's study of sexual violence aimed to uncover the spectrum or 'continuum' of forms of gendered violence which women encounter in their lives (Kelly, 1988). An important aspect of Kelly's work is her critique of narrow definitions of forms of sexual violence which obscure all but the most extreme and visible forms of violence (Kelly, 1988). For example, rape is typically constructed as a violent act perpetrated by a stranger with a knife in a dark alley (Muehlenhard and Kimes, 1999). This, however, does not resonate

with many women's experiences of rape, taking marital rape as a key example (Bergen, 1996; Russell, 1990). Further, Muehlenhard and Kimes state that domestic violence is stereotypically constructed as a scenario in which 'an out-of-control man relentlessly beats his helpless wife, who [...] cowers and cries rather than fighting back' (Muehlenhard and Kimes, 1999, p. 237). Such constructions focus upon some of the most severe and visible consequences of violence in intimate relationships, and may consequently marginalize forms of domestic violence which differ from this dominant image.

Loseke, in her examination of the construction of 'wife abuse', identifies a number of criteria which have to be met in order for a woman to be publicly recognized as a victim of wife abuse (Loseke, 1992). These include experiencing violence which becomes progressively worse and which is very harmful and being an undeserving victim who would leave the relationship if they could and who has not done anything to 'provoke' the abuse. Women who (in the opinion of others) do not meet these criteria may be viewed either as not being in a sufficiently serious predicament to be deserving of public assistance or as not deserving sympathy because their own actions are questionable (Loseke, 1992).

In my study, I found that narrow definitions of violence posed two particular problems: first, prescriptions about the circumstances and severity of the violence; and secondly, heteronormativity in definitions of domestic and sexual violence. The most frequently reported sense of dissonance between women's experiences and their understandings of what could legitimately be termed 'domestic violence' or 'abuse' concerned non-physical forms of abuse. As has similarly been identified in relation to the experiences of abused heterosexual women (Kelly, 1988; Kirkwood, 1993; Wilcox, 2006), a number of women stated that they did not realize that emotional and financial forms of abuse 'counted' as domestic violence. As Anna and Sara said,

> Yes, it weren't 'til the physical side of it I actually thought of it as abusive. I didn't realize how many forms of abuse there were.
>
> (Anna, 34, white lesbian woman)

> I couldn't categorize it as abuse until going to hospital and having a black eye and having a lump on the side of my head and feeling sick, to actually say I have actually been abused.
>
> (Sara, 29, white gay woman)

The influence of dominant constructions of domestic violence upon Anna and Sara's account is clear, since despite having both experienced numerous forms of abuse from their partners prior to the physical violence, they did not relate these other forms of abuse to 'domestic violence'. Indeed, elsewhere, Sara's tone is almost apologetic when she reports a form of abuse which is less often included in dominant understandings of domestic violence:

> I think the first real, *if you can call it abuse*, was when I would be paying for everything, and she wasn't really paying anything at all.
> (Sara, 29, white gay woman, emphasis added)

Sara was not alone in offering an account which was tentative in the claims of abuse which were made. I suggest that narrow definitions of abuse which focus upon what is most tangible and explicit lead some women who have experienced more subtle or less visibly injurious forms of abuse to minimize their experiences, and perhaps even feel hesitant and even fraudulent about self-defining as abused. For example, Sara's account overall indicated that the elements of financial exploitation in her relationship were extremely damaging to her, both materially and emotionally. Despite the subjective impact of this form of abuse upon her, she suggests in the excerpt above that others may not perceive what she experienced as abusive.

In another case, Yvette said,

> what she was doing was not as bad as like well the things I know some women have gone through, and with me, 'cause it wasn't as bad as what I knew was happening to other women, I didn't want, I couldn't have it that it was abuse, and I wouldn't believe that it was actually abuse, because other people went through worse [short pause] but it still like, it can still destroy you.
> (Yvette, 33, white lesbian woman)

Yvette's struggle to describe and define what she had experienced is evident in the hesitance and awkwardness of her speech in the above excerpt. This is a clear example of woman-to-woman partner abuse being almost beyond articulation. Further, what is most striking is the juxtaposition between Yvette's uncertainty about the legitimacy of her claims to having been abused and the severity of the abuse which she had previously described. Indeed, Yvette described some of the most severe and varied forms of abuse of the whole sample, including being

kicked repeatedly in the head, burned with cigarettes on her breasts and on her arm with an iron, financially exploited to the extent that she had no money for basic essentials, and coerced into painful and distressing sexual activities. From an outsider's perspective, it is difficult to understand Yvette's concerns with respect to whether she has the right to claim to have been abused. However, the focus of dominant images of domestic violence upon repeated acts of life-threatening violence potentially silences women whose perceptions of domestic violence do not map onto their personal experiences.

Heteronormativity in definitions of domestic and sexual violence

In addition to the construction of severe physical violence as 'real' domestic violence, the second aspect of narrow definitions which I discuss is heteronormativity in definitions of domestic and sexual violence. Jackson defines heteronormativity as 'the normative status of heterosexuality which renders any alternative sexualities as "other" and marginal' (Jackson, 1999, p. 162). Images of domestic violence are almost exclusively located around heterosexual relationship scripts. The term 'domestic violence' is associated with a gender-specific script which can be understood through Loseke's concept of a 'formula story' (Loseke, 2001). The most dominant formula story or script for domestic violence is based around the constructions of the female victim or 'battered wife', and the male abuser. As Loseke explains,

> The wife abuse formula story that has flourished in recent decades is told in terms of clearly immoral behavior, with pure victims and evil villains (Loseke 1999). This formula story can be an interpretive resource for women, showing them how to understand their experiences in ways that resonate with the story of typical 'wife abuse.' In turn, that formula story helps women conceive of themselves in terms of the identity or type of person that has come to be called the 'battered woman.' Similarly, the formula story promotes the use of the category 'abusive man' to describe women's assailants.
>
> (Loseke, 2001, p. 107)

This formula story offers an important framework for women attempting to make sense of their male partner's behaviour towards them and also encourages women to hold perpetrators responsible for their behaviour. However, because this formula story relies upon the presence of both

a male perpetrator and a female victim, its applicability to non-heterosexual relationship scripts is limited. Colette, for example, recalled a conversation which she had with a friend following a violent episode:

> I phoned Maria [a close friend], she came and got me, and she took me [to her home] for three days, and she tried to talk to me about what was going on and, and she used the words 'domestic violence,' and I think it was then that it hit me and I just looked at her and I said, 'Look Maria, this isn't domestic violence, you know, I studied Women's Studies and that's what men do.'
>
> (Colette, 40, white bisexual woman)

Colette's comments draw attention to the ingrained nature of the dominant formula story for domestic violence, leading women such as Colette to find it incomprehensible that they could be experiencing domestic violence in a same-sex relationship.

Further, Emily, reflecting upon her various experiences of sexual abuse from her partner, spoke of her feelings about the word 'rape':

> I think the main thing was, I had to admit to myself that she, she actually raped me; she did something…she took away something from me that night, something that I never expect a woman to do to another woman, and that's what I couldn't get my head round in a way, I just couldn't, I couldn't accept it.
>
> (Emily, 25, white lesbian woman)

I suggest that for Emily, whilst the word 'rape' conveys the severity of the abuse which she experienced, its conventional definition as an act of penile penetration makes it incongruent with her experiences. Irrespective of gender or sexuality, finding a language to talk about sexual violence is particularly problematic, not least because intimate forms of violence typically feel more painful and shameful to talk about. However, women who experience rape by a woman may find that others query or contest the language which they use. When a woman says that she has been raped by a man, there is a common understanding of what this means. Conversely, if a woman reports that she has been raped by another woman, then this common understanding of what she means by 'rape' is less apparent. This presents significant obstacles to receiving important validation of one's experiences from others. Indeed, women may find that their use of the word 'rape' when applied to an act perpetrated by a woman

may prompt probing questions which seek to clarify the nature of this act – questions which I as a researcher have been asked when speaking to sometimes surprised and almost disbelieving fellow delegates at conferences. Like women who are raped by men, women who are raped by women may fear this disbelief. Indeed, Emily, quoted above, reported that when she first told somebody about her rape – a lesbian friend at college – her friend did not appear to connect Emily's report with an act that was abusive or damaging. Instead, her friend sexualized what Emily told her, seemingly interpreting the act as the realization of a sexual fantasy.

Gendered constructions of 'victims' and 'perpetrators'

As I have identified, dominant images of domestic violence centre upon male perpetrators and female victims. Images of the male perpetrator and the female victim have become dichotomized, implying a rigid and unchanging set of power relations which assume male strength and female weakness, and male aggression and female passivity. Thus, victim and perpetrator are gendered terms, such that irrespective of the sex of the individual, being a perpetrator is viewed as masculine behaviour, whilst being a victim is viewed as feminine behaviour. This is evident in perceptions of women as intrinsically non-violent, and accordingly, perceptions of women's violence as 'unnatural' (Shaw, 1995).

Stereotypical gendered constructions of victims and perpetrators are problematic with respect to both women's own understandings of their abusive relationships and the definitions which others may impose upon their relationships. Two participants gave accounts which contested the dichotomization of 'evil perpetrator'/'innocent victim' (Lamb, 1996, 1999). Both of these women suggested that woman-to-woman relationships were – or at least had the potential to be – different from heterosexual relationships.

Isobel suggested that abusive woman-to-woman relationships had more complex power relations which she felt that 'mainstream' domestic violence support providers would not be sensitive to:

> I think it's treated like a heterosexual violent relationship. I mean, in reality, unless you've got a butch/femme couple, I don't think that dynamic works, 'cause most lesbians aren't in a heterosexual-type relationship, like mine. Were I to go to a heterosexual counselling service and say, 'My girlfriend's bashing me', they'd look at me and

> they'd look at her and think, 'Well obviously you're the victim,' but I never felt like the victim. We didn't have that kind of dynamic where she was the bully and I was the victim.
>
> (Isobel, 31, white lesbian woman)

The constructions of the terms 'perpetrator' and 'victim' as a dichotomy in which victims are perceived as being powerless has been widely critiqued in the context of men's violence to women, with considerable attention having been paid to the ways in which women creatively and agentically resist and cope with domestic and sexual violence (Bergen, 1996; Kelly, 1988; Lempert, 1996b). Isobel's comments are interesting insofar as they indicate her reluctance to apply the terms 'victim' and 'perpetrator' to her relationship. She contests the assumption that there is one victimized party in any abusive relationship, and she further suggests that dividing the two parties in an abusive relationship into victims and perpetrators misses much of the complexity of the dynamics of abuse. Certainly, the issues which Isobel identifies deserve further exploration in the context of heterosexual relationships too.

In another case, Nina spoke of her discomfort with both her own feelings of finding the idea of fighting back empowering and the haste of others to assign victim and perpetrator labels to relationships. As she recalls,

> I said to one friend, 'I'm quite worried because I got in a fight with my partner last night,' and she said to me, 'Oh isn't that just bloody typical, the other one's the bastard,' you know, it was this very heterosexist sort of pattern of response, which assumes that it's always the man to blame.
>
> (Nina, 46, white bisexual woman)

Like Isobel, Nina speaks of being dissatisfied with being made to appear either as a victim or as a perpetrator in a relationship where there is violence. In the excerpt above, she reports needing advice not to deal with the issue of her victimization, but rather, to work out what the boundaries are when it comes to fighting back. She was clear that she did not want to become a perpetrator, but she stated elsewhere that in this relationship, she had found it empowering to be able to 'join in' when her female partner was violent towards her.

More commonly, women spoke of gendered dimensions of their relationships which were at odds with constructions of perpetrators as masculine and victims as feminine. Women who reported that they looked or felt very masculine or that their partners were more stereotypically

feminine and physically smaller or weaker than themselves spoke of particular obstacles to naming and sharing their experiences. As Sam expressed,

> I just certainly wasn't going to tell anybody about it though, that I knew for sure. I mean if they'd have gone round to her house and seen her as tiny as she was and then me towering above her, they would think oh, that doesn't look right.
>
> (Sam, 31, white gay woman)

Sam highlights a disjuncture between her larger physical stature relative to her partner and what others would expect to witness in an abusive relationship. Previously, I suggested that women whose experiences do not reflect dominant constructions of domestic violence may feel fraudulent in making claims to having been abused, and I argue that this is also the case in Sam's account. The association of perpetrators with masculinity and physical prowess is thus very inhibiting when a relationship differs from these images. Whilst for Sam this disjuncture has contributed to her silence about her experiences, for Bryony, the lack of a conventional model of masculine perpetrator/feminine victim has made it difficult for her to interpret her abuse:

> I'm quite masculine in a lot of ways, which again made it difficult because, you know, when it's, at least if it was fucking butch/femme then I could put a tag on it and go right, 'You're the big baddy, and I'm the poor little victim,' but it just wasn't like that, life just isn't necessarily like that.
>
> (Bryony, 26, mixed heritage queer woman)

Bryony also found that the assumptions which others made were very damaging. She described an incident where the police were called during a violent episode, and she reported that the police removed her from their home and gave her a 'telling off'. She attributed the decision to remove her rather than her partner to assumptions about who looked most like the perpetrator. Since two people of the same sex are often presumed to be physical equals, outsiders may rely on outward gender markers to assign the roles of victim and perpetrator in abusive same-sex relationships. However, as is clear in Sam and Bryony's cases as well as those of numerous other participants, such assumptions are not reliable predictors of roles in abusive relationships and may consequently obscure what is really going on. This may have serious

implications if women are deterred from seeking support, or if action is not taken against the perpetrator due to inaccurate assessments of the situation.

Conclusion

Violence and abuse in woman-to-woman relationships is an issue which until fairly recently has received very little attention – particularly in the United Kingdom, where the issue continues to be enveloped in silence. Women who experience violence and abuse from another woman face numerous obstacles when they attempt to receive support or leave their relationships, such as the scarcity of sufficiently inclusive or specialist support services and fear of homophobia. As I have exemplified in this chapter, language is a further significant factor which has the potential to silence, isolate and confuse women, albeit in ways which are less tangible than, for example, the lack of specific support services.

The core issue which I have considered is the failure of wider societal definitions and constructions of domestic violence to validate and affirm women's experiences of violence and abuse from a female partner. As I have noted, narrow lay conceptualizations of domestic violence pose definitional constraints for heterosexual women too. However, what makes definitions of domestic violence for women doubly problematic for women in abusive same-sex relationships is that the constellation of violent acts included under the umbrella term 'violence against women' is primarily understood as male violence against women. Not only are forms of violence against women such as domestic violence and rape presumed to be almost exclusively perpetrated by men, but also, where women's violence is acknowledged, it tends to be viewed through a heteronormatively gendered lens. Whilst the gendered binary of male perpetrator/female victim has served an important function in drawing attention to the widespread perpetration of violence and abuse by men towards women, it is highly problematic in the context of woman-to-woman partner abuse. The dichotomous association of the perpetration of physical and sexual violence with masculinity and victimhood with femininity needs to be challenged in order to make visible currently invisible 'perpetrators' and 'victims' of violence and abuse. This is critical not only for women in abusive same-sex relationships, but also for men in abusive same-sex and heterosexual relationships. The difficulty, however, lies in finding a balance between drawing attention to a greater diversity in the types of perpetrators of abuse than is suggested by stereotypes and implied in the existing vocabulary for domestic and sexual violence,

whilst at the same time not undermining the important connections between masculinity and violence which activists in the violence against women movement have made. In addition to developing thinking around such dilemmas, further exploration of the usefulness of terms such as 'domestic violence', 'rape', 'victim' and 'perpetrator' would offer insights into the ways in which these terms both help and hinder those who strive to make sense of their experiences and to gain support and validation from others, irrespective of their gender or sexuality.

Note

1. Turell's findings, along with other studies referenced above, point to substantial levels of abuse in women's same-sex relationships. These figures should, however, be read with caution. Whilst ascertaining that prevalence was an aim of these studies, the inevitable use of non-random sampling to access a hidden population is a significant limitation. Definitions of what constitutes abuse also vary between these studies, and there is an issue of who classifies a behaviour as abusive: the researcher or the respondent. This may partially explain the very high levels of emotional abuse reported. I make this point not to cast doubt over the significance of the issue of violence and abuse in woman-to-woman relationships, but rather to point out the flaws of using these statistics to argue that most same-sex relationships are abusive.

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3
Cultural Transformations and Gender Violence: South Asian Women's Experiences of Sexual Violence and Familial Dynamics

Bipasha Ahmed, Paula Reavey and Anamika Majumdar

Introduction

South Asian victims, survivors and perpetrators have been largely neglected in conceptualisations of gender violence. As a result, cultural stereotypes regarding South Asian men and women and the demonisation of Asian community relations can circulate without qualification in the wider public sphere. Such stereotypes include representations of South Asian women as 'passive', compliant', pressured by family and subservient to the needs of men. Yet the women we spoke to through this research were brave enough to confront not only their abusive partner, but also extended family and often the community. They had struggled hard to escape situations where they were being harmed and had begun to rebuild their lives under difficult circumstances. Our aim in this chapter is to reveal the complex set of relations that define and shape these women's experience of gender violence[1]: to argue that existing feminist and psychological accounts of gender violence must broaden their discursive fields to acknowledge the *specific* manifestations of gender power relations, interpersonal dynamics and gendered identities, as they are found in different communities. In particular, we discuss two themes that are often discussed in the literature as generalisable to all episodes of gender violence – the idea that gender violence largely operates in the private space of the home, outside of the public gaze, and the reliance on the traditional victim (female partner)/perpetrator (male partner) story to conceptualise power relations. Drawing on

semi-structured interviews and a focus group, with a total of 18 South Asian women from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, we explore two related issues that contribute to a more contextualised understanding of the impact of gender violence in this group (see also, Ahmed *et al*., 2008, in press; Reavey *et al*., 2006).

First, we explore how readings of gender violence must attend to the material spaces that situate women's experiences of themselves as agents. For example, we explore how home spaces for South Asian women can be both public *and* private, making it physically (as well as emotionally) difficult to negotiate a resistance strategy, such as leaving the family home. Second, we discuss the importance of *within gender* hierarchies. Some of the older female family members, for example, were perceived to be instrumental in shaping, maintaining and supporting and directing men to commit domestic and sexual violence against women. This in turn contributed to a lack of 'gender community' in the family (especially between younger and older generations) and made it harder for the men who committed violence to see themselves, and be seen by others, as wholly responsible for their violent acts. We argue that the recognition of broader familial dynamics should result in a more dispersed reading of power that pays specific attention to intergenerational conflict as well as dyadic gender relations (husband and wife).

A discussion of these two interrelated themes, we argue, provides insight into the links between culture, gender violence and selfhood in particular. Furthermore, the analysis disrupts conventional/normative understandings of the categories through which violence against women is conceptualised: public/private; victim (female) and perpetrators (male).

Background

Public concern over women's experiences of sexual and domestic violence has been largely due to the work of feminist writers and activists in alerting the public to the widespread nature of domestic violence (Herman, 1992; Kelly, 1988/1989; Russell, 1984). With regard to sexual violence, feminist research has been instrumental in challenging the notion that the family is a necessarily safe place to live by highlighting the widespread occurrence of sexual abuse in families (e.g. Brownmiller, 1975). While feminist research has been extremely important in raising public awareness about abuse against women and children, some feminists have been criticised for not attending to the differences between women and their inclusion into other salient categories of race, class, sexuality and disability. In particular, some feminist research

has been accused of assuming western models of patriarchal power and intimate relations that are not always appropriate for non-western women (e.g. Mama, 1995).

In this chapter we consider the experiences of South Asian women in the United Kingdom, although we do not assume South Asian women to be a homogenous category and recognise that women's experiences can be differentiated by factors such as social class, caste, religion and place of residence. Research on South Asian communities in the West has highlighted women's experiences of marital violence in various diaspora communities (Abraham, 1998; Ayyub, 2000; DasGupta, 2000; Macey, 1999; Supriya, 1996). Although it is difficult to estimate prevalence of sexual violence in South Asian communities, some US research suggested a slightly higher rate (around 40%) than the general population for intimate partner violence (Raj and Silverman, 2002), although with no greater rates for sexual abuse (Yoshioka *et al.*, 2003). Research in Britain has identified sexual and domestic violence as common factors which contribute to poor mental health, suicide and self-harming amongst South Asian women (e.g. Chantler *et al.*, 2001; Gilbert *et al.*, 2004; Yazdani, 1998).

Chantler *et al.*'s (2001) research, in particular, suggests that the needs of South Asian women are not sufficiently understood or prioritised in service planning or provision. It has been suggested that minority ethnic women are often reluctant to access services though a fear of discrimination; a fear sometimes grounded in racist clinical and social work practices (Ahmed, 1986; McLeod, 1994). Other research points to a number of specific issues relating to South Asian women in particular and their ability to seek help, such as familial and community dynamics. Such dynamics can prevent women from speaking out about sexual violence, giving rise to issues such as whether to remain silent in order to maintain family honour or 'izzat', which can act as a barrier to seeking help (Chantler *et al.*, 2001; Gilbert *et al.*, 2004; Gill, 2003). In our own research, we found that families and communities could potentially offer a means of support to South Asian women, yet could also act as a barrier to women disclosing abuse. Naming the abuse within a therapeutic context became problematic as therapeutic models focussed on the individual, while women were aware that such disclosure could bring their family and/or community into disrepute (Reavey *et al.*, 2006). Furthermore, where women were ambivalent about leaving abusive husbands, it was often due to the pressure exerted by family members more than pressure from their husbands to return to or to stay with them (Ahmed *et al.*, 2008, in press).

Familial and community pressures in the lives of South Asian women have been explained by patriarchal discourses of women as being carriers of tradition and culture and therefore being responsible for maintaining family honour (Brah, 1996). This is reflected in pressures on some South Asian women to marry and take a feminised role within the family (Ayyub, 2000). While research on heterosexual relationships has often viewed discourses on compulsory sexuality and sexual needs and desires as being more often taken up by men (e.g. see Boyle, 1993; Holloway, 1989; Kitzinger, 1993), research on South Asian marriages has documented the conflicts arising between various gendered hierarchical relationships between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law (Sonuga-Barke *et al.*, 1998) and mothers and daughters (Ahmed *et al.*, 2008, in press). This illustrates a particular colonisation of power relations by older women in South Asian families – something that is not highlighted as an issue in more mainstream domestic violence literature and which challenges the dominant assumptions about domestic violence as perpetrated by men against women within privatised intimate relationships.

In view of the widely dispersed set of relations that define marriage in the lives of South Asian women (cf. Gill, 2003), our analytic focus has been the mediation of the self through family members and community. For South Asian women survivors of sexual violence, addressing one's own problems without the cooperation of others can often be extremely problematic (Reavey *et al.*, 2006, Ahmed *et al.*, 2008, in press). Social constructionist writers (Gergen, 1997) have emphasised the idea that the self (even the Western Self) is always already relational and situated in a network of relationships and other selves. This model of self as embedded within relationships with families and communities has helped to shape our understandings about our research with South Asian women (Proctor *et al.*, 2006; Reavey *et al.*, 2006). However, it has been argued that even where non-western ideas about the self have been acknowledged, this has been done in a simplistic or inadequate way (Burman, 2007; Burman *et al.*, 1998; Fernando, 2003; Malik, 2000). For example, Burman (2007) argues that cultural explanations of non-western selfhood have been viewed negatively or have come to stand in for socio-political analysis, thereby obscuring other dimensions such as gender, class and sexuality. We are interested therefore in exploring the complexities between culture and South Asian women's subjectivities and how women's experiences are managed through a whole family and sometimes community system.

The study

We set out to explore the experiences of South Asian women living in the United Kingdom who had experienced domestic/sexual violence, paying attention to social and psychological issues which influenced their seeking of support. This study was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council.

Recruiting organisations and participants

A range of organisations were contacted that worked either specifically or more generally with South Asian women who had experienced domestic and/or sexual violence. An introductory letter was sent out inviting organisations to contact us if they wished to take part. Fliers and posters were placed in offices and waiting rooms of organisations and on university notice boards. The organisations that agreed to take part in the research included rape crisis groups, family crisis groups, clinical services, counselling groups, refuges and woman-run voluntary organisations (both general and South Asian specific) in Bradford, Bristol, Oldham, London and Birmingham. Discussions were then conducted with each of the organisations to establish the best way to conduct the research. While most participants were recruited directly through organisations, one participant responded to a poster request on a university notice board.

Participants

Eighteen survivors were recruited in total from a range of South Asian backgrounds including Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian. One focus group with six women and 12 individual interviews with survivors were conducted in total. The participants were aged between 20 and 50 years and were not currently living with the abusive partner.

Procedure

Prior to individual interviews, the researcher (AM) checked what service users had already been told about the research and explained that the research was about all experiences of violence suffered by South Asian women, including physical, verbal and sexual violence. Participants were advised that they did not have to speak about anything that was uncomfortable for them and the options of not answering questions and/or withdrawing from the interview were discussed before verbal consent was obtained. The interview questions were used only as a guide and participants were also encouraged to talk about other issues which

seemed important to them. For example, some women chose to talk also about housing, childcare and legal issues (Majumdar *et al.*, 2004).

The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours. One focus group was conducted at one of the organisations, as the service providers deemed this to be a more efficient way to conduct interviews. However, the majority of interviews were conducted with individuals and took place in a private room inside the organisation's premises in which the participant attended the interview. In two interviews, members of staff acted as interpreters for service users.

Transcription

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcription procedure stressed readability rather than 'accuracy' in terms of detailing all the various features of talk, as the main concern here was the content of the broad discourses rather than moment-by-moment conversational coherence (Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

Methodology

Our analysis is based on a social constructionist approach (Ahmed, 2000; Parker, 1992; Reavey, 2003; Wetherell and Potter, 1992). We use discourse analysis as a way to examine how individuals draw upon particular discourses and discursive strategies to construct an account of their experience; to ask what functions discourses serve; to explore how individuals position themselves within such discourses; and to consider the material consequences these strategies may have (Parker, 1992; Wetherell and Potter, 1992). In this chapter, rather than complete a fine-grained discursive analysis, we have selected two major issues arising from the interviews and show how these in turn feed into a more relational understanding of gender violence.

Space and the configuration of public and private

Since the 1970s, feminist scholars working within the social sciences have argued that the home and household (the private) are reflective of wider political gender struggles, which have a direct impact on men's and women's subjectivities. Private spaces, such as the family and household, are locations where women and children can be subject to gross infringements of their civil liberties by other family members, which are reflective of a wider inequality in public life (O'Donovan, 1993). Furthermore, the actual material spaces of the private space of the home, including allocated private bedroom spaces and the choice to

lock doors, become one of the key ways in which a range of activities, including the negotiation of agency, is understood and played out in families (Ahmed *et al.*, 2008, in press; Bachelard, 1958; Duncan, 1996; Taylor, 1999).

Incidence rates for child abuse (including sexual, emotional and physical) and the abuse of women within the home illustrate that all forms of domestic abuse (especially against women and children) are relatively common, though the perpetrators of domestic crimes are rarely prosecuted in the public sphere of the court (Bell, 1993; Smart, 1992). Because the home space is relatively immutable to public intervention, domestic abuses are often viewed and experienced by the victims and survivors as a private or psychological issue. A significant number of victims and survivors of domestic abuse, for example, will maintain the belief that they do not have access to their public/civil rights and that their problem is their own. These problems (which have a social origin) can then too easily be attributed to the personal or 'mental health' problems of the individual, who may feel understandably worried and miserable about their predicament – feelings that can too often be retranslated into psychiatric terms such as depression and anxiety (Reavey *et al.*, 2006).

The privatisation of domestic abuse and the separation of the public and private in this way are applicable to many cultural groups. However, we have found a slightly different configuration of these issues in the lives of South Asian women whose experiences of the material space of the home are often less than private or situated in a couple dynamic only. In this section, we discuss the blurring of the boundaries of public and the private spaces through a discussion of three key issues: (1) how South Asian women's experiences of domestic violence can often be more spatially private and public, due to the presence of older family members in the home; (2) how further abuses of South Asian women can be related to community intervention and a lack of institutional/welfare support; and (3) how many women's confidentiality is constantly susceptible to public/community scrutiny and abuse, making it difficult to seek medical or psychological help or to relocate outside the family home.

Physical and emotional limitations: the home as a public space

Many of the women we interviewed did not draw upon a traditional discourse of heteronormative romantic love when describing their reasons for finding it difficult to leave a violent marriage (see also Ahmed *et al.*, 2008, in press). This is contrary to a large number of white women, who cited such a discourse as one of the reasons they stayed in an abusive relationship, as well as financial constraints (Brown, 1990). South

Asian women in the present study cited reasons that were more dispersed in a community (including extended family space) that placed physical limitations on them – limitations on their everyday social movement, as well as their ability to move on from the abusive relationship.

For example, the majority of the women we interviewed made specific reference to feeling depressed and anxious during their time living with physically and/or sexually violent husbands. These feelings intensified when their own and their partner's family would either express support for the violent party or apply pressure to ensure that the marriage remained intact and public family honour was sustained. Many of the women clearly understood that the origins of their misery lay in their unhappy marriage, their lack of 'voice' in their community and a lack of physical private space. The physical entrapment that some of the women experienced came as a direct result of living with extended family, especially when the family played a key role in contributing and/or maintaining domestically violent behaviour:

Extract 1

> It was really bad cos his mother was always there, she was just finding anything to basically get him at me and us to argue more and he just became more violent and hit me...and she [her mother-in-law] was saying how come you go out everyday [to the next door neighbour's house]...I'll see what my son has to say about this...she [then] cut a bamboo that thin green one and er she hit me...really hard (R: you were pregnant?) Yeah.
>
> (Survivor 2)

Extract 2

> I was living with in-laws as well (R: did they see you being hit by him?) Yeah cos my mother-in-law and my husband they don't understand me both...but everytime he held me and beating me when I'm pregnant [and they were there] and nobody going to help me...they said I can't do nothing.
>
> R: you said to them
>
> P:...I said to them [told in laws about violence] and they said I can't do nothing, it's between you and him
>
> (Survivor 7)

These two extracts demonstrate how the physical space of the home becomes subject to a wider public audience (extended family members and other members of the community), making it ever more difficult for women to experience any independence or escape. The woman in Extract 2, for example, was beginning to receive positive support from a neighbour before her movements were constantly monitored by her resident mother-in-law. The physical restrictions placed upon her own space were, in turn, backed up by violence from the mother-in-law. Such constant monitoring and violence has been shown to intensify feelings of entrapment, contributing to experiences of abject misery, self-harm and poor mental health generally (see also Gilbert *et al.*, 2004).

Many of the women described their living space as a public forum, with regular familial participation in the marriage. When families were aware of the violence in a marriage, participation would often take the form of persuading the woman not to leave in order to protect family honour. In brief, keeping her in the field of vision, at home, was a way to ensure that she received appropriate moral guidance (Taylor, 1999). Thus, any support women tried to secure outside the familial boundaries could be physically overridden by the constant presence of a family member in her home, who would monitor her activities, phone calls and even conversations with neighbours. The family of the husband of one woman physically positioned her closely to their house, in order to monitor the marriage:

Extract 3

> So they put her on a [house] on the same road a few doors away basically…basically she said to her father-in-law 'I've had enough, he doesn't want to keep me, so tell my brothers and sisters to come and take me'…and he said 'I will support you'…basically when her father-in-law started supporting her I think her husband became even more resentful…he got much worse and he wouldn't come for days on end…[after he had sold everything in the house] she went to her in-laws and they put pressure on her saying 'don't go, he'll change' (translated interview).
>
> (Survivor 11)

Keeping her physically close to the family, she reflects, was a way of her in-laws taking away the responsibility for the violence from their son, as well as maintaining pressure on her to stay. The close physical spacing of married couples and their families inevitably provides greater

access to view the workings of the marriage, as well as intervention. This physical spacing, we argue, directly disrupts any notion of the 'private', transforming violence into a 'publicly dynamic' problem – a problem that the family and community, and not only the couple, must resolve.

Nowhere to hide: Public emotions and secondary violence

In the previous section, it was clear that the spaces of domestic violence were far from 'private', as they were thoroughly interdependent with larger familial physical spaces. Many women described how such a spatial limitation made it difficult for them to physically and emotionally manoeuvre themselves, which in turn increased their feelings of entrapment and humiliation. This was compounded by a very public sense of shame that was imposed from within (internally) as well as from the extended family and community (Gilbert *et al.*, 2004). South Asian women, therefore, did not have only to contend with their own feelings of shame, resulting from the violence and a sense of having 'failed' to make the marriage work, but a far-reaching sense of community shame, associated with their failings as a wife (see also, Brown, 1990). For some women, the dispersal of shame in the community contributed to fears over safety, because of the 'danger' that resulted from having brought such unwelcome shame upon the family:

Extract 4

> Women are judged by anybody in the community that sometimes they have to run away and hide like I'm here away from the community because I'm ashamed and I shouldn't be feeling ashamed... because you know families are dangerous especially Asian families, I'm not saying all of them.
>
> (Survivor 8)

Thus, there were multiple emotional layers for this group of women to manage – a diminished sense of private space to work through these feelings and great concern over where they were able to go without enduring further physical restraint and violence in the public setting of the community:

Extract 5

> [O]n the one hand Asian communities can be really close knit, people say I'm really close to my family and on the other hand women aren't

> getting the support from the family when it something like this [violence] happens…'we're going to be ashamed'…even though they know their daughter's been abused…the family reputation and that makes the woman, lady feel even more isolated, rejected, worthless, all those feelings of helplessness.
>
> (Survivor 2)

Many women were frightened to go outside because of the negative reactions they would have to face, or worse, because they feared for their own safety in public settings. Many of the women, therefore, had the physical or sexual violence of their partners to confront and further violence from other community members or family, who might physically attack, kidnap or chain them up, with the full co-operation of an often large familial or community group. In brief, the perimeters of their 'domestic' violence were less bounded (that is, confined to the private space of the home) and were far reaching in many cases (that is, involving many people in a broad public setting). As one survivor comments,

Extract 6

> It was from my family (the violence) as well and people who are not even my close cousins by far they would like get involved. My mum and dad were ok but you know the way they would talk to them, they'd talk to them in such a way that they would combine against me so they would fill their ears with all crap and everything and saying you know – your daughter's doing this…like I was living my life in a cage…so I gave them a chance and I came back and went back home and I gave them a chance, it was all worse like they were standing outside the toilet door and wouldn't let me go anywhere…You know here [the refuge] you know I'm stressed, I can't sleep at night, I can't eat, I got problems, everyone's got problems…I just want a place of my own…I think they would probably just kill me…I go out when I need to go out.
>
> (Survivor 4)

This spatial and/or physical restriction made it difficult for those women without any access to privacy to seek help. Some of the women were closely guarded by extended family members, who would attend doctor's appointments, making it impossible for them to disclose the violence to a professional:

Extract 7

> I went to the doctor and told him everything [about the violence from her husband] that I can't live with him coz I can't tell the doctor coz everyone go with me someone, my mother-in-law, always, always go with me, so I can't tell him..One time, I go on my own...
>
> (Survivor 7)

In a study with 'psy' professionals (psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, psychotherapists and counsellors), we found that family members could also use health care settings to discredit, and render 'mad', those women who expressed discontent with their families and the violence they experienced (Reavey *et al.*, 2006). This was especially the case for women who were not able to speak English well, and required a family member to translate on their behalf. As a result of this intervention, the understandable feelings of shame, helplessness, worry and misery that these women experience as a result of unhappy living conditions are too often translated into psychiatric symptoms by professionals and family members (depression, anxiety, personality disorder), where medication, rather than practical and emotional support, was prescribed.

No identity/no confidentiality?

South Asian women, like other women from ethnic minorities seeking help for domestic violence, were constantly aware that the help they sought must not be culturally blind or even institutionally racist (Ahmed, 1986; Brice-Baker, 2005). The situation for those women who left their own country to marry in Britain, in particular, was often precarious, when it came to re-housing and seeking help. For one woman, the situation had sent her 'mad in her head', as she felt she had no voice and no identity base from which to speak, leaving her silently forced to continue enduring severe physical and sexual violence. Her identity, she explained, was very much tied up with her husband's in the eyes of those in statutory services, which in turn increased her sense of powerlessness. Following an eviction from her home she comments,

Extract 8

> We have...we have nothing to know about where we go when we evicted from home, without husband, without his documents, we can't get our right, without his help we can't do because he's...he's the person who is doing everything...And we have no facilities to

> provide ourselves...The system is no good, so I believe only when I got the stay...they should give stay to women when they are evicted from home, when they have no status in this country, they should be given the status as soon as possible.
>
> (Survivor 1)

The preservation of identity and confidentiality was perceived to be key to their escape from violence (see also, Reavey *et al.*, 2006). However, the preservation of confidentiality was threatened by those people who were perceived to be most able to help them in culturally sensitive ways (e.g. Asian GPs, social workers, mental health professionals). According to some of the women we interviewed, Asians could not always be trusted due to their dual role as a community member and professional. For some women, this lack of trust was enough to keep them away from social services. Even for women who had managed to escape and were living in refuges, the constant fear of their whereabouts being discovered by family members because of professional leakage intensified feelings of anxiety and misery.

Extract 9

> Number one is to keep everything confidential, because lots of people tend to work...like my social worker works with the family and with me so I'm scared sometimes, because she's working with them and with me, I think they should work with the women who need the help.
>
> (Survivor 8)

Because the community and family were perceived to be a public and far-reaching network, involving not only family members but also other 'invested' Asian community members, the women in this study considered the protection of their identity (as something that was exclusively theirs and separate from the family) to be paramount to their recovery and security in the long term. Thus, escape from domestic violence alone was insufficient in dealing with the long-term public/community threat. This point, in particular, speaks to how difficult it is for this group of women to maintain a separation of the private from the public in their everyday lives.

To summarise, readings of gender violence in South Asian communities must attend to the material spaces that situate women's experiences of themselves as agents who are entwined in a large relational network. In this section, we have explored the sense in which home spaces for South Asian women can be both public *and* private, making it physically

(as well as emotionally) difficult for them to negotiate a resistance strategy. We have also examined how identity and confidentiality are extremely important to this group of women, who have to take into consideration the further threats by family and community members who wish to punish them for transgressing family honour and bringing shame on the family and the community.

Beyond the couple: Multiple sites of power within the family

Associated with many of the issues raised above, regarding physical and emotional limitations of home space, is the existence of multiple sites of power that extend beyond the relationship between husband and wife. We argue here that power is in fact more dispersed within wider familial dynamics and sometimes even the wider community. As discussed in the previous section, often privacy is not confined to the relationship between the husband and the wife, but often made more 'public' due to the involvement of other family members in a variety of ways. This demonstrates how the assumptions made about intimate relationships in these constructions challenge western ideas about heterosexual couples. However, the women in this study pose a challenge to commonly held assumptions which suggest that power within the heterosexual relationship, and the available discourses regarding sexuality and sexual needs, are more often taken up by men (e.g. see Ahmed *et al.*, 2008, in press; Boyle, 1993; Holloway, 1989; Kitzinger, 1993). Power and constructions regarding relationships are instead embedded within the family and community, which demonstrate a more widely dispersed set of relations that define the personal space of marriage (cf. Gill, 2003). The women in these interviews demonstrate how patriarchal relations are not only just played out between couples; they are exacerbated by the assumptions that exist within their own communities and are reproduced in families. The participants in our interviews often referred to how those views commonly associated with the patriarchal perspective are frequently reproduced by the women's mothers and, in some instances, their mother-in-laws, illustrating a particular gendered colonisation of power relations by older women. Mothers and mothers-in-law were viewed by many in this study as responsible for transmitting ideas about the legitimacy of abuse to their daughters and daughters-in-law. Families in general were also seen to play a key role in trying to persuade women to stay or return to their abusive husbands. Often with the women we interviewed, it was clear that power was more dispersed than conventional understandings

of domestic violence allow for, and more often than not, it was older female family members such as mothers and mothers-in-law that were able to exert power which effectively colluded with the violence.

In our interviews with service providers, mothers-in-law were often discussed as if they are even more problematic than the husbands and were cited as the key reason that confounds the women's experiences of domestic violence. For example, in Extract 1 cited earlier, the participant describes how she felt her mother-in-law directly influenced her son to be confrontational with her, leading him to violence, even though it was the mother-in-law herself who was actually violent towards her. Although this is an extreme case, it is a clear example of how the woman being abused is not only dealing with problematic dynamics within her relationship with her husband, but that the dynamics extend to both her and her husband's relationship with his mother as well as the mother's relationship with the community as a whole.

However, even when the role of the mother-in-law is not as direct as in this case, there appear to be a range of subtle ways in which older women and other family members are seen to collude with partner violence. For example, in the following extract, the participant describes her disappointment with her own mother's point of view:

Extract 10

> P:...they all know what happened, our whole family knows, it's like it's ridiculous. She's [mother] obviously come to terms with the fact that I don't want to be with him but he just doesn't understand, she thinks I should forgive him and try again and things like that
>
> R: right
>
> P: But its not that simple and then she's...with her being quite old she's...she thinks well it happens to every woman it's part of married life

(Survivor 5)

Extract 11

> P:....she [mother] worries too much about family, what people are going to say, oh my god what's this auntie going to say, they're going to say it's your fault...

(Survivor 5)

Extract 12:

> P: like with my mum she's more like oh know you should stay with it stay with it, family name, family name, you're going to put your dad's name in the ground and look at the high izzat he brought up and stuff like that, it just doesn't work. Not with me anyway…
>
> (Survivor 5)

In Extract 10, the participant describes her mother's expectation that she should forgive her husband as it is considered the 'norm' that men can do as they wish with their wives (it happens to every woman it's part of married life) and that this has happened throughout history. In Extracts 11 and 12, the participants describe how their mothers expect them to endure the violence for the sake of family honour ('izzat'). The issue of family honour is sometimes regarded as problematic in situations of domestic violence, since women are often expected to stay in abusive relations in order to protect it (see Ahmed *et al.*, 2008, in press; Gilbert *et al.*, 2004; Gill, 2003). Often daughters and daughter-in-laws are seen as responsible for protecting family honour by way of marriage (Ahmed *et al.*, in press; Burman *et al.*, 2004), which immediately becomes problematic in domestic violence situations. However, we would argue that it is the female family members more generally who hold this responsibility and across generations. Older women often take, and are expected to take, the role of communicating these ideas to their daughters and daughters-in-law to ensure that family honour is protected above and beyond anything else, even if their daughters are in violent relationships:

Extract 13:

> P: the parents…say for example the lady will go to her own parents and say this is happening to me, they turned around and said look you have to put up with it.
>
> (Survivor 6)

Extract 13 also demonstrates how even when the issue of violence is made more 'public' – that is the violence is not just 'private' between the wife and the husband but that other family members, including parents or in-laws, are aware of the violence – rather than this being perceived as a means of seeking support and help from other family members in order to deal with or even escape the violence, often the family members are

seen to support the violence. Ironically in this instance, the participant describes how she was reminded of the 'privacy' of the relationship with her husband ('it's between you and him') as a way of maintaining the violent relationship and how she felt that this was further sustained by her parents doing nothing to help or stop the violence.

'Respect for elders'

The perceived power of older women often converges with a common discourse within many South Asian communities regarding 'respect for elders'. There is a common notion that such respect is seen as obligatory. However, what is actually being referred to is *deference* to elders; that is, that younger people should always respect the views of older people in their community generally, and family members in particular should be deferred to, and anything that they say must be abided even if there is strong disagreement. With this overarching discourse affecting the lives of these women, trying to leave violent relationships is not only often seen as shaming the family, but also as an act of disrespect towards older family members, of disobedience and of selfishness.

In the following extract, the participant relates a conversation with a friend who was also in a violent relationship:

Extract 14

> P:... he did the same thing to her but she's just living with it, she was like oh well you know do it for your parents, but I don't think that's right....
>
> (Survivor 5)

The following participant had been talking about the difficulty she had in escaping her violent husband. The main barrier for her was fear of offending her family:

Extract 15

> P:... I find it so hard talking to them [the family], they really weaken me coz I'm the youngest and they're always like you know – you're not thinking about this, you're selfish, you're thinking about yourself, you're not thinking about your mum and dad, you're not thinking about what's going to happen in the family...
>
> (Survivor 3)

Extract 16

> P:....coz being the youngest it doesn't help coz you have to respect your elders, I've always been told to respect my elders and being the youngest it doesn't help.
>
> (Survivor 3)

Clearly, there is an expectation that respect for elders is seen as more important than personal needs. The effect is that women often feel trapped by this assumption in that they are made to feel that escaping violence is deemed to be disrespectful and selfish, and that they should be more concerned with protecting the family reputation than themselves.

Conclusions

South Asian women face a very specific set of issues when managing and/or escaping an abusive marriage, including the way they manage private and public spaces, as well as a multitude of intersecting familial relationships. The first analytical section examined the role of the material spaces that South Asian women and their families inhabit, illustrating how the marital home is often accessed by extended family members whose task it may be to keep a close eye on things, and in extreme cases, who contribute to the physical violence that women already endure from their husbands. Put simply, the supposed private space of the home is subsumed by others and made 'public', such that women do not feel as if there is sufficient room to manoeuvre and eventually escape. This highlights the limitations of conventional conceptualisations of private/public spaces and their relationship to gendered violence. Furthermore, the perception that outside spaces, including professional centres (which women might access to gain support), are also flooded by community/familial concerns over the shame associated with divorce can lead to women fearing for their safety. This highlights once again the limitations of traditional conceptualisations of normative distinctions such as public/private, and a female victim and male perpetrator.

The second analytical section demonstrated that situations of gender violence were not confined to the relationship between the husband and the wife and that often power relations are more dispersed in South Asian communities. In many cases power struggles exist within gender hierarchies between female family members. Women's expectations, therefore, often lead to contradictions. Whereas being part of a closer

extended family and community is deemed to be potentially supportive, in situations of domestic violence, this is often not the case and, in fact, rather than being supportive of the women and trying to help them, their actions can sometimes be seen as colluding with the violence. However, we have also found that often abused women resist such oppressive constructions of family and community (Ahmed *et al.*, 2008, in press). The effects of such power relations, therefore, are not always inevitable.

We want to conclude by reiterating that the women we interviewed had somehow managed to escape their abusive marriages, despite the range of limitations imposed upon them. For example, the women reported how they had managed to leave, either by accessing South Asian organisations that had ensured their confidentiality and offered valuable practical and emotional assistance or through their personal determination. As a result of leaving, some of these women face a future without their families (mother, father, brothers, sisters), who have sadly turned their back on their daughter. However, other women have made real attempts to work with their families in order to try to change how their community perceives women who encounter physical and sexual violence. We want to emphasise the fact that some South Asian families have begun to make the move to support their daughters and grandchildren, even though they themselves may have faced criticism from the rest of the community.

This chapter has set out to highlight how South Asian women's experience of physical and sexual violence must be understood in fully relational terms. Though we have explored many stories that include negative relationships and multiple sites of abuse and oppression, the bravery and strength of these women in all this should never be overlooked, but respected and ultimately revered.

Note

1. It is not our aim here to generalise about all South Asian communities but to highlight from our data, specific issues relevant to the experiences of this group of women as they have spoken about them.

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4
Sexual Trafficking: A New Sexual Story?

Alison Jobe

The sexual trafficking of women is an increasingly high-profile issue in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in the world, with sexual trafficking stories frequently recounted in the news media, TV and film. Consequently, sexual trafficking has become a much more commonly told, and therefore, more easily recognised story, which has enabled accounts by trafficked women to be considered more credible within the British asylum system. However, in spite of the success of some women's asylum applications, the emergence of 'sexual trafficking' as a commonly told story essentially has a dual effect, in that it both makes the problem visible and constructs what the problem is, effectively defining the perimeters of credibility in the British asylum system.

Ken Plummer has argued that all stories have a moment. The act of being able to tell a story, and to have a receptive audience for that story, is political, and each story's 'moment' develops within certain social and historical spaces (Plummer, 1995, 2003). As Plummer states, 'for stories to flourish there must be social worlds waiting to hear' (Plummer, 2003, p. 34). The research upon which this chapter is based has arguably occurred at such a moment, where (some) stories relating to violence against migrant women working in prostitution were vocalised, heard and acted upon, and were (re)produced by popular media representations. It is also possible that this moment may be a transient one, as changes in the conceptualisation(s) of sexual trafficking are ongoing. As Plummer has argued in relation to stories of rape:

> For some, the stories will go on unfolding but they will be of little consequence. There is an excess of frenzied story telling which in fact now signifies nothing. A spectacle that makes no difference.

> There has been a story-telling overload: and as a parade of stories pass before us every day on Oprah and Donahue, in cheap paper backs and sensational tabloids . . . they count as nothing. Mild amusement, mild diversion; here today, gone tomorrow. If this is so, it does not augur well for the modernist stories of rape.
>
> (Plummer, 1995, p. 78)

The extent to which trafficked women can position themselves in this particular moment as 'credible story tellers' to UK immigration authorities has significant implications for those subject to trafficking harms and their abilities to access help and services in the UK context. O'Connell Davidson (2006) has argued that in the UK context a particular story is seen to be emerging as a legitimate account of sexual trafficking by immigration officers, the police and the asylum system, and that often, the threshold of 'victimhood' is quite high when women tell their stories to these authorities (see also Jobe, 2008a). This chapter explores this trend in relation to the reception of trafficked women's asylum applications and through an analysis of how trafficked women's accounts can disrupt the binaries of choice/agency and the public/private as well as conventional understandings of the roles of victims and perpetrators. This chapter argues that where women's accounts challenge or disrupt these boundaries, women are less likely to be considered credible story tellers, and consequently, are less likely to access services, including asylum, in the United Kingdom.

I use the term 'story' throughout this chapter, not to suggest in any way that trafficking accounts are fabrications, unrelated to trafficked women's experiences. Instead, I understand the telling of stories to be a politically formed set of practices and one that can have both negative and positive consequences for tellers and for those who stories are told about. As Ken Plummer argues,

> Stories are not just practical and symbolic actions: they are also part of the political process. Sexual stories ooze through the political stream. Power can be viewed as a flow, a process, a pulsate, undulating through the social world and working to pattern the degree of control people experience and have over their lives. Power connects processes which make a difference to the conduct of life: it is a flow of negotiations and outcomes . . . This flow is negative – repressing, oppressing, depressing – and positive – constructive, creative, constitutive. It flows into situations, making some open and flexible, making others closed and rigid. It flows through the negotiated social order, controlling and

> empowering, closing and opening. Sexual stories live in [a] flow of power. The power to tell a story or indeed not to tell a story, under conditions of one's choosing, is part of the political process.
>
> (Plummer, 2006, p. 4)

For Plummer, the boundaries of what can be discussed openly and what cannot are constantly changing, moving and being reconstructed. It is common for politicians, writers, journalists, campaigners and some academics to talk about trafficking as a new, emerging and increasing problem, which is frequently considered to be increasing to new and alarming proportions. Forced prostitution, however, is not a new occurrence, and levels of force within prostitution, however experienced, have been documented by feminist researchers for many years prior to the current rise of sexual trafficking as a recognised and widely discussed social problem (see, for instance, Barry, 1979, 1995; O'Connell Davidson, 1998; O'Neill, 1996). The current level of discussion and public narration, throughout the world, of force within prostitution is however new (albeit with some historical precedent), and in this chapter I argue that this impacts directly on how force within prostitution is presently understood and vocalised.

After a brief methodological description of the research upon which this chapter is based, I then set out the dominant 'sexual trafficking story' against which the women's credibility was often judged. The following section explores the importance of telling a credible story in order to negotiate the UK asylum system. The remainder of the chapter explores in detail the ways in which the credibility of sexual trafficking stories is dependent on very particular understandings of three key binaries: (1) agency/coercion; (2) victim/perpetrator; and (3) public/private. The chapter concludes that the credibility of women's sexual trafficking stories within the British asylum system is highly dependent on the extent to which their accounts conform to, or disrupt, the normatively determined boundaries between these binary categories.

The research

This chapter draws from exploratory qualitative doctoral research[1] focusing upon 23 women who have been trafficked, have accessed help and services and who are now applying for asylum to remain in the United Kingdom. The findings in the chapter are generated by the analysis of trafficked women's asylum records, in which women recount their experiences to the UK authorities. The research also included interviews

with victims/survivors, interviews with solicitors and barristers who worked on the asylum cases and interviews with project workers at the POPPY Project – a UK Home Office funded project which was developed in March 2003 to house and assist women who have been trafficked for the purposes of prostitution into the United Kingdom. The interviews all took place between August and October of 2005. All of the interview data and the asylum appeal transcripts are subject to conditions of confidentiality and anonymity, and therefore all identifying information has been removed from the extracts quoted here.

The research participants and the asylum records were accessed through the POPPY Project in the United Kingdom. The project, at the time of writing, has funding to provide support for up to 35 women at any one time and up until June 2007, has assisted 145 trafficked women with accommodation and support and has provided outreach support to further 75. The support provided by the project includes accommodation and subsistence, access to health care and counselling, access to legal advice including support to claim asylum in the United Kingdom and access to education and rehabilitation services. It is currently the only project of its kind in the United Kingdom and is based in London. At the time of conducting the doctoral research in 2004/2005, 23 women were claiming asylum to remain in the United Kingdom and were being assisted by the POPPY Project as trafficking victims/survivors. This chapter is based upon these 23 women's experiences.

The 'sexual trafficking story'

More and more accounts of sexual trafficking are emerging; some are told by survivors themselves and more still by dramatists, journalists or academics. Popular Western depictions of sexually trafficked women in films, fiction, art and the media frequently follow similar plotlines. They overwhelmingly involve non-western (often Eastern European) women who have been tricked or duped into forced prostitution situations, in which, invariably, extreme forms of violence and control are used by predominantly male trafficker(s). These depictions often involve organised criminal gangs and/or mafia-style criminal networks. These stories also frequently involve rescue by (often western) individuals or institutions. For instance, in 'Human Trafficking', a US mini series, first shown in 2005 (Duguay, 2005), a young girl from the Ukraine is tricked into forced prostitution via a fake modelling agency and another young woman from the Czech republic is tricked into prostitution by a 'boyfriend'. Both are trafficked to the United States by an organised

criminal mafia-style gang, subject to sexual violence and abuse, and are later rescued by the US Department of Homeland Security. Elsewhere in 'Sex Traffic', a British and Canadian production first shown on Channel 4 in 2004 (Morgan, 2004), two Eastern European sisters are trafficked into the United Kingdom, forced into prostitution, subject to rape and extreme violence, and one later escapes and is rescued partly through her association with a Western (male) charity worker.

These stories are further reflected in the growing media coverage of the subject. Countless news media reports have been produced (for example Arie, 2003; BBC News, 2004; BBC News, 2007; Buckley, 2005; Cowan, 2005; Gibb, 2003; The Times online, 2005, among others), and television documentaries have also told similar stories (for example 'Macintyre Investigates' (BBC, 2002) and 'The Real Sex Traffic' (Bienstock, 2005)). Similar stories are also told in numerous recently published books of investigative journalism (see, for instance, Gupta, 2007; Malarek, 2004; McGill, 2003; Waugh, 2006).

Trafficked women's asylum applications

In the British asylum process credibility or 'truth' is established at and in between the various stages of the asylum process: during interviews, when cases are initially assessed by the Home Office, and by the adjudicators/ judges in the asylum appeals courts. The 'truth' of an account is therefore 'decided' by a myriad of individuals, but also by a system and in relation to laws and legal procedures, which are inevitably constructions of wider cultural and social productions of 'truths' (Bruner, 2003; Mackinnon, 1987; Spijkerboer, 2000). At all times during the asylum process the trafficked woman's position is tenuous, as others, who are invariably in a dominant position to her, decide the 'truth' of her account in relation to wider cultural understandings around sexual trafficking, violence, sexuality and gender roles.

The growth in the telling of trafficking stories has both a direct and indirect relationship with the credibility of trafficked women in the British asylum system. Some of the media stories appeared in the women's asylum cases as evidence and so were directly consulted and considered. Moreover, it is evident that these developments have had an effect on the public acknowledgement of sexual trafficking as a social problem; more professionals such as those in the legal profession are recognising the problem (Jobe, 2008b) and more trafficked women's accounts are now considered credible than ever before in the asylum process (POPPY Project, 2006). The telling of sexual trafficking stories,

both within and outside of the asylum system, is therefore part of a complex social dynamic of story-telling (Bruner, 2003; Plummer, 1995) which has implications for the lives and futures of those who are the subjects of those stories.

Women applying for asylum from within the POPPY Project have had a significantly higher success rate than other asylum cases, with the success of trafficked women's asylum applications at appeal six times higher than asylum application success rates overall. Eighty percent of the 32 cases analysed for a study by the POPPY Project were granted refugee status and/or humanitarian protection (POPPY Project, 2006). This trend was also evident within my own research sample.

This higher success rate of trafficked women's asylum applications appears to be linked to growing acknowledgment and awareness of the problem within the United Kingdom, but it is also the case that the POPPY Project appeared to lend credibility to the women's accounts. A woman's story was often considered credible because she has been earlier considered credible by the project. This impact was most evident where adjudicators/judges were assessing the credibility of a woman's story and when making decisions over who was a trafficking victim/survivor and who was not. At one woman's appeal hearing, for example, the judge/adjudicator stated,

> I accept that the core of the appellant's account is reasonably likely to be true. I believe that she came to the UK believing she would be assisted to find an education and that she was tricked into working as a prostitute. She has been consistent about the main parts of her account from the outset and has been accepted by the POPPY Project as a person who has been trafficked for the purposes of prostitution and forcibly exploited. I accept that the organisation is entirely reputable and has relevant expertise. I am inclined to agree with their assessment.

From my analysis of the asylum case files and from my interviews with legal professionals who have worked upon trafficked women's asylum cases, it seems that often women's accounts of their experiences are considered credible in the British asylum system if they have formerly been found credible by others, considered to be 'experts' on sexual trafficking. These include project workers from the POPPY Project and often the police. Therefore the role of official discourse on sexual trafficking has a direct relationship with women's access to justice, and women's accounts are frequently judged reliable or credible in relation to wider official discursive understandings.

In addition, the POPPY Project, in their own study on trafficked women's asylum applications, acknowledges the role of their project in successful appeals (POPPY Project, 2006). The report states that the success of women's asylum applications from within the POPPY Project is often due to the expertise of the project workers who work to get the best legal representation and negotiate the complex UK asylum system on the women's behalf, and from my own analysis of 23 women's asylum cases I also found this to be a contributing factor.

Frequently in the trafficked women's asylum applications consulted for this chapter, stories of trafficking were not only told by trafficked women, but also by a range of other tellers including policy makers, journalists, project workers, academics and other social researchers, all of which were used as evidence in the asylum claims. Women's stories, as told to the UK authorities via the asylum system, were often found credible or not depending upon their similarities to the stories told by these other tellers. For example at one woman's appeal hearing the adjudicator/judge stated,

> The appellant has given me a clear, concise, convincing and harrowing account of what has happened to her when she first came to the United Kingdom having unwittingly left the Ukraine to be trafficked almost as soon as she came to the United Kingdom. There has been placed before me a myriad of objective documentation in support of this appellant and what has happened fits in with all the objective evidence before me.

In this case the 'myriad of objective documentation' refers to newspaper reports including those from a wide range of newspapers including tabloids, broadsheets from both the right and the left political spectrum, research reports on trafficking and medical reports. This was typical of the range of evidence consulted in the women's asylum cases. Although it is difficult to predict the weight assigned to each piece of evidence by each immigration official or each asylum judge/adjudicator at appeal, it is evident in this case that other stories of sexual trafficking were directly consulted and the women's stories in this research were compared to and contrasted with other accounts. Trafficked women's accounts were therefore often understood as credible accounts in relation to, and as part of, wider discursive understandings around sexual trafficking, prostitution and violence against women, which frequently appear in wider media representations, research and literature currently being produced on the subject.

For social scientists 'truth' is always contested and a product of a particular theoretical approach, or discourse, whereas in the asylum

courts evidence is frequently taken to be objective due to credence assigned by the UK asylum system to its authors (Good, 2004). Given the current contested 'truths' about trafficking, and the international dominance of one set of 'truths' over another, in present debates around trafficking, this situation is potentially exclusionary for trafficked women claiming asylum who do not 'fit' the dominant trafficking narrative espoused by the media, some NGOs and governments, among other groups. The remaining sections of this chapter explore in more detail the difficulties of telling a story that 'fits'.

The agency/coercion binary

Many of the women's stories were considered credible or not depending upon social understandings relating to 'choice/ agency' or 'coercion'. Where trafficked women's asylum claims were found to be incredible, often the Home Office indicated that they believed a woman had exercised either too much or too little agency. In some cases the Home Office concluded that the woman's story was incredible because the woman had exercised too much agency to be considered a victim of trafficking and therefore was believed to have chosen the circumstances in which she has found herself. On the other hand, at other times, the Home Office considered the women to have not taken enough action to extract themselves from those circumstances and therefore it was believed, by the Home Office, that the woman had chosen the situation through her inaction. For an account to be believed by the Home Office, it appeared that there must be a very delicate balance between a trafficked woman's agency and a trafficker's coercion.

For example, at one woman's asylum appeal the adjudicator/judge disbelieved a woman's story principally because she was considered to have exercised too much agency at some stages in her account, while at other times her apparent inaction indicated to the adjudicator/judge that she could not be a victim of trafficking:

> There is no evidence that she was forced to leave Albania. She chose to come to the United Kingdom…Why did she tell a false story when coming here instead of cutting her links with the criminals at the time? Why did she not seek help from the authorities when she arrived? When arrested by the police she did not seek help. She chose to give them wrong details about herself. On the videotape she says that she screamed and shouted at the police when she was arrested. This shows someone who seeking to avoid removal…The appellant returned to the United Kingdom from Albania after being deported

> there. I find it most significant that she returned to the same group and to the same circumstances that she left when she was deported. I do not believe that she had to return here. I do not believe that she had to go back to being a prostitute with them.

This illustrates how at times certain acts of agency were considered by the Home Office to be conflicting with a recognisable trafficking narrative. However, in my interviews with trafficked women and analysis of women's accounts, I found resisting detention by the immigration authorities to be a common occurrence and women indicated that this was often due to a fear of the trafficker(s) or a fear of being deported and potentially re-trafficked (Jobe, 2008a,b). Moreover, contrary to the adjudicator's argument, in this woman's own account of her experiences, she states she had been deported and re-trafficked to the United Kingdom by her original traffickers. Another woman, in my interview with her, commented,

> You see when you see police you are scared and you start to shake when you see them . . . you think you are going to be deported because that's how the people [trafficker(s)] say to you . . . the traffickers say you know when the police come don't say nothing cos they going to put you in jail, just say you want to go home and that's how they say to you. That's why the majority of the girls who have been trafficked, police send them home cos they sign, they agree to go home cos that's what they have been told to do from the trafficker and in a few months they come back. They been re-trafficked again.[2]

Elsewhere, where women had escaped/exited the trafficking situation on their own without assistance from the authorities (UK immigration services or police), doubts regarding the credibility of their stories were often raised, particularly where women had continued to work as prostitutes after exiting the trafficking situation. Women in their accounts to the Home Office often maintained that they believed they had little choice other than to work in prostitution after exiting a trafficking situation, due to the potential threat of the traffickers finding them in their country of origin and their fear of the UK immigration services and of being deported and re-trafficked. For instance, as one woman described in my interview with her:

> I did it for myself as well as I wasn't with a trafficker so I remember so many different girls who say they don't want to do it. I didn't

> want to do it but I was illegal and I know that I can't do nothing else because I can't go anywhere else, I have nothing else to do...and if I wasn't back to this country I probably be trafficked again and again and again.

Contrastingly, the Home Office frequently cites women's decision to return to work in prostitution while no longer under the direct control of trafficker(s) to be incongruent with the actions of a 'victim of trafficking'.

While agency is frequently considered as contradictory to the recognisable trafficking narrative in the asylum process, some elements of agency are assumed or perhaps even required for credibility. This element requires that the trafficked woman has expressed her desire to escape or perhaps attempted to enact her escape. In this situation, agency and force are closely interlinked. In terms of credibility, only a small amount of agency is required for the account to be considered credible; too much agency and the account is often considered incredible as the woman can no longer be considered to be a 'victim'.

These findings echo findings by feminist writers who have analysed the outcomes of rape trials. Feminist writers have often spoken of the 'good victim' in rape trials (Adler, 1987; Bumiller, 1991; Kelly and Radford, 1996; Lees, 1996a,b, among others). Adler, for instance in her study of rape trials, found that in order to be found credible, the victim must be perceived to be respectable, be sexually inexperienced, should not have been raped by an acquaintance, ought to have fought and be hurt, and have reported the case straight away (Adler, 1987). This has many parallels with the reception of trafficked women's cases in the UK asylum system and is illustrated by the adjudicator's concluding remarks in one woman's asylum appeal:

> It has been accepted by the respondent that the appellant has indeed been trafficked...the appellant was beaten up regularly; raped and ill-treated...she and the other women were kept as prisoners. She was deprived of sleep, taken to various places so that she did not know where she was. She could not make friends with the other girls as they were regularly moved. She could not ask the customers for help. She was continually monitored. She thought of escape constantly and was able to try on a number of occasions unsuccessfully. She was in their hands and they could do what they wanted with her if she did not do what she was told...I accept the appellant's account of what happened to her at the hands of her traffickers.

This woman, according to her statement to the UK immigration authorities, attempted to escape on a number of occasions and as soon as she was able, presented herself to the police and asked for help. This woman's story in many ways represents the 'good victim' described by Adler and others. Her story shows she had little agency in the trafficking situation, she was tricked into prostitution, endured a great deal of violence against her person, yet she indicated her desire to escape and finally she made good that escape, by reporting her story at the first opportunity. Her story comprises exactly the right blend of victim-hood and agency and reflects the 'popular' or dominant sexual trafficking story as outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

The victim/perpetrator binary

In order to be believed by the UK Home Office, it is not just the actions of the woman in her account which are scrutinised, but the actions of others, especially trafficker(s), which come under close scrutiny in the asylum decision-making process. In order to be believed a woman's story should include the 'right' kind of trafficker and the trafficker actions should be consistent with common understandings concerning the roles of the victim and the perpetrator within trafficking situations. This is most evident when a trafficker is presented in a woman's story as a 'boyfriend' or partner, and is therefore linked explicitly to understandings of agency within heterosexual relationships and the private and public boundaries of (hetero) sexualities. Where perpetrators are believed to form one half of a traditional (hetero) sexual relationship, the categories of both the 'sexual trafficking victim' and the perpetrator as trafficker appear to be challenged. One woman, in her statement to the Home Office, recalled how she was forced to work in prostitution, in the United Kingdom, by a man she referred to as her 'boyfriend'. The adjudicator/judge concluded that this was one of the reasons her story was incredible:

> There is no evidence that she was forced into prostitution. She simply complied with her boyfriend's request to become a prostitute...She claims that she was beaten by her boyfriend during her second stay in the UK and yet she chose not to go to the police.

The Home Office often considered women to have more agency in situations involving 'boyfriends' or partners and, therefore, their accounts were not believed to be consistent with a trafficking situation. By contrast,

where organised crime groups were involved in a woman's trafficking account the woman's account was often considered more believable. This again has parallels with the 'popular' or dominant sexual trafficking story as described above. This is illustrated by one woman's case where the adjudicators/judges involved did not believe that she had been trafficked, as there were no references to large-scale organised crime groups in her story:

> It is questionable whether she had been trafficked at all. She left entirely of her own free will, according to her to meet X in the hopes of making some sort of relationship with him. These hopes quickly evaporated and she found out he was much more of an unpleasant character than she had hitherto suspected. The behaviour of X and what actually occurred to the claimant does not smack to us of large scale organised trafficking or anything like it... Although there is mention of sexual intercourse in which she is not a fully consenting partner there is nothing in her statement about being raped or beaten, let alone being subject to horrific violence.

It is unclear in the adjudicator/judge's reasoning what he considers to be the difference between 'sexual intercourse in which she is not a fully consenting partner' and rape. In my own analysis of women's trafficking accounts, a range of methods of coercion were used by trafficker(s) and these were not limited to, although may include, extreme acts of violence (Jobe, 2008b). Many writers have documented psychological and financial methods of coercion, force and control in trafficking situations (see, for instance, Bales, 2000; Brown, 2000; POPPY Project, 2004; Zimmerman *et al.*, 2006, among others).

The Home Office frequently raised doubts about the authenticity of a woman's account where trafficker(s) are believed to have acted contrary to their perceived role as perpetrators. Frequently only the extremities of violence and control are considered to be consistent with a legitimate claim involving sexual trafficking. Similarly Kelly and Radford have argued of the law and other forms of sexual violence that:

> The law plays a central role in constructing 'what counts' as crime and in the case of sexual violence (unlike for example, public order offences) it focuses almost entirely on extremes, thereby discounting many women's experiences. Thus only a proportion of women's complaints are seen as legitimate, according to the law.
>
> (Kelly and Radford, 1996, p. 21)

This focus on explicit and extreme violence therefore underestimates the impact of other forms of violence and coercion, creating space for doubt towards women's own sexual trafficking stories.

The public/private binary

Also contrary to the typical or dominant sexual trafficking story are women's experiences in private spaces not commonly associated with the popular imagination of sexual trafficking. One woman's account, for example, was situated in one household to which she was trafficked for domestic purposes, but where one man also subjected her to sexual violence and other abuses. This woman's story differed from the other women's stories in one principal respect, and this is that her experiences took place primarily in a private 'family' spaces. Her account was not considered to be consistent with a trafficking account and her claim for asylum was rejected. Many feminist writers have explored the link between 'public' justice and women's 'private' experiences (Boyd, 1997; Duncan, 1996; Fineman and Mykitiuk, 1994; Lacey, 1993; Pateman, 1988). Lacey argues,

> The ideology of the public/private dichotomy allows government to clean its hands of any responsibility for the state of the 'private world' and depoliticises the disadvantages which inevitably spill over the alleged divide by affecting the position of the 'privately' disadvantaged in the public world.
>
> (Lacey, 1993, p. 97)

Feminist writers have frequently argued that the divide of the public and the private has detrimental effects on women where they seek redress for injuries committed against them in the private domestic sphere (Duncan, 1996; Graycar and Morgan, 1990). It has also been argued in the literature that the distinction between the public and the private has the effect of marginalising groups or experiences by legally confining experiences to one sphere or the other. Where the law does not legislate over experiences in the private sphere, this creates a situation which adversely affects women's access to legal redress (see, for example, Duncan, 1996; Schneider, 1994). In my analysis of trafficked women's asylum records it appears that the British asylum system understands trafficking situations to take place primarily in prostitution, which the law has often (albeit indirectly) regulated as a public practice, as opposed to other apparently 'private' (hetero) sexual practices. In these conditions the sexual violence

committed against a woman in a private domestic space is therefore likely to be, and was, seen as incongruent with a recognisable trafficking narrative.

Two of the 23 women in my research were trafficked for purposes other than prostitution; one principally for domestic labour and another for other labour purposes. However, both spoke of sexual violence in their accounts. Although it is impossible to generalise from just two accounts of trafficking and impossible to predict how far these two women's experiences reflect other women's experiences of trafficking for non-sexual purposes, gender and women's bodies can be said to play a significant role in constructing the experiences of *all* trafficked women, whether they are trafficked for the purposes of prostitution or not, since regardless of the primary purpose of the trafficking, it is experienced by women as gendered and sexualised subjects. This raises questions about how far other migrant women's experiences of violence outside of the 'sexual trafficking story' are hidden; to what extent sexual violence is involved in the trafficking of women for purposes other than prostitution; and what the consequences of these processes are for women's access to justice and assistance.

Conclusion

While trafficking has become more recognised as a legal and social issue in the United Kingdom, the effect of this on trafficking victims'/survivors' position within the asylum process has been diverse. On the one hand, the increasingly high status of trafficking as a social problem has created the social and political space for such stories to be told, heard and believed. Consequently, this has had a positive effect for those women seeking access to help and services, both within the POPPY Project specifically and with the asylum system more generally. However, as a particular trafficking story is frequently told, heard and considered credible, stories, or elements of stories, that do not 'fit' are consequently less likely to be treated as legitimate. This highlights the inadequacy of the dominant categories through which sexual trafficking specifically, and sexual violence more generally, is defined, leaving those who are unable to tell the 'right' story unprotected and unable to access help and support. Furthermore, even the positive aspects of the increasingly commonplace nature of the dominant 'sexual trafficking story' cannot be taken for granted, since as Plummer notes, it is also possible that as a story becomes more recognised, it may become less believable as it becomes more commonplace (Plummer, 1995).

In addition, as more trafficking stories are told which focus upon labour exploitation or 'modern day slavery' more generally, it is impossible to predict the effect of these 'other' stories on the dominant 'sexual trafficking story' in the future. However, what remains consistent is the extent to which the credibility of the stories told by trafficked women is endlessly precarious, exposing them to the risk of disbelief – an outcome that has significant consequences in terms of their ability to access help and support and to escape from the violence to which they have been subjected.

Notes

1. The research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the United Kingdom, ESRC award No. PTA-030-2002-00517. The PhD was supervised by Professor Diane Richardson and Dr Robin Humphrey at Newcastle University.
2. This quote is from an interview conducted with trafficking victim/survivor during my field work. The quote appears exactly as it was spoken.

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5
'That's a Bit Drastic': Risk and Blame in Accounts of Obesity Surgery

Karen Throsby

Obesity surgery refers to a burgeoning constellation of interventions into the fat body with the goal of reducing stomach capacity and/or intestinal length in order to restrict the consumption and absorption of food. It is an intervention of last resort for those experiencing extreme and intractable obesity, and has the potential to produce significantly higher and more enduring degrees of weight loss than other anti-obesity interventions (Baxter, 2000; Mitka, 2006; Sjostrom *et al.*, 2004). However, it also carries significant risks, including infection, digestive problems, diarrhoea, vomiting, malnutrition, and in a small number of cases, death (see, for example, Ackerman, 1999). It is also a profoundly gendered technology, with approximately 80% of all obesity surgery being performed on women (Ellis *et al.*, 2006), raising important questions about how this burden of risk is distributed.

In the United Kingdom, the number of surgeries performed annually is rising rapidly, with demand continuing to outstrip supply (BOSPA, 2005). Furthermore, surgery was incorporated in the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) 2006 guidelines for the 'prevention, identification, assessment and management of overweight and obesity in adults and children' (NICE, 2006) as a technology of last resort for those for whom all other interventions (e.g. lifestyle and pharmaceutical regimens) have failed, signalling its increasingly mainstream status. From this perspective, obesity surgery is a risky, but medically necessary intervention which saves lives and in long term health costs and money (Ackerman, 1999; Baxter, 2000).

But in spite of the rise of obesity surgery, it remains a very controversial and contested intervention. This contestation can be divided into two very different, but intersecting, positions. First is the argument that

obesity surgery is a morally dubious means of sidestepping the normative surveillance and disciplining of the body through diet and exercise. From this perspective, obesity surgery is rendered not only a signifier of moral failure (to lose weight through the exercise of 'self-control'), but also, as an act of violence against the self, an unnecessarily risky intervention whose goals (weight loss) are presumed to be achievable by other, less extreme, means. This critique is embodied in the common description of obesity surgery as 'drastic'. Indeed, in the interviews with obesity surgery patients on which this paper draws (as described below), the comment from others that the decision to undergo surgery was 'a bit drastic' was almost ubiquitously reported. The epithet is inherently critical, implying that surgery is extreme and unnecessary. The elective nature of the surgery renders the patients themselves the subjects of this critique and the perpetrators of violence against the self.

A second mode of critique, however, focuses blame (in the first instance) not on the patients themselves, but rather on the providers of treatment and the wider social and cultural context within which surgery has become an acceptable anti-obesity intervention. Size activists have spoken out vociferously against obesity surgery as the apotheosis of the 'war on obesity', and by extension, a war against those who are obese. The US-based activist organisation, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), for example, argues in its policy on weight loss surgery (NAAFA, 1993) that surgery is dangerous; that many people end up undergoing successive surgeries; that surgery is experimental; and that there is no evidence that surgery produces health or economic benefits in the long term. Consequently, NAAFA's policy is that 'all gastrointestinal weight loss surgeries be discontinued' (ibid.). Similarly, in its position paper on weight loss surgery (WLS), the International Size Acceptance Association (ISAA) states that it 'cannot support the option of WLS, even as a very last resort' (ISAA, 2002). These activists argue that the 'psychosocial suffering that fat people face is more appropriately relieved by social and political reform than by surgery' (NAAFA, 1993), and that, in spite of claims to the contrary from the medical and policy arenas, health is possible at any size (see, for example, Brown and Rothblum, 1989; Cooper, 1998; Wann, 1998). From this perspective, those engaging with obesity are recast not as the perpetrators of violence against the self, but as the victims of a fat-phobic society and medical profession. The US activist Marilyn Wann, for example, sees surgery as nothing short of 'the mutilation of healthy body parts', and as an act of violence, primarily against women, that is 'never justified' (Wann, 1998, p. 41). In a similar vein, entries in the online guestbook of an ISAA article about the risks

of surgery describe it as 'murder on a gurney' and a 'barbaric crime'.[1] However, as will be discussed in more detail below, this perspective also risks casting those undergoing surgery as complicit with fat-hating ideologies and therefore as perpetrators of fat-phobia and its associated harms. This reconfigures obesity surgery not simply as violence against the self by others, but as contributing to harm to others – an outcome which risks reproducing the individualisation of blame that the size activist position aims to disrupt.

The negative representations of obesity surgery are concurrent with the growing normalisation of surgery as a legitimate anti-obesity intervention. Consequently, those undergoing surgery are always precariously positioned and liable to the negative evaluation of others. Drawing on a series of interviews with women and men who had undergone (or were waiting to have) surgery, this chapter explores the ways in which surgery patients themselves manage and negotiate these critical perspectives. In particular, the chapter explores the ways in which the participants constructed their engagement with surgery not as an act of violence (by the self, against the self, or at the hands of others), but rather as emblematic of the normatively prescribed care of the self. I argue that this discursive work demonstrates the ways in which opposition to obesity surgery isolates those who choose to engage with it – a discursive act that disregards the ways in which the patients themselves negotiate the risks and possibilities of surgery.

After a short methodological discussion, the main body of the chapter focuses on the two fundamentally different, but intersecting, modes of resistance to obesity surgery set out above and the participants' responses to them. The first of these modes of resistance holds in place the necessity and desirability of weight loss, but questions the extent to which obesity surgery is a proportionate response to that necessity. This is the dominant critique of obesity surgery encountered (and resisted) by the participants. The second (and much less common) mode of resistance – that from the perspective of size activism – challenges the very basis of anti-obesity interventions and categorically resists obesity surgery as the material (and gendered) enactment of fat-phobia. This chapter explores the ways in which discourses of blame and responsibility and of victim and perpetrator are mobilised and negotiated in response to these two modes of resistance and argues that both of these critical positions place blame onto those undergoing surgery. This, in turn, produces a highly individualised response that precludes a more politicised discussion of the ideology of the 'war on obesity' on the part of the participants. The chapter argues that

the gendered nature of obesity surgery makes this an important, if complex, site for feminist research.

Methodology

This chapter draws on a series of interviews, conducted in 2005–2006, with 35 people (29 women and six men), all of whom had either undergone or were waiting to undergo obesity surgery. They were recruited through an online organisation which provides support and information for those seeking, undergoing and living with obesity surgery, with participants responding to an interview request on the online discussion forums. Two participants were also recruited through word-of-mouth via friends and colleagues. I also conducted a focus group discussion with the members of a support group in the north-west of England at the beginning of the project, and several of the interviews also included family members and carers. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed orthographically, and then, in the course of repeated re-readings, were coded according to emerging themes. The coded data was analysed using discourse analysis (see, for example, Gill, 1996; Gill, 2000; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wood and Kroger, 2000). Discourse analysis begins from the premise that 'social texts do not merely reflect or mirror objects, events and categories pre-existing in the social and natural world. Rather, they actively construct a version of those things. They do not just describe things; they do things' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 6). By asking how discourse is 'put together and what is gained by this construction' (ibid., p. 160), the research can gain valuable insight into the social and cultural context within which specific accounts are given. As such, the analysis presented here does not aim to pass judgement on what individuals should or should not do with or to their bodies; but rather, explores how, and with what discursive resources, those actions can be accounted for, and what this can tell us more broadly about the experience of obesity surgery.

A (dis)proportionate intervention?

As described above, obesity surgery is often referred to as 'a bit drastic' – a critical assessment that positions surgery as an extreme response to a problem that could be addressed by alternative, less interventionist, methods. Obesity surgery lends itself easily to the rhetoric of extremity, in terms of both the bodies on which it is performed and the surgery itself. The bodies of those who have reached extreme levels of obesity are

a source of public fascination and spectacle in the media, with a steady stream of television programmes featuring oversized bodies stranded on expansive beds or rippling and uncontained in prurient underwater shots. Popular representations of obesity surgery compound this sense of spectacle. Indeed, the vernacular shorthand for surgery – 'stomach stapling' – invokes a brutal, low-tech procedure that is the antithesis of the microscopic cleanliness associated with more high-tech biomedical fields such as microsurgery, stem cells and genetics. This image of obesity surgery is encapsulated in US science journalist Ellen Ruppell Shell's description of surgeon Ed Mun operating on a patient, Nancy:

> Taking aim with his Endo-GIA II stapler, which cuts as well as rivets, he divides the stomach into two parts and staples the top portion in a twenty-milliliter pouch, about two tablespoons. [...] Mun feels down the small intestine, past the duodenum to the jejunum, slices through the sausage like structure and nails it to the stomach pouch with his EEA circular stapler, creating a passageway the circumference of an M&M. Mun regards the EEA fondly, and praises its smooth, powerful action. The device spits out sixty-four stainless steel staples at a trigger pull, accomplishing in a split second what once took long minutes of painstaking needlework.
>
> (Shell, 2002, p. 20)

Shell's description of Nancy's surgery uses the vocabulary of the office ('staples'), the workshop ('rivets', 'nails') and the kitchen ('tablespoons'). Extending the culinary metaphor, we are told that the intestines are 'sausage like'; elsewhere, she describes the smell of the cauterizing scalpel cutting through Nancy's flesh as, 'like hamburgers spitting on a grill' (Shell, 2002, p. 11). The meat analogy is further extended when Mun is described as grasping the end of the small intestine 'like a rodeo star roping a calf' (Shell, 2002, p. 20); Nancy's stomach, Shell suggests, has been 'tamed' (ibid.). Even before a discussion of risk, then, obesity surgery is already popularly framed by the rhetoric of low-tech brutality.

But beyond this image of generalised brutality, the specific risks associated with surgery for patients remain central to the designation of obesity as a 'drastic' intervention, although the relative paucity of long-term studies about the risks (and efficacy) of surgery (Mitka, 2006) means that there is ongoing debate about the precise nature of these risks. The Swedish Obesity Subjects study – an ongoing longitudinal study of obesity surgery and its effects – found a post-operative mortality rate of

0.25% (Sjostrom *et al*., 2004, p. 2691), while others have found much higher mortality rates. For example, in a US study of 16,155 surgery patients, there was a 2% mortality rate at 30 days post-surgery, rising to 4.6% after one year. Significantly, they also found that mortality rates were higher for those over 65, and that odds of death were 1.6 times higher (at 90 days) for those whose surgeons had a lower than average surgical volume (Flum *et al*., 2005). However, death is not the only risk, and obesity surgery is also associated with a wide range of acute and chronic complications that can impact upon overall health and quality of life. The Swedish Obesity Subjects study, for example, found that 13% of patients experienced post-operative complications, and in 2.2% of patients, these complications were so serious that they required re-operation (Sjostrom *et al*., 2004). In addition to the variations in mortality and complication rates, there is also some debate within the field of obesity surgery about what constitutes a complication. The President of the American Society for Bariatric Surgery, Philip Schauer, for example, argues that commonly experienced problems such as nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea are not complications, but side effects 'that are limited and usually resolve during the first 4 months following surgery' (cited in Mitka, 2006, p. 1576). For others, these side effects are understood as integral to the surgery itself and are taken not as problems at all, but instead, as evidence that the surgery is working. As Shell notes, 'Vomiting is not really a complication of gastric bypass surgery; it is an expected and important side effect' (Shell, 2002, p. 9).

However, the contestation around the issue of risk in relation to obesity surgery is less about the degree of risk *per se*, but rather about *relative risk* – that is, whether the risks of surgery outweigh the risks of not having surgery. The presumed causative relationship between obesity and ill-health has become axiomatic in the contemporary rhetoric of the 'war on obesity', and rising obesity rates are conventionally understood as auguring a concomitant rise in a wide range of debilitating, life-limiting and expensive chronic health problems (see, for example, Campbell, 2003; House of Commons Health Committee, 2004; James, Leach *et al*., 2001; Rossner, 2002; WHO, 2000). From the perspective of anticipated obesity-related health decline and premature death, therefore, obesity surgery is a risk worth taking for those experiencing extreme levels of obesity. Indeed, anticipated future health problems were repeatedly cited by the participants as central not only to their decision-making, but also to their claims to publicly funded surgery. Helen, a housewife and mother in her late 30s, for example, suffered severe back problems which she felt were exacerbated by her gradually

increasing weight and which she feared would continue to impinge upon her ability to be a good mother to her daughter:

> [...] it's not going to get any better, and I don't want it to get worse. The more weight I get, the worse it's going to get. And I feel I was going to go down the disability route. And with a young child as well...

For others, the recent onset, or worsening, of chronic conditions such as hypertension or type II diabetes, or growing mobility difficulties, triggered the motivation to undergo surgery, and even those without any existing health problems spoke with certainty about their anticipated unhealthy futures and premature deaths – a certainty that was reinforced by health professionals who participants reported as having issued dire health warnings of being 'dead in 5 years' if they did not lose weight. Surgery may be 'drastic', therefore, but this is constructed in the accounts as proportionately so, precisely because of the presumed future health risks of obesity, positioning surgery as self-protection, rather than self-harm.

However, this justification for the decision to undergo surgery is highly provisional and subject to challenge by one of the most dominant sources of resistance to obesity surgery – the suggestion that obesity surgery is unnecessary because the same outcome – weight loss – is achievable through less 'drastic' means. For many people, both within the medical profession and in the popular/media domain, obesity is a bodily state which is within the remit of the individual to resolve through the 'common sense cure' (Ebbeling *et al.*, 2002) of lifestyle strategies of diet and exercise (Burry, 1999; Ogilvie and Hamlet, 2005). This perspective shares with the pro-surgery view the conviction that obesity is a threat to health and well-being (at the level of the individual and of the state), but insists not only that individuals *can* lose weight through diet and exercise, but more importantly, that they *should*, rather than relying on expensive surgical interventions that divert scarce health care resources from other areas (both in terms of the surgery and its possible negative outcomes, requiring further treatment). This positions those undergoing surgery as failed citizens, effectively harming others by making claims on national resources rather than contributing to them (see also, Herndon, 2005). Obesity surgery, then, is rendered a means of opting out of the morally privileged bodily work of diet and exercise – a construction which aligns easily with the familiar pejorative representations of fatness as the embodiment of negative traits such as laziness, stupidity and a lack of care of the self (see, for example, Cooper, 1998; Murray, 2005). As the daughter of one of the participants

commented, 'It's not really an achievement the same as if it had been done normally. You've just had your insides cut up and it doesn't let you eat. Anyone could do it [lose weight].'

Those engaging with obesity surgery, therefore, are characterised as the perpetrators of several different forms of harm to the self, and indirectly, to others. Obesity itself is rendered an act of self-harm by 'letting yourself go', and the decision to undergo surgery exposes the individual both to moral risk (for trying to circumvent normative body work) and to the physical risks of surgery. This framing of the patient as the perpetrator of self-harm became evident in reported incidences of family members losing patience with some of the more anti-social side effects of the surgery:

> I was having some problems being sick [...] and was making pretty unpleasant noises, burping, this, that and the other. And he got very annoyed one day and said 'It's unnatural. You shouldn't have had it done.'
>
> (Judith)

Similarly, following an unfortunate incident in a restaurant garden where she had had to run into the bushes to be sick, Jennifer's husband demanded angrily: 'What have you done to yourself?' Obesity surgery, therefore, is rendered an 'unnatural' and potentially harmful intervention that people do to *themselves*; it is they, and not the doctors or the wider social context that are positioned as the perpetrators of harm. These accusations are inevitably gendered, not simply because it is predominantly women who undergo obesity surgery, but also because the requirements of bodily discipline and control remain disproportionately focused on women's bodies (Balsamo, 1999; Bordo, 1993), including the need to present a 'civilised' body whose functions are contained and hidden. Furthermore, women find themselves easily labelled as excessively focused on their appearance, even to the point of disregarding personal risk – a story that is frequently told about women in relation to cosmetic surgery, for example (Pitts-Taylor, 2007). Consequently, in this study, it was primarily women, and particularly those undergoing surgery at lower starting weights, who were having to defend themselves from the suggestion that they had harmed themselves unnecessarily.

The participants in this study were very sensitive to the suggestion that they had done something 'unnatural' and that they had disregarded risk in order to circumvent the body work of diet and exercise. Instead, they argued

that this was a reading of surgery which was completely at odds with their own experiences of a lifetime of weight management efforts. Participants reported being repeatedly advised to try conventional weight loss strategies rather than undergo surgery. One female focus group participant, for example, described going to see her GP to discuss the possibility of surgery, to be told, 'That's a bit drastic. Eat more salad.' Another reported being told by her GP: 'That's really drastic. Let's try more drugs.' Family members could be equally reluctant to accept the possibility of surgery; the brother of one female focus group participant simply asked, 'Can't you just exercise or something?' Many of these responses, especially from family members, can be understood as expressions of concern and fear about the risks of surgery, but they are founded on assumptions about conventional weight loss strategies as both effective and benign – assumptions which render surgery an inappropriate intervention and expose individuals to the suggestion that they are simply not trying hard enough.

These suggestions were rebutted emphatically in the interviews, and in direct encounters with critical others (including medical professionals), with the evidence of personal experience. All of the participants recounted years of soul-destroying weight cycling, with successful, and often considerable, weight loss followed by devastating regain, frequently exceeding their starting weights (see, for example, Throsby, 2007). The participants also emphasised their own expert knowledge in relation to food and dieting. As a male focus group participant noted, 'No-one knows the way to eat healthily more than an obese person [...] I could tell you the calorific content of most foods.' Instead, they argued that their long histories of unsuccessful dieting, rather than demonstrating ignorance or a lack of commitment, were indicative of an innately fat-prone body that was simply not amenable to 'lifestyle' weight loss strategies (Throsby, 2007). For the participants, therefore, surgery constitutes an intervention of an entirely different order from the things that they have tried previously, and one which is proportionate to the problems that they face. As Bill, an IT worker in his 30s observed,

> I felt I'd tried absolutely everything else, and there was nothing else to try, and I couldn't face doing the same old things again and think that they would turn out any differently than the other times.

From this perspective, it is not the surgery that is violently excessive and self-harmful, but the repeated health- and self-esteem damaging engagement with weight loss strategies which have been ineffectual in their case. Obesity surgery may be 'drastic', but so is a life-time of weight

cycling, rendering surgery a proportionate response to a serious problem that they are determined to resolve. Surgery, therefore, is reframed not as an act of violence, but as a brave act of self-care, informed by their expertise in relation to their own bodies and histories (Throsby, 2008).

The mutilation of healthy body parts?

The debates set out in the previous section about the proportionality and appropriateness of surgery as a response to obesity share the conviction of the unacceptability of obesity and the necessity of weight loss. However, the second mode of contestation moves beyond the discussion of proportionality and poses a fundamental challenge to the construction of obesity as a problem to be solved. As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, this kind of opposition is exemplified by the size acceptance movement, for whom obesity surgery is the apotheosis of all that is wrong with the 'war on obesity'.

The size acceptance movement wholeheartedly refuses the construction of the fat body as inevitably unhealthy, recasting it as (to use Marilyn Wann's coinage) 'flabulous' (Wann, 1998). In doing so, size acceptance constitutes one of the most radical voices in the obesity debate, albeit a minority one. Size activists argue that it is possible to be healthy regardless of body size and question the ethics of encouraging those who are obese to engage with weight loss strategies which are known to fail for most people and which lead to health- and self-esteem damaging weight cycling. In this, they share some common ground with the growing field of critical obesity studies, which argues that the 'war on obesity' is ideologically and morally driven, rather than being based on objective science (Aphramor, 2005; Campos, 2004; Gard and Wright, 2005; Monaghan, 2005b). But while critical obesity studies remains focused on the role of anti-fat ideology in the production of 'evidence' of the causative relationship between obesity and ill-health, the size acceptance movement is driven by a much broader, and controversial, agenda to revalue and take pride in the fat body (Braziel and LeBesco, 2001; Cooper, 1998; Wann, 1998). This is combined with vociferous campaigning and advocacy work to fight size discrimination and bias. From this perspective, the problems experienced by those who are visibly large are caused not by individual failure to care for the self, but by social exclusion and discrimination, and by an uncaring medical profession. Size activism is strongly informed by feminism, reflecting the profoundly gendered nature of normative body standards, and is populated predominantly by women (Gimlin, 2002, Ch. 4).[2]

The participants in this study made little reference to the size acceptance movement or the literature challenging the construction of obesity as a serious health problem. Indeed, it remains a minority voice and rarely features in the dominant discourse on obesity at all. Furthermore, given the extent to which the threat to health constitutes a primary justification for the decision to undergo surgery (and for that surgery to be publicly funded), any disruption to the equation of obesity and ill-health is logically precluded as a discursive resource for the participants in this study. However, the participants all offered lengthy accounts of the everyday social difficulties of fat embodiment that also populate the size acceptance literature. They recounted the daily difficulties of trying to move around an environment designed for slim bodies: the humiliation of breaking chairs; the problems of negotiating a path through a crowded restaurant to get to the toilets; the inability to purchase comfortable, fashionable clothing; the embarrassment of having to buy two airline seats or request a seat-belt extension. I was also regaled with stories of workplace discrimination, sexual harassment and humiliating encounters with medical professionals; they talked about the trauma of being pointed at in public spaces, of name-calling, and of a stream of unsolicited weight loss advice. The size acceptance movement and the participants in this study represent two divergent responses to this discrimination. For the participants, surgery had offered a chance to escape the everyday difficulties of fat embodiment; but for the size acceptance movement, it constitutes grounds for political action and social change.

One consequence of this divergence is that those who choose to engage with anti-obesity interventions are placed in a very difficult position in relation to the size acceptance movement, figuring either as the passive victims/dupes of anti-fat ideology or as complicit in those values by engaging with them. Ironically, this duplicates the pattern of blame set out in the previous section of surgery as harming both the self and others (although the victim 'others' in this case are those who choose to remain fat, rather than society in general). This implicit, and sometimes explicit, attribution of blame/harm makes it extremely difficult to reconcile size acceptance with surgery, forcing individuals to choose between the two. While none of the participants in this study had been actively involved in size acceptance politics prior to surgery, several had participated in BBW (Big Beautiful Women) social events and online discussion and dating forums, enjoying the opportunity for social interactions (for example, club nights) without the risk of being pointed at, socially excluded or sexually harassed. As Laura noted, 'I couldn't go

out to a nightclub and dance because people would be looking at me. So, going to BBW functions . . . it was great. I could go, and I could dance. I could dress how I wanted to dress.' However, it proved very difficult to reconcile continued participation with obesity surgery:

> I could see where they were coming from, but I never really accepted myself, so I could never get too heavily involved with it [size acceptance politics]. And my view was that all the time that I was healthy and big, I was fine. The minute my health deteriorated, I knew . . . I know they don't agree with it [surgery] . . . so what I actually did, which was a bit naughty of me really, but the day I had my op, when I came home, I actually deleted myself from the list because I thought, I'm not going to sort of go down that road now. I've got a new future to look forward to and that's not part of my life any more.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, announced her intention to have surgery on the discussion forums in the hope of gaining support through established social networks. However, her announcement was greeted with accusations that she was a 'traitor', and she no longer felt welcome on the forums. Puzzled and saddened by this rejection and the loss of the social networks that she valued, Elizabeth discursively resisted the idea that she had betrayed the group (and women generally) by positioning herself as having responded positively to knowledge that the other members, by virtue of being younger (she was in her 50s), did not yet have. She speculated that her own fairly extreme size and failing health had confronted the other forum participants with an unpalatable truth about their own futures: 'Perhaps it hit them . . . hang on, I'm in my 30s now, perhaps in ten years' time when I'm in my 40s that's going to happen to me.' This provides her with a more positive account of her rejection and of her decision to undergo surgery. However, another effect of this is to individualise the 'problem' of obesity ('my health was suffering'), thereby shedding any sense of the wider social and cultural context within which fat embodiment can be so difficult. In Elizabeth's case, this also cut her off from a valued source of social support in the difficult months post-surgery, when she struggled with ongoing complications and side-effects which she did not feel comfortable raising on a forum that had been so opposed to the surgery in the first place.

The ISAA position paper on obesity surgery attempts to address this problem directly, arguing that 'ISAA's policy is against the surgery, not the people who have surgery' (ISAA, 2002). However, given the elective nature of obesity surgery, this is a difficult position to sustain, leaving

few options for support from within the movement for those who have chosen to undergo surgery. This dilemma mirrors that generated by the work of the Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering (FINRRAGE) in the 1980s, which argued that technologies such as IVF were harmful to women and that *all* women should refuse them in order to avoid perpetuating a practice that threatens women as a class (see, for example, Corea *et al.*, 1987; Klein, 1989; Spallone and Steinberg, 1987). Consequently, however incisive its analysis of the problems of IVF, FINRRAGE was unable to account for women's *demand* for those technologies outside of a framework of delusion dupes or complicit perpetrators of harm to other women by contributing to the normalisation of the procedure (Throsby, 2004, pp. 40–43). Similar charges can be levelled against the size acceptance movement, which, in its well-intentioned desire to resist harm and to protect those living in a culture which despises fatness, cannot account for the different meanings that interventions such as obesity surgery might have for individuals (for example, through a risk calculation that balances harm to the self, and potentially to others, with present suffering and future risk).

While the size acceptance position (as with FINRRAGE) is in many ways politically appealing, not least for its overt concern for women and their bodily well-being, it risks placing a burden of political action (and its costs) onto the shoulders of the very people who are already most disadvantaged by anti-fat prejudice. This kind of political action requires a degree of resistance to prevailing cultural understandings of the body that is difficult to sustain outside of what sociologist Debra Gimlin, writing about NAAFA, describes as 'the insulation of the organisation's social life' (Gimlin, 2002, p. 113; see, also, Murray, 2005). Consequently, in spite of an undoubted concern about the risks of surgery and the welfare of those undergoing it, the size acceptance approach is extremely difficult to reconcile with the decision to undergo surgery. For most of the participants, this mutual incompatibility was managed simply through non-engagement with size acceptance. However, for the small number who had been involved in size acceptance groups socially, the decision to undergo surgery necessitated the discursive repudiation of size acceptance, in favour of the same individualised health-based explanations that are used to resist the more mainstream critiques of surgery as 'drastic'. This reinstates obesity as an individual health 'problem', obscuring the social, cultural and political dimensions of the 'war on obesity' and isolating the obesity surgery patient as always potentially culpable and subject to censure.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that obesity surgery is a controversial anti-obesity intervention and that critiques of surgery inevitably become critiques of those engaging with it, as victims and perpetrators of harm to the self and to others. From the perspective of the common criticism of surgery as 'a bit drastic', those undergoing obesity surgery are positioned as morally weak, seeking out a dangerous short cut to slimness and ducking the morally privileged bodily work of diet and exercise. At first glance, the perspective of size acceptance, with its celebration of a range of body types and acute and critical awareness of the difficulties of fat embodiment in a fat-phobic society, seems to promise a more sympathetic reading which will shift the blame away from the individual and onto the wider social values and practices which sustain that fat-phobia. However, from this perspective, obesity surgery becomes easily framed as an act of complicity in those very values, rendering the decision to have surgery an act of harm not only to the self, but also, as a result of the endorsement that this seems to offer to norms of slimness, to not-slim others. In negotiating these oppositional voices, the participants in this study turned to highly individualised explanations which focused on failing health as the primary motivation, positioning surgery not as a moral failure to discipline the body, or as a failure to speak up for other people oppressed by fat-phobia, but as a fundamental and bold act of care for the self. This discursive work, therefore, positions surgery not as violent, or drastic, but as a necessary and proportionate step that was appropriate for the problems that they faced at the time. This argument enables them to rebut the negative portrayals that they are vulnerable to, but at the same time forces them into a defensive stance of absolute certainty in relation to surgery, precluding any discussion of fear or doubt, or of the need for support when there are side effects and complications. Furthermore, these very individualised explanations preclude the discussion of the wider social and cultural context within which those decisions are made.

Several different discourses of interpersonal violence emerge from this analysis, all of which are underscored by the profoundly gendered nature of the procedure itself. In the first instance, there is the exclusion, harassment and humiliation experienced by those who are visibly large. Then, in terms of the surgery itself, those engaging with it are variously understood as the victims of medical violence, or as the perpetrators of self-harm, or more indirectly, harm to others. However, this analysis also highlights a further form of violence in relation to the voices of opposition to obesity

surgery – that of the exclusion of the experiences and understandings of those engaging with surgery. In the case of the argument that surgery is 'a bit drastic', the long histories that most patients have of unsuccessful dieting and of the misery (and negative health impacts) that this causes are largely overlooked in favour of moralising judgements around the avoidance of bodily work and discipline. Conversely, from the perspective of the size acceptance movement, while accounts of negative outcomes are very common (as in the case of the online guestbook discussed earlier which includes many narratives of people regretting surgery because of side effects and complications, or the deaths of friends and family members), there is little acknowledgement of the dilemmas that individuals negotiate in making the difficult decision to have surgery. This leaves the size acceptance position unable to account for the demand for surgery outside of the deeply problematic and pejorative identities of either the passive dupes of anti-fat ideology or its perpetrators. This effectively isolates the very people whose social exclusion the size acceptance movement protests. Consequently, however well intentioned the resistance to obesity surgery, one of its effects (from either perspective) is to shift further blame, guilt and responsibility onto the shoulders of those who are already subject to the negative judgements of others because of their size. It could be argued, therefore, that it is this heaping of responsibility, rather than the surgery itself, that is 'a bit drastic', generating new challenges within feminist writing on this issue to find ways of critiquing the problematic aspects of obesity surgery (not least its prevailing focus on women's bodies) whilst taking seriously the accounts, explanations and decisions of those who choose to engage with it.

Notes

1. http://htmlgear.tripod.com/guest/control.guest?u=ircrusader&i=1&a=view
2. See Monaghan (2005a) for a discussion of male size activism and fat identities.

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6
The Promise of Understanding: Sex, Violence, Trauma and the Body

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Introduction

Throughout her autobiographically informed article 'Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-establishing the Self', the anthropologist Roberta Culbertson makes clear the trauma and suffering caused by violence. 'Violence', she argues, 'is always and necessarily about wounding', 'pain' and 'dissolution', and it is always about 'physical harm which is often permanent – even when this is only implied or threatened' (Culbertson, 1995, pp. 172, 173). Violence, it seems, cannot be lived through or thought about without referencing the body: it is, she argues, 'the reference point, of all violence, and of all power relationships sustained by violence' (ibid., p. 172). Indeed, according to Culbertson, violence is only ever really known by and via the body, even if there is a tendency 'to lose sight of the body's own recall, its response to threat and pain, and of the ways in which it speaks this pain' (ibid., p. 170). In a critical sense, then, violence figures as speaking directly to and through the body: a brutal yet intimate language, the truth of which is always understood by the body. Indeed, for Culbertson it is because the victim is forced to experience her body in the way dictated by the perpetrator that she will endure 'an abiding horror' (ibid., p. 172). This is a compelling and deeply entrenched way of thinking about violence – for how else might we think about the experience of violence, if not in terms of the body? For surely violence and survival is always 'about the body' in someway or another (ibid., p. 178).

But while the body is commonly understood to be key to the experience and meaning of violence – making sense of the fact that violence is a phenomenon thought of as having 'little or no equal' (Englander, 2003, p. 1) – it is an assumption that requires interrogation for above

all the body is a seductive construct which appears to hold the promise for understanding and redeeming the experience of violence, especially sexual violence. The aim of this chapter is to expose the problems and limits of this promise for a feminist understanding of the lived trauma of sexual violence. Sexual trauma cannot be simply or reliably understood by referencing the body, even though it appears indispensable to both the experience and our understanding. It is an experience, I will be arguing, that defeats both the body and the mind. Sexual violence really is devastating, although why and to what end is a matter of fraught feminist debate which began in the early 1980s. On the one hand, there were the 'sex wars' between radical, pro-censorship and pro-sex, anti-censorship feminists, which included controversy over whether or not S/M was an act of traumatic repetition or transgression; and, on the other hand, there was the quarrel between radical and psychoanalytical feminists over the significance of Freud's work on the Oedipus complex (as I will detail later). In many respects, however, these debates, and feminist understanding of the interrelationship between sex, violence, trauma and the body more generally, have stalled. In an attempt, then, to provoke new thinking, my chapter will draw, among others, on the work of the literary and psychoanalytic critic Cathy Caruth (1995, 1996). Associated with the development of trauma theory, Caruth has been instrumental in advancing innovative readings of Freud's work, especially his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Critically, though, her work allows for an analysis of sexual trauma without tying our understanding to the unconscious fantasies generated by the Oedipus complex and for this reason her work provides a valuable new resource for feminist thinking as I now intend to demonstrate.

The logic of embodying violence

As noted above, Culbertson places continued emphasis on the ways in which violence speaks to the body. But while violence is figured as speech aimed at – and in a sense 'heard' by – the body, the victim cannot speak of violence in turn. Culbertson argues, 'No experience is more one's own than harm to one's own skin, but none is more locked within that skin, played out within it in actions other than words, in patterns of consciousness below the everyday and the constructions of language' (ibid., p. 170). The nature and impact of violence is such, then, that the victim is lost for words and while it is readily acknowledged by Culbertson that the silence experienced by victims is due to a complex of social and psychological reasons (at no point does she simply reduce

the experience of violence to the body), there remains a sense in which the victim cannot make 'the leap to the words' because it is experience grounded in the body (ibid., p. 169). Violence and trauma, she argues, no matter how 'horrific in their midst, live on in the victim survivor in ways that confound ordinary notions of [...] narrative, or to which ordinary narrative is simply inadequate' (ibid., p. 171). It is unspeakable, in other words, because it is lived in and by the body.

And 'yet despite this silence, the momentous nature of threats and harm to the body dictates that violence and trauma nevertheless leave the survivor preoccupied with the memory of it, which itself seems both absent and entirely present' (ibid., p. 169). 'Survivor writings', she argues, 'make it clear that to be a survivor of one's violation is precisely this: to live with the paradox of silence and the present but unreachable force of memory, and a concomitant need to tell what seems untellable' (ibid., p. 170). And certainly as an example of survivor writing, Culbertson's article is itself testimony to this paradox and the struggle it generates. Determined, then, to tell, Culbertson offers a series of summary narratives. The first is written by her as an 'external' report – an 'objective', 'pure' account, which according to her subordinates the truth of her experiences of ritual sexual abuse 'to that which can be heard, [a] truth that corresponds to certain expectations of genre and structure' (ibid., p. 183). Unhappy with the limitations imposed by this narrative form, Culbertson proceeds with more 'sensory' narratives which culminate in a short unedited description written in a 'state of dream-paralysis' (ibid., p. 187). 'Immobilized except for her fingers', Culbertson is thus able finally to do justice to a paradox 'based more than simply in the difficulty of reporting events that listeners would rather not hear or believe, or which are too different to grasped' but rather one born 'of a known and felt truth that unfortunately obeys the logic of dreams rather than of speech and so seems as unreachable, as other, as these, and as difficult to communicate and interpret, even to oneself' (ibid., p. 170). It is only when letting her body speak through and for itself that Culbertson is able, then, to give voice to her 'near-death' experiences (ibid., p. 188). Critically, then, and as Culbertson reiterates, the survivor 'knows quite well the truth [of violence, violation and trauma]', for it is there 'in his body if not in words' (ibid., p. 170).

This said, however, and somewhat surprisingly, it seems, Culbertson concludes her article with what she admits is a 'terrible' sounding confession: the 'unspeakable knowledge' of violence is, she argues, 'somehow compelling, if for no other reason than its firm rooting in the body' (ibid., p. 191). 'Like sex', she adds, 'it has a certain presence' (ibid.)

whereupon victims of violence, herself included, it is inferred, might just find themselves facing a dilemma when contemplating their recovery. As she puts it, a 'choice perhaps has to be made; self and identity versus intensity' (ibid.). Dreadful as it sounds, victims of violence might prefer, in other words, a remaining attachment to their trauma rather than choosing the 'normalcy' – as she figures it – linked with surviving, or freeing oneself of, it. Put succinctly and provocatively, if trauma is like sex, victims of violence might not be willing to give it up, opting instead to surrender themselves to the felt intensity of suffering as they might surrender themselves to sex. Admittedly, Culbertson is shy of the logic of her conclusion but while equivocal on the question of the choice left by trauma she is, nonetheless, certain that the 'reclaiming of the self comes at a price': 'dimensions of truth are lost', she maintains, when victims seek to narrate their experience precisely because the body will never exactly 'yield up' its knowledge of violence (ibid.). For this reason, victims might be tempted to hang onto a truth 'not known in words, but in the body' (ibid., p. 170). At best, she argues, the 'secrets' held fast by the body are 'tamed' by language (ibid., p. 191). Despite affording language with the power to undo the 'grasp of the perpetrator' and thus re-establish 'the social dimension of the self lost in the midst of violation' (ibid., p. 179), Culbertson is forced to conclude with a qualified hope, one compromised even further it seems by a desire to 'protect [this] other, unspeakable knowledge' (ibid., p. 191).

Without doubt Culbertson's logic – a logic posing the question of the interrelationship of sex, violence, trauma and the body – is powerful and in many ways her analogy and her reasoning are exemplary and culturally resonant. Like sex, the trauma of violence is easily thought of as an overwhelming, uniquely intense, experience (although, crucially, of course, the overwhelming nature of sex is for the most part thought of as a source of deep pleasure and not trauma, while the overwhelming nature of violence is for the most part thought of as a source of excruciating pain and not pleasure). And certainly as such both can be understood as experiences that defy ordinary expression. There are no words to describe what is felt; indeed, in a sense, both, it might be figured, have to be experienced to be believed (if not experienced to be real). Talking about them is a poor substitute. At a further push, also, it might be said that the trauma of violence, like sex, is a resolutely private experience: nobody can take your place; you would have had to have been there to understand what it was like. This is a point of reading confirmed by Culbertson when she quotes a survivor as saying: 'If you were not there, it is difficult to describe or say how it was' (ibid., p. 170). Indeed, its

singularity is such that only the victim and perpetrator have access to it. Thus Culbertson writes, 'Ironically, while the violator can enter the body of the violated, the rest of us, in trying to grasp the experience, are shut out' (ibid., p. 180). But while a seemingly persuasive analogy for what it seems to reveal about the impact or force of violence and the ways in which it takes hold of or possesses the victim, I am wary of the comparison for just as there is a tendency to romanticise or otherwise redeem the experience of sex, so there is a tendency to romanticise or otherwise redeem the experience of the trauma of violence.

And indeed this is the case, for while Culbertson is tentative when drawing an analogy between violently induced trauma and sex, she is emphatic when arguing a commonality between 'victims' experiences of extremity' and 'ascetics' or mystics' accounts of their experiences' whereby 'pain and extremity often lead to an experience of transcendence, of levels of experience beyond the ordinary' (ibid., p. 176). 'Accounts of shamanic journeying make it clear', she thus argues 'that there are similarities here with the experience of survivors' (ibid., p. 177). Thereby Culbertson argues that the 'survival experience is in important ways then a mystical one, in that it involves states of consciousness, reported experiences, and visions that parallel those reported by mystics' (ibid.). 'In short', she asserts and in testimony to her own experience and her training as an anthropologist, 'survivors are unwilling, uninitiated, unprepared, unschooled mystics', and while this experience of the 'transcendent may appear pathological' to the survivor and non-survivor alike (ibid., p. 178), it is the key to the truth of the experience. Indeed, she suggests that if they are thought of as 'outlandish' or merely metaphorical, the survivor will be left 'with a sense of homesickness for an experience, even a place that cannot otherwise be explained' (ibid., p. 177). Violence, you can easily conclude from her analysis takes us out of ourselves, transports us to other worlds and provides other ways of knowing, just like sex.

While it might be right to insist that violence is no ordinary experience, this way of thinking about the trauma is, I want to suggest, thoroughly romantic, by which I mean it removes the question of violence and trauma from its everyday aspect: its banality – a reality that Culbertson acknowledges albeit in passing (ibid., p. 188). Belying this chapter is, then, a concern with this banal aspect and the ways in which it can be occluded when violence figures as that which overwhelms and thus forces the victim to flee his or her body. There is another way of understanding the force of violence, an understanding that begins with the fact that violence can be experienced without the body registering

its impact. Indeed, the idea that someone can experience a shocking event and yet walk away as if unharmed is key to Freud's later thinking about trauma as I will discuss later. Suffice to say, here, that a failure to register violence is not a question of accommodation, nor simply a question of low intensity background violence which the body due to habituation is barely attuned to experience. But rather what I am looking to suggest is that in some critical sense the body cannot know its own undoing: violence, if properly understood, escapes the body. But this is not to suggest a disavowal of the body, but rather to caution against the idea that the body has an extraordinarily privileged and quintessentially intimate relationship to violence, whereby the body, violence and knowledge appear locked in some unholy communion. At the very least, violence can be experienced in less intimate ways. Indeed, it is with a hope of opening up the ways in which we think about violence that I would like to push for a less intimate, less knowing economy of relations – a way of knowing violence that Jacques Lacan figures in terms of extimacy (cited in Bronfen, 1998, pp. 31, 304). At issue, then, are the limits of ordinary understanding, but rather than figure these limits as the condition of possibility for extraordinary knowledge, it might be more useful to figure them as evidence of a radically evasive, hence strangely unenlightening, knowledge.

But Culbertson is not alone in her thinking and for this reason her confession – which sets up this tendency to romanticise trauma and thus occlude its banality – is less terrible than it sounds. Indeed, given her emphasis on the body and the ways which violence figures as an overwhelming event, her confession is perfectly logical, which is why it is so problematic: on the one hand, it makes it difficult to think sex and violence apart, which in the context of childhood sexual abuse has proved particularly problematic with debate constantly mired in the possibility of infantile sexuality, unconscious complicity and wishful agency; while on the other hand and relatedly, it makes it difficult to think about violence as anything other than an extraordinary and ultimately revelatory, deeply meaningful, metaphysical experience. Why not, for example, think about it in more mundane, pedestrian terms, as a desperately ordinary, run-of-the-mill, unenlightening, experience? Indeed, if sex can be thought of as boring, less a sublime, earth-shattering experience than a matter of going through the motions, a fundamentally meaningless, gratuitous experience, why not think about trauma in the same way? Why not think about trauma as an underwhelming as opposed to an overwhelming experience; as something which does not move us in mysterious ways but is rather a groundhog experience, giving us nothing in return for what has been experienced?

The aim of the rest of this chapter is to pose these questions, which I hope to demonstrate is not an idle gesture on my part (or indeed a commentary on my sex life or a displayed ignorance of the reality of victim experience). Instead, in suggesting that the violence of trauma might not register as intensely known experience, I intend to problematise the ways in which ideas about the body – often romantic in nature – inform our understanding of violence and trauma. So while the body is commonly understood to be the key to the experience and meaning of violence, it is an assumption that requires caution for all too quickly trauma will figure as a potentially sublime, hence 'positive' experience; as something which because it takes us to limits of what we find bearable has thereby the potential to give us great insight into ourselves. If we do not exercise care in our thinking we will give support to the idea that 'we get to know what we are made of when we pushed to the edge of our endurance'. Trauma will thus become an altogether great experience, a gift holding the promise of self-knowledge and enlightenment. Importantly, then, the body cannot simply serve as a self-evident referent, despite Culbertson's conviction and its commonsense appeal. In an attempt, then, to show this logic at work I will turn to the work of Ann Cvetkovich, who, unlike Culbertson, is positively happy to play around with the relationship of sex, violence and the body.

A sex-positive analysis of trauma

While Culbertson ends her article by drawing a tentative analogy between the bodily experiences of sex and trauma, the cultural and literary critic Cvetkovich (2003) begins her own autobiographically informed analysis of sexual abuse – *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* – with a firm commitment to exploring it in terms of sex, and especially lesbian sex. Indeed, according to Cvetkovich, understanding the reality and repercussions of sexual violence requires a shift away from a language of pathology and victimisation towards a way of thinking shaped by an understanding of lesbian and gay culture. At issue, then, for Cvetkovich is a 'way of thinking about trauma that [does not] pathologise' it, whereupon it might be possible to 'seize control over [the meaning and experience of trauma] from the medical experts' and 'forge creative responses to it that far outstrip even the most utopian of therapeutic and political solutions' (2003, p. 3). Wary, then, of what she refers to as the 'magic bullet theory of sexual trauma' (ibid., p. 2) as a way of explaining her own history of incest and the depression she subsequently suffered, Cvetkovich looks instead to the

performance art of raucously punk lesbian bands such as Le Tigre and Tribe 8 for inspiration for a history she 'didn't know how to tell' as her own story (ibid.). Likewise she looks to the writings of sex-positive lesbians such as Amber Hollibaugh and Joan Nestle as 'points of reference when theoretical concepts fail' her (ibid., p. 4).

There are two critical issues at stake for Cvetkovich in her turn to the culture and practice of lesbian sex. The first and quite obvious is the question of pleasure, which I shall discuss in the next section. The second and less obvious, if ultimately more significant, is the question of the everyday, systemic nature of sexual trauma and the ways in which it is overlooked. Thus she writes that while 'Trauma discourse has allowed me to ask about the connection between girls like me feeling bad and world historical events', there is 'an apparent gender divide within trauma discourse that allows sexual trauma to slip out of the picture' (ibid., p. 3). Importantly, then, Cvetkovich argues that sexual trauma slips out of the picture because it does not 'seem to measure up to that of collectively historical events, such as war and genocide'; in other words it does not 'appear sufficiently catastrophic because it doesn't produce dead bodies, or even, necessarily damaged ones' (ibid.). Subject to 'persistent invisibility', sexual trauma 'demands a different approach', an approach sensitive in particular to its connection 'to the textures of everyday experience' (ibid.). On this score, Cvetkovich is not alone for, as she acknowledges, feminist psychotherapists such as Judith Herman and Laura S. Brown are equally keen to stress the 'everyday' quality of sexual trauma and in so doing both therapists have sought to challenge the category of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is clinically defined as the response to having experienced an event 'outside the range of usual human experience' or experiences involving 'actual or threatened death or serious injury, or threat to one's physical integrity' (ibid., p. 18). Thus Herman is given credit by Cvetkovich for her attempt to replace PTSD with an expanded diagnostic category which would be capable of understanding victim response to repeated, inescapable abuse. Consequently, while critical of the fact that Herman's 'argument is grounded in problematic equations between the trauma of enforced captivity in circumstances of war and torture and the more invisible yet no less significant forms of captivity that abused children and battered wives may experience in the home', Cvetkovich considers Herman's project 'important for trauma studies' (ibid., p. 32). Similarly Cvetkovich credits Brown with challenging the clinical limits of PTSD with her concept of 'insidious trauma'; indeed Cvetkovich considers this concept to be especially helpful for understanding trauma as a 'dull

drama' rather than a cataclysmic event (ibid., p. 43) – an emphasis it is important to note at odds with Culbertson's desire to point to the world shattering nature of trauma.

While recognising that Herman's and Brown's attempts to rewrite the terms of PTSD are significant, Cvetkovich remains convinced, however, that 'everyday forms of trauma, especially those emerging from systemic forms of oppression' require 'an understanding of trauma that moves beyond medicalised constructions of PTSD' (ibid., p. 33). Indeed, Cvetkovich is distinctly critical of the PTSD approach because it relies for its explanatory force on the identification of a discrete, pathologically charged cause, whereas she argues 'the challenge of insidious trauma or chronic PTSD [...] is that it resists the melodramatic structure of an easily identifiable origin of trauma' (ibid.). Trauma 'as everyday' life cannot figure as an overwhelming event and as such it requires a new way of thinking. This is a laudable ambition and one I share. But any project looking to 'queer' feminist understanding of sexual trauma is set to be controversial given the fraught history left by the legacy of Jeffrey Masson's *The Assault on Truth*. Published in 1984, *The Assault on Truth* caused controversy because Masson sought to accuse Freud of betraying women when he abandoned his original seduction theory of hysteria – whereby quite famously hysterics were understood to be suffering from reminiscences, memories of actual assault – in favour of an account based on the fantasies generated by the Oedipus complex. This substitution of an internally generated fantasy as the index of women's traumatic reality has become a point of fraught debate. On the one hand, then, radical feminists have sought to dismiss or at least ignore Freud's later work on fantasy and the 'shock' caused by unconscious desires and wishes, choosing instead to remain wed to his perceived original insights concerning the repression of the trauma caused by an unexpected attack. On the other hand, psychoanalytical feminists have persistently argued in return that Masson's reading is a gross simplification of Freud's oedipal logic. Hence in her 'Feminism and the Seductiveness of the "Real Event"' for example, Ann Scott argues that Masson's account of Freud's repudiation of the seduction theory as a narrative of turning away from memory towards fantasy and thus an abandoning of the notion of the real event is already a misinterpretation of the significance of Freud's insights into the interrelationship of these phenomena. Thus she takes issue with Masson's claim that psychoanalysts are only interested in the pathogenic effects of fantasy and not the traumatising effects of real events, arguing that 'Masson is right to say that "psychoanalysts have shown a greater interest in the fantasy life of a patient than in real

events" – but only in the sense that psychoanalysts cannot assume that an (external) event bears within it an unalterable (internal) meaning' (Scott, 1988, p. 91). Scott, then, goes on to argue that Masson 'mistakenly ascribes to psychoanalysis the view that it is only fantasy which has an impact or an effect: indeed that there is no relationship between fantasy and event. In psychoanalysis, however, all events become invested with fantasy, conscious and unconscious, and may on occasion be potentiated by fantasy' (ibid.).

Psychoanalytical feminists are right to claim that traumatic memory and its retrieval is more complex than is suggested by Masson. And I certainly think Scott is right to stress that the value of psychoanalysis is to be found in its challenge to the determinism of a radical feminist reading of sexual violence. As Carine Mardorossian argues, rape victims experience trauma in a multitude of ways, with women who 'fought or talked their way out of a rape' feeling their 'victimisation more keenly than women who had been raped and badly injured' (Mardorossian, 2002, p. 754). Scott is right therefore when she claims that 'in Masson there is what I can only call fetishism of the event – that is, of the physical or external event' (Scott, 1988, p. 97). Trauma does not draw its meaning from the event itself: its status as prior and separate to the victim might work to mitigate the question of complicity as Masson intends, but it does not secure the experience for the victim. But this is a complex formulation. Thus while I agree with Scott that there has been a tendency among feminists following Masson to presume the self-evident and manifest nature of the 'real event' – an event understood to overwhelm the victim, yet somehow still possessed as an experience by them – I depart from her when she insists on the mediating agency of the unconscious. Instead, I want to argue, following the work of Caruth that the death-like break instituted by violence cannot be mediated by the work of fantasy, nor be attributed, in various form, to it. There is no way of claiming it as one's own, whether through unconscious or, indeed, as I shall argue below, sexual labour. Importantly, then, Scott does not entertain the possibility that some 'experiences' might escape the powers of the unconscious, which is the point being made by Caruth when she insists that 'the traumatic symptom cannot be interpreted, simply, as a distortion of reality, nor as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor the repression of what once was wished' (Caruth, 1995, p. 5). Something else is happening, although what that is is more radical than Cvetkovich is willing or able to grasp, despite acknowledging that trauma can be 'unrepresentable' (2003, p. 7) and characterised by 'an

absence of feeling' (ibid., p. 43). So while I agree with Cvetkovich when she emphasises the need to sever our thinking about sexual trauma from the drama of thinking of trauma as a 'punctual event', I am less sure whether, as she claims, 'a queer perspective more attuned to the vagaries of sexuality can resolve some of the conundrums sexual trauma has posed for feminists in their efforts to give it a central place within clinical definitions of trauma' (ibid.). Rather, as I shall now discuss, Cvetkovich simply ends up substituting one drama for another: everyday lesbian sexual pleasure for the clearly historical event.

A queer reading of Freud and trauma theory

Underpinning Cvetkovich's project to advance a queer theory of trauma is Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* – which as she quite rightly notes has been critical to the development of trauma theory since in it Freud developed his ideas concerning the compulsion to repeat, and the suggestion thereby of a death drive. Notoriously, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is one of Freud's most speculative pieces of work, and just as infamously it appears to represent a fundamental shift in his thinking about the structure of the mind and as such it has generated any number of readings concerning its significance for understanding trauma and Freud's entire corpus. In her attempt, however, to queer the importance of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* for our understanding of trauma, Cvetkovich reads it in the context of butch-femme writings on sex. This is, by her own admission, an unusual approach, but it is a reading conceptually linked by the idea of penetration.

According to Cvetkovich, Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is critically important because in it he defines trauma as the breaching or penetration of the protective shield – consciousness – by an upsurge of widespread excessive stimulation: a 'quasi-military' model, which as Ruth Leys notes, clearly betrays the influence of the First World War on Freud's imaginary (2000, pp. 23, 21). Thus Freud argues, for example, that it is possible to 'regard the common traumatic neurosis as a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli' (cited in Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 49). Similarly, he writes of how 'We can describe as "traumatic" any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. It seems to me', Freud continues 'that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli' (ibid., p. 53). Critically, then, Freud uses the topography of the battlefield and trench warfare to offer a different, inherently spatialised,

model of trauma, and as such he institutes a major break with his earlier work, the latter of which had been governed by his thinking on the Oedipal complex (the family romance) and which as I have outlined above has been the source of enduring problems for feminists thinking through the question of sexual trauma. But whatever the historical specificity of Freud's thinking on trauma at this point, it is nonetheless important to note that he appears to retain his general commitment to an economic model of psychic processes. This is evidenced, as Leys points out, in an earlier reflection on war neuroses in which he writes, 'The term, traumatic, has no other sense than an economic one. We apply it to an experience which within a short period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in a normal way' (cited in Leys, 2000, p. 23). There is, in other words, a normal threshold or quantity of stimuli which by definition we can cope with or successfully defend ourselves against and, then, there is overload, and this it seems is the point of trauma.

Having established this reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* Cvetkovich turns to butch-femme writing to demonstrate how the femme experience of sex works to 'depathologise the traumatic nature of penetration' (2003, p. 56). Key to her supplementary discourse is the emphasis Cvetkovich places on what she considers to be the agency of passivity. 'Many self-identified femmes', she argues, 'challenge the idea that being penetrated [...] is a negative experience, or "traumatic" in Freud's sense, by testifying to their active and eager desire to be fucked' (ibid., p. 57). 'Central to femme discourse', she goes on to maintain, 'is the recurrent need to counter the notion that this possibility is a passive one – an assumption that also pervades the image of trauma as a violent breach of bodily boundaries' (ibid.). In an attempt, then, to counter the metaphorical association of 'getting fucked' with 'weakness, powerlessness and submissiveness', Cvetkovich points to how femmes stress the 'power and labour' informing their position (ibid., p. 58). Passivity is only ever apparent, she argues; indeed, it is more usefully figured as receptivity. Getting – or being – 'fucked' is not a metaphor for trauma, but an opportunity she argues for redefining the experience of 'giving up of power' and 'the experience of emotional vulnerability' (ibid., pp. 59, 60). According to Cvetkovich, then, you are never as powerless as you seem, and in this sense Cvetkovich's desire for a feminism and theory of trauma *without victims* is met. In yielding to aggressive authority and dominance there is agency: you positively take it in. Indeed, Cvetkovich pushes the logic of her position here by arguing that 'Butch-femme writings queer trauma theory by troubling

the ease with which negative assumptions about penetration ground a similarly negative sense of trauma that seems to go without saying' (ibid., p. 52). Unlike Culbertson, then, sex is not merely offered as an analogy or metaphor for the experience of trauma, but it is collapsed to the point whereby trauma is sex; there is, it seems, pleasure in the agency of taking the pain of penetration and reason at least for Cvetkovich to believe that sexual discourses 'that fearlessly and shamelessly explore the imbrications of pleasure and danger in sexual practice provide a model for approaches to trauma that resist pathologising judgements' (ibid., p. 35).

On first reading, Cvetkovich's analysis appears radical, courting the controversy sparked by the sex wars of the 1980s, which as I have already noted turned on the question of whether or not practices such as S/M are an acting out of past sexual trauma or whether they serve as a 'vehicle[s] through which trauma can be rearticulated and reworked' (ibid., p. 66). Aligning Herman with the normatively conservative position, Cvetkovich is keen to maintain the value of 'painful' sexual practices. 'Without being essentialising', Cvetkovich argues butches and femmes 'use the body as a ground for negotiating social problems' (ibid., p. 56) and as such they open up the possibility 'for understanding traumatic feelings not as a medical problem in search of a cure but as felt experiences that can be mobilised in a range of directions' (ibid., p. 47). On closer inspection, however, her reasoning betrays a deeply romantic way of thinking about sex, violence, trauma and body; and I shall argue that it perpetuates the logic informing Culbertson's account rather than breaking with it as might be expected given Cvetkovich's claims for the contribution of lesbian sex has to offer our understanding of trauma and differences in their thinking about trauma.

According to Cvetkovich, she is not only inspired by Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* but owes considerable inspiration to Leo Bersani's 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' in which he notoriously endorses the value of 'powerlessness' and 'loss of control'. In its more modest form, it is an assertion that Cvetkovich applauds because it 'is strategically useful for, and compatible with, theories of lesbian sexuality that try to contest the idea that any sexual relation marked by power is problematic' (ibid., p. 62). And yet Cvetkovich is also wary of Bersani's intervention because it stands as a critique of the sex-positive theories on which she relies. According to Bersani, then, sex-positive approaches are 'pastoral and redemptive' since they 'romanticise sex or view it as utopian in order to declare that forms of sexuality that involve submission or vulnerability are pleasurable' and as such, he argues, they 'beg the question of unpleasure by reinscribing

it within the economy of pleasure' (Bersani, cited in Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 62). At issue for Bersani, and in counterpoint, is not 'the value of gentleness, or nonaggressiveness, or even of passivity, but rather of a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self' (ibid.). Hence, as Cvetkovich notes, he 'defends the sexual experience of self-shattering in order to challenge universalising and naturalizing assumptions about the innate positivity of sex' (ibid.).

As noted, Cvetkovich is suspicious of Bersani's challenge and so in defence of a sex-positive approach Cvetkovich insists that femme lesbians 'don't prettify powerlessness as Bersani claims' and while 'radical disintegration and humiliation' might not 'adequately characterize the negative affects that both butch and femme lesbians associate with being fucked, that doesn't mean their accounts romanticise it either' (ibid., p. 63). Cvetkovich argues, 'Read in the context of Bersani's critique of sex positivity, femme accounts of receptivity avoid a redemptive reading of sex, insisting on the fear [and] pain' (ibid.). This said, however, there is little evidence to support Cvetkovich's anti-redemptive defence of butch-femme sex. As her readings of butch-femme testimony continually demonstrate, the 'pain' experienced by either and both parties is redeeming: it is a form of sexual vulnerability which 'gives'. The 'pain is sweet', Joan Nestle writes, and for this reason a 'gift' (Nestle, cited in Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 64). Despite her demand for a 'sex positivity that can embrace negativity, including trauma' (ibid., p. 63), Cvetkovich consistently cancels the question of unpleasure by positing the ameliorative value of perverse sexual practices whereby the body figures as a significant vehicle for working through traumatic histories. In her overt desire to disrupt a reading of butch-femme sex as 'a mistaken displacement of psychic and social processes onto the material body' and thereby 'a repetition of a trauma rather than a possible cure' (ibid., p. 56), it remains the case that Cvetkovich cannot help but fall prey to Bersani's critique of sex radicalism. Simply put, Cvetkovich affords sex and the body with an innate positivity and for this reason her reading is naturalising and wholly redemptive. The body, it seems, can take, and feel, pain.

Almost 30 years since the sex wars of the 1980s, Cvetkovich remains caught in a defining logic – a logic owing its force, I would argue, to the ways in which the body is understood to register violence. Indeed, while Cvetkovich believes herself to be reworking the presumptions underpinning trauma theory and thereby challenging and distancing herself from the premises underpinning Culbertson's analysis, they share an absolutely key conviction: trauma is always experienced or felt by the

body. It is always effectively registered and embodied in some way, even when the violence is systemic and not an event which produces – as Cvetkovich complains above – bodies which are so obviously marked by violence. Hence, for Culbertson violence always 'lives on' in the body as a 'protolanguage' and as memory: 'locked within [the] skin, played out within it in actions other than words, in patterns of consciousness below the everyday constructions of language' (1995, p. 170). It is thus always palpably present if also unreal, 'shadowy' (ibid., p. 170). Indeed, according to Culbertson, 'Violence is about survival, and the body is designed to take the lessons of violence seriously' (ibid., p. 175); it will always recognise and register any threat to its existence, any danger.

Equally, Cvetkovich insists on the affective, embodied economy of trauma, as that which can be 'felt even at a remove from the experience itself' (2003, p. 29) and which can manifest itself both as 'intense sensation' and as a feeling of 'numbness' (ibid., p. 43). And while critical of PTSD, Cvetkovich nonetheless argues, in defence of the therapeutic value of butch-femme sex, that experts in PTSD 'are increasingly turning to the body as a place where trauma is both experienced and healed' (ibid., p. 81). Hence she cites with approval the work of Bessel van der Kolk, who like Freud in his earliest work on hysteria, she argues,

> insists that "the body keeps score", recording traumatic memories in ways that must be activated and addressed by somatic techniques. Contemporary trauma research seems to have come full circle to its mid-nineteenth-century origins in the diagnosis of railway shock; the body has returned as the site where trauma can be both manifested and cured.
>
> (ibid., p. 55)

Trauma is precisely an affect: 'part of the affective language that describes life under capitalism' (ibid., p. 19). Indeed, like Culbertson, Cvetkovich insists that all trauma, insidious and psychic, is affectively registered, arguing: 'The violation of bodily boundaries need not be a literal moment of penetration, but it is experienced as an equivalent to invasive physical contact because it is so emphatically a visceral or sensational experience' (ibid., p. 50).

There is, it seems, no experience destined to be as true as violence, no experience that speaks as immediately and directly to and through our bodies, except sex. No discourse can be so perfectly felt. Somewhere in our body we know, feel, the reality of violence – even if we struggle at times to gauge from which direction it comes (indeed, for Cvetkovich – as for

many theorists – the problem of trauma is presumed due to its status as both internal and external, psychic and social, biological and cultural, whereby it is virtually impossible to know from where the threat to our integrity stems, hence the trauma. We cannot manage the threat, in other words, because we do not know in which direction it is coming). So while we might be confused about how real violence is, and why it is real, it is, nonetheless, knowledge possessed by the body and as such it can become the condition of possibility for other experiences. For Culbertson, then, it can become the condition of possibility for transcendent experiences and sublime self-knowledge; while for Cvetkovich it can be redirected and put to work in the service of self-identity, and thereby, in what is certainly a significant development on Culbertson, self-other relations. Thus Cvetkovich points to the ways in which femmes not only experience a 'self precariously brought into being through their sexual activity' (ibid., pp. 64–65), but in so doing they experience a level of interpersonal communion: 'what is more important than the actual body parts', she argues, is 'the "appropriation of the human body" (to use David Halperin's phrase) to signify the intersubjective dynamics of giving and taking' (ibid., p. 64). Through violence and trauma, butches and femmes speak. There is nothing dull about butch-femme sex for Cvetkovich; it is for her nothing short of a wonderous drama with bodies speaking with the pleasure of 'pain'. This might be sex, and for this reason there might well be grounds of critiquing it as a form of compulsion repetition as Herman does, but it is not trauma.

Toward a more penetrating reading

The question of what, then, causes trauma returns us to Cvetkovich's reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Cvetkovich centres her reading – and thus her understanding of trauma – solely on his account of the amoeba-like organism seeking to protect itself from overstimulation. This is an account that Cvetkovich readily acknowledges is one in which Freud 'creates a melodramatic scenario of embattlement and self-sacrifice' – an 'emotional drama' that she finds 'mysteriously mov[ing]' (ibid., pp. 53, 55). By only focusing on this aspect of Freud's text, however, Cvetkovich does not engage with the ways in which Freud revises the utility of this model, and thereby his commitment to the economic principle, as he thinks through the significance of traumatic repetition. In a reading that develops Cvetkovich's reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and links his analysis of the veterans of the First World

War to the victims of accident neuroses, Caruth begins by noting how it does indeed open 'with Freud's perplexed observation of a psychic disorder that appears to reflect the unavoidable and overwhelming imposition of historical events on the psyche' and how it might seem, then, that in trauma 'the outside has gone inside without mediation' (1996, pp. 58–59). But critically, consciousness is understood by Freud to operate differently to the body; unlike the body, Caruth thus argues,

> consciousness is a barrier of sensation and knowledge that protects the organism by placing them within an ordered experience of time. *What causes trauma, then, is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time*.
>
> (ibid., p. 61; emphasis added)

Like other commentators, Caruth is stressing the fact that the innovative nature of Freud's thinking is due precisely to the ways in which he breaks with understanding trauma in terms of the body. Importantly, here, Caruth is emphasising that the cause of trauma is not a contingent breach of the cortical shield or consciousness that is registered by the body, but rather, trauma is caused by the fact that the victim of violence *does not register what is happening to them at the time of happening*. She writes, 'If a life threat to the body and the survival of this threat are experienced as the direct infliction and the healing of a wound, trauma is suffered in the psyche precisely it would seem, because it is not directly available to the experience' (ibid.). Indeed, quite succinctly 'for consciousness, survival does not seem to be a matter of known experience at all' (ibid., p. 60). Critically, violence does not speak to the psyche as it speaks to the body, and for this reason it is misleading to figure violence as a discourse. Violence says nothing.

What emerges, then, as significant in the aetiology of trauma are not economic or libidinal considerations but a question of temporality. Thus Caruth writes,

> The breach in the mind – the conscious awareness of the threat to life is not caused by a pure quantity of stimulus, Freud suggests, but by 'fright', the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly. It is not simply, that is, the literal threatening of bodily life, but the fact that the threat is recognised as such by the mind *one moment* too late.
>
> (ibid., p. 62)

As such and quite crucially the victim is incapable of feeling anything in response to what has happened. The shock of the threat to life – of

the 'apparently inevitable slippage', as Culbertson puts it, 'from life to death' – is so beyond any ability to prepare ourselves, that there is no way of defending against it: there is no time to be had. The victim of violence is traumatised not because they are overwhelmed by an excess of stimulation, but because they were not aroused to the danger as such; increased arousal and felt anxiety are normal ways of signalling that there might be a threat to life. In the event of violence, there is no time to defend oneself; you are caught unaware to catastrophic effect. So while it might be thought that there is no experience more intimately lived, more intensely known than trauma, the contrary is true: it is the least intimately lived, least intensely known in one's archive, and as such it betrays both body and mind. It is nothing like sex, no matter how it might be desired as proof of life. There is no point of comparison.

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Part II

Representations

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7
‘It’s Wrong for a Boy to Hit a Girl Because the Girl Might Cry’: Investigating Primary School Children’s Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women

Nancy Lombard

The quotation in the title is from Joanne, aged 11. It is representative of the gendered dichotomies used to comprehend and explain male violence during fieldwork with 90 primary school children between the ages of 10 and 12 in Glasgow. Here, Joanne locates her understanding of male violence against women within binary concepts of femininity and weakness. The majority of participants concurred that girls (as opposed to boys) would be more likely to be hurt during physical violence, that females were weaker and that male violence against women was mismatched and unfair as boys (men) are bigger and stronger than girls (women). Alongside the implicit acceptance of normative masculinity and the alignment of this construction with power is the perception that male violence against women is wrong because of the perceived weakness of females. Therefore, women are complicit in their own victimisation because they are not strong enough to counter it. So although the young people were most likely to challenge physical (as opposed to emotional) violence, they were less likely to overtly resist the gendered practices which contributed to it.

This chapter begins by situating the research within a theoretical and political context. It then goes on to discuss the research methods that were developed and employed to encourage the involvement and participation of the young people, and challenge common sense assumptions of their limited abilities. The remainder of the chapter

analyses young people's responses to a vignette (one method in the research process) depicting emotional abuse within a heterosexual relationship, illustrated with (anonymised) quotations. These responses are then embedded within wider understandings of domestic violence and abuse. Vignettes are

> Stories about individuals, situations and structures which can make reference to important points in the study of perceptions, beliefs and attitudes.
>
> (Hughes, 1998, p. 381)

Much child-centred research (Boyden and Ennew, 1997; Thorne, 1993) proposes that children and young people can only talk from their own experience or about what they know. While several of the young people could have been living in abusive households, others may not. Therefore it was necessary to provide specific situated examples to unpick the stereotypes, myths and personal narratives and explore opinions further. Vignettes readily bridged this gap.

The research upon which this chapter is based addresses the theoretical gap between children, gender and violence. The gap exists, in part, because of continued naming of male violence against women as a 'private' problem. Labelling it in this way undermines the feminist campaigns and (limited) developments in government policy (Hague and Malos, 1998; Hague, 1999; Radford and Stanko, 1996) that have sought to publicise the issue. Constructing male violence against women as both 'private' (within the home) and 'personal' (at an individual as opposed to societal level) perpetuates the myth of the home as a safe haven and engenders a reluctance to enable young people to discuss it. By not giving younger people the space or means with which to talk about, challenge or resist male violence against women, we are colluding in the perpetuation of the issue as a 'private' problem, constraining the 'speakability' of interpersonal violence and assuming that children are 'too young' to engage. This silence encourages the propagation of myths and common-sense definitions that normalise a problem which is endemic in our society.

The fieldwork took place within the social and political context of Scotland, involving 90 children from primary schools in Glasgow from a cross-section of class, ethnic and faith backgrounds. Scotland has recognised the social problem of male violence against women, and through the Scottish Executive has drawn up and implemented multi-agency and multi-professional strategies to deal with it (see

National Strategy to Address Domestic Abuse in Scotland, 2000; *Preventing Violence Against Women: Action Across the Scottish Executive*, 2001 and *Domestic Abuse: A National Training Strategy*, 2004).[1] As definitions of violence against women are culturally, historically and spatially specific (Hester and Westmarland, 2004) it is of relevance to note that Scotland is the only country in the United Kingdom to have a gendered definition and to use the term 'domestic abuse':

> Domestic abuse (as gender-based abuse) can be perpetrated by partners or ex-partners and can include physical abuse... sexual abuse... and mental and emotional abuse.
>
> (*National Strategy to Address Domestic Abuse in Scotland*, 2000)

By defining domestic abuse as gender based, the Scottish Executive locates it within a wider structural context. The word 'abuse' incorporates all forms of suffering that a woman may endure including emotional and financial abuses. It also implies that the abusive behaviours are cumulative; they occur with increasing severity and over time. The terms 'abuse' and 'violence' were used concurrently during this research to incorporate young people's awareness of either.

New methodologies

Previous research involving young people within the paradigm of male violence framed them as either victims (with personal experience of the violence) or in terms of catalysts for preventive work (where they were questioned about their views). This latter group have all been over the age of 14 (Burton *et al.*, 1998; McCarry, 2003; Burman and Cartmel, 2005).[2] Therefore there is a whole section of young people who have been ignored in previous research, whether because of age or circumstance or experience. The case for young people's involvement is made here using the feminist arguments of access to naming, knowledge and power (Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Kelly, 1988; Stanley and Wise, 1983), locating the young people within a framework that epistemologically prioritises their language, understandings and knowledge.

A major obstacle faced in this research was the unquestioning acceptance by gatekeepers of common-sense assumptions about children: their age (too young); their capabilities; their knowledge and notions about childhood innocence, particularly in relation to the

subject of violence against women. Such beliefs reinforce the powerless position of young people in our society and propagate the myths of the *unspeakability* and privacy of male violence against women (which is then replicated in research). In this research gatekeepers accepted and perpetuated these assumptions by denying access to the young people (only 6% of schools consented to the research), as the following quotation from a gatekeeper highlights,

> Although some children may have their own experience on which to form opinions, domestic violence in particular and violence against women in general are subjects which are not explored in any depth until secondary school . . . you therefore might have difficulty in finding a primary school willing or able to take part.
>
> (Headteacher, School 47)

It is this reluctance, or inability, to see children as active and independent agents in their own lives that has prompted the development of child-centred paradigms and methodology, defined collectively as the sociology of childhood (see James *et al.*, 1998). The methodologies developed within this perspective minimise power imbalances and strive for the voices of the disempowered to be heard, listened to and acted upon through the creation of participants as active agents in the research process (Thomas and O'Kane, 1998). The four main methods used here were,

1. Information and consent sheets (given to Glasgow City Council, all primary schools, parents and all children). The material was specific to the audience it addressed, to enable an informed decision to be made.
2. Exploratory questionnaires (conducted with 90 participants in a classroom setting).
3. Discussion Groups (90 participants in groups of four, five or six outside of the classroom).
4. Vignettes (used within the discussion group context).

Christensen and James (2000, p. 7) maintain that it is not necessarily different methods that are crucial but the adoption of '*practices which resonate with children's own concerns and routines*'. The exploratory questionnaire was devised with this in mind, and the answers and ideas were to be used as the basis for further discussion; a stimulus for the collection of further data (Boyden and Ennew, 1997, p. 120).

Exploratory questionnaires

It was not intended that the 'results' of the questionnaire be collated statistically. Rather, it was the themes, gendered assumptions and answers to the open-ended questions that were to be adapted for the discussion group sessions. Thus the concepts and language were defined, in part, by the participants rather than have them fit into rigidly defined frameworks (Opie, 1992). The questionnaire was seven pages long and the children were given an hour to fill it in. The questionnaire began with questions about home life, domestic chores, interests, aspirations and friends. The children were also asked about gender and their own gendered expectations as well as questions pertaining to emotional and physical violence.

Discussion groups

The discussion group sessions took place a month after the exploratory questionnaires had been completed. A main theme from the exploratory questionnaires was that the young people tended to rely upon gendered expectations and stereotypes when questioned about emotional and physical violence. Many of their answers perpetuated myths and stereotypes that are representative of patriarchal culture such as that if a woman had done something wrong (such as have an affair) then it was acceptable to reprehend her with violence. Rather than accepting these answers without recourse, the discussion groups provided a space in which opinions and ideas could be explored. The sessions were structured around four areas with this chapter focusing upon the latter two:

1. Gender and gender construction
2. Perspectives on violence and different forms of gendered violence
3. Three vignettes detailing different abusive situations
4. Focused discussion of domestic violence/abuse.

Vignettes

Talking about situations from the vignettes gave young people the opportunity to overcome preconceived assumptions about their age, knowledge or capabilities. In a vignette there is no right or wrong answer – the whole process is made less school-like, which in turn empowers the participants (Hood *et al.*, 1996; Morrow, 2001). Young people, should they choose to, can talk through the characters. Barter and Renold (1999, p. 1) maintain that vignettes are helpful in research:

> to allow actions in context to be explored; to clarify people's judgements; and to provide a less personal and therefore less threatening way of exploring sensitive topics.

Asking what a third person would do is not the same as asking the participants directly (see Finch, 1987), which is a limitation of this particular method, and there is a need to be wary of the methodological challenges of vignettes particularly in concluding 'that responses to vignettes will reflect how individuals actually respond in reality' (Barter and Renold, 1999, p. 3). However, the vignettes were only one methodological tool of this research project, used as a stimulus into further discussion and to frame specific examples of abusive behaviour.

The remainder of this chapter analyses the participants' responses to the first vignette. This vignette describes a situation where Lee attempts to use emotional abuse to coercively control his girlfriend (Stark, 2007). The analysis of the young people's discussions highlights discrepancies in their constructions of equality in relationships and their normalisation, and at times acceptance, of hegemonic power and control.

Claire and Lee have been seeing each other for four months. Claire's favourite outfit is her jeans and pink vest top. Lee has asked Claire not to wear the vest top because he says other boys look at her and he doesn't like this.

After a member of the group read the vignette out loud, I then asked, 'Can you tell me what you think about that?' All of the groups, except for one, focused their immediate responses on what Claire should do. These discussions are analysed here in terms of four themes: *choice; relationship context; modification of behaviour* and *do as Lee asks*.

Choice

Earlier discussions highlighting young people's constructions of gender were invested in cultural texts of embodiment and this understanding was framed by fashion and clothing. In this context, fashion was seen as an arena where girls had more advantages over the boys in terms of variety and choice. Here, the young people who deemed that it was '*up to her what she wears*' stressed Claire's autonomy and choice. Whilst the

focus was on an article of clothing, the responses in favour of Claire asserting her own independence framed the issue in relation to not being defined or 'controlled' by a partner:

> It's her choice.... her options. He can say what he thinks of her but it's up to her to decide on her own whether she like wants to listen to him or she doesn't. (Emily)
>
> It's not his life, it's her life. (Tommy)

There was an acknowledgement of the role of others in determining Claire's and Lee's behaviour. That is, Lee attempted to control what Claire wore by using the anticipated reaction of others to regulate her. Several young people recognised this and felt that this should not deter Claire.

> It's up to her what she wears. (Alison)
>
> She should keep on wearing it.... who cares what everyone else thinks? (Roy)

More boys than girls stressed that Claire's clothing should be her own choice and not defined by her partner. This answer deviated from previous research with young people which found boys to be more 'traditional' in terms of subscribing to male-dominant models of behaviour (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2001) and in which boys 'had not quite come to terms with the changing realities of gender relations and power structures' (O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000, p. 7).

Discussing the subject within the context of the relationship

Here some of the young people viewed Lee's 'request' as an individual incident and not one that was indicative of a wider catalogue of control. They structured their responses around the need to talk, discuss, compromise, reassure and trust, and answers were not necessarily indicative of a heterosexist framework:

> You could reach some kind of compromise. (Karen)
>
> Well I think if they talked about it and she considered what he said about it and then they made a decision. (Rosie)

It could be argued that by cultivating compromise in relationships, equality is encouraged. However, some of the young people still felt it necessary to question Lee's motivations in wanting to control an element

of Claire's life, and the antagonism and sense of entitlement created by Lee in this context did not go unnoticed:

> He can have an opinion, like 'god I don't like that top' but he can't tell her what to do. (James)
>
> If you really love somebody...you wouldn't really care about what they wear would you? (Adam)

The participants were more emphatic in their resistance to Lee when it was thought that the couple were younger. These young people identified themselves at a transient time in their lives where their constructions of masculinity and femininity were still being negotiated; a time when they were working out, '*who they were*' and '*where they fit in*' (O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000). The implication is that young people were more likely to view their own relationships, and those of their peers, as more fluid and open to negotiation, with gender roles less rigidly defined. Thus a boy telling a girl what to do and seeking to control or curb her behaviour was not tolerated, whereas it was seen as more acceptable within an adult relationship.

Frosh *et al*. (2002) argue that hegemonic masculinity is an ideal to which most young boys choose to aspire, and indeed most of the boys in this study were more likely to mobilise this form of masculinity around elements of the lives of grown-up men: marriage, home and children, rather than applying it to themselves as 10- and 11-year-old boys. Yet rather than seeing it as an aspiration, they were more likely to view this 'ideal' as static, fixed and to some extent inevitable as it was bound up in their futures. The heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990), and the gender roles within, became more structured, fixed, rigid and acceptable for the young people (male and female) when aligned with marriage, the private sphere of the home and children. The boys were much more likely to equate their own (young) masculinities as constantly evolving and more fluid.

Thus although all forms of masculinity are constantly evolving, shaped by gender interactions within the wider gendered regimes (Connell, 1995), the hegemonic ideal does not offer enough possibility for the young men here. Whilst not an identity which the boys would claim as wholly their own just yet, they are still able, unlike the girls, to partake in the 'patriarchal dividend' (ibid.) and other such male advantages. The girls' early recognition of this inequality may account for their suggestions of appeasement, in terms of modification of behaviour.

Modification of behaviour

It is vital to note that during the fieldwork the suggestions of placation came entirely from girls. These responses were about placating Lee by suggesting Claire modified her behaviour to please him, but stopped short of suggesting Claire did not wear the top:

> Maybe she could wear something over it. (Gemma)
> [...] you could just like put a jumper over it but you could still wear it like when you are out with your girlfriends. (Rebecca)
> Maybe not wear it as much. (Sarah)

Although this could be included in the previous analytic thread of compromise, the actual modification of behaviour, in response to Lee's demand, indicates a greater acceptance of his coercive action. Whilst modifying behaviour but still choosing to wear the top can be seen as an act of resistance, particularly when performed by women already in abusive relationships, there was an overwhelming consensus by the young girls who expressed these views that Lee's behaviour was unequivocally acceptable. Therefore, advising that Claire should modify her behaviour demonstrates two things: first, that the relationship is more important than personal choice or individual identity, thereby defining Claire in relation to Lee; and secondly, that Lee has and/or should have the power and authority in this relationship:

> I wouldn't like to be told what to wear but then I wouldn't want to upset the person. (Isla)
> If she really likes him then she should think about it. (Kelly)

Do as Lee asks

Epstein (1997) maintains that analysing gender relations within schools is impossible outside of the framework of compulsory heterosexuality. Renold (2000, pp. 309–310) develops this argument through the assertion that 'heterosexuality underpins most interaction and identity work [for young people] as they live out the gendered categories "boy" and "girl" '. During discussions of personal relationships all of the single sex girl groups broached the subject of boyfriends eagerly and without prompting. They talked of the politics of 'going out' with boys and were nonchalant about approaching boys or asking them out. They were

not embarrassed to say who they fancied or who they were currently going out with. Girls, in relation to the boys, took the initiative and were in control of creating, sustaining and ending the relationships. Further to this, cultural investment in the relationship talk provided a stalwart for friendship sustenance, and this was something that boys were reluctant or unable to engage in with their friends. Renold (2000) also found this was an area were young girls could assert their dominance.

Yet this investment in the heterosexual ideal, to which girls may feel pressure to conform, may become the basis of a damaging 'proper' or 'hyper' femininity (Connell, 2002; Renold, 2000). Thus the issue of the clothing becomes a means to please Lee, constructing 'desirability' for the opposite sex, linking 'femininity and bodily practice' (Ali, 2003, p. 278) and aligning attractiveness with obedience. Lee regulates the appropriate standards of femininity for Claire to adhere to; this level of power within their relationship was not resisted by a number of the young people, male and female.

People justified their reasons for Claire doing what Lee said and not wearing the top, because if she did not he might 'dump' her:

> [If you] upset Lee...it might drive him away from you. (Carly)
> If she wants to be with him then she shouldn't [wear it]. (Leo)

The emphasis was firmly on Claire's risk of losing Lee through her behaviour, rather than Lee's risk of losing Claire because of his demands, although there were discussions of both. Some participants did not feel the need to justify their reasoning – they simply thought that Claire should do as she was told:

> [She shouldn't wear it] cos he told her not to, he asked her not to, politely. (Craig)
> [Claire should] not wear the top. (Vicky)

These stereotyped understandings of heterosexual relationships placed the power with the man and the need to be submissive (in doing what he asked) with the woman. From these discussions we can begin to see that the onus to change was on Claire, with very few of the young people finding fault in Lee's controlling behaviour or even identifying it as such. There was agreement that Lee's opinion and feelings were more valid than Claire's personal choice of clothing. Lee's powerful position was further validated in his 'owning' of Claire:

Marie: But he's only been seeing her for four months. He's not...like she's not technically his.
Nancy: When will she be technically his?
Marie: When they are married.
Elaine: When they have children.
Sarah: When they are engaged.

Many of the groups framed relationships in terms of owning or belonging and had specific timescales that located when this came into being. Commitment was often confused with possession and framed by insecurity. It was this insecurity or jealousy which is discussed now in an examination of young people's reasoning about why Lee had asked Claire not to wear the top.

Jealousy

Jealousy was identified as a 'natural' and powerful emotion that could solidify or destroy a relationship. The discussions of jealousy did not identify it as solely an emotion experienced by Lee; it was also seen as an emotion contrived by Claire. Thus Claire was seen as constructing a powerful position for herself, but one which was determined by a limited heterosexual feminine identity, understood here in terms of manipulation. In this sense Lee's feelings of jealousy were blamed on Claire's behaviour.

> You can understand why he doesn't want all these men looking at his girlfriend. Like say you had a boyfriend and there were all these girls that kept looking at him. Obviously you'd get jealous, but you'd also get really annoyed especially if he hadn't done anything to stop it if he knows it annoys you.
>
> (Katy)

In almost half the groups, rather than focusing upon Lee's behaviour, the consensus was that Claire was inviting male attention through the 'sexualisation' of her clothing. Thus her morality was questioned, as these heavily sexually nuanced examples show:

She is flaunting herself in front of people. She could be enjoying that lots of boys are looking at her. (Kenny)
She is *revealing* herself to the boys. (Fatima)
She wants to wear the pink top to *expose* herself to them. (John)
She's got *slutty* clothes. (Geri)

Locating the issue with Claire subscribes to the notion that women are defined by how men view them. Clothing becomes sexualised and encoded as a means to please or displease men. Therefore the ultimate responsibility becomes that of the woman to act and thus change the way men view her. It is significant that it was girls (and a very few boys) who placed restrictions on Claire regarding her behaviour and clothing. The fact that it was more likely to be girls who strictly regulated the behaviour of other girls, operating within a normative framework of femininity that they themselves had been defined by, was supported by earlier studies (Lees, 1993; Renold, 2000; Skeggs, 1991). Yet this does not establish that girls have the power to define. Rather the girls are refracting this power, through a possessive masculine gaze, to regulate themselves (see also, Cline and Sender, 1987):

> I would wear the top. But I think if it was really obvious that people were looking at me, then I would wear a wee jumper. (Mia)

Also of relevance here is the importance attributed to how other men would judge Lee. His masculinity would be undermined, or judged as lacking (Connell, 1995), if Claire did not listen and continued to be on sexual display for other men:

> He's the one who is going to be stood beside her when she's out. And he'll look stupid if he's the one that is going out with her and other boys are looking at her. (Richard)

Others, whilst viewing the relationship in more equitable terms, still framed Lee's behaviour in terms of jealousy rather than entitlement. Yet this was still underlined with notions of possession:

> What's the point of him being jealous? He's going out with her not the other boys. (Donnie)

Control

Very few groups discussed control as a means of understanding Lee's behaviour. When it was mentioned it was rarely located within a wider framework of emotional abuse. Indeed the mention of control focused upon three key, yet differing, areas. First, there was a realisation that Lee was demonstrating controlling behaviour, and that this was unacceptable in terms of an equal relationship. There was also an acknowledgement that this control was focused upon Claire and that justifying it through the expectation of others was simply an excuse:

> You can't kind of control.... he can't tell her what to do. (John)
>
> If he was angry with the other boys he wouldn't have told her not to wear the vest. He would have told them not to look at her. (Denise)

Secondly there was a belief that Lee was controlling Claire and that as her boyfriend it was his entitlement to do so. Lee's reaction was framed in terms of Claire's inappropriate behaviour:

> She [Claire] could be enjoying that lots of boys are looking at her....if she was enjoying it then, yeah, he has a right to say....I really don't want you wearing that top. (Anthony)

Finally there were those who labelled Lee's behaviour in terms of a lack of control. This was articulated in terms of Lee being fearful that not maintaining control would culminate in Claire leaving him. Claire's behaviour and 'inappropriate' clothing were held up as the reason for his lack of control; it was because she did not listen that Lee had no control. Thus control is seen as a prerequisite in heterosexual relationships that can be lost if not actively maintained:

> He doesn't really trust her cos he thinks maybe she'll leave him. (David)

The vignettes, including the example used here, provided specific situations for the young people to talk about. The characters were deliberately chosen to represent heterosexual couples and the actions were indicative of common narratives of abuse. In addition to what the young people said and how they understood the dynamics of each story, there was also significance in how they contextualised the 'individual' incidents within a wider framework. During the presentation of the vignettes (and prior to the following discussion), not one young person specifically labelled any of the behaviour as domestic violence or domestic abuse. These terms were deliberately not mentioned by the researcher until this point, in order to explore how the participants would name and frame the behaviour themselves. There is much behaviour that exists between men and women that is defined as 'normal' but which is in fact indicative of women's subordination. Indeed Jackson (1978) contends that patriarchy is composed of sets of practices that also relate to normal patterns of male behaviour. The very protection of the ideologies of heterosexuality creates, according to Radford and Kelly, 'the cornerstones of the patriarchal status quo' (1996, p. 32).

When asked about the terms 'domestic violence' and 'domestic abuse' at the end of the session, 9 out of the 18 groups had not heard of either phrase. Of the nine groups that were aware of the terms, three groups said they did not know what they meant. The remaining six groups suggested a range of definitions. The young people in these six groups contextualised violence and abuse differently, linking violence with physicality: 'actual violence' (Gareth), and abuse with emotionality, or not as serious: 'just saying things that were really, really bad' (Louisa). The term was also considered less severe because of the prefix 'domestic':

> Domestic violence isn't like just doing each other in, it's just attempting to. (Siobhan)

Several of the groups identified 'domestic abuse' solely with child abuse, thus reinforcing previous concerns over the infantilisation of the term. All groups that were aware of the terms linked 'domestic' with the site of the home but did not necessarily label the violence as occurring between 'intimates':

> People that hit each other in the house. (Craig)
> Domestic violence is like at home, say mum and dad would be, eh, fighting and hitting each other. (Louie)
> Violence at home . . . within the family. (Danielle)

Fewer than half of these groups offered gendered definitions, despite the heavily gendered situations in the vignettes. Significantly, only two of the groups (out of the 18) related the terms back to the examples in the vignettes following this discussion. In the quote below, Pete refers to the second vignette (where Dave slaps Lizzie when she tells him tea is not ready) to describe the term 'domestic violence':

> Controlling a woman and hitting her and won't let her out and he makes her do stuff and sorta just abuses her like Dave. (Pete)

What is demonstrated here is that children of 10, 11 and 12 years of age can talk eloquently and express articulate opinions on the subject of male violence against women. They were able to participate, discuss and give opinions on gender, gendered practices and gendered violence, which are integral in the construction and understanding of violence as a social problem. To confront and challenge the 'everyday' occurrence and acceptability of male violence (Stanko, 1985), we should encourage

children to explore and talk about these issues, as it has been shown that they are able to use participatory methods such as vignettes. This brief analysis explores young people's constructions of masculinity and femininity and how these succeed both in confirming and challenging gender stereotypes. It is contended that gender, gendered practices and gendered violence are integral in the construction and understanding of violence. Children's constructions of gender and gendered practices (in relation to violence) are relevant for two reasons. First, how children construct gender can influence how they understand and explain male violence. Viewing women as subordinate, or justifying violence as an everyday practice of 'normal' masculinity, produces a level of acceptability of male violence. Secondly, it is imperative to challenge the notion that male violence against women is solely a '*women's issue*' (Bacchi, 1999). It has been labelled as such because it is feminists who have named, theorised, researched, campaigned and resisted this violence, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Hearn, 1998). It is important therefore to reiterate that gender is about both men *and* women, by involving both *girls* and *boys* in the research process. It is also important to analyse young people's constructions of gender in terms of both men *and* women and masculinity *and* femininity, rather than take for granted the essentialist notion that one informs the other.

When young people discussed 'the other' in terms of classmates or abstract notions of the opposite sex, they were more likely to locate them within the confines of anticipated binary positions. Young people in their construction of gender rely upon the creation of 'the other', of dualism, because it represents a normative construction of gender based upon *common sense* understanding. It is these constructions that they access, and upon which they base their own understandings of male violence against women. Yet the final research findings highlighted that when young people moved away from *images* of gender and talked about their own *lived* experience, they transcended the binaries of expected gender and were less likely to position themselves in oppositional terms.

Although there were many differences of opinion expressed, the overwhelming majority thought it justified that Lee should be able to dictate what Claire should wear and that Claire was at fault if she did not listen. Whilst an acceptance of gender stereotypes does not necessarily imply an acceptance of male violence against women, it renders any effective challenges to it unlikely. Indeed such a passive resignation sustains a culture which, whilst outwardly condemning male violence against women, does not necessarily condemn the social practices

contributing to and perpetuating women's subordination. For many of the young people, a man's sense of entitlement was bound up in their construction and understanding of a heterosexual relationship. This understanding of a heterosexual relationship is clearly defined by binary roles. Masculinity equals active and strong, femininity equals passive and weak; a dichotomy encapsulated by the title of this chapter.

Notes

1. These strategies include awareness raising campaigns on television and radio under the tag line '*Domestic abuse: there's no excuse*' as well as yearly evaluations of these campaigns (e.g. Domestic Abuse Wave 10: 2006/2007 Post Campaign Evaluation). Whilst unique to Scotland, there have been recent moves to adapt the successful campaigns in England.
2. The exception to this is the early stages of the Zero Tolerance Campaign in Edinburgh when Edinburgh District Council Women's Committee commissioned research based at three local secondary schools involving groups of 12–16 year olds. The results provided the impetus for the Zero Tolerance Campaign and further research was commissioned in Glasgow, Manchester and Fife with 14–21 year olds (Burton *et al.*, 1998).

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8

Images of Abusers: Stranger-Danger, the Media, and the Social Currency of Everyday Knowledge[1]

Jenny Kitzinger

How do journalists portray perpetrators of sexual violence and who do we think about as dangerous? This chapter explores how sexual violence against children is conceptualised and interpreted in the mass media and people's *reading* of mass media texts in the context of their daily lives. It draws on textual analysis, interviews with journalists and group discussions with diverse 'publics' to explore the everyday construction of 'the paedophile' – and how this is refracted through particular language and expectations about gender, sexuality and power. I show how journalists perpetuate unhelpful stereotypes which highlight the threat from 'psychotic' strangers and obscure the more common form of abuse – by known, trusted and 'well-adjusted' adults. I also show how the media fail to confront the fact that child sexual abuse is overwhelmingly committed by men – and thus evade the questions about masculinity and male power that feminist analysis suggests we should address. However, this chapter also broadens out the terms of the enquiry. My research highlights the ways in which stories about threatening outsiders are integrated into day-to-day experience: circulating in parental encounters and community discussions. Certain stories and rumours, I argue, have a great deal of 'social currency' or exchange value. The social structuring of such exchange is key to examining public responses to mass media representations and developing an understanding of how media messages operate within, parallel to, and through social interaction.

Beasts, devils, queers and sissies: images of sex offenders

'It is impossible to identify a paedophile on sight, the abuser could be anyone, including a respected member of the community.' This is an

important message from organisations campaigning to protect children. The media sometimes explicitly acknowledge this. However, a different impression is conveyed by the way in which abusers are often represented. The media, especially the tabloid press, tend to present sex offenders as very different from other men, and often imply that they are easily identifiable misfits (for critiques, see Brownmiller, 1975/1977; Kelly, 1996, Ward, 1984). A chilling piece of footage featured in coverage of the Soham murders in 2003 in the United Kingdom (when two 10-year-old girls were the victims of a sexually motivated killing). This showed a school caretaker speaking to journalists, expressing his concern for the missing children and his horror that men with such proclivities might be living in the community. It was this man who was eventually charged with the murder. It is only with the benefit of hindsight that the irony of such an interview becomes apparent.

At the crudest level, sex offenders are often personified as either devilish, bestial or sub-human. For every one headline using a straightforward term such as 'man' for someone who has sexually abused a child (e.g. 'Man sought over sex assault'), there are three headlines describing them in terms such as 'fiend', 'pervert', 'monster' or 'animal' (Kitzinger, 2004). Such reporting is often accompanied by disturbing mug shots of these 'beasts' with captions or headlines drawing attention to their distinctive appearance, for example 'Evil Mr Staring Eyes' (*Sun,* 2 May 1991). If the photograph makes the abuser look too normal, then some parts of the media will resort to the Jekyll and Hyde metaphor identifying the picture with captions such as 'Smile that hid the violent depravity of sex fiend headmaster' (*Star,* 12 April 1991).

Feminist theorists point out that, in fact, one of the few things that distinguish people who commit sexual violence from people who do not is that the former are usually male. Although women do sometimes commit sex crimes they are much less likely to do so. Feminists argue that this should have implications for how we theorise about sexual violence (Brownmiller, 1975). The media, however, mainly fail to engage in this debate. Instead, they represent men who assault children as the 'personification of evil'. This uses language of supernatural extra-social forces and condenses the problem into the individual criminal in ways which displace consideration of social context and social process, which shape crime. (For discussion of this issue in the reporting of crime in general, see Cohen and Young, 1973 and Hall *et al.,* 1978.)

One strategy to distance child sex abusers from 'ordinary men' or traditional ideas about masculinity is to associate attacks on children with homosexuality. There is a striking asymmetry here. When

a man attacks a girl this is rarely identified as a heterosexual assault, but when a man attacks a boy this is often identified as homosexual. Analysing all national British press reporting for one year, for example, showed that the abuser or act of abuse was explicitly identified as 'homosexual' in 50 newspaper articles (and headlined as such seven times). By contrast no assailant or assault was ever explicitly identified as heterosexual. This was in spite of the fact that most of the reported incidents involved attacks by men on girls.

Unlike the use of terms such as 'monster' and 'beast', which is much more likely to occur in the tabloids, identifying abuse as gay in a discriminatory way is evident in both tabloid and 'quality' press. A case in point is the coverage of Frank Beck, a man who over many years assaulted boys in the care home in which he worked and also raped a young woman. This coverage often included implicitly homophobic statements. The most liberal UK newspaper, the *Guardian,* for example, uncritically reported dismay at the fact that a care worker was allowed to foster two boys – 'even though there were complaints that he was homosexual' (*Guardian* October 1991). It is hard to imagine the parallel sentence: 'he was allowed to foster two girls even though there were complaints that he was heterosexual'. Such blurring of homosexuality and paedophilia was evident in the reporting of other cases too. In one ill-advised phrase a journalist for the *Sunday Times* stated that police investigating a sex murder had interviewed 92 men: 'Not all of them were paedophiles; sometimes they were straight men' (*Sunday Times,* 23 June 1991). Here being 'straight' and being a paedophile are used as mutually exclusive categories. In other cases the allegations were quite explicit – the Sun, for example, has explicitly stated that gay men are 17 times more likely to be paedophiles than heterosexuals. The statement, which was in an article by Anne Atkins, *Sun* columnist and 'vicar's wife', resulted in a Press Complaints Commission ruling stating that the article 'failed to distinguish between comment, conjecture and fact' (*The Pink Paper,* 6 February 1998).

The figures showing that the abuser or act of abuse was explicitly identified as 'homosexual' in 50 newspaper articles (and headlined as such seven times) do not take into account all the references that may *imply* homosexuality, when abusers are introduced as 'bachelors', for example, or described as effeminate. Take the example of the social worker, Frank Beck, again. The young woman he attacked was a lesbian. When he raped her he stated that he was going to show her what 'a real man' was like. This reported statement could have been used by journalists to explore the definition of what it meant to be 'a real man'

and, indeed, to reflect on compulsory heterosexuality. However, instead, the bulk of reporting simply reiterated gender and sexual stereotypes. Frank Beck was ‘a sissy’:

> Students at agricultural college dubbed him ‘Mrs Beck’. Beck stood out from other boys because he did not drink, swear or know about girls.
> (*Star*, 30 November 1991)

The danger that prowls our streets

‘Sexual violence against children is most often perpetrated by someone they know.’ This fact is sometimes included in media reporting of abuse. However, the actual balance of coverage promotes a very different picture. Most news reports focus on attacks by strangers as do most articles about how to *protect* children (Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995). The abduction and murder of children by strangers is cause for national shock and alarm. The random and public nature of such attacks makes every reader or viewer potentially at risk from the ‘pervert on the loose’. Such cases often combine sex and murder. They also have ongoing narrative momentum (the appeal by parents for the missing child, the eventual tragic discovery), and they come with their own images (the little girl in her school uniform, the security video footage of her last journey, the police searching wasteland). By contrast, incest cases are far less easy to report. This is sometimes because of reporting restrictions (the relationship between perpetrator and victim may have to be disguised). However, journalists may also, in any case, see incest cases as less relevant and less palatable to their audience. There is a deep-seated resistance to publicising this aspect of sexual abuse, both within media organisations and among potential sponsors of the charities which promote awareness about child abuse. This is widely remarked upon by children’s charities. As one representative from Kidscape (an organisation promoting child safety) explains,

> Advertisers, people who want to sponsor us [think that stranger-danger] is a subject they’re happy to talk about. [But] people don’t want to be associated with child abuse as incest.

The same is true, in her experience, of journalists:

> It’s a message we try to get across to the press [that most children are abused by people they know] but they’re very wary, [. . .] it’s not a fun

> subject, it's likely to put readers off, may upset readers, and it's easier and safer to concentrate on strangers and bullying.
>
> (See Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995)

Public perceptions of abusers: 'obviously, I don't know any child abusers'

The message that abusers 'could be anyone' has reached people to some extent. I explored how people made sense of (recalled, interpreted, integrated) media representations through conducting 49 focus groups (involving 275 participants) with small groups (usually around five or six people). My research participants were contacted via workplaces, churches, community centres and clubs. I asked people to discuss child sexual abuse with each other exploring questions such as: What causes it? How common is it? What motivates abusers? What should be done about it? (for further discussion of method, see Kitzinger, 2004, pp. 1–4; 27–31). In the course of this discussion clear ideas emerged about the 'type' of person who poses a threat to children. Most research participants state that 'intellectually' they know 'it's not just men in dirty macs'. 'It could be anybody'/'Most normalest person'/'They don't wear a badge' (Group 43). However, in my focus groups many also admit they would find it very hard to believe allegations made against anyone who was part of their own social circle. Here it is worth having a closer look at how people talk about 'paedophiles' both in the concrete and in the abstract.

Research participants routinely distance themselves from anyone who could possibly commit such an act. Indeed, expressions of disgust and incomprehension, particularly by and between men, seem to be an important ritual as some groups settle down into the discussion.

> A geezer's [...] got to be sick to be able to do it to his own daughter ... just physically, I personally physically couldn't do it.
>
> (Group 40, m)

> It's just beyond me, because I've got a daughter as well. I think that the people that do these things must have something seriously wrong with them mentally ... to actually comprehend doing it. I couldn't personally feel sexual toward [...] a harmless child.
>
> (Group 4, m)

> m: Anyone who's normal just doesn't understand it, it's incomprehensible.
>
> m: It's a no-no, isn't it. It's just like a brick wall.
>
> (Group 43)

The obscenity of abuse is beyond comprehension – people shrug their shoulders and make statements such as:

> *Obviously,* I don't know any child abusers, but I can't imagine what sort of person could do that.
>
> (Group 14, m)

This assumption that they cannot possibly know any child abusers is often accompanied by a sense that, if they did meet an abuser, they would instinctively know. Sometimes, even in spite of their own better judgement, people have a very clear mental image of the child abuser. One trainee journalist, for example, describes her reactions to attending court and acknowledges her own prejudices:

> I've been to a child abuse case and I just remember this man [...] just looked like a hollow with the cheekbones [sic] and just how you imagine a child abuser to look like. [...] even though you're innocent until proven guilty, because he fitted the image I could imagine him doing it.
>
> (Group 23, f)

The look of the eyes is often mentioned. Responding to a TV image, one person commented, 'He had these wild eyes [...] if you were going to draw up a picture of someone who was abusing children, it would have been a picture of him really' (Group 19, f). One woman recalled, 'a case in the East End a couple of years ago – there was a bloke who looked particularly odd, he has staring eyeballs' (Group 23, f). Others mentioned the police mug shot of the Moors murderer, Myra Hindley, which is endlessly reproduced in the British press. He imagines abusers to have 'staring eyes'; he says, 'Staring eyes [...] like Myra Hindley [...] when you see a photo you think "oh yeah, I can tell"' (Group 14, m).

People also often assume that child abusers are mentally disabled or obviously mad. A child abuser is likely to be: '...inadequate in some sort of way aren't they, and aren't quite the full ticket' (Group 43, m).

The person most likely to pose a danger is 'a fruitcake' (Group 43, m); 'a nutter' (Group 4, m); 'a maniac wandering the streets' (Group 18, f).

Child abusers are also often described as 'weedy' and 'not very butch'. One research participant says that she would expect an abuser to be 'thin, weaselly like [...] in a scrawny suit' (Group 23, f). Another talks of 'a little guy, sort of thin, anorak type' (Group 20, m). Abusers are 'effeminate' and may be what one research participant describes as 'the lives-with-his-mother type'.

> m: The sort of unmarried bachelor type, never married, never had children.
>
> f: Someone that couldn't conduct normal sexual relationships.
>
> [...]
>
> f: Didn't relate to women
>
> f: Not butch at all, I never imagine a butch abuser.
>
> (Group 23)

Sometimes paedophiles are explicitly assumed to be gay. Some people are self-conscious and ambivalent about this stereotype, but still feel that it influences them. One man, for example, says that he reluctantly gives himself licence to discriminate against gay men, for the sake of his boys:

> If a man's homosexual why does that mean he naturally preys on young boys? It's daft really. Your prejudice is clicking in, I like to think I'm an extremely liberal person but it all goes out the window as soon as my own family becomes involved.
>
> (Group 37, m)

Other groups, however, are less ambivalent. A few move seamlessly between discussing paedophilia and homosexuality. The following exchange, for example, occurs in the middle of a discussion about 'it' (child sexual abuse) and I have to clarify what they are talking about:

> m: Once it was illegal, wasn't it. Then it was optional. Now they've made it legal and I'm thinking of emigrating before they make it compulsory! [laughter]
>
> JK: What's 'it'? What's 'it' in this case?

m: Poofters! [laughter]

m: I actually think they made it legal for men because half the MPs are bent.

(Group 40)

Indeed liberalising laws against homosexuality and allowing gay men or lesbians to work with, or adopt, children is, in some groups, identified as a failure to protect children from potential abuse. (Such embedded knowledge is not, of course, only evident among ordinary lay people – it informs the anti-lesbian and anti-gay legislation in various countries in this area, and is used to defend discriminatory ages of consent for gay men.)

Class and education also come into people's assessment of who is likely to abuse children. Well-educated men are sometimes seen as less liable to abuse. One trainee journalist, for example, who was self-critical of her assumptions about the appearance of abusers, is less reflective about her class assumptions. She is confident that the alleged abusers she has seen in court represent the majority and therefore concludes that intelligence and education must militate against abuse. The defendants, she says, always seemed to be poorly educated or unintelligent. Most 'educated people', she concludes, would intercept their own sexual responses to a child and stop themselves actually doing anything, whereas 'Most people you see in court tend not to look overly bright. [...] they are not always very with it' (Group 23, f). A similar idea was echoed in another group which focused on the 'chaotic' (and working class) nature of the typical 'sex abuse family'.

m: I think a lot of the time as well, it's the sort of background people are from. [...] It's normally people, when you see them on the television, with pretty grubby houses and [...] it's always run down.

m: One-parent families, grubby houses.

m: Basement tenement block or something, waste ground or something, it's not sort of...

m: [...] [not] a normal type of person.

(Group 43)

Intertwined with these ideas is an assumption that abusers would not be the sort of person one might like or admire. This applies to people in the public eye as well as their immediate neighbourhood. Thus, for

example, when discussing whether singer Michael Jackson might be guilty of sexual abuse (allegations made in the media and the courts at various times), responses sometimes seem to be influenced by whether they were fans of, or could identify with, the celebrity.

> f: No, not Michael Jackson, not him [he's not a child abuser]
>
> JK: Why not?
>
> f: My son's going to be the next Michael Jackson – he can do all the dance routines [laughter].
>
> (Group 8, f)

On the other hand, other participants think Michael Jackson is perfectly capable of abusing children because he is 'weird':

> his odd lifestyle...perhaps that influences our decisions...he's going white and he's black...you wouldn't put anything past him. You know,...how many people have a close relationship with a chimp?
>
> (Group 37, m)

It is interesting to note that parts of the mass media frame fan support for Jackson through his 2006 trial as evidence of their deluded 'fanaticism'. This ignores the fact that a refusal to believe that those one likes/admires might abuse children is far more diffuse and widespread (Hills, 2007).

In fact my research suggests that people are often reluctant to admit that anyone they like could abuse children. It is not surprising that people were often confident that no one among their family and friends could possibly be an abuser. Asked if she could accept that sexual abuse might be happening in her neighbourhood, one woman comments,

> I can't imagine it happening to anyone I know, [...] it's very hard to take on board. You couldn't imagine anyone doing something like that.
>
> (Group 4)

In another group a woman comments,

> You can't imagine that. Oh my goodness, if a man that lived next door to us, was out doing so and so and such and such and you just...I can't believe that these kind of things go on. I know that they

> do, but it is like the ostrich thing. Because if you really...you just wouldn't go out, you wouldn't do anything.
>
> (Group 9)

Her neighbour confirms that she feels the same:

> If it is happening in [our area/community] you would tend to say that it can't be happening here. You know the people so well. If it was happening on your doorstep you wouldn't believe it.
>
> (Group 9)

But, she adds (in a statement that still positioned the threat literally 'beyond the threshold'):

> But it can happen on your doorstep. That is usually where you find these sorts of people. They tend to lurk around playgrounds.
>
> (Group 9)

This attitude is shared by several other groups, and in a few cases people flatly deny that sexual abusers could live in their neighbourhood:

> f: They wouldn't be living up here if that's the case.
>
> f: [...] No, I don't know of any.
>
> f: Because you all know one another, we all know their businesses and everything. Everybody knows – see, like if [anyone did anything]...*everybody* would know.
>
> (Group 10)

On a few occasions however, people do describe particular individuals of whom they feel suspicious, even if they think this is irrational. Invariably suspicions focus on 'loners', those on the very margins of their social circle, often people who are 'too quiet'.

> I've got a couple live opposite me [...] They really are a pair of recluses, they don't ever come out their front garden. And he goes off about 10 o'clock every night and he's back there in the morning. Strange behaviour, whether he's got a night job or something I don't know but [...] I'm suspicious, what the bloody hell's he up to? [...] [Because] they don't fit the norm, [...] they never say anything.
>
> (Group 43, m)

> They're quiet, they don't get involved with other people, they keep their own personal life to theirself, they don't tell you anything about theirself.....Like most blokes sit and talk a lot of old crap when we're having a drink, you know, [but] [not them]...Too frightened aren't they?
>
> (Group 40, m)

A few people had to confront actual allegations (or convictions) against people they knew. This was often startling because it challenged their stereotypes. One man recalls how a young colleague was convicted for flashing at little girls: 'You would never have known that he was like that. You'd never think anybody his age would do it, he was just one of the boys' (Group 18, m). Another stumbled on child pornography at his boss's house, the last person you would think might be 'like that', he comments, because he was 'built like a brick shit house'. A third was shocked at the conviction of an acquaintance for sexually abusing his daughter. This was totally unexpected because 'He was a real nice chap' (Group 26, m). Another young woman learned the hard way that stereotypes did not always apply. She expresses intense anger at having been so ill-equipped to respond to her younger sister's needs:

> I think they should do something about it because my little sister was sexually abused by our next door neighbour, and [when] she told me, I didn't want to believe her. I knew this man and as far as I was concerned anyone I knew..., he couldn't do it. I didn't want to believe it had happened. [...] She said 'Marie, somebody was touching me and I don't like it.' I said 'Who was it?' and she said 'Stephen' and I said 'No, no, no, Stephen couldn't do anything like that.'
>
> (Group 25, f)

However, some people continue to reject the possibility that people they know and like could abuse children. One research participant finds it difficult to consider the possibility that a friend of hers might have abused his nieces as they allege. Her reluctance is, she said, informed by the fact that he is married and

> You couldn't meet a nicer couple and they've got six children, a family of their own, [...] he's such a good person in his daily life, he does charity work for prisoners and things like that.
>
> (Group 34, f)

Similar judgements were made about parents who appeared on the news to defend their innocence against controversial allegations. As one group commented on a particular scandal:

> f: I just couldn't, I couldn't believe it. I didn't look at them and think: 'Oh they could have done that'.
>
> f: They weren't, you know..., you have this typical image of a dirty old man that would do it. You know. They didn't look like that.
>
> f: They were just normal people.
>
> f: A married couple.
>
> (Group 22)

Another research participant vehemently defends a man she knows, even though he was found guilty in court: 'I don't believe it. I don't believe he could do it', she says, 'I've seen him with children and I don't think it's possible. He's *brilliant* with kids' (Group 25, f).

People who have themselves been abused are often very angry about the stereotypes which protect abusers. For example, one woman countered her friend's difficulty believing that a man she knew could be guilty because he is 'such a good person in his daily life' by describing her own father's abuse of her. She commented,

> Anybody met my father, great man, a hard worker, he was top staff in the office and everything. Anybody to meet my Dad thought 'oh perfect, Billy's lovely', nobody would think of him touching his kids.
>
> (Group 34, f)

'Public' and 'private' knowledge: extra-media influences and the significance of social currency

In previous work, I have been able to establish some direct connections between media presentations of a particular allegation of sexual abuse and people's memories (see Kitzinger, 2004). Such links are harder to examine when exploring something as diffuse as stereotypes of abusers. If there is a connection, in which direction does it operate? Is it simply a question of journalists' and audiences' common cultural repertoire? Analysis of the focus group discussions suggested that other factors, over

and above media images, may be significant. It became obvious that the nature and type of routine information exchange between friends and neighbours might be important in structuring knowledge in this area. Some information is rapidly and widely exchanged, while other information is censored. It is this factor which is addressed in the final section of this chapter.

Stories about attacks by, or threats from, strangers are routinely exchanged in focus group discussion. These accounts are volunteered without awkwardness or hesitation.

> My kids go to school just up the road here. One girl at the school, this was about 2 weeks ago, she was late for school one morning, some guy tried to get her [...] Police involved, just a weekday morning, half past nine.
>
> (Group 43, m)

Indeed, the way in which these stories were introduced assumes that they are already common knowledge.

> There was somebody kerb-crawling up here about a year ago – in Allison Road. Remember? They stopped that wee girl, Clara.
>
> (Group 9, f)

> Do you remember a man [...] [in] a white car that was going about [...] and it was down at the school, and he tried to drag in Alex McIntosh?
>
> (Group 10, f)

Such events inevitably become the topic of conversation (e.g. outside the school gate) and parents feel that they had a duty to seek out and share such information. These stories also often circulate long after the event.

Structural issues are important here in shaping parents' fears and patterns of communication. Parents talk about the heart-stopping moment when they looked round and realised that their young child had disappeared from their side in the supermarket, or describe the daily pattern of worry around a child's first solo journey to school or at times when they were late home: 'I've only got Matthew and I keep an eye on him. If he's not home by four thirty, I'm out the window looking, you know what I mean?' (Group 9, f). To be suspicious of family, friends and neighbours was also seen as impractical and untenable. Parents need

to be able to trust their nearest and dearest. In addition, while parents often felt they had to, and could, make positive assessments about the people with whom they left their children, the outside world was not under their control: 'When Andrew goes round the corner he could be off the end of the earth' (Group 9, f).

Such fears feed into, and are reinforced by, the public profile of stranger-danger. Any incident is often publicised by the school (e.g. letters sent home to parents urging care) or in the local newspapers. Stranger-danger is routinely raised as an issue with pupils now. (Teachers find it harder to discuss the possibility of abuse by friends and family.) Classic threats from strangers may also be collectively experienced at the time. Take this example, from a young woman, describing an event at her school some years earlier:

> The rumour went round the school, like, Katy Miller is talking to those weird guys. All the kids took a pure panic attack and like half of them ran down to the car to scare the car away and half of them ran up to the teachers and the police were called.
>
> (Group 4, f)

Such incidents ranging from the man who offers children sweets to the actual abduction of a child also become part of the local folk-memory:

> A wee lassie up from the back of us, she was taken away in a car by a guy when she was young [...] he actually tried to kill her and she played dead basically until he went away.
>
> (Group 4, m)

Media stories about stranger-danger are thus complemented, reinforced and reiterated through everyday conversation and the very public, and sometimes collective, nature of some of the experiences.

This is in marked contrast to talk about abuse within one's own community, particularly within families. For a start, such abuse is more private. It often takes place within the four walls of the home, targeting individual children. In addition the victims are less likely to confide in anyone if their abuser is a close and trusted adult, so no one else may ever find out. 'Telling tales' on a family member or close family friend is very difficult because of the power relations and emotional ties between the abuser and the abused and because the victim may feel that he or she is less likely to be believed (precisely because of stereotypes about abusers and the focus on stranger-danger). One teenager, for example,

explains how impossible it would ever be to tell his mother about a family friend who offered him money in return for sex.

> He's a diamond geezer, you seen him with his kids and [...] I used to be jealous of them because my mum and dad split up and this family was really sort of happy and stuff. And [...] all of a sudden he's in there offering me a tenner to sort of do whatever and it just totally knackered me. You just think, 'oh yeah Sam he's a sound guy' and then all of a sudden he turns out to be this. [...] my mum would never hear anything like that. My mum thinks he's an absolute charmer and he is as far as she's concerned and she thinks he's fantastic and I could never sort of turn and just say: 'well, look, he tried to do this to me'.
>
> (Group 14, m)

When abuse takes place inside a family, even where other family members become aware of it, it is unlikely to be discussed outside the home. At a very basic level it is obvious that incestuous abuse is more 'shameful' for the individual victim (talking about being flashed at by a stranger is different from 'admitting' to being flashed at by one's own father). It also is more 'shameful' for the victim's relatives who may be judged for their failure to protect the children.

This gap between the type of accounts of risk and danger which are widely shared and those which are kept more secret is vividly illustrated in one discussion where a member of the group confronts her friends with her personal experience for the first time. This group of friends and neighbours (meeting in their local community centre) had been making a series of negative judgements about mothers of sexually abused children.: 'How could the mother not know?', they asked, 'She must know'. (Such opinions were almost ritually exchanged in many of the session, certain phrases recurring across groups.) This routine exchange is suddenly interrupted by one woman whom I have called 'Alison':

> Jan: A lot of women stay with the guy and I can't understand that.
> Mike: That's crazy, I don't understand that.
> Christine: I mean if I had kids and a guy done anything to my wean [child]...you'd kill him.
> Alison: That's easier said than done. That's crap, Christine, that's crap, that's crap.
> Paula: Everybody's different, maybe Christine feels she could do that.
> Alison: She must be a big person because I'll tell you something...
> Christine: I'm not big.

Alison: You *must* be, Christine, for the simple reason that my lassie was sexually abused by my father. I'd love to blow his brains off. I'd have loved to have stabbed him. [...] Hey listen, there's not a night goes by but that I wish my Da would drop down dead for the things that he's done. [...]

Christine: Maybe I say that right, but maybe I might feel different if I was in the situation, right. But I've never been in the situation so I don't really know.

Alison: Ah well, I've been in the position, I'm in the position. I'm in the position and I've been in the position for years. I've been in the position for 8 years now.

The tangible tension as Alison provides this information is in marked contrast to the routine 'gossip' about strange men offering children sweets or, indeed, the very public knowledge associated with the abduction and assault of a child by a 'maniac'. She discovered that her father was abusing her daughter eight years ago and lived with the consequences ever since, but this is clearly the first time her friend and neighbour (Christine) had heard about it. Here the focus group – which provided an unusually focused context for debate and a 'liminal' space – allowed this experience to be discussed publicly for the first time. This shows how a focus group can balance between the casually informal (where the normal rules of social interaction apply – including what is 'unspeakable') and the formal (where the research questions prompt specific scrutiny and possible defensiveness). It is important, of course, that the facilitation of such groups is not constrained by a detailed proforma which shapes expectations and that it does not push participants to discuss in public that which they will regret. Although this was clearly a highly 'sensitive moment' (see Kitzinger and Farquhar, 1999) it seemed that Alison was relieved to have said what she said and had no regrets at the time. The interaction in this focus group highlights the fact that although parents routinely warn each other about any stranger behaving 'suspiciously', even close friends do not usually talk about the assaults committed by fathers, brothers, grandfathers or friends of the family closer to home. (Research on public understanding of AIDS exposes similar evidence of stigma and silencing of some accounts, such as personal experiences of homosexuality, whereas other stories such as the 'vengeful AIDS carrier tale' had great social currency and had become 'urban myths'. This helped to shape public understandings of AIDS (Miller *et al.*, 1998)).

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the stereotypes about abusers: their appearance, class, education, age, intelligence, mental illness, physique, social marginality and masculinity (or rather, lack of it). I have argued that the media and broader cultural stereotypes encourage a focus on threats from outsiders rather than a focus on the danger posed by ordinary men close to the child. Media coverage also evades the challenge posed by feminist theorists who point out that patterns of sexual violence should make us question the operation of male power in society.

Public perceptions of abusers largely accord with media coverage. The direction of influence here is not completely clear cut. Perhaps the most we can say is that media representations and public views mirror each other and that the media can resource stereotypes and amplify some fears, rather than others. At the very least they often fail to challenge specific conventional assumptions about abuse. There is much to be criticised in, for example, the iconic display of Myra Hindley's photograph and other images of 'sex beasts', the reinforcement of prejudices against people with mental disability or illness, the failure to analyse the gendered nature of sexual violence, the subtle and not so subtle homophobia which informs much discussion of men abusing boys, and the unreflective canvassing of 'community opinion' about contested allegations without asking probing questions about previous convictions.

This chapter has highlighted, however, that it is not simply a question of media influence. It has also revealed the role played by broader socio-cultural factors and the importance of 'social currency' of different stories and how these circulate in day-to-day conversation. I have argued that we need to broaden our understandings of reception and meaning-creation processes beyond the media (while always keeping the media within the frame). We need to pay attention to how people interact and not only what they say but how they say it. Analysis of discussions in focus groups should include looking at how people talk, not just what they say: how they express hesitancy, surprise or mark out a communication as unusual or 'sensitive' (Kitzinger and Farquhar, 1999). Such dynamics give insights into everyday exchanges of information, and they also, crucially, give clues to group responses: the ways in which communities identify threats, react to them, and demand policy solutions.

Note

1. Reprinted with permission from Kitzinger, J. (2004) *Framing Abuse: Media Influence and Public Understanding of Sexual Violence Against Children* (Pluto Press: London).

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9

Female-On-Male Violence: Medical Responses and Popular Imagination

Jarmila Mildorf

In June 2006, the *Sunday Times* featured an article entitled '"Ladette" Scots take it out on their men' (Macaskill, 2006). The thrust of this article was that female Scottish students were particularly prone to assaulting their boyfriends, which the author attributed to 'rising alcohol and drug use as well as the growth of the "ladette" culture'. Drawing upon research conducted with university students worldwide, the article drew the conclusion that female-on-male violence was as common as male-on-female violence and that feminist researchers had been wrong in pointing out the prevalence of men hitting women. As I will show below, the article quite glaringly misconstrues the 'facts' it presents in order to profit from the controversies surrounding intimate partner violence by further dividing opinions and thus gaining topicality. What this article and also others like it do, however, is to invest issues such as intimate partner violence with symbolic meaning for society at large and offer the discursive space in and through which such meaning can be inscribed in 'popular imagination'; that is 'shared (awareness of) concepts and phenomena in particular populations' (Petterson, 2002, p. 34). The ramifications of such practices are as huge as they are damaging since people's knowledge about partner violence is distorted and false stereotypes are reinforced. In order to show how this may also affect the attitudes of people who professionally have to deal with domestic abuse, I complement my discussion of the *Sunday Times* article with an analysis of an interview narrative from my sample of 20 interviews with general practitioners conducted in Aberdeen in 2000 (Mildorf, 2007). The narrative, admittedly one of the more extreme examples from my corpus because it is biased, depicts a doctor's personal story of a friend's experience with violence perpetrated on him by his wife.

As I demonstrate, the narrative is mainly used to make a case against 'feminist' viewpoints on the problem, which resembles the strategy adopted in the newspaper article. By juxtaposing these two texts, I explore potential discursive transformations of stories of female-on-male violence into a 'popular imagination' which in turn suffuses both lay and professional discourses. The methodologies I apply include frame analysis and critical discourse analysis for the newspaper article and sociolinguistic narrative analysis for the interview narrative. Needless to say, the analyses I present here are based on too few examples to be representative. However, my purpose is not to make a valid quantitative claim concerning the relationship between the popular imagination of domestic abuse and, say, GPs' attitudes towards the problem. The aim is to have a closer look at the links between microlevel textual strategies and macrolevel ideologies and to point out the dangers narratives of female-on-male violence may hold if they push to the background more 'standard' cases of domestic violence in our popular imagination. Before I move on to my data, let me map out the terrain by briefly discussing both female-on-male violence and popular imagination.

Male power or mutual combat?: Female-on-male violence

Although domestic violence is predominantly perpetrated by men on women, as numerous surveys all over the world show (Bunch, 1997), male agency started to be contested in the 1970s through the emergence of notions such as the *Battered Husband Syndrome* or *Mutual Combat* in marriage. Incredibly, even more recent work on intimate partner violence suggests the predominance of mutual violence over female-on-male violence, followed by male-only violence (Straus, 2006). The fact that female-on-male violence exists is undeniable, and scholars have attempted to find explanations. Card (2002), for example, argues that: 'Assault is not a function of bodily strength or muscle power but of such things as resentment, lack of scruples, and willingness to use weapons' (p. 146). Feminist scholars, however, have cautioned against re-conceptions of domestic violence situations as mutual battlegrounds and against the foregrounding of battering wives, as that may deflect from more fundamental issues concerning power relations between the sexes and may even downplay the experiences and consequences of domestic violence for women. Saunders (1990), for example, contends that '[w]hile some authors continue to suggest that "men are battered too," most social activists argue that women are violent only to protect themselves and their children. From this feminist perspective, to label

self-defence *husband abuse* serves to direct attention away from the victimization of women and the function of male dominance' (p. 90). Even though female-on-male violence need not always be the result of women's attempt to defend themselves, one must not forget that violent behaviour is conceived differently for men and women in our culture. McKie (2004) points out that for men 'the experience of actual and cultural representations of violence is much more socially and structurally routine' (p. 52). Men commonly use violence to exert power and control over other, also male, members of the family. Women, by contrast, are not expected to act violently. If they do, they are 'seen as violating gender role expectations in the simple act of refusing to be passive', as Meyers (1997, p. 71) points out. Meyers demonstrates in her investigation of news broadcasts about women who defended themselves that these depictions 'are steeped in cultural myths and stereotypes concerning appropriate behaviour for women' (Meyers, 1997, p. 71). It is exactly this 'deviance', however, that makes stories of female-on-male violence newsworthy. While the GPs in my own study almost invariably made allusions to female-on-male violence, a few of them presented fully-fledged narratives whose sensational quality is one of the reasons why they were told.

Popular imagination and doctors' stories

Petterson (2002) maintains that 'in any culture individual imaginations are always to some extent built on shared expectations, and the other way round – popular imagination consists of a host of individual interpretations' (p. 34). Folk belief, which traditionally has often been reduced to 'superstition' – wrongly, one might add – can thus be regarded as 'active, systematic, dynamic, and interrelated with numerous facets of people's lives and of their surrounding cultures' (O'Connor, 1995, p. 51). Anthropologists and folklorists have come to realise, O'Connor argues, that 'folk belief coexists with official belief in the worldviews of all kinds of people, from all kinds of cultural backgrounds, and of all degrees of formal educational exposure' (ibid.). In other words, hardly anyone, not even medical doctors, can completely avoid succumbing to popular beliefs about certain issues that have currency in a given cultural setting. Spence (1998) describes the emergence of popular beliefs as follows:

> an official narrative is established, which feeds on the details of the more sensational accounts; these become a kind of media virus that instantly infect [sic] current explanations. The story with the most

> popular details becomes the one most likely to be believed because truth, under these rules, is governed by what everyone is saying and not by some basic understanding of how the world works. (p. 220)

Popular imagination is thus also steeped in common cultural myths, which, as Barthes (1972) explains, are integrated into organisational discourses in order to help sustain power relationships. Another constitutive pillar of popular imagination is stereotypes; that is, sets of 'relations between knowledge, labels and perceived equivalences' (McGarty, 2002, p. 18). Haslam *et al.* (2002) point out that stereotype formation is a context-dependent dynamic process that allows groups to develop tools '*both to represent their members' shared social reality and to achieve particular objectives within it*' (p. 161; italics original). Popular imagination in general can thus also be regarded as not only reflecting people's shared beliefs but also as offering explanatory frameworks which reinforce and, at the same time, have the potential to (re)create, an existing social system. Ott and Aoki's (2002) study of the media coverage of the Matthew Shepard murder trial, for example, illustrates how 'the news media's tragic framing of that event works rhetorically and ideologically to relieve the public of its social complicity and culpability' (p. 484) by reaffirming an existing stigmatising discourse concerning gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons. In 1998, two young men brutally killed 21-year-old Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming, because he was gay. Ott and Aoki's analysis of media representations of the case over the period of the court trial demonstrates a shift from an initial alignment of the community's attitudes with those of the perpetrators to a reframing of the perpetrators as particularly dull-witted and prone to violence. The stigmatisation of both the victim and the perpetrators as deviant turned them into scapegoats, which, as Ott and Aoki argue, deflected from potential anti-gay feelings and a sense of guilt in the community and thus re-established social order. This example already shows how important language is in framing people's understanding of violent acts and what role the media can play in this regard. In the following section, I have a closer look at how the above-mentioned *Sunday Times* article refashions popular beliefs concerning partner violence by drawing upon two frames of reference: scholarly expertise on the one hand, and myths regarding the so-called 'ladette' culture and substance abuse in Scotland on the other. The representation of interpersonal violence, and its gendering, is of particular interest here as the familiar categories of victim and perpetrator are reversed, thereby creating a less clear-cut, or, if one wants to be more critical, distorted,

picture in people's imagination. Like the other contributions in this book, this chapter thus also highlights the complex multidimensionality of interpersonal violence in the context of gender.

Refashioning violence and twisting the facts: Female-on-male violence in the media

The title of the *Sunday Times* article, '"Ladette" Scots take it out on their men', already sets the tone for the entire text: first, it makes use of two stereotypes, one relating to nationality ('Scots') and one to gender roles ('ladette'); and secondly, it presents violence as deliberate and possibly unjustified action which has to do with pent-up frustration or anger ('take it out on'). The clause already presupposes a group of women that can be classified as 'ladettes'; that is, a new stereotypical category involving young women who are outspoken and promiscuous and who do not refrain from 'unwomanly' behaviour such as heavy drinking. The image is a fairly recent one, and it is often associated with female members of certain pop groups, such as *Girls Aloud*, or with high-profile celebrities like Zoe Ball and Sara Cox. Recent research has shown that girls as young as 13 display behaviour patterns typically attributed to 'ladettes', including fighting and swearing, as well as being loud and cheeky (Jackson, 2006). The express mention of the nationality 'Scots' in the heading evokes clichés of the Scottish as a wild and freedom-loving nation (think of the film *Braveheart*), but also stereotypes concerning the drinking habits of Scottish people. The combination of these two stereotypes makes the perpetrators of the violence discussed in the article stand out as peculiar and noteworthy and thereby signals to the reader the newsworthiness of this topic in general. The prominence of violent women is further emphasised through the threefold repetition of one single proposition in the opening paragraph, namely that young Scottish women beat their men: 'More than one third of female students in Scotland have assaulted their boyfriends'; 'just under 35 per cent of the Scots women surveyed had assaulted a loved one'; 'Scots students were the most likely to have injured their boyfriends, with 8 per cent saying they had inflicted a bruise, cut or broken bone'. Interestingly, the sentences all contain verb phrases in the active voice, which leave no doubt as to who perpetrated the violence. The verbs also clearly suggest physical violence, with the last sentence presenting quite a vivid image of violent action.

Another striking feature is the use of statistical figures, which in this case is completely misleading as it suggests a higher proportion of violent behaviour among female Scottish students than the actual study does. In

particular, the very first sentence of the entire article implies that out of *all* female students in Scotland over one-third have perpetrated violence on their boyfriends. It is only in the second sentence that we learn that the whole study involved a survey of 6500 female students in total, a population spread over 36 universities worldwide, *one* of which was the University of Glasgow. Again a couple of paragraphs further down in the text, we are told that surveys were conducted of 'more than 200 students at Glasgow and Leicester universities'. In other words, what is initially presented as a shockingly high number of violent female students in Scotland soon turns out to be a small and by no means representative proportion when viewed against the backdrop of the entire female Scottish population. The percentage of 'just under 35 per cent' also becomes insignificant if one considers that this is only a fraction of the total number of students surveyed all over the world, and thus does not warrant the claim that female-on-male violence is more widespread than or at least equal to male-on-female violence.

Similarly, the article manipulates statistics to underpin its claim of the predominance of 'women with violent tendencies'. Thus it claims, 'Just under a quarter of those in Scotland said there were occasions when it would be acceptable for a husband to slap his wife. About 60 per cent said there were situations when it was acceptable for wives to hit their husbands.' Leaving the problem of the misleading figures aside, linguistic strategies are used which clearly foreground female-on-male violence. Thus, while both sentences are almost equally constructed syntactically and lexically, they differ in two significant ways: first, the second sentence presents a numeral rather than spelling out the percentage, thereby catching the reader's attention; secondly, the verbs chosen for each sentence suggest a mild form of violence on the part of men ('slap') in contrast to strong physical violence perpetrated by the women ('hit'). Indirectly, violence perpetrated by women is thus again presented in more dramatic and more noteworthy ways. More importantly, however, the figures presented here, like most statistical figures when taken out of context, lack further information on precisely *which* situations those students who found female-on-male violence acceptable had in mind when answering the question. Thus, one could well imagine scenarios in which women used violence in self-defence or in order to defend their children. Again, the information provided is conveniently left incomplete, and what emerges is a picture of the 'facts' which is at best simplified, at worst false. By referring to statistical findings, the article makes an implicit claim to validity and trustworthiness, but then it makes the reader jump to the wrong conclusions by distorting the facts and by

presenting the findings in a misleading way. It is particularly interesting in this context that the study the *Sunday Times* article refers to ('which will be published next month in the *European Journal of Criminology*') is not primarily concerned with the gendered distribution of violence at all but in fact investigates the relationship between students' experience of corporal punishment in childhood and their readiness to assault or injure a dating partner (Douglas and Straus, 2006). Put differently, the newspaper article highlights as a result of the study an aspect which is in reality quite marginal to it.

The reason for this microlevel strategy becomes obvious when one considers the overall 'message' the article tries to convey. Again, propositional repetitions are employed to bring this message home, as it were: 'The findings [...] suggest a far higher proportion of domestic violence is committed by women than was previously thought'; 'For the past 30 years, feminists have alerted us to the prevalence and cruelty of violence by men against female partners but research shows that women do as much hitting of partners as men.' The second statement is cast as direct speech, and the quotation is attributed to 'Murray Straus, professor of sociology at the University of New Hampshire who co-authored the study'. The article refers to a renowned scholar in the field in order to emphasise the validity of its claims and also to refashion the conclusion it wishes to convey to the reader as qualified knowledge passed on by an expert. The implication is that if an expert says that women are more violent than people had thought, then this must be true. The frame of expertise is furthermore combined with a frame of cultural myths or 'folk knowledge' that can be found in statements such as: 'Violent behaviour among young women has been blamed on rising alcohol and drug use as well as the growth of the "ladette" culture'. In contrast to the previous conclusion, this one is not attributed to anyone in particular. Who blames violence among young women on substance abuse and the 'ladette' culture? The passive construction blurs the origins of this assumption and thus also turns it into 'common' knowledge that people can more easily identify with. In other words, the article offers a foundation for female-on-male violence as a new paradigm in the popular imagination concerning intimate partner violence, and at the same time it calls into question feminist approaches by pitting them against 'research', thereby implying a difference between a group of activists making (unreasonable) claims on the one hand, and experts telling the 'truth' on the other.

One may object at this point that the example is flawed in that, first, this is only one of many articles concerning intimate partner violence and,

secondly, the *Sunday Times*, although it would be classified as a broadsheet newspaper, has a practice of presenting stories so as to attract as wide a readership as possible. These objections are valid. However, research has shown that the media frequently exploit stereotypes and distorted images of perpetrators and victims when it comes to presentations of domestic abuse (Meyers, 1997). Moreover, papers like the *Sunday Times* are widely read, presumably by people from many different walks of life, which makes them available resources for gathering 'knowledge' about domestic abuse. As my own study on general practitioners' narrative constructions of domestic violence has shown, doctors also more readily allude to the news media, fiction and popular culture in general when talking about domestic abuse than to scientific research on the issue (Mildorf, 2007, p. 179). This does not mean that doctors are not aware of scientific research. However, the fact that they draw on more popular accounts in their own explanations suggests that such accounts are sources of information that are at least as important as, if not even more important than, scientific accounts when it comes to constructing explanatory frameworks. The sensational nature of many of the GPs' stories, as well as the doctors' frequent recourse to myths and stereotypes surrounding domestic violence, corroborates my claim that GPs' 'narrative knowledge' of domestic abuse is largely also informed by 'folk knowledge' about the problem. This may prove detrimental if GPs bring to bear such internalised 'knowledge' on their practice work with patients suffering domestic abuse, especially if such 'knowledge' has not been filtered through a more critical lens. On the other hand, the news media might in turn reinforce already existing prejudices and negative attitudes GPs may have. In the next section I explore one narrative from my sample which also uses a story of female-on-male violence to attack 'feminist' viewpoints.

Female-on-male violence in a GP's narrative

Out of the 20 GPs I interviewed in my study, nine of the male GPs and seven of the female GPs mentioned female-on-male violence at some point in the interview, and a few doctors elaborated on such cases in their practices. Most of the time, female-on-male violence was alluded to only in passing. However, one can notice a few differences between the men's and the women's responses. First of all, male GPs referred more often to particular cases they had come across in their practice work, while the women's statements are always formulated in general terms. A lot of the GPs mentioned female-on-male violence while they were

discussing reasons for domestic violence but, in addition to that, female GPs brought it up in the context of power relations. In these instances, female-on-male violence was introduced as a counter-argument against the feminist proposition I suggested in the interview that violence is possibly related to men's power and dominance in our patriarchal society. Female GPs stated more regularly that female-on-male violence was rare compared to male-on-female violence, whilst male GPs sometimes took the opportunity to make an ironical comment or to present a particular case in a joking manner. Physical size was always of great importance in those stories and the GPs expressed surprise at the women's unexpected behaviour. Both in male-on-female and in female-on-male violence, the cause was more likely to be attributed to the woman, or, as Bograd (1987, 73) puts it, women were 'defined as the locus of the problem'. Women's violence was depicted and, at the same time, evaluated in negative terms and as something inherent in females. Even when doctors spoke about male-on-female violence gender stereotypes played a role. For example, a male GP in a first round of pilot interviews used PMS as an explanation for male-on-female violence in the sense that men 'tend to react' to their wives' irrational behaviour instead of 'just walking away'. This type of gender-related explanation underlines Bograd's (1987) assumption that doctors' approaches to battered women are also based on 'prevailing male-defined cultural myths about women' (p. 69).

There is possibly a gender issue underlying doctor – patient interaction with regard to domestic violence if the GP is a man, as male GPs might find it more difficult to fully empathise with their female patients. On the other hand, large parts of the GPs' responses are very similar in tone and topic, which indicates that the problem might be related to other factors such as divergent life experiences and backgrounds. It is intriguing, however, that some openly negative comments were exclusively made by male doctors. One late middle-aged male GP stated, for example:

> I think women are just as emotionally violent as men, I think, I think men are less subtle because men are less clever socially. Women's social skills, I know this from school, are much cleverer than women's [sic: men's], I think women are far more devious than, than sometimes people admit.

In using the generic nouns 'men' and 'women', this GP makes some rather categorical statements about what men and women are like. By constantly repeating these nouns, the GP juxtaposes male and female

characteristics, which ultimately leads to a slip of the tongue when the GP says 'women's' instead of 'men's'. This hints at the GP's cognitive preoccupation with the notion of 'women' at this point. The contrastive adjectival pairs, 'less subtle' and 'less clever socially' for men and 'much cleverer' and 'far more devious' for women, are interesting as the comparative form for the adjectives designating women are accompanied by intensifiers. Women's 'superiority' in subtle forms of violence and deviousness is thus emphasised. In addition, the generic term 'people' is an example of how language makes power relations invisible. The noun suggests that other people in general know about (but rarely admit) the deviousness of women. Who are those 'people' who admit that women are devious? By ascribing this judgement to a non-descript group, the GP claims authority for his own judgement because the implication is that he is not alone in thinking that women are devious. At the same time, he sets himself apart from 'people' who know about women's 'deviousness' but are perhaps not brave enough to talk about it in public, say, because it is not politically correct. In this way, the GP claims authority for himself as someone speaking on behalf of a larger section of society that holds the same views. The comment can be interpreted as misogynistic, especially in the wider context of the entire interview, where the same GP made a number of other similar comments. He also used a spontaneous personal narrative involving female-on-male violence in order to underpin his anti-feminist standpoint. I follow Labov and Waletzky's (1967) typology of narrative clauses for line-breaks:

1. I have a friend who was assaulted by his wife.
2. So, I know it happens.
3. And, er, he was, er, he was kicked and various other things, uhm,
4. And he ended up arrested.
5. Incredibly, even though I'm sure I know that it was her who assaulted him.
6. She admitted it, you know,
7. And he was arrested.
8. I just find this,
9. Feminism's just gone completely bananas as far as I am concerned.

The narrative strikes one as being extremely short, which indicates that its purpose was mainly to convey a point rather than to be a captivating narrative related in a storytelling situation. The narrative proper starts with an orientation clause in line one, which introduces the protagonists but at the same time functions as an abstract as it already

anticipates the gist of the story: 'I have a friend who was assaulted by his wife.' What is interesting in this narrative is that the actors are friends, that is, the story this doctor relates is fairly personal. The connector 'so' in the free clause in line two suggests that the GP uses his personal story as evidence for his knowledge that female-on-male violence really exists: 'So, I know it happens'. This is interesting in itself as it indicates the GP's expectation that the interviewer may not believe he would be familiar with that kind of scenario. The bound clause in line three contains the complicating action sequence: 'And, er, he was, er, he was kicked and various other things, uhm.' The narrative action is introduced in fits and starts as can be seen in the repetition of 'he was' and the occurrence of the pause fillers 'er' and 'uhm', but it gains momentum and is abruptly resolved in line four: 'and he ended up arrested'. Line four contains the focal point of this narrative, the friend's arrest, which is emphasised by its almost verbatim repetition in line seven: 'and he was arrested'. The free clause in line five is clearly evaluative and expresses the GP's incredulity concerning his friend's arrest: 'Incredibly, even though I'm sure I know that it was her who assaulted him.' This event is classified as 'incredible', and the concessive conjunction 'even though' indicates that the arrest happened despite contrary evidence the narrator is aware of. This evidence is then displayed in line six, namely the fact that the wife 'admitted' her deed, which is then contrasted again with the focal point of the story, the arrest. By emphasising this incident, the GP also implicitly emphasises the fact that the wife was *not* arrested. In this sense, the narrative clause in line seven gains evaluative force as it reveals the narrator's discontent with the outcome of the story.

The evaluation is then made explicit and the 'moral' of the story is stated in the GP's final comment that 'feminism's just gone completely bananas' (line nine). The fact that the GP slips into an informal and lower register by using the colloquial idiom 'to go bananas' shows his emotional involvement at this point. In sum, the evaluative devices in this story reveal the GP's criticism of feminist developments, and within the context of the entire interview, this story contributes to an overall misogynistic tone. During the interview I formed the impression that this GP deliberately presented his views in an exaggerated fashion in order to appear provocative. The GP did not hold back with often very personal comments and he openly expressed his opinions. This might be attributed to the overall asymmetry between interviewer and interviewee in terms of gender, age and social status in this instance. Thus, the older male GP may have felt less inhibited in front of a young female researcher. Another explanation could be that the doctor assumed implicit criticism

or a feminist viewpoint on the part of the interviewer and therefore felt obliged to 'counter' in advance possible arguments in that direction.

The narrative above, and indeed the interview with this particular GP as such, is exceptional to the extent that it reveals some relatively extreme viewpoints. One may therefore argue that this narrative is not representative of GPs in general and should not be considered further. Indeed, I did not include the narrative in my larger discussion of GPs' narratives of domestic violence (Mildorf, 2007) precisely because it did not seem to be representative at the time. On the other hand, I think it is important to present as broad a spectrum as possible in order to highlight the types of responses one can obtain and that women may encounter when they go to see their doctor. Especially a discussion of intimate partner violence and popular imagination has to take into account somewhat more extreme opinions since these form the materials from which news media, with their objective to present reportable events in a captivating manner, are typically made. The fact that other GPs were less explicit and direct can partly be attributed to the formality of the interview situation and the problem stated in Labov's *observer's paradox*, namely that one tries to investigate research subjects as though they were not systematically observed while the only way to elicit responses is by systematic observation (Labov, 1972). The fact that this particular narrative was selected in the context of the interview indicates that the GP must have considered it noteworthy and reportable, whereas more common cases of male-on-female violence do not seem to feature prominently as 'tellable' material in a storytelling situation. In other words, it is the extraordinary that receives attention by means of narrative evaluation while less conspicuous cases, which probably reflect better the everyday reality women experience, are excluded from this GP's narratives.

Conclusion: Female-on-male violence, reportability and popular imagination

Coming back to what I said at the beginning about the emergence of 'popular imagination', one could argue that narratives of female-on-male violence, by drawing upon stereotypes and myths surrounding physical size and violence, typical behaviour patterns for men and women, fixed gender roles and so on, feed on popular accounts and thus tend to 'suppress complicating variations and replace them with a kind of uniform simplicity' (Spence, 1998, p. 221). As this paper shows, doctors are no different in this respect from other people, who may also use

stereotypes and myths as explanatory frameworks for understanding domestic abuse. The specific narrative I presented goes even further in that it uses a story of female-on-male violence to make a statement against feminism, which, the GP suggests, is responsible for the fact that women, even though they can also be violent towards men, do not receive the punishment they may deserve. This is in line with the indirect quote in the *Sunday Times* article of Murray Straus' claim that 'there was a pressing need for better rehabilitation programmes for women with violent tendencies'. Both texts set up a new category of women, namely women who are deviant and intrinsically violent, and both texts demonise this new 'type of woman'. On the discursive microlevel, the newspaper article and the GP's narrative are similar to the extent that they draw upon cultural frameworks concerning intimate partner violence. While the newspaper article relies on 'expert' knowledge to convey its message, the GP emphasises his own personal knowledge of the true circumstances of his friend's experiences with domestic violence. Thus, both texts create their own authority on an issue which has implications for the ideological macrolevel: they both reject feminist views of domestic violence that emphasise the role of male dominance. One can imagine that a newspaper article like the one in the *Sunday Times* may well reinforce anti-feminist tendencies in professionals working with domestic abuse cases and may thus deflect their attention away from the problem as such. After all, doctors are also only human and not immune to more popular accounts of the problem. However, since GPs are professionals who are likely to have to deal with domestic violence cases in their practice work, such instantiations of popular imagination may prove detrimental as they preclude more differentiated accounts of the dynamics underlying violent relationships. As a result, lack of understanding coupled with conceptual misconstructions of victims and perpetrators may hinder GPs from taking the measures required to help women who suffer abuse from their partners.

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10
Male-On-Male Violence Against Women: Gender Representation and Violence in Rebecca Prichard's *Fair Game*

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Outlining his 'Social Learning Theory of Aggression', Albert Bandura writes:

> Theories of aggression have been largely concerned with individual physically injurious acts that are aversively motivated. In most... aggression is not only attributed to a narrow set of instigators, but the purposes it presumably serves are limited... Most of the injurious consequences of major social concern are caused remotely, circuitously, and impersonally through social practices judged aggressive by the victims but not by those who benefit from them.
>
> (Bandura, 1978, p. 13)

Representations of violence as a straight-forward phenomena often obscure, by means of their broad strokes, the significant details essential to properly understand and, thereby, attempt to reduce and prevent future instances of similar violence. In 'The Politics of Representation: Genre, Gender Violence and Justice', Elayne Rapping effectively outlines the potential consequences of applying and perpetuating simple, often essentialist, notions of violence. If, as she points out, 'we treat sexual offenders and batterers as merely and essentially "evil"', we relegate gender violence to the realm of the frequently inexplicable or wholly incomprehensible. In so doing, we abdicate much of our collective responsibility for dealing with violence against women. For such faulty notions – that the problem inheres entirely in aberrant individual psyches – leave no room for prevention but merely reinforce misogynist

and paternalistic attitudes that hold 'women as in need of nothing more than protection or revenge by the state' and leave women to wonder 'where have our demands for ending sexism, much less for the freedom to determine the terms by which our lives, in general, are lived, gone?' (Rapping, 2000, p. 14). Because interpersonal violence does not strictly adhere to popular conceptions of gender, nor follow strict delineations between victim and perpetrator, more nuanced and complex representations of character and setting are needed.

In 1997, Rebecca Prichard's *Fair Game*, a play that provides just such nuance and complexity, had its debut at London's Royal Court Theatre. Prichard calls her play a 'free adaptation' of Edna Mazya's *Games in the Backyard*, a play that is itself a free adaptation of actual events involving the gang rape of an adolescent Israeli girl by a group of her peers. There are, however, striking differences between the two plays, and, presumably, Prichard would not have felt the need to adapt the play if she viewed Mazya's original as either adequate or definitive. Key among these differences is that Mazya's play does not in any fundamental way explore the possibility that there may be societal sources of the violence she depicts on stage. Prichard, instead, focuses her attention on the arbitrary and seemingly implacable cultural contributors to the violence – a similar occasion of gang rape – that concludes her play. This decision, and others, solidly ground Prichard's work as socially sensitive and socially responsible in ways that Mazya's is not. However, rather than extend an argument about Mazya's play, I include these particulars in order to better illuminate the ways in which Prichard's adaptation succeeds. Towards this end, theories drawn from socio-linguistics and social psychology provide an invaluable set of lenses through which to perceive the potential complexity underlying otherwise seemingly uncomplicated violent events.

Although Mazya's play is frequently marketed for its suitability as a tool to aid teachers in addressing violence against women, Anat Gesser-Edelsburg interrogates this claim and contends quite the opposite – that the play, 'meant to counter sexual stereotypes and gender-related violence', actually serves 'to reproduce them' (Gesser-Edelsburg, 2005, p. 139). Much of the original play is composed of courtroom testimony and cross-examination; choices that may introduce additional complications with regards to the politics of representation. 'In the courtroom', says Elayne Rapping, 'the telling must always conform to the norms of legal discourse. And the law, unlike narrative fiction, drama or autobiography, has very strict rules about how one may say or show her experiences and feelings or attest to her "truth"' (Rapping, 2000, pp. 5–6). By avoiding

this dependence on 'legal and juridical discourses and assumptions' (ibid., p. 6), Prichard avoids the associated linguistic constraints on the potential of her dramatic writing.

Prichard chooses to focus her attention on the adolescents and their language and on the events leading up to rather than following the rape. She thus foregrounds the habits of thinking and speaking that may have contributed to the violence, generating an opportunity to develop a more complete picture of that violence. Like Mazya, she used an all-adolescent cast which, even though it steeped the play's premiere at the Royal Court Theatre in controversy, served to heighten the impact of the sensitive subject matter and to render passive or complacent responses nearly impossible. In any case, the actors (like Mazya's) must have presented a set of visual cues that were hard to ignore or misread, for Prichard's female character is outnumbered four to one. In addition, she is younger and physically smaller, more open and eager, and clearly out of her element in the current setting and among the other characters in the play. These elements, then, would have been seen and felt, understood on a visceral as well as an intellectual level.

Yet, Prichard's work differs dramatically from Mazya's. From the onset, Prichard signals the social foundations of her work. Instead of setting the action in a playground, as does Mazya, she places it on '*a waste ground near a large block of flats*' (Prichard, 1997, p. 5). She, further, identifies the setting as a site of conflict with the very first lines of the play – an argument – thereby foregrounding issues of rivalry and aggression before ever allowing the setting to serve as a site of play. So, when the boys appear and begin to jockey for position, one is already attuned to the competitiveness and hostility of their language and quickly cognizant of the first unsettling elements of their relationships with each other. Such adolescent uses of language – frequently dismissed, as H. A. Giroux (1995, p. 45) points out, because they are considered innocent or merely forms of entertainment and, therefore, unworthy of analysis – ought not to escape examination. This scrutiny is important, because the exertions of male adolescent power that drive the play take place almost exclusively via language. The primary struggle of the drama pits Andy against Alex; however, the other two male characters, Simon and Gigs, are implicated in that struggle and find themselves required to participate and balance the demands of group solidarity with those of individual positioning within the group's hierarchy. This hierarchy and the consequent struggle for dominance, even in a group with only four boys, are viewed as indispensable. This perception alone is enough to render them necessities.

The social environment at work on the characters is signified throughout. The characters refer to a row of 'scummy' derelict flats that 'got all piss up the walls' and serve as hiding places for the stashes of local drug dealers (Prichard, 1997, p. 42). They talk about the 'little basement flat next door' to the neighbourhood store where the shopkeeper lives with 'nothing.... no food or nothing', only a smell (p. 45) and recount that 'his son was killed. By these white blokes. On the street. No one ever did nothing about it' (p. 46). They also discuss how 'people just switch on ya all the time. One minute they're alright. The next time you see 'em and they're all like, "What you staring at?" Can't look at no one' (p. 41). Collectively, these vignettes paint a general landscape of poverty, crime and tension. These conditions, characteristic of a ghetto or slum, creep even closer to the characters' homes and to the core of Prichard's play. For instance, Debbie's biological father, a man she never knew, is dead. Her new step-father, Alex's dad, is unemployed. 'Oy, Alex. This ain't being down on your Dad or nothing, but if I was him there's no way I'd let meself sit around all moody without a job' (p. 28), says Simon in a cutting criticism belied by the initial disclaimer. The characterization of moodiness consistent with joblessness – a condition which apparently leaves one subject to indictment, even by one's own son's underachieving adolescent friends – is later connected with a demoralizing idleness and consequent lethargy.

Urban anthropologist Elijah Anderson discusses the exaggerated need for and significance of respect among boys and young men whose social conditions, like those above, afford few opportunities for or examples of success. He also outlines the material definitions of success and physical elaborations of respect that are typical of such adolescents. Those so circumscribed often feel obliged to honour their subculture's prevailing masculine codes 'in order to establish reputations, because they have – or feel they have – few other ways to assert themselves' (Anderson, 1994, p. 94). These codes, then, serve as the principal means of generating and maintaining a positive self-image. 'Life', Gigs recites from rote, 'is a game one must play according to the rules'. 'Yeah', replies Simon, 'Animal rules' (Prichard, 1997, p. 9). Therefore, even though he is not the group's dominant member, and perhaps counter-intuitively, Alex likely views this small group of friends as *his* space, in the sense that it is removed from spheres of existence – home, school, the workplace – where he may more often encounter contempt (or invisibility) than respect. In crafting her characters, Prichard faithfully represents the anti-intellectualism and disdain for mainstream social institutions that come to typify the members of some marginalized subcultures.

Prichard's group of boys indeed epitomizes the sort of environment for which M. E. Wolfgang and F. Ferracuti coined the phrase 'subcultures of violence'. A subculture of violence, like the microcosm depicted in *Fair Game*, is nothing more mysterious than a subset of the larger culture wherein 'a potent theme of violence [is] current in the cluster of values that make up the life-style, the socialization process, the interpersonal relationships of individuals living in similar conditions' (Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1982, p. 140), a theme readily apparent in the boys' speech. The pervading sense among such disenfranchised adolescent males is that 'any respect they might be able to garner in the wider system pales in comparison with the respect available in the local system; thus they often lose interest in even attempting to negotiate the mainstream system' (Anderson, 1994, p. 94). These subcultures may be thought of as 'tribal' and 'totemic' in nature, insofar as they are clannish and heavily invested in a complex system of (overtly masculine and frequently violent) local rituals. The very means of communication in such groups – in the terminology of Basil Bernstein, a 'public language' – is highly dependent upon forms of speech that are inherited and ritualized (cf. Bryan, 2006). Prichard's frequent use of quotation marks to indicate 'borrowed' speech, in the form of cliches and other pat phrases, represents just one way that 'public languages' privilege the localized social bonding towards which such groups are already predisposed. Bernstein and his colleagues provided some of the most systematic and detailed exposés of the linguistic coding at the heart of social thought and behaviour. Indeed it would prove a valuable enterprise to undertake a reading of the play focused entirely on Bernstein's notions of restricted and unrestricted codes, and formal and public languages. Here, however, let it simply be stressed that, based on the predominant cultural attitudes expressed by the boys, which we may assume to be typical of the actual environments that inspired the play's setting and characterizations, Alex probably considers himself most 'free' to 'be himself' among this localized group of peers. Yet this is precisely where he is most likely to speak inherited language and act out ritualized forms of behaviour and, thus, be more inclined to act contrary to his own instincts, his individual inclinations, and his personal, as opposed to sub-cultural, ethics, than in any other setting.

So, when Andy ignores Alex's objections and invites Debbie to join in with the group of boys, it may be understood as a direct challenge to Alex's standing within the group and, ultimately, to his (masculine) self-image, an invitation for a devalued version of Alex's self (the Alex of home) to infiltrate the space occupied by his preferred version of self (Alex

among his male peers). This violation is consciously enacted, perhaps as punishment for Alex's failure to show up at the soccer match that immediately precedes the time of the play or perhaps as a more general reminder of the boys' relative positions within the group. Whatever the reason, Debbie's presence fuels the conflict, as Andy soon discovers that he can get a rise out of Alex through his sister. In addition to his telling reactions to the words of others, Alex betrays himself further by means of his own verbal responses. For example, a knee-jerk response to Simon reveals additional ammunition to be had in the person of Debbie:

> Alex: Why'd you ask her to the lake for?
> Andy: Who?
> Alex: Debbie.
> Simon: To keep an eye out. What's wrong with that?
> Alex: You fancy her or summink?
> Simon: Are you mad? Your little sister? She's only thirteen.
> Gigs: She's a kid.
>
> (Prichard, 1997, pp. 22–23)

By itself, Alex's taunt about the boys fancying Debbie is taken at face value. However, it is not long before Alex exposes his preoccupation with Debbie. Ostensibly, Alex views Debbie as a threat to the integrity of the group as a whole; nevertheless, when the other boys pretend to accept Debbie, it suggests a threat specific to Alex. As an initial insensitivity regarding Alex's desire to exclude Debbie is transformed first into an implied, and then into a stated, preference for her company, Alex's position and role within the group is increasingly subverted. Then, when Alex utters a similar taunt, the newly adapted response underscores the personal nature of the attack and of Alex's discomfort:

> Alex: Why you sticking up for her? You fancy her?
> Simon: Yeah: Just my type.
> Gigs: She's got nice tits. Only joking, mate. *They laugh*. (p. 23)

By thus exposing the raw nerve, Alex cedes to Andy an auspicious strategic position, one he is fully prepared to exploit. Moreover, the information appears ideally suited to Andy's purposes, for making sexual jokes about Debbie is something all but Alex is free to do. Alex is likewise forced to the periphery as the only potential (male) target of the humour, so long as they keep to this topic. True to such sub-cultural ethics, Andy, Gigs and Simon employ, in the words of Debby Phillips, 'a discourse of

masculinity whose main productive function and effect is verbal and physical humiliation of other[s] . . . thereby reinforcing the hegemonic norm of masculinity by marginalizing others' (Phillips, 2001, p. 52). At Andy's instigation, the conversation continues in this vein and increases in intensity as Alex's defensiveness increases:

Andy: Maybe we should . . . see if her 'dangling glurbs of joy' are for real. *They laugh, except Alex.*
Alex: You do fancy her, don't ya?
Andy: Yeah. She's a babe. Pure horn. What you gonna do about it? *Andy throws the ball at Alex, hard. Alex throws it back at him, hard. Alex turns his back to the group, sitting down. Andy throws the ball at his back.*
Alex: Ow! *They laugh.* (Prichard, 1997, pp. 26–27)

Andy's question/threat is the first unmistakable indication that he conceives of the teasing as something more, as a gauntlet thrown down, an invitation to whatever violence *Alex* may wish to initiate. The idea is to confront Alex with a set of equally hopeless alternatives: either back down and concede Andy's superior position or take up the challenge and settle things once and for all, a battle Andy is confident he will win.

The aesthetics in play here are vitally important as the conventions of ritualized male violence. Andy has, in his mind, assumed the 'high ground', the martial and moral metaphors equally appropriate. For, in addition to promoting a physical confrontation, thus the likelihood of an obvious and outright victory, Andy hopes to put Alex into a position where, in order to save face and demonstrate his masculinity, he must take on the role of 'aggressor'. This would garner Andy the greater degree of honour associated with self-defence than an act of aggression against others and a pat justification for whatever violence he commits (i.e., I 'had no other choice'). Anne Campbell here explains the incorporation of ritual performance into acts of male aggression:

> Because [boyhood] relationships are . . . more public . . . (unlike the clandestine secrets whispered between girls), the pecking order is available for everyone to see. Rough-and-tumble play, contact sports, and especially aggression are the commodities that are traded to climb to the top of the heap. All of this cut-and-thrust is constrained by the basic rules of fair fighting. Kudos can only be gained by beating someone else 'fair and square' – by confronting them openly and by being *seen* to do this . . . Aggression is laudable only when it is used

> properly.... Aggression wins respect only when the odds of winning are equal or unfavorable.... Anything that tips the scales changes the morality of the encounter.
>
> (Campbell, 1993, pp. 76, 36)

In such instances of masculine aggression, aesthetics frequently overshadow ethics. As Campbell attests, attention to formality and propriety, that is, to the 'rules of engagement', is so prominent that it may tend to distract attention from the morality of the conflict. As the odds favour the bigger, stronger Andy, it is vital that Alex be forced to behave aggressively. Alex, however, invents a third and unexpected option. His response to Andy's question is to reject the chivalric call to defend Debbie's honour by refusing his obligation to do so. He essentially denies the aptness of such ritual to the present case by forcefully disassociating himself from Debbie, noting she is his *step*-sister, not a blood relation. He attempts to further distance himself and to participate in the other boys' acts of male solidarity, by also objectifying and derogating her. However, even though a mere step-brother, Alex cannot do so in the same way.

In order to escalate the conflict but maintain an appearance of relative blamelessness, Andy prompts Debbie to take an increasingly aggressive stance towards Alex and his attempts to 'boss her around'. Egging her on and feeding her lines, Andy continues to antagonize Alex through Debbie. Unversed in masculine codes, Debbie unwittingly functions as a 'straw man' and becomes Andy's ventriloquist's dummy. Debbie is unaware that Andy's actions are in clear opposition to his generally hostile behaviour and his negative opinion of all things feminine. Throughout the play, the audience witnesses Andy's objectification of women, as during one lengthy portion of a scene when Debbie is offstage: 'fit' girls, Andy indicates, are to be fucked; the not-so-fit ones 'got AIDS', trade sex 'for a pizza', and are 'so loose' that sex with them is 'like dangling a piece of string in a bucket' (Prichard, 1997, pp. 24–5). Debbie, however, takes Andy at face value. The more he appears interested and supportive, the more she takes up his words against Alex. With every exchange, Alex is further excluded, the sanctity of the group is further breached, and Andy's agenda is further accomplished with less and less effort on his part, as here:

> Debbie: My top's fucking soaked. You've ruined it.
> Simon: You can take it off if you want to. (*to Alex*) Only joking, mate.
> Andy: Your top's soaked. You cold?

Simon: She could take it off.
Gigs: Feel free to take it off, yeah? (p. 39)

Andy's strategy allows him to step back and adopt a seemingly benign position, even to appear to care about Debbie, leaving for others the label 'instigator'.

Male violence, it should be noted, has long been characterized as 'instrumental', as opposed to the 'expressive' violence of women. Male violence (cf. Andy, Gigs, and Simon) has been understood and portrayed 'almost without exception as a means to an end' (Campbell, 1993, p. 35). This dichotomous understanding was a mainstay of both scientific and popular perceptions of gendered violence until very recently. So, even though this binary has since been scrutinized and found lacking, 'so seemingly natural is the ... portrayal of male instrumental violence that it becomes visible only when we try to find examples of men showing expressive aggression' and cannot (ibid.). For its part, *Fair Game* makes palpable the sometimes 'expressive' nature of male violence that is often concealed by enduring beliefs and definitions. Clearly, one can point to elements of 'instrumentality' behind Alex's forthcoming violence. However, Prichard's emphases on the repeated eruptions of laughter, for example, painfully underscore Alex's newly precarious position within the group, and the sequence of derision and humiliation accentuates the emotional reality of Alex's situation.

Besieged by his peers, losing ground to Andy, beset by a 13-year-old girl and denied the opportunity to join in with his friends, Alex is increasingly ostracized and emasculated. Wolfgang and Ferracuti, Campbell, Anderson and others attest that boys in overtly masculine subcultures are more often motivated by *social* as opposed to physical self-preservation so that 'alienation of some kind ... seems to be a form of punitive action most feasible to th[ese] subculture[s]' (Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1982, p. 160). For those already alienated from the mainstream culture and its avenues for respect and success, the thought of social death at the local level is more frightening even than the prospect of bodily harm. Phillips, too, speaks of the fear of being 'positioned on the margins of hegemonic masculinity and the effects of this positioning', characterizing adolescent male subcultures as 'constraining on all accounts because of the boys' constant surveillance of each other' (Phillips, 2001, p. 59). These factors promote the hyper-performance of masculine behaviour, whereby boys 'enforce or strategically work to achieve their positions ... through more visible, and sometimes exaggerated, practices of masculinity'. The hierarchical nature of these

subcultures guarantees that 'positioning depends, in part, on how others . . . are positioned' (p. 62) – that one may, in effect, raise oneself by lowering (or obliterating) another. Such masculine performance tends to assume three basic forms: risk-taking, heterosexual display and violence, and for those who 'have – or feel they have – few other ways to assert themselves', establishing and maintaining one's masculine reputation takes on special significance (Anderson, 1994, p. 94). Indeed, men and male adolescents who feel empowered in other areas of their lives are far less likely to be 'dependent on such physical displays' of masculinity (ibid., p. 89).

Underlying all reputation-building hyper-masculine display, including ritual forms of aggression, is a powerful anxiety. Men have fewer socially acceptable ways of expressing anxiety. Crying (or even dancing, Debbie's way of coping with stress) is far too damaging (cf. pp. 34–7). Violence, however, is not condemned in such masculine environments, and it is hardly surprising that the 'highest incidence of aggression is found in communities in which aggressive models abound and fighting prowess is regarded as a valued attribute' (Bandura, 1978, p. 15). Men are not immune to stressors, nor can they stem basic physiological responses. A lifetime of conditioning within a hypermasculine subculture, however, can determine the available coping mechanisms and funnel expression to a limited number of avenues. For Alex's likely self-conception, the leading stressor is the setting. In addition to the above-mentioned descriptions of the environment, 'choring' (shoplifting) – whose minimal 'rush' no longer satisfies, having become, in Andy's words, 'like manual labour' (Prichard, 1997, p. 45) – and 'gear' (drugs), as well as alcohol and violence, are among the few means of escaping the frequently mentioned unrelenting boredom. 'No-one dances here,' complains Debbie, 'they just get pissed out of their head and fight'. The boys respond defensively, asking, 'what's wrong with getting pissed out ya head?' (p. 33). Wisely, Prichard disallows sentimentality and has the boys lose their football match to 'that mouthy little paki kid' and his friends (p. 6), she makes Simon's only goal one against his own team, and Alex is perhaps worse: 'I'm a spectator,' he says. 'I never get to play' (p. 7). To add to these pride-deflating circumstances, the writer gives Alex a new step-sister, which suggests divorced parents and the stress occasioned by reformulation of the family unit.

Nevertheless, mention of Alex's indolent father is even more damaging. The psychic effects of adverse conditions are the subject of Erving Goffman's theories of shame induction and shame management. For most, shame is intense but momentary, a fleeting pang. For others,

however, shame becomes a central possibility experienced as a prolonged or constant state. Although Goffman's primary examples are drawn from institutions, such as prisons and asylums, the features he describes are equally characteristic of a masculine subculture like the one to which Alex belongs. Combined with a self-conscious awareness of one's separation from mainstream society are the shame and the stigma associated with factors such as joblessness, which are exacerbated when one cannot distance oneself from those one considers (or would like to consider) dissimilar and polluted others. When an individual is unable to draw clear divisions between one's self and those one considers shameful, the resulting shame may be constant and all-pervading. Under such conditions, the symbolic 'territories of the self are violated; the boundary that the individual places between his being and the environment is invaded and the embodiments of self profaned' (Goffman, 1962, p. 23). This process that Goffman calls 'disidentifying' strips the individual of the 'insignia symbolic of self' out of which s/he might have fashioned a comfortable and satisfying identity of her or his 'own choice' (Gardner and Gronfein, 2005, pp. 177–8). For most, shame lasts 'only for the length of the face-to-face interaction' that occasions it; others, however, are 'mired in physical confines in which shame can echo and re-echo' (p. 179). As in Alex's case, one's very home can serve as a reminder of one's shamefulness, thus eliminating a fundamental source of human comfort, pride and satisfaction. The shame felt by Alex's father is referenced obliquely, but Alex's shame is played out on stage, figuratively and literally.

The debilitating reality of Alex's shame is revealed via 'the footprints of shame' (p. 181): instances when people betray themselves verbally and inadvertently provide self-incriminating evidence of shame and its sources. Alex signals his own shame and its likely sources throughout. Early on, he betrays an unhealthy obsession with his little sister. He is the first to sexualize her and he betrays himself with *non-sequiturs* like: 'If you wanna fuck her why don't you just take her home and fuck her, leave us out of it' (Prichard, 1997, p. 38), directed towards Andy. Similarly, 'Why don't you go to the fucking football field? See if there is anyone else left to shag' (p. 48) is directed at Debbie. The seemingly isolated and nonsensical soon coalesce meaningfully:

> Andy: You know what he's got against you, Debbie?...
> Andy: He says you chor money off his Dad. That you steal off him....
> Debbie: I don't steal that money off him. He gives me that money. He gives it to me....

Alex: My Dad don't give you money. Why would he give you money?
Debbie: Because he's a pervert.
The boys laugh. (p. 49)

Here, Alex first threatens violence against Debbie. Andy restrains him, and Alex yells, 'Get your fucking hands off me, you cunt' (p. 49), but when Andy lets him go, Debbie cowers and Alex cannot bring himself to hurt her. He bursts into tears, aggravating his shame.

Mercilessly, Andy levels another challenge:

Andy: What are you standing there staring at? Yeah, your sister's not bad as it goes. You want a feel? It's free for everyone else. What you waiting for?

In response, Alex pulls a flickknife, but the blade will not release, eliciting the following exchange:

Simon: What's the matter, Alex? Can't ya get it out?
Debbie: He never can unless he's wanking in his room.
Simon: Oooh, hear that, Alex! I wouldn't take that if I was you.
Debbie: You're like your Dad, you are. You're a fucking pervert.
Alex: I'm not like him. I'm not like him. I'm not.
Debbie: You're fucking pathetic. (p. 51)

All the ingredients most likely to produce male violence are here consolidated. Alex has lost face before the most important audience – his local, immediate group of peers. He has become the sole butt of jokes, all geared towards further humiliation. Verbal aggression, social scientists agree, is the single most common precursor to physical aggression; of these, attacks on character and competence are the most productive of masculine violence (cf. Bryan, 2006). The humour prompted by the knife is pat; however, embarrassed by his heterosexual inexperience – 'If anyone's queer, you're the one never had a girlfriend, Alex' (p. 13) – and attracted to his own step-sister, it must seem intentionally cruel to Alex. The taint of impotence and incest, and an oblique suggestion of homosexuality, on top of the hormones, the betrayal, and the public humiliation is painful enough; Andy, however, flaunts his ability to have (if he wants) what Alex desires – Debbie – and the impossibility of Alex ever attaining it. Andy paints it as masculine failure, the result of Alex's singular impotence. Still, Alex resists the impulse for violence. It is only when Alex is compared to his father – connected to a symbol

of future (and greater) impotence and failure – that his self-integrity fails.

In hyper-masculine subcultures, a verbal connection is made between violence and maleness itself. More than innately masculine, violence is that which defines boys/men as boys/men. Therefore, violence does not produce the guilt it does in mainstream culture; instead, non-violence – the *forgoing* of definitively male behaviour – is imbued with shame. Abstaining from violence is made to feel like a dereliction of masculine duty; enacting it, like proof of one's right to be called a 'man'. Alex's violence has elements of 'instrumentality'; taken alone, however, this explanation is hardly satisfying. With a mandate to commit violence, no hope of exerting his will over the group or situation, a need to reassert his masculinity and the rituals of hyper-masculine performance deeply rooted, Alex's response is 'instrumental', but also 'expressive' – a hybrid informed by the rituals of violence, but born of an overflow of frustration, anger and humiliation.

Prichard captures the essence of much male violence; however, in representation, as in reality, traditional instrumental accounts prove unsatisfactory. Alex can only damage his masculine status by attacking someone younger, smaller and female. Violence against a female sibling can only offer socially destructive demonstrations of risk-taking, heterosexual display or violence. Finally, the expressive form of Alex's violence can only re-inscribe the connections between himself and the 'pervert' of a father he wants desperately to disown. Only as mute articulation – of indignation and self-doubt, of emasculation and social annihilation – can Alex's rape of Debbie be properly explained. Without, for example, the simple but symbolic fact of having been pushed over to land bodily on top of Debbie, it is hard to imagine Alex taking all the steps that, otherwise, would be necessary to commit the same act. Alex's actions fly in the face of masculine codes and instrumental accounts of male violence. The point is that the act is literally 'unthinkable' under most other circumstances. Instrumental accounts of violence may, however, adequately explain Andy's behaviour or that of Simon and Gigs when they show that their objectifying jokes are more than just jokes – that language is never 'just words' – and scramble to take their turns with Alex's sister.

Andy, then, mercilessly completes his mission. He utterly defeats the abject Alex with words ostensibly aimed at Debbie: 'Jesus. Cover yourself up.... Now you're crying. Look at yourself. Was you born without shame? Go home. You're filthy. Go and wash yourself' (p. 53). Alex, unlike Andy, is mostly portrayed sympathetically. Throughout most of the play, he is the victim. Similarly, Prichard takes pains to convey

Alex's monstrous remorse, leaving her audience with final images of Alex 'gently' covering Debbie and 'cradling' her head in his arms. Nevertheless, it remains clear that we are to abhor and condemn his actions. By altering the relationship between victim and perpetrator that Mazya establishes in the original play, and by placing a male–male conflict at the core, Prichard disallows simplification and escape of the shocking nature of (the) rape. This is an ending which ensures that it is but a small leap for spectators to entertain the longer-term consequences for Debbie, Alex, their family, and future roles and status, individually and collectively. The play reveals the power inherent in definitions of gender, and how gender roles can supersede reason and compassion. For, however remorseful Alex may be, when provoked, he falls into step, aligning himself with the group and its masculine ethic. His final words, the last words of the play, echo Andy's: 'You slag. I'm so ashamed of you. I'm so ashamed' (p. 54). Perhaps, however, he is really speaking of and to himself. Whatever his gestures or intent, Alex's final words betray Debbie (and himself, as 'footprints of his shame'), making her a scapegoat and, at least verbally, positioning himself against his sister and with the boys who rejected him.

Whatever Prichard's goal, she manages to accurately depict features of masculine subculture. She shows that violence against women can have little to do with the women themselves, insofar as the motives of perpetrators are concerned, and since women are 'invisible' in some cultures, there may be profit in addressing violence against women by addressing masculine definitions and male-on-male interaction. If violence is lived as it is defined and presented in the context of gendered norms and practices, Prichard's adaptation demonstrates the value in a more complete and complex understanding of male-on-male forms of violence as one more way of effectively dealing with violence against women.

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11

'He Could See Her No Longer': The Negation of Femininity Through Violence in Ian McEwan's Fiction

Fiona Tolan

Ian McEwan's 1997 novel, *Enduring Love*, charts the growing obsessive 'love' experienced by psychologically disturbed Jed for the protagonist Joe. Largely in consequence of her refusal to countenance Jed's mounting instability, Joe's relationship with his partner Clarissa falters and fails. McEwan opposes science writer Joe's rationalism with the sensibilities of Keats scholar, Clarissa. This classic, rather too neat, dualism constructs a potentially potent sexual tension in the text. But rather than negotiating the masculine – feminine opposition, McEwan dissipates this heterosocial aspect by redirecting Joe's attentions and passions to the third, initially peripheral figure of Jed. Where Joe represents rationalism, and Clarissa emotion, Jed embodies obsession: sexual, religious, and psychological. Ultimately, frustrated obsession engenders violence, and the novel climaxes with Joe shooting his phallic pistol at Jed, and concludes with Jed institutionalized but resiliently enamoured of Joe. Compelled by his own obsessed pursuit of his stalker's condition, Joe and Jed enter into a strange parody of a love affair, and Clarissa's role in the text is increasingly negated.

This chapter identifies and charts a removal of feminine experience through violent interactions recurring in McEwan's works, but eventually suggests that violence is envisioned by McEwan as a consequence, rather than a cause, of the loss of femininity and 'feminine' values. Violence and sexuality have long been entwined in McEwan's work. His novels and short stories frequently and notoriously construct gendered dichotomies of masculine aggressors and feminized (if not necessarily female) victims. Grounded in a psychoanalytic reading of desire, McEwan's texts resist rationalizing social discourses on violence, yet ultimately, I will argue, his response to violence is inherently moral and is grounded in an ideal of gendered harmony that is seemingly belied by his violent works.

To recount something of a cliché, McEwan's early reputation – largely stemming from his frequently Gothic short stories of the late 1970s – was for dark subject matter and perverse imaginings. Writing about this early period, one critic suggests that 'McEwan's imagination seemed as though it could usefully be swabbed out with Dettol' (Kemp, 1992, cited in Byrnes 2002). With time, however, McEwan was hailed to have matured; Brian Finney argues that McEwan's dramatic works of the early 1980s (*The Imitation Game, Or Shall We Die?*, and *The Ploughman's Lunch*) 'reveal his awakened interest in the world of politics and social action, in the nuclear threat, environmental pollution, and the oppression of women' (Finney, 2004, p. 68). In a much-quoted interview by John Haffenden in 1983, McEwan spoke of this apparent shift as intentional:

> I had begun to feel rather trapped by the kinds of things I had been writing. I had been labelled as the chronicler of comically exaggerated psychopathic states of mind or adolescent anxiety, snot and pimples.
>
> (Haffenden, 1985, p. 173)

Marriage, he suggested, had brought him 'a rich source of ideas' (ibid.), and such newfound personal and political engagements were popularly understood to have led the writer towards worlds that were less psychopathological, less claustrophobic, and less insular. Subsequently, texts such as *Atonement* (2001) and *Saturday* (2005) can be held up in evidence of this literary coming-of-age narrative.

This theory of McEwan's steady progression towards an increasing sensitivity to gender and power politics is supported by Angela Roger's frequently biographical and psychoanalytic reading, which suggests that 'we can distinguish a significant shift in [McEwan's] position regarding women which fits with his own growing experience and maturity' (Roger, 1996, p. 11). Relatively little critical analysis has been written specifically on McEwan's depiction of women, and Roger's article provides a useful beginning. She identifies an 'ascendancy' of women in McEwan's developing canon, but ultimately concludes that this 'remains bound up with their capacity to nurture the men' (p. 25). That is, where earlier female characters are predominantly figured as victims who collude in their subjugation, later, stronger women are envisioned, but are only countenanced insofar as they display the nurturing, male-empowering values of motherhood. In the illustration of this analysis, Roger juxtaposes the character of sexually experienced Maria in *The Innocent* (1989), who, 'depicted more as a lover than a

mother-figure' (p. 23), 'represents a threat to [Leonard's] assumed manly position' (p. 24) and is therefore abandoned by the text, and Julie in *The Child in Time* (1987), whose 'sensuality is at one with her maternity' (p. 22) and is consequently portrayed as powerful and successful.

There is, however, another, quite different way in which to read these representations of femininity. Where Roger identifies a growing acceptance of a more fully realized femininity, hindered only by a reluctance to celebrate women who refuse maternity, it can instead be understood that McEwan's developing narrative of femininity roughly charts – during this early and central phase of his writing career – not an opening up to feminine presence, but a closing down and a shutting off: a negation of femininity. This move is not to be read simplistically as an expression or reflection of McEwan's own comprehension of women as other and unknowable, but rather as a complex process of exploring and expressing the dangers of such divisions and reductions of the feminine aspect.

Beginning with the publication of the short story collection *First Love, Last Rites* in 1975 and extending through to *Enduring Love* in 1997, a number of texts enact the removal of women from the crucible of power – an arena which is inextricably bound up in McEwan's work with violence and aggression. Charting these developing plots, it appears that violence becomes progressively less concerned with relations between men and women and more engaged with all-male encounters. Positing that violence in McEwan's work is characteristically embroiled in informing patterns of sexuality, desire and power, the removal of women from violent interactions is inevitably significant. Recurrent aggressive confrontations become increasingly homosocial and homoerotic, until femininity, removed from the power negotiations taking place, is largely negated by the text, resulting, eventually, in the effective absence of the female.

An early text which decisively refuses this removal of the feminine is the 1978 short story, 'Pornography'. The female-centred violence on which the tale climaxes is in significant contrast to both the homoeroticism and the negation of the female role that occurs in *Enduring Love*. 'Pornography' charts the fortunes of pornographer and philanderer, O'Byrne, and the retribution meted out by his cheated girlfriends – both nurses – when they perform an enforced penectomy. Superficially a naïve feminist fantasy whereby the victim is avenged on her aggressor, the recurrent motif of the watchful gaze points instead to complex and frequently shifting and contradictory power negotiations taking place throughout the narrative.

In this story, sex, power and violence are persistently connected by the text and congregate around the theme of pornography, with its informing principles of voyeurism and display. O'Byrne's pornography customers assert their gaze over photographed women, 'naked but for panties and gasmask', and also over other magazine readers, such as the 'uncircumcised male virgin, without hygiene', who writes that he cannot peel back his foreskin 'for fear of what he might see'. Fears, bodies and desires are all diminished and consumed, but the customers are equally emasculated. Derided by O'Byrne, they are 'troubled dreamers' and 'frightened fowl', passively in thrall to the pornographic images. Yet hyper-masculine O'Byrne is, in turn, belittled by financial dependence on his brother, the 'Little Runt', whose optometrically 'magnified eyes' (pp. 1–2), superficially suggestive of weakness, better indicate his possession of the authoritative masculine gaze.

Recalling Laura Mulvey's seminal work on narrative cinema and the gendered gaze, a scopophilic chain of power is constructed through proprietor, customer, and consumed. Where Mulvey notes the manner in which the viewer appropriates the masculine perspective of the film camera, constructing the onscreen actress as object of the 'determining male gaze' (Mulvey, 1975, p. 442). McEwan demonstrates that the subject/object position is unstable and shifting; the subject can find himself unexpectedly objectified by another's authoritative gaze. References to eyes, to watchfulness, and to voyeurism recur in McEwan's work. These signifying images of the gaze are related, as Mulvey demonstrates, to the masculine authority of the subject position over the feminized object, and to be in possession of the gaze infers power over the other who is being viewed. Furthermore, when power in McEwan's work is asserted and disputed by violent means, the struggle that takes place between victim and aggressor is frequently informed by a parallel power struggle to claim possession of the gaze.

This connection between violence and viewing is also discussed by Freud. In his essay 'On Femininity' (1933), Freud expounded his theory of castration anxiety and its consequences for sexuality. He argued that the male's initial sight of a female body prompts, in the first instance, a repulsion at the female's evident lack of the 'master signifier', and subsequently acts as validation of his own, superior wholeness. This psychosexual drama is enacted in reverse in the female. Freud argues that 'The castration complex of girls is also started by the sight of the genitals of the other sex. They at once notice the difference and, it must be admitted, its significance' (Freud, 1933, p. 125). However, despite the validation that the female lack offers to the male, the comprehension that it is possible

to be without a penis also instigates castration fear in the boy, and this fear or anxiety continues to inform his sexual development, particularly in terms of his relationship with the potentially castrating father. And so Freud can be seen to suggest that the seemingly innocent act of looking results in a persistent, deep-felt fear of terrible bodily violence.

However, in her 1974 essay, 'Another Cause – Castration', Luce Irigaray challenged Freud's reading. Questioning why the girl's 'lack' should prompt fear in the boy, she asks, 'why does having nothing that can be seen threaten his libidinal economy?' (Irigaray, 1974, p. 432). Irigaray concludes that the myth of 'penis envy' is created to shore up man's subjectivity, creating a simple 'has/has not' reading of gender: 'If woman had desires other than "penis envy", this would call into question the unity, the uniqueness, the simplicity of the mirror charged with sending man's image back to him – albeit inverted' (p. 434). She suggests instead that this drama of looking on difference and asserting superiority is better understood as a means of laying claim to the power of the gaze, rather than to the possession of the phallus. Penis envy, she argues, is better understood as 'envy and jealousy of the eye-penis, of the phallic gaze' (p. 431). Power, by this understanding, lies not with the masculine body, but with the authority of the viewer who reconstructs the viewed as passive object of his or her gaze.

And so in 'Pornography', the amputation of O'Byrne's penis, undertaken as a means of removing his power and authority, reflects rather than instigates his loss of the authoritative gaze. In sexual relations, O'Byrne has sought to assert his authority. He has perpetrated violence on his partners, inflicting both emotional cruelty and, through his deliberate failure to protect them from his sexually transmitted disease, physical harm. However, the unexpected shifts of power that occur in this story, not least in the final mutilation scene, constantly undermine O'Byrne's dominant position. Even before his castration, he is figured as metaphorically blinded: 'his eyes were closed' and his sight obscured by 'beads of perspiration'. This loss of vision contrasts significantly with seemingly weak and fragile Pauline, whose eyes, nevertheless, are 'large, green and watchful' (p. 4).

And it contrasts again with Lucy, who, whilst introducing O'Byrne to his own repressed masochistic desires, 'opened her eyes and stared down' (p. 11), dominating him visually as well as physically and sexually. In this story, McEwan's portrayal of violence and power is disruptive of stereotypical gendered notions of passivity and aggression, but remains nevertheless heterosocial in its conjunction of masculine and feminine oppositions.

This early image of feminine violence quickly gives way to what becomes a familiar trope of masculine violence in McEwan's work. In the 1981 novel, *The Comfort of Strangers*, as in *Enduring Love*, a heterosexual relationship is penetrated and destroyed by the violent and sexual desires of an intruding male. In both, the obsessive attentions of the stranger mimic a romantic attachment, and in both, the female character is removed from the encounter. What connects *The Comfort of Strangers* to the earlier story, 'Pornography', is the recurrence of McEwan's exploration of sadomasochistic desires, this time expanded in careful psychological detail. As a portrait of pleasure, fear, and desire, it remains one of McEwan's most intense and controversial pieces of writing.

Sadomasochism, which Freud referred to as '[t]he most common and the most significant of all the perversions' (Freud, 1924, p. 251), has been commonly read as an unnatural exaggeration of a normal heterosexual opposition between masculine aggression and feminine passivity. Freud described sadism as a common element in masculine sexuality, which typically 'contains an element of aggressiveness – a desire to subjugate' (p. 252). This aggression, he suggested, was the consequence of a biological impulse to overcome the resistance of the unwilling sexual object. In contrast, he found masochism more difficult to explain, and initially concluded that 'It can often be shown that masochism is nothing more than an extension of sadism turned round upon the subject's own self...'. However, he later added a footnote to this essay, in which he noted, 'My opinion of masochism has been to a large extent altered by later reflection.... I have been led to distinguish a primary or erotogenic masochism, out of which two later forms, feminine and moral masochism, have developed' (p. 252). This connection of masochism with a feminine drive continued, and he concluded that:

> A sadist is always at the same time a masochist.... It is, moreover, a suggestive fact that the existence of the pair of opposites formed by sadism and masochism cannot be attributed merely to the element of aggressiveness. We should rather be inclined to connect the simultaneous presence of these opposites with the opposing masculinity and femininity which are combined in bisexuality – a contrast which often has to be replaced in psycho-analysis by that between activity and passivity.
>
> (p. 253)

Although Freud identified contradictory impulses within the one subject, he described the presence of masochism as not simply an inversion of the primary sadistic aggression, but as evidence of both feminine and

masculine traits occurring within one person. Equally, in McEwan's work, the idea that 'feminine' masochism is a trait of women and sadism of men is challenged by the ambiguous reactions of his characters to both violence and desire. Repeatedly in McEwan's texts, gender boundaries are both explored and disrupted, and this can be seen particularly in *The Comfort of Strangers*.

As Colin and Mary holiday in McEwan's unnamed Venice, they seem to passively collude in the sadistic machinations of the simultaneously repulsive and seductive Robert. Once again, the gaze is a recurring motif in a tale that centres, like 'Pornography', on voyeurism. In a Gothic story of forbidden desires, the gaze turns inexorably to violence. Obsessed by the younger man's beauty, Robert engages in illicit, invasive photography, constructing a montage of captured images of Colin which 'seemed to have frozen every familiar expression', in which 'each picture held, and appeared to celebrate, a different aspect of that fragile face' (p. 91). As the photographs capture and dissect his image, so Colin is metaphorically fractured and dismembered. By emphasizing the camera's function of looking and objectifying, McEwan connects this aggressive visual consumption of Colin with the physical violence yet to come.

As the text moves indefatigably towards its violent climax, gender roles, particularly with regard to sexual fantasy, are repeatedly exposed, repositioned, and inverted. The novel concludes with Mary's contemplation of 'men's ancient dreams of hurting, and women's of being hurt', which she envisions as 'a powerful single organizing principle' (p. 100). McEwan later elaborated on this theme in an interview:

> I had to address myself to the nature of the unconscious, and how the unconscious is shaped. It wasn't enough to be rational, since there might be desires – masochism in women, sadism in men – which act out the oppression of women or patriarchal societies but which have actually become related to sources of pleasure.
>
> (Haffenden, 1985, p. 178)

This opposition is played out in the text by Robert, who, like O'Byrne in 'Pornography', is figured as emphatically masculine – 'his arms were exceptionally long and muscular. His hands too were large, the backs covered with matted hair' (pp. 14–15) – and his fragile and broken wife, Caroline. Together, the couple enact increasingly sadomasochistic fantasies, and Caroline tells Mary: 'He made love to me out of deep loathing, and I couldn't resist. I loved being punished' (p. 87).

In a valuable article on the novel, Judith Seaboyer notes that the text self-consciously inscribes the 'dominant fiction' [society's faith in the stable family unit and the adequacy of the male subject] with a sadistic savagery that unmasks its origins in psychic structures and exposes the dangers of failing to recognize the role of the psyche in the formation of social reality (Seaboyer, 1999, p. 958).

In *The Comfort of Strangers*, Robert and Caroline have given themselves up to psychosexual fantasies to the point where they enter a *Through the Looking Glass*-like other-world of unbridled unconscious desires. Caroline describes how fantasy was passing into reality: 'Have you ever experienced that? It's like stepping into a mirror' (p. 91). Retreating to 'the mysterious topography' (ibid.) of Venice, the couple abandon the limits and restrictions of the superego and immerse themselves fully in the dark drives of the id.

Whilst the respective aggression and acquiescence of Robert and Caroline may be unpalatable, McEwan describes them instead as a sort of comic drawing of a relationship of domination. In contrast to these near-symbolic figures are Colin and Mary, who find themselves compelled by the overt expression of repressed fantasies that their new acquaintances represent. McEwan notes how, 'when this decently liberal and slightly tired couple, Colin and Mary, come in contact with that relationship, they find it has a sway over their unconscious life, and they begin to act out – or rather speak to each other – these incredible masochistic and sadistic fantasies while they are making love' (Haffenden, 1985, p. 179). But though drawn to the primal oppositions embodied by Robert and Caroline, Colin and Mary to some extent work to disrupt and unbalance the strictly gendered binary, as Mary indulges in sadistic fantasy, and Colin, with his hair, 'unnaturally fine, like a baby's' and his 'slender, womanly neck' (p. 40), is repeatedly feminized by Robert's persistent gaze.

Eventually, Robert's fascination with Colin pushes Mary to the periphery of the text. She is joined there by Caroline, once Robert's willing victim, who now shifts away from her masochistic tendencies in a move to occupy her husband's sadistic perspective. Whilst superficially adopting the role of Robert's co-conspirator, the actual negation of Caroline's position that this involves is intimated earlier in the novel in a conversation with Mary. Asked if she would be prepared to kill the person she loves, Caroline responds, 'Oh yes, if I was the man I would' (p. 46). In achieving the capacity to murder Colin, Caroline has finally negated herself and become 'the man': has become, that is, entirely a part of Robert's immense and destructive will. This negation, as she

carefully explains, is a state to which she has aspired; it is fundamental to her acceptance of Robert's sadism: 'It's not the pain itself, it's the fact of the pain, of being helpless before it, and being reduced to nothing by it' (p. 86). Mary, although unwilling to enact the same self-negation, is forcefully positioned within Robert's voyeuristic masculine perspective; drugged and incapacitated, 'she saw with total clarity the obscene precision . . . of a private fantasy' (p. 94). As the dynamic sadistic interaction takes place between Robert and Colin, Mary must passively observe, whilst Caroline, ostensibly participating, subsumes her own actions within those of her husband.

What is repeatedly apparent in McEwan's work, including 'Pornography' and *The Comfort of Strangers*, is that, whether the violence taking place is physical, sexual, or psychological, the aggressor and the victim are always working through a power conflict. Kiernan Ryan argues that:

> McEwan's contention is that we cannot begin to think straight about power relations between the sexes until we own up to what actually excites and pleases us, until we stop talking as though reasoned argument alone were enough to transfigure the lineaments of desire.
>
> (Ryan, 1994, p. 34)

McEwan, who has a longstanding interest in science in general and Darwinism in particular, often opposes reason and instinct in his fictions. For example, the limits of rationalism is a key theme in *Enduring Love*, in which Joe's faith in reason blinds him to powerful, though seemingly irrational truths. Similarly, McEwan points to the scene in *The Comfort of Strangers* in which Colin mistakenly believes Mary is drowning, and suggests, 'if you are so wrong about something you have to question whether your desires aren't involved in your judgement' (Haffenden, 1985, p. 180). In *Enduring Love*, Clarissa asks Joe to consider the possibility that he unconsciously fed Jed's obsessions; she suggests, 'you were leading him on. He brought something out in you' (p. 218). Violence in these texts is bound up with power, but it is also intricately bound up with desire. People, McEwan suggests, can unconsciously invite violence to be done to them, in much the same way as they can unconsciously desire to inflict violence on others. He suggests, furthermore, that it is the repression of these powerful instincts, the refusal to acknowledge their existence, that causes them to erupt in violent confrontations. Subsequently in his writing, as women are removed from these negotiations, and balance and compromise become increasingly hard to achieve, the hope for positive conclusions becomes increasingly slight.

Published eight years after *The Comfort of Strangers* and set in post-war Germany, *The Innocent* (1989) also depicts scenes of graphic and bloody violence. McEwan's Berlin, undergoing intensive reconstruction after the devastation of Allied bombing, forms the backdrop to this tale of lost innocence, in much the same way that Venice, with its labyrinthine alleyways and dark recesses, informs the tale of subconscious desires depicted in *The Comfort of Strangers*. The violence taking place in *The Innocent*, more so than in the earlier novel, implicates both male and female characters, casting both genders as victims and aggressors. However, although not as homoerotic as *The Comfort of Strangers*, the climactic encounter similarly works to explode the stable gender binary by the interjection of a second, invasive male figure. Once again, gender boundaries are disrupted, but ultimately, as in *The Comfort of Strangers*, the violent confrontation takes place primarily between men, who appropriate the predominant roles of both aggressor and victim. The female does enter significantly into violence in this text, and the fatal blow is delivered in unison by both a male and a female character. However, in this instance, the violence and its repercussions continue after death, and it is this posthumous violation that really works to exclude the female experience, making it essentially peripheral to the action.

The innocent of the book's title is 25-year-old Leonard, a British Post Office telephone engineer, engaged to assist in the covert Anglo-American operation to tunnel into the Russian sector of Berlin and intercept Communist communications. Naïve, inexperienced, and awkwardly class-bound, Leonard is approached by 30-year-old Maria, a German survivor of both the war and a violent marriage, and embarks upon a love affair that will effect his painful induction into maturity. Maria's experience of past horrors places her in an ambiguous position in the text as both victim and authority. Knowledge in the novel is a form of power, and virginal Leonard undergoes various initiations – sexual, political, emotional, and moral – throughout the course of the text.

Frustrated by the feminizing aspect of his innocence, Leonard eventually moves to assert his masculinity – equated in the text with experience and power – by engaging in acts he would have previously deemed unthinkable. Primarily, this results in an aggressive sexual attack on Maria. Where initially, 'Maria taught Leonard to be an energetic and considerate lover' (p. 76), with time, he rejects the role of initiate, and increasingly envisions himself as victor: '*She had to give him what was his*'. The text recalls the sadomasochistic fantasies of *The Comfort of Strangers*

as Leonard realizes that 'He wanted his power recognized and Maria to suffer from it, just a bit, in the most pleasurable way' (p. 79). These fantasies culminate, it seems almost inevitably, into an attempted rape. In stark contrast to Caroline's collusion in Robert's fantasies in the earlier novel, Maria entirely rejects Leonard's internal pretence of playfulness or conspiracy, and recalls instead the brutal rape of an injured German woman by a Russian soldier that she had witnessed some years before. Jack Slay suggests that 'In this moment of abuse and denial, of masculine dominance and feminine denial, McEwan makes amends for the theory espoused in *The Comfort of Strangers*' (Slay, 1996, p. 137). Where that earlier novel concludes on the tentative formulation of a unifying psychosexual theory that would explain Robert's violence and Mary and Colin's unconscious submission to it, in *The Innocent*, Leonard's fantasies of mutually pleasurable pain and violence are rejected in the face of real violences intruding into real lives.

From sexual violence, the novel moves to further and fatal aggression. Whilst the murder of Otto, Maria's drunken ex-husband, is committed in self-defence, a significant residue of Leonard's desire to assert his masculine authority, which had prompted his earlier attack on Maria, still remains and informs this encounter. Seeing the passionate hatred with which Maria shouts at Otto, Leonard 'felt momentary shame that he himself had never aroused her this way' (p. 143), and he feels Maria's demand for action as a personal attack: 'She was accusing him of not being a man' (p. 136). Violence in this novel, as in *The Comfort of Strangers*, pushes one of the male protagonists into an increasingly feminized position. The bloody confrontation is initiated by the discovery of Otto asleep in the wardrobe, from where he intended to spy on the couple's lovemaking, thereby placing Leonard, like Colin in the other novel, as unwitting object of the male gaze. Otto's drunkenness enables Leonard to momentarily shift this position; opening the wardrobe, 'He stared at the voyeur.... He continued to stare' (p. 137). However, on waking, Otto easily reclaims his authority, and 'This time [he] held Leonard's gaze' (p. 143). Otto is smaller but tougher and meaner, and whilst Leonard 'put his fists up, the way he had seen boxers do' (p. 144) – reasserting yet again the novel's persistent association of Leonard's innocent Englishness with ineffectual effeminacy in the face of German experience and American confidence – Otto instead fights dirty, wrenching Leonard's testicles, symbolically as well as physically moving to castrate him. Even as the decisive blow is delivered, it is initiated by Maria, and Leonard 'could only take hold and participate' (p. 145).

Ultimately, Maria and Leonard are both responsible for Otto's death, but in dismembering and disposing of the corpse, the couple become increasingly emotionally estranged, and Leonard can no longer sustain the relationship: 'If he was disposing of Otto, in a sense he was disposing of Maria too' (p. 171).

Eventually, Leonard enters into an increasingly exclusive relationship with the dead man, weighed down by the bags that contain his body and haunted by his image at night. As he leaves Berlin for London, Leonard realizes the inevitable consequences of Otto's violent invasion into their lives, and as he looks down at Maria from the aeroplane, she slowly disappears from his life, until 'he could see her no longer' (p. 212).

In *The Comfort of Strangers*, the female perspective is sidelined and subsumed within the dominant male sadistic vision, whilst the victim role is also, unwillingly, appropriated by a male character. In *The Innocent*, Leonard and Maria enter into dreadful violence together, but it is instigated, yet again, by an intrusive male, and for Leonard, his encounter with Otto eventually pushes Maria out of his life. In both the novels, female characters are either distanced from the tangle of desire, sexuality, and need that defines the violence of the narrative or they are exiled from the text as a consequence of their involvement in it. These removals enact, to differing extents, a repeated negation of the feminine, culminating eventually in the total estrangement of the female that occurs in *Enduring Love*.

Ultimately, this apparent pattern of female negation needs to be questioned. Although I have identified a tendency towards the removal of the feminine experience through violence in McEwan's work, significant texts disrupt and divert this trajectory. *The Child in Time* (1987), for example, lacks much of the violence that has characterized McEwan's fiction. Nevertheless, persistent themes recur as the novel again enacts the breakdown of a couple, this time in consequence of the loss of their child. Again, this division is precipitated by a third party (although the gender of the kidnapper of three-year-old Kate is unknown). And once again, the text pushes Julie to the periphery as she and Stephen prove incapable of sharing their grief. *The Child in Time*, however, eventually effects a full reconciliation as the couple reunite after the conception of their second child.

Another point should be noted: the recurrent pattern of disruption of heterosexual relationships by the interjection of a male third figure does not in any way result in an anti-homosexual reading. Rather, the positive depiction of the heterosexual couple can be understood in metaphorical terms, much as McEwan suggested that Caroline and Robert's relationship in *The Comfort of Strangers* should be read

metaphorically. The evidence for this analysis comes most strongly from McEwan's 1983 oratorio, *Or Shall We Die?* in which he writes, 'Shall there be womanly times/Or shall we die?' (p. 23). The oratorio positions masculine rationalism and its violent consequences in opposition to feminine nurturance and empathy. Ultimately, McEwan suggests, it is the balance and harmony of the opposing male and female principles that offer hope and overcome violence. In the end, it is this reading that offers a solution to the conundrum of the loss of the feminine in McEwan's work. By this understanding, the violence in McEwan's texts does not occur merely in coincidence with the negation of the feminine, but is instead a consequence of the loss of 'feminine' values. And so in *Enduring Love*, for example, Joe's extreme rationalism and lack of empathy invites Jed's violent passions, whereas in 'Pornography', O'Byrne's selfishness and cruelty incites reciprocal violence.

In fact, the female does return to McEwan's narratives. Although Mary can have no hope of reunion with Colin in *The Comfort of Strangers*, the novel does at least conclude on her voice and perspective; more hopefully, in *The Innocent*, Leonard eventually returns to Berlin, contemplating a possible reunion with Maria; and *Enduring Love* finally contains some promise of reconnection between Joe and Clarissa. Each of these reconciliations necessitates compromise, generosity, and forgiveness. Without these qualities – within couples and within individuals – violent desires go unchecked. And so violence, in the end, does not usurp the feminine in McEwan's work, but is instead displayed as a consequence of the rejection of 'feminine' values.

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12
Thelma and Louise and the Politics of Excess

Alex Tate

'Thelma and Louise Live': so reads the badge motto sported by fans of Ridley Scott's 1991 film, in reference to the iconic closing freeze-frame shot of Louise's Thunder-Bird car, floating mid-air above the Grand Canyon, against a clear blue sky. This image flashes and then fades out like a developing photograph in reverse, mirroring the opening shot of a desert landscape that slowly fades in from bleached monochrome to intense colour. With this repeated trope of photographic capture and development – reiterated in the photo-album slide-show montage of the two women that precedes the end credits – the film sets itself up for a retrospective gaze.

The image of the suspended car represents the text's metaphorically precarious suspension between conflicting feminist view-points that have historically dismissed the film 'for being too extreme or for not being extreme enough' (Read, 2000, p. 115). *Time* described it as not 'a cultural representation but . . . a fairytale' (ibid., p. 113), whereas other responses expressed concern that it would incite 'male-bashing' (ibid., p. 115). Pointing towards perspectives that assume a direct correlation between the representation of violence and its enactment, and underlining the scrutiny directed at the film's generic exaggerations and lack of verisimilitude, these critiques have culminated in a sort of feminist impasse over what I refer to as the politics of excess. This impasse foregrounds the political complexity of representing and resisting 'real' female experiences of violence within a fantasy frame-work, where seemingly 'the dilemmas faced by the two women have little to do with real life' (Smith, 1991, p. 17).

As is evident from the above examples, theoretical approaches have tended to underline the film's aesthetic and generic qualities; and have criticised these for operating at the expense of any concerted feminist

resistance and at the expense of relating socially 'real' experiences of gendered violence. Far more difficult to reach has been a positive resolution between the film's generic style and its engagement with the reality of sexual violence: how might this dichotomy be transformed? Rather than following the assumption that the former de-politicises the truth of the latter, I want to negotiate a complex and inextricable interface between the two, where I will suggest that a progressive feminist reading cannot be disinvested from a simultaneous fantasy address.

This study engages specific readings of the film from dominant practitioners within the field of gendered representation, such as Lynda Hart, who underlines that the 'subversions' enacted in *Thelma and Louise* are 'constantly at risk for recuperation by the narrative form' (Hart, 1994, p. 78). Along the same lines, Judith Roof is concerned with the excision of real social space from the film and the positing of the female characters within a safe 'imaginary field' (Roof, 1999, p. 2). In challenging the largely realist imperative of this latter perspective, I will consider Judith Halberstam's concept of 'imagined violence' (1993) that interrogates the relation between the 'real' and the imaginary, to in turn destabilise and de-naturalise the 'normalising' processes of culturally dominant and phallocratic violence in both its lived and represented states.

Using close textual analysis of the film's aesthetic and narrative choices, by addressing the '(un)speakability' of violence that runs throughout this collection, and in particular, by paying attention to that which is disclosed and non-disclosed to the viewer, we can re-politicise the conflicts between aesthetic and narrative credibility; between the film's quality of visual excess and the real social and political themes of violence and marginalisation with which its narrative engages. The realist and fantasist tensions underpinning these conflicts can be resolved, I argue, because of the covert intersections between the dichotomously positioned reality and fantasy; the credible and the in-credible; the authentic and the fabricated, which are embedded in the narrative beneath its generic conventionality, and which challenge a victim/perpetrator binary dependent on these dichotomies. I will illustrate that social tensions around articulability and representability are catalysed by the text's ambiguous interface of the real and the simulated, which contributes to the disruption of 'credibly' gendered victim/aggressor positions; a disruptive move that emerges throughout these chapters on interpersonal violence. In turn, this interface forces a dialogue about the highly problematic credibility of social and legal purviews of gendered rape and violence, so highlighting the 'culturally-dominant notions of gender' that are encoded in legal discourse (Ehrlich, 2001, p. 20).

Beyond the road movie or 'chick flick', *Thelma and Louise* has been viewed as rape-revenge film, as spiritual/ religious fable, postmodern Western, screwball comedy and as narrative of lesbian desire (see Greenberg *et al.*, 1992). Amongst these generic classifications, perhaps most problematic for a feminist reading, is the 'Western' label that has been ascribed to it. Hart notes the 'preponderance of phallic images in the landscape' (1994, p. 69) and this points to the undeniably phallocratic epistemology of the genre that she describes; one that has historically been envisioned *by* the male-dominated, that has conveyed its landscape *as* masculine, and produced *for* the male spectator. I want to outline the superficial generic coding at work in *Thelma and Louise*, before questioning how this relates more deeply to realist concerns with gendered violence.

Scott borrows on the well-established iconography and style of the Western genre, employing panoramic cinematography, and foregrounding iconographic sites such as the Grand Canyon and Monument Valley. Against this landscape he posits two outlaw characters and traces a familiar narrative trajectory: a revenge killing of the rapist Harlan who, stopped in the act of sexually assaulting Thelma (Geena Davis) and subsequently unrepentant, is shot by Louise (Susan Sarandon) at the archetypally named 'Silver Bullet'. This is followed by the duo's run from the law into the desert, on the path to the notorious criminal retreat Mexico.

Following the masculine character development typical of the genre, they both adopt a roguish outlaw appearance, discarding their feminine headscarves and lipsticks. Their identities are generically influenced: Thelma's armed robbery rehearses the performance that J. D. (Brad Pitt) presents to her in the motel bedroom. Such generic performativity is further assimilated in the theatricality of the women's violence, epitomised by the spectacular explosion of the leering truck-driver's oil tanker. Adopting mirrored stances, the women aim in unison at the truck wheels (their ability to shoot so accurately legitimised within the fantasy frame-work that constructs them). Their literal trail-blazing journey across the desert is accompanied by the geographically localising rhythms of a banjo soundtrack.

Theatricality extends to Scott's hyper-real portrayal of the North American landscape. Using variation between extreme long shots and close-ups, the colours saturated and lighting enhanced rather than naturalistic, he populates the screen with vistas that appear photo-realist. Amongst these is the spectacle of Thelma and Louise standing by Monument Valley at night, recalling John Ford's iconic foregrounding

of the site in *The Searchers* (1956). With their backs to camera, cast in silhouette by low-key lighting, the two women appear superimposed against a vast artificial-looking backdrop.

Natural landscapes are typically rendered as sublime spectacles in the Western and serve to dramatise the hero's or the outlaw's conquests. Rather than an 'object merely of contemplation' in the Western film, landscape 'becomes an obstacle which has to be overcome. Its beauty incidental to its function as a test of the protagonist's character . . . the conquest of terrain is emblematic of the achievement of the individual in overcoming personal trials' (Buscombe, 1988, p. 127). This point is magnified in *Thelma and Louise* as the heroines take on the gargantuan chasm of the Grand Canyon. I will return to the much debated symbolism of this in my conclusion, but note for now the ostentatious spectacle this sequence affords: again, genre is appropriated in its excess, pointing towards a literal ungrounding of the real in the mid-air suspension of the car.

Verisimilitude is destabilised from the film's opening frame: a panoramic long shot of the vast desert landscape seems to geographically ground the film in reality, yet, as discussed above, the image emerges like the development of a photograph. This shot, along with the repeated use of Polaroid images within *Thelma and Louise* (pictures within a picture), self-reflexively points to the constructed representation and manipulation of the landscape. Its presence as fictional setting becomes transparent, populated by recognisable yet exaggerated characters: the stereotypical crude truck driver and the disaffected square-jawed roadside patrol cop who ends up captive in the trunk of his police car. The desert is also marked by archetypal characters who act as metonyms for the landscape.

Late on in her and Thelma's road journey, Louise sells her jewellery to an old man who sits outside a rickety gas station. His wrinkled face is framed in lucid close-up. This echoes an earlier sequence, in which we share Louise's heightened perception as she focuses on an old woman, sitting in a café, staring at Louise through the window, her face expressionless. In both sequences, despite the protracted exchange of gazes between Louise and these anonymous characters, an absence of dialogue is noticeable. This is particularly significant in the context of the road movie, where typically the reciprocated gaze is indicative of a reciprocal learning or sharing between communities (see Willis, 1997). In Scott's narrative, however, these encounters with the remote desert community produce no exchange in dialogue; no conventional reciprocity. In their silence – the old man's only word being a generic

'howdy' when he tilts his Stetson hat – these figures appear as cinematic props: iconic relics referencing the Western genre and reifying a desert landscape that is identifiable in popular culture largely through cinematic portrayals alone.

As Read summarises, Scott's faithful adherence to the Western's visual lexicon and narrative revenge structure has opened the film up to claims of non-differentiation, where the female characters perform as merely male substitutes (see Read, 2000, pp. 113–14). Judith Roof perceives a more implicit diffusion of individual female subjectivity, or a construction of 'generic femaleness' (1999, p. 29) in the film, through its repeated use of close-ups. Directing what we might term an *authenticating* gaze at *Thelma and Louise*, she identifies a marginalising and gendered lens: 'The close-up stands in for the field so that we do not see what the field is missing. It is therefore no surprise that in some cases, series of close-ups appear in films where patriarchy [is] overtly threatened as one way of containing the threat' (Roof, 1999, p. 3). Roof contends that within this repeated framing device, symbolically lies the film's acute phallocentric violence. The close-up is used to contain the women's male-directed violence and their possible 'threat' to patriarchy by eliminating a 'real' social field: 'systemic proliferation of close-ups enables the ideological separation of female protagonists from the field of social action' (this field being a male-dominated environment of law-enforcement and patriarchal power in the film). She concludes that '[t]he close-up does not only occlude the field, it substitutes the illusion of a field that only exists as imaginary' (ibid., p. 4).

Roof's interpretation of the film foregrounds the tensions between the authentic and the artificial; between the real and the constructed that I have so far touched upon, and highlights the notion of aesthetic excess (here embodied by the proximity of the camera) as counter-productive to a 'realist' feminist agenda. Indeed, as illustrated above, through the hyper-reality of its representation, the theatricality of its images and in its tokenistic landscape figures, the film's visual field does appear, as Roof comments, 'imaginary'. So, where does the threat to a 'real patriarchal field' lie? How are Thelma and Louise positioned within this generic space: Are they ascribed the familiar identity of victim, perpetrator, outlaw or simply 'generic women' (ibid.) and therefore only further constitutive of the film's simulated field, or is there resistance to such positioning? Rather than constructing a typical outlaw identity for its characters, the film engages a more complex dialogue of marginalisation. This emerges once we begin to interrogate the ostensible polarity between codes of

social reality and codes of generic fantasy and how these dominant codes work to position both gendered subjects and gendered narratives, on- and off-screen.

As Roof discusses, the distance of landscape is juxtaposed against the proximity engendered by the facial close-up that also entails its own ideological symbolism, creating the illusion of subjective disclosure, of fully intelligible identity: 'Producing a structure of free-floating exchange, close-ups spawn the illusion of knowledge and certainty located in the image itself as the site of meaning' (1999, p. 2). However, this ideology of subjective closure, articulated by the close-up, is deflected by discontinuities in the text's narrative closure. Drawing out themes of voice, space and subjective control, counter to the visual excesses already outlined in the film, we find that which is visually omitted and vocally undisclosed holds wider significance for an oppositional reading, as I shall move on to illustrate.

After Louise kills Harlan, she and Thelma discuss their escape route to Mexico. Sitting in their T-Bird car, which reaches a stop at a train junction, the two women are framed by close-up shots as Louise adamantly refuses to travel through Texas for reasons undisclosed. A traumatic or violent experience is inferred by good cop Hal Slocum (Harvey Keitel) who suggests Louise's reactions as triggered by past experience – 'I know what happened in Texas' – but its precise nature is never confirmed within the narrative: that is, never enunciated. The close-up framing of the two women is disrupted by a cut to a low-angle medium shot of an approaching train that reinforces the suppression of space. A division is maintained between the facial shots of Thelma and Louise and the action taking place around them: they appear spatially distinct. This would seem to support Roof's argument for the close-up's elimination of the 'patriarchal terrain within which feminist action has political meaning' (1999, p. 2). Alternatively, the close-up's literal elimination of space may figuratively reflect Louise's vocal and spatial evasion of Texas, the proximity of the camera producing a like annihilation of space and of the surrounding landscape. Furthermore, sound works here to contextualise the close-up image through the roar of the train that grows louder as the camera focuses on Louise's face, mirroring her anger as she shouts at Thelma, 'I'm not going to talk about it!' The train's roar resists subjective enunciation, replacing that which is not voiced: the trauma in Texas. Rather than the close-up lens excluding the women from the space that surrounds them, a reversal of this seems to take place, where Louise enacts her own containment of space and her own exclusion of place within the narrative. Texas is eliminated from her and Thelma's

field of vision, and from the narrative's field of knowledge; in turn, it is excluded from the spectatorial field.

Louise's choice to withhold her Texas story, and its absence from the narrative, effectively prevents us categorising her as victim. In turn, it prevents us ascribing with certainty a revenge motive to her violence – namely her killing of Harlan. So she refuses generic codification as either victim or crazed female avenger; resists the 'ideological fullness' that the close-up shot would suggest. The desire to symbolically contain or immobilise woman or reduce her to generic identification through exposure, as suggested by the emotionally probing camera, is counteracted. Personal story is not told as accountable evidential history, and the threat to masculine territory, instead of being contained, is *sus*tained in the territorial embargo Louise places on Texas and her past: the control she exerts on her own literal and narrative positioning. The move against disclosing past trauma has wider implications for a reading of the legal sub-text of *Thelma and Louise* in the context of narrative credibility and visual accountability.

Elissa Marder, referencing Shoshana Felman's *The Juridicial Unconscious*, talks about the law's necessity to 'plac[e] closure on historical traumas [...] because the law is constitutively unable to account for trauma in legal terms' (Marder, 2006, p. 5). One way that the unaccountability of trauma is made accountable on screen is by making it representable; by visually reconstructing the past, normally through recourse to the subjective flashback.

Trauma re-ignites the complex negotiations between the real and the constructed on screen, largely because it complicates the divide between essentialist and social constructionist theories of identity. On the one hand, it is linear and continuous in its insistence or reliance on the past as shaping one's present identity, and on the other hand, it is non-linear in its abrupt return, disrupting the subject's sense of fixed place in space and time. The flashback conventionally functions to repair this disjuncture. Initiated by a classical zoom-in to the character's face and followed by a reconstruction of the past, it reaffirms distance between past and present, and asserts the subject's safe positioning in the 'real here-and-now', signalled by a return to the facial close-up and the actual or immediate space that the subject occupies.

It is significantly noticeable, however, in a film that revisions its own visuals through the use of still imaging and the repeated motif of the Polaroid photo, that this flashback – a staple revisionist mechanism within Hollywood cinema – is not deployed. It is not used either to visualise Louise's past and make her present actions accountable or to

play back Thelma's trauma, and in turn re-contextualise her actions. The distance, segregation and character-knowledge afforded by the flashback are all refuted. Lynda Hart suggests that by 'resisting divulging her secret', Louise resists the imperative of phallocratic narratives to render women 'fully exposed' and refuses 'reintegration into the symbolic order' (Hart, 1994, pp. 70–1). Louise is not submissive to a prevailing ideological or narrative structure. The choice not to represent Louise's trauma through the conventional flashback emerges as point of resistance to dominant cinematic and narrative modes of making actions accountable, of evidencing them, paralleled with the legal objectification of subjective story: 'the price of being protected by the law in court is to surrender control over the telling of your story' (Spelman and Minow, 1996, p. 275). This theme is more explicit in the wider legal discourse the film mobilises, particularly in relation to recorded and revisioned evidence.

Ironically, disinvested from the emotive and identificatory effects of subjective memory, the film's closest resemblance to a moving flashback sequence comes in the form of the closed-circuit television footage of Thelma's armed robbery at the gas station. Here, 'real' visible footage serves as credible criminal evidence. Harlan's assault on Thelma, on the other hand, is unrecorded and unwitnessed. It is this fact, arguably, that precipitates the women's fugitive flight to the desert, suggested by the following exchange:

> THELMA: Shouldn't we go to the cops? I mean, I think we should tell the police.
> LOUISE: Tell them what?! What, Thelma? What do you think we should tell them?
> THELMA: I don't know. Just tell 'em what happened.
> LOUISE: Which part?
> THELMA: All of it. That he tried to rape me.
> LOUISE: Only about a hundred people saw you cheek to goddamn cheek with him all night, Thelma! Who's gonna believe that?! We just don't live in that kind of world.

From this dialogue, we can claim that social and juridical disbelief – that is, the shortcomings of a patriarchal legal system – propels a journey into a generic fantasy space, another 'kind of world'; hence the claims of escapism levelled at the film, and Roof's insistence on an occluded 'real' patriarchal space. Thelma and Louise leave their real dystopian world and enter the imaginary cinematic world of the Western, where they can enact their own justice. So how is this conflict between social/legal

reality and cinematic fantasy resolved? The answer lies not in realising or authenticating the cinematic but in addressing the relation between fantasy, gender and the patriarchal law.

Other than in a purely aesthetic way of drawing attention to replications of the real (explored in the film's meta-textual use of photographic images), the film traverses the gap between reality and perception that tacitly responds to the legal ramifications of Louise's rhetorical question: 'Who's gonna believe that?' This points towards a social litany of subjugation and persecution faced by female victims of sexual assault and invokes statistics that cite rape as the most under-reported of crimes; a 'silent epidemic' (see Ehrlich, 2001 and Sommers, 1995). Louise's statement highlights the discreditation and fantasisation of rape in the service of quashing unvalidated, unsubstantiated or unwitnessed claims, and suggests female complicity in rape as part of this fantasy or as part of what Ehrlich terms the 'institutionalised coerciveness of legal discourse' (2001, p. 1). Dancing cheek-to-cheek with Harlan all night (as witnessed by multiple spectators), arguably Thelma is culpable – was 'asking for it'. In her detailed analysis of academic perspectives on rape, cultural theorist Carine Mardorossian cites Wendy Brown to explain the social constructedness of rape, whereby '[w]riting sexual subordination into the law [...] ultimately creates an identity politics that reinscribes "femaleness as sexual violability", "injury as identity", and keeps us locked in a logic of recrimination and ressentiment' (Mardorossian, 2002, p. 759). Recognising this conflation of female subjectivity with victimisation and critiquing feminism's 'emphasis on female interiority in approaches to sexual violence', Mardorossian warns of the counter-productivity of 'reduc[ing] the political to the personal' instead of engaging the 'systemic practices of power', the 'institutional, physical, and cultural practices that' are deployed to construct 'women's powerlessness' (2002, p. 772). Relating this to Louise's past, in repudiating the flashback and personal trauma, the film confounds this tendency to sublimate the political to the individual, safely 'interiorising' the systemic of rape as a singular and personal rather than socially collective assemblage. Leo Braudy argues that 'the refusal of Texas is a refusal of those wide open genre spaces as a solution' (Greenberg *et al.*, 1992, p. 29). I would argue, instead, that it is a refusal of such 'personal' reconstruction as a solution and as accountable closure; a refusal of generic individualism that functions, ironically, precisely through the film's faithful reconstruction of a generically consistent and visually collective landscape, in which the continuity of this space is not disrupted by the past, while I stress at the same time that Louise's killing itself is not a reconstructive act of closure.

The impossibility of closure lies more obviously in the unlikelihood of juridical retribution for female victims, as suggested later in the film by Thelma, when she discusses Harlan's murder: 'probably nothing would have happened to him…my life would have been ruined a whole lot worse than it is now'. She comes to the realisation that the 'law is some tricky shit'. The articulation of legal and social duplicity surrounding rape is embedded in a narrative where voice bears a significant and direct relation to violence. Louise's shooting of Harlan is precipitated by his actions, undoubtedly, and by the derogatory language that affirms his unrepentance: 'Suck my dick!' After Louise has pulled the trigger, she addresses Harlan with a cold stare and says, 'You watch your mouth buddy'. In killing him, she has enforced an extreme and literal silencing upon him, mirroring his own silencing of Thelma, with a brutal 'Shhh..!' as he molests her. Another silencing is enforced later on in the film, on the leering truck driver who throws a gamut of sexually offensive words at the two women. Again, the attempt to subjugate women through language instigates violent retaliation: the spectacular explosion of the trucker's oil tank and with it the silencing of his symbolic honking horn. So, the film graphically shows the power of discourse to affect violence: to deploy gendered subjugation and instigate retaliation. Harlan's 'Shhh..!' as an oppressive command to a vulnerable Thelma signifies, in a wider social and political context of gendered violence, the subjugation of the female voice and stories or testimonies of victimisation. If not silenced, then the suggestion is that these voices are all too often made culpable: 'Who's gonna believe that?' The reasoning behind Louise's deeply loaded statement is that the discrediting law interprets subjective control in very gendered terms, adopted from culturally dominant or essentialist perspectives. In dispelling women's stories patriarchy creates its own myths, at its extreme equating objectified femininity with passive consent.

Wendy Hesford explains that the term 'rape script' 'draw[s] attention to how historical, geopolitical, and cultural struggles, narratives, and fantasies shape the materiality of rape and its representation' (1999, p. 193). In *Thelma and Louise*, a suggestion of female complicity in sexual violence as part of patriarchal fantasy or this dominant 'rape script' is arguably inverted; turned on its head by the women's extreme retaliatory and active rather than stereotypically passive response, and their cinematically self-conscious styling as gun-toting outlaws. This female response solicits recourse to a fantasised, yet at the same time generically normalised field in which to mobilise its violence.

Louise's indictment of 'that kind of world' manifests in a multi-layered exploration of reality, truth, perception and revisioning that the

cinematic, by nature, and the genre film, quite openly, accommodate. Contextualised within this fantasy field, the idea of a dominant reality becomes de-centred and, in turn, the women's violence itself may be seen as imaginary.

Judith Halberstam constructs the theoretical term 'imagined violence' (1993) that offers some positive mediation between imaginary and realist perspectives. Exploring the relationship between real and imagined violence, Halberstam proposes that, socially and politically, there is no simple binary delineation to be made: 'Imagined violence is the fantasy of unsanctioned eruptions of aggression from the "wrong people, of the wrong skin, the wrong sexuality, the wrong gender" [...] Imagined violences challenge white powerful heterosexual masculinity and create a cultural coalition of postmodern terror' (1993, p. 199). Explaining the role of language in imagined violence, Halberstam references the Black Panthers' slogan, the power of which 'is its ability to represent a violence that need not ever be actualised'. It represents not 'real violence' only the 'threat of violence' (1993, p. 193).

To extrapolate her argument, she uses Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* (1992) as a cinematic example, a text that, with its plot of real crime replicating fiction, clearly 'thematises the relationship between representation and reality' (Halberstam, 1993, p. 198). Applied to *Thelma and Louise*, this relationship is less thematically salient, and although Halberstam references Scott's text several times, this perhaps explains her preferred choice to explicate her theory using Verhoeven's film. Halberstam's description of imagined violence, however, articulates sensations of the undetermined, the unexpected and the dislocated that *Thelma and Louise* evokes in its final moments: '[I]magined violences create a potentiality, a utopic state in which consequences are imminent rather than actual, the threat is in the anticipation, not the act' (1993, p. 199). This threat of the imminent and of displaced identity is encapsulated in the film's final sequence: pursued by police cars and helicopters, the two women decide, 'let's keep going'. Clasping hands, Louise flat-pedals the car as it loses contact with the earth and travels across the vast chasm of the Grand Canyon. In extreme long-shot, the car's projectile tract across the sky halts as the frame freezes, creating the image of the T-Bird car suspended in mid-air and in time: a double-binding suspension. Roof's temporalisation of imaginary violence finds a counterpart in the uncontrollability and unpredictability of the car moving along the road, that signifies displaced subjectivity, as described by Jean Baudrillard: '[T]he car may at any time become the locus of an accident: the culmination in a chance event – which may in fact

never occur but is always imagined, always involuntarily assumed to be inevitable' (1996, p. 67).

The suspension of the car denies a climactic phallocentric ending, and the fantasy of continuous movement voiced by Thelma – 'let's keep going' – is reinforced by the freezing of the image, producing a limitless field; a plane of imminence; a suspension of real time. This iconic image is invariably considered in assessment of the film's 'fairy-tale' quality; in its construction of the women as unreal, legendary or mythical heroines. Elsewhere, Hart reads this image in terms of its symbolic play with absence/presence, and concludes that it effectively 'resists [symbolic] representation' (1994, p. 80). More crucially, I believe, the shot plays highly self-reflexively on the much-referenced code of fantasy representation and spectatorship: 'suspension of disbelief'.

In narrative terms, like Louise's Texas story, the spectacle of Thelma and Louise's death is not granted. Instead anticipation is sustained, and our disbelief, like the car, is quite literally suspended: there is no visual evidence or mitigation. In this sense the women both refuse patriarchal victimisation and deny retributive 'punishment' for their crimes. More than just a neat 'open end' though, the final limbo image strikingly signifies woman's liminal and fraught position in-between reality and representation, and in-between representability and perception. This can be paralleled metaphorically with concepts of culturally intelligible, perceived, representable and articulable violence that are addressed directly in the dialogue between the two characters throughout; concepts that hang like-wise suspended in unresolved states of tension with each other. Consequently, because unresolved, these states are open to contestation; to the resistant act of de-privileging those gendered hegemonies which inform the cultural policing of violence and that masquerade as normative.

Contesting Smith's belief that the film has 'little to do with real life', I would maintain that the film engages a fantasy lexicon (conveyed in familiar generic visuals and narrative structures) to highlight the very real but consistently unspoken reduction of rape to fantasy and to acknowledge the myth-making mechanisms of a subjugative patriarchy, reliant on gender essentialism. I echo Ehrlich's observation here, that '[e]mbedded within legal structures [...] are androcentric and sexist assumptions that typically masquerade as "objective" truths' (2001, p. 9).

A revision of *Thelma and Louise* exposes intricate dilemmas between the politics of the actual and the perceived, the conceived and the

misconceived, the represented and the misrepresented, which continue to govern legal and social responses to the authenticity of rape claims. *Thelma and Louise* highlights anxiety over the articulability, representability and believability of rape, factors invariably prescribed by gendered concepts of sex and power.

Responses to the film have illuminated still pervasive feminist fears of misrepresentation, fears that are applicable as much socially as they are within formal representational contexts. Read maintains that the film produced a 'negotiated version of 1970's feminism' (2000, p. 118) and subsequently poses a challenge to the idea of an 'authentic' feminism itself (ibid., p. 120). Indeed the film foregrounds the problematics of authenticating perspectives, not only feminist, but legal and social as well; critiquing a patriarchal hegemony that purveys this perspective, but does so selectively, to maintain its own power, while simultaneously employing excess and exaggeration to construct gendered fantasies around violence.

It is precisely the complex dilemma between reality and representation, and authenticity and perception, that the film so pointedly animates for a feminist address, and that becomes re-animated in a revision of the film. Furthermore, it is the spectator-palatability of generic coding that not only enables the efficacy of this address, but also points to the duplicitous exchange of the real and the imagined that plays its role in gendering violence and in generically 'locating' victims and aggressors. In this sense, although criticised for its adherence to Hollywood genre conventions, the film is not only accessible generically and feministly, but rather access to both is arguably indivisible or simultaneous, thereby deprivileging the 'correctness' of singularly realist feminist agendas.

Relevant as socially-real grounded politics are in the analysis of fictional texts, particularly those portraying violence and victimisation, it is equally important to challenge views that disinvest politics from fantasy and to re-assess the significant counterbalance of such views that a text like *Thelma and Louise* facilitates. In short, we must be wary of eliminating fantasy from the political field, for in cases of violence and victimisation, fantasy is very much part of our 'real' cultural and political field and its ideologies of gender. This is how the film's criticised artificiality becomes feministly politicised, and why the iconic image of Thelma and Louise suspended above the chasm of the grand canyon remains so much more politically resonant than the stalled image of Butch and Sundance (*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, 1969) running towards camera.

'Thelma and Louise Live'? Or 'Who's gonna believe that…We don't live in that kind of world…'? Without closure, without *dis*closure and

without evidence, we are forced, on point of resistance, to give them the benefit of our doubt.

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13
Slap and Tickle: Violence as Fun in the Movies

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Humour in the grotesque

The general consensus about violence, across epochs and disciplines, is that it is a negative by-product of human nature (and nurture). Representations of violence, and especially visual representations, are often accused of encouraging the propagation of violent behaviours, of glorifying or stylising them. However, there are multiple ways in which representations of violence can be engaged with and interpreted – as a disruption of gender norms, as a subversion of social class, as a destabilisation of laws that govern behaviour. Many visual representations of violence are deemed to be merely symptoms of a degenerative society, but I argue that the value of these representations may be found in the Lacanian 'Real' – those images that enter and shatter our reality (Žižek, 2002). The 'Real' is that which cannot be ignored, that which offers us a reflection of ourselves that is made more accurate by virtue of its grotesque nature. It is reality minus its surface – the 'real thing' so to speak. Slavoj Žižek notes the difference between reality and the Real by highlighting 'the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality – the Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceiving layers of reality' (Žižek, 2002). It is this engagement with the Lacanian Real that enables a challenging of the traditional connection between representations of violence and its execution in 'reality'. If representation can give us access to the Real, to that realm of purity that Žižek and Lacan discuss, then the impact of violent cinema on violent behaviour is fundamentally questioned.

Quentin Tarantino and Pedro Almodóvar each challenge this traditional linkage of violent imagery (in the realm of the Real) with

violent acts (in reality). They have each received popular and critical attention for their portrayals of violent conflict and sexual violence (that latter in Almodóvar's case particularly) and have been criticised and praised in almost equal measure – for their veracity and their love of the fantastic, for their stylishness and their kitsch, for their pathos and their bathos. Their gratuitousness is for critics both problematic and fascinating, as both directors create images that are at once familiar and freakish. Processes of dismemberment, castration and sadomasochism occur in their work, highlighting the fascination with the grotesque that propels many of their films forward. Yet Almodóvar and Tarantino are undoubtedly individual in their approaches to it: for Almodóvar, the grotesque is a means by which to reveal a universe in which rules of moral and social etiquette do not apply. For him, the world is a carnival of continually contradictory human behaviour and he renders it visible through the often garish or saturated image. Tarantino, on the other hand, is determined to turn the body (both physical and social) inside out and to revel in the grotesque innards that are revealed. However, humour is an integral element of the grotesque for both – for to laugh at one's grotesque dilemmas is to open up realms of possibility for cinema and for human consciousness itself. This chapter will examine two early films by Pedro Almodóvar – *Matador* (1986) and *¡Átame!* (1990) – and two more recent films by Quentin Tarantino – *Kill Bill Volumes 1* (2003) and *2* (2004). There is no chronological significance to these choices; rather, the aim is to explore effective mixtures of (often sexual) violence and humour in the work of two directors who have used shock tactics and comedy in their portrayals of violence in order to continually remind audiences of the value of laughing at the grotesque nature of humanity.

The potential of the grotesque lies in its ability to reveal that which is horrific and hilarious in us all – the physical embodiment of our own iniquity. Allon White, in his article 'Hysteria and the end of carnival', discusses the nature and subversive potential of carnival from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries:

> Carnival belonged to a form of society, eliminated by bourgeois life, which had *communal* cultural mechanisms for the 'staging' of the dyadic opposite terms to those in operation in the sphere of daily production. In its elimination of these rituals, bourgeois life became more and more vulnerable to the unexpected and destabilizing emergence of the otherness of the grotesque body.
>
> (his italics – White, 1985, p. 109)

In the absence of carnival rituals in modern society, cinema provides access to that which may visually disgust us. White notes that disgust for the rituals of carnival was due to the normative bourgeois standards of acceptability that created a social hierarchy. The rituals and traditions of the lower classes were thus seen to be unsavoury, immoral and dangerous, and were consigned to a clandestine or debased status. However, for Mikhail Bakhtin, this phenomenon, on the periphery of acceptability, opens up many possibilities of transgression, subversion and transmogrification. In order to become subversive, violence and humour must be synthesised to create a digestible fantasy which we can then use to deal with reality. As Bakhtin says, '[l]aughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically. As it draws an object to itself and makes it familiar, laughter delivers the object into the fearless hands of investigative experiment – both scientific and artistic – and into the hands of free experimental fantasy' (Bakhtin, 1968, p. 23). This 'experimental fantasy' explains the appeal of the horror movie, when we simultaneously *cannot* watch and *have to* watch the images that appear on the screen. It also describes the often excessive violence of Tarantino's films or the 'unsavoury' sexual violence of Almodóvar's work.

As Bakhtin articulates, 'the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences…and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body's limited space or into the body's depths' (Bakhtin, 1968, pp. 317–18). His words are particularly apt for Almodóvar's cinema and resonate with those of Spanish playwright, Ramón del Valle-Inclán, who also extolled the virtues of the grotesque, or as he named it, the *esperpento*. For Valle-Inclán, farce, tragedy and violence combine to form a drama which 'speaks of the grotesque, the deformed, the psycho-sexual drive basic to the human condition…' (Almeida, 2000, p. v). The only way to represent truth in Valle-Inclán's plays is through distortion and one of his favourite dramatic devices is the use of the concave mirror. The importance of the mirror is reiterated in Lacan's writings on the mirror stage of childhood development. Lacan discusses the stage at which a young child recognises his own reflection in the mirror and notes the importance of the child's identification with his own image (Lacan, 1949, pp. 81–82). Valle-Inclán returns to this stage, but rather than showing us our own surface reflection, he reveals a distortion of it, indicating the 'real' underneath. For him, the distortion of reality is reality itself. Almodóvar builds on this Spanish dramatic heritage and displays characters in his films that are as freakish and disturbing as they are weird and wonderful. Taboos are made to be

broken in Pedro Almodóvar's films and he invents new ways of looking at sexuality, passion, violence, gender and desire that are designed both to shock and to provoke thought. He engages with pornographic images of the body as 'the ultimate in mediated sex' as Mark Allinson has described it (Allinson, 2001, p. 98). Both erotic and perverse, pornographic images draw attention to the position of spectator as voyeur, to the fetishistic, often Freudian guilt over the sex act, to the sadomasochistic desire that is quelled in everyday life. In Almodóvar's work, we also see an echo of Valle-Inclán's concave mirror, where freakishness reflects a debased truth, passion may be reflected as violence, and orgasm is a mirror image of death.

Matador: the carnival of the death drive

In *Matador*, violence, passion and sexuality are inextricably linked. The film begins with Diego masturbating to a porno-horror, in which images of dismembered bodies are accompanied by blood-curdling screams. Diego is aroused, presumably because the scene 'creates the association between sexual pleasure and death' (Edwards, 2001, p. 58). We are therefore introduced to an alternative form of eroticism to the soft pornography found in Hollywood movies, in which the female body is lit and positioned in order to fulfil the expectations of the male viewer. Here, it is death that is positioned as a fetishised object (Diego even asks Eva to play dead during their sexual games). Killing and climaxing are paralleled again in the following sequence when María's seduction and murder of a sexual partner is crosscut with shots of toreros (or matadors) in training. Almodóvar's psychoanalytic references are many: the Freudian death drive runs through the narrative and acts of repressed or animal desire are played out. He sets out his premise early – that the 'Real' is found in those moments of extremity that violence and passion allow. While there appears to be little scope for humour here, with the darkest recesses of the sexual psyche being explored, Almodóvar manages to whittle humour from fear in his depiction of rape. The rape scene follows a particularly revealing discussion between Ángel and Diego, in which Diego questions Ángel's sexuality. Ángel vehemently refutes any suggestion that he might be homosexual; his ardour for heterosexuality is so great, in fact, that he dedicates himself to stalking his neighbour, Eva. The homosocial network is bound together through the scopophilic fetishisation of women (Mulvey, 1989, pp. 58–69), and Ángel sees Eva as an object that will free him of his homosexual desires. 'Scopophilic fetishisation' is a term coined by Laura Mulvey that describes the process by which men apprehend the feminine through the power of the gaze

and is central to the workings of the homosocial matrix. Stephen Maddison makes the distinction between homosocial and heterosocial groupings in his article 'All about women: Pedro Almodóvar and the heterosocial dynamic.' In the homosocial network, the relations between men 'may often be hostile or violent, but always secure common male interests that are defined through the marginalization and exchange of women, and the repression of homosexuality'. Maddison contends that outside of the homosocial bonds between men, there develops a network between those who are dismissed or vilified by the homosocial structure, namely women and gay men. This he defines as 'heterosocial relations'. However, heterosocial identification is not limited only to these groups, but may be used to describe any person or persons who reject the imposition of male-dominated gender norms and who instead break free from the shackles of the homosocial system (Maddison, 2000, p. 280). Ángel's decision to rape Eva is not formed out of a desire to control her, but rather to control himself.

Almodóvar turns the rape scene on its head until it is no longer concerned with the fetishisation or victimisation of women (Eva is non-plussed throughout), but with the frustration and ineptitude of men in continually acting out the binary game of psychoanalytic repression and desire. While this is problematic in its refusal to tackle the realities of sexual violence, we are reminded that in Almodóvar's cinema, *obligations* to address such issues are replaced by the *possibilities* of altering our perceptions altogether. Here, these possibilities are enabled through laughter and the unlikely humour is found in Ángel's ineptitude at performing a primal act of lust. He cannot get his knife up and fumbles with the blade in an obvious reference to his repression of homosexual desire. He climaxes almost immediately and receives no pleasure from the act. Ángel immediately apologises to Eva and is so horrified when she falls and cuts her face that he faints at the sight of blood. Thus, it is inferred, the restrictive nature of the psychoanalytic model of desire can only result in a circular replaying of normative gender stereotypes. That is to say, by choosing Eva as his 'fetish' and by forcing her to have sex with him, Ángel aspires to be the stereotypical heterosexual man in a homosocial nexus, who represses his homosexuality and engages in the 'exchange' of women in order to solidify his position of power. This is ultimately unproductive as Ángel cannot mask violence as passion, and fails miserably in his attempt to prove his heterosexuality. Rape is no solution to the pressure of normative social mores; if you violently force your body to conform, it will betray you. In contrast, María's passion is *for* violence itself.

María is a purely phallic female, seducing men with the traditional wiles of feminine sexuality and murdering them with a long phallic hairpin. Her ability to use this phallus as a sexual murder weapon confirms her as 'another species', a term she uses to indicate the similarities between herself and Diego. To be of this species, one must be 'obsessed by death'; to be truly phallic, one must be accustomed to violence. Thus, gender has little to do with the biological penis itself. Rather, real penetration can only be gained through the ultimate sadistic act: murder. It is interesting, and not accidental, that the ultimate advocate of the phallic law is a violent woman who reaches orgasm through the death of her victims. María appropriates the violence of the phallic act of rape as her own in order that she will not be reduced to the castrated 'other' of man (as other women are). She effectively castrates men with her own penis by murdering them while they are demonstrating their utmost penile prowess. Luce Irigaray discusses the procedure by which women are positioned as the 'prop' for men, to 'support the currency' of masculinity and to perpetuate the homosocial sphere. For Irigaray, philosophy and psychoanalysis have created discourses and theories about culture and society that exclude women, that attempt to 'explain' female identity via its deviation from male subjectivity. She notes that Freud utilises a patriarchal model in order to reveal the 'truth' about female subject positions. According to Freud, for femininity to be normalised, the desire for a baby must outstrip the woman's desire for a penis (Irigaray, 1985, p. 73). However, María rails against this theorisation and opts to retain her penis and use it as a dual defence – against the men who would castrate her of it (and make her conform to a more acceptable form of femininity) and against the pressure to be a feminist figure (one who would challenge male dominance from the outside).

In this sense, María is indeed another species, an individualist who can only secure her goal (the search for the definitive orgasm) with another individualist. At the end of the film, the phallic woman enters a suicide pact with Diego and the threat of castration is contained. Death seems to be portrayed as the site of ultimate pleasure, yet it is also the only way out of an impossible scenario – to achieve the elusive 'perfect' orgasm, they must die simultaneously, yet María must kill Diego before she kills herself. It is more likely that Almodóvar explores, through the death of this species, the necessity for an alternative to phallic law, to the homosocial nexus that restricts sexual pleasure. María and Diego defy both the hetero- and the homo-social matrices but cannot create a sustainable alternative. In desiring the death of both systems rather than forming an alternative to dominant hegemony, the individualist can

never hope to form anything that can sustain life, joy or true subversion. Rather, the sexual act merely becomes a carnival without substance, with the Freudian death drive as the main attraction.

Sadomasochistic desire in *¡Átame!*

In *¡Átame!,* Almodóvar once again introduces the theme of aberrant sex and violence as two sides of the same coin. While the film begins as a thriller, it becomes a love story – between a stalker and his object of desire, the star of pornographic and horror films (who is also a drug addict). Once again, the homosocial premise is laid out within a psychoanalytic framework: scopophilic fetishisation is established as a manner of control over the desired object (woman) and sex is seen to be a commodity for both characters (Ricky secures his release from the asylum by paying the Director in sexual favours and Marina enables her body to be fetishised and desired on screen in exchange for cash/drugs). The memory of a one-night stand is the catalyst that propels Ricky to seek Marina out once he is released from the asylum. He remembers one night that they shared long ago, and is determined to make her love him, regardless of the obstacles that may present themselves. Like María in *Matador*, he is prepared to use violence to regain the sexual pleasure he once experienced. It is clear when examined through the trope of courtly love (that Žižek utilises in order to examine the bond between characters in Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game*) that the relationship will necessarily be based on a sadomasochistic desire that is characteristic of carnivalesque transgressions of social and sexual laws (Žižek, 1993, pp. 97–98). Courtly love, Žižek points out, is a sadomasochistic system in which masochism is often politely administered, and which places the servile partner in control. The servant coldly informs the dominant partner what is to be done, issuing instructions that must be carried out. However, Žižek assumes here that it is the woman who occupies the role of dominatrix and the man that of the servant. In the case of Ricky and Marina, Marina is the servile partner, and so should be in control, yet she has not chosen to be servile and therefore upsets the rules upon which courtly sadomasochism rests. Ricky headbutts and punches her when she first struggles against him and he initially ties her up with rope to prevent her from escaping (rather than as a sadomasochistic game). Yet once again, Almodóvar injects humour and romance where fear and disdain should appear. Ricky lies alongside Marina, who is gagged, and tells her that he has dreamed of such a moment, much as a romantic protagonist might profess his love to a doe-eyed and loving partner in

a romantic comedy (Edwards, 2001, p. 114). This is both comic in itself and an indictment of action movies and romantic comedies that posit the male as the dominant, active creator of the moment and the woman as the passive object of desire who waits to be rescued. Ricky uses softer ropes to save Marina's skin from chafing and takes her to the doctor when she feels ill. Ultimately, it is she who kisses his wounds when he is beaten up by drug dealers (whom he visited to get heroin for Marina) – it is she who seduces him. His grotesque, wounded appearance reveals the 'Real' of his desire and the purity of his feelings, giving access to his inner vulnerability.

Marina is, as Paul Julian Smith argues, accustomed to the voyeurism of men (Smith, 2000, p. 109), and is the object of the many male gazes on the film set. In particular, she is fetishised by the director Máximo Espejo, who is as addicted to Marina as she is to heroin. In this character, Almodóvar creates a homage to the work of Ramon del Valle-Inclán, whose *Luces de Bohemia* features a picaresque protagonist named Max Estrella (Valle-Inclán, 1993, p. 52). It is interesting to note Almodóvar's move from '*estrella*' (meaning 'star') to '*espejo*' (meaning 'mirror') – we are once again inside the concave mirror of the grotesque, of the '*esperpento*'. Espejo's self-image is reflected through Marina, giving him back his libidinous self. Similarly, for Ricky, Marina 'functions as a mirror onto which the subject projects his narcissistic ideal' (Žižek, 1993, p. 96). Espejo refers to how sexually stimulated he feels in his wheelchair; he claims he has put his 'heart and genitals' into the film and he changes the ending in order to have Marina over and over, in retakes. Possession of Marina consumes Ricky also, and while his actions to secure her are more violent than voyeuristic, his intentions towards her are traditional and pure. He plays the sadist, yet wills her to make him a masochist. He tells Marina that he was forced to kidnap her in order for her to get to know him: 'I'm sure you'll get to love me as I love you. I'm 23 years old. I have 50,000 pesetas and I am alone in the world. I'll try to be a good husband to you and a good father to your kids.' He has apparently kidnapped Marina for her own good, an assumption that is hilarious in its audacity. In capturing Marina, Ricky attempts to place a homosocial framework over an already existing heterosocial network. Marina, her sister Lola and their mother form a unit that has no place for men, a heterosocial, self-contained network that does not require a male presence in order to validate it (Smith, 2000, pp. 109–110). Similarly, Marina despatches her male attacker with conviction in Máximo's film, *Midnight Phantom* and is seen to be beautiful, intelligent, powerful and strong. These facets of her character are carefully highlighted before the

kidnapping to ensure that Marina is not depicted merely as a helpless female victim of violence. Ricky is similarly difficult to categorise. He is not simply an aggressor, but is also the object of the gaze of others on account of his physical attractiveness (Smith, p. 109). His innocence is at once naïve, threatening and hilarious and his insistence on transgressing the laws of courtship is both challenging to our standards of acceptability and romantic in the extreme. However, for Almodóvar, violence is the only tool available to a disenfranchised loner (Smith, 2000, p. 107). Ricky must use violence because he has no personal or social qualities with which to endear himself to Marina. She falls in love with him not only because he replaces heroin in her addictions, but also because he collapses the boundaries between the forbidden and the socially acceptable. His initial violence gives way to bondage (and bonding) and this form of sadomasochism becomes for Marina the true manifestation of desire. Her final submission to her sadomasochistic instincts comes when she tells Ricky, '¡atame!' ('tie me up'). It is through this request that violence becomes playful, transgressive, consensual and funny. As in Tarantino's work, this offers a problematic premise: violence without repercussions as a viable alternative to crime and punishment. Yet this is truly attainable in cinema as a latter-day realisation of the carnival. Almodóvar invites us to look through the '*cutre*' or vulgar reflection of the concave mirror (Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas, 1998, p. 64), and what we see is the reflection of the grotesque: violence as the comic manifestation of desire and love.

Quentin Tarantino's 'castrating bitches': severing the phallic law

For Quentin Tarantino also, violence collapses boundaries: his violent scenes are at once musical 'numbers', Western showdowns, love scenes. Violence is explored at a new level, often bordering on the farcical and always excessive in its gushing force. He creates a world within our world, with easily recognisable cultural signifiers and outrageous, if familiar, graphic violence that maintains several elements of the carnivalesque. Unexpected, violent eruptions are intentionally comical, such as Vince's mistaken shooting of Marvin during a discussion with Jules about the difference between divine intervention and coincidence in *Pulp Fiction*, or The Bride's extraction of Elle's eye, which she then has to search for without being able to see in *Kill Bill: Volume 2*. While these realistic and ghoulish images are designed to shock, the fantastical nature of the violence also demands to be laughed at. The pitting of the

fantastic against the Real penetrates all of Tarantino's films and provides a vision of an America wound so tightly that it must laugh at its own excesses. The inability to cope with the violence of the Real is explored further in Slavoj Žižek's work on simulations in 'Welcome to the Desert of the Real', in which he discusses our search for the perfect virtual reality (Žižek, 1992, pp. 231–234). In terms of cinema, we are looking for the perfect version of sex that is not sex (because we do not want to be sexually corrupt or degenerate), the perfect simulation of violence that is not violence (because we do not want anyone to get hurt). Tarantino undoubtedly provides us with this; a nauseatingly accurate depiction of what we believe violence to be: the fantastic dressed up as the Real. Tarantino's representations of violence do not give us the Real itself but rather a glimpse of it. Through the fantastic depiction of violence, we access its power of disruption but we are shielded from the pain of the act itself. In fact, violence is for Tarantino (and perhaps for his audience) a means of rebirth and regeneration. Characters that are killed during the course of the film reappear at the end in his non-linear narratives. The use of violence in personal dealings or everyday transactions is not explained away as a personal flaw or a psychotic tendency, but rather as an undeniable truth. When viewed through the prism of violence, federal, moral and social laws are no longer binding. Instead, they are fluid and exist only to be transcended. Tarantino, in *Kill Bill*, uses violence as a force that undermines the homosocial sphere from within, that challenges male codes of dominance through his own version of the phallic woman.

In the homosocial networks of Tarantino's movies, the relations between men 'may often be hostile or violent, but always secure common male interests that are defined through the marginalization and exchange of women, and the repression of homosexuality' (Maddison, 2000, p. 280). Up until 1997 when *Jackie Brown* was released, Tarantino dealt almost exclusively with patriarchal themes of brotherhood, with women occupying marginalised (though interesting) roles as wives or waitresses. It is not until *Kill Bill* that he provides a serious alternative to homosociality at the centre of the narrative – a woman who can at last destroy the male hegemony that has always defined her. In *Kill Bill*, Uma Thurman (as 'The Bride') is placed in the role of heroic protagonist and her aim is to methodically deconstruct the homosocial sphere. She methodically marks her victims off her list as she kills them, bringing the reign of the patriarch to an end, and punishing the women who enabled it. Bill, her ultimate nemesis and an ex-lover, employs many women in his posse, most of whom are what Wendy Arons would call '(literally) castrating

bitches' (Arons, 2001, p. 37). These actual castrations are perpetrated in order to avenge female disenfranchisement, to assert the female as the maker, not the bearer of meaning, within the narrative (Mulvey, 1989, p. 15), yet ironically, these women are locked into a patriarchal nexus from the outset. Laura Mulvey outlines two modes of escape from the anxiety of castration for men – the first is to demystify, then punish, the woman, the second is to fetishise the woman, turning her into a cult icon and making the act of castration less threatening (as it is now a composite part of a fetish, and so more fantastic than Real). Tarantino chooses the latter, and his villainous women, who castrate and behead men, are beautiful and deadly with their weapons and do not waste an opportunity to inflict wry humour as an additional insult. Gogo Yubari is perhaps the quintessential 'castrating bitch'. She is also highly fetishised, forever dressed in a schoolgirl's uniform, her hair in ponytails.

When we first encounter her, The Bride's voiceover tells us that 'Gogo may be young, but what she lacks in age, she makes up for in madness'. As Gogo sits at the bar, she is propositioned by an unattractive, horny barfly. For Gogo, the prospect of sex with this man is an attempt to own and control her, and she uses the masculine language of penetration as a weapon to prove that she is by no means a sex object. She stabs him with a tantō (or short sword) in the genitals and asks him (in Japanese), 'How 'bout now, big boy? Do you still wish to penetrate me? Or is it I...who have penetrated you?' The Bride's wry comment that signals an end to this flashback ('See what I mean?') encourages us to laugh at such excesses. Gogo's particular form of sexual violence is a means of compensating for her youth and of displaying her bloodthirstiness. If anyone is doing the penetrating, it is she. Yet, we desire Gogo to be cruel and sadistic to this personification of the phallocentric regime; in fact, the voiceover has prepared us for such an eventuality. Gilles Deleuze, borrowing from Nietzsche, reminds us that 'even death, punishment, and torture are desired, and are instances of production...It makes men or their organs into the parts and wheels of the social machine' (Deleuze, 1984, p. 159). In order to form a meaningful society, punishment for wrongdoings must be meted. Gogo performs this desire for violence and the comedy of the scene is derived from the fact that her companion has merely spoken to her and has not harmed her in any way; thus, he is the example that proves her psychosis. She is outside the law-abiding system in a carnival all her own, where fun is derived from administering justice for imagined acts of sexual violence against women. She inscribes on her companion's body the mark of the phallic female: the mutilation of the male penis.

The Bride as action heroine

The Bride resides in the interstice between the phallic woman, the musculine female and the femme fatale. Yvonne Tasker outlines these varying types of female heroine with reference to '90s films such as *Alien*, *Thelma and Louise* and *Terminator* (Tasker, 2002, pp. 295–310). While action films have been traditionally overlooked by feminists, Tasker draws attention to the 'symbolically transgressive iconography' of action heroines (Tasker, 2002, p. 295). She notes that in many films of the 1980s, female action heroines were derided for being too like men (especially those who had short, boyish haircuts, were muscle-bound, or flat-chested) with the implication made by critics and theorists of the time that women on film should always maintain visible and recognisable signifiers of femininity. In fact, these sorts of comparisons serve only to reinstate gender binaries and draw attention to the patriarchal system in which images of women operate. The character of The Bride is especially interesting in this regard, as she is 'created' by Bill as a killing machine. He turns her into a phallic female, only to find that the phallus ultimately turns on itself. The Bride is phallic not only in her choice of weapon (a specially chosen sword), but in her resemblance to male action heroes who frequently come close to death yet never fail to 'get it up' when it counts. In fact, her body resists pain and regenerates despite the many fatal blows that it receives. Wendy Arons notes that in kung fu and musical genres, 'both hero/ines and villains have superhuman capacities and can give and take an enormous number of blows without showing pain' (Arons, 2001, p. 30).

Despite her superhuman strength, she is known throughout the two volumes by the moniker 'The Bride', and is only referred to as 'Beatrix Kiddo' when she is buried alive by one of her enemies. Once again, her strength and determination are all derived from the processes of cruelty and degeneration that Nietzsche and Deleuze tell us are so vital to our sense of propriety. Yet of course, The Bride is never truly phallic, for she maintains not only an attractive, svelte physique and soft blonde hair but an overwhelming maternal instinct. She is muscular, but not remarkably so. Tasker notes that while these 'musculine' heroines threaten male dominance, this threat is generally contained. As in Mulvey's analysis of scopophilic fetishisation, the female heroine must be fetishised or punished in order to be made palatable. The Bride is subject to both methods, as she is punished for her transgression from the patriarchal order by being separated from her unborn child. She is also fetishised, most notably when she dons her yellow biker suit and sets out to kill

O-Ren Ishii in *Volume 1*. Similarly, she adheres to Freudian law when her desire for the phallus (sword/ implement of revenge) is replaced by her desire to be reunited with her child. Yet her dedication to her bloody work sets The Bride apart from the previous heroines that Tasker discusses. While she murders her potential rapist, just as Louise murders Thelma's in *Thelma and Louise* and she is as strong and athletic as Sarah Connor in *Terminator* or Ripley in *Alien*, The Bride, in her own words, is on a 'murderous rampage' for no other reason than old-fashioned revenge. In an early scene after she escapes from the hospital, she sets out her manifesto:

> As I lay in the back of Buck's truck trying to will my limbs out of entropy, I could see the faces of the cunts who did this to me, and the dicks responsible . . . When fortune smiles on something as violent and ugly as revenge, it seems proof like no other, that not only does God exist, you're doing his will.

The Bride uses masculine language, reducing both men and women to the defining aspects of their anatomy. Yet she maintains the traditional roles of desired female and of mother, while simultaneously frequently defying death and administering bloody justice at every opportunity. She is both looked at and looking. She is being watched by the other characters in the film, and is secretly watching them. She is continuously aware of their gaze, as they are simultaneously aware of hers. Her powerful position defies Mulvey's and Freud's classifications; instead she is a heterosocial outsider, who seeks violence upon the homosocial nexus from whence she came. Her desire for revenge is never superseded by her desire to be a mother. On the contrary, she is ever-more determined to dispose of Bill as the ultimate patriarch after she meets her daughter. In this sense, the cartoonish violence of the 'five point palm exploding heart technique' is the perfect ending to the film; by using a technique that was not even entrusted to Bill, she undermines phallic law and creates a heterosocial nexus which does not require men in order to validate it.

Violence as fun: the process of 'uncensoring' ourselves

We are accustomed to critically viewing cinematic violence in negative terms, as a force of destruction that erodes our moral and social codes. It is a reliable foe, one that threatens the development of our children, encourages copycat crime and damages our regard for the sanctity of human life. Tarantino and Almodóvar challenge this reading, and reveal

cinematic violence to be a convention, something that is constructed to create fear, an ideological apparatus as Althusser might describe it, designed to repress insurgency by depicting the horror that is a consequence of it. Instead, both directors utilise comedic elements to put violence into perspective, to grant it the irreverent consideration that it deserves. This is the power and privilege of the cinema – to envision gendered violence *within* the frame. What extends beyond the boundaries of the frame is obviously more complex, with gendered violence creating binaries of male and female subjectivity that cannot be so easily diffused by laughter. Yet, it is crucial here to note the role of art in ensuring that these binaries are always unsettled and never fixed. This chapter does not seek to undermine the struggle of those (gendered subjects) who experience violence in their everyday lives, but instead to explore new ways of addressing this issue within a specifically cinematic space. Through *cinematic* violence, we are privy to instances of '"the real": that which exists in our world without explanation. By laughing at it, we return ourselves back to reality, the mediated state in which we must exist in order to remove actual violence from everyday life and retain it as imagined violence' (Halberstam, 2001, pp. 244–266). This 'imagined violence' is the power of representation – the power to fantasise the Real. Representation gives us access to the violence of the Real while protecting us from its actual enactment. As Judith Halberstam says, '[i]magined violence…is the fantasy of unsanctioned eruptions of aggression from the wrong people, of the wrong skin, the wrong sexuality, the wrong gender. We have to be able to imagine violence, and our violence needs to be imaginable because the power of fantasy is not to represent but to destabilize…' (ibid., p. 250). The power of cinematic violence then is not to destroy or to corrupt, nor is it to cheapen the plight of those who are abused or disenfranchised. Instead, the power is to create a space in which anything is possible, in which our most primal instincts can be engaged and explored without danger or apprehension. Laughter allows us this passage. It encourages us to highlight the grotesque and the ridiculous and to investigate social constructions of fear. As Bakhtin articulates, 'laughter frees people from the "great interior censor"' (Bakhtin, 1968, pp. 93–94). It enables us to unshackle ourselves from the systems that keep us in line. Through our laughter, we embody the power to laugh at ourselves, at our self-imposed social, sexual and gender systems and at the repression of corporeal and cerebral desire that these systems have begotten. Through cinematic violence that makes us uncomfortable and laughter that gives us relief, Almodóvar and Tarantino each seek to destabilise the ground on which conceptions of fear and disgust have been built.

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Conclusion

Flora Alexander and Karen Throsby

By bringing together chapters from a variety of disciplines, this collection has questioned traditional constructions of interpersonal violence and shown how they have worked to limit understandings of how violence is enacted, experienced and represented. The disruption of the binary categories through which violence is conventionally conceptualised is a key feature of many of the chapters. The first of these binaries is that of a male aggressor enacting violence against a female victim. While the authors emphasise the significance of long-standing feminist insistence on the shocking prevalence of male violence against women, they also highlight the many sites where this does not apply and where violence is consequently overlooked and misunderstood. Several chapters undermine the familiar assumptions of violence as perpetrated by men and of women as incapable of physical violence. From a basis in historical studies, Pattinson demonstrates clearly that women are capable of killing, and in some cases are very willing to do so. However, in her discussion of Pearl Cornioley (née Witherington), who in spite of being a Resistance leader did not wish to kill, we can see gender norms being defended at the same time as they are disturbed. Violence, therefore, is never outside of gender, even when (or perhaps, especially when) gender norms are disrupted. This is equally true in Barnes' chapter on female-on-female intimate partner abuse, where gendered norms were seen to affect to whom the categories of victim and perpetrator were likely to be attributed. Further complexity is added to this picture of women as potential perpetrators of violence in Ahmed, Reavey and Majumdar's chapter, as they demonstrate the agency and complicity of older women in facilitating, and sometimes enacting, the abuse of younger women.

In addition to undermining the conventional understandings of gendered violence as being about male perpetrators and female victims, the chapters also demonstrate the problematic nature of the categories themselves, which prove to be much more fluid than the simple opposition that the binary suggests. Throsby, for example, describes how those engaging with obesity surgery find themselves variously (and sometimes concurrently) positioned as the victims (and therefore, perpetrators) of violence against the self, and the victims and perpetrators of fat-phobia. Significantly, in this context, and in many others in the collection, the identity of 'victim' is highly problematic, imposing on individuals a disempowering passivity that they are then compelled to resist. This is also evident in the chapter by Barnes, where the women she spoke to were reluctant to see themselves in those terms. Similarly, Kilby's chapter on the problems of articulating the experience of sexual abuse highlights the desire of the authors never to position themselves simply as victims. The experience of interpersonal violence, therefore, is never straightforward, however unambiguously 'wrong' the act of violence.

A final core categorical disruption occurs around the binary categories of the public and the private. Ahmed, Reavey and Majumdar's chapter highlights this explicitly in their discussion of the family home as a public space where women find themselves watched and governed by the wider family and community. In a very different setting, Jobe's chapter on trafficked women also problematises the distinction between the public and the private that governs perceptions of sexual trafficking, with those trafficked into conventionally 'private' spaces largely excluded from the dominant 'sexual trafficking story', and therefore less able to seek help. These categorical disruptions all highlight the importance not only of looking beyond conventional understandings of how, where, to whom and by whom violence happens, but also to consider the effects, both material and discursive, of those understandings on experiences of violence that do not fit those understandings.

Related to the disruption of binary categories discussed above is a second central concern for many of the chapters: language. Barnes' respondent, trying to come to terms with woman-to-woman abuse, and speaking of 'floundering in a sea of non-language', focuses powerfully the crucial importance of naming for understanding. If a form of violence is hidden, and is not (and cannot be) articulated, it cannot be addressed, and the resulting confusion and ambivalence certainly do harm. Mildorf's linguistic analysis of narratives of female-on-male domestic violence, based on a newspaper report and from an anecdote supplied

by a medical doctor, shows compellingly how a popular imagination is formed which can propagate misleading beliefs. She identifies how language, combined with manipulation of statistics, can wilfully blur the distinction between a woman who is violent in defence of herself or her children and a woman who indulges in casually 'beating up' her male partner. In a related study of barriers to understanding created by communications media, Kitzinger shows the difficulty of achieving currency for unpalatable facts about the abuse of children. She notes that the media operate in a market and that the unacceptability of the topic of incest for advertisers who sponsor charities, and for journalists as a news item, means that it is easier to sell spectacular stories about 'evil' than to address seriously the gendered nature of sexual violence.

This points to another broad theme which many of the chapters touch upon: the construction of knowledge, and where, and with whom, the authority lies to determine what constitutes a legitimate claim to experience and understanding. Lombard's sociological investigation brings the important insight that education for children in the area of domestic violence is obstructed by the activity of gatekeepers, who deny young people a space in which they might work towards an understanding of domestic abuse, on the unchallenged basis that primary school children are not mature enough to begin discussing issues of control in relationship – something which Lombard's research demonstrates to be a false assumption. The chapters by both Mildorf and Kitzinger signal the ease with which problematic forms of 'authority' (GP narratives, news articles) gain influential currency, and Jobe's chapter highlights the extent to which those in positions of authority (asylum case adjudicators) both reflect and reproduce particular 'knowledges' in ways which silence other forms of experiential knowledge by rendering them incredible.

The first nine chapters of the book address various aspects of the challenges of describing and accounting for violence, and the problems inherent in the articulation of the experience of violence in the face of delimiting normative constructions. In the cases outlined in these chapters, this struggle with discourse has serious material consequences: mundane forms of violence go unnoticed; attempts to seek help are disbelieved; people are ignored, isolated and judged; constraining norms of gender become even further entrenched. The final four chapters in the book, however, take the collection in a slightly different, but related, direction. Bryan, Tolan, Tate and O'Connor all devote close attention to artistic representations of interpersonal violence, always with a focus on power in gender relations. They make plain that written fiction, a theatre

piece and film equally require to be understood in a way that does not make a simple correlation between representation and enactment, and we need not labour the point that popular demands for censorship of sexually violent material are frequently misguided. These four chapters on violence in the novel and on stage and screen each make the case that creative work can only usefully be approached with an appropriate set of assumptions about the deployment of aesthetic codes and an openness to the resonance of language and image. Bearing in mind the currently existing barriers to proper debate about, and (un)speakability of, gendered violence, as is explored throughout the collection, we suggest that creative arts may currently offer ways of articulating critically important insights in this area that may be denied expression by more direct means. Consequently, while this book is divided into two sections – Lived Experience and Representations – what this collection demonstrates is the deeply imbricated nature of the two and the ongoing imperative to continue to find new ways to articulate and conceptualise gendered interpersonal violence in all its manifestations.

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