



Men's violence Narratives of men attending anti-violence programmes in Sweden



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SYNOPSIS

The efficacy of batterer-intervention programmes for men has frequently been questioned, inviting additional research and development. Men inclined to violence have multifaceted problems but are frequently squeezed into 'one-size-fits-all' programmes with high ambitions for change that often show little evidence of effectiveness. Some research even indicates that any changes in men's violent behaviour might result from factors not at all linked to the programmes.

For this study, ten interviews were carried out with men who had attended anti-violence programmes within the Swedish Probation Service. The overall aim was to analyse gendered identity constructions in the narratives of men attending the programmes – how men articulate the course of violent events and in what way they talk about themselves and the programmes.

According to our results, men defended themselves by making excuses, explanations and victim positions. Furthermore, the men's gendered identity constructions collided with the programmes' ambitions of changing men's conceptions and behaviour.

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Introduction

Men's violence against women has, again and again, been described as a major social and public health problem (Walby & Allen, 2004) and also as a human rights crime (Hearn & McKie, 2010). The perpetrator is almost always a current or previous intimate partner; this seems to be the case internationally and also holds for Sweden, where this study was carried out (Renzetti, Edleson, & Bergen, 2001). Preventing and bringing intimate partner violence (IPV) to an end require the understanding of complex causal connections that are explained mostly in terms of personal, societal and socio-cultural factors impregnated by gender and power structures (Firestone, Harris,

& Vega, 2003; Heise, 1998). Consequently, taking action against violence requires a long-term change at many different levels in society. Until sustainable alterations have been implemented, most public and research opinions suggest short-term solutions such as efficient programmes to stop perpetrators of IPV (Gelles, 2000).

For decades, the US and several Western countries have run 'Duluth-inspired' batterer-intervention programmes that are reasonably consistent with cognitive behavioural therapy and apply a confrontational, pro-feminist and 'one-size-fits-all' approach (Dia, Simmons, Oliver, & Cooper, 2007). However, the anti-violence programmes might have the wrong agenda, believing in accomplishing change by confronting all violent men in the same way (Gadd, 2002). When challenging violent men's gendered identity, there is a risk in ignoring the complexity, the emotional processes and the defence mechanisms involved. It is that the intervention might not only be ineffective, but also that it can sometimes increase tension and

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stress, and thus be dangerous for the partners of these men (ibid.).

Despite some positive reports saying that the programmes are making attendees less violent compared to non-attendees (Gondolf, 2004), it is still tricky to measure behavioural change and prove whether a noticed change is a result of the programmes or caused by other factors (Silvergleid & Mankowski, 2006). However, and overall, most reviews of intervention programmes for men inclined to violence have reported quite pessimistic efficacy reports, inviting additional research and improvement (Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004; Feder, Wilsson, & Austin, 2008; Gelles, 2000; Smedslund, Dalsbø, Steiro, Winsvold, & Clench-Aas, 2007).

Studies of the participants' subjective perceptions of intervention programmes and therapy show different results regarding to what extent such interventions can facilitate a change of behaviour. According to Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, and Lewis (2000), Scott and Wolfe (2000) and Silvergleid and Mankowski (2006), the participants reported positive changes due to the treatment, irrespective of the fear of legal punishment. However, according to Shamai and Buchbinder (2010), men can experience treatment as positive and meaningful, but still use a power scheme in creating relationships. Buttell's (2003) study shows similar results, illustrating that batterer-intervention programmes are not effective in changing the level of moral development. Alexander and Morris (2008) argue that intervention programmes are more efficient if the men have already started to change when they start the treatment.

Intimate partner violence in heterosexual relationships includes two parties, and both of their perspectives are needed to understand the violence and how women's and men's agency interact while influenced by hegemonic socio-cultural codes of male dominance (Cavanagh, Dobash, Dobash, & Lewis, 2001). Our research deals with reported IPV against women and the insider perspective from one side, i.e. the male side.

This study was carried out with men attending anti-violence programmes in Sweden, a country ranked as one of the best regarding the promotion of gender equality (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2010) and welfare systems in general (Balkmar, Iovanni, & Pringle, 2008). Gender equality ideologies are embedded in, for example, legislation and organisational structures (Eriksson & Pringle, 2005). Nevertheless, men's violence against women exists, and the Swedish criminal justice system, which is supposed to be gender neutral, i.e. treat men and women in the same way, is criticized by researchers for not being so (Burman, 2010). Consequently, men are neither expected to take full responsibility to rectify their behaviour nor are they held entirely responsible for the consequences of their violent deeds, and this reduces women's scope and ability to take action regarding their situation (ibid.). For this study, we presume that the men's stories reflect a continuous negotiation not only with programmes and professionals' discourses but with more general discourses about how a man should be and act (Edin, Lalos, Högberg, & Dahlgren, 2008). Moreover, in this dynamic process of negotiation, we believe that hegemonic constructions of dominant masculinities are both contested and (re)produced (Cavanagh et al., 2001; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The overall aim was to analyse gendered identity constructions in narratives of men attending anti-violence

programmes: how men articulate the course of violent events and in what way they talk about themselves and the programmes.

Method

Theoretical framework

In this paper, we use men's narratives and view them as representations of the social world (Riessman, 1993). However, this does not mean that there is a linear connection between "reality" and narratives. Instead, narratives are interpretations of "the real" (Edin, 2006), and depend on several factors, i.e. actual discourses, situations, traditions and ideologies, etc. People use narratives of different kinds in the creation of individual and collective identities. Narratives can be seen as "identity claims" (Mishler, 1999), e.g. in the form of contrasting or differentiating oneself from others (Georgakopoulou, 2007). To regard narratives as both representations of and producers of "reality" is to say that personal narratives are something more than just personal. They can, for example, reflect experiences that others can identify with, and they contribute to the reformulation of public discourses (Shuman, 2005). Moreover, narratives emerge not only *in* but also *through* the interview dialogue (Presser, 2008, p. 143). Somers (1994) describes narratively mediated processes as constituting social identities and guiding social actions and interplays.

In line with the narrative approach, we view gendered identities as socially, relationally and culturally constructed and as intimately related to discourse. Discourses – systems of meaning (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) – are constructed in and through the language in use, offering gendered positions (masculine and feminine) that individuals can identify with (Edley, 2001). However, these positions are not fixed; instead they are subject to continuous change. Accordingly, identity will be viewed as a process and as an on-going attempt at identification (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). Any identity is contingent, and "identities are always 'failed identities' which never fulfil the telos of subjective identification, thus rendering them vulnerable to further dislocation" (Glynos & Howarth, 2007 p. 129). Thus, the men's narratives are viewed as attempts to establish a "fixed" masculine identity, but this "fixation" will always be temporary. An important part of fixation processes is disidentification, which is defined as the rejection of unwanted positions and attributions (cf. Skeggs, 1997).

In order to explain men's violence and in the quest for a change, one ought to understand masculinities (and femininities) as being contingent, inconsistent, changing and complex normative discourses reproduced in sexuality and in daily interactions between men and women. However, even if gender and the meaning of violence are changeable constructs, they are part of the multifaceted practice and culture where they were formed. For that reason, a change is not unproblematic because of allied opposition, including power, and hence a process of negotiation is needed (Connell, 2005; Edley, 2001; Kimmel, 1987).

The theory of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) has received a lot of attention in gender studies, and refers to a particular idealized image of dominant masculinity to which

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