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Strangers in the Field: An Ethnographic Exploration of Men's Accounts of Intimate Partner Violence in a Treatment Group

Mira Sörmark*

Department of Social Work, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

*Correspondence to Mira Sörmark, Department of Social Work, Stockholm University, Sveavägen 160, Sveaplan, SE-106 91, Stockholm, Sweden. E-mail: *mira.sormark@socarb.su.se*

Abstract

Researchers have investigated violent men's accounts of intimate partner violence and have, to various extent, emphasised self-presentation, external structures and lived experiences as understandings for these accounts. Through an ethnographic exploration of a treatment group for men who have been violent towards their female partners, I explore how we can understand the accounts of the violence. Similar to previous findings, this study initially lends support to a Goffmanian interpretation of the accounts as 'remedial work', highlighting how the members negotiate the moral meaning of offences by transferring culpability for violence to female partners. However, through an extended presence in the studied context, I discovered aspects of the therapeutic conversation which may challenge this interpretation. I use Bourdieu's concept of the habitus and analyse the accounts as a product of embodied dispositions. As such, the accounts do not harmonise with the structures of the late modern field of gender relations, dominated by ideals of equal intimate relations. I interpret the accounts as habitual and restricted. Finally, I argue that different understandings of the accounts give rise to different treatment options for social work and that factors such as lived experiences may contribute insights into why men use violence towards female partners.

Keywords: Accounts, ethnography, intimate partner violence, lived experience, men, treatment group

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Research aim

This article explores a group therapy setting for men who have been violent towards their female partners, and how we can understand the accounts of the violence that the men express during treatment.

Previous research

Following an established sociological tradition of studies of how people account for their offences, as a way to explore delinquency and social problems (Mills, 1940; Scott and Lyman, 1968; Goffman, 1971), researchers have explored men's accounts of their violence against female partners. Findings unveil a similar pattern consistent over time; men describe their violence as a consequence of women's behaviour (Ptacek, 1988; Hydén, 1992; Dobash and Dobash, 1998; Hearn, 1998; Anderson and Umberson, 2001; Cavanagh *et al.*, 2001; Wood, 2004; Mullaney, 2007; Presser, 2008; Gottzén, 2013; Boëthius, 2015). However, researchers have understood these accounts in different ways: as self-presentation, as self-presentation affected by context and structures or as influenced by context and lived experience. How we view the accounts will ultimately affect how we choose to approach men in treatment (Eisikovits and Buchbinder, 2008; Askeland and Råkil, 2017).

Accounts as self-presentation

Several researchers have built on Goffman's (1959, 1971) theoretical framework in order to understand how violent men present themselves to others and how they seek to negotiate the moral meaning of their offences. Finnish researchers have illustrated, using Goffman, how men in group therapy use accounts of lost self-control as a fundamental component when they try to excuse their violence against women (Partanen *et al.*, 2006). These accounts were interpreted as a tactic employed by the speaker to present himself as a responsible person, admitting the reprehensible aspects of his behaviour, while at the same time denying full responsibility (Partanen *et al.*, 2006). The therapists used this inconsistency to challenge and negotiate the narratives to call for more responsible accounts, thereby encouraging the men to adapt a non-violent identity (Partanen *et al.*, 2006).

Boëthius (2015), in a Swedish dissertation, shows how men, as a way of accounting for their violence, commonly employ the strategy of characterising their women as mentally ill and in need of psychiatric help. She also found that the men she interviewed tried to replace the image of themselves as controlling, evil offenders that use violence as a way to

exercise power, with stories of harmless acts, relational conflicts between equals, or as a result of how the men tried to protect their children from witnessing women's immoral behaviour. By presenting their actions in this manner, the men tried to disassemble the image of a univocal victim and perpetrator (Boëthius, 2015).

Presser (2008) drew on a symbolic interactionist framework (Scott and Lyman, 1968; Goffman, 1971) when interviewing violent offenders in prison. Presser (2008) found that all the men presented themselves as morally decent, an identity enabled by the narrative of their life story as a heroic struggle. However, drawing on Holstein and Gubrium (2003), Presser also emphasises the interview as a site for this construction. The accounts cannot simply be viewed as something derived from inside the narrators, waiting to be expressed; instead, they emerge through the research interview.

The influence of Goffman on the understanding of men's accounts is also visible in British research by Cavanagh *et al.* (2001). The researchers used Goffman (1971) to illustrate the exculpatory and expiatory discourses that dominate men's narratives about their violence against female partners. They argue that their data, in-depth interviews with 122 men, lend strong support to Goffman's theoretical conceptions of how actors perform mitigation following an offence (Cavanagh *et al.*, 2001). The tendency to view spoken accounts as something derived from calculated considerations is evident when the authors write '... men's responses to their use of violence as strategies, as purposeful, reactive and proactive tactics designed to mitigate their responsibility for violent behaviour' (Cavanagh *et al.*, 2001, p. 700).

Accounts as self-presentation in context

However, by using Goffman, the researchers above portray the accounts as a product of a calculating individual. This excludes other dimensions of social reality that could influence the accounts, such as structure, discourse or lived experience. Other studies, drawing on feminist theory and theories of masculinity, have explored the relation between violent men's accounts and constructions of masculinity, in an argument that implies a critique of Goffman's view (Hearn, 1998; Anderson and Umberson, 2001; Wood, 2004; Mullaney, 2007). Rather than describing the accounts of violence as primarily a product of individual agency, they present them as cultural and contextual practices, contributing a structural and/or discursive understanding of the accounts and thereby arguing that they are restricted.

Anderson and Umberson (2001), building on Butler (1990), understand violent men's accounts as a way of doing gender and examine them as ongoing routine accomplishments. They point to the risks of giving privilege solely to agency and underline that the gender

performances are shaped by cultural options, and that this structural context forms the setting for those acts.

Similarly, Mullaney (2007) writes that men rely on available cultural accounts and that consequently there are limits to the accounts the individual can produce. In her article, based on interviews with fourteen men who have been violent towards a female partner, she writes that the accounts are influenced by the men's beliefs about gender and their commitment to particular kinds of masculinities. Recognising them as dimensions of moral work alone is not sufficient (Mullaney, 2007). Mullaney analyses men's ways of accounting for their violence as attempts to re-establish hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005).

Wood (2004) has also explored how violent men's accounts and social constructs of masculinity are interrelated. She argues that violent men *in extremis* embody widely accepted cultural ideologies that promote men's authority and aggression. Wood (2004) claimed that there were two kinds of patriarchal masculinities evident in her interviews, both prevalent in the surrounding American society; one that dominates and is superior to women, and the other a protector of women.

Ptacek (1988) researched eighteen men's accounts of their intimate partner violence and argued that the similarities between the accounts and societal discourses suggest that the accounts are ideological constructions, culturally accepted, that connect the individual at the societal level. Finally, he argues that feminists have tried to bring researchers' attention to how this both obscures individual men's interests and benefits of exercising violence, and how men's structural oppression and power over women is a fundamental basis for violence.

Accounts as affected by context and inner structure

Eisikovits and Buchbinder (1997) have argued that there is a deficiency of analysis in studies of men's accounts of violence that leads to oversimplifications and a failure to capture their multi-layered meanings. Instead, they argue the merits of using a phenomenological perspective that contextualises the accounts as a reflection of lived experiences. Thereby, they emphasise the accounts as a form of social action that is expressed by habit and as a consequence of an inner structure acquired over time. This means that actors are limited both by inner structure and external context. Eisikovits and Buchbinder (2008) later wrote that dominant treatment paradigms of batterers that focus on cognitions and behaviours fail to adequately recognise and address the inner world of violent men.

Summary

Some previous research has interpreted the accounts of violent men as an expression of how the individual presents himself and performs a

moral work. Others have understood the individual accounts as also being a product of context and gender structures, meaning that they are to some extent limited to a cultural repertoire. Finally, some have understood the accounts as restricted by external but also inner structures. How we view the accounts, as insights into why men are violent towards their intimate partners, will have consequences for how we chose to organise treatment, a much-debated topic (Babcock *et al.*, 2004; Gondolf, 2004, 2011; Eisikovits and Buchbinder, 2008; Kelly and Westmarland, 2013; Askeland and Råkil, 2017). This poses the question of how we can best understand the accounts. In the following, I will explore this question in an ethnographic study of a treatment group for violent men.

Theoretical understanding

Remedial work

Goffman's theory of remedial work, used by several researchers, was something I carried with me when the fieldwork began. In his dramaturgical account of human interaction, Goffman (1959) imagines us as preoccupied with how we come across, displaying a series of masks vis-à-vis others, constantly trying to portray ourselves in the best light. In his theory of remedial work (1971), he specifically focuses on talk as a social behaviour at play when renegotiating the interpretation of an offensive act, such as intimate partner violence. The purpose is to transform perceived offences into something acceptable. Remedial work contains three devices: 'accounts, apologies and requests'. An 'account' is an explanation of why an offence occurred and can be associated with, among others, the tactics of 'denial' and 'blame'. After an offence, the speaker can either 'deny' that it happened or acknowledge it but argue that someone else is to 'blame' and thereby escape the burden of responsibility. By 'apologising' the actor shows that despite the offence, he really knows what acceptable behaviour is. The speaker divides himself into one part that has committed the offence, and one that morally distances himself from the deed. Remedial work also includes 'requests', 'minimisation' and 'reduced' competence, which will not be further described because these were not evident in the empirical findings.

Critiques of Goffman's presumptions about the social being

Raffel (2013) writes that Goffman's theory has shown resilience because it captures an aspect of social life that most of us recognise: the feeling of playing a role. However, several researchers have criticised Goffman

for assuming that the social being is amoral (Gouldner, 1970) and unauthentic (Raffel, 2013), and that he underestimates the extent to which social action is carried out by routine (Garfinkel, 1976). Transferred to this project, the critique problematises the interpretation that self-presentation can be fully calculated, and calls for a theory that makes it possible to see accounts as rational but also habitual. This led me to Bourdieu and the way he rethinks action as practical reason, at play when agents try to master a social situation, determined by the interaction of habitus and the social field.

Embodied dispositions

While Goffman (1959) argues that accounts emanate from calculation, Bourdieu argues that it, to a large extent, is habitual. The accounts are the product of embodied dispositions—'habitus'—and its relation with the structures of the 'social field' (Bourdieu, 1992). Habitus is the history of past actions, transformed into an inner structure, imprinted by a specific social context. Habitus operates when the individual tries to master situations that arise in a 'social field'. A field is a context that produces, transforms and restricts actions (Bourdieu, 1992). It is structured by norms about what is right/wrong and these rules can be understood in terms of the field having its own logic (Bourdieu, 1992). The field prescribes different types of legitimacy to different actions and thereby stratifies positions which lead agents within it to occupy different positions of privilege (Webb *et al.*, 2002). This means that actions are restricted by the individual's habitus and the social field (Broady, 1991).

When the individual finds himself in a social situation where his habitus and the rules of the field harmonise, he does not need to think about why he does something; he just does it (Bourdieu, 1992). Akin to the masterful tennis player who anticipates the game—he has a feel for the game (Bourdieu, 1992). However, when the structures of the habitus and the social field do not harmonise, suddenly the individual finds himself in a situation where he does not know how to act. The ways in which he usually orients himself are no longer helpful. He notices that people do not respond to him as he anticipates they will. He feels like a stranger.

Bourdieu's (1992) concepts lead to interpretations of the accounts as not only a product of the individual's strategies to present himself in a certain way, but also that actions are determined in the meeting between the external structures of the field and the individual's habitus (Broady, 1991). Translated to this study, this means that the accounts would be a result of how the individual's habitus harmonises more or less with the norms in treatment, and thus that they are restricted.

A social field of gender relations

Here, I will use Giddens (1992) to discuss which field the studied context reflects. Treatment for intimate partner violent men clearly reflects a view of the violence as a social problem and emerges in a specific historical context as an anomaly where we regard intimate relationships as something that should be equal (Giddens, 1992). The logic of the treatment is a reflection of societal ideals about gender relations that have been described by scholars of late modern relationship ideals, such as Giddens, 1991, 1992; Duncombe and Marsden, 1993, 1995; Beck and Beck-Gernshiem, 1995, 2002; Jamieson, 1998; Smart and Neale, 1999. Giddens (1992) writes, in his historical review, that macro democratic processes mirror what we have come to view as desirable in personal relations. In late modern west, when women no longer depend on men for financial support, marriage ceases to be an economic transaction between families, blessed by religion. This prompts people to voluntarily enter into and end relationships in search for intimacy, which he defines as: 'a matter of emotional communication, with others and with the self, in a context of interpersonal equality' (1992, p. 130). This requires the ability to relate to others in an egalitarian way and the ability to reflect on oneself. Thereby Giddens (1992) argues that preventing men's violence towards women becomes crucial for every society that strives for democracy. Intimacy, in symmetry with equality, can be interpreted as an ideal that structures the field of gender relations and shifts different positions within it, meaning that preferences that are not coherent with this ideal will occupy a marginalised position within the field. This means that in the field of gender relations, authoritarian relationships where men are superior to women and use intimate partner violence will be regarded as deviant.

Method

This study uses an ethnographic method to explore an authentic context in social work—group treatment—where men's accounts of their partner violence appear. Naturalistic inquiries take part in everyday contexts that allow different aspects of studied phenomena to emerge (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Proceedings

To gain access to the therapy group, I first contacted the head of the studied social services agency and we arranged a meeting. The social workers expressed a positive view to the project, which probably made it easier to gain access. Thereafter, the men undergoing treatment were

asked whether they wanted to participate. All members approved to participate in the study. The sample of research participants could be characterised as purposeful—a sampling method commonly applied in ethnographic methods (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It is based on the assumption that context is crucial, must be dealt with on its own terms, and its purpose is to maximise information about the studied context (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This limits the opportunity to generalise the results to a greater population, but provides rich and powerful qualitative data about the specific treatment context.

Research participants

All of the five to seven men who participated in the group during my observations had been referred to the group because they had been violent towards a female partner. They were twenty-eight to forty-nine years of age. All were fathers and all had experienced their father's violence against their mothers as children. Several of the participants had experienced physical abuse from their fathers while growing up. The majority were born in Sweden. No one had contacted the agency of their own accord; instead, they had been reported to the social services. A common reason for being referred was that during a violent episode the man's partner had contacted the police who in turn reported the matter to the social services. Another reason was that the partner had sought shelter at the social services, which then referred the man to the group.

The ATV treatment model

The treatment was arranged by the Child Protection Department of the social services in Stockholm, Sweden. Sessions were organised weekly and the full treatment consists of a cycle of twenty-four sessions in total. The group was led by two male psychotherapists and inspired by the method Alternative to Violence (ATV) (Isdal, 2017).

This Norwegian method is commonly used in the Nordic countries. It emphasises both sociocultural perspectives on intimate partner violence—that the violence is gender-based—and individual perspectives, such as the effects of trauma (Askeland and Råkil, 2017). Four essential themes are included: violent behaviour, responsibility, psychological connections and consequences of violence. However, its fundamental basis is an awareness of how gender, power and control issues relate to violent behaviour (Askeland and Råkil, 2017).

Data

The study's data consist of observations of seven 1.5-hour-long sessions, all recorded and transcribed. During the observations, my focus

concerned accounts of the participants' intimate relationships, conflicts and violence, as well as the interaction taking place within the treatment group. My understanding of the context also includes field notes, participating in and overhearing informal conversations before and after therapy, and my meetings with the staff at the centre before and after I gained access.

Analysis

Ethnography should provide a rich description (Geertz, 2000), describing a social context in as trustworthy a manner as possible. The trustworthiness is enhanced by prolonged engagement and persistent observation for which presence is a prerequisite (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), what I have labelled an epistemology of presence. Through long-term participation, over time I acquired what Van Maanen (1988) describes as an interpretative ability in relation to the studied context. The long-term participation allowed me to discover patterns of a remedial moral work that recurred every session but also to question Goffman's presumptions of the accounts when aspects that did not seem to cohere with his understanding emerged in my data, and to search for other theoretical tools that allowed me to better comprehend the empirical findings.

Ethical considerations and approval

The participants received information via the staff about the project, aims and research issues of interest. They also received information about ethical requirements and were offered the opportunity to see field notes and transcriptions. All members have approved to participate in the study. The project on which this article is based has undergone ethical review and was ethically approved by the Department of Social Work at Stockholm University. Below, when I write about the participants, I have replaced their names with pseudonyms.

Results

Remedial work

Blame

One evening, the therapists asked the participants to reflect on what makes them violent. The assignment generated an intimate and trustful

atmosphere, which allowed one of the participants, Adam, to explain that what makes him violent is a combination of stress and a feeling of being misunderstood by his partner. As a humorous confession, he related an episode when he had experienced this with his ex-partner: 'I remember this one time, when I thought that we had reached an agreement and she just starts arguing all over again. I walk towards her, grab her by the t-shirt that she is wearing and tear it apart. Then she becomes totally silent. It was so relieving. It was amazing.'

This dramatic account, presented by a participant who enjoys a strong position in the group, unites the members in laughter. Another man, George, endorses Adam, saying that his ex-partner was just the same, always seeking an excuse to start a fight. The therapists try to problematise the statement. One of them asks Adam, when reflecting on the situation, if there is anything he could have done differently. He replies that he does not think so. Another participant, John, says that he found the story amusing but the violence disturbing. He asks Adam how he subsequently felt. Adam replies: 'It felt so good … I don't regret that thing because she was crazy … I can't regret that because in the end she has to learn to respect other people's limits. When I look back upon this situation, I almost view it as … maybe not self-defence but … yes, it was absolutely self-defence!'

Illustrated above is the negotiation of the meaning of a morally offensive situation. The narrative can be interpreted as remedial work, employing the strategy 'blame' because of how the story shifts focus from the speaker, as a perpetrator of intimate partner violence, to a question of his partner's behaviour and her involvement in a disagreement that occasionally ended in violence. Simultaneously, the blame transfers to the ex-girlfriend, which is crucial because it unburdens the speaker of responsibility, allowing him to claim a general moral decency. This finding is also in line with what previous research has stated, namely that men, when accounting for their violence, portray women as irrational and irresponsible (Hydén, 1992; Dobash and Dobash, 1998; Anderson and Umberson, 2001; Cavanagh *et al.*, 2001; Wood, 2004; Mullaney, 2007; Boëthius, 2015).

The strategy to blame women was reinforced by the other participants, similar to how Goffman (1959) emphasises the help from the audience as a crucial device for the actor when orchestrating an impression. Here is an example of the interaction and assistance of the group. One evening Philip tells the members that his wife, during an argument, has hit him. James then gets upset because he feels that the therapists are not taking the wife's violence seriously. He exclaims: 'So it is ok for them to hit us?' Both therapists reply: 'No!' However, James persists: 'Somewhere you have to draw a line!' Furthermore, he gets support from Adam: 'Well it is weird though, I would never hit a person like this' [meaning that Philip is a tall and big person]. 'Why would you

even do that? Then there's something wrong with you. You have to admit that she is out of line.' Therapist: 'No, but she feels angry.' Adam: 'Well then what if he gets mad? She is not taking responsibility, certainly not, and then you have to realize, she's gone off the deep end. It's impossible.' By focusing on Philip's wife's behaviour, portraying her actions as stupid and unreasonable, the group is implying that Philip is not to be held accountable for this situation nor for his actions.

Denial

Another aspect of remedial work is 'denial' of a violent act, which also fills the function of mitigation (Goffman, 1971). When no violence has occurred, there can be no harmed victim and thereby no blameworthy offender. This was the case one evening, by the end of the session, when the men got an assignment by the therapists. They were asked to write a letter to the partner they had abused and then to read it aloud to the other participants. The task was to try to understand how she experienced the violence. Immediately, a member raises an objection and states that he does not believe that he has been violent towards his ex-partner, although he knows that she claims he has. He states that he attributes this to her, in his view, mental illness.

Denial was a common strategy repeated during every session, also shown in the following example. Several of the observed sessions were dedicated to the recurring conflicts between Philip and his wife. The other participants and the therapists spent some time during the previous week's session trying to encourage Philip to restrain his emotions so that he could manage to stay with his wife and resolve the conflicts without violence. During the session, Philip told the group that he could not handle his wife and he had therefore left her for several days with their one-year-old child. The following week, something similar had occurred. Philip says that he cannot calm his wife and that she yells at him in a way that makes him afraid the neighbours will hear their argument and that they will eventually call the police again. One of the therapists' objects to this narrative by pointing out that it also sounds as if Philip, by abandoning his wife, wishes to punish her. He enquires what Philip did when the yelling started. Philip answers: 'I didn't leave her, but I said that she shouldn't behave like that. I didn't insult her but I told her that she needs to go see a psychiatrist because there is something wrong with her and then she became even angrier.' As often in treatment, where a trustful and relaxed atmosphere prevails, the group unites in laughter on hearing Philip's statement because he does not seem to understand the contradiction. One of the therapists indulgently replies that 'of course she got angrier', while another participant, Thomas, says in a comforting way that the group laughs because they recognise themselves

in this situation. Philip's account can be viewed as an act that seeks to mitigate offensiveness through denial. He denies that he has been violent towards his wife by emphasising her involvement in their conflicts, which he claims has placed him in an unmanageable situation.

Apologies

Denial of violence or accounts of blame that transferred responsibility were not the only aspects of remedial work to appear in the group. There were also acknowledgements of culpability and expressions of remorse. John is an example of a speaker who reflects on the blameworthiness of his actions through an 'apology': One evening he starts to cry while talking about how he has handled his ex-girlfriend's mental illness: 'I feel so guilty about that. I have yelled at her, even though she has her condition, just because I was angry … I should have been able to handle it in a different way. I feel guilty for being mad at her. Like, she has her mental illness, and then Íve responded to that by yelling at her and being mad … and I have pushed her … I feel so bad.'Goffman (1971) would view this narrative as an example of an actor that splits himself into two parts, one blameworthy that has perpetrated the offence, and one that is righteous and reliable looking back at the other part. By admitting that the offence is unacceptable and apologising for it, he shows that in reality he knows the behaviour that is expected of him, and thereby that he is a decent person.

The extracts above clearly demonstrate a coherence with previous interpretations: the participant's accounts describe men's violence towards partners as a result of women's behaviour (Hydén, 1992; Dobash and Dobash, 1998; Anderson and Umberson, 2001; Cavanagh *et al.*, 2001; Wood, 2004; Mullaney, 2007; Boëthius, 2015). Similar to previous research, the men presented their violence as self-defence, because of their partner's violent actions or provocations, by describing it as reasonable and necessary or by just denying that it ever occurred (Hydén, 1992; Cavanagh *et al.*, 2001; Wood, 2004; Mullaney, 2007). This can be interpreted as remedial work because it transfers blame for violence to women, thus unburdening the men of responsibility who can thereby show a general moral decency.

Reinterpretation

Habitual accounts

However, after more extensive observations, aspects became known of the conversation that did not seem to correspond well with Goffman's theories. Three aspects of the conversation challenge an interpretation

of the speech as the product of a calculated actor seeking control over the impression he is trying to make.

First, it was striking how openly and uninhibitedly the men presented their perspectives, like when Adam tells the group how he has ripped his partner's t-shirt apart. Or when Philip claims that he has not insulted his wife and immediately thereafter, without any effort to withhold information, discloses that he has told his wife that there is something wrong with her mental health. It was only when the therapists challenged the narratives that it occurred to the speaker that his suggestions could be interpreted as hostile and that he should have attempted to avoid them. The men related their stories seemingly without considering if they might appear as immoral to listeners.

Second, the participants did not always react by distancing themselves from one another when their accounts contained offensive acts such as violence. On the contrary, they responded with recognition and sympathy when members tried to master relational conflicts in a violent way. For example, when George responds to Adam, who tells the group about how he ripped an ex-partner's t-shirt during an argument, that he has similar experiences of partners seeking conflicts. Following Goffman, we would expect the actor to be more eager to let others know that he understands the potential offensiveness of such acts.

A third aspect that contravenes an interpretation of the conversation as an expression of simple self-presentation is that the participants seemed to have difficulties understanding what the therapists meant when they questioned narratives about violent incidents. The men often misjudged how stories about conflicts and violence would seem to others, even when confronted with different interpretations of a situation. When the therapist asked Adam if he, when looking back on an argument, felt that he could have handled the situation differently, he failed to understand the therapist's intimation, which suggested that he had done something unacceptable. Instead, Adam claims that he could not have done anything differently and that it felt good to silence his ex-partner.

The habitual character of the accounts was evident one evening when the therapists introduced the group to Swedish researcher Hydén's (1992) findings. The therapists conveyed common strategies that men use when explaining their intimate partner violence, such as denial, blaming women or claiming that women lie about abuse. John then raises his hand. He shows that he does not understand what the therapists are aiming at by asking what exactly the difference was between the conversation of the group and the strategies in the presented research: '

I was thinking about the last strategy: to deny [the abuse] by saying that she is lying … I believe that many of us in this group have experienced our partners lying about the violence to the police, but then that

raises the question; you may truthfully think that she is lying or that she has a completely different view of reality that you cannot comprehend. Honestly!'

These aspects challenge the previous view of the accounts of men who are violent to intimate partners as derived from calculating every potential social outcome of it. Quite the opposite; these features suggest an inability to mirror oneself in the eye of a beholder. The men's accounts appeared more as guided by routine. A model of social action that I suggest fits better with the data is Bourdieu's (1999), who describes action as an expression of the relation between the individual's habitus and the structures of the social field.

Strangers in the field

The conversation about intimate partner violence that takes place in treatment can be interpreted as strategies aiming at negotiating identity and moral. However, with Bourdieu's perspective, they could be understood as spontaneous, guided by the habitus and thus restricted in meeting with the social field. The participants' limited ability to reflect on others' views of their actions can be interpreted as a consequence of a habitus that does not harmonise with the rules in treatment, which I argue is a reflection of the dominant norms of the social field of gender relations. In this field, intimacy, in symmetry with democracy, is a structuring ideal, which prescribes intimate relationships to be equal between men and women (Giddens, 1992). Thereby, men's intimate partner violence is viewed as a social problem (Giddens, 1992). This results in a treatment logic where violent men are taught to interact in intimate relationships, to reflect on themselves and to communicate their vulnerability, instead of exercising power and violence. In treatment, the participants must show that they can conform to these norms, not being violent, and thereby show that they are morally decent. However, this is complicated by their dispositions, acquired over their life-course, that cause their accounts to appear as unsophisticated when they try to translate their strategies to the norms advocated in treatment. In line with Bourdieu's writing on the interplay between the logic of the field and the individual's habitus, I argue that the availability of strategies for these men are restricted by previous lived experiences, formed to an internal structure, and by external social structures. Bourdieu's concept of a social field is that of an 'unwritten musical score according to which the actions of agents ... improvising [their] own melody, are organised' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 8). In treatment, the participants' composed melodies are out of tune. They are strangers in the field. This is because the treatment is guided by the norms of intimacy in late modernity, that men must be able to have relationships where they are

equals to women, and show themselves as equally emotionally vulnerable (Giddens, 1992). In relation to the ambient field of gender relations, the violent masculinity that the accounts reflect becomes its dark mirror.

Discussion and implications for social work practice

In line with Bourdieu's theory, I have interpreted the strategies expressed in therapy as habitual and limited. Thus, I have problematised the image of the participants as cynical and suggested that the external forces of the field and their inner structure influence their accounts. With this theoretical dissection, I aim to underline that how we approach key questions in the social reality, like the foundation for accounts, is crucial because it relates to how we understand the problem and bring about change (Beasley, 2012). How we view men's accounts, as potential insights into why they use violence, will have consequences for the focus and direction of treatment.

Researchers have debated on the most effective way to treat men who have been violent towards a female partner (Babcock *et al.*, 2004; Gondolf, 2004, 2011; Eisikovits and Buchbinder, 2008; Kelly and Westmarland, 2013). Some have criticised the dominant ideological treatment paradigm for directing too much attention to men's attitudes, cognitive schemes and awareness raising, thereby failing to handle other suggested motives such as lived experiences (Eisikovits and Buchbinder, 2008). Norwegian researchers have argued that the feminist understanding of violence as gender-based, underpinning structure-oriented treatment models, needs to be complemented with an understanding of trauma, which an over-represented part of intimate partner violent men have experienced, and its profound effects on the individual (Askeland and Råkil, 2017). Such research could be in line with how Bourdieu envisions the habitus and is what I argue here, using his theory. That there is more that influences the men's accounts, such as lived experience—perhaps experiences of trauma—transformed into a stable inner structure. Factors, such as experiences acquired over the life course, may contribute with insights into why men use violence.

Methodological limitations

This study draws on a small sample. Naturalistic inquiries are not intended for larger generalisations, which require randomisation and representativeness. Instead, it is based on the assumption that context is crucial and must be dealt with on its own terms (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). However, there are possibilities for comparisons if there are likely to be similarities between the studied and the receiving context (Lincoln

and Guba, 1985). This means that these results cannot be used to make wide predictions. However, it is likely that the findings can contribute with insights to conversations of other treatment groups with similar contexts, such as other groups underpinned by the ATV-model or Nordic countries characterised by the same ideals of gender equality.

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