

Standpoint: “Murderous women”? Rethinking gender and theories of violence

Adelene Africa, University of Cape Town

‘Murderous women’ such as Dina Rodriguez who, in 2005, contracted two men to kill her ex-boyfriend’s baby have been sensationalised in the South African media. Similarly, in 2006, also in South Africa, Najwa Petersen was convicted of the murder of her musician husband Taliep Petersen while in 2007 Ellen Pakkies received a non-custodial sentence for murdering her methamphetamine (‘tik’) addicted son. These women have gripped public attention because their acts were judged within courts of law as “calculated” and “intentional” and therefore contrary to popular conceptions of women who kill as either part of an anti-social political anarchism, or as those who kill violent partners, after years of abuse, in self-defence.

However, the image of the woman who kills for financial gain or who intentionally kills a child, challenges (and indeed violates) societal conceptions of stereotypical femininity, constructed as nurturing, vulnerable to abuse herself, and peace-loving. The issue of women’s violence makes us uncomfortable as it challenges the normative social fabric and causes us to confront our beliefs about polarised gendered norms.

In the last two decades women’s violence has increasingly received empirical attention by researchers in the Northern hemisphere because of the proliferation in arrest statistics for women in countries such as the United States of America (Melton & Belknap, 2003; West, 2007). Consequently, a range of studies have been conducted in an attempt to understand the phenomenon of women’s violence in various spheres (Swan & Snow, 2003; Miller & Meloy 2006; Spinelli, 2001). Despite the growing numbers of women soldiers and women participants in “violent unrest” (such as Rwanda’s 1994 genocide) in different contexts, there have been limited attempts to explore women’s violence on the African continent (Adinkrah, 2007; Tibatemwa-Ekirikubinza, 1999; Pretorius and Botha, 2009). In South Africa in particular there is a dearth of empirical research.

Given the high rates of gender-based and other forms of violence, it is understandable that substantial local research has focused on violence perpetrated by men (Boonzaier and de la Rey, 2004; Jewkes & Abrahams, 2002). However, given that currently 1020 women are incarcerated for violent crimes and 337 are awaiting trial in South African correctional facilities, we cannot ignore the reality of women's violence (downloaded from <http://www.dcs.gov.za/webstats>, 20 August 2010). While it may be argued that women's low levels of violent perpetration do not warrant feminist attention, I think that failure to explore this simply reinforces stereotypes about the meaning and shape of "gendered violence" and adds to the sensationalisation and demonisation of *violent women* in media and popular discourse. As a feminist researcher I am interested in the ways in which notions of "violent women" have been constructed and how this leads to the perpetuation of unhelpful discourses on femininity and violence.

Discourses of women's violence

In my own review of the international literature I have identified three main discourses which underpin the mainstream empirical work in the last ten years. I will briefly discuss how the literature has constructed violent women as pathological (mad), victimised (sad) or deviant (bad) so as to highlight how they embody particular ideas of femininity.

Mad women

The image of the mentally disordered woman who kills is one of the predominant constructions in the literature and draws on a discourse of madness which has historically been utilised to explain and censure women's aberrant behaviour (Busfield, 1996; Chesler, 1997; Comack & Brickey, 2007; Lerman, 2005; Ussher, 2005). In attempting to establish the aetiology of women's lethal violence, the psychological and psychiatric literature has framed these acts within a psychopathological discourse. The focus on inherent biological or psychological dysfunction is seen to provide tangible evidence for 'uncharacteristic' violence – thus violence is medicalised and is viewed as the outcome of this dysfunction. Consequently a range of studies have been conducted so as to establish both the incidence and nature of various mental disorders present in women who are incarcerated for murder. In particular, these studies have focused on establishing the role that aberrant personality characteristics play in accounting for women's murderous acts

such that particular *types* of women can be identified (Putkonen, Collander, Honkasalo & Lönnqvist, 2001; Rossegger, Wetli, Urbaniok, Elbert, Cortoni & Endrass; 2009; Verona and Carbonell; 2000; Weizmann-Henelius, Viemerö & Eronen, 2003). It is significant that in profiling the type of woman who kills, the literature often concludes that masculine traits can be identified. The construction of the masculinised woman provides a plausible explanation for her acts – in this way the masculine-feminine binary is maintained and violence and aggression remain within the masculine realm. In addition, diagnostic labels also provide support for the notion of women’s psychological fragility thereby reinforcing the binary.

While the construction of the personality disordered woman has provided plausible explanations for the killing of strangers and intimate partners, child killing represents the breaking of one of the central societal taboos. It is significant therefore that empirical work has focused on reinforcing the idea that women who kill their children often suffer from serious mental disorders. Consequently, psychotic disorders have formed the basis for most of these investigations thereby reinforcing notions that a gross impairment of psychological functioning can explain these acts. Thus *filicidal mothers* are not culpable as their acts are constructed as unintentional thereby maintaining the idealisation of motherhood. This “psychiatrisation” (pathologisation) of women’s violence (Maden, 1997, p.245) denies women’s agency and reinforces the gender stereotype of *filicidal mothers* as *mad*. In a similar vein Ussher (1991) implores

“a diagnosis of madness denotes an absence of reason, this implies that women who commit crimes, who are violent, are not in control of their senses. Is this because criminality, violence or aggression cannot be reconciled with our conceptualisation of femininity, and thus the woman *must be mad?*” (p.172)

Victimised women

A significant proportion of the literature has focused on how women’s victimisation by their partners has been shown to be the primary aetiological factor in their perpetration of lethal and non-lethal violence. In the 1980s the construction of the “*victimised woman*” drew attention to women’s experiences in violent intimate relationships thereby highlighting intimate partner violence as a major social problem (Comack & Brickey, 2007). While on one hand these early feminist attempts were laudable, this construction

has entrenched stereotypical notions of women as helpless, weak and passive. Walker (1984, 2009), for example, showed how repeated exposure to violence combined with periods of caring and affection, left women feeling unable to exercise any agency in their lives. This “learned helplessness” (Walker, 1984, 2009) therefore explained why *battered women* were unable to leave their abusers. While the *battered woman* construct has been criticised for rendering women impotent and devoid of agency (Ferraro, 2003), the image of the victimised women continues to pervade our understanding of women’s perpetration in violent relationships.

Since the 1990’s increasing empirical attention has focused on quantitatively assessing bi-directional violence albeit to provide support for “gender symmetry” in levels of non-lethal perpetration (Archer, 2004; Brush, 1990; Straus & Gelles, 1986; Straus, 2005). However, this body of research has been criticised for equating the nature, frequency and severity of men and women’s violence (Loseke and Kurz, 2005). Consequently, by focusing on the duality of the victim-perpetrator identity, researchers such as Dasgupta (2002) and Swan and Snow (2003, 2006) have argued that women’s acts of resistance mostly occur in response to victimisation by partners or to protect their children. Thus violence is construed as serving a protective function and is therefore located within the legal discourse of self-defence (Dasgupta, 2002; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Muftic, Bouffard & Bouffard, 2007). While it is significant that several studies have established that some women perpetrate violence in the absence of provocation by their partners (Byrd & Davis, 2009; Swan & Snow, 2003), researchers have been loath to explore the meanings of these acts outside of the discourse of victimisation. Thus terms such as “abused aggressor” (Swan & Snow, 2003) have been coined to describe women who initiate violence – this has been done under the pretext of acknowledging the deleterious effects of battering on women’s psychological functioning. This example illustrates that the *battered woman* discourse continues to permeate mainstream understandings of women perpetrators thereby perpetuating notions of women as devoid of agency. I would argue that such constructions are extremely limiting as they entrench stereotypical ideas of femininity and constrain our understanding of violence.

As discussed above, the *battered woman* discourse has been heavily critiqued by feminists and non-feminists. However, Rothenberg (2002) argues that it still maintains “cultural authority” in that it provides a plausible framework within which to understand the actions of *victimised women*.

This is probably most apparent in instances where women kill their abusive intimate partners - these acts are contextualised in terms of a very real threat (Walker, 1992, 2006; Ferraro, 2003). While a woman's right to defend herself is not at issue here, it is significant that she continues to be constructed as a victim of men's violence. This denies agency and assumes that her violent response is somehow beyond her control. This loss of control is not consistent with stereotypical femininity and is viewed as being indicative of her inability to exercise restraint (Campbell, 1993). This inability can be linked to the effects of victimisation thereby removing culpability. It can therefore be seen that the construction of the *battered woman* draws on the discourses of victimisation and psychopathology in that it describes a woman who is psychologically impaired because of her experiences of victimisation. Consequently, this construction can be offered as a plausible defence in criminal trials - however, in doing so, society's "rigid cultural gender polarity" (Gilbert, 2002: 1282) is maintained as the subtext is that *normal* women do not perpetrate violence. While I am arguing for an acknowledgement of agency in our conceptualisations of violence, I do realise that the legal implications are severe. While I have not resolved this double bind, I do feel that as a feminist who challenges the victim status accorded to *abused women*, I am even more uncomfortable with the ways in which psychiatric discourse is often expediently adopted to explain women's violent actions.

Deviant women

While *victim* and *mad* discourses focus on intra-individual deficits, the discourse of deviance focuses on the impact of the environment on women's levels of perpetration. Structural factors such as race, class and regional location are held to interact so as to provide a context which predisposes women to violence. While mainstream criminological theorising has been criticised for marginalising women (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004; Smart, 1995), empirical work has focused on establishing whether the criminogenic factors which account for men's violence can also be applied to women. The investigation of homicide statistics in various jurisdictions has formed the basis of these quantitative studies and researchers have focused on establishing the structural correlates of violence (DeWees & Parker, 2003; Schwartz, 2006; Steffensmeier & Haynie, 2000). Large scale aggregate studies have therefore succeeded in profiling violent women so as to highlight *those sectors* of society which may be at risk. While to some extent these studies

point to the ways in which women are marginalised in society, they do not critically examine women's gendered experiences. In addition, by focusing on women's positionality as a causal mechanism in their violence, these studies run the risk of stigmatising marginalised women such that violence becomes synonymous with being poor, unemployed and Black. Therefore as several American studies have illustrated (Gauthier & Bankston, 2004; Scott & Davies, 2002; Pollock, Mullings & Crouch, 2006), the discourse of deviance is one which plausibly accounts for Black women's violence. These macro-level analyses serve to entrench societal beliefs about the positive correlation between race and violence without questioning the social forces which construct people in particular ways. In addition the aggregate data which underpin these studies ignore the subjective experiences of women and construct them as being products of their environments. Consequently the notion of agency is ignored.

A motivation for a feminist analysis of women's violence

While each discourse outlined above constructs particular conceptions of the aetiology of violence, the common thread which runs through all of this work is that violence is inconsistent with femininity. In this way the feminine-masculine dichotomy is maintained and violence remains framed within a masculine discourse. In addition, the categorisation of violence within these frameworks contributes to the silences around women's experiences as perpetrators thereby continuing to construct these acts as devoid of agency.

Given the shortcomings of the mainstream endeavours outlined above we are faced with the question as to the utility of a feminist analysis of women's violence. Kelly argues that it is imperative that we engage in empirical work in this area as we need to challenge the impetus of non-feminist endeavours in entrenching stereotypical notions of femininity and violence. She argues that a feminist framework which starts from the premise that gender is a "social construct" and "which recognises the variability with which gendered selves and individual biography combine, *can (my emphasis)* locate women's violence within its existing framework" (Kelly, 1996: 37). Thus a systematic analysis of women's violence is not antithetical to the feminist project. In fact, as has been argued, it will add to feminist endeavours focused on challenging and dislocating dominant discourses which stereotype women and men's behaviour and which emphasise the differences between them (Day, Gough & Macfadden, 2003; Gilbert, 2002). In addition a feminist analysis is pivotal

in challenging prevailing notions which construct women as passive and non-violent and which reinforce images of women as pathological victims who have no agency. Gilbert therefore argues for a “multilayered discourse of women and violence that will allow women to present and speak for themselves in such a way as to portray the complexities and realities of their lives” (Gilbert, 2002: 1296).

In the last decade Northern hemisphere feminists have qualitatively explored women’s violence in a variety of ways. Some studies have focused on exploring the subjective meanings which women attach to their perpetration of lethal and/or non-lethal violence. These studies have sought to elicit the discourses implicit in women’s narratives so as to ascertain how these contribute to the construction of femininities in various contexts (Comack & Brickey; Day, Gough & McFadden, 2003; Pollack, 2007; Wesely 2006). Other studies have utilised textual analyses to explore the ways in which the media constructs *violent women*. These studies have found that textual representations of women have largely drawn on traditional discourses of aberrant femininities thereby reinforcing images of women as mad, bad or victimised (Morrissey, 2008; Ringrose, 2006). Given the ways in which this body of work has sought to destabilise existing discourses of femininity and violence, I therefore argue for a feminist analysis of women’s violence within a South African context. In doing so I also argue that a focus on violence can contribute to our understandings of the construction of femininities within our context.

South African women’s narratives of violence

My positionality as black woman, a mother, a wife, a daughter, a sister, a feminist academic and a clinical psychologist (amongst others) has contributed to my interest in exploring women’s violence. As a daughter, I lost my father to violence and as black South African woman I am concerned about the ways in which blackness is often equated with criminality and violence – thus the seeds for my work were sown a long time ago and in many ways the research project provided me with the opportunity to put (some) of those questions to rest.

My doctoral research has focused on exploring the subjectivities of women who are currently incarcerated for violent crime in a local correctional facility. As such it adds to feminist analyses which are concerned with challenging mainstream discourses of femininity and violence and to my knowledge is one

of the first local attempts at exploring women's violent perpetration outside of the domestic sphere.

The research questions which underpinned my study were as follows:

1. What meanings do women attach to their act(s) of violence?
2. How do women's narratives of violence oppose or take up socially constructed gendered norms?
3. What identities do women construct in their narratives of violence?

Since I am interested in the construction of subjectivities, I used a narrative framework for my study. Narrative as both theory and method provides a means of exploring the construction of identity within the context of the life story (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998). In fact, as McAdams argues, "identity is a life story" and involves many "evolving narratives of the self". These narratives are organised around plots and themes which in turn function to tell a story about the self. The purpose of the life story is to provide an "integrative narrative of self that provides modern life with some modicum of psychosocial unity and purpose". (McAdams, 2001: 100). Within this framework, I conducted open-ended narrative interviews with 24 women who were serving sentences ranging from eight years to life imprisonment for crimes ranging from armed robbery to murder.

Since I was interested in exploring the identities which women constructed in their life stories, I paid attention to both the form and content of their narratives. Narrative form refers to the way in which a story is structured such that it conveys a particular story about the self. Narrative content refers to the actual substance of stories which pertain to the 'facts' of the individual's life as s/he constructs it (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998). Form and content are intricately intertwined such that the content which an individual uses to tell a story shapes it so as to tell a story about the self. While each life story is different, McAdams (2001) argues that it is also reflects the individual's positionality – thus structural forces such as race, class, gender and the discourses which underpin them, influence both the form and content of narratives.

In reading through the stories which the women shared with me, I identified three narrative forms which they used to convey stories about the self.

Conversion narratives

Some women told stories in which the protagonist was transformed from the bad woman into the good woman. The central theme of these conversion

narratives was one of redemption (Esterberg, 2002) in which criminal convictions were necessary elements for transformation. These narratives started off by providing micronarratives of badness – thus women told stories about their violent and aggressive behaviour towards other people. Since violence was constructed as a normal response in conflictual situations this provided a foundation for understanding why they had committed their crimes. In this way, a plausible trajectory was set up as their violent acts were inevitable outcomes of bad behaviour.

While inherent badness was a core theme in the macronarrative, women also referred to external influences which could account for their actions. Thus associating with bad friends and abusing alcohol were constructed as influencing them in a negative manner. While on one hand, this exacerbated their badness, the focus on external influences also provided some mitigation – thus some of the blame could be borne by their friends and alcohol and they (the women) were not solely culpable. The focus on the self pre-incarceration served the purpose of providing a contrast to the self post-incarceration. In order to negate the identities of bad girl, murderer, criminal which had been ascribed, women constructed identities of goodness by recounting how incarceration had saved them from themselves. Thus they told stories about becoming good women in prison and how this had led them to resolving to desist from violence. Thus incarceration was central to this transformation and they welcomed it as it had been celestially ordained. Conversion narratives therefore enabled women to make sense of their violence (and their lives) by attributing it to predestination – in this way they were able to coherently integrate various aspects of their life experiences in a meaningful way.

Stability narratives

In this group of narratives women constructed their violence as temporary aberrations of their behaviour. In essence the violence was constructed as out of character with the individual's "normal" behaviour and the central theme of these stories was the constancy of the protagonist's moral fibre over time (Presser, 2004). Thus protagonists in stability narratives were essentially good women who identified very closely with stereotypical femininity. These stories focused on their roles as wives and mothers and the ways in which they were completely devoted to their families. In addition, their narratives also highlighted their experiences of victimisation both in childhood and adulthood thereby drawing attention away from their identities as perpetrators. The

construction of victimhood as central to their identities as women reinforced their impotent, passive natures which in turn emphasised their femininity. Images of respectability also permeated their stories particularly in relation to their crimes – in these micronarratives the protagonists tried to avoid extreme provocation by their victims or sought to do the “right thing” by notifying the police of the crimes. In this way, the high moral character of the protagonists could not be questioned. Interestingly, these narrators did not attach much significance to incarceration in relation to their stories of the self – instead, they focused on the unjustness of their sentences and emphasised the differences between themselves (as good women) and other inmates who deserved to be incarcerated. In this way they consolidated their narratives of “the good woman” who was unjustly punished.

Incoherent narratives

As discussed previously, identity is constructed through the life story and provides the individual with means of telling a story about the self. In the narrative forms discussed above, the narrators were able to construct coherent accounts by organising micronarratives around central themes thereby providing plausible accounts of violent acts as well as the self. However, the majority of the women whom I interviewed provided incoherent narratives (McAdams, 2006) in which they were unable to link life experiences in meaningful ways such that plausible causal trajectories were set up (Habermas and Bluck, 2000). The ways in which these narratives were structured suggested that these women were unable to integrate their experiences into a meaningful whole which led to these being unable to make “psychological sense” (McAdams, 2006: 114). Since the lack of thematic coherence (Habermas and Bluck, 2000) was evident in these narratives, I focused on the ways in which the form and content of the stories contributed to its incoherence. These narrators were unable to successfully locate the violent acts within the explanatory context of the life story in spite of various attempts to do so. Some narrators attempted to make causal connections between their life experiences but were unable to sustain these connections – consequently, the plot lines were thin and the causal trajectories were not convincing. Other narrators provided accounts of their crimes but did not adopt an interpretive stance so as to indicate the meaning which they had attributed to their acts. A third sub-group of narrators defocused from their crimes by focusing on other aspects of their lives which suggested that they were unable to integrate

the violence into their macronarratives of the self. While the ways in which crime narratives were conveyed differed amongst this group of narrators, the strategies which they adopted illustrated their inability to successfully integrate their life experiences into a meaningful whole.

Conclusion

From the above it can be seen that the monolithic *violent woman* does not exist; instead women construct various identities in narrating stories of violence. This was pertinently illustrated in those instances where coherent macronarratives could not be constructed - these narratives illustrated the fluidity of the construction of identity or identities, a process which these narrators, in particular, seemed to be grappling with.

In exploring the construction of subjectivities within narratives, my work moves away from mainstream thinking around violent women. Instead it provides a way of understanding how violent women construct themselves and illustrates the ways in which prevailing discourses of femininity and violence influence these constructions.

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