

(Re)Gendering Violence: Men, Masculinities and Violence

Kate Seymour¹

Abstract

This paper focuses on constructions of violence, in particular the ways in which violence is constructed as a social problem in and through policy discourses. Inspired by an earlier study into the ways in which practitioners, engaged in work with men who are violent towards their female partners, construct and understand violence, this paper highlights the extent to which societal/cultural beliefs regarding gender and violence are embedded at the levels of policy, 'expert' knowledge(s), and practices. Illustrating the exercise of (gendered) power through knowledge in shaping Australian government/agency responses and initiatives, it is argued that this has critical implications for the ways in which 'gender(ed) violence' is conceptualised, named and addressed.

Introduction

This paper has its genesis in a 2006 exploratory study into the ways in which practitioners, engaged in work with men who are violent towards their female partners, construct and understand violence. In drawing attention to professional constructions of violence, this study, aspects of which have been presented in other forums (see Seymour 2009a, 2009b, 2009c), highlighted discourses – and discourses of gender and violence in particular – as crucial to understanding societal responses to violence. Here, by treating the practitioner accounts as 'indications of the discourses at play' (Alvesson 2002:14), rather than 'just' the personal beliefs of individuals, I extend this earlier analysis, focusing in particular on the ways in which discourses of violence rely upon, and reproduce, particular gender constructions through reference to relevant Australian (federal) policy. Thus this paper draws attention to the ways in which certain representations of violence are problematised in and through social policy, illustrating the exercise of power, through knowledge and expertise, in shaping Australian government responses.

A significant finding of the 2006 study was the extent to which the participating practitioners' understandings of violence was based upon foundational, yet implicit, assumptions about the nature of violence and its equation with men and men's behaviour; as something that *men* do. While this cultural conflation of masculinity and violence (Morgan 1987) has been widely acknowledged, it is particularly significant in the context of professional, 'expert', conceptualisations of violence. The participants also tended to dichotomise male violence as either 'generic' or 'domestic': generic violence, in this perspective, was something that men do to other men and seen as, to a large extent, normal or at least inevitable and unremarkable (for men). In contrast, domestic violence was understood as something that (some) men do to women² and as, unequivocally, unfair and unacceptable. Crucially, whereas domestic violence was associated with gender and gendered power, with an emphasis on imbalances in or abuse of power, generic violence was conceptualised as non-gendered, or not specifically gendered, with the implication that violence between men is 'fair game'. It is thus clear that in this context, as has been observed elsewhere, men, unlike women, were granted

¹ School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, NSW.

² While beyond the scope of this paper, the implications of this 'closed definition' (Milner 2004) of domestic/gendered violence for the obscuration of violence within same-sex relationships is equally significant. It seems the assumption that domestic violence is a 'phenomenon peculiar to the heterosexual community', as was noted by Vickers in 1996, continues to form the basis for domestic violence discourse in Australia.

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a special status as un-gendered beings except when their behaviour involved women. That is, because gender was associated with women (Powley and Pearson 2007), gender mattered when women were the victims of violence but, it seems, was neither acknowledged nor deemed significant when violence was between men. Here I argue that these individual accounts reflect broader discourses, in particular the inseparability of discourses of gender, violence and power/knowledge, and function to 'mask the power relations that determine what acts will qualify as "violence"', thereby naturalising the belief that 'violence is the exclusive province of men' (Anderson and Umberson 2001:367).

Problematizing Violence

Whilst seemingly straightforward and self-evident the concept of violence is profoundly ambiguous: as observed by Stanko (2003), 'what violence *means* is and will always be fluid, not fixed' (p. 3, emphasis in original). Different theories about violence 'start from very different assumptions about the nature of violence, gender, and men' (Hearn and Whitehead 2006:41). The dichotomised construction of violence, as evident in the earlier study, therefore has important implications for the ways in which violence is, and isn't, named, identified and addressed. Firstly, it highlights the resilience of culturally dominant beliefs regarding men and masculinity, women and femininity, in particular the association of masculinity with power and femininity with passivity, contextualised within the 'cultural fact' (Eardley 1995:136) of women's victimisation. In short, the violent subject is man. Secondly, it positions men's violence as, in itself, unremarkable; leaving untouched the 'natural' association of masculinity and violence. The focus therefore shifts to a concern with the *control* of violence; that is, limiting it to particular contexts and victims: simply put, men are fair game and women are off limits. As observed by Hearn and McKie (2010:140) 'men are supposed to know when and where and to whom they may be violent'. From this perspective, men convicted of violent offences are those who have transgressed these limits, allowing their 'normal' aggression to escalate into the criminal realm. Thus some forms of violence are transformed into *problem* violence and claimed as the 'territory' of particular professional groups.

Following Foucault's (2007:141) 'history of problematizations', exploring the transformation of some forms of violence into problem violence, as observed in this study, can be seen as constituting an inquiry into the *problematization* of violence. The defining and labeling of violence is a 'social, not a natural, process' (Hearn 1996:29) which enables it to be represented as 'understandable' in certain circumstances. Accordingly the (violent) subject is 'defined and transformed' (Foucault 2007:151): some subjects are transformed into violent subjects and hence into objects of knowledge. The dichotomisation of violence into 'acceptable'/non-problematic (most male-male violence) and unacceptable (both male-female, or 'domestic', violence and 'abnormal'/excessive male-male violence) categories is a fascinating illustration of the ways in which 'group[s] of obstacles and difficulties' are transformed into social problems and provides the opportunity to track 'how the different solutions to a problem have been constructed; but also how these different solutions result from a specific form of problematization' (Foucault 1984:389).

'Solutions' to the Problem of Violence

As evident in this study and in the broader literature and policy context, because domestic violence is positioned as a distinct behaviour, it is seen as requiring specific intervention. In contrast generic (male-to-male) violence is, in a sense, everywhere but nowhere. Interventions relating to violence consist primarily of mainstream 'anger management' programs or, at the other end of the spectrum, referral for 'specialist' psychological intervention—this reserved for 'abnormal' (excessive or 'un-controlled/able') displays of violence. Positioned as a specialised field within psychology and, less often, psychiatry, violence intervention emphasises (scientific) authority and expertise in relation to individual pathology and dangerousness. Domestic violence work however is generally undertaken by the 'applied knowledge' professions (Rose, O'Malley and Valverde 2006), including social workers, probation officers, and health workers. Whereas psychological intervention focuses more narrowly on individual abnormal behaviour, domestic violence work tends to embody a structural approach, focusing on

'sociocultural belief systems and structures' within the context of 'unequal relations of [gendered] power within society' (NMCHS 1997:19). Thus whilst gender is the fundamental basis for this work, the tendency within psychology is to conceptualise gender as sex difference and, hence, as an 'independent variable'. Gender is thereby reduced 'to the behaviour of individual women and men' (Anderson 2005:855), reinforcing essentialist notions of gender difference and implying that 'individual sex *causes* violent behaviour' (Anderson 2005:863, emphasis added).

Policy and the Australian Context

Bacchi (1999, 2000) is a key advocate for analysing policy as discourse, arguing that paying 'attention to the ways in which "social problems" or policy problems get "created" in discourse' (2000:48) is critical in order to expose, and thereby challenge, the 'silences in problematizations' (Bacchi 1999:50). Social 'problems', in Bacchi's (2000:48) view, are "'created" or "given shape" in the very policy proposals that are offered as "responses"', or, in Foucault's terms, 'solutions'. That is, governments don't simply respond to already existing 'problems', but rather, by 'constituting the shape of the issues to be considered' (Bacchi 1999:50), construct the meaning, significance, and indeed, the very existence of problems. Thus in analysing policies it is necessary to see policies as 'constituting competing interpretations or representations of political issues', rather than as straightforward 'solutions' to 'problems' (Bacchi 1999:2). My approach here, inspired by the work of Bacchi and others, is to examine policy as a means through which to 'probe processes sustaining gendered inequities and hierarchical relations among diverse women and men' (Hearn and McKie 2010:149-50). In the current context, I will show how these contribute to a 'policy lens' that remains focused on women whilst averting its gaze in relation to the 'discourses and practices [of] men and violence' (Hearn and McKie 2010:147).

Australia lacks a coordinated and overarching policy approach to violence prevention. Responses to violence are not recognised as the responsibility of any one Minister and, complicated by Australia's federal structure, there is no discernable 'logic' regarding responsible sectors/bodies in each state and territory. Thus it is 'not possible to speak with any authority about "Australian violence prevention policies"' (Junger et al 2007:330). It is nonetheless evident that primary policy themes in relation to violence in Australia include violence in Indigenous communities (mainly concentrating on family violence and sexual assault), women and children's safety (focusing on domestic/family violence), and developmental education through schools (anti-bullying programs, 'positive' relationships, etc). While there has also been interest in alcohol-related violence, such as that in and around licensed venues, the policy emphasis appears to have been on policing and control, for example, in relation to closing hours, licensing conditions, and so on. Violence in Indigenous communities seems also to have been approached from a policing/control perspective, the most stark example being the then federal government's 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response, but there is also a range of programs, services, and supports directed at both men (behaviour change) and women and children (as victims) within the health, correctional and justice contexts. For the purpose of this paper, the main federal policy areas identified as having a substantial focus on addressing and/or responding to violence are those relating to health, schools, and women's safety, as discussed below.

Health

At a national level, male and female health policy aims to 'ensure that specific health needs of both men and women are addressed' (DHA 2010a). The National Women's Health Policy (NWHP), released 29 December 2010, builds upon the commitment of the previous NWHP (1989) to build an 'environment where more can be done to ensure that all Australian women have better health and health care' (DHA 2010b: p. 7). The National Male Health Policy (NMHP), however, released in May 2010, is the first such policy in Australia and 'provides a framework for improving the health of all males and achieving equal health outcomes for population groups of males at risk of poor health' (DHA 2010c).

Each of these policy documents positions men and women, as subjects, in distinct ways. The Consultation Discussion Paper for the NWHP, for example, addresses women as ‘mothers, grandmothers, sisters, daughters, wives and partners’ (DHA 2009: iii), whereas the NMHP, in addition to these familial roles, presents a more expansive view of men as providers, carers, ‘uncles, friends and role models’ (DHA 2010c:10). Further, whilst women’s health is linked to the ‘health and wellbeing of families and whole communities, through [women’s] caring, nurturing and educative roles’ (DHA 2009:2), the NMHP emphasises men’s ‘varied and important roles in Australian society’ and their contribution to a ‘wide range of community activities [...] and in the paid and unpaid workforce’ (DHA 2010c:10). Men’s ‘good’ health is associated with ‘employment and financial security’ (DHA 2010c:22) and a focus on men as ‘healthy workers’ is especially prominent and linked with productivity, reduced absenteeism, and so on. In contrast women’s employment and associated health needs are all but overlooked in the NWHP Discussion Paper. The way that each policy deals with violence, however, is of particular interest. Whilst the NWHP Discussion Paper positions ‘intimate partner/family violence’ as a key ‘health risk factor’ for women (DHA 2009:6), no reference is made to violence, in any context, in the NMHP. Given men’s overrepresentation as both instigators (ABS 2008) and victims (ABS 2010) of violence, this is difficult to credit.

Education

The National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF), available on the Department for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) website, ‘provides an agreed national approach to help schools and their communities address issues of bullying, harassment, violence, and child abuse and neglect’. It was endorsed in 2003 and is currently under review. The NSSF explicitly links school bullying with subsequent (adult) aggression, violent offending and domestic violence, and can therefore be considered a key strategy of primary violence prevention. Interestingly, however, it clearly differentiates violence and bullying, stating that ‘[u]like bullying and harassment, violence is not necessarily associated with an imbalance of power. It can occur between people of equal power ... It implies extreme forcefulness, usually (but not always) of a physical kind’ (DEEWR 2003:12). In contrast, and mirroring the dividing up of ‘violence’ (‘real’ violence) and ‘domestic violence’ (‘gendered’ violence) discussed earlier, bullying is defined as involving a ‘more powerful person or group oppressing a less powerful person or group, often on the grounds of [gender and other] “difference”’ (DEEWR 2003:11). Despite this recognition of the importance of power and (unequal) power relations, it is recommended that the focus of school-based programs be on ‘positive and healthy relationships’, including communication, assertiveness, anger management and skill building. Hence in this context power is depicted as a personal quality/possession and bullying as an inter/personal issue linked to poor communication and conflict, thereby shifting focus away from the social context and structural conditions of gender and power.

Women’s and Children’s Safety

Time for action: The National Council’s Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2009-2021 (NCRVAWC 2009) was finalised in March 2009 and presented to the Prime Minister in April 2009. The 204-page plan provides a ‘framework for social change through the achievement of six outcomes’ (NCRVAWC 2009:7), namely that communities are safe and free from violence, relationships are respectful, services meet the needs of women and their children, responses are just, perpetrators stop their violence, and systems work together effectively. While acknowledging the importance of ‘obvious and covert expressions of inequality in the community’ (NCRVAWC 2009:37), the plan does so only in relation to sexual assault, ‘domestic and family violence’, thus failing to consider the links between power differentials and other forms and manifestations of violence. Most significantly, the plan firmly positions men as agents, that is, as either (potentially or actually) ‘violent’ or ‘non-violent’, the latter being responsible for ‘efforts to end violence against women’ (NCRVAWC 2009:44). The plan places particular emphasis on ‘perpetrator’ responsibility (outcomes 4 and 6) and, in the neo-liberal tradition, individualises violence by constructing it as a rational and deliberate choice. In doing so, it draws upon men’s ‘masculine’ qualities, of strength, rationality and control, as the means through which men should manage, or control, their violence. Women, in contrast, are joined with children in a

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position of victimhood, again as either actual or potential victims, forever vulnerable to (some) men's violence. A strong focus on education in relation to 'respectful relationships' and associated skill development, particularly for children and young people, mirrors to a large extent the tone of the NSSF, as discussed above.

Gender, Bodies and Violence

An essentialist view of bodies, based upon a rigid binary of gender and gendered bodies, clearly underpins current Australian policy approaches. Men's bodies, in this perspective, are (naturally) 'strong and impenetrable'; women's bodies are vulnerable – or, in McCaughey's (1993:37) terms, 'breakable [and] takeable'. Masculinity is linked to men's capacity for violence and their potential dangerousness. Women's safety is inextricably linked to men and, in particular, to men's willingness to control, protect and defend. Hollander's (2001) work, in drawing attention to the centrality of beliefs about vulnerability and dangerousness to the construction of gender, is instructive here, highlighting the essential relationship between gender, difference and violence. Vulnerability and dangerousness are embodied and, as such, inseparable from (embodied) social positionings; thus gender, age, race, and ethnicity are 'translated into vulnerability through the body' (Hollander 2001:105). As seen in these policy documents, the association of masculinity with competitiveness, control, aggression and violence is largely unquestioned: the 'natural' association of masculinity with violence implies that to be a man is to be violent but that such violence should be controlled/able. Vulnerability, as observed Hollander, is 'not part of shared cultural conceptions of masculinity' (Hollander 2001:85). Crucially, because masculinity is seen as *belonging* to men the solution proposed in much of the 'gendered violence' (read: 'domestic violence') literature, is to redefine masculinity. Such an approach, however, as observed by Greig (2001), remains within a 'binary logic of gender' and identity which is inherently violent in its 'definition of self through the negation of the Other' (Greig 2001:10). By focusing on the possibility of 'new and improved' masculinity/ies, the oppositional construction of man/woman is simply maintained, thus reaffirming the 'necessity (and violence) of that negation' (Greig 2001:10).

Both men *and* women are 'produced by gender' (Greig 2001:4). In the policy context, however, the term 'gender' continues to be used to refer to women or to designate women's interests and concerns, a practice that, to a large extent, is mirrored in much mainstream literature³. This is evident in the construction of violence as 'gendered' when it is directed at women and children but, as claimed in a recent (feminist) criminology text, as offering 'little basis for a consideration of gender' (Wykes and Welsh 2009:5) when it is between men. Indeed attention to men's violence against other men, in and of itself, is relatively rare; rather the tendency has been for research and policy to focus on the particular contexts or circumstances (see, for example, Carrington, McIntosh and Scott 2010) within which this occurs, for example, as indicative of (public) disorder, as interfering with the workings of the 'night-time economy' (see, for example, Tomsen 2010), and so on. Most significantly, violence is depicted as a manifestation of the problems presented by particular groups of people and from which other groups need to be protected. In this context, men's (gendered) experiences of and engagements with violence—including as victims of other men's violence—tend to have been disregarded in the policy focus on 'gendered violence', thus overlooking a critical opportunity to explore the links between men's violence against men and men's violence against women and children. An alternative approach, as advocated by theorists such as Greig (2001), is required. Focusing on the violence of identity and identification offers the potential for a richer and deeper understanding of the ways in which violence both 'produces and is produced by the gender order' (Greig 2001:18), thereby connecting the 'violence of gender with the violence between individual men and women' (Greig 2001:10).

³ While significant exceptions exist (see, for example, Connell 2000, 2002; Hearn 1998, 2010), I argue that this has endured as a remarkably persistent tendency within mainstream academic (Sharp and Hefley 2007) and policy discourses.

Conclusion

This study raises critical questions regarding the ways in which the problem of violence is constructed and thereby governed. Power, as the exercise of government, is exercised through the ways in which 'certain persons, things or forms of conduct come to be seen as problematic' (Rose 1999:xi). The critique offered here, though cursory at this stage, demonstrates the power effects, as evident in Australian policy documents, through which 'certain subjects become objects of knowledge and at the same time objects of domination' (Foucault 2007:153). Hence, as noted by Stanko (2003:12), '[n]ot all violence is condemned; not all forms of violence are punished; [and] not all forms of violence receive widespread disapproval'. In partitioning off certain behaviours as representing particular types of problem, and particular types of people ('perpetrators', 'violent offenders') and the 'territory' of some professional groups and not others, vital opportunities for discussion, debate, and knowledge sharing are lost. The arbitrary division between, in Sanchez-Hucles and Dutton's terms, 'societal and domestic violence' must be challenged by instead focusing on 'where these areas overlap and where they are distinct' (Sanchez-Hucles and Dutton 1999:203). Further, I argue that it is crucial to move beyond a focus on the gendered nature of violence, to instead think about the ways in which understandings of violence reflect, embed, and reinforce gendered discourses and the implications this has for the ways in which 'violence' is—and isn't—defined, identified, explained and addressed. This demands the (re)gendering of men; a particularly pressing issue for criminology which, in its relative neglect of men's experiences of violence, has failed to theorise men's overwhelming involvement in violence, other than to say it is so. As was observed some time ago by Stanko and Hobdell, the 'image of the invulnerable man is embedded within criminology theory' (Stanko and Hobdell 1993:401): it seems that little has changed in this regard.

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