Understanding Women’s Responses to Domestic Violence

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ABSTRACT
This article examines women’s responses to violence perpetrated by an intimate male partner. Qualitative data gathered from interviews with abused women who were part of a wider evaluation study of programmes for violent men is presented. Findings reveal that understanding women’s responses to violence prompts practitioners to be: mindful of the complexity of violent relationships; aware of the strategies of resistance which women deploy in order to stop/reduce the violence; and cognisant of the interconnectedness of women’s and men’s responses to men’s violence against women.

KEY WORDS: domestic abuse, domestic violence, men’s responses to abuse, resistance, women’s responses to abuse
INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s when violence against women in the home was ‘rediscovered’, a largely feminist literature identifying the failure of social workers to provide effective services to abused women and their children has grown and a multitude of criticisms of social work policy and practice have been identified, including the reluctance of practitioners to intervene in ‘private’ family matters except where concern for children is evident; a willingness to privilege men’s explanations for the violence over women’s; and a preference for encouraging women rather than men to change (Charles, 1995; Dobash et al., 1985; Hague and Malos, 1993; M. C. Williams and M. Kiernan, 1993; Maynard, 1985; Mullender, 1996). The position for women from ethnic minorities and women with disabilities has been even more difficult (Imam, 1999; Mama, 1989). While many of the above criticisms are still valid, the 1990s witnessed positive changes in the development of services for abused women and their children (Hague, 1999; Hester, 2000; McGee, 2000). Importantly, feminist ideas have exerted a powerful influence on developments in practice and, while this has been welcomed, ‘the territorial encroachment of feminist discourse within social work’ (Featherstone and Trinder, 1997: 148), specifically in relation to domestic violence, has also been problematized, adding even more complexity to the social work task of effective intervention.

Notwithstanding recent and welcome developments, it is widely acknowledged that much work is still to be done (Hague, 1999; Harwin and Barron, 2000; Humphries, 1999). Related to this, service provision in the form of programmes for male perpetrators of domestic violence has grown significantly in recent years, provoking contentious debates about orientation, effectiveness and consequences (Hague, 1999; Lupton, 1994; Mullender, 1996).

Despite improvements, the provision of effective services for women, children (and men), is significantly dependent on the extent to which social workers seek to develop their knowledge and understanding of women’s experiences of and responses to violence and abuse, and it is here that practitioners are much criticized. Some suggest social workers’ responses to abused women continue to be underpinned by assumptions that not only infer a uniformity in women’s responses to violence but also fail to consider men’s responses to their use of violence (Malloch and Webb, 1993; Morran and Wilson, 2000; Pringle, 1995). Conceptions of abused women as passive participants in their own intimate relationships are reflected in these assumptions. However, while such conceptions have been refuted for many years (Dobash and Dobash, 1979), their explanatory power continues to exert significant influence in practice. Missing from current practice debates are more complex articulations of women’s experiences of abuse and how women themselves make sense of these. The concept of ‘research mindedness’ (Everitt et al., 1992) has become extremely
important in social work, alongside the increasing recognition of the need for social workers to develop practice repertoires informed by the experiences of service users (Orme, 2001). The responses of social workers to abused women have been much criticized (Lloyd, 1995; Mynard, 1985; Mullender, 1996). However, less well developed is any acknowledgement that practice in this area is extremely complicated. This is a reflection not only of the complexity of intimate violent relationships themselves, but also of the difficulties experienced by social workers endeavouring to meet the often competing needs of women, children and, sometimes, men (Featherstone and Trinder, 1997). Responding to requests for help in what are often highly complex family scenarios presents practitioners with many dilemmas not the least of these being the need to prioritize service responses. Indeed, the dilemmas experienced by social workers may sometimes mirror some of the dilemmas faced by abused women themselves, for example, whose 'needs' should take priority.

The aim of this article is to present accounts of the ways women understand and respond to their abusive experiences, using qualitative data gathered from interviews with 136 women who had been abused by their intimate male partner. Incorporating a theoretical perspective which forefronts the complexity of intimate relationships, and which sees women as active rather than passive agents, I consider what women actively 'do' when attempting to make their relationships safe for themselves and their children. Importantly, the connectedness of women's to men's responses is considered here. This critical aspect of any understanding of women's responses is seldom discussed in the literature. Focusing on women's responses and the ways that they are influenced by men's responses, is a crucial theme for practitioners, increasingly required to provide services to both victims and perpetrators. In presenting women's voices, my purpose is not to criticize current practice but rather to present findings to inform and improve practice. By unfolding the complex stories women tell, I want to encourage practitioners to reflect on the meanings women attach to their experiences of abuse, and the reality of their lives with the men they loved.

Three key points ground the theoretical framework of this article. First, much literature fails to highlight what women actually 'do' when violence occurs. Instead simplistic assumptions continue to be made which infer that solving the problem is simply a matter of staying or leaving, a reductionist response which does not recognize the complexity of intimate relationships and belies the many contradictions and dilemmas experienced by women as they struggle to make their relationships safe (Mahoney, 1994). Violent and abusive behaviours take place within the context of intimate relationships characterized by love and commitment: such relationships cannot be reduced to just the violence - much else is at stake. Second, all intimate relationships are not only complex entities they are also complex interactive entities, the literal and figurative sites of struggle constructed by men and women interacting with one
another. Responding to violence is a dynamic process; men and women give violence meaning, they define it and this process significantly influences the ways in which they respond to it (Bergen, 1995; Kelly, 1988). Further, the process of attaching meaning is interactive in character (Denzin, 1984), therefore if social workers are to understand women’s responses, consideration must be given to men’s responses for the two are interwoven. Third, all interactive processes must be located in the wider social structural contexts within which individual actions and their interpretations take place. Historical and structural forces beyond the boundaries of such interactions shape these encounters and responses to them. Thus, individuals’ definitions of domestic violence are influenced by structural inequalities between men and women, and, within the context of many violent intimate relationships, individual men have the power to define and give meaning to their ‘violent’ behaviour, to impose and, if necessary, enforce, ‘definitional hegemony’ (Lempert, 1995: 176). The foregoing themes provide a critical theoretical context for understanding women’s responses to violence and abuse.

Understanding Women’s Responses to Violence and Abuse

Early studies of women’s responses to violence assumed only two possibilities - staying or leaving (Aguirre, 1985; Gelles, 1976). Mahoney (1994: 60), posts that staying is often seen as ‘...a socially suspect choice – often perceived as acceptance of the violence’ while leaving is often seen as the only response which confirms a woman’s unwillingness to tolerate the violence. Notwithstanding the significant risks involved in leaving, particularly the risk of homicide (Daly and Wilson, 1988), or the economic and social problems women face when they do leave, separation from the partner was and still is seen as the ultimate, or only, act of resistance. Women who stay or return, continue to be implicated in their abuse as either willing victims responsible in some way for ‘provoking’ the violence. Stereotypes of women’s helplessness, dependency and passivity, often reflected in the social work literature, confirm women’s status as ‘victims’ (Walker, 1984). However, much other literature rejects notions of passivity preferring to see women as ‘survivors’ of abuse (Barnett and LaViolette, 1993; Kirkwood, 1993) and there is now a substantive literature highlighting women’s ‘active’ responses (Dutton, 1993; Gondolf and Fisher, 1988; Hoff, 1990). This literature, less well developed in Britain, highlights the fact that women who have been abused expend much energy trying to stop or reduce the abuse (Dobash and Dobash, 1992). Several commentators have identified the ‘strategies of resistance’ many women employ to counter men’s attempts to control them (Dutton, 1996; Lempert, 1996; Mills, 1985; Tifft, 1993). However, while many of these studies ‘...have been instrumental in demonstrating the interactive and complex processes that characterizes abusive relationships and women’s responses to them’ (Campbell et al., 1998: 744), few, if any, studies have
considered how women's and men's responses are interactively related. What we know from the growing academic and practice literature concerning perpetrators is that many men minimize the violence, deny its existence and seek to divert blame from themselves (Cavanagh et al., 2001; Dobash et al., 2000a; Eisikovits and Buchbinder, 1997). Absent from this literature is any examination of how women's responses are influenced by men's responses.

**METHODOLOGY**

The data presented here are drawn from The Violent Men Study, which was a longitudinal and comparative evaluation of two Scottish programmes for perpetrators of domestic violence. In the broadest sense, this three year study was designed to assess and compare the effectiveness of a range of criminal justice sanctions on men's subsequent violent behaviour towards their partners (Dobash et al., 2000a). All of the men in the study had been convicted of at least one offence involving violence against their partner, and many had been charged with similar offences in the past. Separate, in-depth interviews were conducted with 122 men and 136 women partners of abusers. Information was gathered from men and women over a one year period: they were interviewed at Time 1 and responded to a postal questionnaire 3 months and 12 months after the initial interview (Time 2 and Time 3). The interviews averaged two and a half hours in length with men's interviews tending to be shorter than women's. Most were conducted in the respondent's home and without the presence of the partner. Women's safety was always a consideration. All interviews were tape-recorded and the majority transcribed. Respondents were advised that the interviews would cover sensitive areas of their lives and for many this was the first time they had spoken in any depth about the violence and their relationship. Women and men were invited to talk about a number of aspects of their lives including: social, educational and familial backgrounds, relationships with their partner, the nature, frequency and severity of the violent and controlling behaviours perpetrated on the women and women's and men's responses to violence. Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered and analysed, much of the former has been reported elsewhere (e.g. Dobash et al., 1998, 1999, 2000a, 2000b).

Presented here are the qualitative data gathered during interviews with women. These were structured interviews, comprised of a number of open and closed questions. The analysis of the qualitative data progressed through a number of different stages. First, a small number of transcriptions were read independently by different members of the research team, each of who identified dominant themes. When these themes were compared much commonality was found but also important differences. From this initial comparative process, a set of key categories and sub-categories were identified. Using the NUDIST
software package, a coding framework was established and all transcribed interviews coded. This phase of the analysis was a lengthy, flexible and evolving one that permitted the inclusion of new categories and the revision of existing ones. All interviews were coded by (the same) two members of the research team who worked closely together throughout this process not only to maintain consistency and reliability but also, through discussion, to clarify questions of interpretation raised by the data.

FINDINGS

At the time of the interview, 74% of women were either married or cohabiting, 24% were either divorced or separated with the remaining 2% involved in ‘dating’ relationships with men. The women were aged between 18–57; the majority of relationships were longstanding, over half being more than 5 years. All women except two had birth children.

Contextualizing Women’s Responses to Violence and Abuse

Our findings revealed that 81% of women evaluated their relationships as ‘OK’ or better. Many wanted them to continue but the violence to stop. All the women in this study experienced physical abuse of varying frequency and severity: it was always accompanied by other coercive, intimidating and controlling acts and sometimes sexual abuse (Dobash et al., 1998, 2000a). Women’s responses to violence and abuse were highly nuanced, their accounts revealing complex and at times contradictory responses that often changed over time and in character. As Campbell et al. (1998) found in their study, the process of achieving non-violence was not linear with easily identifiable stages. The women in this study described vacillating both in terms of what they did and what they thought. I recognize this not as a linear, but as a reflexive process. However, I also recognize, as many women did, that understanding evolves alongside experience. Many women did identify a pattern which suggested not only that responses do evolve over time but also that there are different types of responses, some being more ‘challenging’ than others. Thus how women respond after the first incident of abuse might be very different from their responses to later incidents. Importantly, while changes in responses were often influenced by the extent to which they stopped/reduced the violence, they were also affected by the consequences of the violence and abuse itself, particularly fear.

The women in this study had much invested in saving, protecting and changing their relationships and two dominant themes were identifiable in their responses: (1) women actively struggled to make the relationship non-violent and devised strategies to this end; and, (2) women reacted to and reflected on men’s responses to their use of violence. These themes emerged from the accounts of the majority of women at the time of the interviews. There were, of course,
dissenting narratives. However, the above themes were often present, in a muted form, in the minority narratives and were influenced by a number of factors including, for example, the length of the relationship, the frequency and severity of the violence, the nature and extent of coercive and controlling behaviours.

1 Working to Stop/Prevent the Violence

The process of working to stop/prevent the violence included a number of elements: defining and redefining the violence; protecting the integrity of the relationship; employing strategies for avoiding the violence or ‘doing gender’; deploying responses which challenged men’s use of violence. Each is discussed in turn.

Defining and Redefining the Violence

Defining men’s behaviour as violent or abusive was a key process in determining how women responded to it. Gender socialization is extraordinarily difficult to transcend and when violence was first experienced, women were shocked and confused, struggling to make sense of an act which was incongruous with the expectations and hopes they had for their relationships. Inevitably questions were asked and dilemmas presented, as the following quotations illustrate:

W 1054: [After first assault] I was shocked: I couldn’t believe what he’d done. I didn’t know how to make sense of it . . . was it me, him? But then I thought it was just a one-off incident that wouldn’t happen again.

W 1066: [After first assault] I just thought, ‘What have I done to deserve this?’

Powerful cultural myths about the violence are reflected in the above responses for example that women ‘deserve’ violence. Many women were reluctant to define their initial experiences as violence, some preferring to see abusive incidents as single events not as part of a (possibly) violent relationship. However, definitions are dynamic and reflecting on their (continuing) experience of violence was an important element of the process whereby women changed their definitions and therefore their responses to abuse as the following woman reveals:

W 1064: At first I felt I couldn’t admit what was happening to myself. The first time it happened was five days after we were married. He just punched me in the face after we’d had an argument. And I remember thinking afterwards ‘Oh God, I’ve married a man who’s going to hit me? But the next day he was fine and I just left it but then it happened again and again . . . and I came to see that this wasn’t my problem which, by the way, he always told me it was, but that this was his problem and that made a difference, I started to see it differently.

Seeing things ‘differently’ often meant deploying other ways of responding.
Protecting the Integrity of the Relationship

Responses to incidents of abuse often involved the absence of dialogue between partners: many women, like men, were initially reluctant to tell others about the violence. Ideas about privacy were important and many women were concerned to safeguard their relationship.

W1062: We didn’t talk about it at first. I just wanted to get it out of my mind. I wanted to forget it.

W1120: I felt I couldn’t tell them [family and friends] about it [violence] . . . I was ashamed . . . Everyone had told me that it would never last and I was determined to prove them wrong. So I had to sort of take the good with the bad. I just thought it would work out, I thought I could change him.

The above quotes reveal several common patterns amongst women. First, disclosing the violence to others especially at an early stage in the relationship was anathema to many women. Feelings of shame were common. Women wanted to forget the violence and to pretend to others that ‘it wasn’t really happening’. Second, many women did not tell others because they hoped to change their partners, a belief grounded in cultural expectations of women as the primary caretakers of relationships (Hochschild, 1983). Women wished to present themselves and their relationships in a positive light; acknowledging that their relationship was a violent one reflected more on their ability to be a ‘good partner’ and less on the man’s actual behaviour. Socialized by cultural expectations that encourage women to accept primary responsibility for the success or failure of their intimate relationships, many did their utmost to make their relationships ‘work’. Thus even before the violence emerged, the fact that women are generally held responsible for the success or failure of their relationship made it difficult for many of them to initially define behaviour as violent and respond as such: his violence might well be seen (by men, women and outsiders) as the outcome of her failure to adequately sustain and nurture their relationship.

Employing Strategies for Stopping/Reducing Violence - ‘Doing Gender’

Women’s efforts to stop/reduce the violence can be categorized in relation to the extent to which they ‘did gender’ or not. ‘Doing gender’ (West and Zimmerman, 1987) in this context means responding to violence in ways that presented no direct threat to the man’s overall authority and power. Such responses are derived from culturally constructed gender scripts. Many women in this study talked of the strategies they developed for ‘managing’ the violence. Managing the violence is an important concept; it does not mean simply ‘coping’ with or ‘accepting’ it, concepts well rehearsed in the literature. Managing suggests
something more than this. Just as women managed children and households, so too did they apply their energy and multifarious skills to managing the violence. In other words, they did not simply ‘take it’; they tried to make sense of it within the context of their relationship and they took steps to manage it in an effort to reduce/eliminate it. Thus managing implies agency; it requires an ability to resist in some way. Resistance, in turn requires acknowledging something or event as a ‘problem’ and, as the violence continued, while women always saw it as a problem, many came to re-define it less as a series of ‘one offs’, and more as a continuing feature of their relationship. As the following quote illustrates, ‘managing’ often involved women responding in ways demanded by men, and reflected men’s efforts not only to impose their justifications (for using violence), but also to persuade women to behave as men wanted:

W1160: You’re saying to yourself, ‘Why me? Maybe it’s my fault. Maybe I am doing something that I shouldn’t’. He used to say, ‘Look it’s your fault.’ And I’d think well maybe it is. Maybe I wasn’t doing what I was told. Sometimes I’d say to myself, right, we’ll do it his way. I wasn’t to go out, I wasn’t to see my pals, I was to just sit in with the weans.

As the above quotation illustrates, many men wanted women to ‘do it his way’ and most women did this to some degree, using a variety of diverse responses in their efforts to manage the violence. Each is discussed in turn.

Engendering Dialogue

As discussed earlier many women were initially reluctant to talk about their experiences. However as the violence persisted, women reflected on their experiences and in turn often made greater efforts to persuade men to engage in a dialogue about his violence:

W1064: I used to talk about it [violence] as often as I could. I wanted him to realise he had a problem and the only way I could make him realise was to bring it up, to say to him, ‘You have a problem, I think we should talk about it’.

W1126: After it happened [violence], it was just basically how sorry he was, just basically forgotten about until the next time . . . he thinks that by no’ bringin’ it up that you’re gonnae forget but I don’t let him forget . . . I keep asking him why he does it.

The above quotations demonstrate not only that talking about the violence was important for women, but also that women’s freedom to talk was compromised by men’s reluctance to discuss the violence, this demonstrating the importance of viewing responses interactively. Additionally, talking has to be contextualized. Devault asserts that, ‘ . . . women speak in ways that are limited and shaped
by men’s greater social power and control’ (Devault, 1990: 98). Thus women had to tread warily when seeking to engender dialogue. The importance of ‘knowing’ their partners and the relationship was critical here with women continuously gauging their partners’ motivation to ‘hear’ them. The interviews revealed that many women made it their business to be ‘tuned’ into their partner’s moods as signalled by their use of alcohol, tone of voice, repertoire of gestures and mannerisms, in order to work out what the optimum responses might be. While fear of further violence was never far from their thoughts, many were prepared to take risks in an effort to persuade the man to confront his violence, as the following extract reveals:

W1064: I tried everything to try and help him help himself. I thought if I did something wrong maybe I could try and talk to him about it. And if I did speak to him about it then I got what for, but I thought it was worth getting a slap to try and help him.

Specific Strategies for Avoiding the Violence

Many women devised strategies for avoiding the violence, which were often directly linked to violent events. By using calculated responses deduced from knowledge and experience accumulated over a (varied) period of time, women tried to prevent men from using violence and employed a range of tactics to this end.

W1144: I’d make tea or coffee or just basically try anything to keep him in a good mood. Sometimes it worked too.

W1064: Sometimes if we were sitting on the couch, I would hold his hands or just touch him, let him know that I was there. I’d cuddle into him and tell him I loved him even if I hated him, and that used to help sometimes, it would sort of calm him down.

W1089: I would agree with him all the time if that’s what he wanted to hear jist to keep the peace.

As the above quotations demonstrate, women tried to stop the violence calculating how best to, for example, cajole their partner, and/or diffuse his potentially violent mood by acceding to his wishes. However it would be mistaken to think that these behaviours denoted passivity, acceptance or acquiescence; rather they were often calculated actions oriented towards diverting violence. While it was difficult to predict their effectiveness, such tactics formed an important element of women’s overall repertoire of responses. Some might prevent violence but success was usually transient.

Importantly, fear was a significant factor in women’s responses. The
emotional impact of living with abuse exacts a painful toll on women: it can result in the gradual erosion of their personal integrity making it difficult to respond in more ‘challenging’ ways. During interviews, some women described losing their ability to think clearly, some questioned their responses.

W 1036: It’s as if you’re the one that’s ‘mental’ and at times you say to yourself, ‘Am I “mental”? I must be, Christ I’ve put up with this for so long’. I mean I was a very strong person before all of this.

Deploying Responses which Challenged Men’s Use of Violence – ‘Not Doing Gender’

Having tried to elicit men’s motives and having tried to respond to these in ways that did not threaten men or the stability of the relationship, most women found that little changed; ‘doing it his way’ did not work.

W 1055: He reckons that I made him hit me, that I wanted it, that I liked it. So he reckons it’s all ma fault. If I hadnae shouted at him it wouldnae have happened. If I hadnae went oot it wouldnae have happened. W hat he means is if I had lived ma life like he wanted me to live ma life, none of this would have happened. He was alright as long as you were playing the game, living by his rules but I got fed up wi’ his rules.

Many women, like the one quoted above, became increasingly reluctant to play by ‘his rules’, to accept his rationales for his violence, to live their lives as he directed and responded to the violence in more challenging ways. Some confronting strategies, as the following quotations illustrate, were born of women’s longing for the violence to stop, whilst others emerged as a consequence of desperation and fear, sometimes for their survival:

W 1116: I used to phone my dad whenever we had fights thinkin’ my dad would protect me and stop it – but my dad had two strokes in the last two years and he’s not able now and so I realised then I had to stand on my own feet and stop it myself one way or another.

W 1064: Well I thought if I don’t do something more, I’m gonna die so I would start to get scared and start to realise that I was scared. And it wisnae jist I’m scared but I’m no’ goin’ to do anything aboot it. I swore to myself, ‘I’ve got to do something about it’ so I did.

Women’s attempts to ‘do something’ often involved deploying a range of different, more challenging responses including verbal confrontation; physical confrontation; leaving the relationship; ejecting him from the house; and telling others about the violence. While such responses might occur at any time, they
were often the outcome of a process of reflection. Women identified a number of different forms of action that they hoped might be more effective. Each is discussed in turn.

**Verbal and Physical Retaliation**

Many women in this study talked of the ways in which they confronted men both verbally and physically in an effort to stop the abuse. Such responses were often riskier than other previously discussed responses for they ostensibly presented direct challenges to men's authority.

W1071: Alec got very bloody angry wi' me cause I had the audacity to argue back wi' him, I had the pure cheek to doubt what he was sayin' . . . Now when he hits me, I give him a hard time I shout at him and I say to him, ‘You can't do this. You can't get away with this’, and I just start. I would never have been able to do that before. I was always too scared.

W1089: I kept going back to him but then I started to retaliate. Once I realised that I hadnae done anything to deserve it, I just thought I'm no gonnae let him away wi' it . . . Don't get me wrong I didnae dae it because I wis feeling big, I was frustrated and angry but I was terrified when I was daen' it because I thought he could kill me but I done it anyway.

As the above quotes demonstrate, some women reached the point where they refused to be silenced. Many were fearful and aware of the potential danger involved in such responses but were prepared to take risks in order to challenge men's use of violence. Importantly, women's physical retaliations were mostly defensive and expressed in two main ways: women might hit first hoping to prevent an assault or hit back after an assault. Women's attempts to 'fight back' were regarded by many men interviewed in this study as a 'joke' (Dobash et al., 2000a). For many women, verbal and physical confrontation had both positive and negative consequences: it might temporarily halt the violence for some but for others it antagonized men further.

**'Going Public' or Telling Others about the Violence**

Earlier discussion revealed that many women, like men, were initially reluctant to let others know about the violence. However this position did change with many women choosing to make their experiences public. In 'going public', women transgress gender roles by stepping outside the boundaries of the relationship. While all of the women in this study went public in that the police were involved in processing charges, many had done so prior to this.

W1160: Sometimes I would stay in for weeks, ma eyes were that black. I'd wait for it all to go away. Then I got to the stage where I thought well, they
Several common themes are identified in the above quotation. First, conscious acts of resistance like going public to others enabled women to exert greater pressure on men to 'own' their behaviour. Second, publicizing the violence and attempting to shame men was, for many women, a double-edged sword in that the responses of others sometimes presented further dilemmas. Women weighed up the advantages and disadvantages of going public, some actively seeking help from formal and informal sources. Going public had positive consequences for some women, enabled them to challenge the violence and men's constructions of it. Importantly, the responses of those approached were critical, often determining whether or not they would be approached for assistance again.

Leaving the Relationship

Eighty-five percent of women left their partner at least once during the relationship, some on many occasions and for varying periods of time. Men's dependency on women often surfaced when the woman left. The effectiveness of leaving varied but some women reported that it could be a powerful lever that might reduce the violence for a time. Women's departure from the relationship generated much activity from men and while many women left, most returned.

As the above quotations illustrate, many powerful factors influenced women's decision to return; their feelings for the man; their wish to make the relationship work; and the wishes and feelings of children. The man's responses themselves in the form of apologies and promises to change were also important. When the cumulative effect of such pressure is considered, women's return to their partners becomes more comprehensible.

Changes in legislation in the last two decades have resulted in more housing rights for women and while many women in this study had left their
partner, many refused to leave their home, preferring instead to exercise the
rights they had in relation to the house, i.e. challenging their partners traditional
rights and expectations as ‘head of the household’.

W1055: I’d never ever leave my own house . . . I’d rather get the police to
help him out the house. I don’t see why I should take my son somewhere when
he’s got a house here and it’s not me but him that’s the problem.

Just as when women left the home, some men went to extraordinary lengths,
agreeing to almost anything in order to be reunited with the family.

2 Reacting to and Reflecting on Men’s Responses to their Violence
Elsewhere, (Cavanagh et al., 2001) we have examined men’s responses to their
violence against intimate partners applying Goffman’s (1971) concept of
‘remedial work’ and his three related devices - accounts, apologies and requests
to explain this. Goffman (1971: 108) posts that, the purpose of remedial work
is to,’change the meaning of an act transforming what could be seen as offen-
sive into what can be seen as acceptable’. His three devices appear to encapsu-
late the ways many men respond to their violence to partners: they account for
it by minimizing, denying and blaming; they apologize after the event – swearing
undying love and promising change; and they set out conditions which must
prevail for violence not to occur by ‘requesting’ (often demanding) that women
behave in certain ways or perform certain tasks. These responses are predomi-
nantly oriented towards damage limitation. However, men’s responses are even
more complex: men exert power and control over women, not only by using
violence, but also by seeking to impose their understanding of what is hap-
pening in the relationship. Thus many men try to influence not only whether
a violent incident is defined as such, but also how women will respond to that
(violent) incident. In this section I develop this more fully, highlighting how
the three dominant responses of men impact on women’s responses.

Accounting
Men’s accounts of their violence, involving tactics of minimizing, denying and
blaming are often very convincing, with men using these tactics to persuade
women that, for example, what they had experienced was not actually violence,
or that something or someone other than themselves was to blame. Some
women’s responses demonstrate how successful some men were in imposing
‘definitional hegemony’. In attempting to make sense of the violence, some
women, like men, diluted the impact and significance of the violence, mini-
mized its frequency and severity and used men’s rationales and the culturally
held beliefs about the causes of abuse to explain his behaviour. The following
quotations demonstrate the ways in which women minimize, deny and blame:
W 1056: Sometimes I think I’ve pushed him to it [violence] so it’s my fault. I’ve antagonised him so much that he has to do it.

W 1066: He never hit me when we were arguing, he just hit me when he had a bloody good drink in him . . . he’s no’ violent when we’re arguing.

W 1123: His dad beat up his mum when they were younger. He came from a violent family so maybe it’s rubbed off. He cannæ see that it’s wrong hitting oot at a woman. I dinnae blame him. I think it was his Mam’s and his Dad’s fault, I blame the way he was brought up.

Such responses should not be viewed as demonstrations of acceptance of the violence but rather as the outcome of an interactive process whereby men seek to impose their will and to enforce their ‘account’ of the violence. Seen within the context of their intimate relationship, women’s search to ‘blame’ something or someone other than their partner is understandable: resolving the contradictions evoked when considering that the man who purportedly loves them also beats them was often extremely difficult.

Responding to Apologies

Women’s understandings of and responses to violence are further influenced by one of the most significant and common responses of men – apologies. Only 6% of women in this study reported that their partner never apologized after a violent event. As the following quotations illustrate, many women accepted men’s apologies and their promises ‘to change’, women wanted to believe men:

W 1072: Peter [partner] is always sorry. That’s his words ‘Sorry’ and ‘I love you’, ‘I’ll change’, and it does not matter what he has done, he can turn the tears on and he will be so, so sorry. And I used to fall for it all the time . . . I wanted to believe him and he would only need to get the tears rolling and cry for a couple of hours and I would fall for it every time.

W 1081: Well as soon as he’s done it, [used violence] he usually starts crying and pacing about or he would walk out or just walk away . . . he probably says ‘sorry’ but he doesn’t do anything other than that.

However responding to apologies is an altogether more complex process than it appears. It is an important part of the ‘emotions work’ expected of women (Hochschild, 1983). Emotions work in personal relationships is heavily gendered: women are expected to be the more emotional partner and to manage and respond to their partner’s feelings (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993). Calhoun (1992: 178) posits that emotion work includes, ‘. . . regulating and managing others’ feelings, soothing tempers, boosting confidence, fuelling
pride, preventing frictions and mending ego wounds', much of which was very evident in women's responses.

W1123: [After an assault] He started crying and saying he was sorry . . . I felt sorry for him . . . I just put my arms round him.

W1117: [After an assault] I just sat with him and cuddled him . . . I told him not to cry, that I still loved him.

Managing men's apologies was a problematic task for women for several reasons. First, the focus of attention often shifted from the violence to the apparently 'distressed' man. Thus, as the above quotations reveal, many women felt sorry for their partners, tried to comfort them in order to reduce their distress, usually subordinating their own needs and emotions. Taking care of his emotions rather than confronting her abuse may become the shared agenda. Second, one of the functions of men's apologizing was often to limit dialogue. Apologizing was often a quick and easy way for men to acknowledge that a violent incident had occurred, though not necessarily their responsibility for it. However, as the following quote illustrates, many women made determined efforts to persuade men to talk about the abuse, endeavouring to move them beyond simply apologizing:

W1123: [After first assault] I tried to talk but he wouldnae talk about it . . . He just says he was sorry and that was it. He wanted to forget it, to sweep it under the carpet but I wanted to speak about it and find out why he did it.

Responding to Requests or Demands

The third dominant response of men often occurred before a violent event happened. Men's 'requests', for example, that women 'stop nagging' or their 'demands' for particular services, for example meals on the table at a certain time, often set the conditions which had to pertain if violence was not to occur. Importantly, given the forewarning, any breach of these conditions by women was often seen by men as a justification for using violence. Thus, if women did not 'do as they were told', they should realize their mistake and accept the consequences. The following quotations illustrate this process:

W1062: He wants me to do everything he tells me to and if I don't do it then that's why he hits me.

W1144: He said if I gave him money like he asked for, it [last assault] would never have happened.
Women often had no choice but to respond to these demands. ‘Doing it his way’, (discussed earlier) was one of the strategies many used to try and prevent the violence from occurring, this illustrating once again just how interrelated women’s and men’s responses are. Conceding to men’s demands might occasionally prevent a violent episode from occurring but such effectiveness was usually short lived as women came to realize.

**Women Reflecting on Men’s Responses**

Struggling with contradictory feelings for the man and their wish for the relationship to ‘work’, women listened to what men had to say about the violence. They heard the denial, the justifications alongside the apologies and declarations of love. Women’s hope for a violent free relationship was often boundless but occurrence of further violence and abuse belied the sincerity of men’s apologies and their promises to change. Campbell et al. (1998: 753) refers to ‘turning points’ – small incremental changes that taken together resulted in a shift in thinking. Many women reported such shifts; they realized that their ability to influence the violence was limited. Many replayed events recognizing the rituals and patterns associated with their own and importantly their partner’s responses as the following quotations illustrate:

- **W1089**: He says, ‘I’m really sorry’, always. He might take me for a meal or he’ll buy me something but it disnae wash wi’ me any mair. At first it did, but no any mair.

- **W1047**: He wid say it wis my fault, if you didnae answer back you widnae hiv got this [violence]. So I didnae answer him but then I got it anyway. I couldnae win.

- **W1064**: He forgets but he chooses to forget .... he says he could not remember half of it [last assault] which I think’s a load of nonsense because as the months went past, things he has said show he does remember – it’s only an excuse you know.

Such reflections often provided the impetus for a reappraisal of the violence and the effectiveness of previous responses to it. This might result in a change of strategy with women deciding, for example, to adopt more challenging responses. Nevertheless, women’s ability to critically reflect on their experiences inevitably varied, the consequences of living with violence and abuse often exacting a powerful toll on their strength and level of resistance. Importantly, providing the opportunity to engage in such reflection can be an important element of any practitioners’ responses especially when this is grounded in an understanding of the difficulties and dilemmas, complexities and contradictions.
a woman faces in attempting to keep herself and her children safe from the man who purportedly ‘loves’ her.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Interrogating women’s responses to violence and abuse reveal them to be both dynamic and complex. Contrary to assumptions evident in the literature, which often presents women as ‘helpless’ and ‘passive’, women in this study actively responded to violence in diverse ways. As women’s definitions of their experiences changed, many developed a repertoire of responses employed to reduce the violence and to resist men’s efforts to impose dominant mitigatory understandings of their experiences of violence. Women struggled to establish their own, divergent understandings of violence, often in the face of significant risk to themselves. The majority in this study read their partners like books; they came to know the patterns of men’s behaviour; they recognized the cues and the danger signals. Importantly, women’s responses were played out in relation to men’s responses. Should she cuddle him, forgive him, make his tea, show him her bruises? Should she argue back, fight back, tell her mother, call the police or throw him out? Women made decisions about these responses while simultaneously thinking about the possible outcomes for themselves and their children. Many continually tested out how far they could go, what were the limits, where were the boundaries? But the boundaries often shifted. Some strategies of resistance were more effective than others: some antagonized men but some temporarily reduced the violence. Women struggled continuously to change the man’s violent behaviour. At some points in time the struggle to change took second place to the struggle to survive but not even women subjected to the extremes of abuse totally ‘gave up’.

Findings from this research reveal how important it is for social workers to be aware of the complexity of women’s responses to violence; to be attentive to the strategies of resistance which women deploy in order to stop/reduce the violence and abuse and to contextualize women’s responses within the sphere of intimate, interactive relationships, thus requiring practitioners to be cognisant of men’s responses to their violence. Being informed by women’s interpretations of their responses to abuse can but assist in the development of more effective interventions by social workers.

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References


Cavanagh Responses to Domestic Violence


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