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Conversations with otherness: violence and womanhood in narratives of women imprisoned for violent crimes

Satu Venäläinen

Abstract

Widely circulated cultural conceptions about women who have committed violence recurrently place them in positions of otherness in relation to what is considered as being normal, valuable womanhood. In this article I explore ways in which Finnish women imprisoned for violent crimes grapple with this troubled relation between womanhood and violence in their enactments of gendered identities. The analysis is based on a novel, discursive-affective approach to positioning that can accommodate complexity and context-specific variability in enactments of identities. Four different, recurring modes of positioning are discussed in the analysis: aligning with forcefulness, aligning with vulnerability, (dis)-aligning with demonization and aligning with motherhood. By shedding light not only on the complexity and fluidity of these gendered identity enactments but also on their affectively ambivalent dimensions, the analysis contributes to attempts at countering reductionist views about women who have committed violence and the gendered dichotomizations that they work to reproduce.

Keywords

affect, discourse, positioning, violence, womanhood

Women's violent actions are often seen as posing a challenge to gendered understandings about the very nature of womanhood. If conceptualised through traditional associations with caring, nurture and passivity, womanhood appears as the antithesis of violence (Gilbert, 2002). In turn, violence often functions as a central marker of masculinity. These associations bear heavily on women who have committed violence. Several feminist scholars have claimed that, due to their actions being at odds with gendered expectations, women who are considered violent are often seen as being "doubly deviant" (Naylor, 1990). This is evident, for example, in attempts to make sense of women's violence in the media, or in courts that have been noted to frequently rely on reductionist categorizations of 'violent women' as either mad, bad, or victims

(e.g. Allen, 1998; Morrissey, 2003). It has been claimed that by minimizing the agency of women who have used violence, such categorizations effectively place these women outside the normative frames of humanity (Morrissey, 2003). From this perspective, 'violent women' are recurrently discursively positioned as 'other' in relation to 'true women', against which normative notions about womanhood (or humanity in general) are defined (Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001: 137–139).

Meanings attached to women and violence are, however, also nuanced by more local socio-cultural contexts. In Finland, a myth of the 'strong Finnish woman' has prevailed. This myth may be evoked, for instance, in attempts at making sense of women's violence against their abusers in intimate partner relationships (Ruuskanen, 2001). In courts, violent actions of abused women are seldom considered in relation to their victimization but rather in terms of their own failure to get help or to leave abusive relationships (Ruuskanen, 2001). Similar assumptions about strong agency of Finnish women have also been shown to be entangled with processes of othering and demonization in Finnish tabloid news' portrayals of women who have committed violence (Venäläinen, 2015).

In this article, I analyse enactments of gendered identities by Finnish women imprisoned for violent crimes. Taking as my overall frame prevailing views about women who have committed violence as 'the other' – and as contrasted with 'normal women' – I focus particularly on ways in which these women constitute relations between themselves, violence and womanhood. Overall, the existing literature is scarce regarding how women talk about committing violence, and how they talk about themselves in relation to that violence. There is, however, a narrow branch of studies in which narratives by women convicted of violent crimes have been analysed in relation to publicly circulated images of 'violent women'. Kathleen Ferraro (2006) has discussed how the recurring categorizations that are drawn upon when making sense of women's violence – in public arenas as well as academic work – are generally based in prevalent modes of binary thinking that establish dichotomies between good and bad women, and victimized and victimizing women. According to Ferraro (2006: 13), in narratives of convicted women that she interviewed, boundaries between these categories are often challenged: The women's own victimhood coalesces with their violent or otherwise criminal activity in various ways. Other studies have emphasized the plurality of meanings that women attach to their violence, thus also speaking against reductionist, binary views commonly held about women and violence (e.g. Comack and Brickey, 2007; Kruttschnitt and Carbone-Lopez, 2006). Elizabeth Comack and Salena Brickey (2007) have analysed criminalised women's talk about their violence with a particular interest in how their talk relates to categorisations of 'violent women' as either victims, bad or mad. They found that to an extent, the women they interviewed

drew upon these categorisations. However, they also noted that their identity constitution is multifaceted and thus not reducible to any single frame.

This article contributes to these efforts in developing more nuanced understandings about relations between women and acts of violence. I do this by analysing imprisoned women's identity enactments with a novel approach, which I characterise as discursive-affective. The approach allows for detailed analyses of ways in which meanings are attached to womanhood and violence in talk/texts. It also makes room for considering how possible contradictions in those meanings are grappled with – both discursively and affectively – in identity constitution. By illustrating complexities and affective ambivalences in gendered identity constitutions of women who have committed violence, the analysis opens further possibilities for research and views on women and violence that go beyond reductionist binaries and categorisations.

Theoretical and methodological framings: discourse and affect in positioning

My analytical approach draws centrally on feminist poststructuralism, which is based on not only disentangling the processes whereby dichotomisations and categorisations are formed; it also prioritises attempts to challenge those processes by attuning to inherent fluidity and multiplicity in the constitution of gendered identities and the complex ways in which they are lived (Davies et al., 2006; Gannon and Davies, 2007). The analytical focus is on *positioning*, which is seen as a means of enacting identities that occurs through shifting alignments with subject positions that are made available within prevalent discourses; i.e. systems of meaning-making that are re-produced in social practices (Gannon and Davies, 2007). By inviting subjects to inhabit certain kinds of positions, normalising social practices of, for example, psychological sciences and the media constitute their desires and possibilities for understanding themselves in a profound way (Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001: 117–118). Thus despite fluidity and spaces for resistance, positionings are nevertheless always enacted in dialogue with normative notions about gendered identities. These normative identities include those upon which othering images of 'violent women' are built.

I have also drawn upon critical discursive psychology (CDP) when implementing the above ideas in analyses. CDP has been developed partly on the basis of poststructural theory, but is also influenced by, for example, ethnomethodology (Wetherell, 1998; see also e.g. Edley and Wetherell, 2008). CDP provides practical tools for analysing how positionings are enacted in discursive interactions. It is based on an approach to positionings as unfolding in micro-level, interpersonal interactions, as well as being linked to macro-level, socio-cultural affordances, such as prevailing discourses. Thus, CDP directs attention to context-specific variability and discursive detail in the uptake

and creation of subject positions, and calls for an analysis of not only what kinds of positionings are enacted but also of *how* they are enacted (Wetherell, 1998).

While generally relying on the principles of CDP, I aim to add more nuance to the analysis by complementing it with an attunement to affective dimensions of positioning. Apart from recent developments towards integrating affects into discursive analyses (Wetherell, 2012; see also Scharff, 2012), discursive-analytic approaches to positioning have not typically emphasised affective processes as a part of the analysis. Yet affects and their entwinements with discourse can be seen as crucial elements in terms of the ways in which positionings are enacted and inhabited. As Davies et al. (2006: 90) have put it, “discursively constituted as we are, the constitutive effect resides not just in language but in the affect of the material body.”

Integrating an interest in affects into a discursive analysis is not without its challenges. Affect studies constitute a broad field with various approaches that build upon different conceptualizations of affect as well as its relations to other related concepts, such as emotions and feelings (Koivunen, 2010). While many affect scholars aspire to move away from analyses of discursive meaning-making and thus see affect as separate from it, some advocate analysing affect in unison with discourse (Ahmed, 2004; Hemmings, 2005; Wetherell, 2012). Aligning with this latter view while being aware of various complications in viewing discourse and affects as connected to each other, I see that an analytical attunement to affectivity in positioning importantly lays emphasis on not only its discursive accomplishment but also its bodily and emotionally felt dimensions. I view these affective dimensions as forms of “embodied meaning-making” (Wetherell, 2012: 4), which tap into personalized significance of socially circulating valuations and understandings (c.f. Wetherell, 2012: 96–100). Looking at these dimensions in positioning analyses enables a consideration of bodily and emotional aspects in the uptake of certain positions, as well as how they are inhabited socially and psychologically beyond particular instances of language-use.

Positionings in research encounters with imprisoned participants

In a discursive-affective approach to positioning, research materials – such as narratives of imprisoned women – are seen as irreducibly entwined with research encounters between research participants and researchers. What is seen as being produced in the context of these encounters is therefore not stories with an unproblematized status as ‘the truth’, but rather situated and always partial interactive accounts (Gannon and Davies, 2007). Researchers and participants alike, we are inevitably affected by prevalent categorizations and rely on them in constructing accounts of events in the social world (Davies, 2016). This approach thus calls for constant reflective attunement

to the ways in which the research practices adopted are inscribed into the research materials and their interpretation, and how they may reproduce power-imbalanced positionings.

Doing research with imprisoned participants involves several ethical and methodological issues that make researchers' reflectivity all the more important. As Lois Presser (2005) has discussed, the context of imprisonment easily marks the participants in their interactions with researchers as deviant 'others', from whom an account of their deviant doings is expected. On the other hand, participating in research may also provide inmates an opportunity to tell their side and thus challenge the hegemony of official interpretations of their actions and character. In my study I tried to make space for participant opportunities to give counter narratives by encouraging them to take the lead in telling their stories. I also informed them that I did not gather any other information about them other than what they told me, and would therefore not be comparing their stories to other accounts. Nevertheless, all of these interactional aspects can be seen as guiding the production of participants' narratives.

I collected research materials by visiting a few different prisons in Finland during the years 2012-2014. Prior to my visits, I obtained a research permit from the Criminal Sanctions Agency. During my visits I described my research to potential participants and encouraged them to participate in it by either sending a written account or by being interviewed. Altogether twenty Finnish women serving a prison sentence for violent crimes participated in my study. I interviewed eleven of these women. Five of the interviews are recorded, while six of them were not due to requirements by the prison personnel. In addition, fourteen of the twenty participants sent a written account, five of whom I had also interviewed, while nine of them participated only in the written account. The interviews lasted from approximately one to two hours. The lengths of the written accounts range from half a page to four pages. The interviews were open-ended, albeit based on questions prepared beforehand, which I showed to the participants before each interview. They focused on doing violence and being a victim of violence, feelings and consequences attached to these events, and the reactions of others to the violence perpetrated by the participants. The instructions for written accounts included mostly the same themes, but the participants were also given the option to write freely.

The participants were aged 23-54 years¹ at the time of collecting materials, and their prison sentences vary from aggravated assaults to homicides. As is common among imprisoned women in Finland and elsewhere (Jokinen, 2011), most of the participants had had various physical, psychological and financial problems in their lives; most notably problems with substance abuse and with violent abuse by others, which were often their close-ones. Some discussed having used violence only once in their lives,

while others talked about it as a recurring way of acting. Most had used violence towards their male spouses, while some had (also) other female or male victims.

As feminist criminologists have recognized, working on sensitive and morally loaded topics such as violence often evokes strong and sometimes disturbing affects. Lizzie Seal (2012), among others, has discussed the complexity involved in the emotive responding of the researcher towards participants who have committed violence, since the moral trouble linked to violence usually disrupts straightforward sympathizing with them. Michele Burman, Susan Batchelor and Jane Brown (2001) have similarly drawn attention to affectively experienced dilemmas linked to differences between researchers and participants in terms of ways of relating to violence. Resonating with these descriptions, my affective responses throughout the research process have been intense and vastly ambivalent. They have ranged from immersion into the suffering evident in the participants' narratives, to experiencing deep discomfort when confronted with stories about violence as a mundane part of life. In line with Sharon Pickering (2001), I see working with these affective ambivalences and making them visible as important. This not least because they tap into issues of difference and sameness, which are central in processes of othering and attempts to avoid it in research.

Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson (1996) discuss how failure to acknowledge differences between researchers and participants as well as material effects of these differences on the one hand, and how emphasizing and thus potentially reifying them on the other, can both lead to perpetuating participants' otherness. Relatedly, Clare Hemmings (2012) has problematized the central role of empathy in feminist thinking by pointing out its links with presumptions of sameness; links which then also implicate risks of reinforcing powerlessness and invisibility in 'the other'. While I see it as crucial to be aware of the very material differences between myself and my participants, in line with my approach to positioning I also see it as pertinent to attend to the constant vacillations in difference and sameness between us that are enacted through positioning in research encounters. These were particularly evident in a group meeting that I held before conducting the interviews with six potential participants, five of whom later volunteered to be interviewed.

The purpose of the group meeting was to introduce my preliminary interview themes and questions and to ask the potential participants' about their views on them². The participants showed interest overall, approved of my interview questions and recognized my study as having relevance. Yet I was simultaneously faced with understandings and phrases shared by them and not with me, which highlighted our differences. The differences between us became particularly apparent when I responded to questions by one of the participants about my PhD studies. What happened was that the participants'

otherwise active questioning and commenting, often enlaced with self-ironic banter, was momentarily disrupted with silence. This left me feeling (as I had written into my notes right after the meeting) as the wrong-kind of a person to be interviewing them. I felt that contrary to my efforts, my own privileged social position – along with my safe distance from the kind of violence and insecurity the participants talked about – had put the unconventionality of their lives on display. This, coupled with my likely apparent timidity due to my limited amount of encounters in prisons at that point in time, positioned me as an outsider in relation to the participants and the particularities of their lives in prison. In the subsequent interviews, however, this outsider status did not merely evoke distance but also allowed the participants to take an active role in explaining how things worked in prison as well as in subcultural circles that some of them had inhabited prior to imprisonment. Moreover, the interviews also included several moments of collusion as we seemed to arrive at mutual understandings. Nevertheless, I was irrefutably reminded of the differences in our circumstances.

Since this article focuses particularly on gendered identity constitution, my analysis of the research materials began by identifying strips of talk/text that make reference to gender, women or womanhood. These were then grouped based on the kinds of identities they worked on enacting, which I discuss below in terms of different modes of positioning. In line with my interest in the affectiveness in positioning, I also paid attention to emotive expressions – occurring mostly but not exclusively linguistically – and affective resonances that accompanied the positionings.

Aligning with forcefulness

Positioning oneself as forceful recurred in several participants' narratives. Of particular interest regarding these positionings from the perspective of gendered identity constitution is that they were occasionally based on distinguishing oneself from others inhabiting the category of 'women'. In these cases, 'women' were often talked about in negative terms. Most often the womanhood that was dis-identified with was constructed through vulnerability. This was accomplished for instance by linking incompetence to other women in terms of physically defending themselves. For example, Anna³ (unrecorded interview) talked about women generally being incompetent in fighting (physically), since they resort to tactics such as pulling the other's hair. She presented this incompetence as a rationale for her not typically fighting with them, thus indicating that she, unlike others, knows how to fight properly and prefers to engage in fights with those who are similarly competent. Maija, in turn, talks about other women as being incapable of defending themselves against being abused by men:

Never have I abused my [male] spouse but all of my victims [...] have been male, I am not a man-hater but I get pissed off when most women can't do anything to men and I have decided that I can. (Maija, written account)

By linking the capacity to defend oneself to herself and not to other women, Maija positions herself as an exceptionally competent (female) actor. She associates “most women”, in turn, as lacking in capacities for both resisting gendered practices that render them vulnerable, and in making individual decisions to ‘do’ something. In the extract this decision of hers appears both as a reasonable response to being cast into a dominated position, and also as affectual; getting “pissed off”, connoting anger, is attached to encountering gendered limitations and attempting to resist them. Maija’s positioning as a forceful actor, then, can be seen as interwoven with an emotional expression of anger that taps into the affectiveness of not only such gendered practices that associate womanhood with vulnerability (Hollander, 2002), but also of those associating it with a derogated lack of will-power and rationality. In Maija’s account, her affective relations with these gendered notions seem ambivalent; they entail devaluing and distancing from attributes attached to womanhood, but also attempts to resist the gendered subordination of women. Moreover, her disclaiming an identity of a “man-hater” further complicates her gendered identity enactments by mitigating the potential trouble⁴ associated with non-conforming gendered positionings. To be seen as a “man-hater” risks breaching normative heterosexuality and an ‘appropriate’ gender performance (Scharff, 2012: 75). Maija can be seen as averting this risk not only by explicitly disclaiming such an identity, but also by pointing out that she never abuses her male spouse. Thus she discursively and affectively situates her violence outside of her intimate, heterosexual relationship.

Positionings such as Maija’s can be seen as efforts to subvert a troubled relation to culturally defined womanhood by indicating that it is not oneself but the other women – the members of a generic category ‘women’ – who are lacking in qualities seen valuable, such as forcefulness. In some narratives, such as that of Leila’s, below, the uptake of a forceful position means an explicit disavowal of a victim position.

L: Then I remember as well that when we were together...my friends also...always noticed when I had marks of abuse [**I:** Yeah] and it was sort of like...sort of like oh how that [**I:** Mm] man beats you so

I: Yeah

L: But for example I did like tell quite frankly to my best friend that I do beat him as well [**I:** Yeah], so that was ok then [a slight laugh] (Leila, recorded interview)

Despite bringing up her own abuse by her intimate partner⁵, in the extract Leila rejects the position of an abused woman deserving pity by positing her own use of violence as

a counter-argument for it. Her rejection of a victim position is therefore based on the assumed mutual exclusiveness of the categories ‘vulnerable and pitiable victim’ and ‘forceful perpetrator’. Similar to Maija, this can be seen as allowing her to fend off otherness by taking up attributes that are characteristic of the ideal neoliberal subject who has an individualized will that is free from structural constraints (Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001: 181).

Aligning with vulnerability

Partly in contradiction with the uptake of forceful positions, positionings emphasizing gendered vulnerability also recurred in participants’ narratives. These positionings were particularly frequent in recounting their own victimhood in the context of intimate relationships, which in several narratives preceded their own use of violence. In these narratives, vulnerability is often seen as a condition that is shared with other women. This shared vulnerability is frequently constructed through emotions such as fear. For instance, Sanna (unrecorded interview) talked about women, including herself, not leaving abusive relationships because they are afraid of being left alone with their children. Other participants also take up vulnerable positions by referring to emotional attachment to their abusers, or feelings of worthlessness, as Jaana does below.

What I did was wrong. I deeply regret my deed. Continual violence that was inflicted on me brought me to prison. Violence is NOT the right way to handle one’s relationship. It is easy to say get away from that relationship, it is not easy for a woman when your self-respect is beaten out. I felt that I don’t have any kind of value in this world. (Jaana, written account)

In the extract, Jaana can be seen as grappling with the moral trouble associated with violence by positioning herself as deserving blame, yet with mitigated responsibility due to her violence being linked to her own long-lasting victimization. She also grapples with an assumed responsibility for not leaving the abusive relationship. Jaana therefore engages with gendered, widely circulated discourses that offer women victims of abuse in intimate relationships positions of responsibility to end their abuse with their own actions (e.g. Ruuskanen, 2001). This negotiation entwines with what she expresses as a loss of self-respect as a result of victimization, associated in particular with womanhood and thus both with herself and with other women sharing similar positions. Jaana’s account can therefore be seen as imbued with an affectiveness of intimate partner violence experienced by women, as well as with an affectiveness of the common social practices that hold women responsible for their own victimization. As has been discussed by feminist scholars (see e.g. Enander, 2010), the affects attached to positions of abused women are often seen as centring particularly around emotions of shame.

However, what is noteworthy is that even though Jaana displays recognition of common sense expectations by providing an account for not leaving, she also resists them by bringing forth the paralyzing, gendered effects of violence done to her. Thus Jaana describes her difficulties in not complying with expectations to leave the abusive relationship as being due to circumstances that were not of her choosing. Furthermore, by linking this affectual experience to womanhood she takes up a position as spokesperson for other women, implying that their actions should also be seen in the context of their victimization and its (affective) effects.

In a slightly different yet related mode Anna negotiates her positioning as a perpetrator of violence, and as a woman, in association with feelings of helplessness when facing the violence of an intimate partner.

I believe that many women in my situation would do the same as I did, the feeling when you are clearly overpowered, when the person who should treat you with care starts to beat you madly it feels that you have to do something to make it stop. (Anna, written account)

By stating her belief that many women would act in the same way as her in a similar situation, Anna normalizes herself and her violent actions and thus also refutes their disparity with womanhood. In contrast to Jaana, Anna presents the situation in which she is victimized as demanding her action rather than inhibiting it. By doing so, she attaches a higher level of agency to herself and to other women she aligns herself with. Also noteworthy in Anna's account is that she presents the feeling of helplessness as a legitimation for doing violence. Consequently her violence, even though attached to affect, appears as a rational reaction to her situation. In effect, then, Anna portrays the violence of "many women" as self-defense. She can therefore be seen as deflecting the pathologizing cultural positions (e.g. Morrissey, 2003) that are readily available for women as perpetrators of violence.

(Dis)-aligning with demonization

Several participants talked about the dire treatment and demonization of women imprisoned for violent crimes. Laura (unrecorded interview) for instance talked about how women imprisoned for violent crimes are, unlike men, seen as emotionless monsters that other people in prison are afraid to talk to. The legitimacy and the dire consequences of such demonizing views were often explicitly challenged by the participants. Some of this talk (although not all) was a direct response to my interview question to the participants about whether they think that their being women has an impact on how other people relate to them as perpetrators of violence. My purpose with this question was to put my interest in gender explicitly on display, and thus to provide

the participants with an open invitation to participate in defining it. However as this question can also be interpreted as an invitation for taking the position of a demonized woman, it may be taken as offering them a troubling position. Therefore it may not surprise that responses to it were varied; some denied and some concurred with the relevance of gender in this respect. Petra responds to this question below by both concurring with the gendered trouble linked to this position, and refuting its affective significance for her.

- P:** Of course now it is so, like many...[a slight laugh] think that I am a real bad person
I: Ok, yeah
P: And there are such people who are scared of me
I: Yeah, yeah...do you think that it's exactly linked to that you are like=
P: =Specially that one is a woman
I: Yeah, ok, yeah
P: Violent woman, that...when it is after all expected of women all that...all motherhood and home [**I:** Mm, yeah] and...so all these kinds of things
I: Yeah...yeah
P: So they now just...[a slight laugh] don't quite fit into that
I: Yeah, right, so it does influence...yeah...yeah...what kinds of feelings awaken for you from that, if you feel that people somehow relate to you in that way
P: I dunno, cause I don't like...I rarely care sort of
I: Yeah
P: So that now I just try to keep that [...] I myself know where I'm going
I: Mm, yeah
P: And what I'm doing and why I'm doing
(Petra, recorded interview)

Petra's narrative positions her as a feared 'other' in the eyes of other people whose affective response to her body is that of being pushed away (Ahmed, 2000). Her talk is accompanied with slight laughs, which can be seen as an affective expression that orients towards the troublesome aspects of her positioning. Petra acknowledges the genderedness of trouble attached to her demonized positioning by actively concurring with me that it is linked to her being a woman. By acknowledging the conflict between gendered expectations and her violent actions, Petra's talk can be seen as pointing towards the oppressiveness in assumptions that reduce womanhood to traditional dimensions such as "motherhood and home". Her acknowledgement of the conflict can hence be read as resisting of dominant gendered notions. However when I ask about her own affective responses to the way people relate to her, she shifts to refuting the significance of others' views – again accompanied with snickering – by stating a lack of affect in response to being demonized. In doing so, she positions herself as a subject who is able to withstand the affective power of the gender order, adherence to which she notably attaches to other people and does not attach to herself. That this positioning is based on claiming lack of affect is also significant; since emotionality is linked to and

often expected of women in particular (Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001: 137–138), claiming an absence of affect establishes further individualizing distance from gendered expectations. Thus in similar ways to Maija, Petra enacts a positioning as an autonomous subject whose actions are not dictated by others or compliance with the gender order. Rather, their actions are portrayed as deriving from their own rational evaluations. Furthermore, by emphasising her responsibility towards herself and not others, Petra attaches more value to her own self-knowledge than to other people's views. This works to further repudiate the validity of others' demonizing views.

These discursive moves in the interview with Petra are also illustrative of the continuous negotiations of relations between the researcher and the participants in research encounters. By disclaiming affective vulnerability as regards to others' views and by adopting an autonomous position, Petra can be seen as responding with resistance to my potentially stigmatizing positioning invitations. She thus breaks away from any assumptions of similarity in our views. This allows her to momentarily distance herself from potential stigma associated with her being positioned as an inmate accountable for gendered deviance. As discussed above, this kind of constant movement between collaborating in constructions of shared understandings and breaks in such collaboration – as well as the incessant negotiations of difference and sameness that are associated with it – is integral to the identity enactments in the participants' talk/texts.

Aligning with motherhood

Adopting a position of a mother can be seen as a powerful means for gaining recognition within the gender order. This positioning recurred in several participants' narratives, yet it was often imbued with troubled affect. Most of the participants had children, who sometimes had been taken into custody before their current imprisonment due to substance-abuse or prior imprisonment. Especially when talking about their plans and hopes for a life after prison (which I asked about in the interviews), many envisioned violence-free lives with their children and also often with their current intimate partners. These alignments with motherhood were thus often linked with distancing oneself from a violent identity, for instance by associating their use of violence with a phase of their life from the past. Jenni, in the extract below, links her feelings of emptiness when her children were taken into custody with increased substance abuse and with the beginning of her using violence:

J: ...And then when the kids were taken into custody then it somehow then when I was released from that sentence then...it felt just so somehow empty that...then...then I started to use sort of...even...even more substances than what I have used before in my life so that...and after that for the first time in my life have also come these kinds of violent sort of...violent sort of behaviours (Jenni, recorded interview)

Noticeable in Jenni's account are hesitations and a search for words, evident for example in the repetition of the word "then" and in continuous pausing. These could be seen as indicative of affectively loaded trouble in telling about these events; the difficulties of putting into words the pain in losing her children, and the transition to using violence. Similar to Jenni, in several other participants' accounts trouble with being positioned as a mother is expressed in an emphatically affective way. For example Laura (unrecorded interview) talked about having much more to lose now than she did before, as she wants to be a part of her child's life in the future. She talked about feeling that everything collapsed when her child was taken away from her. She also told how, because of her past that involves drug abuse and violence, she is not seen by others as being fit to be a mother. As she talked about her obstructed motherhood, she nearly came to tears. As an interviewer I was also deeply affected by the intense feelings that accompanied her talk. I came close to tears myself. In hindsight, this affective moment turned out to be of central importance in my study. It shaped my interpretations and ways of relating to the participants by allowing me to sense some of the pain attached to the dilemmas they face. Crucially, it also sparked my aspirations to integrate affectiveness into my analyses. I felt that without an attunement to affect, so much would remain untouched.

Striving towards the position of mother means attaching oneself to meanings that are culturally linked most potently with membership in the category of 'women' (May, 2005). Thus this positioning can allow for resisting the stigma associated with the participants' other positioning as a woman imprisoned for violent crimes (c.f. Opsal, 2011). In terms of gender and its reproduction, to express this desire to mother can, in this context, be seen as not only concurrent with dominant gendered notions but also challenging them by questioning the boundaries defining who can claim the identity of a (good) mother (c.f. Ferraro and Moe, 2003). The affective intensity of these expressions, evident particularly in participants' talk about their motherhood being obstructed, speaks not only to the affective weight of the identity of a mother but also to their trouble with enacting this alignment. In narratives such as Laura's, this trouble is linked in particular to its irreconcilability with the position of a violent perpetrator they are cast into.

Conclusion

This article has illustrated how women imprisoned for violent crimes negotiate gendered identities against a socio-cultural backdrop that offers them positions of otherness. Drawing upon a discursive-affective approach to positioning, I have demonstrated how these negotiations occur in dynamic processes of aligning and dis-

aligning with different positionings. The advantage of this approach is that it allows for viewing identity enactments as being informed by socio-culturally circulating understandings and valuations as well as interactions between participants and researchers.

As the analysis shows, the participants' identity negotiations are imbued with various ambivalences and enlaced with often difficult affective resonances. For instance, some of the participants' identity enactments involve repudiating vulnerability associated with womanhood, while some are based on acknowledging it. Gendered meanings hence cut across these enactments in complex ways: Some of the positionings in the participants' narratives rely on attachments to attributes that have traditionally masculine connotations, such as forcefulness. Others rely on attachments to dominant categories of femininity such as mothering. Further, and paradoxically, while speaking against the abnormality and demonization of women who have committed violence, the participants frequently attach themselves to the very same ideals of individuality and rationality on which their gendered otherness is largely based (Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001). This highlights the power of those ideals despite attempts to challenge them.

By shedding light not only on the complexity and fluidity of these identity processes but also on their affectively ambivalent dimensions, this analysis contributes to efforts undertaken by feminist criminologists at countering reductionist views about relations between women and violence. Specifically, and in contradiction to stereotypes of women who have committed violence as masculine (Ferraro, 2006) and thus abnormally gendered, this analysis allows for viewing their complex attachments to gendered attributes as being part of the inherent multiplicity of gendered identity enactments; as entailing both reiterations and transgressions of traditional positionings (Davies, 2016). Making this multifacetedness visible can take us one step closer to disrupting the purity of the gendered binaries that pose women either as good and non-violent, or as bad and violent.

Notes

¹ Age of four of the participants is unknown.

² While it is sometimes customary in feminist research to consult the participants about the transcripts and/or the researcher's interpretations, in this case it did not appear possible since several participants were either moved or released shortly after their participation, without my having access to their changed contact information.

³ All the names are pseudonyms. In interview transcripts, the interviewer is referred to with "I" and the interviewee with the initial of their pseudonym. The transcripts have been slightly edited in order to assist intelligibility, although the aim has been to retain their original form as closely as possible. All the materials were originally in Finnish, extracts from which have been translated by the author and checked by a native English speaker. The transcription symbols are [...] to indicate omitted material, three dots to show pauses, text to indicate emphasized word[s], = to indicate absence of a gap between utterances, [text] for information added by the transcriber.

⁴ See Wetherell (1998) on the notion of trouble in positioning.

⁵ None of the participants talked about non-heterosexual relationships, thus their partners were all men.

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