

The final version of this paper has been published and is available in *Feminism & Psychology*, 26:4, 2016 by SAGE Publications Ltd.  
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0959353516655370?rss=1>.

## **“She must be an odd kind of woman”: Gendered categorizations in accounts of lethal intimate partner violence in Finnish tabloid news**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the ways in which lethal intimate partner violence perpetrated by both men and women is made sense of in news reports in Finnish tabloids. An analytical approach drawing upon critical discursive psychology, complemented with tools from membership categorization analysis, was adopted for distinguishing recurring patterns in accounting for violence and use of gendered categorizations in the news. Two recurring interpretative repertoires of violence were identified. The first constructs violence as originating from interactional or relationship problems, while the second relies upon characterizations of the perpetrators as pathological or deviant to explain violence. The analysis accords particular attention to the ways in which the ideal of gender-neutrality that is prevalent in Finnish society is drawn upon in these repertoires,

and how this ideal entwines with the circulation of gender-specific assumptions. The analysis also illustrates how categorizations often work in the reports to preserve the normality of men as perpetrators of lethal intimate partner violence while attaching deviance and moral questionability to women both as victim and as perpetrators, thus maintaining the taken-for-grantedness of gendered differences in relation to violence.

### **Keywords**

Critical discursive psychology, gender, gender-neutrality, intimate partner violence, membership categorization, morality, news, violence

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### **Introduction**

The link between gender and violence, especially intimate partner violence, has been one of the core interests in feminist studies for several decades (see e.g. Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Johnson, 2005). A large body of research has also documented the

connections between ways of talking about violence – most often by men who have been violent towards women in intimate relationships – and the reproduction of understandings and practices that sustain gendered power relations (e.g. Hearn, 1998; Lau & Stevens, 2012). The aim of this article is to explore the construction of understandings about violence, more specifically lethal intimate partner violence committed by both men and women, in Finnish tabloid newspapers. By applying an approach to discursive meaning-making that draws on critical discursive psychology and membership categorization analysis, I focus in this article particularly on the ways in which commonsensical notions about gender are deployed in the news.

For researchers studying sense-making about violence and gender, the contemporary societal climate in Finland offers a particularly intriguing set of discourses and practices. The expression “genderless gender” (Ronkainen, 2002) has been used to characterize the Finnish context. This expression refers to a paradoxical interplay between, on the one hand, everyday practices that maintain gendered inequalities and, on the other hand, wide acceptance of ideals of gender equality and neutrality. Oftentimes, advocacy of gender neutrality has translated into reluctance to address violence as a gendered issue (Clarke, 2011). From the 1990s onwards feminists have increasingly challenged such gender neutrality by pointing to the links between violence (in intimate relationships) and gendered power relations (Kantola, 2006). However, as

elsewhere (see e.g. Enander, 2011, regarding the Swedish context), feminist analyses are repeatedly opposed by gender neutral arguments, in which it is occasionally claimed that women are as violent as men. In recent years, Finnish tabloids have frequently highlighted violence committed by women, expressing concerns about its increase (Venäläinen, 2015). Yet statistics show that more women than men are victims of intimate partner violence.<sup>1</sup> The difference is even more marked in intimate partner homicides; the number of women killed by their male partners in 2003-2011 was 199, while the number of men killed by their female partners was 46 (Lehti, 2013).

A large body of feminist research, mainly in Anglo-American countries, has documented bias in reporting about violence in newspapers and magazines: the relative invisibility of intimate partner violence in this reporting (Carter, 1998); the tendency to blame female victims (Meyers, 1997); and the tendency to depict men's violence towards women as arising from individual pathology rather than being linked to patriarchal structures (Berns, 2001). Researchers have noted that portrayals of women in the news, either as perpetrators or as victims of violence, often reproduce stereotypical dichotomies between "good" and "bad", or "blameless" and "blameworthy" women (Meloy & Miller, 2009). Boyle (2005), among others, notes that the lower frequency of women's violence leads to more sensational treatment than men's violence. According to Boyle, media portray female perpetrators, more explicitly than male perpetrators, as

of a specific gender and as transgressing gendered expectations, thus indirectly lending a sense of normality and ordinariness to men's violence (also Naylor, 2001). Overall, however, studies examining portrayals of both men's and women's violence in the news are scarce. Even fewer studies have examined reporting of violence, and particularly its relation to gender, in Finland. The most extensive analyses have been conducted by Nikunen (2006, 2011), who studied news about murder-suicides from an ethnomethodological perspective. Nikunen found that gendered notions, in particular gendered moral orders, concerning family and heterosexual relationships are inscribed into portrayals of mothers and fathers who have killed their children (2006) and into the construction of newsworthiness (or lack of it) of femicide-suicides (2011).

This study contributes to the existing literature first by providing an analysis of portrayals of both women's and men's lethal intimate partner violence that allows a parallel scrutiny of how gender is mobilized in each case. Second, by applying an analytical approach that is new to analyses of media texts, the study gives detailed views of connections between accounts of violence in newspapers and culturally circulating, commonsensical, and significantly, morally inflected, understandings of gender and violence. The analysis is underpinned by an understanding of gender informed by feminist discursive psychology (e.g. Magnusson & Marecek, 2010). I view gender as a social construct based on practices whereby gender categories are

distinguished and hierarchical relations between those inhabiting them are (re)produced and negotiated. Constructions of gender rely on normative assumptions about women and men that gain a sense of naturalness through repetition (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Media are central arenas for such repetition and contribute significantly to the (re)production of gender. News stories are typically based on circulating dominant understandings that make them recognizable to the readers, allowing such understandings to be both drawn upon and constructed in the news (Gill, 2007).

My analytical approach broadly follows principles of critical discursive psychology (Edley 2001; Wetherell, 2003), with an interest in the entanglements of local meaning-making with culturally shared and socio-historically shaped resources for sense-making. I use the analytical tool “interpretative repertoires”, defined as “relatively coherent ways of talking about objects and events in the world” (Edley, 2001, p. 198), to explore the discursive resources that are drawn upon in news about violence. Different modes of accounting for violence have different consequences for both blame allocation and portrayals of the morality of the people involved (see Drew, 1998). To look closely at the processes whereby different portrayals are achieved and how gender is mobilized in these processes, I have drawn upon insights and analytical tools from membership categorization analysis (MCA). This enables me to highlight the gendered moral work

that is accomplished – often quite subtly – by the use of categories in accounts of violence.

MCA, developed by Sacks (e.g. 1992), provides tools for unpacking the construction of relations between identity categories and activities. According to Sacks, when interpreting and morally evaluating the activities of others, members of a culture resort to their shared, commonsensical knowledge about identity categories and their incumbents. Identity categories are seen as vehicles of cultural knowledge, making interpretations and explanations of activities available so that “by *categories* competent members *know* what is being done by whom” (Stetson, 1999, p. 79, emphases in the original). In other words, certain activities are “category-bound” in that they are routinely observed together with certain identity categories (Sacks, 1992, LC1, p. 337–338). Therefore, researchers and other members of a culture alike can infer identity categories on the basis of references to category-bound activities, or predicates such as rights, responsibilities and other attributes bound to them (Jayyusi, 1984).

Routinely accomplished links between activities, predicates and identity categories often gain a normative quality, making the links significant in the reproduction of what is societally seen as moral and normal (Stokoe, 2003). Mundane activities of categorizing can work to naturalize certain discourses and power relations attached to

them, and therefore, like discursive resources such as interpretative repertoires, contribute to maintaining hierarchical divisions, for instance, gender (Baker, 2000). For example, in relation to violence LeCouteur and Oxlad (2010) have shown how men use categorizations based on normative conceptions about gender in their accounts to warrant their abuse of their female partners (see also Stokoe, 2010). Though most studies drawing upon MCA use interactional data and attend to sequential organization of talk, MCA has been fruitfully applied in analyses of news about violence (e.g. Eglin & Hester, 1999; Nikunen, 2006, 2011).

## **Material and procedure**

The material for the current study was gathered from two Finnish tabloids, *Ilta-Sanomat* and *Ilta-alehti*. Both are among the most widely circulated newspapers in Finland, and the only tabloids in the country. Due to its potential to arouse shock and interest, violence is a common theme in tabloids. This, and the vast number of people daily reached by tabloids, provided the rationale for choosing tabloids as the source of material for this study. Even though more moderate in their style than for instance Anglo-American tabloids, as is common for this genre (Gill, 2007), the descriptions of violent cases in these papers are often more vivid than those of less entertainment-oriented newspapers.



All reports published during one year (2009) in the abovementioned papers about lethal intimate partner violence (including ex-partners) by men and women were included in the analysis. Compared to reporting of other, more mundane and recurring forms of violence, news stories about lethal intimate partner violence are often particularly sensationalizing and detailed. While the material drawn on in this study does not cover reporting of all partner violence in tabloids, the decision to focus solely on news about lethal intimate partner violence was made because of the deep moral undertones that these stories carry, and the implications these undertones have for the construction of gendered, normative understandings in relation to violence. The material consists of 101 reports, of which 60 are about lethal violence committed by men and 41 by women<sup>2</sup>. Most of the reports (32 out of 41) about violence by women are about the same case (the widely covered Ulvila [name of a town] case, further discussed in the analysis section); therefore, the number of cases with women as perpetrators (N=6) covered in the reports is markedly smaller than the number of cases with men (N=25).

The primary purpose of the analysis was to examine in close detail how notions about gender are used in these reports, and how the usage entwines with how violence is accounted for. In line with the analytical approach and tools described above, the analysis began by distinguishing different ways of describing and explaining violence in the reports and comparing them with each other to discern prevalent ways of accounting

for violence. Subsequently, identity categories, actions and predicates explicitly mentioned or implied within each report were listed, and relations between them and their discursive effects were scrutinized. Special attention was given to gender categories and gendered assumptions that were mobilized in the accounts of violence.

## **Analysis and discussion**

In the analysis two frequently occurring interpretative repertoires, both evident in reports about both men's and women's violence, were identified: a repertoire of relational interaction and a repertoire of individual pathology or deviance. These repertoires consist of modes of accounting, each with an underlying logic that constructs violence, its causes and the character of the people involved, in certain ways. The following two subsections describe each of these repertoires. In order to discern details in how these repertoires were intertwined with the mobilization of gender, the subsequent analysis focuses on the processes of gendered categorization in the materials.

### *A repertoire of relational interaction*

Jayyusi (2007) has said that death is always accountable, that is, death typically generates searches for reasons and culpable parties to make sense of it. While not always including explicit searches for explanations, reports about lethal intimate partner violence usually provide at least some means of accounting for the events, for example descriptions of activities or selection of identity categories. However, sometimes, as in the extract below about a murder-suicide committed by a woman, the reports construct the events as escaping explanations.

#### Extract 1<sup>3</sup>

During Monday shock grew when it came out that the 44-year old woman had shot her common-law husband and after that herself. (...) We may never get an explanation for the common-law wife's final solution. According to the neighbor, none of the events of the last 24 hours gave clues about what was to come. The popular couple was often seen taking walks together – including on the evening before the killing. (*Ilta-Sanomat*, 20 October 2009)

In the extract, an increase in shock is linked with learning that the perpetrator was “a 44-year old woman”, thus allowing for a connection to be made between shock and the arguably disjunctive combination of the category “woman” with the activity of “shooting” one’s husband and oneself. The latter part of the report focuses on the search for motives, the failure of which is made explicit by stating that they may remain

unknown, and by the neighbors' reported observation of lack of signs of what was to come. The extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986) "never" and "none" strengthen the sense of mystery and suddenness of the event. Reference to continuing the activity of taking walks together provides further support for this image; via this description of engagement in mutual activities, the absence of relationship problems is implied, and the unexpectedness and mysterious nature of the outcome is emphasized. Thus, even though seen as not applicable to this case, the possibility of accounting for the events with reference to a dysfunctional relationship is entertained.

Similar to the extract above, explanations for another murder-suicide – this one committed by a man – are sought in relationship problems.

#### Extract 2

*What led to the break-up?*

According to neighbors the couple had been very nice and cozy up until the last weeks. Problems had however arisen from something, because the wife had a couple weeks before moved away from the couple's shared home. (...)

Despite this life change the man, known as an enthusiastic hunter and fisher, appeared as his usual self in the eyes of an outsider.

According to a fishing-buddy no jokes were made about the break-up, but it was nevertheless possible to talk about it together.

In a manly way slightly uneasily, but [possible] anyhow. (*Iltalehdi*, 3 December 2009)

In extract two the subheading orients attention towards causes for the couple's break-up, thus making it relevant in relation to the killing, for which no other explanations are presented. While the description of the perpetrating man as appearing as his usual self despite the break-up appears to diminish its relevance, its problematic status is preserved by describing it as a touchy subject. It is noteworthy that by characterizing the "uneasy" mode of talking about the break-up as "manly", the difficulty of talking about it is explicitly linked to the category "men", here represented by the perpetrator and his "fishing-buddy". On the one hand, linking an activity, i.e. talking uneasily, that is characterized as manly to the perpetrating man can be seen as strengthening his membership in the category "ordinary men" and thus normalizing him despite his activity of killing. On the other hand, the "manly" uneasiness in talking about the break-up allows the man to be seen as having difficulty in coping with the break-up *because of* his manhood, thus portraying him as vulnerable to the detrimental effects of the dissolution of marriage because of his membership in the gender category "men".

Besides reporting about ongoing relationship problems, several reports account for violence with references to conflictual interactions between the victim and the perpetrator. Extracts three and four illustrate this mode of accounting for violence, with a woman as the perpetrator in extract three and a man as the perpetrator in extract four.

### Extract 3

#### **Young common-law wife stabbed her husband to death**

A couple's Saturday night led to a fierce argument and to the man's death.

A 20-year old woman and her 44-year old common-law husband spent Saturday night in their apartment building home in Seinäjoki [name of a town] with a few guests. The social evening ended in fierce arguing that was carried also into the neighboring flat.

*(Iltalehti, 20 April 2009)*

### Extract 4

#### **A woman was shot**

A 25-year old man from Lahti is suspected of shooting his common-law wife at home with a handgun. There were also guests at the young couple's home that night. At some point the man and the woman nevertheless drifted into an argument. The situation ended in the 24-year old woman getting shot dead. *(Iltalehti 11 April 2009)*

Both articles featured in these extracts report on the police investigation into the cases shortly after the killing, at which point information is still likely to be scarce. In both extracts, however, the writer attempts to make sense of the events by constructing a sequence of activities, in which "a couple's" social evening "leads to" an argument, which in turn "ends" with the killing. In both reports the outcome, therefore, is tied to a particular situation, with both the perpetrator and the victim – as units of a shared "membership categorization device" "couple" – participating in the unfolding of

events<sup>4</sup>. The concept of membership categorization device means that certain identity categories – such as a husband and a wife – are seen as bound together, thus constituting a shared unit, membership in which guides how their activities are judged (Baker, 2000). In these extracts, evoking this shared membership of the parties seems in particular to tie their actions together, creating a sense of mutuality.

Despite similar portrayals of violence in extracts three and four regardless of the gender of the parties involved, there is a difference, particularly in how the headlines of the reports mobilize gender. This pattern recurs in several other reports. While the first headline contains an explicitly gendered categorization of the perpetrator as a “young common-law wife” and the victim as “her husband”, the second includes no mention of the perpetrator as a man or his relation to the victim. Also, unlike the headline in extract four, in the headline of extract three the description of violent action – stabbing – is in active form and therefore does not obscure the activity of the perpetrator. Since the function of headlines is to arouse interest and to frame the subsequent story (Watson, 1997), the headline of extract three can be seen as making gender, as well as age, available for making sense of the events as unusual, as young women are not usually perceived as typical perpetrators of lethal violence. Furthermore, in the main text of extract three an age difference between the woman perpetrator and her spouse is made evident. This is hearable as a sign of asymmetry in the couple, which, along with the

description of her conceivably unusual violent activity in the headline, sets her action apart from the unit “couple”, thus undercutting the otherwise prevalent sense of mutuality in these extracts.

The extracts above account for violence either with references to relationship problems or to interactions between the perpetrator and the victim. The construction of these accounts relies on the use of what I have labelled an interpretative repertoire of relational interaction, a frequent occurrence in the material. This repertoire can be seen, at least to some extent, as mutualizing responsibility for violence, as it appears as an activity involving both parties (c.f. Coates & Wade, 2004). Therefore, by locating the origin of violence in the relation between the involved parties, this repertoire relies largely on the assumption of power symmetry (which, however, was also partly undermined as seen for instance in extract 3) in the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. This repertoire thus connects to the prevalent gender-neutral discourse of intimate partner violence in Finland based on the assumption of attained equality between women and men (Kantola, 2006). In the next extract this gender-neutral logic is illustrated more clearly. It is from a commentary that seeks to explain why, for over two years, the police were unable to solve a case with a woman suspect (the Ulvila murder case discussed below).



## Extract 5

### **The police trusts female victims**

Many men claim that the faltering initial investigation in the Ulvila case was based on the fact that the police, in the event of a crime, traditionally believe an injured woman more than a blood-stained man. After the hearing women get to tidy themselves quickly and (surviving) men in domestic disturbance calls most commonly go to jail, even though a woman could just as well be the guilty party. Such is the law of the land. (*Ilta-Sanomat*, 3 October 2009)

In the extract those who attribute faulty investigation to police, who believe statements made by women more than those made by men, are categorized as “men”. In terms of footing<sup>5</sup>, then, men are displayed as the authors of claims about gender-biased practices of the police. Combined with the contrast constructed between the treatment of women and men, the extract portrays relations between the gender categories as those of adversaries, the benefit of one being at the loss of the other. Moreover, women are portrayed as benefiting from what is described as the prevalent state of affairs. This “law of the land” is in turn contrasted with the assertion that women “could just as well” be the perpetrators, which functions as a call for broadening the category of “perpetrators” to include not only men but also women. Thus, inequality in favor of women is constructed as a prevailing practice based on a faulty assumption of violence being perpetrated by men only. At the same time, an alternative understanding based on

the assumption of irrelevance of the gender of the perpetrator is forwarded. In sum, while an understanding of violence as a gendered phenomenon – with men being more likely to be perpetrators – is displayed as benefiting women, men are portrayed as advocating and implicitly benefiting from the alternative, gender-neutral understanding. Furthermore, by linking what is portrayed as the prevalent practice to the failure of the police to identify women as perpetrators and to solve the case under discussion, this practice is portrayed as detrimental to the proper functioning of the justice system. The commentary, therefore, can be seen as a critique against a gendered understanding of violence which, however, itself relies on a construction of a gender dichotomy.

The above extracts illustrate accounting for violence with the use of an interpretative repertoire that lays particular emphasis on relational mutuality. While this repertoire is largely based on gender-neutral logic similar to that made visible in the commentary above, it is nevertheless often constructed, as well as undercut, with the help of gendered categorizations. The functions of these categorizations are even more visible in the construction of the repertoire discussed in the next section.

### *A repertoire of individual pathology or deviance*

The second recurring interpretative repertoire in the material – the repertoire of individual pathology or deviance – emphasizes personal qualities of the perpetrators and their habitual ways of acting. Thus, in contrast to the repertoire discussed above, this repertoire relies essentially on characterizations of the perpetrators. Extract six illustrates how this repertoire often also involves, and indeed relies upon, a characterization of the victim.

#### Extract 6

A person who had known the couple describes the victim as a backward, quiet and ethereal woman, who did not make a fuss over herself. The suspect is described as being hot-tempered by nature. (*Ilta-Sanomat*, 16 September 2009)

The extract is from a report about a case of a woman found dead in a parking lot, at the point of the investigation where her husband was the only suspect, and the circumstances of the victim's death were not yet known. The characterizations of the victim and the suspect in the extract can be seen as offering a possible way of making sense of the events. The predicates linked to "the victim" (backward, quiet and ethereal, combined with a membership in the category "woman") portray her as submissive available in relation to the suspected man, who is characterized as "hot-tempered". Furthermore, since the dispositional characterization of the suspected man implies the

possibility of acting violently, it makes available inferences of past violence, therefore rendering possible an understanding of the killing as an escalation of continued violence and/or dominance by him. Further support for this interpretation is provided in a report the following day:

#### Extract 7

##### **The victim returned from a safe house to her common-law husband**

VANTAA [name of a town]: What led to the death of the young mother found on a parking lot in Havukoski [an area in the town of Vantaa]?

Only about three weeks before the suspected killing the 20-year old mother of a small baby had spent over two weeks in a safe house.

She nevertheless returned home with her infant to her common-law husband, a 27-year old painter. (*Ilta-Sanomat*, 17 September 2009)

The activity of the victim described in extract seven (her having been at a safe house) establishes her membership in the category “victim” even prior to being killed. This allows for inferring that her common-law husband has indeed acted violently before. However, aside from offering an account of the death of the victim as a part of continuing victimization, the report also sets her own activity – on which the headline focuses – as relevant in relation to it. The word, “nevertheless”, at the beginning of the sentence in which her having returned to her common law husband is reported, indicates

a contrast in relation to her previously described activity of having spent “over two weeks” in the safe house, thus marking her returning as an unobvious activity following the first. The sense of her returning as being problematic is further strengthened by mentioning her being accompanied by her infant and her entailed categorization as “a mother”. Since one of the central, gendered predicates of mothers is the responsibility to protect their children, her returning with her baby to an assumedly violent husband can be seen as a violation against that responsibility, thus troubling her categorization as a “good mother” (Ingrids, 2013). In sum, then, not only is the activity of the victim made relevant, but its moral quality is brought under suspicion. Similar attention to the activity of the woman victim is discernable in extract eight from a report about another case.

#### Extract 8

Behind the deed there was jealousy caused by a dissolved intimate relationship, the district court states in its sentence.

The victim of the murder foresaw her fate, such that shortly before the slaying she had even told two friends about her foreseen death.

[Omitted name of the perpetrator] had beaten the victim earlier at least half a dozen times to the point of being hospitalized, but only once had the woman reported him to the police, which had led to a suspended sentence for abuse.

On the fatal night of the victim in April last year [Omitted name of the perpetrator] had left by taxi from Kotka [name of a town] to go to his ex-partner's apartment in Hamina [name of a town] with a bag containing both an axe and a crowbar. A bit earlier he had called his ex-partner and threatened to kill her.

When the call came the victim of the killing had still been in the Kompassi [name]-restaurant in Hamina with her female friends. The friends had heard how she responded to her soon-to-be killer on the phone:

– Oh, you mean to kill me, huh, well you have tried that before too, but have not succeeded. (*Ilta-lehti*, 14 March 2009)

This extract accounts for the violence by referring to the perpetrating man's experiences of jealousy. However, a large portion of the space is also allotted to descriptions of the woman victim's actions; her talk, for instance, is presented by use of direct reported speech and thus acquires high significance. Presenting her talk as immediately preceding her killing allows for it to be read as provocation, especially when considering that the content can be seen as questioning the perpetrator's ability to kill her. The perpetrating man is described as acting consistently. Activities such as 1) having been violent towards the victim in the past, 2) having threatened her with killing, and now, 3) following what is readable as provocation, killing her, place him firmly into the category of a "dispositional perpetrator" (Ingrids, 2013), who habitually acts violently. This categorization, along with the victim's reported premonition about being

killed, allows her killing to be seen as foreseeable and thus as preventable. It is to the victim's reported lack of action – her not reporting prior abuses by the perpetrator except for “only once” – that the failure to prevent her death is attributable. According to Ruuskanen (2001), “good battered women” in the Finnish context are generally expected to be active in ending the abuse by leaving the relationship or by seeking help. In this context, not reporting the abuse to the police can appear as an “absent activity” (Stokoe, 2003), the absence of which, if not accounted for, signals moral lack and threatens membership in the category to which the activity is normatively tied. Despite the characterization of the perpetrator as dispositionally violent, then, partial responsibility for the actualization of the killing is placed on the victim, and in the process her moral character and the reasonableness of her actions are impugned.

The above extracts exemplify how accounting for men's violence in intimate partner relationships with references to violent dispositions is often accompanied by the mobilization of gendered expectations about how women victims of violence should act. Therefore, even though this mode of accounting constructs the intimate relationship between the perpetrating man and the woman victim as imbued with continuous violence by the man, the relevance of the implied imbalance of power between them is undermined by drawing attention to the oddity of the woman victim's actions.

Similarly, accounting for men's violence through reference to jealousy also relies on a

complex entwinement of gendered assumptions with the de-gendering of violence (c.f. Hearn, 1998). Arguably, the intelligibility of accounting for violence with jealousy relies on notions of ownership and entitlement in intimate relationships conventionally attached to the category “men”. Explanations of violence that rely on jealousy, but do not acknowledge gendered power dynamics, often resort to referring to individual pathology in ways that obscure the perpetrator’s responsibility for his actions (Coates & Wade, 2004). Indeed, in some reports in the material perpetrating men are said to have been “suffering from” jealousy (e.g. *Iltalehti*, 14 February 2009), an expression which strengthens the appearance of violence as a result of a disease for which the perpetrator cannot be blamed. Occasionally, references to alcoholism are used when accounting for men’s violence with references to alcoholism (e.g. *Ilta-Sanomat*, 16 January 2009). Similar to jealousy, such references are often part of the construction of violent dispositions in the material. In sum, despite references to the repeated use of violence, these modes of accounting – echoing common understandings of Finnish men as potentially less powerful within the domestic sphere than women (Lahti, 2001) – work to portray men perpetrating violence as non-agentic in their perpetration, and thereby also diminish their responsibility for violence.

In reports about women as perpetrators the interpretative repertoire that employs characterizations of the perpetrators for making sense of their violence appears to



function quite differently from when men are perpetrators. Perhaps not surprisingly, “category-activity puzzles” (Stokoe, 2003) – which result from a discrepancy between the used identity category and the depictions of activities – seem often to be constructed in the reports where this repertoire prevails. The puzzles have the effect of implying deviousness on the part of the suspected women. Extract nine is from a report about the Ulvila case, taken from an article that was published shortly after a surprising turn of events in the investigation: over two years after the killing, the wife of the deceased who had till then been seen as also a victim,<sup>6</sup> was revealed as a suspect. The reports that followed included quoted reactions of residents of Ulvila, such as the following:

#### Extract 9

A woman working at a nearby gas station wonders about the psyche of the wife.  
– She must be an odd kind of woman to be able to keep such a deed a secret for so long,  
the woman says. (*Ilta-Sanomat*, 29 September 2009)

As in extract nine, quoted reactions often focused on the ability of the suspected woman to cover up the killing and to live with her secret. In order to make sense of the Ulvila suspect’s activities (extract nine), her membership in the category “woman” is qualified with the expression “an odd kind”, thus constructing her as not a typical incumbent of

the category. In another report, exemplified in extract ten, the gender of the suspected woman is even more explicitly scrutinized.

#### Extract 10

In connection to the killing of [victim's name omitted] many have asked how a woman is able to do such a deed.

An explanation can be found for this.

According to acquaintances [the suspect's name omitted] had a clear size advantage compared to her husband. The wife has been described as being over 180 centimeters tall and [victim's name omitted] as being about 160 centimeters. Thus there was a difference in height between the couple of about 20 centimeters. (*Ilta-Sanomat*, 2 October 2009)

Interestingly, explanations for what is construed in the extract as an anomaly – i.e. a woman as the killer of her husband – are provided only in terms of physical qualities. In the paragraphs that follow the extract in the report, physical fragility of the victim and his being older than the suspected woman are added to the list of physical qualities that are together offered as an answer to the question at the beginning of the extract. The ability of “a woman” to kill her husband, then, is linked solely to physicality, implying the irrelevance of other qualities attached to the category “woman” that could make it difficult to see the incumbents of that category as killers. As in extract five, then, the

underlying assumption appears to be that, omitting physical differences, the category “perpetrator of lethal intimate partner violence” is gender-neutral. This is also partly in line with the way in which the killing is accounted for in other parts of the report, as illustrated in extract eleven.

#### Extract 11

According to detective superintendent Pauli Kuusiranta the relations between the couple had been inflamed for [a] long [time], because the wife did not feel that she got respect from her husband.

– The wife has taken care of the children and worked long hours. In the wife’s mind the husband did not give her the worth that he should have, Kuusiranta said about the motive for the killing to Turun Sanomat [a name of a newspaper]. (*Ilta-Sanomat*, 2 October 2009)

In the extract the detective superintendent is cited as presenting the suspected woman’s experience of not being respected by her husband as the motive for the killing. It is noteworthy that in the report not getting the respect that she “should have” is authored by the woman herself (indicated by the expression “in her mind”), and therefore presented as an evaluation not necessarily shared by the cited detective superintendent or by the reporter (c.f. Attenborough, 2015). Later in the report the husband is characterized by the neighbors as having shown in his demeanor that he was the “master

of the house”. Despite these references to dominance by the victim, the suspected woman is, however, not portrayed as subordinate. Attributes attached to her, such as 1) being physically bigger and stronger than her husband and thus able to overpower him, 2) expecting respect and not getting it, and 3) killing her husband, undermine her categorization as a victim of a dominating husband. Furthermore, by attaching the abovementioned attributes to her that are conventionally associated with men rather than women, her membership in the category “ordinary women” is brought under suspicion. This evoked exceptionality is functional in accounting for her violence by relying upon and reproducing gendered assumptions about the abnormality of women’s violence. However, as elsewhere in the material, simultaneously and somewhat paradoxically, a societal context is constructed in which it is just as possible for a woman to do violence as it is for a man.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have explored ways in which lethal intimate partner violence is made sense of in Finnish tabloid newspapers, with particular focus on the mobilization of gender in the construction of violence, examined through use of categorizations. In the analysis, two recurring interpretative repertoires were identified. The first constructs violence as originating from the couple’s mutual relationship problems, while the

second sees violence as originating from individual pathology or deviance of the perpetrator. These repertoires construct the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator differently, which has implications for how responsibility for the violence is allotted. While the first repertoire implies equality and shared responsibility between the couple, in the second the categories of a victim and a perpetrator are more clearly distinguished from each other and also related differently to violence. What is significant about both repertoires is that, in line with the gender-neutral ethos in Finland, neither connects violence to structural inequalities between women and men. Both of these repertoires hence bear resemblance to what has been called a gender symmetry perspective on violence (Barrett & Levin, 2015) that favors individualizing and situational accounts over ones that link violence to unequal structural factors. It appears, then, that feminist views about the links between violence and gendered, society-level asymmetries in power are largely absent in the analyzed reports.

Even though offering only a narrow glimpse at the reporting of lethal intimate partner violence, the analyses indicate several points of concurrence with trends in reporting of violence discussed in previous studies. In particular, what has been labeled as victim-blaming language (e.g. Richards, Gillespie & Smith, 2011), shown to appear frequently especially in news about lethal intimate partner violence by men towards women, is evident in the material. As the analysis and the discussion above illustrate, both direct

forms of victim-blaming, indicated for instance by portraying the woman victim as not taking the necessary measures to protect herself against violence, and indirect ones, such as mutualizing responsibility for violence or displaying men perpetrators in a sympathetic light, recur quite often in the reports. In previous studies the occurrence of these forms of language has usually been observed by focusing on quantified content; however, in this study the emphasis has been on detailed analysis of their discursive construction. The benefit of this close discursive scrutiny, enabled by the use of tools from critical discursive psychology and MCA, is that it has allowed an understanding of the complexities of how the constructions of violence and of gender coalesce in discourse.

In particular, the analysis presented in this paper shows the variety of ways in which the prevalent gender-neutral discourse discussed above is entangled with the circulation of gender-specific assumptions that are linked with constructions of morality in relation to violence. In the reports, the mobilization of these assumptions works to construct gendered notions about normality, often preserving the appearance of men who have killed their women spouses as normal, while portraying women who have either perpetrated violence or been victims of it as deviant. As the analysis illustrates, the use of categories is central in the accomplishment of these gendered discursive patterns<sup>7</sup>. Similar to interpretative repertoires, gendered categorizations are powerful discursive

devices, the routine use of which in everyday sense-making effectively maintains commonsensical notions about gender and violence (LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2010). Since these repetitive, micro-level processes thus contribute to the sustenance of gender as a system of naturalized hierarchical differences (Stokoe, 2003), particularly in complex societal contexts where ideals of equality and gendered practices co-exist, analyses of these subtle processes are crucial for questioning the taken-for-grantedness of relations between gender categories and violence.

### **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank Eva Magnusson, the anonymous reviewers, Rusten Menard, Päivi Berg and Suvi Ronkainen for their assistance with this paper, as well as those several others who have commented on this paper at its various stages.

### **Funding**

This work was supported by the Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies and Oskar Öflund Foundation.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In a survey conducted in 2012, 10 percent of women and 6 percent of men reported having encountered physical violence from their intimate partners at some point in their lives (Danielsson & Salmi, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> All of the reports were about violence in heterosexual relationships.

<sup>3</sup> The extracts are translated by the author, and checked by a native English speaker.

<sup>4</sup> Description of the event as a “social evening” also avails explaining violence with use of alcohol, which is also evident in several other reports.

<sup>5</sup> Footing refers essentially to the ways in which relations are constructed between speakers and the message that is being delivered, and thus it can work to either bring one’s authorship of the message to the fore or to deny it (see e.g. Auburn, Drake & Willig, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> The suspected wife was also wounded on the night her husband was killed.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the use of categories, the construction of gendered normality and deviance in the reports relies often also, for instance, on portrayals of agency, as shown in this and in previous studies (see Venäläinen, 2015; c.f. Nikunen, 2006).



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