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What are true women *not* made of? Agency and identities of “violent” women in tabloids in Finland¹

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Abstract

This article examines how Finnish tabloids portray women who have used violence. The aim is to look at the ways in which violence committed by women is made sense of in relation to culturally shared conceptions and expectations regarding the relations between gender categories and violence. The analysis of the data draws on socio-semiotics and distinguishes modalities as discursive devices that attach meanings and different levels of agency to violent action. By focusing on descriptions of women’s violent agency, the analysis attempts to dissect the ways in which the identities of ‘feminine women’ and ‘violent women’ are dialectically constructed. A recurring theme in the positioning of women in the analysed news articles is the attachment of deceptiveness to them and their actions. Especially in the reporting of the most sensationalized cases, women as perpetrators of violence are often portrayed in the data as strong agents with an antisocial will to hurt others, and with the capacity to potentially escape being held responsible for their violence. These findings are discussed in relation to the Finnish cultural context and the prevalent discourses on gender, violence and equality in it.

Keywords: women, violence, agency, modalities, identity

Introduction

On December 1, 2006 a fifty-one-year-old man was killed in his home in the presence of his wife and four children in Ulvila, a small town in western Finland. After searching for two years for the perpetrator, described as a man in a black hooded sweatshirt, the police arrested the wife. She changed from alleged victim to alleged perpetrator, which caused a flurry of media attention. Headlines such as “From a Supermom to a Killer “ ([IL, October 2, 2009](#)) expressed shock about a stay-at-home mother killing her husband. What also aroused disbelief was her ability to escape suspicion for so long, which was attributed to her cold-bloodedness as well as the assumed disinclination of the police to suspect women of murder.²

In addition to the ‘Ulvila case’ described above, several other cases of violent crime in which women have been perpetrators have gained vast visibility in the Finnish media during recent years. Especially in tabloids these cases have been treated with marked sensationalism (see Venäläinen 2013), which is not uncommon when women’s violence is portrayed in the media. Women who commit violence are commonly seen as breaching gendered expectations, which is why they are often perceived as ‘doubly deviant’ (Naylor 1990). As such, they are also seen as deserving of more emphatic moral condemnation, and consequently more sensationalism in the media, than men who have committed violence.

In this article I scrutinize the representation of women as perpetrators of violence in Finnish tabloids in light of the construction of gendered identities. Drawing on Theresa de Lauretis’s (1987) conceptualization of gender technologies and the processes of meaning-making via which they operate, I approach gender as a

social construct that depends on the (re)circulation of socio-historical discourses and narratives. What we see as reality is produced in practices of representation, whereby culturally shared understandings, disseminated via various types of media, are both drawn upon and created (Hall 1997, 33--39). Due to its capacity to encourage certain readings (Carter and Steiner 2004), media representation significantly contributes to the construction of gender within a certain cultural context. In short, in this article the representation of women as perpetrators of violence in the media is viewed as a central part of our social reality and its construction. As such, media representation is linked to the sustenance of differences in relations of power between gender categories and other social categories intersecting with them (Seal 2010).

Representational processes involve positioning people into subject positions that are culturally available for making sense of them and their actions (Hall 1997). The construction of identities via positioning, then, involves rendering people recognizable, i.e. identifiable, within the existing systems of meaning. Processes of identification always entail making distinctions between what is being identified with and what is expelled, both of which depend on the construction of the other (Hall 1996). As shall be discussed below, due to this dialectical nature of identifications, representation of women who have used violence works to construct gendered identities not only for the women whose violence is being portrayed, but for all women.

Several scholars have discussed how notions of femininity and their antithetical relation to violence are reflected in portrayals of women who have used violence in the media (e.g. Boyle 2005; Naylor 1990; Seal 2010; Sternadori 2014). In line with prevailing gender stereotypes, women's violence is often portrayed as more irrational and abnormal than men's (Naylor 2001). As Karen Boyle (2005) has shown, for example, attempts to reconcile the paradox between femininity and violence often results in pathologization, sexualization, or masculinization of perpetrating women. Thus, women who have used violence are commonly labeled either as 'mad', 'bad' or, alternatively, as victims, not only in the media but also in legal and scientific discourses (Berrington and Honkatukia 2002; Brown 2011; Gilbert 2002). According to Belinda Morrissey (2003), all of these portrayals are problematic because they foreclose the possibility of seeing women as agentic in relation to violence. They therefore reinforce notions about women as passive and helpless. Moreover, due to linking women's violence to individual pathology or to inhuman evil, common ways of making sense of it are often lacking a consideration of the contexts in which women act. For example, due to insufficient understanding of gendered dynamics in intimate relations, in cases in which women kill their batterers their actions are seldom seen as a rational response to a threatening situation (see Ogle and Jacobs 2002; also Ruuskanen 2001).

Morrissey (2003), among others, has also pointed out that since portrayals of especially women who kill often emphasize their exceptionality, they are distinguished through those portrayals from other, 'normal' women. In terms of Judith Butler's (1993, 7--8) conceptualization of subjecthood, which is recapitulated by Morrissey, they are cast into the realm of "the constitutive outside", against which 'normal' women's properly gendered identities are constructed. Similarly, Lynda Hart (1994) has argued that the production of the category 'woman' depends on the expulsion of aggressiveness onto a figure of the 'other', violent woman, which also stands for other than heterosexual desires. Thus the identification of 'feminine women' always implies the existence of 'other' women not fulfilling the expectations,

on the basis of which the ideal womanhood – also imbued with meanings linked to social class (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008) – is constructed.

The dynamic between ‘normality’ and ‘deviancy’ is also a central component of crime reporting. Violent crime in particular is an everyday subject in the newspapers and it is allotted considerable space in reporting. However, not all violent crime gain as much attention; it is usually the most extraordinary types of violence that have the most news value and are therefore reported most often and in most detail (Carter 1998; Jewkes 2004). In Finland, studies (e.g. Syrjälä 2007) have shown that as the competition among various types of media has become fiercer in the last decades, the depictions of violence for example in advertisement bills and front pages of tabloids have also increased and become more graphic. However, in comparison to, for example, British and North American media markets, the competition in Finland is more moderate due to a smaller number of newspapers and their concentrated ownership (Berrington and Honkatukia 2002). The style of reporting in Finnish tabloids is also somewhat less shock-oriented in comparison to tabloids in other countries.

Inspired by the discussions of women’s identities and agency as perpetrators of violence outlined above, in this article I am interested in ways in which portrayals of agency entangle with ways of positioning women who have used violence in relation to the category of ‘women’ in the Finnish context. The dialectical construction of womanhood is always dependent on the socio-historical and cultural context in which it occurs and the prevalent valuations and understandings in it (Seal 2010). As will be further discussed in the final section of this article, Finnish society is commonly perceived as equal, and Finnish women are often seen as strong and responsible actors in it. My analysis illustrates how this socio-cultural context is inscribed into portrayals of women who have used violence by emphasizing their capacity for both doing violence and disguising it. By so doing, my analysis also illuminates the link between portrayals of ‘violent’ women and changes in women’s societal position, sometimes discussed in terms of a backlash against feminism (e.g. Chesney-Lind 1999, 2006).

Since the rise of the women’s movement in the 1970s, women’s violence has been raised periodically as an issue of moral concern, coupled with demonization of violent women (Jones 2009). This is often connected with blaming women’s violence and its purported increase on feminism, and thus can be seen as reflecting anxieties about women becoming like men. Meda Chesney-Lind (1999, 2006) has argued that since distinguishing ‘good, non-violent’ women from the ‘bad, violent’ ones contributes to maintaining gendered divisions, it is heightened when the validity of the division is threatened. My analysis shows how attaching deceptiveness to women accomplishes these divisions by implying a fear that women’s ‘true’ identity as caring and nonviolent is nothing but an illusion.

Moreover, the purpose of this article is to disentangle the discursive means through which different modes of agency and identities are constructed. I accomplish this through a reading of the data that applies socio-semiotic concepts for deconstructing meaning-making processes. In short, the reading that follows aims at answering the questions of (1) how is violence committed by women described in terms of agency in Finnish tabloids, and (2) how do these descriptions work to construct violent and non-violent feminine identities?

The Data and the Method

The data analysed in this article are gathered from two Finnish tabloids, Italehti (IL) and Ilta-Sanomat (IS). The selected papers are the only tabloids in Finland, and they are among the three most read Finnish newspapers (MediaAuditFinland 2014)³. Despite the fact that news reports rely on actual events, the stories told in the news are always constructions, built on the basis of culturally dominant understandings (Gill 2007, 113--114). Especially due to tabloids' sensationalist style (Syrjälä 2007; see also Carter 1998; Gill 2007), they focus on cases of violent crime that deviate most from social expectations. Since doing violence is routinely linked with men and not with women⁴, women as perpetrators of violence have a marked potential to shock the readers and thus to add news value (Jewkes 2004), especially to reporting of sensationalist variety. Therefore tabloids, entailing vast amounts of detailed descriptions of women as perpetrators of violence that are faced by masses of people every day, are a relevant source for data for an analysis of commonly circulated ideas about women and violence.

In my analysis I apply concepts from Greimasian socio-semiotics to an examination of descriptions of violent action in the data. Semiotic concepts function in my analysis as tools for structuring my interpretations, to organize the often subtle ways in which meanings are constructed. I particularly draw on conceptualizations and models developed by Pekka Sulkunen and Jukka Törrönen (1997) on the basis of Algirdas Greimas's (see e.g. 1987) theorization. The analysis aims specifically at identifying different types of modalities in the data through which positioning of people is textually accomplished. I focus especially on pragmatic modalities, which can be seen as discursive devices that attach meanings and valuations to the action being described; they are different ways of characterizing action within narratives constructed around it. Different types of modalities refer to different ways of articulating the value of action, and thus constitute different kinds of relations between actors and their environment. The distinction between endotactic and exotactic modalities is particularly germane for my examination. It allows for distinguishing action that appears to originate from within the actor (endotactic) and that which appears to originate from factors outside the actor (exotactic). When considering violence as action, whether violence and its origins are placed "inside" or "outside" the actor is highly significant regarding the kinds of identities that are being constructed for those suspected of doing it.

In the model developed by Sulkunen and Törrönen (1997), endotactic modalities are further divided into those referring to the will of the actor and those referring to the actor's competence, i.e. skills and knowledge acquired by learning. Exotactic modalities are divided into obligation, referring to the role of other people's expectations in formulating certain activities as actor's duties, and ability, which refers to other actors' – human or non-human – role in facilitating action. Regarding violent action, looking at these different ways of making it meaningful allows for seeing what kind of agency is linked to it. Agency as a concept is understood here as referring to the relation between an actor and her or his environment and the level of relative freedom to act within it (e.g. McNay 2008). If, for example, violent action is described as originating from qualities that appear as inherent to the actor and not to the same extent from the circumstances in which it is enacted, violence appears as a more or less stable characteristic of the actor, while factors related to the actor's environment might not appear as relevant in relation to it. Therefore descriptions of agency constructed via modalities are central in formulating identities for those doing violence; an actor portrayed as wanting to do violence (implicating will) is seen quite differently than one whose violent action seems to derive from, for example, a need to

defend herself due to her life being threatened by the actions of another actor (implicating inability).

The analysis proceeded from coding for meanings, explanations, and characterizations, linked in the reports both to violence and the women suspected of doing it, into organizing the data around the abovementioned modalities. The initial round of coding included coding for explicit expressions of modalities. However, as modalities were found to succinctly capture the differences between various ways of making sense of violence in the data also on a more heuristic level, in the final analysis they were used both as tools for deconstructive close reading as well as for constructing broad groups of meanings.

Modalities of Violence and Agency: From Inability to Willingness

Altogether the data consisted of reports of violence⁵ committed by women (N=657) and articles discussing women's violence as a phenomenon (N=15) that were published within three years, 2009–2011. Although the data cover violence of various types and contexts, a vast majority (43 percent, N=284) of the reports are about violence towards a male spouse and about lethal violence, which is most often reported on in more than one report per case. Some 10 percent (N=66) of reports are about violence towards a man other than a spouse, 18 percent (N=117) towards people labeled as “elderly” (in practice mostly women), 10 percent (N=68) towards another woman and 19 percent (N=122) towards children (under eighteen years). A large portion of reports (N=219) about violence towards a spouse were about the Ulvila murder case discussed above. In order to avoid taking a stand on their culpability (on which there is no verdict in some of the cases), I refer to women whose (purported) violence is discussed in the data as suspects.

Descriptions of violent action in the data often involve several modalities interlinking with each other, so that, for example, modalities of ability may appear in connection with those of competence. It is, however, possible to formulate a continuum in terms of agency on the basis of modalities that appear to dominate in the narratives of violence. Moving from ability to competence and finally will, agency constructed for the suspects becomes stronger⁶. What this also means is that violent behavior becomes more tightly linked with the identity of the actor.

The modality of ability, or more specifically inability to avoid doing violence, characterizes especially the portrayal of non-lethal violence directed towards adult men and women in the data. The portrayals center on ability when doing violence is linked to factors that appear to be beyond the control of the suspect, indicating a low level of agency⁷. These factors can be related to the immediate circumstances prior to violence or to more permanent life conditions such as the suspect's own victimhood, as in the article with the following excerpt: “According to the court the woman was not able to control her actions in the situation but in fear hit out reflexively with a knife towards the man” (IS, November 7, 2011)⁸. An account of the suspect's repeated victimization by the victim preceding the excerpt allows for viewing her fear as being caused by the victim's prior conduct and as such as a factor causing a violent response in the form of an uncontrollable reflex. Not being able to control her response means that the suspect cannot be held fully responsible for her violence.

Descriptions of pure inability to avoid doing violence, such as in the excerpt above, appear rarely in the data. What appears more often is what could be called lowered ability to avoid doing violence, which often places the interaction

between the perpetrator and the victim as the cause for violence. For example, in some articles (e.g. IL, May 27, 2011) violence is linked to provocation by the victim, which, as an external influence, appears as causing some level of inability but not as rendering violence unavoidable. In a similar manner, in some articles references to having drunk alcohol (IL, January 27, 2010) or being “enraged” (IL, January 13, 2011) link violence to abnormal emotional states and as such to a level of inability. By explaining violent action by women with a reference to an altered state of mind, these portrayals allow for seeing violence, along with being drunk or enraged, as separate from what is expected of women in a ‘normal’ state of mind, i.e. the ‘good’, feminine way of acting. The articles that portray violence in such a manner, however, are usually short and do not include detailed accounting for violence. Thus, it seems that for the tabloids to portray women’s violence in terms of inability or lowered ability is not particularly newsworthy.

The difference between inability and incompetence is in practice often vague, and it is not uncommon to see those modalities appearing simultaneously in accounts of violence. In the data, especially violence towards children by their mothers or nurses appears to be primarily attached to a lack of competence. Competence refers to skills and knowledge acquired through learning, and thus denotes external factors being internalized by the actor. For example, competence is evoked when violence is linked to the lack of professional nurses’ education or experience (e.g. IL, September 30, 2011). As an endotactic modality, competence implies stronger agency than ability, and thus positions the suspect in a more active and responsible role regarding violence, or avoidance of doing it.

Motherhood and the competent caretaking to which it is usually attached (Barnett 2005) often appear as central expectations guiding the construction of ‘true’ womanhood. Indeed, a few articles about violence towards children articulate explicitly the otherwise often implied interplay between modalities of competence and obligation regarding avoidance of violence in the data: “According to Ingervo, in a nursery other means by which eating is managed without forcing must be found, even if resources would seem inadequate” (IS, July 2, 2010). The excerpt, reporting a view provided by an authority figure (the chair of a social welfare board) interviewed for an article about (alleged) child abuse in a nursery, illustrates not only how finding nonviolent means to conduct daily activities in a nursery appears as the employees’ obligation but also how, in the end, their incompetence in finding those means is presented as an explanation for violence. Even though lack of resources is mentioned as a factor that could potentially complicate functioning properly as a nurse, only the possibility that they may appear as inadequate is granted. Thus, despite allowing for resources, which would denote inability rather than incompetence to act in accordance with the obligation of non-violence, to play a potential role in the actualization of violence, ultimately the responsibility for avoiding violence is placed onto the nurses as actors expected to possess the required competence.

Also when a mother acts violently towards her own children the reports often implicate competence, but with less direct references to a learning process as a factor allowing for the acquisition of the required skills. As the excerpt below illustrates, the vagueness of the source of a mother’s lacking in non-violence in the reports allows for viewing it alternatively as a lack in innate capacities:

There were two suspected, exceptionally violent assaults...Both resulted when the 20-year old mother lost her temper due to the crying of the child and tried to silence her

with violence...The mother did not cope with the crying but took hold of the child and shook her forcibly. (IS, May 5, 2011)

In the excerpt the child's crying forms the context for the mother's failing "to cope" and "losing her temper". Failing to cope, then, appears as the immediate cause for violence. What is evident is that not coping is the property of the suspect, but whether it denotes lack of acquired skills (i.e. competence, lack of which could be indicated by the suspect's young age) or lack of innate skills, is less clear. Nevertheless, the difference in the portrayals of the professional caretakers and mothers can be seen as reflecting different notions of the origins of their nursing skills; whereas professional caretakers' skills are assumed to derive from their training, mothers' skills often acquire a sense of naturalness, as something they are expected to possess simply by virtue of being mothers.

Neither inability nor incompetence in avoiding violence implies intentionality. Intention indicates a will to do violence which, as an endotactic modality, denotes strong violent agency. By pointing towards internal desires of the actor, references to a will to do violence links violent action most firmly to the identity of the actor. Thus a will to do violence makes the suspect, and only the suspect alone, appear as the source of violence and therefore as responsible for its occurrence.

As other modalities, the will to do violence appears in the data often only implicitly. Sometimes it can be inferred from the choice of verbs to describe violence, such as "to torture" (IL, April 30, 2010), which can be seen to imply sadistic pleasure derived from violence, and as such as attaching it to the suspect's inner pursuits. In a case about a woman of foreign origin being suspected of "intentionally infecting men with HI-virus" (e.g. IS, March 5, 2010), on the other hand, intentionality, always mentioned when the case is discussed in the reports, is the prerequisite for the suspect to be seen as guilty, since without it her action would not meet the criteria for a violent crime. The way the case is reported supports the assumption of the guilt, and thus of intention, of the suspect. For example, it is told in the reports as an undisputed fact that the suspect was aware of her infection prior to having sex with the men alleged to be her victims, and that she had concealed that information from her sex partners (e.g. IL, December 21, 2010). By making it evident that the suspect was aware of her infection, lack of competence – in this case denoted by lack of knowledge – is ruled out as a potential explanation for her action, thus supporting the interpretation based on the assumption of intentionality and willingness to hurt. Furthermore, by pointing out that she had not told the truth about her infection to her partners, she is portrayed as willfully misleading them, thus also indicating a will to deceive.

An implied will to do violence is also in several other articles connected to a will to deceive. In articles about various different cases, deception appears both as a means to do violence as well as a means to avoid being held responsible for it. The linkage between these two pursuits is most evident in articles about so called 'insulin murders', referring to two cases in each of which a woman working as a nurse was suspected of poisoning elderly people (as well as an infant in one of the cases) in her care.

The suspects of 'the insulin murders' are portrayed as intentionally taking advantage of their professional roles as trusted caretakers. Of one of the suspects it is said that she "is capable of lying exceptionally skillfully" (IL, May 12, 2009) and that "she sort of charmed some of her victims" (IS, November 27, 2010).

The other suspect is characterized in a similar manner: "She knew how to be credible...the nurse in Nokia⁹ evaded the truth as naturally as us others breathe"(IS, January 14, 2010). In both cases the deceptive action of the suspects is signified in terms of competence. However, their deceptive competence is repeatedly linked with psychopathology (more specifically to psychopathy and personality disorders¹⁰). This is done for example by referring to the results of their psychiatric assessments, which are used in the reports to explain both their capacity to deceive and to do violence. Thus psychopathology in these cases is linked with the activities of deception and doing violence which, when entwined in this manner, appear as purposeful and voluntary.

Another case, in the reports of which deception informs both doing violence (in more than one way) and the avoidance of taking responsibility for it, involves a wife being suspected of murdering her husband. The reports portray a desire to protect a secret from being exposed as the motive for the murder. Moreover, the murder is reported as having been enacted by "luring" the victim to the scene of killing with a lie:

Led into a trap and shot dead¹¹...The deed came as a total surprise for the husband. According to the preliminary investigation the man was lured into a trap with an untruthful story weaved by the wife. (IS, May 6, 2011)

In addition to detailed descriptions of the actual enactment of the killing, reports about the case dwell on the suspect's activities after the killing; her notifying the police about her husband being missing and mourning her husband's death in Facebook. Both of these activities are portrayed as being intentionally deceptive: "The young family mother who has confessed to the bloodshed acted out her role as a mourning widow in cold blood until the end" (IS, July 20, 2010). Maintaining the appearance of a widow in mourning in spite of being herself the one to take her husband's life appears in the reports as a signal of cold-bloodedness, which comes to characterize the suspect and all of her activities as deeply antisocial.

Similarly, what is portrayed as an untruthful presentation of oneself on the internet by the suspect is highlighted in the reports about the 'Ulvila case', which was briefly discussed at the beginning of this article.

A mother, to whom family, home, children, food, and health were everything. That's the kind of impression she tried to give of herself. So much so that she founded a small company to promote it, which she ran already before her husband's death and all the way until she was arrested yesterday. (IS, September 29, 2009)

In the excerpt above, the contrast between the suspect's presentation of herself on the internet and the killing she is suspected of is portrayed as deriving from her active intention to deceive. In other reports, her ability to avoid being suspected is also linked to her intelligence (IS, September 29, 2009; IL, September 30, 2009; IL, October 2, 2009; IL, May 7, 2010) and to the purported tendency of the police not to suspect "female victims"¹² (IS, October 3, 2009). Thus the success of the suspect's enactment of the pursuit of what seem as desired objects of her antisocial will (i.e. violence and covering it up via deception) appears as being enabled by gendered assumptions guiding the activities of the police. As will be discussed below, similar constructions of gendered assumptions functioning as a context for women doing violence, and purportedly getting away with it, recurs in the data when women's violence and its purported increase is discussed also on a general level.

In the Pursuit of ‘Truth’ about Womanhood

The actantial model (e.g. Greimas and Courtes 1982) in socio-semiotics clarifies relations between actors and the objects that their action is directed towards within narratives. It distinguishes between the roles of the subject (i.e the actor whose action or the program the narrative focuses on) and those for example of her or his opponents, helpers, and the anti-subject, who has her or his own program that is oppositional to the pursuing of the object of the action being narrated. In terms of the actantial model, a recurring pattern in the narratives formed in articles about violence committed by women in my data is a quest for truth, which hence appears as a highly valued object. In order that the rightful recognition of the perpetrator be commenced, and thus the justice to be carried, the perpetrator of violence must be identified. Reports of violence in the data include detailed descriptions of the proceedings of police investigations, the trials and their outcomes, i.e. the sentences given for violent crimes. When reporting about the functioning of the justice system, the reporters typically align themselves with those who appear as the acting subjects searching for truth in the narratives they construct, such as the investigators or authorities with expert knowledge. This alignment further consolidates the value of the truth, as the reporters position also themselves as the seekers of it.

Especially the women suspected of violence who are portrayed as acting deceptively are often positioned as anti-subjects in the quest for the truth. For example, in addition to deceptiveness being often linked to violent action, and to the avoidance of being suspected of it as discussed above, the suspect’s reluctance to confess (repeatedly detailed in reports of both ‘Ulvila case’ and the ‘insulin murders’), or descriptions of her intentionally misleading the investigators, appear as hindering reaching the truth and justice. Thus, suspects who are portrayed as acting in ways that oppose finding the truth appear as anti-subjects with their own anti-program that threatens the implementation of the justice system’s (and thus the society’s) object of restoring law and order. This positioning effectively others the suspects, and arouses a fear that they might actually be successful in avoiding taking responsibility for actions that are portrayed as violations against the society.

The recurring themes of truth and deception are evident also in articles discussing violence committed by women as a phenomenon. One of these articles includes an interview with a detective superintendent, who expresses his concern over the increase in violent crimes committed by women. He sees this increase as “an unfortunate manifestation of the realization of equality” and is reported having emphasized that “one should not be fooled by the fallacy that women could not be violent. – Unfortunately the truth is that they can.” (IL, March 23, 2010). Thus in the article the superintendent posits the existence of women’s violence as “the truth”, while claiming that there is also a possibility of falling prey to a “fallacy” concealing this truth. He also explicitly links women’s violence to equality, and by so doing reproduces the so called masculinization theory (see Chesney-Lind, 2006) based on the assumption that along with gaining equality women become more like men, also in terms of doing violence and other crimes. As Chesney-Lind (2006) has pointed out, whilst this hypothesis has been refuted in research, it has nevertheless often been resurrected in the media.

In a similar manner, another article cites a trade union leader who states that “violent behavior has been equalized but the women’s movement does not want to admit it” (IS, May 18, 2010). Advocates of “the women’s movement” are similarly

positioned in yet another article as being "dedicated for maintaining the myth of unilateral family violence" (IS, May 20, 2010), in which it is also maintained that "the production of knowledge about family violence is strongly ideologized". Moreover, the article states as an ill consequence of the endeavors to hide the truth the inability of women and men as perpetrators and victims of violence to get help equally. Advocates of the women's movement are, thus, positioned in these articles as opponents in the quest for the truth, i.e. for pure, objective knowledge about violence, untainted by ideologies that denote false knowledge. The 'ideology' of the women's movement is portrayed as harmful not only in terms of hindering the quest for the 'truth' about women's violence but also as a causative agent in relation to its purported increase, which is portrayed as an outcome of gender equality. Moreover, the women's movement and its advocates are, ironically, also positioned as opponents for reaching equality at the level of practices of helping those involved with violence. The reporters and the people whose talk they incorporate into their articles, on the other hand, position themselves as bearers of truth, who have escaped from being fooled by false knowledge and myths that, as the articles imply, do not hold in today's world, characterized by equality between women and men. This positioning also functions as an invitation to the audience to become one of 'us', who value and know the 'truth' about women and their potential to be violent.

In socio-semiotics, the truth is seen as a veridictory modality that, referring to the nature of knowledge, entails both being and seeming (Greimas and Courtés 1982, 369). A deceiver, on the other hand, is described as "somebody who passes himself/herself off as somebody else" (67), and thus hides the truth. Hence, to deceive means to purposefully disalign seeming and being in regard to a person's identity. In the data, then, the suspected women who appear as opponents or anti-subjects in the quest for truth are positioned as deceivers who appear as competent and willing to do violence, and to avoid taking responsibility for it. Moreover, especially in the articles discussing violence committed by women as a phenomenon, women are portrayed as acting in a social context that grants them the ability to act deceptively and possibly also violently, despite their implied obligation not to do violence or to deceive. What the deception appears to lead to in the data, then, is a possibility of a failure in the process of recognition, which refers to reaching a truthful image of an actor's identity and sanctioning her or his actions accordingly (256--257).

Thus, positioning suspected women as deceivers rests upon casting a feminine, nonviolent identity merely as an appearance and a violent identity as the truth. The recognition of this truth appears as being facilitated by the activities of the reporters, along with those of the other seekers of the truth, that are portrayed as aiming at revealing the suspects' 'true' nature. In this process of positioning, the evaluations regarding the suspects' action and identity continuously interlink. For example, in the reporting of the 'Ulvila case', the implied murderousness of the suspect is constructed via indicating a lack in emotionality that the suspect's action (or lack of it) is taken to exhibit. The prosecutor is cited asking: "Is this a widow who has just lost her husband? Why is she so calm, why doesn't she cry?" (IS, April 15, 2010). The prosecutor's question, expressing suspicion about the authenticity of the suspect's status as a widow in mourning, and thus aimed at proving her guilt, is repeated in bold in headlines. The suspicious calmness of the suspect is referred to in several reports as a characterization of both her mode of acting and being (e.g. IS, March 26, 2010). In addition, her characterization as "unsociable" (e.g. IL, April 6,

2010) prevails in several reports, and thus contributes to building her mode of being, in a way that is fitting with doing violence, i.e. her mode of acting.

Expectations of emotionality in the Ulvila case imply the obvious expectation of a feminine mode of acting, which emotionality is habitually linked with (Shields 2002). On the basis of pervasive cultural expectations, a feminine mode of acting towards other people can be viewed as centrally denoting caring (see e.g. Gilligan 1982), a mode of action that appears antithetical to doing violence, which obviously indicates hurting others. This antithetical relation between expected femininity and actualized violence is perhaps most emphatically drawn upon in the sensationalized reporting of ‘the insulin murders’. The suspects of the cases are repeatedly called “poisoning nurses” (e.g. *IS*, April 20, 2011), which constructs an ironic paradox between their profession as nurses, and the heightened obligation of caring it carries, and the act of poisoning, implicating a will to hurt. Highlighting this paradox between expectations and what is portrayed as the reality concerning the suspected women’s mode of being and doing is what the news value in reporting of violence committed by women in the data is recurrently built upon. Thus the divide between violence and acting, and thus being identified as a feminine woman, is being constantly reinforced, as the image of the ‘other’ woman, one who hurts and deceives, simultaneously emerges.

Concluding Remarks

By applying socio-semiotic concepts for analyzing the construction of agency and identities of women who have used violence, this article has described the ways in which women’s violence is made meaningful in Finnish tabloids. Descriptions of women’s violence in the data often entail complicated mixtures of modalities which attach different types of agency to violent action. Similarly to portrayals of victimhood (e.g. Morrissey 2003), when violence is modalized as an inability to avoid doing it, by emphasizing external factors that force the suspect to do violence, her being identified as a feminine woman may not be threatened. However, inability appears only rarely in the data. Much more common are portrayals that emphasize the violent agency of the suspected women via expressions of will and competence. The sensationalism attached to these portrayals highlights the inherent incompatibility of femininity and violence. As Helen Kennedy observes:

In almost every culture and every period in history, a she-devil emerges as an example of all that is rotten in the female sex... a woman who knows none of the fine and noble instincts when it comes to men and children; a woman who lies and deceives, manipulates and corrupts. A woman who is clever and powerful. This is a woman who is far deadlier than any male, in fact not a woman at all. (1992, 240)

In the data violent agency is recurrently divorced from a feminine identity by portraying the violent mode of acting as the reality being revealed, and the femininity of the suspect as merely an appearance proven to be false. As Hilary Neroni (2005) has discussed, this kind of splitting of violence from femininity indicates the difficulty of integrating ‘violent’ women into society. However, since there is no external reality separate from the system of gender (de Lauretis 1987, 25--26), the construct ‘violent woman’ does not reside outside of it, but rather is vital to its sustenance. As processes of identification rely on distinctions (Hall 1996), the threat that doing violence poses for the truthfulness of the identity of ‘a feminine

woman' is also a threat towards the validity of the category of 'a man' and the naturalness of its connection to violence. In effect, as Chesney-Lind (1999) has observed, the construction of the categories of violent and non-violent women intertwines with distinguishing those of 'women' and 'men'.

Reminiscent of historically established views about women as morally lacking and deceitful (see Naylor 1990¹³), the especially prominent figure of a deceiver in the data encapsulates the threat that women's violence poses for the maintenance of gendered divisions. Women portrayed as deceivers are attached with both an antisocial will to hurt and an ability to disguise it, and hence appear as doubly dangerous. These portrayals, along with the mission of revealing 'the truth' about women as perpetrators of violence in the data, imply a fear of betrayal concerning the true identity of women and their desires. Much like the antifeminist views articulated by the advocates of a recently risen men's rights movement in Finland (Keskinen 2013), women are seen as betraying the trust placed on them and as misusing their purportedly powerful position in society.

Advocates of the men's rights movement maintain that in Finland equality has not only been reached, but has in fact gone too far. Since a belief in Finnish society's equality is widely shared among Finns, feminists that challenge these assumptions are often perceived as a threat to what is seen as a harmonious coexistence of women and men (Raevaara 2008). Echoing these views, the articles in the data that discuss women's violence as a phenomenon portray the women's movement as detrimental to society due to not only disguising women's violence, but also due to increasing it. Much like women accused of violence, then, feminists are also portrayed as deceptive and capable of exploiting notions of women as nonviolent, which, thus, appear as misleading and obsolete. Furthermore, placing the blame for women's violence on feminists and equality allows for explaining what otherwise may appear unexplainable – women acting in an unfeminine manner – (c.f. Neroni 2005, 60--62) in a way that allows for the maintenance of the gender order. Besides providing for an explanation, portraying women's violence as an ill consequence of gender equality can also be seen as delivering a message that equality is not all good but comes with a price.

As a conclusion, it is obvious that the portrayals constructed in the data rely heavily on notions about Finnish society as equal, even to the point of being portrayed as a context that enables women to do violence and to get away with it. Indeed, in the data, the social context is linked to women's action almost solely as an enabling factor, while violence is portrayed as originating from women themselves and the decisions they make as individuals. In other words, for the most part, the suspected women are not portrayed as being involved in intra-action (to borrow Karen Barad's [2003] term) with both an enabling and constraining environment, and especially not one that is structured by practices whereby gender, and thus a less powerful position for women, is constituted. In this respect the reporting reproduces the image of an autonomous Finnish woman, which sits uncomfortably with a consideration of factors such as women's own victimhood as a possible part of the context of their actions¹⁴. In sum, then, while the sensationalist dichotomizing of 'true' women and 'violent' ones reproduces gendered notions on the one hand, on the other women's violent action is simultaneously de-gendered by a lack of attention towards gendered constraints on their action. Thus the reporting echoes the curious paradoxicality of the Finnish context that Suvi Ronkainen (2002) refers to as "genderless gender" – assumption of equality combined with the reproduction of inegalitarian gendered practices.

Notes

¹ An earlier, different version of this article is to be published in Finnish in 2015 in an anthology (in Finnish) about the representation of women as perpetrators of violence in the media.

² During the following years the case has been followed closely as the suspected wife was convicted of murder in 2010 and then acquitted on appeal in 2011. In 2012 the case was reopened, and she was convicted again in 2013. However, after the latest appeal she was exonerated in 2015. In 2012 the suspect was also sentenced for sex crimes and child abuse. The case has become known among Finns as an infamous 'Ulvila murder case' and continues to arouse attention.

³ In 2013 the estimated number of readers of Ilta-Sanomat was 544 000 and Ilta-lehti 428 000. Only the leading newspaper in Finland, Helsingin Sanomat, had a higher number of readers (837 000) (MediaAuditFinland 2014).

⁴ Also according to crime statistics in Finland violent crimes committed by women are significantly rarer than those committed by men; in 2013, 17 percent of the suspects of non-fatal assaults and 13 percent of the suspects of homicides were women (Salmi and Ruuskanen 2014).

⁵ I have only included the kind of violence that fits the criteria of criminalized violence, i.e. physical violence ranging from assaults to homicides. Not included are cases in which there are both men and women as perpetrators.

⁶ Obligation, in turn, appears in the data in relation to violence mainly as an implicit duty to avoid doing it, and not as directly linked to it.

⁷ My conceptualization of ability differs slightly from that of Sulkunen and Törrönen (1997) in that ability in my analysis refers to forces that appear as external to the suspect's control (and not only to other people's influence or temporary influences), including also some forms of continuous mental disorders that are portrayed as rendering the suspect unable to control her actions.

⁸ All the excerpts have been translated from Finnish to English by the author.

⁹ Name of a town.

¹⁰ Unlike other forms of psychopathology, in the data these disorders do not appear to diminish the culpability of the suspect, but rather deepen their appearance as antisocial.

¹¹ Emphasis in the original.

¹² The suspect in the Ulvila murder case also received a wound herself in connection with the killing of her husband, and was for a long time portrayed as one of the victims in the case.

¹³ The figure of a deceiver in the data can also be seen as a variation of a mythological category of a "trickster" described for example by Jack Lule (2011).

¹⁴ See e.g. Ruuskanen (2001) for a discussion of how in court women's claims of being abused are often not heard.

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