

RESEARCH REPORT: VULNERABILITY IN NARRATIVES OF WOMEN IMPRISONED FOR VIOLENT CRIMES

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on ways in which vulnerability is given meaning and related to in narratives of women serving a prison sentence for violent crimes. These women can be seen as inhabiting specifically vulnerable social positions in many respects, while at the same time their vulnerability is often denied. In my analysis I view the past, present, and future vulnerabilities of these women in a dialectical relation with the narratives they tell and the identities they enact through these tellings. In their narratives, vulnerability entwines with agentic orientations towards violence in complex ways. While often figuring as part of the context of doing violence, vulnerability is also refuted, combated, and distanced from the selves constituted in the narratives. In my reading, these ambivalent relations to vulnerability reflect the gendered trouble it poses for being seen as a worthy subject in the context of Western valorization of autonomy and individual agency.

Keywords: vulnerability, violence, women, affects, discourse

In this paper I explore meanings attached to vulnerability in the narratives of women who are serving prison sentences for violent crimes in Finland. Based on my PhD study (Venäläinen 2017c) that focused on women as perpetrators of violence I discuss ways in which imprisoned women acknowledge, negotiate, and disclaim their multiply vulnerable social positions. I approach this meaning-making around vulnerability in imprisoned women's narratives as a central part of discursive and affective processes through which their identities are constituted in relation to violence. Adopting this approach means that I view these

women's acts of narrating their violence as social action that draws on socio-culturally circulating meanings and evaluations—concerning, for instance, vulnerability—as well as personal, affective histories of social encounters in multiple, locally variant ways.

My analysis of meanings attached to vulnerability in the imprisoned women's narratives is largely based on an understanding of vulnerability put forth by Judith Butler (e.g. 2004). Accordingly, the analysis relies on a definition of vulnerability as a human condition that touches upon all of our lives and is based on our embodied relationality that inherently

attaches people to each other (see also Bottner in this special issue). This understanding of vulnerability based on universality is, however, also complemented, and complicated, in Butler's conceptualization by the observation that vulnerability is lived differently by people inhabiting different social locations. (e.g. Butler 2004: 32.) Importantly, these social locations also affect the possibilities to recognize vulnerability in the lives of people belonging to different social groups. Alongside these views, in my analysis I have also drawn upon Margrit Shildrick's (2002) related description of vulnerability as the othered opposite to individuality and autonomy that are widely valorized in Western thought. Together, these theoretical insights allow for grasping some of the central ambivalences in ways in which women are positioned in relation to vulnerability on one hand and violence on the other. Hence, I argue that these conceptualizations of vulnerability provide a fruitful interpretative tool for exploring meaning-making through which the identities of imprisoned women are constituted.

In the sections below I will first describe some of the particularities in the social positionings of women imprisoned for violent crimes. In particular, I discuss how culturally available understandings about gender and violence tend to get inscribed into ways of making sense of women as perpetrators of violence, and describe the circumstances that commonly inform imprisoned women's lives. I then move onto describing my analytical approach in more detail, and from there to the recurrent tendencies in the ways in which the imprisoned women who participated in my study position themselves in relation to vulnerability in their narratives.

WOMANHOOD, VIOLENCE, AND VULNERABILITY

Women imprisoned for violent crimes can be seen as inhabiting specifically vulnerable social positions in many respects, while at the same time their vulnerability is often denied. Due to prevalent, socio-culturally circulating gendered understandings, women who have committed violent crimes are often cast as 'the other' in relation to properly feminine, 'normal' women in cultural imaginary, and thus excluded from the realm of normalcy. Being seen as 'doubly deviant' (Naylor 1990) in this manner may lead to them being subjected to heightened moral condemnation and social exclusion at the level of social practices. This is evident, for example, in many of the attempts to make sense of women's violence in the media and in courts. Portrayals of women suspected of violent crimes have been noted to frequently rely on reductionist categorizations based on labeling them either as insane, inhumanly evil, or as victims without agency (e.g. Blackman and Walkerdine 2001; Eastal et al. 2015; Gilbert 2002). What makes these modes of sense-making particularly problematic is the way they work in placing women who have committed violent crimes outside the normative frames of womanhood and even humanity in the eyes of others (Morrissey 2003).

Meanings attached to women and violence however also vary depending on the societal, historical, and cultural context. In the Finnish context, and particularly in the tabloid press (see e.g. Venäläinen 2016), making sense of 'violent women' seems often entwined with the minimization of gendered vulnerabilities of Finnish women. In the tabloid narratives that I have analysed this coalesces with laying emphasis on women's individual agency in the depictions of their actions. Such descriptions

shape the portrayals of women suspected of violent crimes by tying violence to their character and to what appear as their inner individualized pursuits and will. This works to construct their identities as essentially and permanently violent. Simultaneously, possibilities for viewing violence committed by women in the light of social, gendered relations imbued with power are generally foreclosed.

These tendencies to individualize women's violence can be seen as relying on similar assumptions as the often cited myth of the 'strong Finnish woman'—particularly potent in the context of making sense of intimate partner violence and power dynamics in the domestic sphere (Lahti 2001)—and the related notions about gender equality as having been widely achieved in Finnish society. Such notions allow for seeing Finnish women as strong actors while diverting attention from the still existing gendered inequalities.¹ In other words, these notions may hinder acknowledging the vulnerabilities of women suspected of violent crimes. Minna Ruuskanen's study (2001), for instance, has shown how such notions may be influential in efforts in legal settings to make sense of women's lethal violence against male intimate partners who have abused them. Based on Ruuskanen's study it appears that in Finnish courts violent actions of abused women are seldom considered in the light of the effects of their victimization but rather emphasis is laid on their own failure to get help or to leave abusive relationships.

The specific life-circumstances of women who are convicted of violent or other crimes in Finland and elsewhere are frequently imbued with heightened insecurity and lack of privilege, and are hence characterizable as involving multiple marginalization (Granfelt 2007). Violent abuse has often been a prevalent part of their lives and the majority of their social

relationships. In addition, imprisoned women often have histories of substance abuse and other physical as well as mental health problems. It has also been noted that during their imprisonment women tend to inhabit marginalized positions due to a lack of gender-sensitive awareness and practices among the professionals they come in contact with. (Jokinen 2011; Lattu 2016.) Thus the imprisoned women's marginalization tends to take various forms and often extends across their lifespan. Furthermore, the incarceration of women who have committed violent crimes tends to significantly deepen their marginalization and limit their future possibilities, making it even more difficult for them to find stability and security in their lives (Wesely 2006).

NARRATING VULNERABLE LIVES: NOTES ON THE THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The context of criminalization and imprisonment is highly significant in relation to the narratives the women tell and the selves they enact through the narratives. While prison contexts and the experiences they allow for may vary considerably, one of the ways in which they are impactful is how they influence the research encounters between participants and researchers, and the positionings enacted in those encounters. Lois Presser (2005) has claimed that the imprisonment easily marks research participants as deviant 'others' in their interactions with researchers, and thus casts them into a position from where they are expected to give an account of their deviant doings.² However, narrating the experiences that have brought one to prison may also provide opportunities to counter, or to negotiate with, the potential powerlessness and

otherness brought on by the imprisonment. This may then enable redeeming one's potentially troubled appearance as a moral actor. (Presser 2010; c.f. Gueta and Chen 2016.) As I further discuss below, such negotiations of moral worth can be enacted for instance by striving towards positionings that allow for being seen, and seeing oneself as, a socially valuable subject through the repudiation of vulnerability.

In my analysis of the imprisoned women's narratives I have focused both on the discursive enactments of identities and the affective aspects associated with adopting, negotiating, and resisting identities attached to varying degrees of social worth. This combined analytical orientation, which I have elsewhere elaborated with the use of the conceptualization *affective identificatory practices* (Venäläinen 2017b; 2017c), was based on theoretical influences from critical discursive psychology (CDP) (Edley and Wetherell 2008; Reynolds and Taylor 2004; Reynolds, Wetherell and Taylor 2007; Wetherell 2008, 2012) and Sara Ahmed's (2014) theorizations on emotions and embodiment. CDP entails a synthetic *micro- and macro-*orientation that allows for viewing subjects as both constituted in discourse, and the social practices they entwine with, and as actively constituting their identities in constant negotiations with available discourses (Edley and Wetherell 2008). Sara Ahmed's (2014) theorization, in turn, enabled a deeper engagement with the relational processes in the research materials, whereby affective, embodied orientations can be seen as getting shaped on the basis of social positionings in relation to other people and the surrounding world. By approaching the imprisoned women's narratives from this angle, it became possible to consider ways in which their identity enactments may exhibit continuity beyond the immediate

interactional context. This therefore enabled constructing analytical links between their past, present, and potential future social encounters, on one hand, and their situated, discursively enacted identity performances, on the other.

This underlying theoretical and methodological approach to identity construction has enabled a reading of vulnerability in the imprisoned women's narratives that attends to the multiplicity of meanings attached to it. This approach has made room for the research participants' agency in negotiating meanings—such as those attached to vulnerability—while allowing the interpretation of those negotiations through the lenses provided by theoretization on vulnerability such as put forth by Butler (2004) and Shrilrick (2002). In my analytical encounters with the imprisoned women's narratives, there was a constant interplay, imbued with contradictions, between my reading, and noticing, the vulnerability of the women on the basis of the theoretical lenses on vulnerability I had adopted on one hand, and the ways in which the narratives worked to position vulnerability in relation to the women and their identities on the other. In other words, the narratives the women told, and the ways they positioned themselves in them, worked to problematize vulnerability as a characterization imposed on imprisoned women, and thus shed light on the ambivalences and complexity attached to it. Simultaneously, however, in many ways the narratives seemed to support and invite a reading that attends to vulnerability seen as the inseparability of humans and their ability to affect each other (Butler 2004). In particular, this attunement allowed for an interpretative lens on the impact of other people—specifically their violent orientations—on the orientations adopted by imprisoned women, including those aimed at resisting vulnerability.

RESEARCH MATERIALS

The imprisoned women's narratives gathered for my study are based on interviews and written accounts that I collected in a few prisons in Finland during the years 2012–2014.³ Altogether twenty Finnish women serving a prison sentence for violent crimes participated in my study. I interviewed eleven of these women, while the rest participated only in the written account.⁴ The interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately from one to two hours, while the length of written accounts ranges from half a page to four pages. In both, the participants were asked to narrate their experiences of perpetrating and potentially encountering violence, as well as to discuss feelings and consequences associated with violence.

I visited the prisons multiple times, first telling the women about my research and encouraging their participation in it, and later interviewing women who had volunteered to participate in an interview. Before conducting the interviews, I also held a group meeting in one of the prisons with the purpose of asking potential participants how they perceived my study and my preliminary interview scheme. However, as a researcher whose visits to the prisons were rather brief and limited in number, I assume that I remained largely an outsider in the eyes of my participants, who, for the most part, did not share with them a common language and the basic understandings about life in a prison. This status has most likely affected the interactional dynamics in the interviews, as well as the resulting narratives about violence recounted in them. Overall, the interviews, as well as the written accounts, varied in terms of depth of reflection and detail. However, each provided a vivid image of violent encounters in the participant's life.

The women who participated in my study were aged 23–54 years⁵ at the time of collecting

materials, and their prison sentences varied from aggravated assaults to homicides. As is common (as mentioned above) among imprisoned women in Finland and elsewhere, most of the participants had had various physical, psychological, and financial problems in their lives; most notably problems with substance abuse and with violent abuse by others, who were often people close to the women. Some discussed having used violence only once in their lives, while others talked about it as a recurring way of acting. Most had used violence towards their male spouses, while some had other (additional) female or male victims. Below, I approach these narratives of violence with the specific focus on meanings attached to vulnerability. This exploration is based on and extends analyses presented in my PhD study (see in particular Venäläinen 2017a and b for more details on the analyses).

ENTWINEMENTS OF VULNERABILITY AND AGENCY IN THE STORIES TOLD

A clear majority of the imprisoned women who participated in my study contextualized their narratives about their use of violence with descriptions of their own victimhood. Most of the abuse—both physical and mental—they described happened in the context of intimate partner relationships, although also abuse in other contexts and forms was described by several women.⁶ This is in line with previous studies in which women's own victimization has been reported to be intimately linked to their use of violence, particularly in cases of severe or lethal violence towards intimate partners (Banwell 2010; Moen, Nygren and Edin 2016; Weizmann-Henelius et al. 2012; Wesely 2006). Indeed, some researchers (e.g. Ferraro 2006) have claimed that the boundaries between

women's victimization and agentic perpetration of violence and other crimes frequently appear as blurred in women's own accounts.

In several narratives being victimized and thus rendered vulnerable in intimate partner relationships is talked about in gendered terms, as a condition that is shared with many other women. This vulnerable position is frequently attached in the narratives to emotions such as fear and shame. For instance, many of the women, such as Sanna below, described losing their self-confidence and their capacity to act, and thus leave an abusive relationship, due to the continued abuse directed at them.⁷

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

In these descriptions shame is attached both to having been abused, and having lost one's capacity to act as a result of it, as well as to having committed violence, which is portrayed as a direct result of failing in the act of leaving. Fear is also linked to the women's incapacity to act in these narratives, and is described for instance by Elli as being 'always present'. These descriptions flesh out the gendered affectiveness—intimately tied with experiencing vulnerability—of intimate partner violence that has been widely documented in research on gendered violence. These affective dimensions of experiencing abuse collide with common demands targeted at abused women to leave abusive relationships or to be otherwise active and responsible agents in ending the abuse

directed at them (e.g. Enander 2010), and thus create discursive and affective ambivalences in the positions laid out for abused women.

What is noteworthy, however, is that alongside these descriptions of vulnerability in the women's narratives are positionings based on refuting, combating, or distancing vulnerability from one's self. These positionings are attached in the narratives to fear, as well as anger, and involve agentic orientations towards others that are based on preparedness to defend—also violently—oneself and one's bodily boundaries against abuse that signifies an invasion of those boundaries. Thus vulnerability, in the form of an orientation towards threats to one's security, entwines in these positionings with agency. Agentic orientations are exhibited particularly through testifying to one's competence and readiness to take action if faced with the threat of being abused. This is evident for instance in an interview with Hanna, where she describes her own as well as other imprisoned women's affective orientations towards being touched or otherwise approached unexpectedly, based on their shared histories of being abused:

You should not come behind my back, I do not like that, or then I need to have a mirror, so that I can see that someone is moving there. Nor should you walk behind me in stairs. This is by the way the case with many of us here, so that never come from behind suddenly to hug or anything, without a warning. I mean it may seriously lead to a bit wilder outcome. (Hanna, recorded interview)

Another interviewee, Salla, also described a very similar kind of automatic responding to being touched unexpectedly by someone due to her history of being abused by her intimate partners:

I sort of see red because I cannot stand being touched, I have after all, mm all my, every single intimate [partner] relationship has so far been violent. (Salla, recorded interview)

These descriptions were usually part of narratives where past victimization was portrayed as having pushed the women to a turning point in their lives, after which they ‘no longer took a beating for free’, as Salla, among several others, stated. This turning point thus indicated a shift from being positioned as a victim to adopting the position of a perpetrator of violence.

In addition to descriptions of a preparedness to defend oneself with violence, similarly agentic orientations towards violence are adopted in some of the narratives also in defense of others — mainly children or other people who were deemed weaker than oneself and in need of protection. These orientations towards active protection of not only oneself but also others are further examples of gravitation towards (violent) agency and away from vulnerability. As I discuss below, these agentic positionings can be read as attempts to fend off otherness by repudiating the vulnerability attached to the position of an abused woman, and by aligning with attributes associated with an agentic—as well as agendered and disembodied (Ronkainen 2002)—ideal subject.

(UN)WORTHY SUBJECTHOOD

In line with approaching identity enactments as a part of affective identificatory practices, I view the vulnerable and agentic selves in the imprisoned women’s narratives described above as dependent on both their positionings in the past, such as those in which they have been cast in violent encounters, and the local contexts in which they are produced, such as their

imprisonment. In addition to creating the need to establish one’s morality by giving an account of one’s criminal activities, the prison context may, for instance, affect the narratives told in the form of shared meaning-making repertoires among prisoners. Such repertoires not only evolve in encounters among the prisoners but are also influenced by their encounters with the officials and prison employees (e.g. Clough and Fine 2007). During my encounters in prisons, it appeared to me that for instance the phrase ‘I no longer let anyone hit me for free’, which was repeated in almost identical forms by many of the imprisoned women, represented a shared understanding of vulnerability shaped specifically in interactions in prison contexts.

Alongside the more local contexts of meaning-making, it is fruitful to consider these narratives and the entailed phrases in the light of socio-cultural intelligibility and the positionings it avails and forecloses. From this viewpoint, the imprisoned women’s narratives can be seen as reflecting the requirements posed on people in Western liberal-humanist ideologies to exhibit agency and autonomy in order to be regarded as proper subjects (Lawler 2014: 180). In this thinking, vulnerability easily marks one as ‘the other’ in relation to the ideal subjects that are coherent, self-possessed and agentic (Shildrick 2002: 5). In addition to vulnerabilizing past experiences and the current condition of imprisonment, the associations of porosity and thus lack of boundaries linked to female bodies (Ahmed 2014: 69–70) make it all the more difficult—and thus arguably also all the more pressing—for the imprisoned women to strive towards being seen as subjects of worth in a socio-cultural context where being a proper subject is equated with invulnerability (Ronkainen 2002). Thus, what is evident in their narratives from these viewpoints are gravitations towards worthiness through repudiating

vulnerability—also through the use of discourse—attached to the embodied condition (Butler 2004) of inhabiting femaleness *and* relational spaces shaped by histories of violence.

The negotiations of worthiness in these women's narratives are further complicated and made relevant by the affective stickiness (Ahmed 2014) of the stigmatizing label 'violent woman'. Some of the women explicitly referred to the troublesomeness of this label in their narratives. Leena, for instance, wrote in her written account that its effect is something that will follow her for the rest of her life. Also some interviewees described how they had noticed that their presence and people's awareness of their prison sentences evoked fear and movement away from them in some of the people they had encountered. The shamefulness of this label can thus be seen as an integral part of the vulnerabilities present in the imprisoned women's narratives, giving an added layer to their negotiations with otherness. This shamefulness was negotiated in their narratives for instance by divorcing the violent act(s) from their inner selves, and by emphasizing change in one's orientations towards violence and other people. In these ways the women talked back (hooks 1989), at times rather directly, to the images circulating in tabloids and elsewhere, where women suspected of violent crimes are often portrayed as inherently and permanently 'violent'.

In sum, the analysis of imprisoned women's narratives from the adopted perspective on identity enactments illustrates complexity and ambivalence in relations constructed between the women's selves and vulnerability. This ambivalence can be traced to paradoxical socio-cultural valuations and expectations regarding femininity, with which vulnerability is commonly associated: Femininity and vulnerability may function in certain contexts as markings

of incomplete subjects, while simultaneously performances of femininity are regulated through the poignant othering of women marked as violent and thus seen as embodying meanings that are oppositional to vulnerability. These gendered meanings that attach vulnerability to otherness in ambivalent ways also entwine with a multitude of meanings given to doing violence in the narratives of imprisoned women. Violence appears in the narratives both as a means to counter positionings based on vulnerability—in terms of being hurt and being reduced in terms of worth—and as hurtful in rendering the women vulnerable to stigmatization.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The vulnerability of women imprisoned for violent crimes, along with and despite of differences within this group of women, needs to be recognized at various levels and in various arenas, such as violence interventions, rehabilitative programs, and support services for women upon their release from prison. A relevant part of this is an awareness of the impact of culturally circulating understandings about gender on ways women who have committed violent crimes are perceived and related to, and how their self-perceptions and social orientations get shaped. These understandings often translate into othering discourses about women convicted of violent crimes as inhumanly deviant, which particularly in the Finnish context entwine with notions about 'strong Finnish women' that are affective both in denying women's vulnerability in relation to violence and in constituting positions of victims as shameful. As I have proposed in my study, these dynamics of othering are linked to the trouble with vulnerability in Western thought due to the ways in which its recognition

goes against liberal-humanist valuation of autonomy and agency (see further Venäläinen 2017c).

In addition to analyses identifying macro-level discourses and social practices tied to them, it is important to also look at more micro-level, context-bound identity negotiations of those who are seen either as violent or vulnerable, or both, and the ways in which vulnerability is given meaning and related to in the context of those negotiations. Combining the scrutiny of these dimensions is enabled by a micro- and macro-oriented approach such as the one I have developed in my analysis. This approach, based on a conceptualization I refer to as affective identificatory practices, has allowed for viewing meaning-making in imprisoned women's narratives as entwined with both culturally circulating sense-making resources and the affective orientations shaped in their past and present social encounters. In the context of my study, applying this approach has enabled seeing both vulnerability and agency in the dynamics and resistance of otherness and violence. Importantly, what also becomes visible is the mutual constitutiveness of vulnerability and agency in imprisoned women's lives as well as their situated tellings.

NOTES

- 1 To give an example of still existing gendered inequalities, Finland ranked second in terms of the rate of violence against women in an EU-wide survey conducted in 2014 (Violence against Women 2014).
- 2 The risk of reiterating the positioning of imprisoned research participants as 'others' is one of many ethical issues that have demanded considerable attention in the process of enacting this study. For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see Venäläinen 2017c.
- 3 In order to protect the research participants' anonymity, I will not discuss the prisons in question and their particularities in detail.
- 4 Altogether fourteen of the twenty participants sent a written account, five of whom I also interviewed. Five of the interviews are recorded, while six of them were not due to requirements by the prison personnel.
- 5 Age of four of the participants is unknown.
- 6 14 of the 20 women who participated linked their violence to being abused in intimate partner relationships. The others either did not explicitly construct a link between abuse they had endured and their violence, made references only to abuse in contexts other than intimate partner relations, or did not discuss events other than those in which they used violence themselves.
- 7 The names presented in this paper are pseudonyms.

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