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'I'd rather you'd lay me on the floor and start kicking me': Understanding symbolic violence in everyday life

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Synopsis

In this article we argue that to understand the intransigence and plurality of violence, we need to understand the presence of symbolic violence with other direct forms of violence. We argue that it is important to analyse symbolic violence since its subtle and non-visible ways of working do not allow us to understand its mechanisms completely.

Drawing on the narratives of women who have experienced violence, we have identified specific features of symbolic violence that were evident in these narratives. We illustrate features of symbolic violence embedded in everyday life such as consent, complicity and misrecognition. At the same time, we also analyse how institutional language and implementation of procedural norms can also be a form of symbolic violence.

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Introduction

In this article we will explore some of the processes and mechanisms through which symbolic interactions, behaviour and modes of conducts sustain and nurture structured inequalities in our everyday lives and interpersonal attitudes. These mechanisms have been conceptualised as symbolic violence by Pierre Bourdieu (1990, 2000, 2002). We choose to focus on symbolic violence since we suggest that it is a form of violence that remains unexplored, primarily because of a conceptual and empirical focus on more direct forms of interpersonal violence such as domestic and/or sexual abuse. Thus the insidious and invisible nature of symbolic violence as a mode of domination which acts upon the women but which goes unrecognised, is important for this article. Also, if we want to understand the intransigence and permanence of violence in some women's lives, we need to be aware that several forms of violence can co-exist and

support one another,¹ for example in the way symbolic violence may accompany or precede physical violence.

The article will be structured in the following way: in the first section we will briefly highlight some of the methodological issues and concerns that arose while researching on violence. In the second section we will analyse how the theoretical frameworks for understanding gendered violence have developed. In particular, the narratives of women who experience violence have made us aware that symbolic violence is embedded in 'normal' routines of everyday lives and shapes social experiences and subjectivities in myriad ways. Thus these narratives suggest the need for a broader understanding and conceptualisation of 'violence'. Finally, in the third section, we will explore some specific features of symbolic violence, specifically those that are evident in the narratives of women who have experienced violence and in the personal safety advice literature that is aimed at women in general.

Methodology

Our focus for this research is the U.K., although some of the issues raised are relevant to global manifestations of violence. The first author conducted thirteen interviews with women who had experienced various forms of (mainly, but not exclusively) physical violence. Obviously, in researching such a highly sensitive area, focusing on domestic and sexual abuse, ethical issues were paramount. As Lewis et al. (2003:51) note, those who investigate violence face particular dilemmas in relation to 'ethics, data collection, confidentiality, safety, empathy, emotionality and "values"'. However, as a result of the longstanding relationship the first author had established with a local *Victim Support*² (*VS*) scheme in the South West of England, it was possible to enlist their support in approaching victims to request their participation. In the interests of confidentiality, *VS* were, of course, unable to directly supply any names and addresses. However, it was agreed that they would send a letter to women to whom they had offered support in the past year. The women 'victims' were invited to respond directly to the researcher either by post via an enclosed stamped addressed envelope, by telephone or e-mail, if they were willing to take part or wished to ask any questions. The participants were, therefore, to some extent 'self-selecting' as only those who responded positively to the letters were interviewed. There was a positive response rate of 54% to the letters sent out, although in practice, for a variety of reasons, 46% of those approached were eventually interviewed. Ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 55, and they were from a wide range of educational, economic and social backgrounds.

When conducting any sensitive research, one of the main concerns is to ensure not only the safety of the participants (and the researcher) but also that the participants can be sure that their contribution to the research will be treated confidentially. Furthermore, it falls upon the researcher to ensure that the impact of relating distressing or painful events is minimised for the participant (see e.g. Creighton, Neal, Field, & Finch, 2003). Here, the first author's personal experience as a *VS* volunteer was particularly useful, enabling her to respond to and deal with emotional and potentially difficult situations in a sensitive manner. On the few occasions the participants (the 'victims') became slightly distressed during the interviews, it was possible to talk through their emotions and all declined the offer to terminate the interviews, or even to switch off the tape recorder at this point.

Often, the most distressing time for those recounting painful experiences can be after the discussion is over, when there is time to reflect on what has been said and on

the emotions and memories which have been revived. At the end of each interview, once the recorder was turned off, time was spent (usually up to about thirty minutes) talking to the participant about a variety of general 'safe' topics, however the possibility of them feeling emotional after they had been left alone was also discussed. All participants were provided with relevant details of available support and asked if they required any immediate assistance of any kind in relation to the issues discussed. In addition, approximately five days after each interview, the first author contacted the participants to ensure that they were not feeling distressed by the interviews and that no particular issues had been raised. Although two of the participants did, apparently, feel a little emotional after the interview (and both stated that they were glad they had been warned of this possibility), all said that they felt fine and needed no further support.

The contexts of violence

Feminist research and 'feminist resistance'³ have stressed the need to bridge the gaps between the ways in which gendered violence is 'lived' and the ways in which we understand, reflect and theorize violence. The issue of violence against women was particularly highlighted by the 'second wave' of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s when feminist writers, particularly radical feminists, made a valuable contribution in highlighting the issue of male violence against women and its association with male power and control (Hester, Kelly, & Radford, 1996; Maynard, 1993).⁴ Power came to be analysed by feminists as a 'relation' which structured the interaction between men and women in all aspects of social life and explicit force/violence as a response 'to the failure of, or resistance to, other forms of control' (Kelly, 1988:22). In opening up the definitions of violence to include a range of behaviours including, for example, physical, emotional and psychological abuse (Kelly, 1988; also see Das, 2000; Farmer, 1996), the feminist movement led the way in recognising the multi-faceted nature of violence. Most importantly, analyses of this kind shifted from focusing on the 'battered woman' to look at 'lesser' forms of abuse that damage women and children psychologically and which, if not checked, can set the stage for more 'extreme' incidents (Hooks, 1997:282).

A significant development in feminist research and in thinking through strategies of feminist resistance was to stress the 'naming of violence and abuse by men' in order to ensure that women's experiences of violation should not be left literally 'unspeakable' (Kelly, 1996). Through a commitment to exposing gendered violence and enabling women to be heard, 'feminist practice...

[began] from, although [has] not limited itself to, what women who have been abused say they want and need' (Kelly, 1996:46).

Before we are able to 'speak' about violence, however, we have to recognise it for what it is. As illustrated by the following narratives, from the first author's Ph.D. research, those who experience violence appear to have, on the whole, a clear understanding that violence can take both physical and non-physical forms, and that the latter can be as damaging as the former. As Kraiss argues:

Physical violence just draws attention to the fact that in the oppression of women elementary modes of domination play an important part and that, therefore, we have to look at the complementary mode of domination, too — namely at symbolic violence (Kraiss, 1993:172).

'Elementary modes of domination' are those that are 'made, unmade, and made in and by the interactions between persons [rather than via institutions]' (Kraiss, 1993:171).⁵ In the various social fields outside the family and probably in the normal course of life inside the family too, it is symbolic violence that acts upon women to maintain a relation of domination (Kraiss, 1993:171). Bourdieu refers to symbolic violence as relations and mechanisms of domination and power which do not arise from overt physical force or violence on the body (Bourdieu, 2002). 'Symbolic violence clearly lacks the intentional and instrumental quality of brute violence, and works not directly on bodies but through them...by extending the concept of violence to the symbolic domain, Bourdieu spotlights an often unnoticed mechanism for instituting or reproducing relations of domination. And to the extent that such mechanisms go unnoticed they remain outside the purview of political deliberations or remedial action' (Topper, 2001: 48). The narratives of some of the women interviewed bring out some of these features:

I think (..) with physical violence, you can see there's — and again, I've talked to other women in [the refuge], and they've said they prefer the physical violence. Well not — you know what I mean? ...I don't mean they want it [laugh] but because you can actually see the scars heal, so each day you're seeing your scars healing, but with mental abuse you don't see that. And you also don't realise how it affects you through life (Ruth).

I'd got to the point — it was in a magazine and there was a book they recommended reading if you thought

you were in a violent relationship. Well obviously (..) I must have thought I could be, but it wasn't actually until I read that — because I thought violence was just smashing you up all the time. You know, to me, that was a violent relationship. Physical violence. And so I thought, "well no, I'm not being beaten up all the time". Umm and then I read the book, and then I thought "oh no, I am actually" [in a psychologically violent relationship] (Ruth).

I don't think there's a worse or a better or a whatever in terms of physical or, you know mental abuse. I think mental abuse can be very under-estimated. You know, I think physical abuse is a very obvious thing. You know a black eye or whatever. And I'm not taking anything away from that because that's horrendous. But I think...mental abuse takes so many different forms, it really does (Annie).

...I mean I did actually used to say to him "I'd rather you'd lay me on the floor and start kicking me". Because the mental bullying I got was so much worse (Alison).

A common theme emerging from these narratives is the paradox that women who experience violence often find psychological violence more debilitating than physical abuse. Abuse which results in 'scars' that one does not see 'healing', or those that are 'underestimated' such as mental abuse, are seen by those who experience them as more debilitating than physical violence. Given that physical violence is a great deal more visible to others, this is particularly interesting. After all, physical signs such as bruises and scratches have to be accounted for or hidden in order to avoid the stigma of 'black eyes...worn in public by females' (Goffman, 1963:45). It is comparatively easy, on the other hand, to disguise the signs of psychological abuse. To many, women affected in this way may be seen 'simply' as depressed or stressed, neurotic and hysterical — characteristics often applied to women in any case. Why then, do women say that they would rather deal with physical than psychological abuse? Is it because they subconsciously *want* people to see the signs and for something to be done (Morgan, 2005)? After all, in doing so, women would be able to show the violence 'on (their) bodies' and having being 'done violence', thus stressing the physicality of violence rather than the violence which is located in the symbolic plane. On the other hand, is the avowed preference for physical abuse something to do with the desire to avoid the pathologisation associated with psychological abuse and statements such as 'she is mad'?

In relation to domestic violence, it is apparent that there is a wide range of harmful behaviours ranging from mental cruelty to physical violence resulting in death. While most acts of physical abuse are easily recognisable as ‘violence’, the same cannot be said for indirect and subtle forms of abuse, some of which may be dismissed as ‘normal’. Crucially, many of the women interviewed noted that they did not at first recognise the psychological abuse they experienced as *violence* until it had been going on for some time — or even, in some cases, until they were out of the relationship. As some of the women commented:

But I actually didn't see it as a violent relationship. No. Which is strange. Because my friends could see it. The thing is, because you're living it. So it's normal. So — the way it is with them, becomes like normal living. So to you, that's just normal. And because it's very subtle, and so you just (..) it's just normal (Ruth).

...I didn't know whether it was physical violence, whether it was (.) termed domestic violence or not, it was such a weird thing, cos I've never been exposed to anything like that before and [my boyfriend] had been saying “this is normal in relationships, I'm a passionate man”. So, and you know, I couldn't quite get my head round it, what was happening (Anita).

Similarly, in the context of sexual violence and in highlighting the need for bridging the gap between ‘aberrant’ and ‘typical’ behaviour, Liz Kelly (1988:75) has argued that the concept of a ‘continuum’ could enable women to ‘make sense of their own experiences’ and in understanding how different forms of male behaviour ‘shade into one another’.⁶ This Kellian continuum is important for understanding the multi-faceted nature of violence for two reasons. First, it enables us to move beyond creating a ‘hierarchy of abuse’ or focusing on the relative seriousness of some forms of abuse. Rather than focusing on different forms of violence and abuse as discrete issues, the continuum recognises commonalities between them in women's experience and theoretically as forms of violence underpinning patriarchal power and control (Radford, Friedberg, & Harne, 2000). As Liz Kelly argues, the continuum does not imply that a ‘linear straight line’ can be drawn between different experiences and forms of violence — instead it ‘validates’ the shifting boundaries between several forms of violence. Second, it moves us beyond concentrating only on ‘extremes’ of violence and instead looks at the range of experiences of violence

which are more common (or a ‘continuum of prevalence’) in women's lives such as ‘threat of violence, sexual harassment, pressure to have sex and sexual assault (see Kelly, 1988:78).

In this article, we would like to build on the Kellian continuum model to suggest that in specific contexts (public or private/stranger or intimate), several forms of violence can co-exist and that often, one form of violence may be supported and nurtured by another form of violence. Also as Bourdieu points out in *The logic of practice*, ‘the harder it is to exercise direct domination, and the more it is disapproved of, the more likely it is that gentle, disguised forms of domination will be seen as the only possible way of exercising domination and exploitation’ (Bourdieu, 1990:128). Paradoxically, the more feminists fight against direct violence, the more it is subverted and takes the form of symbolic violence.

In the following sections, we will highlight specific features of symbolic violence prevalent in a range of situations such as sexual abuse and domestic violence. We will explore these through two sets of data: women's narratives of abuse and violence and discursive practices that are framed through personal safety advice literature. We would suggest that while the former enables us to analyse a ‘sociology of power’ in the ‘micro-politics of everyday life’, the latter exposes the ‘macropolitics of institutional silencing and exclusion’ (see Topper, 2001:31).

Symbolic violence and ‘micropolitics of everyday life’

The social dynamics of everyday practices are often governed and shaped in many ways by the gendered inequalities and ‘micro-contexts of local power’ which enable forms of normative violence against women to continue with impunity (Kleinman, 2000:227). We would suggest that it is important for us to see how ‘violences of everyday life’, to borrow Arthur Kleinman's phrase, become normalised and naturalised. Importantly, in using the plural, ‘violences’, Kleinman suggests that though some are more vulnerable to violence, the ‘violent consequences of social power also affect other social groups in ways that are often not so visible, perhaps because they are also not so direct’ (Kleinman, 2000:228). Also, we would suggest that ordinary everyday interactions could embed feelings of fear and hatred, which may fester under the state of normalcy. Similarly, the ordinariness of everyday life can often make symbolic violence go unnoticed. So, symbolic violence can be subtle and disguised but nonetheless effective in its impact and seen as legitimate.

As Nancy Henley and Jo Freeman (1979) have argued, everyday interpersonal relations often reflect the gendered power dynamics through acts such as language and communication, joking and touching. Hearn (1998:15) also, argues that ‘violence is not separated off from the rest of life...[it] can be mixed with all sorts of everyday experiences — work and housework, sex and sexuality, marriage, leisure, relaxing and watching television’. This was aptly illustrated by one of the research participants who described her feelings of panic each day, as her husband was due home from work:

That film we mentioned [“Sleeping with the Enemy”] where the husband would inspect the dust, my husband would do that. And if the place was a bit dusty and he was due home, I would — I would have a panic. A sort of panic. Because he used to do that [indicating wiping finger and inspecting] on the TV. On the top (Geeta).

Kelly found that ‘many abusive men felt that they should control almost every aspect of household organisation, from where the clock stood on the mantelpiece, to how often windows were cleaned, to how the table should be set’ (Kelly, 1988:131). ‘It is these perceptions and realities that result in women feeling that they have to be constantly aware of their environment, watching and checking the behaviour of men they may encounter, trying to predict their motives and actions’ (Kelly, 1988:98; also see Hearn, 1998:15). Feminists such as Jill Radford (1987) refer to such behaviour of men as ‘policing’ which in a day-to-day interaction involves watching, supervising, isolating them or trying to reform their behaviour. This can be seen as another form of control that does not involve overt physical violence. In addition, Bartky (1984), has argued that the attitudes embedded in the language and images used by men, in everyday life, only serve to deny women freedom and autonomy over their own lives.

Ironically, if women were to enquire about the whereabouts of men, it often leads to violence from the man towards the woman. Underlying these feelings could be the fact that men perceive enquiries from women as a form of ‘policing’ of their lives, a feature that men don’t question about themselves:

...I thought he’d gone into the pub and started drinking. When he came back he was in an awful mood. He got into the car and then, I don’t know, I said something like “have you gone to the pub?” or something silly, which I’d learned you don’t say.... So then he went absolutely ballistic and he started to

smash my car up, threw my bag under a — a van, went absolutely mad (Ruth).

While not explicitly using the category of symbolic violence, Kelly with reference to the various forms of sexual violence, suggests that there is a link between the generalised fear that most women experience and forms of visual and verbal violence that accentuate it’ (Kelly, 1988:97). The invisible and insidious workings of symbolic violence, as mentioned above, facilitates a climate of fear which is more intrusive, pervasive and threatening in women’s lives. As Bourdieu (1991:52) states, ‘[t]he power of suggestion which is exerted through things and persons...is the condition for the effectiveness of all kinds of symbolic power that will subsequently be able to operate on a habitus⁷ predisposed to respond to them’. For many women there is a ‘durable effect’ exerted through the dominant social order (Bourdieu, 2000:172), which habituates them to perceive certain situations as threatening and to respond with fear.

Through symbolic violence, Bourdieu wanted to draw attention to the ‘opaque’ power relations, which ‘contribute and sustain forms of domination not only within formal legal and political institutions but in relations and spheres of life commonly thought to lie outside of the arenas of power and politics’ (Topper, 2001:42). Social interaction, language and symbols itself reproduces structures of domination and hierarchy. Power relations in everyday social interactions and relationships can be best explained through three conceptualisations of Pierre Bourdieu: consent, complicity and misrecognition.

Consent and complicity

Understanding the ‘invisible’ nature of some forms of violence is an important aspect in understanding *why* and *how* violence against women is able to persist. Therefore, Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence, a definition of which is provided below, provides us with a particularly useful tool for recognising the subtle operation of certain types of violence.

...the coercion which is set up only through the consent that the dominated cannot fail to give to the dominator (and therefore to the domination) when their understanding of the situation and relation can only use instruments of knowledge that they have in common with the dominator, which, being merely the incorporated form of the structure of the relation of domination makes this relation appear as natural... (Bourdieu, 2000:170).

In referring to ‘consent’, however, Bourdieu is not suggesting that individuals are willingly and knowingly putting themselves in positions where they may be open to abuse. The point is, as [Krais \(1993:172\)](#), our emphasis) notes, that while an individual may be able to ‘decode the relevant signals and to understand their veiled social meaning’ this is ‘without recognising them *consciously* as what they are — namely as words, gestures, movements and intonations of domination’. The state of compliance is not, [Bourdieu \(2000:171\)](#) states, a “voluntary servitude” and [the] complicity is not granted by a conscious deliberate act; it is the effect of a power, which is durably inscribed in the bodies of the dominated, in the form of schemes of perception and dispositions (to respect, admire, love etc)’. As Richard Jenkins points out, symbolic violence is the imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (i.e. culture) upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate. This legitimacy obscures the power relations, which permit that imposition to be successful ([Jenkins, 1992:104](#)). The following quotes from the women interviewed by the first author suggest not only how the power relationships are obscured but also indicate the paradoxical nature of practices and social spaces that are created for women: while they resist the lived experiences/norms/expectations of them, they also subject themselves to these norms.

And he rings up quite a lot...and you know I’m lonely down here, so I just — and he’s all nice on the phone (Alison).

I know I’ll always love him. I know...I could easily (.) fall back under his spell (Alison).

Also they’re wearing you down so much that you haven’t got strength to do a lot And it’s very subtle. You know, you start off very strong, you’re strong for quite a long time, and then they just eat away at you if you like.... And take from you. So they’re taking all the time, whether it’s your time, your energy, your love, your — your passion. They’re just taking. But they’re actually not giving very much back at all. It’s a bit like a torture technique. One minute they’re being — being nice, but not for that long. Then they’re being (.) awful again. Then that nice bit seems to be nicer than it normally should be (Ruth).

And I had to make those choices...of giving up my whole life for him or retaining my family, my friends

and hopefully (.) somehow rebuild my life...and at one point...I did actually think “I wonder if it would be worth it” [laugh].... And I thought, “well maybe I could”, because there were times that were good. Mind you, there weren’t that many, but [laugh] (.) there must have been some. And there were. And he did have a sense of humour when he wanted to and you know. So, I thought “is it worth, for those (.) times (.) to give up everything else?” (Ruth).

Because the relationship is absolutely fantastic when it’s just the two of us.... And umm (..) I think it’s this control thing that [my boyfriend] — he seems to have some kind of power over me. That’s why (..) and he makes me laugh as well (Anita).

The complicity described by [Bourdieu, \(1977:51\)](#) in relation to the exercise of symbolic violence, is neither a ‘passive submission to external constraint nor a free adherence to values’. Intimidation, for example, ‘a symbolic violence which is not aware of what it is...can only be exerted on a person predisposed...to feel it’ ([Bourdieu, 1977:51](#)). As illustrated by the above comments, to some extent, the women concerned recognised that they were subjected to some form of power relationship, yet it was often not until they were away from the abusive situation that they truly recognised it for what it was.

Thompson, elucidating Bourdieu’s theory, writes that domination in the form of symbolic violence must disguise itself ‘beneath the veil of an enchanted relationship, lest it destroy itself by revealing its true nature and provoking a violent response from the victims or forcing them to flee’ ([Thompson, 1984:56](#)). Such is the power relationship between victim and abuser — that while ‘overt violence’ ([Bourdieu, 1990:127](#)) will attract social disapproval and unwanted consequences (such as flight of the victim), symbolic violence is a more efficient and effective mode of domination as in disguising the true nature of the relationship ([Bourdieu, 1990:127](#)), it forestalls any such reactions. Certainly for those women who love and feel loved by their abusers *despite* the emotional, psychological and sometimes even physical violations they experience yet often initially fail to recognise, it does appear that they perceive their relationships as ‘enchanted’, at least initially ([Morgan, 2005](#)).

He’s very good...when he’s himself he’s lovely. You know, he’s placid and he’s calm... (Nell).

First of all, he’s such a nice man, that’s the weird thing about it, he really, and it’s very confusing (.)

because on the one hand you've got this lovely person who I enjoy (.) my time with, he's very loving and kind and all that. (..) But when we argue he just (.) flips (.) into something else... (Anita).

Parallels can also be drawn here with Foucault's sovereign and disciplinary power in which the move from brutal, physical and public forms of punishment to disciplinary punishment was based not, Foucault says, on reasons of reform, but because it was 'more regular, more effective, more constant and more detailed in its effects' (Foucault, 1991:80). If power is 'exercised too violently, there is the risk of provoking revolts' (Foucault, 1989:232). On the other hand, exercising discipline through surveillance — 'an observing gaze that each individual feels weighing on him, and ends up internalising to the point that he is his own overseer...[is] ...a continuous form of power at practically no cost' (Foucault, 1989:233). This masking of disciplinary power, therefore, is what in Bourdieu's terms enables a dominatory relationship to persist — in other words 'through strategies which, if they are not to destroy themselves by revealing their true nature, must have been disguised, transfigured, in a word, euphemized' (Bourdieu, 1990:126).

Therefore, as illustrated in the following section, domination, as Bourdieu argues, cannot be sustained without the complicity of everybody involved. 'The misrecognition of the economic reality of the gift exchange is a collective deception without a deceiver, for it is a misrecognition embodied in the habitus of the group' (Thompson, 1984:56).

Misrecognition

Symbolic practices can exercise an invisible and subtle form of violence which is either never recognised or recognised only by obscuring the mechanism on which it depends. As Bourdieu in *Language and symbolic power* states: 'Symbolic violence can only be exercised by the person who exercises it, and endured by the person who endures it, in a form which results in its misrecognition as such, in other words, which results in its recognition as legitimate' (Bourdieu, 2002:140).

'The concept of symbolic violence directs us towards a reflection on the forms in which relations of communication are interwoven with relations of power' (Thompson, 1984:43). Bourdieu in his *Outline of a theory of practice* claims that power operates through a subjective misrecognition of the meanings associated with a particular action, practice or ritual (Bourdieu, 1977:189–90). Drawing on the example of the North

African Kabyle society, Bourdieu (1977) argues that relations of domination are not created by the mechanics of the state or the self-regulating market, but by the cultivation of personal bonds. This domination can be maintained only if participants fail to recognise it as an act of domination and perceive these bonds 'as disinterested and legitimate, even though they support relations that are quite literally suffused with power' (Topper, 2001:36).

In the context of the ritual of gift exchange, Bourdieu argues that giving is also a way of possessing — if a gift is not met by a counter gift of comparable quality 'it creates a lasting bond and obliges the debtor' to adopt a peaceful and obsequious attitude (Thompson, 1984:56) as demonstrated by Alison below:

...And, you know each time I would have him back, and then it would get to a Sunday evening and I — he knew how to play me, and he would always turn up with flowers and a bottle of wine and a curry and a bunch of flowers [sic] and "can I just talk to you for a minute? I don't want to stay, I just want to speak to you". And the next minute he's "oh, can I have a bath?" And the next minute he's, you know, he's staying there and I'm back to square one. Hating myself but not able to get rid of him... (Alison).

I still feel quite (..) under his control sort of thing... He's still playing this money game. You know, I do — do hold onto the fact that I might get some money from him for the children. Because it's horrible being (.) skint (Alison).

This narrative suggests that the perpetrator would often try to win the 'victim' through material demonstration of gifts. This would in turn make the 'victim' emotionally and materially indebted. One of the consequences of this was it would compel the 'victim' to allow the perpetrator back in the house but also be in many ways forced to see the relationship as normal. For example, in the case of Alison, allowing him to have a bath in the home he had left. In many ways this also takes away the 'voice' from the 'victim' because they are forced to adopt an obsequious attitude.

Jane experienced a similar, but perhaps more overtly sinister situation. Her ex-partner (and father of her youngest child) had been waging a war of constant intimidation against Jane, often involving damage to her property. His 'favoured' technique was to slash her car tyres. Jane's resignation in respect of the ongoing terrorization and her continued acceptance of some

financial reparation from her ex-partner place her in a particularly dependent position, which she, and apparently he, recognised:

Like if [after slashing my car tyres]...then the next day he might take some money down to my mum and say “tell her I’ll pay for it and I’m sorry” and he knows I’ve got no money and how am I going to work, so I take the money and what do you do? ‘Cos you’re in a vulnerable situation and he knows it and he uses it (Jane).

Symbolic violence is, however, so powerful precisely *because* it is *unrecognisable* for what it is. Through a process of *misrecognition* ‘power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are, but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eye of the beholder’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990:xxii). The power of symbolic violence rests precisely in its lack of visibility — in the fact that for those exposed to it the doubts and the fear engendered by it cause them to question themselves. The victims are therefore left uncertain and confused as to what, exactly, is happening and unable to articulate to themselves or to others what they are going through. Bruising can be mistaken for nothing other than what it is. Although the cause may be contested, it is nearly always an external cause — a ‘door’ or a ‘child’s toy’ or a fist.

...I constantly had bruises and a friend at one stage was saying to me to go to the doctors, because she thought I had something wrong with my blood, because I always had bruises on my arms and legs (.) and I used to go “oh, you know, I don’t know where I got that. I must have just knocked myself. And I think I even thought “I do bruise really easily” (Alison).

Emotional bruising can be put down to fatigue, illness, depression — to some inner cause, and therefore more easily attributable to some failing of the victim; a ‘miserable weak girl that’s always crying’ as one of those interviewed put it. One consequence is that they are forced to doubt their own sanity:

But if I don’t watch out, it’s gonna go — cos he’s always dragging me down. Cos it was always “you’re mad” you know? (Rose).

And I know there have been some occasions I’ve actually gone to a friend and said “look, you’ve got to — am I going mad? [laugh] Or is this (..)”. So it is

(.) it’s very difficult because you do actually think you’re going mad (Ruth).

...and (.) you just think you’re going mad. You really think you’re going mad (Becky).

He said...whenever we had a row “oh I’ll just tell them you’re an unfit mother. You won’t be allowed to have [son]. Look...you’re mad, you’re on antidepressants” (Nell).

As Bourdieu and Boltanski (1975:8, cited in Galfaroro, 1998) have argued ‘symbolic domination really begins when the misrecognition [*meconnaissance*] implied by recognition [*reconnaissance*] leads those who are dominated to apply the dominant criteria of evaluation to their own practices’. The dominant criterion of evaluation that women could use to understand their lived experiences of violence were those that disempowered them further. So, as illustrated by the quotes above, some of the women believed that they were ‘going mad’ or were ‘unfit mothers’.

Symbolic violence and ‘macropolitics of institutional silencing’

In this section, we will discuss symbolic violence in relation to some of the institutional language aimed specifically at women. A clear indication of the subtle manifestations and impact of the power of symbolic violence on women in general, we contend, can be found in some of the ‘safety advice’ aimed at women. Disseminated by the Home Office, and other institutions, this advice plays on and exacerbates women’s fear of crime, not only subjecting women to a form of social control but also under the guise of ‘commonsense’, creates an implicit division between women who follow the advice and those who do not. As Bourdieu (1991:52) states, ‘[t]he power of suggestion which is exerted through things and persons... is the condition for the effectiveness of all kinds of symbolic power that will subsequently be able to operate on a habitus predisposed to respond to them’. The fact that most women almost instinctively follow much of this advice, can be seen as a form of consent to domination — not consciously but because of a ‘tacit and practical belief made possible by the habituation which arises from the training of the body’ (Bourdieu, 2000:172). The ‘durable effects’ that the social order exerts on women’ (Bourdieu, 2000:172) include convincing women that they should comply with such ‘advice’.

The overwhelming implication of the advice given out by various agencies and by the Home Office is that is

the responsibility of the *individual* to avoid potentially violent situations. Gardner (1990:312) notes that it is 'women's alleged responsibility for their own victimization' which results in them having to become 'streetwise' and to take a variety of precautions. For example, although there is unambiguous reference in literature provided by *Victim Support* to the fact that '[r]ape and sexual assault, whether by a stranger or friend, is never the woman's fault' (Victim Support, undated) at the same time the 'personal safety' information they distribute places emphasis on the need for women to 'take care'. This, we suggest, is a form of symbolic violence in that the status quo is maintained by reiteration of the dominant position — that it is incumbent on women to take precautions rather than on men to take control (of themselves) (Morgan, 2005).

The Home Office leaflet *Your practical guide to crime prevention* points out that the 'best way to minimise the risk of attack is by taking sensible precautions'(1994:3). While the suggested safety measures may 'seem particularly relevant to women'(1994:3), the proposal is that men should pay attention as well because they can 'contribute towards women's safety'(1994:3) in public spaces as well as reducing their own risk of violent attack, although it is not made clear that statistically speaking, young men are actually more at risk of attack than women. This creates what Bourdieu refers to a set of durable dispositions (which constitute the habitus) which incline agents to act and react in certain ways...and generate practices, perceptions and attitudes which are 'regular' without being consciously co-ordinated or governed by any 'rule' (Bourdieu, 2000:12). And as Beate Kraus points out, 'it is by habitus that the meaning objectified in institutions are kept alive' (Kraus, 1993:169) and 'habitus is what enables the institution to attain full realisation' (Bourdieu, 1990:57).

The recommendations made to women in The Home Office leaflet include carrying a personal alarm at night, avoiding taking short cuts through dark alleys or parks, walking facing the traffic 'so a car cannot pull up behind you unnoticed'(1994:5), as well as crossing or re-crossing the road if you fear you are being followed. Making it clear that the advice is specifically aimed at women, the accompanying pictures in the leaflet are all of lone women in various situations — walking along a street at night, talking to a taxi driver, checking the back seat of a car and so on. If a car does stop 'and you are threatened'(1994:5), several reactions are proposed — all apparently to happen at once. One should, therefore,

'scream and shout...set off your personal alarm... Get away as quickly as possible...make a mental note of the number and description of the car'(1994:5). As Stanko (1990:178) points out, such 'advice avoids making it explicit that the danger lies with the man in the car' and such approaches to crime prevention are more likely to increase women's fear of crime, fail to 'take into account women's own knowledge and precautionary strategies, normalize women's concern for personal safety and keep the burden of safety firmly upon individual women's shoulders — formulating a new version of blaming women for their victimization' (Stanko, 1990:179). The literature is presented in such a way as to make it appear 'natural' that women take precautions — in other words, women are disposed to the social order imposed on them through symbolic domination (Bourdieu, 2000:171).

The danger of crime prevention strategies such as the advice literature is that, in placing the blame on the individual and thus ignoring the cause of the crime, '[i]ndividuals see themselves not only as potential victims but as potentially responsible for preventing their own victimization' (Walklate, 1989:161). Furthermore, the dominant discourses in relation to women's safety from 'public' violence results in them becoming increasingly isolated from their wider communities and forces them to '[retreat] into their homes as ostensibly safe havens, where their resultant dependency on men makes them even more vulnerable to abuse' (Radford and Stanko, 1996:67). Where private violence is acknowledged, notwithstanding the fact that women are, in terms of the dominant discourse consigned to their homes, the onus is still placed firmly on the woman to remove herself from the situation — indeed the Home Office (1994:11) *Crime prevention* leaflet explicitly states that 'in the longer term, you have to plan what you will do to alter your situation'. This perspective 'stems primarily from a perspective that rests prevention on situational deterrence...[which moves] the responsibility for crime prevention to the individual through adequate security and reasonable precaution' (Radford and Stanko, 1996:76). Consequently, for many women, the reality of violence (and the fear of violence) means living in 'an assiduous state of vigilance and the deployment of well-developed coping strategies' (Pain, 1997:234). The censure heaped upon women who appear not to behave 'sensibly', indicates that even before the obvious violence takes place, women are subjected to a legitimate form of power through which symbolic violence can be exercised.

Research indicates, as Pain notes, that women's fear of crime stems from behaviour socialized in childhood and

adolescence and which becomes internalised as a part of everyday life for women. These behaviours, in turn, reinforce ideas about femininity and sexuality, about how to act in public spaces, how to dress and so on (cf. Gardner, 1990) — in other words, the inculcation of such behaviour, forms part of the habitus for women. Research conducted by Mehta and Bondi (1999) with full time undergraduate students at University of Edinburgh, U.K. suggests that there is an oscillation between different discursive positions that women occupy: ‘between asserting their rationality and autonomy, through the control of their fears for their safety, and protecting their physical and emotional selves through the regulation of their movements and behaviour in urban space’ (Mehta & Bondi, 1999:75). For example, one of their research respondents suggested that ‘if you don’t put yourself in certain situations, you can avoid violence’ or ‘do the right things and you should be left alone’ (Mehta & Bondi, 1991:75). The participants in the first author’s PhD research made similar comments such as: ‘you’ve got to be careful now wherever you go and...like work your route out and know where you’re going to go and all that sort of thing [in order to avoid violence]’ (Emma: *V/S* Volunteer).

The social rules governing the way women are expected to act therefore insist on certain ‘standards’ of behaviour. When women ‘fail’ to meet these standards, the consequences can be severe — whether inside or outside the home. The ‘instruments of knowledge’ (Bourdieu, 2000:170) held in common by both men and women in relation to the ‘danger’ of public spaces means that women are constantly subject to a form of symbolic violence. Despite the fact that women’s victimization patterns are different from men’s in that women are more likely to know their attackers and assaults are most likely around the home, it is still the stranger on the street that we most fear. For many women, encounters with men in public spaces are ‘unpredictable, potentially uncontrollable and hence threatening’ (Valentine, 1989 cited in Pain, 1997:235). Yet in private, confrontations may be just as unpredictable and uncontrollable (Valentine, 1989 cited in Pain, 1997:235) — for example, as one of the women interviewed by the first author discovered with her boyfriend, ‘one minute they’re telling you they love you...and can’t live without you, the *next* minute he’s being violent, aggressive, telling you the ways he’s going to kill you’ (Ruth).

Although it is presented as ‘self-evident, established, settled once and for all, beyond discussion’ (Bourdieu, 2000:174) that public spaces are more dangerous for women than private spaces, the

evidence is that the opposite is actually true. It can be shown, in fact, that the literature aimed at women purporting to offer sensible advice on avoiding crime, and the associated fear of crime experienced by many women, are both forms of symbolic violence (Morgan, 2005).

Conclusion

In this article we suggest that in order to understand the intransigence and permanence of violence, we need to analyse how, in specific contexts, different forms of violence can co-exist, nurture and sustain each other. In particular, we have focussed on symbolic violence, whose invisibility often does not enable us to recognise it as a mode of domination. Drawing on the narratives of women who have experienced violence, we have identified specific features of symbolic violence that were evident in these narratives. We illustrate features of symbolic violence embedded in everyday life such as consent, complicity and misrecognition. The dominant social order would have us believe that women are safer in their homes than on the streets, that violence is only harmful if it is physical and that the advice aimed at women with a view to avoiding violence from strangers will reduce the levels of violence against women. However, we would assert that the language used by the various institutions regarding such violence only serves to alert us to a climate of fear, which is relayed *through* women’s bodies rather than *on* their bodies. The corporeal inculcation, that is the ‘subtle inculcation of power relations upon the bodies and dispositions of individuals, is what Bourdieu refers to as symbolic violence (McNay, 1999:99). Furthermore, as Abu-Lughod and Lutz (1990) point out, fear as an emotion has to be located within the ‘public social order’, which also governs the ways in which it is embodied. This ‘avoids the trap of treating emotions as ‘natural’ or pre-social while acknowledging that they may be non-linguistic’ (Mehta & Bondi, 1999:70). The obscure power relations both in terms of interpersonal relationships and institutional language aimed at women, can be shown to permit the existence and persistence of symbolic violence. The failure to recognise the immanence of such violence and its impact on those concerned can, we suggest, be seen as indicative of an ongoing resignation to gendered violence.

Endnotes

¹ We are aware that other forms of violence such as structural and cultural violence often support physical and symbolic violence, but it is outside the scope of this article to elaborate on these forms. For a good discussion on structural violence see Farmer (2003) and Scheper-

Hughes (1992). For a discussion of cultural violence see Galtung (1990, 1969).

² The *raison d'être* of *Victim Support (VS)* is to ensure that people affected by crime receive 'appropriate recognition, support and information to help them deal with their experience' (National Audit Office 2002:10). A key aspect of the *VS* ethos is that those providing support are *volunteers*. Both *VS* and the Home Office perceive 'the involvement of members of the community, offering their time free of charge [as being] vital to the work. Victims [do] not necessarily want full-time paid professional counsellors supporting them, but local people' (House of Commons Committee, 2003). The primary aim of *VS* therefore, is to ensure that members of the community are trained and available to provide emotional and practical support to victims of crime. As well as dealing with individuals affected by crime, however, *VS* represents victims and witnesses within the criminal justice system by playing a major role in policy planning and in ensuring that the rights of victims and witnesses of crime are acknowledged and protected.

³ Chris Corrin (1996) uses the term to refer to a range of activities including feminist research and theorising, support services and forms of activism.

⁴ Liz Kelly (1988) argues that that most of the theoretical discussion on sexual violence up to the late 1970s focussed on rape as a paradigmatic example of male violence to control women. It is only towards the end of the 1970s that a body of feminist research emerged which documented the incidence of a number of forms of sexual violence.

⁵ Bourdieu states that institutions of a self regulated market, the bureaucracy, of literacy and of an educational system are fundamentally different from social formations such as the Kabyle society (Krais, 1993:168).

⁶ Elizabeth Stanko talking specifically in terms of sexual violence and in supporting the need to document a broader range of 'experiences' argues that often women's experiences are filtered through by a distinction drawn in men's behavior as 'aberrant' (harmful) or 'typical' (unharmful). She argues that even though women may feel violated or intimidated by 'typical' male behavior, 'they have no way in specifying how and why typical male behavior feels like aberrant male behavior' (1985:10 cited in Kelly, 1988:75).

⁷ In his Editor's Introduction to *Bourdieu's Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), Thompson defines habitus as 'a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways. The dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes which are "regular" without being consciously co-ordinated or governed by any "rule"' (Thompson, 1991:12).

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