

How Do Intimate Partner Violent Men Talk About Self-Control?

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Title: How do intimate partner violent men talk about self-control?

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Abstract

This study investigates discourses that male perpetrators of intimate partner violence (IPV) use regarding self-control when talking about their IPV. Literature addressing the role of self-control in committing and avoiding using violence towards partners is discussed, however it is shown that self-control has not been investigated from a discursive psychological perspective, in which the function of talk, rather than what this talk says about speakers' cognitions, is analysed. Discourse analysis of interviews with six male perpetrators, currently attending treatment and selected for their recent and multiple uses of IPV, revealed that talk of lacking self-control was used to account for situations when individuals engaged in violence. Conversely, talk about having self-control was used to account for refraining from IPV. An improvement narrative in which perpetrators of violence talked about moving from lacking to gaining self-control was also evident. Talk about self-control however was not as simple as this suggests because of particular note is the situation where perpetrators offered varying levels of self-control within their accounts of violence where *having* and *lacking* self-control was presented simultaneously. This demonstrates that talk about self-control is a discursive device that is used flexibly by perpetrators in order to manage their accountability for acts of IPV.

Keywords: Self-control; Intimate partner violence; Discursive psychology; Discourse analysis

Introduction

The aim of the current paper is to understand how male perpetrators of IPV talk about control, specifically self-control and how they use notions of self-control within their narratives of violence to account for their use of violence. Traditionally, notions of control within IPV concern the control of 'others' (e.g. Dobash & Dobash, 1977). Such approaches contend that men's violence to women arises from patriarchal values and that this motivates men to seek to control women's behaviour, and so violence is a mechanism for them to do this (DeKeseredy, 2011). Here IPV is viewed as a function of social and economic pressures and a male's violence results from his need to be in control and determine his partner's behaviour, which is based on his internal patriarchal beliefs about men's superiority (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Therefore, IPV is presented as a response to a male's feelings of powerless and of being threatened by a loss of control over a spouse (Sugihara & Warner, 2002), or the mere perception of losing power (by men who believe they legitimately deserve it, based on culture and tradition), and their need to retain dominance in an intimate relationship (Dutton, 1995). This explanatory frame is used extensively to inform the content and design of treatment programmes (Bowen, 2011).

Contention surrounds examining intra-individual variables as potential risk factors or mechanisms through which IPV occurs. Whilst feminist perspectives explain the role of control through the purposeful use of certain strategies and tactics (one of which includes violence (Gondolf & Russell, 1986), when understanding IPV, self-control (along with all other intra-individual variables) is by contrast deemed to be a potential excuse rather than explanation for IPV (Bowen, 2011). For some theorists, however, self-control as an intra-individual variable has a pivotal role to play in crime and violence (e.g., Baumeister & Boden, 1998; Burton, Cullen, Evans, Alarid, & Dunaway, 1998; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Nagin & Land, 1993).

However, evidence from several studies has found that self-control is not as stable over time as originally reported, thereby implying that it is more of a flexible state (Burt, Simons, & Simons, 2006). Some researchers have suggested that self-control is not a fixed trait but is comparable to a resource, the levels of which fluctuate over time in response to individual experiences (vanDellen & Hoyle, 2010). Certainly, when considering self-control within the context of violent relationships, there is evidence to suggest that there is a connection between self-control and perpetration of IPV with typical findings indicating that lower levels of self-control are associated with increased levels of IPV (e.g., Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009;

Gover, Jennings, Tomsich, Park, & Rennison, 2011; Kerley, Xu, & Sirisunyaluck, 2008). For example, Finkel et al. (2009) found that when participants were trained on self-regulation they displayed less violent inclinations than a group who had received no such training. Likewise Gover et al. (2011) found that low self-control predicted the perpetration of physical and psychological IPV for males and that this held cross-culturally.

Kerley, Xu, and Sirisunyaluck (2008), found that IPV was differentially associated with different facets of self-control. Impulsivity and low frustration tolerance were robust predictors of physical and psychological IPV; risk-taking only predicted physical IPV and physicalness (preference for doing physical tasks over mental tasks) only predicted psychological IPV. Taken together there is considerable objective evidence that self-control as an intra-individual variable is associated with IPV, but what is less clear is how IPV perpetrators account for its role in IPV. It is important to understand this from an intervention perspective so that interventions appropriately frame content relating to self-control. To date limited research has addressed men's talk about IPV. Studies that have done this have demonstrated that IPV men talk use a range of discursive devices to justify their actions, for example by suggesting that males should be dominant in relationships (Adams, Towns, & Gavey, 1995) so that being 'disrespected as a man' is routinely offered as an explanation for IPV (Wood, 2004). However, a purposeful discursive analysis of self-control in the accounts of IPV is currently missing from this literature.

Discursive psychology (DP, Edwards & Potter, 1992) has effectively been used to argue that talk about psychological concepts, such as self-control, cannot be used as a way to assess whether or not such concepts genuinely exist within the speaker. Instead, in DP these concepts are repositioned as notions that speakers can draw upon to effectively make claims and achieve outcomes within an interaction. This process is summarised in the claim that discursive psychologists should focus on the 'action, not cognition' (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p. 154) of talk, particularly when such talk draws on psychological concepts. To date there is a lack of research that takes a discursive approach to men who engage in partner violence (see Adams et al., 1995; LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011 for exceptions). In LeCouteur and Oxlad's study they focus on 'how constructions of violence in intimate relationships are routinely worked up, how interactants' accountability is managed, and how particular identities around such violence are accomplished and maintained' (2011, p. 6) and showed how

the men blamed their partners for the violence and downgraded their own blameworthiness in ways that managed their accountability and stake in the interview interaction being analysed.

The aim of the current research is to use the discursive psychological approach to examine the ways in which men who have recently used violence towards their partners talk about self-control to better understand how this notion is used by these perpetrators in their accounts of violence.

Method

Participants

The current research was interested in recruiting those men identified as IPV perpetrators. The most appropriate and ethically sound recruitment procedure is via rehabilitation programmes, which are accessed through self- or court-referral. Hence, participants were a heterogeneous group recruited from both court-mandated samples and self-referral samples in the community. A specific group of six males were selected, from a larger sample because they met the following criteria: (i) using the Revised Conflict Tactic Scale (CTS2, Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) were identified as having used physical and psychological violence against an intimate; (ii) they were attending treatment; (iii) had used physical and psychological violence in the last year; and (iv) had use physical and psychological violence on multiple occasions in that year. Four of the males attended community self-referred programmes and two of the males were court-mandated to treatment. The mean age of the participants was 34 years ($SD = 5.06$), with an age range of 26-41 years. All participants reported as being White British. All of the participants were currently in a relationship. None of the participants attended education post 18 years, with three of the participants leaving school at age 16 with no or very few qualifications. All were currently employed (builder, caterer, plumber, cabinet maker, computer programmer and money loaner). Three of the participants had a history of using physical violence in one (their current) relationship only (over two to seven years). The other three had used violence across several relationships (over 15 to 22 years). All were attending group intervention for IPV for the first time.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from Coventry University's Research Ethics Committee. Ethical approval was also obtained from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) to recruit male offenders. Offenders were recruited from intervention groups run in the South, West and Midland regions in the UK. In

total 40 semi-structured interviews were completed for a wider research project on desistance from IPV (see Authors, 2014). From these interviews the transcripts from 6 participants were selected for the current study based on the fact they had recently used violence. After participants were given a full briefing about the nature of the study and what it entailed, written consent was obtained from each participant. All participants were interviewed on a one-to-one basis in a private room, within their treatment setting. The males were asked to talk through their use of violence within their intimate relationships. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author following an orthographic 'play script' format (see Gibson, 2010).

Analytical approach

The method used in this analysis is the version of discourse analysis that is associated with discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992). This analysis addresses the ways in which the participants' talk is designed to manage their stake and accountability in the interaction. Particular attention is given to examples where participants referred to self-control (either explicitly or indirectly). The analysis focusses on the ways in which this concept is used in the interaction and to what end. In this way claims can be made about the ways in which talk about self-control are used in the interaction, particularly regarding the men's accountability for their use of violence. The analysis was conducted by both authors who first identified cases of self-control being discussed and then further analysed the varying ways that this concept was used and to what end. The examples provided were chosen because they offer the clearest illustration of the main ways in which self-control was spoken about, rather than to equally represent all participants.

Analysis

Analysis of the data demonstrated that self-control was not spoken about in a uniform way; instead levels of self-control were seen to vary, not just between participants but in some cases within short sections of talk. This analysis section therefore contains examples of perpetrators talking about lacking self-control and having self-control and an improvement narrative where participants present a move towards gaining self-control. Finally it is seen how there are varied accounts of simultaneously both having and lacking self-control.

Lacking Self-Control, Reducing Accountability

In its most simplistic use, a lack of self-control is used to illustrate a lack of accountability that is associated with using violence towards a woman. In this first extract P1 is describing an extreme act of

violence when he (unsuccessfully) attempted to set his partner on fire. He had previously described how he wanted to end the relationship in a dramatic manner, when he begins to speak of a lack of control.

Extract 1, P1

1. P1: And a lot of the time when I was in a situation like that, or any violent
2. situation, it was almost like I was kind of standing outside my body, and I
3. don't want to sound like some weirdo
4. I: No no but this is it, what you are describing to me is how you feel and if that's
5. how you feel, that's how you feel. There's nothing weird about it.
6. P1: I was essentially just kind of, it was like I just stood back and watched myself
7. do it, and most people I think would probably have got as far squirting it and
8. then just left it as that (I: yeah) and I'm not sure if that's me having to do that
9. one step further just to kind of prove to myself that I am that crazy, but then
10. why am I proving that I'm crazy to myself.

Here the lack of self-control is signalled through a lay definition of a separation between mind and body (line 2), which is presented as a common feature of what happens when he is involved in violence. By glossing in this way, the partner violence aspect of the action is removed as it is generalised to any violent situation (line 1). The participant continues with his account of the mind-body separation by presenting himself as a spectator of his own actions. A number of hedging terms are used in order to protect his explanation from being presented as too outlandish (line 6). Next he describes . He presents this action as being more extreme than 'most people' (line 6-7) would do, however, in doing so he presents this as being only slightly beyond the norm which works to downgrade the seriousness of his actions. Following the description of the situation where he sets his partner on fire the participant makes a display of his self-reflection and concludes that this incident was a way of confirming his own lack of self-control through a lay reference to madness (crazy; line 9-10). His talk of lack of self-control, which is attributed to madness, is used to account for a very serious violent incident and works to present him as having a flawed identity, despite him engaging in some work to downgrade the seriousness of his violence. In the following extract we see the opposite where self-control is used to present the participant in a positive way and accountable for his actions.

Self-Control, Positive Identity

In this extract another participant is describing a recent argument with his partner which is described as a situation where he refrains from using violence.

Extract 2, P2

1. I: So what's stopping you? Is it her, is it you?
2. P2: It's me and my not wanting to hurt her (I: ok) because this is the woman I, this
3. is what I've come to realise, I think if you truly love someone you wouldn't do.

The extract begins with the interviewer asking the participant who is accountable for the lack of escalation of violence during the argument. P2 takes responsibility for the lack of violence by presenting himself as having good self-control and being a good partner (through 'not wanting to hurt her,' line 2). The repeated use of 'I' helps to highlight how his agency and self-control are responsible for the lack of violence. He draws on a repertoire of being a loving partner who is caring rather than harmful. The reference to coming to a realisation (line 3), suggests he may have undergone an improvement in self-control.

Improvement Narrative

It has now been shown that lack of self-control is associated with using violence whereas having self-control is associated with refraining from using violence. In the following example, an account of improvement, where self-control is gained with positive outcomes, is explored. P3 contrasts an account of previous violence associated with his lack of self-control, with a recent situation where he used self-control to avoid using violence.

Extract 3, P3

1. P3: Mainly like hit her, grab her hair. I would get in angry mode and I just do
2. this this thing, you know. It's like they've taught me know at [*name of*
3. *treatment provider*] (I: hmm) we saw it the other day, I said to Claire, we were
4. having an argument and I wasn't getting mad and I wasn't angry, I wasn't
5. going to hurt anyone but I didn't say anything afterwards because like
6. emotion.

The extract begins with examples of violence, which P3 immediately accounts for with reference to 'angry mood' (line 1). This draws on the same idea of lack of control, similar to that seen in the first extract.

However instead of using that to reduce or remove his accountability and present himself in a negative light,

he refers to his treatment programme, and how this has taught him how to have self-control (lines 2-3). He gives a recent and specific example of how he is able to control himself. This is given credibility by the reference to 'the other day' (line 3) and the reported speech, which is used to demonstrate his new found self-control. It is of note that the preceding questions were about historic violence, which he does refer to at the start of the extract, but because this would be associated with negative identity, he quickly shifts to a recent more positive situation where his recently learned self-control is associated with not having to use violence within the context of argument. This infers a more positive identity at the point where potentially damaging accounts of violence would have been given and speaks to what Auburn (2005) describes as treatment progress in which offenders can claim to be making improvements based on their treatment programme.

Varying Self-Control

Up to this point we have demonstrated that lack of self-control is associated with negative behaviours and showing self-control is associated with positive behaviours and identity which is why an improvement narrative is also present. This would suggest that talk about self-control is relatively straightforward and polarised with participants taking up just one of these opposing identities at any given time, with a preference for moving from lacking to gaining self-control. However, analysis of the data suggests that this is not the case, and instead talk about self-control varies so that participants can be seen to be claiming to have *and* to lack self-control simultaneously. Examples of this variation are presented in the following extracts. Extract 4 begins with the interviewer asking the participant to explain his use of violence.

Extract 4, P4

1. I : And do you think that actually going through the process perhaps you were
2. able to justify you using violence as a) because she done it to you, deservedly
3. and undeservedly so you kind of thought the same was OK the other way
4. P4 : Yeah well sometimes, it was you know, I've always grown up with the notion
5. that it is wrong to hit a woman (I : Right) I still firmly believe in that, I just
6. feel that I didn't have very well trained inhibitions frankly to hold back
7. I : OK so when you kind of let's say like having an argument or whatever, can
8. you actually feel something happening that, and I'm talking back then, that
9. P4 : Like rage?

10. I : Like rage and
11. P4 : Yeah
12. I : And then what happens is it because could you just not control it or did you not
13. try to
14. P4 :Yeah well like I don't know, sometimes I could not control it (I : Hmm) for
15. the life of me (I : Hmm) and other times control was all part of what I was
16. doing, like hmm like if I seriously attacked my ex-partner, I would probably
17. be doing bail now (I : Right) because I probably really tear her to pieces (I:
18. Right OK) you know, like because I boxed for 10 years (I : Hmm) like on
19. national level (I : Right) If I really wanted to throw the hammer at her, I
20. probably could of but there was always an element of control of myself there
21. (I : Yeah) but even and that's the point, even during violence there was still
22. control (I : Hmm hmm) but there shouldn't have been the violence anyway.
23. I : And nothing at the time would kind of, nothing was saying to you stop, stop
24. this is wrong. You just carried on
25. P4 :Yeah I suppose yeah you know, sometimes I would be like stop this is wrong
26. (I : Hmm) and then something else would be said and I'd be like oh fuck this
27. (I :Yeah) you know, and like even now like, now if I speak to her and she says
28. something that hurts me like I would just get that you know that like a CBT
29. thing where you get like a signboard in your head says stop (I : Yeah) or a red
30. light (I : Yeah) I just do that now.

The interviewer draws upon his previous account of his partner's violence towards him and if this provides justification for his use of violence towards her. He rejects this possible explanation for his actions and instead draws upon a repertoire about it being 'wrong to hit a woman' (line 4-5). However, both the participant and interviewer are aware he has broken this norm of not hitting a woman (this is the very reason this interaction is taking place), so an explanation for this contradiction is required and promptly follows. This explanation draws on his lack of self-control in the form of a lack of inhibitions, . Although having a lack of inhibitions sounds like a simple lack of self-control, the reference to the inhibitions as being not 'very well trained' (line

5-6) does suggest some level of individual responsibility for his lack of self-control. The interviewer then questions whether he can control this rage, it is at this point that the participant claims to both *have* and *lack* self-control.

First we get the explicit claim 'I could not control it' (line 14). At this point this is similar to extract 1 where a simple lack of self-control is used to explain a lack of accountability. However, what immediately follows is a claim of having self-control within the context where he has already resorted to violence. He then claims to have self-control twice more (line 20, line 21-22). This is reminiscent of extract 2 where self-control was seen as providing the ability to have constraint. What differs is that in this case this self-control is occurring within a violent interaction, which occurred following what was presented as a lack of self-control. The lack of self-control is initially used to explain the violence, but the switch to having self-control is used to downgrade the violence that he has just admitted to using. Following this admission, and the varying use of self-control, the interviewer challenges him on his levels of self-control. He responds once more with varying accounts of self-control. First he directly restates the interviewer's suggestion 'stop this is wrong' (line 25) which suggests being in control, but this is followed with a claim of lack of self-control when further provoked (line 26). This contradiction is rectified with the use of an improvement narrative, similar to the kind seen in extract 3 in which he claims to 'now' (line 27, line 30) have the skills to assert self-control. This extract demonstrates claims about self-control are not fixed but instead vary both across and within situations depending on what the speaker is attempting to achieve within the interaction.

In this final extract we see another example of variation of self-control. In this case there is a shift following a new question from the interviewer. The extract begins with a response from the participant to the interviewer asking him to explain his continued use of physical violence.

Extract 4, P1

1. P1 : And not, I guess it is almost a, it wasn't premeditated or anything, it wasn't
2. like I was thinking right I'm build up and I'm going go, it just happened (I :
3. Hmm) just off the cuff
4. I : And when you thought about it, did you try and explain to yourself why it
5. happened and looked to say it was my fault or actually it was because of the
6. circumstances, or my partners fault, it was

7. P1 : I've never been one of those gentleman, well you can't really use the term
8. gentleman if you are describing yourself in a situation, but I've never been one
9. of those men that's always gone it was her fault, she pushed my buttons (I :
10. Hmm) this that and the other, despite the fact that I said some things she may
11. have said may have caused me to do that (I : Hmm hmm) that isn't the reason
12. why I, at the end of the day, I made that decision, I made that choice (I : OK)
13. So would never trivialise the situation by going on she didn't have my tea
14. ready (I : Hmm) or she said this that and the other (I : Hmm). It's not right (I :
15. Hmm hmm) and this you're in control of your own actions aren't you?

This extract starts with a recognisable claim of a lack of self-control (line 2-3) to explain violent behaviour. However, this extract takes a different direction because the interviewer asks a new question about who was responsible for the violence, by offering three options for fault: he is at fault, the circumstances of the violence or that his partner is at fault. Initially no reference to self-control is made; instead P1 resists the suggestion to blame his partner. Partner-blaming is oriented to as problematic and as something that other people do. Next, his reference to decision and choice making (line 12) does imply self-control, which contradicts what he said at the beginning of the extract. At this point blaming his partner is clearly a more problematic line of argument than claiming to be in control, so left with the choice of either blaming his partner or claiming to be in control, it is being in control that he aligns with. This is different from previous references to self-control, because in most cases self-control is associated with accountability for positive actions. However here, claiming to lack self-control would present him as blaming his partner and this is a claim that he is going to rhetorical lengths to distance himself from. We have therefore demonstrated that talk about self-control is not straightforward and instead varies according to the interactional context in which these claims are made.

Discussion

These findings therefore challenge the existing literature which has claimed to demonstrate a relatively straightforward theoretical connection between self-control and perpetration of IPV in which low self-control is viewed as a risk factor for using IPV (Gover et al., 2011;) and where higher levels of self-control are thought to reduce the likelihood of responding violently (Finkel et al., 2009). Generally these studies see self-control as a simple construct, which individuals have different levels of, and where these different levels are

associated with their use of violence. It could therefore be argued that measures used in these studies over generalise self-control and do not consider the influence of the context. How people respond to these questionnaires might not therefore actually reflect how they talk about self-control.

There remains debate as to whether self-control is a stable within individuals (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) or more of a flexible construct (Burt et al., 2006). Based on the current analysis it is not possible to ascertain if self-control is truly malleable or stable per se, however analysis of talk about self-control shows that the role of this construct varies depending on what the individual is trying to achieve. It has been demonstrated that the variation in talk about self-control in the accounts of the men occurs because different representations of self-control do different types of rhetorical work to rationalise and justify their use of violence. Their talk about self-control depended on what that individual was trying to achieve at that specific part of the interaction. So for example for P4 a *lack* of self-control was introduced to explain his use of violence, as at this point this claim to be lacking in self-control was able to reduce his culpability and therefore his agency in committing actions that he is being held to account for. The switch to *having* self-control in certain instances (i.e. being able to hold back during violence), was used to downgrade the original violence that had already been confessed to. This meant that while an admission of using violence is made (for which he is not accountable because he was lacking self-control) the level of the violence is presented as not as serious as it could have been; it is at this point that he does claim to have self-control because he is accountable for reducing the level of violence that could have been used.

It has been shown therefore that self-control *varies* according to the context within which the claims are made in ways that manage the perpetrators' accountability for their actions. This means that in most cases when perpetrators are describing something problematic for which they are accountable they are likely to claim to be lacking self-control, but when they are describing something positive for which they may be accountable (or where it would be good for them to be accountable) claims about having self-control are likely to be made. Extract five contains an exception to this as in that case the perpetrator was left with a choice of claiming to have self-control or to blame his partner for his violence towards her. In this case partner blaming could have been more damaging to the speaker than claiming to have self-control, so in this case the context requirements made the claim of having self-control more appropriate. This adds further weight to the claim that talk about self-control is used flexibly depending on the details of the interaction, rather than providing

any insight into actual levels of self-control that perpetrators may or may not have. Such a finding is entirely consistent with the discursive literature that demonstrates how psychological concepts are used in talk (e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992). Where it could be argued that the study's sample size is a limitation in fact the level of variation in this sample actually serves to emphasise the flexible and varying uses of talk about self-control. A larger sample size would not necessarily strengthen this claim although further studies could address other action orientations that talk about self-control can achieve.

It has been suggested that treatment for offenders of IPV should be directed towards self-control issues and encouraging offenders to increase their levels of self-control (Payne et al., 2010). However, as self-control has been shown to be a fluctuating construct, it is perhaps more important to understand how offenders use this construct across a range of different contexts in order to achieve different outcomes rather than to treat it as a stable and measurable concept. It is not being argued that self-control may not be an important concept and that work shouldn't continue to be done to increase this to help reduce violence. However, what is being argued is that talk about levels of self-control should not be viewed as a reflection of an individual's current levels of self-control and instead need to be viewed as ways that individuals manage accountability and make arguments about their use of violence.

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