

Pain and Violence

Reversing Positions: Constructions of Masculine Victimhood in Online Discussions about Intimate Partner Violence Committed by Women

Men and Masculinities
2020, Vol. 23(3-4) 772-787
© The Author(s) 2019



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/1097184X18824374
journals.sagepub.com/home/jmm



Satu Venäläinen¹

Abstract

Discussions about men's victimization by their female intimate partners have gained increased visibility in the last two decades. These discussions put victim positions on offer for men that stand in stark contrast to more widespread associations between masculinity and perpetration of violence. This article examines how these contradictory positionings play out and are discursively negotiated in Finnish online discussions of female-inflicted intimate partner violence (IPV). Two recurring types of positioning of men were identified in the analysis: neglected victims and naturally superior perpetrators. The analysis illustrates how gendered differences between men and women in relation to violence are both reiterated and denied in the processes of enacting, balancing, and rhetorically employing these positionings. Thereby, light is shed on the multiplicity of complex and fluid ways in which masculinities are constructed and customized in the context of meaning-making surrounding the issue of IPV.

¹ Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

Corresponding Author:

Satu Venäläinen, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, P.O. Box 54, 00014 Helsinki, Finland.
Email: satu.venalainen@helsinki.fi

Keywords

intimate partner violence, masculinity, victimhood, discourse, online discussions

Over the last two decades, violence perpetrated by women, especially against their male intimate partners, has risen to prominence as a topic of keen interest in several contexts, from academic discussion to both traditional and new forms of media (e.g., Enander 2011; Hester 2012). This increase has coalesced through the rise of anti-feminist rhetoric and the advocacy of men's rights, in which context much of the discussion of women's violence has emerged. Men's rights rhetoric relies on claims of widespread discrimination against men and the assertion that, in many ways, men hold a position of less power than women in contemporary societies (Dragiewicz 2011; Kimmel 2013; Mann 2008). These rhetorics make victim positions available to men, both in relation to violence and more generally, with men being portrayed not only as the hidden victims of women's violence in their intimate relationships but also as more broadly oppressed by mainstreamed feminist politics (Kimmel 2013; Messner 1998). Such positions entail several gendered paradoxes: taking up the mantle of a victim may be problematic for men because such positions are seemingly at odds with widespread notions about masculinity and its associations with competence in violence, male superiority, and strength (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). At the same time, men claiming victimhood may effectively divert attention from their positions of power in society and thus work to maintain those positions by curtailing feminist attempts at societal change in unbalanced-power gender relations (Durfee 2011; Ging 2017).

In this article, I explore how these paradoxes linked with men's victim positioning play out in Finnish online discussions that focus on the phenomenon of intimate partner violence (IPV) committed by women. This article illustrates patterns in how men are positioned (Davies and Harré 1990) in these discussions, as not only victims but also naturally superior perpetrators when compared to women. A focus on contradictions in these positionings helps to reveal how masculinity is constructed and discursively negotiated in multiple ways, which entwine with each other in a complex manner in the context of meaning-making around IPV in online discussions. The analysis is theoretically grounded in feminist poststructuralism (Weedon 1987) and the related view on gender as constructed in continuous social practices. Applying this framework, I view masculinity as fluidly constructed in relation to femininity in interactional practices that are informed by larger societal, cultural, and structural formations. The analysis is guided also by a Foucauldian understanding of the intertwining of power and knowledge (Hall 2001) and of discourses as providing socioculturally contingent ways to understand and to construct phenomena such as violence.

The approach adopted in my analysis relies specifically on the concept of positioning (Davies and Harré 1990), which draws attention to the numerous ways, rich

with local variation, in which people and their actions are made sense of and assigned meaning via drawing on the socioculturally, and situationally, available discursive resources. Placing actors—who in an online discussion may be identified with self or others, such as real or imagined perpetrators and victims of violence—in subject positions accords them a particular social location *vis-à-vis* other actors and the surrounding world, along with certain sets of rights and responsibilities in relation to these. Through positioning, violence and its perpetrators and victims are hence imbued with meanings that may, for instance, readily afford deflecting blame and responsibility by justifying and excusing violence (Towns, Adams, and Gavey 2003). In addition, discursive attempts to position oneself in the manner desired may be central in narrating violence in ways that allow for performing masculinity by relying on normalized links between masculinity and violence (Andersson 2008). Most importantly, by allowing for analysis that is attuned to dynamism and elements of multiplicity in gender construction (Edley and Wetherell 1997), this approach provides a fruitful angle for approaching the apparent paradoxes in the relations constructed between IPV and masculinity in contemporary discussions.

Discursive constructions of gender and IPV have been explored in a wide array of research. Most studies addressing these have focused on how men who have used violence against their female intimate partners talk about their violence in ways that silence and obscure their responsibility as perpetrators while emphasizing the responsibility and blameworthiness of female victims (Anderson and Umberson 2001; Edin and Nilsson 2014; Hearn 1998; Towns, Adams, and Gavey 2003). Similar tendencies to “degender violence and gender the blame” (Berns 2001) in discourse about IPV have been observed in, for instance, newspaper reporting and portrayals in magazines. Discourse on men’s victimhood and its connections with gender construction in the context of IPV have not been studied as extensively. There is, however, a growing body of literature that focuses on ways in which men account for being victimized in their intimate relations. This work has highlighted men’s difficulties in disclosing their experiences of victimization in the context of prevailing ideals of masculinity and how such ideals are detrimental to men who wish to seek and receive help (Allen-Collinson 2009; Corbally 2015; Migliaccio 2001). In particular, a study focusing on men’s portrayals of their victimhood in petitions for domestic-violence protection orders against their female partners (Duffee 2011) has shed light on how men negotiate the contradictions between victimization and hegemonic masculinity. This analysis illustrates how men may portray their victimhood in ways that allow them to avoid being seen as powerless or fearful while simultaneously denying the identity of a perpetrator of violence.

The present work contributes to the literature on discursive constructions of masculinity and IPV by closely examining the contradictions in the positionings of men as victims of IPV, with particular emphasis on how these are discursively negotiated in the context of online discussions. The Internet and social media have become highly relevant arenas for discussion and debate about IPV and gender in recent years. They have also become central sites of dissemination of men’s rights

rhetoric and the accompanying claims of men's victimization (Mann 2008). Finland is no exception in this regard: online forums have played an important role in the rise of claims related to discrimination against men and anti-feminist views about IPV in recent decades (Keskinen 2013). Internet discussion forums offer an influential platform with extensive reach for expressing, formulating, and contesting anti-feminist, as well as feminist, views on IPV and issues bound up with it (Dragiewicz and Burgess 2016). Moreover, as discussed by Ging (2017), these forums permit complex gender constructions in which seemingly nonhegemonic notions merge with hegemonic ones. This is facilitated particularly strongly by the possibility of spontaneously and anonymously expressing contentious views and of positioning oneself accordingly, thereby actualizing potential to gain support from numerous codiscussants—an audience not restricted to any particular geographical location.

The Finnish context entails some noteworthy particularities and further paradoxes pertaining to the predominant ways in which gender and IPV have been made sense of and related to. In Finland, gender equality is widely assumed to have already been achieved, and for many Finns, this notion is an integral part of the national identity. The emphasis on equality has often tended to translate into advocacy of a gender-neutral approach toward IPV, notwithstanding statistics that point to gendered patterns in it (Clarke 2011).¹ In consequence, the perspective on gender that has been applied in such domains as Finnish policy and interventions against IPV has remained, for the most part, moderate (Hearn and McKie 2010; Virkki 2017).

A gender-neutral approach to IPV is not, however, unique to Finland. Rather, it has been articulated more widely also, as a view set in opposition to a gendered understanding of IPV among researchers in recent decades. Also known as the “symmetry discourse,” a gender-neutral approach to IPV lays emphasis on similarities in perpetration and victimization between women and men (e.g., Dutton 2012; Straus 2011). The symmetry discourse is, accordingly, based on attempts to refute the notion, exemplified in the literature on gendered violence, that there is value in viewing IPV as linked to gendered power dynamics, a link reflecting reports on extensive gender differences found in rates of victimization and perpetration, and in the nature and consequences of IPV (Anderson 2005; DeKeseredy and Dragiewicz 2007; Johnson 2011; Kimmel 2002; Nybergh, Enander, and Krantz 2016). As the following analysis illustrates, these competing understandings of IPV constitute a significant backdrop to controversial online discussions about IPV committed by women and the associated constructions of masculinity in relation to violence.

Materials and Methods

The materials for the research described here are discussion threads focusing on IPV perpetrated by women, collected from various online discussion forums and comment areas of blog sites hosted in Finland. The materials were collected in April 2017 for a larger project examining discourses about violence in a contemporary Finnish context. The threads, from some of Finland's most popular online discussion

forums, were found by means of Internet searches conducted with Google and site-specific text-search tools. The search terms used were “violence + women,” “women’s violence,” and “intimate partner violence experienced by men.” Threads in which discussion did not focus on the topic of interest were removed from the corpus before analysis. Discussion threads for a span of ten years, 2007–2016, formed the body of research material.

The discussion threads were collected from six distinct discussion forums and nine blog sites. The former consists of one general online discussion forum and the forums of a national newspaper, a regional newspaper (from northern Finland), a youth magazine, a baby-focused magazine, and a science magazine. All of the comment areas on blog sites were accessed via a popular blog section of a web-based newspaper. Many of the writers of blogs featured in this section are politically active, and one of them has become well-known as an advocate of the men’s rights movement in Finland.² All told, the body of material consists of ninety-eight discussion threads and 3,190 comments.³ Ten of the threads were prompted by a reporter’s article about IPV committed by women, while the rest followed a blog post or discussion piece by a nonreporter. While the reporter-penned articles that triggered discussion were not included in the formal analysis, they were considered as background data that proved informative with regard to the ongoing societal discussions of the topic during the selected time period. Most of the posters used pseudonyms and did not identify themselves as either women or men, though in some cases they did, at least implicitly. This, coupled with the online context in general, makes it difficult to contextualize the comments with knowledge about their writers. Rather than focus on the writers’ gender, however, the analysis attends specifically to the ways in which gendered positionings were enacted through depictions of violence constructed in discussions wherein variously located men and women may participate, and which are enabled by gendered cultural imaginaries.

The analysis of the material collected was based on the methodological principles of discourse analysis (e.g., Wood and Kroger 2000). Accordingly, it focused not only on the content connected with the portrayals constructed but also on the processes of their construction (i.e., how they were constructed) and their functions (i.e., what was accomplished through them). In line with the poststructural orientation described above, the analysis was sensitized specifically to subject positions made available by various discourses and not so much to fine details in the use of discursive devices in achieving this. The analysis process involved, firstly, coding the research materials for recurrent themes and claims related to the topic of IPV committed by women. After identification of general patterns in meaning-making in the discussions and their associations with wider discourses, the recurring ways in which men and women were positioned in the materials in relation to IPV (and in relation to other people) were distinguished. The nature of the materials and the research interest dictated that the analysis of positioning concentrate primarily (though not exclusively) on the positioning of others as subjects in discourse rather than on the postwriters’ self-positioning. The last stage of analysis involved

examining in more detail how the positionings were accomplished and how they functioned, particularly in terms of gender construction.

The analysis presented below focuses on the recurring contradictions in how men are positioned in relation to IPV in the online discussions examined. Accordingly, I do not attempt to map the entire space of views expressed in online discussions about IPV committed by women; rather, I wish to cast light on patterns in the discussions that are particularly illuminating of the tensions and inconsistencies in the construction of masculinities in the context of these discussions. The extracts included in the next section of the article have been translated from Finnish to English by the author. After each extract, there is an identification number representing the discussion forum, the year, and the number of the discussion thread within that year from which the extract is drawn.

Analysis

The online discussions within the selected time frame followed broadly similar paths in the core claims and themes reiterated across the various discussion sites and threads. The analysis presented here focuses on two recurring types of positioning of men in the discussions: (1) neglected victims and (2) naturally superior perpetrators. These contradictory positionings often appear together—even within the same comment—and alternate in the discussions. This coappearance exemplifies the complexity, fluidity, and multiplicity of the constructions of masculinity in relation to IPV. As illustrated below, the complexity is particularly evident in the way the doing of gendered distinctions through these positionings repeatedly coalesces as denial of gender differences with regard to IPV.

Constructions of Gender Symmetry: Men as Neglected Victims

One of the core themes in the online discussions analyzed was the prevalence and harmfulness of IPV committed by women against male victims. Commonly, IPV by women was depicted as being just as harmful as IPV carried out by men. The following extract exemplifies how such constructions of IPV were linked with positioning men as disregarded victims of IPV, whose victimization should be given the same attention as women's. In the extract, the writer uses this positioning in response to statistics indicating high prevalence of violence against women in Finland, which were cited by a writer earlier in the discussion thread.⁴

Studies that are this one-sided and misleading should be banned. Why weren't men's experiences investigated at the same time? Aren't men's lives and health considered valuable; isn't violence against men seen as an equally severe and important problem? Aren't men seen as having the right to live without violence and fear of it? (January 12, 2014)

The extract echoes the concerns about the invisibility of male victims raised both in academic discussions (e.g., Graham-Kevan 2007) and in men's rights rhetoric. It demonstrates a common rhetorical function of the positioning of men as neglected victims of IPV: the positioning allows for disputing and silencing any gender-specific talk about violence against women. This is done by mobilizing the symmetry discourse of IPV, wherein women's and men's experiences of victimization are set in parallel, thus denying the legitimacy of gender-sensitive analyses.

The symmetry discourse was drawn upon also in a related positioning of men in the online discussions, one relying on claims of false depiction of men as perpetrators of IPV. These claims position men as victims not only of their female intimate partners but also of prevailing gendered assumptions that obscure their victimhood. Hence, these positionings are, in actuality, based on a view of gender as influencing the treatment of victims of IPV; accordingly, they imply that a need exists to take gender into consideration when one is discussing violence. Paradoxically, however, instead of being appealed to in support of a gendered understanding of IPV, these positionings tend to appear in the discussions in the context of arguing for the value of the opposing, gender-neutral view. The following extract illustrates how this positioning of men as doubly victimized is constructed by emphasizing their difficulties in being recognized as victims of IPV.

We rarely think that men face violence at home too and are dominated by their partners. For a man, the shame is maybe even worse than for a woman, because people relate to violence experienced by men more cold-heartedly. It's not talked about, and there aren't any noticeable campaigns to stop it. It's like it's not real violence if the wife slaps you a little nearly every day. (January 11, 2012)

As in several other comments, the harm inflicted on victimized men by gendered assumptions is established here through references to shame. The extract below further elucidates how such references function in the discussions in reinforcing the factuality of men's victim position.

Domestic violence by women against men may be even more frequent than men's violence toward women, because nowhere near all men report violence to the authorities, on account of being afraid of being shamed. (January 5, 2010)

In the extract, the shamefulness of being victimized by their female partners is presented as a possible reason for men not reporting their victimization, with the implication that it may therefore remain hidden. This is, in turn, used in support of the claim that IPV committed by women may be even more frequent than IPV by men. Thus, references to gendered shame commonly linked to men's victimization (Allen-Collinson 2009) function here to offer support for claims of gender symmetry in IPV. While such shamefulness of the victim position, and the associated difficulty in seeking help, may indeed be reality for many men experiencing IPV (e.g.,

Migliaccio 2001), what is particularly relevant in the context of the online discussions studied is the way in which these gendered notions were rhetorically, and paradoxically, drawn upon in support of notions centered on the irrelevance of gender with regard to IPV.

In addition to purportedly hiding the truth about IPV and about the gender of its perpetrators and victims, gendered assumptions are recurrently portrayed in the discussions as being hurtful to men in that they can lead to men's wrongful indictment in situations of spousal conflict:

The man's position in a relationship where a woman is violent is troublesome. He cannot hit her even for self-defence without being labelled as a violent wife-beater and hence as the primary problem. There are cases where a violent woman manages to label the man as violent and on that basis also gets custody of the children in a divorce, for example. The authorities' prejudices could finally change to match reality. A woman may be violent just as well as a man. (March 13, 2012)

In the extract, men are positioned as facing a double bind when abused by their female partners: their self-defense is portrayed as inevitably leading to them being falsely labeled as violent by their partners and the authorities. What is insinuated is that the true position of the men as victims does not come to the fore because the authorities assume them to be perpetrators even when they are, in fact, victims. This is, therefore, another way in which gendered assumptions about men as likely perpetrators of violence are portrayed as detrimental to male victims of IPV for reason of blinding people to men's victimhood. These claims about the prevalence of "male bashing" (Berns 2001) in the form of demonization are accompanied and enabled by culturally commonplace positionings of women as prone to make false allegations of men's use of violence (Durfee 2011; Naughton et al. 2015). In consequence of the relational nature of subject positions (Davies and Harré 1990), these positionings of women in the discussions effectively deflect the possibility of the truthfulness of such allegations against men. Furthermore, they simultaneously allow for positioning men in these depictions of conflict situations as nonviolent, pure victims of both IPV and gendered demonization.

Constructions of Gender Difference: Men as Naturally Superior Perpetrators

Inconsistently with the symmetry discourse, the victim positionings of men in the discussions are often accompanied by a positioning as naturally more effective at committing violence. This contradictory positioning often relies on references to gender-linked differences in size and/or strength:

We all know that women are by nature just as violent as men; women's violence is only limited by their lesser physical strength in comparison to men and a fear of losing when both are equally violent at home. (January 15, 2009)

In the extract, the gender differences in physical strength are presented as the primary distinguishing factor in women's and men's perpetration of IPV. The writer states that this difference "limits" women's violence, although "by nature" women and men are equally violent. After noting this gender difference in IPV, the writer reiterates the initial, contrary claim of gender parity in IPV. This seeming acknowledgment of gender differences allows for adding nuance and, thereby, credibility to the claims presented about equal perpetration of IPV between women and men. Significantly, however, the references to women's "lesser physical strength" and "fear of losing" also may serve to counter the connotations of men's weakness and lack of difference from women that are inscribed in the contradictory claim that follows: that men and women are equally violent at home. Portraying men in this way as superior to women in ability to perpetrate violence allows for integrating elements associated with traditional forms of masculinity, such as strength and activity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), into their positioning. Through this, the discourse negotiates the discrepancy between masculinity and the position of equal victim that is made available by the symmetry discourse drawn upon in the comment; in other words, it assists in managing the gendered trouble attached to men's victimhood (Åkerström, Burcar, and Wästerfors 2011).

The extract above illustrates how doing gender difference in the discussions often entwines with denying it by relying on the symmetry discourse of IPV. Related to this, another way in which gender difference is done in the discussions is found in drawing on discourses familiar from developmental psychology and other psychological sciences wherein women's and men's violence are distinguished from each other by ascribing indirect aggression to women and direct aggression to men (Ringrose 2006). These discourses proceed from the premise that, while women can be just as aggressive as men, if not more so, they exhibit this differently, particularly in the form of psychological violence. The following extract exemplifies the use of this discourse of feminine psychological violence in the online discussions.

Intimate partner violence is a thing that is often seen as committed only by men. It is also emphasised that physical violence such as hitting someone is the most horrible thing. The reality, however, is that psychological violence is often much more hurtful. Already in middle school [at roughly ages 12–15], girls know how to bully each other in a much nastier way. The worst traumas are caused precisely by women's psychological violence. Boys' physical violence causes a few bruises, but many girlish, mean jokes will never heal. In many relationships [I have myself witnessed], a woman psychologically abuses her man extremely cruelly. In my view, a man can in certain situations slap his clucking misses a little, as long as he doesn't take it too far. (February 14, 2007)

As the extract illustrates, psychological violence committed by women is occasionally portrayed in the discussions as more harmful than physical violence committed by men. According to Dragiewicz and Burgess (2016), circulating such a notion is

one “equivalency tactic,” affording a reversal of the positionings of women and men typically articulated in gendered-violence literature, psychological abuse having been identified in the literature as a specifically harmful component of IPV against women. In this respect, the discourse of female-inflicted psychological violence is closely related to the symmetry discourse, and it indeed does somewhat similar discursive work in opposition of more widely accepted understandings of gendered power in IPV. Simultaneously, however, the idea of indirect, psychological violence as a specifically feminine mode of abuse enables retaining a facet of gender difference in preservation of the natural masculinity of the realm of physical violence.

Also noteworthy in the extract above is how women’s use of psychological violence is taken as justification for men’s use of physical violence toward them. Men being entitled to respond violently to women’s violence emerged among the recurring topics of debate in the discussions that generated contradictory positionings. Below are two additional examples displaying the manner of constructing the legitimacy of men’s violent response:

It’s part of equality that a man hits back; no-one needs to agree to become a punching bag. (February 13, 2009)

If a woman hits me, then damn right I will hit back, but so much harder, so that the bitch will fly all the way into the wall. (March 14, 2014)

In the first of the extracts, men’s entitlement to respond with violence is constructed with references to equality—specifically, to equal treatment for all, irrespective of gender. In the second extract, the gendered categorization of the woman in the last clause as a “bitch” functions to legitimize violence directed at her by placing her morality under suspicion (LeCouteur and Oxlad 2010). Such positionings of men as legitimate perpetrators of IPV relative to women who are “asking for it” were contested by many, however. The writers quoted below employed anecdotes, in which they identify themselves as men, in arguments that this position is not a legitimate one:

Is he a man, then, who beats a woman after she hits him? I could have done it physically, a million times better than the woman who hit me, but I am, you see, a GENTLEMAN, who does not hit someone weaker, and I did not hit her, even then!!!! (March 13, 2009)

I have sometimes been bitch slapped, but I still under no circumstances will hit a woman. I have been raised so that only a man without balls hits someone weaker than he is, and, yes, I am—at least so far—stronger than my wife. (March 14, 2014)

These extracts vividly illustrate the contradictions between openly assuming a position based on masculine entitlement to use violence, on one hand, and, on the other, the shamefulness of a position of “wifebeater” (Towns, Adams, and Gavey 2003). The writers quoted above position men who respond to women’s violence with

violence of their own as breaking the norms of honorable masculinity and, accordingly, as not “real men” (Edin and Nilsson 2014). This is a tool for deflection of the potential threat to their masculinity that arises from refraining from using violence even when subjected to it (Andersson 2008). The writers positioned themselves in terms of certain notions of male honor—made explicit in the category “gentleman”—linked with the norm of men not hitting women or any other party assumed to be weaker than oneself (Edin and Nilsson 2014).

Moreover, the positions illustrated above allow the writers to portray themselves as manly by implying an ability of impulse control in not resorting to violence (Åkerström, Burcar, and Wästerfors 2011). The writers can be seen as doing masculinity by displaying their capacity to choose when *not* to use violence—an attribute that positions them as rational and controlled actors (Ravn 2018). At the same time, though, the writer in both cases adopts a position of superior perpetrator, attesting to a physical capacity to exert force if choosing to do so. With this positioning, the writers distinguish themselves from women by aligning themselves with meanings associated with hegemonic masculinity. They do this in two ways: firstly, by referencing a capability of violence that women’s physique does not enable them to match, and secondly, by indicating their superiority as perpetrators of violence through an ability to choose or not choose violence, in a controlled, rational manner that is distinct from that of their female partners. Via these maneuvers, positionings that are based on victimization and refraining from violence are shaped into ones that confirm rather than threaten the manliness of victimized men.

Conclusion

By examining the discursive construction of contradictory positionings of men in relation to IPV, specifically in the context of online discussions focused on women’s IPV, this article has contributed to the understanding of how such contradictory positionings are negotiated and related to. The analysis revealed elasticity and complexity in discursive processes through which manhood (inclusive of its distinctiveness relative to womanhood) is reproduced in the context of the sense-making surrounding IPV. This elasticity is enabled by the multiplicity of discourses drawn upon and tailored in the construction of men simultaneously as neglected victims of IPV and as naturally better at inflicting it in physical forms. Crucially, the elasticity of these positionings is precisely what gives vital support to their effectiveness in the maintenance of gendered power relations.

The positioning of men as victims and the contrasting positioning as superior perpetrators of violence perform different yet related kinds of discursive work in the online discussions. The former acts, in particular, to recenter men’s experiences in a context wherein they are perceived as having been sidelined (e.g., Kimmel 2013). In the discussions, this positioning is recurrently employed in denying the significance of gender or the existence of differences between women and men as perpetrators and victims of IPV. It therefore relies primarily on the symmetry discourse and,

hence, echoes the related notions put forth far and wide by men's rights advocates (Mann 2008). The positioning as superior perpetrator, in turn, functions to establish and maintain the sense that an association between violence and masculinity is natural. Contrary to the gender-symmetry discourse, this positioning reiterates; renders natural; and importantly, legitimates differences between men and women in relation to violence. In particular, the positioning draws on notions that clear gender differences exist in terms both of physical power—with emphasis on men's greater strength—and of men's capacity to exercise violence in a more controlled manner than women. The “superior perpetrator” positioning thus acts in support of a system of gender hierarchy, by relying on a narrative speaking of natural gender differences and the related traditional gendered meanings (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), while the victim positioning partially challenges these.

The contradictions between these positionings are negotiated in the online discussions by synthetically drawing together elements from both in the process of constructing relations among men, women, and violence. What one may find particularly alarming about the hybrid masculinities (Ging 2017) that emerge from such syntheses is their effectiveness in downplaying and simultaneously legitimizing men's violence toward women. These positionings, which are often called upon in unison with demands for gender-neutral IPV interventions and for research endeavors consistent with the symmetry discourse in this domain, are advanced considerably by efforts to erase gendered power relations from understandings of IPV, and they operate toward replicating such stances. Indeed, even the positionings relying on gender difference paradoxically get activated in the discussion both to support the gender-symmetry discourse and to naturalize men's violence rather than to encourage an understanding of IPV that is sensitive to gendered power. The erasure of such elements from the narrative space hinders tackling the gendered inequalities entwined with IPV and serves to deny the value of feminist analyses of these inequalities (e.g., Johnson 2011). An additional sort of erasure is enacted in these online discussions: differences *within* the category of men and that of women, alongside the intersecting inequalities attached to those differences (e.g., Ravn 2018), are largely invisible in the positionings applied. This absence further consolidates the rendering of distinctions between men and women, by shielding those categories against internal ruptures.

The contradictory positionings revealed in the analysis of online discussions are focused principally on creating categorical distinctions between women and men, though all the while seemingly ruling out such distinctions. They constitute powerful modes of gender construction based on accommodating and harnessing multiple aspects for the purpose of preserving a gendered social order. Quite significantly, this preservation relies on culturally circulating discourses that associate masculinity with violence (along with other attributes connected with dominance, such as rationality and control). My examination of the online discussions has laid bare the deep rootedness of these discourses. With such ingrained patterns in evidence, discussions

about men's victimization that might otherwise afford disruption of hegemonic gender performances largely become, in reality, sites of their maintenance.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research has been conducted as a part of the project "Social inequalities and discourses of violence" funded by the Kone Foundation.

Notes

1. There has been some variation across studies on intimate partner violence (IPV) in Finland with regard to the extent of gender differences. In 2010, a study focusing specifically on men's experiences of victimization was published (Heiskanen and Ruuskanen 2010), triggering extensive public debate on IPV and gender. Many of the online discussions analyzed in this article were prompted by this research, in which 35 percent of the women interviewed and 22 percent of the men reported having encountered violence from a current or former partner. The severity gap was much wider, with the women reporting considerably more serious consequences of the IPV they had faced than the men.
2. The number of forum visitors per month as of August 2018 was 2,344,883 for the general online discussion forum, 3,125,425 for the national newspapers, 1,041,918 for the regional newspaper, 499,905 for the youth magazine, 1,783,328 for the baby magazine, 512,369 for the science magazine, and 954,526 for the blog aggregator from which the material from blog sites' comment areas was retrieved. The total number of Finnish Internet users as of the same date was 4,612,000 (FIAM—Comscore MMX MP 2018). In light of points raised in discussions about ethics in Internet research (see Markham and Buchanan 2012), further information about these forums and blogs is omitted for ensuring poster anonymity.
3. All the discussion threads focus on IPV in heterosexual relationships; the discussions feature almost no references to IPV in nonheterosexual relationships.
4. The statistics referred to came from a European Union-wide survey conducted in 2014 (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014) in which Finland ranked second for violence against women per capita.

References

- Åkerström, M., V. Burcar, and D. Wästerfors. 2011. "Balancing Contradictory Identities—Performing Masculinity in Victim Narratives." *Sociological Perspectives* 54:103–24.
- Allen-Collinson, J. 2009. "A Marked Man: Female-perpetrated Intimate Partner Abuse." *International Journal of Men's Health* 8:22–40.
- Anderson, K. L. 2005. "Theorizing Gender in Intimate Partner Violence Research." *Sex Roles* 52:853–65.

- Anderson, K. L., and D. Umberson. 2001. "Gendering Violence: Masculinity and Power in Men's Accounts of Domestic Violence." *Gender & Society* 15:358–80.
- Andersson, K. 2008. "Constructing Young Masculinity: A Case Study of Heroic Discourse on Violence." *Discourse & Society* 19:139–61.
- Berns, N. 2001. "Degendering the Problem and Gendering the Blame: Political Discourse on Women and Violence." *Gender & Society* 15:262–81.
- Clarke, K. 2011. "The Paradoxical Approach to Intimate Partner Violence in Finland." *International Perspectives in Victimology* 6:9–19.
- Connell, R. W., and J. W. Messerschmidt. 2005. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender & Society* 19:829–59.
- Corbally, M. 2015. "Accounting for Intimate Partner Violence: A Biographical Analysis of Narrative Strategies Used by Men Experiencing IPV from their Female Partners." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 30:3112–32.
- Davies, B., and R. Harré. 1990. "Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 19:43–63.
- DeKeseredy, W. S., and M. Dragiewicz. 2007. "Understanding the Complexities of Feminist Perspectives on Woman Abuse: A Commentary on Donald G. Dutton's Rethinking Domestic Violence." *Violence against Women* 13:874–84.
- Dragiewicz, M. 2011. *Equality with a Vengeance: Men's Rights Groups, Battered Women, and Antifeminist Backlash*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Dragiewicz, M., and J. Burgess. 2016. "Domestic Violence on #Qanda: The 'Man' Question in Live Twitter Discussion on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Q&A." *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 28:211–29.
- Durfee, A. 2011. "'I'm Not a Victim, She's an Abuser': Masculinity, Victimization, and Protection Orders." *Gender & Society* 25:316–34.
- Dutton, D. G. 2012. "The Case against the Role of Gender in Intimate Partner Violence." *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 17:99–104.
- Edin, K., and B. Nilsson. 2014. "Men's Violence: Narratives of Men Attending Anti-violence Programmes in Sweden." *Women's Studies International Forum* 46:96–106.
- Edley, N., and M. Wetherell. 1997. "Jockeying for Position: The Construction of Masculine Identities." *Discourse & Society* 8:203–17.
- Enander, V. 2011. "Violent Women? The Challenge of Women's Violence in Intimate Heterosexual Relationships to Feminist Analyses of Partner Violence." *NORA—Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 19:105–23.
- European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). 2014. "Violence against Women: An EU Wide Survey. Main Results Report." Accessed January 31, 2017. <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2014/violence-against-women-eu-wide-survey-main-results-report>.
- FIAM—Comscore MMX MP.2018, August. "Tulokset [Findings]. Finnish Internet Audience Measurement (FIAM)." Accessed October 2, 2018. <http://fiam.fi/tulokset>.
- Ging, D. 2017. "Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere." *Men and Masculinities*. doi: 1097184X17706401.
- Graham-Kevan, N. 2007. "The Re-emergence of Male Victims." *International Journal of Men's Health* 6:3–6.

- Hall, S. 2001. "Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse." In *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, edited by M. Wetherell, S. Taylor, and S. Yates, 72–81. London, UK: Sage.
- Hearn, J. 1998. *The Violences of Men: How Men Talk about and How Agencies Respond to Men's Violence to Women*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hearn, J., and L. McKie. 2010. "Gendered and Social Hierarchies in Problem Presentation and Policy Processes: 'Domestic Violence' in Finland and Scotland." *Violence against Women* 16:136–58.
- Heiskanen, M., and E. Ruuskanen. 2010. *Tuhansien iskujen maa: Miesten kokema väkivalta Suomessa* [The land of thousands of blows: Violence experienced by men in Finland]. Helsinki, Finland: European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control.
- Hester, M. 2012. "Portrayal of Women as Intimate Partner Domestic Violence Perpetrators." *Violence against Women* 18:1067–82.
- Johnson, M. P. 2011. "Gender and Types of Intimate Partner Violence: A Response to an Anti Feminist Literature Review." *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 16:289–96.
- Keskinen, S. 2013. "Anti-feminism and White Identity Politics: Political Antagonisms in Radical Right-wing Populist and Anti-immigration Rhetoric in Finland." *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 3:225–32.
- Kimmel, M. 2002. "'Gender Symmetry' in Domestic Violence: A Substantive and Methodological Research Review." *Violence against Women* 8:1332–63.
- Kimmel, M. 2013. *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*. New York, NY: Nation Books/Perseus.
- LeCouteur, A., and M. Oxlad. 2010. "Managing Accountability for Domestic Violence: Identities, Membership Categories and Morality in Perpetrators' Talk." *Feminism & Psychology* 21:5–28.
- Mann, R. M. 2008. "Men's Rights and Feminist Advocacy in Canadian Domestic Violence Policy Arenas: Contexts, Dynamics, and Outcomes of Antifeminist Backlash." *Feminist Criminology* 3:44–75.
- Markham, A., and E. Buchanan. 2012. "Ethical Decision-making and Internet Research 2.0: Recommendations from the AOIR Ethics Working Committee." Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR). Accessed December 17, 2018. <http://www.aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>.
- Messner, M. A. 1998. "The Limits of 'the Male Sex Role': An Analysis of the Men's Liberation and Men's Rights Movements' Discourse." *Gender & Society* 12:255–76.
- Migliaccio, T. A. 2001. "Marginalizing the Battered Male." *The Journal of Men's Studies* 9: 205–26.
- Naughton, C. M., A. T. O'Donnell, R. M. Greenwood, and O. T. Muldoon. 2015. "'Ordinary Decent Domestic Violence': A Discursive Analysis of Family Law Judges' Interviews." *Discourse & Society* 26:349–65.
- Nybergh, L., V. Enander, and G. Krantz. 2016. "Theoretical Considerations on Men's Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence: An Interview-based Study." *Journal of Family Violence* 31:191–202.
- Ravn, S. 2018. "'I Would Never Start a Fight But . . .': Young Masculinities, Perceptions of Violence, and Symbolic Boundary Work in Focus Groups." *Men and Masculinities* 21: 291–309.

- Ringrose, J. 2006. "A New Universal Mean Girl: Examining the Discursive Construction and Social Regulation of a New Feminine Pathology." *Feminism & Psychology* 16:405–24.
- Straus, M. A. 2011. "Gender Symmetry and Mutuality in Perpetration of Clinical-level Partner Violence: Empirical Evidence and Implications for Prevention and Treatment." *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 16:279–88.
- Towns, A., P. Adams, and N. Gavey. 2003. "Silencing Talk of Men's Violence towards Women." In *Discourse and Silencing: Representation and the Language of Displacement*, edited by L. Theismeyer, 43–77. Amsterdam, the Netherlands: John Benjamins.
- Virkki, T. 2017. "At the Interface of National and Transnational: The Development of Finnish Policies Against Domestic Violence in Terms of Gender Equality." *Social Sciences* 6: 1–17.
- Weedon, C. 1987. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.
- Wood, L. A., and R. O. Kroger. 2000. *Doing Discourse Analysis: Methods for Studying Action in Talk and Text*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Author Biography

Satu Venäläinen (PhD in social sciences) is a postdoctoral researcher in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Helsinki, Finland. Her research focuses on interrelations between publicly circulating meanings of gender and violence and enactments of gendered identities. Her articles appear in *Feminist Media Studies*, *Feminism and Psychology*, *European Journal of Women's Studies*, and *NORA—Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*. She currently works in a research project focusing on discourses of violence in online forums and among welfare state professionals.