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Victimization in Intimate Partner Relations in Social and Crisis
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Gendering and Degendering: The Problem of Men's Victimization in Intimate Partner Relations in Social and Crisis Workers' Talk

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ABSTRACT

The notion of intimate partner violence (IPV) as gender-based has been widely questioned by advocates of antifeminist men's rights movements, who have claimed that societal disregard for men's victimization in intimate relations is a central component of discrimination against men in contemporary societies. Similar views have been expressed by researchers as part of a gender-neutral discourse articulated in opposition to feminist, or gender-sensitive, understandings of IPV. To date, the views of helping professionals who work with IPV in terms of men's victimization have been underexplored. This study traces the discursive process of problem construction concerning gender and IPV in social and crisis workers' (N=21) talk about men's victimization through focus group interviews conducted in Finland. The analysis shows that social and crisis workers' sense-making closely aligns with talk about men's victimization by men's rights advocates; they construct and justify men's victimization in intimate relations as a pressing societal concern in ways that both posit gender-specific normative conceptions as a significant, oppressive context for men victims and simultaneously obscure gendered structural inequalities by advocating gender-neutral understandings and solutions for IPV. The analysis highlights challenges in attending to IPV with a gender-sensitive approach in the context of widespread politicization of men's victimization.

KEYWORDS: intimate partner violence; men's victimization; gender; construction of social problems; helping professionals.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a persistent social problem that prevails in societies with widely different cultural, economic, and gender-equality profiles. According to a worldwide survey, approximately 30 percent of all women who have been in a relationship have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner at some point (Garcia-Moreno et al. 2013). The World Health Organization, among other key actors, places IPV under the broader concept of violence against women (VAW) and views it as a globally pervasive, gender-based social problem that constitutes a serious threat to women's well-being, one which severely violates their human rights (Garcia-Moreno et al. 2013). However, in recent years, this notion of IPV as gender-based and thus a problem that specifically harms women has also been questioned in various contexts. Most vocally, this

questioning has been done by advocates of men's rights movements and anti-feminist actors, who have claimed that *men* are, in fact, victimized in intimate partner relations to at least an equal extent as women and that gendered understandings of IPV with a focus on women's victimization discriminate against men and their rights to equality (Dragiewicz 2011; Mann 2008). In online forums across the globe, constituting what has become known as the "manosphere," IPV committed by women against men has been raised as a prominent concern in debates regarding men's purportedly disadvantaged position in contemporary Western societies (Dragiewicz and Burgess 2016; Kimmel 2013).

Men's rights rhetoric constructs such images of men's oppression through various equivalency tactics and reversals of gendered positions (Dragiewicz 2011; Dragiewicz and Burgess 2016) that appropriate and twist feminist understandings of gendered dynamics in the reproduction of women's societal disadvantage. As Dragiewicz (2011) has shown, the rhetorical tools employed by men's rights advocates in their talk about IPV closely resemble those commonly used by violent men (see, for example, Anderson and Umberson 2001), with the same functions of minimizing, justifying, and excusing VAW and thereby acting against feminist efforts to tackle gendered inequalities. These sense-making methods simultaneously involve both constructing an image of IPV as a gender-neutral phenomenon and shifting the blame for IPV onto women (Berns 2004). Similar constructions of gender, power, and IPV are circulated in antifeminist men's rights advocacy, in which assertions that men are equally or even more oppressed than women by traditional sex roles are mobilized. These advocates say that men are the true victims of various social problems, such as domestic and sexual violence, and these statements are joined with calls for gender-neutral understandings and policies on the basis of claims that gendered ones reiterate men's false demonization and hence contribute to their societal victimization (Marwick and Caplan 2018; Messner 1998, 2016; Venäläinen 2020a). Such understandings of men's victimization, linked with what has been called by some men's rights advocates as misandry, have spread widely, and are not confined to the rhetoric of men's rights activists, but have also become influential among the general public, irrespective of gender (Bjørnholt and Grønli Rosten 2021; Marwick and Caplan 2018).

The current study shows how such contradictory dynamics of degendering and gendering also inform social and crisis workers' (N=21) talk about IPV focused on men's victimization in six focus group interviews organized in southern, eastern, and central Finland. More specifically, the analysis demonstrates how these helping professionals constructed and justified men's victimization in intimate relations as a pressing societal concern in ways that both relied on notions about gender as significant and simultaneously obscured gendered structural inequalities. The analysis is derived from a two-phased project examining discourses of violence committed by different groups of people (particularly those belonging to various minority groups) in the national context of Finland, which is known as a woman-friendly welfare state where, nevertheless, similar problematic discourses on gender and violence are evident as in several other contemporary country contexts. The first phase of the project analyzed online discussions on IPV committed by women and experienced by men, which were collected from six different online discussion forums and comment areas of blog sites hosted in Finland; these consisted of 98 discussion threads and 3,190 comments.[1] The online analyses showed that gender-neutral understandings that resonated with men's rights rhetoric were dominant in the discussions and that their mobilization was frequently connected with silencing feminist views and refuting their factuality with the use of various discursive techniques (Venäläinen 2020a, 2020b). These findings in phase 1 formed the basis for phase 2 of the project, in which social and crisis workers were asked to comment on statements designed to encapsulate the predominant understandings circulating in online discussions.

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1 These numbers refer to online discussions focusing on IPV. In addition to these, discussions on violence focusing on social distinctions other than gender were also collected and analyzed in the same project and are reported elsewhere. For more details on online materials and analyses, see Venäläinen (2020a, 2020b).

This paper is based on an analysis in phase 2 that showed a close alignment of the workers' responses with a statement claiming (in line with the men's rights rhetoric) that women's perpetration of IPV is equal to men's (see the materials and methods section for more details). By drawing on a poststructural approach for analyzing the construction of social problems (Bacchi 2009; Bacchi and Goodwin 2016), the analysis sheds light on resonances between the social and crisis workers' understandings of these issues and both the meanings circulated in men's rights advocacy and what has become known as a gender-neutral discourse on IPV more generally. What follows next is a discussion on relations between gendered and gender-neutral approaches to IPV in research as well as the controversial approach to IPV in the specific context of Finland.

CONTINUOUS CONTROVERSIES REGARDING GENDER AND IPV

The contradictions between viewing IPV as a gender-based social problem or, alternatively, as more or less unrelated to gender are evident not only in meaning-making among the general public but also in academic research, where these contradictions have led to the so-called gender-symmetry debate that continues to divide researchers into two relatively distinct camps. The two opposing approaches to IPV have been characterized as a gendered (also known as gender-sensitive, systemic, or feminist) approach, on the one hand, and a gender-neutral (or family violence) approach, on the other. Advocates of the gendered approach (e.g., DeKeseredy and Dragiewicz 2007; Johnson 2011) emphasize analyzing violence, particularly IPV toward women, as linked to gendered power relations and their social and societal reproduction, in which gender, and, for instance, class and racialization processes significantly shape the particular vulnerabilities of people in disadvantaged positions. Research conducted from this perspective has made visible significant gender differences in the experiences, perpetration, and consequences of IPV and has made available an understanding of these differences as linked to gendered and intersectional societal structures. The gender-neutral approach, in turn, generally emphasizes factors seen as unrelated to gender and as linked, instead, to the psychological properties of individuals who perpetrate violence or to the relational dynamics within relationships in which IPV occurs. The advocates of this approach (e.g., Dutton 2012; Straus 2011) have often strongly opposed the value of viewing IPV as gender-based; in arguing for this, advocates have relied on research findings that have shown similarities in the rates of perpetration and victimization of women and men in intimate relations. They have frequently highlighted IPV committed by women as evidence of the agendered nature of IPV and have claimed that neglect of this form of IPV attests to the severe limitations of the gendered/feminist approach's specific focus on IPV perpetrated by men and targeted at women (e.g., Graham-Kevan 2007).

It should be noted that a clear division of IPV researchers into two distinct camps is, however, somewhat reductionist and that the advocates of the gender-neutral approach usually do not completely deny the existence of gendered differences in IPV, specifically in its severity or consequences. Recently there have also been attempts to bridge the gap between these approaches with a "gender-inclusive" approach that highlights the multiplicity of meanings and influences of gender in contemporary contexts (see, for example, Corbally, Hughes, and Delay 2016). Nevertheless, differences do persist in the approaches adopted in IPV research, specifically in terms of the underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions that grant gender a different position in IPV and in people's lives in general (Winstok 2011)—differences which also constitute the main focus of interest in the analysis presented in this paper.

In attempts to arrive at a synthesis of relations between gender and IPV, many researchers have found Johnson's IPV typology (Johnson 2011; Johnson, Leone, and Xu 2014) to be a useful tool. The typology distinguishes types of IPV associated with different levels of power imbalance and one-sided control in the relationship, such as intimate terrorism (IT), violent resistance and situational couple violence (SCV). Research suggests that IT, which typically involves a combination of physical violence and various control tactics, is most markedly gendered, whereas in SCV, gender differences,

as well as relational power imbalances, might be relatively small (e.g., Stark and Hester 2019). However, the assumption that gender would be relatively irrelevant in some forms of IPV in the ty-pology (such as SCV) has also been questioned by pointing out that gendered structures and mean-ings inform all aspects of women's and men's lives and thus are not confined to relationships characterized by stark power imbalances (Anderson 2005; Enander 2011; Nybergh, Enander, and Krantz 2016). Similar observations have also been made concerning the effects of emotional abuse as both a part of IT and a mode of IPV in general: while some studies suggest that there are similarities in women's and men's exposure to emotional abuse, there are clearly gendered patterns in the effects of such abuse and the ways in which it contributes to and gains support from both symbolic and structural-societal gender inequalities (e.g., Nybergh, Enander, and Krantz 2016). Specifically, consid-ering manipulative techniques commonly associated with IT that alter the victim's sense of reality, the impact of gender seems crucial. By adapting the concept of gaslighting, commonly used to refer to psychological dimensions of abuse, into a sociological analysis of gendered structures operating in IPV, Sweet (2019b) has highlighted how such techniques rest not only on the perpetrator's capacity to exploit structural inequalities, such as those based on gender, but also on the symbolic mobilization of historically rooted associations between femininity and irrationality and madness, which allow for subordinating the victim's perceptions of reality to those of the perpetrator.

In recent years, research on men victims of IPV has significantly gained momentum, as a growing number of studies have sought to address gaps in knowledge about both heterosexual and gay men victims (e.g., Nowinski and Bowen 2012).[2] Even though men's victimization has typically been fo-cused on in gender-neutral studies, several recent studies on men's victimization have paid particular attention to the impact of gendered normative conceptions about masculinity. For instance, Corbally's (2015) study shed light on narrative strategies used by men to account for their victimiza-tion by women partners, and showed how men rely on dominant discursive identities in their efforts to negotiate contradictions between normative conceptions of masculinity and victimhood. Allen-Collinson (2009) identified key themes in a man's narrative of victimization—including trouble nam-ing violence, the stigma associated with victimhood, and non-retaliation—and how they relate to gen-dered notions. Brooks et al. (2017), among others, have shown the impact of gendered contexts of violence in, for instance, some men victims' ways of highlighting their own power and control in their stories of victimization, thereby implying the centrality of normative conceptions of masculinity for men's ways of making sense of and experiencing victimhood.

In Finland, studies focusing on men's victimization have so far been sparse; however, a pioneering study (Heiskanen and Ruuskanen 2010) yielded findings that largely align with those in several other country contexts. In the study, 22 percent of men respondents, in comparison to 35 percent of women, reported having encountered violence from their current or former partners. The study also showed that women more often suffered injuries (twice as often as men); psychological consequen-ces, such as fear (three times more often), from violence they experienced; and that women were more often victimized repeatedly by their previous partners. Even though such findings indicate gen-dered differences in IPV and an overall high prevalence of VAW in Finland—for instance, Finland ranked second for VAW *per capita* in an EU-wide survey in 2014 (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014)—previous studies have shown that Finnish policies directed at tackling IPV have tended to adopt the gender-neutral family violence approach, whereas feminist views on IPV have often been met with resistance and suspicion (e.g., Hearn and McKie 2010). Furthermore, it has been suggested that the image of Finland as a gender-equal, woman-friendly welfare state may, in fact, work against effective IPV interventions in Finland because such an image hinders approach-ing IPV as a public issue associated with gendered inequalities that continue to persist in several areas

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2 It is noteworthy that, guided by the online discussions analyzed in phase 1, the current analysis is restricted to meaning-making that focused only on the relevance of gender in heterosexual relationships. The implications of this limitation are briefly discussed in the concluding section.

of life (Clarke 2011). These paradoxes make the Finnish case particularly interesting in terms of how gender figures into sense-making of IPV and men's victimization. Simultaneously, however, the current study set in the Finnish context illuminates patterns in sense-making on IPV and gender that are far from unique; rather, they speak instead to the wide transnational spread of meanings and ideological stances via, for example, digital spaces.

CONSTRUCTIONS OF GENDER AND IPV AMONG HELPING PROFESSIONALS

The views of the group of people selected for the present study (social and crisis workers) have specific significance in terms of violence interventions, since they work as helping professionals who are in a key position to put understandings of IPV into practice in an institutional setting. In terms of the poststructural approach outlined below, social and crisis workers can be seen as representatives of expert knowledge that plays a central role in the governance of social life (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016) and, more specifically, in shaping professional practices in encountering and understanding IPV. Their views are shaped within various multilayered contexts that range from organizational cultures to social policies and cultural norms (Loseke 2003), and, therefore, provide a unique angle from which to examine understandings of IPV and gender.

Previous studies focusing on helping professionals' views of IPV have suggested that individual-focused understandings of IPV that fail to recognize the impact of gendered power dynamics, often combined with explicit or implicit victim blaming, may be relatively common among helping professionals in various country contexts (e.g., Virkki and Jäppinen 2017). A literature review of studies focusing on views of practitioners who work with men IPV perpetrators (Labarre et al. 2017) found a high level of variability in whether the practitioners saw gender as significant in IPV; while some viewed perpetration of IPV as linked to expressions of masculinity, gender stereotypes, and gendered inequalities, others viewed it in gender-neutral terms as a family problem linked with relational or individual factors, thereby aligning with a family violence perspective rather than a gendered one. In a similar vein, a study conducted by Leung (2011) found that, while social workers in family settings tended to rely on the family violence framework, those working in shelters or with survivors groups relied on a framework built on feminist understandings.

It is noteworthy that existing qualitative studies focusing on helping professionals' sense-making of IPV and its relation to gender have tended to focus on violence committed by men and experienced by women (see, however, Miller 2005, on views of social service providers and criminal justice professionals working with women arrested for domestic violence). Indeed, to the best of my knowledge, ways of making sense of men's victimization and of giving meaning to gender and violence in relation to it have not yet been explored among helping professionals. The current study addresses this gap with a novel contribution to knowledge by illuminating not only social and crisis workers' views specifically on men's victimization but also the similarities between their views on the topic and those circulating in online contexts and in men's rights advocacy more broadly.

The construction of understandings of IPV, gender, and men's victimization among social and crisis workers is approached in the current study from a theoretical perspective that particularly builds on the principles of a Foucault-influenced poststructural analytic approach developed by Bacchi (2009) and refined by Bacchi and Goodman (2016), labeled as a WPR (what is the problem represented to be) approach. Though specifically designed for critical policy analyses, the approach constitutes a viable strategy and a theoretical and methodological framework for any critical analyses focusing on the construction of social problems. The central goal of this approach is to make visible the politics beneath the practices that produce the reality and its social problems in particular ways (Bacchi and Goodman 2016). The WPR approach directs attention toward the dispersed effects of power/knowledge practices that shape people's lives by governing what can be thought, said, and done (Foucault 1980). This view is based on a Foucauldian understanding of power and knowledge as intimately connected and as operating via discourses, defined as broad systems of meaning

available for sense-making within particular sociohistorical contexts (Hall 2001). Discourses inform meaning-making across all social contexts: everyday interactions in both face-to-face situations and social media, policies, and, for instance, professionals' and researchers' understandings. Such meaning-making constructs and stabilizes power relations and is thus effective in reproducing, as well as challenging, inequalities (Hall 2001). These processes can be highly consequential in terms of how efficiently the problem of IPV is tackled on the state level as well as through the work of helping professionals (Berns 2004). Discourses, such as gender-neutral ones can, for instance, effectively "degender the problem and gender the blame" (Berns 2004), and, by doing so, silence any understandings of gendered power inscribed in both violence and accounts of it that may normalize, excuse, or justify it, contributing to the sustenance of prevailing gendered inequalities (Towns, Adams, and Gavey 2003).

The WPR approach allows for unpacking such processes of silencing by inquiring into the implications of certain ways of constructing social problems such as IPV and of the underlying and often unexamined assumptions that work as premises for particular kinds of constructions (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016). This process of interrogation involves asking six questions: 1) what is constructed as a problem that needs to be solved; 2) what are the underlying presuppositions behind this problem construction; 3) what kinds of practices and processes have led to this problem construction; 4) what are the silences in this construction; 5) what is accomplished with this construction; and 6) how and where is the construction produced, disseminated, and defended, on the one hand, and challenged, on the other (for a detailed account, see Bacchi 2009 and Bacchi and Goodwin 2016). Applied to the research interest of this paper, these questions allow for tracing how social and crisis workers construct IPV and its relation to gender, what discourses and associated background assumptions they rely on when doing this, and what kinds of implications their constructions have.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

As mentioned in the introduction, the current study was conducted as part of a larger project focusing on discourses of violence committed by different groups of people (especially people belonging to various minority groups) in the contemporary Finnish context.[3] The research materials were based on focus group interviews in which social and crisis workers were asked to comment on statements (seven altogether) formulated on the basis of online discussions analyzed in phase 1 of the project. The focus of this paper is on how the participants commented on the following statement: *"Finnish women and men are equally violent in intimate partner relationships, and violence committed by women is equally severe or sometimes even more severe than violence committed by men. It is irritating that everywhere people are ranting about violence against women without any concern for male victims."*

The purpose of organizing the focus groups was to gain knowledge on how helping professionals relate to views circulating online about violence and social differences—whether and how they concur with or refute statements such as the one above. Focus groups are a highly suitable data collection method for studies focusing on how certain groups of people orient toward, draw upon, and negotiate culturally available discourses on a certain phenomenon (Krzyzanowski 2008). Using prompts such as the statement above with the aim of stimulating discussion and directing it toward a particular topic is a common practice in focus groups (Kitzinger 1995). In such cases, the views expressed by the participants are interactionally generated in dialogue both with the statement as well as with other focus group participants. Interaction among participants in focus groups allows for dynamism and multiplicity in the expressed views, with the potential of yielding rich data that also sheds light on any possible contradictions in understandings formulated on the phenomenon of interest. Especially when analyzed from a Foucauldian viewpoint, such data can also shed light on the socio-culturally available possibilities and tendencies in the discursive construction of socially significant issues. In

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3   The project was entitled "Social Inequalities and Discourses of Violence. Current Controversies in Finnish Online Forums and Discussions among Welfare State Professionals," and it was led by Tuija Virkki from the University of Jyväskylä.

line with the WPR approach outlined above, this is the interpretative angle adopted in this paper: the views expressed in the focus groups are not interpreted as indicating personalized perceptions, nor with a primary emphasis on interactional dynamics in the focus groups, but rather as providing a possibility for tracing the impact of broader discursive systems on situated meaning-making. This meaning-making is generated with the help of the prompt statement, which should accordingly be seen as a relevant part of its situatedness.

To recruit focus group participants, research permits were first applied for from municipal support service agencies that provide help in cases of IPV in the regions of southern, eastern, and central Finland, which were chosen to provide regional variability in the national context. For the sake of participant anonymity, project researchers decided that no further information would be disclosed about the organizations (N=6) whose employees participated in the study. After receiving research permits from the organizations, the heads of each unit were asked to assist in organizing the focus groups and in advertising the chance to participate among their employees. Then focus group sessions were scheduled with employees who had expressed their willingness to participate. All participants worked either as social and/or crisis work professionals or as trained volunteers, and the criterion for participation was a minimum of one-year of work experience in social or crisis work. In addition, the employed workers all had vocational education in the field of social and health care services, and the trained volunteers had all completed a training period required by their organization.

Altogether, six focus group interviews were conducted between May and September 2018, with 3–5 participants in each (N=21). Seventeen participants were women and four were men. In four groups, there were both women and men participants (one man in each group), while in two groups there were only women.[4] Perhaps surprisingly, there were no discernible differences between groups with different gender compositions in terms of the expressed views or the tone of the conversation. Participants' ages were between 26 and 70 years, and the length of their employment in their current positions ranged from half a year to 25 years. Each focus group was led by two facilitators, all of whom could be categorized as heterosexual cisgender women. This social positioning may well have been inscribed into the ways they posed the questions, were perceived by the participants, and interpreted the participants' sense-making. The author acted as one of the facilitators in three focus groups, and conducted all phases of the analysis.

In the beginning of the focus group interviews, all the different statements used as prompts were shown to the participants on slips of paper placed on the table in front of them, and the participants were told that these are the kinds of views that are frequently expressed in online discussions. They were given a few minutes to read the claims and were then asked to pick one of them that they were willing to initiate a discussion on. After each participant had selected a claim, they were asked to read the claim out loud and express their thoughts on it. The other participants were then asked to participate in the discussion, and after about ten minutes of shared discussion, the next claim was scrutinized with the same procedure. The last ten minutes of the focus group interviews were reserved for debriefing, with the purpose of allowing informal discussion among the participants and the facilitators on the claims, the topics, the experience of participating in the focus group interview, and the purpose of the study.

Throughout the focus groups, the facilitators moderated the discussion and made sure that all participants expressed their views on each statement. The discussions were generally lively and entailed a variety of views but without any actual conflicts among the participants. Each focus group interview lasted approximately two hours, and they were both video- and audio-recorded. Prior to conducting the sessions, An ethical approval was granted from the Ethical Board of the University from which

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4   The information about participants' presumed gender is based on their gendered names and matching appearances, and, therefore, was not self-defined. In the analysis section, the participants are given gendered pseudonyms to indicate their presumed gender, followed by the number of their focus group.

the project was led. An informed consent was requested in writing from each participant. The focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized.

As mentioned above, the analysis was guided by the poststructural WPR approach (Bacchi 2009; Bacchi and Goodwin 2016). The WPR approach is not a form of discourse analysis itself, but rather a tool for interrogating symbolic and material practices of governance. In the current study, the approach was combined with poststructural discursive analysis, which has been found to be highly useful for analyzing meaning-making in IPV and gender (Towns, Adams, and Gavey 2003). As discursive analyses in general do (see, e.g., Wood and Kroger 2000), the analysis focused not only on the research materials' contents but also on the process of meaning construction and, in alignment with question 5 in the WPR approach, what was being accomplished with certain constructions. Regarding the other five questions in the WPR approach, the current analysis emphasizes questions 1 and 2, and sheds light on how the participants construct IPV and the related discourses and on the associated background assumptions informing their constructions. Questions 3–6, which focus specifically on the conditions of possibility associated with the identified construction, are used to structure the discussion of the analytic findings, mainly in the concluding section.

The analysis began with coding the materials for contents to get an overall view of recurring content-related patterns. The next step included identifying all instances of talk where the issues of gender and violence were discussed, followed by another round of coding that identified different ways of agreeing and disagreeing with the prompt statement. The more detailed analysis that took place next was based on distinguishing ways in which the participants constructed IPV and its relations to gender, what aspects of IPV they constructed as central to their work (i.e., their problem construction in WPR approach), and how their constructions related to wider discourses on IPV and gender—thereby also shedding light on how the participants' sense-making aligned with the assumptions characteristic to gendered or gender-neutral approaches to IPV, as outlined above.

ANALYSIS

The analysis showed that all focus group discussions on the claim about gender and IPV, as stated in the previous section, began with the person who had selected the claim for discussion expressing agreement with it. Indeed, many participants remarked that, compared to other claims they could have chosen, this was the easiest to agree with because it appeared more reasonable and moderate and/or because it resonated with their own observations and work experience. Others generally concurred with this agreement in the discussion that followed. As the closer analysis shows, however, the participants' views also included variability and problematization that complicate their orientations. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that all of them saw at least some degree of accuracy in the claim, and, for the most part, saw it as tapping into an important issue worth addressing. The following analysis illuminates how the participants engaged in dialogue with the prompt statement and expanded on the views presented in the statement by relying on culturally available, contradictory discourses about gender and IPV. More specifically, the analysis shows 1) how the gendered social problem of men's victimization and its neglect is constructed and 2) how the significance of gender in IPV is neutralized in the focus groups.

Constructing the Gendered Social Problem of Men's Victimization and Its Neglect

> Yes, well, the first thing that does come to mind is that, whether it irritates or not, violence against women is still talked about a lot more than violence against men. . . . So, it should be talked about truly equally, and perhaps even highlight it [violence against men] because it has an impact on how men then dare to come forth with it. (Mary, G4)

The excerpt above exemplifies an opening comment that expresses agreement with the prompt statement. In the excerpt, Mary justifies the importance of raising the issue of men's victimization by

noting that this has an impact on men's willingness to disclose their experiences of violence. By calling for "truly equal" talk that specifically emphasizes men's victimization, she constructs IPV experienced by men as a neglected yet relevant problem. In answer to the first question in the WPR approach, this problem construction was reiterated in remarkably similar fashion among the participants and clearly appeared as a predominant one.

A closer examination of this problem construction in the materials (in alignment with question 2 in the WPR approach) revealed a process of sense-making that centrally relied on gender-specific background assumptions and discourses. This is evident, for example, in the way the participants constructed the problem as originating either from 1) the influence of gendered cultural expectations and assumptions; 2) gendered shortcomings in the service system; and/or 3) the gendered experience of victimhood by men that hinders their seeking help. The following excerpt provides an example of the first of these origins, referencing gendered cultural expectations that hinder the recognition of men's victimization:

> It is easier for us culturally to talk about this thing in a way that the woman gets beaten, but men do [get beaten] too, both mentally and physically. And women as well as men get just as severe injuries, especially in the mental area, but also physically. (Lily, G5)

This excerpt evokes a contradiction between the unequal distribution of attention among women and men victims and the equal severity of injuries incurred by them. This discrepancy is attributed to the influence of culture in facilitating the recognition of women's victimhood but not men's. The excerpt below from another focus group locates similarly constructed neglect in the service system's shortcomings in responding to men's victimization:

> Sarah, G2: So, I do somehow think that it, violence experienced by men, is in some way still not taken as seriously as violence experienced by women. And this surely also leads to them not being treated *equally*, and perhaps also the service system does not function *equally*. If we think about our service providers, most of the employees in work on violence are women.
> Nelly, G2: Adding to what Sarah just said, what comes to my mind is that one thing in it may be that for some men the threshold for bringing it forth can be extremely high, if there has been violence, and if it has lasted for, let's say, several decades or something, whether it has been physical or mental. So right at the moment, when the man tells someone about it [being victimized], it would be extremely important that we immediately attend to it, and absolutely do so without any belittling.

In the excerpt, Sarah presents the idea that the unequal regard of men and women as victims is influenced by the fact that women constitute the majority of the workforce in helping professions that deal with violence. Echoing a discourse built around similar but more general concerns about the effects of gender segregation in social work in the Finnish context (Kuronen et al. 2004), she consolidates the image of men's needs not being adequately met in women-dominated organizations working with IPV. Furthermore, by positioning women as specifically responsible for men victims' neglect, the comment also reiterates gendered positionings in anti-feminist men's rights activists' claims-making, where women, particularly feminists, are held culpable for discrimination against men in the form of misandry (e.g., Marwick and Caplan 2018). This lack of serious consideration of men's victimization and workers' incompetence in providing help for men victims is presented here, as well as in the sense-making in many other participants' talk as both a cause and effect of men's difficulty disclosing their victimhood. Expressing support for Sarah's views, Nelly complements them by raising the difficulty that men experience in disclosing their victimization and uses it to highlight the importance of developing professional practices to better respond to men's talk about their victimization. In doing so, Nelly not only relies on culturally available discourses to make sense of men victims'

experiences, but also responds both to the prompt statement as well as the preceding views expressed by Sarah, both of which can be heard as pointing out shortcomings in taking men's victimization seriously, something any helping professional should avoid reiterating. Therefore, even though the core interest in the analysis at hand lies in the macro-level discourses employed in such sense-making, it is worth recognizing that they are employed in the context of interaction where both the interactional dynamics as well as work ethics may play a part in inviting particular kinds of responses.

Participants specifically attributed men victims' difficulty seeking help to the emotional experience of shame, which was constructed as originating from gendered cultural expectations concerning proper masculinity, as it is in the bulk of research on men's experiences of and accounting for victimization (see, e.g., Corbally 2015). Associated sense-making that highlights the significance of gendered normative assumptions about masculinity for men's experiences of victimhood is also evident in the excerpt below, where Paula joins in the discussion initiated by Sarah and Nelly. Paula links men's difficulty seeking help to both their experiences of shame and their tendency to adopt a position of responsibility as the head of the family, in which they have no other choice but to endure the violence inflicted on them:

> The way I think about it is, when I work with violence and I have male clients, then somehow the threshold for a man to seek external help is higher, since for them the difference somehow is that they often think, when there's a family there, for example, that, as a man, they see themselves in a way that they need to endure more and they need to secure and take care of the family, to be the head of the family. . . . So, there comes the shame, and somehow a kind of manliness perhaps comes into play, and in some way also, the thought that this has not happened to other men, it is yet stronger from men than for women. (Paula, G2)

It is noteworthy that, while the above views expressed by Sarah, Nelly, and Paula may indeed capture significant gendered patterns in men's victimization, and, thereby, facilitate a consideration of gendered aspects in men's victimization, they simultaneously rely on rather homogenizing and stereotypical images of manhood in assuming that traditional notions of masculinity constitute a shared experience of victimhood for all men. In Paula's turn, for example, this homogenizing is accomplished and reinforced by contrasting men's experiences with women's. In the materials, these comparisons had the effect of highlighting men's disadvantaged position due to the influence of gendered norms, while remaining virtually mute concerning their potential impact on women victims. By emphasizing men's plight through rigid gender roles that position them at a societal disadvantage exceeding that of women, this mode of sense-making comes rather close to the core tropes in men's rights advocacy (Messner 1998, 2016). Similar "language of sex roles" and references to the experience of shame as disrupting the recognition of men's IPV victimization have been part of antifeminist men's rights discourse from the late 1970's onwards. In contrast to the profeminist men's movement that was later to evolve and to adopt the language of gender relations, these antifeminist tropes are based on largely individualistic and depoliticized understandings of men's societal position that evoke a sense of symmetry between women's and men's oppression (Messner 1998).

In sum, the participants constructed men's victimization and its neglect as a gender-specific problem, particularly with references to gendered norms related to masculinity that hinder addressing it. However, this problem construction was frequently associated in their sense-making with calls for equal treatment of women and men victims that make sense only if premised on a background assumption of equality in women's and men's victimization, and, hence, *a lack of* gender difference in their experiences. This points toward a contradiction illuminated in more detail in the next section that shows how the participants constructed the solutions proposed for tackling this problem, as well as the dynamics of IPV in general, in largely gender-neutral terms that work against the recognition of gender as a significant factor in IPV.

NEUTRALIZING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GENDER IN IPV

Despite constructing the problem of men's victimization and its neglect in gendered terms, the participants' reliance on gender-neutral discourses on IPV was highly evident in their sense-making. A closer analysis of the processes of meaning construction in their talk showed that the participants aligned with these discourses via both direct and indirect techniques of gender neutralization. In terms of direct gender neutralization, in addition to constructing gender as irrelevant when talking about IPV, several participants explicitly stressed the importance of overlooking gender to effectively intervene in violence in their work. In the excerpt below, this insignificance of gender is compellingly constructed by setting the safety for everyone in intimate relations as a priority in work on violence. The excerpt is also a rare example of talk in focus groups where not only gender but also sexual identity was mentioned in relation to IPV, although only to be dismissed as irrelevant—which is in contrast with the findings in the literature (Anderson 2005; Nowinski and Bowen 2012):

> I find it very important that we lose this man–woman distinction altogether when we talk about violence in intimate relations. So, at least for me, it is the uppermost goal if you work with violence in intimate relations. So, it is important to talk only about the phenomenon. It is irrelevant in which gender role and in which sexual identity any person is; [what is most important] is that it would be safe in intimate relations. (Steven, G1)

Indirect gender neutralization, in turn, involved the use of 1) a mutual violence framework, 2) provocation narratives, 3) definitional extensions of IPV, and 4) humanizing or individualizing IPV. The next excerpt shows the operation of a mutual violence framework that constructs IPV as a mutual problem shared by the couple, and thus distributes the responsibility for IPV equally among its parties:

> Violence in intimate relations often also intersects. There's violence from both sides, so that one is not always the victim and the other the perpetrator, but sometimes both are responsible. (Stephanie, G5)

Due to an assumption of shared responsibility, the mutual violence framework does not rely on a clear distinction between the positions of victims and perpetrators in terms of the rights or the responsibilities linked to those positions (cf. Miller 2005). Nor are the positions of the parties involved in IPV seen as gendered in terms of power; instead, it is insinuated that they have an equal standing, both within the relationship and societally.

While the mutual violence framework does not necessarily distinguish between different forms of violence, provocation narratives are based on attributing mental violence or manipulation to women and physical violence to men. Below, Geena describes such a narrative as a common way of viewing IPV (while not necessarily the only way). Iris, on the other hand, corroborates the narrative with a remark about women's gender-specific manipulative skills:

> *Geena, G4*: But there is quite a lot of talk also that, at home, the violence can be so mutual. Of course, it isn't always so; sometimes one is the victim and the other is the perpetrator, but rather it's about how different forms of violence present themselves in it. And then there's often talk about how a woman knows how to do mental violence a lot better, and then, when the man has been forced enough into a corner, he lashes out. Then, the physical violence is raised up, and that can lead to [criminal] processes, and then, the man is again the perpetrator and the woman is the victim.
> *Iris, G4*: Yes, no matter how it was in reality, women sure know how to do it, oh, yes.

The provocation narrative is based on widely circulated notions—often seen, for instance, in men perpetrators' talk (e.g., Towns, Adams, and Gavey 2003)—about women's active role in causing men to treat them violently, which, similar to the mutual violence framework, places women in a responsible position in relation to IPV. The provocation narratives are constructed on the basis of a sequence of events, beginning with a woman mentally abusing her man partner, who, after enduring the abuse for an extended period of time, usually ends up responding to this abuse with physical violence. As in the excerpt above, these events were commonly portrayed in participants' talk as resulting in the sanctioning of men's physical violence, while the women's mental violence against men remains hidden and, thereby, unsanctioned. This closely resonates with patterns in meaning-making identified in men perpetrators' talk emphasizing their unfair treatment, as well as in online discussions on IPV (Anderson and Umberson 2001; Venäläinen 2020a).

The excerpt below provides an example of the third indirect gender-neutralization technique, definitional extensions of IPV, which often accompanied provocation narratives in the data. This technique is based on calls for expanding currently dominating, implicitly or explicitly gendered understandings and definitions of IPV in ways that allow addressing, in particular, mental violence, which the participants presented as a form of violence used specifically by women.

> *Cindy, G4*: So only when it really starts to go down, and if this means that the man uses his fists, then only at that point does it become public. So, really the whole concept of violence gets distorted, if only these are brought up.
> *Mia, G4*: Yes, and in some, indeed in some couple relationships, there can be mental violence for years before it erupts into any sort of hitting contests. But sometimes it is worse, the mental violence, than a small bruise on one's cheek.

In this excerpt, Mia presents a recurring view in participants' talk that mental violence is equally or more harmful than physical. Reliance on this notion, commonly reiterated, for example, in online discussions, works as an equivalency tactic (Dragiewicz and Burgess 2016) that downplays gendered power differences and their impact on IPV dynamics. This is against research findings indicating gendered patterns in the impact of mental violence discussed earlier in the paper, owing to the capacity of men's mental VAW finding support in gendered stereotypes and structural inequalities that women's mental violence against men cannot similarly exploit (Anderson 2005; Sweet 2019b).

Finally, gender neutralization was achieved in the participants' talk by humanizing, or, relatedly, individualizing IPV. Humanization relied on references to universal human nature that entails the capacity to be violent and bears a close resemblance to the strategy of degendering described by Berns (2004) as a "human violence frame." This view was commonly portrayed as providing a better alternative to a structural or gendered view, which was presented by some of the participants as a means of distancing violence from oneself and denying the fact that anyone can be violent. In the excerpt below, for instance, the concept of violence includes a broad array of hurtful behaviors that any human is seen as equally likely to exhibit:

> So, the kind of talk about female or male violence, it somehow works to distance the violence from ourselves, but in the end, we all have aggression, and each one of us has, in some way, been violent, for instance in couple relationships. Not necessarily having hit the other, but having hurt the other or subjugated the other at some point with something we said, or something else. (Harriet, G1)

The participants' talk often alternated between humanization and individualizing IPV. Echoing the focus on psychological properties in gender-neutral approaches to IPV, the latter relied on locating the origins of IPV in individuals' psyches, more specifically to a lack in emotion regulation skills or, as in the excerpt below, to their psychological developmental histories:

> I think that, in a way, talking about violence, like, oh, how we in Finland have so horribly much violence in intimate partner relations, based on my own working history, I think that its root causes are often there in defective interaction in early childhood. (Steven, G1)

In partial contrast with humanization, individualization tended to rely on emphasizing the uniqueness of each individual case of IPV. However, similar to humanization, this technique worked to devalue structural approaches by implying that professionals should not rely on any preconceptions of the relational power dynamics involved in IPV and any gendered patterns in these, but should be attuned to the specifics of each case and each individual.

All of the identified techniques of gender neutralization work to construct an image of IPV and gender that closely aligns with the background assumptions of gender-neutral approaches to IPV by emphasizing psychological and interpersonal dimensions in dynamics of IPV, while de-emphasizing the significance of structural inequalities. Indeed, the absence of any background assumptions that would align with a gendered understanding of IPV (e.g., Anderson 2005), and accordingly direct attention to gendered societal inequalities placing women and men in different positions in terms of their overall vulnerability, constitutes a key silence (in response to question 4 in the WPR approach) in the materials. This is not to say that gender differences in vulnerability would not have played any role in the participants' talk. In addition to, for instance, gender-specific talk of men's victimhood (which obviously highlights men's gender-specific vulnerabilities, not women's), a few references were also made to physical gender differences and how IPV by men incurs more physical damage than that by women. However, by drawing on individualistic notions of gender as individuals' physical or psychological property linked either to a tendency to resort to physical or mental violence and/or to one's body size, what remains absent even in these instances of talk is an understanding of links between gender and societal inequalities. The next section further discusses the implications and resonances of these patterns of silence in the social and crisis workers' sense-making.

CONCLUSION

The social and crisis workers' sense-making on IPV and gender constituted men's victimization in intimate relations as a serious yet neglected problem in close alignment with the online argumentation they were asked to comment on. Examining the underlying assumptions and the discourses and practices that this sense-making relies upon and gains authority from (in accordance with questions 2 and 3 in the WPR approach utilized here), the analysis revealed its close affinity with men's rights rhetoric, where the detrimental effects of gender stereotypes on men are highlighted in unison with anti-feminist arguments in favor of gender-neutral approaches to social problems, such as domestic and sexual violence (Marwick and Caplan 2018; Messner 1998, 2016). Similar to such men's rights rhetoric, the participants' sense-making reproduced the apparent paradox between assuming that gender significantly influences men victims' neglect and hinders their seeking help, and simultaneously speaking against a gender-sensitive approach by prioritizing gender neutrality in the pursuit of work practices that allow for equal treatment of men and women victims of IPV.

This prioritization of a (seemingly) gender-neutral approach to IPV in participants' sense-making also finds support from and becomes intelligible in local contexts, such as the historically continuous predominance of state-driven, gender-neutral policies and practices in IPV interventions in Finland. Specifically in mainstream welfare state agencies, where the participants of the current research worked, service provision and design have more commonly relied on gender-neutral notions of equal opportunities rather than an emphasis on gender-specificity informed by feminist theorizations (Clarke 2011; Hearn and McKie 2010). Another significant and interrelated local context for such meaning-making is the institutionalized social work culture built similarly to the ideal of gender neutrality in the Finnish context (Kuronen et al. 2004). The neoliberal resonances in such ideals of neutrality closely align with increasingly influential postfeminist assumptions (which often work in

unison with antifeminism) that traditional gendered inequalities no longer exist in contemporary Western societies (Messner 2016). In the current international political climate, such views co-operate with the antifeminist politicization of men's victimization (Bjørnholt and Grønli Rosten 2021). The mundane reproduction of assumptions about reversed discrimination against men among this specific group of participants, the majority of whom were (presumably) women, speaks to the wide dispersion of such views and their unquestioning acceptance. Even though operating through a different set of sense-making mechanisms, similar absences regarding structural considerations have also been noted in hegemonic individualistic narratives on women's IPV victimization across various institutional contexts (e.g., Sweet 2019a; Virkki and Jäppinen 2017).

A specific site of authority supporting the propagation of these discourses and the related absences is academic research; calls to abandon feminist approaches to IPV due to their purported incapacity to capture its various forms have not subsided among researchers (e.g., Bates and Taylor 2019). Increasingly, the views originating from academic work are being appropriated and customized on online sites, specifically among communities such as the manosphere, to support their political interests and to be further disseminated among wide audiences for whom such understandings may become routinized and deemed common sense through their proliferation across various contexts and sites. Simultaneously, however, online contexts also provide increasing possibilities to challenge, for instance, gender-neutral understandings of IPV and to gather support for feminist ones (Dragiewicz and Burgess 2016).

A central limitation in the current study can be traced back to its focus on making a distinction between women and men, leaving out helping professionals' sense-making on gender and sexual diversity in relation to IPV. This is a relevant topic for future inquiries, along with an intersectional lens on IPV and making distinctions. Another related limitation of the current study is that it has shed light on only a limited number of social and crisis workers' sense-making on IPV and gender in the context of focus group discussions initiated with a particular kind of a prompt statement—the kind that particularly invites responding to a view resonating with men's rights rhetoric. Therefore, the sense-making analyzed here should not be seen as straightforwardly representing helping professionals' views or work practices, but rather as situated meaning-making among a particular group of participants, who were asked to engage in dialogue with not only each other and the facilitators but also with the meanings circulating online captured in the prompt statement. Further research on helping professionals' views on men's IPV victimization in various country contexts and with various research designs is needed to help fill the gap in knowledge. Despite these limitations, however, the analysis at hand strongly suggests that gender-neutral discourses on IPV were readily available and familiar frames for these helping professionals' sense-making. Most importantly, such discourses provided a significant backdrop for gendering and degendering men's IPV victimization in their sense-making, and by doing so worked against incorporating a comprehensive understanding of gendered inequalities as a significant context for IPV.

The prioritization of gender neutrality, and the associated inattentiveness to structural inequalities, in attending to men victims of IPV, that was identified in the participants' sense-making, may have severe concrete consequences by reducing the effectiveness of IPV interventions (e.g., Berns 2004). To give just one example, assumptions such as that of mutuality in IPV may hinder perceiving its severity and the associated power imbalance between the perpetrator and victim, particularly in cases where its dynamics resemble IT rather than situational couple violence. Instead of increasing helping professionals' sensitivity in grasping the specifics of each case of IPV, this may guide toward an insensitive approach that fails to perceive the impact of gendered structures in maintaining the perpetrators' dominance over, for instance, the definition of reality in which IPV occurs, including beliefs about who is responsible for it or what, in the end, constitutes IPV (Sweet 2019b). Similar insensitivity may result from decontextualized treatment of all violent acts committed by women and men as equal in their nature, without an interrogation of ways in which violent acts and broader contextual factors may feed into each other (Miller 2005).

To intervene in the identified patterns, the current analysis suggests that helping professionals might significantly benefit from strengthening the following aspects in their education: 1) theoretical and practical tools for gender-critical thinking that allows seeing links between gendered inequalities and IPV and questioning any individualizing or antifeminist assumptions about the latter's nature; 2) a more nuanced understanding of differences in the types of IPV and the multiplicity of ways that gender informs them; and finally, 3) a more nuanced, (pro-)feminist understanding of gender that enables viewing, for instance, the difficulties faced by men victims as a manifestation of the same gendered societal-structural system that subordinates women as victims of IPV. This is most likely facilitated by what has been labeled a "small g" understanding of gender as a practice attached to structural inequalities, rather than a "big G'" understanding that draws attention to categorical gender differences in, for instance, frequencies of IPV (Yates 2018). Ideally, helping professionals' working practices should provide them constant opportunities to reflect on how notions about gender might inform their views and practices around IPV or be absent from them. Specifically in efforts to engage with men's victimization without losing sight of gendered inequalities, such reflection is indispensable.

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