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## LANGUAGE OBSTACLES IN THE NARRATIVES OF ABUSED WOMEN

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*Language is a gendered system that reflects male experience and expressions and the categories used in traditional sociological inquiry are often incongruent with the experiences of women's lives (Devault 1990; Long 1987; Keller 1985; Smith 1979). An examination of 32 abused women's narratives of violence from their intimate partners demonstrates that words for the content of their experiences were readily accessible. Women's articulations of the interactional meanings of the violence, however, indicated vocabularies insufficient to describe the effects. I examine how abused women's reports of naming and use of language shape meaning and consequent actions. I argue that a gendered language system poses obstacles to the constructions and expressions of these meanings.*

Language is the quintessential embodiment of human experience. It is the most social of all human phenomena anchoring and articulating everything from sexual relations and family intimacy to the war plans and peace negotiations of nation-states (Boden 1991:848). Language is not merely a passive form of communication (Todd and Fisher 1988), but an active force shaping the constructions and interpretations of experience. It defines, mirrors, and thus sustains social order.

Language and the power to name are vital in both social control and knowledge construction processes. It is through language and naming that actors create their own realities and that phenomena are made "real." Evelyn Fox Keller (1985), for example, discussed the power of language and naming in science. By naming nature, by creating theories and models which constructed and defined nature, scientists transformed the unknown into the known. DuBois' (1983:108) amplifications of naming processes suggested that what was left unnamed, in society as in science, became non-existent, as its reality was not confirmed:

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[T]he power of naming is at least two-fold: naming defines the quality and value of that which is named -- and it also denies reality and value to that which is never named, never uttered. That which has no name, that for which we have no words or concepts, is rendered mute and invisible: powerless to inform or transform our consciousness of our experience, our understanding, our vision: powerless to claim its own existence.

Women's experiences, particularly of intimate violence, are separated from the social forms of thought available to them for expression (Smith 1979). As Long (1987) and others (Smith 1979; Reinhartz 1987; Devault 1990) have already demonstrated, at the level of the social production of knowledge, the language available to women privileges male experiences and expressions. Masculine language and paradigms and the consequent lack of language adequate to express women's experiences have rendered abused women's discourses on "lived experience" problematic.

I begin this paper with a discussion of language as a gendered system that gives salience to male experience. I argue that women's experiences of abuse from their intimate, male partners fall outside of the gendered discourses of everyday life. That linguistic constructions available to women frequently result in the invisibility of both individual and social consequences of intimate violence, or as one respondent (17) declared: "[I] mostly looked at it kind of like as life. You know what I'm saying?" (emphasis is respondent's). To explicate this linguistic impoverishment, I examine how women's reports of naming and use of language shape meaning and consequent actions. I argue that abused women construct knowledge and "make sense" of their experiences within the context of a language system that poses obstacles to the expression of the meanings of violence in their lives.

### A GENDERED LANGUAGE SYSTEM

Language and naming affect the constructions of those events that come to be constituted as social problems and, consequently, the ways in which social problems are brought to attention and remediation. Although women have long suffered violent physical affronts to their bodies and verbal affronts to their psyches by husbands, fathers, male siblings, and others, it was not until the 1970s that feminists named and publicized this behavior as a social problem identifying it as "woman abuse," and "wife abuse," and naming its victims "battered women" and "battered wives" (Schechter 1982; Loseke 1987; Kelly 1988). Prior to these feminist definitions, such violent behavior was just "life" and, consequently, was interpreted on an individual and nongendered basis.

Intimate relational violence, however, is gendered violence in that it is perpetrated by and large by men against women in their social locations as wives, lovers, and mothers.<sup>1</sup> Violent assaults directed against intimate, female partners challenge the stability and continuity of the taken for granted world of

marital relations. The experiences shatter women's marital myths and steal their marital dreams, as this respondent (23), a 41 year old landscape planner, nostalgically acknowledged: "[I lost] a fantasy really, A fantasy of what I wanted my marriage to be and it never was. Really." Although women experience this violence as both individual and ambiguous, it is nonetheless embedded within a social context of hierarchal and patriarchal relations. Women, particularly abused women, tend to live in social worlds characterized by hierarchal orderings and social inequalities that shape understandings and assumptions of gender (Chafetz 1984). Consistent with this view is linguistic behavior as the arena in which the asymmetries of power and authority become conspicuous (Maynard 1991). Yet it is only through interpretation that women make their individual experiences of violence meaningful. Such interpretation, I suggest, is problematized when women must use male linguistic categories to unravel their experiences.

I am not positing an "essentialism" that presumes an innate femaleness, in binary opposition to maleness, which is denied voice in linguistic arenas. Rather my argument acknowledges and illuminates the play of difference in language. Nor am I proffering a theory of innate sexual difference, that assumes that women's experience, unmediated by theoretical analysis, is the source of true knowledge. Rather this argument is a discourse on one form of gender marking. By examining the subjective in abused women's constructions of meaning, by analyzing the ways that battered women make sense of their lives linguistically, by demonstrating where their experience comes from and how it is tied to social practices, I characterize one way in which power relations structure reports of the lived experiences of abused women.

Gender bias is implicit in hierarchal and patriarchal social relations. Abused women necessarily relate their experiences within this social context. According to Riessman (1990:ix):

To cope with events that jar our illusions of permanency, we usually talk about them. We reflect on what has happened, assign motives, and characterize the situation in the context of a general scheme of meaning, which includes explanations provided by our cultures. Through interpretation, we not only render events meaningful but also empower ourselves to go on, despite loss and change.

Vocabulary for the descriptive contents of violent experiences was readily accessible to my respondents: "he slapped me," "(he) forced me to, uh, have sex or whatever," "he shot a gun off at me," and so on. However, the interactional effects of the violence on their senses of self and situation were not so easily articulated.

Women in abusive intimate relationships necessarily must interpret their experiences, yet their efforts to do so are bounded by a language system that often renders inadequate their attempts to capture the meanings of the experiences. Abused women recognize these gaps in communication and they

assign meanings to what they perceive as failures of understanding. Two common constructions are that the listeners have no experience with violence and thus cannot understand the abused women's experiences, as these respondents alleged:

I just didn't know what to do. I just didn't know where to go. I just, you know, there's a certain point where the friends, they really don't, they can't understand because unless they've been there, they don't know. (Respondent 5)

...not some side chair person who read these books about what the appropriate thing would be and this is the response, and this is the -- not that, not that, I really don't need that at all. Because I can read books, and I can listen to all the logic, and it does not help me with what I'm going through. Because it's almost isolated. They're insulated; they have no knowledge of what it's all about. Or at least my sense of it is that they don't. And particularly, it's good to be able to talk with women, it's good to be able to talk with a woman. At least, even if a woman hasn't been through it, she has some notion of what it feels like to be in that kind of situation, and not all women are -- my uncle's wife is a woman and she doesn't have the foggiest idea of what I'm going through and she's very critical. Extremely critical. And she thinks, as a matter of fact, she told me that her 22 year old granddaughter handles her relationships much better than I do. (Respondent 25)

The three friends that really understood, one had been raped, one had been in a marriage where her husband was an alcoholic and had beaten her, and the third was a friend who had been abused as a child, um, well, not sexually abused, but just had a very strong disciplinarian household. Those three really, I felt, understood. Um, there were other friends who, you know, offered me shelter and, if you need me to drive you somewhere, I will with no problem, but they were more kind of like, well why did you do that? Well, why did you let him do that? (Respondent 8)

or, alternatively, that the consequences of the abuse have left the women "feeling so crazy" and/or "so embarrassed" that they are reluctant to expose their violent experiences, as these women attested:

I don't know. I was kind of scared and plus I don't want to feel embarrassed, you know. (Respondent 12)

I wouldn't talk to, 'cause I was like kind of embarrassed about how it was going, you know. That it was really going so bad that, you know,

I couldn't talk to [friends] about it. Like Sue would tell me that when she didn't hear from me she knew things weren't too well...I just didn't feel like there was too many people I could talk to who'd really understand, who could pull me --- I could ---I just didn't know what was going on. (Respondent 16)

I figured I was hopelessly trapped in a relationship that was so evil, so sick, and so dark that I was embarrassed and and I was also afraid to tell anybody. First of all they wouldn't believe me and I was right about that, you know. And I, and I, and I kept saying no one will ever believe me because [partner] is so charming and so convincing. And I kept saying to myself nobody is going to believe [me]. And, and [partner] would tell me -- he'd say no one will ever believe you. No one will ever believe you. And, and, and he was right. And I was right. That is what exactly what has happened. (Respondent 21)

Although idiosyncratic in articulation, both meaning constructions attribute communication gaps to individual deficiencies. I argue instead that abused women's perceived failures to communicate meaning are, in part, due to the profound failures of a gendered language system.

## METHODOLOGY

Because the population of abused women who remain with their abusing mates and who do not seek assistance from public agencies is unknown, research at present must rely on those women who seek assistance outside their homes. Because women seeking such assistance are socialized through contact with professional service agencies and/or ideological service providers, sample populations are both limited and compromised by the nature of the problem.

The primary data source for this analysis consists of interviews with 32 women who participated in Drop-In Center support groups for women who were currently experiencing or who had experienced abuse from their intimate partners. The Drop-In Center operates as an ancillary service of a shelter for abused women located within a metropolitan area of a western state.

Interviews ranged in duration from one to four and a half hours. The volunteer respondents ranged in age from twenty one to fifty seven years old. Nine were women of color who self-identified as Pilippina (2), Black (5), Chinese American (1), and Hispanic (1). Although three women had less than a high school education, most participants had some post secondary training and eleven respondents had university or professional degrees. While this sample thus illustrates the range of abuse across racial/ethnic and class lines, it simultaneously appears non-representative because of the high percentage of women with advanced educational training. It can be argued, however, that the appearance of sampling bias strengthens the argument, that is, if highly educated women can't find the words to articulate the meanings of their experiences, it is

probable that women with less education would be more linguistically disadvantaged. The obvious methodological limits of such a selective sample warrant further recognition of this research as suggestive.

All interviews were taped. Participants responded to an open-ended probe: "Tell me the story of this relationship." They were thus able to construct their narratives in their own terms as they currently understood them providing their own descriptions and definitions of the violent events. In most cases, their retellings were episodic and provided significant insights into their developing awarenesses of the scope of the problem.

For the purpose of this study, abuse was constructed as the repeated use of physical, emotional, or psychological force by a man against his female partner in an intimate relationship. This definition thus includes violence against both wives and unmarried female partners and establishes the abuse as a gendered social problem (Loseke 1987). It accounts for violent interactions in culturally determined and socially sustained heterosexual relationships. Additionally, the range of force includes a continuum of abuse (Kelly 1988) from verbal degradation and humiliation to the severe psychological abuse of threats of murder and/or suicide, from slaps and pushes to assaults with weapons.

The analysis presented is firmly grounded in the shared dimensions of the emergent social psychological processes of the abused women. However, the compelling nature of the accounts themselves often pulls the individual to the forefront while the analysis appears to recede. Additionally, the imagery of the accounts may appear to characterize the women as victims, as indeed they are victims of particular episodes of violence. They are not, however, victims in their self-identities as interactive persons. The women in this research were active participants in the interactions with their partners, in the development of strategies to halt, change, or cope with the violence that came to characterize their lives, and in the constructions and reconstructions of their relationships and their selves.

In my exposition of their narratives, I attempted to ratify the women speaking for themselves and, therefore, chose examples from those women who seemed to articulate a particular point across the shared dimensions of experience. Along with Loseke and Cahill (1984), I maintain that the women's own experiences and the meanings that they attach to the violent events in their lives are as legitimate as the expertise proffered by domestic violence experts, including academics, social service providers, political activists, and journalists. There were no women in the sample for whom the basic processes delineated here did not hold.

### ABUSIVE LANGUAGE

In "Doing Gender," West and Zimmerman (1987) maintained that the absence of symmetry in language has established a system of deference and dominance between men and women where discourse is an active force in the construction of gender. Support for this argument is clear in the accounts related

by these respondents of their verbal interactions with their mates. The men used words to name them: "slut," "cunt," "whore," "bitch," "career woman hag," and so on. The women were frequently characterized as objectified body parts or as denigrated reproductive vehicles reduced by their intimate partners to anatomical features with sexual connotations. The terms of reference used to name and define the women were dehumanizing and served to remind them that they did not have full control over their own bodies or their lives. Respondents' retrospections poignantly captured this recognition, as this respondent reflected:

I wasn't me. I was somebody else. He molded someone else, and that wasn't me. That wasn't me. And I see it now...It was like he was Houdini or something. I was mesmerized...I was basically still the same person, but (pause 5 seconds) he made the person inside of me disappear, you know, real deep inside of me. (Respondent 9)

as well as the consequences:

He never hit me after that [third pregnancy], but it's just the psychological, got worse and worse. So there was four years of him hitting me and four years of just the psychological, but I think the psychological was worse. I think, because with the hitting, you can kind --, it's like with the hitting there is this, there is the psychological that goes along, that how can somebody hit me? Why would they treat me this way? But you can kind of block that out. It changes, it changed me, but I could kind of block it out, and the physical part healed, and stuff, but I think with this emotional abuse and the psychological games that he would play, just kept changing me, more and more, and taking me away [from myself]. (Respondent 19)

### DEFINITIONAL HEGEMONY

The names that abusive males used not only reflected stereotypic roles for women, but they also reflected the counterroles of dominance assumed by men, who implied that theirs' were the sole significant definitions. Abusing men used their "words as weapons" (Belenky et al. 1986) to separate, humiliate, and control the women, as this respondent, a 36 year old college student, clearly identified:

...[W]hat the batterer does is names you in a, he names you in this other way that you deep down wonder if you're really that, but I think you also deep down really know you're not. (Respondent 15)

When the power to define belonged to men, men achieved definitional hegemony and an implied ability to control. With the imposition of language, the abusive men strengthened their control over the women. As the respondents

were battered by the words used to characterize them, they began to internalize the derogatory definitions of themselves. They interpreted their own behaviors within the linguistically rooted frameworks of oppression. Their actions, then, became contingent to significant degrees on the men's definitions. The women altered their actions hoping to alter the definitions that the men were using to characterize them. These accounts, the first two from women who have exited their relationships, illustrate different pieces of the process of internalization also described by others:

We got into a big fight because he felt I was leaving him alone, and I later looked at some things he'd written. He wrote down that my work was more important than him, and that -- in effect, he was punishing me for being involved in my work. And I had to go out on a dinner, a business dinner with an advertiser, he was like distrustful of that, so right away the message was, your work can't take precedence over me. And I let that happen, I let my work go. And my friends go, you know...and he ended up telling me I was acting like a cunt. (Respondent 16)

When I met him I was taking dance classes and stuff. I stopped taking my dance classes because he didn't want me to dance, you know. So I'm back doing those things. You know, I'm doing things that are going to benefit me, you know. And when I was with him I didn't do those things. He had me upset so --- all the *time*. (Respondent 17 - emphasis is respondent's)

I think I changed my whole lifestyle to accomodate --centered around his feelings. When he started accusing me of this one and that one or going to bed with this man and that man, in order to combat all of that, I just started, I was real active. I was real active in a lot of volunteer work and other community things and I love this city --that's where I lived, and I was always over here. And now a lot of people who used to call me don't call. (Respondent 25)

While the women did cling to the "not me" aspects of the men's definitions, their senses of self in the world were, nonetheless, influenced by these definitions. Fending off degradation was costly, as this respondent's account suggests:

He takes up all my time, so I don't have a chance to do things I used to do, like when I started coming to [support group meetings] he has a fit, and every time I come home from something I go through hell. He's really insecure, when I was at the shelter, he calls it the crazy house, he thinks it's -- that's what he calls it, he's always making me feel inferior and weak and stupid and worthless and all that stuff...coming back it

was worse because he'd accuse me of all kinds of things. Screwing somebody else and stuff. (Respondent 31)

When definitional control was sustained over a period of time and was overtly unquestioned by the abused women, it eventually came to form a preemptive definition that was then applied to new and differing situations. One respondent (10), a 40 year old antique dealer, in referring to her partner's influence on her individual therapy with a psychiatrist reported:

[Partner] would never want me to talk about the relationship, 'cause I'm not ever supposed to talk about that.

When the men achieved definitional hegemony over women and their actions, and set the parameters of when the women could talk, as well as where, why, and how the talk would occur, the women lost their sources of confirmation of reality, their knowledge of the situations and, consequently, their abilities to act in those situations. When they could not name an experience, they began to wonder if it did, in fact, occur. For example, another respondent, a physiologist, related this incident:

I was sitting on a chair after dinner and he just came up and hit me. There wasn't an argument. There wasn't a why didn't you do this. I can't remember anything that happened before. And then one week later the same evening, the same chair, he just hit me again. And the first time, there wasn't any bruising so I kind of thought maybe I was imagining what he did. (Respondent 2)

At first the women were not certain how to define the violent acts or how to label the abuse events. As noted earlier, they did have access to, could and did utilize, a descriptive language of facts with which to recount the violence. This included what was done, by whom, and under what circumstances. But this type of language did not convey the full range of meanings, the intensity, or the effects of the violence in their lives. There was a lack of symbolic and interpretive expression of the events' consequences which, in and of itself, resulted in the gendered suppression of their lives.

In the episode recounted above, the narrator had no difficulty in naming the event, the setting, and the action. Although the content of the violent experience was clearly articulated, this woman questioned its reality because she lacked the evidence that would help her to comprehend the meaning, i.e., the precipitating cause and the physical evidence afterward of the strike. In order to explain the violence, women had to be able to give it meaning. Meanings were not inherent in the events, but in their responses to them.

Although all the respondents recounted beliefs in the cultural ideologies of family, hearth, and home, some of the respondents had grown up in violent families. These respondents consistently nurtured hopes that their relationships

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would be different, would be harmonious. For them violent episodes required little interpretation as this woman, a 34 year old Air Force lieutenant in process of divorce, explained:

And he was always, I don't know, he'd call me stupid, or a bitch, or a slut, or a whore, and I kept on saying, well that's my father, you know, always ran down my mom. And I thought that's just part of marriage. (Respondent 11)

For others, intimate violence was something to be aware of and avoided, as this respondent, a 29 year old transportation manager, recounted:

I'm just saying, exactly like my grandmother, my mother, I've always seen her get jumped on and beat up by different men. And I never wanted that to happen to me. So, I think through my grandmother and my mother and I have seen them go through a lot of changes. My mother have real -- men that would say to her, "Bitch, come here." And stuff like that, I mean, call her out her name and stuff, you know...I seen my mother with black eyes from men, big lips, you know, I seen my mother -- and I think that's what made me wait so long [28 years]. And when I did do it, I still end up getting the wrong kind...But now, I did build the courage [to leave the relationship]. (Respondent 17)

For all the respondents, gendered language impeded the process of capturing the meanings of their experiences. The forms of thought available to women and the means of expression necessary to formulate their experiences are culturally invented (Smith 1979) and are insufficient to account for the effects of the violence perpetrated against them by their intimate partners.

### NEGOTIATING RECONSTRUCTIONS

In attempting to cope with the power of the abusers' definitions, the respondents became particularly unsure of their own definitions of the situations and they began to question the severity of what they, sooner or later, perceived as deliberate violence. (Severity is, after all, an important aspect of the definition itself.) Their questioning was related to the negotiations over the definitions of the violence that were features of these relationships. The women and their partners were continuously constructing, negotiating and re-constructing both the severity and the intentionality of the violence. The respondent quoted next, the Air Force lieutenant, described what others also identified as typical negotiations over changing definitional frames:

In the beginning I just thought this is what marriage is about, dealing with the ups and downs, I just thought the cycle was the ups and downs of marriage. In the end, like I said, I said, you know, "You're abusive."

And he said, "You want abuse? I'll knock all your teeth out." (Respondent 11)

This respondent concisely reported the changes in her definitional frame over the course of the marital relationship. She struggled with the ambiguity and initially interpreted the husband's actions as "the ups and downs of marriage," or what she interpreted to be a normal expectation in marriage. The "violent" actions as such did not determine the meanings for her. As they continued, however, she attempted to name them, to label them "abuse," thereby indicating her reconstructed definition of the violence as intentional. The man's negotiational response focused on the severity of the consequences of his actions, not on the acts themselves. Implicit in his response was a strategy of denial of his actions as violent or, at least, as a minimization of the violence of the actions.

As they negotiated the violence, the women simultaneously engaged in internal negotiations that re-configured, and often also minimized, the violence as defined within their own ideological frameworks. Especially in the beginning, they often did not interpret the men's actions as violent, a phenomenon also noted by Kelly (1988) and recounted by many respondents, and particularized by this one:

...even before my hip [kicked on sciatic nerve], because I didn't see -- I didn't realize how abusive all the other things were that he was doing. I focused in on 'well, he just doesn't hit me, OK, and we'll work on these other things'. I'm not comfortable with him breaking things. Promise not to break things...oh, everything was negotiated. When we'd have problems, we'd go see the counselor and we'd negotiate. (Respondent 23)

In order to make sense of the violence to self and to others, these women had to be able to apprehend its meaning. The meaning inhered not in the events per se, but in their responses to the events. Because violence in domestic relationships was experienced as ambiguous and because it challenged conventional assumptions about marriage and family, it elicited interpretation. Interpreting the violent interactions resulted in definitions of the situations. The definitions did not emerge intact to these women. They developed slowly over the courses of the relationships. Throughout the process of constructing meaning, the women struggled with definitional ambiguities. Their interpretations of the violent events were subject to wide ranges of variation and were frequently dominated by the definitions of their abusing partners.

The definitions negotiated by these women with their partners, with others, and within themselves were inherently biased. They were predicated both on individual male, that is, their husbands' hegemony over the interactive situations and on a gendered language system. The male linguistic frames, in which the

women developed definitions of self and situation, also shaped their consciousness.

### LINGUISTIC INCONGRUITIES

The dominant language formulations, which reflect male experience and categories, are often incongruent with women's lives (Devault 1990). In this instance, such "linguistic incongruence" (Devault 1990) allowed women to name their experiences, but not to interpret them. The abused women in this study had a palpable need to make sense of their violent life experiences. In narrating these experiences, they struggled with gendered language to communicate what was virtually incommunicable. This respondent's struggle vividly captured the nature of the problem:

And I remember, uh, (pause 5 seconds) you know, it was like, just like, just waiting for it [a glass water bottle] to come down on my skull. I can't, it's like, it was like torture, you know, because he was really gone. He was just like screaming. Hey, you know, I can't even get into it. If I did, it's scary, you know. And it was all in really close quarters, like in my car (incredulity), you know, like tiny little quarters, and this thing over, and screamin', you know, and, and I could see, you know, cause I was all like this (a semi fetal position), I could see that that this thing, you know, and I, I know he's done really bad stuff, um, that was the day, he broke my nose that day. (Respondent 15)

The violence in this narration was not clearly articulated. Although she eventually did identify the physically violent act, "he broke my nose that day," it was almost an afterthought. This was the only part of the experience that she could communicate with clarity. She could tell what happened physically. She succeeded in communicating the situation, i.e., the conditions of the verbal violence. But the social psychological effect of this chaotic, claustrophobic, physically and psychologically violent episode was powerfully communicated precisely in her *inability to name* it as a totality. Her pauses, halts, and hesitations -- the spaces between her words -- conveyed her experience of terror. Instead of directly naming the experience, she was giving it meaning in other ways.

This inability to name was common to the women's narratives. While pauses and hesitations are part of normal contemporary language usage, they take on particular meaning in abused women's narratives through repetitions, through staccato deliveries, through fillers identifying verbal struggles to find words to convey their experiences. Like others in the study, to communicate her experience this respondent, a 37 year old, unemployed mother of two, juxtaposed an inability to name with an affiliative appeal to me calling forth a shared reality of our experiences as women:

Yeah, and he'd just be, or I'd be tryin' to, he'd be angry and I'd be tryin' to drive away and he'd be kicking on the car and banging on the windows, you know, with me in it and [2 year old son]. That's when he got real -- off his rocker, nuts. (pause 4 seconds) And I, um, and then it got *real* bad... You know, saying that he was gonna get me and I was gonna be sorry. I mean, he never actually said, this is the problem, he's not dumb. He never actually said, "I'm gonna kill you." He never actually hit me, but um, you know what I'm talking about. (Respondent 6)

Labov's (1972; 1982) seminal work on narrative analysis of stories of violence utilized methodological formula that reduced the stories to skeletal outlines of nominative clauses and established patterns that related speech acts to actions. Labov presumed that this process would provide an outline of the generating mechanism that would, in turn, produce the narrative backbone. However, as the preceding accounts suggest, by reducing the narratives to their clauses much valuable contextual material is lost. The respondent quoted first does not utter a narrative clause for 12 lines! Gilligan (1982) has argued that for women, relational connections provide highly contextualized ways of seeing their worlds. These contextual markers are critical to the analysis of women's stories, because they identify the scenes as women see them played out. Any reduction of women's stories to nominative clauses violates the contextual nature of women's discourse. The nuances and subtleties of their communications are lost.

Labov (1982) treated the violent stories merely as reports. It is my contention that while the narratives related to me are, indeed, reports of a particular sort, they are also what Tannen (1990) has characterized as "rapport talk." In "rapport talk" telling about a problem is a bid for understanding. Women's rapport talk is contextually situated and reports feelings not just actions. The respondents were attempting in their re-tellings to make their violent experiences understandable both to themselves and to me as researcher/interviewer. They were presenting their situated knowledge and situated understandings and constructions. The contexts of violent events then are critical to understanding the dynamic qualities of the events. To argue, as Labov did, that narratives can be 'deconstructed' via some formula is to imply that the content of narratives is objective. The importance of narratives is in their meanings, in the subjectivity of lived experience, which is not communicable via language that is oriented toward the 'objective' world of rational/cognitive/logical/scientific renderings. When women's narratives are reduced to nominative clauses, as Labov (1972; 1982) has suggested, important interpretive information is lost to analysis and understanding.

The narratives recounted above were punctuated by halts, hesitations, repetitions, false starts, and use of non-standard English. These tentative approaches signal a realm of experience that is difficult, if not impossible, for the narrators to articulate (Devault 1990). Women attempting to communicate

abusive experiences must negotiate within the context of word choices that are insufficient to the task of capturing their realities. These women tried to speak about their experiences, but the vocabulary was wanting. They tried various communication channels. The first woman searched mightily for an analogous tool, something to which she could equate the experience, something "like" abuse. When only insufficient vocabulary was available, respondents attempted to find emotional images within the dominant language that would convey the closest approximation to their experience. Metaphors are an effective means for capturing the experience of emotion. This particular woman settled on the metaphor of torture. "Torture" vividly characterizes the emotive content underlying the cognitive recitation of her language of facts. Torture is the exercise of ultimate domination. Torture is not ambiguous. Torture has victims. As a metaphorical statement, torture is also a masculine term framing predominantly masculine experience.<sup>2</sup>

### "WOMEN TO WOMEN" TALK

The women also "translated" their experiences by calling forth a shared reality. They drew on "women to women" talk (Devault 1990), the taken-for-granted experiences of women dealing with men in the society that form a part of a meaningful female discourse. "You know," repeated seven times in the first account and "you know what I mean" in the second, are, at least in part, affiliative appeals to me as a woman interviewer to understand the implications of these experiences. The repeated phrases assumed shared assumptions about certain kinds of knowledge or experiences with men. They were not empty phrases (Devault 1990). They appeared where words failed, where vocabulary was inadequate to the task of communication. Here the phrases, "you know" and "you know what I mean," called forth a gender consciousness that is not articulated within the male linguistic frame.

When there was no language to communicate messages, effects, and/or meanings, then experiences with similar circumstances provided a communication path that language lacked. All women have some experience of perceived violence from males. This violence falls on a continuum (Kelly 1988) that ranges from what some women view as innocuous street remarks to severe physical and/or psychological acts. Women in these abusive relationships were familiar with the severe end of the continuum. When unable to communicate the effects of the violence, they relied on shared experiences of being female for some degree of understanding. Being a woman was not, however, a sufficient condition for understanding severe and prolonged partner abuse. As stated previously, these respondents came to believe that those who could understand what they, themselves, had insufficient means to communicate could only be other women who had experienced acute violence. The closer the women placed themselves to one another on the continuum of violence, the higher their expectations of shared reality.

Abuse took many forms. This is exemplified by the following anecdote of shared understanding offered by a 41 year old fashion designer married to a foreign national, whose greatest fear beyond her own personal safety was the abduction of her 18 month old son. She had met another abused woman, also married to a foreign national, whose spouse had successfully kidnapped their daughter and moved her to his country of origin.

And I just, you know, listening to her story it was nice, not to hear her tragedy cause it was very sad, and she called me, she said, "I had a complete and total nervous breakdown." And she said, "I couldn't even get up in the morning and put on my clothes." But it was interesting to even meet somebody who understood my fear. (Pause 6 seconds) You know, that she didn't think I was crazy. (Pause 21 seconds) But that was the only person when I think about it--she believed that (spouse) was just like her husband and that given the opportunity or given the right reasons that, ah, he would abduct (child). Cause he didn't seem to have any reason not to. (Respondent 21)

The powerful and awful consequences of the ordeal, i.e., the loss of her child and "a complete and total nervous breakdown," the respondent perceived as significantly less important than the validation that the woman's story provided. That "...it was nice..." The other woman truly understood the respondent's fear. The level of communication between the two women transcended the language of facts when experiential knowledge bridged the language barrier. The content of their interaction was relevant only in so far as it validated experiences which had, thus far, been incommunicable.

### CONCLUSION

This examination of the interview data of women violently abused by their intimate male partners contributes to the literatures of discourse, gender, and abuse by directing analytical attention to the poverty of language in conveying the meanings and emotions of women's lived experiences of intimate, interpersonal violence. This research thus complements and extends the survey and interview observations of previous researchers of wife abuse.

In this paper, I have suggested that the social silencing of abused women's voices has occurred, not simply through the systemic and systematic oppression of institutional forces, but perhaps primarily through the very ordinariness, the taken-for-granted quality, of our socio-cultural linguistic frame. I have argued that vocabulary, or the content of language, available to women for the expression of their experiences reflects and sustains socio-cultural arrangements that privilege male experiences and expressions. Abused women's problematic framings of the meanings of their experiences are not isolated cultural artifacts. They are essential components in the reproduction of social power relations in this society.



There is, I further suggest, a complex relationship between narration and experience. Richardson (1990:133), for example, claims that: "Narrative is the best way to understand the human experience, because it is the way humans understand their own lives." Because human experience is constituted in talk, meaning is constituted in the act of saying something and in the ways that it is said. A gendered language system denies abused women the totality of interpretation of their experiences. It reframes their discourses within androcentric boundaries and thus denies them voice.

I have argued that the strictures against which women, particularly abused women, struggle are rooted in language that suppresses their experiences. Our collective task then is to invent both language and discourse that captures and reflects the experiences of women.

### ENDNOTES

1. Male on female violence is by far the most common intimate partner violence. Studies on prevalence suggest that from one fifth to one third of all women will be physically assaulted by a partner or ex-partner during their lifetime (Frieze & Browne 1989). However, it is important to note the full range of variation: some wives and women partners do batter husbands and male partners; some gay men and lesbian women do abuse their partners. Both men and women abuse children physically and sexually, but again it has been found that men are much more often the perpetrators. Lastly, it is also important to note that men use abusive strategies to control other men as well as women.

For a discussion of wife to husband abuse see:

Steinmetz, S. (1977-8); Straus, M. (1980); Straus, M. and R. Gelles (1986).

For responses to the discussions see:

Berk, R., S.F. Berk, D. Loseke, and D. Rauma (1983); Kurz, D. (1989; 1991); Loseke, D. (1991).

Both male and female victims of abuse are susceptible to physical and psychological strategies of battering where violence is a social control tactic used to maintain unequal power relations. The intent of abuse with both POWs and women is to establish social control through both consensus and physical coercion. However, violence within an intimate relationship is socially constructed as conflict and abuse to POWs is defined as victimization based on unequal power relationships. Romero found significant differences between the two: 1) in the sex of the victims; 2) in the relationships between abusers and victims; 3) in the circumstances of

abuse strategies; 4) in rationale for abuse; and 5) in the responses of the society to the abuse.

For a full discussion see: Romero, M. (1985).

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## THE SOCIAL STRUCTURING OF POSTINDUSTRIAL CONFLICT: CITIZEN POSITIONS ON ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSIONS

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*The new social movements characteristic of postindustrial societies have raised a number of novel issues, in particular environmental ones. The positions which groups in these societies take on these issues, however, is far from clear. The paper examines three perspectives on the problem: traditional class, new middle class, and transitional disequilibrium. Data from a western New York community are used to examine citizen positioning on three eco-factors—environmental protectionism, deep ecology, and limits-to-technology. The two class perspectives perform poorly but the disequilibrium perspective proves useful. Cluster analysis yields a five-group indicator which is significantly related to all the environmental factors. Two associated property vectors, democratic-party affiliation and education, help account for intersectoral distances on the eco-factors. The implications for research and practice are discussed.*

Postindustrial politics seems in disarray. Traditional issues (e.g., unionization, enfranchisement) have receded in salience while new issues (environmentalism, feminism) have grown in significance. Traditional parties, slow to respond to the new concerns, have lost adherents while the number of independents has grown and "new social movements" (NSMs) and new parties have recorded gains. For some scholars, however, traditional class remains salient for postindustrial issues. According to others, a new middle class has formed which better accounts for positions on the new issues. Still others would contend that only a completely new formulation of social location can account for postindustrial attitudes.

Considerable debate, therefore, surrounds the question of the social-locational basis of postindustrial conflict. What social grounding, if any, can be found for citizen positions on the new issues? This paper investigates the social basis of opinion on perhaps the central postindustrial issue, environmentalism, through an analysis of survey data from a western New York community.

### THEORIES OF SOCIAL POSITIONING ON POSTINDUSTRIAL ISSUES

Three perspectives can be adduced to account for citizen positions on postindustrial issues: traditional class, new middle class, and transitional disequilibrium.