

Problematizations: violence intervention and the construction of expertise

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Abstract

Foucault's (2007, p. 141) 'history of problematisations' draws attention to the ways in which 'things' become 'problems'. This paper focuses on the dichotomisation and categorisation of violence as either serious/abnormal (non-gendered) violence or 'domestic' (gendered) violence, reflecting the transformation of some forms of violence into problem violence. Evident here, based on the findings of an exploratory study of the ways in which practitioners who work with male perpetrators of violence construct and understand violence, is the creation of particular realms of intervention, divided along disciplinary lines, each associated with distinct domains of knowledge, authority and expertise. In the process certain behaviours are 'claimed' as the 'territory' of a professional group. As Foucault emphasised, 'for knowledge to function as knowledge it must exercise power' (2007, p. 71). Expertise thus performs a powerful exclusionary function, controlling who can speak authoritatively about an issue. I argue that this partitioning of certain behaviours, as representing particular types of problem and particular types of people and the 'territory' of some professional groups and not others, reflects the broader context of (gendered) power and disciplinary knowledge and has significant implications for the ways in which male violence is conceptualised, named and addressed.

Foucault's concern was with 'making things more fragile' (2007, p. 138) by demonstrating that 'what appears obvious to us is not at all so obvious' (p. 139). Accordingly violence, whilst seemingly a straightforward and self-evident concept, is profoundly ambiguous: as Stanko observed, 'what violence means is and will always be fluid, not fixed' (2003, p. 3). Based on the findings of an exploratory study this paper focuses on the ways in which practitioners engaged in work with men who are violent towards their female partners construct and understand violence. I argue that understandings of violence reflect broader cultural beliefs about gender and power, thereby demonstrating the exercise of power through knowledge and, in particular, the powerful, exclusionary nature of expert knowledge.

In the current study practitioners, in discussing their work, express an understanding of violence based upon foundational, yet implicit, assumptions about the nature of violence and its equation with men's behaviour; as something that *men* do. Whilst this cultural conflation of masculinity and violence (Morgan 1987) has been widely acknowledged, it is particularly significant in the current context – of professional, 'expert', conceptualisations of violence – given the related tendency of participants to dichotomise male violence as either 'generic' or 'domestic'. In this perspective 'generic' violence is something that men do to other men and is, to a large extent, 'normal' or at least inevitable and unremarkable (for men). In contrast, 'domestic' violence is understood as something that (some) men do to women and is, unequivocally, 'unfair' and unacceptable.¹ Crucially, whereas 'domestic' violence is associated with gender and gendered power, with the emphasis on imbalances in or abuse of power, 'generic' violence is conceptualised as non-gendered, or not specifically gendered, with the implication that violence between men is 'fair game'. Thus it seems in this work setting, as in wider society, men, unlike women, are granted a special status as 'un-gendered' beings except when their behaviour involves women. Because gender is associated with women (Powley & Pearson 2007), gender 'matters' when women are the victims of violence but, it seems, is neither acknowledged nor deemed significant when violence is between men.

¹ Whilst beyond the scope of this paper, the implications of this 'closed definition' (Milner 2004) of domestic/gendered violence for the obscuration of violence within same-sex relationships is equally significant. It seems the assumption that domestic violence is a 'phenomenon peculiar to the heterosexual community', as Vickers (1996) noted, continues to form the basis for domestic violence discourse in Australia.

Different theories about violence, as Hearn and Whitehead noted, ‘start from very different assumptions about the nature of violence, gender, and men’ (2006, p. 41). The dichotomised construction of violence, as evident here, therefore has important implications for intervening in violent behaviour and, crucially, is aligned with the demarcation of areas of expertise and authority. Firstly, it highlights the resilience of culturally dominant beliefs regarding men and masculinity and women and femininity, in particular the association of masculinity with power and femininity with passivity, contextualised within the ‘cultural fact’ (Eardley 1995, p. 136) of women’s victimisation. Secondly, it positions men’s violence as, in itself, unremarkable; leaving untouched the ‘natural’ association of masculinity and violence. The focus therefore shifts to a concern with the *control* of violence; that is, limiting it to particular contexts and victims: simply put, men are ‘fair game’ and women are ‘off limits’. From this perspective, men convicted of violent offences are those who have transgressed these limits, allowing their ‘normal’ aggression to escalate into the criminal realm. Thus some forms of violence are transformed into *problem* violence and ‘claimed’ as the ‘territory’ of particular professional groups.

Problematising violence

The ‘history of problematizations’, as Foucault (2007, p. 141) explained, is a history of the ways in which ‘things’ become ‘problems’. In this respect Foucault was interested in analysing the ‘transformation of a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems’, specifically the quest to understand ‘how the different solutions to a problem have been constructed; but also how these different solutions result from a specific form of problematization’ (1984, p. 389). The transformation of some forms of violence into problem violence, as observed in the current study, thus constitutes an enquiry into the *problematisation* of violence. As a ‘social, not a natural, process’ (Hearn 1996, p. 29) the defining and labelling of violence enables it to be represented as ‘understandable’ in certain circumstances (p. 181). Hence the dichotomisation of violence into ‘acceptable’/non-problematic (male–male violence) and unacceptable (male–female violence) categories, as evident here, performs a crucial function in terms of the establishment of ‘particular domain[s] of scientific knowledge’ (Foucault 1984, p. 388).

Apparent in this study is the positioning of domestic violence as a distinct behaviour requiring specific intervention. In contrast generic (male-to-male) violence is, in a sense,

everywhere but nowhere. Interventions relating to violence, in the South Australian context, consist primarily of mainstream ‘anger management’ programs or, at the other end of the spectrum, referral for ‘specialist’ psychological intervention, this reserved for ‘abnormal’ (excessive or ‘un-controlled/able’) displays of violence. Positioned as a specialised field within psychology and, less often, psychiatry, violence intervention emphasises (scientific) authority and expertise in relation to individual pathology and dangerousness. Domestic violence work however is generally undertaken by the ‘applied knowledge’ professions (Rose, O’Malley & Valverde 2006) including social workers, probation officers and health workers. Whereas psychological intervention focuses more narrowly on individual abnormal behaviour, domestic violence work tends to embody a structural approach, focusing on ‘sociocultural belief systems and structures’ within the context of ‘unequal relations of [gendered] power within society’ (NMCHS 1997, p. 19). Thus whilst gender is the fundamental basis for this work, the tendency within psychology is to conceptualise gender as sex difference and, hence, as an ‘independent variable’. Gender is thereby reduced ‘to the behaviour of individual women and men’ (Anderson 2005, p. 855), reinforcing essentialist notions of gender difference and implying that ‘individual sex causes violent behaviour’ (p. 863).

Governing violence

This study raises critical questions regarding the ways in which the ‘problem’ of violence is conceived and governed, in particular, how those (offenders) deemed ‘violent’ are governed; paraphrasing Foucault (2007, p. 135), what is done with them, what status they are given, where they are placed, in what type of treatment, and so on. Evident here, alongside the dichotomisation of violence, is the creation of particular realms of intervention, divided along disciplinary lines and each associated with distinct domains of knowledge, authority and expertise. The (violent) subject is ‘defined and transformed’, certain types of knowledge are formed (p. 151) and, in the process, certain behaviours are ‘claimed’ as the ‘territory’ of a professional group.

In his focus on the history of knowledge Foucault was especially interested in those knowledges that seek to ‘construct a scientific knowledge of the subject’ (2007, p. 152). Thus he drew attention to the ways in which particular discourses emerge and come to be ‘seen as true’ and, in particular, ‘certain subjects become objects of knowledge and at the same time

objects of domination' (p. 153). Nikolas Rose (1996; 1999), in building upon Foucault's work, has focused in particular on a critique of 'psy' knowledges: those 'heterogenous knowledges, forms of authority and practical techniques that constitute psychological expertise' (Rose 1999, p. ii). Power, as the exercise of government, works through 'the authorities who define phenomena as problems' and the criteria through which 'certain persons, things or forms of conduct come to be seen as problematic' (Rose 1999, p. xi). As Foucault asserted, 'for knowledge to function as knowledge it must exercise power' (2007, p. 71); thus critiquing the discourses of violence exposes 'classification as a powerful act', revealing the 'underlying assumptions that operate when such powerful concepts are adopted' (Grenier 2007, p. 426).

Rose, in his discussion of expertise 'as a mode of authority', drew attention to the existence of 'alliances, conflicts and rivalries between different claims to authority' (1999, p. xi). Expertise thus performs an exclusionary function, controlling who can speak authoritatively about an issue. Accordingly, the establishment of one set of 'truths' closes off the production of others (Rose 1999, p. xvi), amounting to limitations 'on who may be allowed to speak appropriately and legitimately of certain issues' (Breckenridge 1999, p. 14). In this context the 'dividing up' of violence and its 'claiming' as the 'property' of either psychology or social work/probation has more to do with the exercise of 'arbitrary authority' than the 'real nature of humans' as subjects (Rose 1999, p. viii). Further, and consistent with Foucault's notion of power as 'something which circulates' (1980, p. 98), it is clear that the 'splitting off' of domains of expertise, as described in this study, is not solely imposed 'from above' but rather is how these professional groups have come to 'see' themselves. Foucault's notion of 'dividing practices', those techniques whereby 'the subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others' (1982, p. 326), is critical here. In this sense the 'dividing up' of violence and its 'claiming' as the 'property' of either psychology or social work draws attention to the effects of power, exercised through the 'production of truth' and 'validated by their belonging to a system of knowledge' (Foucault 2007, p. 59).

Conclusion

The 'rules of engagement' in relation to violence, as Stanko discussed, imply that '[n]ot all violence is condemned; not all forms of violence are punished; [and] not all forms of violence receive widespread disapproval' (2003, p. 12). Accordingly male-to-male violence, as long as

it is within (somewhat arbitrary) limits, may be condoned or taken for granted as ‘normal’ (Hearn 1999, p. 7). As Matthews observed, the suggestion that domestic violence is ‘one expression of a broader problem of male dominance’ (2000, p. 312) is not popular. In this sense the conflation of ‘women’ and ‘gender’ is critical. As evident in this study, gendered approaches to practice that involve ‘challenging basic notions about gender’ are seen as a ‘special interest’ and ‘separated from broader public concerns with violence’ (Matthews 2000, p. 312); thus domestic violence work has, at least in Australia, become *gendered* work. In contrast to the relative reverence that is reserved for the ‘high’ expertise of psychological interventions for ‘serious’ violence, domestic violence work (and workers) are marginalised in terms of both funding/resource allocation and professional status. In this way the gendered approach underpinning domestic violence intervention is tolerated as it is contained, or ‘quarantined’, from the mainstream – business as usual – of government/institutional policy and practice (see Flood 2007).

This study demonstrates the extent to which societal/cultural beliefs regarding gender and violence are embedded at the levels of both institution/policy and practice; in the planning, funding and delivery of therapeutic/behaviour-change programs as well as in professional expectations and practices. Illustrating the exercise of power through knowledge in shaping Australian government/agency responses and initiatives, this has critical implications for the ways in which violence is conceptualised, named and addressed. In partitioning off certain behaviours, as representing particular types of problem and particular types of people (‘violent offenders’) and the ‘territory’ of some professional groups and not others, vital opportunities for discussion, debate and knowledge sharing are lost. Thus, I argue, the arbitrary division between societal and domestic violence must be challenged through a focus on ‘where these areas overlap and where they are distinct’ (Sanchez-Hucles & Dutton 1999, p. 203), thereby leading the way towards a profound re-evaluation of mainstream responses to violence.

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