

“Every Couple Has Their Fights . . . ”: Stigma and Subjective Narratives of Verbal Violence

Stacey Hannem, Debra Langan, and Catherine Stewart
Wilfrid Laurier University, Brantford, Ontario, Canada

Drawing on thirty in-depth interviews with individuals who have experienced verbal violence in intimate and family relationships, this article utilizes constructivist grounded theory to examine the tensions inherent in representations of verbal violence in the interview context. The authors find that participants discursively construct verbal violence as a normalized experience, discuss it as an escalating problem, and retrospectively define it as an intolerable form of abuse. These discursive constructions are related to social understandings of verbal violence as both a normal experience (fighting) and a stigmatized behavior (abuse). Normalization and defensive othering are discussed as techniques of identity management in light of the stigma attached to being a victim of abuse.

INTRODUCTION

Many individuals have experienced verbally violent behavior in an intimate or family relationship. Behaviors that may be characterized as verbal violence include criticizing, insulting, degrading, name calling, threatening, ridiculing, belittling, screaming, ranting, racist or sexist language, crude or foul language, and disparaging comments disguised as jokes. Depending on the position of relative power, the gender, age, personal history, and/or interpretation of the person on the receiving end, verbal violence may or may not be perceived as abusive behavior. Research suggests that the phenomenon of verbal or emotional abuse is more prevalent in North American families than physical abuse (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics 2011; Henning and Klesges 2003; Mihorean 2005). Some researchers have further argued that the damage caused by chronic emotional abuse is often more extensive and long lasting than the effects of occasional physical violence (British Columbia Task Force on Family Violence 1992; Hart, Binggeli, and Brassard 1998; Loring 1994; Ney 1987). In fact, qualitative studies of women who have experienced concurrent physical and emotional abuse have found that victims often describe the emotional abuse, humiliation, and verbal assaults as more distressing than the physical abuse that they experienced (Follingstad et al. 1990; Henning and Klesges 2003; Walker 1979).

Despite evidence that verbal abuse has serious implications for individuals and families, very little substantive research has been conducted on the experience of verbal abuse, separate from

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Address correspondence to Stacey Hannem, Department of Criminology, Wilfrid Laurier University, 73 George Street, Brantford, Ontario N3R 1S8, Canada. E-mail: shannem@wlu.ca

physical forms of abuse (Henning and Klesges 2003). In part, this may reflect the fact that the two often manifest concurrently, but there are many instances in which verbal abuse predates the onset of physical abuse, or persists in the absence of physical abuse. It is also possible that the lack of research on verbal abuse is reflective of a more systemic social issue: the societal minimization of non-physical forms of abuse, such that even those who experience verbal violence may not define it as abuse (Goldsmith and Freyd 2005).

In this article, we begin to demystify the experience of verbal violence¹ and the seeming social complacency that surrounds this issue by examining how victims of verbal violence represent their experiences in multiple and often competing ways. Drawing on thirty in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals who have experienced verbal violence in an intimate or kin relationship, we present a constructivist analysis of representations of verbal violence. We argue that a common discursive pattern within the research interview setting is for those who have lived the reality of verbal violence in their families to construct verbal violence as being first, a “normal” pattern of interaction; secondly, they describe the tension of escalating violence (both verbal and physical); and finally, verbal violence is reconstructed as behavior that is “abnormal” or intolerable. These multiple and competing representations of verbal violence highlight the contested space that this behavior occupies as a phenomenon that is statistically unremarkable,² and yet socially stigmatized. We explore the tensions between these bifurcated understandings and their implications for intervention and social response. The participants in this study utilized two strategies in the interview interaction to manage the felt stigma (Jacoby 1994; Scambler and Hopkins 1986) of a verbally violent relationship: they first attempt to “normalize” the verbal violence in their narratives and, when the account of escalation prevents continued normalization, they engage in defensive othering to distance themselves from the prevailing stereotypes of victims of domestic abuse.

LITERATURE ON VERBAL VIOLENCE AND EMOTIONAL ABUSE IN FAMILIES AND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

The sociological and criminological literature specific to verbal violence is not well developed. In research and theory, verbal violence is most commonly subsumed within the broad category of emotional or psychological abuse, which includes such non-verbal behaviors as isolating the victim from friends and family, limiting the freedoms of another individual, withholding affection or contact in an intimate relationship, and/or destroying valued property. Most of the research on verbal violence (and emotional or psychological abuse) considers its occurrence in the context of

¹Although we problematize the phenomenon of verbal violence and implicitly recognize that it often constitutes a form of abuse, we have chosen to utilize the language of “verbal violence,” which is arguably more objective and emphasizes the *form* of the behavior, rather than the *effect*. This is done purposively in light of the fact that while some of our participants defined themselves as victims of abuse, some did not, and nearly all evidenced tensions and were conflicted in their interpretations of this behavior.

²Seventeen percent of respondents to Canada’s General Social Survey on Victimization in 2009 reported having been the victim of some form of emotional abuse, and of these 53% reported that they had been called names or been put down by an intimate partner (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics 2011).

physically or sexually abusive relationships (see Follingstad et al. 1990; Stets 1990; Winstok and Perkis 2009).

Literature that does isolate verbal (or psychological/emotional) abuse has tended to focus on verbal aggression by adults toward children as a form of child abuse (Chamberland et al. 2005; Doyle 2001; Hamarman, Pope, and Czaja 2002; Trickett et al. 2009; Yates 2007). Specifically, much research is concerned with the long-term psycho-social effects of emotional abuse on children as victims, or as witnesses of their parents' abuse (usually the mother) (Hughes and Graham-Bermann 1999; Jaffe, Wolfe, and Wilson 1990; Wolfe et al. 1984). The literature in this area strongly suggests that being a childhood victim of emotional abuse or being witness to the verbal or physical abuse of a parent is correlated to later psycho-social, behavioral, or relationship difficulties, including intimate partner violence, both as an aggressor and as a victim (see Gross and Keller 1992; Kent and Waller 1998; Moore and Pepler 2006; Morimoto and Sharma 2004; Palazzolo, Roberto, and Babin 2010; Riggs and Kaminski 2010; Shaffer, Yates, and Egeland 2009; Shook et al. 2000; Spillane-Greico 2000; Vissing et al. 1991; Wright 2007). Childhood emotional abuse has also been found to be significantly related to depression and mental illness later in life (Ferguson and Dacey 1997; Gibb et al. 2007; Johnson et al. 2001; Ney 1987; Teicher et al. 2006). This concern with verbal violence against children is reflective of our desire to protect children from abuse and is based on a general social/cultural consensus about the appropriate treatment of children by adults (Follingstad and DeHart 2000). Comparatively, social understandings of what may be appropriate in relationships between "consenting" adults are more flexible (Follingstad and DeHart 2000) and this is reflected in some literature that treats verbal violence among adults as being generally reciprocal, without a clearly identifiable victim and aggressor (Follingstad and Edmundson 2010; Siegel 1999).

Sims (2008) argues that the exclusion of emotional abuse in mainstream media accounts of domestic violence is evidence of social neglect of this insidious and destructive behavior. She writes poignantly that "a police report cannot be filed for a 'stolen self' or a 'broken self-esteem' and a picture cannot be taken of a 'bruised and battered soul' . . . the lack of physical marks on a victim's body may have an effect on the definition of the act by authorities, which in turn influences how the incident is reported (if at all)" (Sims 2008:377). In fact, the concept of non-physical violence is so maligned in mainstream understandings that Goldsmith and Freyd (2005) found that women who reported having been the victims of emotionally abusive actions by an intimate partner were often unwilling or unable to articulate this experience as abuse. Ashcraft (2000) has argued that restricting the social understanding of domestic violence to severe cases of physical abuse allows the public to believe that the problem is confined to a few pathological batterers, rather than acknowledging it as a systemic social problem that needs to be addressed more widely. Thus, we find that there is a significant gap in existing literature on verbal violence perpetrated in domestic settings. Existing research is primarily quantitative, psychological in orientation, and focuses on the negative psychological, emotional, and health effects of verbal abuse on victims (see Ali, Oatley, and Toner 1999; Follingstad 2009; Kelly et al. 2009). Two studies by Lecovin and Penfold (1996) and Lammers, Ritchie, and Robertson (2005) are notable, qualitative, exceptions; however, these studies are limited by their relatively small samples—6 and 7 women, respectively. The present study, therefore, is a contribution to the empirical literature on verbal violence, and also extends our sociological understanding of the social stigma that is attached to this behavior.

THEORIZING STIGMA AND VERBAL VIOLENCE

Goffman's (1963) now famous definition of stigma refers to "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" and that reduces a person "in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (3). There is certainly research that suggests that the experience of violence in a family relationship is just such an attribute, in the sense that its victims describe *feeling* that they will be discredited and tainted if they disclose their experiences. They represent these feelings in the language of embarrassment and shame (see Ahmad et al. 2009; Chatzifotiou and Dobash 2001; Crawford, Liebling-Kalifani, and Hill 2009; Fugate et al. 2005; Gelles 1976; Hadeed and El-Bassel 2006; Hathaway, Willis, and Zimmer 2002; Lachkar 2001; Thapar-Björkert and Morgan 2010). Thus, the aspect of "felt stigma" (Jacoby 1994; Scambler and Hopkins 1986) or shame³ looms large and the research suggests that this felt stigma often prevents victims of domestic violence from seeking help. Comparatively, however, there is little research to suggest that victims of domestic violence regularly experience incidents of *enacted stigma*, or social discrimination from others in the community if they choose to disclose and seek help to escape a violent situation. The most clearly documented forms of stigmatization directed at victims of domestic violence seem to emerge in relation to blaming a woman who chooses to stay in such a relationship (Crawford et al. 2009), and in the idea that the victim is partly responsible for her own abuse because of her failure to leave a violent partner (Enander 2010). The very question, "why doesn't she leave him?" has been deconstructed as inherently problematic and blaming of women in violent relationships (Dobash and Dobash 1988; Loseke and Cahill 1984; McHugh 1993). It seems that while abusive behaviors are stigmatized and generally recognized as "abnormal" and harmful, there may be increasingly less social stigma attached to the victim role for women who do disclose and demonstrate commitment to exiting an abusive relationship, likely due to the influence of feminist advocacy and growing social awareness of the need to provide support and resources to the victims of family violence. Conversely, we continue to see victim blaming and negative stereotypes of women who "choose to stay" or perpetuate an abusive partnership.

The experience of verbal violence and the question of its stigmatization, however, are arguably even more complex than that of physical abuse. In Canada, physical violence is clearly delineated as criminal behavior and may be subject to legal sanctions, in addition to growing social censure. Verbal violence, on the other hand, falls into a gray area in that it does not generally constitute a criminal act (unless it includes threats of death or bodily harm), and therefore is not subject to the same general social disapproval as physical violence. In fact, the definition of verbal aggression as violence is necessarily subjective and individuals do not understand or problematize verbal aggression in the same way. Given the prevalence of verbal aggression in family relationships, and the absence of objective proof of harm (e.g., bruises or physical marks) there are difficulties in clearly demarcating abusive verbal interactions from reciprocal fighting; the subjective experiences of a victim become the only definitive barometer of abuse. In the present research, while some participants indicated very clearly that they felt themselves to be the victims of verbal abuse, others suggested that the verbal violence that they experienced was normal, and minimized these behaviors as a part of their everyday reality.

³The feeling of shame is discussed sociologically as representative of the individual taking on the supposed views of social others (Barbalet 2001; Katz 1990; Scheff 1990), but may not in fact mirror the likely views or actions of sympathetic or wise others.

The tension between these two perspectives is worthy of consideration, particularly since many of the individual participants both normalized examples of verbal violence in describing their everyday experiences, and then retrospectively problematized these same behaviors. The problematization generally occurred in the context of what we might call the “turning point” accounts,⁴ in which the individual provides an explanation for their decision to refuse to tolerate abuse any longer (Eisikovits, Buchbinder, and Mor 1998). In this article, we argue that the very prevalence of verbal violence in families makes it prone to stigmatization and silencing by individuals, academics, and society in general. It is the normalcy of verbal violence in families that underlies the fact that it is generally not studied in isolation from other forms of domestic abuse (i.e., physical, sexual, or emotional), nor targeted as a site of intervention. In this sense, verbal violence is counterintuitively stigmatized as something that is present but that individuals do not feel comfortable to acknowledge or seek help for. We contend that the phenomenon of verbal violence is not statistically aberrant, nor a necessarily unusual experience. Therefore, if we are to construct this phenomenon (in the absence of other forms of abuse) as socially deviant and problematic, many individuals will find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being defined, by extension, as the victims and perpetrators of verbal violence. These labels are potentially damaging to self-identity (and to our understandings of relationships) and are therefore undesirable. We theorize that: (1) if you are an individual who is experiencing verbal violence as either an aggressor or on the receiving end (and often these positions are not mutually exclusive) it is easier to understand the situation as normal family conflict. The normalization of verbal violence allows individuals to eschew the labels of victim and abuser and to preserve a non-stigmatized identity. (2) Only when the experience begins to escalate or reaches its “turning point” through the accumulation of incidents does it become redefined as abnormal, and victim status is claimed in interaction with police (or other agencies) as a means of obtaining assistance to leave or diffuse the situation.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

For the purposes of this research, we employed the concept of verbal violence very broadly as encompassing a wide variety of non-physical aggressive behaviors, including yelling or screaming, insults, name-calling, threats, manipulation, and the general denigration of the victim for the purposes of control. The participants in this research were recruited through the victim service bureau of a small city in Ontario (Canada) and had been referred to victim services by the local police as part of a pilot initiative intended to provide early intervention and resources to individuals involved in non-criminal domestic violence situations. This pilot project was designed to identify families at risk of escalating violence and to provide appropriate services for both aggressors and victims, with the understanding that these are often not mutually exclusive. Therefore, the individuals who were clients of the project and referred to us as research participants may be classified as either aggressors or victims and we did not necessarily know their standpoint when we contacted them to participate in the research. For this reason, and because we wanted to approach the topic using grounded theory techniques (see Charmaz 2006, 2009;

⁴The turning point account often describes choosing to involve the police and/or to leave the situation.

Glaser and Strauss 1967), we did not define the term verbal violence prior to entering the field⁵ and we avoided the use of the terms verbal abuse and emotional abuse initially in our interactions with referred participants, because not all of our participants defined their experiences in this way. Our understanding, and the following analysis of verbal violence and the behaviors that it encompasses, has emerged in conversation with women and men who describe these experiences. The research design used a constructivist grounded theory method, which acknowledges the researcher's role in the construction of knowledge throughout the research process and draws on existing concepts and theories to situate "participants' meanings and actions in larger social structures and discourses of which they may be unaware . . . [to] show the connections between micro and macro levels of analysis and thus link the subjective and the social" (Charmaz 2009:131).

The interviewees were self-selected from approximately 500 client contacts who were asked by Victim Services if they would be willing to participate in the research. Victim Services staff used a recruitment script designed by the researchers to conduct follow-up calls with all clients of the pilot project; clients were reminded of their previous contact with victim services and asked if they had been able to follow through on the referrals provided by the staff and if the referred services were helpful. The victim service worker inquired if the client's current situation had improved or if they were in need of any other services or referrals at that time. The staff member then briefly described the research project and asked for permission to provide the client's contact information to the researchers to follow up with an interview. Fifty-six people agreed to be contacted by the researchers; despite repeated attempts we were unable to contact all of them. Due to safety concerns for individuals who might still be in a violent relationship, we did not leave messages for potential participants. Several participants agreed to be interviewed but withdrew from the research or did not show up for the interview. Others decided that they did not have time or want to revisit their past experiences. This self-selected sample, then, reflects the experiences of individuals who were motivated to discuss their situations and interactions with police. In the end, although both victims and aggressors were among the clients contacted by victim services, none of the research participants self-identified as the aggressor in the situation; however, a few participants described some degree of mutuality, or being an aggressor at times in self-defense.

The final sample was comprised of 27 women and 3 men, with an age range of 17–70 years. The participants were involved in situations characterised by verbal violence in intimate partner relationships, or in parent/child relationships in which the adolescent or adult child was perceived as the aggressor by the parent. The in-depth interviews revealed very complex family situations, often with long histories of physical and/or sexual violence, in addition to verbal aggression. A minority of the cases appeared to fit the stated mandate of the Victim Services pilot project. Instead, many cases were being referred where there was already a history of physical violence of which the police were either not aware (because it had not been previously reported), or where the *current call* was not for a chargeable offense. However, all participants did make reference

⁵While we did not explicitly define the term verbal violence in order to avoid inadvertently excluding participants' experiences or definitions, it must be said that the researchers had an implicitly shared understanding of what *we* meant by this term, shaped by our initial conversations and personal interests in the topic. Our understandings were both reified and challenged by our conversations with participants and with one another over the course of the research.

to experiences that we would define as verbal violence. In our coding, we attempted to isolate representations of, and responses to, verbal violence for the purposes of this analysis.⁶

The interviews were digitally recorded with the permission of the individual participants⁷ and transcribed verbatim to allow for the most accurate data collection and analysis. Transcribed interviews (and field notes) were coded using NVivo software to organize and compare themes and categories across and between interviews. While many themes and issues were represented in these interviews, this article will focus on the findings particular to the narrative representations of verbal violence in the interview setting and their implications for understanding verbal violence as both a stigmatized and normalized phenomenon.

FINDINGS

Representations of Verbal Violence as Normal

The first substantive question of the interview asked participants to describe the situation and events that led them into contact with the police and Victim Services. For most of the participants, the account that led to their eventual involvement with the police and Victim Services spanned multiple incidents, some over many years. Some participants had multiple encounters with the police, while others avoided calling the police until the situation reached a point at which they could no longer cope without outside intervention. Reaching that point did not necessarily mean that the victim wanted to have her abuser arrested and/or criminalized, but participants called on police in an attempt to stop the violence. Consequently, many of the participants gave lengthy descriptions of ongoing, and sometimes escalating, patterns of verbal violence, confirming earlier literature which suggests that victims of abuse often do not report when aggression is first manifested (see, for example, Fugate et al., 2005). These long histories of conflict in the family suggest a kind of normalization in which the violence is tolerated as a reality of life, until the situation reaches a critical point, referred to as the turning point. Participants in this research discursively represented verbal violence as a normal part of their daily realities. Some participants spoke very candidly of name-calling, yelling, and other forms of verbal aggression as an everyday kind of occurrence:

Kevin is wonderful. I love him to death, I really do, but, he's a yeller. He doesn't hit and he doesn't do anything like that, but he always yells. (Interviewer: So what kinds of stuff does he yell?) Oh, he's got a mouth on him (laughs). But he—when he gets angry, he yells. Or if the kids are doing something, like uhh, if they're doing something they're not supposed to, they're in the fridge or whatever, he doesn't hit them. He just— (yells) “Get the fuck out of the fridge now!” (Laughs) (Regina)

⁶The fact that some participants had also experienced physical violence in their families has implications for this analysis as it is impossible for the participants to sever their experience of verbal violence from the context of their relationships; thus verbal violence becomes one thread in a *fabric of abuse*. It is also possible that the experience of physical violence could contribute to a minimization of verbal violence as being less serious and it certainly seems to play a role in decisions about what is *serious enough* to report to the police (Stewart, Langan, and Hannem 2013). However, as mentioned, previous research has found that victims of verbal violence often rate it as more damaging than concurrent physical violence (Follingstad et al. 1990; Henning and Klesges 2003; Walker 1979).

⁷All but one participant permitted the interview to be recorded.

Some participants mobilize a discourse that suggests that they believe that everyone lives with verbal violence and that it is not remarkable, nor particularly problematic. This line of reasoning is perhaps revealing of societal assumptions about the prevalence and normalcy of verbal aggression, or may be reflective of individual experiences of violence in the family of origin. Mary's remarks allude to both of these phenomena:

[The name calling], well that was ongoing.

(Interviewer: And were you aware at the time that it was abuse?)

Um, I've been getting called names since grade school. (laughs) Everyone gets called names all the time so . . . Um the day before yesterday I was walking with my son and a random person, yelled out "B-I-T-C-H" at me, from a car. I had no idea who they are, never seen them before in my life. People are like that. (Laughs)

Donna's adult son regularly engaged in aggressive and verbally violent behavior toward her. She related that she did not want to have him criminalized or to have people believe that he was "crazy," so her response to his aggression was to try and deal with it on her own:

Well it's just sort of you know, verbal attacks like I'm a bitch, like the swearing, the yelling, the, the whatever. But he, he also starts having tantrums and he was like, at that time, if I remember correctly, he was just basically um, at the stairs sort of pounding the floor—cause I have a raised ranch, or whatever—pounding the floor of the thing and, you know, screaming loud, or whatever. And so I just um, I went and tried to calm him down.

Many of the participants described a history of verbal or physical abuse in their family of origin, directed at them as children, or between their parents. Several of the participants who had since ceased to normalize this behavior pointed to a history of abuse as the reason why they tolerated verbal violence as adults. Isobel clearly indicated that she had previously thought that this type of interaction was normal, and she felt that the normalcy of verbal violence contributed to her failure to leave a verbally abusive relationship:

It's weird because we all [her co-workers] went for training and it was on lateral violence, like two days of lateral violence [training], and that's how I learned that's how I grew up. Hearing my parents fight, hearing them call each other down. And then your mother tells you you're just like your father or, you know, you're just like your aunt that you can't stand . . . so (pause—starts to cry) If I wasn't treated this way, I wouldn't accept it I guess . . . My whole life, as a kid, that's what I grew up. I was called down, made fun of, I was treated like that. The one that everyone picked on at home and at school.

Still others describe becoming accustomed to verbal abuse and coming to believe the derogatory things that are said about them:

He would tell me over and over again how I wasn't worth being married to, that I was disabled and that the only reason he was even with me was because God told him to. That I was not worthy as a person for anyone to be with. Um, and when you hear that every day from the person that's supposed to love you after a while, I believed it. So it took a long time after to get myself back. (Josephine)

Participants in this research also recounted attempts to fight back or to engage in what they defined as reciprocal fighting. Defining these encounters as fights also served to normalize the behavior and to prevent them from taking on a victim status in the relationship. As long as they

were fighting back, these individuals assumed their own agency and equal responsibility for the conflict in their relationships:

I never, even after everything was said and done, I never put the full blame on him. I knew it was a two way street. It wasn't just him. I didn't deserve what I got, but at the same time I mean, I'm not innocent. I'm not the, you know, the nicest person in the world sometimes to be around either. (Vicky)

Overwhelmingly, the participants in this research initially normalized the verbal violence in their households and represented this behavior as something that was not unusual. As the interviews continued, we noted that the participants often began to alter the way that they spoke of the verbal violence, reflecting escalating violence and changing situations.

Representations of Verbal Violence as Escalating

Many of the participants described the escalation of abuse in their relationships. For example, Nancy described her ongoing and slowly escalating conflicts with her on-again/off-again partner:

A lot of putting me down, a lot of not appreciating or recognizing everything that I'm doing for him, but wanting to flip it around and constantly keeping me on my toes as far as the constant accusations and—and I'm like, I would—I'd sit there, shaking my head, "Listen, you know better than this. What is your problem?" I push away and then things would back off. And then it would start all over again—because, okay, we'll be just friends. We'll hang out for the day, have dinner, do a barbecue, whatever. . . . And then it just seemed like once he was here, he wouldn't leave. So now it would take a full blown fight to get him out of the house again. And then—Enough distance would be given. Okay, maybe he's recognized that I'm not about to keep taking care of him. And I'd let my guard down a little bit, and he'd be right back. No, I don't want this. I'd push away again. And the more I pushed, and made him back off, the more he's fighting to stay. He was showing up at my house at three o'clock in the morning. He was starting to kick my door in. Umm, showing up drunk. Calling and leaving all kinds of nasty messages. Accusing me of fooling around. Accusing me of being a slut. Accusing me of all these things . . .

Escalation often did not mean an automatic redefinition of the situation as intolerable. Rather, attempts would be made to try and solve the situation alone, or with the assistance of family, or the informal assistance of police (without pressing criminal charges). As Grace described one of her initial calls to the police: "They [the police] talked to him and I was right there and I said 'I don't want him to leave permanently; I just want him out of this house so he can go cool down.' And he went to his mom's for the night."

These types of negotiations and the pattern of escalation, de-escalation, and resurgence of abusive behaviors might take place over a period of months or years. The situations described by the participants in this research were often consistent with previous theorizing on the cycle of violence in domestic abuse (Walker 1979). The escalation sometimes involved retaliation or self-defense on the part of the non-aggressor. This engagement in reciprocal verbal (or physical violence) was often used as evidence that the participant was not a victim, but was actively engaged in the conflict. This standard was also used to judge the blameworthiness of other women involved in domestic violence:

Like I'm not saying the women aren't at fault at times. Sometimes I know . . . I do understand the cycle of abuse. Sometimes we do things to make it come on so that we can have that honeymoon

phase type thing, but I just got so sick of being moved out of my house because he come home drunk, AGAIN. And whoever would fight with him was the target. (Anne)

It sometimes takes a drastic event to disrupt the attribution of agency and responsibility that women accord to their reciprocal fighting back. According to Mary, it was not until she was pregnant and made a conscious decision not to fight back in order to protect her unborn child that she realized that the aggressor was not going to stop and she began to define the situation as problematic:

He was verbally abusive and he was very controlling. I was the one to clean up the house and stuff like that. Once I got pregnant though the abuse turned physical, so . . . and I guess I didn't really count it as physical abuse because, when we'd get into a fight, what would happen was he'd shove me and I'd shove him back and it was mutual. And when I was pregnant it wasn't mutual, so . . . I mean people always say it takes two people to argue, but it really doesn't.

In other cases, patterns of abuse were represented as having been fairly stable, *until* the non-aggressor began to fight back. Several women suggested that the abuse only began to escalate when they started to stand up for themselves and demonstrated to the aggressor that his behavior was not acceptable.

Representations of Verbal Violence as Intolerable: The Turning Point

Participants' identification of a turning point in their situation often involved an escalation into physical forms of violence—but not always. For some of the participants, the increasing intensity or accumulation of incidents of verbal violence led them to feel that the situation was problematic and untenable. Even when a participant describes incidents of physical violence as having tipped the scales toward her feeling that she needed to get away from the situation, the turning point account generally reconstructs the previous verbal violence, which may have been normalized earlier in the interview, as decidedly problematic and positions the newfound victim as an active subject who has decided to do something about her situation:

When he started to drink heavily again, I decided to test out the word alcoholic; I called him by the name of what he was doing to me, without ever losing my cool. I don't use dirty words or anything, nothing, but it's helped me try to leave. You know he was disrespectful, feeling that there was nothing, no respect visible anymore. So, I finally decided that I couldn't go on like that and when it wasn't the first time when I called the police, that, I mean, it wasn't the first time that he really completely went out of control. But I thought that time I'd show him that I meant business, it didn't matter to me anymore if I left or whatever I would do. You know, after all I'm on my own, I can't expect anybody else to step in so I thought, "I'll show him I mean business." (Hannah)

In cases where the turning point did not include physical violence, it is common for the account to describe a feeling of fear or the sense that the violence is about to become more severe, thereby necessitating outside intervention:

That was the reason I called the police because usually I don't feel unsafe. I don't like my house being damaged but I don't feel totally unsafe with him. I didn't think he would cross any paths in that regards but he went right in my face and started screaming. Like two inches like his nose to my nose and um, and he didn't want to touch me but he was right in my face saying 'La la la' (makes funny noise) and then I just backed away and I ran into my bedroom and that's when I called the cops. (Darlene)

What is particularly interesting is the way in which the interview process itself produces the discursive account of a turning point—we have asked them to talk about and explain the events that led up to their involvement with the police and victim services (the events that caused them to seek assistance). One of the interviewers even phrased the question as: “Tell me, what was your line in the sand?” Much as Mills (1940) suggested that individuals provide vocabularies of motive when asked to explain their behavior and Scott and Lyman (1968) offered that individuals produce *accounts* to excuse or justify their non-normative behavior, it appears that our participants were providing us with accounts designed to explain three things: (1) why they put up with verbal violence for so long, (2) how the situation destabilized and got worse, and (3) what it was that finally made them seek help or leave the situation. Within the same interview, one can first identify accounts of verbal violence as normal and then new retrospective analyses of verbal violence as problematic. For example, Mary, the same woman mentioned earlier who said that “everyone gets called names all the time,” later in her interview also said:

Say you had like a time bomb. . . . Okay and the verbal abuse is the ticking and then the physical abuse is the big boom. So once you hear, you know, ticking, the verbal abuse right . . . cause that’s . . . and the very first thing is just the tone of voice and the unnecessary use of words because you know, I know anything can be turned into a derogatory way of saying something. (laughs) But um, but yeah. That’s usually the warning sign.

There is a clear tension in these discursive representations: if everyone is always being called names, then how are we to understand this verbal aggression as the “warning sign” of further violence? The changing representations of verbal violence produced by our participants in the research encounter point to the issue of felt stigma as a barrier to the disclosure of abuse, but are also arguably revealing of larger social tensions in our understandings and experiences of verbal violence. It is to these social-structural issues that we now turn.

DISCUSSION: RECONCILING FIGHTING AND ABUSE

Even while they normalized verbal violence as an everyday occurrence, the participants in this research revealed an underlying discomfort with the behavior that they would eventually come to define as abuse. The absence of physical violence seems to be a feature that prevents some individuals from immediately defining what they are experiencing as abuse, and causes them to believe that their experiences will not be taken seriously by others, including the police. “It did seem stupid [to call the police] after having gone through a more serious case of abuse but I did, I felt silly calling them for something that seemed so mild. . . . Like getting things shouted at me is not the worst thing that can happen” (Mary). There seemed to be a general understanding that being called “mean names” does not fit under the police mandate in Canada and a sense that others would not understand or be sympathetic to the experience of verbal abuse, even if the individual did subjectively feel it to be problematic. “It’s like me—before he [be]came violent? It’s like I didn’t wanna tell people. Are they going—like, I can’t phone the police ’cause he’s telling me all this mean stuff. If you’re verbally abused, and you go to get help, you don’t really have proof” (Poppy). The question of proof came up repeatedly and most of the participants pointed out that the absence of bruises and physical evidence meant that, even when called to intervene, the police were often powerless to help them. The nebulous and subjective nature of verbal abuse prevents

the kind of unequivocal social denunciation that legal codification lends to physical abuse. To wit, sometimes a fight is just that, and the wholesale criminalization of verbal violence in domestic situations is neither a desirable, nor a practical response. However, the participants' incongruent narratives suggest that while they are not happy with their situations, they also present verbal violence in their families as normal.

Presenting a narrative that represents verbal violence in family relationships as normal (and therefore not abusive) may be viewed as one means of discursively protecting one's identity from the onslaught of negative stereotypes and stigma that are believed to be associated with being a victim of domestic abuse or a victim, more generally. When looking more closely at the data, we find that there remain stigmatized social stereotypes about the "kind of woman" (Loseke and Cahill 1984) who becomes involved in an abusive relationship. Some of the common implications are that she has low self-esteem, is uneducated, unintelligent, needy or co-dependent, psychologically damaged, a bad mother, a nagging wife, and/or a trouble-maker herself (see Kelly 1988; Loeske and Cahill 1984). These stereotypes are revealed when participants recount their interactions with police (see Stewart et al. 2013), who respond to these calls for service with assertions like, "You know—we could take him down to the jailhouse but what's the sense? She's only gonna let him back in in the morning. And then we'll be there again. It's an occurring (sic) thing" (Regina, interview transcript). One participant described how a police officer responding to her call commented with surprise, "Wow, your house is very clean!" (Poppy, interview transcript), perhaps suggesting that one of the predominant stereotypes of the type of woman who is involved in domestic conflict is one who keeps a dirty or untidy home, and is thus not an ideal wife/mother.

Even more surprising than police stereotypes of abused women is the degree to which participants themselves are invested in these stereotypes and reproduce them in their accounts to the researchers. Poppy's deconstruction of the police officer's comment on the cleanliness of her home is telling:

I know a lot of them [calls to police for domestic abuse] can be the same, but a lot of the wives or moms are on assistance. So I don't know if that's what they expected—for my kids to be running around filthy or something—I don't know. It was rude. . . . I think the police should realize that when they come to my house. I'm not the same as the last guy you were at.

This reification of stereotypes of abused women as women who are "on assistance" and bad mothers is used here as a technique of defensive othering. Defensive othering, also known as "distancing" (Snow and Anderson 1987) is defined by Schwalbe et al. (2000) as a process that "involves accepting the legitimacy of a devalued identity imposed by the dominant group but then saying, in effect, 'There are indeed Others to whom this applies, but it does not apply to me'" (425). Defensive othering is commonly recognized as a strategy of identity management which positions a person who finds themselves ascribed a stigmatized identity to reject that identity and preserve a sense of self as a "whole and usual person" (Goffman 1963:3), without having to systematically challenge the legitimacy of the socially prescribed stereotypes. Many of the participants in this research make use of defensive othering to describe to the interviewers how they are *different* from the stereotypes of abused women—the *exceptions to the rule*—and thus maintain a "normal" identity:

I'm sure they [the police] deal with a lot of people that, um . . . woman's all beat up and then they're dragging the man away, and they're going, "don't take him! Don't take him!" You know what I mean?

To see that stuck onto me and stuff like that. They feel like they're wasting their time because they're gonna be back together 24 hours anyways. And mind you . . . I would love to mend my relationship with him in the future. I mean, we have a twenty-five year marriage. (Frances)

When women are in an escalating situation that they can no longer construct as normal, participants are faced with the choice of continuing to try and cope alone, thereby avoiding the label of victim of domestic abuse, or to seek outside intervention (whether formally through the police, or informally from family and friends). Soliciting or accepting formal intervention from police or victims' agencies ascribes, by extension, the victim label, a stigmatized status that strips individuals of agency. Defensive othering is a strategy of identity management that is used when the situation can no longer be defined as normal, but individuals are unwilling to accept the host of stereotypes that accompany the victim label. Participants' use of this strategy demonstrates that they do experience a sense of felt stigma and are actively attempting to manage their discreditable identity (Goffman 1963).

The fact that verbal violence in domestic situations is stigmatized behavior is counterintuitive to its seeming prevalence in North American society. Tom's assertion that "every couple has their fights" and widespread social acceptance of this idea is troubling in the way that it normalizes that verbal violence which admittedly may be understood unproblematically as "fighting," while at the same time obscuring and minimizing the situations of people who experience this behavior as abusive. The concurrent normalization and stigmatization of verbal violence presents a barrier to disclosure, as evidenced by participants' reluctance to call the police for something "so mild" (Mary), and their concern to distance themselves from victim stereotypes, but also represents a significant hurdle in determining an appropriate sociolegal response. While the research on verbal and emotional abuse clearly suggests that it is problematic (particularly in its effects on children who witness and experience it), there are strong arguments for a holistic, alternative social response that does not rely solely on the police and criminal justice system. There are also significant social and systemic barriers to further recognition of verbal violence as a form of abuse; the prevalence of verbally aggressive behavior in our communities places the identities of many individuals at stake, were we to speak more openly about verbal violence and to problematize it in domestic contexts beyond physically abusive situations. We would argue that it is precisely the subjective nature of verbal abuse and the reality that *almost anyone* could be constructed as a victim or perpetrator of some form of verbal violence that underlies societal minimization of the phenomenon and reluctance to draw clear legal and social boundaries around verbal violence in domestic situations.⁸ Just as our participants were reluctant to be labeled and stereotyped as victims of abuse, verbally aggressive individuals would even more strongly resist being labeled as perpetrators of domestic abuse (this is perhaps why no admitted aggressors self-selected to be part of this research), and the social repercussions of criminalizing domestic verbal violence would be vast. We would suggest that endeavors to de-stigmatize victims of abuse and promote social discussion about the harms of verbal violence could assist in the development of appropriate sociolegal intervention and the reframing of verbal violence in domestic contexts as socially unacceptable.

⁸Verbal abuse in the workplace, including threats and harassment, is addressed in the Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act and requires a written policy of employer intervention.

CONCLUSION

These tensions between fighting and abuse, normal and abnormal, are clearly visible in the conflicted understandings of verbal violence that are presented in the interview narratives, and these narratives mirror the tensions that exist in our societal understanding of the issue. The literature suggests that the experience of emotional and verbal violence is marginalized in media accounts and in systemic responses to domestic violence, giving legitimacy to the idea that verbal violence is a normal part of intimate and family relationships. Our analysis of the data showed that participants in the interview setting first normalized the experience of verbal violence, then provided an account which identified a changing perception of the verbal aggression as increasingly problematic and, finally, reframed the initial experience as abusive. Clearly, the interview participants were initially reluctant to identify as victims of abuse, preferring to frame their experience as normal and avoid the stigmatized victim identity, but narratives of normality are insufficient to tell their stories in a way that does justice to their experiences.

The experience of verbal violence is complicated by the social tension that surrounds it as, on the one hand, a common behavior that is not considered serious enough to be criminalized, and, on the other, as a shameful and damaging behavior that is considered a red flag for escalating violence. While our society does discursively and legally denounce domestic abuse and support the provision of assistance for victims, negative stereotypes of abuse victims continue to be perpetuated by police, citizens, and by victims themselves (in the form of defensive othering). Victims of verbal violence continue to feel stigmatized and to fear disclosure, and lack of disclosure prevents awareness of the prevalence of verbal abuse that might serve to aid in destigmatizing victims. Because “every couple has their fights,” we suggest that the very commonality of verbal violence may perpetuate the marginalization of its victims and poses a barrier to the wide scale acknowledgment of this behavior as legally or socially problematic. This research is only a first step in opening discussions about social understandings of verbal violence, exploring the experiences of victims, and raising questions about the forms that appropriate sociolegal interventions might take.

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STACEY HANNEM is an Associate Professor in the Department of Criminology at Wilfrid Laurier University. Her research interests are broadly linked around the experience of stigma and marginality and include the implications of crime and the criminal justice system for families of offenders, the reintegration of sexual offenders released from prison, and sex work legislation and policy. She is a co-editor (with Chris Bruckert) of *Stigma Revisited: Implications of the Mark* (University of Ottawa Press, 2012). Dr. Hannem's research has appeared recently in *The International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, *Canadian Journal of Law and Society*, *Canadian Review of Sociology*, and *Feminist Criminology*.

DEBRA LANGAN is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminology at Wilfrid Laurier University. She has researched and published in the areas of violence against women, families and intimate relations, critical pedagogy, and policing. Her recent publications include articles in *Feminist Criminology*, *Women's Studies International Forum*, and *Action Research*, and forthcoming publications will appear in *Applied Linguistics* and *Gender & Society*.

CATHERINE STEWART is an Associate Professor in the Department of Criminology at Wilfrid Laurier University. Previously, she was active as a practitioner in violence against women and children: she has written technical reports, developed prevention programs, and provided multiple training sessions to criminal justice professionals. She now teaches and does research in human rights and criminology, specializing in the areas of women, victimology, violence against women and children, sexual abuse/assault, and disability. She has published in the *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences*, *The Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, *Feminist Criminology*, and *Applied Linguistics* (forthcoming). A book is forthcoming with Wilfrid Laurier University Press.