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Abstract

This article shows how a narrative methodological approach is particularly suited to examining the dynamics of intimate partner violence, especially among poor women of color in South Africa. We show how a narrative approach allowed women to represent their experiences of violence according to their own frames of meaning, examining the complexities of abuse as it is informed by sociocultural factors of gender, poverty, and deprivation. In particular, we show how a narrative approach departs from other qualitative work by enabling women to construct particular forms of identity, thereby giving them agency in authoring their own stories of violence.

Keywords

intimate partner violence, narrative analysis, South Africa

For a range of reasons, poor women represent a particularly vulnerable group with regard to intimate partner violence. Across a range of contexts (which include Peru, Palestine, the United States, the Phillipines, and Canada) being poor, having a low level of educational attainment, and being unemployed have been identified as significant risk markers for violent victimization among women (Gonzales de Olarte & Gavilano Llosa, 1999; Haj-Yahia, 2000a; Hampton & Gelles, 1994; Hindin & Adair, 2002; Johnson, 2001). Women living in poverty are also disproportionately affected by partner violence (Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2002). The violence to which poor women are subjected is only one of the many other social problems they are likely to face. Other challenges may include a

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lack of access to health care, food, shelter and a wide range of other resources (Shiu-Thornton, Senturia, & Sullivan, 2005). Leaving or obtaining assistance for violence in the relationship would also be compounded by the fact that the woman is likely to be financially dependent on her partner. Women are also likely to be isolated from a supportive network that may ameliorate the effect of the violence in their lives (Shiu-Thornton et al., 2005). Given these multiple challenges faced by poor women of color, it would be important to understand how they make sense of the violence they experience from intimate male partners, especially given that women, to a large extent, are not given "voice" within mainstream research. Few studies have specifically explored the potentialities of narrative for uncovering the complexities of partner violence in the lives of poor women of color.

Traditional approaches to studying violence in intimate relationships have been critiqued for not being able to capture the complexities of partner violence. The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979), for example, which is perhaps the most widely used measurement instrument, asks women (and men) to indicate whether they had ever experienced particular acts of violence, such as being slapped, punched, kicked, threatened, or forced to have sex. Among a range of criticisms of the method have been that the measurement of "particular" acts of violence or controlling behaviors overlooks the essence of the abusive relationship itself, or as Heise, Ellsberg, and Gottemoeller (1999) stated, the "atmosphere of terror that often permeates abusive relationships" (p. 5). The dynamics of the abusive relationship are overlooked as the method cannot assess, for example, whether violence is used in self-defense, nor can it make an assessment about the impact or severity of the violence.¹ In addition, Thoreson and Øverlien (2009) found that women experienced problems answering survey questions that assessed levels of interpersonal and sexual violence. Participants expressed a struggle in answering "yes" or "no" questions, in part due to ambivalence about whether their own experiences qualified as "abuse." Such approaches therefore ensure that the research endeavor is dominated by the researcher's own frame of meaning, which does not fully allow participants to give voice to their own understandings of what may constitute violence or abuse. Moreover, the focus on violent acts alone, which are often biased towards physical forms of violence, does not take account of the individual, interpersonal, and socio-cultural contexts within which a man's violence toward a woman partner occurs (Dobash, Dobash, Cavanagh, & Lewis, 1998). The fact that large-scale survey studies using measures such as the CTS yield important information about the prevalence of woman abuse across a range of contexts is not disputed. However, an in-depth, more nuanced account of women's experiences and understandings of violence remains out of reach.

Qualitative Research on Women's Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence

Recent qualitative work in the field has shed some light on the heterogeneity of women's definitions of violence that may be shaped by culture and other contextual factors. Mason et al.'s (2008) study found that women's experiences of psychological abuse held particular meanings that were related to the gendered social roles and relations of an Indian community of immigrants. In a study of African American women's interpretations of violent experiences, Nash (2005) found that women's interpretations were shaped by an interaction of their

sociocultural positions of race, class, and gender. These studies have also provided insight about the ways in which immigrant groups' definitions of violence are shaped by the cultural definitions of intimate partner violence provided by the country of residence as well as being related to specific cultures or community groups (Adames & Campbell, 2005; Wilson-Williams, Stephenson, Juvekar, & Andes, 2008). Qualitative work has provided data that challenge static categories and dimensions of violence, providing access to definitions that represent multiple forms of violence that interact with each other (Fox et al., 2007; Gill, 2004). Work in the field of sexual violence has shown that women's definitions "extend the prototypical experience of sexual victimization" (Harned, 2005, p. 386), providing multiple subjective reasons for labeling events as abuse (DeKeserdy & Joseph, 2006). Furthermore, qualitative work has provided in-depth information about the distinctive experiences of abuse in relatively understudied groups of women. For instance, Kulkarni (2006) found that adolescent mothers' accounts of violence were characterized by certain contextual issues that were related to their age and position in society. In addition, Bacchus, Mezey, and Bewley (2006) found that pregnant women describe distinctive experiences of psychological abuse that are geared toward their pregnant body and the pregnant self. In sum, qualitative work has provided the space in which women can express their own definitions of violence, providing insight into the meaning that women give to their experiences and the way that this meaning is dependant on the cultural context within which the woman is situated. The adoption of narrative theory and methodologies with its focus on the culturally embedded storied account with implications for subjectivity adds, as we will argue, a valuable dimension to the qualitative work outlined above.

This article argues that a narrative methodological approach is particularly suited to exploring the dynamics of intimate partner violence in the lives of women who have traditionally been marginalized and who, to a large degree, have been "shut out" of research and theorizing. We will illustrate how such an approach allows women to make "sense" of their relationships, which are characterized by violence. As Wood (2001) argues, narrative imposes coherence on experiences that do not necessarily make sense. In their tellings, women attempt to relay coherent stories about their experiences of victimization. Moreover, a narrative approach acknowledges that narratives are not simply aimed at conveying meaning, but also at constructing subjectivity for the narrating individuals. Women therefore not only tell stories about their relationships and the violence but also they construct themselves (and significant others) in those stories.

Method

Narrative Theory and Method

In psychology, the study of narrative emerged in response to a general turn to language that has been aligned with the interpretive turn in the social sciences. The social scientific "turn to language" questioned assumptions about whether the external world could be neutrally or accurately "represented." Narrative research gained popularity when, in the 1980s,² a number of influential scholars argued for adopting a narrative approach to understanding human experience and meaning. Gergen and Gergen (1984) and Bruner

(1990), for example, argued that narrative is an essential aspect of human nature and experience, and that we “naturally” make sense of our experiences in the world through narrative. We bring order and meaning to our realities and actively construct the world through narrative (Ricoeur, 1984, cited in Murray, 2003). Narrative theory or narrative psychology is argued to be more than simply a debate over method as it also incorporates broader ontological and epistemological assumptions (Murray, 2003), including assumptions about experience and the representation thereof (this is discussed in further detail below with regard to Squire’s approach to experience-centered narratives).

Narrative research is more than just a means to bring order to human experience; it is also a means whereby individuals are able to construct subjectivity, which makes it particularly suited to the discipline of psychology. Stories are understood to be the representation of an inner reality in which a person is able to shape and construct an identity (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Stories are told to reconstitute the past, interpret the present, and hypothesize about the future of an individual’s life and identity. Narrative identities, however, not only have personal connotations but also are constructed within dynamic personal and social contexts (Murray, 2003). It is this subjectivity-constructing aspect of narrative research that sets it apart from other qualitative work on women’s experiences of intimate partner violence and which we were interested in deploying in this paper.

Narrative research is characterized by theoretical and methodological diversity, making a clear definition of “narrative” challenging (Riessman, 2008; Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2008). Sequence has been identified as a key feature of narrative (Gergen & Gergen, 1984; Murray, 2003). Narratives have also been defined as stories that have a clear beginning, middle, and ending as well as a plot that holds the story together (Murray, 2003). Some of these features, however, have been called into question, particularly in relation to the narration of traumatic events or experiences (Langer, 1991, as cited in Riessman, 2008). A relatively new distinction is made in the field between event-centered and experience-centered narratives (Squire, 2008). Narratives about prescribed events are said to neglect a number of features fundamental to narrative research, namely, (a) talk that is not about the events in question, but may be important for the teller’s story of identity; (b) representation and the recognition that stories may have many meanings and may change over time; and (c) the interactions between the listener and storyteller and the recognition that stories are coconstructed (Squire, 2008). In this regard, Squire argues for the importance of an experience-centered approach to narratives, which assumes that narratives (a) are sequential and meaningful, (b) are a means of human sense-making, (c) express, re-present, and reconstitute experience, and (d) are transformative. We find Squire’s definition of narratives of experience a useful lens through which to view women’s stories of violence from intimate partners.

Given the diversity within narrative approaches to research, we deem it important to make our theoretical approach explicit. This article is informed by feminist poststructuralism as “a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relationships and to identify areas and strategies for change” (Weedon, 1987, pp. 40-41). Through this

approach, we call into question the traditional psychological conception of identity as static and unitary and acknowledge the social, cultural, historical, and politically embedded nature of subjectivity. Our attention to the multiplicity of subject positions available to narrating subjects accords well with the feminist poststructuralist attention to language, subjectivity, and meaning.

The Research Context

The data on which this article is based draw on interviews with 27 women who reside in marginalized and low-income areas of the Western Cape Province of South Africa, who in various ways had been identified as victims of domestic violence. The data are drawn from two data sets: one from women whose partners had been involved in a domestic violence program and who lived in primarily urban areas, and the other in which women from a semirural area had self-identified as being victims of violence in a survey conducted in the area (Gardiner, 2008).

The two areas from which this sample was drawn have particular histories that have shaped the current problems in those communities. Women from the urban communities reside in areas known as “the Cape Flats.” These are urban ghettos that were created as a result of apartheid segregationist policies in South Africa. People of color were moved out of neighborhoods in which they had lived for generations and into areas with little infrastructure, which were far away from the city centers and industrial hubs. These forced removals created immense psychological harm and the new areas into which people were moved became breeding grounds for gang activity and associated crime and violence. In the urban sample (13 women), the data are drawn from the doctoral research of the first author, which focused on couples’ narratives of violence (Boonzaier, 2005). Women whose partners had been involved in domestic violence intervention programs were asked to participate in interviews exploring the dynamics of their relationships. Women, although being interviewed separately from their partners, knew that the men had also been interviewed for the study. This may have shaped the kinds of stories the women chose to tell about their experiences of violence. In particular, knowing that the interviewer (first author) had already heard one version of the “story” of their relationship, they may have used the interview situation to present a version of themselves as “valid” victims of partner violence (see analysis).

Rural, farming areas of the Western Cape region of South Africa also have their own particular histories of exploitation, degradation, and marginalization. The infamous “dop system,” a system in which farm laborers were compensated with alcohol for their labor, resulted in deep-seated problems of alcohol abuse and related consequences, which is a major public health issue in many of these areas. Rural farm workers, who are almost exclusively people of color, perhaps represent the most vulnerable population in present-day South Africa, as they are still likely to be underpaid and remain dependent on farm owners who might be exploiting them but who are also necessary for shelter and survival. Women who live on farms with partners who are farm workers are placed in a particular position of subservience, especially if they find themselves in an abusive relationship. In

the rural sample, the larger study focused more broadly on intimate heterosexual relationships in one particular farming community and couples were randomly sampled and participated in a survey about their relationships (Gardiner, 2008). Women were also asked questions about the existence of physical violence in their relationships. Women who indicated that they had experienced such violence and were willing to participate in further research were contacted and interviewed by a female fieldworker (14 women). These women were subsequently contacted and interviewed separately from their partners. Women in the rural community sample came to the interviews after having participated in an extensive survey about their lives and relationships. In some ways, this previous encounter may have prepared them for the interview situation. Of course, it would be naïve to overlook the fact that women had been compensated for their participation and would have expected similar compensation for participation in further research. In an economically marginalized community such as this, even a small compensation for participants' time may be particularly important. Women were told that they had been asked to participate because they indicated that they had experienced violence from their intimate partners. As a result, and in a similar way to the urban group of women, the interview encounters may have been employed to illustrate how women were positioned as victimized within their intimate relationships.

There were few demographic differences between the participants from the urban and the rural samples, with the average age of the former group being 37 years and the latter 41 years. A majority of both groups were married to their partners at the time of the interviews, with the average relationship length of the urban sample being 22 years and the rural sample being 19 years. Detailed demographic information with regard to levels of income are not available for both groups of participants, but participants in the urban sample were more likely to be employed outside the home, although in low-skilled and low-paid jobs and sometimes in the informal sector. Although both groups of women could be classified as "poor" on the basis of their low levels of educational attainment, their areas of residence, and their employment status, it is likely that, for the historical and other reasons outlined earlier, the rural women were more economically marginalized. They may also have been more dependent on an abusive partner and therefore unlikely to leave the abusive situation. Despite these differences between the rural and urban samples, we do feel that the common ground shared between these two groups stand as a means through which to meaningfully explore the potential of narrative research for uncovering marginalized women's stories of abuse.

The Interviews

For both data sets, the interviews followed an unstructured, narrative format, asking women to tell the stories of their relationships in ways they deemed relevant. In particular, a frame of reference that stands in opposition to traditional question-and-answer techniques was employed. Using a free-flowing narrative method of interviewing ensured that the research endeavor was not dominated (only) by the researcher's meaning-frame (Mishler, 1986). Interviews were conducted in a variety of places (e.g., homes, cars, or at

organizations), depending on the wishes of the participants. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Many of the interviewees spoke a nonstandard form of English, a combination of English and Afrikaans. The quoted interview text used in this article has been re-presented in English. As qualitative researchers who concern ourselves with issues of language and re-presentation, we are mindful of the fact that much may be lost in the movement from the spoken word to the transcribed text and the translation thereof, and further, to our ultimate interpretations of the texts (see Riessman, 1993, 2008). In this article we reanalyze two existing data sets. The original projects for which these data had been collected received ethical clearance from the appropriate ethical bodies and we see no further ethical implications from our reanalysis of the original data.

Data Analysis

Riessman's (2008) method of thematic narrative analysis and Lieblich et al.'s (1998) holistic analysis of content were used to frame our reading of the transcripts. For us, women's interviews (i.e., their extended accounts of their violent relationships) signified the "narrative" as in Riessman's (2000, cited in Squire, 2008) research interviews with south Indian women about fertility. As is consistent with thematic analysis in general, the selection of themes involved searching across the data set (the transcribed interviews) to find repeated patterns of meaning (Braun & Clark, 2006). Similarities and differences within and across cases were explicated. As per Mankowski and Rappaport (2000), the importance of a theme was not the frequency with which it occurred in the narrative but rather its centrality to meaning and identity. We paid attention to themes surrounding women's constructions of "violence" and to how these themes provided insight about the subjectivities of the women. In particular, we were concerned with setting our analysis apart from traditional categorical analytical approaches by attempting to keep the story intact and "theorizing from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases" (Riessman, 2008, p. 53). Consistent with a postmodernist understanding, we acknowledge that our readings of women's narratives, at this particular moment, are just one of a variety that may be possible.

Analysis and Discussion

This article focuses on how women discuss various forms of violence or abuse³ to which they have been subjected in their intimate relationships. It shows how the narrative approach allowed women to go beyond mere "standard" descriptions of abuse (as they are defined in literature or legislation, for example) to construct their own complex understandings of abuse and, in particular, coming to a shared understanding about which "types" of abuse could be considered to be more damaging to the self.

Researchers working in the field of community psychology and narrative have highlighted the interplay between community narratives and personal life stories (for example, Humphreys, 2000). Mankowski and Rappaport (2000) have focused on community narratives as a psychological resource for community members to understand and interpret their experiences and to guide the construction of their personal identity. Community narratives

are said to be particularly vital when dominant cultural narratives fail to adequately represent the lived experience of individuals (Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000). We acknowledge that our participants may indeed represent a community. Women whose partners are attending an intervention program may be versed in particular organizational or social service language about domestic violence. Similarly, women who live in a deprived and marginalized context may themselves, by virtue of the context, come to certain shared communal constructions about partner violence. Indeed, since the 1990s, with the massive changes occurring in South African society, intimate partner violence has been transformed from a private, family issue to one that is visible and public, receiving attention from a range of social, legal, and political avenues (Boonzaier, 2008). It could be argued therefore that, in general, South African women are likely to be aware of and “versed” in a language of intimate partner violence. In this sense, by “shared understanding” we do not mean that the women come to a shared understanding of themselves and their experience through an interactive, micro-process. Rather, we suggest that their narratives of experience imply a communal construction of what “abuse” might entail (as seen through our identification of the commonalities expressed as themes in the individual stories) and which forms of abuse might be more damaging to the self.

The Complexities of Physical Violence

South African domestic violence legislation (Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998) delineates a number of different forms of abuse, including physical abuse; sexual abuse; emotional, verbal, and psychological abuse; and economic abuse (Bollen, Artz, Vetten, & Louw, 1999). Physical abuse includes any act or threatened act of physical violence with the intention to cause harm. Beyond this somewhat limiting definition, how do women themselves give meaning to what physical abuse is? In the first instance, women narrate the *act* of physical violence as being preceded by a *specific* incident or causal event (even if, in the current interview context, the narrator was unable to remember what the actual incident was). For example

. . . my eyes, my eyes were hit shut, shut. And it only happened because of a misunderstanding. Somebody told him um, he went to drink, with friends, and the one friend told him: “Your wife is having an affair.” But it was a joke. So he came home, . . . and he came to accuse me about the story . . . [Afrikaans]

And

. . . I can’t really remember what the argument was about and um he smacked me that hard that my nose started bleeding . . .

In the latter extract, the woman’s depiction of the violence suggests that the incident of physical violence may have been preceded by a verbal disagreement—an “argument”—a construction that implies an engagement between two actors. The woman’s construction

here concurs with Hyden's (1994) interpretation that a physically violent act may be preceded by an unresolved verbal disagreement. However, narrating their experiences of physical violence through constructions of a *valid precursor* to the violent episode allows women to make sense of an experience that is likely traumatic, chaotic, and inexplicable. Of course, this kind of narration also has identity implications for both the woman and her violent partner. In an important way, the woman is constructed as partially culpable and her partner therefore not fully liable for his behavior.

I'm like this, I can't keep quiet. I must talk back. And he does not want that! If I talk back or say something back, then it seems like he can give me one hell of a smack. I decided, one day I decided, it is better if I keep my mouth shut. Because if I stay quiet it seems like he will also be quiet . . . [Afrikaans]

The positioning of the self as a culpable actor who contributes to the violence runs parallel with constructing the man as "less responsible." This may be a means by which women are able to overcome the contradictory position of being beaten by an intimate partner and perhaps to even overcome the paradox of the coexistence of love and violence in their relationships (Yassour Borochowitz & Eisikovits, 2002). Indeed, past research has shown that abused women's subject positioning as "pure victim" is not uncomplicated (Boonzaier, 2008). The construction of self as coproducer of the violence shifts away from a position of an entirely "passive victim" and may even be a way for women to resist the labeling of themselves as "abused women," an identity which itself has negative connotations.

Through constructing their experiences of violence on their own terms and in their own words, women are able to give voice to a range of complexities. The complicated construction of the duality between *agency* and *blame* in terms of the women's sense of power in their relationships manifests in the extracts above. Narrative interviews, as unmediated ways for women to tell their stories of violence, enable women to verbalize (and perhaps conceptualize) a range of complex identity moments that may be tied to their responses to physical violence (such as blame, power/powerlessness, victimhood, survival, and strategic choices).

Another significant way in which women constructed the occurrence and severity of physical violence—and thus the "self" as an "abused woman"—was through their *embodiment* of such violence. The "markers" of abuse are rendered visible on women's bodies as "proof" of violence.

With this small body that I have, and those big hands, I'm like a rag doll in his hands. But you can believe me, with all the fighting, I didn't have one blue eye. That's how the Lord spared my face. There isn't one mark. When I tell people about my life, how much hell I had, then they say, "How can it be? Look at your face, you don't have marks." [Afrikaans]

. . . I won't say that violence is a problem in our relationship. Not really . . . because there's nothing that I can really show you . . . [Afrikaans]

The idea of physical evidence for violence has implications for the ease in which the women can take on the identity of “abused woman” in their broader community (first excerpt) and in the interview situation (second excerpt). The second excerpt appears to highlight the tension for the woman with regard to her right to take up the identity of being an “abused woman.” The construction of certain identities may occur within the context of tension between a woman’s experiences and broader societal/cultural conceptions of what constitutes an “abused woman.”

In certain communities, the sign of a blue eye is something that is shameful and signifies an “open secret”—that the woman is being abused by her partner. It seems ironic, then, that these observable consequences of abuse generate shame for the woman who holds the marker on her body and not necessarily so for the man who was the agent who inflicted the violence.

. . . Mondays, Monday then I can’t even go to work if my eye is hit closed. It’s not nice to go and stand in front of the white people like that . . . with a blue face . . . it was very painful for me. [Afrikaans]

Beyond an understanding that an episode of physical violence is likely to be preceded by a valid precursor (such as an insubordinate wife), there also appears to be a construction of violence as something that needs to be *physically* proven. The idea of *physical evidence* for violence has the function of limiting the definition of violence—i.e., it is only physical. However, this visual marker of violence on women’s bodies has a dual function. On one hand, it provides “evidence” of her positioning as someone who has been “abused,” which may mean that she is then able to receive certain kinds of services. On the other hand, but in a related manner, it is also an intense source of shame for the woman.

Writing also in a South African context on physical violence in young people’s sexual relationships, Wood, Lambert, and Jewkes (2008) state

As a privileged site for the inscription of power, the body spoke about what was often literally unspeakable. Bodily marking insinuated shame for both parties, since it implied that the man had gone too far and indicated wrongdoing on the part of the woman (hence her need for “discipline”). (p. 54)

Discourses of “justifiable” violence connote meanings of violence as being a disciplinary act over the “disobedient” woman. Here the shame associated with abuse is especially pertinent with regard to the notion that the level of punishment, as seen via the “observable” consequences of the abuse, is equivalent to the women’s “wrongdoing.” The meaning that is ascribed to the identity of “abused woman” implies images of the “bad woman” who is “deserving” of abuse. An alternative interpretation of the shame associated with the “blue eye” is offered by one of the women in Hydén’s (1994, 2008) research: that it is symbolic of being “unloved” and therefore a less valued member of society. In the context of a racialized society such as South Africa, the colored⁴ woman positions herself as being

even more vulnerable to this social perception of blame or shame when she is in the presence of white people. Here the “double burden of gender” (gender and race) contributes to the silencing and shame of abuse in contexts in which the women are disempowered in a multitude of ways.

South African society, while massively transformed since apartheid, still remains highly unequal. Poverty is clearly stratified by race, with people of color representing the poorest sectors of society and women of color perhaps the most marginalized. Women living in poverty and those marginalized by race may have very limited options for securing positive forms of identity, and thus their experiences of shame associated with the identity of being an “abused woman” may be amplified.

The Violence of Words: Verbal and Psychological Abuse

Verbal and psychological abuse involve a pattern of humiliating and degrading behavior “associated with psychological, spiritual and other forms of abuse that relate to an individual’s sense of integrity, freedom of expression and well-being” (Bollen et al., 1999, p. 4). Narrating their experiences in violent relationships, women were able to reveal that physical violence cannot simply be understood in isolation from other forms of abuse or from the context of the relationship itself. Physical violence was put forward as being frequently accompanied by emotionally controlling and verbally abusive behavior. The construction of verbal statements as possessing a tangible physical force (cf. Stamp & Sabourin, 1995) was an important way in which women narrated the complex relationship between physical and verbal/psychological forms of violence. Words or language were described as having a corporeal physical energy, in particular, the “force” of men’s verbal or psychological abuse was intensely *felt* by the women.

He didn’t hit me but that time I say then you can rather hit me, but don’t say all these bad things to me. . . . It even hurts me more. And he swear at me, or told me I’m like a highway queen. I’m, I was the badest woman God could ever, you know, like create.

Even though sometimes it’s not physical, but the verbal abuse is just as painful as the physical abuse. . . . When I speak to people he would always try and like break me down.

In these extracts, the two women depict verbal abuse as more painful than physical violence. In the second extract, the woman suggests her partner’s words “break her down,” implying that his words have a tangible physical strength, that the man is able to accomplish something destructive with his violent use of words. Through this metaphor, women are able to acknowledge that verbal or psychological abuse, even though not visible *on the body*, may also constitute a valid form of violence that is potentially experienced as harmful to their “morally respectable” self.

The complexities of intimate partner violence are such that the different forms thereof cannot be captured in isolation from each other. Through narrating their experiences of the physical force of psychological and verbal abuse, women also capture some of the nuances of the different and changing manifestations of violence in their lives. The point at which the legal sphere enters the private one—through threatened imprisonment and other forms of legal sanction for violent men—is the point at which the “predominant” form of abuse in the relationship appears to transform.

But the abuse is still going on and it's like worsened because he's so clever he knows that he cannot physically abuse me. He's now abusing me psychologically, mentally . . . [Afrikaans]

Women lucidly depict verbal/psychological forms of abuse as more damaging to the self than physical violence. Their narratives show that they perceive the various forms of abuse to be occurring along a continuum of violent behavior. They also represent psychological forms of abuse as more serious, perhaps because the existing strategies (such as calling the police) may have been less effective and it therefore becomes a form of violence that is more difficult to manage. Indeed, after physical violence has first been used by the partner the future threat of physical violence is perceived to be very real, an aspect that might compound the experience of verbal/psychological abuse and intimidation.

And then he would phone me to work and um, tell me if I see tomorrow morning then he would have hung himself and the child in the garage. . . . Now I'll come home with a fear. Or, later I didn't know what I could expect when I come home. He now really . . . when he didn't hit me anymore . . . so emotional, that later I felt that I could lose my mind. Because he already knew I was scared of a knife now he would get up at night and then he would go and scratch in the draw, now he walks in the dark. Now I don't know, does he have a knife, or . . . [Afrikaans]

In a relationship with a history of physical violence, verbal/psychological abuse may contain the omnipresent threat of physical violence and subsequently becomes a way in which a man is able to maintain control and instill fear without actually *using* physical violence. It becomes almost *unnecessary*. Expressing their fears of the threat of future physical violence and the damaging effect of verbal/psychological abuse, women are able also to give voice to the “behind the scenes” experiences that are sometimes lost in mainstream definitions of what intimate partner violence may constitute. The women's lucid descriptions of the impact of psychological violence, their narrations of their fear, and their positioning of themselves as “helpless” in the atmosphere of terror serve to validate their experiences as abuse. These accounts also function for the women to construct themselves as “abused woman,” a self that is justified even though the women may not have visible marks or scars.

Narrating Sexual Coercion

Sexual abuse includes any behavior that humiliates, degrades, or violates an individual's sexual integrity. It may be defined as "any unwanted physical invasion of an individual's body that is sexual in nature" (Bollen et al., 1999, p. 5) and can be understood to occur along a continuum of coercive behaviors (Kelly, 1990), ranging from explicitly sexually violent acts to insidious coercive practices that aim to control access to women's bodies. One way in which the insidiousness of sexual control may pervade an abusive relationship is when women feel they are compelled to acquiesce to unwanted sexual activity with a partner out of fear of violence or other forms of retaliation (see also Basile, 1999).

And also when, I mean if you say no, he wants to have sex and you say no and then he just does it anyway . . . you know. That kind of thing.

Interviewer: Did it happen often?

Ja, especially when he's like drugged and stuff like that ja. And comes in late. . . . And wake me up, ja. That wasn't nice. It leaves you very empty. It actually leaves you with a feeling of being raped.

. . . you know sometimes after we have sex I will cry because I feel like somebody that's been raped. You understand? You don't do it. For instance, he'll be, he'll be rude to me in the bed, then he still expects me to sleep with him. Then I sleep with him because I, I'm fearful . . .

In both extracts, the women, although using the word "rape," stop short of naming their experiences "rape." Of course, there are a multitude of difficulties around the naming of experiences of sexual violence, which may be more troublesome when the wifely script involves "naturalized" sexual obligations on the part of women. As further complication, the "victim" role, particularly as a victim of sexual violence, incorporates shame and humiliation. It thus makes sense for the first participant to speak about "a feeling of being raped" and for the second woman to state that she felt "like somebody that's been raped." These constructions possibly signify some of the difficulties women encounter in positioning themselves as "rape victims," an identity which, in hegemonic cultural discourse, is understood to run counter to those of "wife," "girlfriend," or "partner" (Gavey, 2005). In South Africa, in particular, rape and intimate partner violence are manifestations of the assertion of male dominance and women's subservience. South African men, to a large degree, have ideas about entitlement to sex and hierarchical gender positions, and male success is often defined in terms of the ability to control women (Abrahams, Jewkes, Hoffman, & Laubsher, 2004).

Once more, as with narrating their experiences of psychological, verbal, and physical violence, women are able to demonstrate the complexity of sexual abuse as well as the disjuncture between the legal definition of sexual abuse, for example, and the ways in which they experience such abuse. Verbal and psychological attacks on women's sexuality feature prominently in their narrations.

And at times when I worked overtime then he told me, if I now say I'm working tonight, till 11 'o clock, then, . . . let Friday come, then you know what he does? Then he tells me, yes I'm sleeping with my, with the [men at work], or I'm sleeping with my manager. Then I must hear all that. [Afrikaans]

. . . I've got somebody else, it's always about affairs. Always accusing me. Always, always, always.

Jealousy and possessiveness on the men's part symbolize a sense of ownership over women partners; this in turn insinuates the misbehavior of women that needs to be controlled. The jealous partner responds to any transgression of his control (such as working late and not being accounted for) as an example of the woman's promiscuity. He responds to this by degrading her worth and attempting to position her as a "whore." This negative description is tied into patriarchal discourses that offer a limited range of possibilities for women and position them as either bad (whores) or good (virgins; Macdonald, 2005).

A prominent theme in the women's narratives was the preoccupation with being labeled a "bad woman." Accusations of infidelity attack the woman's sexuality and degrade her sense of self as a moral person in the world. A woman's investment in a moral self signifies a distancing from the "abused self" and the shame associated with this positioning. This highlights the disparities between her sense of self as a "good" moral person and her self that is positioned as "bad" abused woman. For poor women of color, who grapple with day-to-day issues of disempowerment associated with their race and their class, the importance of the investment in a positive moral self is amplified. Here this investment is a means of negotiating a level of power in a world where women can validate their own worth and values. Thus the partner's accusations and verbal attacks of the woman's sexuality strike at the core of her subjectivity, destabilizing her (already limited) sense of power in the world.

The above examples have shown that a narrative methodological approach has allowed for women to narrate their experiences of abuse as located within their particular sociocultural contexts. The structural inequalities of women's lives as well as their particular social-historical location have been shown to shape the meaning that women give to their experiences of violence/abuse (Bhuyan, Mell, Senturia, Sullivan, & Shiu-Thornton, 2005; Fox et al., 2007). In their narrative accounts, women constructed particular selves in relation to their descriptions of abuse and their "explanations" of the abuser's behavior. These multiple identities are often in flux and they both interact with and challenge broader cultural discourses of abuse, shedding light on the complex subjectivities of these women.

More specifically, narrating a problematic and traumatic experience involves "making sense" out of "nonsense." This involves the construction of a particular "self" in relation to the abuse and to others in the world. Our analysis has illustrated that the positioning of self in these women's stories illuminates certain identity decisions that serve particular functions for the women at different moments, enabling them to articulate and conceptualize the violent events in a coherent narrative, and thus conveying meaning to the listener. Women invested in certain discursive positions, from a narrative perspective, to (a)

construct the self in particular ways and (b) to engage in subject positions as a means of restructuring/reworking the life story. Both points are constitutive of narrative purpose and signify how narrative may restore agency to the speaker. On one hand, women's constructions of a powerless, vulnerable self served to convey meaning about the seriousness of certain incidents, especially with regard to events that do not fall under mainstream definitions of abuse. On the other hand, narrations of their own agency enabled the women to make sense of the abuse (as being caused by conflict/aspects of their behavior) as well as their negotiation of power in the situation. The women also invested in a moral self to make sense of the contradictions of self in an abusive relationship and in a disempowering social context. In this way, they counteracted the shame that is associated with the positioning of "abused woman" and articulated the ways in which the abuse threatened their sense of self in the world. Thus the women were able to ascribe meaning to and make sense of their confusing and often inexplicable experiences of violence, constructing certain identities along the way and providing insight into their subjective world.

Conclusion

Women in this study described multiple forms of violence, including physical, verbal/psychological, and sexual abuse. This is consistent with other studies such as Fox et al. (2007), which have qualitatively examined women's stories of abuse. Their stories about the abuse showed that each "type" of violence cannot easily be explored in isolation and that the abuse could usefully be viewed as a web of interrelated actions and behaviors. Women also spoke about how the forms of violence had changed over time, as a result of their own strategies as well as through other forms of intervention. Moreover, they constructed psychological forms of violence as more damaging to the self than physical violence. These particular insights were made visible with the use of a narrative methodological approach, which allowed women to narrate their experiences on their own terms, with no predefined scripts. Qualitative work in general has moved away from the static, researcher-defined frames of quantitative surveys that impose dominant cultural definitions of violence on women's experiences. Narrative research goes a step further with its focus on the construction of identity that emerges during the process of storytelling.

Narratives, however, also have political dimensions. In reauthoring their stories, women are able to construct meaning out of their experiences in a way that makes sense for them; it involves a restoration of agency. The women's narratives illuminated certain identity moments in which the women fluctuated between investing in identities that are consistent with broader social discourses of "abused women" and also identities that challenged these scripts. The investment in certain forms of identity served particular functions for the women narrators and raised questions about the complex interplay between agency, responsibility, and power in their lives. Narratives are not merely personal; they provide us with a means to think in new ways about broader sociological and political phenomena (Day Sclater, 2000). The narratives have provided for a rich and multifaceted understanding of women's lived realities of violence in a context of poverty and lack of social resources.

A thematic narrative analysis and holistic analysis of content can be said to be particularly useful in achieving levels of interpretation that complement a feminist interpretive schema. This kind of analysis does not facilitate learning in detail about the lives of individual narrators, a function which is possible with other narrative methods; however, it allows researchers to learn about participants' lives in relation to categories of power and subordination (such as gender, race, or class; Riessman, 2008). This approach, informed by a feminist poststructuralist lens, allowed us to study identity as it functioned in relation to these particular categories of power. As a result, we were able to provide commentary on the ways in which gender, race, and class function in the narratives of poor women of color and how they enable or constrain particular forms of subjectivity for the narrating women.

This article has argued that the adoption of narrative concepts and methodologies adds a valuable dimension to qualitative work in the field of woman abuse. Narrative concepts allow the researcher to understand stories as context-bound and therefore shaped by social, political, historical, and cultural forces. Narrative methods of data gathering allow access to participants' extended accounts of their experiences and particular aspects of these experiences that are most meaningful for them. We have shown that a thematic (and holistic) approach to narrative analysis allows for the exploration of how the women position themselves in various ways through their language and in relation to certain "violent" events. In turn, this opens up the possibility to engage in interpretation about the various identities that women construct through their narrative accounts. The analysis has shed light onto the multiple selves that women construct that both draw on and challenge dominant cultural constructions of abuse, providing insight into the subjectivities of the participants as "abused women" in their social worlds.

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Notes

1. The authors thank an anonymous reviewer for raising further critiques of the CTS.
2. The authors are grateful to an anonymous reviewer who pointed out that the roots of narrative research in the social sciences emerged well before the 80s, through the reflexive and

introspective methods of early psychologists and cultural anthropologists. Indeed, as Riessman (2008) notes, narrative study appears to bud early but bloom late.

3. These terms are used interchangeably.
4. The term “colored” is one of the many racial categories constructed by the apartheid government of South Africa but is still used in the country today to refer to a group of people who constituted one of the oppressed groups and who are of “mixed” ancestry.

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