

The Language of Violence

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Content warning: domestic violence.

When it comes to awareness of domestic violence, we are in an unprecedented time in Australia. Media reporting, social media campaigns, research and public debate has been heightened as the reality of the numbers hit home. One woman per week is being killed by a partner or ex-partner¹.

It is timely then to examine the language we use to talk about domestic violence. The language we use changes the way we think about and view victims and offenders, and therefore how we respond to them².

The language we use can minimise the brutality of the offender, and can contribute to victim-blaming. The way we tell stories can also portray victims as passively unresisting or even mentally unwell. In this way, the language of domestic violence can perpetuate the very problems we are trying to tackle.

This article explores three ways we can use language that clearly depicts both the actions of the offender and the agency of the victim. The first is to focus the language on the offender as the agent of violence; the second is to describe violence as a one-way act rather than a mutual social interaction; the third is to include the victims' resistance and responses to violence in the story and to view these actions as a sign of victims' agency rather than 'effects' of violence.

1. Focus responsibility on the offender

So often, domestic violence and violence against women is described in terms of something that 'happens to' women. Newspaper headlines describe acts of violence against women as if by an invisible force, rather than a human being choosing to be violent. We talk about "violence against women" rather than

¹ Although this article uses the language of men's violence against women, it is important to note that violence is not limited to heterosexual relationships between cisgendered people. Data on intimate partner violence within the LGBTQI population is harder to find, but what data has been utilised "suggests that rates of intimate partner violence are either equal to, or higher than, those of family violence between non-LGBTQI people" ([DVRCV](#)). As with data from heterosexual partnerships, the research is focussed on rates of violence with a lack of discussion of who the offenders are.

The concepts explained here are relevant to male victims as well as female victims. Using accurate language is important when discussing any actions of abuse and violence, whatever the respective genders of the victim and the offender.

² In this article, the terms offender and victim are used as "situated-action terms" not as "identity-terms" (following the terminology of Renoux and Wade 2008). This means that in each specific act of violence there is an offender and a victim. However, these terms are not ongoing identity markers.

“men’s violence against women”. In this way, the violent offenders are written out of the story and become invisible in our speech and questioning. We therefore ask questions of the victim, not the offender. This way of discussing domestic violence is “all part of the public perception of violence, where we concentrate on the victims and ignore the actual problem – the offenders” (Jane Gilmore, [Daily Life](#)).

When we continually write about violence with only reference to the victim, and not the offender, we encourage victim-blaming. Making the focus on the woman leads us to ask questions about these women: “Why are so many women being abused? What is wrong with them? Why doesn’t she leave?” By talking about women all the time, we imply that this is a ‘women’s issue’. Once something is a ‘women’s issue’, we assume it is of no relevance to men. In reality, 95% of violent offenders are men, whether the victim is male or female ([Our Watch](#)). With such a high percentage of offenders being men, this is clearly a men’s issue.

Take for example the hypothetical headline: ‘Woman killed in violent attack’. The focus is on the woman. Grammatically, she is the subject. She is the one being killed. The husband who is the offender, the cause of the violent attack, is not acknowledged. This is the kind of statement that inspires questions about what women can do to avoid violence, and what society can do to help women in these situations. This line of thinking, while well-meaning, is victim-blaming and less productive, because ultimately the woman is not the one responsible for the attack. Meanwhile the husband remains invisible and escapes our questioning.

To turn this statement around, it could be rephrased: ‘Husband kills wife in violent attack’. When the statement is focussed on the offender in his way, we begin to ask questions about him, such as ‘Why would a man kill his partner? What can we do to stop men from doing this?’ In this alternate statement, the man is in the active position, and the responsibility is where it belongs: on the offender. The questions turn to the source of the violence, rather than taking the violence for granted and asking how victims can respond to it.

When we change the language to focus on the offender, the nature of research about men’s violence against women can change. We may start to collect data on the offenders – that is, the men who are causing this violence in the first place. We can begin to ask questions about violent offenders: Why are these men abusive? Why do they choose to use power and control over their wives/partners and children? Where do they get their views and beliefs about women and children? Where do they get their sense of entitlement?

Dealing with the cause of the violence is more productive than looking at why women aren’t doing more to avoid violence. In reality, women are already doing all they can to avoid and rally against violence. The violence will end when offenders stop choosing to be violent.

2. Violence is a one-way act

“Ordinary social acts are *mutual* in that individuals coordinate their actions to accomplish them, for example greetings, jokes, hand-shakes and even arguments. In contrast, violent acts are *unilateral* in that they consist of actions by one person against the will and well-being of another”
– Renoux and Wade, 2008

So often, the language of mutuality is used to describe domestic violence and violence against women. This is because social interactions are mutual: relationships, sex, and arguments are all mutual social interactions.

When violence is involved, however, the interaction is no longer mutual, therefore unilateral expressions must be used, for example: abuse, rape, assault. The problem arises when mutual language is used to describe unilateral violence, thus implicating both the offender and the victim in the violence.

There are some common phrases that can be rephrased so that violence is not hidden in mutual language. Instead of saying ‘violent relationship’, as in ‘she left a violent relationship’, it would be more accurate to say ‘she left a violent man’. In reality, a ‘relationship’ cannot be abusive but an individual within a relationship can be. To use the term ‘violent relationship’ has two critical consequences. The first is that the offender is not identified and remains invisible. The second is that the very use of ‘violent relationship’ implies mutuality: both people are involved in the violence. In a ‘violent relationship’, either the victim is also violent, or she is responsible for his violence.

Instead of ‘unwanted sex’, it is crucial we use ‘rape/sexualised assault’. Sex and sexual intercourse are mutual acts between people who are able to and have given consent. When sex is unwanted, it is rape.

The use of the word ‘sex’ to describe ‘rape’ is a critical problem in the landscape of child rape and sexualised assault allegations and reports to authorities. Just recently, reports of an Australian man charged in the US for paying \$250 for ‘child sex’ were all over the media. The headlines need to state ‘man paid \$250 to rape a child’. Terms such as ‘child sex’ implies that a child has ‘sex’ to give; has the capacity to give consent. This is not true.

Instead of ‘an argument that got out of hand’ we need to say ‘an assault’. An argument is mutual and on equal grounds. An assault is not a natural extension of an argument, but a unilateral act of violence.

When mutual language is used to describe a situation of unilateral violence, the violence is minimised and absorbed between the two people involved. If the violence, rape, or assault is described as ‘relationship’, ‘sex’ or ‘argument’, then the responsibility for the violence is implicitly shared between the offender and the victim.

Even if the victim is not accused of also being violent, she is still held accountable for the violence, and the same victim-blaming questions get trotted out: “why

doesn't she leave?" "What did she do to deserve it?" Furthermore, by describing violence as mutual, we are not only holding the victim responsible, but we are also masking the victim's response and resistance to being violated.

This use of language has flow-on effects on the public perception of victims, and how we respond, collectively and individually, to victims and offenders. One example of how this plays out is seen in Jess Hill's article about how domestic violence is dealt with in the family court system. She writes, "domestic violence is 'ignored or minimised, re-constructed as inconsequential' or passed off as mutual violence, where both parents are equally at fault" (Jess Hill, [Daily Life](#)). This is an example of our mutual language directly affecting perceptions of domestic violence, and therefore how victims and offenders are treated.

By using more accurate language to describe violence, the extent of the brutality is clearer, and the offender is rightfully placed in the position of responsibility. Keeping mutual language exclusively for mutual social interactions also redefines a relationship as something that exists in a situation of equality.

3. Include victims' resistance and responses to violence

Two major stories that are often missing in the dialogue around domestic violence and men's violence against women are 1) women's resistance to violence, and 2) the length to which male offenders go in order to stop their victims' resistance.

In discussions of domestic violence, women are often portrayed as passive and weak. This is in direct contrast to the reality that women are constantly resisting the abuse, either quietly or robustly, and are often attempting to protect their children. As Michael Salter noted, "My experience of girls and women as the active agents of their own lives didn't accord with the message that they were docile, weak and dependent on male beneficence" (Michael Salter, [Meanjin Quarterly](#)).

In a general sense, violence is an affront to human dignity and victims resist this affront in a variety of ways. In discussions of violence, resistance is usually either ignored altogether, or framed as "effects of violence", thus pathologising victims.

Victims resist violence in many ways. Sometimes resistance takes the form of a defensive action, for example dodging a punch or fighting back. Resistance can be internal, for example by thinking, "I hate you", or by mentally vacating to endure the torment of rape. Women with abusive male partners will often rebel against control to the point that they believe they can safely do so, or even if it is unsafe. Renoux and Wade use the example of a woman who wore a short skirt to a party against the wishes of her abusive husband "even though [she] knew there would be hell to pay" (2008). Resistance in all of its forms is a sign of a victim's strength of spirit against the violation of their humanity.

Often in court cases and newspaper accounts, violent acts are described but women's resistance to the attacks are not. The result is a one-sided account in

which the attempts of the victim to avoid or protest the violence are not told. The implication is that the victim did nothing to avoid the attack. This invites the victim-blaming questions: "Why didn't she stop it from happening?"

To explain the difference that including the victim's responses makes, here are two contrasting accounts of the same assault (trigger warning – description of violence):

Account 1:

Sue and Tom had been dating for five weeks. One night they had an argument on the way home from the pub. Tom complained that Sue was cold and not interested in sex. When Tom stopped to urinate in the bushes, Sue kept walking. Tom asked Sue to stop and wait. By the time Tom caught up to Sue, they were at Sue's apartment. Tom wanted to come in. He pushed the door open and forced his way in. Tom pushed Sue hard against the wall, called her a nasty name, and punched a hole in the wall inches from her face. Tom grabbed Sue and punched her in the ribs. He kicked her in the ribs and left the apartment.

Account 2:

Sue and Tom had been dating for five weeks. One night they had an argument on the way home from the pub. Sue complained that Tom was rude and drank too much. Tom complained that Sue was cold and not interested in sex. When Tom stopped to urinate in the bushes, Sue kept walking. Tom asked Sue to stop and wait, but she refused. By the time Tom caught up to Sue, they were at Sue's apartment. Sue told Tom he could go to his own place, but Tom wanted to come in. Sue insisted that he go to his own place. He pushed the door open and forced his way in. Sue told him loudly to get out. Tom pushed Sue hard against the wall, called her a nasty name, and punched the wall inches from her face. Sue ducked underneath his arm and ran for the phone in the living room. Tom grabbed Sue and punched her in the ribs. Sue rolled onto her side, gasping for breath. He kicked her in the ribs and left the apartment. Sue found the phone and called her best friend, who lived two blocks away.
- Renoux and Wade, 2008

The first account focuses entirely on the Tom's actions. No resistance by Sue is recorded; in the account she is effectively an object of his actions. The reader is required to fill in the blanks, and from this account it could readily be inferred that Sue did nothing to defend herself against Tom's attacks.

The second account does not allow the reader to fill in the blanks, but records Sue resisting every action of the man. At each turn she asserts her boundaries and attempts to avoid his attacks. Eventually she deals with the aftermath of his assault.

By omitting the resistance, the true extent of the violence is concealed in the first account. Because Sue's actions are not reported, it appears as though she has done nothing to fight the attack. Omitting victim resistance and responses invites victim-blaming, and also objectifies the victim by removing any description of her agency.

By including women's acts of resistance, we uncover the actions that the offender takes to subvert her resistance in order to continue to be violent. Renoux and Wade write that "to conceal resistance is to conceal violence" (2008). It is crucial for police, journalists, researchers, commentators and any other people talking about violence to describe the actions of both the offender and the victim.

Another problem with the reporting of victims' resistance to violence is that these responses are often reframed as symptoms of mental illness. Renoux and Wade give some examples of ways in which adults resist or respond to violence: 'lying awake at night; withdrawing affection, being intensely vigilant. Children can respond to violence by having nightmares, refusing to obey abrasive adults, or worrying themselves sick'. Renoux and Wade note that these forms of resistance are often seen as the effects or symptoms of various disorders, and thus are "made the objects of clinical intervention" (2008).

In this way, the victim is pathologised; in such a framework, the problem is the victim's mental state, rather than the violence. The treatment of disorders becomes the focus, and the root issue of past or ongoing violence is eclipsed. Once more, the problem of violence, and violent offenders, is silenced in the intense scrutiny of the victims of violence.

In order to better discuss and document responses and resistance to violence, it is important to first understand that such resistance is right and normal, even if on the surface it may look anti-social or unusual. Being violated is not a normal occurrence, so the usual social rules don't apply. People discussing violence can be encouraged to tell the whole story, including their resistance. And when interacting with people who have been victims of violence, it can be empowering to frame their actions in terms of responses and resistance.

Summing Up

The concepts explained in this article are key to framing the public discussion around domestic violence. Acknowledging the agency of victims of violence in resisting and responding to attacks, focussing on the offender rather than the victim in discussions, and using unilateral terms rather than mutual terms to describe acts of violence is key to framing public discourse and public policy in the prevention of men's violence against women.

It is important to note that harmful ways of discussing domestic violence and men's violence against women are deeply entrenched, and changing the language we use is not easy. Even within this article, the passive voice focuses on victims in the introduction: "One woman per week is being killed by a partner or ex-

partner”³. The phrase ‘violent relationship’ is used in one of the articles cited here. But while not easy, change is possible. We can pay attention to the way that we speak about these issues, as well as holding each other accountable to using the right language. Only when we leave behind any language that leads to victim-blaming and assign responsibility back to the offender, where it belongs, will we start to see real change in the treatment of victims and responses to offenders of domestic violence in this country.

For more information on using accurate and helpful language to discuss domestic violence, specifically for journalists, see these:

http://www.ourwatch.org.au/MediaLibraries/OurWatch/Images/ourwatch_reporting_on_domestic_violence_aa_v1.pdf

http://www.ourwatch.org.au/MediaLibraries/OurWatch/Images/ourwatch_reporting_on_sexual_violence_aa_v1.pdf

<http://www.femifesto.ca>

<http://www.responsebasedpractice.com/>

To continue the conversation, see #usetherightwords

References:

Gilmore, Jane, “No, women aren't as likely to commit violence as men” ([Daily Life](#))

Hill, Jess, “The Family Court has a serious attitude problem when it comes to domestic violence” ([Daily Life](#))

O’Halloran, Kate, “Family Violence in an LGBTQI Context” ([DVRCV](#))

Our Watch, *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia* ([Our Watch](#))

Renoux, Martin and Wade, Allan, “Resistance to violence: A key symptom of chronic mental wellness” (<http://goo.gl/0ugWc4>)

Renoux, Martin and Wade, Allan, "Account 1 & 2"(private collection of author).

Salter, Michael, “Real Men Do Hit Women” ([Meanjin Quarterly](#))

³ This is because the statistics available to us are focussed on victims and not offenders, so we cannot state that all of the offenders are men.