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## **From rejection to understanding: Towards a synthetic approach to interpersonal violence**

**Marita Husso, Helena Hirvonen & Marianne Notko**

The last chapter discusses the challenges and possibilities related to understanding interpersonal violence. First, this chapter draws together main themes of the book and indicates the ways interpersonal violence is rejected and ignored as an individual experience, institutional and societal phenomenon and as a scientific question. Second, the chapter introduces Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice as one of the possibilities for overcoming some of the limitations on conceptualisations of violence in social theories and the human sciences.

The topics of the various chapters of this book emphasise time, space, institutional regimes and intersectionality in relation to interpersonal violence. The empirical examples given show how cultural conceptions and institutional practices related to interpersonal violence have historically been, and remain, despite all the violence prevention work that has been done, constitutive of the justifications for violence. The overarching themes of the book include; the denial, minimization, normalization and deflection of violence; the power of shame and honor; the contribution of emotional dispositions like fear, duty and responsibility; gender blaming; a culture of silence about the types of violence that are intertwined with traditional practices and interpreting violence as an individual problem.

The empirical studies also show that experiences of violence have historically been, and continue to be particularly susceptible to rejection, misunderstanding and suspicion, and that experiences of interpersonal violence continue to distinguish abused people from those who have not encountered this kind of hurt and injury. It seems that interpersonal violence has remained culturally and individually denied and marginalised as a phenomenon and as a topic due to the societal and gendered beliefs and attitudes that surround it. On the one hand, interpersonal violence is understood as an inevitable and normal way to solve problems, while on the other hand the existence of violence has been denied and rejected. In many cultures threatening topics such as interpersonal violence are viewed psychologically and culturally through the lens of rejection and thus hidden from view (see also Brison, 1998). One reason for rejection is that such topics endanger our belief in the existence of self-sufficient, rational and freely choosing individual actors as the constituents of society (Taylor, 1992). Such rejection can be either deliberate or happen unwittingly (Douglas, 1996), and as the chapters of the book show it can take various forms including:

- Denial of the existence of violence
- Belittling of the quantity and quality of violence
- Silence about violence
- Neglect of the documentation of the existence and consequences of violence in organizational practices
- Structural underdevelopment of services for the victims of violence
- Simplifying and stereotypic patterns of explaining the causes of violence
- Exclusion of interpersonal violence from scientific discourses

The rejection of interpersonal violence has excluded it from the field of explicit discourse both in everyday life and in academic research. Combating such exclusion means first, making the existence of interpersonal violence visible and, second, to analysing it as an ongoing practice produced and reproduced as an integral part of social relations and power structures (Kristeva, 1982; Bourdieu, 1998). Viewed from this perspective the sensitive nature of interpersonal violence as a topic of study is revealed to be not an innate feature of the phenomenon itself but a quality of the whole societal totality in which it takes place.

The legitimization of certain violent acts depends on temporal and spatial locations, institutional regimes and intersectional differences in people's position in the world. The explanatory models, attitudes toward and means of conceptualising violence form the conceptual basis and ideological means that drives both the continuation and justification of violence. As long as we do not speak or write about the suffering caused by violence, and as long as we fail to deal with, research and analyse the experiences of violated persons, it will continue to be possible to justify the use of violence as a means of problem solving and maintaining social order (see also Kappeler, 1995).

However, the necessity of recognizing and acknowledging experiences of violence does not concern individuals alone, but also communities and societies that need to deal with the effects of violence. The sharing of experiences of violence is thus also a question of both communal and societal relationships and global political orders. Oppressive practices and objectifying attitudes related to interpersonal violence are also present in other social situations, means of knowing and attempts to control and manage the world. They eliminate the possibilities to engage in relationships and inhabit spaces that are based on reciprocity, in

which mutual recognition and acknowledgement could be possible. At the same time they maintain the existence of interpersonal violence as logical – as a behaviour or a practice that can be explained by the circumstances or the characteristics of the victims of violence, and confirm the ways of rejecting and ignoring interpersonal violence as an individual experience, as an institutional and societal phenomenon and as a scientific question. Hence, it is crucial to understand experiences and narratives of violence in relation to institutional practices like structural and symbolic violence, and also reflect on the rejection of interpersonal violence in scientific discourses. Next we will introduce one possible path to a synthesis. Our approach draws on the conception proposed by Pierre Bourdieu.

### **Towards a synthetic approach: Symbolic violence, doxa, social suffering and habitus**

Interpersonal violence, especially violence in everyday and intimate practices has not been a central concern in the study of social theories. This limitation reflects the cultural attitudes and “taken-for-grantedness of violence”, and the hierarchical and gendered nature of research fields and theories, combined with the earlier marginalization of gender, ethnicity and age. To develop a social theoretical approach to interpersonal violence and to discuss problems and possibilities related to the rejection and recognition of interpersonal violence in this book, we draw on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice. Bourdieu’s interest throughout his career as a sociologist and an anthropologist was in phenomena of power and domination. Moreover, he considered the subject matter of sociology to be diverse, historically variable and susceptible to changes through feedback arising from sociological reflection on society (Krais, 2006). In line with his idea, the chapters in this book present empirical realities from a variety of spatial and temporal locations and intersectional and institutional settings. To assess these realities

and to broaden the social theoretical discussion on violence, we investigate the possibilities of using some of the central concepts of Bourdieu's theory as instruments for the analysis of the empirical realities of interpersonal violence.

Theoretically, the reproduction of violent and abusive relationships and practices in society can be understood through Bourdieu's (1977) concept of "symbolic violence". The concept of symbolic violence refers to domination that implies certain complicity on the part of the dominated (Bourdieu, 2000, p.168–171). Most of the time to facilitate relations of domination or to become a victim of violent practices is not a matter of individuals' personal choice.

Rather, the reproduction of symbolic violence is first and foremost representative of the ways in which people become accustomed and habituated to their everyday lives. According to Bourdieu (2000, p.168), in time habituation to customs and law produce misrecognition of their arbitrariness. The idea of symbolic violence therefore points to the structural, taken-for-granted conditions that create different forms and relations of domination between people.

The chapters in this book show many examples of the ways in which cultural conceptions, societal practices, institutional regimes, and implementations of procedural norms can also be forms of symbolic violence. This includes the various mechanisms of denial, minimization, deflection and normalization of interpersonal violence analyzed in these chapters, such as practices intertwined with honour-based violence, victim blaming and gendered responsibilities, and mandatory participation in genital mutilation and other violent traditions.

Symbolic violence can be found anywhere in social practice. As described by Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004), Bourdieu finds domination and symbolic violence in a variety of unlikely places – in courtship and marriage, in systems of classification, in style and the various uses of culture. Symbolic violence does not refer to physical violence itself, but to the

mechanisms that institute and reproduce relations of domination. Focus on these relations points to the emotional and psychological characteristics of violence and abuse. Because of this, symbolic violence can be a useful point of departure in recognizing and analysing the multi-faceted nature of violence (Morgan & Björkert, 2006). For one thing, the concept offers a sociological, analytical way to understand how the social practice of gender may contribute to interpersonal violence as a phenomenon and as a social problem. Gender domination, as Bourdieu and Wacquant (2004) point out, is a case in point of symbolic violence (see also Bourdieu, 2001; Kraus, 1993). The taken-for-grantedness of gendered relations of domination is naturalized via the body – in the social construction of masculinity and femininity that shape the body, and its habits and possibilities for expression. In the process of storing the social within the body, gendered cultural patterns and social relations of domination between women and men become perceived as “natural” (Bourdieu, 2001; Kraus, 2006). As many of the chapters in this book demonstrate, gender domination is embedded in social structures and institutional practices in diverse ways. For this reason the analytical significance of gender should not be overlooked in research on interpersonal violence.

The misrecognition of violence as something else, or even as something good, affects how individuals deal with violence in personal relationships, but it also affects institutional arrangements and practices concerning violence interventions. The chapters in this book shed light on the consequences of rejecting interpersonal violence as a social problem in variety of cultural situations, intersectional and institutional settings and temporal and spatial locations. The persistence of some of the characteristics of violence as a phenomenon – such as its gendered nature - are informative about the persistence and power of the learnt, shared, and often unconscious beliefs and values that Bourdieu calls “doxa”. The theory of *doxa*, namely, the discursive universe and topics forced out of the explicit discursive universe by

mechanisms of rejection, helps extend the application of the concept of rejection (Freud) from the individual level to the social and cultural level (Bourdieu, 1977; Kristeva, 1982; 1997).

Lois McNay (1999), for example, has pointed out that although the detraditionalizing forces in society have thrown certain aspects of gender relations up for renegotiation, men and women continue to have deep seated, unconscious investments in conventional images of masculinity and femininity which cannot easily be reshaped. Much of everyday agency remains in the pre-reflexive and the unconscious (Bourdieu et al., 1999; McNay, 1999; Bourdieu, 2001; McNay, 2004; Bourdieu, 2000). Thus, the destabilizing of conventional gender relations on one level may further entrench conventional patterns of behavior on other levels, and produce different states of autonomy and dependency for men and women. Pre-reflexivity and unconsciousness are necessary for everyday life to run smoothly in a predictable manner, but the unconsciousness of violent acts and practices can also be damaging and cause suffering.

From the point of view of social theorization and the empirical study of interpersonal violence, the idea of doxa brings to the fore the importance of a focus on the social structures and institutional practices that enable violence, and that produce what Bourdieu calls “social suffering” (Bourdieu et al., 1999). The concept of social suffering perfectly encompasses the condition in which the victims of interpersonal violence live. Additionally, it refers to both the individual body and the socio-cultural structures and practices behind suffering, transcending the boundaries between the individual and the societal, body and mind, reason and emotion as well as the private and the public.



Although suffering is an individual experience, it is produced by the social structures and institutional practices in which it occurs, and hence protecting people from violence and violation is always also a socially negotiated process. Hence, suffering, *misère*, is a product of social forces. Bourdieu stresses the importance of studying people's own experiences, but nevertheless approaches this question, above all, from a structural point of view. The analysis of violence and violation also means facing the fact that exposing people to violence, violation and vulnerability, and protecting people from these, is always also socially negotiated. Therefore, it is essential to pay attention to the question of whose experiences of hurt are taken seriously, and what kinds of experiences of being hurt we are exposed to and protected against.

Bourdieu uses the concept of habitus to explain the embodiment of an individual's life history, and it can also be applied to understanding the causes behind gendered patterns and practices of interpersonal violence. Habitus is a site where the individual's conflicting experiences and classifications coalesce. Human agency is generated by emotions, affects and corporeality, and habitus is the site of the individual's internalizations of rules that apply in a specific field. In order for individuals to cope and manage with the exigencies of a certain societal field, they have to acquire an emotional habitus that corresponds to the central ethical values and rules governing feeling in the field, a process that is gendered (Krais, 2006; McNay, 2008; Probyn, 2005). Gendered differences in the emotional habitus are produced by prevailing structures and cultural practices that often grant men and women access to positions and practices in the field that differ from one another, and in ways that may be difficult to recognize (Husso & Hirvonen, 2012; Virkki, 2008). For their part, the studies in this book show how this process takes place in the variety of historical and geographical locations and institutional regimes.

In light of Bourdieu's theory of practice, some problems can be identified that inhibit the effectiveness of interventions for interpersonal violence. First, the concept of habitus itself points to the fact that the pace of societal change can be painstakingly slow. Over time, individuals habituate to their living conditions and to their normative, cultural structures and practices, regardless of how strict these might be. A related problem concerns the difficulty of recognizing the subtle ways in which symbolic violence can take place in the public and private spheres of life, as the authors represented in this book have demonstrated with examples from both the private and public spheres (homes, schools, court rooms, social services, to mention a few) and by pointing to dispositions such as gender, age, class, ethnicity and filiality, variables that help to explain the position of victims and perpetrators alike.

While, following Bourdieu, ideas of habituation and symbolic violence can certainly help us understand the persistence of interpersonal violence as a mechanism of power in various historical and cultural locations, they also offer a means to initiate change. From the point of view of recognizing and intervening in interpersonal violence, it is crucial to try to understand the conditions and factors that enable the rejection and misrecognition of violence and social suffering, but also those that can bring about social change. Violent institutions, relationships, everyday practices or cultural conventions can only make sense to individuals as long as people are habituated to following and reproducing these practices. However, conventions and habits can also be reflected upon, and can be both learned and negotiated once they are explicated. Hence, in order to prevent violent social, cultural and institutional practices and different forms of interpersonal violence, as well as experiences of personal failure and social

suffering, it is crucial to understand their connection with the practices produced by gendered expectations in society.

According to Bourdieu (2000) there is always room for changing doxic attitudes, for engaging in symbolic struggle and for taking political action. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* or the embodied physical, psychological, social, and cultural style is the reverse side of the social, institutional and cultural structure. The concept of habitus can therefore be used to analyse how people learn to take responsibility for violence or alternatively, how they routinely avoid knowledge of other people's suffering and then abstain from any interventions in violent situations. Consequently, understanding the social and structural factors behind the existence of interpersonal violence can improve understanding of the phenomenon by research communities and authorities, and enhance understanding of the situation of the victims of interpersonal violence. Social struggles to improve the recognition and understanding of interpersonal violence in scientific discourses, professional practices and in society at large are at the same time symbolic struggles over the legitimate ways in which violence is or should be perceived, classified and confronted. The research from various disciplines, spatial and temporal locations and institutional and intersectional settings collected in this book is engaged in a symbolic struggle over how to achieve recognition and understanding of interpersonal violence as a global social and health problem.

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