

The teller-focused interview: Interviewing as a relational practice

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Abstract

This article traces its origin to 25 years of qualitative study of men's violence towards women in close relationships. Major methodological concerns have involved finding ways to facilitate and support the research participants – women, men and children – in formulating themselves in as genuine and multifaceted a narrative as possible. Over the years, the approach 'the teller-focused interview' has emerged, with its theoretical and methodological base in feminist research, narrative theory and methodology, and a dialectical way of thinking about the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. It views them as partners with different tasks and responsibilities in the research process. This dialectic is referred to as a 'relational practice'. It is argued that the methodological concerns brought up are not limited to the area of violence towards women but are also applicable in studies of various types of human experience that are complex, sensitive, and difficult to bring up. Indications for the use of the approach will be addressed, and basic aspects of the relational practice of teller-focused interviewing will be presented. Some remarks on the relationship between qualitative research and psychotherapy will also be included.

Keywords

Domestic violence, feminism, interviewing, methodology, narrative, qualitative research

Background: Developing the teller-focused interview

For the past 25 years I have studied men's violence towards women in close relationships, beginning with my first study which included 20 couples (Hydén, 1994a; 1994b; 1995; Hydén & McCarthy, 1994). Through interviews conducted with each couple every three months for two years, individually and jointly, I gained access to intimate accounts of violence from several perspectives: the male perpetrator, the female victim, and the couple engaged in the joint project of living in a partner

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relationship. What I wanted to know was how the women and men made sense of acts of woman battering in their relations. How did they define, interpret, and explain them? Did they try to justify them? What did the violence do to their lives and partner relations? For my second study (Hydén, 1999; 2005; 2008a; 2008b) I interviewed ten women every three months for two years, starting when they had left their abusive partners. By following their processes of leaving, I studied the women's agency and the complex ways in which they negotiated their power. For my third study (Hydén, 2009; Överlien & Hydén, 2009), I analyzed children's narratives of witnessing violence. Currently, I am conducting research on the victims, perpetrators and their children, and how their social networks respond to the violence.

In today's 'interview society' we frequently learn about lives, feelings and experiences by way of interviews (Silverman, 1997). Ever since I began my studies, the interview has been my major tool for gathering data. As a researcher I am trained in semi-structured interviewing, and as a clinical social worker and licensed psychotherapist I am trained in structured diagnostic interviewing as well as open exploratory psychotherapeutic conversations. My major concern as a researcher of men's violence towards women in intimate relationships has been to find a way to *facilitate and support the research participants – women, men and children – in formulating themselves in as genuine and multifaceted a narrative as possible*. Over the years, I have developed a way of interviewing I call *the teller-focused interview*, which takes place within a 60-minute time frame and at a location of the interviewees' own choice. It is not based on questions as the fundamental structural element of the interview, as in the structured (Shaughnessy et al., 2006) or semi-structured interview (Kvale and Brinkman, 2008). The teller-focused interview resembles unstructured interviewing in that it is opened with questions like: '*Can you tell me what happened?*' (couples' study and children's study), '*Can you tell me how it happened that you left your abusive husband just now?*' (battered women's break-up study), or '*Can you tell me about your social network's responses to the violence?*' (social responses study). Since the teller-focused interview approach can (but does not necessarily) include recurring interviewing, the opening question in the recurrent interviews can be something like: *Can you tell me what has happened since we last met?* By conducting recurring interviews complexities and processes developed over time could be captured.

The teller-focused interview is oriented towards narration. In order to support and facilitate narratives, the practice of teller-focused interviewing is based on a dialectal way of thinking about the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewed. It includes these two parties as partners with different tasks and responsibilities in the research process, connected by mutual respect and a mutual desire to gain an understanding of the research issues. Since the teller-focused interview is based on this dialectic, I will refer to it as *a relational practice*.

In the first part of the article, I will place the teller-focused interview in its *theoretical and methodological context*. I will then present some *indications for the use* of this approach and, after that, present some ideas about how *a relationally safe space* can be established. I will then introduce *two interrelated themes* that form

the basis for the relational practice of the teller-focused interview. The first concerns ways to address *the gap between experiencing and knowing about violence*, and the second deals with *power issues*. Before ending with some concluding remarks, I will comment on *the relationship between qualitative research and psychotherapy*.

Theoretical and methodological context

My main sources of influences for the development of the teller-focused interview belong to the approach in social sciences known as *social constructionism*. The focus is not upon some object of reality but upon the different meanings with which one's worlds become invested, maintained and reaffirmed. From a social constructivist perspective, a major interest in social sciences is the study of how social phenomena are created, conceptualized and interpreted, and in the ways in which humans participate in these practices (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2003; Parker, 1998).

In the process of developing a 'relational practice' in research interviewing one of the main sources has been feminist theory and methodology. The feminist psychiatrist Jean Baker Miller suggests that growth-producing relationships are mutual and include 'the five good things': zest, empowerment for action, increased knowledge, increased self-esteem and desire for more connection (Jordan et al., 1991; Miller, 1976). In accordance with Baker Miller, I will suggest the same five good things for a relational interview practice and add the desire for more connection elsewhere than the interview relation. This has often been a subject for the concluding part of the teller-focused interview: With whom can you/I continue this conversation?

Joyce K. Fetcher (1999) introduced the concepts 'relational practice' and 'relational work' in her foundational work regarding relational practices in day-to-day work, such as caring. In *feminist research interviewing* (Oakely, 1981, 2005; Reinharz, 1992; Roberts, 1981), the relationship between interviewer and interviewee is frequently emphasized and has been described as a relational practice (Gergen and Davis, 1997). A major concern in feminist methodology has been to address issues of power and how they affect the research process (Maynard, 2004). Since the teller-focused interview approach has emerged from research on intimate partner violence, power issues have been of major concern throughout the development of the approach.

My second source emanates from a similar dialectic way of thinking about the relationship between the interviewer's activity and the data collected. The long cherished view that the researcher's task is to present objective facts has been called into question during the time I have struggled with developing a sustainable method for conducting interviews suited for studies on intimate partner violence. An interest in the interview's character of *interplay* between people (e.g. Gubrium et al., 2012; Mishler, 1991) has emerged. In this discussion, the interaction between interviewer and interviewee is in focus. The notion that it is possible for the researcher to maintain an outsider's position in relation to what is being studied

has been challenged. What the interviewee has to say has come to be regarded as the result of a joint production between interviewer and interviewee. In the teller-focused interview approach, this dialectic way of understanding the interview includes the interviewer and interviewee as partners in a *complementary relationship*; that is to say, they have different tasks and responsibilities in the research process.

My third and final source of influence derives from *narrative theory and methodology*. In recent years, there has been a significant embracing of narratives for the study of human experience and meaning-making processes. It has been argued that the narration reconstructs actions and context; it reveals place, time, motivation and the actor's symbolic system of orientation (e.g. Andrews et al., 2000; Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000; Wells, 2011). It has been further argued that we as *human beings are constructed by stories and are storytellers by nature*. In an often-cited quote, French literary theorist and linguist Roland Barthes (1977) points out:

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man's stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting, stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news item, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society. (Barthes, 1977: 79)

The close relation of the teller-focused interview approach to narrative theory and methodology means that it can be characterized as a form of *narrative interviewing* (e.g. Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000; Mishler, 1991; Rosenthal and Bogner, 2009; Schütze, 1977). However, my experiences tell me that even if storytelling is a basic form of communication and meaning-making, it is not an easy task to produce a narrative about something as sensitive and morally questionable as violence in close relationships. Tellers involved in such action need various forms of facilitation and support in the process of generating narratives. One of the major indicators for the application of the teller-focused interview is when the more common open or semi-structured form of interviewing is not sufficient for facilitating narration.

Indications for the use of the teller-focused interview

Originating in the argument that we as human beings are storytellers by nature, in one of his earliest works on interview narratives Elliot Mishler (1986) proposes that if we as researchers simply hold back in asking the questions we are so eager to ask, our interviewees are likely to burst into storytelling:

If we allow respondents to continue in their own way until they indicate they have finished their answer, we are likely to find stories; if we cut them off with our next

questions, if we do not appear to be listening to their stories, or if we record a check mark or a few words on our schedules after they have talked at length, then we are unlikely to find stories. (Mishler, 1986: 235)

Encouraged by Mishler's groundbreaking work, for my first study (1994) I equipped myself with just a few open questions, adopted a slightly laid-back interview style and prepared myself to listen to stories. I obtained a meager result, and learned the hard way that the emic knowledge of a certain phenomenon is not gained solely by inhabiting a certain state of mind that honors the interviewee's perspective. Emic knowledge of interpersonal violence is desperately dependent on the meaning-making processes of those who have experienced it. One of the crucial questions here concerns whether or not the interviewee had told about the violent incident before, that is, tried to structure his or her experiences in order to give them meaning and make them communicable. I found that, for many of my interviewees, their experiences had remained untold until the interview.

One of the men in my first study (1994) almost dropped out as early as his first interview, in his efforts to tell me about the previously untold story of his violent behavior: 'I'm not sure this will give so much. I guess I don't have that much to say. I mean, *experienced* a lot, I have. But I don't *know* anything about it.'

The man had been the perpetrator of violent activities towards his wife, but had chosen to refrain from reflecting on this and positioned (i.e. Davies and Harré, 1990) himself as a non-knowing person, resulting in a lack of personal understanding. For victims of violence, a considerable part of the victimizing process involves non-knowing positioning as a psychological protection against overwhelming pain. The flip side is that this creates a gap between experiencing and knowing, that is painful to live with. An invitation to the building of knowledge about the violence, by talking openly and frankly about it in the presence of an attentive and interested listener, can be seen as part of a process of dealing with *the gap between experiencing and knowing* and can be a strong motivating factor for participation.

Establishing a relationally safe space

The process from 'experiencing' to 'knowing' is dependent on a 'relationally safe space', where the possibility for *control* by the interviewee as well as a clearly stated assumption of *responsibility* by the researcher are important themes. Living in a non-knowing position means living on a weak foundation that could give way any minute. Leaving this position means jeopardizing the little security that might be at hand for an insecure future that might have some solidity to offer later. Telling about self-experienced violence demands a certain kind of context, and in itself establishes a particular interactive reality. For the interviewee to feel secure in this interaction, it is necessary that the researcher takes responsibility for jumping in and helping with a demarcation if the situation seems to be becoming too emotionally painful or chaotic. In my practical experience, however, it has only

happened on very few occasions that the interviewee has wished to stop. On the contrary, it has appeared as if my informants have experienced it as positive to verbalize difficult feelings and experiences. I have, though, often felt it was called for to offer supportive comments to an interviewee.

A woman living with a violent man has a great deal to gain by being unclear. If she clearly articulates her own opinion and will, she risks setting off his rage. Expressing herself in line with a *discourse of elusiveness* can be functional: not answering a question directly but rather a bit to the side, answering in generalities, contradicting oneself, or vaguely expressing what one thinks and finishing with 'I don't know' are central aspects of this discourse. The discourse of elusiveness could be equated to the occupation of a non-knowing position.

More than anyone else, an interviewee in a non-knowing position who uses the discourse of elusiveness as her primary form of representation is dependent on secure framework conditions. As an interviewer, one has to also *reposition* her from a person of low value to one who is valuable to the research, show her respect and treat her well. So positioned, interviewer and interviewee are in a more equal relationship, which forms the basis for the researcher to be able to successfully ask examining and expanding questions. Without an equal basis for the interview, such questions can seem challenging to a person who has endured a great deal of criticism in previous relationships and can thereby strengthen rather than weaken the discourse of elusiveness.

Correspondingly, a relationally safe space needs to be established for interviewing violent men. Control and responsibility play a striking role in these interviews. The men have a great deal to gain from positioning themselves in a non-knowing position. Being responsible for a morally questionable act puts you in danger of being viewed as a morally questionable being; and being responsible for something you know nothing about is hard, perhaps even impossible. However, if a violent man wants to save his relationship, insisting on not knowing about something his wife has been subjected to and that causes her suffering is not a way to do this. In this split, between the need for non-knowing in order to save face and the need for knowing in order to save the relationship, rests a substantial part of the motivation to participate in a research project aiming at exploring questions about 'what happened and what sense do you and your spouse make of it'.

Most of my studies have included repeated interviewing, for several reasons. It is impossible to say everything on one occasion. The interviewees' accounts are thus time-specific. In my first study (1994) I interviewed men and women in 20 couples, beginning the first interview soon after a violent event that was one in a pattern of repeated violence had been reported to the police. During an interview following soon after a violent event the feelings are intense, while during a later interview the story may be characterized by reconciliation, and a third interview may be filled with grief and hopelessness. To establish a relationally safe space is not only important for methodological reasons (i.e. offering the interviewed support in his/her telling) but for ethical reasons as well (i.e. offering support when intense feelings are present during the interview). It is impossible to avoid time-specific

accounts, but it is possible to make them fuller by combining the stories told during different interview sessions. Further, repeated interviewing offers the opportunity to create a relationally safe space. Given that your relationships with your interviewees have a chance to mature during the course of the interview series, there might be room for some ways to support and challenge the informant to develop his or her story.

The research ethics underpinning the establishment of a relational space understand consent as an on-going process that does not start and finish with the consent form (see further Shaw, 2008). As a teller-focused interviewer I will secure consent that is informed – but I cannot inform about everything that might come up during the interview. I must be prepared to deal with that during the course of the research process. Issues of confidentiality were of great importance for the men in my study. They wanted to make sure that I had no connection to the police or to the social services before they consented to participation. The women assumed an almost reverse position. They never questioned my confidentiality and could at times reveal so much pain that I found myself stopping them, asking them if they were sure they wanted to go on. For the studies including children, safety and risk assessment issues were at the forefront, leading up to a close relationship with a therapeutic center (Hydén, 2009; Överlien & Hydén, 2009). The teller-focused interview is oriented towards the research participant. In case of conflict between the best interests of the research project and the research participant, the latter is a priority.

Even if the use of repeated interviewing offers possibilities for the relationship between researcher and research participant to mature, it is nevertheless a temporary relationship. It can cause distress when a relationship is destined to be discontinued but this can also form a free space suitable for free speech.

Relational practice: Bridging the gap between experiencing and knowing

Bridging the gap by supporting and expanding the narratives

In the essay *Discourse in the Novel*, Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) argues that what we say reflects dialogues we have been involved in before. In order to develop our own talk, we must actively take control:

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to his moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's concrete contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there one must take the word and make it one's own. (Bakhtin, 1981: 293–294)

A life largely characterized by subordination – like those of abused women and children exposed to violence – has most likely involved difficulties in the process of ‘taking the word and making it their own’. Besides inhabiting a non-knowing position, this shortage of one’s own words for telling will most probably be reflected in the interview with the victimized woman. What the researcher can expect to hear is the echo of the dominant person’s words in the interviewee’s talk. Is this a problem for research that might want to focus on the women and children subjected to violence? It is problematic only if the researcher is searching for the one and only true story. If the dominant person’s words are omnipresent in the victims’ lives, they are central to the study as well. One of the most important issues for the teller-focused interview to handle is the multi-voice character of the accounts.

Co-construction

In literature on qualitative research interviewing focusing on the interaction between interviewer and interviewee, there has been an emphasis on the notion that the accounts developed in interviews are co-constructed through the interaction of both participants in the conversation in which they occur (Gubrium et al., 2012). Interviews have been described as a form of ‘interpretative practice involving respondent and interviewer as they articulate ongoing interpretative structures, resources and orientations with what Garfinkel (1967: 4) calls “practical reasoning”’.

To support, encourage and challenge means that the researcher gets involved in a process of co-construction. In order to avoid being the dominant party in this process the interviewer’s moves in the interview could be described as a ‘dance of balancing involvement’. In this ‘dance’, the interviewer will give the interviewee space for distancing and evaluating the words (‘To what extent are they my words?’) and allow space to make words of his or her own. A too-great degree of involvement might lead to the interviewee’s submission to the words of the interviewer, while a too-small degree of involvement might lead to the interviewee’s submission to the dominant words of others.

Support and encouragement by expansion

Examples of questions that encourage the interviewee to *expand* her reasoning include ‘Keep telling me, does this remind you of something you’ve experienced before or is there something more to say about this?’ An example of a question that encourages the interviewee to use *different forms of representation* in her storytelling is ‘Is it possible to give me an image, or a color or scent, that could express what you’re talking about?’ The image, color or scent may open up for an expansion of the interviewee’s account. An example of the responses to such a question is the man I interviewed who had been violent to his partner and tried very hard to tell me about his feelings in the relationship. When I asked him to give me an image

instead of trying to express his emotions he gave me the most elaborate story about his life as a ‘low ranked dog’ in the family, and the frustration accompanying this position.

Support and encouragement by generalization

There are two ways of asking questions that have worked well for me with interviewees who use a discourse of elusiveness; both give the interviewee something concrete to base their answers on. One way is to give a *generalizing account* for the interviewee to relate to, for example: ‘Many women I’ve spoken with say that what usually happens is. . .’, ‘Women often talk about. . .’, ‘Is this something that’s familiar to you?’.

Support and encouragement by creating an image

Another way is to assist the interviewee in the creation of an image that can form the foundation of the interview. I have used such a foundation in research on abused women’s social networks and their responses to the violence. That study involves 30 women engaging in programs for women at two Centers for victims of violence. I begin each interview with the woman and me together drawing a *social network map*, as a starting point for an interview about who knew about the violence, how they had responded, what they actually did and whether what they did had led to any improvement of the situation or even made it worse.

On the map, triangles represent men and circles women. What is produced is an image of an ‘ego network’ where the narrator’s relationship with the individuals in the network is shown rather than their relationships with each other. At the center of the map is the narrator, who ‘looks out’ over her network and draws those whom she is closest to near her and those who are more distanced out near the circle’s border (Figure 1). This way of mapping based on the individual’s (‘ego’) relations to other individuals is not to be mixed up with the *eco-map model* (Hartman, 1995), a graphical representation that shows all of the systems at play in an individual’s life.

The quality of the contact with the various individuals is marked with minus and plus. On a battered woman’s network map (Figure 1), it is her violent ex-husband and his mother who are marked with three minuses, while a brother-in-law and sister-in-law are marked with plus, as are all her co-workers, most of whom are men.

Bridging the gap by challenging

Most studies in which I have utilized the teller-focused interview model have been designed as qualitative studies with repeated interviews every three months over a two-year period. It has given me the opportunity to develop a relational space that is solid enough for not only supporting but also challenging the accounts.

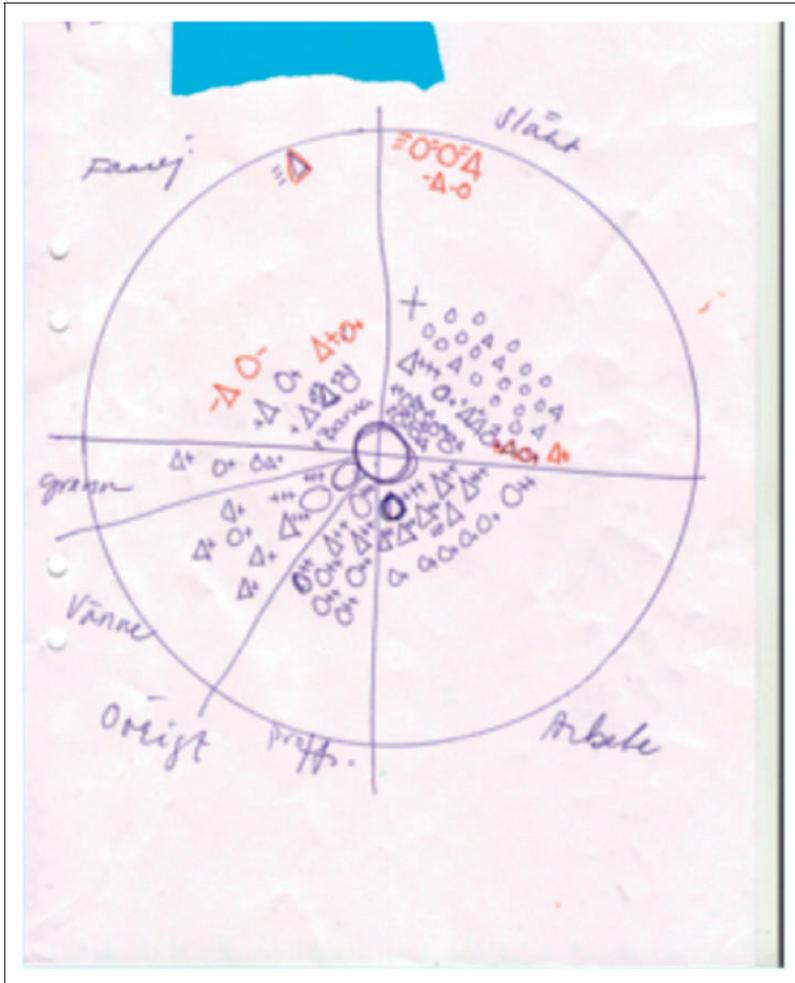


Figure 1. Example of a network map.

One example is taken from interviews for my first study (1994) with a man I call Jim. He had beaten his wife on several occasions, sometimes severely. He was in his early forties, was obviously pleased at being interviewed, seemed to be very happy to tell stories and easily went off on sidetracks about how he had lived as a classic American car enthusiast in his wild youth, including extensive drinking and risk-seeking behavior as well as some time spent in jail. In a paradoxical way it was a pleasure to interview him: he was amusing and pro-active in that he spared me the details of the violence he had exposed his spouse to. In fact, he spared me almost all

information about what had happened, referring to his non-knowing about it. He formulated himself relatively well regarding things like the pre-history of the violence, which he most often described in terms of arguments that contained provocations by the woman, but was more restrained when it came to describing the actual act of violence.

What he presented to me was a description of why he could not remember what had happened: he had been too drunk, too angry or too tired, or quite simply had a bad memory. During these interviews, I was struck by growing feelings of skepticism and irritation. I felt that he was skimming past the fact that he had been reported to the police for serious violent crimes, and I suspected that he had more to say.

Determined to get more elaborate accounts of his violent behavior, I tried my narrative expansion practices and my generalizing practices. What I got in return was a description which he often returned to in subsequent interviews:

J: You see, in our heads there's a place with two poles. There has to be a certain distance between them. Like this (shows a two-centimeter distance between his thumb and finger). When you get angry, the poles move closer together.

The thing is, in my head these poles are too close together, so when I get angry they crash into each other! A doctor himself told me this. A doctor at the major hospital. He said it was caused by a motorcycle accident I was in.

I: Hmmm... How can you tell when it happens?

J: I simply have a total blackout. I get mad and then BANG, it crashes and I'm not aware of anything for a long time. When I come to again, I've often done something violent. Hit Sarah or trashed the apartment.

What is it that is happening here? A man describes how his wife was seriously injured in a situation in which he was extremely angry and the two of them were alone. He uses a form of representation – you could also describe it as a narrative approach – that leaves the listener in doubt concerning *what* or *who* caused his wife's injury. The narrative entails his absence as acting subject. The actions turn into something that floats freely without anyone claiming them. One might be able to talk about 'the crashed-together poles' as occupying the subject position in his story. The man does not deny that his wife has been subjected to serious violence, and indirectly acknowledges being involved. He describes his actions in *actively passive* terms. The actions are presented as something that actually happened, but it is unclear who has done what.

What is exposed in this excerpt is the exposition of what I will call I a special *rhetoric of exculpation*, often used by both men and women in describing the man's whereabouts during the violent event (Hydén, 1994a). Jim *indirectly* admitted his

involvement in the violent incident by dissociating himself from it, but disclaimed responsibility for it. Through this the violence was neutralized.

I could have stopped there in my interview with Jim and refrained from any more attempts to get him to tell an even more elaborated narrative. After all, I had a central narrative of great value to my analysis, a narrative that could contribute to answering my research question: *How can it be possible for a relationship to continue despite repeated violence?* But I did not stop. It should be mentioned here that for a number of days in a row I had already heard other men in my study express themselves the same way, which made me increasingly frustrated: Did they really have nothing more to say about their violence than this, not implicating anyone? I found this almost absurd. I decided to challenge Jim's narrative by following it to its ultimate logical reasoning:

I: Then it must be unbelievably lucky that Sarah's still alive?

J: What? What do you *mean*?

I: I mean that when you get mad at her and it short-circuits in your head, your body takes on a life of its own and becomes violent. It's lucky that you haven't stuck the bread knife or scissors in her.

J: What's wrong with you? Are you *crazy* or something??!! Do you think I could do such a thing?? I would never be able to hurt her that bad!!

I: But you know you have your blackouts and then it happens . . .

J: I would never be able to do something like that to her! Don't you think I know what I do?

I: No, it didn't seem like you did.

From having described himself as principally a non-present person without the ability to control the situation, he goes over to *demanding* to be regarded as a highly present person with a sense of responsibility and the ability to be a loving man. My way of following his narrative to its ultimate logical reasoning showed that there was a limit to how far he was prepared to go in his insistence that he was unable to act consciously and responsibly. What one could also say is that through this interview I was equipped with *two* quite different stories about the violence Jim had exercised.

Did my way of bridging the gap between experiencing and knowing in this interview have anything to do with gender? I perceived the victimized women in general as not being helped in bridging the gap by being confronted with the logic, or lack thereof, in their stories, but as being in need of support. Some of the men were also in need of support in the same fashion, some of them insisting so

stubbornly on holding on to their non-knowing position that it was obvious to both interviewer and interviewee that it was absurd, that it was obvious that another repressed account existed and that they could be challenged on this. A prerequisite for keeping the relational space safe when the teller's narrative was confronted and challenged, however, was that it included a special kind of energy, including humor. This was the same for women and men.

Relational practice: Dealing with power issues

As a social worker, I often experienced the imbalance in power between my clients and myself: they were more dependent on me than vice versa. When I first reflected on this matter as a researcher, the case seemed to be quite the reverse. I was the one asking my research participants for something that was valuable to me, that is, their experiences of intimate partner violence. Soon, though, I came to understand that our power relations were much more complex than this. For example, as a researcher, I held a culturally highly valued position while their positions as battered women or abusive men were more questionable.

One woman vividly expressed her apprehension at seeing herself as a woman of culturally low value. It was not the violence *as such* that placed her in this position, but rather *the message* it carried: You are unloved.

To think of yourself as a battered woman... That's almost impossible. I feel so ashamed... to me a battered woman is an unloved woman. I think this is why a woman doesn't want to go to the grocery store with a black eye. She doesn't want people to think 'See, there's a woman whose husband beats her'. It's simply a way to protect yourself. (Hydén, 2008a: 121)

Few people are prepared to voluntarily put themselves in a position they themselves interpret as a pure demonstration of the fact that they are unloved. Why then do people agree to participate in a study on interpersonal violence, in which according to their own logic they run the risk of exactly this? I believe it is a case of the researcher's ability to formulate research questions and design the study so that it concerns those who are intended to participate, so that they feel it will allow them to make a contribution for others – which moves them away from the position of the unloved to that of the respected and valuable. My interviewees have 'experienced a lot', but 'don't know anything about it'. They share this predicament with a lot of others. It is worth an abundance of effort to reveal something about it. This places my interviewees and me in a more equal relationship than what could initially seem to be the case. We are all interested in knowing more about intimate partner violence.

Narration from the position of the unloved

One of the clearest memories I have of the power a positioning of the teller brings, and the completely different story that followed a repositioning, has its origin in an

interview with a woman about her social network's responses to her being exposed to violence from her husband. She had been married for many years to a man who had alternately been violent, harsh, demanding and quite nice. He regularly burst out in accusations of her being interested in other men. Although her life was quite difficult, she had no plans to divorce her husband.

Our meeting took place at the center for victims of violence in a small town. We were not alone – my nine-year-old male boxer Buster was sleeping at the back of the room. After my weeks of preparing for a day of interviewing, it turned out that there was no one who could look after him while I was away. 'Bring him', said the therapists at the center. So I brought him and asked the woman I interviewed whether he should go to another room or stay. She agreed to let him stay.

She tried to talk about what had happened. She seemed to be struggling with more than one narrative that was clamoring for attention. This struggle partly included intellectual work in efforts to produce an account of the abuse she had suffered, including the structuring of the account, deciding what plot to put forward and what points to make. The hardest part of the struggle included emotional labor. She told about her husband's abuse and partly justified it by suggesting that she was not easy to live with, at the same time her body exposed vulnerability, pain and loneliness and her voice lowered.

Narrating from the position of the respected and valuable

The boxer was sleeping. We could hear him snore. While she was struggling with her story, he rose, shrugged and moved towards her. I told him to stop and asked her if I should tell him to step back. She told me it was alright.

The dog continued moving, walked up to her and put his head in her lap and looked at her. He sighed. She started to cry. Tears wet his head. He did not pay this any noticeable attention but simply stayed with her. This 80-pound guard dog offered a safe space for her externally as well as internally. Still crying, she started to tell the story of 'her morally rotten and worthless self' she repeatedly tormented herself with. In relation to her husband, and in relation to me in the first part of the interview, she had positioned herself accordingly.

Some years ago she had been on the brink of leaving her husband. She had told a male colleague about the abuse. She received a great deal of support from him, and they became lovers. However, she decided to go back to her husband and was now trapped in a situation in which he constantly accused her of being unfaithful. She could not disagree. They both regarded marital unfaithfulness as morally faulty behavior, which in her and her husband's view positioned her in the same category as him – that of a person in bad moral standing. The hidden story of the 'morally faulty' served as a 'backup story' for the official story of 'justified violence' she first told me. This backup story increased the power base of the main story quite dramatically.

The dog's loyal affection blocked the way to the realm of self-hate she had created for herself as a result of writing herself into the story of justifying violence.

With this self-hate blocked, she gained some distance from the justifying violence story and attained a better position to talk about the violence. Space was given to stories that positioned her more in line with the dog's positioning of her as a person worthy of loyal affection.

Allowing 'new' stories to evolve during the course of the interview does not mean the teller-focused interview is a method for finding the 'true story'. The model rather reflects the understanding that different stories exist side by side and must be dealt with as such.

The relationship between qualitative research and psychotherapy

A number of qualitative researchers have observed that research activities such as participating in research interviews are sometimes beneficial to participants in ways that might be described as therapeutic (Birch and Miller, 2000; Bondi, 2013; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). Qualitative research and psychotherapy are both projects of meaning-making. American psychoanalyst Roy Schafer (1992) has described the psychotherapeutic process as follows: 'the life-historical material being worked with may be usefully approached as a series of tellings and retellings constructed and reconstructed' (p. 35).

To live in the gap between experiencing and knowing means to feel and to live in 'raw' experience without having access to the kind of symbolic elaboration necessary to create stories or make meanings. Psychotherapeutic practice offers a space for the symbolic elaboration of experience. The relational space the teller-focused interview offers is more limited, in that it is shaped for making meaning of acts of violence that could be put in wider circulation. Psychotherapeutic stories are validated in the psychotherapeutic setting, while research is validated in the research community.

What psychotherapy and the teller-focused interview have in common is that both practices offer a 'third ear' or 'third voice'. Being observed by a third person – researcher or psychotherapist – means that the world has changed and become more plural than binary. This allows a new and more complex dynamic to emerge.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shared some of the experience of research methods I have gained during years of studying men's violence towards women in close relationships. My aim has been to provide researchers in the area with some methodological advice and guidance, and I have structured my experience in an approach I call 'the teller-focused interview'. This approach has its theoretical and methodological base in feminist research, in dialectic thinking concerning the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, and in narrative theory and methodology. As studies of intimate partner violence are located in the more extensive field of studies of social problems and social vulnerability, I do not believe the methodological

concerns I have brought to the fore are limited to the area of violence towards women. I believe this approach is applicable in studies of various types of human experience that are complex, sensitive, and difficult to bring up.

My researcher ideal is a person who does not primarily take on the role of the questioner but rather that of the listener. And, contrarily, my ideal interviewee is a person who has something to tell. According to this definition, neither abused women nor abusing men are ideal storytellers. They might think they have nothing to tell, or know what they should tell. Their narratives are often incomplete and contradictory. If a researcher is interested in hearing precisely these people's experiences, it is necessary to develop an interview form that focuses on the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. This relationship forms the starting point for the common work of communicating knowledge about men's violence towards women in close relationships. The researcher's special task in this relationship is to take responsibility for building it up, and to have knowledge about different ways to support the teller in the telling.

The teller-focused interview has been developed for studies of intimate partner violence when traditional forms of semi-structured and open interviewing are 'not enough'. It is demanding in a sense that it requires skills in qualitative interviewing. However, for researchers who want to further develop their skills and enter new and demanding research topics, this approach might have something to offer.

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