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# Accounting for the Hero: A critical psycho-discursive approach to children's experience of domestic violence and the construction of masculinities

Caroline Dryden

School of Health and Related Research, University of Sheffield, UK

Kathy Doherty

Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK

Paula Nicolson

Department of Health and Social Care, University of London, UK

## Abstract

This article employs a critical psycho-discursive approach to social identity processes and subjectivity in an important and under-researched area; the psychological impact of domestic violence on children. We use a case study of interview interaction with two teenage brothers talking about their father's past violent behaviour to show that a highly idealised, dominant form of hegemonic masculinity - 'heroic protection discourse' (HPD) - was a major organising principle framing both brothers' understandings of events. However, significant differences occurred in how each boy identified and made sense of self and others within this discourse. We discuss our findings in terms of (1) the destructive power of HPD to position sons as responsible for a father's violent behaviour (2) the utility of our approach for developing a better understanding of *when, if or why* psychological and behavioural problems associated with domestic violence are likely to develop in *a particular child*. In so doing, we hope to contribute to theoretical debates in social psychology on identity and subjectivity by showing how it is possible to make sense of the 'collision' between structure and agency through the study of social interaction.

## Introduction

The aim of this article is to do two related things. Firstly, we want to contribute to the theoretical debate on masculinities in social psychology through the development of a contextualised analysis of identity, discourse and subjectivity. Secondly, we want to anchor our analysis in a case study of interview data with two teenage brothers talking about their experiences of domestic violence in order to demonstrate the utility of such an approach in this important and under-researched area. Specifically, we employ a critical psycho-discursive analysis of interview data to explore individual differences in boys' sense making around their lived experience of domestic violence, linking this sense making to a broader analysis of gender power relations.

Our study starts from the perspective that gender is a pivotal concept in sense making around domestic violence. We build on discursive psychological and feminist studies of gender and gender relations (e.g. Bordo, 1999; Edley and Wetherell, 1995; 1997; 1999; Edley, 2001; Wetherell and Edley, 1999; Dryden 1999; Ussher, 1997) and on the earlier ethnomethodological work of West and Zimmerman (1991), Buttny (1993); Goffman (1972) and Garfinkel (1967) taking the view that gender and identity are best understood as something we *do*, constructed in language and other symbolic practices, rather than something we essentially *are*. As West & Zimmerman argue with regard to gender:-

“virtually any activity can be assessed as to its womanly or manly nature... to ‘do’ gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity ... *it is to engage in behaviour at the risk of gender assessment* ... in so far as society is partitioned by 'essential'

differences between women and men and placement in a sex category is both relevant and enforced, doing gender is unavoidable" (West & Zimmerman, 1991, pp22-24, our emphasis).

Gender is conceived as a routine, methodical and morally *accountable* accomplishment, an activity that is embedded in everyday interactions and managed in the light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities deemed appropriate for one's sex category. Accounting, in this perspective, involves the various ways that people present and explain their activities and the activities of others so as to render them sensible, understandable and 'proper' i.e. aligned with cultural norms and expectations, and dealing with issues of cause, fault, blame, responsibility or motive when a failure to conform is signalled. Accounts thus have an important role to play in any interaction - serving impression-management, face-saving and relational alignment purposes and being held accountable can also operate as a powerful constraint on one's actions, where social control is, "... seen as an emergent feature of interaction, which arises from how persons orient to and actively respond to the regulative function of the rules" (Buttny, 1993, p. 23).

Henriques et al pointed out in 1984 that the individual is 'always already social' and the impact of this observation is to encourage social psychologists to find ways to avoid creating an artificial 'dualism' in theorising social relations and identity. In taking a discursive approach, we follow Wetherell's (1998) strategy of combining an emphasis on the highly occasioned and situated nature of identity with a consideration of broader cultural and social interpretative resources and social practices (see Brown and Locke 2008 for a review of differing discursive strands in social psychology). Potter and Wetherell (1987) argued in their seminal text that psychologists should focus on the fine grain of conversation interaction. This is useful because of the way it helps us to understand something of the relationship between variability and contradictions in talk and the potential function of different utterances for the speaker in building and sustaining identities in particular local contexts. However, in trying to understand the relationship between discursive forms and gender power relations we have also been inspired by Foucault's writings (Foucault, 1970) and also see Parker (1992), Gavey (1989; 2005) Miller and Rose (2008). For Foucault, interpretive resources are conceptualised as discourses that can be understood as sets of historically located knowledges and normative practices - coherent systems of meaning related to different positions of power - that constitute subjectivities by making available a 'space' (or subject position) for particular types of self to 'step in' (Parker, 1992). Hence, our approach involves attempting to focus simultaneously on exploring the fine grain of interaction in interview data whilst teasing out the coherent systems of meaning that provide a framework of accountability in interaction.

In focusing on the social construction of identities we have also been careful not to background the individual subjective experience of research participants. This is a key dimension in feminist standpoint research (Harding 1987) and in writing on feminist reflexivity (Duelli Klein 1983; Stanley and Wise 1983) and there is an overlap here with some of the more contemporary discursive writing that attempts to ground textual analysis in an understanding of participants' phenomenology (e.g. see de Visser and Smith 2006). Also, in the field of psychosocial studies there have been some important moves to reconstruct the dimension of 'agency' in research through a turn to psychodynamic concepts (e.g. see Hollway and Jefferson, 2005; Frosh, Phoenix & Paxman, 2003). However, our ethnomethodological orientation draws us

to concepts such as ‘face-work’ and ‘face threat’ as an interesting and potentially productive way of interrogating the psychological dimensions of an interaction. Goffman (1972) observed that in social interaction participants will routinely orient to maintaining a positive self and public image or identity, within a shared understanding of what counts as acceptable conduct. Importantly, we see this sense of *interactional accountability* as potentially highly charged emotional territory. For example, doing gender within the boundaries of hegemonic masculinity offers the promise of a subjective sense of ‘belonging’ (Tajfel 1980) or ‘authenticity’ (Foucault 1970) whereas deviations from the norm run the risk of criticism, rejection and compromised self esteem (c.f. West and Zimmerman 1991).

In sum, this study employs a critical psycho-discursive approach as a means of creating a ‘way in’ to addressing psychological dimensions of difference. We do this through analysing the interactional management of identity in the context of two brothers’ interview discussions on their experiences of domestic violence. We aim to highlight precisely how a particular dominant version of hegemonic masculinity enters into both of their accounts, but is mobilised in different ways to accomplish quite different gendered identities and subjectivities in relation to their experiences. This approach therefore holds out the possibility of exploring particularity and difference in gendered meaning making for children who have experienced domestic violence in the same home, whilst not losing sight of the fact that there are very real social and cultural constraints on how children can perceive and interact with the world and their place in it.

### **Children and Domestic Violence**

There is now widespread acknowledgement that domestic violence is a major issue for many children (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990; Mullender, Hague, Imam, Kelly, Malos & Regan, 2002; Hester, Pearson & Harwin, 2007). Although exact figures are understandably hard to come by, there is long-standing evidence that when a man is violent to his female partner children are frequently present (Pizzey, 1974; Renvoize, 1978; Walby and Allen 2004). What is more, men who are violent to their partners are frequently also violent to their children (Stark and Flitcraft 1988, Bowker, Arbitell and McFerran, 1988, Edelson 1995, Hester et al 2007). Children who have experienced domestic violence are vulnerable to developing a range of short and long term psychological and behavioural problems – a comprehensive list of which can be found in Hester et al (2007).

A growing number of qualitative research studies (e.g. see Abrahams 1994; Epstein and Keep 1995; Hague et al 1996; Kelly 1994a; McGee 2000; Mullender et al, 2002) have highlighted that both short and long term impacts of domestic violence can be highly variable. Yet little is understood about interpersonal differences between children. Factors such as a strong and supportive adult being available for the child; someone to talk to and a ‘community safe haven’ have all been identified as factors that can potentially help children to deal with their experiences more effectively (Mullender et al 2002). However, we need to know more about complex and subtle differences in children’s sense making in order to avoid an oversimplified or determinist approach to understanding impact. For example, although there is evidence that men who are violent to other family members in adulthood have often, themselves, been victims of domestic violence in childhood (Buchanan, 1996),

children who have been abused do not *necessarily* go on to develop psychological or behavioural problems. Even children from the same family context can differ markedly in the way they respond to such circumstances (Mullender et al 2002 p. 207). In short, although we have a good idea of the types of psychological and behavioural problems that *can* be associated with children who have suffered domestic violence, there is currently little understanding of *when, if or why* any of these problems may become relevant for any particular child. We aim to show in this article that a critical psycho-discursive approach can prove a useful starting point for addressing such questions and could have potential application in practice.

### **Case Study Material**

Our data is taken from a sample of children interviewed for the DASH<sup>1</sup> study which included a retrospective exploration of children and young people's experiences of living with domestic violence and their coping strategies. Seven children (with an age range of 8-14 years, 5 boys and 2 girls) who had previously lived with their mother in a situation where her partner was violent or abusive were interviewed by an expert children's counsellor. We focus here on a case study of just two of these children - teenage brothers aged 12 and 13 whom we have called Adam and David. (All names and personal details of participants have been anonymised and identifying details changed.) The children were from the same family and same cultural background living in a working class community. The abuser was their biological father. Both boys recalled violence from around the age of 5 and gave overlapping accounts of similar events and circumstances. Both boys had experienced sustained verbal (and sometimes physical) abuse at the hands of their father and had witnessed sustained violence by the father to their mother. Their maternal grandparents lived reasonably nearby and although elderly, did provide some refuge for the boys and their mother. The mother and children all slept in the same bedroom latterly (i.e. in the years before their mother left their father). Both interviews are grounded in the boys' experiences of having now separated as a family from their abusive father and finding themselves in receipt of voluntary agency support.

### **A Note on Analytic Process**

In terms of our approach to the relationship between theory and data analysis, our aim was to adopt a model whereby our analysis of the data emerged from an interplay between our own cultural emersion in discourses of masculinity and gender relations, our reading of critical theory and, importantly, constant reflexive attention to the fine detail of the boys' own accounts *and* the role of the interviewer in interaction. In practice, this meant that as our ideas developed from close reading of the data, we would explore different literatures which would then, in turn, shift the focus of our attention in the data. This process was instrumental in deriving the analytic construct of Heroic Protection Discourse which we describe in more detail below.

### **Heroic Protection Discourse (HPD)**

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<sup>1</sup> "Domestic Abuse Women Seeking Help" (DASH) was funded by the National Lotteries Charities Board Health and Social Research Programme from 1999-2002. PN was the principal investigator.

In the initial readings of the data it occurred to us that Adam and David were operating with and orienting to very traditional notions of masculinity and femininity in order to account for their experiences of domestic violence. For example, in the extracts below, both boys speculate about how different things might have been at home if only their grandfather had been around:-

I just wish my granddad were there sometimes you know like – like my granddad’s – if my granddad were there when he were beating her up he wouldn’t have let it happen – he would have hurt him a lot – he would have killed him (Adam )

he could have tried to knock the door down and said ‘are you going to let me in now?’ and if my granddad fought with him I don’t know what would happen (David)

In these extracts, both boys position their grandfather as someone who could potentially have overcome all obstacles, knocked down a locked door and, if necessary, fought their father to the death to stop his violence. The identity implied by the boys’ descriptions of their grandfather’s imagined behaviour (Wowk 1984) is one that resonated for us with cultural notions of what it means to be a hero. Wetherell and Edley (1999), in their discursive work, identified a form of idealised masculinity that sanctions macho behaviour which they argued constitutes the subject position of ‘hero’ as an individual who is autonomous and in control of events. In our data, however, Adam and David’s version of hero took on an additional dimension foregrounding the motivation to ‘protect’ and the construct of HPD emerged out of linking this observation with a closer reading of feminist and cultural studies literatures on heroism and heterosexual relationships.

For example, Jane Ussher argues that men are often positioned as powerful rescuers, protectors or saviours in fairy stories, comic books, romantic fiction and films, in relation to subject positions for women which are essentially passive (Ussher, 1997). Wendy Hollway (1989) argues that a ‘marital’ version of heterosexuality normalises men as head of the family with responsibility for the care and protection of wife and children. Bordo (1999) writes at length about how cultural definitions of what it is to be a ‘real man’ are tied into notions of protection and rescue and notes that men are culturally sanctioned in their use of physical force if it can be convincingly argued that the violence was *justified* in the sense that it was employed in the service of protecting or ‘standing up’ for the weak or defending women’s honour. Important cultural signifiers of ‘man as hero’ thus are physical strength, phallic potency and aggression, and little boys are encouraged to ‘act tough’ as part of their socialisation. Images of male heroism are a key element of the cultural construction of masculinity in films, although representations of the hero identity have become increasingly complex (McNair, 2002). Modern heroes can be maverick, funny, self reflective or cynical but will still be clearly motivated by principles of justice and fair play. However the bottom line for a hero is that physical prowess, aggression and bravado must save the day, “...when all else fails, it is the body of the hero, and not his voice ... that is the place of last resort” (Tasker, 1993, p. 241).

For us, therefore, HPD refers to a set of interpretative resources and practices that normalise a form of masculine identity that combines physical strength and

aggression with the motivation to use physical force in the service of protecting others.

## **Data Analysis**

Given the extreme nature of the behaviour the boys had to talk about, e.g.:-

...and my dad came boom, boom, down the corridor and he hit her and he didn't even know what had happened so I don't know why he should hit my mum – and he broke a glass or something knocked it off – and my mum couldn't see through one eye properly and her eyebrow was cut and stuff and he even kicked her when she fell on the floor (David)

we were not particularly surprised that descriptions of the violence tended to illicit a highly idealised hegemonic version of masculinity, populated with the subject positions of 'villain', 'victim' and 'hero'. However, in drawing on HPD to make sense of episodes of domestic violence in their life and their parents actions, it became apparent that both children were faced with a difficult set of contradictions. The family is supposed to be a safe, protective environment for children, but for these children, use of HPD involved a story about heroism with a villain for a father and no obvious adult hero to step into the breach. Someone else needed to take on this idealised masculine role and at various times Adam and David placed their Grandfather in this role, as can be seen in the extracts above. However, the boys' grandfather did not live with the children and did not seem to be a present enough figure in their lives to do more than partially or transiently fill the hero role or be a 'wished for' hero. We began to realise, and will argue in the next section that as HPD became a central organising principle in the boys' accounts of violence so each child became personally implicitly accountable to the role of male hero, but handled this accountability in different ways.

### **Adam's use of Heroic Protection Discourse (HPD)**

Turning first to Adam, his interview is peppered with harrowing accounts of his father's abuse of power which he consistently explains as gratuitous:-

Adam: Well – just like he'd shout at my mum all the time – like you know – get angry - nasty – he never used to do anything like be nice – like never say anything nice – just kick everyone up the bum or a smack on the back of the head – I mean I got smacked at the back of the head and a kick

Int: Right

Adam: and he used to nip your ear, and he used to...what my dad used to do to me was like get a pen, put it on his thumb and squash it on your ear like that [shows interviewer] – he's done that to me before you know – pretending as if he were just saying it but he done it. He's nasty.

and ultimately self serving:-

Adam: ... some days he'd be ok and some days he won't – I mean like – he'd be nice and treat you nice after he's distreat you kind of thing [int: yeah] like I'd go with him somewhere and just wait for hours and hours and hours while he's doing [work] and that and then after that he might take me somewhere – if I'm lucky

Int: Right – so he was inconsistent

Adam: If I didn't do something for him he wouldn't do owt for me

Within the framework of HPD, Adam positions his father as the 'bad guy' - indiscriminate in his use of violence, cold, calculating and (despite the interviewer's interjection about inconsistency) ultimately rational in his self-serving behaviour. Adam states, for example, that 'nice' behaviour from his Dad was never unconditional, exhibited only if he could use it to manipulate a situation to his own advantage. In other words, Adam's father is the archetypal villain within HPD. In accounting for his father in this way, Adam's interview is reciprocally full of examples of placing himself in the hero role through, firstly, trying to account for himself as having the raw physical strength to accomplish an adequate defence e.g. standing up to his Dad by 'blocking' the attempts to smack him in the extract below:

Adam: Sometimes he even smacked my lip against my teeth like that [shows interviewer] he'd smack me you know...and then he'd miss a little bit then...I think I did a good enough job of blocking him anyway, if most of his hits had hit me then I would have had black eyes but I managed to dart quite a few of them

Int: Yeah, so you tried to stop...stop him from hitting you

Adam: I used to go like that all the time [shows interviewer] you know...and block it, then he'd block me into a corner you know...like he normally did, he'd get you into a corner like that corner there [shows interviewer] put you against the wall and he'd just like start smacking you

And secondly – crucially important – positioning himself as using physical aggression in the service of *protecting* other members of his family e.g. by chastising his Dad and kicking him in the back as revenge for picking on his brother David, as described in the extract below:-

Adam: He started picking on [brother] a lot more than anyone else, you know like...not punching wise but talking to him and saying nasty stuff to him...

Int: Right

Adam: then I'd like come up to him and kick him in the back and say like...leave [brother] alone, and I'd run away then he'd grab me and punch me against the wall...

It is also important to emphasise that Adam and the interviewer both orient to HPD as a normative framework in the context of their interview interactions, drawing on it as a sense making resource to discuss the boys' experience of domestic violence. Consider the following exchange:

Int: Ok. You sound quite angry, do you feel angry with him at all

Adam: Yeah, I'm angry

Int: Mmm...and it sounds like...I don't know if you were scared of him at all but it sounds like quite a scary situation to be in

Adam: Well I wasn't scared of him but I were scared of what he were doing

Int: Right...ok, I understand what you're saying

Adam: I'm not scared to go up to him and stick up for my mum or something but you know on the last night I was stood in front of her cos I wouldn't let him do it and I grabbed him and that you know...to stop him from hitting her but he almost got me

Int: Right, so you wanted to protect your mum

Adam: Yeah, I were just punching him and everything you know...then after it finished I were standing in front of my mum...you know like...and then he'd go up to her and act right nice after. I didn't even want him to talk to my mum any more, I didn't want him...I just stood in front of my mum and said don't go anywhere near her I wouldn't let him go anywhere near the baby or anyone, I got her in my arm and I sat down in front of mum and I says you're not going anywhere near her..."

In the above interaction, Adam carefully deals with the interviewer's suggestion that his situation was 'scary' by drawing a distinction between *being* scared of his father per se and being wary of the grave consequences of his father's violent actions. He elaborates by establishing that he was not scared to confront his Dad, 'go up to him and stick up for my mum ... grab him ... to stop him for hitting her'. Adam thus invokes the cultural norms of HPD - physical strength and bravery combined with the imperative to protect - and in so doing ascribes to himself an identity of heroic masculinity, at the same time heading off any possible ascription of a 'coward' identity. In the underlined part of the extract above, the interviewer responds to Adam's account by invoking one of the core elements of the hero identity - a desire to protect - as her understanding of Adam's motivation. By characterising his behaviour in this way, she effectively accepts Adam's account of his actions, motives and emotional state as 'sensible' and confirms his claim to a masculine hero identity. In the final turn, Adam elaborates further on his actions as designed to protect his mother and wrestle back control of the situation from his Dad.

If we return to West and Zimmerman's argument (1991) that gender identity is something we *do* and something we are accountable for, we can see that Adam does heroic masculinity in the above extracts and in so doing accounts for himself satisfactorily to the interviewer. In this interaction then, the normative status of Adam's account is marked by the interviewer's confirmation of it - rather than her rendering it as problematic or in need of further explanation. Goffman (1972) observes that social interaction is structured by rules protective of one's face (image or identity) and the face of others, and in the above extract we see how both interactants engage in face-work on Adam's behalf, preserving a positive self and public image, within a shared understanding of what counts as acceptable conduct, as defined by the ideology of HPD. We would argue that this means Adam does not have to struggle in this context to account for his actions and that, as such, it is likely that he experiences a sense of acceptance and tacit approval.

There are two additional points we want to make about the implications of orienting to HPD in this context for Adam's developing subjectivity. Firstly, in taking up the position of the absent hero, Adam becomes responsible for dealing with his father's behaviour. However, being positioned in this way seems an exceptionally heavy burden for a 12 year old to bear. In the fantasy world of film and comic book superheroes, the hero always wins through, even in the face of incredible odds. Subjectively, to try to be a hero, but ultimately feel like one failed, could lead to a sense of impotency and demoralisation. As Ussher has pointed out, "the romantic myth provides us with an image of 'man' which is ultimately as destructive for men

as it is for women as it sets up an ideal which is impossible for most men to match” (Ussher 1997, p. 50). At one point the interviewer asks Adam how his experiences have affected him and he replies:-

Adam: Me...I just...I don't know....I felt I could have done more

Int: You felt you could have done more

Adam: Yeah, that's all really, I felt I should have done more and I could have done more

Secondly, constructing self as idealised masculine hero in this context also means that Adam is, by default, identifying closely with a key element of his father's behaviour – namely the aggression element of masculine discourse and the conviction that things might have been better if he had been more of a physical match. HPD does however allow Adam to construct a point of separation between him and his Dad, to make sense of his own actions as justifiable, and thus heroic, in the circumstances, rather than self-serving or hedonistic. For Adam this may operate in the medium term as an important coping strategy, helping him to maintain positive face within prevailing cultural norms for heroic masculinity. However, danger also lurks within this discourse. All that is required is a re-shuffle of the cast of characters to construct self as 'victim' and other (wife, girlfriend or child) as the 'bad guy' (as 'inadequate' or 'irritating' perhaps) for the use of physical force to be employed in a seemingly 'justified' act of protecting or 'looking out' for oneself (Scully & Marolla, 1984; Scully, 1990; Beattie & Doherty, 1995; Mullender, 1996, Anderson & Doherty, 2007)

### **David's use of HPD**

David's use of HPD is different in important ways from his brother's. In the first place, there is evidence of much more critical reflection surrounding the events he discusses and, relatedly, much more troubling of some of the precepts of HPD. Unlike Adam, he describes his father as possessing neither physical strength nor bravado - essential ingredients of cultural constructions of masculinity, heroic or otherwise. He positions him as fearful and essentially a 'wimp' as in the extract below where the interviewer has just asked if he can remember any good times when his dad lived at home:

David: When he used to go out, but I still thought like – like he could protect us at night when there like used to be drunk people on the flat above and they used to be banging up and down the stairs and that and I used to feel a bit scared because we were just on our own but when he came back he didn't wanna do anything anyway – cos I thought of somebody as big – that's what I thought he would do – like protect us – but anyway

Int: But he didn't

David: Not really no –he was scared himself

or again:-

it was as if we were like lodgers in the house and he was like the boss – even though we used to rent the house and he was the one who was in and out all the time, he wants to be man of the house but he's not up to it – no

David's interview was full of poignant descriptions of feeling let down by his father's failure to 'stick up for' or protect his family and live up to the role of Dad/husband-as-

hero. For David, not only was his father 'not up to' the masculine role but other fathers were compared and also found wanting, as in: -

Because you usually think you've got a father and stuff but it seems like we've missed something and I see all these other fathers these days – they don't seem to do much anyway because there's this boy called [name] and his dad – he's always em – a kind of wimp, he won't go out and stick up for him and he tells him to come in and play on the back or something like that, his mum comes out and she tells them to clear off and then he can go and play on the front. It's the mums who do things for their children and it's usually the dad that stick up for the mum but he doesn't even do that. Sometimes they're in the pub or something while the mum stays at home looking after the kids

Overall, David struggles to match the idealised qualities of HPD to his observations of the behaviour of any of the men around him (with the possible exception of his grandfather). In positioning his father as a wimp, rather than essentially hard and calculating as his brother had done, David also questions his father's rationality by categorising him as 'unstable', 'psycho' and 'totally mad', drawing on psychiatric discourse as a potential explanation for behaviour as in the following:-

I could tell by his technique that he were actually doing it wrong himself when he were shooting basketball he used to do it wrong – and he used to say 'I don't do it wrong' and I'd show him what he done it like and used to say "oh I don't do that" He definitely had a problem mentally

and again:-

He – he's – he's unstable – like he'll be really happy and put his arms round us and stuff – he might be really nice and then he'd start shouting at us – he – he was always changing his mood – to say – to psycho – to em totally mad

Overall, although David's account is clearly located within an HPD framework – e.g. through discussions of 'cowards', 'wimps' and 'not being up to' being man of the house etc - his narrative contains continual challenges to the validity of this idealised version of heroic masculinity. This can be seen in his account of his own role in events, for example in the following interaction:

#### **Extract 1**

Int: ...I'm wondering if you can remember how old you were when you were first aware that there was trouble at home

David: Trouble at home

Int: Yeah

David: Em...well probably about 5,6...

Int: 5 or 6...

David: I can always remember a lot of arguing and stuff but it started really troubling me at about 8 when I could really remember it properly

Int: ok

David: [brother] were like trying to help all the time even though he were only little and he didn't really understand what was going on much

Int: Right, so he tried to help...and who was living with you then

David: Well when it started I think my little sister were born about...well I wasn't that old and [brother] was only little and that

Int: Yeah

David: and my father used to come home and he'd be shouting at my mum and us...and [brother] used to get really upset

Int: Ok

David: and I just used to try and ignore it and that

### Extract 2

David: "And the last time she got beat up I were definitely upset and I were definitely mad. I mean he kept saying...he were saying stuff to her and swearing and that and I didn't understand everything he were saying so I was getting mad, [brother] answered back to him and he didn't like that at all. I just didn't say anything to him because I know what he's like, he'd probably start hitting my mum again if I said anything to him

The underlined text in extracts one and two above illustrate a recurring theme in David's interview, as he constructs an account of himself and his actions during the violent episodes. Namely, he describes himself as avoiding confrontation with his Dad ('I just used to try and ignore it and that' ... 'I just didn't say anything to him...') and at the same time questions his brother's interventions as a 'sensible' response to their father's violent behaviour. In extract two above, David calls into question the rationality of his brother 'answering back' to his Dad by stressing the *negative* impact of such action ('...and he didn't like that at all' and '...he'd probably start hitting my mum again if I said anything to him'). David explains Adam's behaviour as immature and ineffective (if well-meaning), characterising his actions in extract one as '...were like *trying to help* all the time *even though he were only little*' and claiming greater knowledge of how his Dad operates and what is likely to make the situation worse e.g. 'I just didn't say anything to him because *I know what he's like...*' In the context of the interview, the construction of Adam's action as an irrational and immature attempt to intervene, functions as an explanation for David's 'avoidance' approach. In so doing we could argue that the germ of an alternative identity of masculine rationality emerges – one more akin to the 'New Man' prevalent in contemporary popular culture and identified in other critical work (e.g. Nicolson, 1990; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). In contrast to the archetypal masculine hero, 'New Man' represents a shift away from the body as focus, toning down the physical, aggressive elements of masculinity in favour of a more verbal cultured masculinity.

However, even though David doesn't position himself straightforwardly in the idealised hero role, we argue that he is still *accountable* to HPD in this context. This is evidenced by the large portion of his interview which is taken up with trying to account for his deviation from this role. Like his brother, he clearly does not want to be labelled as 'a coward' as can be seen in this very complex attempt to distance himself from any potential accusations of being scared, whilst still maintaining the construction of his father as a very real physical threat, and thus as an object that should be perhaps avoided (his own approach) rather than challenged (his brother's):

David: I wasn't scared of him but I was scared of his size cos he seemed scary...but if I was

as big as him I wouldn't be scared of him...cos I was more scared of him in the way that he might hurt [brother] or my mum

Int: Right, I see

If we put the interaction between interviewee and interviewer more clearly into the picture again, we can see the strangle hold HPD exerts on the conversation where the interviewer tries, as she did with Adam, to offer David an identity as hero-son in the underlined part of the extract below:-

David: Yeah, cos when you're older you can understand what they're arguing about and you know...you know what the thing is so you like want to join in and I'm on my mum's side and I did want to tell him so I did start arguing with him and I started getting quite nasty with him as well but then he used to shout at my mum, and I didn't like it that he'd shout at my mum so...and my mum didn't like it when he shouted at me, so it like started a real big argument and it were...it were just getting stupid. If she hadn't left him it would have just got past a joke really.

Int: so you feel it would have got worse

David: It would have just got worse until I'd end up getting older and leaving the house and my mum was with him and then...my mum would have been stuck then

Int: And it sounds as though you wanted to protect your mum, is that how it was

David: Mmm...[brother] used to try to protect her from him cos he wanted us all to be a happy family

[...]

David: But then he started arguing back to my dad as well as telling him that he shouldn't be doing this and that...

In the first turn, we once again see traces of the theme identified in the analysis of extract two above: David argues that intervention in the form of shouting back or hitting back was not a straightforward solution to the problem of his father's violence; in fact it could make the immediate situation much worse. David describes how arguing with his Dad escalated things, his Dad would shout at his mum which would lead to a 'real big argument'. He describes this pattern of meeting fire with fire as ridiculous (rather than heroic), '... it were just getting stupid' and '...beyond a joke...' and points to his mum leaving as the most positive action in the situation. The normative status of HPD is displayed in the interviewer's interpretation of David's turn. She offers him an identity as archetypal masculine hero, '...it sounds like *you wanted to protect* your mum...', sidelining his central argument (that trying to fight back is misguided) and picking up on the disclaimed piece of (possibly face-saving) scene setting to his story. This is confirmed in David's uncomfortable response to the ascription of a hero identity and continuation with the theme of his brother's misguided behaviour.

In summary, for David, we would argue that the fairy story contained within HPD has crumbled. The ideal of heroic masculinity does not work for him in trying to account for events in his family, nor does it help in his understanding of gender relations and the behaviour of Dads in general. It is unrealistic. David questions the rationality of his father's behaviour and his brother's behaviour and tries to construct an identity for

himself that is outside of the hero narrative, challenging the norms of masculine identity constructed in HPD. The success of such a challenge does however depend quite precariously on the context, which has to be supportive of transgressions of this kind (Buttny, 1993; West & Zimmerman, 1991). Stepping outside of the idealised HPD narrative produces a gender identity accounting problem which David carefully attempts to negotiate – namely if he wasn't going to identify himself as the hero of his story he was in danger of experiencing a 'loss of face' through, by implication, being vulnerable to the label 'coward'. He manages this by distancing himself from this label and by presenting his (in)action as the logical and sensible approach. However, the analysis of David's interview suggests that his emerging critique of masculinity and gender relations and his own precarious identity positioning was not particularly supported in the context of the interview. Instead, the cultural norm that the boys would, naturally, want to be young heroes and 'save' their mum from the father-villain, is uncritically mobilised. David grasps at an alternative understanding of events, but the lack of explicit support for his version may well lead to subjective feelings of confusion and regret.

## **Discussion**

In this article, we have attempted to use a critical psycho-discursive analysis of interview data to explore individual differences in two brothers' sense making around their lived experience of domestic violence and to link this sense making to a broader analysis of gender power relations. We have argued that a particular form of idealised hegemonic masculinity, HPD, was a major organising principle within the interview context in framing both brothers' understandings and explanations of their father's violence. In particular, HPD contained within it the means to hold each boy personally implicitly morally accountable to the role of heroic protector in response to their father's violence. In both interviews, the interviewer at some point offers each boy the possibility of accounting successfully for self as a heroic protector and, therefore, interactively colludes with this discourse. We would argue that this is because the interviewer was *sensitive* to the potential threat to face lurking in not aligning with the hero in HPD and was, therefore, attempting to help the boys do face-work and protect self-esteem. Despite all this, however, the boys did not orient in the same way to HPD. Whilst Adam, the younger brother, positioned himself closely with the idealised role of heroic protector in his interview David, the older brother, was much more critically reflective and there was evidence of a good deal of troubling of some of the key precepts of the discourse in his interview.

In terms of professional practice, we would argue from this study that this type of discursive approach could be a useful 'way in' to exploring individual children's sense making around violence, to challenge deeply embedded hegemonic assumptions and support critical thinking around gender roles. In particular, it might prove fruitful to focus on concepts such as 'face-work' and 'face-threat' in order to tease out psychological dimensions of identity work, individual difference and situated action. It is difficult to predict with any certainty how Adam and David will continue to position themselves in relation to HPD outside of the local context of the interviews analysed here. However, other writers (e.g. Davies and Harre, 1998; Connell, 1995; de Visser and Smith 2006) have suggested that gender identities shape how we go on to use our bodies through a process of body-reflexive practice. Also, the consistent nature of Adam's accounting to HPD in his interview coupled with the cross

referencing between the boys' accounts in relation to Adam's adoption of a hero-protector identity suggest that this pattern of identification is fairly routine for him. If Adam continues to identify in this way as 'hard' we would argue that he is likely, reciprocally, to be continually motivated to produce the 'hard' behaviour to match – or fall foul of the label 'wimp' (Wetherell and Edley 1999; de Visser and Smith 2006). We could speculate that, for Adam, identifying so strongly with the physically aggressive elements of HPD – where violence is conceived as a problem solving strategy - could mean that domestic violence is more likely to be reproduced in the long run. On the other hand, grappling with the ambiguities surrounding HPD and searching for alternatives, as David was doing in his interview, may mean that he is more likely to be lead away from domestic violence. However, given the deeply entrenched cultural significance of the male/hero, the identity benefits that go along with positioning self as eligible to be a male hero and the potential threats to face associated with standing outside this formulation, David's troubling of traditional gender roles may yet prove very hard to sustain.

This analysis of the interrelation between social and cultural context and interactional identity work should act as a challenge to perspectives such as Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2007) who suggest that:-

“Fundamental transformations in men's and women's lives are taking place in Western societies (Hennessy, 2000, Walby, 1997). Empirical studies are beginning to detail how traditional 'gender roles' no longer look the same, mean the same or feel the same.....Perhaps the most important advance in feminist theory is that gender relations have been problematized. In other words, gender can no longer be seen as a simple, natural fact (Flax, 1990) (extract from Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2007, p. 1)

Mac an Ghaill in the above quote paint a picture of a transformation in gender roles and the lack of relevance of 'old fashioned' notions of gender. This resonates with much contemporary academic writing and offers a sense of fluidity in the meaning of masculinity in relation to femininity. However, in our study there was no such freedom. We have tried to show how a particular cultural construction of hegemonic masculinity was highly significant in providing a *framework of accountability* that was restrictive and constraining, though not necessarily determining. As Bordo eloquently argues:-

“Superman haunts Everyman, threatens his undoing” (Bordo, 1999 p. 33)

We started from the proposition that the individual is always already social and have tried to work through what this means in practice by demonstrating how social control is an emergent feature of social interaction, showing how the boys oriented to and, to some extent, reproduced the social norms proscribed in HPD, in the particular context of accounting for their experiences of domestic violence.

We have used case study material to try to show how identity work is always 'done' in relation to a *situated context* and that an individual's struggle to make sense of self is negotiated within a framework of social and cultural norms. At the same time, contextual similarity (siblings from the same family situation) and a dominant hegemonic form of sense making (HPD) did not prevent significant individual differences occurring in the ways in which children engaged with their circumstances

and the people around them as they attempted to forge relevant 'selves' to step into (Parker 1992). We would argue that using a discursive approach to focus on research participants *as individuals* can help us to push forward our theoretical understanding of how the personal and the social collide in interaction. By focusing on individual difference, we hope to have provided an approach to exploring the way in which identity work is simultaneously personal, social, interactional *and* precarious.

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