

DISTORTIONS OF THE MIND: FROM CULTURAL MODELS TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE¹

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1. INTRODUCTION

Discourse studies on gender violence carried out within the fields of Critical Discourse Analysis and social psychology have revealed different strategies in the discourse of aggressors and victims of sexual abuse. Whereas victims tend to blame themselves for their own victimization, aggressors are found to avoid blame and disclaim their taking part in the sexual assault (Hydén & McCarthy, 1994; Wood & Rennie, 1994, and Ehrlich, 1998). These studies coincide in identifying issues of blame and responsibility as pervasive in the discourse of victims of sexual violence.

This article acknowledges the relation between discourse, society and cognition. On the one hand, it adheres to the interpretation of discourse as social practice. That is, following Fairclough (1992: 64), discourse is conceived as a mode of both action and representation inasmuch as it contributes to the formation of social relations, identities and also conventions but also encodes a representation of the world. On the other hand, the present study draws on Núñez Perucha's (2004) claim that a close look at how mind works can help us to understand the issue of social victimization and its manifestation in discourse. By incorporating theoretical notions taken from the fields of Cognitive Linguistics, Cognitive Therapy and Cognitive Anthropology, this paper seeks to achieve the following objectives: (a) investigate the connection between cultural models, cognitive distortions and domestic violence, considering how these cognitive mechanisms underlie not only the aggressor's justification of violence against women but also the way victims perceive themselves and their experience,

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and (b), establish relations between the activation of cognitive mechanisms and discourse patterns.

For this two-fold purpose, the analysis draws on data taken from two Canadian novels (*Don't. A Woman's Work*, by Elli Danica 1988 and *I am Woman*, by Lee Maracle 1988)² as well as from survivors' stories from the Internet. The data represent cases of women who have been victims of sexual abuse and battering at the hands of their husbands or stepfathers.

The paper is organised into four main sections. After this introduction, section 2 discusses the notions of cultural models and cognitive distortions. It will also show how these cognitive mechanisms give rise to stereotyped roles assigned to men and women, which in turn, seem to underlie the justification of domestic violence. Section 3 focuses on the way battered and raped women construct a fragmented identity for themselves on the basis of distorted conceptualisations of their stereotyped roles. Section 4 offers the main conclusions.

2. SOCIAL STEREOTYPES, CULTURAL MODELS AND COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

According to Quasthoff (1989: 184), "the cognitive function of stereotypical thinking acknowledges the fact that the human mind has to simplify to a certain degree in categorizing and forming expectations about the world". The basis of expectations are provided by our knowledge of the world, which, following the postulates of Cognitive Linguistics, is organised in terms of *cognitive models* (see Lakoff, 1987 and Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). These models, or mental structures organising thought, do not exist objectively in nature; rather, they are idealised in the sense that they represent reality from a certain perspective resulting from a process of idealisation, as the case of the model of *a week* as consisting of seven days (Lakoff, 1987: 68-69). Each idealised cognitive model (ICM) makes use of four types of structuring principles (Lakoff, 1987: 68): *propositional structure*, characterised by a set of elements and relations among them, as in Fillmore's (1982) frames; *image-schematic structure* or preconceptual structures which arise from our everyday bodily experience, as the FORCE schema (Johnson, 1987: 41-64); *metaphoric mappings*, whereby a target domain (A) is interpreted in terms of a source domain (B), as in POWER IS CONTROL (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: 15); and, *metonymic mappings*, or mappings within a single domain so that one element of the domain stands for another element of the same domain (e.g. *whole for part metonymies*).

² These two novels will be referred to as D and I respectively when providing examples for the analysis and discussion of data. Regarding the novel *I am Woman*, it should be noted that only chapter 6 "Rusty" has been considered for analysis.

Cognitive models can also organise the way in which human beings interpret the social order. These models are usually termed *folk models* (Lakoff, 1987: 8) or *cultural models* in studies within the area of cognitive anthropology (Quinn & Holland, 1987). The notion of cultural models encapsulates the idea that cognitive models that are culturally shared become cultural models of the world (Quinn & Holland, 1987: 4). What is more, given the fact that the understanding of the social relations is culturally determined, cultural models can also establish what is socially right or wrong.

It is now turn to consider the connection between cultural models, the cognitive distortions to which they may give rise and domestic violence. As Hydén & McCarthy (1994) and Mooney (2000) have suggested, the cultural patriarchal model plays an important role in maintaining unequal power relations between men and women and in legitimizing men's control over women. According to radical feminists, patriarchy and the construction of masculinity within this social order appear to be the ultimate causes of men's violence against women (see Mooney, 2000: 96).

One specification of the patriarchal model at stake in domestic violence is the *Strict Father model* (Lakoff, 1996: 65-66 and Lakoff & Johnson, 1999: 313-314). This propositional model represents a traditional nuclear family where men, women and children are assigned different roles. The father is responsible for protecting the family as well as setting family policies. He is also a moral authority and has the right to either reward obedience or punish disobedience to the standards set by him. In contrast, the mother is responsible for looking after the house, upholding her husband's authority and bringing up the children, who are expected to respect their father's authority and learn self-discipline.

As the analysis of data will show, these patriarchal cognitive models can, in turn, give rise to cognitive distortions, a notion used within the field of Cognitive Therapy to refer to inaccurate or faulty thought patterns about own's or others' behaviour, such as "I'm a real failure", "He/she thinks I'm not attractive" (cf. Leahy, 2003: 18-20). These distortions have been found to be associated with depression and other emotional disorders (Leahy, 2003) as well as with antisocial behaviour. In this regard, research has identified four categories of cognitive distortions that are frequently used by delinquent teenagers to justify unacceptable social behaviour as acceptable: self-centred, blaming others, minimizing/mislabelling, and, assuming the worst (cf. Liau *et alii*, 1998; Barriga *et alii*, 2000 and Gibbs *et alii*, 2001). Interestingly, our analysis reveals that some of these types of cognitive distortions are also used

by sexual offenders to justify violence on women, as is the case of those distortions termed *self-centred*, *blaming others* and *(mis)labelling*³.

Liau *et alii* (1998), among others, explain that the SELF-CENTRED type of cognitive distortion takes place when a person acts according to his or her own views, expectations, needs, rights, immediate feelings and desires without considering the other's views or needs. From a cognitive point of view, the interpretation of the self as the centre results from imposing the valuation SELF-OTHER on the image schema of CENTRE-PERIPHERY (Johnson, 1987: 125). Thus, the SELF is also attributed the positive value inherited from the positive evaluation of the CENTRE in our recurrent patterns of experience (cf. Johnson, 1987: 124).

In the narratives of victims of domestic violence, the aggressor understands his own subjectivity as being central. As shown by the following extract from Danica's novel *Don't: A Woman's Word*, the aggressor has internalised the Strict Father model and perceives his relation to women in terms of a cultural model of male supremacy. By distorting reality and reorienting the act of sexual abuse towards the good, he tries to make his daughter believe that he is "teaching" her and acting "for her own good". It should be noticed that the aggressor's system of beliefs is not shared by the victim, as she is forced to say she likes what her father is doing to her:

1) Pretend you are a woman. Pretend you really want me. Want you? You want me to do this to you don't you? Oh yes daddy. I'm good to you, aren't I? Yes daddy. You love it when your daddy makes love to you don't you? You love what daddy's teaching you? Daddy has so much loving to give to a woman. Pretend you are daddy's woman. A hand squeezes my shoulder at the base of my throat. Before he makes the world go dark again he says: say you like it (D, 51-52).

Hydén & McCarthy (1994: 55) suggest that distorting morally unacceptable acts on the basis of exculpating arguments such as the one of "for your own good" gives way to the non-acknowledgement of these acts. In a similar vein, Salter (1988: 124) notes that this type of cognitive distortions whereby the aggressor perceives himself as doing nothing wrong is an important barrier to his acknowledging that his actions represent a case of sexual abuse.

Another cognitive distortion underlying domestic violence is that of BLAMING THE OTHERS, which consists in attributing blame for one's own acts to outside sources (see, for instance, Liau *et alii*, 1998). By *blaming*

³ In the present discussion *labelling* is regarded as including cases of *mislabelling*.

the other the aggressor manipulates the victimizing situation and justifies the exercise of force on the basis that the woman's behaviour has to be disciplined or punished. In extract (2) from the book *I am Woman* (L. Maracle), Rusty's father is presented as a figure of parental authority who has to discipline the rest of the family members. For him, physical violence represents a way of exercising discipline.

2) All week long, my dad would discipline us and on the weekend with the help of some hard stuff, it would be my mom's turn. From the darkness I could hear them arguing. Soon the voices would drop and the sound of fists connecting with bodies would wind up the discussion. (I, 54)

In example (3) the aggressor seems to justify battering on the basis of propositional implications derived from the patriarchal model of male superiority and his own distortion of reality concerning his wife behaviour. The idea that, according to the patriarchal model of male superiority, men have power over women, and therefore, control them, allows for the metaphorical interpretation of women in terms of *possessions*. Such an interpretation is based on the close connection between the notions of control and possession, as shown by the widespread view of understanding control over an object as holding on to it and keep it in one's possession (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999: 272). This conceptualisation becomes the source of physical violence once cognitive distortions concerning the woman's behaviour come into play. More specifically, the man adheres to the belief that his wife is seeing other men and uses this argument to rationalise violence, thus placing the cause of the aggression within the victim.

3) Thrusting the door open with such a vengeance that Julia was thrown across the room, Reece bore down on her, fists tightly clenched at this side. "You think I don't know what you've been doing, huh? You think I don't know that you've been fucking around behind my back?" (...) With one deft movement Reece picked her up and threw her on the bed, somehow managing to fist her so hard as he did so that she just fell back and lay there, dazed. "Trying to make a cunt huh, you'll be sorry (...). "Huh, fuck you, you're nothing but a fucking bitch anyway" he said (Julia's story).

The aggressor's exercise of both physical and verbal violence on the victim is linguistically manifested by means of verbs of movement, indicating action exercised on the victim (e.g.: "Julia was thrown across the room", "Reece picked her up and threw her on the bed") and by threatening speech acts (such as "Trying to make a cunt huh, you'll be sorry") and insults

(e.g. “you are nothing but a fucking bitch”). In both cases, the victim is conceptualised as an object towards which action (either physical or verbal) is directed by the aggressor or origin of force (cf. Núñez Perucha, 2004).

The example also shows a negative LABELLING of the victim, as her characterisation by means of derogatory terms (e.g. “a fucking bitch”), which can be said to increase the force of verbal violence and also contribute to women’s victimization. In this connection, Mooney’s (2000: 96) remarks that violence does not necessarily take the form of physical aggression but it can also appear in the forms of verbal violence and psychological harm.

3. THE CONSTRUCTION OF *VICTIM IDENTITY*

As can be observed from the examples discussed in the previous section, women are not only victims of physical aggression, but also victims of the offender’s arguments that destroy their own personhood. In this section, we will show that the way battered and raped women construct their identities is conditioned by their relationship with their aggressors and the way their social roles are perceived by the men at their own home.

The discourse of the victims of domestic violence shows that their internalisation of the cognitive models of male superiority prevents them from perceiving themselves as victims and makes them vulnerable to cognitive distortions concerning their social roles and their relationship to men. Once women have internalised the stereotyped roles that patriarchal models impose on them, they are likely to make use of the following cognitive distortions: *other-centred*, *personalization*, *labelling* and *overgeneralization*.

As the following example shows, the way the victim of gender violence perceives her social role is highly influenced by the social model of marriage, which is positively valued (“Julia lay there a few minutes enjoying the feeling, so safe, so secure, so married!”). According to this model, marriage represents the measure of a woman’s success in life and, consequently, being unable to hold on to a husband is a failure (Quinn, 1987 and Quinn & Holland, 1987: 12). In order to conform to the stereotyped roles of good mothers and wives, women are forced to satisfy men’s needs and expectations instead of their own (OTHER-CENTRENESS).

4) A new day dawned as usual with nothing new in Julia’s life. Everything was still the same. This time Julia didn’t take an overdose though, when she rose in the morning she cooked a lavish lunch and sat watching television waiting for Reece to wake up. When he was still asleep at 2 o’clock she walked quietly into the room and sat on the bed beside him. Shaking him gently she whispered to him “Reece darling, please wake up. I’ve cooked us a lovely lunch, aren’t you

hungry? (...). Honey wake up please, I'm so lonely". With a grunt Reece opened an eye and looked at her and then closed it again. (...) Julia lay there a few minutes enjoying the feeling, so safe, so secure, so married! (Julia's story)

Another type of distortion is that of PERSONALIZATION, which results from the woman's perception of herself as the cause of some negative event for which she is not originally responsible. On this basis, she feels guilty for not being able to fight back and change the victimizing situation that she experiences at home, as in (5).

5) The first time he beat me up was because I seriously shamed him. After that, the crimes got smaller until he just wailed on me as a matter of course. (...) You start to think that you could have done this or that to avoid a beating. Even if you didn't deserve it, you somehow think that if you could have avoided it and didn't, in some twisted way, it was your own fault (I, 67).

In addition to blaming themselves for their own situation, victims of gender violence attach negative labels to themselves (distortion of LABELLING). When narrating their experience of sexual abuse, they regard themselves as having been deprived of humanity and, consequently, reduced to a thing, as the following extract shows:

6) For me, 39 years after the fact, I'd say the most pervasive, damaging effect was what I call the "thingness", being reduced to a thing (Debbie's story).

Battered women's feelings of sexual objectification make them lose their integrity as human beings. Bartky (1979: 34) points out that the degrading identification of a person with her body is a form of fragmentation in the sense that it involves the splitting of the whole person into parts, thus making room for feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem.

The negative self-image that women have of themselves activates another cognitive distortion, namely, that of OVERGENERALIZATION (e.g. If my husband does not like me, nobody will like me). This type of thought reinforces the victim's dependency on her aggressor:

7) I have no friends, even if Reece allowed me to have nobody would like me anyway, I'm weird and Reece is right, I'm stupid too. If I get a divorce I'll spend the rest of my life alone, Reece is right there too, I'm too fat, no man would ever be interested in me. With a gulp she swallowed another handful. Who will miss me, she thought sadly (...) (Julia's story).

The cognitive distortion of OVERGENERALIZATION can be considered as the ultimate expression of defeat. Once the victim attributes herself an inferiorised identity, not only does she appropriate of the discourse of her aggressor (*He is right, I'm wrong*) but she is also tempted to commit suicide. In other words, the construction of a fragmented victim identity may also lead to the destruction of the self.

4. CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis of data has explored the effects of patriarchal cultural models and their associated cognitive distortions on the aggressor's justification of violence against women, on the one hand, and on women's construction of a victim identity, on the other hand. Furthermore, the analysis has shown that the different activation of cognitive distortions concerning men's and women's stereotyped social behaviour is also manifested in discourse.

As far as the aggressor's justification of sexual violence is concerned, his violent behaviour seems to derive not only from his internalisation of the cultural model of male supremacy and the Strict Father model, but also from cognitive distortions whereby he perceives his relation to women in terms of his own needs (*self-centred distortion*) and constructs a positive image of himself versus a negative image of the victim (*distortions of blaming others and labelling*). As a result, his discourse, embedded within the victim's narrative, exhibits mainly strategies of positive self-presentation and threatening speech acts.

In contrast, the victims of domestic violence are found to be vulnerable to cognitive distortions related to their stereotyped roles of mothers and wives. In this way, they aim at fulfilling "the other's expectations" (*other-centred distortion*), blame themselves for disrupting her family (*personalization*) and feel themselves as mere objects or failures (*labelling and overgeneralization distortions*). On this basis, they construct a fragmented identity for themselves, as evidenced mainly by her discourse of negative self-presentation.

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