

5 The Normative Framework of Intimate Partner Violence: Mechanisms of Differentiation from Others

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Intimate partner violence has long been considered a private problem. However, the women's movement and feminist research have contributed to politicizing this so-called private domain, drawing attention to violence perpetrated behind closed doors and its gendered nature (Pease 2019). Indeed, as Crenshaw and Bonis (2005) conclude, one achievement of the women's movement is the recognition that intimate partner violence is part of a broad-scale system of domination that affects women as a group and that needs to be addressed politically, legally, and socially. This acknowledgment led to wider recognition of this formerly private and covert violence as a violation of human rights and prompted international resolutions and conventions holding individual nation states accountable for protecting and supporting survivors¹. Nevertheless, despite these advances at a legislative level, intimate partner violence continues to be depoliticized or culturized: it is typically ascribed to specific groups, namely migrants and the working class (Karlsson et al. 2020; Pease 2019), despite studies demonstrating that intimate partner violence is prevalent across all social strata (BMFSFJ 2014). This gap sheds light on social problematization and has led to controversies related to patterns of interpretation and categories that have been symbolically transmitted—the typical social problematizations. The traditional patterns of interpretation of intimate partner violence point to a *migrant background* categorized by a *lack of education*. In Western Europe, survivors who are classified as middle class—the dominant social group—tend to be excluded from public discourse about violence (Karlsson et al. 2020; Schröttle 2011) and consequent political and legal interventions (Pease 2019). Indeed, Gloor and Meier (2014) note, in the Swiss context specifically, that women from the middle and upper classes (and men in general) are the most difficult to reach target group. Accordingly, they do not benefit from available support (i.e., they rarely appear in women's shelters) nor from inclusion in scientific studies.

1 In the following, the term *survivor* is used. This term focuses on ideas of coping and resistance. However, if I address the dominant conception of *victimhood*, I use the term *victim*.

In this paper, I illustrate how the absence of the middle class in public discourse and interpretation of patterns of intimate partner violence relate to these typical social problematizations and how it may determine how survivors (women and men²) perceive violence. Central to this is how traditional patterns of interpretation and problem categories contribute to the normalization and individualization of intimate partner violence and thus influence the perception, interpretation, and coping strategies of survivors who are identified as members of the middle class. Thus, this research makes an important contribution, as these survivors' perceptions of violence are widely unknown.

This work is grounded on the viewpoints of feminist violence research. The research aims to expand the concepts and analyses of violence by including structural and cultural components in addition to the symbolically transmitted and subjectively defined concepts of violence (Brückner 2002). This can be achieved by applying a qualitative approach to the life views, the interpretation of violence, and the subjective level of experience (Böttger and Strobl 2002).

5.1 Methods and Terminology

In this chapter, I draw on the results of my study of intimate partner violence based on 18 interviews conducted throughout Switzerland from 2015 to 2019. They were analyzed using qualitative reconstructive methods, in line with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). The thirteen women and five men interviewed had all experienced intimate partner violence in heterosexual relationships. Their ages ranged from 20 to 72 years, and they were in relationships that were ongoing or had ended prior to the interviews. All had been socialized as either male or female. They were born in Switzerland or the European Union and identified as Swiss/European nationals. Most had secondary education and the rest had studied at higher vocational or university level. It became clear that the interviewees all self-identified as members of the middle class. For example, Ms. Mueller³ positioned herself as being from “the higher or richer class” (paragraph 20).

The following terms are relevant to this analysis: violence, interpretation, frame of orientation, dominant conceptions, and coping strategies.

2 All interviewees were socialized as male or female and identify with their assigned gender. In the following, I therefore refer to a heterosexual two-gender model and use the terms *woman* and *man* accordingly.

3 All names were replaced by pseudonyms.

Violence, in this study, is understood as a phenomenon that does not exist in a fixed manner but is classified in social processes of negotiation and interpretation and embedded in power relations (Staudigl 2012). The social-theoretical analysis is based on the empirically founded model of violence modalities that I developed (see Nef 2020). According to this model, violence not only refers to (physical) experiences but above all, to social and intersubjective processes of interpretation. Consequently, violence must be understood as a social construct that a society constantly renegotiates (Staudigl 2012). Central to this is that in these negotiations dominant conceptions represent value judgments and norms. In relation to the present study, these can be, for example, dominant conceptions about what a couple relationship must be like.

In the social sciences, interpretations are not individual opinions or hypotheses—they are supra-individual, as they reduce the complexity of everyday experience and organize the world into common schemes of possible ways to solve problems. Because specific interpretations may diverge due to the biographical course or individual narrative perspectives, they depict the social reality of the respective subjects when confronted with a problem of action. Hence, social reality only manifests through the interpretation itself (Herma 2009, 99). These interpretations are, in turn, embedded in frames of orientation (Kavemann et al. 2016). These frames consist of values and norms that have become hegemonically established. In this chapter, these frames are referred to as *dominant conceptions*. Therefore, not only violence itself is embedded in relations of power and domination. Moreover, it is assumed, that the respective experience of violence and its interpretations are not only subjective but interactively negotiated and socially situated (Kavemann et al. 2016; Staudigl 2012). Survivors use individual coping strategies to deal with violence. Defining *coping* is complex, as different forms of dealing with a situation can be employed simultaneously. Moreover, it is important to note that coping strategies are not to be understood as strategies that pursue some larger plan or clear goals. They are merely ways of surviving and, as a concept, simply refer to ways of dealing with an actual situation, incident, or experience (Bauman et al. 2008).

5.2 Survivors' Perspectives and Applied Coping Strategies

In this section, I first outline the dominant conceptions about intimate relationships, violence, and victimhood from the survivors' perspectives. I then describe how these dominant conceptions relate to coping strategies and how this connection results in well-rehearsed routines and a dynamic

that gradually gels into patterns that contribute to normalizing and individualizing intimate partner violence. As an illustrative example, I show this dynamic along with the pathologization as a central means of coping that emerged throughout the interviews. These explanations illustrate that survivors and their means of coping are shaped by two intricately interwoven dominant conceptions of intimate relationships: a) dominant conceptions about intimate relationships, violence, and victimhood, and b) dominant conceptions of intimate relationship expectations shaped by the power dynamic of perpetrator and survivor.

5.2.1 Dominant Conceptions of Intimate Relationships, Violence, and Victimhood

Dominant conceptions of intimate relationships, violence, and victimhood were instrumental in shaping the interviewees' process of meaning-making and developing their ways of coping and survival. For instance, throughout the interviews, the most dominant idea about intimate relationships is that they are an essential aspect of life. This is reflected in comments that stressed that one *has to have* and *has to maintain* a relationship. From the perspective of female survivors, relationships are associated with social status—they bestow higher status upon a woman than being single does, and the desire to retain this status leads female survivors to stay in violent relationships:

I think we [women] are partly victims ... in the sense of letting too much happen to us ... I noticed that the protection or other prestige I had, just because I had a partner, was immense [long pause].
(Ms. Mueller,⁴ paragraph 46)

Moreover, the different ways in which the relationships began and proceeded, as described in the interviews, suggest several dominant conceptions of relationships:

And that was a moment when I thought, "Come on, take the plunge! Now it's your turn to dive into a relationship." And that's how it actually started with him. And it all happened extremely quickly. So, he also pulled the strings, and, at that moment, I was very happy that someone was there for me. Someone to make decisions. Someone to take over everything. Yes, someone who was not afraid of tasks. Someone who carried you in his hands, who did

4 Ms. Mueller, Swiss, 42, mother of two children, degree in management, 8-month relationship.

everything for you. Offered himself for everything, yes. And then I was happy, so to speak. I could let things slide and not always have to take everything into my hands and somehow do it myself and take responsibility, so ... (Ms. Bertrand,⁵ paragraphs 14–15)

Dominant conceptions of relationships are also linked to the roles one has in a relationship and to the duties associated with them:

That's just the way it is, and if you have a family and are in a relationship, ... then this becomes almost like a job, or a ... so, any self-determination is gone, and instead there are just duties. This is how you do it, this is how you do it, and this is what you do, and this is a family. (Ms. Gerber,⁶ paragraph 66)

Such conceptions of a relationship serve as a frame of orientation (“how a relationship has to be”): “... a relationship simply [has] to work” (Ms. Gerber, paragraph 36). The result is that interviewees demand a great deal of themselves as they see themselves as responsible for making their relationships work.

This burden of responsibility is clearly illustrated in the case of Mr. Bischoff. He remained in a violent relationship, as he felt responsible for his wife due to his understanding of gender roles and relationship dynamics. For him, this included maintaining the relationship at all costs and taking care of his partner, whom he said was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and alcohol dependency. When she became violent, he reacted by withdrawing. For example, he moved small objects from the apartment to the basement, gradually withdrawing from the common bedroom, and slept in his car to be rested for work the next day. She, in turn, reacted aggressively, and the violence increased, with her smashing objects that belonged to him. Finally, one day when he was leaving to walk the dog after an argument, she stabbed him in the back, leaving him hospitalized:

That was the cut-off-day for me, because she attacked me with a knife and because it was simply finished for me ... That was simply the point where I could not do it anymore ... (Mr. Bischoff,⁷ paragraph 18)

The decisive factor in his decision to leave was the clear departure from his dominant conceptions of a relationship. For him, it was impossible

5 Ms. Bertrand, Swiss, 43, mother of one child, IT specialist, 18-year relationship.

6 Ms. Gerber, Swiss, 48, mother of one child, yoga instructor and sales manager, 10-year relationship.

7 Mr. Bischoff, Swiss, 56, foreman, 31-year relationship.

to reconcile the notion that someone who loved their partner would stab them with a knife. Nonetheless, he reported still being burdened by his decision to end the relationship and questioned whether his actions could be interpreted as a failure to take responsibility for his wife and their relationship. This *burden* was shared by other interviewees. They shared their feeling of not having invested enough and of having failed to maintain the relationship. Central to this is the observation made by interviewees that their partners described them as incapable of relating when they ended the relationship. The interviewees incorporated this kind of pathologization into their self-description. Another form of pathologization was also evident across cases: the pathologization of the violent partner. Cross-cases, a gendered pattern became apparent: male survivors explained that their partners had borderline personalities, while female survivors described their partners as narcissists.

With regard to dominant conceptions of violence, the most prevalent was that intimate partner violence was a concept to which the interviewees were not able to relate their own experiences. For them, *real* violence was physical violence, especially of the type associated with visible injuries and requiring hospitalization. In their perception, what they experienced was *not real violence*. Thus, it was downplayed or excused. For example, some interviewees minimized their own physical abuse by noting that their injuries did not require hospitalization or, if hospitalization was necessary, by ascribing the injury to an accident, such as an “unfortunate fall” (Ms. Novak, paragraph 202). It became clear that the abuse they experienced was not immediately interpreted as violent but characterized as merely one of life’s adversities, accidents, or unfortunate circumstances for which nobody was to blame. Hence, violence was described as unintentional. By objectifying violence as one of life’s adversities and bestowing legitimacy upon it, interviewees interpreted their experiences either as *not quite violence* or, in comparison with *others*, *not even violence at all*.

This comparison with *others* is closely linked to dominant conceptions of victimhood. Indeed, there is a complex connection between the essentialist notion of *real* violence and its disavowal and the projection onto others (*real victims*) (Nef 2020, 327; Reuter 2002, 13; Scherr 1999, 51; Velho and Thomas-Olalde 2011).

Ms. Mueller’s case exemplifies how these interwoven interpretations become powerful; she had been separated from her partner for about five months. Before ending her eight-month relationship, she had been a single mother for eleven years. Ending the relationship meant leaving her home with her children “in a hurry”. They were still living in a women’s shelter at the time of the interview. She found the decision to leave difficult. To her, the

family home was a status symbol as was the community in which they lived. She described herself as a very strong woman, a self-image that precluded seeing herself as a victim. She associated victimhood with weakness, a migrant identity, and being less educated.

It is obvious to Ms. Mueller who the *real victims* are. They are women who are complicit, who *allow it to happen*. They are women with a “low IQ” and “no education”. Above all, as she goes on to clarify, real victims are “others”. She does not see herself as “belonging to that group” (paragraph 72), nor to any other group of victims who fit into traditional patterns of interpretation, namely those with a “migrant background”. In her words, “women ... from other cultures” (Ms. Mueller, paragraph 84).

The offshoot is that these interviewees found it nearly impossible to see themselves in the role of a victim:

Domestic violence ... for me, it's something ... that women allow to happen to them: [it happens] to women who have a low IQ, who have no education, [and] who are, yes, weak. (Ms. Mueller, paragraph 72)

In all cases, dominant conceptions of intimate partner violence were linked with dominant conceptions of victimhood. These include the notion that the status of victimhood entails involving social/state institutions, for example, reporting the violence or pressing charges. In other words, it is only through this report, for example, and thus the social/legal recognition that someone becomes a victim in the interpretation. Therefore, victimhood is not associated with the experience of violence *per se*. Moreover, it differed greatly depending on the gender of the survivors. The men felt they needed to fight for recognition because, due to their gender, social recognition and victim status were generally denied. The women, meanwhile, expressed the need to distance themselves from the image of the “typical victim” to maintain their self-image. Ms. Gerber, for example, emphasized that she would not press charges because she did not want to be “portrayed in that way” or let others “make her a victim” (paragraph 28).

The cross-case pattern is that the interviewees employed gendered categories, such as strong/weak, woman/man, and the like, thereby rearticulating the social patterns of interpretation associated with these terms. Importantly, however, they do not see these categories as applying to them. Female interviewees, in particular, distanced themselves from supposedly female attributes, emphasizing instead their own strength, emancipation, and independence, whereas male interviewees described themselves as being “open to injury” (Popitz 1992), something socially recognized as a female trait.

What also became apparent was how survivors interpreted violent experiences as non-violent, thereby normalizing their experiences. Dominant conceptions of intimate relationships became the backdrop against which the interviewees (re)interpreted their experiences as non-violence. That is, even when the dynamics of violence changed, the experience continued to be normalized by differentiating it from dominant conceptions, as the following quote illustrates:

For me, it [violence] somehow became a part of the relationship then: ... our relationship was just like that. (Ms. Novak,⁸ paragraph 82)

Ms. Novak had been with her partner for about six years. They were married but had been separated for two years at the time of the interview. Her case is typical of perceiving violence as non-violence. Instead, the violence is framed as merely a “*relationship problem*”:

Well, I never considered it as violence, as domestic violence. I kind of considered it a relationship problem ... Even if somebody was talking about [intimate partner violence], I never felt [like my situation was being] addressed. (Ms. Novak, paragraph 184)

It is noteworthy that Ms. Novak gives meaning to her experiences and reaffirms that violence and relationships are mutually exclusive. Describing her partner’s violent actions as making her feel insecure or uncomfortable, she recounts having admonished herself not to “make a scene” (paragraph 202). For her, this meant not *exaggerating* what she experienced. Part of this process included her partner bringing her the bathroom scales weekly or sometimes daily to weigh herself, and her weight and figure were then assessed. These interventions escalated markedly and assaults also took place—he pushed her, for example. The fact that she then made “no scene”, in her words, led her to write off such incidents as “accidents”, even when she was hurt. When she was pushed or her partner threw objects at her, she interpreted his actions as just a “reflex”. Indeed, she downplayed violent situations, using idioms such as her partner being “on edge” or that “his temper got the better of him”. Her semantics offer an insight into her meaning-making processes. This is further reflected in her euphemistically qualifying situations in which she was financially and socially controlled by her partner as “someone looking after me”. This illustrates that the violence experienced was not merely physical but extended to financial, social, and mind control (e.g., making her control her weight). For Mrs. Novak, however, it was central that as soon as they were

“outside” in public, her partner had been the “nicest man”. In her words, they had a “nice relationship outside” (paragraph 120), as illustrated by this quote: “As soon as we were outside, he told me that I was pretty, that I looked good, and then he always hugged me and kissed me” (paragraph 120).

As Ms. Novak’s example shows, violence experienced in relationships is imbued with the interpretation of non-violence and is (re)interpreted as merely a relationship problem. Moreover, this frame of orientation is continuously readjusted by, for example, relativizing dominant conceptions after each instance of violence. A typical adjustment tactic reported by the interviewees was to try to please the partner. In Ms. Novak’s case, this was done by constantly trying to lose weight. Other tactics adopted by the interviewees involved intensifying their relationship work by, for example, trying to be even more attentive and supportive of their partners’ wants and needs.

Furthermore, the example of Ms. Novak demonstrates how interpretations of violence are informed by the underlying dominant conceptions about relationships. However, there is also a correlation between these concepts and the strategies survivors used to deal with the situation: When everyday life is reorganized and the relationship becomes problematic or even impossible, survivors develop coping strategies. This can be seen in Ms. Novak’s case. Due to sexual pressure from her partner, she struggled increasingly with everyday life, partly due to a lack of sleep. Giving in to his advances, however, enabled her to at least function on a daily basis. The downside was that this coping simultaneously created a new relationship dynamic in which her own needs were put aside. She thus oriented her actions toward his expectations of what a “healthy relationship” entails. Her coping ended up normalizing his violation of her physical integrity and sexual self-determination.

5.2.2 Dominant Conceptions of Intimate Relationship Expectations Shaped by the Power Dynamic of Perpetrator and Survivor

I previously illustrated that, on the one hand, survivors normalize their experiences and thereby retain the feeling of being able to act. On the other hand, this normalization successively turns violence into an ordinary experience. In brief, dominant conceptions of intimate relationships are intricately connected to expectations within relationships. These are shaped by the power dynamic of perpetrator and survivor and result in normalizing and individualizing patterns of intimate partner violence. This process and the extent to which relationship ideals are used to normalize violence are illustrated in the example of Ms. Spindler.

Ms. Spindler⁹ experienced psychological and physical violence from her partner of 19 years. At the time of the interview, they had been separated for a year and a half. Her case exemplifies how violence becomes a regular part of life and how normality is established by drawing on dominant conceptions about intimate relationships. Ms. Spindler met her partner as a teenager, and they married after nine years, but the relationship dynamics changed with the birth of their first child. For the couple, a “traditional assignment of roles”, as Ms. Spindler called it, was very important, which is why she quit her job to devote herself to caring for their children and the household.

After work, her partner would check whether and how she had done the household chores. His daily accusations of improperly performing housework chores intensified, and she reacted with compensatory clean-ups shortly before he was to return home:

Yes. That became more frequent ... Before he'd come home, I'd quickly clean up everything and put everything away, because ... otherwise he'd start complaining again. Yes, and then at some point he threw a chair at me, but I think he missed on purpose.
(Ms. Spindler, paragraph 32)

This interview passage illustrates the dynamic of anticipating or trying to anticipate what may potentially trigger violent outbursts. This anticipation shaped the ordinariness and omnipresence of violence, even when the violent partner was not present. As a result of this mind control, Ms. Spindler began to structure her day around her partner's (surprise) inspections:

I increasingly noticed I was panic-stricken in case something wasn't right again, but at the same time, I knew that it could never be right anyway. Sometimes I thought—when he was on a business trip or something—that when he comes home, I'll do this and that and that and that, and I'll make over there nice and there nice and there nice, but I actually knew full well that it would never be right. (Ms. Spindler, paragraph 34)

This dynamic gradually settled into patterns, and the couple eventually followed their well-rehearsed routines: Ms. Spindler did the housework according to her partner's wishes and cared for the children, while he controlled her in the evenings by conducting comprehensive inspections. His disparaging tone and shouting became their only communication. The dynamic became even more intense when he began throwing things at her. In our interviews, Ms. Spindler continued to relativize this development by

emphasizing that the objects either missed or were not heavy or large enough to cause her serious harm. Even when beatings were added, she immediately put the new dynamic into perspective: “[B]ut not in such a way that I would have had to go to hospital or anything like that. Nothing like that” (Ms. Spindler, paragraph 34).

Their couple’s dynamic was further charged by her partner, who justified his actions based on her supposed “lack of love”: If she truly loved him, he reproached her, she would know that her behavior bothered him and would know what he expected from her. She anticipated and preempted his criticism and thus, violence began to occupy her mind every minute of the day:

That’s actually something I’ve always thought about, too. I’ve always thought, yes, I have to, I have to do the housework even better. And I have to, if he doesn’t want to talk, then I have to leave him alone. Even if he still doesn’t want to talk, I just have to go away, I have to leave him alone; I have to accept that. (Ms. Spindler, paragraph 45)

After moving to a larger house, Ms. Spindler decided to try even harder to be “nicer” and “more understanding”. She adopted his viewpoint and tried not to provoke him with her behavior: “Yes, and I, well, I’m just not a good housewife; he’s quite right, and maybe I can do better (?) Yes” (Ms. Spindler, paragraph 45).

Ms. Novak and Ms. Spindler have in common the way they normalized their respective dominant conceptions and organized their daily lives accordingly. In each case, their ways of coping strengthened the asymmetric power dynamics. Consequently, the dynamics of violence changed considerably and became part of the routine of the relationship. Thus, it became “normal” in Ms. Spindler’s relationship that her partner used the *if-you-loved-me* argument every time she failed to meet his standards. With this argument, he put psychological pressure on her. She, in turn, adapted accordingly. This shows the power dynamic at play, wherein his erratic expectations were elevated to the guiding norm in their relationship. Efforts to achieve the partner’s ideals and organize the relationship in accordance with those ideals dominate the quotidian life of the relationship.

5.3 Discussion

This paper examines how survivors interpret and cope with their experiences of intimate partner violence. Their interpretations are strongly

influenced by dominant conceptions of intimate relationships, violence, and victimhood. These dominant conceptions led interviewees to interpret love and violence as mutually exclusive. Moreover, the prevalence of societal conceptions about the importance of being in and maintaining a relationship prompted interviewees to employ a variety of means to cope with violence in their attempts to retain the relationship.

I identified three ways in which middle-class survivors cope with situations of intimate partner violence. First, survivors do not conceive of their own situation as intimate partner violence. In their understanding, intimate partner violence is something that affects poor, weak, or migrant women but not them. Thus, a distinction is made between the constructed “others” (Velho and Thomas-Olalde 2011) who are affected and the self who is not. The resulting paradoxical consequences are that middle class survivors often normalized and trivialized their experiences of violence. For them, victimhood applies exclusively to these constructed *others*. This was illustrated by the finding that when the interviewees were confronted by third parties or violence prevention campaigns, they separated themselves from the *other victims*. The findings also reveal a complex relationship between the interpretation of *real violence* (i.e., physical violence, especially if it results in visible injuries and hospitalization) and its denial and projection onto others (i.e., *real victims*). Hence, the need to affirm that one is *not a real victim* or to project the concept of true victimhood onto others is a way of coping with the lived experience of violence in a society that stigmatizes survivors of violence as weak and passive (Glammeier 2011). The *real victims* are coded as the *socially accepted victims*. This finding is supported by Kersten’s study in which the author reconstructed connections between victim status and categories of difference (with the main focus on gender) (Kersten 2015). Hence, the interweaving of survivors’ interpretations of violence, traditional patterns of interpretation, and problem categories can lead to the above-mentioned paradoxical consequence that women and men from the dominant social group do not consider themselves *real victims*. On the one hand, this categorization reinforces the constructions of self and other that may lead to further divisions and hierarchies, which could be construed as another form of violence (Galtung 1990, 295). On the other hand, survivors have to explain to themselves what they have experienced in order to remain capable of acting. In this process of meaning-making, a central means of coping emerged throughout the interviews—pathologization. When interviewees cannot interpret what they are experiencing, they pathologize it. By doing so, something inexplicable can be made accessible or even comprehensible. According to Reemtsma (2008), this type of pathologization—as a general interpretation of violence

and not specifically related to intimate partner violence—is the last coping strategy left that can explain the inexplicable.

Second, survivors integrate personal experiences of violence into their lives by modifying their own behavior. In particular, they ascribe a socially and personally accepted meaning to the violence they experience. This meaning is always subject to a cultural repertoire in which love relationships and intimate partner violence are per se mutually exclusive. From the survivors' perspective, coping strategies, such as Ms. Novak's acquiescing to her partner's sexual demands, might be the only possible path for survival at the time. Nevertheless, this strategy tends to maintain the status quo, allowing violence to dominate a relationship and to (re)produce power asymmetries. Furthermore, a strategy such as acquiescing may be understood as a form of normalization because it does not deny female sexual availability but rather regulates it. In this way, Ms. Novak's approach merely serves to support gender norms such as the desire of reassurance from the partner about compliments on attractiveness or the perceived female sexual availability (Villa 2011, 99).

Third, survivors mobilize dominant gendered conceptions about the nature of relationships and sexuality. This helps survivors distinguish what is intimate partner violence and what is not. For example, in a romantic relationship, it is *natural* to be sexually available as a woman, and therefore violations of sexual integrity are not considered transgressions in this context. Although these strategies serve to cope with and survive violent situations, they ultimately exacerbate the asymmetric power dynamics in relationships and consolidate violence. As a concrete example, a gendered dimension was also evident in the desire of Ms. Bertrand and Ms. Novak. They constructed their experience as being looked after and cared for. This desire to have a partner who looks after you is one of the dominant gendered conceptions of intimate relationships (Gunnarsson 2016).

Central to these interpretations, dominant conceptions, and coping strategies are the mechanisms of differentiation across cases. This also becomes clear in the pathologization presented above; this type of pathologization interprets the act of violence as an individual transgression and thus individualizes and depoliticizes it. In short, the structural dimension of violence is dethematized. It is also clear from other studies that these mechanisms of differentiation are not restricted to self-perception. As Khazaei (2019) shows, individuals who identify as Swiss or European nationals received different treatment when they reported intimate partner violence. The structural anchoring of these mechanisms is evident, as underscored by Philips (2009) who concludes that these mechanisms of differentiation from *others* supports the tectonics of the patriarchal structure of the dominant society. Thus, the

dominant understanding of intimate partner violence obscures the violent character of gender relations within the middle class of society (Song 2009).

Again, this can be exemplified by pathologization; the survivors explained their experiences and the violence in psychological terms. Male survivors characterized their violent partners as borderline personalities, while female survivors described their partners as narcissists. In so doing, they individualized their experiences by reducing the violence they experienced to an individual act of violence. Moreover, violence was typically de-gendered—in the sense of not being structurally embedded in a violent gender order—and therefore depoliticized.

5.4 Conclusion

Middle-class women and men are considered invisible in the discourse of intimate partner violence. With the insights into how dominant social groups interpret and cope with violence, I illustrated (1) how traditional patterns of interpretation and problem categories contribute to the normalization and individualization of intimate partner violence, and (2) how violence is subject to intersubjective processes of negotiation and interpretation. These interpretations revealed complex processes of social differentiation and hierarchization. Furthermore, I discussed how these processes lead to paradoxical consequences. The consequences of such a distinction are divisions and hierarchies. From a survivor's perspective, victimhood is a concept that applies exclusively to *other* cultures and social classes. The self appears neutral and universal and tends to be understood as non-violent (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005). I conclude that it is this mechanism of differentiation that may explain why social groups such as the middle class are considered a difficult to reach target group by social workers and researchers.

My findings support an urgent recommendation that intimate partner violence be addressed as a social and structural problem across social distinctions. Prevailing concepts of intimate partner violence and the mechanisms that lead to differentiating dominant class survivors from *others* must be critically discussed. Feminist research and, by extension, social, political, and legal discourse of violence must focus on survivors' perspectives. Scholars must likewise draw attention to the structural character of these interpretations. This will enable a comprehensive description and thus understanding of violence as a social construct throughout a society structured by complex social processes of differentiation and hierarchization. Further analysis and empirical research are needed to specifically address the interplay of privilege and discrimination in the context of intimate partner violence.

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