

Narratives of desistance from intimate partner violence

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Introduction

Intervention programs aimed at preventing recidivism of men who use intimate partner violence (IPV) have become an integral part of the efforts to stop violence against women worldwide. Research on these interventions has primarily focused on evaluating quantitatively their effectiveness showing equivocal results. Less attention has been paid to change processes and little is known about how men desist and stay free from IPV in the long term.

Research Project

Building from criminological theory of desistance (Maruna & Farrall, 2004) and psychological theory of narrative identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013) a discovery-oriented narrative study was implemented to analyze and contrast the personal identity constructed by men who desist from IPV and men who do not, with the aim of understanding the subjective process of desistance from IPV.

After gaining ethical clearance, using purposeful sampling six men identified by their partners as desisting from IPV (desisters) and five men identified by programs as non-desisting from IPV (persisters) were recruited and interviewed in different programs across Victoria. Audio recorded life narratives were co-produced using an adapted form of McAdam's life-story interview, transcribed verbatim and narratively analyzed with a focus on thematic narrative components. Themes and identity constructions were derived from the analysis of each interview and contrasted within and between each group.

Research Findings

Findings showed that all participants articulated narrative plots where the sequencing of critical events of their lives were crucial to give coherence to the personal identity they claimed in the interview. Psychological discourses of emotional trauma and social learning proved central for the construction of a diachronic sense of self, whereas the characterization of adult partnership as progressive decline due to increasing conflicts produced by external problems and psychological deficits appeared indispensable for making sense of their use of IPV.

Despite their similarities, desisters and persisters showed significant differences in constructing their life-stories and personal identities. While desisters constructed life-story stressing the harmful effects of family violence and claimed a transformed personal identity resulting from their engagement in a change process aimed at preserving and enhancing their affective relationships through stopping abuse and taking responsibility for their behaviours and the improvement of their psychological problems, persisters constructed a life-story stressing their reduced responsibility for their use of IPV, claiming the continuity of the personal identity they constructed around different themes, ranging from the need for psychological healing to the need for a change of their external circumstances.

Only desisters accounted in their narratives for a process of personal change they attributed to a series of factors and actors internal and external to the intervention programs. Change consisted in increasing the gender and emotional awareness of themselves and others through both learning and therapeutic processes where psychological discourses played again a relevant role in facilitating the navigation of the diachronic sense of self. However, change was regarded by desisters as an incomplete and non-stable process, requiring ongoing commitment and external assistance to be preserved and expanded in order to prevent relapse.

References

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