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Male Social Workers Working With Men Who Batter: Dilemmas in Gender Identity

Benjamin Bailey,¹ Eli Buchbinder,¹ and Zvi Eisikovits¹

Abstract
Research into the impact of dealing with intimate partner violence has focused mainly on women who treated victims. The present article explores the interaction between male social workers and battering men. The sample included 15 male social workers who worked with battering men in social services. Data collection was performed through semistructured interviews. The main theme emerging from the interviews describes the reconstruction and renegotiation of the worker’s professional and personal self in light of his experiences with violent clients. Two major motifs describing their experience emerged: The first is self-doubt arising from adopting a broad definition of violence, thus creating increased sensitization to and inclusion of a wide range of behaviors under the term violence. The second motif is related to compromising with reality by renegotiating their identity as aggressive, at times, but not violent. Findings were discussed in the light of the constructionist perspective.

Keywords
male social workers, batterers, intimate partner violence

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Research into the impact of dealing with intimate partner violence (IPV) has focused mainly on women who treated victims (e.g., Bell, 2003) and only seldom on women who worked with perpetrators (Tyagi, 2006). The research has found overall that working with perpetrators of IPV arouses strong feelings and is emotionally demanding; it penetrates the personal, interpersonal, and family domains, and triggers a series of moral and value-based questions (Goldblatt, Buchbinder, Eisikovits, & Arizon, 2009; Iliffe & Steed, 2000; Tyagi, 2006). Iliffe and Steed (2000) found that among male and female therapists, who were working with victims and perpetrators of IPV, the therapeutic content shook their basic sense of trust and security in relation to people and the world in general, enhanced their consciousness of gender tensions, and led to various degrees of burnout.

An area that has not yet been explored is how the personal space of male social workers working with perpetrators of IPV is affected by their work experiences and perceptions of clients. The present article attempts to provide an in-depth understanding of the interaction between male social workers and battering men, which often seem to evoke various dilemmas around the worker’s masculine identity and the definition of aggression and IPV.

Gender identity is fundamental to a person’s individual and interpersonal existence (e.g., West & Zimmerman, 1991). While the extent of control over one’s gender is disputable, it would be difficult to identify anything more influential on how people experience themselves in the environment, and their perceptions, values, and behaviors (Hearn & Morgan, 1990; Stets & Burke, 2000). Along these lines, every interaction within or between genders can be understood as an instance of one’s “gendered self” confronted or realized and acted out according to a presupposed social script. As such, little or no reflection is performed over gendered self.

The therapeutic encounter between two men suggests a series of risks and benefits, being simultaneously threatening and bearing the potential of a meaningful male-gender experience (Thomas, 2003). In terms of risk, an intimate encounter of two men leaves room for a flood of anxieties and defenses that are described as homophobia (Ipsaro, 1986), along with the need to prove potent “masculine” attitudes (i.e., be powerful, dominant, and respected; Cohn & Zeichner, 2006). In such emotional states, men’s ability to disclose their inner feelings and create intimacy and trust tend to narrow. Men benefit from these encounters through the opportunity to address common male anxieties in a unique emotional setting that is less judgmental than usual social encounters, allowing them to reflect on their selves and their lives in an intimate manner (Felton, 1986; Lewis, 1978). The interaction of male social workers and battering men is a case in point for this kind of
situation; it raises dramatic content—intense gender issues in the social worker’s relationships with himself and his environment.

Relevant to the encounter of male therapists and battering men in the field of IPV is the lack of a clear distinction between aggression and violence. Violence is commonly viewed as a severe form of aggression in spite of the lack of clarity and agreement concerning the exact location of where aggression ends and violence begins (Archer, 1994; Baron & Richardson, 1994; Berkowitz, 1993). This difficulty is exacerbated in the feminist view of couple violence as an expression of patriarchal social arrangements (Frieze, 2007). Such perspective necessarily strengthens the linkage between violence against women and normative masculine identity and characteristics. From a feminist perspective, physical aggression along with emotional, economic, sexual, or verbal aggression are all seen as violent strategies used by men to intimidate and subjugate women (Mankowski, Haaken, & Silvergleid, 2002; Schechter, 1982). In light of such a broad definition of violence, drawing the boundaries between psychological abuse and ordinary couple power struggles is difficult (Greene & Bogo, 2002).

To the best of our knowledge, no definitions of IPV to date illuminate the distinction between normative aggression and psychological abuse. Between such blurred situation in the definitional domain, and the ethical requirement of IPV staff to be violent-free (Austin & Dankwort, 1999), practitioners (particularly male practitioners) are left in the dark to develop their own distinction concerning the delicate issue of where normative aggression ends and abuse begins. If acting aggressively at times is part of internalized masculinity (Cohn & Zeichner, 2006), the unclear line between aggression and violence poses another dilemma for men who work with IPV batterers. We believe that when dealing with this topic, it is imperative to provide a clear working definition of violence and use it as the distinctive line. Our definition in the light of the above is as follows: Interpersonal violence (attack) is a nonlegitimate forceful tactic, intentionally employed by one party (action) to cause physical and or psychological harm to the other (consequence) in the attempt to control a situation. It includes the use of physical force and infliction of injuries as well as emotional and sexual abuse and harassment. The definition focuses attention on the acts of violence themselves along with the intention of the perpetrator, the experience of the victim, the consequences of violence, the patterns of violent episodes, and the overall climate of the relationship (Crowell & Burgess, 1996; DeKeseredy & MacLeod, 1997; Band-Winterstein & Eisikovits, 2009; Winstok, 2007). The interviewees, who are all IPV therapists, are socialized to be sensitive to accounts and justifications of violence by their clients. The distinctions they draw are context
based and use practice wisdom (Eisikovits, Beker, & Guttmann, 1991) and experiential knowledge (Polanyi, 1967). While such distinctions are similar to the ones batterers use to account for their violence, the difference lies in their ability to assess intention (e.g., not about controlling but rather about authentic expression of discontent), experience of spouse (e.g., should not produce terror and fear), and the consequences of their behavior (e.g., undermining of other’s self-esteem and confidence).

In sum, the literature points to the fact that an in-depth examination of male social workers’ experience of working with battering men contains information on two areas of limited and fractional knowledge: Men’s struggle with their gender identity and the impact of such work on their personal and interpersonal lives. In addition, this in-depth look into men’s inner struggles with their gender identity can add to the understanding of masculine identity formation at times of multiple identity options and changing cross-gender dynamics (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1997; Rogers, 2005).

**Method**

The present study used a phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective, viewing the human world as constructed from multisubjective realities (McLeod, 2001; Weiss, 1994). The phenomenological-hermeneutic researcher’s goal is to expose, clarify, and interpret meanings and processes of a phenomenon without trying to confirm or negate prior assumptions (Schwandt, 2000; Van Manen, 1997). Accordingly, the sample is composed of a small number of people who were selected because they experienced a certain phenomenon (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Patton, 2002). In the present study, the sample included 15 male social workers who worked with battering men in IPV public services. All interviewees expressed their willingness to participate in the study. Their working experience with battering men ranged from 2 to 20 years ($M = 8$); their age ranged from 31 to 55, and, except one bachelor, all men were married and had children.

Data collection was performed through semistructured in-depth interviews (Weiss, 1994). In this study, we attempted to understand how the interviewees, all male social workers, construct their work experience with battering men in the context of their personal, interpersonal, and professional life. Such interviews are characterized by a flexible structure, offering the interviewees a framework to express their understandings in their own terms and language, while an elaborate picture of the studied phenomenon is gradually formed (Kvale, 1996). The questions in the interview guide included several topical areas such as (a) masculinity themes at work (e.g., What kind
of masculinity-related topics are raised in working with violent men?), (b) the worker’s masculine role models (e.g., What is the male model you go by? How does this model affect your work?), and (c) the impact of working with battering men on the social worker’s private and professional lives. The interviews were held at the interviewee’s work place or private residence according to their preference and lasted between 60 to 90 min each. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Content analysis was performed in three phases: phase one involved intimate acquaintance with the text through repeated reading (Kvale, 1996). The authors, all experienced in working with and conducting research about battering men, felt that every reading provided a deeper, more empathic understanding of the meaning of such work and surfaced some of their own experiences to reflect on. In this way, a dialogue was constructed between personal experiences and the experiences of the interviewees as others, while the researchers formed a male subgroup by themselves, sharing and mirroring each other’s experience. During phase two, the researchers identified, sorted, and organized the “units of meaning” relevant to the specific interest of the study (Shkedi, 2005; Van Manen, 1997; Weiss, 1994). Units of meaning were identified by axial coding of repeated texts that had major influence on the interviewees’ meaning system. The researchers and another member of the research team analyzed each interview separately. Later, the three researchers met, compared their list of units of meaning, and compiled a joint list, reaching approximately 85% agreement. In cases of disagreement, the researchers discussed the issue and tried to reach a joint decision. In the few cases where this was not achieved, the units were eliminated from the study. This phase ended when the organization of the different units of meaning that the interviewees attached to their work experience reached saturation. Phase three included the gathering of the different units of meaning through focusing, comparing, confronting, and synthesizing the themes that compose the conceptual skeleton of the study’s findings (McLeod, 2001; Shkedi, 2005; Van Manen, 1997).

Trustworthiness. Credibility in this study was accomplished by thick, detailed description of the multiple, contextually based realities that emerged from the data (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of in-depth interviews allowed the participants to express their meanings freely and in full. The depth and breadth of the interviews enabled the researchers to claim a comprehensive, authentic understanding of the experiences, meanings, and interpretations of the social workers interviewed. Citing extensive quotes from the interviews (i.e., grounding) added additional trustworthiness to the analysis (Maxwell, 2005). The quotes and the analysis
were thus separate, yet adjacent, creating a dialogue between the voices of the interviewees and the analytic voices of the researchers. The readers of the article participated in the assessment of the analysis, conceptual development, construction of the explanatory model, and the overall authenticity and coherence of the researcher’s interpretations, thus completing the qualitative research process (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

**Ethical considerations.** The study was conducted according to the rules of the University Ethics Committee and was approved by this forum. All participants agreed voluntarily to participate in the study and signed informed consent forms following a brief explanation of the general aims of the research.

**Findings**

"Violentization" of Life: From Self-Doubt to a New Balance

This theme describes the reconstruction and renegotiation of the worker’s professional and personal self in light of his experiences with violent clients. The interviewees described two major motifs that characterize their initial experience in the field: The first is self-doubt. This arises from adopting the broad definition of violence. Adopting such a broad definition creates increased sensitization to and inclusion of a wide range of behaviors under the term *violence*. Such “violentization” triggers among the male social workers, particularly when young in the field, a series of inner dilemmas and anxieties. Their primary dilemma is whether they, too, are violent in their intimate relationships and representative of a violence-prone gender. The second motif is compromising with reality. Under the effect of the broad definition of violence, which was part and parcel of their basic training, the interviewees renegotiate their identity along the lines of being aggressive, at times, but not violent. This reflective process teaches them that reality is more complex and less dichotomous than theory, and leads them to a compromise of relativity, where not every aggression is necessarily abusive and indicative of IPV. Such compromise is established with time and professional experience, enabling them to continue working with a quieter and more balanced sense of self.

**Self-Doubts: Am I a Batterer?**

The need to identify acts of abuse goes beyond the narrow parameter of physical contact and is crucial to professional training in IPV. The broad definition of IPV stretches the boundaries of violence and enhances the awareness of a
spectrum of behaviors with abusive qualities. Such expansion of definitions erodes the interviewees’ previous conception of violence. The following interviewee shares, at least in part, this newly acquired professional angle:

The field of IPV has taught me to listen differently to language and body-language. I look at the subtext and am preoccupied with behaviors, what you are saying to me without saying a word. I look through the lens of violence. When someone moves his body, I say, “Hey that’s not just a body movement, he is trying to humiliate, to subjugate another person.” I listen to the words more and ask what he means when he uses a specific word? He’s not only trying to convey a message; he also wants to tell me who’s in control and who isn’t. (No.4)

The interviewee describes newly acquired modes of listening and observation that his work has taught him. He describes a different way of understanding human interactions, trying to read between the lines, to discover what is implied by the subtext. The interviewee does not mention physical violence but describes forms of emotional abuse that are enough to humiliate and symbolize power and control. The description reveals how a reality that was previously passed unobserved is now thoroughly examined in light of new awareness—raising suspicion of violence.

The change in perspective of “what violence is” leads to personal questions that undermine the interviewees’ concept of selves as nonviolent men. This experience is powerful and difficult, characterized by self-analysis, self doubt, confusion, and anxiety, all seeded in the growing awareness as to what constitutes abusiveness and violence, and to the personal repercussions of this understanding. If previously the distinction between violence and nonviolence was clear in their mind, the distinction becomes increasingly blurred following exposure to IPV work. Ordinary activities in their personal lives have become suspect and a source of introspective self-examination, doubt, and harsh self-criticism. At the heart of this experience is the disturbing question “Where is the distinguishing line between violence and nonviolence in my life?” This is how the next interviewee describes it:

It tortures you ’cause the whole time there is this issue of testing in what way you are different and in what way you are similar to the men you work with. I think that the personal and the professional dance together; very much so, in therapy in general but in the field of intimate violence in particular. There is this constant inner dialogue with
yourself and your couplehood relationship. This constant ping pong in the discourse: “What am I like as a father? What am I like as a partner? Am I also violent? What makes me different from these men? (No.3)

The interviewee describes the doubts arising from his work as “torturing” him. Issues that he confronts at work penetrate his intimate relationships at home through doubts that challenge his identity as a father and as an intimate partner. He describes a constant inner tension between work and private life. What surfaces at work often touches on basic gender-related male experiences and roles, such as being a husband or a father; questions he asks the batterers, he frequently finds relevant to himself.

The continuous necessity created by work circumstances to broaden the definition of violence and the tendency for microscopic self-analysis create additional tensions related to expressing anger in past and present relationships. What is the proper style? What is the acceptable amount and intensity? These are all questions that intensely preoccupy the interviewees. Another interviewee expressed his experience as follows:

The questions reflect inner doubts: What am I like? In what way am I different from them? If my reaction, let’s say, is 30 on the anger scale, is that OK? And let’s say his reaction is 50 . . . So is there a problem or isn’t there? I ask myself, what differentiates us? Also when I go home, what type of reactions do I have? Are they any different? If I would look at myself and at my reactions from the outside, would I say that I have a problem? (No. 5)

This interviewee measures his differences from a battering man on a virtual scale. Although the distinction seems unclear at first, a more detailed examination shows that their commonality is in the expression of emotions of anger yet their differences lay in the degree to which these are translated into violent behavior (reaction). From his assumed reflective stance as an outsider to himself, the interviewee reflects an experience of split between being an IPV worker and doubts about being a violent man within his intimate space. This doubt creates much restlessness in the worker’s self-evaluation: Is he for real? Is he cheating himself and others? All in all, on which side of the fence does he locate himself? The fact that the interviewees’ work focuses on men’s violence in intimate circles forces them to constantly confront their relationships, their masculinity, and their aggression. The interviewees describe how in the early phases of their work with battering men they had made a double generalization: They included themselves within
the battering men category and they included masculinity as part of violence. These two generalizations became a source of fear of the repressed violent self. The next interviewee describes the fear arising from the danger that lies in the masculine self:

In my own therapy, I dealt a lot with myself as a male therapist, as with other unresolved issues like the relationship with my father. But mainly, with the great fear . . . it seemed to me, and I really tried to check whether I also . . . Maybe I was also an abusive male in the relationship I was in at the time . . . naturally, I am concerned for myself with the more sophisticated type of violence, the violence of alienation, the violence of detachment. (No. 8)

The interviewee describes ongoing self-inspection, attempting to clarify his position on the continuum between masculinity and abusive masculinity. His inspection scans behaviors in intimate relationships retrospectively within the context of biographic elements, all of which put him in a dangerous and stressful zone. He, as other interviewees, judges himself with severity concerning emotions such as alienation and detachment, and the fact that he was never physically violent does not satisfy him. He questions the very subtle qualities of interpersonal emotional abuse (such as alienation and detachment) according to the professional standards he acquired at work. The option that he may have inflicted some measure of psychological abuse threatens to situate his identity within the boundaries of battering men. The fear of the violent self in the past not only hangs over him as a constant deterrent from violence but also produces a considerable measure of insecurity as to his present identity. Concerning the fear of such realizations, another interviewee adds,

This masculine thing, on the most instinctive level—and even violence—is alive and kicking in there. Connecting to the most primordial id . . . acknowledging the most frightening places of this aggression inside me—also our victimhood, as with our aggression, our violence—when you touch these places, it’s very scary.

There are elements in this type of work that I even start to regret . . . I think it damages a lot of the spontaneous and instinctual life. So sometimes anger comes out and, you know, it’s very subtle, where I express anger at a legitimate volume and where it is too much, and one could define this as psychological abuse, emotional abuse. Where did I start hurting the other. (No. 11)
In the first quote, the interviewee discusses the issue of masculinity and aggression and the threat of what he may let loose if he connects to his instinctual masculine layers. Work confronted him with a great deal of experiential learning about violence, which served as a mirror for his own aggressive tendencies that he had previously disregarded. The second quote deals with the fine line between legitimate and illegitimate expressions of anger. The interviewee’s thoughts reflect a common concept in the profession, which views violence as stemming from a masculine type of anger that always carries the potential of loss of control. Thus, the anger of men is always perceived as a negative and even dangerous quality. Throughout the interview, the interviewee describes his expression of anger as guarded and of a cautious mode. However, this occurs at the expense of his spontaneity, which he seems to miss and regret losing.

The feeling of shame that the next quote reveals is another example of the interviewee’s genuine absorption of professional values and conceptualizations regarding the relationship between masculinity and aggression. The feeling of shame expressed here casts doubt on whether the worker can be a man without being abusive:

There was a period when, because of the battering men, I felt ashamed of being a man because being a man means being violent. There is such an image. And you keep on asking yourself: “Am I that kind of man? Am I like them or am I not? What do we have in common? And if I am like them, am I also violent?” (No. 1)

This kind of framing associates his self-inspection with increasingly deteriorating self-esteem and self-confidence, as in an ongoing trial with no verdict, of everlasting doubt. As if various levels of self-doubt concerning their personal and social identity are not enough, the interviewees are also faced with another challenge: to be experts at preventing violence in their living environment. Within this role, they are expected to present a flawless model of proper male behavior at all times. In other words, they are expected to deliver a male model that they themselves have not yet fully deciphered. The next interviewee describes the guilt he experiences due to the potential dissonance between his true self and expectations of him:

There are numerous questions I ask myself about the way I cope with my aggressions, as someone who treats battering men, and I should be some kind of model and example. I ask myself if I am OK, if I know how to contain my aggression at home, with my partner, as a father.
And you can imagine the many instances that life presents where we can be aggressive, so these questions trouble me a lot, as if the shoemaker walks around barefoot. There is always a test, and at times I even feel guilty about it. (No. 3)

The question that troubles the interviewee relates to others’ expectations of him now that he is a social worker treating battering men. He is questioning whether discrepancies exist between the behaviors that he previously knew and took for granted as acceptable, and those he advocates in the present as a professional. To what extent does he practice what he preaches to his clients? His guilt seems to derive from his suspicion that he may be a fake preacher.

The following interviewee describes a situation in which he failed to conform to his public image, this time at a family meal:

I think, many IPV counselors see a potential for abusive interaction in just about any relationship. I can tell you, for example, in family arguments, it can be over politics or any other topic, not necessarily very personal, that they can suddenly say to me, “Cool down a little, you are overreacting!” or something of that sort. I didn’t used to give it a second thought. I overreacted. So what! But today, it suddenly hits me in a soft spot, and I think to myself “Hey, what happened to you? Did you lose control a bit, maybe?” (No. 11)

This interviewee narrates an incident in which he lost his cool during an ordinary family argument. He describes how his close environment perceived him as overreacting, which embarrassed him and caught him off guard. Loss of control is central in the IPV literature and signals violent outbursts. The possibility that he, too, has lost control is experienced by the male therapist as a stain on his anger management credit. He experiences his family’s remarks about this as a blow to his personal and social identity and as a source of much distress. In addition to his distress is the failure to comply with the professional ideal of self-control at times of conflict and tension.

The Dual Solution: Violence as a Matter of Scope and Context

The stage of confusion and anxiety fades gradually as the interviewees become more familiar with the different nuances and degrees of violence in intimate relationships. As time goes by, they develop qualitative distinctions of
scope and severity, which help them to set themselves aside from their violent clients and make more permissiveness and self-acceptance possible, while moderating their self-criticism in relation to aggressive behavior. The following quotes help identify a process of how the interviewees start measuring their behavior in more relative terms, leaving the dichotomous split “violent/nonviolent” behind. The following interviewee describes his emerging acknowledgment that not every act of aggression is necessarily an act of violence:

For a long time, every man here in the agency was suspected [by the female social workers] and labeled as violent. These remarks used to intimidate me at first; but as time went on, I started not to mind it. They can say whatever they like. I couldn’t care less. . . . I sorted this out. I know what I am and what I am not.

At first, I thought that I was also violent in many ways, but eventually this changed, and I understood that even if I was . . . it could be that even if I do behave violently, it’s OK, as it is part of life. It requires work, but it’s not the end of the world. It must be understood that it’s not violence. It was disturbing at first because whatever I was doing, I used to wonder if I was being violent and the experience was a bit castrating. With time, I felt less threatened. I can meet these violent parts of me and even express them from time to time, and even apologize retroactively, and that’s OK, that’s life. (No.1)

This interviewee moves from a phase of unease to a phase of self-acceptance in a reality that is sometimes less than perfect. In the former quote, he realizes that his mere masculinity places him in a suspect status. In the second quote, we are witnessing his attempts to unify the extremes in himself. This, in turn, leads to a measure of normalization of aggression, particularly psychological, similar maybe to what Holtzworth-Munroe and her colleagues (Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, 2000) have termed nonviolent marital distress. The use of statements such as “it’s part of life” and “it’s not the end of the world” imply acknowledgment of his aggressive behavior without guilt, as an ordinary man in an ordinary relationship. The quote illustrates the interviewee’s subjective line drawn between legitimate and illegitimate aggression, based on contextual considerations. For instance, he may use the term violence in its professional sense referring to acts of emotional abuse that he inflicted on his wife (“it could be that even if I do behave violently”), but his final conclusion is that such behaviors are not violent. In other words, recognizing elements of
emotional abuse in his relationship does not turn him into a violent man in the harmful and destructive form attributed to his clients. Another interviewee adds to this complex distinction: “If, let’s say, I expressed some kind of aggression, or I was angry, let’s say, it’s still difficult for me to tell you because I think that aggression is legitimate, the question is, to what degree?” (No. 3).

This interviewee acknowledges the existence of aggressiveness and feelings of anger but finds it difficult to view his behavior as categorically unacceptable. Rather than solving his conflict concerning the use of aggression, it appears he deepens it. He continuously struggles with himself as a man, his comfort with masculine violence, and his role as an IPV therapist (based on an observation by an anonymous reviewer of Journal of Interpersonal Violence). Talking about his anger and aggression seems embarrassing (“If, let’s say, I expressed some kind of aggression”), yet he attempts to deproblematize it. The interviewee seems to vacillate between his initial guilt about not serving as an ideal role model and his present willingness to consider occasional expressions of aggression and anger as legitimate.

The following quotes portray how the interviewees have absorbed the fact that masculinity carries aggressive qualities, and how they learn to acknowledge and balance having this common denominator with the battering men alongside their differentiating characteristics:

I found similar things, I found things that are different, though it also depends who you are dealing with. In general, my ability to express myself verbally, my ability to recognize what I am going through, my ability to control myself, were much greater than those of most of my clients. . . . they simply have weaker ego strengths, maybe they are more intense; my feeling was not that I am beyond some kind of fence but that I am on the same scale as them, but at a different stage, a different point maybe. (No. 1)

I see myself confronting the same issues that he confronts ( . . . ) maybe at a different volume, maybe on different levels of sophistication, maybe in more hidden ways . . . my solutions are different from his, maybe they are less destructive and less damaging . . . But I will also sometimes take it out on my wife. (No. 8)

These workers draw a subtle differentiation between themselves and the battering men, focusing on inner, emotional qualities that they possess as
opposed to the client. They see themselves and the battering men as belonging to the same masculine emotional and behavioral homeland. They range along the same “scale,” but at different points, distinguished by certain inner qualities and better developed skills. These are demonstrated through how the aggression is administered and contained at the desired level. This enables the impression of control and sophistication, which balances the bare existence of aggression. Toward the end of the quote, there is an attempt to “humanize” aggression, while still considering it antisocial and undesirable.

The next interviewee provides additional detail in differentiating by certain parameters, such as atmosphere and context of violence:

Under the simplest definition, we all behave violently, we all do it. We have all cursed, overturned, spilled, thrown stuff, on the road, in the family, between brothers, with parents, between children. Under the wide definition—we all act violently. The question is, do we create an environment of fear, of terror, of intimidation? That’s the difference. (No.5)

Along with the attempts to “universalize” aggression, this interviewee does draw the line between his own violence, which he believes to be bearable, and the client’s unbearable violence, in relation to the broader ecological effects of the violent occurrence. He maintains that the qualitative difference between the two lies in whether the violence leads to terror and the expectation of further violence. His own aggression does not frighten or paralyze the other and thus is free of intimidating and coercive elements.

Another aspect of differentiating between the acceptable and unacceptable expressions of aggression by the interviewee and the battering men, respectively, is based on the awareness and unawareness of being aggressive, and the ability and inability to control its volume.

I double check myself more. I am more aware of how I speak, of body language. If it happens that I feel angry energy towards my wife, then it’s probably after I have run through the whole process. I probably want to do it. I probably want to talk to her that way. But I am aware of the impact of body language. Here, I must pay attention to all these things, how it isn’t from the position of entitlement but rather of negotiation.

When I ask myself why I am treating her like that, it’s probably because I feel like hurting her at that moment. It’s not out of a lack of control or lack of awareness. (No. 9)
The interviewee mentions the self-awareness and anger-management skills that he has developed, both taken directly from the therapeutic culture and language at work. He claims that when he expresses anger today, it is after he has examined himself and chosen to behave in that way. He acts out his aggression based on conscious choice and is capable of keeping his expressions of anger under control. The interviewee relates to his state of consciousness while being in a conflict as another parameter that differentiates him from battering men. While he implies that battering men manage their conflicts on the assumption of being deprived of things to which they are entitled, he experiences conflicts as a form of negotiation between equals.

To conclude, the exposure of social workers who enter the field of IPV to the theoretical definition and professional concept of “violence” places them in a dichotomous position. The inclusion of forms of emotional aggressiveness under the term violence initiates and increases the interviewee’s awareness of the covert and more subtle aspects of IPV. These new realizations initiate and catalyze a tough self-reflective process among the interviewees, who question whether they, themselves, were abusive in past or present relationships, in ways of which they were not previously aware. As the interviewees gain experience at work, their anxiety and initial self-criticism become moderated and they reach a dual solution. Male aggression is more acceptable as performed by them than by their clients. More specifically, on one hand, the interviewees realize that aggressive behavior is an integral part of certain human life situations and of men in particular. Yet, qualitative differences exist between forms of aggression, and they become more or less violent according to the context, scope, and atmosphere created by it. The attitude reflected by the quotes is that as long as a person is aware of his anger and expresses his aggression in ways that are not dangerous, terrorizing, or intimidating, its existence is a given and cannot be categorically ruled out.

Discussion

We attempted to analyze the interviews of male social workers working with perpetrators of intimate partner violence through the social constructionist perspective. This perspective assumes a worldview of interrelated and ever-changing elements; gender identity is seen as a dynamic matter and identity formation as a process with no final and predetermined destination (Gergen, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1991). The study shows that for male social workers, the experience of working with battering men becomes meaningful in their identity construction. As a consequence of their work, they reassessed their intimate relationships and private lives, and reflected on a series
of interrelated challenges concerning their view of themselves, as men in intimate relationships. To understand these drastic changes, we must examine them in light of the social identities of these men as related to commonalities and differences between their masculine identity and that of their clients. The theories of social identity separate between person and group-role identities (Stets & Burke, 2000). These operate simultaneously and create constant tension between the need to belong to a “group” and the desire for personal uniqueness. The degree of freedom lies in the individual’s choice of how much of the group’s characteristic he absorbs into his private being. Stets and Burke (2000) defined a social group as a collection of individuals who hold a common social identity or who see themselves as belonging to a given social category. The interviewed social workers and the battering men belong to the same group/category, and the research describes the interviewees’ social identity formation when compared to the male group, represented by the battering men. Constructing the personal identity in relation to a group contains processes of social comparison and self-categorization, the latter resulting in manifesting the similarities (group-in) and differences (group-out) between the group’s attitudes, beliefs, values, behavioral norms, styles of speech, and so on (Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000). The self-categorization process that the interviewees undergo in relation to their clients portrays their need to distinguish themselves from battering men around the suspicion of being violent (group-out). Issues of identification with their clients (group-in) have been discussed elsewhere. The present article has shown how the encounter of the therapists with their clients is anxiety ridden and undermines their taken-for-granted masculine self-image. Initially, the interviewees perceive their behaviors as inherent to the power-based structural relationship between men and women. As such, they locate and judge their behaviors in relation to the social category of men and masculinity to which they and their clients belong. The relationships with this group of belonging are more complex than would appear: On one hand, the social workers interviewed experience social identification with their clients on the basis of masculinity as a group of belonging, while on the other hand, they are expected to condemn them for their violent male identity and carry the burden of proof that they are men of a different kind. This contradiction needs to be solved through some kind of compromise, which enables the men to continue working with a quieter conscience. In the process of ongoing contact and comparison between the group identity of their clients and their own view of themselves as males, their rigidity is somewhat ameliorated and their self-evaluation becomes gradually more balanced.
An additional source of pressure is related to the prevalent social construction of woman abuse as a primarily male phenomenon, perpetrated on the basis of the power differential between men and women in a patriarchal social structure (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Lorber & Farrell, 1991; Schechter, 1982; Walker, 1979). The present study described the ways in which professional socialization of workers in this domain was associated with the feminist orientation, which catalyzed the demonized public image of battering men (Cavanaugh & Gelles, 2005; Sorenson & Taylor, 2005) and the connection of this image to male identity (Dutton, 2007a; Mankowski et al., 2002). According to this view of the social structure, the argument that masculine socialization is strongly connected to aggressive qualities sets the stage for the claim that men, by definition, have the power to abuse women. When the interviewees recount their initial experiences in the profession, the implied view of men and the covert manifestations in the professional definition of IPV have made them anxious and apologetic about their masculinity. As men who sometimes find themselves in marital conflicts, the theory to which they were exposed has led them to suspect that every emotionally charged intimate relationship is, by definition, abusive. In such an environment, the interviewees are constantly reflecting and examining themselves for abusive elements in their relationship and express related self-doubts and anxieties as to their own aggressive tendencies. As they gain more experience, the interviewees learn to reflect on themselves and their masculinity and come to see themselves as men who may occasionally be aggressive, through power struggles or forms of alienation, without crossing the line of male violence. Stets and Burke (2000) also pointed out that while a constant interchange between person–role–group identities exists, it is easier for individuals to adjust to group norms than the other way around. Taking this perspective, the interviewees’ sense of unease toward the wide definition of violence can be interpreted as the wish to surpass another barrier from the opportunity to actualize masculinity that is not violent, thereby coming closer, each in his own style, to the male “group” hegemony. The interviewees find that the theoretical social construction definition does not capture the whole phenomenon, and as time goes by, they find it harder to accept it as it is. In their experienced eyes, the theoretical definition of men’s violence is overinclusive, does not always fit the reality they encounter in practice, and becomes untrustworthy (Gergen, 1994). They formulate their own definition of IPV that differentiates between levels of aggressive behavior and violence (Greene & Bogo, 2002).

The findings also underscore another masculine confusion, this time a more common one, which reflects today’s reality of being a man in a Western society, where men are expected to formulate their identity along two
often incompatible doctrines, the traditional and the modern (Andronico, 1999; Gergen, 1994; Giddens, 1992; Kellner, 1992). If, as an example, we think of three traditional expectations of men—to be assertive, independent and competitive (Mintz & O’Neil, 1990), and of the way men perform them—through emotional closure, or exhibiting aggression and power (Hearn, 1998), this suffices to explain male aggressive interactions. However, more recent expectations of men to be able to express a wider range of feelings and to have an increased ability for self-criticism (Hearn & Morgan, 1990) may lead to entrapment between contradicting qualities. These symbolize the current dynamics surrounding gender-role and identity norms. For some men, including the interviewees, this reality is confusing, not to say contradictory. Men, who were described as giving a more reflective meaning to their masculinity, are often seen as holding a weakened and more fragile sense of manhood (Rogers, 2005). The dilemmas arising from a similar situation are reflected in the interviewees’ struggles and doubts associated with the process of restructuring their masculine identity to be part of the male group at work and in their private lives. They do so by navigating between the two doctrines, adhering to terms that are more flexible and situational than rigid and constant.

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