

## PROTECTION OF FACE AND AVOIDANCE OF RESPONSIBILITY: CHINESE MEN'S ACCOUNT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

*This study of the accounts of Chinese male abusers identified three categories of narrative strategy: protection of face, avoidance of responsibility and the privatization of violence against women. The extent of the use of narrative strategies is a function of the interaction between the audience and the abuser, or the therapist and the client in the clinical context. Our findings underscore the need to obtain information on intervention, so that abusers might take full responsibility for halting their violence, unlearning their habitually violent behaviour, and moving toward finding previously unappreciated, constructive forms of conflict resolution.*

**Keywords** family violence; Chinese male abusers; violence against women; narrative account; protection of face

The study of narrative accounts of male abusers is an important method with which to begin to develop an appropriate treatment of abusers, in view of the critique that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to abuser intervention cannot accommodate the diversity of abusers with their profound sociocultural differences (Healey *et al.*, 1998). It is of course important in such an endeavour to focus on obtaining meaningful data and to avoid unrepresentative claims based on anecdotal evidence or cultural impressions. This highlights a very important issue, that is, how to most usefully study male abusers and insightfully interpret their accounts of family violence.

The issue of the interpretation of male abusers' accounts has become controversial. Some researchers have presumed that there is an oppressor-victim dichotomy (Geffner *et al.*, 1989) with the man and woman categorized as victimizer and victim, respectively. Male abusers' narrative accounts are usually believed to minimize and deny their use of violence, and even to externalize their responsibility (Bograd, 1988; Eisikovits & Buchbinder, 1997; Hearn, 1998; Hyden & McCarthy, 1994). These classifications have been criticized by Wood (2004) as overly dependent on 'outsiders' views'. Wood argues that understanding violent men's views of themselves and their actions is a necessary starting point for efforts at effective intervention and rehabilitation. Based on what she terms the 'insiders' view', she has classified male abusers' accounts of intimate partner violence into three types: justifications, dissociations and remorse. Augusta-Scott and Dankwort (2002) have

argued that when abusers' right to speak in their own voice is denied and challenged, men react with considerable frustration, anger and resistance. The mounting resistance is evident as the men defend their power and control, and the social worker's challenges become increasingly forceful. Eventually, such an intervention may not only accomplish little but may even reinforce the old and destructive ways of coping that have been targeted for modification. Therefore, presuming that all abusers operate with convenient excuses and justifications designed solely to deflect their own responsibility will not contribute to a useful and insightful understanding of their accounts.

Although it is of great concern in engaging male abusers in a therapeutic context, men's use of, and account for, violence against women should be viewed by practitioners in a balanced way. Scholars warn that the way men account for their use of violence against women provides the least reliable source of information and needs to be triangulated against victim statements and third party evidence (Gondolf, 1998). Thus, the majority of assessment tools are designed to ask questions of victims rather than of perpetrators (Websdale, 2000). Stark (2007) even warns that interventions have failed to improve women's long-term safety in relationships or to hold perpetrators accountable. Men can use coercive control to extend their dominance over time and through social space in ways that subvert women's autonomy, isolate them and infiltrate the most intimate corners of their lives (Stark, 2007). Professionals could be influenced by these coercive strategies to form discriminatory practices that would in the end result in common cause being made with the abusers to blame woman victims (Stark & Flitcraft, 1996).

### Explanations of men's use of violence against their female partners

An explanation of the cause of violence against women may be complicated by the heterogeneity of abusers, the methodology used and the subjects involved (Saunders, 1992; Stuart & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1995; Tolman & Bennett, 1990). The psychodynamic approach is the traditional one in explaining the root causes of family violence. It suggests that violence is caused by a psychological abnormality (Gelles & Straus, 1979; Stith & Straus, 1995), mental illness and personality defects (Miller & Wellford, 1997). The abuser's personality characteristics are regarded as the chief determinants of violence and abuse (Stith & Straus, 1995). Dutton and Golant (1995) classified male abusers as psychopathic, overcontrolled, or cyclical or emotionally volatile. Gondolf (1987) revealed that sociopathic, antisocial and chronic abusers were very abusive, but about one third of the abusers were sporadically active and were family-only abusers. Stuart and Holtzworth-Munroe (1995) found three types of male abusers, which they defined as: family-only, dysphoric or borderline and generally violent or antisocial. These subgroups are good predictors of the distal or historical correlates (i.e. genetic or prenatal loading, family-of-origin violence and deviant peer association) and of the proximal correlates (i.e. attachment, impulsivity, social skills and attitudes) of marital violence (Holtzworth-Munroe *et al.*, 1999). Fonagy (1999) applies the attachment theory to argue that the trigger for a man's use of violence against female partners is often incidental and insignificant; it is the abuser's perception and intention to attack in order to get what he wants.

The extent to which the psychodynamic approach explains violence against women has been challenged. Evidence shows that only a small proportion of mentally ill persons and drug or alcohol abusers are violent (Burgess & Draper, 1989). Attempts to establish the cause–effect predictive model for domestic violence have not yet been successful, as the victim population is large and relatively accessible. It is still inadequate to have ‘sufficient temporal contiguity to make onset clear’ (Stark & Flitcraft, 1988). The ‘factors’ identified are likely to have co-existed with intimate violence. It should be noted that the subjects of studies are usually participating in treatment programmes for abusive partners. These subjects are more pathological and more likely to be detected or arrested. As Tolman and Bennett (1990) argue, ‘the overrepresentation of psychopathology in clinical abusive populations does not clearly implicate psychopathology as a causal factor in abusive behaviours’ (p. 89).

Gelles (1997) argues that the association between alcohol and violence is clear but what is not clear is how alcohol is related to violence. The consensus resulting from studying alcohol and drug abuse as factors in intimate violence is that drugs and alcohol on the one hand and abuse on the other are not causally linked, because being drunk may merely provide the abuser with a convenient excuse to hit his partner (Gelles & Straus, 1979; Miller & Wellford, 1997). The psychopathology model of family violence has been criticized by scholars, especially by feminists, as tending to minimize or eliminate the responsibility of the abuser and obscure the social context in which men abuse women. The pathological factors of anger or depression are also regarded as ‘excuses’ for violence (Tolman & Bennett, 1990).

Proponents of a systems theory perspective seek to explain family violence in interpersonal terms. Violence is viewed as a result of the interaction between the two couples and is maintained by the spousal dynamics (Stith & Straus, 1995). The characteristics of the perpetrator, the victim and the situational context contribute to violence. The central focus of studying the family system is based on cybernetics. At the core of cybernetics is the concept of the feedback loop, be it positive or negative. As applied to families, cybernetics focuses on several phenomena: family rules, negative feedback mechanisms, sequences of family interaction and a positive feedback loop (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998).

The maintenance of violence cannot be understood clearly without knowing how men use tactics to retain their wives. From the interactional perspective, the violent man employs a number of tactics to induce his wife to stay in the abusive relationship. In Ptacek’s (1997) study of abusers’ strategies, the abusers usually attack or deny the women’s attempt to leave the relationship by using more violence and threats to hurt her children and her family members. The abusers also use different types of ‘aligning actions’ from making apologies and excuses to attributing the violence to the victim’s behaviour (Wolf-Smith & LaRossa, 1992). It is important to note that abusers usually adopt, as the explanation of violence, an ‘interactional perspective’ as a strategy to blame women and escape responsibility. Unfortunately, if a woman accepts this as a cause of violence, she will stay in the abusive relationship.

Based on the systems perspective, structural family therapy (Gelles & Maynard, 1987) and couple therapy (Shamai, 1996) are commonly used to treat family violence. However, the use of the family systems perspective to explain and treat spousal violence receives heavy criticism from feminist theoreticians, who maintain that the

family systems theory fails to include the significance of gender role and gender identity development (Hansen, 1993). It fails to attend to the impact of the greater social system on the family. From the feminist perspective, the family therapist tends to focus on the characteristics of the victim in an abusive relationship and to see the abuse as a response provoked by the victim. The victim is directly or indirectly blamed for her own abuse. Focusing on the sequence of spousal interaction and circular causality implies that the victims are co-responsible for the abuse (Stith & Straus, 1995). The 'neutrality' position of family therapy is also criticized, in that it implies co-responsibility and ultimately results in victim blaming (Hansen, 1993).

Although the pivotal significance of dynamic interaction in family violence, as proposed by the family systems theory, is controversial, it is important to note the complex process experienced by abused women in their decisions on whether to leave their abusive relationship or stay in it. Understanding men's use of controlling strategies to induce women to stay will have implications for their treatment. In clinical practice, practitioners should be sensitive to abusers' use of the interactive perspective in making sense of violence against female partners or as a way to justify their violence. It sounds reasonable to them that their anger and aggression have been provoked by something the women have done. These cognitive strategies should be challenged in the treatment of abusers.

Violence is a tactic men use to control their wives. Violence is purposeful rather than dysfunctional or accidental. It is one point in a continuum of controlling behaviour (Holmes & Lundy, 1990). Violence grows out of inequality within an intimate relationship and reinforces male domination and female subordination within the home and outside it (Yllo, 2005). The controlling tactics employed by men include using coercion of their spouses and threats toward them and their children, intimidation, emotional and economic abuse, or isolation. They may also entail minimizing or denying the abuse or blaming the victim of it (Pence & Paymar, 1993). Recently, Dutton and Goodman (2005) conceptualized men's violence as coercion based on social ecology, stage setting and threats employed by abusers. A model of this kind helps to unravel the complex dynamics involved in coercion and partner violence. It better informs us about the patterns of violence, including coercion, and it can help to tailor interventions with regard to safety planning with victims, perpetrator treatment and mental health interventions with both victims and perpetrators.

## Understanding Chinese batterers' accounts of violence

Abusers' resistance to disclosing socially undesirable behaviour is one of the difficulties in working with male abusers, especially within Chinese culture. Chinese abusers are predominantly concerned with 'face'. The concept of face is not a cultural element only for Chinese people. In the West, most studies of face were developed around the concept of face proposed by the Western sociologist, Goffman (1955). However, while face is recognized as a universal concept in all societies, it assumes particular importance in Chinese culture (Hu, 1944). The Chinese are more conscious than other nationalities of the significance of face in social processes (Ho, 1980). Face

is related to a set of personality constructs including self-esteem, social desirability, need for achievement, social anxiety and interpersonal relationships (Chou, 1996). Ho (1980) regards face as a useful construct in the analysis of social interaction, particularly when considering the attainment of standing in society as a result of meeting social expectations. Face or status orientation has an important effect on self-disclosure. The more an individual associates face with morality, the less willing is he or she to disclose immoral behaviour. Men have been found to have a higher 'acquisitive face orientation' than women because they are under greater pressure to present themselves as capable (Li, 1999). Chinese men would be aware of their need to save face in the presentation of their views or disclosure of their problems, and thus regard help seeking and disclosure of personal problems as a sign of weakness.

In view of the importance of face in the understanding of Chinese male abusers, this research set out to study how Chinese abusers account for their violence in order to protect their face and to negotiate their responsibility for using violence. The objective of the study is to identify the themes and patterns in Chinese men's accounts of violence against their intimate partners, and to investigate the narrative strategies they employed during the interviews.

## Methods

### *Sample and sampling*

The study was conducted in Hong Kong, which is a modern Chinese society with powerful traditions from older times still much in evidence. It is very difficult to make contact with male abusers, as Hong Kong does not yet require them to undertake mandatory counselling. The subjects in this study were referred by social service agencies working with abusers and with victims of family violence.

The sampling was purposive, in order to include only subjects who fulfilled the study requirements. Criterion sampling (Patton, 1990) was adopted to select all the cases that met the predetermined criteria. Subjects were required to be: (a) male and from 21 to 55 years old; (b) married to, or cohabiting with, a female partner for at least six months; and (c) involved in two or more reported violent incidents against their partner in the year preceding the interview. The exclusion criteria included: (a) active psychotic symptoms, for instance hallucinations or delusions; and (b) other mental health issues and learning difficulties. Subjects were invited to take part in individual in-depth interviews conducted by the researcher and two experienced social workers. The researcher was a Chinese male social scientist, and he conducted all the interviews with the subjects. The other two interviewers were male and female social workers who had been working with domestic violence for over 10 years. Each interview took about 90 minutes. Participation in the study was voluntary. An information sheet about the study was provided and written consent was obtained from all the participants.

### *Data collection*

A qualitative in-depth interview was employed to obtain the subjects' narrative accounts of violence. The researcher explained to the subjects that the purpose of the

interviews was to understand their experience of being violent toward their female partners and their views and feelings regarding it. The data would be used for research purposes. Throughout the interviews, the interviewees were encouraged to describe the difficult-to-express experience of being violent in more depth, with the interviewers' assistance where requested, and to articulate the salient events and their feelings from an abuser's point of view. A structured and standardized, yet open-ended, interview guide was employed to maximize the comparability of responses but one that allowed the interviewers flexibility in terms of the sequencing and wording of questions so that in each individual interview the subject could be encouraged to share more openly.

To develop engaging and empathetic conversations, the interviewers used empathetic listening and probing skills. Gentle probing was used to elicit elaboration, with expressions of understanding and a selection of words that would be expected to encourage self-disclosure (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). A balance was attempted between avoiding excessively judgmental characterizations yet recognizing violent behaviour. Awareness that the interview itself is a process of reconstruction helped the interviewers to avoid imposing their personal perspectives. However, for the good of the abuser, as well as for ethical reasons, the reported violent behaviour was challenged at the end of each interview when the relationship of the interviewers and the subjects had become established, but an interest in the subject's difficulties and concerns maintained. Indeed, considerable effort was undertaken to not convey any message that abusive behaviour was construed as acceptable. Where needed and where consent was forthcoming, the subjects were referred for further treatment.

### *Data analysis*

As the interviews had been audio taped, the first step in the data analysis was to transcribe the tapes. The first five accounts were used for coding development and their content analyzed using the open coding procedure to develop categories or themes. After a coding scheme had been constructed, each interview was coded on a present or absent basis for each category.

Narrative analysis was employed to study the abusers' accounts of violence and to understand how and why particular perspectives had evolved. This method had been repeatedly used previously to understand violence toward abused women and to understand abusers (Bograd, 1988; Hyden, 1994; Riessman, 1994). Subjects' self-reported accounts of each violent incident are the units of analysis. According to Bograd (1988), accounts are operationally defined as: (1) the reasons for an incident of domestic violence having occurred; (2) attributions of the husband's intentions; and (3) definitions of incidents as violent or not violent. An account is an individual's formal response to the questioning of socially unacceptable behaviour. The abuser may employ narrative strategies in such a context, for example, the use of socially approved vocabularies and rationalization in an effort to make sense of his behaviour, or to normalize or justify it (Ptacek, 1988).

### *Credibility of data analysis*

The researcher was sufficiently sensitive to monitor his own emotional response to the accounts, to avoid obviously judgmental attitudes, and to facilitate a narrative

whenever possible during the interview rather than simply challenging the men. The questions were phrased in such a way that no highly sensitive word (such as 'abusive'), which might make the subjects defensive, was used, especially when the relationship of the interviewer and the subject was still in the process of being built. The coding of the interview process involved the two social workers who were study participants. These workers also coded the interviews. To increase the credibility of data analysis, triangulation was employed. Triangulation is a means of supporting a finding by showing that independent measures agree with it, or at least do not contradict it (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This was achieved by comparing the coding scheme of the research with those developed by the two social workers. The inter-coder reliability reached at least 90% agreement.

## Results

A total of 17 men who had used violence against their female partners participated in the study. The majority had been referred by social workers from family service centres, school social work services, and a refuge for abused women. Only two men were self-referred after seeing the publicity for the study. The men were middle-aged, namely, from 30 to 55 years old. The mean age was 43.5 years. Thirteen men were educated to high school level. Six were divorced or separated at the time of the interview. They came from a variety of occupational backgrounds, and included labourers, skilled workers, technicians, a salesperson, businesspeople, a policeman, a correctional officer and teachers. About 30% of them were unemployed and about 60% of their female partners were housewives. All of them had children.

### *The interviewer–subject relationship*

The relationship between the interviewers and the subjects had a significant impact on the subjects' self-presentation. The male abusers were found to be sensitive to the perception of the interviewer and the social workers as educated people who apparently represented society or the government and thus might be investigating their socially undesirable aggressive behaviour in an official capacity. Some of the subjects shared their thoughts that we were representing government and we wanted to challenge what they had done to their partner. Such beliefs about an interviewer's role have an effect on their presentation of their views. For example, a man told us when he was asked about his feeling about the process of the interview at the end of the interview,

When I attended this interview, I thought you might be representatives sent by the government because your agency is government-funded. I didn't really want to talk a lot because I had been blamed by relatives and other social workers and clinical psychologist. I was tired of talking. But after the initial conversation, I found that you were friendly and were willing to listen. That made me talk more and made me become less nervous. I feel good about this interview.

The men did indicate having a sense that violence was socially unacceptable. To prevent conveying a negative image, in the early stages of the interviews they tended to present themselves as responsible and honourable men. Once they found that we were willing to listen and to make an effort to understand what they had experienced, they became less defensive. They became more likely to disclose their experience, their views, beliefs, and emotions when they felt that we were attentive, trustworthy, and supportive of their expressing their version of events.

### *Protection of face*

The third main narrative strategy the participants tended to employ was to prevent loss of face, in other words, to present themselves as 'healthy men' with the aim of building up a positive image and gaining the interviewer's empathy and support. The men expected to receive social recognition for their competence in, and responsibility for, taking care of their families. They also needed recognition and appreciation that they would be accepted socially. As they were afraid of rejection, they endeavoured to present themselves as men of 'passion and responsibility'. One of the subjects, Chan, persisted in his attempt to convince the interviewers that he was rational and could control his temper. He stated he wanted to remain 'peaceful' during 'conflict', and only used violence when his wife was excessively irrational in the course of an argument.

During that incident, I pushed her away but she did not let me go. She kept blaming me, to the extent that I could not tolerate it any longer. I burst into a fit of temper and choked her, such that I might have killed her. But I then became calm again and rational; I stopped myself and left her alone.

This account can be construed to be a justification of violence, and hence a way to escape from taking responsibility. Such accounts are, in fact, frequently criticized as reproducing domination underlying the false presentation of self as nonviolent, capable, and rational (Anderson & Umberson, 2001). However, this account also crucially provides a point of entry for intervention. This abuser's expressed desire to be rational and competent in the exercise of anger management deserves to be recognized, not in order to support his justification but, on the contrary, to support him in his efforts to get his violent behaviour under effective control. The gap between the intention and the reality that he had indeed hurt his partner was then contrasted and probed. This examination provided room to further explore collaboratively whether there were constructive and nonviolent ways to achieve his intended result. The ensuing discussion helped him to recognize the need to take responsibility for changing and for understanding that the choice of using violence was not open to him, even when he felt provoked. Though this particular subject did seek to justify his violence, examining his account provided a turning point for him, enabling the interviewer to better engage him in practising the positive and even proactive behaviours required for the self-directed cessation of violence. Through engaged conversation, he became more willing to disclose the vulnerability that was in part the context for his violent behaviour.



Most of the subjects reported pretreatment changes in a way that suggested they had already made some improvements to their lives and behaviour before obtaining help. They demonstrated a wish to convey that they were not passive and that they were willing to take responsibility, at least in part, for solving their own problems. They wanted to show that they could solve problems and were thus still competent. For example, Cheung, a man frustrated by using violence against his partner, told us,

I have made efforts to enhance marital communication. I can control my temper better. I am not so violent. I come to see you with the hope of improving my situation.

Cheung emphasized that he had been making efforts to deal with marital conflicts and with his propensity for violence. When he was recognized for this behaviour by the interviewers, he then exhibited an increased willingness to receive intervention to further improve his ability to deal with his problems. Engaging him in the collaborative process provided an increased capacity for an effective conversation designed to assist him in making the requisite behavioural changes.

*Minimization of violence.* Another narrative strategy utilized to save face was to minimize the impact of the violence. Being labelled as violent or aggressive is shameful. The subjects perhaps unsurprisingly consistently presented themselves as non-aggressive. They minimized violence by describing their aggressive behaviour in neutral terms. The subjects seldom used the word 'abuse', for example, which is obviously value-laden. In the interview process, they typically did not either admit to 'violence' or recognize it as 'abuse'. Instead, they tended to use words such as 'punch', 'push' or 'hit', to describe their violent acts, avoiding any value judgment on their own behaviour. One of the examples from the transcripts is as follows:

I did not abuse her. Nor did I abuse her psychologically. No violence at all. I just slapped her. I told myself not to hurt her. Just hit her arms and legs. Sometimes I used a pillow. It is good to use a pillow. It never hurts.

This subject was very defensive about the fact that his wife had reported him to the police and sought medical help as a result of the violence. He denied having used severe violence against her. He trivialized it as a mutual conflict. It was clearly difficult for the subject to take any responsibility for his violence.

### *Avoidance of responsibility*

The subjects were conspicuously conscious of their own masculine identity and of the image they convey to others. Accordingly, analysis of their self-presentation strategies is valuable to identify their definitions of self and masculinity, and thus also to identify the potential entry points for better engagement. The first main narrative strategy used was to negotiate the extent to which they should bear the responsibility for using violence. Three common strategies were identified: placing the blame on the wife, victimization of self, and externalization of responsibility.

*Blame on wife.* The main strategy the men used to blame their spouses was to condemn them for not fulfilling the role expectations of wife and mother. Ten of the 17 subjects complained that their wives caused them great stress. The men attributed their family problems and even their own violence to their wives. They tended to present themselves as non-problematic and expected social workers to help solve their wives' problems, not their own. A typical man blamed his wife for provoking the violence and cast all the responsibility on his wife. He stated,

Every slap I gave her had a good reason behind it. The first time she slapped me was in the middle of an unimportant argument. I had never beaten her before that time. At that moment she slapped me first, without any mercy or consideration. I slapped her back because she had ruined my life and destroyed my loyalty to her. I gave her a second slap because she made me undergo a sterilization operation from which there was no return, and that made me want to kill her.

He was frustrated by the feelings of shame, loss of face, and anger. He strongly blamed his wife and shifted all the responsibility to her, without seeing his part in using violence and causing severe injury to his wife.

*Victimization of self.* The subjects tended to present themselves as being under extraordinary pressure to perform the masculine roles of husband and father. When considering the changing status of women in modern society, they felt that they no longer enjoyed male domination and control, while at the same time the responsibility of taking care of the family had not lessened. They complained that society tended to protect women against men but failed to address the fact that their wives were not powerless. There was a sense that they had to be both competent at work and responsible at home, but were feeling suffocated, distressed and unacknowledged in terms of the difficulties of fulfilling these roles. They complained that at times their wives were not considerate and supportive. They saw themselves as victims as well, but victims who did not receive attention and assistance from society, partly because they were too ashamed to tell others how they felt and partly because society always presumed that the woman was the victim. A subject, Lam, recognized that he had been violent to his wife but argued that his aggression was less serious than that perpetrated by his wife:

I did not mean to hit her. She was over-reacting. She reacted as if she were fighting against an enemy. She once grasped a stick and lashed out at my legs. That made it difficult to walk the next day. Maybe I grabbed her too hard and forcefully. I saw some bruises left on her arms.

By presenting himself as the victim, he expected to be understood empathetically. Recognizing a subject's need to describe himself in this fashion will afford a greater opportunity to engage him and thus open up more discursive space to effect the desired behaviour change.

*Externalization of responsibility.* As pointed out in various studies, male abusers often externalize their responsibility in an attempt to explain violent behaviour that seems to be out of their control (Coleman, 1980; Sonkin *et al.*, 1985; Stordeur & Stille, 1989; Walker, 1979). The subjects also externalize their responsibility by attributing the behaviour to ignorance and work stress.

The men in this study consistently presented themselves as passive, meaning that they had no choice but to use violence to regain control over their partners. They complained that they were never taught the knowledge and skills required for, communication, anger control and conflict resolution. One typical saying among the men was,

I had no idea of how to be constructive. I used outdated methods to restrain her by force. I paid too much attention to my kids but neglected her feelings. I do not have the knowledge to maintain a harmonious relationship with her.

There is a Chinese saying that seems appropriate to quote here, namely, 'one cannot be guilty if ignorant'. Claiming ignorance makes it easier to present one's own undesirable behaviour to others and to shift responsibility, while at the same time reducing the effect of losing face. It also reflects the fact that many men have never learned how to work on their emotions and take responsibility for their violence in intimate relationships.

Almost all the subjects felt that they were powerless to cope with stress levels at work, which they saw as a factor contributing to domestic violence. They often attributed violence to high stress levels at work. Five of the subjects were unemployed and, as middle-aged men, were having difficulty in finding new jobs, and were hard-pressed to meet financial demands. However, they seldom talked to their wives about the situation, even if they were experiencing serious economic hardship or indebtedness. They tended to bear the sole responsibility because they believed that it was the role of a man to take care of his family. One of them shared his sense of the situation in this way:

I think the most disturbing thing was my work stress. Every time I went home, my wife kept complaining about this and that. We had disagreements most of the time. She said that I should spend less time at home and more time at work. But how can I afford to take care of all these things?

He felt that demands at work were so high that they created great tensions between his work and his role in the family.

### *Privatization of violence*

Most of the subjects argued that marital violence is familial and interactional, and is unrelated to legal or social issues. To them, the intervention of police and social workers was unjustified. The interactional viewpoint on spousal abuse was commonly held by the subjects. It seemed to be assumed by them that it was understood and

socially acceptable that marital violence is just between the couple with no right of involvement of others. This perspective gave the subjects an excuse with which to defend themselves against social and legal interventions. The male abusers systematically employed this strategy to avoid taking responsibility and to shift the blame onto the victim (Hansen, 1993). This is similar to the accounts of the subjects reported here, that is, they attempted to argue that spousal violence was a matter just between the couple. As Wong said,

I slapped her. She always fought back. She hit me and I hit her back immediately. Previously, I had hit her only twice. She had slapped me all the time over the past two years. After I knew that she had had affairs with another man, I hit her. It's just a conflict and the conflict is mutual. It's just between the two of us.

He defended his actions by arguing that his wife was not powerless but, on the contrary, was provocative and controlling. She would fight back verbally or even physically. Certain other subjects similarly wanted to avoid taking any responsibility for using violence. They refused to take 'full responsibility' because they thought that they were always being blamed by society for using violence against their partners in an unfairly one-sided manner, without any recognition of women's faults and difficulties. For instance:

I knew it was my fault. I was the one who fought first. Even if I was right in the argument, I should not have beaten her. Using violence was wrong. But she also bore some responsibility. I carry the larger share, say, 80%. Maybe I should take responsibility for a larger proportion of the mistakes. But I thought she might also be responsible for the violence to some degree.

These quotations show that the subjects felt they were being marginalized. By arguing that violence is interactional, they may not really escape all responsibility, but they do want to emphasize that they are not the only player involved in spousal violence. In the context of the interviews, the subjects attempted to explain how their wives had failed to be good partners and effective mothers. By emphasizing their wives' faults, they sought not only to provide justification but also to present what they saw as a more balanced picture of spousal dynamics.

Another reason the men cited for using violence was to discipline women. Physical punishment was justified as a way to discipline and educate women to be virtuous, dutiful and to follow their lead. With this behaviour they were holding on to a long-standing cultural belief that it is the proper familial role of Chinese men to discipline family members. They believed that violence was effective in disciplining their wives and in resolving conflict, because they were of the opinion there would be no serious conflicts thereafter if they played their disciplinary role appropriately. The idea that men properly have a disciplinary role is powerfully anchored in traditional Chinese culture. The abusers privatized the violence against their partners through this narrative strategy of appealing to traditional roles in an attempt to escape society's intervention in their family affairs.

## Discussion

The limitation of this study is that the findings cannot be generalized to Chinese male perpetrators of domestic violence, because the sample size was small and the samples were not being chosen with the aim of representing all abusers. There was no comparison group to differentiate the effect of supposed loss of face on abusers from its effect on the general population. The purpose of the study was not to make generalizations from the findings but to identify Chinese cultural factors that are embedded in men's violence against their domestic partners. The narrative strategies of a group of Chinese male abusers employed to account for their violence against wives have been examined. These strategies are categorized into protection of face, avoidance of responsibility and privatization of violence against women. These are tactics designed to manage the impression formed by other people, including the interviewers, but also in order to win recognition of 'another side to the story'. The extent of the use of narrative strategies is thus to an important degree a function of the interaction between the audience and the abusers, or the therapist and the client in the clinical context. This sort of defensive posture can result in disengagement and ultimately lead to the subjects dropping out of the intervention process. In contrast, the more recognition is received for their described roles and for the contributions made to their families, the less the narrative strategies are required as a defence. The use of narrative strategies is thus characterized as being interactive. Therefore, the perceptions and expressed views of the interviewer or the counsellor should be addressed in the scope of research and intervention contexts.

There is no doubt that therapists and practitioners should hold the abusers accountable for their use of violence and should encourage them to take full responsibility for halting their violence. An immediate reduction of the risk to partners and children must be sought, and full protection must be given to the victims of spousal violence. For the purpose of effecting a meaningful improvement in the behaviour of abusive men, it is also of crucial importance to recognize the narrative strategies the male abusers use in the interview context. These strategies are not just for the purpose of self-justification and denial, they also are a real attempt to communicate and as such offer opportunities for therapeutic intervention. Perpetrators of domestic violence do indeed tend to justify and make excuses for their violence, but they are also prepared to share their needs and the distress experienced during violence with the interviewers. Greater recognition and understanding of these strategies would certainly help to create a context in which abusers might unlearn their habitually violent behaviour and move toward finding previously unappreciated, constructive forms of conflict resolution. As Wood (2004) has pointed out,

trying to understand men who harm their domestic partners is not at odds with denouncing violence against women, which must be condemned without qualification. Indeed, more effective strategies of intervention may not be possible until and unless some effort is made to understand the perspectives of men who commit domestic partner violence.

The author hopes that this study will increase our understanding of Chinese abusers' accounts of violence in the wider social context. Such an improved understanding seems likely to be a prerequisite to effecting meaningful change, and as such, is as valuable for improving the lives of the victims, as it is those of the abusers.

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