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Fluid positions and changing strategies: a narrative analysis of how parents exposed to intimate partner violence talk about their contact with social services

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ABSTRACT

Many parents exposed to intimate partner violence (IPV) encounter the childcare unit at Personal Social Services (PSS) in Sweden. This article explores how different ways of positioning in relation to the childcare unit, on one hand, and the other parent, on the other, may influence how parents exposed to IPV respond to interventions from the PSS organisation. The article draws on findings from qualitative interviews with 16 PSS clients who are or have been exposed to IPV and who have children with the abusive partner. Positioning Theory is used for the narrative analysis of the material. The narrative of one person is presented as an example of how narratives of IPV victims can be told. The study reveals that clients' responses to different interventions might be the result of strategies for handling both the other parent and social services. Furthermore, over time, clients may change strategies in their contact with social services as a result of new ways of positioning in relation to social services and primary relations. An understanding of how primary relations, such as the relation to the other parent, may influence clients' contacts with PSS and vice versa may improve the understanding of why clients act a certain way in relation to the organisation or why they suddenly seem to change their approach to interventions.

KEYWORDS

Child protection; family studies; violence; practice research

Introduction

In Sweden, the childcare unit is a part of the Personal Social Services (PSS) organisation. The unit is responsible for child protection and coercive measures and for providing treatment for children, parents and families as a whole. Parents exposed to intimate partner violence (IPV) may encounter the childcare unit as a result of a reported concern or a child custody investigation. Several previous publications have noted that the way that clients handle contact with the PSS and respond to different interventions from the organisation are a result of how they perceive the organisation (see, for example, Littell, Alexander, and Reynolds 2001; Cooper 2004; Yatchmenoff 2005; Mirick 2012; Grell, Ahmadi, and Blom 2016). However, studies have seldom considered that clients' decisions and actions are products of complex interactions among clients, professionals and cultural and environmental factors (Littell, Alexander and Reynolds 2001). Studies of these complex interactions are needed to develop

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a greater understanding of why a client handles a situation in a certain way (Blom and Morén 2010). This paper examines the interaction between professionals, clients and clients' primary relations – in this case, the former partner of the client, who is also the other parent of the client's child.

This study uses Positioning Theory to investigate these interactions. Tirado and Gálsvez (2007) describe positioning as the discursive construction of personal narrations, which constitute the actions of individuals in a way that is comprehensible to the individual and to others. *The aim of this article is to explore how different ways of positioning in relation to the childcare unit and to the other parent may influence how clients exposed to IPV respond to interventions from the PSS organisation.*

The article draws on findings from a qualitative interview study with 16 PSS clients (parents in families with children) who define themselves as IPV victims and who have children with the abusive partner. By presenting one person's narrative, this study shows how different ways of positioning in relation to both the former partner and the social service organisation might lead to different ways of handling contact with the PSS. Furthermore, the narrative analysis reveals that clients may shift strategies during their contact with the organisation. These shifts have seldom been explored in previous research.

Different forms of violence

Researchers use different terms when describing the abusive behaviour of one individual towards another in a relationship. The term 'intimate partner violence' (IPV) specifically refers to abuse occurring within a couple relationship (i.e. marriage, cohabitation or non-cohabitating intimate partners) (Krug et al. 2002). The term can imply men's violence against women as well as women's violence against men (Johnson and Ferraro 2000; Johnson 2008). As this study focuses on couple relationships and men as well as women are interviewed, the term IPV is relevant.

Johnson (2008) describes three major types of IPV: intimate terrorism, violent resistance and situational couple violence. The type of violence highlighted in this article is intimate terrorism, which is a combination of physical and/or sexual violence with a variety of non-violent control tactics, such as economic abuse, emotional abuse, use of children, threats and intimidation, constant monitoring, blaming the victim or threats to 'out' a person to work or family. In these types of abusive relationships, the relationship between the two parents is often affected during the relationship and afterward as the violence does not automatically end after a break-up. Instead, many IPV victims say that the terror became even worse when they left the abusive partner (Holmberg and Enander 2008). After years of taking no interest in the children, the abuser might start fighting for custody of the child when the relationship is over as a way to hurt the former partner. The abused parent is often afraid of letting the other parent have custody of the child. With this in mind, child custody battles can be understood as battles between the two parents as much as a battle over the child. This makes clients who define themselves as victims of IPV an important source for understanding how primary relationships may influence a client's response to interventions from the PSS.

The article is structured as follows. First, I present a brief overview of how social services are organised in Sweden. Then, I provide a short review of the previous research on how clients perceive and handle their contact with social services, followed by a presentation of the conceptual framework employed in the paper. After describing the method applied in this study, I present the findings and analysis. Finally, the results are discussed in relation to previous research.

The organisation of social services in Sweden

In Sweden, social services are organised within each municipality and normally consist of three major divisions: elderly care, care for people with disabilities and PSS (Bergmark and Lundström 2007; Lundgren et al. 2009). In the majority of municipalities, different entities are responsible for PSS's three main areas of interest: substance abuse, monetary benefits and childcare. In addition to addressing child protection and coercive measures, childcare includes providing support and treatment for children

and for parents and families as a whole. If separated parents do not agree on how the custody of the child should be organised the case can be brought to court. In these situations the PSS is responsible for making a child custody investigation.

The different areas of social services are often complemented by function-based specialisation, and assessments and interventions are conducted in separate units (Perlinski 2010). Some municipalities have special units that support families facing violence. The presence of such a special unit is often related to the size of the municipality. The type of service an abused woman is offered depends on several factors, such as which services are available, whether the woman is considered to have her own financial, emotional and practical resources and whether a social worker is available (Ekström 2016).

IPV clients' perception of social services

Previous research on the support and services that social service organisations provide for this group of clients often takes the perspective of social workers (Eriksson 2003; Douglas and Walsh 2010; Ekström 2016). One main finding is that child protection workers appear to perceive women as bearing the responsibility of caring for their children and blame women for violence in the home and any consequent failure to protect their children (Eriksson 2003; Douglas and Walsh 2010).

Studies from the perspective of clients often focus on abused women. One main finding is that clients exposed to IPV often have a negative experience of their contact with social services (Eriksson 2003; Meyer 2015; Jarnkvist and Brännström 2016b). Central problems include professionals' denial that violence occurred, refusal to take information about violence seriously until the father is convicted of a crime, and/or failure to consider the consequences of violence for the children and the mother (Eriksson 2003; Jarnkvist and Brännström 2016b). Abused women also experience victim-blaming attitudes when seeking help (Meyer 2015; Jarnkvist and Brännström 2016b). Davies and Krane (2006) found that women are often anxious and fearful of engaging with child protection authorities as they fear that they will not receive support and that their children will be removed. That study introduced the idea of incorporating 'a mothering narrative' into social work practice so that women might begin to tell their own stories as mothers. The authors argue that this contextualised approach to child protection practices in domestic violence situations is needed to understand the daily realities of mothers as clients and to reduce blaming attitudes.

Previous research on abused men reveals that they often do not report their problems out of fear that they will be laughed at, humiliated or accused of being the abuser (Tsui, Cheung, and Leung 2010). Negative experiences of contacts with social services are also discussed in studies of other clients with complex needs. Clients express feelings of mistrust and aversion regarding PSS (Dale 2004; Palmer, Maiter, and Manji 2006; Angelin 2009; Buckley, Carr, and Whelan 2011; Grell, Ahmadi, and Blom 2016; Smithson and Gibson 2017). Due to the organisational specialisation (Grell, Ahmadi, and Blom 2016), social services are considered difficult to understand and navigate (Blom 2004; Ungar, Liebenberg, and Ikeda 2012; Grell, Ahmadi, and Blom 2016; Jarnkvist and Brännström 2016b). Clients may perceive individual units of the PSS organisation differently. The childcare unit is perceived to be very powerful and threatening by clients in general (Grell, Ahmadi, and Blom 2016), including those who define themselves as victims of IPV (Jarnkvist and Brännström 2016b).

Strategies used in relation to PSS

Most previous research has focused on how clients perceive and are affected by service conditions, but few studies have explored how clients handle these conditions (Grell, Ahmadi, and Blom 2016). According to previous research, the way a client perceives the PSS organisation influences the approaches and strategies the client adopts in relation to it (Grell, Ahmadi, and Blom 2016). Clients' degree of trust or mistrust in the service system (Littell, Alexander, and Reynolds 2001; Cooper 2004; Yatchmenoff 2005) and the extent to which clients consider themselves to have power and control over the situation (Mirick 2012) have also been found to be relevant to how clients relate to social services.

Clients who are afraid of losing custody of their children may adopt a strategy of ‘playing the game’. Although they may not completely agree with the measures taken by the social service, they struggle to appear cooperative and motivated (Brown 2006; Dumbrill 2006). According to Dumbrill (2006), clients’ interpretation of the power relationship between clients and social workers directs their perspectives on and reactions to intervention. The author presents three ways of responding to intervention: parents may fight workers by openly opposing them, ‘play the game’ by feigning cooperation, or work with professionals in collaborative relationships. In response to the feeling that power is being used against them, parents tend to fight or ‘play the game’; in contrast, parents who experience power being used for their benefit tend to work with the intervention.

Grell, Ahmadi, and Blom (2016) present similar strategies that clients use to handle contacts with several units of the social service organisation. The authors found that in clients’ multiple contacts, they shift between different approaches in an attempt to promote their own interests. The way clients perceive a certain unit of the PSS influences which approaches and strategies they use. The authors present four ideal typical approaches to social service: consensus, resignation, fight and escape. *Consensus* is characterised by clients’ adoption of a cooperative approach as an offensive strategy to achieve positive outcomes. *Resignation* is described as a defensive type of cooperation in which clients accept the demands of PSS even though they do not like them. The *fight* approach is offensive and is characterised by open resistance as the client aims to win over the PSS. Finally, in the defensive *escape* approach, the client focuses on avoiding expected negative outcomes (Grell, Ahmadi, and Blom 2016).

Previous research on how primary relationships might affect clients’ contact with social services is rare. Jarnkvist and Brännström (2016a) analyse how women who have left abusive relationships position themselves in relation to the image of the ‘ideal victim’ and how gender is constructed in that positioning. The social context at both an individual and a societal level has an influence on the narrative. For example, the way a woman positions herself in relation to the abuser is relevant to whether she talks about herself as a victim. The material reveals three strings of narratives representing different forms of femininity. The master narrative of the ideal victim reveals a form of femininity that describes women as inferior in relation to men. In the alternative narrative, the narrator positions herself as inferior in relation to the offender but discusses resistance. She describes herself as a caring mother who risks a great deal to protect her children. In the counter-narrative, the narrator positions herself as strong and independent in relation to the offender and as a strong and caring mother. The positioning of different narrators may shift depending on the duration of the relationship and the type of violence. Moreover, the narrator may position herself in different ways throughout the narrative. The study reveals that different narratives have different functions in each phase that relate to the context in which the narrative is expressed. Narratives are also gendered in different ways.

Positioning in narratives

Drawing from narrative theory and positioning theory, this study explores how narrators position themselves in relation to the PSS organisation, on one hand, and the father of the child, on the other. The term ‘narrative’ originates from the ‘linguistic turn’ towards language in the social sciences, which is primarily rooted in social constructionism and other relativist approaches (Johansson 2005). From this perspective, a narrative is a story-based account of happenings/events. Contained within it are other forms of communication that convey the social and cultural location of the teller. The narrative points to a particular situation or context. It is an account of what happened, to whom it happened and where it happened. According to narrative theory, self-representation can be interpreted as a result of the interactions between an individual and different social structures. A story reflects something about not only the individual and his or her meaning but also the narrator’s culture and social world.

Positioning theory is integral to the narrative turn in social research. It began to emerge in the 1980s primarily in the area of gender studies (Kroløkke 2009) and feminist poststructuralist theory (Davies and Harré 1990). The theory is based on the principle that people involved in a social episode do not have equal access to rights and duties to perform particular kinds of meaningful actions at that moment

and with those people. The rights and duties determine who can use a certain discourse mode. Tirado and Gálsvez (2007) describe positioning as the discursive construction of personal narrations, which constitute the actions of individuals in a way that is comprehensible to the individual and to others. Positioning theory focus on how people use words (and discourse of all types) to locate themselves and others (Moghaddam and Harré 2010). The narrator is always assumed to be an active participant in the construction of the contexts of interaction (Hayati and Maniati 2010).

In this study, I explore narratives of persons exposed to IPV who have been in contact with social services in Sweden. Positioning theory can provide good insights for analysing the ways in which narratives shape individuals' formulation of the relationships between self and others while recounting their specific experiences. My approach in this study is that clients' strategies or responses to different interventions in relation to the PSS can be seen in the effects or outcomes of particular positioning acts. This perspective on responses will be explored through the discussion of how narrators (here, clients exposed to IPV) position themselves in relation to the PSS organisation and to the former partner in their personal narratives.

Method

This article is part of a study focusing on how IPV survivors experience the management of IPV-related work by public authorities in a Swedish county. The Regional Ethical Review Board in Umeå (Reg. No. 2015/260-31Ö) approved the study. This study includes 16 men and women between 26 and 54 years of age who defined themselves as survivors of IPV in heterosexual relationships. Using the typology of partner violence by Johnson (2008), the narrators mainly described the violence as 'intimate terrorism'. A few of them said that they had responded to the violence and that the intimate terrorism had become what Johnson (2008) calls 'violent resistance'.

The narrators were approached via posters, established networks related to domestic abuse or previous interviewees. Prior to the interviews, the narrators were informed about the study, given the option to participate and notified that they could terminate their participation at any time during the process without explanation. The interviews occurred during 2015–2016 at locations selected by the narrators. Two of the interviews were conducted over the telephone. Each interview session lasted 90 min on average.

The interviews were framed by a set of themes: relationships, violence, contact with authorities and help and support from other sources. The interviews focused on how the narrators experienced contact with public authorities, such as those from social services. During the interviews, the narrators described the situations that led them to interact with the authorities, how they experienced and handled these contacts and how the different contacts affected their life situation. This article focuses on the narrators' experiences of their contact with the childcare unit within social services, which was the organisation the interviewees discussed most. After each interview session, the interview was summarised and transcribed. During transcription, the material was anonymised.

Analytic method

During the initial stage of the analysis, I read all the summaries to obtain an overview of the material. Then, I read the transcripts to obtain a deeper understanding of them. I focused on the parts of the narratives that described the narrator's contact with social services. Based on narrative analysis and Positioning Theory, I focused on the form of the narrative: the way the narrator talked about herself in relation to her social surrounding indicated how she experienced power being used in the relationships and to whom she directed her actions. Thus, in the analysis, I examined how the narrators positioned themselves in relation to PSS and to the other parent in their stories and how they responded to different interventions through the speech acts they performed.

In this article, I present the narrative of one single person, Pernilla, as an example of how narratives of IPV victims can be told. Pernilla's story is similar to other interview persons' stories by the way

it tells about the experiences of and relation to the previous partner as well as PSS. As Pernilla has experienced three child custody investigations and had contact with PSS during several years, her narrative clearly shows how positions and strategies may change over time. This is why her narrative is chosen as an example in this article. Pernilla's narrative illustrates how different ways of positioning lead to different strategies in relation to PSS and the other parent. Furthermore, the analysis reveals the fluidness of positioning as it shows that the client may shift position and strategies during different phases of the intervention.

Critical reflections on methods

The subjects were asked to participate in a study on how they experienced the way authorities approach partner violence. Most of the narrators were not happy with the outcome of their contacts with social service and expressed a desire to help other abused men and women by telling their stories. It is possible that to protect their self-image, the interviewees portrayed PSS as the 'bad guys'. It is also possible that they portrayed their own behaviour as more rational or intentional than it actually was.

People continuously reinterpret personal life stories according to the existing situation and the structure of the narrative (Johansson 2005). Therefore, it is difficult to determine the causes and factors that create a narrative. It is also possible that the narrators reinterpreted events that happened during their contact with PSS when talking about them during the interview, thus creating a new narrative.

Fluid positions and changing strategies

In this section, I present the narrative of Pernilla, who talks about her contact with PSS. Pernilla's way of handling the relationship with the organisation has changed over the years. Based on my interpretation, during the first encounter with PSS, Pernilla used a type of imagined consensus approach towards the organisation. She says that she thought that the social workers would understand her and use their power for Pernilla's benefit. However, Pernilla states that she instead experienced power being used over her; she felt that, in the eyes of PSS, she was sometimes in a lower position of power than her former partner was. Nonetheless, the story ends with Pernilla describing herself as a responsible actor in a position of power in relation to PSS and her former partner. Along with these changes in positioning, Pernilla uses different strategies to address her contact with PSS and her former partner. In this article, the strategies she used and her speech acts are understood as products of her way of positioning. Pernilla's case reveals the interconnection between the client, his/her primary relationships and the PSS organisation.

From imagined consensus to being powerless

Pernilla, 31, met the father of her third child when she was 26 years old. She became pregnant only a few months later, which was when the violence started. Pernilla describes the violence as intimate terror. In subsequent months, she escaped from the man several times but always returned to him. Finally, when the child was three months old, Pernilla decisively left the man after a violent incident; she also reported him to the police. Her case was brought to court, but the man was never charged. The court prohibited him from communication, and Pernilla was awarded sole custody of their child. The father of the child reported Pernilla to social service, accusing her of not taking care of the child. Since then, Pernilla has had several child custody disputes with her previous partner regarding their shared child.

Pernilla says that during the first child custody investigation, she initially thought that social services would understand her situation: 'You expect to be met with understanding and help; that they [the social workers] will understand why you are feeling bad when you are explaining it to them', she says during the interview. As with many other interviewed clients, Pernilla describes how she used a type of imagined consensus approach during her first encounter with social services, expecting that the social workers would understand and believe her and use their power for Pernilla's benefit. She

told the social workers how she felt and how she experienced life. When talking about it during the interview Pernilla says that she was inexperienced with interacting with social services, as if she feels that she has to explain her way of acting and positioning in relation to the social workers. 'I did not understand that it could be a disadvantage for me to tell them that I felt bad', she says. According to Pernilla, the social workers wrote in the first child custody investigation that it might be bad for Pernilla's son to live with a mother who was feeling depressed. Pernilla expresses disappointment that they did not mention that her illness was a consequence of being abused by the father of the child. She also says that it seemed like social services sometimes put more trust in the father than in her, which made her very disappointed. During this part of the narrative, Pernilla positions herself as powerless in relation to PSS and the father of the child. She says that when she described her life situation to the social workers, she hoped that they would understand and help her; instead, they blamed her for not being a good mother. Experiences of blaming attitudes, questioning of violence and normative discourses of mothering such as those Pernilla describes have also been recognised in previous research (Eriksson 2003; Meyer 2015; Jarnkvist and Brännström 2016b). This normative discourse of mothering puts mothers in a position of being responsible for the welfare of the children. There is no space for weakness and the narrative of the mother is not understood in its context.

Using a fighting strategy

According to Pernilla, the first two investigations made the court awarding her sole custody of the child, and the father had the right to supervised visits. He had a restraining order, but Pernilla was nonetheless obliged to bring the child to him for visits. Pernilla protested by refusing to take the child to the appointments with the father. However, she says that the strategy only led to greater pressure on her from PSS. In the following quotation, Pernilla talks about when a social worker phoned her after Pernilla refused to leave the child with his father.

I told her [the social worker] that he [the father of the child] has a restraining order and that I am really afraid of being around him. It is like a barrier within me. Well, she said that she really could not understand me. She said that she had to explain to me that if I did not bring the child to the appointments, it was possible that the police would have to come and get the child. I had to know about that, she said. She was very impolite and snappish. Then I said, 'You can go the way you want to, but do not phone me any more.' However, she went on phoning me, also during evenings, asking me if I knew about the rules. She was really not nice.

My interpretation of this part of the narrative is that Pernilla felt that power was being used over her by the social worker. Pernilla says that when she explained her fear of the child's father, she was met with mistrust. The experience of not being listened to put Pernilla in a low power position as the authorities did not value her story. Moreover, it seems that Pernilla felt threatened rather than informed by the social worker when the social worker told her what could happen if Pernilla did not follow the rules. Pernilla's strategy was to fight by not bringing the child to the visits. According to Dumbrill (2006), this strategy is common among clients who experience power being used over them. Using the typology of Jarnkvist and Brännström (2016a), Pernilla presents an alternative narrative of herself as a victim. She positions herself as inferior in relation to social services and her former partner but also talks about how she resisted. She describes herself as a caring mother who risked a great deal to protect her child. Her way of acting can be interpreted as a way to resist the heteronormative discourse of the nuclear family. According to this discourse it is always good for children to have contact with both parents.

From powerless to being in power

Pernilla says that when the third investigation started, she changed strategy to make the investigation work in her favour. When talking about the change of strategies, Pernilla also changes the focus in her narrative from describing herself as weak in relation to PSS to describing herself as being in power. She talks about herself as an actor who influenced the investigation and thus also influenced

her former partner. Pernilla describes how she used PSS as a medium to target the father of the child. My interpretation is that Pernilla, in relation to PSS as well as her former partner, had moved from experiencing herself as powerless to being in power. This also made her able to act in new ways in relation to PSS and her former partner.

When the third child custody investigation was about to begin, Pernilla first asked for another social worker to lead the investigation as she did not like the way she was treated by her previous social worker. Pernilla was also better prepared for the meetings than she was during the previous investigations. Pernilla describes the third investigation, which was also the most recent, in the following way:

It was not until that investigation that I thought that I knew how to act in relation to social services to make it proceed properly. And I guess they noticed that I was stronger. I knew the rules; I knew that we should do this to make it all right for my child. I knew that they [the social workers] were not my friends who would help me, and they noticed that. (...) I had documents showing that everything I had told them before about him [the father of the child] was true. (...) So they saw that I had been right all along, so then they could question him a bit more, and I knew how to make them question him.

In this statement, Pernilla describes herself being in power in relation to PSS, which also puts her in power in relation to her child's father. As Pernilla describes it, she had learned 'how to act' to make the investigation work in her favour. She says that she 'knew the rules' and that the social workers noticed that she was stronger. By bringing documents that supported her argumentation, she achieved a position of power in relation to both PSS and her previous partner: 'I knew how to make them question him,' Pernilla says, indicating that she had learned how to make the investigation work the way she wanted. Her actions put pressure on her previous partner.

In response to questions related to her own well-being, Pernilla changed the focus from telling PSS about herself and her current situation to talking about the future and how she wanted life to be for her son. 'In the last investigation, I was very direct and told them, 'I do not want help; I do not feel bad, I just want you to secure the life of my son'', Pernilla says in the interview. I interpret her actions as a type of escape that was used in a strategic manner. Instead of portraying herself as a weak mother who was unable to take care of her child, she chose not to talk about her own well-being at all. In doing so, she distanced herself from the image of herself as a victim. Instead, she adopted the role of a director who decided what the social workers should focus on in the investigation.

Feigned resignation

Pernilla's third custody dispute with the child's father resulted in Pernilla being awarded sole custody of the child. However, the father was still allowed supervised visits, which did not please Pernilla. She says that she did not want the child to have any contact at all with the father, and she did not dare to meet with the man herself. However, instead of fighting the decision to let the father see his son, Pernilla agreed to the demands from PSS in hopes that the father would not show up for appointments.

(...) So I thought, 'I hope that he fails'. I thought, 'I will change my strategy. I will not do as before, that I do not want to go there, that I hesitate, or something like that. I'll shock him instead'. Then, I think he got very scared because he had expected me to say 'no'.

As Pernilla describes it, her way of acting was not actually directed towards the social services but towards the father of the child. However, it also affected her relations to the social services. In relation to PSS, Pernilla seemed to have changed her strategy from fighting to consensus or resignation (see Grell, Ahmadi, and Blom 2016), but when Pernilla talks about her change in strategy, she does not mention social services at all. Instead, she talks about how she changed strategy in relation to the father and how the father of the child reacted to her strategy. This change shows that her actions were primarily directed towards the man and not towards PSS.

When the father finally had the opportunity to see his child, he did not show up for the appointments or tested positive for drugs before the appointments. After several failed appointments, the father seems to have stopped fighting to see his child. At the time of the interview, one year had passed without the father trying to obtain custody of the child. Pernilla was pleased.

As Dumbrell (2006) observes, clients may describe shifts in the type of power PSS uses as a result of shifts of social workers. Pernilla refers to a change from power being used over her to power being used with her when she was assigned a new social worker during the third investigation. The change in the experience of power seems to have been relevant to her experience of the intervention. However, the shift of social workers occurred as a result of Pernilla's own initiative and, as she reveals in the narrative, was part of a new strategy. When talking about the third investigation, Pernilla describes herself as a strong and strategic actor. My interpretation is that her feeling of being in power had an effect on how she acted in relation to the social services and in relation to her child's father. This time, she dared to agree to let the father see the child and therefore took the risk that the child would be hurt. However, the father did not show up for the meetings, and Pernilla seems to have 'won the battle'.

Using the typology of Jarnkvist and Brännström (2016a), Pernilla shifted narratives from the alternative narrative to a counter-narrative. In the counter-narrative, the narrator positions herself as a strong, independent and caring mother in relation to social services and her former partner.

Discussion

The aim of this article has been to explore how different ways of positioning in relation to the childcare unit and to the other parent may influence how clients exposed to IPV respond to interventions from PSS. The study examines the interaction among professionals, clients and clients' primary relationships and reveals insights regarding how the interaction may influence and be influenced by the clients' responses to different PSS interventions. Such insights may improve the understanding of why clients act in a certain way in relation to the organisation or why they suddenly seem to change their approach to the interventions that the organisation demands.

One main finding of this study is that clients' responses to different interventions might be the result of strategies for handling the other parent as well as social services. The intended targets of different actions have seldom been considered in previous research on how clients respond to different interventions. Often, previous research has taken for granted that clients' different ways of responding to interventions reflect only how they perceive the social service organisation. Without recognising other social relationships in clients' lives, important influences on ways of handling social services may not be acknowledged. The analysis presented here highlights the need for increased awareness when attempting to understand the behaviour of abused men and women. Clients' encounters with specialised PSS are complex and are influenced by factors beyond the relationship between the client and the PSS organisation.

Another finding of this study is that over time, clients may change strategies in their contact with social services. This issue has seldom been discussed in previous research, although some researchers (for example, Grell, Ahmadi, and Blom 2016) note that clients use different strategies in their multiple contacts with social services. According to Positioning Theory, strategies or responses to different PSS interventions can be seen as the effects or outcomes of particular positioning acts. Furthermore, positioning is fluid and may change over time. Seen from this perspective, changes in strategies might be recognised as outcomes of changes in positioning and power relations between the people involved. The analysis presented here highlights that awareness is required when trying to understand the behaviour of abused women. The fact that Pernilla in the end of her story presents a counter-narrative and portray herself as rational actor being in power suggests that such characterizations are rooted in particular types of discourse. Descriptions of abused women as submissive or passive should not be accepted as facts, as they fail to take into consideration the different contexts that influence the meaning of these terms.

The narrative of Pernilla also illustrates that she during the three child custody investigations was going through a kind of learning process in relation to the PSS. She says that she by the time of the third investigation had learned how to act in order to make things proceed the way she wanted. This knowledge put her in a power situation in relation to the PSS as well as to the father of the child. Pernilla talks about the time of the third investigation as if she was the one in charge. She had moved

from experiencing herself as powerless to being the one in power. This made her respond in other ways to interventions and act in new ways in relation to her previous partner.

The way a person describes a situation and how she positions herself in relation to other people in her story reflect the way she experiences her situation and understands the power dynamics within different situations. This might also influence how the person behaves. A person who describes herself as responsible for her own actions has, in a way, taken over the power in a situation. Listening to the stories of clients and the ways they talk about themselves and their own situations is important for evaluating the interventions of PSS. In line with Davies and Krane (2006), I recommend that social workers incorporate ‘mothering narratives’ into social work practice so that women can begin to tell their own stories as mothers, including the ways they experience life. This practice might reduce attitudes such as victim blaming.

Clients who have been exposed to partner violence are the focus of this study. It is likely that the relationship with the other parent may have an especially strong influence among these clients as the power relationships between the parents are often unbalanced. However, primary relationships also influence direct interventions for other clients (Blom and Morén 2010). More research on this group of clients as well as on other clients is recommended to improve the understanding of this topic.

Limitations

The study was conducted in a county in Sweden that includes small- and medium-sized cities. One possible limitation of this study is that the PSS organisations in these cities differ from the way social services are organised in large cities. However, organisations in larger cities may be even more specialised, which makes the handling of the contacts even more complex. The influence of primary relationships may remain the same.

Many clients who are or have been exposed to partner violence also have contact with authorities and support organisations other than social services. This situation leads to even more complex relationships and more contacts to manage. More studies are needed to understand how people exposed to partner violence handle and experience these contacts and how primary relationships may influence these relations and encounters. Furthermore, expanding this research beyond the Swedish culture is essential to create a reliable and valid framework.

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