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POLICE DISCOURSE ON
POLICING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for a degree of
Master of Arts in Psychology
at Massey University

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1996

Acknowledgements

My thanks and appreciation go to my main supervisor, Dr. Mandy Morgan, whose patience and encouragement never wavered, even when I was about to give up. This thesis would not have been possible without her, even at times when there was silence (especially when she was the last person I wanted to see) her presence in the work here is great. I'm not sure she'd go along with all that was said but she will probably leave that unsaid! Hine, my second supervisor was helpful in providing me with Maori writers wise words. I hope I have honoured them.

Andy, my partner, has been very supportive in the last weeks when tempers frayed and the kids kept asking haven't you finished that '*#@!!*' thesis' yet, and when you've finished we can have some fun... I'd echo those sentiments. Friends have been of invaluable help in more ways than I can say, I won't name names but you know who you are. To all those people who so freely gave of their time to talk with me and share their thoughts, I thank you. Finally, thanks to all those 'textual friends' (John Shotter's words) without whose words this would probably never have been written.

Abstract

This research looks at how six police officers talk about policing domestic violence. The analysis is based on interview data collected in 1993-4, in Palmerston North, New Zealand. A 'discursive approach' was adopted in analyzing the texts. The central assumption was that the meanings given to events and people are likely to influence policing practice. Two main areas were looked at: the first was the social construction of policing domestic violence; the second was how the officers talk seemed to position people as either deserving or undeserving of police 'discretion'. Gender, race, and class assumptions influenced these decisions. Women who were about to leave or had attempted to leave a violent relationship were seen as more deserving of police time. Women generally were negatively constructed in the talk of them, and no excuses or justifications were given as explanatory accounts for their actions. By contrast, excuses and justifications were often offered for some men to account for their violence. This tended to be more evident if the offender was a white middle-class male. Thus, some forms of violence and abuse seemed to be condoned, and no action was taken. Maori and Pacific Island men, in contrast, were viewed as the 'type of guys' most likely to beat their wives. Generally, though, domestic violence still seemed to be viewed as a 'private' matter or a 'relationship' issue. This interpretation appeared to function in a way to place domestic violence in the category of 'not real police work', thereby decreasing the likelihood that action would be taken in the form of an arrest. This is contrary to a policy that endorses arrest and the criminalization of male violence in the home.

Preface

This thesis is a report of a research project that was conducted, in part, from October 1993-January 1994, when I interviewed six police officers based in and around Palmerston North, New Zealand. The focus of the research is the policing of domestic violence. The thesis looks at how these officers spoke about policing domestic violence, subsequent to the implementation of the 'arrest policy' in New Zealand in 1987. Interviews were also conducted with five women who had been victims of male violence and abuse and who had sought police intervention. These interviews are not included in the analysis, but they provided valuable background information and 'expert' knowledge, both prior to interviewing the police officers and whilst analyzing the texts. Women's refuge workers were also spoken with, again to gain an insight, from their perspective, of the major issues and questions involved, for women, in policing domestic violence. These interviews are not included in the thesis proper, but they also informed my reading of the texts.

Domestic violence is increasingly recognized as a serious social problem, and one for which there is a raised awareness at the present time, following quite prominent media coverage and advertising campaigns targeted at reducing it. A background to the 'problem' and literature/research on policing domestic violence is outlined in Chapter one. This is framed from a feminist perspective. Chapter two outlines the theoretical assumptions that inform the analysis of the interviews with the six officers. The central assumption was that any or all 'talk' is neither neutral, nor just referential, but that the interpretations and meanings 'given' to and about situations and people influence both thoughts and actions. That is, domestic violence as a 'problem' needs to be contextualized as created by, and arising from, the culture in which it is embedded. This construction of the 'problem' is also allied with, and not separate from, the linguistic resources that are culturally available to make sense of experiences; and I argue that this 'sense-making' contributes to the formation and maintenance of domestic violence. Chapter three details the 'method' adopted to analyze the texts. This was a 'discursive approach' (see Norris, 1982; Parker, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This approach is based upon contemporary theories and practices currently utilized by many social scientists. It is informed by a perspective that is generally known as 'social constructionism'. Chapters four through to six detail the analysis: with Chapter four outlining the social construction of policing domestic violence; and Chapters five and six looking at how the officers talked about themselves and those they police. The central 'findings' are then summarised in the final commentary.