

# Misinforming the Public:

An Analysis of Descriptions of Violence and Resistance by  
Canadian Anti-Violence Agencies

A work in progress by Will Bratt



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# The Interactional and Discursive View of Violence and Resistance

Coates & Wade, 2004

## Interaction

### 1. Violence is social and unilateral

- It occurs in specific interactions with at least two people.
- It entails actions by one individual against the will and well-being of another.

### 2. Violence is deliberate

- Perpetrators of violence anticipate resistance from their victims and take steps to suppress and conceal it.

### 3. Resistance is ubiquitous

- Whenever individuals are subjected to violence, they resist.

# The Interactional and Discursive View of Violence and Resistance

## Social Discourse

### 4. Misrepresentation

- Public appearances are often misleading.
- The risk of inadvertent collusion with the offender is high.

### 5. Fitting Words to Deeds

- All descriptions of violence influence the perception and treatment of victims and offenders.

# The Interactional and Discursive View of Violence and Resistance

## Social Discourse

### 6. Four Discursive Operations

- Language can be used to conceal violence, obscure and mitigate offenders' responsibility, conceal victims' resistance, and blame and pathologize victims.
- Language can also be used to expose violence, clarify offenders' responsibility, elucidate and honor victims' resistance, and contest the blaming and pathologizing of victims.

# The Interactional and Discursive View of Violence and Resistance

- Perpetrators of violence, psychiatrists, judges and lawyers, politicians, and therapists misrepresent violence and victims' acts of resistance (Coates & Wade, 2007).
- Coates & Wade call for a shift in our attention, toward the implications that our uses of language hold for reproducing these misrepresentations of violence and resistance.

# Misinforming the Public

- Human service workers across vast contexts work with people responding to violence.
- We should be committed to providing our highest standard of help to those responding to violence and oppression.
- This requires us to use accurate language for the sake of:
  - Providing positive social responses to victims.
  - Holding perpetrators and systems that enable violence accountable.

# Attuning to Misinformation

To what extent do Canadian anti-violence agencies misrepresent violence and victims' resistance in their online public material?

# Procedure

- Looked at 43 anti-violence agencies.
  - Vancouver Island to Newfoundland.
  - Transition houses, women's shelters, sexual assault centers.
  - Analyzed online public media using 4 Discursive Operations.
- Recorded examples of misrepresentations.
  - 141 examples of text.
  - Categorized each example by the operations they fit with.



# Results

- From 141 examples in total...
  - 13 concealed violence
  - 78 obscured and/or mitigated perpetrator responsibility
  - 78 concealed victims' resistance
  - 25 blamed or pathologized victims.
- The sum of these totals is greater than the number of examples on which they are based.
- Many statements included assumptions that met the criteria of multiple discursive operations.

# Results

## Internal Validity

- Chose 10 examples from the 141 total.
- Asked 4 colleagues to evaluate them.
  - Compared notes: 81% agreement
- Subjective evaluation of text.

# Concealing Violence

**Organization:** Men's Trauma Centre

**Website:** [menstrauma.com/](http://menstrauma.com/)

**City:** Victoria, BC

“The Men's Trauma Centre exists to provide treatment and support services to adult and late adolescent males who are survivors of physical, emotional or sexual trauma as well as support for our clients' significant others.”

- Language of “trauma” conceals acts of violence.

# Concealing Violence

**Organization:** Home Front Calgary

**Website:** [homefrontcalgary.org/](http://homefrontcalgary.org/)

**City:** Calgary, AB

“The Domestic Conflict Response Team (DCRT) proactively addresses families impacted by domestic conflict once they have come to the attention of major intervening systems.”

- “Domestic conflict” conceals violence.

# Obscuring and Mitigating Perpetrator Responsibility

**Organization:** Faye Peterson House

**Website:** [fayepeterson.org/](http://fayepeterson.org/)

**City:** Thunder Bay, ON

“Faye Peterson Transition House offers: Safe and secure shelter for women and children who have left abusive situations”

- “Abusive situations” fails to name a social agent responsible for the abuse.

# Obscuring and Mitigating Perpetrator Responsibility

**Organization:** Edmonton Women's Shelter LTD

**Website:** [winhouse.org/](http://winhouse.org/)

**City:** Edmonton, AB

“If you feel like you have to walk on eggshells around your partner—constantly watching what you say and do in order to avoid a blow-up—chances are your relationship is unhealthy and abusive.”

- “Unhealthy”/“abusive” language obscures responsibility for violence.

# Concealing Victims' Resistance

**Organization:** North York Women's Shelter

**Website:** [nyws.ca/](http://nyws.ca/)

**Location:** North York, ON

“Witnessing violence increases the chances that boys will grow up to act violently with dating and/or marital partners. For girls, it increases the chances that they will accept violence in their dating and/or marital relationships. (Health Canada, 2005).”

- Assumes young people subjected to violence will become either perpetrators or victims themselves, without criticism.

# Concealing Victims' Resistance

**Organization:** Klinik Community Health Centre

**Website:** [klinik.mb.ca/](http://klinik.mb.ca/)

**Location:** Brandon, MB

“Choosing to talk to a counsellor is a smart thing to do when you feel that help is needed. Counselling is a process that can help you understand how you have been affected by a traumatic event”

- Language of effects conceals resistance.
- Assumes victims are passively acted upon.



# Blaming or Pathologizing Victims

**Organization:** Sudbury Women's Center

**Website:** [sudburywomenscentre.com/](http://sudburywomenscentre.com/)

**City:** Sudbury, ON

“Self Esteem For Women: provides information and resources to help women understand the connection between self-esteem and domestic violence and importance of self-esteem, assertiveness, confidence, and identifying and communicating feelings.”

- Assumes that women are the victims of men's violence because they lack self-esteem.

# Blaming or Pathologizing Victims

**Organization:** Saskatoon Interval House

**Website:** [saskatoonintervalhouse.org/](http://saskatoonintervalhouse.org/)

**City:** Saskatoon, SK

“To educate women and their children through our professional services to achieve a violence-free lifestyle with client centered services, education services, accountability, co-ordination and integration.”

- Assumes victims choose a “violent lifestyle” and are in need of reeducation.

# Multiple Discursive Operations

Organization: Vernon Women's Transition House Society

Website: [vwts.ca/](http://vwts.ca/)

City: Vernon, BC

“Children who witness the abuse of their mother or serious family conflict live in fear and anxiety, waiting for the next violent episode to occur”

- X Obscures perpetrator responsibility through an agentless description of abuse against a woman.
- X “Serious family conflict”: Referring to violence? Or a firm but peaceful disagreement between family members?
- X Conceals victim resistance by mentioning only the emotional responses children might experience.

# Accurate Descriptions of Violence

Organization: Vancouver Rape Relief Shelter

Website: [rapereliefshelter.bc.ca/](http://rapereliefshelter.bc.ca/)

City: Vancouver, BC

“Women! Has a man in your life ever: Hit you? Pushed you around? Called you names, such as stupid, ugly, crazy, nagging, etc? Stopped you from seeing your friends or leaving the house? Forced you to have sex when you did not want to? Asked you to perform sexual acts for cash? Done things to frighten you? Threatened you? **You do not deserve to be treated this way!**”

- ✓ Exposes violence using clear descriptive terms (“hit”, “pushed”).
- ✓ Elucidates perpetrator responsibility by naming the person doing the abuse & using unilateral language.
- ✓ Supports victims in resisting violence.
- ✓ Places responsibility for violence on perpetrators.

# Victim Resistance

- The word “resistance” appeared only on two websites:

## 1. Victoria Women’s Sexual Assault Centre

“Lack of resistance on the part of the survivor of sexual assault or abuse does not imply consent.”

X Assumes that victims don’t resist sexualized assault.

➤ Overt resistance is the least common form of resistance.

## 2. Calgary Women’s Emergency Shelter

“Whenever people are abused, they do many things to oppose the abuse and to keep their dignity and their self-respect. This is called resistance.”

✓ GREAT JOB!

# Social Responses

- It is well-documented that the social responses people receive after adversity seriously help or hinder their recovery.
  - Positive, affirming, understanding, and non-judgmental responses support connection and safety.
  - Negative, judgmental, and condemning responses support isolation and further adversity.
- Only one organization alluded to the implications of social responses for victims.

# Social Responses

**Organization:** Men's Trauma Centre

**City:** Victoria, BC

**Mission statement:**

“Assisting other agencies, through educational outreach, to improve their responses to their own male clients who may also be survivors of trauma.”

# How Does New Zealand Compare?

**Organization:** Women's Refuge

**Website:** [womensrefuge.org.nz/](http://womensrefuge.org.nz/)

**City:** Auckland, NZ

“Crime and injury statistics show how significant a problem domestic violence is in our country. It is one of the leading causes of injury and death to women, and also leads to short and long-term health problems such as mental illness, and problems with sexual and reproductive health.”

- Conceals resistance and pathologizes victims:
  - Positions women's responses to violence as “mental illness”, not resistance.



# How New Zealand Compares

**Organization:** Family Action

**Website:** [familyaction.org.nz/](http://familyaction.org.nz/)

**City:** Te Atatu South

“We offer groups for women who wish to move away from the cycle of violence, “Women in Action - Wahine Toa”

- Obscures/mitigates perpetrator responsibility and blames victims:
  - Cycle metaphor obscures who is responsible for violence.
  - Positions women as responsible for cessation of violence.

# How New Zealand Compares

**Organization:** Sexual Abuse Centre

**Website:** [sexualabuse.org.nz/](http://sexualabuse.org.nz/)

**City:** Rotarua

“Child sexual abuse victims are often conditioned from an early age to accept the abusive sexual behaviour of their offender(s). This conditioning may begin with gentle non-threatening behaviour such as massaging and cuddling, and continue over a varying period of time along a continuum that can lead to such acts as kissing, fondling, genital stimulation, and may progress to oral sex or intercourse.”

- Language of “acceptance” conceals victims’ resistance.
- Conceals violence and obscures perpetrator responsibility through mutualizing language.

# Exposing Misrepresentations



**Stephen Harper** @pmharper · Oct 10

Our government has recently introduced two pieces of legislation to combat child sexual exploitation. Read more: [pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2014/...](http://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2014/...)



61



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@pmharper consider revising "sexual exploitation" terminology. Nothing sexual about violence or exploitation. "Sexualized" more accurate.



6:54 PM - 11 Oct 2014

# Exposing Misrepresentations



**CBC News** @CBCNews · Oct 15

Sex traffickers called 'master manipulators' in report [cbc.ca/news/canada/ma...](http://cbc.ca/news/canada/ma...)  
[pic.twitter.com/JpeqgGUbi](http://pic.twitter.com/JpeqgGUbi)

← ↻ 11 ★ 5 ...



**Will Bratt**  
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@CBCNews "sex trafficking" is misleading and inaccurate. 13 year old children do not have sex to sell. We're talking organized child rape.

← ↻ ★ ...

FAVORITE

1



8:54 AM - 15 Oct 2014

# Exposing Misrepresentations



**Huffington Post** @HuffingtonPost · Jan 27

Ex-boy scout describes the mental scars left by sex abuse [huff.to/1JzUSbB](http://huff.to/1JzUSbB)



18



14



**Will Bratt**

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@HuffingtonPost I know it's shorter, but "sex" and abuse are of 2 different worlds. "Sex" implies consent, "sexualized" is unidirectional.



6:55 AM - 27 Jan 2015

# Exposing Misrepresentations



**CBC News** @CBCNews · Feb 4

Soccer coach arrested for allegedly trying to meet 12-year-old girl for sex  
[ift.tt/1yJOKAi](http://ift.tt/1yJOKAi) [pic.twitter.com/AgQpWDNaUA](http://pic.twitter.com/AgQpWDNaUA)

← ↻ 16 ★ 10 ...



**Will Bratt**  
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@CBCNews 12 year old girls cannot consent to [#sex](#), so calling it such is misleading. The coach allegedly made plans to [#rape](#) said girl.

← ↻ ★ ...

5:20 PM - 4 Feb 2015

# Conclusions

- Anti-violence agencies should be the **most** well-informed on language, violence, and resistance.
- These misrepresentations are a reflection of the deterministic psychological theories that continue to dominate the helping professions.
- Attuning to language can help us provide:
  - More helpful (and less hindering) responses to victims.
  - More just responses to both victims and perpetrators.
  - Interventions that get to the interactional heart of the issues.