

Dossiê: Mulheres e violência

# The causes of violent actions by young women

## *As causas de ações violentas de mulheres jovens*

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**Abstract:** The academic debate on female violence has always centred around issues such as differences in the violent behaviour of men and women, and how much violence is carried out by women. The reason for this focus lies in the historical development of the debate itself. Besides looking at the quantity and quality of female violence, this article is therefore also devoted to a discussion of the academic discourse as it has developed in Germany in the field of gender, and research results. Past research shows that there is a need to study the relationship between causes and effects, in other words the genesis of present violent behaviour. The biography of Jacky Mahler, which I will shortly present in this article, shows that present violent behaviour is closely bound up with historical causes.

**Keywords:** Gender discourse. Violence. Women. Biographical research.

**Resumo:** O debate acadêmico sobre violência feminina sempre esteve centrado em torno a temas como diferenças no comportamento violento de homens e mulheres e o quanto mulheres praticam violência. A razão para este foco reside no desenvolvimento histórico do próprio debate. Além de abordar a quantidade e qualidade da violência feminina, o artigo dedica-se igualmente à discussão do discurso acadêmico como se desenvolveu na Alemanha no campo do gênero e em resultado de pesquisas. Pesquisas anteriores apontam que há a necessidade de estudar a relação entre causas e efeitos, em outras palavras, a gênese do comportamento violento atual. A biografia de Jacky Mahler, que irei apresentar brevemente neste artigo, mostra que comportamento violento no presente está intimamente vinculado a causas históricas.

**Palavras-chave:** Discurso de gênero. Violência. Mulheres. Pesquisa biográfica.

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## Introduction

Does violence have a gender? Is it possible to speak of female or male violence? These are fundamental questions in the academic discourse on violent behaviour by women in Germany. Right from the beginning it must be said that the bipolar division into female and male, woman and man, is questionable

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because it is impossible to classify human beings without doubt as men or women in their social behaviour (gender) and often not even in their biological constitution (sex). In my understanding, following West and Zimmermann (1987), any gender role typology is socially constructed, in other words we *are* not male or female, but femaleness or maleness is produced in interactions (doing gender). However, this does not happen in a “gender-neutral space”, but in our interactions we are influenced by what we know is regarded as typically male or typically female (see Goffman 2001). In every society there are ideas about what are typically male and typically female attributes, even if they are not found in every man and every woman. It is natural for every person to place herself or himself in relation to these constructions, to constantly locate her or his gender self-understanding on a scale between traditionally male and traditionally female gender roles, and to accept or reject these roles. Social gender role typologies are extremely influential, and are developed, practised and slowly transformed over generations. It is difficult for us, for instance, to imagine girls and women as thugs or murderers, because for us females are essentially “peaceful” and “caring” and not “violent” or “destructive”. To break free from these ascriptions, or to defy them completely, is practically impossible. It is thus legitimate to ask me whether or not I will follow female or male stereotypes in this or that sphere, but not to ask me what my gender is. And although I consider that these ascriptions, and especially the bipolar or dichotomous split into two sexes (especially in view of the high number of people with unclear sexual characteristics), need to be socially reviewed, I, too, am obliged to relate my discussion to them and so I speak here of girls and women, or boys and men, even though strictly speaking I ought to speak of persons who are read as female or male, with an analysis of the interactive mechanisms that drive the underlying gender constructions in each case.

I have looked at these construction levels in some detail because the academic discourse on violent behaviour by young women in Germany is strongly influenced by gender theoreticians who focus on questions of gender similarity and difference, deconstruction of gender, and doing gender. In this article I will show that the aim of this debate is to discover how far violent behaviour by young women is similar to or different from that of men, whether violent acts can be categorized in terms of gender at all, and, if so, how gender is constructed interactively in violent acts. However – and this point is usually neglected – gender is not only situatively and socially constructed, but also embedded in the experiential history of the particular actor; in other words, besides the situative and social framing of violence, its genesis must also be examined – and not only in respect of the production of gender, but also in

respect of the causes of violent behaviour. On the basis of my studies of right-wing oriented young women, I argue that speaking about violence serves to demonstrate power and strength, as has been observed in the case of young men. Violence is used by young women to create a feeling of being active or powerful, but also as a means of warding off an (avoidable) threat of violence. In order to be able to clarify these motives, it is necessary to reconstruct the biographical genesis of the violent behaviour, and often also the family history. This will show that violent young women have a history that is bound up with violence, whether as witnesses, victims or perpetrators. Moreover, the forms of violence used by young women are strongly connected with this biographical genesis. I will show the link between violent behaviour and biography by reconstructing a biographical trajectory.

## **Women and violence – the research discourse**

### ***Background***

Studies of violence tend to focus on adolescence, because this phase of life is characterized by internal and external conflicts. Adolescents like to experiment with different types of behaviour, and are thus ready to try out extreme solutions in practice, in this case violent solutions. For a long time, studies of the readiness to use violence and violent activity among adolescents in Germany concentrated on the violent behaviour of male adolescents, without explicitly reflecting on this choice. Predominant was the idea that girls and women are victims of suppression and abuse, or that violent behaviour is foreign to their nature, or plays a subordinate role. These ascriptions were common not only in the field of youth studies, but also in large parts of society. Feminist researchers such as Thürmer-Rohr (1983) were irritated by these assumptions for the first time when discussing the involvement of women during the nazi period. Into the 1990s little attention was paid to girls and women in the field of youth studies (see for instance Bruhns and Wittmann, 2002; Neuber, 2011). It was the growth of right-wing tendencies in Germany and the resulting burst of research activity that led to studies of violence by girls and young women (Siller, 1993; Engel and Menke, 1995; Köttig, 1995 and others). In chronological terms, feminist debates on the role of women and the opening up of a new perspective in research on adolescent violence coincided, so that there was an overlapping of the two discourses. In the following years, issues of femaleness and maleness, and later of doing gender, were therefore linked to research on violence by young women. In concrete terms, this means that most studies are interested in whether the forms of

violence used vary between the genders (with their bipolar division), and in what way the violent behaviour corresponds to constructions of femaleness. Before discussing in more detail the results of some of these studies, I will first consider the quantity and quality of the phenomenon.

### **Women and violence – quantity, quality and the state of our knowledge**

In order to give at least an indication of the quantitative aspect of violence in Germany, I refer to the German Police Crime Statistics. These include lists of offences that show the gender of the suspects. In the field of violence a distinction is made between violent crimes on the one hand, and murder and manslaughter on the other. In respect of the quantity of violent crimes committed, these statistics only give us limited information, as they list only those suspects known to the police. Moreover, only known crimes are registered, meaning that undetected cases are not taken into account. Some regional studies come to the conclusion that up to 37% of violent crimes are committed by females (see for example Boers et al., 2014). The problem is that, due to stereotyped ideas regarding gender roles, girls and women are not always perceived as perpetrators in the reporting and investigation of crimes, and in the search for suspects; or their involvement is trivialized, even when their presence during the crime is undisputed (see for instance Bitzan, Köttig and Schröder, 2003; Bruhns and Wittmann, 2002). There is still insufficient social awareness in Germany that girls or women can be guilty of violence. Despite these restrictions, the Police Crime Statistics are the only reliable statistics that provide at least some idea of the size of the phenomenon in general, and in particular of ‘female violence’.

For the year 2014,<sup>1</sup> according to the lists showing the age and gender of suspects, a total of 167,019 suspects were registered in the area of violent crime, of which 24,261, or about 14.5%, were women. In the area of murder and manslaughter, a total of 2,714 suspects were recorded, of which 351 (12.9%) were women. These figures show that the number of women suspects is far lower than the number of men. However, there was a considerable increase in the number of females suspected of committing violent crimes in the first twenty years after 1987, the year in which the statistics began to include the sex of the suspects. In 1987 only 8,846 females suspected of violent crimes were registered, while in 1997, ten years later, the number was 18,083. In 2009

<sup>1</sup> Published on 13.02.2015, see: <<http://www.bka.de/DE/Publikationen/PolizeilicheKriminalstatistik/2014/2014Standardtabellen/pks2014StandardtabellenTatverdaechtigeUebersicht.html>>.

the number of female suspects peaked at 27,908 and since then the number has fallen moderately, but continuously.<sup>2</sup> This may be due in part to a general decrease in the level of violent crime in Germany, and in part to a greater awareness of female violence, but the statistics offer no explanations, either for the increase or for the decrease. In public discourses, the increase inspired comments such as “Girls catch up”, but the subsequent decrease attracted very little attention.

And although the number of girls and women involved in registered violent crimes is low in relative terms, the question remains how their violent behaviour can be classified and explained. In academic research different concepts of violence are current, but very few studies define which concept they have used (see Diop, 2007). The definitions range from narrow concepts, restricted to physical forms of violence, to a much broader definitions that include instrumental, mental or structural forms of violence (see Heeg, 2009, p. 16ff.). Diop (2007, p. 50) remarks:

that the violent behaviour of girls is often insufficiently taken into account from the beginning, due to the design of the study and the chosen definition of violence, so that it is practically impossible to say anything about ‘violence by girls’. Rather, the results of the studies simply confirm the established expectation that girls resort to violence much more rarely than boys<sup>3</sup>.

With regard to forms of violence, many studies focus on the difference between men and women, concluding that young women are not only *less* violent than young men, but also that they practise violence in ways that *differ* from those of young men. Thus Campbell (1984; 1995), for instance, argues, on the basis of an ethnographic study of female gang members in New York, that girls and women practise violence mainly in hidden or indirect ways. She distinguishes between a male, or instrumental, understanding of violence in which aggression is a means of gaining power and control over others, and a female, or expressive, understanding in which violence is interpreted as a loss of control. She sees this as being due to the fact that the female gang members develop typical conflict management patterns as a result of gender-conform adaptation processes, which means that violence is directed not against others but against themselves. The aggressive expression of anger is equivalent to a loss of control and is followed by feelings of guilt and shame. Koher (2003),

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<sup>2</sup> See: <<http://www.bka.de/DE/Publikationen/PolizeilicheKriminalstatistik/2014/2014Zeitreihe/pks2014ZeitreihenTatverdaechtigeUebersicht.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> All of the quotations are translated from German.

with reference to Gilligan (1992), argues that girls turn their aggression inwards and remain outwardly silent. The reason for this is that aggressive or violent behaviour in girls is regarded as a sign of “unsuccessful socialization” that is incompatible with traditional images of femaleness. She refers to the high proportion of adolescent girls with psychosomatic problems (see Popp, Meier and Tillmann, 2001, p. 174), who harm themselves or develop eating disorders (see Jansen and Jockenhövel-Poth, 1992). In addition, quantitative surveys (e.g. Wahl, 2001), qualitative studies (e.g. Hilgers, 1996; Bruhns and Wittmann, 2002; Bitzan, Köttig and Schröder, 2003; Köttig, 2004) and reports by pedagogical practitioners (e.g. Niebergall, 1995) indicate that all conceivable forms of violence are practised by girls and young women. The forms of violence described include direct physical violence, vicarious forms in which others are functionalized to carry out violent acts, indirect forms such as damage to property, psychological violence in the form of threats, and autoaggressive forms of violence (Bitzan, Köttig and Schröder, 2003). The studies published by Wahl (2001) and by Bruhns and Wittmann (2003) show that while there is a tendency for young women to use violence against other young women, they are also capable of attacking male adolescents, but not the other way round. At the same time, so say the authors, it is the young women who tend to play a conciliatory role and who do not use weapons because they regard this as a weakness (2003, p. 216). Moreover, my ethnographic study of a right-wing oriented youth group (Köttig, 2004), as well as other studies (see Bruhns and Wittmann, 2002; Silkenbeumer, 2000), show that in this context young women are also at risk of becoming victims of violence by their partners. It can be concluded that the forms of violence used by young women are similar to those used by young men, and can be more varied than those used by young men in the areas of physical, psychological and indirect violence. Besides the issue of similarities and differences in the forms of violence used by young women and young men, it can be shown on the basis of a biography-oriented research method that the chosen forms of violence, and the way violence is explained, are not accidental, but correspond closely to the person’s biographical development and reflect a process of understanding, as will be discussed in greater detail below.

In respect of the functions of violent behaviour for the actors involved, arguments will be presented relating to differences between male and female violence, in order to negotiate whether violent behaviour by young women can be understood as belonging to femaleness or is at odds with it (see Neuber, 2011). For a long time academic discourses in the field of right-wing extremism were influenced by the “dominant culture hypothesis” (*Dominanzkulturthese*),

as represented by Holzkamp and Rommelspacher (1991). And although this hypothesis has never been empirically tested, it is directly or indirectly followed in later studies of violence. The dominant culture hypothesis says that young women who live in Western industrial countries grow up with the idea that they belong to a dominant culture, but that this consists of patriarchal societies in which femaleness is socially devalued (Rommelspacher, 1991). Women solve this ambivalence by belittling and ostracizing persons they perceive as being weaker than themselves, and supporting, or practising themselves, the use of violence against them. This enables them to satisfy their own claim to dominance. Following the dominant culture hypothesis, Bruhns underlines an additional phenomenon, namely that young women directly or indirectly support violence by male adolescents, in order to delegate their own aggressive impulses and claims to dominance (Bruhns, 2003, p. 2017).

Neuber (2011) asks whether readiness to resort to violence can be interpreted as a sign of change in gender relations or as an expression of emancipation. Silkenbeumer (2002) does not think that violence should be interpreted as an expression of emancipation, and argues that it can be a means of constructing femaleness. Young women can integrate violence in their images of femaleness. This is also underlined by Bruhns (2003, p. 218). She argues that violent behaviour does not cast doubt on femaleness, but is “accepted and expected as a normal and justifiable reaction to being attacked”. In groups the ability to use violence is always regarded positively and is a way of earning respect (Bruhns and Wittmann, 2002; Köttig, 2004). Girl in-groups within mixed gender right-wing oriented groups usually have their own hierarchy that is maintained by displays of violent behaviour (see Köttig, 1995; 2004); this is regarded by some researchers as an imitation of male behaviour patterns (see for instance Utzmann-Krombholz, 1994; Niebergall, 1995). Some studies address ambivalent behaviours (see Neuber, 2011; Silkenbrunner, 2007; Bruhns and Wittmann, 2002) which set out to demonstrate femaleness on the one hand and defy it on the other. Bruhns and Wittmann (2002, p. 152) argue that violence serves both to extend and to question the traditional image of women. Young women are concerned with repositioning themselves in the field of gender relations. They stick to traditional models with regard to career choices, for instance, and play conciliatory and caring roles in the groups they belong to, while at the same time they develop greater autonomy for themselves by practising violence.

Another important aspect discussed in many studies is the use of violence as part of the range of behaviours of young women and men (see Neuber, 2011; Bruhns and Wittmann, 2002; Heeg, 2008) and its importance for them

as a means of trying to understand their own situation (Popp, 2007, p. 64). The functions of violence for young women are described in the same terms as for young men, for example violence can serve to ward off or prevent physical attacks, or it can be a means of self-assertion, a means of gaining power, honour and respect, a means of raising one's self-esteem, or a means of resolving conflicts between female rivals (Niebergall, 1995; Wittmann and Bruhns, 2002; Köttig, 2004; Neuber, 2011). In the context of their biographical studies, Böttger (1998), as well as Heeg (2008), underline the aspect of group solidarity created by carrying out violent acts jointly. Violence also serves to give a feeling of being active instead of passive, and is bound up with transforming feelings of helplessness triggered by being a victim of violence, into feelings of strength and power. It is a means of breaking out of a victim mentality (Neuber, 2011; Bereswill, 2010; Silkenbeumer, 2007; Köttig, 2004). In his study of juvenile violence based on the biographies of adolescents, Sütterlüty (2002) comes to the conclusion that there are no obvious gender-specific differences in the meaning of violence. And Bereswill (2010, p. 14) says: "It is not very helpful to assume that there is male and female criminality – deviant behaviour<sup>4</sup> has no gender". And although the social valuation of violent behaviour still differs depending on whether young men or young women are involved, so that similar crimes may have different consequences, this statement by Bereswill must above all be regarded as an important recognition of the fact that the permanent use of gender as a central category in research on juvenile violence tends to make the research results self-referential and thus to limit their relevance. Hirschauer (2001) has already pointed out the difficulties involved in focusing on this one dimension, which is bound up with a determinist use of gender as a category in the research process.

Especially in the past decade, some studies have taken a closer look at the biographical trajectories of young people who practise violence (Silkenbeumer, 2000; 2007; Heeg, 2009; Equit, 2011). In her study, Silkenbeumer (2007) discusses the orientation pattern of "strength" as a common feature, which is linked to social self-assertiveness and the ability to put up a fight; it serves as a means of managing conflicts among adolescents, and can be understood as a strategy to avoid falling into a victim mentality which can arise from a "life characterized by multiple stress situations" (Silkenbeumer, 2007, p. 324). Heeg (2009) is interested in the question of the subjective meaning of violent behaviour, with a focus on interactions that produce violence. She distinguishes

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<sup>4</sup> The term "deviant behavior" needs to be examined critically because it implies an assumed "normality", but I will not discuss this here.

between young women who have suffered violence and others who have grown up in violence-free contexts. She concludes that in both groups “the logic behind their violent behaviour” can be explained by “experiences of interaction within the family” (2009, p. 281), but that

in the case of female adolescents who have been subjected to violence by their parents, their own violent behaviour reinforces their negative self-image in which they are lacking self-control. They regard themselves as victims of their own aggressive impulses and suffer from the fact that they see small things as an existential threat. For them their own violence is a burden which they would like to get rid of (Heeg, 2009, p. 281).

Equit (2011) concentrates in her study on reconstruction of the conditions of violent behaviour by female adolescents, and comes to the conclusion that such behaviour is basically characterized by “the experience of a biographical downward impulse which includes processes of victimization and debasement” (2011, p. 253). “The downward impulse can be described as a biographical process in which the girls experience a fundamental loss of respect of their person in a precarious life situation, without seeing any way out of their situation” (Equit, 2011, p. 253). These young women enter into a struggle to gain respect for their person in which the use of violence plays a central role in order to be able to present themselves as victors:

But their recognition as an honourable victor requires constant situative re-construction, so that a dynamic develops in which a biographical downward impulse is followed by violent retaliation at the slightest provocation in the context of the peer group, which ultimately leads to an affirmation of their violent career (Equit, 2011, p. 254).

All these studies have in common that the statements made by the interviewees are analysed in such a way that both the lived practice and the (biographical) meaning of the practice are revealed, even though in some of the studies a discrepancy is apparent between presentation and actual experience or practice (e.g. Silkenbeumer, 2007; Heeg, 2009). In her study, Heeg (2009, p. 40) even discusses the question of the interrelationship between self-concept and behaviour. And yet her analysis is restricted to the manifest statements without any comparison of these with the person’s biographical development. This is due in part to the fact that the authors have worked with a content-analysis research design based on Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967)

and have therefore not reconstructed the motives and correlation of different factors *in the individual case* but have related the statements made by different young women to certain topics. However, only through a reconstruction of the individual case is it possible to say why particular forms of violence were, or still are, used, how they have been cemented or modified in the course of the person's life, and in what way the particular young woman regards her own history or tries to come to terms with it. At certain points of the research process, an analytical separation can be made between the way a person presents their own biography in the interview and their real experiences (Rosenthal, 1995). This makes it possible to show how violent behaviour develops in a person's life course, as well as the concrete experiences to which this development is linked and which shape the presentation.

I therefore plead in favour of a research approach that reveals the lines of development of violent behaviour within the framework of a biography, in order to be able to understand how different factors are correlated. At the same time, however, it is important to observe carefully the situative and interactive structure of violence, since violent acts in the present are closely linked to causes in the past. I will illustrate this with a discussion of the biography of Jacky Mahler.

### **Women and violence – methodology from interpretative social research – the case of Jacky Mahler**

Anyone who wants to understand a social phenomenon such as violent behaviour in terms of its causes and its overall context, and the interdependence between social, biographical and family-history frameworks, must follow a theoretical approach that understands "social reality" as being constructed by interactive processes and thus modifiable (Berger and Luckmann, 1969). This means that it is important to reconstruct the development process (of the present violent behaviour or of the person's life up to the present) (Rosenthal, 2011). This requires an empirical research design that allows broad flexibility in the collection and analysis of data, without deciding from the outset that particular categories – such as gender – are necessarily relevant (see Köttig, 2013). In this way both the manifest and the latent meanings of violent behaviour can be analysed in their processual structure. This can be demonstrated by taking the example of a young woman, Jacky Mahler, from the sample I used in my research on right-wing women. I focus here on the history of her violent behaviour (for more details, see Köttig, 2004, p. 194ff.).

When I first met Jacky Mahler, she was a young woman who, after successfully completing the final exams at a lower secondary school, was

working as a decorator in a small town in western Germany. She was going out with one of the prominent male figures in the local right-wing scene who was known to be violent. It was this boyfriend who arranged for me to contact her.

A reconstruction of her biography shows that Jacky grew up together with her brother, who is four years older than herself, in a family framing in which from early childhood she witnessed the way her father – generally in a drunken state – beat her mother. There were occasions when her mother roused her in the middle of the night and ran off with her to her grandmother’s house. Shortly after her birth, her mother contracted cancer, and she died when Jacky was twelve years old, after a long stay in hospital and very visible physical deterioration. Even during the last phase of her mother’s illness, Jacky saw her being maltreated by her father. The death of her mother was extremely distressing for Jacky, but due to her father’s behaviour she had to lock up her feelings inside her. During this phase she developed bulimia. At first she was protected by her brother, but after about a year he was turned out of the home by their father, and in the next three years, until she was fifteen, Jacky was at the mercy of her father. He beat her with his fists, pushed her about or pulled her along by her hair, often for no apparent reason. He controlled her eating and sleeping, made her do the housework, and sent her to the kiosk in the middle of the night to get alcoholic drinks for himself and his friends. It is highly likely that she was also abused sexually, although she did not say so explicitly. Her indirect references to this issue were confirmed in an interview with a social worker, and in the interview with her brother. Her father did not allow her to contact friends, paternal or maternal relatives, or her brother.

This biographical trajectory shows that Jacky was first a witness, and later a victim, of her father’s domestic violence. Although she received support from her mother, she felt that both her parents were unpredictable: her father because of his violent habits, and her mother because of the sudden night flights and because of her illness. Her social framing during her childhood was thus full of uncertainty and ambivalence. In addition, during early adolescence, at a time when bodily changes take place and a process of separation from the family normally begins, she suffered the loss of her female attachment figure (who would have been able to advise and support her in questions relating to bodily changes) and she was extremely subject to control by her father. During this phase, she was socially dependent on her violent father, and her freedom of movement was extremely restricted.

Nevertheless, Jacky put up a form of resistance to her father, for instance by deciding to induce vomiting after a meal. After some time, she defied her father’s order not to see her brother, and she found various ways to take the

tension out of her situation. Thus, she took up kickboxing, and she formed a relationship with an actively violent young man from the right-wing scene, and introduced him to her father. She sought contact with right-wing groups, especially those that were known for their violent behaviour and their consumption of alcohol. She sometimes found herself in situations in which she hit out automatically without being able to stop herself.

Now if we were to examine these activities in respect of femaleness, we would find signs of typically female reaction patterns (eating disorders, inwardly directed forms of violence, desire for a ‘strong’ man...), but the motives behind these activities would be very inadequately identified. In this phase Jacky was exposed to the extreme violence of her father, while at the same time she reproduced her father’s uncontrolled violence, both in the above-mentioned situations and in the context of the right-wing clique she belonged to. Here, she entered into violent conflicts which arose mainly from the fact that she refused to go along with the group’s high alcohol consumption. On the one hand she tried to gradually distance herself from her father, but at the same time she chose to join the right-wing scene, a milieu that was not unlike her family situation – with the difference that it offered her more freedom to live out her own aggressions, both directly and indirectly.

Jacky succeeded in resisting the excessive dominance of her father, and finally left home – after physically hitting him back for the first time. She succeeded with the aid of “significant others” (Mead, 1968) in being placed in local authority care. From this distance, and within the framework of the right-wing milieu, she began to reflect on her father’s behaviour in all its different facets, in an attempt to make it explainable and controllable for herself. This included an intellectual study of claims to power. For this purpose she looked for a high-ranking aggressor and found him in the person of Hitler. The question she explicitly addressed was at what point would Hitler, in the last phase of National Socialism, in other words of the war of extermination and during the systematic extermination of people, have had to renounce his claim to power to avoid losing everything and retain his “leadership function”. She also defended the political argument that “male foreigners commit more serious sexual offences against German women than are committed by German men”. This may also be seen as an attempt to explain the violent behaviour of her father, who probably abused her sexually, because he came from Austria and was therefore defined by her as “foreign”. For her this was an effective way of reversing the power relations between herself and her father. For although she experienced her father as destructive and powerful, both as a parent and as a man, in the dualism of Germans and foreigners, he, as a foreigner, was the

underdog and she, as a German, was in the dominant position. However, these constructions prevent any direct consideration of the way she was sexually abused by her father, so that she was still unable to speak openly about it. By choosing the partners she did, Jacky chose another way of coming to terms with her situation. From early adolescence she repeatedly formed relationships with young men from the right-wing milieu, who were known to be violent and/or who already showed signs of having alcohol problems. But with each relationship she became better able to stand up to her partners, with the result that their potential violence was no longer directed against her.

In terms of femaleness, Jacky's behaviour at this time could be regarded as both typical and non-typical, but this would be a very limited perspective, because this is only one phase in her attempts to cope with and understand violence. This phase was characterized by Jacky's desire to understand her experience of violence, and at the same time to achieve a situation in which she was no longer a victim. This highly vicarious relation to her father in the right-wing scene prevented her from understanding and processing not only her real relationship with him, but also her split-off feelings of grief, loss and pain. These became virulent when Jacky was taken in by the family of her partner, where she experienced a supportive relationship with her partner's father and was able to join him in trying to moderate the violent behaviour and excessive drinking habits of her partner. Triggered by this alliance, she remembered the death of her mother and feelings of pain, grief and weakness were co-present, which up to then had been split off. However, Jacky experienced these feelings as so threatening that she was able to react to them only in the form of life-threatening illnesses.

On the basis of Jacky's reconstructed biography, violence can be understood as a development process. In Jacky's case, the uncontrolled violence of her father and the loss of her mother led to her distancing herself from her father and wanting to become strong. Jacky chose for this purpose the reproduction of violence through her own behaviour and that of the groups she joined. From this necessary distance she began to find explanations for her own experiences, both on the intellectual level and on the practical level in her partnerships. However, this also meant that up to this point her real relationship with her father and her feelings of grief and loss could be expressed only indirectly.

These complex processes can be reconstructed if the sequence in the individual case is preserved and not destroyed. No phenomenon stands alone and apart from all other experiences, and therefore its meaning cannot be discovered separately from the whole genesis. The meaning of biographical

events or development phases can thus not be generalized independently of their genesis, for instance by assuming that violent behaviour always has gender-specific connotations or is always destructive. Rather, a case such as Jacky's shows that violence can be bound up with attempts at reparation and self-understanding. In the development process, behaviour patterns are formed according to regular structures. These generative rules are referred to by Oevermann (1981, p. 40) as "case structure", where his concept of structure is characterized by an autonomous, processual self-generation. He assumes that social structures have an autonomously constructed history that is characterized by their specific sequentiality. They thus form their own special structure, which he calls the "individuated formation process" (Oevermann, 1981, p. 25) (for more details, see Köttig, 2005). Violent behaviour is thus no longer regarded as an isolated phenomenon, but as a formation process characterized by reproduction and transformation and in which coping behaviour patterns are formed in the course of life as a result of different experiences. For the research process and methodology, this means that the starting point must be an individual case, in this case an individual biography, and that the layers of lived experiences must be reconstructed in their sequentiality. Reconstruction in this sense means "tracing and opening up the case-specific structural form" (Oevermann, 1981, p. 4).

Jacky's biography also shows that her practice of violence is not accidental but corresponds closely to her experiences. Thus it is no coincidence that, from a great variety of possible topics, Jacky chooses sexual abuse and control from a position of power, and it is also no coincidence that the situative conflicts in which she engages are usually connected with the consumption of alcohol. These topics correspond very closely to her process of experiencing and understanding. However, Jacky is not conscious of many of these correlations, so that the researcher must work out the meaning of what she says and her interest in presenting her story. Her statements in the interview show only her reflection process up to her present perspective (Fischer, 1978).

The present perspective determines ... the selection of memories, the temporal and thematic linking of memories, and the way remembered experiences are presented. The reason for this is that the meaning of an experience, like any other meaning, depends on a context or contexts, and that new memories are created in the course of a person's life from different interpretation points. However, this construction of the past from the present should not be understood as a construction that is separated from the experienced past. Rather, the narratives based on memories of lived experiences are co-constituted by the past experiences (Rosenthal, 2011, p. 180).

In order to come closer to the meaning of an event or a phase of life in the past, it is also necessary to unfold the logic of the presentation construction, and therefore there must be an analytical separation between the reconstruction of past events, ascriptions of meaning in the present, and the interactive construction of the story.

## Brief summary

In this article I have shown that previous studies of violence by young women have produced many interesting results concerning, for example, the quantity of the phenomenon or the forms of violence used. Important contributions have also been made to gender research, but cause constellations and process structures have not yet received enough attention. These can be reconstructed only with a research design which makes it possible to show the behaviour structures and interpretation structures in any given individual case. With the aid of Jacky's biography, I have also shown that the situative practice of violence corresponds closely to the lived past.

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