

South African newspaper representations of women perpetrators of heterosexual intimate partner violence (IPV)

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## Abstract

This paper examines how women who have perpetrated intimate partner violence (IPV) in the context of heterosexual relationships are constructed in South African printed newspapers, further investigating the implications of these constructions. Significantly, this aims to address a gap in research, and contribute to the limited literature that focuses on women perpetrators of heterosexual IPV in South Africa and globally. The online newspaper archive *SABINET* was used to search for and collect relevant reports on women perpetrators of IPV across a range of South African printed newspapers between the years 2003 and 2018. A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis revealed three emergent constructions of women perpetrators of IPV, namely *Women Perpetrators of IPV as Unnatural*, *Women Perpetrators of IPV as Masculine* and *Women Perpetrators of IPV as Reflective of Changing Gender Norms in Society*. In unpacking these constructions, it was found that women perpetrators of IPV – a subversive and unexpected gendered performance – challenge and make explicit South African societal stereotypes and discourses of violence and gender, such as the notion that women perpetrated violence is inconsistent with ‘traditional’ femininity. The findings suggest that women perpetrators of IPV are represented through gendered constructions, allowing them to persuasively occupy the gendered space of violence for their perpetration to be accepted by South African society. This research further suggests that race intersects with gender, influencing these newspaper constructions to determine a more ‘ideal’, or more harmful and stigmatised, women perpetrator identity.

*Keywords:* Women perpetrated IPV; intersectionality; newspaper media; South Africa.

### **Introduction: South African Discourses on Perpetrators of Violence**

To date, South African psychological empirical work on criminal discourses and intimate partner violence (IPV) has been selective (Pretorius & Botha, 2009), focusing only on men as perpetrators of violent crimes against women (Artz & Rotmann, 2017; Gill, 2007; Sutherland, McCormack, & Easteal, 2016). This is not that surprising. In this patriarchal country, IPV, defined for the purpose of this research as physically and emotionally violent behaviour within an intimate heterosexual relationship (Anderson, 2002), has predominantly been perpetrated by men (Jakobsen, 2014; Jewkes, 2002). In a recent South African study analysing gender differences in IPV perpetration, 25.2% of women reported behaving physically violently towards their partners, and 20.9% of men indicated that they had been victims of physical IPV (Gass, Stein, Williams, & Seedat, 2011). Although some scholars imply that relatively low levels of women who perpetrate IPV (located within a criminal discourse) in South Africa may downplay the importance of research development in this area of criminality (Haysom, 2016; Jakobsen, 2014), other scholars purport that to ignore this population would be careless (Africa, 2010; Gruenewald, Pizarro, & Chermak, 2009). Not only could it cloud public discourse on the often self-defensive conditions under which women perpetrate IPV, but it could moreover maintain binaristic gendered conceptualisations of violence (Africa, 2010; Hesselink & Dastile, 2015). As Africa (2010) states, “[a] failure to explore [women’s violent perpetration]... reinforces stereotypes about the meaning and shape of ‘gendered violence’ [adding] to the sensationalisation...of violent women in media.” (p. 80). Here, Africa (2010) suggests that having little research on women as perpetrators of IPV strengthens the belief that violence and crime are synonymous with men only. Africa (2010) also asserts that limited research on women perpetrators perpetuates stereotypes that exist in the media, including the notion that violence is inconsistent with a ‘traditional’, culturally constructed, ‘ideal’ version of femininity (Connell, 1987). As scholars have argued, this stereotype has resulted in women perpetrators of IPV being represented and sensationalised in newspapers as ‘unfeminine’ or ‘masculine’ (Africa, 2010; Gruenewald et al., 2009).

Therefore, this research aims to suggest that in South Africa, an empirical shift which includes women as perpetrators of IPV, is imperative in investigating newspaper representations of women perpetrators as ‘unfeminine’, further examining other identity markers that shape this construction. How these representations actively challenge and make explicit normative societal discourses of violence and ‘traditional’ femininity will furthermore be explored.

### **IPV, the Gender Binary and ‘Traditional’ Femininity**

In South Africa, constructions of femininity in the printed media have been moderately researched, and noteworthy literature has discussed how in general, gendered portrayals of femininity in magazines are mediated according to intersecting social locations of race and class (Sanger, 2009; Sanger & Hadland, 2008). However, there have been limited attempts to explore the discourses of ‘traditional’ gendered practices, and the social identities that influence these discourses, that emerge *particularly* in media accounts of violence. Furthermore, the notion of a ‘traditional’ femininity and the way in which it is reproduced in newspaper reports on women perpetrators of IPV is something that remains understudied both locally and internationally (DeShong, 2015).

While some scholars have commented on the link between newspaper depictions of ‘traditional’ femininity and understandings of women’s powerlessness and vulnerability to IPV victimisation (Anderson, 2002; DeShong, 2015), few scholars have looked at how ‘traditional’ femininity is challenged and redefined through the act of women’s perpetration of violence (Gill, 2007). In newspaper articles on men’s perpetration of IPV, an idealistic scripting of gender norms emerges and is even sustained whereby men and women externally embody expected, ‘traditional’ norms (Connell, 1987; DeShong, 2015; Jakobsen, 2014): Men are written about in terms of their physical ‘prowess’, ‘agency’ and ‘aggression’, and women are cast as ‘passive’, ‘victimised’ and ‘powerless’ (Lorber, 1994; Russell & Kraus, 2016).

When dominant gender norms are contested through subversive and unexpected performance, idealised versions of ‘traditional’ masculinity, femininity and power become complicated (DeShong, 2015). This is why, according to Gill (2007), when women engage in violence, they contradict perceptions and representations of expected, ‘traditional’ femininity. When women perpetrate heterosexual IPV— an act considered a gendered, masculine and powerful performance – existing gender norms are disrupted, and there is social confusion (Gill, 2007). As most heterosexual IPV discourses uphold dichotomous gender binaries of ‘traditional’ femininity and masculinity, when women perpetrate IPV, they are therefore harmfully stigmatised and homogenously ‘masculinised’ for their violence to be accepted (Collins, 2016; Gill, 2007). This can perhaps be most explicitly seen when deconstructing newspaper representations of violent women (Collins, 2016).

### **The Newspaper Media and ‘Alternative’, ‘Masculine’ Femininity**

Commenting on the media and ‘traditional’ femininity, Collins (2016) believes that newspaper representations act as a framework from which to understand gendered constructions of violence. As highlighted above, few studies as of yet have looked at how a

perpetrator of violent crime's social location of gender shapes the way that the perpetrator is constructed and sensationalised (Gruenewald et al., 2009). Studies that have, however, noted that newspaper representations of women who perpetrate crimes, particularly IPV, frequently construct and emphasise an 'alternative' femininity (Easteal, Bartels, Nelson, & Holland, 2015; Jakobsen, 2014). Specifically, media scholars have found that women perpetrators of crime and IPV are mainly constructed in newspapers as embodying character traits of 'deviance' and 'masculinity' (Africa, 2010; Collins, 2016). In exploring why women are reported as 'deviant', Africa (2010) suggests that in order for society to reconcile the idea of women as perpetrators, women, as mentioned above, need to be located in a dominant discourse of violence in the newspaper media. Women who perpetrate IPV are thus described as 'alternative' – 'cold', 'calculating' and 'promiscuous' (Collins, 2016; Easteal et al., 2015) and are 'masculinised' perhaps most obviously, as Easteal et al. (2015) states: "[Newspaper] stories are told within a gendered landscape... Against this backdrop, violent women are anathema, and... [are] constructed as unfeminine" (p. 38).

In this 'alternative' depiction, women are stigmatised in that they are portrayed as naturally 'less capable' of committing acts of violence, therefore distinctly 'acting out' of character when they do (Easteal et al., 2015). In order to rationalise this 'unfitting' act, women who perpetrate IPV are often described with language that highlights their 'masculine' performance, emphasising their potential for power, agency and physicality (Gill, 2007). In news articles about women who perpetrate violent crimes, words like "unfeminine", "stoic" and "promiscuous" have therefore often been juxtaposed against the gender of the offender for her to persuasively occupy the gendered and masculine space of violence (Easteal et al., 2015, p.35). This 'masculinised' or 'alternative' femininity of women perpetrators, according to Gruenewald et al. (2009), emphasizes the particular behaviours of offenders that align with dominant gender stereotypes, and neglects those that conflict. By reinforcing these gendered stereotypes, newspaper representations serve to naturalise prejudiced social structures, ideologies, and practices (Sanger, 2009). Thus, the 'masculinised' woman provides an explanation for a violent act without disrupting the idea of a static masculine-feminine binary (Russell & Kraus, 2016).

In having a further look at literature on the 'masculinisation' of women offenders, Easteal et al. (2015) highlights why this process, which homogenises women perpetrators and complicates gendered roles of power and powerlessness, can be dangerous. For one thing, it has been reported that the more masculine the portrayal of the woman perpetrator, the heavier the criminal charge (Easteal et al., 2015). Furthermore, scholars have investigated how

‘deviant’, and ‘masculinised’ portrayals of women who perpetrate violence are often mediated by social identity factors of race and class (Africa, 2010). This shows how, through ‘masculinisation’ as justification for their act, women perpetrators of IPV and crime are often unrelentingly stigmatized twice – first as criminal, and then as breaking societal conventions of ‘traditional’ femininity (Collins, 2016). This is particularly the case for Black<sup>1</sup> women perpetrators of violence, where these perpetrators of violence have been found to be written as ‘different’, and more ‘deviant’ and ‘masculine’ than White women perpetrators of violence (Africa, 2010). These literature findings suggest that in this research, it is therefore crucial to delve deeper into the topic of women perpetrators of IPV to address the fundamental discourses around ‘masculinisation’, power, race and stigma emerging within newspaper representations.

### **Summary of Literature**

A review of literature surrounding criminality, violence and the media has shown that both ‘traditional’ and ‘alternative’ discourses of heterosexual IPV serve to perpetuate stereotypical social constructions of gender (Anderson, 2002; DeShong, 2015; Jakobsen, 2014; Russell & Kraus, 2016). When looking at the few studies focusing directly on women as perpetrators of IPV, authors have commented on how a ‘masculine’, ‘alternative’ femininity is constructed in newspapers for women to successfully and un-markedly enter the space of violence without disrupting the gender binary (Africa, 2010; Eastal et al., 2015). This construction of ‘deviance’ and ‘masculinisation’ is perhaps most rigorously done when Black women perpetrate violence (Africa, 2010).

In South Africa, further analyses of these newspaper representations are therefore needed to tackle the question of how depictions of violent women make society uncomfortable, blurring the positions of power and powerlessness found in ‘traditional’ gendered discourses of IPV. It is furthermore important to investigate how these depictions can be ultimately harmful, clouding understandings of the conditions under which women perpetrate IPV, which in South Africa, is often in self-defence (Gass et al., 2011). Lastly, an exploration of women who perpetrate IPV could also allow for an examination of the social factors, including gender, but also race, that intersect to influence how women’s perpetration of IPV is portrayed in newspapers (Africa, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> This research paper uses “Black” to refer to all South African “non-White” racial groups historically discriminated against under apartheid laws; namely, Black, Coloured, Indian and Chinese (Gqola, 2001).



## **Aims and Research Questions**

### **Aim**

The objective of this research is to address the highlighted gap in literature, and to focus on South African women perpetrators of IPV against men. Significantly, this research functions as a continuation and extension of the limited South African literature that has focused on constructions of South African women perpetrators of violence (Africa, 2010).

This research explores newspaper coverage of South African women who perpetrated IPV against their heterosexual partners through a feminist post-structuralist intersectional lens. The aim of this is to comment on how the discourses of ‘traditional’ femininity, stigma and ‘masculinisation’, emerging from newspaper constructions of women perpetrators of IPV, make explicit commonly held stereotypes that exist in society, such as the notion that violence is inconsistent with ‘traditional’ femininity. This aims to further shed insight onto the way in which the social identity marker of race influences how women’s violence is mediated and accepted by society.

### **Main Research Question**

How are women perpetrators of heterosexual IPV constructed in newspaper reports in South Africa?

#### **Sub-questions.**

- What are the discourses of ‘masculinisation’, femininity and stigma that emerge within newspaper representations of women who perpetrate IPV?
- How do the intersections of race and gender shape the way in which South African women’s crime is reported in the newspaper media?
- What are the implications of the emergent constructions of women perpetrators for the women who have perpetrated IPV?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research is located in a feminist epistemological, post-structuralist qualitative paradigm. Situated in feminist theory, feminist post-structuralist qualitative methodology was developed as a framework from which to critique traditional, ‘value neutral’ and ‘objective’ positivist social scientific research (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007). Unlike positivism, which disregards the importance of subjectivities in the construction of knowledge (Rice, 2009), feminist post-structuralist research foregrounds women’s lived experiences (Bhavnani, 1993). In addition, the approach assists in making the structures that uphold gender-based stereotypes and inform oppressive and dominant constructions of femininity explicit (Denzin

& Lincoln, 2000). Feminist post-structuralism is therefore well aligned with the aims of this study, which focus on constructions of gender in the newspaper media.

Feminist research is apt when looking at the way in which the newspaper media reproduces and maintains oppressive gender binaries (Easteal et al., 2015). By deconstructing the harmful and stigmatising representations of women perpetrators of IPV, and by showing how violence remains located in a masculine discourse, feminist theory can be used to understand how these portrayals exist, and to challenge their basis (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007). Post-structuralist feminism is useful here in that it recognises that these oftentimes analogous newspaper portrayals of women perpetrators of IPV are dangerous because they are partial – they overlook the multiplicity of women’s identities (Mbilinyi, 1992). Furthermore, because women’s identities are not identical and are contextual, shaped, for instance, by social locations of race, understanding the research question through a post-structuralist lens is appropriate (Mbilinyi, 1992). Post-structuralism can thus provide tools to explore how women perpetrators of IPV are often portrayed in newspapers homogenously as ‘masculinised’, giving salience to stereotypical gender discourses (Africa, 2010). To understand this idea further, intersectional theory is also used to guide this research.

Intersectional theory is a framework that attempts to make explicit social identities and the interconnectedness of systems of oppression and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989). From an intersectional perspective, individuals are seen as multi-layered, with varying, ‘intersecting’, personal locations making up their social positioning and accounting for their subjective lived experiences (Warner, 2008). Intersectionality asserts that social positions are categories within which individuals claim membership, and to which serve as organising categories of social order (Shields, 2008). Through intersectionality, an individual’s positionality, then, demands acknowledgement that they are connected to overriding power structures of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989).

Intersectionality is therefore an important theoretical framework to employ when researching constructions of femininities in newspaper articles. In understanding the crucial tenet of intersectionality – that interlinking positionality enables one to recognise associated relations of privilege and oppression – the newspaper is seen as an organising power that upholds and naturalises discourses of gender and violence (Sanger, 2009). Within this structure, ideas around what constitutes ‘traditional’ and ‘alternative’ femininities are contextually dependent and relationally dynamic (Greer, 2017). Furthermore, like post-structuralism, intersectionality asserts that identities are not universal (Warner, 2008). Therefore, in highlighting very specific tenets of certain identities only, such as race and

gender, intersectionality allows researchers to ask (depending on the context), why certain social locations are given salience in hegemonic newspaper representations of women perpetrators of IPV, and how these locations interlink to construct and determine a more ‘ideal’, or stigmatised, perpetrator identity (Brennan & Valdenberg, 2009; Greer, 2017).

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

This research employs a feminist post-structuralist qualitative design. As opposed to quantitative designs, which have firm roots in positivism, qualitative research focuses on examining and describing individual experience to make meaning of ‘real-world contexts’ (Bohan, 1993; Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). Whereas quantitative methods assert ‘scientific’ and ‘fixed’ universalising ‘truths’ about an ‘objective reality’, qualitative research values the insight of individual subjectivities, acknowledging that there are multiple realities or ‘truths’ to be understood (Bohan, 1993). Qualitative feminist research approaches furthermore acknowledge relationships of power between researchers and the ‘researched’, and attempt to not reproduce them in prevailing and harmful ways (Bhavnani, 1993).

Scholars have argued that qualitative methods provide appropriate tools for exploring issues concerning identity and intersectionality (Mason, 2002; Warner, 2008). This is because qualitative methods allow for a deep investigation of the complexity and constructedness of individual identity and experience, and the ways that these constructions are implicated in systems of power (Warner, 2008). In this sense, a qualitative post-structuralist design as a method of inquiry into how newspaper texts construct and reinforce discourses of femininity and violence in South Africa is best for this research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

### **Sampling Strategy and Collection Criteria**

This qualitative research is interested in how women perpetrators of IPV are represented in South African printed newspapers. Generalisability was therefore not important for this research, and sample size, or number of newspaper articles collected for data, was initially not limited (Mbilinyi, 1992). Purposive sampling was employed to collect newspaper reports. In this type of sampling, the selection of texts is done so selectively and ‘purposively’, based on outlined criteria (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003). Particularly beneficial to the subjective and inclusive nature of qualitative research, these criteria enable the researcher to deeply explore the topic of interest, and find themes emerging around the discourses pertaining to the stated research questions (Orb et al., 2001; Ritchie et al., 2003).

In this research, the key criteria that the newspaper representations needed to meet was that of portraying women perpetrators of heterosexual IPV.

Important to note here is that it was rare to find articles of heterosexual women who had merely perpetrated physical or emotional IPV against their partners that had not resulted in killing. Perhaps this is because in a media-saturated world, newspaper publications tend to focus on the most sensational of news stories to compete for consumption revenue (Bakhshay & Haney, 2018). This is true, too, for news concerning women perpetrated crime, whereby the most physically violent and sensational stories – most of which involve the killing of intimate partners, are deemed ‘newsworthy’ and are reported on (Gruenewald, Chermak, & Pizarro, 2013). Therefore, the majority of articles eventually chosen for analysis, sparing one, detailed women perpetrated IPV that had ended in the killing of a male partner, either by the women perpetrator alone, or together with hired contract killers. In the end, data from 12 of the most relevant newspaper articles was collected for analysis.

### **Data Collection Technique and Procedure**

Data was collected through the online South African newspaper archive resource *SABINET*, accessed through UCT Libraries. To find relevant articles, the keywords ‘women’, ‘female’, ‘perpetrator’, ‘crime’, ‘IPV’, ‘violent’, ‘partner’, ‘husband’, ‘boyfriend’, ‘murder’ and ‘kill’ were searched. From here, the particular names emerging in articles of heterosexual women who had committed physical violence against their intimate partners, including women who had killed, or hired contract killers to kill their partners – were specifically searched on *SABINET*.

This research was primarily inspired by a scarcely researched area of literature in South Africa looking at constructions of women perpetrators of violence found in empirical articles and in the media from 2005-2007 (Africa, 2010). In this sense, this research functioned to look at the same cohort of reports that previous literature presumably looked at, but then also interrogated articles beyond this time period, aiming to see if recurrent or different types of constructions of women perpetrators of heterosexual IPV found in existing literature, emerge in newspaper articles today. Therefore, newspaper articles from the past 15 years were looked at.

Due to a dearth of newspaper articles of women perpetrators of IPV in South Africa, articles were not limited to a specific publication, and an array of printed newspaper articles, from multiple publications, were looked at. Furthermore, the search was not limited to any particular geographical South African location, and articles across all provinces were

collected. Due to the scope of the research, whereby access to external translators was difficult and time-consuming to obtain, only English articles were collected.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Since human subjects did not participate in this research, formal ethics were not required.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Mbilinyi (1992), research located in a feminist post-structuralist paradigm often focuses on ideas surrounding the instability of concepts and the constructedness of discourses. When analysing research questions centred around the contextual constructions of identities in newspapers and the discourses that shape them, scholars have suggested that a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) be employed (Holt, 2011; Wiggins & Riley, 2010). Although there is no strict method of FDA, Carla Willig's (2008) FDA stage-by-stage model was adopted (and adapted) as a guideline to analysing the collected data, South African newspaper articles on women perpetrators of heterosexual IPV.

In FDA, discourses are defined as instances of language, such as newspaper text, that, when grouped, determine the way that meanings are negotiated, subsequently constituting reality (Holt, 2011; Mbilinyi, 1992). According to FDA, discourses construct subjective meanings and realities that can be situated in broader contexts of power (Wiggins & Riley, 2010). Discourses furthermore locate individuals within subject positions, and, depending on how the subject is situated in terms of power, these positions can gain or lose from the dominance of different discourses (Holt, 2011). In this way, discourses provide insight into how the world is constructed through language (Holt, 2011). These constructions, which are at times perceived as 'truths', have implications for the people who are subject to them, indicating that discourses 'do' things (Holt, 2011). Thus in FDA, discourses are 'deconstructed' – analysed, broken down and interpreted – to demonstrate how certain power structures, such as gender binaries, are perceived as 'true' or 'real' (Mbilinyi, 1992). Importantly, FDA aims to make these structures clear, depending on the context within which they arise (Mbilinyi, 1992).

For this research, FDA positioned in a feminist post-structuralist paradigm is suited to explicating how the newspaper media serves as a powerful tool in the construction of 'acceptable' gender roles, reinforcing and perpetuating dominant ways of thinking that follow idealised ways of 'doing' gender (Sanger & Hadland, 2008). FDA, because it identifies how power circulates through negotiated social practices (Waite, 2005), also allows for an examination of the intersecting identity markers of women perpetrators, such as their gender

and race, that are made salient in their newspaper representations, influencing how their violence is mediated and accepted by society (Brennan & Valdenberg, 2009).

Newspaper article texts portraying women perpetrators of IPV, most of them having killed their partners, were ‘deconstructed’ to unpack the various discursive sets, and subject positions that emerged within them (Willig, 2008). The constructions of the discursive object, ‘women perpetrators of IPV’, identified according to the research question, were explored (Willig, 2008). Descriptive words with shared meaning were found and grouped accordingly as emergent constructions (Willig, 2008). Table 1 (Appendix A) shows the three ways that ‘women perpetrators’ were constructed in the newspaper text, all of which were located in wider discourses of race, and gender as binary (Gill, 2007).

### **Reflexivity**

Although there were no ethical considerations for this research per se, I feel a great responsibility to give full disclosure about the ways in which this study may, by virtue of my positionality and role as a researcher, be influenced by micro-political processes implicated in every step of the research process (Bhavnani, 1993). This is called being ‘reflexive’, and, according to Sultana (2007), involves being aware that produced knowledge is partial in that it embodies various power relations that the qualitative researcher must acknowledge in the undertaking of an ‘ethical’, reflexive study. Here, I shall therefore disclose some of my own intersubjectivities as a White, middle-class, cis-gendered woman.

According to Rice (2009), feminist post-structuralism asserts that subjectivity and social identities are embodied. Therefore, my various intersubjectivities and perspectives shaped by and embedded within broader ideological, political and social relations, have irrefutably privileged many of my life experiences. They have furthermore allowed me to anonymously but authoritatively frame how I conduct this research, which looks at the construction of identities that are different to my own (Sultana, 2007). I am neither a perpetrator nor a survivor of IPV. This undoubtedly has informed the way in which my data has been collected, analysed, and to a large extent, interpreted (Bhavnani, 1993).

In maintaining reflexivity and being cognisant of the way that my intersubjective positionality privileges and creates bias in my production of knowledge (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007), I need to be critically reflective and accountable to how my positionalities are limiting to my research (Riggs, 2010). Importantly, because my research looks at textual newspaper representations as data, there is no mutuality in the knowledge produced, unintentionally creating a strong ‘researcher’/ ‘researched’ dichotomy (Sultana, 2007). In this way, my research could be interpreted as silencing of the unknowing ‘research participants’

or the women represented in the newspaper articles that I analysed (Holt, 2011). Here, I need to be aware that my research may be complicit in the reproduction of work that is beneficial to me, the researcher, only. Although I am attempting to foreground their identities and fill a gap in South African literature, being attentive to power, knowledge and context through reflexivity allows me to understand how my research is limited in the way that it simply cannot empower the women that I am using for my own intellectual gain (Holt, 2011).

### **Analysis and Discussion**

As distinguished by the research question ‘how are women perpetrators of heterosexual IPV constructed in newspaper reports in South Africa?’, the discursive object ‘women perpetrators’ is constructed in three different ways: *Women Perpetrators of IPV as Unnatural*, *Women Perpetrators of IPV as Masculine*, and *Women Perpetrators of IPV as Reflective of Changing Gender Norms in Society*. Within these constructions, this analysis further addresses the research sub-questions, which look at how emergent constructions within newspaper representations of women who perpetrate IPV are located in a gendered discourse, but also influenced by the intersection of race. The implications of these constructions for the subject positioning ‘women perpetrators’ is also analysed.

#### **Women Perpetrators of IPV as Unnatural**

Across all of the newspaper representations of heterosexual women who perpetrated violence against their intimate partners, reflective of a gendered South African societal landscape (Jewkes, 2002), there is a dominant scripting of femininity which draws on discourses that maintain that women are subordinate to men (Easteal et al., 2015). This first construction draws on one such discourse, that of gender as binary. Here, notions of an ‘ideal’ and hegemonic ‘traditional’ femininity are reproduced in newspaper accounts of women perpetrators of heterosexual IPV.

In South African newspaper articles, women criminality, specifically the act of women perpetrated IPV, is written as being inconsistent with an existing hegemonic ‘traditional’ femininity. The article “Sex, strychnine and other weapons of man destruction” speaks directly to this. Hurry (2004) writes: “Women are not supposed to be violent. [They] should be doting wives and dedicated nurturers, not killers...People are inevitably shocked when women commit violent crimes” (p.18). In this dichotomising of gender, women and men are ‘expected’ to embody ‘pre-existing’ binaristic gender roles and behaviours (DeShong, 2015). This is found to be especially true when the women perpetrated violence is done in a domestic context: Men are expected to take on masculine subjectivities, such as being aggressive and “violent”, whereas women are expected to be victimised and powerless

“wives” and “nurturers” (Hurry, 2004; Lorber, 1994). Reflected in South African newspaper articles, South African society “rarely associates violent behaviour with the fairer sex” (Corrigall, 2007, “Murder for hire”, *Sunday Independent*, p.2). Therefore, when a woman engages in violent perpetration, her performance is written about as “violating [of] natural femininity” (Corrigall, 2007, p.2). When a woman perpetrates IPV, her ‘transgressing’ act is thus rendered ‘shocking’, ‘unexpected’ and ‘unnatural’ by the newspaper media. Extract 1.1, an article about Najwa Petersen, who along with three hired contract killers, shot and killed her husband – famous South African musician Taliep Petersen – illustrates this.

*Extract 1.1*

*“It was shocking that Petersen had been killed in such a ‘callous’ manner, tied up and humiliated, by a wife he prayed for each night,” [judge] Desai said.*

(Breytenbach, 2009, “Najwa should suffer the same fate”. *Cape Times*, p.1)

Petersen’s perpetration of violence is constructed as “shocking” and therefore ‘unnatural’. This functions to uphold discourses of femininity and gender as binary. Due to that fact that women perpetrated IPV is not associated with an ‘ideal’ version of ‘traditional’ or ‘expected’ femininity, this type of violence complicates discourses of gender (Easteal et al., 2015). Instances of language constructing women’s perpetration of IPV as ‘unnatural’ in newspaper articles, like in Extract 1.1, then subtly ‘un-complicates’ women’s perpetration by describing this violence in a way that maintains ‘traditional’ discourses of criminality, femininity and gender. Stating that women’s perpetration of violence is “shocking” and “[humiliating]” for instance, convincingly infers that ‘naturally’, women do not perpetrate heterosexual IPV violence, and perpetuates a constructed notion that violence is not synonymous with societal conceptions of womanhood (Africa, 2010).

Imperative to mention here is that Petersen is a Black woman. Although constructions of *Women Perpetrators of IPV as Unnatural* are found in articles commenting on Black and White women’s perpetration of violence, articles on Black women are found to more frequently and sensationally cast their violent perpetration as ‘shocking’, ‘unexpected’, and ‘unnatural’. In this sense, all women perpetrators are harmfully stigmatised, reinforcing that women are ‘less capable’ of being violent. It moreover infers that men are ‘expected’ perpetrators, and women are ‘ideal’ victims, drawing on discourses set in a masculine-feminine dichotomy (Easteal et al., 2015). However, the gendered (and racialised) notion of an ‘ideal’ victim, is found only really to be true for White women perpetrators. White women



are found to be readily located as victims, and their violent performances are more often written about, and somewhat pardoned, as self-defensive to long-term abuse (Extract 2.1, 2.5, & 3.2).

This is significant, and this discursive construction, found mainly in newspaper articles about Black perpetrators, has implications for the women located within it. Homogenously constructing Black women as ‘unnatural’ perpetrators in a racialised and gendered victim-perpetrator discourse not only further stigmatises these women as perpetrators, but in frequently de-contextualising their crimes and overlooking the possible self-defensive reasons for their perpetration, this construction also negates the possibility that many of these women, like White women, can be both perpetrators *and* victims. The idea of Black women as less ‘ideal’ victims of perpetration, is something that the next discursive construction touches on further.

### **Women Perpetrators of IPV as Masculine**

This second construction coincidentally emerges in South African newspaper representations of women perpetrators of IPV. As found in the first construction, when women engage in ‘unnatural’ violence, they contradict perceptions of expected and ‘traditional’ gender binaries (Gill, 2007). Therefore – as found in previous literature on the topic, and in the collected data – when women perpetrate heterosexual IPV, an act considered a gendered, masculine, and powerful performance, existing gender norms are interrupted, and there is confusion (Gill, 2007). In the newspaper articles, women’s violent acts are therefore found to be written in a way whereby the women perpetrators are ‘masculinised’, for their violence to be accepted, and to fit into ‘traditional’ expectations of violence (Collins, 2016; Gill, 2007). In doing this, these women are described with language that highlights their ‘masculine’ physicality and appearance:

#### *Extract 2.1*

*Marais is dressed in a black power suit...in 2006...Ruby [killed] her wealthy husband... [who] she has claimed she had suffered [abuse] for 16 years at the hands of...*

(Witten, 2009, “Once close – now divided by murder”. *Cape Argus*, p.11)

*Extract 2.2*

*“She battered him in a vicious, cruel and degrading manner...with such brutal, crude and raw force...”*

(Venter, 2014, “Judges lessen peeved testicle puller’s sentence”. *Star*, p.3)

In Extract 2.1, Ruby Marais, who stabbed and killed her husband along with three hired contract killers, is described as wearing a “power suit”. This focus on and terminology used to describe her dress is significant. The words “power suit” juxtaposed against the gender of Marais, infers that ‘naturally’, women are not powerful, and suits are moreover associated with men. A woman being described then as wearing a “power suit” suggests that she is not ‘traditionally’ or ‘ideally’ feminine, and is ‘masculinised’ to the extent that she is ‘unnaturally’ powerful. In Extract 2.2, Gladys Chauke, who injured her husband’s penis after he was caught cheating, is described as being “vicious” and thus ‘masculine’. Words usually employed to describe masculinities, such as being powerful – having “brutal, crude and raw force”, are used here to emphasise her ‘unnatural’ and ‘masculine’ capacity for violence.

In Extract 2.2 specifically, language is used by the newspaper media not to provide contextual information about the crime itself, but rather to construct the women perpetrator of violence in a way that persuades the reader of her ‘unnatural masculinity’. In Extract 2.1 and 2.2, language is thus used in these newspaper articles to emphasise both perpetrators’ ‘masculine’ mien, physicality and capacity for violence, without disrupting ‘traditional’ gendered discourses. Language emphasising the ‘masculine’ behaviours and emotions of women perpetrators of heterosexual IPV was used in newspaper articles to achieve this too.

*Extract 2.3*

*Najwa maintained a stoic appearance throughout her trial...only once crying in public...*

(Phaliso, 2009, “Najwa: Behind the stoic veil”. *City Press*, p.3)

*Extract 2.4*

*...Sivhidzho was depicted as a cold-hearted golddigger...[that] masterminded [her] husband’s murder...Sivhidzho maintained a defiant demeanour in court. At times it bordered on arrogance.*

(Seale, 2010, “Black widow’s web ripped apart”. *Pretoria New*, p.5)

*Extract 2.5*

*...Engelbrecht has claimed her husband was abusive and that she killed him because she was suffering from stress related to work...Engelbrecht was “extremely aggressive”....*

(Templeton, 2004, “Alleged husband-killer appears before judge again”. *This Day*, p.3)

In Extract 2.3, Petersen is described as “stoic”– a trait typically constructed relative to a discourse of masculinity – to persuade the reader of her inability to have remorse. In Extract 2.4, Mulalo Sivhidzho, who with two hired contract killers, burnt her husband alive, is described as being “cold-hearted”, “defiant” and “[arrogant]”. In Extract 2.5, Anne-Marie Engelbrecht, who suffocated and killed her husband, is described as being “extremely aggressive”. These uses of language are notable. Supposedly ‘naturally’ or ‘inherently’, an ‘ideal’ femininity is one that is expected to have sensitivity and remorse (Gill, 2007). Therefore, describing Petersen as “stoic”, furthermore “only once crying in public”, Sivhidzho as “cold-hearted”, and Engelbrecht as “aggressive”, actively convinces the reader that these women perpetrators are therefore not stereotypically or ‘traditionally’ feminine, and their behaviour and emotions are ‘masculinised’ for their violent acts to be made reconcilable. In these extracted examples, the notion that violence is located in a masculine, and not a feminine discourse, is therefore upheld, and dichotomous gender expectations are fiercely maintained.

Analysing *Women Perpetrators of IPV as Masculine* in the collected articles further showed that this construction blurs the lines of power and powerlessness typically framed within a masculine-feminine dichotomy. In some ways within this construction, all women subjects are positioned as somewhat powerful, having “masterminded” (Extract 2.4) the violence and killing of their heterosexual partners. Overall, however, this construction of women perpetrators is delimiting to the women subjects. As an authoritative institution, the newspaper media establishes this construction as ‘normative’ and ‘real’, naturalising ‘expected’ and ‘ideal’ ways of doing gender and violence, furthermore perpetuating long-standing discourses that maintain that ‘traditional’ femininity is inconsistent with violence (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Gill, 2007). Key to note here is that this construction is especially harmful for Black women.

When looking at the way in which the newspaper media frames and forms representations of *Women Perpetrators of IPV as Masculine*, this construction, which

highlights the ‘masculine’ tropes of women perpetrators of IPV, is found to be made most salient in articles portraying Black women perpetrators of IPV. Language used in newspaper reports of Black women’s violence is found to be more elaborate and decorated than language used to describe White women’s violence. In Extract 2.4, the negative language used to construct Sivhidzho as masculine is long-winded and elaborate, and an array of negative adjectives such as “cold-hearted”, “golddigger”, “mastermind”, “defiant” and “arrogance” are used to describe her ‘callous’ and ‘masculine’ character and behaviour. In Extract 2.6 below, the writing style adopted is equally, if not more, negative.

*Extract 2.6*

*Najwa...has shown little emotion at the sometimes gruesome evidence played out in court. Greed has been presented...as part of the motive for the murder of [her husband] ...Najwa being by some as a callous monster... “[she] had behaved like a demonic zombie” after stabbing Taliep in the neck six months before he was killed.*  
(Swart & Kamaldien, 2008, “Najwa: Judgment in sight”. *The Times*, p.5)

As can be seen in these extracts, the negative adjectives used to describe Black women’s perpetration are furthermore sensationalist, stigmatising and shocking. Compared to the discursive scripting of White women perpetrators of IPV in the newspaper media, where much less decorated language is used to describe the women’s characters and behaviours (Extract 2.1 & 2.5), this is noteworthy. Having Black women perpetrators of violence against their intimate partners written about with negative and elaborate language in newspaper reports convinces readers that Black perpetration is perhaps different to White perpetration. It is more “callous”, “cold-hearted” and “gruesome” (Extract 1.1, 2.4, & 2.6) than White perpetration. As mentioned in the discursive construction *Women Perpetrators of IPV as Unnatural*, while White women’s perpetration is more readily defended in newspaper reports (Extract 2.1, 2.5, & 3.2), the newspaper media dangerously does not take into account the multiplicity of *all* women’s identities, and rarely attempts to understand the potential conditions under which Black women perpetrate heterosexual IPV. Therefore, in general, the way in which Black women perpetrators of IPV are represented in South African newspapers is altogether harmful.

In framing Black women’s violent perpetration as ‘masculine’, and not attempting to justify their plight as thoroughly as White women’s perpetration, the newspaper media vigorously reifies the normlessness and confusion brought upon by women’s violence

(Easteal et al., 2015), and in return, ‘masculinises’ the Black woman perpetrator most harshly. Echoing racist colonial and apartheid discourse (Sanger, 2009), Black femininity is defined then by the newspaper media as essentially ‘different’, more ‘masculine’, ‘exotic’, ‘deviant’, “callous”, “demonic” and “[monstrous]” (Extract 1.1 & 2.5) than White femininity. This maintains and naturalises the subordination and racist stereotyping of Black women in South Africa, homogenising and stigmatising this cohort of women perpetrators most profoundly.

### **Women Perpetrators of IPV as Reflective of Changing Gender Norms in Society**

As the constructions of women perpetrator’s as ‘unnatural’ and ‘masculine’ most commonly occurred in the collected newspapers, they were privileged as they had the most conviction. However, in the last year, albeit infrequent, a third emerging construction, *Women Perpetrators of IPV as Reflective of Changing Gender Norms in Society*, is different in its scripting of gendered discourses. This construction potentially indicates that women perpetrators in general are becoming more readily accepted, and their violence is moreover coming to be understood as “reflective” of “the role of the female in society changing” (Bailey, 2008, “In cold blood: The lady killers”. *Saturday Star*, p.8). Importantly, this construction makes explicit how newspaper representations of women who perpetrate violence can contradict, challenge *and* disrupt normative societal discourses of gender. Whereas the first two constructions reveal how the newspaper as an institutional power naturalises prejudiced gender structures, ideologies and practices (Sanger, 2009), this third construction actively attempts to acknowledge, but then also disrupt the hegemonic and problematic idea of static and ‘normative’ gender and criminal discourses. Extracts from 2018 which speak to this construction, frame women’s violent perpetration quite ‘matter-of-factly’, instead of using words to infer that women perpetrators are ‘unnatural’ or ‘masculine’.

#### *Extract 3.1*

*26-year-old woman accused of stabbing and killing her husband...Makhalemele-Maseko walked into the packed court-room...she sat quietly with her arms folded to her chest.*

(Mahopo, 2018, “Address mix-up keeps ‘killer’ wife in custody”. *Sowetan*, p.10)

*Extract 3.2*

*Alleged black widow Cathy van Oudtshoorn...shot her husband...because she could no longer handle the years of abuse he had subjected her to...it came to light... that she was pregnant with her second child...Judge Bert Bam...said there was no reason why a pregnant woman could not stand trial.*

(Venter, 2018, "Abuse led me to shoot my husband." *Cape Times*, p.5)

In Extract 3.1, Itumeleng Makhalemele-Maseko, accused of stabbing and killing her husband, is written about by the newspaper straightforwardly, stating that she merely "sat quietly with her arms folded to her chest". This scripting moreover indicates that Makhalemele-Maseko perhaps felt remorse for her performance, instead of focusing on any 'unnatural', 'sensational' or 'masculine' character tropes and emotions that she may possess in order for her violence to be reconciled and accepted by the reader. Similarly, in Extract 3.2, Cathy van Oudtshoorn is spoken about with factual, terse language. She "allegedly" shot her husband, was pregnant, and was awaiting trial. The newspaper indicated that her court proceedings should not be impacted by her pregnancy, as "there was no reason a pregnant woman could not stand trial". The language used in Extract 3.1 & 3.2 is interesting, and in line with this emergent construction, it cautions against treating women differently on the basis of their gender, inferring that women and men are equally as capable of committing IPV, and violent crimes in general, and should be treated as such.

In both constructions of *Women Perpetrators of IPV as Unnatural* and *Women Perpetrators of IPV as Unnatural* found in the South African newspaper media, the idea that violence is located in a rigorous racialised and gendered discourse is reinforced. The construction *Women Perpetrators of IPV as Reflective of Changing Gender Norms in Society* – although it does little to challenge the harmful racialised ways in which women perpetrators are depicted in newspapers – does however disrupt the discourse of gender as binary, calling it out as outdated and "traditional" (Bailey, 2008, p.8). As the articles within this construction are found in 2018, they potentially reflect an acknowledgement that gendered discourses, and indeed gender roles in society, are changing. Women perpetrators of IPV and crime are perhaps becoming less 'shocking', 'unnatural' and 'newsworthy' as expectations and understandings of women and men are becoming more equal. As discourses around gender as binary change, there is thus less of a need to construct women perpetrators in newspapers as 'masculine' or 'unnatural' to rationalise their 'unexpected' behaviour. Further suggested by

this construction is that the subject positioning of *Women Perpetrators of IPV as Reflective of Changing Gender Norms in Society* carries the possibility for action. This construction in South African newspaper articles, albeit slowly, can change discourses of gendered violence, in turn changing individual and broader social subjectivities and understandings of gender as a whole.

### **Conclusion**

This feminist post-structuralist intersectional qualitative research is significant in that it fills a gap in local empirical work on women perpetrated criminality and IPV. Additionally, it looks at whether the same types of constructions of women perpetrators of IPV found in previous work of this sort still exist, or if new constructions emerge in South African newspapers today. Due to a dearth of newspaper articles portraying women perpetrators of IPV that had not resulted in the killing of their partners, most of the articles chosen for analysis focused on women's perpetration of heterosexual IPV that ended in killing, either by the woman perpetrator alone, or together with hired contract killers.

As guided by the main research question, FDA was used to investigate how women perpetrators of heterosexual IPV are constructed in newspaper reports in South Africa. The analysis further addressed the research sub-questions, which looked at how emergent constructions within newspaper representations of women perpetrators of IPV are located in gendered discourses, but also influenced by the intersection of race. The implications of these constructions for the subject position 'women perpetrators' were also analysed.

The discursive object 'women perpetrators' was found to be constructed in three ways: Two constructions *Women Perpetrators of IPV as Unnatural* and *Women Perpetrators of IPV as Masculine* were similar to those that emerged in previous literature on women perpetrators of IPV. In these constructions, it was made explicit that women's violence is implicated in broader discourses of gender and power, where women perpetrated violence is 'unexpected'. Women perpetrated IPV therefore indirectly and uncomfortably complicates and challenges hegemonic discourses and understandings of 'traditional' femininity, power, and violence (Gill, 2007; Gruenewald et al., 2009). As the newspaper media serves to uphold dichotomous gender binaries (Collins, 2016), constructions of women perpetrators of IPV as 'unnatural' and 'masculine' in South African newspaper reports serve to 'un-complicate' women's violent perpetration. This is done by emphasising the behaviour, demeanour and physicality of women IPV perpetrators that align women's violence with 'traditional' gendered stereotypes, upholding the idea that violence remains located in an 'unchanging', masculine gendered framework.

Looking at the intersections of gender and race, this research further elucidated how social identities influence newspaper representations to construct and determine a more 'ideal', or more stigmatised, perpetrator identity (Brennan & Valdenberg, 2009). In the first two emergent constructions, Black women perpetrators are homogenised and written about with more negative and decorated language than White women perpetrators. White women perpetrators are also more readily defended by the newspaper media, as their violence is often written as self-defensive to long-term abuse, while the conditions under which Black women perpetrate IPV are frequently de-contextualised. This has harmful implications. By suggesting that White women perpetrators are merely acting in self-defence, they are cast as more likely, 'ideal' and deserving victims than Black women. Moreover, the excessively callous language used to describe Black women's IPV perpetration echoes colonial and apartheid discourses that define Black femininity as essentially 'different', more 'exotic' and more 'callous' than White femininity, naturalising and preserving the stigmatisation, subordination, and racist stereotyping of Black women in South African society (Sanger, 2009).

While the first two constructions reiterated previous literature on women perpetrators of IPV, the third construction *Women perpetrators of IPV as Reflective of Changing Gender Norms in Society*, found in recent newspaper articles, is different. Although this construction does not challenge the fact that women perpetrators are harmfully depicted in newspapers in racialised ways, it does suggest that the way that women perpetrators are framed in the newspaper media is changing, indicating that gender expectations and stereotypes in South Africa encouragingly are becoming less rigorous and archaic.

Although time was a limitation in this project, it is recommended that future research on this topic investigates whether other social identity locations, such as class, further influence how women perpetrators of IPV are represented (and stigmatised) in South African newspapers. It is also recommended that for a more holistic investigation of constructions of women perpetrators of IPV in the South African media, printed *and* online news sources, written in all South African languages, should be looked at.

This research is altogether significant. Importantly, it sheds light onto South African representations of women perpetrators of IPV in a way that does not attempt to reproduce these women in prevailing and hegemonic ways (Bhavnani, 1993), but rather to make explicit how these hegemonic constructions can have harmful implications. This research therefore does not imply that women perpetrators of IPV cannot possess stereotypical 'masculine' or 'violent' qualities, and maintains that these qualities are merely constructs imposed on



gendered beings. Rather, this research suggests that in South African society, women perpetrators of IPV predominantly *need* to be represented in newspaper reports in stigmatising ‘unnatural’ and ‘masculinised’ ways for their crime to be accepted. There is reason to believe, however, that this could be changing.

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## Appendix A

### Discursive Constructions of Women Perpetrators of IPV Table

Table 1

*Discursive sets and Discursive Constructions*

Discursive Sets	Discursive Constructions
“women are not supposed to be violent”, “violating [of] natural femininity”, “society does not expect women to commit violent acts”, “women are infrequently involved in murder”, “unnatural”, and “shocking”.	‘women perpetrators of IPV as unnatural’
“power”, “force”, “aggressive”, “violent”, “cold- hearted”, “gold-digger”, “master-minded”, “defiant”, “arrogance”, “stoic”, “little emotion”, “callous”, and “greed”.	‘women perpetrators of IPV as masculine’
Language that frames women’s perpetration of violence matter-of-factly.	‘women perpetrators as reflective of changing gender norms in society’