

‘Big G’ and ‘small g’ gender in Victoria's family violence policy subsystem

Sophie Yates¹

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Introduction

While researching gender and the framing of domestic and family violence (DFV) in Victoria's 2015-16 Royal Commission into Family Violence, I asked senior professionals ranging from psychiatrists to family violence researchers to drug and alcohol experts what they meant when they used the word 'gender'. Gender is a complicated concept, so it is unsurprising that responses varied. However, it became clear through data collection and subsequent analysis that many of these actors were using the same word to describe fundamentally different things.

In this article, I introduce the concept of 'big G' and 'small g' gender to help conceptualise how actors in Victoria's family violence policy subsystem² talk about and understand gender. Big G gender tends to be categorical, more fixed than fluid, and relates mainly to the state of being male or female. Small g definitions see gender as something constituted by actions, that resides both in individuals and in societal structures, and that refers to patterns of relationships within and between sex categories. I explain why such varied definitions of gender pose a problem for DFV advocates, and how big G definitions might be associated with reluctance to accept gendered explanations for DFV.³ Conversely, I show how small g definitions (coupled with an analysis of power in relationships) can help us understand both the way gender influences a variety of forms of DFV. This in turn helps us to understand how to address the problem.

¹ Research Fellow, Australia and New Zealand School of Government and PhD candidate, UNSW; s.yates@anzsog.edu.au

² The policy subsystem is a useful unit of analysis for understanding policy processes. It comprises a range of actors from different organisations who are interested in a particular policy area and regularly attempt to influence subsystem affairs (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014).

³ Defined here, as in the Victorian Family Violence Protection Act 2008, as behaviour by a person towards a family member that is physically, sexually, emotionally, psychologically, or economically abusive, or is threatening, coercive, or in any way controls or dominates them. Additionally, causing a child to hear, witness or be exposed to family violence constitutes family violence. I prefer the term 'domestic and family violence' as it encompasses both terms commonly used in Australian research on this topic, although I sometimes use it interchangeably with 'family violence' when discussing the specific Victorian policy context.

Big G and small g gender

Some of my earlier research (Hartley et al. 2013) focused on public managers' understandings of politics in their work. In that research it was useful to distinguish 'big P' politics - that is, formal politics - with 'small p' politics, which is more informal and involves the different goals, values, priorities and interests of individuals and groups (Manzie and Hartley 2013). Big P politics is what most people think of when you ask them about their working definition of politics - it encompasses the 'headline' elements of parliaments, Prime Ministers, political parties. But small p politics is broader, more applicable to everyday situations and interactions, and is pervasive in our lives.

A similar taxonomy can also be applied to definitions of gender. Like big P politics, 'big G' gender encompasses most people's working definitions, and the 'headline' elements of men and women, Mars and Venus. As one of my participants remarked, "*I think sometimes the way in which we conceptualise how gender is coined colloquially, is it's about physiological differences between men and women*". Gender is seen as two or more categories that attach to people – whether innate, self-defined, or socially assigned. People who accept that gender identity is not necessarily tied to biological sex can still have big G understandings of gender; the distinguishing characteristic is that they see gender as what people *are* (i.e. male, female, or even non-binary).

'Small g' understandings of gender have roots in recent decades of feminist and queer theory. For people with small g definitions, gender is something that people perform, that includes hierarchies and relations within gender categories and between gender categories, that exists in societal structures, and that is malleable. The main distinction from big G is that small g definitions see gender as what people (and institutions) *do*.⁴ Figure 1 captures the main elements of difference between the two approaches.

It is important to note that gender *inequality* can be equally recognised by those who use Big G and those who hold small g definitions.

⁴ In her work on gender in international development (Fletcher 2015) and sexual violence prevention (Fletcher 2014), Gillian Fletcher draws on many of the same ideas to distinguish 'object/category' thinking from 'process' thinking.

Figure 1. big G and small g gender

'big G' gender

- gender as category
- gender as something that people 'have' – focus on gender identity
- can be (but need not be) synonymous with sex
- assumed to be more fixed than fluid
- example definition from participant sample:
P14: *Well sex is plumbing, gender is either the self-applied label or the societal-applied label*

'small g' gender

- gender as process (at individual and structural levels)
- gender as something people 'do', i.e. perform
- often conceptualised as fluid rather than fixed
- encompasses hierarchies and relations within and between gender categories
- example definition from participant sample:
P10: *Gender is the social construction, so the social rules and regulations, the pattern of how men and women relate to each other but also amongst themselves, how men relate to men, women relate to women, and men and women relate*

This work is informed by policy scholars (e.g. Bacchi 2009; Murray and Powell 2009; Verloo 2005) who argue that the way policy problems are defined has strong implications for the actions that are taken to address them. I contend that policy actors' understanding of gender is important for their framing of - and therefore their response to - domestic and family violence. Big G, categorical understandings of gender can be very useful: they allow for analyses of official statistics showing that that men mostly perpetrate violence in families, and that this violence is directed mostly towards women and children. Without big G gender and the advocacy and action of grassroots feminist movements of the 1960s and 70s, DFV may not have been recognised by governments at all as a matter requiring urgent action.

However, if gender is only a category (big G), and some family violence does not fit the stereotypical pattern of men abusing women, it can be easy to dismiss 'the gendered approach' to family violence, and frame the problem as a gender-neutral phenomenon. Or even if big G arguments about majority male perpetrators and majority female victim/survivors lead to an acceptance of the need to consider gender, it can be difficult to see how gender processes interact to create some of the conditions that lead to violence.

On the other hand, if gender is also process, structure, and patterns of relations that distribute power (small g), it is easier to tease out how gender affects the prevalence, directionality and outcomes of family violence. It is also easier to incorporate experiences and outcomes relating to marginalised groups into the problem definition and policy prescription.

Why do definitions matter? Big G, small g and DFV

In this section I expand on what I mean by 'small g' gender, based mainly on the work of key theorists Raewyn Connell and Barbara Risman, with additional insights from feminist institutionalism. I also explain, drawing on relevant literature, how small g definitions aid our understanding of DFV as a gendered phenomenon. By this, I do not mean that DFV is perpetrated solely by people of one biological sex against those of another, or that its negative effects are solely suffered by people of one sex. I mean that patterns of perpetration, outcomes of violence, and perceptions of violent behaviour are related to gender. As Sjoberg (2015) argues (with reference to international relations, but with equal relevance to DFV), gender is necessary for understanding the problem, important for analysing causes and predicting outcomes, and essential when thinking about solutions and promoting change.

Small g understandings are not a monolith, but fundamentally they recognise that gender does not map neatly to biological sex, and that biological sex itself is far from a binary phenomenon (in fact, the sex binary owes a lot to cultural constructions; see e.g. Ainsworth 2015; Butler 1990). Gender, according to sociologist Raewyn Connell (2005), is a set of repeated 'processes' that are not determined by biological sex but are still linked to the body: "the everyday conduct of life is organized in relation to a reproductive arena, defined by the bodily structures and processes of human reproduction" (2005, p. 71). Key to the 'gender as process' view is the notion that gender is neither fixed nor stable, and in fact is "an identity tenuously constituted in time...through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 2002, p. 179). Although constantly referring to bodies and what bodies do, gender exists "precisely to the extent that biology does *not* determine the social" (Connell 2005, p. 71). Gender identity is continually renegotiated as we engage with our physical embodiment, participate in social practices, and encounter networks of power relations that are specific to our time and culture (Hooper 2001).

Socially constructed gender binaries

Gender defines the social categories of women and men and locates them differentially in many spheres of life. Divisions between masculinity and femininity – what it means to be male and female, and the actions expected of sexed bodies on each side of the binary – are persistent features of social and cultural life, even though the 'content' of gender (i.e. the details of these binaries) varies across time and space (Jackson 2006; Hooper 2001).

Much recent scholarship on *multiple* masculinities and femininities (e.g. Connell 2005 and Hooper 2001) has argued that there are many ways to be male and to be female. However, the way we in Western countries speak about gender often constructs masculinity and femininity as opposites, with qualities such as rationality, autonomy, strength, power, and competitiveness being coded as masculine, and intuition, empathy, vulnerability, and cooperation coded as feminine (Hooper 2001, p. 43-44).

Gender and power

Crucially, there is not simply a difference in the gender attached to male and female bodies; gender differences lead to a *sustained and pervasive power differential*. Certain patterns of practicing masculinity – those that comprise 'hegemonic' masculinity, or "the most honored way

of being a man” – form the peak of the gender hierarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The processes that create gender often confer power to masculinity at the expense of femininity in what Connell refers to as the ‘patriarchal dividend’ (Connell and Pearse 2014). This can be difficult to grasp, because while particular transactions involving the assertion of power by one person over another are easily observable, the structures (i.e. the sets of regularised social relations) that underlie individual acts of force or oppression are less visible (Connell 1987). Thus it is hard to look beyond one man physically or psychologically abusing his partner to the structures of power that support and enable this violence.⁵ This is partly because overt violence is not usually necessary to assert dominance; violence appears as part of a ‘complex’ of gendered power relations that involves public institutions and the way they are organised (Connell 1987). These gendered institutions (such as laws on marriage, property, parenting and inheritance; the recognition of heterosexual coupling; and the male-dominated military) are not just analytical constructs - they are “concrete parts of our daily lives” that “position human subjects in unequal and hierarchical relations of power and meaning” (Htun 2005).

Literature reviews on IPV outcomes for women and men have found that women suffer disproportionately from the effects of DFV, and a gender and power analysis can help us understand why. Economic disadvantage (Anderson 2005), and rates of injury, fear, posttraumatic stress, relationship dissatisfaction, depression/anxiety, and substance abuse all tend to be higher for female victims of IPV (Anderson 2005; Caldwell et al. 2012). Big G understandings of gender can take us this far, as these points relate to the effects of violence on different categories of people. As discussed above, a big G approach has arguably been instrumental for promoting the message that men largely perpetrate the violence, and women and children are much more at risk (and suffer more from its effects). But as valentine and Breckenridge (2016) note, this type of recognition acknowledges a difference in the sex of the victim/survivors rather than analysing the gendered performance of violence in interpersonal relationships. It does not account for the gender asymmetry of violence except through categories of risk.

Here is where a small g understanding of the relationship between gender and power has explanatory value. The analyses of Anderson (2005) and Caldwell et al. (2012) show that while sex category is a moderating influence on IPV outcomes, structural and cultural factors leading to a gender-related *power imbalance* are the nub of the problem. Rather than an ‘inherent feminine vulnerability’ on an individual level, Caldwell et al. (2012) argue that “women are more likely than men to encounter contextual factors that disempower them, and put them in situations ...that increase risk of poor outcomes” (p. 53).

Gender and economic inequality

Economically, the structural power imbalance between men and women is very high; in the words of Connell (2005a), there is a “dividend accruing to men from unequal shares of the products of social labour” (p. 74). This is strongly shaped by gendered norms about the work

⁵ I acknowledge other forms of DFV (e.g. abuse in same sex relationships; abuse of children by parents; abuse of LGBTI children by parents and other family members) and have addressed some of them later in this article and in my doctoral work.

women and men should do, and the way women and men should engage in the workforce (Workplace Gender Equality Agency 2016). As a result of this dividend, women are much more likely than men to be financially dependent on their partners (Anderson 2005).

Even if women are engaged in paid work, there is still a substantial pay gap between the sexes, with Australian men working full-time currently earning 17.3% more than Australian women working full-time (Workplace Gender Equality Agency 2016). The pay gap is explained by factors such as the segregation of women and men into different industries combined with the devaluing of work performed in 'feminised' occupations such as nursing and social work. Precarious connection to the workforce, difference in work experience, and difference in seniority (often due to careers shaped or interrupted by childcare responsibilities) also contribute. Finally, conscious and unconscious discrimination play a part (Workplace Gender Equality Agency 2016).

Women also complete much more unpaid caring and domestic work as men; worldwide, women do approximately 2.5 times as much of this work as men, and in Australia 1.8 times as much as men (UN Women 2015, p. 84 and 269). Time spent on unpaid labour is time *unspent* on the development of skills and networks outside the home. These factors increase women's vulnerability to economic abuse (a form of DFV gaining increasing prominence through the work of the Commission), make them less able to leave abusive relationships or family situations, and also more financially disadvantaged when they do leave (Anderson 2005).

Violence and sexual/gender diversity

Despite the straw feminists constructed and handily dispatched by researchers such as Dutton (2010), contemporary feminist analysis does not maintain that patriarchy as often crudely construed (i.e. domination of men over women) is the sole explanatory factor for DFV, or that "all consequential intimate partner violence is male-perpetrated" (Johnson 2011). If that were so, same-sex relationships (especially between women) would be violence-free, and they are not.

But even in same-sex relationships, overall patterns of abuse are still gendered. Women in same-sex relationships are more likely to experience emotional abuse, and abusive/controlling behaviours related to their children (Donovan and Hester 2014); men are more likely to experience physical and sexual abuse from their male partners (Donovan and Hester 2014; Robinson and Rowlands 2009). These findings relate to gender and not just sex because of structural factors, for example the fact that women are assigned more responsibility for the care and wellbeing of children (and thus children are more likely to be a factor in abusive lesbian relationships than in abusive gay male relationships). The findings about higher rates of physical and sexual abuse in gay male relationships can be partially explained by the fact that men and boys tend to "receive more instruction in the use of violence" from a young age (Anderson 2005, p. 859; see also Connell and Pearse 2014), while women and girls are commonly socialised to express aggression non-physically (Eliot 2012).

LGBT relationships can be the site of identity-related abusive behaviours (Donovan and Hester 2014). These include 'outing' or threatening to out someone; undermining someone's sense of

gender or sexual identity (e.g. “you’re not a real gay man”); and withdrawing or threatening to withdraw gender transition treatment or medication (p. 209). Heterosexism intersects with the ‘women as caregivers’ norm, meaning that women are more likely than men to have custody of their children, and then be at risk of losing custody if outed by their partners (Anderson 2005). Further, homophobia and transphobia - leading to abuse of LGBT people by their families, and a major barrier for LGBT victim/survivors seeking help from DFV services (Calton et al 2015) - have roots in rigid societal understandings of what it means to be male or female.

Modern gendered approaches to family violence do not assume a straightforward relationship between gender and power, but rather use a questioning of power, gender and sexuality as a central focus (Hester et al. 2010). These ‘gender and power’ approaches are sensitive to how gender distributes power unevenly in cultures across the world, while recognising that power does not map neatly onto gender, and can be manifested in age difference, income inequality, community knowledge, class and education - just to name a few (Donovan and Hester 2014). Moving beyond individualist analyses where the use of a person’s sex category (often conflated with gender) is used to predict violent behaviour, these ‘small g’ ways of thinking about gender “provide more fruitful contributions to our understanding of the relationship between gender” and DFV (Anderson 2005).

More simply put, modern gendered approaches to DFV focus on *how gender matters*, while keeping a firm eye on the many ways in gender intersects with other power-distributing factors to contribute to patterns and experiences of domestic and family violence.

Gender lies within and beyond the individual

Many scholars have argued that the construction of gender occurs at different levels or on different dimensions. Here I employ sociologist Barbara Risman’s (2004) conception of gender processes at the *individual/personality*, *interactional/cultural*, and *institutional* levels. Risman’s framework helps to show how processes in different arenas and at different abstractions from the individual combine to create gender. I explore these processes below.

Risman (2004) proposes that gender “differentiates opportunities and constraints based on sex category” (p. 433) at three levels, and in complicated ways. In the following discussion, I underline examples of (small g) gender processes that operate at each level.

Our gendered selves develop on the individual level. Here we can look to identity-constructing processes such as explicit socialisation (i.e. direct or indirect behavioural instructions) and modelling (i.e. watching and copying the behaviour of others) to explain why people seem not only *constrained* to perform gender in certain ways, but also apparently *choose* to do so (Risman 2004; see also Hooper 2001 and Fine 2011 on the differential treatment of boys and girls from birth). For example, a toddler may insist on wearing a pink dress because she has seen other girls doing so and has inferred that girls are supposed to like pink. This may happen despite her parents’ careful choice of varied colours for her wardrobe, and their commitment to gender neutral child-rearing.

On the interactional and cultural level, men and women face different cultural expectations even when they fill identical structural positions (e.g. senior management roles). Status expectations associated with gender (and race) categories have been shown to be cross-situational - that is, they recreate inequality even in new settings where male privilege would not be expected to emerge. Women and people of colour (in Anglo societies at least) are assumed to have less to contribute to task performance than white men, unless they have another externally validated source of prestige, such as wealth (Risman 2004). Subordinate adaptation - the “strategies that people use to cope with subordinate status” - may produce financial or status benefits for individuals, but also reproduce power differentials. For example, women may “trade power for patronage” by accepting practices that demean or disempower them in exchange for protection or better status relative to other women (Schwalbe et al. 2000), such as when younger women form relationships with older, more powerful men.

Finally the institutional level concerns formal and informal rules such as laws, regulations and organisational practices. Some of these distinguish by sex category (Risman 2004) and therefore are easily understood in a big G sense, such as the recently repealed restrictions on women serving in frontline combat roles in the Australian military. However, some have differential effects upon women and men despite their apparent gender-neutrality (Beckwith 2005; see Gains and Lowndes 2014 for more on “rules with gendered effects”). For example, formal rules about the timing of meetings can have gendered effects when combined with the ‘women as caregivers’ norm, and the limited availability of state-subsidised childcare (Chappell and Waylen 2013). These rules matter to gender at all levels; as Beckwith (2005) argues, “public practice shapes private behaviour and possibilities” (p. 133).

How gender processes at different levels interrelate

The interrelationship between various levels of gender processes makes it difficult to change outcomes. The formal institutional level is often the easiest at which to effect change – for example by passing new legislation – but even when formal institutions are improved, there is still insufficient improvement in gender equality outcomes. The “stalled gender revolution” (Risman 2004 p. 436) can be explained by reference to the two other levels: legislative requirements to hire staff based on merit rather than sex category may not gain much traction if men are seen as more capable and dedicated, or if women have less impressive CVs or interrupted work histories due to childcare responsibilities. Formal and informal institutions intersect and affect each other in complicated ways (see e.g. Chappell and Waylen 2013), meaning that unless scholars take account of the ‘host’ of institutions in which women and men operate, it will be difficult for them to understand the causes of disadvantage (Burns 2005). As Risman (2004) puts it:

The implications for feminist social change are direct: We cannot simply attend to socializing children differently, nor creating moral accountability for men to share family work, nor fighting for flexible, family-friendly workplaces. We must attend to all simultaneously (p. 441).

These conceptual foundations also apply to the way we address DFV. Based on the scholarship presented here, it is insufficient – as occurs with many prevention programs – just to teach men

not to hit women, and to teach women to recognise the warning signs of violence and control. As valentine and Breckenridge (2016) argue, DFV is gendered not just because it mainly affects women, but because we inhabit social and economic systems in which women and children have limited choices and are constrained in their capacity to act. Taking another angle, Sjoberg (2015) notes that women are statistically less likely to be violent because they experience gendered expectations of passivity, peacefulness, care labour and dependency, and live with fewer freedoms, rights, and less access to personal autonomy – not because of any inherent peaceful character. DFV is influenced by complicated patterns of (small g) *gendered* power relations.

Even if prevention efforts are broadened to include changing people's attitudes towards gender equality, this is *still* not enough. As Salter (2015) notes in his recent review of violence against women (VAW) prevention programs, little attention is paid to institutional factors such as the division of labour or economic inequality, while gender *norms* are prioritised “as the primary basis upon which VAW will be prevented” (p. 7). However, the conditions that enable violence occur on every level of gendered processes individual, interactional, and institutional. ‘Small g’ gendered approaches to DFV provide the best conceptual framework we have for understanding and combating the conditions enabling violence at all these levels.

Big G and small g in RCFV expert witnesses

In this article, I draw on data from a larger project examining problem framing in Victoria's Royal Commission into Family Violence. This work focuses on how and where gender appears in both the Commission's report and recommendations, and the narratives of the expert witnesses heard in the Commission's public hearings.

I analysed public hearings transcripts and witness statements, and conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 expert witnesses and two Commissioners.⁶ Interviewees came from a variety of sectors, including family violence, alcohol and other drugs, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, mental health, LGBTI, and disability. Interviewing these experts gave me an opportunity to directly ask “what do you mean when you say gender?” and relate those statements to their understanding of the role of gender in DFV. I mostly asked this question opportunistically during discussions of gender's role in DFV, although in one or two cases the subject did not arise naturally and I introduced gender as one of my questions. To help preserve participants' anonymity, I use singular ‘they’ in the following discussion.

Participants' definitions of gender were extremely varied. Many did not have a ready response, or had not thought deeply about the meaning of this term. One participant (P04, a child mental health professional) mused that men and women was the immediate construct that came to mind, but they were not sure that this was adequate to describe the human race: “*So what my construct would be...is I don't have a construct. I don't know.*” Another (P08) responded:

⁶ Of the 18 expert witnesses interviewed, three were not directly asked about their understanding of gender. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, apart from one (P20, The Hon Marcia Neave AO, Commissioner of the RCFV), for which I took notes. The research received ethics clearance from the University of New South Wales.

I don't understand the question. Gender...I'm a [woman/man].

SY: Yep. So that's what it means?

To me it does.

SY: OK. So it means whether you're a woman or a man.

Or something else.

The answer had seemed so obvious to P08 that they wanted the question clarified. Others, while giving a categorical 'big G' response about the differences between men and women, seemed aware that others might define gender differently:

P18 (men's health worker): Well normally I think of male and female as gender, and that's a rigid old-fashioned style...and I suppose I've been conditioned to that because of the work environment and what's our clientele and what we deal with. If I was working in the middle of [capital city] I'd have learnt very differently.

P19 (anti-alcohol advocate): I suppose I do, in terms of working around this stuff, just think about it as the...the differences between men and women. That's quite reductionist but that's probably how I approach it.

Still others referenced the ways in which gender is constructed, and not innate:

P06 (family violence researcher): ...gender is a construction and it is the way in which people define themselves. So I think it's...yeah. Gender is not something you're born with.

P07 (alcohol sector CEO): It's what [assignment to gender has] meant as people's identity and what behaviours are being associated with that, that have maintained those differences absolutely. And how you deconstruct that, and how we help create generations of kids for which there's less prescription about what it should mean to be a man or a woman.

The broadest definitions brought in societal structures and patterns of relationships between different masculinities and femininities:

P10 (LGBTI researcher): ... gender is the social construction, so the social rules and regulations, the pattern of how men and women relate to each other but also amongst themselves, how men relate to men, women relate to women, and men and women relate.

P20 (Commissioner Neave): The power structures and meanings that exist in our society as a consequence of human beings' assignment to their biological sex; what it means to

be masculine and what it means to be feminine; the notion that you need clearly defined differences between men and women

This is not just an interesting academic exercise. These people, many of whom use the same term to mean very different things, all have a role in Victoria's response to DFV. They were all deemed to have experience or expertise important enough to provide input into the world's first royal commission into family violence.

As mentioned above, their understanding of gender is important for their framing of DFV, which in turn affects the actions to be taken to address the problem. If gender is only a category, and some family violence does not fit the stereotypical pattern of men abusing women, it can be easy to dismiss 'the gendered approach' to family violence. Because big G gender attaches to people rather than structures and institutions, it is also more compatible with the kinds of individualised (rather than sociopolitical) DFV responses criticised by scholars such as valentine and Breckenridge (2016) and DeKeseredy (2011) as not addressing the roots of the problem. If gender is process, structure, patterns of relations, it is easier to tease out the ways in which it affects the prevalence and outcomes of family violence.

For example, P05 (a senior mental health professional) gave a big G definition of gender: "*it's usually how a person defines themselves in terms of their...whether they regard themselves as male, female or whatever. As distinct from biology.*" They had remained gender neutral throughout the interview, including when discussing causes of family violence (mainly seen as societal attitudes to aggression or violence and criminogenic risk factors). This is itself noteworthy - Ackerley and True (2010) urge researchers to pay attention to silences and absences in the research process, because what is *not* voiced can be as revealing as what is voiced. P05's silence on issues of gender suggested its low priority in their understanding of the problem. However, in the final five minutes P05 volunteered this observation:

So I know it's possible to look at family violence from a feminist framework and see it all as a result of power imbalances which reflect paternalistic structures in society. I think that's an important perspective but it doesn't explain all violence, and there clearly is violence which occurs which is hard to explain from that framework.

SY: And do you think there's too much emphasis on the gendered view here?

No I think it's appropriate because by and large the violence is- the majority is male against female. But it's important to recognise there are other types of violence which do occur, so female and female partner does occur, and siblings on parents violence does occur and that's a really important emerging problem. And so it can get a bit blinded to that fact if you over-emphasise.

Because they defined gender primarily as category, in P05's view gender was adequate only to explain violence perpetrated by adult men against women. However, a small g analysis of violence in lesbian relationships or child to parent violence reveals patterns that are profoundly gendered. Taking the latter example, due to the 'women as caregivers' norm, mothers on verage

spend much more time with their children than fathers. They also hold less power in families, again for gendered reasons. This makes them more vulnerable to violence from children of either sex. Boys and young men, on the other hand, are socialised to suppress their emotions (Schwalbe et al. 2000), while being socialised more than girls and young women to use violence (Anderson 2005; Sjoberg 2015). Thus they may resort to violence both inside and outside the home because they lack the verbal skills to express their feelings - as noted by addiction researcher P14: *"A lot of young men will hit because they can't talk."*

These gendered factors create the conditions through which, in the family violence incidents recorded by Victoria Police from 2009-2014 where the perpetrator was a child under 17 and the victim was a parent, 64% of perpetrators were male children, and 80% of victims were mothers (State of Victoria 2016, p. 151). While police statistics do not tell the whole story, this is a strikingly gendered pattern (in a big G sense, and for small g reasons). This was reinforced by P02, who reflected that when they encountered women running a support group for parents being abused by their adolescent children, *"it was the mothers who would come to the group, and what they realised was that often, not always but often the violence was actually directed toward the mother ... The husbands, partners, fathers would often not be so much exposed to it, or wouldn't be the target."*

P09, an Aboriginal sector executive, acknowledged that most victims of family violence are women. However, they also rejected

a gender-based thing where a woman is a victim and a man is a perpetrator, let us just look at everybody is a victim of family violence to some degree, and everybody needs a service delivery that will effect behavioural change.

To P09, 'gender-based' services failed to see women as capable of perpetrating violence. While arguing that behaviour change programs needed to be offered for female perpetrators, P09 suggested that they should be separate to men's programs because *"women process information and think differently, and communicate differently to men"*. Taken together, these statements seem to indicate a big G understanding of gender.

Simultaneously, P09 argued that men do not like to admit being a victim of violence due to the 'shame factor': *"I think there's some standardised gender expectations that if you're men you wouldn't be a victim."* Thus, while P09 mainly used the word gender in its big G categorical sense, rejected 'gender-based' approaches, and explained the causes of violence with reference to intergenerational and individual factors, they also recognised the barriers that hegemonic gender roles impose on men's reporting of violence.

Discussion

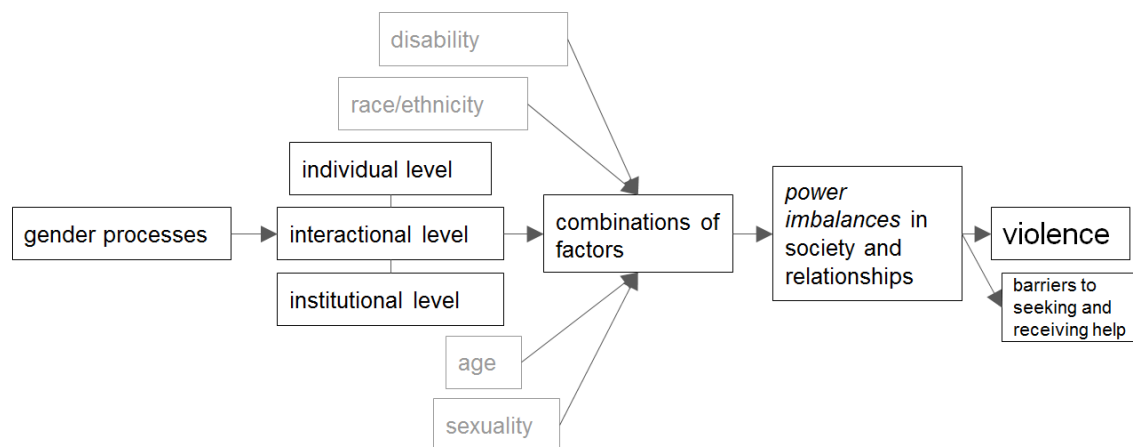
The clear message from my interviews with members of Victoria's family violence policy subsystem is that policy actors can mean very different things even when they use the same language. This is problematic in any field, but is particularly so in a field whose purpose is to respond to such a devastating and complex social issue.

Not all participants who gave big G definitions rejected the role of gender inequality as a cause of DFV. Some argued that the official statistics demonstrating primarily male perpetrators and primarily female victim/survivors showed that (big G) gender was a key factor, and that gender inequality (i.e. inequality between people of the male gender and people of the female gender) was a primary underlying cause of the violence.

Interestingly though, all participants who *were* skeptical of gendered approaches, or thought there was too much emphasis on gender in the DFV response system (e.g. P14: *If we're caring we should be caring about all the people and not just one group over another*), defined gender in big G terms, or hadn't thought enough about gender to have a working definition. I argue that the prevalence of big G gender in the family violence policy subsystem (and in the community generally) may frustrate researchers and policy entrepreneurs who want to cement (small g) gender as a crucial explanatory factor in the problem of DFV. If gender attaches only to bodies, if it means men and women, then it loses its explanatory power when violence occurs that either does not fit the pattern of male to female intimate partner violence, or is not solely explained by gender inequality. This is why we see people saying that it can't be about gender because violence occurs in same sex relationships, or that it can't be about gender because sometimes women abuse men, or children abuse parents. If you look closely and employ small g understandings of gender, gendered patterns appear everywhere.

While not all domestic and family violence can be explained with reference to gender, a useful working model (Figure 2) sees DFV as primarily caused by *power imbalances* that are mediated by many things. One of those things - certainly one of the most important in understanding DFV, because of its ubiquity - is gender. Other factors include race, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, age, and socioeconomic status. These factors intersect in individuals and collectively increase their vulnerability to violence, while also affecting the nature of violence and how it is experienced (Nixon and Humphreys 2010; Our Watch et al. 2015). This leads to the "double disadvantage" of being Aboriginal and being a woman described by P08, or of being a woman with disability (P11). The intersectional 'gender and power' approach to DFV developed in this article is greatly aided by small g understandings of gender.

Figure 2. Gender, intersectionality, power, and violence



Getting the message out about gender can be difficult, especially in the face of large-scale, decontextualised research tools that distinguish by sex category or big G gender, and count incidents rather than examine context and outcomes. Small g gender allows us to peek behind the numbers to contrast a) a woman hitting her husband in an isolated incident with b) a man hitting his wife in the context of an ongoing pattern of power and control, involving her comparatively lower status in the family, her fear of losing her children if she leaves, and her lack of financial independence. Each scenario might be counted as one incident using the kind of research tools based on big G gender, and be given equal weight in policy evidence. But small g gender reveals the structures and processes that lie behind the incidents – and how we might act to alter them.

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