

POSTPRINT

**Arnulf Deppermann**

Institut für Deutsche Sprache, Mannheim, Germany and  
Department of Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian Languages, University of Helsinki, Finland  
E-mail: [deppermann@ids-mannheim.de](mailto:deppermann@ids-mannheim.de)

**Unpacking Parental Violence in Narratives:  
Agency, Guilt, and Pedagogy in Narratives about  
Traumatic Interpersonal Experiences**

**Abstract:** This article deals with narratives of traumatic experiences of parental violence in childhood, told by adult narrators in the context of clinical adult attachment interviews. The study rests on a corpus of interviews with 20 patients suffering from fibromyalgia, who were interviewed in the context of psychodynamic psychotherapy. Nine of the patients reported repeated experiences of parental violence. The article focuses on extracts from two interviews, which provide for a maximal contrast concerning the practices of telling experiences of violence and which are 'clear cases' of the practices that are characteristic of the whole corpus. The main differences between the different ways of telling concern:

- With respect to the ascription of guilt and responsibility, parental violence is portrayed as legitimate pedagogic action versus as being evil-minded and guilty without rational justification.
- With respect to the process of the telling, we find narrative trajectories over which an initial vague gloss is increasingly unpacked by reports of highly violent actions versus narratives in which violence is overtly stated and morally ascribed from its very first mention.

**1. TRAUMATIC VIOLENCE, AGENCY, AND NARRATIVE  
TRAJECTORIES**

'Agency' is a key notion for analyzing trauma narratives because traumatic experiences share two defining features, which are immediately related to agency: physical or psychological damage and helplessness (Resick 2001; Maercker *et al.* 2018). Helplessness refers to a state of extremely reduced agency in the face of a severe danger and damage. Responsibility, guilt, and intentionality are facets of agency, which are basic for how victims interpret traumatic violence and cope with it. In stories of interpersonal traumata, the narrator has to deal with the question how violence was motivated: was it intentional or caused by situational contingencies? Did the narrated I give rise to violence so that it may have been justified or could have been avoided?

Prior research has discussed linguistic properties of narratives, which seem to be related to different styles and degrees of coping with trauma; however, findings have not always been consistent yet (O’Kearney and Perrott 2006; Römisch *et al.* 2014; Crespo and Fernández-Lansac 2016). Some of these linguistic properties are also means by which victims ascribe guilt and responsibility in trauma narratives (Deppermann and Lucius-Hoene 2005; Scheidt and Lucius-Hoene 2015). Namely, the selection and categorization of actions reported, the creation of causal and legitimizing coherence between narrated events, (non-)naming of perpetrators and victims in the story, and emotional and evaluative stance-taking are primarily important for ascribing agency. Representation of violence and ascriptions of agency, however, are not simply ‘encoded’ by tellers. Rather, they emerge over the process of storytelling, often being co-constructed by interlocutors’ questions and responses and being contingent on the development of topic and rapport.

This article deals with narratives of the experience of traumatic parental violence in childhood told by adult narrators in the context of a clinical interview. It has two analytic foci:

- With respect to the ascription of guilt and responsibility, it analyzes practices of the representation of parental violence as legitimate pedagogic action versus violence as being evil-minded and guilty without rational justification.
- With respect to the process of the telling, it contrasts narrative trajectories over which an initial gloss is increasingly unpacked in reports of highly violent actions with narratives in which violence is overtly stated and morally ascribed from the beginning.

In Section 2, the notion of ‘agency’ is introduced as a theoretical background for the pragma-linguistic analysis of issues of guilt and responsibility. Section 3 describes the data of the study. In Sections 4 and 5, results of a qualitative study on the ascription of agency in narratives about parental violence are reported. Section 4 briefly deals with the general observation that narrators characterize parents who, as turns out later in the story, have acted violently as being ‘strict’. In Section 5, two exemplary, contrastive cases are analyzed. In the first one, violence is at first indirectly glossed and legitimized and only made explicit in later narrative episodes; in the second case, violence is explicitly described and morally ascribed already in its first mention. Section 6 closes with conclusions about how agency ascription is built into the representation of episodes. It highlights the interpersonal, sequential, and holistic nature of the ascription of guilt and responsibility in the narratives studied.

## 2. AGENCY

Agency is a core dimension of the conceptualization of events. When conceptualizing events, the following questions inevitably arise: How were they caused? Who did what to whom? In linguistics, sociology, and philosophy, ‘agency’ is to capture properties of the subject as agent, that is, its role with respect to the

events in which it is involved. Linguistic approaches theorize agency within the context of semantic roles (Fillmore 1977; Primus 1999); the most detailed linguistic discussion of the role of 'agent' by Dowty (1991) concludes that a prototypical agent is characterized by volition, sentience, movement, causative force upon other entities, and independent existence (Dowty 1991: 562). The agentive role is often identified with the (transitive) subject, a connection that, however, does not always hold (Duranti 2004). Yet, a sociologically informed approach to agency goes beyond these mental and physical qualities (Ahearn 2001). By ascribing agency, physical behavior is conceived of as meaningful action, which is attributed to an agent as a responsible subject (Giddens 1979, Taylor 1985) and which is related to the social power that a person may or may not deploy (Duranti 1994, 2004). When talking about persons' actions, they can be characterized by reference to different dimensions of agency, exhibiting either a high or a low degree of agency on each of them:

- a. Activity versus passivity, that is, the subject either performs an action or—as a patient—is affected by another's action. Refraining to act deliberately, however, is seen as an action.
- b. Causation of action: is the self (autonomy) or the other (heteronomy) the source of an action?
- c. Consciousness: actions may be conscious or unconscious, preconscious routine actions being an intermediary case.
- d. Control: actions may be controlled by the subject or be perceived as being uncontrolled or uncontrollable.
- e. Intentionality: intentional action in a strong sense is planned action as opposed to unintentional and unplanned behavior. While highly individual, strategic, or creative actions are actions with a high degree of agency, actions that follow conventional, socially expected pathways of routine are actions with an intermediary level of agency. A subject theoretical notion of 'autonomy' would locate it on the level of intentional action.
- f. Moral evaluation, that is, the assessment of an action as good or rational versus bad or irrational as opposed to no moral assessment: moral evaluation presupposes agency in terms of being able to control one's actions, which is the prerequisite that an actor can be held responsible for what she/he has done. Moral evaluation also mostly rests on an ascription of intentionality.

Ascriptions of actions and their results as achievement versus failure, luck versus bad luck, legitimate action versus guilt, responsible actions versus unintentional *faux pas*, blunder, instinctive reflex, enforced behavior, etc. all involve different ascriptions and configurations of aspects of agency to persons. The linguistic study of how agency in the wider, sociological sense is represented in language is still in its very beginnings (Duranti 2004). Beyond the study of its specific subject matter of trauma narratives, the current study, therefore, aims to contribute to discovering how agency is expressed in talk.

Methodologically, this study is situated within a pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and interactive approach to narrative (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012,

2015), which reaches beyond a structural and proposition-oriented approach. In particular, it attends to the contextual embeddedness of the act of narrating and to the teller's moral and emotional stance (Ochs and Capps 2001), which is importantly expressed not only on the propositional level but also on the performative plane as well (Deppermann 2015). In addition to prototypical, full-fledged narratives, 'small stories' (Georgakopoulou 2007), which are told in service of communicative goals that arise during social interaction, will also be taken into account.

### 3. DATA

This study rests on a corpus of interviews with 20 patients suffering from fibromyalgia, which were recorded at the Department of Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy of Freiburg University (Germany). Interviews were conducted according to the guidelines of the Adult Attachment Interview (Hesse 1999). All patients were interviewed in the context of psychodynamic psychotherapy and have consented to be included in this study. Interviews were repeated at the end of the therapy and 12 months after treatment in order to control for (long-term) changes induced by psychotherapy (Scheidt *et al.* 2013). The analyses presented here, however, only rest on a comprehensive inspection of all interviews at  $t_0$ . Nine out of 20 patients included in the study reported regular experiences of parental violence in their childhood and youth. Psycho-diagnostic measures suggest that suffering from fibromyalgia in these patients is probably related to a post-traumatic stress disorder arising from experiences of interpersonal violence. Section 5 will focus on extracts from two interviews, which provide for a maximal contrast concerning the practices of representing experiences of violence and which can be seen as most 'clear cases' of the practices which are characteristic of the whole corpus.

### 4. GLOSSING PARENTAL VIOLENCE AS 'STRENG' ('STRICT')

The Adult Attachment Interview requires that early in the interview patients characterize the relationship to their parents by five adjectives for each parent. Seven out of the nine patients who, as turns out only later in the interview, had suffered from parental violence, characterized the relationship to their parents (mother, father, or both) as 'streng' ('strict'). None of them used adjectives such as 'grausam' ('cruel'), 'gewalttätig' ('violent'), or 'aggressiv' ('aggressive'); only 'jähzornig' ('irascible') was mentioned once.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of agency and against the background of an interview of (as turns out later) experiences of parental violence, it is remarkable that 'strict'

- a. does neither denote nor imply physical violence, but only that the person affected is led to stick strictly to standards of behavior which are sometimes at odds with what the person prefers,

- b. denotes enforcement of rule following, thus, an orientation to rules,
- c. is a category-bound predicate (cf. Sacks 1972). It applies to people who are in a position to educate others, that is, parents, teachers, etc. German 'streng' ('strict') implies a pedagogic motive, that is, rational justification of actions, at least if the normative background of educational goals is shared. If this is not the case, there is still the presumption that the parent categorized as 'streng' acts according to a normative motive which is justified from their point of view, that is, from the normative order valid for him/her and in her cultural background, even if the teller does not subscribe to it. Anyway, actions that are 'streng' are not, for example, sadistic, arbitrary, or pointless.

These semantic properties of 'streng' apply in each case it is used. If, however, 'streng' is used as a predicate to refer to physical violence, then it is not the violent act which is foregrounded, in fact, it becomes invisible. Rather, violence is framed as a pedagogically motivated and thus basically rational practice. In some interviews, patients explicitly justify being hit by parents. In other cases, patients evaluate violence as inappropriate, while still conceding the justification of the pedagogic motive.

## 5. NARRATIVE UNPACKING OF VIOLENCE

In the Adult Attachment Interview, interviewees are asked to tell how their relationship to their parents developed from early on. In this autobiographical storytelling part of the interview, initial attributions of properties to the parents viz. the relationship with them as 'strict' get elaborated in a narrative mode. In the nine interviews from our corpus in which parental violence was reported, the narrative representation of violence unfolded in two different ways in the process of telling. In one type, violence was made explicit only stepwise over consecutive stories, offering an increasing amount of details and overt evaluations (Section 5.1); in the second type, violence was addressed from the very beginning in an unambiguous and upgraded fashion and was characterized as the main feature of the parent-child relationship (Section 5.2).

### 5.1 Approaching violence stepwise

In six of the nine interviews reporting traumatic parental violence, the details and the morally problematic character of parental violence are only gradually unpacked. In first narratives about parental violence, violence is relegated to a secondary property of action; details of violent actions and negative moral assessments are provided only in later narrative episodes of the interview. Mostly this is done only (i) in response to follow-up questions by the interviewer and (ii) in several runs of stories in which parental actions become increasingly clearly and drastically categorized and described as being violent.

5.1.1 *From gloss to detail, from pedagogic legitimation to illegitimate outbursts of violence* In Interview 4a, in the very beginning of the interview, the interviewer asked the narrator to describe her relationship with her parents, starting in early childhood. The teller reported that she grew up on a farm. The parents were poor and she had to start working at the age of 10. She then turns to a narrative report of parental violence. The narrative is not about a single episode, but about an iterative pattern of interaction (Genette 1979).

#1 Interview 4a 102-106

001 NAR: ähm dann HÄN die mich,  
           *erm then they had me*  
 002       also mei mutter hat mer REgelrecht ähm,  
           *well my mother has me properly erm*  
 003       wie soll ich SAGE,  
           *how should I say?*  
 004       also war sie sehr STRENG,  
           *well she was very strict*  
 005       hat also nicht ZUGlasse,  
           *well didn't admit*  
 006       dass ma wie gsagt auf der STRASSE rumlungert sozusage.  
           *that one as I said like prowls in the street*  
 007       die hat also praktisch ähm mich mehr oder weniger auch schon  
           ganz schön ich SCHACH ghalte manchmal.  
           *well she erm more or less held me at bay properly really quite  
           nicely sometimes*

In lines 001 and 002, the patient cuts off twice her attempts at describing actions of her parents and her mother. The second attempt with the hedge ('regelrecht', 'properly') possibly projects the attribution of a morally problematic action. Instead, the patient self-repairs and switches from action description to using the adjective 'sehr streng' ('very strict', 004) and reformulates this by saying that her parents didn't allow her to prowl. The mother's action is not characterized in terms of its modalities, for example, if the mother had argued, threatened her, forced her physically, hit her, etc. Instead, the factive verb 'zugelassen' ('admit', 005) describes the result that the daughter was prevented from loafing about. In addition, this result has an auto-argumentative value: since prowling is an intrinsically negative categorization, an action that is destined to prevent the daughter from prowling leads to a positive effect and thus is legitimized as an action with a positive pedagogical motive. Reciprocally, the teller adumbrates by implicature that the narrated I tended to prowl because otherwise the mother's action would have been futile. So, a morally problematic action of the narrated I is introduced as the condition which together with the mother's pedagogic goal accounts for her action as a rational action.

After this, the teller uses another reformulation ‘in Schach gehalten’ (‘kept at bay’, 007). Again, this is a factive construction, which, however, indicates that this result was reached by using force. The nature of the constraint, however, is not made explicit.

This small excerpt is paradigmatic in two respects of the practice of representing physical violence as pedagogically motivated practice and thus (at least basically) as rational:

- a. Abstraction from violence: violence is not made explicit by abstaining from depicting the mode of action. Instead, the pre- and post-contexts of violence are depicted: the pre-context is the situational contingencies which motivated the action, the post-context is the pedagogically motivated results of violent action. The action as such is omitted, that is, the phenomenon that makes for the core action of the narrated episode is not named (cf. Wooffitt 1992).
- b. Agency of the violent parent and agency of the narrated I are intertwined. The parent’s action is not depicted as such, in its decontextualizable properties, but is introduced as a response to a prior action of the narrated I or at least as a preventive action to pre-empt actions of the narrated I. These actions of the narrated I, however, are morally deficient in the first place. Their moral deficiency provides a justification for the parent’s response and frames it as a pedagogically motivated response. The child’s prior guilt thus legitimizes the parent’s response. Parental violence thus indexes the child’s guilt or at least potential tendency to become guilty as its *raison d’être*, parental violence is not categorized as being intrinsically guilty by itself.

The description of action and the attribution of agency and guilt to the narrated I and the parents are thus neatly tailored to each other, most importantly, by (i) constructing sequential coherence between the narrated I’s problematic actions as a context for the parent’s response and (ii) by using action predicates which intrinsically evaluate the narrated I’s action as negative and which characterize the parent’s action by its pedagogically motivated result, but not by its mode of action.

In the next extract, we will witness how the description of parental violence becomes more vivid step by step.

#2 Interview 4a 204-227, 15: 00-16: 15

- 001 INT: sie hatten als ERstes (.) gesagt,  
*You first said*
- 002       dass ihre mutter STRENG war;  
*that your mother was strict*
- 003 NAR: JA-  
*yes*
- 004 INT: in der beZIEHUNG zu Ihnen (-)  
*in the relationship with you*

005 NAR: JA.  
*yes*

006 INT: ähm fällt Ihnen DAZU eine konkrete erIn[nerung ein-]  
*uh do you have some specific memory*

007 NAR: [((sighs)) ]

008 INT: ein erEIgnis, an das sie sich [erinnern-  
*some event which you remember*

009 NAR: [Ah ja zum BEIspiel,  
*well for example*

010 we\_mer äh, (. )  
*if one*

011 ich durfte zum BEIspiel,  
*I was allowed for instance*

012 wenn ich äh wenn ich äh, (-)  
*if I uhm if I uhm*

013 bei uns war so\_n MIETHäus-  
*in our village there was a tenement*

014 INT: [Mhm.]  
*uhum*

015 NAR: [und] da war des tre treffen der JUgend und so; (-)  
*and there the youth met and so on*

016 INT: Mhm.  
*uhum*

017 NAR: Un\_äh hat se gesagt,  
*and she said*

018 um NEUne, (. )  
*at nine o'clock*

019 musste daHEIM sein, ne,  
*you have to be at home right?*

020 INT: Mhm.  
*uhum*

021 NAR: und WEhe dem,  
*and beware if*

022 ich bin nit daHEIM komme und dann (. )  
*I didn't get home and then*

023 ((laughs))

024 is die mit em FAHRrad hh,  
*she took her bike*

025 hab halt öfter meine ZEIT vergessen,  
*I forgot my time often*

026 sagen wir mal, wenn man grad mal so FREIzeit ghet het,  
*say, if one had a bit of leisure time*

027 da isch die mit e fahrrad im ganze dorf und hat mich geSUCHT  
*then she took her bike and searched the whole village for me*  
 und so, ne? (-)  
*and so on right?*

028 INT: Mhm; (-)  
*uhum*



029 NAR: oder wenn ich mein ZIMMER nicht aufgeräumt hab, ne? (-)  
*or if I didn't tidy up my room, right?*

030 dann kann\_s also SCHON mal sein  
*then it can be*  
 dass sie mir an der HAAR gepackt hat, (-)  
*that he seized me by the hair*

031 INT: Mhm.  
*uhum*

032 NAR: und äh hat ihre gesagt,  
*and uh she said*

033 also ich hab dir das jetzt dreimal gSAGT und so weiter,  
*well I told you three times already and so on*

034 und wenn du\_s jetzt nit MACHSCHT,  
*and if you don't do it now*

035 jetzt räume mir zuSAMME auf, =oder,  
*now we will tidy up together, right?*

036 äh (.) sie war au, (-)  
*uh she was also*

037 also EHRlich gesagt hat die mich als manchmal- .h  
*well to be honest she did to me sometimes*

038 (1.2)

039 NAR: s:  
 (- - -)

041 NAR: PF EINmal konnt,  
*PRT once could*

042 die konnt in ekstASE gerate,  
*she could get into ecstasy*

043 wenn, (-)  
*if*

044 wenn die\_n (.)ne WUT gehabt hat,  
*if she was in rage*

045 dann äh, (-)  
*then uh*

046 dann hat die mich also au schon (.)  
*then she did to me also*

047 SEHR verprügelt mit em KOCHlöffel und <<laughing>Allem>  
 MÖgliche  
*heavily beat me with a cooking spoon and all sorts of things*

048 (-) ((sighs))

049 INT: Mhm.  
*uhum*

050 NAR: gell?  
*right?*

051 also bin dann als unter den!TISCH!, (-)  
*wellt he I used to hide beneath the table*

052 INT: Mhm.  
*uhum*

- 053 NAR: aber die war könne halt GNAdelos,  
*but she was could be just ruthless*
- 054 hat mich unterm TISCH vorgezoge. (-)  
*tore me out from beneath the table*
- 055 Und dann ging das WEIter,  
*and then it went on*
- 056 sie hat manchmal ZWEI drei KOCHlöffel an mir abgeschlagen=  
*sometimes she broke two or three cooking spoons by beating*  
*on me*
- 057 INT: =Mhm; (-)  
*uhum*
- 058 NAR: des WEIß ich noch.  
*this I still remember*

As in the first extract, the description starts again by depicting pedagogically motivating contexts and results. Parental action again is represented as a response to negatively valued actions of the narrated I, that is, infringements of parental orders. The narration then gradually shifts to the description of the modalities of violent actions, which finally become extended as such, that is, without further reference to legitimizing contexts. Although much more situational detail is provided, the stories reported again are indexed to be iterative at various points by establishing a conditional relationship between the actions of the narrated I and the mother (12, 44–46) and by temporal qualifications (e.g. ‘öfter’, ‘often’, 25; ‘schon mal’, ‘sometimes’, 30; ‘manchmal’, ‘sometimes’, 37, 56, ‘als’, ‘usually’, 51).

**The first small story (001–028).** In response to the question about a memory of her mother being ‘streng’ (‘strict’), the teller starts to narrate how she violated her mother’s order not to get late home too late. The strict response of the mother is projected by ‘wehe dem’ (‘beware if’, 021), which announces severe punishment; but at this point, the teller shifts to a jocular key and uses the morally sanitized formulation ‘gesucht’ (‘looked for me’, 027), which does not imply any harm to the narrated I. The scene is rendered as a comical episode, reminiscent of a slapstick scene. Still, in comparison to excerpt #1, the moral balance is already at this point tipped in favor of the narrated I because its actions are now described as morally unproblematic actions of an adolescent who prefers to share her leisure time with her friends. These are actions that are understandable according to a shared psychological logic (if one is relaxed during leisure time, one tends to forget time.) Until this point, the narrative depicts a rather typical scenario of both the narrated I and the mother acting according to their different category-bound rationales of action, which are typical of adolescents and parents and which therefore are perfectly well accountable. It is the scenario of a normal conflict of family life arising from rivaling pragmatic preferences, that is, orientation to fun versus order.

There is no moral imbalance as to entitlement or guilt of the parties to the conflict.

**The second small story (029–035).** The picture, however, changes with the next small story. Again, a violation of the parents' order is the starting point (the narrated I has failed to tidy up her room). Now for the first time, physical violence is explicitly named 'hat mir an der haar gepackt' ('took me by the hair', 030). Still, violence is contextualized within a pedagogically motivating situation, that is, the violation of the parent's order, and it is indexed to be the ultimate resort after verbal means to enforce the parent's order have failed.

**The third small story (037–058).** The teller opens up the third run by the hedge 'ehrlich gesagt' ('to be honest', 038), which projects a dispreferred move to follow, that is, a sensitive confession. Now the motivating context for violent action switches from a legitimizing prior context, that is, infringements of the narrated I, to an emotional state of the mother herself. Violent action now becomes decontextualized, it is no more legitimized by external reasons, but it is conceptualized as the uncontrolled enactment of the mother's aggressive emotional states ('ekstase', 'ecstasy', 042; 'Wut', 'rage'). Correspondingly, the description of the mother's action changes from the enforcement of pedagogical aims to the description of the modalities of violent action. The teller now explicitly categorizes the mother's action as beating and adds an instrument (cooking spoon, 047) for conveying more drastically that the beating was excessive and illegitimate. She then sketches a scene where the daughter, in reaction to the beating mother, tries to hide under the desk, but the mother tears her out from there (051–054). The mother now is explicitly categorized as being ruthless ('gnadelos', 053). Finally, the teller adds that the mother carried on with her violent action until the instruments of her violence, cooking spoons, were destroyed (056), indexing the excess of violence and its painful effect on the narrated I.

The excess of the mother's physical violence is conveyed iconically by an additive mode of narration, the teller continuing to add violent acts and their features. Over the narrative trajectory, the teller shifts from a rational motivation for violence to its delegitimization and overt depiction. This is most obvious if we look at which causes for violent actions are stated and how violence is formulated:

- 1 small story 1: if I didn't get home (022), then she searched for me (027);
- 2 small story 2: if I didn't tidy up my room (029), then she seized me by my hair (030);
- 3 small story 3: if she was in a rage (044), she heavily beat me with a cooking spoon (046f).

The conditions in the first two small stories state infringements by the narrated I as a legitimizing external context for violence. In small story 3, there is

no legitimizing external context. The formulations of consequent violent actions exhibit a continuous increase in the degree of violence: In the first small story, looking for someone is a morally sanitized formulation, which implies no violence; in the 2nd small story, 'she seized me by my hair' describes a violent action; small story 3 reports excessive violence and provides a wealth of descriptive detail indexing recklessness, excess, and loss of control.

Taken together, the reduction of legitimizing prior contexts and the description of the violent modalities of action convey that the mother is guilty of morally inadequate action. Over the trajectory of the narrative sequence, there is a shift in agency from pedagogically motivated action to guilty, excessive violence. It is to be noted that this is not due to different events to be told, but by the way events are conceptualized.

In this kind of trauma narratives, the teller approaches her traumatic experiences step by step, formulating consecutive conceptualizations of the trauma which make abuse increasingly explicit. Such narratives emerge as trauma narratives—they are not produced as such from the outset. There is no abstract (cf. Labov and Waletzky 1967) or preface (Sacks 1974), which foreshadows the emotional and moral quality of the events to be told. It takes several runs for tellers to get to the traumatizing core events and describe them in detail.

It is an open question why this should be so. In principle, there is a sociological or a psychological explanation. The sociological explanation would be that talk about actions causing traumata like physical violence in the family is tabooed and that talk about traumatic experiences is embarrassing because it positions the teller as a helpless victim and violates solidarity with the family as an ensemble, both of which are face-threatening (Goffman 1959). The successive approach to the traumatic core may index the development of trust and rapport over the course of the interview (cf. Fontana and Frey 2000). A psychological explanation, in contrast, would hold that traumatic experiences are isolated and not easily accessible, whether because of fragmentation of memory or because of psychodynamic motives (Brewin 2011). The telling could self-referentially establish a thematic and autobiographic context, which facilitates access to traumatic memories.

*5.1.2 Mitigating guilt by subordinating violence to other properties of the perpetrator* In the first extract, the ascription of guilt to the mother because of her violent action was mitigated by presenting it as pedagogically motivated action. In the next excerpt from interview 4a, we can identify another strategy of mitigating guilt of the abusing person. The strategy is to rank the moral deficit of being violent as being less important as compared to other moral characteristics of the perpetrator.

In contrast to extract #2, extract #3 represents the story of a singular episode. The narrator tells how she came home late. Her father was cross with her because of this. He tried to light the oven and didn't succeed. At this point,

the narrated I makes a naughty remark, which the father responds to with extreme violence:

#3 Interview 4a, 384-393, 27: 07-27: 48

001 NAR: <<all> ich hab gmerkt der hat a STINKwut.> (-)

*I realized he was full of rage*

002 INT: mhm.

*uhum*

003 (4.0) ((sighs))

004 NAR: da hab ich gsagt,

*then I said*

005 ja wenn man die FLAmme halt nit ankriegt,

*so if one doesn't manage to light the flame*

006 da KRIEGT ma halt dann isst ma halt am beschten GAR nichts=

*then one gets then the best is to eat nothing at all anyway*

007 =hab ich gesagt. ((lacht))

*said I ((laughs))*

008 INT: [ ((laughs))

009 NAR: [ ((laughs)) und das war dann schon zu VIEL,

*and this was already too much then*

010 dann <<len> hat der so eine WUT bekomme,> (1.0)

*then he flew into such a rage*

011 und hat mich am HALS gepackt. (-)

*and he seized me by the throat*

012 INT: Mhm. (-)

*uhum*

013 NAR: also <<len> rEgelrecht (-)! gewÜRGT!,> gell?

*well really strangled me, right?*

014 und dann hab ich natürlich-

*and then I did*

015 ((laughs)),

016 <<laughing> da hat er\_s choLErisch,>

*then he became choleric*

017 ((laughs))

018 ja jetzt geht\_s aber LOS.

*so now are you crazy?*

019 da isch mei Oma noch geLEBT,

*at that time my grandma was still alive*

020 un hat gsagt,

*and she said*

021 <<h> lass mer das MÄdel in RUH,>

*leave the girl alone*

022 <<lachend, all> hat se gsagt.>

*she said*

023 hätt se als scho so gSCHRIEe und so,

*she had already started screaming and so on*

- 024       und irgendwo war er scho e weng, > (-)  
           *and somehow he was quite a bit*
- 025!       MANCH! mal, (.) ja?  
           *Sometimes       right?*
- 026 NAR: aber gott [sei dank] hat er nit geTRUNKE,  
           *but thank god he didn't drink*
- 027 INT:               [Mhm.]  
                       *mhm*
- 028       hat nit geTRUNke,  
           *didn't drink*
- 029       hat nit geRAUCHT, (-)  
           *didn't smoke*
- 030 INT: Mhm.  
           *uhum*
- 031 NAR: also es war sonst e vorbildliche faMILievater.  
           *so he was a model family father apart from this*

On the one hand, the teller conveys that her father acted extremely violently. The action description 'gewürgt' ('strangled', 013, which is highlighted by extreme focal stress) indexes mortal danger, the evidential modifier 'regelrecht' ('really') underscoring the factuality of the report. Yet, it is striking that the teller intersperses laughter and laugh particles in her narrative (008, 015–017, 022), which may be understood as mitigating the embarrassing quality (Haakana 2001), possibly framing it as a (partially) funny event (see also Schwitalla 2001). A third person, the grandma, is introduced as a witness validating the moral condemnation and the severity of the father's action (019–024). The guilt of the father is thus underscored. The teller also indexes that the told episode was not singular, but that this kind of violent behavior happened more often (024f). The teller thus suggests violence as a dispositional property of the father.

But precisely in 024, the teller cuts her turn-constructional unit off before ascribing the discursively and syntactically projected predicate (the rheme), which ascribes the moral verdict to the father. Instead, the story takes a contrastive turn. The teller now points to unrelated positive properties of her father (he did not drink nor smoke, 026–029) and concludes her story with the general statement that he was a model family father (031). The positive personal properties of the father also belong to the realm of family relationship and education, so they can serve to trade-off against violence. The teller manages to convey how excessive the father's violence was, however, blocking the inference to a moral verdict about his person as a whole. In turn, the general positive evaluation of the father constructs his general personality in a way that downplays the relevance of his violent behavior. As this positive evaluation closes the story about violence, it stands out as the more relevant and concluding statement, although it is topically unrelated to the preceding story.

In Sections 5.1.1 and 5.1.2, we have analyzed two different kinds of contextualizing violence used to mitigate violent actions:

- a. the local context of infringements of parental orders by the narrated I justifies a pedagogic response. This is expressed by narrative sequence and optionally by causal and conditional connectives like ‘if-then’ and ‘because’; and
- b. the global context of the personality of the parent. Here, violence is not justified, but stands in an oppositional relationship to positive characteristics which are given higher value; the relationship is established by contrastive connectives such as ‘but’.

In six out of nine interviews depicting parental abuse, violence is at least initially portrayed as legitimate action. It is made explicit only stepwise, concentrically over the course of the interview, in subsequent runs of tellings, but not as a projected upshot of a story.

## 5.2 Making violence explicit and portraying it as illegitimate

Section 5.1 has discussed how the ascription of violence and guilt became increasingly explicit in detail over several narrative episodes. In three out of nine cases, abusive violence was made explicit and negatively evaluated already when first topicalized.

In the case to be presented, the narrator talks about childhood experiences of violence similar to those described in Section 5.1. She initiates the topic of violence already in her response to the first interview question, which asked the narrator to give a short overview of the family history, including the parents’ employment and the places where they lived. The narrator states that her parents moved to Germany for work, while she was left in a children’s home in her native southern European country for an unspecified time. When she rejoined the family during kindergarten, her father worked in a warehouse and they moved several times. The description of violence is very explicit from the beginning. The narrator makes clear that she does not consider the parents’ violent actions as justified.

#4 Interview 6a, 18-28, 01: 37-02: 12

001 NAR: JA, (-)  
*yes*

002 und wenn JA:, (. )  
*and if yes*

003 dann mussten wir vorher erstmal das, (. )  
*then we first had to*

004 die ganze WOHNung sauber machen  
*clean the whole apartment*  
 bevor wir überhaupt [LOS durften in die schUle.  
*before we were allowed to head for school*

- 005 INT: [Mhm.  
uhum
- 006 (1.5)
- 007 INT: Mhm.  
uhum
- 008 NAR: wIr durften halt keine FREUNde mit nach HAUse nehmen.  
*we were just not allowed to take friends home*
- 009 INT: mhM; (-)  
uhum
- 010 NAR: wenn mer EINkaufen gegangen sind,  
*if we went shopping*
- 011 mussten mer uns schnell beEilen. (1.0)  
*we had to hurry up fast*
- 012 hab sogar ANGST gehabt,  
*I was even afraid*
- 013 falls mal ne SCHLAnge dasteht, (-)  
*if there happened to be a queue*
- 014 dass wir [zurück, also (-) zu SPÄT nach HAUse kamen. =  
*that we back, that is, came home too late*
- 015 INT: [mhM.  
uhum
- 016 INT: =Mhm. (.)  
uhum
- 017 NAR: ja weil dann gab\_s halt (-) ↑PRÜgel,  
*yes because then there was beating*
- 018 INT: Mhm.  
uhum
- 019 NAR: weil se gemEInt hän,  
*because they thought*
- 020 wir wäre ja wohin ANders gegAngen.  
*we had gone somewhere else*
- 021 INT: Mhm. (-)  
uhum
- 022 NAR: und (-) <<p> so haben wir halt geLEBT zu hause.>  
*and that's how we lived at home*

Similar to excerpt 2, but more explicitly so, this story is produced as an iterative, habitual story (Genette 1979: ch. 3). The regular character of the events reported is made clear by using conditional statements (003f, 010f, 013–017) and by the lack of references to single, specific events. The final conclusion ‘So haben wir halt gelebt zu Hause’ (‘that’s how we lived at home’, 022) instructs the hearer to treat the prior story as a metonym for the whole of the family life, characterizing the parents in sum as being depriving and unjust, violent, and fear-inspiring.

While in interview 4a, offenses and negatively valued actions of the narrated I provided the context for violent responses, the pre-context here consists of severe restrictions the parents impose on the narrated I. The



context in which the telling of violent action is put does not include any action on the part of the narrated I, which could be regarded as providing a justified motive. The teller even takes care to prevent the hearer from speculating on possible justification when she explicitly refers to the queue, that is, coming home late is not to be seen as caused by dawdling like in interview 4a. The lack of justifying contexts is communicated by (a) not talking about any offense of the narrated I, (b) letting the hearer infer that the parents' justifications were inadequate. This is done by formulating their educational orders in a way that makes their deviation from any rational standard of education obvious.

The restrictions the parents impose on their children can be understood as being exaggerated; modal verbs, extreme case formulations, and gradation are used as auto-argumentative devices to index the impropriety of the parents' orders ('had to clean the apartment before we were allowed to go to school', 003f; 'had to hurry up fast', 08; 'were not allowed to take friends home', 011; 'I was even afraid', 012). The teller does not refer to any offenses committed by the narrated I. Instead, it is characterized by fear of being punished for an infringement of the parent's order, which lies beyond its own responsibility (i.e. coming home late from shopping, because she had to queue up, 013–020) and rests on unwarranted suspicions on the part of the parents. The parents' violence is thus described as a routine practice, which is not backed by any justified reason.

In sum, the teller portrays a holistic context of growing up in a way which frames violence as being consistent and thus strongly motivated in an overall hostile and neglecting attitude of the parents against their children. The violent episode is depicted as being recurrent and typical of the whole family life. Whereas in interview 4a, violence was contrasted with the general character of the father, here the hearer is lead to generalize it as a metonym for the parent's style of relating to their children. Ascription of intentionality and guilt of violence are thus maximized.

#5 Interview 6a, 49-66, 03: 48-05: 13

001 INT: wie würden sie denn (.) ihre beziehung zu ihrer mutter  
und ihrem vater in der (.) KINDheit beschreiben? (-)  
*how would you describe our relationship to your mother  
and your father in the childhood*

002 NAR: (<<aspirated, p>) nicht so [gut>]  
*not so good*

003 INT: [versuchen sie sich möglichst früh-  
*try to as early as possible*

004 NAR: ((sighs)) also überhaupt nicht so gut,  
*well not at all that good*

005 muss ich ehrlich Sagen.  
*I must admit*

006 INT: ja;  
*yes*

007 NAR: von (-) von der mutter her gab\_s jedes mal halt äh (.)  
*DREsche,*  
*by my mother there was erm beating every time*

008 wenn ihre irgendwas nicht gePASST hat.  
*if she didn't like something*

009 INT: aha.  
*oh*

010 NAR: wie gesagt,  
*as I said*

011 jetzt zum beispiel beim EINKaufen mussten wir sogar  
Angst haben falls da ne schlAnge steht.  
*for example when going shopping we even had to be afraid*  
*if there was a queue*

012 INT: Mhm. (-)  
*uhum*

013 NAR: kamen wir nach HAUse und, (-)  
*if we came home and*

014 WEIL\_s halt etwas länger gedauert hat, (-)  
*because it took a bit longer*

015 dann gab\_s halt PRÜgel;=  
*then there was beating*

016 entweder mit dem SCHUHabsatz, (-)  
*either with the heel*

017 mit\_m BAMbusrohr, (-)  
*with a bamboo*

018 INT: Mhm, (-)  
*uhum*

019 NAR: und mit\_m KOCHlöffel, (.)  
*and with a cooking spoon*

020 alles was ihr (x) in die HÄNde kam.  
*everything what she had at hand*

021 INT: Mhm.  
*uhum*

022 NAR: ja und Abends halt,  
*yes and in the evening*

023 wenn der VATER nach hause kam, (.)  
*when the father came home*

024 hat sie ihm die OHre heiß gemacht, (.)  
*she instigated him*

025 und dann gab\_s halt NOCH,  
*and then there was still more*

026 vom vater noch mit dem GÜRtel dazu. (-)  
*by the father with the belt*

027 INT: Mhm. (-)  
*umhm*

028 NAR: das war halt, (1.0)  
*this was*

- 029 ja vom vAter her häm\_mer NIE: so richtig (-)  
ZUneigung gekriegt oder so.  
*well we didn't ever receive like real affection or something by  
the father*
- 030 INT: Mhm;  
*uhum*
- 031 NAR: nie mal (-) in ARM genommen oder, (-)  
*never took us into his arms or*
- 032 was weiß ICH, (.)  
*what do I know*
- 033 ich hab dich LIEB oder.  
*I love you or*
- 034 INT: Mhm;  
*uhum*
- 035 NAR: <<aspirated> das gab\_s nicht.>  
*that never happened*
- 036 INT: Mhm;  
*uhum*
- 037 NAR: also von der mutter seiner seite AU nicht. (1.5)  
*so from the mother's part not either*
- 038 wie gsagt,  
*as I said*
- 039 also mir sind auf die ART (-) so einfach GROß geworden.  
*so we grew up like this way simply*
- 040 INT: Mhm.  
*umhm*
- 041 NAR: das zu tun, (.)  
*to do*
- 042 was sie halt gesAGT haben und- (1.0)  
*what they told us and*
- 043 wenn das nicht so war wie sie\_s WOLLten dann, (1.5)  
*if it wasn't the way the wanted it to be*
- 044 <<aspirated>gab\_s (ein/halt) DRAUF.>  
*then we got hit*

In a second excerpt from the same interview, the teller goes on to unfold the nature of the parents' violence.

The context for this description of violence again is a rather neutral question about the relation to the teller's parents. She describes it as having been bad (002–005), and again, maltreatment is depicted as a regular practice and as a metonym for family life (007–015).

In what follows, the mother's guilt is conveyed by detailed descriptions of the beating and its circumstances:

- Instruments are listed (heels, bamboo, cooking spoon, 016–019); the list and its closure with 'everything at hand' (020) contextualize that beating was excessive and out of control.

- Reasons for beating are described to be rather arbitrary ('if she didn't like something', 008), unjust (reference to the queue like in #5, 011) and inadequate ('if it took a little bit longer', 014)—what gave rise to beating is portrayed as being just normal actions of the narrated I.
- Grading particles ('sogar', 'even', 011) and mitigating quantification ('etwas', 'a bit', 014) index that the actions that gave rise to violence did not warrant this response.
- The evil-minded intention of the mother is evidenced by the fact that she is said to instigate the father to beat the narrated I once more (023–026). This conveys that beating is not just occasioned, but that the mother aims to harm her children out of sadistic motives without any external reason.
- The teller adds properties of the context of family life, which support the ascription of guilt and contextualize violence as part of an overall style of austere and rejecting parenting.
- The story again is provided as a metonym of the process of growing up (039).

In contrast to interview 4a discussed in Section 5.1, in interview 6a, parental violence is explicitly described from the very beginning of the autobiographical storytelling and not merely cued in response to detailing follow-up questions of the interviewer. The nature of violence is overtly conveyed by naming the action and giving details (instruments and insufficient reasons) attesting to its excessive nature. Displaying that there were no justified contextual reasons in the behavior of the narrated I for using violence as a response, stating the generality of the practice, and portraying violence as a metonym for and contextualizing it within an unjust, austere, and frustrating family life, that is, as part of a larger strategy of action, work as warrants for the ascription of unilateral guilt to the parents. Yet, similarly to interview 4a, the second narrative exhibits more situated details (concerning the instruments of the mother's violent actions, 011–020) and adds additional abusive actions on the part of the father (022–026).

## 6. DISCUSSION: UNPACKING AGENCY IN NARRATIVES OF TRAUMATIC VIOLENCE

In this article, the narrative representation of parental violence in adults suffering from fibromyalgia which may be related to traumatization in childhood has been analyzed. In this concluding section, four upshots are discussed:

- there are different narrative trajectories of approaching the representation of violence (Section 6.1),
- agency is intrinsically ascribed and assessed via the description of violence (Section 6.2),
- the ascription of guilt crucially rests on the interpersonal, sequential order of participants' actions (Section 6.3), and
- agency is ascribed as a holistic phenomenon going beyond local action (Section 6.4).

## **6.1 Narrative trajectories of approaching violence**

Two different kinds of trajectories of approaching experiences of traumatic violence have been found in the data. Traumatic experiences were either found to be approached stepwise, beginning with abstract and morally sanitized categorizations of parental acts of disciplining the child. First descriptions lack narrative detail, expression of subjective emotional and evaluative stance and are often cut off before projected rhematic predications are delivered. More vivid, detailed, stance-expressing narratives emerge only over the course of several runs of narrative episodes of violence. Although ascriptions of guilt to perpetrators are increasingly made over this trajectory, narrators still mostly remain ambivalent in their evaluative and ascriptive stance by highlighting that their own behavior gave rise to legitimate parental sanctions and by relativizing parental violence in the context of a positively valued personality. In contrast, narrators who already in first stories explicitly categorize parents' actions as violent, provide narrative details from the beginning, unilaterally ascribe guilt to the parents, adopt a determinate negative evaluative stance toward them, and portray violence as a metonym of a general parental style of neglect, austerity, and emotional frustration.

## **6.2 Intrinsic evaluation and ascription of agency via description of violence**

Descriptions of violence which portray the parents' actions as legitimate do not portray violent action as violent action. We have called this: not naming the phenomenon. Instead, parental behavior was cast in rather abstract and vague notions, which states pedagogical motives and results of actions, parents' dislikes and influences exerted on the narrative I in a rather abstract fashion, which mostly does not evoke a visual scene. If violence is depicted by naming violent actions, the representation is autoargumentative to a high degree: The categorization of behavior as violent action almost always implies its moral condemnation, leaving room at most for some basic justification of a pedagogical motive. If violent action is described, it is only rarely evaluated explicitly; rather, its negative evaluation is strengthened by giving details about instruments, modes, and regularity of violent action which give proof of the impropriety of violence independently from its motivation. Thus, the presupposition of standards for justifiable action and standards of adequate response is crucial for the communication of ascriptions of guilt and evil-minded intention.

## **6.3 The interpersonal, sequential order of guilt**

We can see that in accounting for agency in experiences of violence, the representation of the agency of both the perpetrator and the victim plays a role. More precisely, it is the location of violence in sequences of initiative actions

and responses, which accounts for the moral evaluation of violence. The victim's actions may or may not be represented as a prior context for the perpetrator's violent actions as a response. Depending on how a first action by the narrated I is portrayed in moral terms, different trajectories of responses by the parent are portrayed as being justified. If prior action by the victim is depicted, then its moral evaluation is decisive for the issue of guilt and justification. On the one hand, if tellers show that infringements of parent's orders by the narrated I provide for at least a basic educational justification of parental violence, then we can assume that the teller adopts the perpetrator's perspective and moral evaluation on their own experiences. This is because it is less the intrinsic value of these actions as being offenses, but rather their character of being infringements of parental orders which makes them morally problematic in the first place. If, however, parental action is to be portrayed as being guilty and not justifiable, tellers take care to show that their actions prior to parental violence were just normal and morally unproblematic, in particular, that they either did not intend to or were not responsible for violations of parents' orders, or, again recursively, that the parents' orders as such were unjust or inadequate, thus, not justifying the attribution of guilt to the child. Thus, tellers seem to adhere to an interactional moral order of guilt, where a first guilty action justifies a violent response, whereas the ascription of guilt to one part requires the partner to be innocent.

#### **6.4 Agency is ascribed as a holistic phenomenon extending beyond local action**

We have already pointed out how sequential context is crucial for the ascription of agency. Beyond this, speakers regularly link stories of violence to the larger context of family life, educational style, personality traits of the parents, and biographical consequences of education for their own lives. The ascription of guilt, pedagogical versus ill-minded intention, relevance, and intentionality of violence as such largely depend on these wider contexts. Portrayals of these contexts either serve to support and strengthen the ascription of guilt or they are used contrastively to exculpate the perpetrator and to downplay the relevance of violent action as an exception. Agency thus is ascribed as a rather holistic phenomenon. It does not only refer to local actions, but is attributed to a wider practice of action on a biographical scale. The ascription of agency to local action itself is importantly influenced by its wider personal, interpersonal, and biographical contextualization.

The findings of this study, of course, need to be supported by other studies of narratives about traumatic experiences. In particular, it will be interesting from a psychological point of view to find out more about the relationship between successful coping and the representation of traumatic experiences. This will be most valuable for clinical treatment and diagnosis. From a linguistic point of view, this article identifies discursive practices by which the ascription of agency (in terms of guilt and responsibility) is accomplished, which may

well be relevant beyond narratives of traumatic experiences. The article thus provides empirically based examples and makes a plea for a more comprehensive understanding of linguistic practices of agency ascription in discourse.

## NOTE

- 1 Like almost all of the adjectives chosen by the patient, 'strict' refers to properties of the parents which were consequential for the respondent, but not to a reciprocal property of the relationship (like 'intimate', 'competitive', 'peaceful', etc.).

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