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"Gimme shelter"? Complicating responses to family violence

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Responses to domestic violence, such as those codified in state and voluntary sector service provision, have historically provided both 'common ground' and 'contested' territory for thinking about the intersections between feminism and the politics of childhood[1]. Drawing on the evaluation of a voluntary sector programme, the Community Group Programme[2] for children and their mothers in London, England, the chapter explores 'the (im)possibilities of dialogue' across feminism and childhood[3] for those children and women/mothers who have experienced family violence. We argue that drawing children, as active meaning makers, into the analysis of and responses to domestic violence, offers a way of extending the possibilities of social support systems in ways that can further strengthen women's recovery experiences, as well as benefiting children and young people themselves. At the same time, we argue that the focus on the mother-child couple does not take us far enough in complicating responses to domestic violence. Our intention in the analysis presented here is to imagine more complex and contextualized responses to domestic violence. An analysis that focuses on the messy actualities of practice responses[4] has the potential to recruit further interlocutors into the fold and move the practice conversation beyond a currently exclusive focus on women as heterosexual mother-victims and children as genderless witnesses (and sometimes-victims) to predominately male perpetrated violence. Troubling these categories can help to complicate responses to *family* violence that are sensitive to a diversity of genders, ages, sexualities, and cultures, extending service provision to young men, and hetero- and homo- sexual fathers who may have experienced violence (from female or

male partners, respectively), as well as lesbian mothers and parents of both or either gender who experience violence from their children and mothers/fathers[1].

Thinking through case studies

The Community Group Programme (CGP) is a psychoeducational 12-week programme designed for children 'exposed to woman abuse'[25]. The programme emerged in London, Ontario (Canada) in the late 1980s and early 1990s and focused on working with children and their mothers who had left the violent family relationship. The programme aims are to strengthen child-mother relationships and to support children in processing their experiences of witnessing or experiencing woman abuse. Children are encouraged to recognise, name, and explore the multiplicity of feelings surrounding incidences of their mother's abuse and are given opportunities to respond to these feelings using creative methods (e.g. arts and crafts) in a safe space facilitated by professionals, and in the company of peers who have had similar experiences. A parallel series of groups with mothers assists women in supporting their children with coming to terms with their experiences.

The programme emerged out of research and clinical practice (family therapy) following observations by clinicians that no local provisions existed for supporting children and youth affected by domestic violence[6,7,8]. The original programme was firmly located within a discourse of 'woman abuse', a feminist perspective of domestic violence as a gendered crime

[1] The chapter deals exclusively with the issue of family violence as that affects heterosexual women who are mothers and their children. The issue of family violence towards children, such as child abuse, raises equally important questions about responses and social support; it is however beyond the scope of this chapter.

[2] The term 'woman abuse' is frequently used in a North American service context to refer to violence perpetrated by a man against their female partner. It is often used interchangeably with the terms domestic violence and/or intimate partner violence. It usually signals a radical feminist analysis of patterns of violence.

committed by men against women. At the same time the programme was also rooted in a deep concern for children's experiences and their needs, which the programme originators saw as largely unmet. The idea of working with, and strengthening the relationship between children and their mothers is a key theoretical component of the CGP.

In many ways, the programme is typical of framings of domestic violence which rely on particular feminist interpretations of gender-based violence - situating men as violent/ perpetrators and women as oppressed/victims. For example, Women's Aid, one of the leading domestic violence charities in the UK, defines domestic violence as a form of patriarchal violence that disproportionately impacts women: 'Domestic abuse perpetrated by men against women is a quantitatively and qualitatively distinct phenomenon rooted in women's unequal status in society and oppressive social constructions of gender and family'[9]. The idea that women are predominately victims of domestic violence is certainly not unwarranted. In the UK, statistics suggest that women are overwhelmingly represented in reported incidents of domestic violence[10,11], men are four times more likely to perpetrate violence than women[12], and the violence perpetrated against women by men is often more severe in nature[13]. As such, many programmes that seek to provide help and support for those experiencing domestic violence focus on women as victims of domestic violence.

At the same time, the CGP was innovative in creating a child-focused *and* relational space, that was concerned with both individual (children or women) and shared (children-and-women) needs and experiences. In this respect, CGP is a good example of a turn towards more complex practices of intervening to support those who have experienced family violence - in this case children and their mothers. Through the CGP case study we highlight the various necessary relational struggles in contemporary responses to family violence. The analysis developed builds

on an understanding of practice responses to social injustice as necessarily pluralistic and complex, and enmeshed in theories, methods, values, and practices[14]. By following these complexities and enmeshments new conceptualizations of family violence can emerge that are better able to engage with the multifarious experiences and needs of all involved.

The (im)possibilities of dialogues?

Historically UK domestic violence services have drawn on particular feminist framings of gender-based violence, and focused efforts on ensuring the safety of women who have experienced domestic abuse. The impact of domestic violence on women's psychological health, well-being, and social positioning has long been recognised, and the reality of domestic violence, and creating socially supportive responses to it, has played a pivotal role in the shaping of the women's movement.

However, it was not until the 1980s, with the collision between the categories of childhood, youth, and risk in policy and practice and the institutionalization of the children's rights movement, that children started to become a cause of public concern in relation to incidences of domestic violence. At the same time a new legal concept of parental responsibility emerged that saw parents and parenting increasingly scrutinized by the state[15]. This historical shift has disrupted the well-established refuge practices that previously focused primarily on women and new practices of support have begun to emerge that take mothers *and their children* into account.

With children coming into the fore, the tensions between women/mothers-and-children highlighted become salient[16,17]. Burman argues that formulations such as 'womenandchildren' or 'women vs children' are conceptually, politically, and practically inadequate. The first

because it perpetuates inequalities by essentialising both children and women's positions, and the second because it creates competitive and unhelpful divisions, maintaining a status quo that misses the needs of both parties. As such, Burman[18] offers the useful conceptual framing of children and women being in 'a necessary struggle-in-relation'. This is a struggle that is encoded into the history of women's fights to bring child abuse to the attention of the state, as well as in the coining of the term 'battered woman syndrome' as a response and reaction to the 'battered child syndrome' which implicated mothers without acknowledging how complex maternal practices of protection can be[19]. In the CGP training, for example, trainers often used the example of one former participant who reported smacking her child because she knew she could minimize the level of violence and hurt inflicted on her child if she intervened between her husband and their child and undertook the smacking action herself instead of leaving it to her partner.

In the UK, AVA, the charity which rolled out the CGP in London, did not use the term 'woman abuse'. Instead, the CGP was described as a programme 'to support children and women affected by domestic violence'. While the 'children and women' phrasing carries echoes of essentialism, the reversal of the order to 'childrenandwomen', we argue, has the potential for thinking through what Lisa Baraitser calls 'the ethics of interruption', those interruption created by bringing children into the adult fold, which Baraitser argues have the potential to provide both children and their mothers 'new 'raw materials' for experiencing [them]selves, others and our worlds' differently[20]. Furthermore, the longer description leaves open the possibility to explore what Burman calls the 'complex relationalities and mutualities between [mothers'] mental and physical states and those of [their] children'[21], and what Haaken has described as the common

ground between women and children in calling on the state (or civil society in this case) to intervene on family violence[22].

An ethics of interruption?

Children's experiences of domestic violence, and the consequences of violence for them, have come to the fore in the last 25 years in Anglo-American contexts, on account of the introduction and ratification of the UNCRC (1989) which has precipitated policy and practice changes towards more child-centred service provision[23]. In England, for example (which is the main focus of this chapter), we have witnessed a rise in national evidence reviews being commissioned to better understand and support children's experiences of domestic violence from a range of professional perspectives, including public health, social work, and clinical psychology[24,25,26,27,28,29,30]. A shift in focus to children's concerns with regards to family violence provides a number of creative junctures to rethink support for women and children. In this section, we re-read our evaluation report[31] with a view to picking out three key ways in which bringing children and young people into the fold, and listening to the 'interruptions of the child'[32], may contribute towards complicating responses to family violence.

Guilt and blame

Guilt and blame have been identified as key discourses in women's and children's accounts of experiencing domestic violence[33,34,35]. However, such knowledge is based on mothers' and/or clinicians' perspectives and not on children's own experiences. These discourses have in turn fed into practice responses, including the CGP, where professionals delivering the programme repeatedly emphasized that children should not blame themselves for what

happened. Our evaluation[36] found that only a minority of the children made reference to the theme of self-blame in the qualitative research (*n*=3), and that the majority of children we surveyed identified that children are not to blame for parents' fighting both before *and* after taking part in the programme (with no significant shift taking place). This was surprising given how much emphasis both the programme manual and professionals placed on absolving children from blame, and the findings from previous programme evaluations that suggest that groups reduce self-blame[37,38]. Instead the theme of blame was more prominent in mothers' accounts, with many mothers appearing to experience their children's anger and withdrawal as their punishment for what had happened. Yet in the questionnaire data (pre-groups) none of the children blamed their mothers for what happened. Neither did children blame themselves for their parents' fighting. More recent research on children's views of domestic violence suggests that children know whom to hold responsible for violence/abuse - this tends not to be themselves and is instead usually the abuser or both the parents[39]. Taking children's and young people's perspectives in account can help develop a more nuanced analysis of emotional experiences of family violence that take us beyond dichotomies of perpetrators and victims, guilt and blame.

Cycles of violence

A further challenge to established discourses used to frame experiences of family violence comes from the intersections of age and gender in childhood. In thinking about either women-and-children or women vs children, children appear as genderless subjects to be subsumed under the gendered, female, and largely heterosexual mother. The CGP, for example, which was designed to run with children and young people from the ages of 4 to 16, was explicit about gender not being an important consideration in convening a primary-school aged group. In

the Canadian manual, it was argued that mixed sex groups for adolescents could be productive for addressing gender-related issues. In England, the advice given to London practitioners was to run same sex groups for older children where possible. This disaggregation was seen as especially important for girls as it helped 'to create a safe environment for disclosing personal information' but left young men (over 16s), occupying an especially precarious position with regards to the possibilities and limits of support.

Younger and adolescent boys presented a source of anxiety for mothers. From those mothers we interviewed, some were concerned with the 'cycle of violence' theory, and their anxieties for their children unfolded along gender lines – with some women expressing concern that their sons would grow up to be violent (like their fathers). Some mothers hoped that the CGP might alter their sons' destinies without challenging the idea of 'violence as destiny':

> "...it was like my son was getting very, like, really arrogant behaviour, he was turning out just like his dad so I think, in a way, the groups really helped him. It's calmed him down a bit - but not as much as, you know, you'd expect" (Beth, mother, lines 248-251).

> "They've started mimicking the partners' behaviours and, you know, you're just not wanting that, you don't want the future to be a repeat of the past..." (Doris, mother, line 260).

Findings from interviews with coordinators highlighted their difficulties in breaking from popular yet contentious theories of domestic violence such as the 'cycle of violence' theory. 'Cycle of violence' theories are problematic[40] and are not espoused by the programme. However,

even where coordinators were aware of such problems they found it hard to deviate from the core metaphors provided by these theories:

> "...because I know that violence isn't automatically inter-generational... I see enough of it to know there's a greater propensity for children that have lived in violent homes... You knew the parents, and now the children are in the same service... Some of them you'd know as grandparents... So the cycle has to stop somewhere, doesn't it?" (Coordinator Area 16).

Such discourses, particularly if they invoke convenient and easily grasped - as well as evocative - images of a problem, such as the image of a cycle that needs to be broken, are hard to shift even when the nuances of experience are understood. This suggests that a new metaphor is necessary in order to re-imagine historical discourses on domestic violence that would allow a safe environment for adolescent boys in particular to address their anxieties, as well as their mothers' concerns for them.

Reinstating the everyday

A final creative junction to established discourses for thinking about domestic violence emerged in considering children's experiences of the programme. These experiences largely focused on the space the programme had given children to rehabilitate their 'everyday' lives. In recounting what they enjoyed the most about the programme, children and young people reported valuing their time on the programme because it provided a fun space and fun food.

Jenny: We hide from the parents.

MJ: Yeah, that was the best thing about it.

Cherry: We was 'hiii' [sic], at the end, yeah, when the parents came to get us we used to make all these hiding places and always hid in them.

Bugatti: We played hide and seek.

MJ: We should do that again! We should all hide from the parents! (lines 381-398)

Children placed much more importance on the experience of fun and being together than they did on the learning derived from the programme[41]. For us this was a reminder to be mindful of the multiple identities that children and their mothers occupy, which can be easily overlooked in simplistic, binary analyses of family violence. While seemingly banal observations, these reports can be read as an assertion of the value of everyday experiences themselves as important in providing sources of creativity and renewal[42]. Hiding (previous quotation), which for many children would have previously been a practice of protection (to hide from violence in the home) is rehabilitated to a more pleasurable and thrilling experience of childhood hide-and-seek and the mischievous teasing of mothers. Our findings are echoed in research by Nicky Stanley and colleagues on young people's experiences and perceptions of specialist domestic violence services, with those young people who took part in the NSPCC research reporting that youth spaces 'gave us a break, it let us be children… we never had a chance to be children'[43]. Children's experiences of the programme is an important reminder of the limitations of single identities (victim or witness, in this case) and the need for provisions that address children and women's multiple needs and identities.

Separate and connected

Historically the women's movement has been instrumental in creating the foundations for a responsive infrastructure to domestic violence and child abuse. Much of that early infrastructure revolved around the creation of refuges, or shelters, for 'battered women' - temporary accommodation that women could access in order to physically remove themselves from a violent relationship. Shelters were an important feminist intervention, and later institution, and remain an important physical and symbolic space of refuge for women leaving violent relationships. More recently, however, with the joining up of academic research and good practice, international bodies such as the Council of Europe[44] have advocated for the need of a range of services in responding to domestic violence, including helplines and shelters which offer immediate services with 24 hour access to counselling and safe accommodation for women and children; early proactive services; short term counselling and advocacy; trauma care and long term support; and outreach work and mobile services[45].

The CGP is, we believe, an example of a transitional moment in traditions of responding to domestic violence from responses that focused on an individual, liberal subject (the woman) to approaches that start to embrace what 'the maternal' means, namely a lifelong intersubjective and relational need to care and to be cared for[46]. By bringing children into the fold the opportunity arises to rethink a number of foundational assumptions underpinning support practices.

Our own evaluation, and large mixed methods studies on children's experiences of domestic violence[47], suggest that taking children's views seriously can open up new understandings of the emotional landscapes of family violence. The idea that guilt and blame, and the responsibilities those imply, may be the predominant emotional responses to violence

experienced simplifies the affective assemblages of violence[48] and places specific demands on the victimhood of women and the vulnerability of children in order to be worthy of collective concern, intervention and support services[49]. Children and young people's responses to violence bring a family perspective to the fore, in that violence is perceived as an interaction between adults with varied consequences for children.

The persistent theory that violence is transmitted from fathers to sons, and a generalised anxiety about all men being perpetrators of violence, puts young men in an uncertain position, and can make access to support difficult. Boys' and young men's complex and nuanced understanding of themselves and their positions in the social world can be undermined by essentialised and binary understandings of gender[50]. Research evidence also suggests that the pathways for inter-generational transmission of violence are far from direct, often requiring the co-existence of neglect as well as multiple forms of abuse in a person's life history[51,52,533]. Persistent metaphors of the dynamics of violence can contribute to young men's precarity. In recognition of this AVA extended the provision of the programme up to 21 years of age, and developed an educational programme to address violence and abuse in teenage relationships. However, we are not sure to what extent this programme provides young men with the tools to explore their own biographies and relationship patterns without being positioned as potential perpetrators.

Finally, listening to children's experiences of participating in social support provides an avenue for reframing the dominant identities ascribed and enacted to those affected by domestic violence. The children in both our evaluation and similar evaluations[54] interrupted dominant

[3] With thanks to Robbie Duschinsky (Cambridge) for the careful explanation and relevant references regarding the intergenerational transmission of violence and abuse (personal communication, 26 October 2015).

responses that focus on safety and protection, reminding us through their narratives of their agency and participation. The shift from women-only to 'the necessary struggle-in-relation' opens a space for theory and practice in family violence to go beyond the woman/mother and (genderless) child couple relationship. In the final section of this chapter, we sketch out ways in which responses to family violence can be further complicated in the journey from individual and couple to family and community responses to violence.

Imagining complexity

The focus on children in violent homes/families has coincided with an international and national triptych of trends characteristic of knowledge-based economies in late modernity: the institutionalisation of the evidence-based (medicine) movement[55], the rise in parenting cultures[56], and the systematic dismantling of the welfare state under neoliberalism and austerity policies[57]. As such, we are at a point of witnessing a shift in the policy and practice landscape, from a framing of domestic violence and intimate partner violence as a 'woman-only' issue to a public child mental health issue[58,59,60,61]. At the same time calls have been made in the literature for a more meaningful integration between feminist, sociological, and childhood studies approaches[62], and a reimagining of the dynamics of, and responses to, experiences of domestic violence in order to generate new practices.

Given the shifting in framing it is perhaps unsurprising that evaluation research finds that attempts for more holistic responses to domestic violence, both in terms of prevention and provision/intervention, are currently fragmented on the ground[63]. In the CGP the relational message given in the training was often at odds with the programme commitment to a 'gender-based analysis' of violence. At the same time, the practitioners' responses[64] suggest that the

transitional moment that we are arguing the programme represents was well recognized. Practitioners identified the programme as providing children *and* mothers a start to recovery; the child-centred nature of the programme was well understood and in their accounts of the programme a number of the guiding principles, such as respecting and listening to children, were well articulated. Professionals also identified the programme as neither a parenting programme nor a woman abuse group, but, rather, something in-between. Professionals varied in the extent to which they found the feminist theoretical underpinning of the programme useful for practice, and often drew on other bodies of knowledge (theoretical and policy) to make aspects of the programme theory more meaningful to them.

It is our argument in this chapter that the well-being of children *and* women can be improved when an attempt is made to work through the necessary tensions embodied in their relationship. Children and women are inevitably connected at the same time as also having separate cares and concerns. The next generation of responses to family violence need to build on these emergent understandings of responses to domestic violence as 'a struggle-in-relation' to think about the broader contexts and ecologies in which violence takes place. In thinking about the plurality of relationships that are implicated and explicated in thinking about family violence, consideration also needs to be given to relationships beyond the heterosexual couple/family (partners; parent-child).

The need for such consideration is important for the well-being of all involved, but is most starkly illustrated in family relationships that do not conform to the normative conceptions that were embedded in the CGP model. Women's decisions to leave a violent relationship are multi-faceted (especially where a woman has children) and often involve multiple and complex considerations about her own and her children's safety, housing, finances, immigration status,

and access to legal information[65,66,67,68,69]. The most internationally comprehensive reviews of the research evidence on identifying and responding to domestic violence[70,71] suggest that advocacy, outreach, and information services can play an important role in mediating a woman's decision to leave a violent relationship.

The CGP grappled with the tensions that many women experience between their rights and their society's cultural values[72]. For instance, the specific gender-based analysis of the CGP meant that, in a diverse city like London which is home to a number of different communities, some women who were unable to leave the family home were not able to take part in the CGP. Children and women from Orthodox Jewish families, for example, often continued to live in the same home with the perpetrator even after they had officially split up. This is likely to be true for a number of women and children from cultural or religious backgrounds where multiple generations may live together in one house, or where perpetrators had modified their behaviours through perpetrator programmes[73]. Decisions to leave a family home are also dependent on structural constraints and possibilities. For example, in the UK, refuge spaces are under threat, and UKROL[74] data suggests the England's refuge provision requires nearly 2000 more spaces to meet Council of Europe Taskforce recommendations. This means that while some women fleeing violence will be able to secure safe accommodation in a shelter, others will have to seek out alternatives (e.g. friends or family members) if possible, or continue living with violence until other options become available.

Burman argues that services for children are often good on provision and protection but not on participation[75]. While practices of children's participation have become more widespread in children's service provision across sectors in England, there has been a narrow focus on Article 12 in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – and the elicitation of children's

views in decisions that affect them - but less of a focus on trying to understand what matters to children beyond the confines of an institutional moment[76]. More programmes like the CGP need to be offered to children and young people, and the needs of young people who witness or experience domestic violence should be prioritized and listened to.

Analyses of violence need to move beyond the current models that rest on essentialised ideas about men and women, and that ignore the multiplicity of experiences and factors that might lead someone to experience violence. Support needs to go beyond the reification of the idea that being violent (for men) and experiencing violence (for women) are ontological realities. Instead, analyses need to consider the contextual elements of violence that are situated in relation to power dynamics that include but are not limited to gender. Perpetrator and victim are not ontological positions, and should not be imagined as such. There are fathers who have experienced violence at the hands of female or male partners, and mothers who have experienced violence in the context of a lesbian partnership. While these people may only represent a minority of those in violent relationships, they are not unimportant. Equally, recent research in perpetrator programmes[77] make clear that established interventions with violent men can lead to dramatic changes within relationships.

At the same time, further responses need to consider the complexities and challenges of 'intimate autonomy' and the complex dynamics of relating and separating[78]. A US survey on women who had experienced domestic violence[79] showed that while respondents from the 90 DV programmes surveyed reported their primary needs as being largely met by existing provision, they nevertheless had some key unmet needs, namely economic support and help for perpetrators of domestic violence. Women's concern for perpetrators is unsurprising given the complexities of intimate relationships, yet these concerns are rarely represented in research or

practice. It has been suggested that the theoretical dominance of feminist and cognitive behavioural theories in framing research on domestic violence is partly responsible for such concerns being overlooked[80]. In the CGP there was some recognition of the complexity of intimate family relationships. A repeated relational message in the training was that violence was a *response* to a situation and not a personal attribute ('dad is not a violent person, he reacted violently'). Such a message allows for the possibility of change and transformation to apply to all, including potentially the perpetrator of violence, and needs to be further embraced in the provision of services.

Responding to family violence emerged as a political project built on women's communities[81]. We have argued that the CGP, and programmes like it, are emblematic of a crossroads in responses to domestic violence, an indication that the original political project is changing in response to social and cultural changes in how gender is understood and experienced. One of the analytical and practical challenges of carving up social problems in terms of demographic categories (young/old; male/female) and binary oppositions (victims/perpetrators) is that any gestalt between parts and wholes become severed. Haaken's analysis of the narratives that have framed the women's movement and the struggle to support women who have experienced domestic violence suggests a meaningful way of reintegrating parts and wholes. In her book, *Hard Knocks,* Haaken develops her arguments by engaging with the myths and counter-myths that have been historically employed to mobilise awareness and action against domestic violence. 'It takes two to tango' vs. 'men initiate ninety-five percent of incidents of couple violence' have for a long time framed knowledge of domestic violence. Original framings of women's experiences of domestic violence also largely ignored children.

Drawing on object-relations psychoanalytic thinking, Haaken argues that 'battered women have been valorized within feminism because they do bear – literally and symbolically- the collective injuries of women'[82]. She goes on to explain that, while completely understandable, such idealisation results in denying women the 'full range of [their] humanity'[83]. In other words, a 'battered woman' is not only positioned as a victim, but specific demands are placed on her victimhood in order for her to be a symbol that can mobilise collective action: she must, above all, be 'good' in order to be worthy of collective concern. A woman who feels anger, rage, or violence herself is a challenging candidate for a symbol of collective mobilisation.

Haaken argues for the cultivation of a more 'depressive position'[4] in response to domestic violence, a term that comes from a Kleneian object-relations school of thought and 'represents a movement beyond all-good and all-bad categories'. At the same time, recent feminist analyses of violence in other contexts have begun to reconceptualise violence as 'a dynamic relational process that produces docile bodies *and* complex intersectional subjectivities'[84]. Such analyses of violence and intervention, as the one also presented in this chapter, have the capacity to instigate a movement towards more integrated and inclusive ethical responses to social problems that cut across age, gender, sexuality, class, and culture. Such analyses would enable a more dynamic and fluid model of family violence - and responses to it - to emerge, that place oppression and hierarchy at the centre of an analysis of *contexts* that produce violence[85,86,87], moving past ontologically determined positions that rely on essentialist notions of age and gender alone.

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