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Framed to fit? Challenging the domestic abuse 'story' in child protection

Introduction

Domestic abuse is recognised internationally as a social problem demanding co-ordinated action at a range of levels from the societal to the individual. Statutory child protection has a long and contested history in dealing with such abuse with a substantial literature containing numerous critiques and attempts at reforms (Humphreys and Absler, 2011). However, in England, patterns of responding appear stubbornly resistant to change resulting in what is, in effect, the privatisation of a 'public trouble' with the management of its consequences outsourced to those often most harmed by it, for example, multiply disadvantaged mothers.

In this article we suggest this is not surprising given how the issue has been framed to fit a child protection project that has a long history of individualising social issues. We discuss whether a social model of protecting children, informed by theories of intersectionality and restorative approaches, may be of value in offering more hopeful and progressive possibilities for children, mothers, fathers and the wider community than are currently to be found in contemporary approaches.

We begin with a recent practice example provided by one of the authors in order to bring to life some of the challenges posed by contemporary practices for very marginalised mothers, fathers and children.

Risky mothers and recalcitrant fathers

D (3), A (26), and L (28) are a Black British family from an area of high socio-economic deprivation in London. D was subject to a child protection plan with the local authority under the category of neglect. The child protection plan centred on A's parenting of D and her 'capacity to protect' him from witnessing domestic abuse following a physical assault by L. When L was imprisoned, following a 'gang' fight where a young man was seriously injured, a

decision was taken by the local authority to move D and A out of the area because of concerns that they might be in danger due to retribution from 'gang' tensions.
A grew up in a socially deprived area of London and entered the care system as a teenager due to being deemed 'beyond parental control' by the local authority. Her entry into the care system occurred in the context of her struggling to cope with the death of her father and a difficult relationship with her mother and siblings. The birth of her child had helped to repair and restore relationships between A and her mother and older siblings. They all supported her with his care and he was assessed by professionals as a well looked after child. However, A's mother became ill and her poor health impacted on the levels of support she could provide with the care of D.

The protective action to move A and D to another borough caused significant difficulties especially in terms of A being able to access support from her wider family and created substantial needs which increasingly became framed as risks to D from A's 'neglectful parenting' and 'failure to protect'. A's expressed worries about a range of issues were offered little recognition within child protection processes. Thus she was forced to struggle alone with financial worries, unsuitable accommodation and the high crime levels in the area. Emotionally she was dealing with feelings of loss, grief and disappointment: her mother's illness, the loss of her relationship with L, and having to give up her college course. Looking after D where she was some distance from her supportive networks and the nursery was also very challenging.
The practice approach increasingly framed A as a risk to her son wherein A taking D to see his father in prison was understood only in terms of L exercising control over A and her failure to protect her child. D arriving hungry to nursery was understood as evidence of parental neglect resulting in a referral to a parenting course.

L also grew up in an area of social economic deprivation. He experienced a difficult childhood and was subject to a child protection plan as a child under the category of neglect which centred on his mother's substance misuse difficulties and witnessing domestic abuse from his father. L has aspiration to be a chef, however, he struggled at college and became involved in supplying drugs in the local area. Throughout the child protection process, L was assessed and understood as a 'gang member' and 'perpetrator of domestic abuse' with little focus on his identity as a father despite positive reports in previous records. He was assessed using the

Duluth Model which framed the causes of his violence as rooted in his need for control and power. As part of the child protection plan he was offered a cognitive behavioural therapy intervention in prison which he struggled to engage with.

While this is an account of an individual piece of practice, the themes raised echo those found in the empirical literature. For example, the expectation that the mother is protective in a context where key material and emotional resources are not available to her or, indeed, are actually ruptured by the practice interventions, is a recurring theme of research in this area (see a summary in Humphreys and Absler, 2011). The offer of a parenting programme, disconnected from the actual needs of those involved, is a routinized response in many local authorities but the actual needs of families are often for help with financial difficulties, poor housing and lack of social supports (see, for example, Morris et al, 2018). It can appear in such circumstances that the relationship between the state and those who are marginalized is characterised by both intrusive and neglectful responses creating high challenge/low support paradoxes (Wacquant, 2010). Finally, the lack of attention to the actual substance of the domestically abusive behaviour, and its causes, resulted in L receiving a standardised approach (the Duluth programme) that he struggled to find meaningful. Again, this is borne out in the research of responses to those who abuse as we will discuss further below.

In this article we outline the background to contemporary developments before exploring more fully the themes from the extensive scholarship in this area and identifying how we might develop more progressive possibilities. We begin by tracing the evolution of the child protection story through the 'rediscovery' of child abuse in the 1960s highlighting its relentlessly individualising gaze and its eschewal of the need to anchor parents' actions/inactions to social and economic contexts.

A relentlessly individualising gaze

The 'modern' child protection system emerged in the 1960s from a concern to stop babies dying or being 'battered' by parents, who were considered to be suffering from a lack of 'empathic mothering' in their own lives (Featherstone et al, 2018). Poverty, inadequate housing and other social factors were not regarded as relevant to understanding why some babies were seriously harmed by their parents/carers (Parton, 1985, 2014). Indeed, it was considered that the post-war welfare settlement provided for the basic needs (such as income, housing, health care and education) of the majority of citizens, but there were some who were damaged by earlier psychological experiences and needed therapeutic help to care safely (Featherstone et al, 2018).

The focus was the individual family and their particular needs in a project led by the medical profession. As social work assumed ownership of this social problem, the emphasis on the individual dovetailed neatly with a history of casework and home visiting (Parton, 1985). This focus on the actions of individual parents has proved enduring becoming central to a broader and harsher project as a much colder climate was ushered in, with a variety of economic and social changes, under the rubric of neoliberalism, from the 1970s onwards (Parton, 2014).

Wacquant (2010) has argued that the role of the 'night-watchman' state in managing the working class and the poor has been expanded and aggressively strengthened under neoliberalism. He outlines the development of a 'centaur state'. This presents a 'comely and caring visage towards the middle and upper classes, and a fearsome and frowning mug towards the lower class' (p, 217). The state has retreated from a number of areas most notably the regulation of the market but has increased the scope and extent of state regulation of the poor. In the meantime, social protections developed under Keynesian models of state spending have been dramatically curtailed.

This analysis by Wacquant is helpful in understanding some empirical findings around how child protection systems operate. There has been a steady increase in the

numbers of families experiencing investigations for suspected abuse in the last decades, the majority of which do not appear to uncover actual abuse and do not result in help being offered to families (Featherstone et al, 2018). This is a trend across a range of countries but if we focus on England investigations increased by 79.4%, in the period from 2009/2010 to 2014/2015 (Bilson and Martin, 2016). While the numbers on child protection plans did rise, this rise fell far below those actually investigated. Moreover, because there are no statistics on the numbers who move from investigation to help or support services, it is difficult to assess how any needs that were uncovered in the course of an investigation were dealt with.

Over time, there has been an expansion of the category 'child abuse' and an array of issues have become subject to the child protection gaze. The boundaries have proved paradoxically to be permeable and rigidly policed; with the apparent periodic additions of 'new' abuses and associated sites of protection activities whilst at the same time practitioners must patrol clear exclusions. Domestic abuse is the most obvious example of 'new harms'. However, other issues that harm children such as unsafe housing, food poverty and precarious employment for parents have not been named as abusive to children or considered within the remit of child protection. Indeed, in recent research on social workers' attitudes to poverty, 'core business' was defined as effecting parental change and the procedural management of risk while dealing with poverty was explicitly ruled out as part of the child protection task (Morris et al, 2018).

Overall, in order to qualify as an abuse requiring child protection activity, it would appear that the following needs to be in place; a focus on the intra-familial and the inactions or actions of care takers and the dis-embedding of such actions from socio-economic circumstances in a story that goes as follows:

- *The harms children and young people need protecting from are normally located within individual families and are caused by actions of omission or commission by parents and/or other adult caretakers;*

- *These actions/inactions are due to factors ranging from poor attachment patterns, dysfunctional family patterns, parenting capacity, faulty learning styles to poor/dangerous lifestyle choices;*
- *The assessment of risk and parenting capacity is 'core business' and interventions are focused on effecting change in family functioning;*
- *Developing procedures, expert risk-assessment and multi-agency working are central to protecting children* (Featherstone et al, 2018)

Recent research developments have disrupted this story but have yet to destabilise it in any fundamental sense. A growing evidence base highlights that the families who are engaged by services are living in poverty, although poverty is often invisible in practice and policy accounts. Furthermore, while explanations for children's maltreatment are routinely seen through a gaze that focuses on what happens in the home, the brain, learning patterns and family dynamics, research uncovering the systematic links between deprivation and a child's chances of coming into care suggests the need to pay attention to the contexts in which children are being raised (Bywaters et al, 2018).

In the next section we explore how domestic abuse has been framed to fit this child protection project.

Framed to fit?

Goffman (1986) sees the work of frame analysis as attending to the question: 'What is it that's going on here?' The concept of the 'frame' has been developed and used in a variety of different and related ways (Banks, 2016). Frames are usually tacit and determine what counts as a fact and what arguments are regarded as relevant. In the field of social movements the concept of frames and framing processes has also been applied to studying the way meanings are constructed collectively and function, for example, to diagnose issues (identifying victims of an injustice) and mobilise people into action (Nixon and Humphreys, 2010).

Over the last decades a number of narratives about domestic abuse have emerged to construct a particular framing in relation to child protection policy and practice. One

such narrative has highlighted the damage caused by the exposure of children to violence between their parents or adult caretakers. This emerged primarily from practitioners (often working in refuges) who witnessed children's distress and then became a concern for statutory agencies and policy makers (Rivett and Kelly, 2006). Official recognition that children needed a policy and practice response became part of governmental guidance from the 1990s onwards. In England the Adoption and Children Act 2002 identified 'impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another' (s. 120) as a form of significant harm. The legislation reflected the shift from a view of domestic violence as an issue of concern to adults, to one that recognised that children were affected and centrally involved. It also had the effect of drawing a new and potentially vast group of children and families into the auspices of children's services (Stanley, 2011).

The second narrative emerged from feminists who highlighted the link between child deaths and woman abuse that emerged from enquiries into child deaths. For those critical of the failure of statutory agencies to take domestic abuse seriously, this provided important evidence to support calls to put the abuse of women on the child care agenda (see Mullender and Morley, 1994). They argued for the importance of statutory agencies responding to domestic violence because women and children were harmed and it compromised women's ability to mother well.

Over time it has become apparent that one narrative is emphasised more in child protection law, policy and practice; the one relating to the exposure of children. The experience of women in violent relationships has become a secondary concern for children's services and is minimally addressed by adult services.

The problems that this causes for women who are abused are compounded by a theme running through both narratives that occludes discussion of the differing social and economic contexts in which women live their lives. The message that domestic violence is common and affects women of all backgrounds, effectively cutting across stratifications of ethnicity and socio-economic status, has been highly influential in

establishing domestic abuse as a social concern over the last decades (Nixon and Humphreys, 2010). But while all women are indeed vulnerable, it is also clear that the 'equal vulnerability' thesis may be inaccurate and unhelpful. A review for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation by Fahmy et al (2015) concludes that there is a host of evidence showing vulnerability to domestic abuse to be associated with low income, economic strain and benefit receipt. The mechanisms linking these are not well understood and require further research. The most common relate to the effects of financial strain on relationship stress and quality and issues arising from men's inability to fulfill the 'traditional' male breadwinner role. Nixon and Humphreys (2010) note also that the increased vulnerability to domestic abuse of minority ethnic women, found in research evidence from a range of countries, is likely related to poverty and income.
We have already identified how the state, in the context of neo-liberalism, has sharpened its gaze in relation to those most marginalized. Currently, certainly in England, the focus on developing procedures and multi-agency working, alongside strengthening state responses, is inadequately interrogated in terms of the possibility that this has differential impacts on different groups in society with particular consequences for those most marginalized. As we explore below, this obliges further thought and learning from other countries.

An inter-related issue is that differentiating between different types of abuse in terms of seriousness is an underdeveloped area. Johnson (2008) proposed a typology to differentiate between principal forms of intimate partner violence (IPV): intimate terrorism, violent resistance and situational couple violence. Thus, for example, intimate terrorism is a process that involves an underlying pattern of coercive control by one partner over another and is highly gendered. Situational couple violence, by contrast, consists of specific abusive acts perpetrated by one or both partners. Myhill (2015) notes the importance of such differentiation but highlights the considerable methodological challenges to robust research in this area and recommends the need for more work to be done to establish prevalence and develop more through understandings of the factors behind different types of abuse.

As the practice example we offered at the beginning notes, a frequent approach to men who are violent seems to see all violence as intimate terrorism. This leads to a one size fits all approach to men and may be very unhelpful (Featherstone et al, 2014, 2018).

To summarize, a story containing the following elements appears dominant currently:

- Domestic abuse between adults harms children through exposure;
- In the majority of circumstances, the mother is the person experiencing the actual abuse but in assessing risks for particular children and future safety, her potential to be protective is key;
- Domestic abuse occurs across all classes and cultures and all mothers are, therefore, equally vulnerable irrespective of economic or social contexts;
- Moreover, their capacity to be protective is unrelated to economic or social contexts;
- Economic circumstances and associated issues are also not relevant factors in why men are abusive;
- Men's violence within relationships is rooted in their need to retain power and control over women.

In the next section we discuss how this is played out in practice.

The more things change, the more they stay the same?

Linda Gordon (1989), in her study of family violence in Boston from 1880-1960, explored how violence against children represented a complex challenge for those concerned to develop feminist policies and practices. She noted that, historically, child protection work supported mothers' demands for protection from violent men but also made them vulnerable by bringing scrutiny to bear on their mothering. In a context where there was no Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Women, women tried to turn the agencies concerned with cruelty to children into one. It was often at great cost to themselves although there were some advantages too – financial help, moral support and condemnation of the men (Gordon, 1989).

As a range of writers have noted, the costs to mothers of social work intervention have continued through the decades (see Humphreys and Absler, 2011). Moreover, there is some evidence, especially in the recent context of austerity, that the benefits have become sorely circumscribed (Featherstone et al, 2018). As we saw in the case example above, mothers too often shoulder the risks of protection and the burdens of recovery- they alone are responsible with little attention paid to the economic, social and psychological challenges despite the research evidence noted above that they are increasingly likely to be without a range of resources themselves.

Why has such a pattern endured in relation to focusing on women? Numerous writers have noted the persistence of gendered norms in relation to both mothering and fathering in the workforce and the population at large (see, for example, Lapierre, 2011). Research suggests, for example, that fathers have both resisted and been ignored by workers, leaving mothers to bear the sole focus of agency attention (Featherstone, 2017)

Humphreys and Absler (2011) have highlighted the importance of recognising that the resources available to child protection workers are also part of this complex picture. These are, of course, a critical issue in the current climate of austerity. The greater the workload and pressure on front line workers, the less time they have for support and the more dependent they are upon women to protect their children.

More generally a child-focused discourse runs through policy and practice (Gilbert et al, 2011). This discourse concentrates on the child as an individual with an independent relationship to the state. In such a discourse parents are seen as impacting upon children rather than being in relationships with them, and with each other, thus practice focuses on how their actions/inactions do or do not affect children. A punitive ethos pervades practices often with parents (especially mothers) constructed as prioritizing their own needs over those of their children.

Furthermore, in relation to men who abuse women, the field in the UK is, to some extent, characterised by a lack of curiosity about them. It's as if we all know why they

do what they do and they need to move on or receive a routinized response. This, of course, means that they may move from one family to another resulting in multiple encounters that cause damage and trauma. Whilst there are now examples of more complex approaches to male violence, it is still the case, in the main, that if they do access a perpetrators' programme, and these are under severe pressure as a result of austerity, they may receive an overly reductive approach.

Domestic Violence Perpetrator Programmes (DVPPS) were developed originally in the US in the 1980s and were concerned to move away from therapeutic, particularly psychodynamic approaches. In their initial development they were envisaged as one part of a wider Co-ordinated Community Response to domestic abuse. This aspect has not always been developed fully as they have been rolled out worldwide although many are embedded in local arrangements in the UK (Kelly and Westmarland, 2015). Such programmes are group work programmes and are based on cognitive behavioural approaches and underpinned by a feminist understanding of the role power and control issues play in men's motivation to abuse. Usually the group work for men is accompanied by support services for women. In this analysis, men's abuse is considered a rational strategy to keep power and control in relationships. There does not appear to be a focus on the complexities attendant upon their use of violence and areas of vulnerability. How do they make sense of their own lives in the context of socially validated constructions of masculinity that stress men should be able to manage their emotions, be self-supporting, rational and independent? Indeed, we would suggest highly rational treatment approaches may run the risk of reinforcing the very behaviours that are key to the violence in the first place. Most importantly, in the context of this discussion, how do the various services connect in their aims to increase the safety of children and women with the desire to reduce men's harmful behaviours? How are these different preoccupations joined up to achieve sustainable change? (Featherstone et al, 2018).

To conclude it is important to recognise that some innovative practice developments have emerged in a range of contexts (see, for example, Sen et al, 2018 and Stanley and Humphreys, 2017). But assessing risk in the immediate sense and promoting

separation remains a routine response in England certainly. As a multi-agency thematic inspection (JTAI 2017) noted, the focus is on immediate protective action in a very narrow sense. Someone must leave (sometimes it is the man but it can also be the women and children) and someone must protect and manage the risks to the children. Indeed, it can appear that domestic violence is constructed in such a way that it is a 'doable' project, rendered manageable through its breaking down into discrete tasks.

Beyond reform: why adjusting the clothing may not work?

There are a number of fault lines that oblige pessimism about the possibilities for reforming current child protection practices:

- *The conceptualising of child protection as intra familial and an individualised issue of capacity and ability to care safely*
- *The absence of an understanding of the intersectional nature of abuse and women's likelihood of being adversely affected by both the abuse and the interventions of the state*
- *The exclusion of a focus on those who cause harm from micro and macro strategies for change*

In this context we highlight the possibilities offered by broadening the lens away from the individual mother, father and child to think in more collective ways about how all involved can be supported to live lives that are safe and flourishing. We explore the possibilities offered by three separate but inter-related areas of scholarship: intersectionality, restorative approaches and the emerging social model for protecting children.

Intersectionality

A body of scholarship and activism has emerged in the past decade that nuances in important ways the message that it could be **any** woman, and challenges the use of gender inequality as the only framework for understanding and addressing domestic abuse. This body of work is concerned with analysing how other forms of inequality

and oppression intersect and impact on the lives of poor and marginalised women and children (Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005; Josephson, 2002; Nixon and Humphreys, 2010). These authors consider how gender intersects with other socially constructed categories, particularly class and 'race', to shape unique life experiences and are indebted to conceptual and political developments that have become associated with the term intersectionality.

Intersectionality is a conceptual framework concerned with social justice that conceives experiences of privilege and oppression as shaped by interacting social constructions such as class, 'race', gender, and sexuality (Collins and Bilge, 2016). It evolved from the black feminist civil rights movements of the 1970s. One of the earliest of such movements was the Combahee River Collective in the US who highlighted that black women were over represented in the working class and who argued that inequalities arising from 'race', class, gender and sexuality were intersecting forms of oppression that created new categories of suffering (Taylor, 2017).

The term intersectionality was advanced by Kimberly Crenshaw (1989) and has proved very influential although it remains contested without a single definition. It opens up possibilities to understand a diverse range of experiences and thus fractures unitary categories such as woman. There can also be a risk though that, if the focus is simply on diversity, power relations are minimised, and the significance of social, structural and material factors are undermined. In relation to domestic abuse specifically, Sokoloff and Dupont (2005) argue that it is necessary to integrate an intersectional and a structural perspective to ensure that different groups of women who have been subject to domestic abuse are provided with the types of personal and social supports required for safety at individual and community levels.

More recently Nixon and Humphreys (2010) have argued for a social movement frame to address domestic abuse that draws on intersectionality to examine the evidence in relation to prevalence, gender, ethnicity and poverty and develop new understandings. They argue for the importance of being attentive to evidence that

highlights that, while it might be correct to say that domestic abuse occurs across all classes and cultures, it is not correct to say there is **equal vulnerability** across all classes and culture. As the example at the beginning of this article illustrates, a young black woman living in poverty and an unsafe neigbourhood is likely to have very particular needs arising from interacting oppressions.

Alongside this more nuanced exploration of women's experiences and needs, there is an emerging literature from Canada that explores children's experiences of domestic abuse and seeks to move beyond a historical tendency to treat children as a homogenous group and to use a trauma framework to understand and engage with them. This work seeks to incorporate an intersectionality frame, considering the complexities of children's identity development and how interlocking oppressions can impact on vulnerability and adjustment (Etherington and Baker, 2018). The value of intersectionality for children may facilitate approaches that move beyond the 'one size fits all' approach and thus address their experiences of domestic abuse across a wider range of factors related to age, gender, class, ability, race and ethnicity (Etherington and Baker, 2018).

This intersectional perspective has similarities with the ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) that informed Every Child Matters (ECM), the policy approach to children developed under New Labour, and in Scotland, Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC). These policies promote assessments of children that take account of the differing contexts in which children live. However, in England, during the past decade, there has been a strengthening of the importance of statutory child protection investigations which do not routinely consider the social context of family troubles and, indeed, an explicit abandonment of ECM at a policy level (Parton, 2014) although, GIRFEC remains the policy approach in Scotland.

The implications of intersectionality for understanding men are also far-reaching and need further exploration. Findings on poverty as a contributory factor in men's violence open up important possibilities conceptually as well as practice wise. They

are an underexplored part of the jigsaw when seeking to understand what fuels different types of violence. Currently, it does seem that men's desire to retain power and control is seen as the only game in town. We do not reject this particularly when seeking to understand intimate terrorism but consider it important to develop a more curious and rigorous ethos that is rooted in on going explorations with men and women themselves about how they understand what is happening and why.

A potentially valuable avenue for exploration might be around the emotion of shame. As is well documented, shame is a chronic feature of the experience of poverty and has been explored most recently in relation to child protection practices (Featherstone et al, 2018). While there is a literature on the relationship between shame and the use of violence (see Scheff, 2014) this work is not directly related to poverty and has not been developed in terms of its practice implications.

Restorative approaches

Internationally, feminists such as Joan Pennell (Pennell and Kim, 2010) work within restorative justice. These developments have emerged from an understanding of the ways the state and state agencies can further reinforce the oppression of already multiply disadvantaged communities. Thus they seek to increase the involvement of family and community networks in repairing the harms caused. They are explicitly designed to restore relationships and counteract the fracturing that can occur through interactions with justice or child protective services. Because of their origins they are highly attuned to the importance of culture and context in devising responsive approaches to what all those harmed by the violence need.

These approaches are located within restorative justice aspirations of bringing to bear the caring and knowledge of those harmed, the responsibilities of those who committed the harm, and capabilities of the wider community, so to build trust, heal the trauma, and create the conditions for peace. They do not mean replacing the legal system, but are concerned with engaging and empowering communities to use the law to safeguard human rights.

A crucial aspect of Pennell's work concerns that carried out with men who are abusive. A potential strategy for mitigating the recurrence of family violence is to support the men in assessing and managing their own risk to family members (Pennell, Rikard and Sanders-Rice, 2013). This is the aim of the Strong Fathers program that was developed and tested in North Carolina, a state in the southeastern United States. The program was a parenting group for men with a history of committing domestic abuse and whose families received child protection services. The overarching framework of Strong Fathers has moved away from crime-centered risk approaches to engaging men in solution finding. Guided by this theory of change, the program encourages the men to specify their change goals, develop skills for reaching these goals, and reconstruct themselves as responsible fathers. Pennell et al suggest that Strong Fathers is a starting point for reinforcing responsible fathering, resolving the harms of family violence and its underlying causes, and restoring a sense of personhood. A fundamental underpinning premise is how discrimination and oppression are so often reinforced by state services. Therefore, engaging men as agents of change in a way that is respectful is a first step. The men's testimonies suggest they struggle however in a society that offers highly restrictive messages about what it is to be a man, especially in relation to the economic provider role, and simultaneously places serious obstacles in the way of achieving such goals.

As Ptacek (2010) notes, restorative justice is most commonly applied to youth crime and is concerned to develop mediation practices that seek to decrease the role of the state and increase the involvement of personal, familial and communities in responding to crime. Its use with domestic abuse is controversial and we recognise that there will be many instances where there are too many risks attached. This could apply particularly in contexts of intimate terrorism but it is vital that we do not assume this is the only type of abuse. It is also really important that we acknowledge it speaks to a growing recognition that existing systems and approaches can cause further hardship to those they seek to protect, that the causes of harm are not necessarily the focus of the responses and that the wider inequalities in society are played out and

reinforced in current services and practice frameworks. A particular strength of restorative approaches lies in an understanding of the ways the state and state agencies can further reinforce the oppression of already multiply disadvantaged communities.

However, there are limits to its use in the current child protection context as the evidence from evaluation notes. For example, restorative approaches have been developed in England using family group conferencing with domestic abuse (Sen, et al, 2018). The evaluation of one project found that the families who used the service were incredibly positive about it, and there was repeated evidence of children exercising their influence on plans, of women drawing strength from other women in their networks to assert their rights, and, on occasion where men were engaged, of men seeking to change their behaviour and make positive contributions to family plans. However, despite highly skilled relational practice from coordinators and real determination from families, the service was curtailed by mother-centric and risk focused systems and routine practices. It could assist women to build support networks and positively plan for their and their children's future and it could also help families arrive at safe plans for any contact between children and fathers, and support family networks to arrive at contingency plans. But it struggled to hold FGCs where restorative outcomes were the aim – in essence where the FGC focused on men addressing the harms they had caused / were causing and where the aim was to reduce the harm they might cause and to 'put right a wrong'.

The evaluation concluded that existing systems were preoccupied by assessing whether a mother can keep her children safe, and that changing the focus to how the harm the man presented could be addressed simply couldn't fit within existing processes. Ironically, for some children, arriving at plans to prevent further violence from the man would have been the most protective outcome, but was the least possible development.

We suggest that the contribution of restorative approaches could be strengthened by being more securely anchored in a social model that broadens the focus beyond individual safety and risk factors.

A social model

Drawing from the already existing social models of disability and mental health, this model is being used to think about what is needed for protecting children –what are the economic, environmental and cultural barriers to ensuring children are cared for safely and their relational needs and identities respected? It challenges the disconnect that Parton (2014) has noted between policies aimed at the protection of children and wider social and economic policies. It emphasises the importance for protecting children of putting in place policies to reduce poverty, ensure safe and affordable housing and other social protections so that all families can be supported to care safely (Featherstone et al, 2018).

A social model in the area of domestic abuse asks all involved to engage in sophisticated and nuanced practices. It obliges the most careful attention be paid to individual stories of pain and trauma **and to** social understandings of inequalities and suffering and the shame associated. It is vital that either/or logics are eschewed.

A range of strategies is required obliging attention to local and societal constructions of gender relations, the local and societal opportunities available to achieve lives of dignity and respect and to the complexities of individual life histories. Thus all stakeholders need to consider:

- What is expected of men in this society and in this neighbourhood and how is this different for different groups of men?
- What do different groups women want from or expect from their lives and loves?

In individual assessments:

- What kinds of fathering and mothering did you experience?
- Were such experiences unique to you growing up?
- Where are the resources for you to be the kind of man/woman you want to be?

In this last section we focus briefly what this might mean for practice with young men. We note there are examples of work with young men in harsh economic and social contexts that are not specifically branded as domestic abuse approaches but are targeting aspects of men's lives and needs that may be highly pertinent. For example, Robb et al (2015) describe their research with young men aged 16-25 in a range of projects run by two charities. This research highlighted the intersecting nature of societal deprivation and trauma and the kinds of approaches workers used to engage with the young men's lived realities. A third of the young men lived in an area of the UK (the West of Scotland) that had been devastated by de-industrialisation and most lived in areas and/or families struggling with change, loss and deprivation. A further third who were BAME lived in London, which was experiencing enormous changes in terms of economic and social changes with areas of the city becoming increasingly out of reach to all but the wealthiest. Frost and Hoggett (2008) argue for the importance of grasping the relationship between individual biographies and the social processes attached to such huge social changes.

A significant number of the young men, researched by Robb et al, had experienced multiple losses in their own lives within such communities; they had lost mothers, fathers and grandparents as well as experiencing moves in care. Their experiences bring to life the messages contained in a growing body of research highlighting intersecting inequalities in children and young people's lives. For example, children in the most deprived areas of England are over ten times more likely to be removed according to this research. Such rates also map onto other inequalities. For example, a town such as Blackpool, in the north west of England, with high rates of children who are in care, also reports England's lowest subjective happiness score and the greatest use of anti-depressant drugs (Featherstone et al, 2018). Male life expectancy

at birth in Blackpool is 74.7 by contrast, with an affluent area such as Wokingham in the south of England, where it is 81.8.

Frost and Hoggett (2008) note that, experiences that have been forced upon us rather than those we freely choose, those we face as powerless objects rather than as active agents, threaten to go beyond our capacity for thought and emotional processing. They argue that it is very damaging if we are not able to think about our experiences and make sense of them emotionally and intellectually. Indeed, in such circumstances, there are a number of very different possibilities for how we act/react. These include self-destructive behaviour, behaviour that is damaging or harmful to places and to others, including those more vulnerable.

In the research by Robb et al, damaging constructions of masculinity fuelled the issues for young men who had been constructed as risks to others and threats to the social order. Thus it could be hard for them to lay claim to a language of pain, vulnerability and hurt. There was also a lack of a language around structural inequality for them to access, growing up as they had in a highly unequal society with a neo-liberal emphasis on risks and opportunities as individually generated and dependent upon character or choice (Featherstone et al, 2014).

The practices of the workers in the projects researched were steeped in understandings of the damage that can be done by vulnerable young men's investment in 'hyper masculinity'. Such hyper-masculinity can be defined as acts of aggression, violence, risk-taking, substance misuse, drinking large amounts of alcohol and homophobic language and behaviour. Practitioners worked with the young men to develop 'safer' masculinities. They used a holistic strengths and place based approach where the young men could get respite from a cold and lonely flat, help with job applications, emotional support with loss and pain, and be challenged on damaging and destructive sexist and abusive behaviours. The young men were offered high support but also high challenge responses (Robb et al, 2015).

While not branded as targeting domestic abuse, we consider there is much potential here to inform alternative approaches to decontextualized programmes that focus on men solely as problems and offer highly rational challenges to their 'faulty' thinking.

Conclusion

The current framing of domestic violence generates problems for those involved with domestic abuse and the child protection system. What is a 'public trouble' has been privatised with the management of its consequences outsourced to those often most harmed by it with a concomitant failure to offer high support/high challenge approaches to those who abuse.

Amending and revising existing systems and approaches may mitigate the worst excess of current experiences, but still not promote sustainable long lasting change. In drawing from scholarship on intersectionality, restorative approaches and a social model, we hope to open up spaces to advance dialogue on how we might move away from current individualized risk saturated approaches to embrace more progressive possibilities.

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