

Relationships between women and their babies in domestic violence: A new perspective for responses

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Background

Currently attachment theory is used to shine a searchlight on mother/baby relationships but....

A searchlight leaves many things in the dark-the context, other relationships and women's thoughts, feelings and actions.

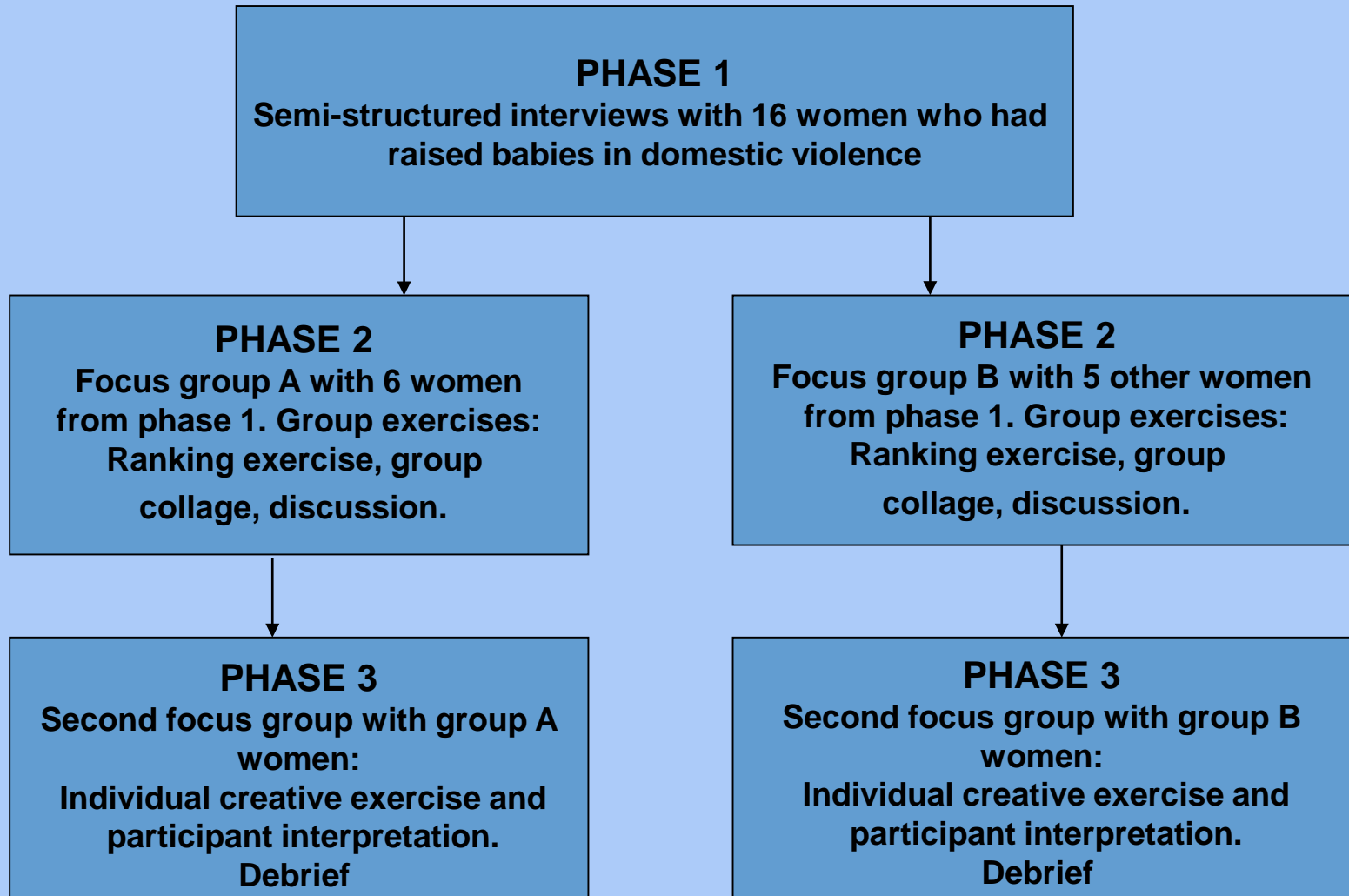
In domestic violence an attachment theory searchlight may distort and obscure the experiences of women and their babies.



A different approach

**To challenge current views I undertook qualitative research to answer the question:
‘How can knowledge of relationships between women and their babies be informed by focusing on the lived experiences, including the emotional experiences of women who have mothered babies in domestic violence?’**

Methods



In Phase 3 women were asked to: 'Model in clay an abstract representation of your experience of forming a relationship with your baby while in domestic violence'



**Kay : making myself as encompassing as possible, and stretching my arms around and keep her in tight,... the symbolism of the snake is him, and me protecting her from him...
(pause, emotional, jaw trembling)
But that, but that part was kind of important, that little gap there between our heads and faces, yeah.
Hmm, that's probably as close as you can go without kissing each other all the time (laughing), and that's it there, so the whole eye contact thing, umm, is something that's really important**



Lily: Mine's sunshine and an angel because my daughter is my sunshine and she was the brightest thing in my life at the time, and she still is (*crying*). And the angel is because she's like my guardian angel, she is the one that gave me the strength to leave, because it was all for her and if it wasn't for her I wouldn't have left, so she's my little guardian angel.

Analysis

- 3 major themes:
- **Context-sustained hostility**
- **Relationality- protectiveness**
- **Subjectivity-constricted space**



Sustained hostility

- **Causing fear through physical attacks to mother and threats and baby**
- **lack of support**
- **Undermining**
- **Isolation**
- **unrealistic expectations leading to Exhaustion**
- **Financial deprivation**

Protectiveness :

- **Going to extraordinary lengths to appease their partners because women were concerned for their babies safety**
- **Holding the baby close when it was safe to do so and keep them safe out of harms way at other times**
- **Picking up and acting on the baby's cues when the baby was frightened**
- **Dealing with the threat then providing comfort**

Constricted space:

‘I was too busy protecting my baby, I didn’t have time to attach with him-to cuddle him, to play with him’ *Elizabeth*



Conclusion

Sustained hostility



Protectiveness



Constricted space

Considerations for policy and practice

- **Domestic violence constitutes an environment of sustained hostility**
- **Protection may be the primary basis of connectedness between women and their babies in domestic violence**
- **Domestic violence often constricts the space for women and babies to relate with each other in peace**
- **Women use their agency in a variety of ways to protect and to find space to relate to their babies**

Implications for practice:

- **Explore context-ask about sustained hostility**
- **Conceptualize relationships between women and their babies as protectiveness and connectedness intertwined.**
- **Ask about and validate protective feelings, thoughts and actions.**
- **Make space available for mothers and their babies to relate in peace.**

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