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

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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

**PHASE 1**
Semi-structured interviews with 16 women who had raised babies in domestic violence

**PHASE 2**
Focus group A with 6 women from phase 1. Group exercises: Ranking exercise, group collage, discussion.

**PHASE 2**
Focus group B with 5 other women from phase 1. Group exercises: Ranking exercise, group collage, discussion.

**PHASE 3**
Second focus group with group A women: Individual creative exercise and participant interpretation. Debrief

**PHASE 3**
Second focus group with group B women: Individual creative exercise and participant interpretation. Debrief
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.
Mothering Babies in Domestic Violence
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It challenges the dominant attachment theory paradigm, offering an alternative understanding of how primary relationships between women and infants are formed in these situations.

Mothering Babies in Domestic Violence reflects current policy and practice focus on early intervention and prevention, but its unique analysis of real-life experiences provides new multi-disciplinary approaches to helping women, children, and anyone raised in a setting of domestic violence.

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