

# Critical Reflections on the Family in the Context of Violence Against Women

## WEBINAR 25 January 2018

### 6:00-7:00am UCT/GMT



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# Mothering in Domestic Violence: Why look further than attachment theory?



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# Background

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**Currently attachment theory shines a searchlight on mother/baby relationships allocating them to 1 of 4 categories-3 of which are seen as deficit.**

**but....**

**A searchlight leaves many things in the dark-cultural contexts of mothering, poverty, other relationships. As such the attachment theory searchlight may distort and obscure the experiences of women and their babies, particularly when they are living with violence.**

**In my research I wanted to hear from women's about their experiences, thoughts, feelings and actions when they mothered in domestic violence**

# My research question :

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**‘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?’**

**In particular I wanted to know how we can support relationships between women and children and focus on strengths rather than focusing on deficits**

# The Research :

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16 women from diverse communities, all living in Australia

I worked with them over time building trust with and between them.

**From their experiences women described:**

**Living with sustained hostility from their partners**

**How they thought, felt and, when possible, acted protectively**

**How time and space to be at peace with their babies was  
affected by the behaviour of abusive partners**

# What the research showed:

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**Sustained hostility**



**Protectiveness**



**Constricted space**

# Sustained hostility

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- **Causing fear through physical attacks to mother and threats to baby**
- **Lack of support for mothering**
- **Undermining mothering**
- **Isolation**
- **Unrealistic expectations from partners leading to exhaustion**
- **Financial deprivation**



# Women's protectiveness :

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- **Going to extraordinary lengths to appease their partners because women were concerned for their babies safety**
- **Holding the babies close when it was safe to do so and keeping 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*

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# Considerations for policy and practice

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- **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 women who mother in domestic violence about their own experiences of 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.**

# More information

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**Thank you**