

# **How domestic violence impacts on the forming of relationships between women and their babies: Implications for policy and practice**

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# Outline of presentation

- Background
- Research question and aims
- Methodology and methods
- Analysis
- Findings
- Discussion
- Recommendations

# Attachment theory

The focus of attachment theory is on the relationship between women (or primary caregivers) and their babies with research determining classification as secure or insecure by observation and survey.

Attachment theory is informing policy and practice concerned with children across the westernised world.

# Bowlby and beyond

John Bowlby(1979) believed the primary attachment relationship between mother and baby is the survival system that ensures babies are protected.

Bowlby promoted observation as a means of creating evidence to prove his theory that attachment was the third primal need.

Now video-observations, cortisol testing and MRI scanning contribute to the assessment of attachment patterns.

# Categorizing the relationship between women and their babies

- **Secure attachment**-seen as optimal for babies healthy psychological and social development

## **Insecure attachment:**

- Insecure avoidant
- Insecure ambivalent
- Insecure disorganised-most likely to lead to psychopathology later in life

# Domestic violence: definition and prevalence

**Domestic violence is defined as ongoing physical, emotional, social, financial and/or sexual abuse used to exert control and power by one partner over another in an adult relationship.**

In Australia one woman in three is subjected to ongoing domestic violence

Women with children are 3 times more likely to be subjected to domestic violence than childless women

Domestic violence is highest for women during pregnancy and following birth.

# **Rational for study**

**Although research has been conducted and observations made about the effects of domestic violence on the formation of relationships between women and their babies from an attachment perspective the lived experiences of forming mother/baby relationships in domestic violence had not been explored.**

# Research 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 birthed and mothered babies in domestic violence?**

# **Aims of study**

- **To gain knowledge from women's experiences about how the formation of relationship between themselves and their babies was affected by domestic violence.**
- **To review current theory applied to the formation of relationships between women and their babies in domestic violence from a feminist perspective**
- **To gain insight into practice implications for work with women and their babies in domestic violence situations, informed by women who participate in the research.**

# **Literature review: 1990-2011**

**The effects of domestic violence on:**

- **Women**
- **Babies and young children**
- **Mothering**
- **The formation of relationships between women and their babies**

# **Attachment study of women and their babies in domestic violence**

- Only 37.5% of babies affected by domestic violence had a secure attachment pattern compared with estimates of 65% securely attached in the general population.**
- Of the total sample 56.9% were classified as having disorganised attachment. That is 91% of those classified as insecurely attached.**

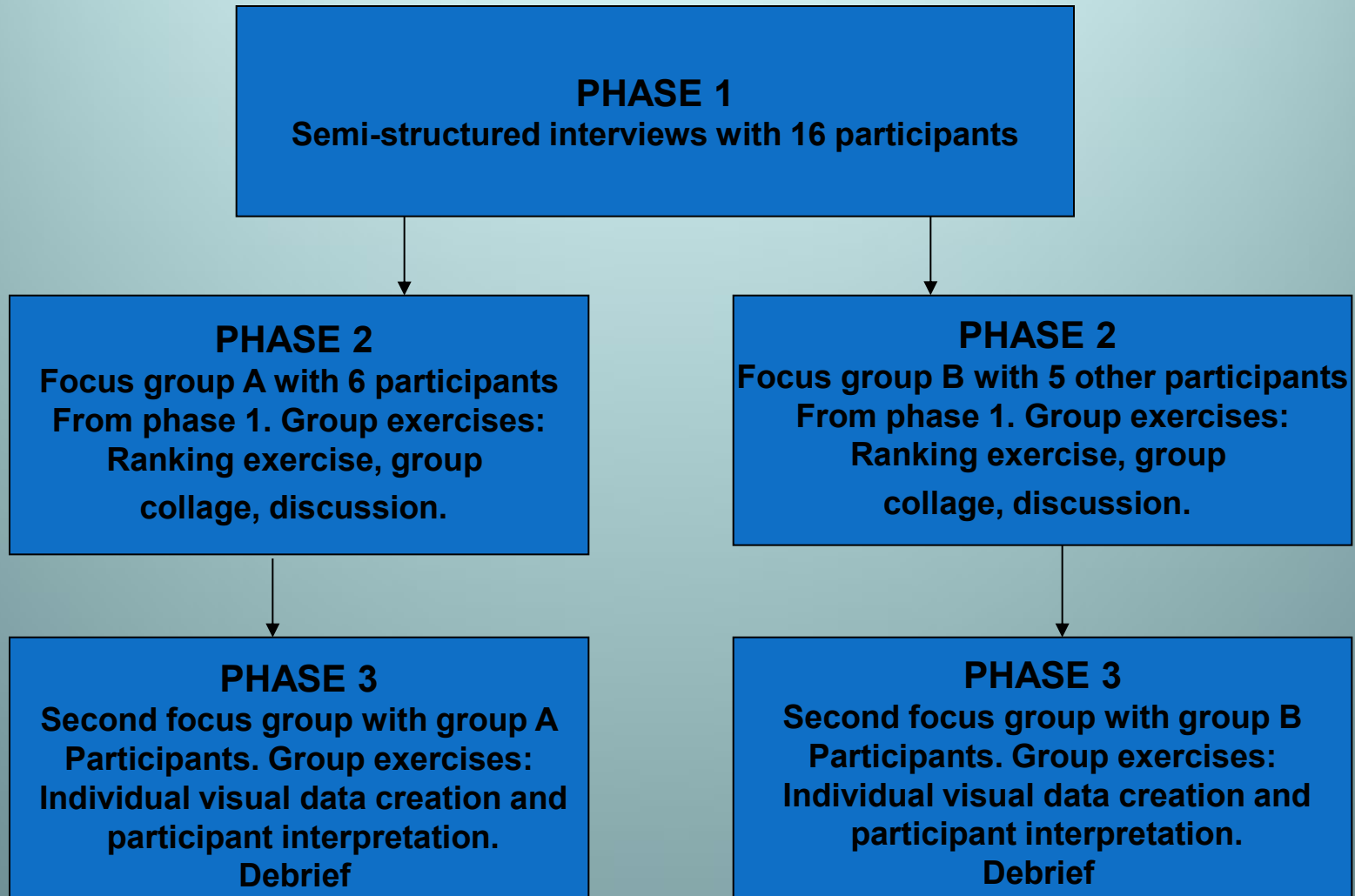
Zeanah, Danis et al (1999)

# Methodology: Relational empowerment

- everyone can contribute to the making of knowledge
- knowledge creation needs to be based on emotional authenticity
- emotional authenticity can be voiced through a communication of care
- power emerges between participants and the researcher
- mutual support within groups and between individuals is important.
- women are seen to achieve empowerment as individuals through a process of mutual support and caring.
- Mutual support is depicted as communicatively achieved validation and awareness of shared experiences

*(Surrey 1991; VanderPlaat 1998)*

# Methods



# Selection Criteria

- **Women who self identified as having been in a domestic violence relationship.**
- **Women with children under 10 years old who had birthed and mothered at least one of their children in a domestic violence situation.**
- **Women who had been out of the domestic violence situation for a minimum of 1 year.**
- **Women who self identified as not suffering from a mental illness at the present time.**
- **Women who could communicate in English.**
- **Women from the Adelaide regional community.**

# Ranking exercise

exhausted

undermined

withdrawn

stressed

isolated

protective

shameful

controlled

unsupported

fearful

sadness

hurt

# Group Collage



**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**



**Tanya: holes in everything, emotionally, mentally,...emotion flooding out and clinging to the side of me and all of this on top is just all the other stuff of life, the big and the small just issues and that's all got holes in it as well and it's not particularly orderly and it's complicated and there's just a big mess and it's all on my shoulders....(*crying*)**



**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.**



**Angela: I always felt like the ball and chain, like he was dragging me through and I was dragging him through the same thing, so therefore, you know, I felt I never could give him me, that there was never 100% and that nobody knew and I couldn't, you know, nobody knew me well enough to know what was going on in my life,...I just felt neither of us got the whole, (*Pause, crying*),any, any, anything from it.' ,(*voice breaks, crying, very distressed*)**



**Coongah: I'm holding Wunyi and my other 3 babies sitting with me, I've got tears in my eyes, cause I'm in pain and tryin to breast feed, but baby is just refusing, so I'm feeling like a failure, coz this child won't take it, my other 3 are reassuring me 'it's OK mum'. Little did I know all the pain, loss, grief, stress was affecting my babies as well. I saw it in their eyes, so it wasn't just me. Cross represents my sister, my inspiration. Now I'm free, and so are my children**

## **Second clay model:**

**‘What do you want for your relationship with your children in the future?’**



**Kay: Self explanatory - don't have to protect her as much, but we're connected by love, and we're happy, so that you can still be apart but feel connected ... (*emotional*).**



**Tanya: Mine is just all turned on its head so we've got all the muddle and just stuff that was bothering us underneath me, I'm all on top of it... It's all smoothed out as well, there's no holes in us, it's still a bit lumpy and bumpy because that's how we are but there's no holes, we're a little bit more smoothed over and emotionally ok**



**Lily: Mine is Poppy and I, that's supposed to be an oyster and that's the world. So, in our future the world is our oyster and I want to show her that she can do anything that she wants to do, and she can become anything that she wants to become, and she's never had to be controlled by a man, and to be independent and strong, and never let that get overshadowed by anybody else, and I'll always be there for her.**



# **Context: sustained hostility**

- **Unsupported**
- **Undermined**
- **Isolated**
- **Exhausted**
- **Financial deprivation**

- **the name calling, the silent treatment which you get all the time, the manipulation, you know, you make the decision but all hell breaks loose if you don't make the right decision.**
- **There's no routine in that sort of ridiculous lifestyle, you don't know when there's going to be someone freaking out or kicking a door in...**
- **I would say I was isolated because I had to withdraw because of the stress and the fear and the shame and the exhaustion, all those had me withdraw which caused isolation and it was all because I wanted to protect myself and my children**
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# **Relationality themes:**

- **fear for the baby's physical and psychological safety**
- **recognising and responding to the babies emotions**
- **keeping babies in mind**
- **awareness of effects on the relationship with baby**

# **Relationality: Protectiveness**

**Whether women felt attached to their babies or not they felt, thought and acted protectively.**

**Protection came first and took priority over attachment.**

# **Protection included:**

- **Going to extraordinary lengths to appease their partners because they 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**
- **Protecting in accord with what was essential for the babies physical and psychological safety**
- **Picking up and acting on the baby's cues when the baby was frightened**
- **Dealing with the threat then providing comfort**

# **Subjectivity: 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

# Creating space

- **While breastfeeding**
- **Co-sleeping**
- **Staying with the baby in childcare instead of going to lectures**

**‘It’s important to make sure that we’re safe and that the children are safe as well, you know, and there’s all these different things that you can do in order to keep yourself safe. But you know, are there playgroups where you can go, or is there a space in an agency somewhere with a room full of toys and books that you can book for an hour, just to go and sit and play with your child, and be given the space and permission?’ Kate**

# Conclusion

**Sustained hostility**



**Protectiveness**



**Constricted space**

**Student:** My mother is still suffering domestic violence after over 50 years of marriage. After listening to you today, I now understand why she never gave us any affection and why she didn't really bond with us - she was not allowed to because my father was jealous of us. This severely affected my self-image as I felt I must be unlovable so must be ugly and stupid. ... Thank you again for helping me to understand that my mother was busy trying to protect us and so did not have time or space to show she cared.

# Considerations for policy and practice

- **Domestic violence constitutes an environment where sustained hostility is aimed at the mother/baby relationship**
- **Protection may be the primary basis of relationships 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**
- **Many 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**
- Conceptualize relationships between women and their babies within the parameters of a protective relationship.**
- Validate protective feelings, thoughts and actions.**
- Make space available for primary relationships.**

# Where to from here:

- What are the implications for policy from these findings?
- Could this study be of use to inform practice?
- In what way?
- With which clients?
- How could this knowledge be used to make a difference for women and children?
- Are there other areas of policy and practice which could be viewed from this perspective?
- To build on this study what would further research it focus on?

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# Thank you

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