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‘The violence of women: Making sense of child abuse perpetrated by
mothers’

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Introduction

Trying to make sense of physical, sexual, emotional or verbal assaults of children by their mothers is a complex undertaking. All of us are born of women and ‘mothered’ in some form. To explore the reality of women hurting their own children, requires us to question a number of foundational beliefs that we hold dear. These beliefs have become ‘truths’ which underpin many of our social and familial systems. A couple of examples of such truths include the view that mothers naturally love and nurture their children, that children are safe with their mothers and that women are naturally passive and caring. As many of us are aware, these ‘truths’ are actually social myths and stories that most of us have an investment in believing and keeping. However, the evidence of children and adults, along with admissions from women who have hurt their children, all tell us different stories. Such stories are also ‘truths’; truths that we need to hear, respond to with respect and sensitivity and seek to understand. As with any journey, it is hoped that if we understand, even from a limited perspective, such understandings may enable us to work in ways that may reduce future violence. This paper does not assume to offer definitive answers as to why mothers may hurt their children, nor new solutions or strategies to stop such violence. Instead I am seeking to contribute to a critical conversation that has been occurring for a number of years now. This conversation has been exploring what women’s use of violence can tell us about the lives of women, children and men and more critically, what it can tell us about the social context in which we live. As you can imagine, this is an extremely interesting and challenging topic and whilst there are a number of diverse subjects we could explore, this paper will focus specifically on the physical assault of children by their mothers.¹ The paper will briefly present recent debates on the absence of critical analyses of physical assaults of children by mothers and present four key issues that I argue are important to consider when seeking to make sense of women’s violence against their children.

At this point it may be useful to offer some information as to the background of my study. I have been studying women’s use of violence since 1991 when I first began

¹ Physical assaults will often also include emotional and verbal assaults.

working in the sexual assault field and where I worked with two women clients who identified that their mothers had sexually assaulted them. I completed my MA degree on the experiences of women victim/survivors of maternal incest and then in 1998 began my PhD studies on women who have perpetrated violence against an intimate other. During this time I have interviewed seven women who have been imprisoned or placed on community orders for sex offences, accessory to murder, conspiracy to murder, stalking and making bomb threats, child abuse and perpetrating grievous bodily harm. In addition I have interviewed 120 practitioners who work with women who have perpetrated violence against others.

Most of us are aware of international covenants that define violence as a violation of basic human rights² along with State legislation that defines physical assaults on children as criminal.³ However, contradicting these public discourses as to the rights of children and the illegality of physical assaults on children is the reality that children are a most vulnerable population group, who experience high levels of physical and sexual assaults and emotional abuse. In addition, the majority of assaults on children are perpetrated by a parent, member of the child's family, close relative or family friend and 90 percent of assaults are perpetrated in the family home.⁴ This reality clearly challenges the view of the family as a 'safe haven' and parents as 'protectors' of children. Any quick review of, for example, criminological, feminist or sociological research will demonstrate that men form the majority of offenders of violent physical assaults against others in their families.⁵ However, women also perpetrate criminal assaults against their children and it is these women and their crimes that are the focus of this paper.

The statistical evidence of women's violence against their children is contested territory, but there are some statistics that are generally acknowledged, if not discussed widely, within the child protection, family violence and sexual assault fields. Women commit between 31-50 percent of physical assaults on children.⁶ Mothers commit almost 50 percent of the recorded infanticide⁷ and women perpetrate between 2-7 percent of sexual assaults against children.⁸ It is worth noting that often researchers identify that, for example, 69 percent of perpetrators of such and such crime are men, but then fail to discuss who perpetrated the remaining 31 percent. Within family violence research often a gender-neutral term such as 'parent' or 'care giver' is used, however there is no further discussion as to whether it was a father or mother who perpetrated the assaults. This absence may reflect a general understanding that men are the majority of perpetrators of child assaults, however it may also reflect a denial of the assault of children by their mothers. As a feminist researcher interested in critical analyses of violence, such silences are disturbing but not really surprising. Clearly, one of my objectives in presenting this paper is to speak into that silence.

² Including The Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.

³ For example: the Crimes Act, 1958 and the Children and Young Person's Act, 1989.

⁴ See Mouzos, 2000.

⁵ See Herman, 1992; Victorian Police Statistics, 1995/1996; Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 1996; Department of Justice, 1997; Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), 2001 for further discussion.

⁶ See for example Wise, 1991; ABS, 2001; Motz, 2001; AIC, 2001.

⁷ Morris and Wilczynski, 1993.

⁸ See Finkelhor, 1986; ABS, 1996, 2001; Motz, 2001; AIC, 2002 for further exploration.

Foundational beliefs

This paper positions women's use of violence within a social context that includes historical, structural and institutional violence characterised by patterns of domination and oppression. This social context includes patriarchal, racist and classist ideologies whereby some people are defined as superior to 'others'. Familiar categories include, for example, white, middle class, men who are defined as superior to coloured, working class, women. Drawing on this analysis we can see that through elected representatives, armies, legislation and social mythology we consistently develop and reinforce systems and institutions that enact harm on others who are defined as less important than those in power. Our world is underpinned by violent acts between men, women, and children, communities and countries. Within this social context, violence is often defined as a legitimate strategy to maintain power and the existing social order. As such knowledge is an intrinsic part of our social fabric, we all learn about legitimate and illegitimate violence and who is defined as less important or 'other', and 'available' for abuse.

I would argue therefore that an analysis of women's violence should be positioned within an analysis of the human capacity for violence. We can all desire retribution for perceived harms, experience rage and the wish to inflict pain on another. Some of us, due to particular circumstances and/or experiences, chose to perpetrate violence against others more vulnerable than themselves. Why some and not other people chose to do this, is a more complex question that is outside the realm of this brief paper.

A component of our assumption about the violence enacted by people is the long held social and theoretical 'truth' and therefore, belief that violence is innately masculine. Debbie Kirkwood (2000) when concluding her study on women who kill, commented that:

The reason men commit the vast majority of violent crime in our society is not because they are biologically predisposed to but because we believe they are (2000: 267).

Part of the belief as to the 'natural' aggression within masculinity is the belief therefore that femininity is innately passive. An outcome of the belief as to the 'true nature' of masculinity and femininity has been the acceptance, tolerance and often celebration of acts of violence perpetrated by men. Because of the binary nature of such logic, if it is 'normal' for a man to be violent, then it is abnormal for a woman to be violent. Consequently, women who enact violence are often pathologised as mad and/or evil. The positioning of women perpetrators as acting against their 'true natures' and as an embodiment of evil, disallows any space for women to speak about their experiences or to offer explanations as to the circumstances and/or purpose of the violence. Because of our own investment in the 'good' woman, we often are unable to hear such voices, take time to make sense of them nor seek to critically analyse women's choices within a structural framework.

Critical analysis

I would now like to briefly present three points that I suggest are key elements to include when seeking to make sense of women's choice to assault their children. First, is the social construction of 'motherhood'. reality that many women bring up their children in extremely difficult, unsupportive and often violent environments.

There is a broad body of feminist research that has comprehensively analysed women's actual experience of mothering as distinct to the social construction of 'motherhood' and the idealised mother.⁹ In addition it has been identified that we, within the community both idealise and denigrate mothers. This contradictory view of mothering impacts on our ability to hear and respond to women's difficulties in mothering, their own ambivalent feelings towards their children and the violence they may enact against vulnerable children in their care.

A second point to consider when analysing women's violence towards their children, is women's complex experience of mothering. This complexity includes the long held understanding that women can and do both simultaneously love and hate their children. Freud noted that emotional attachments could be both loving and hostile at the same time (Freud, 1926). Rozsika Parker (1995, 1997) has written extensively on maternal ambivalence and her work is extremely useful in assisting us to understand the difficulties women experience. Within our cultural context, mothers are positioned as 'naturally loving and nurturing', therefore a woman's intense feelings of hatred or rage towards her children are often not heard. As Parker (1997) commented:

Women mother within cultures that maintain impossible, contradictory maternal ideals which render the range of feelings considered 'normal' or 'natural' in mothers narrow indeed (1997: 35).

The third point to consider is the controversial and as yet, unresolved debate as to the link between a women's own victim experiences and her choice to perpetrate violence. To assist with the exploration of this issue it is worth broadening our gaze for a moment to include the broad body of research that has documented the experiences of prisoners of war, survivors of torture, inmates of concentration camps and women and children who are victim/survivors of family violence.¹⁰ This work has identified the complex and wide ranging impact of long-term torture, imprisonment, sexual, physical and emotional violence on the emotional and physical well being of a victim. Commenting on the impact of trauma on victims Judith Herman stated:

Traumatized people suffer damage to the basic structures of the self. They lose their trust in themselves, in other people, and in God. Their self-esteem is assaulted by experiences of humiliation, guilt, and helplessness. Their capacity for intimacy is compromised by intense and contradictory feelings of need and fear (1992: 56).

Alongside this very useful and sensitive work on the diverse impacts of trauma, lies a 'cycle of violence' theory, of which I am extremely wary. Briefly, the theory argues that victims of violence, when in positions of power or given opportunity, **will** perpetrate violence against others. Numerous feminist theorists have deconstructed the flawed logic underpinning the notion of a 'natural cycle' that located a man's violent actions in an essentialised framework, removing individual choice and responsibility.¹¹

We know that the majority of women who have experienced childhood physical or sexual violence chose **not to** perpetrate violence against children in their adulthood.

⁹ See Segal, 1995; Featherstone, 1997, 1999, 2000 for further discussion.

¹⁰ Herman, 1992 and Harel, Kahana and Wilson, 1993; Motz, 2001 for further discussion.

¹¹ See Hall and Lloyd, 1988, Miller, 1991; Herman, 1992; Motz, 2001 for further discussion.

However, research on women's use of violence indicates that the majority of women perpetrators have also experienced chaotic and troubled family lives and have survived some form of child and/or adult violence.¹² It has been identified that social and cultural factors interact with psychological factors and that therefore the violence perpetrated by women may have complex links to their own experiences of violence. Researchers have suggested that women may 'chose' to perpetrate violence because the enacting of violence meets a range of complex personal and social needs which are linked to their victim experiences.¹³ In other words, analysing the impact of women's own experiences of violence is a fundamental part of the critical examination of women's use of violence against the bodies of their children. In making this claim, I am not asserting that victims will automatically become perpetrators of violence, as is often posited within the cycle of violence theory discussed above. Instead I am seeking to explore the complex emotional needs that may be met through acts of violence and the power relationships between women and their children.

Further, exploring women's use of violence does not imply that I am taking a gender-neutral stance towards the perpetration of violence within families. In other words, it is sometimes assumed that to explore women's violence, the researcher is ignoring the fundamental gender power relationships that inform the construction of masculinity and femininity and construct the intimate power relationships between women, men and their children. Gender analyses of social power relationships are an essential element within any theorisations of women's use of violence. As Liz Kelly (1996) argues in her thoughtful analysis of women's use of violence:

...the fact that an individual woman is strong and challenging, not to mention violent, does not alter the structures which maintain and reproduce male dominance and female subordination (1996: 39).

In addition, acknowledging women's violence does not deny nor negate the seriousness and prevalence of men's violence towards children. Within an analysis of violence against children, the violence of both men and women should be addressed. Further, identifying the often unsupportive and oppressive social context within which women care for children, does not preclude the need to critically examine women's individual agency and capacity to make choices and their 'will to violence' (Kappeler, 1995). Clearly women can be and often are powerful individuals who make choices and decisions, some of which may be to hurt vulnerable others. Therefore, I would argue that while we need to critically examine the social, cultural, historical and familial context which may impact on women's use of violence, this examination should also include a reasoned examination of individual women's choices. An extension of this point is the recognition that although women perpetrators may also have their own experiences of violence, such experiences do not automatically excuse women for such assaults. As Kelly (1996) continued:

...being victimised does not remove all responsibility, but it places actions and choices in a particular, constrained context (Kelly, 1996).

In relation to the abuse of children, clearly women's violence can be positioned in a familiar feminist analysis of hierarchical power relationships and 'hierarchies of

¹² See Kelly, 1991, 1996; Saradjian, 1996; Stewart and Tattersall, 2000; Motz, 2001 for additional evidence.

¹³ Saradjian, 1996 and Motz, 2001 explore this issue in their research with women offenders.

vulnerability' in families (Wise, 1990, 1995). Although we can acknowledge that women may experience oppression or violence themselves, their children who are less powerful and more vulnerable, also have the right to be safe and free from abuse. Researching feminist ethics in child protection work, Sue Wise commented:

Moreover, the needs of the more vulnerable person – be it a child, elderly relative and so on – may very often conflict with the needs of the woman (1995: 111).

Practice examples

To ground the issues explored above, I would like to briefly present a number of extracts from interviews with women who participated in the research. Joan was a victim/survivor of violence perpetrated by her husband, who also perpetrated physical assaults on her children. This situation raises a number of issues relevant to this paper as it explores both Joan's own experience of violence and how she made sense of the violence she perpetrated against her children.

It's hard to know whether it was violence because I'm a bit unclear, but it certainly much heavier than I would have wanted it to be. In trying to protect the kids, so that if I was a strict enough parent, they wouldn't get into hassles with their dad. There were lots of times where I reacted much more heavily than I wanted to, but it was about protecting them. There's also other stuff in there that even when you were trying to parent, they were never afraid of me, so within all the other stuff that was happening, there would be cycles from the kids and the build up too, because I was trying to parent and through the different stages, and kids know when you're down and they'll niggle you and ride you, but because they were never frightened of me, the times they did react was when I would blow my stack. I'd either be yelling or rampaging because I really had enough, they would react then, but that wasn't how I wanted to parent, but it would work.

When you look back at those times, what were the sorts of things you would have been doing when you're rampaging or yelling?

I could still feel like I would get really angry, but it was also that I just lost all my .. like for me even now, if I start yelling, it's because I've absolutely run out of every coping strategy I can think of. It's been a struggle for a long time with stuff and the whole lot is too much and I'd just be really, really angry (Joan: 3).

Joan explained the chaos of her family situation where the threat of and actuality of violence was an all-pervasive reality.

I would be trying to protect the other children [from abuse by eldest son] and I wondered now when I can look back if that was because I was never protected. I still haven't worked out what is the right thing to do in that situation because he was a little bit bigger and if he punched one of the girls, that it was really wrong (Joan: 4).

For me it's just a whole desperation point, just being bombarded and manipulated. Because nothing follows a logical consequence, so everything becomes reactionary, that's where you're living. For that adrenaline all the time, so everything is reactionary. You're not living in a place that you can slow down the process (Joan: 7).

The family situation Joan described and her own response, as a mother and a victim of violence perpetrated by her husband, raises a number of major issues that the feminist, family violence and child protection fields have begun to examine. They include the following points.

- Women, who have not experienced positive or good mothering themselves, can experience major difficulties when mothering their own children.
- There are complex short and longer term coping strategies women may use to protect themselves and their children from violent family members, predominately husbands, fathers and sons. Such strategies may not always be 'healthy' choices.
- The domestic violence may be exacerbated by the possibility that older sons, watching and learning from their father, may also make a choice to assault both their mothers and/or younger siblings.
- Within a context of extreme domestic violence, 'violence' may be normalised as a method of control, which may result in children not responding to other forms of parental authority.
- This experience may lead to a situation whereby when a family escapes from a violent offender – earlier norms and behaviours may be re-created and/or re-enacted.
- In addition is the possibility that women may enact physical, emotional or verbal abuse against their partners and/or children.¹⁴ A group of workers commented on this issue and suggested that often:

...when families escape violence, sometimes the children run amok, the father who was the perpetrator isn't there anymore and the children just let loose. Children become abusive towards their mothers. She may also become abusive towards her children, due to the fact that her only way of understanding, controlling her children, using power is abusive against the children (Workers group meeting, 24.2.99: 3).

The link between women's own experiences of domestic violence and their assaults on their children is a little studied, but extremely serious and important issue within family violence. Belle, a worker who participated in the research, commented on a particular family situation that:

As we got further into the work, what I discovered, he was responding to her violence. She had been belting up their disabled child, in a wheelchair. So, somehow or other, this cycle started and she was linked into the women's outreach centre, and he was linked into corrections (Belle: 4).

This last example clearly indicates:

- the different beliefs held by the corrections and women's services sectors as to who is the main perpetrator of family violence. Such beliefs can result in a focus on the violence of the husband and a denial of the violence perpetrated by the mother. Consequently as Belle described, the mother is defined as a 'victim' and referred to victim support services, whilst the husband is defined as the 'offender' and placed within the criminal justice system.

In presenting this example, once again, I am not excusing the criminal violence of the husband. However, I would suggest that it illustrates that the violence of women towards their children, is often not addressed and therefore, the child victim is also not protected.

¹⁴ This issue has been discussed by Wise, 1990, 1995; Kelly, 1996; Featherstone, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2000; Featherstone and Trimble, 1997.

Conclusion

To conclude this paper, I would suggest that the capacity for violence is part of our humanity. This is a difficult statement to make as it implies a form of biological determinism that I, as a feminist, have always argued against. Feminist analyses have comprehensively argued against the notion of an innate human potential for violence and instead have critically examined the patriarchal ideology that underpins men's choices to perpetrate violence. However, in seeking to make sense of women's violence, I have come to the position that we need to incorporate both elements of this previously oppositional debate. That is, we as humans all have the potential for violence. This potential is expressed in the actions of our elected governments, our laws, institutions and systems, our communities, along with our familial and intimate relationships. A key component of the patriarchal ideology, is the foundational belief that violence is innately masculine. As a result of this widely held, though contested belief, men's violence is defined as 'normal' and accepted and no one is surprised that men perpetrate the majority of violence against children. Therefore, feminist analyses of power relations that are based on hierarchies of domination and oppression are fundamental to our understanding of the violence of men.

Sitting parallel to the construction of men's violence as normal, is the reality that women's use of violence is defined as 'abnormal' and women perpetrators are treated as pathological bad or mad women. We have, as yet, failed to develop complex analyses of their worlds and the violence they perpetrate against their children. I would argue that the analysis of social power relations used to make sense of male violence is also fundamental to our analysis of women's use of violence. In acknowledging that we create our social world, we are also led to acknowledge that the violent acts that are intrinsic components of our social relationships, have come from us. We need to accept responsibility for the world we have created and the use of violence as legitimatised strategies to maintain existing power relationships. If we accept this, then we cannot profess surprise when some women chose to meet their own needs through acts of violence against children. Examining the nature of such needs is outside the scope of this brief paper. In conclusion I would like to argue for broad social action on our part. I suggest that through an analysis of the structural, systemic and familial systems that reinforce and perpetrate violence as a 'legitimate' tool to maintain power and control, we may be more able to make sense of and respond to women who hurt their children. The challenge for us is not to pathologise and blame women, but to hear and see their violence, respond appropriately to protect vulnerable children and to deconstruct long held myths, beliefs and ideologies that underpin oppressive social, cultural and familial systems.

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Abstract

Women perpetrating violence against a beloved child, is a dis'grace' hidden in the private realm of the home and/or publicly denounced as a crime of unnatural evil. Images of women hurting their children transfix and horrify the general community. These extreme social reactions emerge in part as a response to a construction of 'woman' as 'mother', the origin of life juxtaposed with the image of the 'bad' mother. The paper will explore the contradictory constructions of 'woman' and 'mothering', combined with the often inconsistent social responses to and theoretical analyses of women who perpetrate violence. In addition, I will present a critical examination of possible reasons why mothers perpetrate violence against their children. The study primarily focuses on women's use of physical violence against their children, however categories and definitions of 'violence' per se are not fixed or definitive. Therefore the paper acknowledges that a focus on physical violence does not preclude a critical examination of other acts of emotional/psychological, sexual, social and/or financial violence perpetrated by women.

The broad aim of my research is to contribute to the current body of knowledge, which explores women's diverse and contradictory experiences as both victims/offenders. In undertaking the study, I believe that a detailed examination of women's use of violence may assist women themselves in their own choices and actions. In addition, it is hoped that such explorations may aid practitioners, the human service, child protection and criminal justice systems, which respond to women and their children.