

ATTACHMENT CH3

This is the attachment marked "**CH3**" referred to in the witness statement of Professor Cathy Humphreys dated 7 July 2015.

Absent presence: the ongoing impact of men's violence on the mother–child relationship

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws from interviews with 45 mothers and 52 children who participated in an action research project to develop activities to support women and children in the aftermath of domestic violence. A thematic analysis was used to analyse the data and explore the question: In what ways does the perpetrator of abuse remain present in the lives of women and children following separation? The paper invites workers to recognize the distortions created by domestic violence that may need to be identified and addressed in the aftermath of violence. The ways in which past trauma, erosion of self-esteem and the undermining of the mother–child relationship continues to create a shadow across the present relationship are identified. The continued presence of the perpetrator of abuse through child contact arrangements and ongoing harassment is also highlighted. The ‘absent presence’ of the abusive partner is posited as a concept to assist workers with a framework through which to understand problems in the mother–child relationship which emerge when living with and separating from a violent partner. The paper has implications for social workers orientating practice to focus on perpetrator accountability and support strengthening the mother–child relationship.

INTRODUCTION

... you notice things, like he was wearing his socks and pants in bed and I thought I ain't seen his toes for ages, why is he wearing socks now. I spoke to him the next morning and that killed me, that really made me realise what that boy had been through. To be waiting to run and not go to sleep. (Fam 40, mother living in a refuge)

This paper explores the ways in which men's violence and abuse against their partners and children impacts on the relationship between mothers and children in the aftermath of domestic violence. By drawing on interviews with women and children, it is argued that the damaging presence of the abuser remains even in his absence, casting a continuing shadow over the relationship between mothers and children. This ‘absent presence’ of the abusive partner is posited as a concept to assist workers with a frame-

work through which to understand problems in the mother–child relationship that emerge when living with and separating from a violent partner.

CONCEPTUALIZING ABSENT PRESENCE

The concept of absent presence has a long and rich philosophical tradition, which dates back to Aristotle and Plato. Latterly, Heidegger and Derrida have taken up the mantle to unpack the relationship between presence and absence and the role of speech, writing and representation in mediating this relationship. Central to this discussion is the binary notion that absence and presence can only be understood in relation to the absence of the other. Thus, a person or an object is either absent or present. The philosophical tradition, however, has constantly questioned and placed this binary under scrutiny. An example lies in

the role of the photograph as an image, which denotes a presence in the absence of the actual person or scene (Barthes 1981) or text (defined broadly) as always mediating the presence of a person through speech, writing and images while these representations of a person exist, a person is continuously present even in their absence.

Although the philosophical debate should not be ignored, the application of the concept of absent presence also has traditions within social work and therapeutic work more generally. 'Ghosts in the Nursery', the evocative title of a paper by Fraiberg *et al.* (1975), graphically illustrates the ways in which trauma and emotional pain may be carried across generations. The events and people creating pain may be in the past, but the impact of their invisible presence continues. In fact, in reading across the applied literature on absent presence, the heterogeneity of the concept is striking. The area of loss and grief is particularly well represented (Cody 1991). The presence of the dead or absent person is constantly acknowledged by both practitioners and the grieving person. In other areas also, the ways in which subjugated knowledge is surfaced uses the terminology of absent presence. Brown (2008), for example, uses the metaphor of the absent presence of ghosts to refer to the marginalization of the colonized 'other' in Canadian multicultural discourse. Perhaps most common of all is the usage of absent presence to refer to the distraction of people in the communication realm. People may be present, but lost to the other person through their engagement with books, mobile phones and other electronic devices:

We are present but simultaneously rendered absent; we have been erased by an absent presence. (Gergen undated, p. 1)

The use of absent presence in this paper invites practitioners to look beyond the immediate behaviour that confronts them when assessing and responding to women and their children separated from domestic violence. Instead, to recognize the ways in which the perpetrator of violence, either through the legacy of violence or through actual and continuing contact, remains present. Thus, we argue that both absence and presence exist simultaneously.

RESPONDING TO THE IMPACT OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The heightened risks to the emotional and physical well-being of children living with domestic violence have been well established (Kitzmann *et al.* 2003;

Holt *et al.* 2008). Hearing and seeing their mothers attacked, becoming caught in the violence themselves, and living in an atmosphere of fear and unpredictability where there may be little attention to their needs, particularly (but not only) during violent incidents, undermines children's development, their mental health and well-being (Mullender *et al.* 2002) and physical health (Rivara *et al.* 2007). Although the concerns for children are now better identified, attention to women living with domestic violence also needs to remain in focus. Research shows consistently heightened vulnerability to mental health problems such as depression, trauma and suicidality (McLaughlin *et al.* 2012).

It is unsurprising that given these negative impacts on both women and children, an emerging area for attention lies in the different ways in which domestic violence undermines the mother-child relationship (Radford & Hester 2006; Humphreys *et al.* 2011). A complex picture emerges of women who are systematically physically and emotionally disabled becoming poorly placed to respond consistently to their children's needs. This may include criticizing and humiliating the woman in front of her children and manipulating children in ways that undermine her parenting (Mullender *et al.* 2002). Morris (2009) refers to these tactics of abuse as the abusive household gender regime to highlight the pervasive and gendered nature of the abuse. A 'conspiracy of silence' may develop between mothers and their children in which each believes they are protecting the other by not disclosing (or debriefing) about their fears. Only a minority of women and children have talked together about the domestic violence they are both experiencing (McGee 2000). While acknowledging the damaging impact of domestic violence on the mother-child relationship, the resilience of that relationship should also not be underestimated. Casanueva *et al.* (2008) in a large US study of a child protection population showed that most women took active steps to compensate for their partner's violence and that their parenting behaviours were comparable or more positive than those for a national sample of disadvantaged families (Bradley *et al.* 2001).

Although the impact of domestic violence on women, children and their relationships has been increasingly identified, effective intervention responses are less developed (Stanley *et al.* 2011). This is particularly marked in the attention given to strengthening the mother-child relationship in the aftermath of violence (Radford & Hester 2006; Humphreys *et al.* 2011). The statutory response often

appears to dominate the intervention, yet the history of statutory child protection services in responding effectively to both an adult and child victim (as occurs where there is domestic violence); engaging men as the perpetrators of abuse; and overcoming the fear that women hold that their children will be taken into care remain barriers to supportive interventions (Coy *et al.* 2011; Humphreys & Absler 2011). These barriers may be particularly strong for women who already experience themselves as marginalized (Thiara *et al.* 2012; Nixon & Cripps 2013). It remains an area where the gaps in professional practice continue to emerge in spite of programmes to address these lacunae (Munro 2011) and shift from continuing to hold women responsible for all aspects of their children's welfare to more accountable interventions for fathers who perpetrate domestic violence (Devaney 2009).

The response to women and their children escaping from a violent partner through divorce and separation has been particularly criticized (Douglas & Walsh 2010). Although statutory child protection responses have continued to pressure or support women to leave violent relationships for the sake of the children, in the area of private or family law, the requirement for children to have ongoing contact with their fathers remains a source of concern. High levels of continuing post-separation violence (Stanley *et al.* 2011; Thiara & Gill 2012) leave women and children vulnerable to ongoing fear and the continued undermining of the mother's relationship with her children (Scott & Crooks 2007).

In short, effective intervention in the domestic violence area remains problematic particularly in understanding the dynamics and the strategies that undermine the mother-child relationship.

METHODOLOGY

The semi-structured interviews, which provide the empirical data for this paper, are one part of a broader action research study (Humphreys *et al.* 2011). Action research is a combined strategy for enquiry (research) and development (practice/action) (Ison 2008). The approach is based on repeated cycles of planning, action and reflection in which the process of reflecting on what has been achieved in any one phase of activity leads to planned improvements that form the beginning of the next cycle. University of Warwick provided the ethical clearance for the research, which was funded by the Big Lottery Community Fund, and involved a partnership with a domestic violence organization.

The aims of the project were to research aspects of the mother-child relationship and develop activities to support the communication and relationship building between mothers and their children who had lived with domestic violence (Humphreys *et al.* 2006a & b). The project was based on three cycles of implementation and feedback, followed by reflection and incorporation of feedback into the developing materials. The project worked with children aged from 5 to 16 years and their mothers and included research sites in 10 refuges, two NSPCC teams and two voluntary sector women's services. A limitation of the project lies in the predominance of the families from a refuge population where the experiences of abuse and need for safety may be higher than for the other survivors and their children living in the community.

A total of 45 mothers and 52 children participated in the research. Of the participating children, 27 were boys and 25 were girls; their age ranged from 5 to 16 years, with the largest being the 5- to 7-year-olds ($n = 15$) and 8- to 10-year-olds ($n = 19$), seven were 11- to 12-year-olds and 11 were teenagers. Twelve of the families were Asian. Children, young people and their mothers were interviewed individually. The interviews provided an opportunity for participants to act as research consultants. Similar to other research in this area, both women and children said they were motivated to engage with the research in the hope that it would help other women and children (Morris *et al.* 2012). In the process of these interviews, a range of issues about current and past experiences were also explored.

All interviews were taped and transcribed. As with any action research project, questions arose as the project developed. The researchers noticed strong patterns in the themes emerging and the particular intensity around issues related to the perpetrator of the abuse. These led to an exploration of the focus question for this paper:

In what ways does the perpetrator of abuse remain present in the lives of women and children following separation?

The exploration of this question led to a thematic analysis (Thomas & Harden 2008) across all interviews, ignoring the different cycles and focusing instead on the ways in which children and their mothers talked about the effects of abuse and the past and present impact of their fathers or stepfathers who perpetrated the abuse. Mother and child transcripts were placed together and numbered by family to support the analysis of relationship issues and experiences. The three stages of thematic analysis (line-by-

line coding, the development of descriptive or primary themes, and the generation of analytical themes) provided the structure through which the interview data were approached (Thomas & Harden 2008, p. 45). The descriptive themes remain 'close' to the original data and are reported in the findings section of the paper. An analytic theme is used to organize the reporting of the findings and represents an interpretation by the researchers, which 'goes beyond' the descriptive themes and generates new interpretations or constructs.

Analysis was manual but systematic, building the *descriptive* themes from line-by-line analysis of the interviews with mothers and their children. Researcher inter-reliability was gained by three of the researchers sampling transcripts and checking the theme analysis and 'coding tree' (Bazeley 2009). The *analytic* themes were developed through intensive researcher discussion and checking back to the descriptive themes. The concept emerged much more strongly from the women's transcripts. They were able to talk more explicitly about the past and present impact of domestic violence on their mothering. Children were asked less about the abuse and in fact were much more inclined to talk about the immediate positive effects of 'spending time with mum' rather than the nightmares or anger that their mothers were still managing. The findings therefore draw more from women's transcripts than those of their children.

In the *reporting* for this paper, the process of descriptive and thematic analysis is reversed. The final analytic concept, the absent presence opens the findings section and the descriptive themes are then organized to identify the different aspects of this overarching concept. In itself, it is an interesting aspect of qualitative data analysis where the analytic concept once identified reorganizes or 'unscrambles' the themes that built its original identification. As with a jigsaw, we felt that the 'audience' needs to see the whole picture and then the different pieces are more easily understood.

FINDINGS

The absent presence of the abusive man on both his ex-partner and children marked the stories of the interviewed women and children. Arguably, most aspects of the ongoing effects on women and children from their experiences of domestic violence could be highlighted as absent presence, a part of past trauma that is relived in the present for both women and their children, especially if they have received little or no

supportive interventions for their experiences. However, we have chosen to focus on those aspects that women and some children reported directly impact on their relationship. It is here possibly more than any other area that the perpetrator continues to cast a shadow over the mother-child relationship in the post-separation period.

The past surfacing in the present

An interesting and pervasive issue is that there was slippage in the language about the present and the past. Even though women were separated, they often spoke as though the past experience of domestic violence was ongoing:

It's like a mask, you wear it for so long that it sticks to your face and you can't take it off. Because it's what everybody knows. So you're never you. Even with people that you care about, you're never you. Because you can't be. Because if you take the mask off it means that you might slip up when you put it back on. . . . Because if the secret gets out you just know from this churning feeling inside you, something awful is going to happen. You just know. And it's going to hurt and you're going to be the fall guy. (Fam 44, woman living in a refuge)

This woman was talking about a time when she was in the relationship fearing that she would disclose the violence she was experiencing. However, there is a strong sense in this narrative that this learnt behaviour is still present.

Erosion of confidence in their mothering

The undermining of women's mothering appeared to be a deliberate strategy used by abusive men and reported by the majority of women in the study. Alongside eroding their self-confidence more generally, the attempted psychological manipulation resulted in women questioning their ability to parent:

He basically destroyed all my confidence in me and my confidence in being a mum too. I just thought I'm just a shit mum. (Fam 37)

The manipulative games and the psychological impact this had on women were regularly mentioned:

. . . it wasn't so much the physical, it was the mental abuse that was the worse. He manipulated my mind all the time and he'd twist everything and he did things that made me feel like I was going mad . . . I'd think well I'm sure I did that, no you haven't. But I had done it. But he'd . . . make me think that way . . . so he could control me. (Fam 37)

Additional issues were raised in several cases by South Asian women, who described how they were

forced, sometimes through rape, to have children and were then prevented from forming a mothering relationship with them; a role assumed by members of men's families:

They didn't used to leave the baby with me, his sisters used to take him out all the time, I never had much time with him. I was like their servant. They had a shop at home, the house full of boxes, so they made me work there. I was forced to have the children, I didn't want to go near him, all three were forced. There was no love between us. (Fam 28)

Others were isolated and prevented from normal mothering activities:

We used to live in a council flat on the top floor of a tower block. I couldn't leave the house or take the kids out. My son was four years old and I had never taken him out. I knew nothing about looking after kids. He prevented me from taking him to play groups. . . . I knew nothing when I came to the refuge. I didn't even know how to cross the road with them. . . . I was not confident. (Fam 31)

In short, women's narratives were replete with examples of ways in which their confidence as mothers was undermined *in* the relationship, but where they were left with a confidence and skills deficit in the present: the long shadow of the impact of the perpetrator of violence.

Undermining the mother-child relationship

The erosion of women's sense of self, their confidence in their mothering and the undermining of the mother-child relationship are all closely linked and form part of a continuum for women in the pre- and post-separation periods. Women in the study talked about a range of overt and covert ways in which their relationship with their children was undermined both in the past and stretching into the present. Although now separated, most women wanted to talk at length about the different ways in which their relationship with their children was undermined while they were still living with the abusive man.

A group of women could name ways in which men deliberately attacked the mother-child relationship:

He never wanted me to show love towards my son. He wouldn't let me breastfeed which I wanted to do. . . . When my son started to speak he didn't want him to call me mummy. When he started school and if he hugged me he hit him. If he tried to stop me from crying he would hit him. (Fam 49)

Sometimes children were also able to speak of this impact on the relationship with their mothers:

I never used to get to talk to my mum . . . because he had big ears . . . he was like Dumbo because he could hear everything . . . I could never like get to talk to mum unless we were out or anything. (child, Fam 40)

Women reported having to prioritize men's needs at the expense of the children, which they perceived had a negative impact on their relationship in the post-separation period:

Oh he was very jealous about it, very, very jealous . . . he was always there trying to come between us . . . if he wanted a meal, he had to come first. So it was hard, really hard to juggle . . . It really did affect her . . . she obviously realised that I'd got no respect. So she learnt not to respect me. And when we got out of the relationship she had no respect for me at all. (Fam 21)

In some South Asian families, women were undermined by men and other family members who attempted to deliberately turn children against their mothers:

I used to listen to his dad telling him not to listen to me, he used to tell him, 'Your mummy is thick, she doesn't know anything, she is mad, uneducated'. They all used to tell him that. (Fam 28)

Alongside undermining women in front of children, men also used children to undermine women, leaving women to counteract the negative effects:

My husband used to swear at me and he used to try and teach my son to swear at me as well. He used to tell him negative things about me . . . I used to sit and talk to him and say 'What daddy is saying isn't right and you shouldn't do that'. (Fam 30)

The impact of such negative messages about the child's mother do not disappear upon leaving, although women were in a better position to counteract such 'brainwashing' once men were more absent than present. Women also talked extensively about tactics and the legacy of abuse continuing in the post-separation period.

He'd belittle me, call me names and all sorts of things and laughs about it in front of her as he was handing her over. . . . He did his absolute level best, level best to destroy through manipulation. (Fam 52)

The women's confrontation with poverty and needing to rebuild their lives was a challenge for women, but one which also impacts on their children and their mothering.

I was a wreck coming out. An absolute wreck and sometimes I can understand why people go back because they know what to expect. I came out, I lost my house, my job, I had a huge debt because of him and I thought, 'God what can I do?' (Fam 37)

Absent presence impact of violence R K Thiara and C Humphreys

Sometimes, women were unaware of the extent to which their own experiences of domestic violence distracted them from the needs of their children.

And I thought it wasn't really that bad. I didn't suffer that much and I'm out of it now so it doesn't matter. But I came into the room and we (women in the refuge) sat down and they started talking and I just felt 'God that happened to me' . . . It's like actually it was horrific what I went through and I'd blocked it all out. I went back and I thought I'm not being a good mum to my daughter because I'm not talking to her and she's crying out to talk to me. (Fam 44)

Women who were aware of the impact on children of men's deliberate undermining recognized that children needed time and support to overcome this so that the presence of the perpetrator was diluted over time:

I knew he was affected and I know it will take time but he's changing. He was taught a lot of negative things and it will take time. (Fam 28)

In particular, re-establishing authority and control over children, where this had been chronically eroded by the abuser, was cited as a significant challenge by women, some of whom overcompensated because of guilt about what they had put children through. Many said they struggled to get into the driving seat to appropriately discipline children:

That's why I think I've lost a little bit because I'm trying to be the mum and dad . . . the discipline bit you see was always the dad . . . and it isn't quite working because I'm not firm enough and I give in. (Fam 42)

All women in the study could cite ways in which their relationship with their children had been undermined by the tactics of the abuser, and for many the early post-separation period was particularly challenging.

Child contact problems

Child contact was an area in which the absent presence of the abuser was clearly evident and an issue for about a third of the women and children in the sample. Child contact formed a link between men's undermining of relationships between women and their children before separation and the continuation of this after separation occurred. Men's abuse through contact arrangements greatly impacted on children and their relationship with their mothers:

She's scared of him . . . he comes and takes her out on Sunday and she doesn't want to go in the first place, but she daren't not go. She daren't say boo and then she takes it out on me when she comes back. It's like all that frustration that's built up during the day, I get it thrown in my face. It's awful. (Fam 42)

In many cases where child contact was an issue, this provided a site not only for men to further harass women but also to continue undermining women to children.

He's discussing things that are going on in Court with her . . . and he's saying to her 'look you know next time I go to Court the Judge is going to make a decision because he's sick of your mum messing me around'. . . he shouldn't be discussing the Court case with her. She's nine years of age . . . it's times like that that the relationship becomes difficult between me and her. (Fam 33)

Sometimes, the undermining of the mother-child relationship became worse after separation. Given the separation between child contact and child protection processes, professionals encountered by women often took little cognisance of the ongoing abuse. When voicing their concerns about the negative effects on their children, a number of women reported being disbelieved, sometimes leaving them blaming themselves for being a 'bad mum':

Everything and everybody I used to go to for help were . . . just didn't want to know. And I was just, 'is it just me? I'm a bad mother?' . . . Nobody wanted to know . . . I fought and fought and eventually I managed to have the access stopped because she was terrified of him. . . She'd wet herself in front of the mediator as soon as he walked in through the door and then they blamed me . . . for a child to come back and behave the way she was for so long . . . there was one particular night where she literally destroyed her bedroom. She was five years old. (Fam 52)

In these cases, the ongoing abuse was not seen by professionals and was therefore 'absent', even though the presence was clearly a reality in the lives of the women and their children.

Post-separation harassment/violence

Post-separation harassment often, although not always linked to child contact, prevented women and children from moving on with their lives:

He basically wouldn't leave it alone. I had a year and a half of harassment from him. I had to go to Court and he basically got off with a smack on the hand and had to pay a fine. (Fam 37)

The absent presence especially prevented women who had insecure immigration status from moving on. In such situations, upon separation, women and children were frequently left in a state of limbo for long periods as they attempted to secure their immigration status:

I have been living in the refuge for one year; I am waiting for my passport from the Home Office as he didn't give me my passport. It's hard to live in the refuge for so long with four kids. (Fam 31)

In these cases, the actual presence of post-separation violence or the legacy of dealing with abuse tactics meant that the abuser continued to cast a shadow over mothers and their children.

Issues for children

That was how he ruled it, because he made sure that every time I had a holiday he booked the six weeks off and then he'd just sleep through the holidays. So I couldn't have any friends round or anything . . . every holiday . . . claimed that it was my fault that he was drunk. (Child in Fam 44)

The majority of women reported that their children had been exposed to a range of abusive situations, which created trauma for them and continued to affect their lives after separation – a reality that provided many challenges for mother–child relationships. Almost all of the children were aware of the domestic violence and a large number had seen extreme violence, where some had intervened by calling the police. Fear about their situation was sometimes outweighed by fear for their mother's safety. Some had been subjected to physical and emotional abuse, something which had ongoing consequences for children:

His dad used to say 'you're thick as shit you are, you've got a fucking problem' . . . so that boy has no self-esteem. 'I am thick, I can't do anything at school, I'm rubbish'. And I say to him 'you're none of those things' . . . (Fam 38)

Growing up with domestic violence, where they had either seen and heard or been directly targeted, resulted in various effects on children. Women in our study widely reported behavioural issues for children, not only while living with domestic violence but just as commonly after they had left, and especially if child contact was in place. Sometimes women only realized the extent of the impact on children once they were out of the abusive situation as reported by the mother in the opening quote for the paper.

Leaving their home was often unsettling for children and created a sense of displacement that manifested in their behaviour after separation; however, for others separation created the space for their recovery:

He started speaking very late, only when he was five years. He understood but didn't speak. He was very withdrawn, my husband used to hit me in front of my son. . . . When I left and he went to nursery he started to talk. He made friends in the refuge and we started to go out. (Fam 31)

Most women with more than one child reported that domestic violence affected children differently in the same family. Anger issues for children were reported by many of the mothers and this was something that women were left to manage, sometimes becoming the target of their children's anger. This was one area where the legacy of the abuser and his violence especially brought his presence into the mother–child relationship. Some children were able to talk about their anger:

He's hurt my whole family in the heart so I'm not happy with him. One day he's getting his comeuppance. I hope . . . If you give it away, if you do that you expect it to come back to you . . . So I hate him for doing what he's done to my mum and all that. (Child in Fam 41)

In this quote from the child, there is a strong sense in which the child's feelings towards their father are configured by the past but remain strongly present. It is also noteworthy that it is the perpetrator's actions towards the child's mother, rather than the child herself, which lie at the heart of the emotion.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the interviews with women and children in the aftermath of domestic violence highlight the many ways in which their lives have been marked by abuse. Low self-esteem and self-confidence and the ongoing impact of fear manifested in symptoms of trauma for many women and children (Holt *et al.* 2008).

As seen in other studies, the relationship between women and children bears the brunt of the continuing effects of domestic violence and the tactics of abuse (Mullender *et al.* 2002; Morris 2009). Re-establishing the mother as parent away from fear and the controlling behaviours of the domestic violence perpetrator is new territory for both women and children. Most importantly, while women and children may be separated from the perpetrator, the abuse may be ongoing through child contact arrangements, stalking, harassment and financial abuse.

Using the accounts from women and some children, we have conceptualized these ongoing effects of abuse as the absent presence of the perpetrator. This terminology represents a helpful reminder to practitioners to explore, understand and to be curious about the things they may not be seeing directly, yet may be profoundly affecting the lives of those with whom they are working. This language stands in stark contrast to conceptualizations that focus on the deficits in mothering and the mother–child relationship and

which fail to grapple with the ways in which the domestic violence perpetrator continues to cast a shadow over that relationship. Although most social work practitioners would argue that their practice is no longer so narrowly focused, there are a number of indicators which suggest that 'the invisible man' or the invisibility of the effects of abuse remain problematic (Lapierre 2010; Humphreys & Absler 2011).

A particular problem highlighted by women in the study was the need for ongoing support. The domestic violence abuser had targeted not only the woman but also her relationship with her children leaving a legacy of ongoing mother-child issues; a problem Morris (2009) refers to as 'maternal alienation'. The implications of this for practice post-separation are obvious. Women's narratives revealed a need for support to help them to build their capacity to mother/parent. Unfortunately, services remain concentrated at the crisis and assessment stages of intervention, with work to strengthen the relationships between women and children in the aftermath of abuse marginalized and underfunded (Humphreys *et al.* 2011). Interestingly, evidence now suggests that parallel group interventions (Graham-Bermann *et al.* 2007) or mother-child interventions (Lieberman *et al.* 2005) in the post-crisis period show stronger effects than child-only or woman-only interventions.

Women in this study also highlighted the problems of ongoing child contact with domestic violence perpetrators. Within family or private law proceedings, women are still urged to become 'future focused' and to place the experiences for themselves and their children behind them and to focus on the child's need for their fathers (however violent and abusive). The denial of direct contact to abusive fathers remains an exception in spite of high reported rates of post-separation violence (Stanley *et al.* 2011; Thiara & Gill 2012). Guidance such as that developed by Sturge & Glaser (2000) to inform the Court of Appeal about the need to restrict contact that could be re-traumatising unless specific changes had occurred in those responsible for the perpetration of domestic abuse were outside the experience of the women in this study.

The findings from the study have implications not only for practice with women and their children. The development of programmes for fathers that tackle the issues of their abusive behaviour is an emerging area of practice. The circumstances under which these interventions are effective are still in the early stages (Scott & Crooks 2007; Coy *et al.* 2011). Nevertheless it is now clear that most men, no matter how abusive, will live with or have contact with children (Alderson *et al.*

2013). An opportunity lies in making the presence of the perpetrator of abuse and his tactics overt rather than absent.

CONCLUSION

Derrida contributed to understanding a world in which absence and presence are not binary positions in which presence is 'truth' and absence a negation. Rather, he reminds us that every word, every textual representation has both a presence and a meaning which is open to construction and interpretation (Derrida 1997). It is in this 'space', where difference (differance) is determined (Derrida 1997), where absence can be made visible and where opportunities lie for practice.

Social work practitioners and particularly statutory workers hold significant power to interpret the behaviour and the meaning of the relationships with which they are confronted. We have argued in this paper that the shadow that the perpetrator of abuse continues to cast across the relationship between women and their children may not be fully understood and interrogated in practice. Instead women, who themselves may be struggling, may be held responsible for both the problems and the solutions to those problems in the relationship with their children following separation from an abusive partner.

Strengthening the mother-child relationship through joint work, debriefing the violence and abuse they have both experienced and building on the strengths and protective actions that were needed to survive the experience of domestic violence are not common practitioner models. Without proactive strength-based work with mothers and their children in the aftermath of violence, it is all too easy for women to be left struggling with the absent presence of the perpetrator that can continue to undermine rather than rebuild the relationship between women and their children.

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