Mothers' Experiences With Child Protection Following Domestic Violence:
Hear Their Voices

By

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Abstract

This study analyses women's experiences with the child welfare system following episodes of domestic violence. Narratives have been gathered through interviews with three voluntary participants. Two of the women who participated are Aboriginal and the third is an immigrant woman from a South American country. The women described how they were treated by social workers, how their involvement with the child protection system motivated them toward change, and what they experienced while accessing recommended support services. The three mothers provided details of the contact that they had with child welfare services in their interviews. There were three main themes that characterized the mother's stories. These themes were Benefit of the Doubt, Catalyst for Action and The Right Resources. In Benefit of the Doubt, they spoke of how the workers expectations and manner of working with them impacted their lives and feelings of what was happening. They spoke about themselves as mothers and how they wanted social workers to see them in this role. In Catalyst for Action, the mothers spoke about how the involvement of the child welfare system motivated them towards change – either voluntarily or by feeling forced into change. In The Right Resources, they spoke of the services that they accessed and how the provision of supports assisted them. Knowledge of the experiences of mothers gathered directly from their told stories provides direction to the field of child protection.
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Chapter I

Introduction

As I walk into the hospital room, the first thing I see is the brace. It looks like a halo over her head. But in the movies halos are always golden. This halo is made of steel and has been bolted into her skull with four huge screws. All that keeps running through my mind is “HE BROKE HER NECK!” She’s lucky to be alive. But she might not feel so lucky once I leave – I am a child protection worker.

Research has established that children’s exposure to domestic violence has significant negative effects and therefore is a cause for investigation by child welfare agencies. There are significant variations in legislation across North America, which results in different approaches being used by different workers in different jurisdictions under these circumstances. Workers are frequently faced with the dilemma of whether or not to remove children given the potential harm of observing parental violence. Society’s expectations of mothers are that they should place the safety of their children first. Mothers are often labeled as bad mothers if they make choices that social workers do not agree with and risk the removal of their children.

I look at the halo brace and ask myself these questions: As a child protection worker, what is my most effective response? How will I address this family and assist them? How would she want me to assist? As a social worker in the province of British Columbia I have very little to guide me in this journey. The response that this mom will receive from me will quite likely be different than the one she has received from other
workers in the past. I want to be sensitive to her and at the same time I have a professional responsibility to safeguard the children.

This study seeks to examine the experiences of mothers with the child welfare system following domestic violence. A child exposed to violence is viewed as a possible cause for a child protection investigation. The legislation guiding the intervention by social workers is unclear and leaves social workers to interpret situations on their own. A current review of the literature reveals that few studies have examined these experiences from the perspectives of mothers and that there is significant tendency to blame mothers. By learning from mothers about their experiences we can use this knowledge to provide a better service for mothers and children.

Chapter II

Literature Review

In my review of literature related to this study I began by examining literature in two main areas. Firstly, how domestic violence has come to the attention of child protective services and secondly, how child protective services have chosen to respond to this issue including the current legislation in British Columbia. My examination of how child welfare services responded to mothers who have been abused lead me to examine the discourse on mothering that exists in the research on domestic violence as a child protection issue.
Domestic Violence as Child Protection

Research conducted within the last two decades has revealed that the prevalence of abuse of children in homes where spousal violence is occurring is high (Bennett, 1991; Erickson & Henderson, 1992; McKay, 1994; Edleson, 1995; Edleson, 1997; Fisher, 1999; Edleson, Mbilinyi, Beeman & Hangemeister, 2003; Cox, Kotch & Everson, 2003). As a leader in this area of research, Jeffrey Edleson has documented that there is evidence that children are more at risk of being harmed during episodes of domestic violence. His 1995 report suggests that in 32% to 53% of families where the mothers are battered, the children are also abused. In addition, in his later research he cites that children in this situation exhibit long term difficulties such as adult depression, low self esteem as well as other trauma related symptoms (Edleson, 1997).

The co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse has been identified as a significant area of concern for child protection agencies in all jurisdictions due to the prevalence of harm to children during these episodes (Mills, 2000; Jones, Gross & Becker, 2002; Folsom, Christensen, Avery & Moore, 2003; Osofsky, 2003). Research clearly reflects that there is a high correlation between domestic violence and subsequent child abuse (Chamberlin, 2001; Edleson, 1995; Edleson, 1997; Edleson, 1999; Edleson, Mbilinyi, Beeman & Hagemeister, 2003; Fisher, 1999; Ghate, 2000; Lansdown, 2000; McKay, 1994). Domestic violence is identified as an issue that child protection needs to assess as a risk factor for families because often men who batter their wives batter their children and because witnessing violence is seen as emotionally traumatizing to children.
Mothers are often caught between knowing that the violence against themselves is wrong and rationalizing that the impact on the children is not significant. Should a mother choose to leave an abusive relationship her life and the lives of her children will be changed forever. Being free from violence does not necessarily equate with a better life in the minds of many mothers faced with this choice. This has been reflected as the “double bind” that mothers are placed in – being forced to choose themselves and the marriage or their children’s safety (Danis, 2003). The choice to leave her home and possessions is significant. Often, leaving means leaving financial security. Statistics Canada reported in 2003 that the average total yearly income for two parent families with children was $85,600, whereas for male lone-parent families the average income dropped to $54,700. For female lone-parented families the average income was significantly less at $32,500 (Statistics Canada, 2003). Anderson and Saunders (2003) note that the economic and the emotional impacts the decision to leave will have on their lives are what women think about the most. For practitioners the implication is that these two issues must be taken into consideration and supports need to be created to ensure that a woman is able to provide for herself and her children and also be able to be emotionally supported through the decision and the transition afterward (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Concrete examples of this are daycare subsidies and employment counseling as well as one to one trauma counselors who can validate the woman’s experience (Anderson & Saunders, 2003).

The threat of having to endure court to fight for the custody of her children can also be a deterrent. Removal of custody is used by the abusive partner as a threat and the court system is structured to deal with the violence and the custody issues separately often leaving the abuse out of the decision making in custody cases (Barnett, 2000). Mothers
fear loosing their children to their husbands if they leave but the decision to stay in an abusive relationship could also result in the removal of her children by a child protection worker.

It is important for social workers to recognize that most women do not choose to leave a violent relationship the first time that violence occurs. In her review of the literature written on why women do not leave Ola Barnett (2000) summarizes that it has been found that women go through a process whereby they have thought about leaving prior to actually doing so. The literature states that women must first examine their beliefs that impact on their decision to leave. They examine the relationship and come to the understanding that it is unhealthy and accept that there will be no improvement and then generally something major happens for them to make the decision to leave. In leaving they are often accepting that their reality is different than the ideal image portrayed in the media and perhaps the image they dreamed of (Barnett, 2000). The entrance of child protective services into a family may be the event that assists a mother with making these realizations. Barnett (2001) continued to examine the factors impacting on why women remain with their abusive spouses raising the issue of the overall lack of support offered by child protection workers. Women live in fear of revealing the abuse they are living with for fear that their children may be removed from them by child protection workers (Barnett, 2001).

**Interventions**

The primary role of the child protection agency is to respond to reports of children being at risk and to assess the reports and determine what types of supports are required for
the family (Findlater & Kelly, 1999). A significant amount of research has focused the child welfare response to domestic violence – both to the mothers and to the children (Aron & Olson, 1997; Humphreys, Mullender, Lowe, Hague, Abrahams & Hester, 2001; Echlin & Marshall, 1995; Danis, 2003; Norman, 2000; Waugh & Bonner, 2002; Edleson & Beeman, 2003). Child protection workers responding to reports of domestic violence in families with children are faced with several conflicting perspectives. One view is that children should not be removed from the non-violent parent, usually the mother, because mothers themselves are victims (De Voe & Smith, 2003). Removing her children blames her of wrong doing rather than acknowledging her victimization (Humphreys, Mullender, Lowe, Hague, Abrahams & Hester, 2001). The other view is that mothers in abusive relationships do not have the ability to protect their children. Mothers demonstrate this by not protecting themselves from their abusive partners. The responsibility then falls to the state to intervene and protect the children on her behalf.

The response to domestic violence by the child welfare system varies from province to province, from town to town, office to office and even worker to worker (Echlin & Marshall, 1995; Norman, 2000; Osofsky, 2003; Danis, 2003).

"The response of child protection workers to the needs of children witness of woman abuse in Canada and the United States is as varied as the provinces and states that make up the two countries. Allegations that child witnesses of woman abuse are in need of protection often can result in inconsistent and sometimes inappropriate responses by agencies mandated to protect children. It is no surprise then, that a great deal of controversy surrounds the issue of how child protection workers intervene in such cases (Echlin & Marshall, 1995)."

There are significant gaps in legislation guiding child protection agencies on how workers are to intervene in cases where domestic violence is identified resulting in confusion and ambivalence (Norman, 2000).
Part of the dilemma for practitioners has been that it has only been in recent years that the marrying of these two issues has been identified as needed (Fleck-Henderson, 2000; Mills, 2000). Because of the way that legislation is written, identifying children as the main beneficiaries of services rather than the entire family, workers have difficulty assessing the needs of families where domestic violence is an issue (Magen, Conroy, Hess, Panciera & Simon, 2001). Child welfare legislation is written to only focus on the protection of the children within a family. It does not address the needs of the family as a unit. This results in child protection workers being forced into this narrow perspective, even if their desire is to protect mothers in addition to children.

The question for a child protection worker is about how to best protect the children in these cases while at the same time responding to the needs of the mother (Aron & Olson, 1997; Humphreys, 1999; Norman, 2000; Humphreys, Mullender, Lowe, Hague, Abrahams & Hester, 2001; Waugh & Bonner, 2002). At the heart of the interventions with families where domestic violence is being perpetrated is what expectations are being placed on the mothers (Beeman, Hagemeister & Edleson, 1999).

**Child Protection in British Columbia**

Child protection in the province of British Columbia today is governed under the Child, Family and Community Services Act. This act is seen as being very child focused. Section 13 of this Act outlines when a child is in need of protection. The legislation does not speak to the issue of domestic violence specifically, therefore in cases where domestic violence is the reported concern workers must rely on other clauses for
direction in their decision making. But social workers employed by the Ministry of
Children and Family Development may only focus on child protection – they are not
given a mandate to protect mothers who are being harmed in violent relationships. The
overall interpretation of Section 13 is that a child is only in need of protection when the
parents themselves are not able or willing to protect. Therefore in the situation of
domestic violence, the responsibility of protecting lies with the non-offending parent. In
the scenario that most often plays out - where the man assaults the woman - it is the
woman’s job to not only attempt to protect herself, but also to protect the children from
the violence as well. Some would argue that this is an impossible feat and by faulting
the woman for not being able to protect the children during incidents of violence the
child protection system is further victimizing the woman (Aron & Olson, 1997; Echlin &
Marshall, 1995; Edleson, 1998; Humphreys, 1999; Norman, 2000; Vetere & Cooper,
2003; Wilson, 1998).

Half of the jurisdictions in Canada specify clearly in their legislation that children are in
need of protection due to witnessing domestic violence. The remaining provinces do not
make any reference to violence or domestic violence. BC is one of the jurisdictions that
does not specify domestic violence within its child welfare legislation. This results in the
assessment of the impact of domestic violence on children and families being left up to
individual workers. Workers must fit domestic violence situations into other sections of
the legislation. Given the variability of interpretations among workers, families can
receive conflicting messages resulting in even more confusion in an already confusing
time. Should the family come into contact with the child welfare system more than once,
each worker’s assessment and recommendations could be different.
In May 2004, BC's Ministry of Children and Family Development released a document that outlines best practice approaches for child protection workers when intervening in families where domestic violence has occurred; *Best Practice Approaches: Child Protection and Violence Against Women*. Within the Ministry there is a directive that best practice papers do not constitute policy. They may or may not be followed. It is up to each individual office to determine if they will follow such directives. The document suggests to workers different ways that they can work with families when domestic violence is the issue. It offers suggestions to workers as to what topics might need to be discussed and how to phrase questions in a supporting way. Practice from a woman centred approach along side the child centred approach dictated by the act is suggested as best when dealing with domestic violence in families. This practice directive can be seen as a step in the right direction in offering guidelines for practice but due to the fact that it may be used or ignored, it continues to contribute to confusion.

By not specifically addressing this serious issue in our child protection policy we are not acknowledging how serious the impact is on children and families and we are not providing workers with the tools they require to step in and assist mothers and children. By not having clear policy to follow, parents are impacted by having variability during the investigation period should child protection be notified. Of course because domestic violence is not specified in the legislation there are many times where incidents of domestic violence are not reported. Acknowledging domestic violence is a step towards understanding what is needed to assist families. The next step is to gain the perspectives of mothers regarding their views of helpful interventions.
A divide exists between child protection workers and battered women’s advocates whereby women’s advocates charge that child protection workers fail to take into consideration that once children are removed women are left at the mercy of their abusive spouse unless they too are provided with services (Jones, Gross & Becker, 2002). The potential for the removal of their children has become a core fear for mothers who become involved with child protection as a result of the domestic violence they are enduring (Humphreys, 1999). The feminist perspective claims that by removing a woman’s children when she is the victim of violence is re-victimizing her and contributes to labeling her as a bad mother (Blackman, 1990; Jacobs, 1998; Mills, 2000; Lombardi, 2002; Kopels & Sheridan, 2002; Hartley, 2004). Women lose their dignity at the hands of the men who beat them and they lose again when their children are removed. But is she able to protect her children when she is not able to protect herself? Societal discourse on mothering suggests that elevated expectations are being placed on mothers by the child protection system (Swift, 1995; Wilson, 1998; Featherstone, 1999; Krane & Davies, 2000; Buchbinder & Eisikovits, 2004). Mothers are laden with the responsibility of providing the care and nurturing of their children no matter what else is occurring in their lives. The high expectations of mothers are promoted in popular culture via TV, magazine and movie images. Women are to look and act perfectly in all situations placing their children’s needs at the centre of their existences while ignoring their own needs (Swift, 1995). In families where domestic violence is occurring child protection workers work with families from a child-focused approach by focusing on the needs of the children rather than the needs of the mothers who are being battered. This leads to blame being directed towards mothers because workers
look to them with the belief that protecting their children from harm needs to be their first priority (Magen, 1999). Mothers are often blamed for the harm that their children endure at the hands of their abusive spouses by child protection workers. Mothers are looked to in order to end the violence that is being perpetrated on them and their children (Findlater & Kelly, 1999).

Systemic gender bias is evident in the ways child protection agencies intervene in families experiencing domestic violence and is perpetuated by workers continuing to expect mothers to resolve the issues of violence in their families (Beeman, Hagemeister & Edleson, 1999; Findlater & Kelly, 1999; Phillips & Henderson, 1999). This is evident in that domestic violence is identified as a woman's issue. The language most commonly used relates to women more than to men who are the perpetrators of the violence (Phillips & Henderson, 1999). This fact is also evidenced in the methods used by agencies to track reports and data about investigations. Records are kept in the names of mothers. This contributes to workers continuing with the ideas that it is the mother's role to protect her children thus taking the focus off of the abusive man in the family (Edleson, 1998). Rather than focussing on the violent behaviors of the fathers, child protection workers focus on the mothers placing all responsibility on them to resolve the situation in a manner that the mothers may not find suitable but fits for the child protection worker's planning and expectations.

Child welfare legislation is narrow in scope. Workers are forced to focus on the protection of children and are limited in what they are able to offer mothers trapped in violent relationships. In addition, when domestic violence is not identified clearly in legislation there is more opportunity for there to be a varied response by workers.
Differing responses by workers are difficult for families to understand and results in confusion. The dilemmas that mother’s are faced with – the choice to leave or to remain – have significant impact on their lives and the lives of their children. The issue of domestic violence in families is fraught with difficult choices for social workers and for mothers.

Few studies incorporate the mother’s experience as told by the mother herself. The mother is the expert on her own experience thus she should be provided the opportunity to share the details in her own words. Only one study could be located that incorporated narratives of mothers to describe what they experienced when child welfare workers became involved with their families after they were abused. In her Ph.D. dissertation, entitled *Experiences with domestic violence and the child welfare system: Voices of women*, Seri Porter (2002) used in-depth interviews with women to examine what they went through. Porter also acknowledged that little research in this area conducted from the perspective of the mother existed and cites this as one of the main reasons why she undertook her research. Her desire was to give mothers voice and provide recommendations for practice directly from the lived experiences of women who had the concurrent experience of being victims of spousal abuse and loosing their children to the child welfare system (Porter, 2002). All of the participants in Porters’ study had lost custody of their children. Some reported positive experiences with child protection workers while others shared negative experiences. Recommendations toward the development of best practices in work with mothers who have been victims of domestic violence can be provided to the field of child protection directly from the stories of these women by hearing their experiences as they tell them. To work towards achieving the best responses possible we must continue to research mother’s experiences with child
protection services following episodes of domestic violence. We must ask: What have been the experiences of mothers with the child welfare system following episodes of domestic violence?

Chapter III

Methodology

Recruitment

An advertisement was placed in a local newspaper. The add invited mothers who had experienced domestic violence and had contact with child protective services to come forward and tell their stories (Appendix A). The newspaper chosen was a free paper, delivered to all homes in the community. Five women in total responded, three were interviewed. The two women who responded but were not interviewed expressed initial interest but then chose not to participate in the study. The women who responded self identified as mothers who had suffered from domestic violence in past relationships and had involvement with child protection services. They were paid $25 for their involvement in the study.

Procedure

In depth interviews were conducted with three of the mothers who responded to the add. In accordance with Catherine Kohler Riessman (1993) open-ended questions were used to encourage the participants to tell their stories in a free flowing manner.
Reissman (1993) suggests that using narratives is a way for individuals – especially women who have experienced traumatic events – to tell their story. Semi-structured interviews of the women yielded narratives detailing the violence they encountered, their subsequent contact with social workers and their views on the child protection system.

The interviews were transcribed in their entirety and analyzed for their content with more emphasis being placed on the sections that concentrated on interactions with the child protection system. The parts of the interviews where the women discussed the abuse they endured were used as a way to understand the women’s frame of mind and their starting point at the onset of intervention. Unlike Leiblich, Turval-Marchiach and Zilber (1998) who describe their data collection as narratives of individual’s life stories, this study requested that participants focus on a narrow aspect of their lives – a few incidents that took place in their lives. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) frame this collection of small chunks of stories as gathering chronicles stating that people recount their lives not in long monologues but instead in briefer more concise stories about specific events that happened. The request of the mothers was that they tell their stories of violence and the resulting encounters with the social workers that came into their lives.

As a researcher who is also a child protection social worker, my goal was to gain an understanding from the mother’s perspective of her experience and to give her a voice in a process that often strips women of their power. In accordance with Riessman (1993), since I have not lived the experience of these women, I accepted their accounts as genuine depictions of their reality from their perspective and made an attempt to learn from their accounts.
As proposed by Leiblich, Turval-Marchiach and Zilber (1998) the data collected was sectioned into categories. Categories were chosen from the narratives to illustrate the participant's thoughts and perspectives. The data was reviewed repeatedly and narrowed to specifically draw out references made by the mothers about their contact with social workers and the child welfare system. The narratives were split into categories acknowledging themes found in the content. Three themes were identified.

The first category identified was mothering. All three of the women spoke of their roles as mothers and how it felt to be under the microscope of an investigation. In analyzing the concept of mothering as spoken about by the participants the issue of power became evident as an underlying theme. When the mothers spoke about their interactions with social workers they asked for their role as mother to be acknowledged. The name for the category was chosen from one of the direct quotes: *Benefit Of The Doubt.*

The second category was change. In their stories the mothers identified the impact that the involvement with the child welfare system had on their lives. They each spoke about the way that the system prompted them into action. The influence of power was also evident as an underlying theme in this category. The involvement of the system appeared to be the ingredient for change thus the name for this theme: *Catalyst For Action.*

The third category identified focused on what assisted in the change. In addition to the impact and the influence that social workers had on the mothers they also spoke at
length about the impact and influence that their contact with shelters, counseling programs and support workers had on them. The name of the theme was chosen because it seemed that the women spoke about what was the most helpful: The Right Resources.

The Participants

All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the participants and all names of children have been removed. Two of the mothers were of aboriginal decent living off reserve. One was an immigrant to Canada from a South American country. The women were between the ages of 30 to 45. Two were mothers of one child each ages 5 and 3 while the other was a mother of four children ages 6, 8, 12, and 15. At the time of the interviews all reported that they were single parents, separated from their abusive partners. Two women reported that they had experienced multiple episodes of domestic violence at the hands of their husbands while the other recalled only one episode of violence. All reported having contact with child protective services on more than one occasion. The two Aboriginal women also reported that their families of origin had been involved with the child welfare system when they were growing up and reported that they had been in foster care.
Bios

Unity

Unity is an Aboriginal woman. She is the mother of 1 son who is 5 years old and in kindergarten. Unity shared that she had been raised in the foster care system. She explained that she lived with the same white foster family throughout her childhood and adolescence and referred to them as her adoptive family even though they had never legally adopted her. Unity said that by growing up in a white foster home, while she herself was Aboriginal, gave her a perspective whereby she could understand both cultures. She chose her own pseudonym reflecting that in her community she was revered by friends and family for knowing Aboriginal and white ways. Unity recounted that she had suffered two significant episodes of violence in her marriage. The second resulted in child protection being called in. Her son remained in her care. She accessed support services with the assistance of a social worker. She was separated from her husband due to the violence. The interventions by child welfare assisted her in leaving the relationship.

Nancy

Nancy is also an Aboriginal woman. She is the mother of four children. Two sons ages 8 and 12 and two daughters ages 6 and 15. Nancy recalled having contact with child protection services sporadically as a child and being in foster care on at least one occasion. Nancy remembered several violent episodes between her and her husband. Many times social workers were called upon to assist her and her children. Her children
were removed from her custody multiple times. At the time of the interview all four of her children were in her custody and living with her. She reported that she was separated from her husband due to the violence and the threats by child protection to remove her children if they reunited.

Mary

Mary is an immigrant woman from a South American country. She immigrated to Canada in her 20's. She is the mother of one son aged three. Mary recalled only one significant episode of violence between her and her husband. This resulted in the removal of her son and his placement in foster care. Although this was the first episode of violence it was not the first time that her son had been removed. At the time of the interview her son was residing with her and she was working toward having sole custody of him. She was separated from her husband due to the violence. He was awaiting trial as a result of the attack on her. Her involvement with social workers assisted her in separating from her husband.

Chapter IV

Results

The three mothers provided details of the contact that they had with child welfare services in their interviews. They discussed how these services impacted their lives and how the services assisted them. There were three main themes that characterized the
mother's stories. These themes were *Benefit of the Doubt*, *Catalyst for Action* and *The Right Resources*.

In *Benefit of the Doubt*, they spoke of how the workers expectations and manner of working with them impacted their lives and feelings of what was happening. They spoke about themselves as mothers and how they wanted social workers to see them in this role. In *Catalyst for Action*, the mothers spoke about how the involvement of the child welfare system motivated them towards change – either voluntarily or by feeling forced into change. In *The Right Resources*, they spoke of the services that they accessed and how the provision of supports assisted them.

**Benefit Of The Doubt**

The participants seemed to ask many things of their social worker. They wanted communication to be clear. The mothers noted the importance of social worker acknowledgment of their efforts to protect their children and understanding of what they had done or planned to do in this regard. This involved taking time to listen to them carefully and refraining from applying labels such as *bad mother*. In the words of one mother they felt it only fair that they be given the "benefit of the doubt" as far as their mothering capacities were concerned. The mothers focused a great deal on how they felt they were valued by their social workers. The acknowledgement, or lack thereof, that they received from their social workers impacted how the mothers framed the interventions that they received. Within the descriptions of their experiences were descriptions of how things could have been better or different for these women.
Unity recalled after a particularly bad episode between her and her husband, the RCMP responded. It was their threat to take her son and place him in a foster home that she recalled as the first mention of child protection becoming involved.

"There were cops that came in. The one cop says 'Let's just take the little boy and put him in a home until she figures out what she's going to do.' But as soon as that cop went to grab my son, I snapped out of it and said, 'You're not taking my son anywhere.' The cop said, 'If you don't charge him we're going to take your son.' Well you don't have to threaten to take away my kid."

The RCMP was explicit in what their expectations of her were as a mother and the threat of removing her son from her care was identified clearly to her. The RCMP presented to her that she was somehow not adequate as a mother due to her circumstances – being in an abusive relationship. In Unity's case, the RCMP used the threat of foster care for her son as a method of gauging her commitment to parenting him. The involvement of child protection was a threat. With this threat being verbalized to her, Unity acknowledged that she was able to make a decision about what her role as a mother needed to be, even given the chaos that she was experiencing.

Unity framed her experience as positive by framing it against a hypothetical negative one. She stressed that service providers should consider what mothers said and not immediately suspect them of or blame them for inadequate mothering.

"A negative experience would have been the police not believing me and just thinking that this is someone who doesn't know what she wants and she doesn't care about her kid. Negative experience would have been the police just taking my son, putting him in a foster home. Negative experience would have been social workers blaming me and telling me it was my fault that my kid's in care, just making me feel like nothing. A positive experience for me was being given the benefit of the doubt that I was a good mother and show it by proving what I needed to do to make and reinforce the fact that I was a good mom. And not being labelled."
Nancy discussed her perceptions of what would be helpful from social workers when intervening with families and how she tried to incorporate this intrusion into her thinking. She indicated that it was important that her efforts to care for her children be acknowledged and understood.

"I always thought I was doing the right thing because my social workers told me - get some help - get some help. And I always reinforced their values by showing them how far we had gotten - by verbalising how far we had gotten - what we had overcome. Those things don't count with Ministry workers. I could never explain to a social worker the difference between that rocky night where he lifted me up by the neck and the fishing trips."

She went on to add how she thought that social workers should work with families. She saw the two most important methods social workers could use as spending time and listening.

"The Ministry would be way better off spending time with families. Spend more than an hour with them a month in the office. Spend more than 1/2 an hour with them at their front door. Spend more than 3 hours with a family because that's exclusive information."

Nancy stated clearly that she did not feel heard by the social workers that she worked with.

"As much as I tried though to tell them of my game plan in regards to healing my family, it was never heard. It was heard verbally, but it was never copied down. All of my talking was in vain. I had told them my game plan, it just never panned."

Nancy wanted to have acknowledgement from her social worker that she was working toward change. Acknowledgement for the difficult work she was undertaking. Nancy wanted the response she got from her social workers to be different than what had occurred as well. Her request was to be listened to and heard and for the good to be acknowledged. Nancy felt victimised rather than supported by asking for help. The response by workers to remove her children appeared not to have assisted her in making a change but rather in placing herself at as much fault in her own mind.
"I blew things out of proportion a lot and the Ministry followed my lead. I'm just as much at fault as he was and they didn't see that. They didn't see me crying out for help."

Mary did not feel as though she had been given the benefit of the doubt by the first social worker who assisted the family but rather the social workers actions assisted her husband to further victimize her. She juxtaposed this intervention with a more favorable one that she experienced. She emphasized the importance of social workers not being judgmental and not labeling mothers.

"The social worker who took care of the caseload was the worst woman you can ever cross. Right away she listened to his side. She never actually sat with me and asked what happened. I don't want to think about if the first social worker had stayed involved but thank god a new one was. The professionalism, the caring, the compassion, the intelligence. Like seeing what is really going on instead of 'Mary's crazy!' That's what the first one was doing."

Mary recalls a time when a social worker informed her she was under investigation and emphasized how she felt labeled.

"So here comes this investigator in the house 'You are under investigation did you know that?' They said somebody called saying I was a drug user and drinker and bad mother - I am an unfit mother."

Mary's husband used the threat of foster care in his abuse against her. He threatened that she would be labeled by the system if she asked for help or if she ever told what was happening in the home.

"He would say, ‘Son I wonder who is going to raise you because if mommy tells what daddy just did you are going to foster care and mommy is going to the nut house and daddy is going to jail.’"

Mary's initial experiences had been negative but improved once she began working with a different social worker. She commented on how things looked in this positive working relationship and how much power social workers have.
“Very positive with the second social worker – nothing but respect. That’s what exactly it is meant to be – to help people – not be prejudice, not being sexist, not being inappropriate. Social workers have a lot of power on their hands and to use that in a bad way they can destroy somebody’s family, somebody’s life.”

Unity used similar terminology to Mary in describing the intervention she experienced.

“If I wanted to be a better mom for my son, I wouldn't try to live out a fantasy family life.”

Both moms heard themselves being described as bad mothers by the social worker, a common conception for women being investigated. Mary was explicit in how she felt labeled by the social worker that she dealt with. She spoke again about feeling labeled.

“She proved to be really prejudiced and looked at me like I was a piece of dirt.”

It appeared that the mothers wanted to be acknowledged for the efforts they had been making. They appeared to need reassurance and in some cases found blame.

Catalyst for Action

Each of the women referenced how the involvement of child protection assisted them in making changes in their lives. Each expressed what it meant to be acknowledged by the system and the change process that occurred for them. One of the women acknowledged that without the intervention by her social worker she might not have made any changes at all. It was the involvement of a child protection social worker that was the catalyst for action.
Unity acknowledged that things were different the second time that she experienced violence at the hands of her husband because a social worker had gotten involved.

"I never would have felt like that if the social worker hadn't gotten involved. If the social worker hadn't have gotten involved I probably would have just stayed at the shelter for a month and probably gone back to him."

Unity identified that the introduction of a social worker helped her identify that her son needed to be her priority. It is evident by her statements that the worker subscribed to the popular belief that the mother must focus her attention on the protection of her child.

"They said that it was looking like a pattern of being in a domestic violence relationship. 'So to protect your son you have to make sure that you make the right choices for your son or else you might be endangering him to save your marriage.' I said 'OK.' They were just wanting me to make sure that I was listening to what I was supposed to do, to protect my son."

She repeatedly referred to the messages that she received from social workers that her son needed to be the most important.

"Getting a place, getting furniture, getting self-confidence and feeling like I am doing everything right. Keeping that in mind always for my son so he is happy."

Unity acknowledged that in the past without the interventions of a social worker things in her life did not change and she returned to an abusive situation.

"I didn't go to the shelter the first time. There was no social worker called. Nothing had changed."

But the second time she was assaulted by her husband a social worker was involved and she made different realizations due to the threat of foster care. Again this threat was the motivator for change rather than the need to exit a violent relationship to ensure her own safety. The social worker's expectation was that she would place her son's needs over her own.

"They helped me realise that this wasn't just a one-time incident and that with their help I could go farther than just going back to him. By dropping charges
and taking the heat away I would be letting them take my son and putting him in a foster home."

Mary spoke very negatively about the first time that her son was removed from her care. She recalled feeling put down by the social worker and saw her only hope in forced compliance.

"She was the authority so fine, I did everything."

Unity embraced the perspective offered by the social worker and this may have been a reason that she managed to have her son remain in her care. Mary saw the involvement of a social worker as a threat. She spoke about the power that the social worker had over the situation and how she felt she needed to respond.

"The social worker I got was evil. She trapped me and it was horrific but she holds the power. I am doing what ever she asked me to do."

Nancy also did not feel supported by her social worker. She recalled being motivated but likely not in the manner a social worker would want her to be.

"I didn't want the Ministry to take my kids again. I always tried to get ahead of it - keep ahead of it so that the government was always aware of my effort."

Nancy stated that she initially looked to the child protection system for assistance. She stated, "I called the Ministry and said, 'I want to get out.'" But the response she got was not the one she was hoping for.

"I had asked the Ministry to step in many times before the violence escalated. My kids got taken away from me. I called the Ministry and asked them to help me sort it out and they took all my kids away from me."

Nancy wanted the assistance of social workers but because of the way the system is structured the workers removed her children. The narrowness of the legislation did not allow the social worker to work with her and protect her and her children. There
appeared to be no acknowledgment for the fact that she was asking for help. Eventually Nancy began to question the extent that social workers could help.

"I would get scared because the healing process is so risky as it could make or break your family. It's so much easier to isolate and close off because that social worker isn't there every single day."

The women's stories acknowledge the power the child welfare system has over the lives of families. One decided to use the threat of such power as a motivator while the others seemed overwhelmed by it. Nancy and Mary had their children taken away from them by child protection social workers as a result of domestic violence. Unity managed to have her son remain with her. The women described the negative feelings they experienced due to the involvement of the child welfare system. The threats to take their children from them evoked negative feelings at times but at other times the threats forced them into action. The women's descriptions of the services they were referred to appear far more positive in contrast.

The Right Resources

The mothers spoke of their involvement with services that their social workers matched them with or referred them to. They spoke of how their involvement with the services assisted them in making changes. The mothers identified supports from shelters, counseling programs, victim services and one to one support workers as being helpful and the right resources to assist them.

Unity used her time at the women's shelter to gain insight into her situation. The other women and the staff at the shelter assisted her to examine her situation through a different lens.
"I stayed at the women's shelter. All I heard for a month was people non-stop telling me horror stories about being abused. I just told them 'Well that's not me.' I just figured I wasn't one of them. Till I did a program."

Unity spoke about the help she received from her social worker and the shifts in her thinking that took place while staying at a women's shelter. She also made reference to the realisations that she made by putting together all of the messages that she received from her social worker, the shelter staff and the counsellors.

"I figured out where I was supposed to go from the women's shelter. If I had just been told you can stay the night and leave in the morning, I probably would have left. I would have been thinking something to make it like it was my fault. I talked with the workers in the shelter. Being in the shelter opened my eyes and doing the courses made me even more aware."

Unity spoke specifically about how the counselling programs that she accessed helped her to be introspective and examine herself before and after the abuse that she lived through. She spoke about going through an exercise and using creative writing to help her remember her life before the abuse.

"When I went into the programs I learned that I wanted to rediscover who I used to be. Especially reading the stories about me before I met him, before I had his son. Just to try and rediscover who I was and who I wanted to be. I could chose to be a resentful and vindictive person who can be angry about what happened to me, or I could learn from it and want to be something bigger than that and do something."

In addition to the shifts in thinking that she experienced within herself Unity also spoke of what it was that the social worker actually did for her in terms of providing support in addition to making the referrals for her that made a difference.

"What they did for me was help me find the resources I needed. I was provided with vouchers for getting bus passes and for a grocery store for food. Every month I had a bus pass to go to appointments and meet with legal aid. Getting a doctor for me and my son. Getting a place in
Mary's previous accounts of her interactions with social workers were negative as she referenced feeling powerless and bullied into making changes. When she spoke of some of the tangible things that her social worker did for her Mary acknowledged the need for child protection to become involved in caring for her son after a particularly bad incident between her husband and herself and saw this intervention as positive.

“I went to the hospital and stayed there for 10 days. There was nobody to watch over my son so he stayed with a foster family. They passed custody on to me when I was able to care for my son again. That was wonderful. That was the proper thing to do.”

Mary spoke about how the information that she received from victim services assisted her in seeing her situation more clearly. She could identify herself in the descriptors that she read in the material they gave to her.

“Victim services came to the hospital to give me a package to read and I am reading one of those things and it says exactly what I did. I knew that this was very serious.”

Sometimes it is the work taken on by a social worker that makes a difference or other times it can be a piece of written material that helps a woman reflect on her situation in a different way. Mary recalled one single recommendation that made a big difference in her life that came as a result of making a connection with a counsellor.

“The counsellor gave me an escape route if things escalated.”

While Unity and Mary spoke positively of the supports that they received from their social worker, the shelter staff, the victim services counsellors and the one to one
counsellors that they accessed Nancy did not. Nancy described going through multiple programs as suggested by her social workers.

"‘You should take that parenting program’, ‘You should try ‘Nobody’s Perfect’ ‘You should try Building Healthier Babies’ ‘You should try ‘How to Talk to Kids So Kids Will Listen and How to Listen So Kids Can Talk.’ All these things I’ve done, I did a family treatment centre for sixteen weeks, and what else was there? I did the Willow Tree program - that was another sixteen-week program. And I finished the Cope program."

Nancy spoke extensively about the impact that the counselling services and counselling programs she was referred to had on her life. She had attended several at the recommendation of her social workers and when she spoke of them she spoke of them in a general sense referring to them just as healing programs.

"After going through the healing programs I have learned that it goes unnoticed that you are living your life constantly in survival mode. For me to even admit it is even harder. Because once you admit it, it is in your face all the time. They say awareness is the first stage to self-healing."

But still, even after attending all of these programs she continued to experience violence in her marriage and she continued to have child protection involved with her family. Nancy spoke of asking to be referred to counselling programs and seemed to be able to articulate what they had to offer but she could not find the match that she felt she needed.

"Every time that there was Ministry involved it was because I asked for their help. I always had a game plan. I always had some sort of healing plan that we could follow. It was always hard to get the kind of supports that was really needed - to have it stopped."

Nancy acknowledged that she welcomed counselling program interventions in her life. She was not opposed to having people assist and had ideas about what could help her in her situation. She suggested that the Ministry could look at the recruitment of mentors for women who had experienced the kind of turbulent life that she had.
"You can sit a person in a church to listen to a sermon but you can't make them learn exactly what was said, and go and do it. The Ministry should be looking for people who want to be a mentor."

Nancy spoke of not being mentored by her mother or grandmother because she herself had been in foster care. She had been involved with the system as a child and now again as an adult. Going through such a wide range of services was not helpful to her. She was able to describe the type of assistance that she would have found helpful.

The involvement of social workers and the involvement of programs greatly assisted the mothers in making changes in their lives. The shifts that the mother's experienced in their thinking is evidenced in the way they described the services they accessed. The positive manner that they spoke about these was much different from how they spoke about the power that social workers had. They saw the services as supportive but the process of investigation as negative and threatening. It is important for there to be a broad range of services available so that mothers can select what they would see as the most helpful. Again the importance of listening was emphasised. Nancy's story of being involved with so many services but never the kind that she identified reiterates that the social workers involved should have taken their cues from what she was asking for. It was the involvement in counselling, with shelter staff and victim services programs that assisted two of the mothers in embracing changes in their lives which had positive results.
Chapter V

Discussion

In order to examine the impact that the child welfare system had on the lives of the three participants their stories were broken down into three themes. The first theme, *Benefit of the Doubt*, examined how the women thought they were viewed and influenced by the social workers they dealt with. The second theme, *Catalyst for Action*, reviewed what impact the involvement of the child protection system had on the changes that the mothers made in their lives. And thirdly, the final theme, *The Right Resources*, delved into how the mothers viewed the support services that they were referred to to assist them.

By examining these three mother’s experiences with the child welfare system we can clearly see that encounters range from person to person. In the first two themes when talking about the interactions that they had with social workers all of the women seemed to have different experiences. Unity spoke highly of her social worker and positively about the influence that the social worker had on her decision making. Mary had very different experiences with two different social workers. She felt bullied by one social worker and labeled as a bad mom. But with a change of social worker came a change of how she felt. She felt respected by the second social worker. Nancy felt labeled and unheard by her social worker.
Two of the mothers brought up that they wanted to feel heard by their social workers. Mary and Nancy identified that a social worker listening to them was not only respectful but also allowed them to feel like they had contributed to the planning that was occurring about their family. Unity reported positive interactions and resolutions with the assistance of her social worker while Nancy described not feeling heard or valued for having her own thoughts about how to resolve her own problems. The power imbalances seemed to affect how the mothers felt they were viewed by the social workers and also how they made changes in their lives. All three women presented descriptions of the power imbalance between social worker and client. Unity spoke of this power imbalance in an accepting way. In her statements it was evident that she accepted the power imbalance that existed and held the social worker she worked with in high regard. The relationship with the worker allowed her to be led through the decision making that took place. She spoke of the knowledge that the worker had as being right and positive thus influencing her decisions. Mary on the other hand did not like the ideas of the first social worker but felt threatened into accepting them. Nancy viewed the power on a broader level. She acknowledged the power held by individual social workers but also by the system on a whole.

The power a child protection social worker holds is very real given that one of the options they have available to them is to apprehend children from their families. There are times when the use of this power is necessary because removal is the only way to protect the child. For two of the mothers this became a reality and their children were removed from their care. The difference in the mother’s descriptions appeared to be in how they spoke about the presentation of the social worker. Unity acknowledged the power but did not feel a lack of respect from her social worker. The acknowledgement
of the power was there for her but she did not feel threatened by it. Mary did feel threatened by the power because she tied it to not being listened to and being labeled by her social worker. Nancy’s experience was similar.

The mothers clearly articulated that being heard was very important as well as being recognized for being good mothers who knew what was best for their children. They did not want to be blamed for the predicament that they were in. While Unity felt empowered by her social worker to make the right choices with some assistance being provided to her, Nancy felt bombarded with her social workers suggestions. Mary felt lack of respect from one social worker and then supported by a new one. Nancy felt like none of her own ideas were respected. The key for social workers would appear to be that mothers need and want to have someone intervene who is willing to be open to hearing from their client and who will assist rather than dictate a plan for intervention. By being more open to listening the power imbalance would diminish.

The mother’s statements about the powers of the social workers they dealt with can be viewed as being negative in flavour. When they spoke of the support services they accessed the flavour was much more positive. The mothers appeared to be asking to be viewed positively – not be blamed for the situations that they were faced with. When they spoke about accessing support services the tone changed. The actions that they took and the changes that they made were viewed as compliance based and forced. When the mother’s spoke about these same actions and changes in the context of accessing the supports there was no more reference to the power of the social worker. The descriptions became about themselves.
In order to assess if the services provided by the child protection agency were effective, it is important to canvas the ones in receipt of the service to inquire if the services were appropriate and were delivered in a helpful manner. One of the main roles the child protection worker can play when assisting women who have experienced domestic violence is to assist them in accessing community support services. It is often the intervention by these community supports that assist in change. Nancy's description of being referred to several support programs speaks to the importance of finding the right match.

Child protection social work in the context of domestic violence is very challenging due to the limiting scope of the legislation. The child protection social worker needs to intervene to ensure the safety of the children but also find a way to work with the mothers. Systemic issues make it very difficult for child protection social workers to offer support for both mothers and children. The legislated mandate does not allow for workers to protect mothers as well as children. Mothers are thrown into the protector role by default in their role as the non-offending parent. The protection worker's response depends upon the mother's response following an episode of violence. The mother is placed often in an all or nothing dilemma. Her intact family or parenting on her own with significant changes in her lifestyle. In order for a clear intervention strategy to be implemented on how to work with families where domestic violence is occurring, policy must be written and introduced so that workers have guidance in their daily work with families. Currently the lack of policy and the discourse that exists on mothering allows for broad ranges of responses from workers resulting in confusion by clients. As child protection scenarios often come before the courts for scrutiny, legislation and policy directives must be broadly agreed upon and workers in all disciplines must be
trained so that everyone has the same understanding. This would further enhance a movement towards equality within the system. If all child protection workers as well as all community partners such as RCMP, medical professionals, mental health professionals, etc. had the same training and the same written policy to work from there would be less variation in responses. In addition it would assist to reduce the unrealistic expectation placed on mothers to resolve the violence in their families. The hope would be that interventions across workers and families would be similar. By combining both of these strategies – changing legislation as well as developing practice recommendations and policies - there is a better likelihood that interventions may be offered to children and families and interventions following these tragic events may be offered sooner therefore stopping the cycle of violence. Written legislative policy would be a move in this direction as it would ensure that domestic violence incidents would be reported to child protection agencies and services could be offered to ensure safety. The end result would be that children and families would be provided with the assistance they required to begin the healing process. For example, if the practice guidelines introduced in BC in 2004, *Best Practice Approaches: Child Protection and Violence Against Women*, were to be adopted as a standard policy whereby all workers used the same principles in working with families where domestic violence is an issue then fewer varied responses would occur. The use of the woman-centred approach in tandem with the child centred approach to service delivery would give mothers a voice and would allow social workers the opportunity to support mothers as well as protect children.

The experiences shared by the women in this study varied. There were descriptions of both positive and negative experiences. Combining these descriptions with the lack of
clear policy on how child protection social workers should respond to domestic violence informs us that this is an area that requires continued change. By failing to include a clear statement that children are in need of protection due to witnessing domestic violence in policy, BC is failing to acknowledge that children truly are at risk during these times. BC is one of 6 provinces that have chosen to not make this specification. The impact on families when such a specification is not made is that child protection investigations can become ambiguous. Workers are left to interpret situations with no clear definitions to work from. The issue of domestic violence needs to be brought out of the shadows so that funding can be targeted towards the development of effective strategies that will evoke change. The changing of BC’s child welfare legislation to ensure the recognition of the seriousness of the problem for families would be a step in the right direction.

Edleson (1995) recommends that initiatives be implemented by child protection agencies to provide safety not only for children but rather for mothers with their children so that families can stay together as a unit. This strategy acknowledges the difficult position that mothers are in when trying to protect themselves and their children. The current system in BC fails to acknowledge this position by placing the responsibility of protecting the children on the abused women and reacting often with removal when she is unable to fulfill this responsibility. An inclusive approach that acknowledged the mother as a victim as well as the children would offer her services to assist her in protecting rather than faulting her for not being strong enough to do so. Domestic violence should not simply be added into the already long list of risk factors workers need to consider when assessing families. Rather, policies should address both agency and interagency methods of providing service (Humphreys, Mullender, Lowe, Hague,
Abrahams & Hester, 2001). Clear direction should be developed beyond simply identifying that risk exists. When the “how to’s” are left to the imagination of each individual worker things can become very confusing.

Further research should be completed with women who have experienced domestic violence and had contact with child protection services as few studies that use these women’s stories as a starting point exist. Most studies begin from the viewpoint of the worker or from the child. Although these views are important they can not speak to the individual women’s experience. In order to provide the best service possible to mothers it makes the most sense to ask her what it is she wishes to be provided with and how she would like it to be delivered to and for her.

The women who responded to the call for participants in this study are women that are marginalized and one would think less willing to speak out. In British Columbia more than 50 percent of families that the Ministry of Children and Family Development is involved with are Aboriginal so perhaps the fact that two of the three mothers’ were Aboriginal is appropriately reflective. This study is limited in that only three women participated. Two others responded to the ad but chose not to participate. Both expressed that they were not ready to talk about their experiences. For one her experience had been recent while the other had been over 15 years prior. For both it was the same – the emotions were too raw. Of the mothers who did participate all had their children with them at the time of the interviews. Had their children still been in care and they continued to be involved with child protection I would not have accepted them into the study. The fact that I am a practicing child protection social worker in the same community that my study was completed in would have put me in a position of possibly
having to receive critiques about my colleagues work. Mothers could have seen their participation in the study as a way to gain my support and this would not have been appropriate. In addition this study was conducted in a mid sized urban community therefore the input of mothers living in rural or large urban areas has not been taken into account. Further research from the perspectives of mothers will continue to provide the field of social work with insight as to how to best serve families where domestic violence is an issue.

The mothers who participated in this study gave voice to issues of power imbalances that exist and how that impacted on their situations. They also spoke of the insight that they gained from the services that they accessed in the community. Change occurred both due to the influence of power and due to their involvement with support services such as women's shelters, victim's assistance workers and one to one counselors. Their most prominent requests from the mothers were that their role as mother be acknowledged by the child protection social workers they had contact with, that they be listened to and that their ideas be incorporated into the plan being put in place for them.
References


Talking about the subject of domestic violence can be distressing. I will assist you in accessing support services should you feel the need. A full list of services available in the community will be provided to you.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

I ______________________ agree to participate in the study described. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time.

Participant Signature                      Date

Signature of Witness                      Date