

The effects of domestic violence on the relationship between women and their babies: Beyond attachment theory

Fiona Buchanan
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School of Nursing & Midwifery
Faculty of Health Sciences
Flinders University

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Abstract

The basis for both feminist theory and attachment theory is human experience. Attachment theory looks at the development of the self in relationship. Feminism is concerned with women's relationship with self and others, the environments and the structures of societies. In this thesis I am particularly concerned with the experience of formation of relationships between women and babies in domestic violence. As such, knowledge from both fields is of value.

Feminist theory, informed by women's experience, underpins my knowledge of the effects of domestic violence on women and babies. Attachment theory, which focuses on the needs of babies in relation to their primary attachment figure, underlies the deliberation in this thesis. Research into the formation of relationships between women and their babies in domestic violence situations has, until now, been mainly within the positivist paradigm of attachment theory. As such there is a gap in knowledge about the formation of primary relationships sourced from the lived experiences of women who have mothered babies in domestic violence situations.

To acquire data from women's lived experiences, including their emotional experiences, I look to feminist standpoint theory to support a research design based in empowering relationships. Within a communicative space based in caring which established safety in trusting relationships, with and between participants, I use evolving and creative methods of data collection. In this way I bring deep and rich data based on the experiences of women to light so that policy and practice can be informed through women's knowledge. Simultaneously, the methodology and methods used enable the empowerment of participants.

Through analysis of the data collected it becomes clear that women form relationships with their babies in domestic violence within an environment of sustained hostility created by their abusive partners. In response to this environment women seek to protect their babies in a myriad of ways not recognised when traditional methods of enquiry are applied. Protection of their babies was of

paramount importance to the women in my study and I contest that in domestic violence primary relationships may be based in protection rather than attachment. However, the space to spend peaceful time relating to their babies was often constricted because of partners' antagonism towards the woman's focus on the baby. Although several women found ways to surreptitiously attain relational space with their babies others were prevented from doing so. All of the women saw relational space as important for their babies and themselves but all prioritised protection of their babies and they developed the relationship with their babies from that foundation.

The implications for policy and service provision that unfold from my enquiry highlight a need to work from a new paradigm when engaging with women and their babies and children in and after domestic violence. This paradigm utilises a strengths perspective to enquire about contexts, focus on protective feelings, thoughts and actions and to work across disciplines and services to make spaces available so that women and babies can relate in peace and safety.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed:

Date:

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