

“Don’t even get us started on social workers”: Domestic Violence, Social Work and Trust, An

Anecdote from Research

Abstract

This paper explores the concept of trust in relation to social work, child protection and work on domestic abuse. Trust is a complex notion. Borrowing from the arguments of Behnia, that trust is the outcome of a process, the paper uses the talk of women who have experienced social work in the context of domestic abuse and child protection to consider the barriers to trust-building. The evidence is gathered from 3 focus groups which formed part of an evaluation of a ‘Freedom Programme’. The findings highlight issues with trust-building that start with the context of living with abuse and work outwards to considerations of professional power, social work systems and wider inequality, suggesting an ecological approach to the trust-building process. The key argument is that social workers will struggle to gain trust within a system that sees domestic abuse as a hurdle that mothers must overcome, rather than a trauma through which they should be supported. The experiences of the women in this research, however, does show that trust and respect for voluntary service is achievable and that practice which builds alliances with the voluntary sector and service users could develop more trusting relationships.

Introduction

Seated in a community centre’s meeting room, the atmosphere was relaxed occasionally slipping into raucous good humour. We were observing a session of the Freedom Programme (FP) being delivered by two skilled facilitators to a group of 15 women. The observation formed a part of an evaluation commissioned by the third sector provider of the FP in an area of significant deprivation in the North of England and we (the researchers) were about to conduct a focus group with the participants. The group were discussing how a domestic abuser’s influence and manipulative tactics extend beyond the relationship. “Don’t even get us started on social workers.” Another vociferous member of the group responded with; “And I am a social worker.” There was an awkward pause, filled quickly with, “Don’t worry I don’t do child protection” as she explained that she works with older people.

~~The evaluation report demonstrated that service users appreciated the FP, which produced positive outcomes in relation to: their confidence/self-esteem; their involvement with social services; their children’s well-being and future plans. This observation was pertinent in relation to the evolution of~~

this paper. As researchers we had been commissioned to undertake an evaluation into the delivery of the Freedom Programme. That evaluation found service-users appreciated the support the programme offered and positive outcomes could be demonstrated in relation to the attendants self-confidence, their involvement with social services, their children's well-being and future plans.

However, the above anecdote made us question the social worker role within the lives of women experiencing domestic abuse. This led ~~to a secondary analysis of the focus group data and an exploration of the question:~~us to revisit the focus group data and to explore it as a source of talk about professional relationships for those experiencing domestic abuse. Our research question became:

What are the barriers for women and their social workers in developing a trusting relationship in the context of domestic abuse?

This led to a thematic analysis of the focus group discussions, looking at the talk about social work and issues of trust for women surviving coercive domestic abusive relationships. The analytical themes were developed using Behnia's (2008) critical framework of trust within helping relationships.

The FP is a short course developed by ~~former probation officer~~, Pat Craven, now delivered across the country:

The Freedom Programme examines the roles played by attitudes and beliefs on the actions of abusive men and the responses of victims and survivors. The aim is to help them to make sense of and understand what has happened to them, instead of the whole experience just feeling like a horrible mess. (<http://www.freedomprogramme.co.uk>)

The evaluation was based on a discussion with staff, 3 session observations, each followed by a focus group with women attending the programme and a survey. 26 women took part in the focus group discussions and 51 women took part in the survey. We have not published the results of this

evaluation elsewhere, apart from reporting back to the commissioning agency. Whilst the original aim of the evaluation was to provide outcome data for the service provider, this paper is concerned with the focus group discussions in relation to social work.

This article locates these discussions about social work within an analysis of trust. Behnia (2008) argues that trust is the outcome of a future-orientated process. Trust could be defined as; “the mutual confidence that no party to an exchange will exploit the other’s vulnerability” (Sabel, 1993: 1133). This definition foregrounds two of the complexities of trust. First, the use of vulnerability acknowledges that trust cannot be divorced from discussions of power and inequality. Second, the issue of mutuality highlights the role of relationships within the development of trust.

Behnia (2008) suggests that there are two levels of trust within professional helping relationships: initial trust to start a relationship and a deeper level that facilitates further disclosure and action.

Furthermore, initial trust ~~can be analysed into~~ has three significant factors: the trusting nature and disposition of the client; the credibility and trustworthy behaviour of the professional and the characteristics of their relationship. To understand how this progresses, Behnia (ibid) argues for a symbolic interactionist approach, as this emphasises the interpretations of the actors within the relationship:

“In making the decision on whether to trust or not, the prospective client collects and interprets information about the professional along three interconnected parameters: their self-concept, perceived self and the professional’s identity” (ibid: 1435).

In other words, during encounters with social workers, service-users aim to establish whether the professional is knowledgeable, genuinely cares and has a positive perception of her. This interpretation is also shaped by structural factors such as class, ‘race’, age and gender. Using these insights and considering the focus group participants’ talk about social work, we consider the barriers to the process of building trust, in cases where domestic abuse is present.

This paper sets out some key markers about domestic abuse, then considers the background, methods and findings of the FP evaluation with an emphasis on the talk about social work then there is a presentation of the thematic analysis of trust within the focus group discussion and it concludes with implications for practice. The key argument is that social workers struggle to gain trust within a system that sees domestic abuse and coercive control as hurdles that mothers must overcome, rather than as complex experiences through which they need support. The feedback from the women in this study show that trust and respect for a voluntary service is arguably more readily achievable and so social work practice which builds alliances with voluntary sector specialists could enable stronger relationships to emerge.

Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse includes extreme violence and is a widespread phenomenon on a global scale and at a national level. WHO (2013) notes that 38% of all murders of women globally were committed by their intimate partners. Similarly, in the UK, 44% of female homicide victims are killed by partners or ex-partners (ONS, 2016a). Domestic abuse is gendered, whilst both women and men suffer abuse, women and especially younger women, are more likely to be victims (ONS, 2016b). The current Government definition of domestic abuse is:

... any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. (Home Office, 2013: 2)

This deliberately gender neutral definition includes young people (aged 16 to 18) and places emphasis on coercive control as a behaviour that characterises abusive relationships. Indeed, a specific legal offence of “controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship” came into force in December 2015 (Serious Crime Act 2015, section 76). This is an important aspect

of abuse in any analysis of trust. Considering the ways that abusers manipulate their partners helps to highlight the importance of trust, in attempts to offer support to victims.

This article concerns the abuse of women by men, since the participants in the FP observed were all women who had experienced and spoke, of male coercion and violence.

Background to the Study

The FP is usually delivered by voluntary sector groups and is designed to enable women to make positive life choices by giving them information about abuse, in a group context (Craven and Fleming, 2008). The ideas draw on the Duluth Model of communities working to end domestic violence (<http://www.theduluthmodel.org/about/index.html>) which argues that it is possible to undertake positive work with women whilst retaining the understanding that the perpetrators are responsible for the abuse (Pence and Paymar, 1993). The FP uses this idea to raise women's understanding of ~~the~~ manipulation and deceit within abuse, without blaming women for becoming victims (Williamson & Abrahams (2010).

The FP has been described as a "support group" (McGovern, 2012) although a "course" is more appropriate, given the level of formality in the sessions. In the organisation which commissioned the evaluation, facilitators explained that the FP is generally run over 12 weeks, on a rolling programme and women can attend more than once. Group leaders are trained by one of the FP's recognised trainers and the sessions are facilitated by two leaders. The FP examines eight abusive behaviours, characterising these as "dominators" personified as; "the persuader", "the sexual controller", "the king of the castle", "the bully", "the headworker", "the jailer", "the liar" and "the badfather".

Craven says of the "dominator":

He is one man but I describe him as changing into the other characters to use different kinds of controlling behaviour. (Craven & Fleming, 2008: 9).

Each weekly session focuses on these dominators and enables women to explore their ideas and experiences. The programme also considers the effects domestic abuse has on children and introduces women to community resources for support.

Several evaluations [of Freedom Programme delivery](#) have taken place, and these were reviewed in designing our own project. ~~One of these attempted to use a before and after method of appraisal, (Williamson & Abrahams 2010). In the event, however, the researchers found it difficult to contact women after they had left the programme and only 4 women were interviewed (Ibid).~~ Previous evaluations generally support the FP, as women “who had engaged with the programme reported much better ranges in terms of confidence and self-esteem.” [\(Williamson & Abrahams, 2010;Ibid, 4\)](#). They also note that working in a group decreased women’s sense of isolation (McGovern, 2012, 4) and that all the women who finish the course say they would recommend the FP to a friend.

In summary, the FP is a widely-used intervention which appears to support women to move away from self-blame. This is a considerable achievement for a relatively short and inexpensive programme.

Social work and domestic abuse

Feminist research established the need for improved social work practice, in relation to domestic abuse (Hamner & Itzen, 2000). UK research into social services casefiles demonstrated that historically there had been little consideration of violence towards mothers (Humphreys, 2000 and Maynard, 1985). However, once a direct link between domestic abuse and child abuse was established and the potential damage of children witnessing domestic abuse acknowledged (Brandon and Lewis, 1996) domestic abuse became mainstreamed into child protection practice. However, there are several tensions and contradictions for children and family social workers who should ensure the welfare of any children, pay attention to the needs of the adult victim and engage with abusing partners as perpetrators and parents.

Several writers have highlighted that the focus of the intervention often becomes mothering and that separation from the abusing partner is considered pivotal to protecting the child (Holt, 2016, Hester, 2011, Featherstone and Peckover, 2007). This is problematic as separation, whilst possibly desirable for both social worker and mother, does not mean the end of violence or control. Nor does it mean that parenting problems produced by violent contexts are resolved. Thiara and Humphreys (2017) draw attention to the 'absent-present' dynamic which continues post-separation, through trauma, erosion of self-esteem and contact which can undermine mother-child relationships. This is particularly important given Leung's (2015) assertion that the non-abusing parent-child relationship is the key protective resource for the child in recovering from traumas associated with domestic abuse.

Sadly, evidence suggests that current UK social work systems are not best suited to enabling long-term support for those who have experienced domestic abuse. Stanley et. al., (2010) tracked interventions with children and families following police notification and found that the notification only triggered services in 5% of cases. They also report that structures for assessment and intervention contributed to a stop/start pattern, ill-suited to building trusting relationships. Bilson and Martin's (2016) research on child protection in England also points to the problems of a case-management approach. Their Freedom of Information request revealed that 22.5% of children born in the 2009/10 financial year were referred to children's social care before their fifth birthday, with a quarter of these formally investigated under the suspicion of significant harm or neglect. This should mean that there is increased detection of domestic abuse. However, Bilson and Martin point out that the trend produces the simultaneous negative impacts of increased stress on families and the reduced likelihood that children receive help.

So, two contrasting approaches to domestic abuse have emerged: one from the voluntary sector where expertise developed in relation to the welfare and rights of women, the other from statutory services where the emphasis is on child protection, risk and investigation. Whilst their remits might

not align, as demonstrated in Hester's (2011) Three Planet Model, both have a concern to improve the well-being of families experiencing domestic abuse. The voluntary nature of attendance and the emphasis on the long-term recovery within the FP, may not fit neatly with the short-term planning and statutory timescales of social work. Nevertheless, many of the women in the groups we met had been mandated to attend by social workers and could provide evidence of improvement in their well-being through attending the FP. Therefore, there is something to be learned from how they have constructed their experiences of the FP and social work.

Methods

The research was conducted between April and July 2015 and received ethical approval from the university ethics committee. The requirement for approval was triggered by the involvement of service-users in focus group discussions. In the event the focus groups did not appear to create difficult issues for the women involved, who generally appreciated the opportunity to voice their views.

The evaluation began with a focus group discussion with staff facilitators. This was followed by observations of FP sessions, one at each of the three venues being used. At the end of each of these sessions the women were asked to stay to participate in a short discussion on their views of the programme. The focus group approach was chosen as it was considered likely to promote participation, given that the FP is delivered in a group format. All women who attended the FP on the days observed took part in the Focus Groups (n = 26, although not all could stay for the full duration). The researchers appreciated that some women might be feeling excluded from the FP group and that this sense of dislocation could carry through to the focus group. Because of this risk, individual surveys were also completed, so that this would give everyone another space to express her views.

The same set of questions was used for the three discussions and these were devised following the review of previous evaluations. There was only one question in relation to social workers, which was:

What do you think about social workers, police officers or other professionals you have come across, do they understand domestic abuse?

~~This article concentrates on the data from the participant focus groups, though the survey data is explored further in the next section.~~

Through observation and focus group sessions, it became clear that there are many strengths to the FP. The manner of delivery; the fact that the programme is repeated and the relationships built up within the programme all contributed to its success. The non-confrontational delivery style of the FP gave space for learning at different speeds and made it possible for women to choose when to disclose personal experiences. The group setting meant that women learnt that they were not alone in suffering domestic abuse.

“Before I used to think that some of his behaviour was normal like that’s what everybody does in a relationship. But obviously, it’s not cos when you come here and you start realising the facts they are doing to you and you think it’s normal. It’s clearly not normal and it gets in your head then you think, ‘No, I’m not, I’m not putting up with it.’” (Focus Group 2)

The rolling nature of the programme was considered another advantage. It allowed women to attend more than once and this regularly created a fresh group dynamic. It also gave women chances to re-enter the group after leaving a violent partner or whilst entering a new relationship.

“We’ve done it before and wanted to come back.” (Focus Group 1)

Attending the course allowed women’s sense of well-being to improve (all of the 51 women who completed the survey felt that the programme may have resulted in positive change, although one said she only “rarely” felt this) and women reported that they felt stronger and more able to protect

their children (96% felt more able to protect themselves and their children often or all the time). They also left violent relationships (35 women) and could identify domestic abuse as the reason for the demise of that relationship (14 said so specifically, others suggest this in their responses).

Attending the programme also meant that the need for support from social services might lessen. Two-thirds of the women were referred by social services and many were mandated to attend and therefore may have been resistant to the learning. However, the staff reported successes, such as downgrading of child protection classifications and closing of cases, by social services.

It was evident that economic circumstances impacted on attendance. The evaluation recommended that expenses for the women mandated to attend the programme should be available.

“A lot of people who are in relationships have got younger children and because domestic violence rises when people are pregnant or when a small baby comes along, they become more and so need childcare arrangements.” (Focus Group 1)

~~There were messages for professionals. Women’s experiences, discussed in more detail below, suggest that there are issues to be considered by local social services, in terms of their responses to domestic abuse. In relation to working with other professionals, some of the women attending sessions felt blamed for their partner’s violence and some reported having high numbers of different workers, allocated to their cases.~~

Approach to Analysis of Focus Group Data

This section relates to the further analysis of the focus group data. There are limitations in using data collected for one purpose to answer a secondary research question, the most obvious being that the group discussion did not directly respond to the new research question:

What are the barriers for women and their social workers in developing a trusting relationship in the context of domestic abuse?

Nevertheless, this analysis may be useful in developing further investigations into the formation of barriers to trust. Focus groups also have an advantage when responding to research questions regarding the joint construction of meaning since the free-flowing discussions can allow ideas to emerge naturally. Here, the focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed by the researchers and the data was analysed for the original evaluation. However, prompted by the anecdote at the beginning of the paper, ~~secondary thematic~~ further thematic analysis was undertaken with an emphasis on the concept of trust. Thematic analysis is a loose term for much of the iterative process of qualitative analysis (Bryman, 2012). Following Ryan and Bernhard (2003), we used Behnia's (2008) conceptual work as a springboard for themes and the transcripts were re-examined for examples and repetitions of discussions relating to trust-building and barriers. The transcripts were re-examined for examples of discussions relating to trust-building and barriers. This provided a flexible approach to evaluating the discussions, ~~and several themes emerged which allied to Behnia's (2008) paper.~~ Behnia suggests that trust is usually approached in one of three ways: the service-user's attitude, a trait model of a trustworthy professional and the characteristics of a trustworthy relationship. Behnia also argues that these characteristics support an understanding of initial trust and that to work towards deeper levels of trust means attending to the women's interpretations of the relationship. These interpretations are shaped by interactions with social work systems and by structural inequalities. Themes emerged from the analysis which can be grouped starting with the individual and the context of abuse, moving outwards to consider the role of professional power, to social work systems and the context of wider inequality. These aspects inter-link and are related, suggestive of an ecological approach to understanding the trust-building process.

Trust: Findings and Discussion

This section of the paper considers women's discussions of social work, in the focus groups and the implications of these for workers aiming to establish trust-based relationships.

Trust is a pre-requisite for relationship-based practice (Preble, 2015), however, within child protection, social workers are predominantly working with families as involuntary clients and where child welfare is paramount. This creates a balancing act. As Fauth et. al. (2010: 9) state, whilst the Rogerian qualities of empathy, active listening, demonstrable genuineness and respect are necessary, practitioners also need: “an eyes-wide-open, boundaried, authoritative approach, aimed at containing anxiety and ensuring that the child’s needs and outcomes stay in sharp focus.”

There is also a balance between being child-focussed and acknowledging family dynamics. Effective work cannot focus single-mindedly on the child, but needs to engender trust with parents who may need further social work support as the family changes and grows (Gallagher et. al, 2012).

Sadly, women in the focus groups who spoke about social work saw had not experienced this type of balance:

“Instead of maybe threatening all the time through social services, saying so we’re going to put your children on a protective register, maybe go and help a bit more and show some awareness.” (Focus Group 1)

“You constantly have to prove yourself to them.” (Focus Group 2)

“They [social workers] kind of just judge you on, well why are you then, staying...” (Focus Group 3)

This direct assault on trust is primarily concerned with the power of the profession to remove children, but there were other dimensions to the lack of trust that could be observed within the talk of the women about social workers.

The context of abuse

In Behnia’s schema attending to the context can support an understanding of the barriers for trusting in relation to the disposition of the service-user. Domestic abuse can be characterised as involving isolation created by the coercive control of the abuser, which is often worsened by

continually moving home, when fleeing the abuse. Sadly, the regulations aimed at keeping children safe often reinforce these difficulties.

Stark (2007:4) argues that a common mistake when working with domestic abuse is to concentrate on physical harm and violence, when the key characteristic of abusive relationships is coercive control: “an offence to liberty that prevents women from freely developing their personhood, utilizing their capacities, or practising citizenship, consequences they experience as entrapment”. Coercive control is a useful framework that examines the processes of abuse and its impact on victims. It grants an understanding of how women can appear complicit in their abuse, placing women in a position of isolation, disempowerment and constraint. The FP is good at enabling women to understand this:

“All that controlling aspect of it. It is a massive part of it because that can become internal, because you know the way they make you feel about yourself. Manipulate you and affect your self-esteem and tell you that no one else will want you...” (Focus Group 1)

Research indicates that domestic abuse is often a cause of homelessness and housing instability (Clough et. al., 2014). This was evident in the women’s responses to the survey, where many (88%) had moved house in the last five years. Two-thirds had moved either once, twice, or three times. 16% (n = 8) had moved an average of once per year (five or more times) with two women moving over ten times in the last five years.

“Cos I had to go to [town]; then to move from [first town] to [town] and I didn’t know anybody and then coming to this group is like, I get to know people and I get to speak about my problems.” (Focus Group 2)

Whilst this is necessary for security, it is hardly conducive to having a network of trustworthy support. Relationships are fractured and many must be discarded. New professional relationships may also be needed, after moving from town to town, as the quote illustrates. The FP provides a

rare space for trust to be recreated. Furthermore, the isolation of enforced single-parenthood needs to be considered:

“... and where they [social services] know there is something wrong with me child, so I’ve still got no life, no one else is allowed to have [child’s name] so I’ve got to constantly have him with me all the time. Yet you know nobody’s harming this child and you know I’m doing all these things and everything and everyone’s observing him and they can know that he’s got his faults, but I’ve still got no life. I can’t go to my mum: ‘watch [child’s name] for an hour’, you know, it’s so...” (Focus Group 2)

Here the regulations recreated and enforced the woman’s isolation, reinforcing her stress and vulnerability. Considering this conflation of experiences, it becomes clear that women must be extremely strong to escape an abusive relationship, with their children. However, the focus groups discussions made it clear that there are also times when social workers can help.

Professional Power

A second aspect to understanding the development of trust is a consideration of the behaviour and position of the professional.

“If you’ve not got a social worker, though, how do you get access to the course and all that? Because I’d never heard of it before” (Focus Group 1)

This demonstrates that social work intervention can be the avenue to receiving support. In terms of building initial trust this could be significant. Behnia (2008: 1427) suggests that trust from the service user at the point of help-seeking, requires a level of vulnerability based on “one’s positive expectations of the other’s intentions and competence.” However, Gallagher et. al. (2012) suggest that trust in the social work profession has been eroded. The cause is not simply social work scandals, but more the response to such tragic circumstances by the profession and those in charge of policy. In particular, the current focus is on risk and what Featherstone et al. (2014: 1739) call

“the underlying approach to time and parents” with a preference for telling parents what to do.

Focus group discussions indicated a good grasp of this difficulty:

“Leaving that violent relationship is more dangerous for them and Social Services don’t get it and say right, you’re doing this, you’re doing that but where’s your support, because basically you’ve lost everything.” (Focus Group 1)

Behnia (2008) argues that to move from initial trust, based on professional credentials, to a longer-lasting credibility-based trust requires consistent behaviours. However, the lack of understanding of the mother’s circumstances as a victim of abuse does not achieve this:

“Yeah, checking me fridge, under me bed and taking pictures, that’s rude, that’s mine and my partner’s private room.” (Focus Group 2)

Because the response to domestic abuse has a child protection focus, it has become highly centralised with risk-averse procedures. Importantly, it can also mirror the coercive control the woman is trying to escape.

“Checking under beds and telling people what to do should not be our raison d’être. If it is then we are definitely part of the problem.”(Featherstone et al. 2014: 174)

However, social workers themselves are also subject to surveillance and inspection on how they manage tasks. Policy makers understand this as necessary to install confidence in the system. Sadly, it is therefore unsurprising that social workers subject their service-users to a similar regime, despite awareness that such behaviour can be experienced as punitive.

*“Social worker phoned the police out on me last week, cos I, it was my birthday and was out, so I wasn’t in for an **unannounced** visit? The police officer said it was a waste of time.”
(Focus Group 3 – met with outraged laughter.)*

Social Work Systems

The final aspect of initial trust is the relationship, which in the case of domestic abuse is influenced heavily by social work as a system. In reviewing social work systems, Munro (2011) argues that the response to Serious Case Reviews was hampered by a need to allocate individual blame and the belief that a more rigid system could eradicate risk. The impact has been to produce an overly-bureaucratic, defensive system where expertise in working directly with children and young people has been eroded by accounting processes. The key recommendation of the Munro report was to move from “doing things right” to “doing the right thing”. This attractive soundbite ignores the complexity of ‘right’ in the context of parenting through domestic abuse and poverty. There should also be recognition that families do not experience domestic abuse as an isolated issue, but that it overlaps with other problems: crime, poor housing, mental health needs, immigration, etc. Different forms of harm and abuse intersect, requiring a range of responses from a range of agencies. Therefore, social work is not the only system that families experiencing domestic abuse will encounter and social workers could be engaged in navigating services outside of child protection. Focus Group respondents’ experience gave examples of Stanley et al’s “stop-start” ways of working (2010):

“I’m on social worker number 13.”

“Yeah, I’ve had four and I’ve only been with him 6 weeks.” (Focus Group 3)

Here cases are quickly closed and/or different social workers oversee different parts of the process from initial referral, assessment and child protection planning, to fit with statutory timescales. Outputs and compliance are privileged over support and lines of accountability are blurred. The writing of accounts matters more than accounting for the service-user’s experiences, strengths and expertise.

“I met my social worker briefly for 10 minutes about 3 times and she wrote this stupid report where she thinks all this and that.” (Focus Group 2)

Dincer (2011) argues that trust “depends on how optimistic people are about their future and how optimistic they are controlling their own fate”. Being written about from a perceived position of limited information reduces such optimism.

Inequality

Being in control of one’s fate also relates to resources available, therefore it is necessary to consider structural inequality in relation to trust. As we have already commented, the women lived in a deprived area. Poverty and inequality impacted upon their understandings of social workers, making them ~~skeptical~~sceptical:

“Unless they’ve been in it, they’ll never understand it.” (Focus Group 1)

“Social Workers who are they? They have not gone through it.” (Focus Group 1)

“... get it out of textbooks and gone to colleges and things like that and led a normal life, so they’re not on the same wavelength as you.” (Focus Group 2)

Given that meetings with social workers have been characterised by a lack of hands-on support and scant time spent with families, it is not surprising that the women saw social workers as a breed apart, with little understanding of their experiences. There was a perceived gulf of experience between the workers and their service-users, even when one of the women has acknowledged being a social work professional. In a period of gross inequality, as currently in the UK, distances between groups are intensified and exaggerated (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). The women in the groups saw social workers as alien in terms of experience, understanding and class. They also demonstrated a keen awareness of gender as an axis of discrimination:

“It’s funny how they can threaten your children and basically most females just want a nice relationship without a fella kicking their heads in. Yet we’re the ones who is taking the rap for it.”

“Social services knows the man does things wrong but they keep talking to us and tell us we have to do this we have to do that. We are doing everything but still they are telling us.”

(Focus Group 1)

Mothers are held responsible and blamed for the protection and welfare of their children (Holt, 2016). Hester (2011) describes this making of ‘culpable victims’ on ‘Planet Child Protection’. Knowing that men are responsible for abuse, their victims are seen primarily as mothers and the fathering role has disappeared. Mothers are consequently allocated the responsibility for managing the behaviour of violent fathers, whilst recovering from their own victimisation. However, the injustice runs deeper:

“They say crime don’t pay and yet when my ex got out of prison for kicking my head he got given a flat.”

“I think there should be more consequences for the men, because it’s them who do the shit and they just seem to live the life of Larry, move house, get a car and everything and women are dealing with the emotional shit, having to care for our children and that with very little support. They’ve got all the control still.” (Focus Group 1)

This analysis of gender-based power also demonstrates an understanding that this is perpetuated not just through the abuse, but also through the systematic condoning of violent masculinity and the economic deprivation of single mothers. Economic inequality drives many of the problems that domestic abuse produces. Whilst domestic abuse can occur within any social milieu, Walby and Allen’s research (2004) demonstrated that access to income and resources could mitigate risk. They found women are 3.5 times more likely to be subjected to domestic violence if they could not find £100 at short notice, compared to relatively better-off women. In the groups, the women illustrated more complex impacts:

“We should be social workers, support workers and that sort of thing. Because then we get the chance to serve the community by what we have learned from them.”

“Well, you can but what about the bloody tuition fees?” (Focus Group 1)

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

Returning to the original anecdote, there was an uncomfortable jarring moment that needed unpacking. A social worker felt the need to disown a part of her profession to be understood as a woman experiencing domestic abuse. Part of this disavowal could be explained by the group dynamic, but it also speaks to a particular view of the child protection process. For the focus group attendees, child protection appeared to be synonymous with problematising mothers. Behnia (2008: 1434) states:

“To define the other as a professional and to disclose personal information, the client needs to develop a high esteem for the professional’s expertise, judgement, honesty and caring attitudes”

This is difficult for the social worker to achieve when social work intervention is viewed as threat. Furthermore, social workers frame domestic abuse as *a priori* a child protection issue, where investigation and control trumps support. The women in these focus groups support Stanley et al’s (2010) evidence that when interventions follow notifications of domestic abuse, they are more likely to focus on safeguarding, than family support. Acknowledging that survivors will require practical support for issues alongside the domestic abuse and using voluntary sector resources to address the intersecting issues of, for example, housing, drugs, immigration, etc., could begin the process of trust-building.

The women’s observations about gender inequality could also prompt a new look at the ways in which families receive social work services. Children and family social workers should be provided

with training and support to increase their confidence in working with controlling and abusive men, to balance the focus on mothers' (in)ability to protect children.

The women in the focus group did demonstrate respect for and trust in the FP and support offered by voluntary sector workers and each other, showing that alliances can be forged even within the context of abuse. Systemic change is unlikely to be facilitated by the acts of an individual social worker. However, the move to seeing the voluntary sector and service-users as allies could support more useful interventions and trusting relationships. Domestic abuse will always be a multi-agency issue and engaging with agencies that work across the needs it produces could promote a more holistic approach.

It should be noted that there was a wealth of experience and understanding within the focus groups. Much of the talk of the focus groups replicated research findings in the field of domestic abuse, around coercive control, economic deprivation and inequality, but without the academic credentials (hooks, 2001). This is not to say that experience should be taken at face value and not be open to challenge, but attending to the words of survivors does offer access to others' experience and facilitate the empathy needed for an understanding of how women survive (Author). This requires appropriate supervision that can reflect on the encounters with abuse to support a trauma-informed approach to domestic abuse, which attends to survivors' emotional as well as physical safety. Supervision should also be responsive to the practitioner's wellbeing. The social worker in the anecdote reminds us that those experiencing domestic abuse, if not us, could be our close colleagues. We should offer a service that we would want for ourselves or a friend.

In conclusion, this paper allows the authors to take the opportunity to explore the experiences and discussion of domestic abuse survivors to consider the barriers and opportunities in relation to trust-building with social workers. Their talk exposed some of the potential fissures for the women in developing trusting relationships. Through thematic analysis and using Behnia's (2008) schema an ecological model was developed for investigating possible points of disruption within the process of

trust. We suggest, during encounters with social workers, service-users aim to establish whether the professional is knowledgeable, genuinely cares and has a positive perception of her. Practice needs to be mindful of the impact of abuse, particularly the isolation and fear induced by manipulation and coercion, as well as the perceived threats of professional power, the complexity of social work systems and the context of wider inequality. Domestic abuse is a multi-faceted problem for families but knowledge of local voluntary sector provision is a good starting point in navigating a family through the system. The study suggests that these women could place some trust in the voluntary sector FP, but that social work was primarily seen as a threat. This work contributes to the body of evidence in relation to the conflicting messages given to women as mothers and victims of domestic abuse. Whilst there are limitations to the study, it is suggested that the ecological conceptualisation of trust presented here could support further investigation.

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