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**Child protection and fathering where there is domestic violence: contradictions and consequences**

**Running Head: Child protection, fathering and domestic violence**

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## Child protection and fathering where there is domestic violence: contradictions and consequences

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### **Abstract**

Children live in different contexts of protection and vulnerability when exposed to domestic violence. The negative impacts for many children are consistent and widely acknowledged. However, the implication that this requires men who use violence to address their fathering has been slower to emerge. This article draws from 69 in depth qualitative interviews with

men, women and workers across four Men's Behaviour Change Programs (MBC Programs) in rural Victoria, Australia. Particular attention is given to men's attitudes to their fathering and the formal and informal consequences they experienced as a result of their violence and its impact on their fathering. While most men came to recognise that their violence impacted their children, they failed to make the connection that the involvement of statutory child protection services in their lives was a direct consequence of their abusive behaviour. This article explores this disconnection by fathers who use violence, their attitude to the involvement of statutory child protection services, and identifies the implications for social work practitioners in addressing this issue.

Key words: domestic violence; fathering; child protection; children; men's behavior change; perpetrators, accountability

### **Introduction**

The paper reports on a study of men's experiences of being held to account for their domestic violence and their perceptions of these experiences. It draws from interviews with men attending Men's Behaviour Change (MBC) programs and their (ex) partners. Interesting results emerged particularly in relation to intervention by statutory child protection workers. Men spoke consistently of their anger and resentment at child protection 'interference' in their family life and the 'hold' that they felt statutory child protection services had over their lives. This was an unexpected finding given the on-going criticism that intervention by statutory child protection services in the domestic violence area has tended to avoid perpetrators of violence who have consistently remained invisible (Baynes & Holland, 2012; Zanoni, Warburton, Bussey, & McMaugh, 2013). Instead the focus has been concentrated on women and their ability to protect their children (Hughes, Chau, & Poff, 2011). The men in this study were clearly reporting a different statutory child protection experience that was worthy of further exploration. Paradoxically, most men spoke of their role as fathers as being of great importance to them and yet failed to make the link with the formal intervention system's interest in their fathering.

The article situates the findings from interviews with men and women perpetrating and experiencing domestic violence in the wider research literature before outlining the qualitative methodology and emergence of key themes in the data. The discussion focuses on the implications for practice and specifically the way in which the leverage of statutory involvement both created and missed opportunities to support accountability for men and protection for women and their children who had been victimized by violence and abuse.

The challenges of shifting practice cultures to focus on men who use violence and abuse are highlighted.

### **Relevant literature**

Statutory child protection intervention where there is domestic violence has a contentious history (Humphreys & Absler, 2011; Stanley et al, 2011). While most interviews with women survivors of domestic violence will point to some excellent support that they received from child protection workers, these commentaries are in the minority. Overwhelmingly, research reports are critical (Lapierre, 2010). The level of criticism points to systemic issues which go beyond the individual worker and point to a number of challenges for statutory child protection services (child protection), a system not specifically designed to intervene in domestic violence (Humphreys & Healey, 2017).

A particular concern lies in the ways in which child protection responds to the issues for adults. Increasingly, the shift has been to focus on the child and their safety as though reified from a wider network of family and community relationships (Featherstone, White & Morris, 2014). However, domestic violence has an adult victim, usually the child's mother who requires intervention in her own right, and not only as the child's mother. Her perceived protectiveness (or otherwise) in the face of domestic violence has been the focus of investigation and measured by her willingness to separate from her abusive partner: regardless of the increased danger during separation; the risks of homelessness; and the extensive nature of post-separation violence (Stanley, Miller, Richardson, Foster & Thomson, 2011; Humphreys & Campo, 2017). The adult perpetrator of abuse, frequently, though not exclusively the child's father or step-father also requires an intervention response. Statutory child protection services have not had a strong history of engaging with fathers either as risk or as resource. Generally, men have been avoided and particularly when they have a history of violent and abusive behaviour (Scourfield, Smail & Butler, 2015; Heward-Belle, 2015).

The attention to both accountability and responsibility for fathers who use violence is an area more strongly developed in other parts of the service system. The literature on men's accountability traverses different levels, including the individual, organisational and the systemic level. Systemically, men are more effectively held accountable when the response from police to courts to support services is swift and predictable (Goldolf 2012; Day, Chung, O'Leary & Carson 2009). An integrated service is concerned with "coordinated, appropriate, consistent responses aimed at enhancing victim safety, reducing secondary victimisation and holding abusers accountable for their violence" (Mulroney, 2003, p.2 ). It requires

tighter co-ordination of services to ensure that the capacity for offenders to evade responsibility is reduced (Ross, Frere, Healey, and Humphreys 2011).

Responsibility also occurs individually at a cognitive and emotional level, when men who use violence, take responsibility for their violence. This may be a felt experience or a consequence of formal (police, intervention orders, courts), and or informal interventions (children, family, partner). Participants understand their violence as a choice; they accept responsibility for that choice and its consequences (Jenkins, 1990), or alternatively he may minimise deny and blame others for his violence (Heward- Belle 2015; Heckert and Gondolf 2000a; Shepherd and Pence 1999). Formal and informal consequences were not always easily separated. There is often an interplay between the formal (service system) and informal (relational and personal) consequences and accountability experienced by men who use violence, with each potentially reinforcing the strength of the other.

In response to the demand for a greater focus on accountability and responsibility from both individual men and the service system, a number of projects are emerging which provide a stronger focus by child protection workers on the perpetrator of domestic violence. The Domestic Violence Intervention Project (DVIP) has been developing a model with Hackney Social Services in which specialists in working with perpetrators are co-located with child protection social workers (Blacklock & Philips, 2015). Similarly, a demonstration project in the Doncaster, UK specifically funded workers to engage with men, women and children where children living with DFV had been referred to child protection services (Stanley & Humphreys, 2017). Process evaluations from both studies identified important benefits for women and children and increased engagement with men in relation to their violence and their fathering. In the US, Australia and Scotland, the Safe and Together framework is being used to develop domestically violence informed practice in statutory child protection services and non-government organisations (Mandel, 2014).

The re-focusing of attention onto men who perpetrate domestic violence raises the problematic issues of their fathering. While the research is at an early stage, to date there is little positive evidence about the ability of this group of men to be constructive fathers. Research reports: poor parenting skills which resulted from over-controlling behaviours and self-centred attitudes (Scott & Crooks, 2007); over-use of physical forms of discipline (smacking) when compared with other fathers (Fox and Benson, 2004); and a strong focus on entitlement rather than responsibility for fathering (Heward-Belle, 2015). The undermining of the child's mother proves to be a continuous theme through this research

and belies the notion that men may be abusive to their partners or ex-partners but remain good fathers (Scott & Crooks, 2007).

An interesting paradox emerges in the focus on men as fathers. While there is little research to suggest that domestically violent men make good or even adequate fathers, the engagement with men suggests that their fathering is where they show the greatest motivation to change and may be the key point of leverage for attitudinal and behaviour change (Stanley, Graham-Kevan & Borthwick, 2012; Holt, 2015). Programs are emerging which address fathering in the context of domestic violence including the complexities of focusing on the safety and well-being of children while simultaneously addressing the violence and abuse towards the man's partner or ex-partner (Scott & Crooks, 2007).

The accountability and engagement of men who use violence in relation to their fathering and the role of child protection services in this process is at an early stage, but one where there is identified readiness to change and an openness to research to inform practice development. It lends itself to the following research question:

*How do domestically abusive men experience consequences and accountability through their informal family relationships and formal interventions by child protection workers?*

### **Methodology**

The study of the impact of formal and informal consequences on the accountability of men who attended perpetrator or men's behaviour change programs (MBC programs) in rural Victoria was a 'nested' study within a wider program of research on the integrated family violence system in Victoria, Australia (LP LP0776573 SAFER program).

Purposeful sampling was undertaken through the recruitment of men in four Men's Behaviour Change programs (MBC programs), while women were recruited through the partner support components of these programs. An interview guide was developed and in total, 20 men were interviewed once; fifteen were interviewed a second time not less than six months later. Fifteen women were interviewed in first round interviews with twelve follow up interviews conducted approximately six months later. Seven workers across four programs in one rural region of Victoria were also interviewed comprising a total of 69 interviews. Women and men were always recruited and interviewed separately. Within the sample were 10 men and 10 women partners or ex-partners, as well as 10 men and five women whose partners were not interviewed. Ten of these men had contact with child protection services. Of these ten men, three had part time work, four were on

unemployment benefits, one was on a disability support pension, one provided full time care for the children, with only one in full time work. Eight had not finished secondary school. Two were eastern European, while the other men were Anglo-Celtic, and three had experience of child protection services as children.

One of the most complex ethical dilemmas in developing this research methodology, centred on issues of women's safety and perpetrators' power and control (Hlavka, Kruttschnitt, & Carbone-Lopez, 2007). Drawing from safety and recruitment protocols from other research which interviewed men and women from couples (Gondolf, 2002; Logan, Walker, Shannon, & Cole, 2008), safety protocols were developed to mitigate risks for women. Risks identified by the researcher at times needed to be weighed against women's right to choose to be involved and the recognised benefits for women of involvement in research in which they are experts through experience (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002; Hlavka et al., 2007).

A qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate for exploration of the research question (Bazeley, 2009). Understanding of men's perceptions of the consequences and accountability they experienced for their behaviour and the language they used to construct their perspectives was triangulated with data from women about their reflections on their own and their (ex) partner's experiences and cross referenced with workers discussions. The two point in time interviews provided opportunities for engagement and reflection on change processes and the experience of the intervention system over time (Gondolf, 2002). Exploring how men and women interpreted their changing realities facilitated more nuanced understandings of complex situations. The consistencies and contradictions within these experiences yielded rich data that shed light on participants' experiences particularly in relation to the statutory child protection services and more broadly men's perceptions of their fathering role.

Data analysis began with loading the transcripts through NVIVO 10 to manage the data. Nodal trees were developed through an initial primary coding of the data (Bazeley, 2009). Secondary and conceptual categories were developed from across the interview data. A themed analysis of the data emerged based on the recurrent experiences and concepts in the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Triangulation of the data from workers, men and women also occurred through placing the interviews from each couple and their workers alongside each other and exploring the different ways in which incidents, or the interface with the child protection system occurred. This more phenomenological approach stepped away from the aggregated

thematic analysis. Particularly complex sections of the transcripts which made reference to the primary issues of responsibility and accountability provided opportunities to apply a forensic lens to the construction of language (Stokoe, 2010). The language used shed light on the ways in which responsibility and accountability were addressed, minimized or denied.

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## **Findings**

A number of themes emerged from the analysis of the interview data. In this paper, we report findings specific to men's attitudes to fathering; and the issues of engagement with statutory child protection services (child protection).

### **Men's attitudes to fathering**

The interviews with both men and women highlighted the complex terrain of fathering for men who are domestically violent. The layered construction of fathering shown through behaviour, attitudes and language demonstrate the shifting nature of their relationship to their children.

#### *Minimisation of harm to children*

Most men in this study, at least at Time 1 interviews demonstrated limited understanding of the harm caused to their children from witnessing their violence. They did not see that being a bad partner necessarily impacted on them being a 'great father'.

A typical example lies with Mitch, who was eventually taken to court for 17 breaches of his intervention order and whose ex-partner needed to re-locate to another state to find a greater sense of safety for herself and her child. He made the following statement about his fathering:

*I'm quite a good father I think. I'm quite attentive, I understand childhood development so I kind of know what's right and what's wrong and I pride myself on being a good dad. He's a beautiful boy and I love him to death and I guess my relationship with him is a bit strained because of his mother. (Mitch Interview 1/2)*

The juxtapositioning of the interviews between Dane and Fiona also highlight the fathering or partnering contradictions.

*Me and my daughter are real close. [Their mum] keeps taking them and keeps using the kids and takes them away from me, because ever since there was police involvement I got a court order [on me]. When I was scared, I was slamming doors and that and it scared her and they said that was enough. They [the police] said I threatened her [the child's mother] over the phone, which I didn't do, but that's what they. They said that was enough. (Dane Interview 1/2)*

*Once there was [physical stuff]. He grabbed me around the throat, oh no, twice actually sorry, before I was pregnant with [my son]. [My daughter] was hiding in the cupboard and I found her and he goes, 'look what you've done', and he rammed my head into the cupboard door. (Fiona Interview 2/2)*

The theme is further explicated through an interview with Mike, whose violence towards his partner was so intense that she was hospitalised the first time he hit her:

*Um that I think there is always room for improvement but I think I'm a wonderful parent. I love all of my children equally for their uniqueness and their differences...I attempt to participate with them as a group and on an individual level... I place great importance on participating as a family together and on an individual basis and I think I'm a good parent and a loving parent. (Mike interview 1/2)*

#### *Remorse and recognition of harm*

However, juxtaposed against the minimisation of the harm to children was also remorse expressed by the majority of the men about the way that violence had affected their relationship with their children:

*He stills remembers. It lasted a long time, [for him] the memory of that night and...I learnt a lesson for how children take on responsibility for an issue and it can be very damaging. (Mitch Interview 1/2)*

*Seeing my son's face when I hit her... I knew it wasn't right, didn't feel like a man, felt soulless. (Desmond Interview 1/2)*

#### *Children providing motivation to change*

The desire to be a better parent or the best parent they could be was expressed by nineteen of the twenty men. All but one of the men eventually expressed some measure of responsibility for their violence particularly in relation to their children. All but four of the

men (16/20), talked about how their children impacted on their motivation for change (two of the men had adult children, two recognised no impact on children):

*It's my fault the kids were taken ,I wasn't allowed to see them that's fine because I had to change, he's my little boy. He shouldn't have to go through that, um, and I didn't realise it at the time, I do now. (Andrew Interview 1/2)*

*Yeah, it's about choices. It's just like, if I want to do this to better myself, and if I can do that I'm going to benefit my kids. (Dale interview 2/2)*

Workers concurred with the impact of children on the men in the group:

*Definitely children. Separation from children and supervised access. The feeling that they are regarded as being unsafe with their own children. (MBC program worker 4)*

Changing the way they treated and communicated with their children provided markers of behaviour change:

*Well I don't really want kids growing up in a household full of violence and different people said that. Because monkey see; monkey do. (Charlie Interview 1/2)*

*The language of responsibility and minimisation*

On first examination many of the men's comments appear unequivocal. They seemed to own their violence and its impact on their children. However, as interviews progressed, hedges and contradictions emerged in most men's interviews that qualified responsibility. For example:

*He said, why did I hurt mummy? I said, well daddy was silly. Daddy was a lot at fault, mum was a lot at fault. Mum and dads do do that sometimes. (Matthew Interview 1/1)*

Men moderated their responsibility and accountability in different ways. For some, this emerged in how the impact of their violence on their children made them feel. Their concern for their children was, to varying degrees, moderated by a focus on themselves:

*I've got children. It hurts that I can't see them. At times I wish I wasn't here. Everything I have and love in my life has been taken from me. (Morris Interview 1/1)*

*Yes, I can tell they're scared - I can tell they're scared. But then that upsets me. It upsets me because they're scared. (Garry Interview 1/2)*

In these comments men expressed regret for their violence but focussed on how difficult the situation was for them, rather than for their children.

#### *Change over time*

The impact of children on men's motivation to change was also evident in change over time. At Interview 1, Desmond had no contact with his child or ex-partner and referred to her only as *the ex*. At Interview 2 Desmond was repeating the program voluntarily. He was in contact with his partner and referred to her by name. He was in a new relationship and wanted to regain visitation with his child:

*This is my second time doing it; this time is off my own bat. The first time I missed a few meetings and I wasn't really ready. I'm more ready now. I'm sick of doing the same things. Things are never going to change if I don't do something, and it's not right to hit someone. (Desmond Interview 1/2)*

Edward reflected on his contact with his children now they are adults:

*My children [that] I do see I've been upfront about talking about my behaviour and that it was wrong and that I was drug and alcohol affected. They're organised, got nice jobs, but...they've got problems that all stem from the way they were brought up. They saw the violence, [the] attitude to family. (Edward Interview 2/2)*

#### **Women's perspectives on men's motivation to change**

Most women reinforced the powerful role of children as significant catalysts for change for men. Melanie suggested her partner experienced the children's fear as an informal consequence that held him accountable when she is able to bring this to his attention:

*I say you're carrying on here in front of the kids and they're hiding in their bedroom. What's that tell you...[and he'll say]...Oh, yeah, yeah, I don't care [then] all of a sudden he'll go, oh no. It'll dawn on him and he'll think about it. (Melanie Interview 1/2)*

*Well, I asked him why he'd changed and he said it was ever since he saw his son for the first time because he watched him be born. He said he just felt this connection with him as soon as he come out...big smile on his face. That's when he changed really. (Sarah 2/2)*

There were also several significant exceptions drawn from women's stories about the impact of men's violence on their children:

*Although they love him and they do love to play with him, at the same time they're scared of him. That's what I try to point out but - he can't see it...I don't think he's had a real revelation yet. (Shelby Interview 2/2)*

### **The impact of statutory child protection services**

Ten of the twenty men interviewed for this study had been involved with statutory child protection services. Six of these men were no longer with their partners; two further women whose partners were not interviewed also provided insights into child protection involvement. As mentioned in the previous section, all but two of the men engaged in some identification of the negative impact of their violence on their children and experienced this informal consequence as a measure of accountability. However, even men who expressed remorse about the impact of their violence towards their children struggled to see any necessity for statutory child protection involvement.

#### *Perceptions of Victimisation and Powerlessness*

The ten men in this study with child protection involvement saw child protection as having power over their lives, which was used unjustly and unfairly. The men almost all saw statutory child protection workers as the enemy with an *us and them* approach to their interaction:

*They came to the hospital. There was about five of them against me and my partner...they've always been against me from day one. (Brian Interview 1/2)*

*What hope have I got, why care, she can make me look bad to child protection, to the police, lie her teeth off and still walk out with the kids. (Andrew Interview 1/2)*

As with the police and courts, many men constructed child protection as an ally of their partners:

*My previous marriage, she was a drug addict and we had kids and that. The child protection came in and took the kids out. She was a good storyteller so probably dealt first hand with child protection...so I had to come here just because they ordered us to. (Dale Interview 1/2)*

*She's decided to make me do every course in the book, just to stall me seeing my son, so I've got to do it, I've got no choice. (Morris Interview 1/2)*

Others saw statutory child protection creating a wedge in the power that they held in relation to their partners and ex-partners:

*Certain people were using those threats there; that was just making her panic*

*stricken that she was going to lose her kids. It took away from her being able to focus on what was necessary [i.e. saving the marriage]. (Sean Interview 1/2)*

### *Blaming and denial*

Some men took this sense of victimisation further. Child protection services became the cause of their violence, rather than a consequence. Brian related how the involvement of child protection exacerbated his behaviour, and in particular his anger:

*Yes, just every time child protection said something to me, I'd fire up at them because I'm sick of allegations. They don't prove anything. They just like to talk about stuff and I like proof as most people do. So I cracked the shits and walked out and told them all to go and get F-ed. (Brian Interview 1/2)*

Other comments portrayed child protection workers as *fair game*, reflective of the men's sense of entitlement to impose their control and abuse on others. Kyle, who threatened to kill his worker argued:

*I just thought, oh well they're the Department of Human Services. Surely they're used to people abusing them. I felt like it was sort of made out to be a bigger thing than what it was really. Someone's got to bloody abuse them or tell them what to do, otherwise they're not going to do anything. (Kyle Interview 1/2)*

### **Moving to accountability and responsibility for men**

The impact of statutory child protection services varied amongst participants. At a systemic level, the men were held accountable to varying degrees by child protection insisting on attendance at MBC programs. Workers confirmed that the leverage of child protection was used to support attendance at these programs. Of the ten men who had child protection involvement, eight of them articulated some motivation to change which they ascribed to either involvement with MBC programs or child protection. However, while child protection may have assisted in the leverage for change, even men most affected by and engaged with their children, often seemed unable or unwilling to recognise child protection involvement as a consequence of their violence.

There were exceptions to this. Three men were eventually able to see beyond a sense of coercion and victimisation and came to understand child protection wanted to ensure their children's safety and that attendance at MBC Programs would benefit their family. However, this process occurred over time. Andrew and Desmond were attending a second round, and for Darren, the change in attitude was evident at Interview 2:

*Yeah, it was that: losing the kids. But once you lose them, you're going to fight to get*

*them back, so you have to do something. The [child protection] said to do this behavioural program, so then yep, straight away, and then start from there. (Darren Interview 1/2)*

Darren first attended a MBC program after his children had been removed following a history of drug and alcohol abuse by both parents. Their return was conditional on attendance at the program. He was unemployed, had no money, little contact with his family and nowhere to live. The removal of the children was the catalyst for Darren. At Interview 2, Darren discussed how workers at the MBC program (which was integrated into a broader generic service agency), helped him obtain an income and accommodation. He believed the program helped him regain access to his children. Workers indicated Darren was a willing participant, who engaged in the program and seemed genuine in his desire to learn from the process. His attendance was compelled by the involvement of statutory child protection service but his engagement was voluntary:

*So this is my third time back, just to get myself more confident and keep on doing what I'm doing. That's where it's good. You don't want to fall back. I come back to just get a bit more info and just keep on going. That's why it's good. (Darren Interview 2/2)*

Work with the MBC program helped Darren see statutory child protection services in a more positive light.

#### *Erratic child protection intervention*

Men spoke with intensity about child protection involvement and their perceptions of this involvement are described here. Importantly, it was often the inconsistency of child protection practice that was spoken about with as much feeling as the experiences of feeling controlled by child protection intervention:

*In the office here, they've got 13 staff... they're dealing with hundreds of families and they have got 13 people. It takes you six weeks to contact them. They wonder why people go in there stressed out and all raging because no-one ever does anything in there. (Brian Interview 1/2)*

*When you go to court they make out as if they've got a team to help you. But if you try and ring them up or something like that - I've been ringing them for 18 months and I've probably had maybe three phone calls returned. So it makes it hard yes. (Kyle interview 1/2)*

After he was reunited with his children Kyle made a further comment:

*No, I am the same person as I was back then. I am probably a lot more smarter towards them now. I know when they want something and I know to deal with it and just give them what they want basically. I am still the same person; I still hate them. I don't like them at all. I hate them with a passion. (Kyle interview 2/2)*

Tracey and Mike also reported negative experiences of CP intervention. Tracey's teenage child reported her to child protection alleging physical abuse. The teenager was placed with his biological father, despite Tracey's protestations that the biological father had seriously physically assaulted her. In the meantime, child protection initiated an investigation into the welfare of Tracey's other three very young children with her current partner Mike. Ultimately after months of visits and assessments from CP, counselling, and court processes, Mike and Tracey along with their child protection worker were told by the courts, that this was a family court issue. Following \$30,000 in legal expenses, the teenager was returned to his mother's care. Within weeks, he involved child protection again. Despite the recent Family Court outcome he was again removed from his mother's care, returned to his biological father and the court process was repeated:

*I gave up the battle and let him live with his biological father. He is now rude, sullen and abusive towards me and his younger siblings when he visits. (Tracey interview 2/2).*

At second round interviews, Tracey blamed child protection for what she described as the loss of her son, the deterioration in his behaviour and in his attitude to her and his sisters when he visits. Tracey believes her ex-partner used child protection to gain custody of their child and continue his abuse of her:

*They're supposed to be there to help families not tear them apart. They tore ours apart without any real hard evidence on what the claims were. (Tracey Interview 2/2)*

Ironically, following this experience, the couple were approached by CP to consider whether they would provide kinship care for their niece. Tracey and Mike's experience highlighted the complexity of child protection work and the importance of co-operative and consistent working relationships across the integrated system if accountability is to be enacted.

### **Discussion**

The findings reflect the disconnections in the data between men's perspectives of fathering and the experiences reported by both men and women of their interaction with statutory child protection. At times, it reads as two different issues: one about fathering; and one about the interface with child protection. The issues however are clearly connected as the involvement of child protection is due to the man's fathering.

In common with other studies (Heward-Belle, 2015), these men expressed varied understandings of the impact of their violence on their children, which, to differing degrees, impacted on their motivation to change. They moved in and out of accountability and responsibility in relation to their children echoing the interviews reported with men on a UK perpetrator program (Harne, 2011). However, the majority (18/20 of the men) took some degree of responsibility for their violence when it came to their children. As with other studies, they did not necessarily see the violence towards their partner as violence against their children (Scott & Crooks, 2007).

The men's stories about child protection varied. However, a consistent theme was men's understanding of the power that statutory child protection had over their contact with their children; an awareness commented on in other studies (Stanley et al, 2012; Blacklock & Philips, 2015). Predominantly these men did not acknowledge the statutory involvement as a consequence of their violence. Rather, statutory child protection services was constructed as an unreasonable constraint on their access to their children. As mentioned in other studies, child protection created a strong compulsion to attend MBC programs with less attrition from a MBC program when child protection was involved (Stanley et al, 2012). However, attendance did not necessarily equate with engagement. A problem for child protection workers lies in the lack of attention to men as fathers in these programs.

The lack of power these men experienced, and against which they raged, confirmed their perception of themselves as victims. Frequently, the focus of their involvement was not on their own parenting, nor on the protection of the children, both of which related to their violent behaviour, but rather on their grievances against child protection for their constraints over their family relationships. Exceptions occurred over time through the links between MBC programs and child protection workers.

The interplay between formal and informal consequences for men's violence and abuse holds potential opportunities as well as vulnerabilities in the intervention response. Seven of the ten men who came to MBC programs via child protection identified the consequences of CP involvement as the reason they stayed. However, whilst access to and retention on the program was created via the child protection referral, the adversarial nature of this relationship did not necessarily assist men to engage with their fathering in the context of domestic violence.

More generally, inconsistent responses, lengthy delays in responses from child protection workers, changes in allocated workers, and repeated adjournment of court cases strengthened feelings of victimisation and facilitated minimisation and denial. These

system's failures had the potential to be used by the men to strengthen their sense of victimisation and to form an aggrieved alliance with their partners (and ex-partners) feeding the men's sense of righteous indignation at child protection.

However, statutory child protection did place some boundaries around the men's behaviour. The accountability afforded was often not recognised by the men. In many instances where the relationship with child protection was conflicted, the adversarial nature of the interaction was an obstacle to change. These contradictions that child protection involvement brought to the intervention was an important finding.

### **Conclusion**

Children and fatherhood were important concepts for men whose children provided a significant informal compulsion to attend MBC programs. Further research is needed to explore how, or if, the interaction between the two formal consequences (MBC programs and child protection) holds men accountable, and supports women's efforts to protect their children. The process would be undoubtedly strengthened if the fathering was a more central aspect of MBC programs.

It was not within the scope of this study to fully explore the links between child protection and MBC programs. On the evidence that did emerge, child protection is used by the men to obfuscate responsibility and reinforce constructions of victimisation. Denial and minimisation were facilitated by inconsistent responses, time delays and staff shortages, impacting on the effectiveness of child protection as an accountability mechanism. There were lost opportunities to create alliances with women in their attempts to stand up to their partners' violence and abuse and to engage men in positive ways about their fathering. The link between DV and fathering and the ability to communicate this relationship is an area for practice development.

In this study there was little evidence of feedback loops between MBC programs and child protection. Linkages that may exist were not evident to participants. Strengthening the linkages between these two services emerged as an important area for policy and practice development. As with other studies (Stanley & Humphreys, 2017; Blacklock & Phillips, 2015) when such linkages do exist there is a need to make the cooperative relationship between the two services a significant and visible part of the accountability process.

The fracturing of the relationship between fathering, family violence and statutory child protection services is an area for practice development which is ripe for change. There are

significant disconnections between men's perception of their fathering and the parallel service disconnections between men's perception of child protection in relation to their fathering, and the disconnection between child protection and MBC programs. In this study, child protection practitioners were clearly putting constraints on men in relation to their fathering: a major step forward. However, both the service system collaboration and the skills development required for child protection workers to communicate the relationship between domestic violence and children's safety and well-being lie as a work in progress.

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