

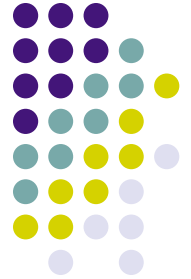


# **Challenging the Notion of Failure to Protect: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Protective Strategies of Urban and Northern Abused Mothers**

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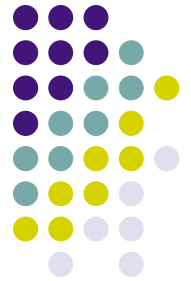
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# The Literature on Mothering\* in the Context of IPV



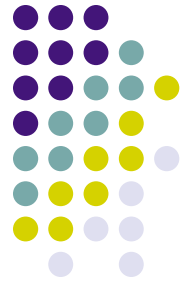
- Generally, being battered has a direct and negative impact on the victim's parenting, which in turn, endangers their children's adjustment & well-being
  - Experience greater levels of stress than non-abused mothers, therefore, may be less able to respond to children's behaviours in effective ways (Levendosky & Graham-Berman, 1998)
  - Less attentive & emotionally supportive to children (Sudermann, 1997)
  - More likely to use physical aggression than non-abused mothers (Holden & Ritchie, 1991)
  - Less able to assert authority or control over their children, putting their children at risk for anti-social behaviours (Levendosky & Graham-Berman, 2000)
  - Parental stress due to IPV may put children at greater risk of maternal neglect or abuse (Holden, Stein, Ritchie, Harris, & Jouriles, 1998)

# Literature (cont'd)

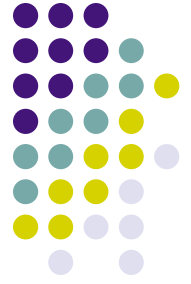


- Other research refutes claims that abused mothers are helpless, incompetent & aggressive parents
  - No differences between abused mothers & non-abused mothers regarding their use of physical punishment (McCloskey et al., 1995; Ritchie & Holden, 1998; Van Horn & Lieberman, 2002)
  - Abused mothers compensate by being very attentive & sensitive to their children (Letourneau, Fedick, & Willms, 2007)
  - Abused women take active steps to protect and care for their children despite the violence in their lives (Hilton, 1992; Schechter & Edleson, 1994; Schechter & Edleson, 1999).

# Gap in the Literature

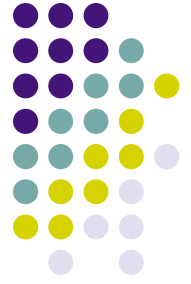


- Notably missing is a discussion of the protective strategies that abused mothers may employ to protect and care for their children
- The protective strategies are often underestimated or overlooked
- Researchers and clinicians have over-emphasized women's inadequacies and deficits in parenting their children



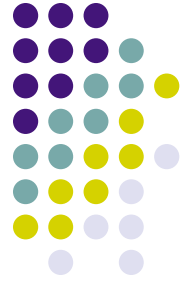
# Study Methodology

- To identify/explore the strategies that abused mothers use to protect their children from direct abuse and/or exposure to IPV
- In-depth interviews with 17 mothers in Winnipeg (n=9) and Thompson (n=8)
- Interviews lasted 45 minutes to 2 hours and transcribed verbatim



# Study Demographics

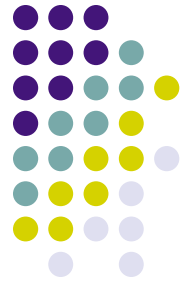
- Participant Age (n=17)
  - Ages ranged from 21 years to 52 years (SD = 8.3)
- Racial Background (n=17)
  - Aboriginal or Métis: n=13
  - Caucasian: n=2
  - Black: n=1
  - Other: n=1



## Demographics (cont'd)

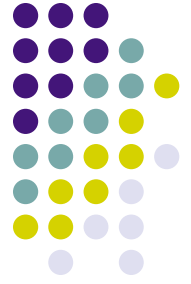
- Average monthly income (n=13) = \$1,390
  - Six participants reported a monthly income < \$1,000
- Employment (n=17)
  - Not working: 14
  - Working Part-time: 2
  - Working Casually: 1
  - Working Full-time: 0





# Mothers' Relationship Status

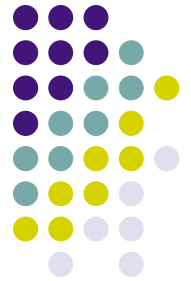
- Relationship Status (n=17)
  - Ex-boyfriend: n=11 (65%)
  - Common law: n=4 (23%)
  - Divorced: n=2 (12%)
- Length of Relationship (n=17)
  - 6-12 months (n=1)
  - 1-3 years (n=3)
  - 4-6 years (n=6)
  - 7-10 years (n=4)
  - 10+ years (n=3)



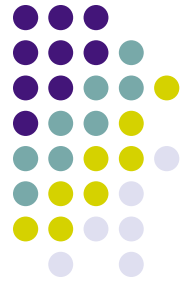
# Children

- Number of children ranged from 1 – 7 per participant
  - One mother was pregnant at time of interview
- Children's (<18 yrs.) ages ranged from 6 months to 16 years
  - Average age of “child one” = 9.25 years (S.D = 5.2)

# Preliminary Findings: Nature of Violence - Participants



- Of 17 women, all but one reported physical violence
  - 9 reported severe violence (e.g., beatings, choking, repeatedly punched in face, stabbings, sexual assaults, attempted drowning, pushed down stairs)
  - 6 reported injuries (e.g., bruises, stab wounds, cuts, broken nose, broken arm and leg, black eyes)



# Nature of Violence - Children

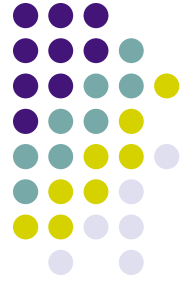
- 2 women reported that their children were assaulted during violent incident
  - six-month old punched in face while being held
  - Toddler thrown across room
  - Toddler thrown off bed
- 10 women reported their children present during violent situations
- 6 reported their children tried to intervene/stop the violence



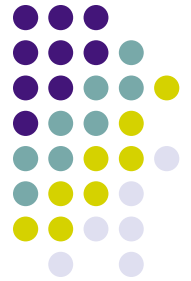
## Nature of Violence (cont'd)

- Only one reported that children witnessed arguing only (no physical violence)
- Only one reported that children only heard violence (not physically present)
- Only one reported their children saw the aftermath only

# Women's Use of Protective Strategies



- Women reported in engaging in a variety of acts/behaviours to protect their children from:
  - Direct violence
  - Potential harm of witnessing/exposed to violence
  - Becoming future victims or perpetrators

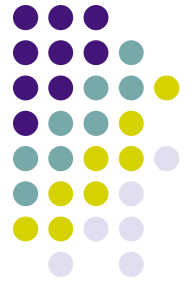


# Direct Violence

- Accessing formal services
  - 10 women contacted the police (7 Thompson; 3 Winnipeg)

*I called the cops... As soon as they saw my son's face, they just went straight to my house and their dad was sleeping inside like nothing happened and they took him. (T-02)*

*Yeah, I called the police, charged him... I would phone the cops. (Jane)*

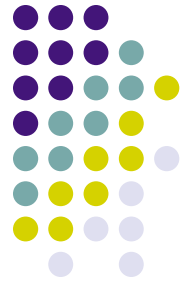


## Direct Violence (cont'd)

- 8 women reported going to shelter (6 Thompson; 2 Winnipeg)
- 9 women reported obtaining protection orders (6 Thompson, 3 Winnipeg)

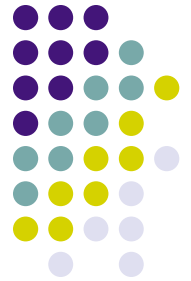
*It' feels like I got a saying to my kid now, "You can't just come grab her, cause this time I'll just phone the cops on you." So that's working out well. (T-04)*





## Direct Violence (cont')

- 7 reported seeking assistance from other professionals (e.g., nursing station, Band Office, therapist/counsellor, mental health worker, psychiatrist, lawyer) (6 Thompson; 1 Winnipeg)
- Access informal supports
  - 8 women reported seeking assistance/support from family (8 Thompson; 0 Winnipeg)
  - 6 women reported seeking assistance/support from friends or neighbours (4 Thompson; 2 Winnipeg)

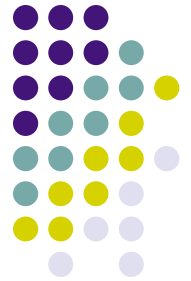


## Direct Violence (cont'd)

- Women reported ending their relationship with their abuser, either permanently or temporarily

*I know that that's her dad and that's her family, but they're not healthy people to be around. (Scarlett)*

*[Did you ever separate from an abusive partner to try to protect your children?] Yeah. Yeah. We did, go, did try to and he would come to my work place, to where I was working, that daycare, and yell at me. (Lynn)*

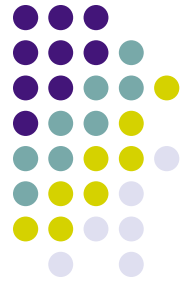


## Direct Violence (cont'd)

- Separated Children and Abuser

*I got very good at getting him (abuser) to go to the basement. I made the basement his place, I put his stereo in... he slept down there. I had a floor between them I insulated them by an entire floor. He slept in the basement. He didn't sleep with me, and I slept with the kids on the third storey. (Becky)*

*I would turn on a movie in her room and I would lead the fight back to the other end of the house, where she wasn't directly in front of us fighting. (Tulee)*

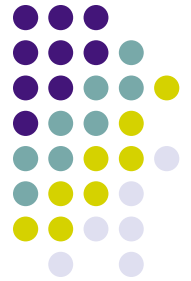


## Direct Violence (cont'd)

- Avoided Fights/Confrontations

*If he asked me a question, I'd just know right away that he was getting angry or that he was gonna hit me, so I'd just walk away or go sit outside for a while or go do work, some work or something. (T-03)*

*Usually if I seen that there was something fueling, if he was looking to fight, we'd go visit friends or something, to avoid the situation even happening. Or at least if something were to happen by the time I got home it would be bed time for him, so he would miss it, hopefully, or not hear it. (Janelle)*



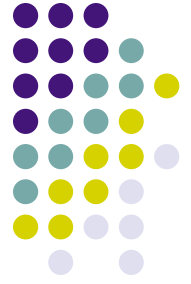
## Direct Violence (cont'd)

- Placate Abuser

*I always talk to him and try to calm him. (T-01)*

*I would just keep him on his pills. I would crush pills for him, make sure he didn't run out just so he'd be happy. (T-04)*

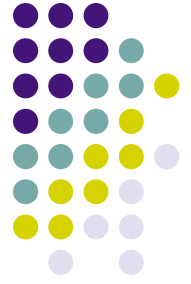
*You try to comply all the time. Try to comply so trying to prevent the blow-ups. (Becky)*



## Direct Violence (cont'd)

- Control Children's Behaviour

*When we went for rides in his vehicle, I just told the kids to sit back and be quiet, cause if you, if they're fooling around, he might try to - be mad at them too. (T-03)*



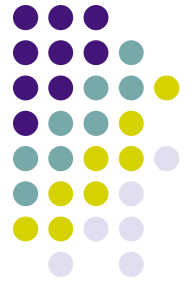
# Harmful Impact of Exposure

- More Attentive/Nurturing/Affectionate

*I would try to explain to her like what happened or whatever, and I just felt like she needed extra attention. (Mandy)*

*I spend more time with her and more, just telling her like, "I love you. Mommy and Daddy love you." (Tulee)*

*We'll have special nights. I let her sleep in my bed and stuff. Or we'll pull out the foam mattress and sleep out here, her and I and just have a movie night. (Scarlett)*

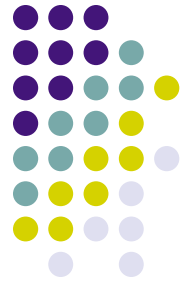


## Harmful Impact (cont'd)

- Talked about Violence

*I sit there and I talk to them and asked them how they felt when they would see, well I talked mostly to [daughter] and [son] and asked them how they felt when they seen what their dad did to me, and I tried explaining to them. (T-02)*





## Harmful Impact (cont'd)

- Hid the Violence from Children

I'd be like, "Me and daddy are just playing." Just so she won't be scared too.... I tell them, "It's okay. That was yesterday, today is today." I was carrying on like nothing happened. (T-04)

*When she was asking questions I tried to answer them in the best way I could so that it wasn't daddy's fault. I tried to go around it so that it was an accident or something. Even though it was lying to her, I just didn't want her to understand what was going on. (Tulee)*

*My kids would have never heard me. It didn't matter how hard he hit me, my children would have never heard me.*  
(Becky)

# From Becoming Future Victims/Perpetrators



- Talked about violence

*“You seen what your dad did to me, right?” And they’ll be like, “Yeah.” I said, “Well, I don’t want you guys growing up like that because it’s gonna hurt, you’re gonna hurt a lot of people” and then they’d said, “okay”. Ever since I’ve been talking to them, they’ve been changing a lot.” (T-02)*

*I’ve been talking to my daughters a lot, my 17 year old and my 15 year old. And then I got a 13 year old son and I talk to him a lot about not hitting women, not to grow up to hit women. It’s really wrong. It’s against our culture.” (T-04)*

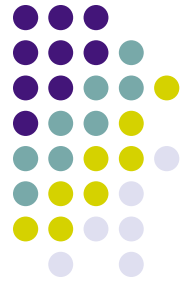
# Women's Perception of Effectiveness



- Variability in the effectiveness of strategies
  - E.g., for some women, the police were seen as an effective strategy (i.e., offender was removed, charges laid, and jailed) but not so for others...

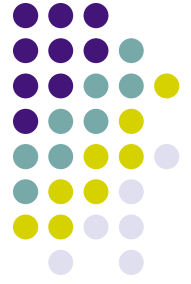
*The police came to talk to me after, and they told me that there was nothing that they could do because he didn't hit me with the car, so they told me to go down, that I just have to go down and take my chances and get a restraining order. (Scarlett)*

*I have and I ended up getting arrested for it. (T-04).*



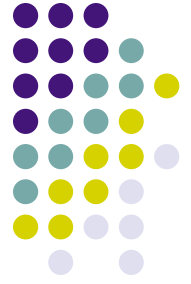
# Discussion

- Abused mothers use a variety of protective strategies
- Variability in women's usage of protective strategies
- Variability in the effectiveness of strategies
- Informal strategies often perceived to be more helpful than formal ones
  - As professionals do we acknowledge? Are we including in our assessments and/or case management?



## Discussion (cont'd)

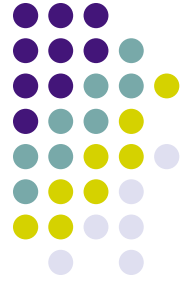
- Motherhood serves to preserve a woman's sense of self and being a good mother helps mothers heal and cope with their experiences of abuse
- is a source of strength and pride for women coping with abuse (serves as a buffer or respite from the abuse) (Irwin, Thorne, & Varcoe, 2002)



# Conclusion

- Limited (or perhaps erroneous) assumptions about abused mothers' parenting strengths may lead to unnecessary, inappropriate, or intrusive intervention (i.e., child protection)
- As researchers and social service providers working with abused mothers, we must be aware of mothers' strengths and protective abilities
- Empowering mothers by focusing on their parenting strengths may be more helpful than presuming ignorance or incompetence on the part of these mothers because they are abused

# Questions or Comments?



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