Putting Gender Back On The Agenda In Domestic And Family Violence Policy And Service Responses: Using critical reflection to create cultural change

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Social work has a key role not only in responding to domestic and family violence through the provision of direct services, but also in promoting cultural change through education and policy development to redress the social conditions that create violence. Such practices can result in shifting the consciousness of individuals and communities, ultimately affecting societal and structural changes. These changes begin with the practice of critical reflection, which aims to unearth and challenge dominant assumptions about gender, power and violence. 'Best practice' responses to domestic and family violence are widely contested and therefore highly political. Within neoliberal contexts, conservative governments have sought to de-gender and de-politicise domestic and family violence by attacking and de-funding feminist services and reducing domestic and family violence to a relationship problem, rather than acknowledging it as a gendered human rights issue. However, critical and progressive forms of social work have always advocated a research-informed and critically reflective approach to practice that champions women's and children's rights, whilst simultaneously holding perpetrators accountable and seeking to change the societal structures implicated in producing violence. This paper will highlight the importance of structural analytical approaches that explicitly link gender and power, to making informed, effective and relevant responses to domestic and family violence. It will also highlight the need for critical reflection as the first step in redressing violence against women.

Introduction

Social work has historically played a key role in responding to domestic and family violence in Australia. This role includes direct service practices such as responding to the social, emotional and immediate safety needs of victims/survivors; participating in education and consciousness raising campaigns to raise awareness about of the devastating impact of domestic and family violence; and engaging in movements to reform social policies that contribute to gender inequality. Social work practice in this field also includes influencing social policy to be more responsive to the needs of those experiencing and perpetrating the violence, and campaigning for social and cultural change. Feminism has strongly influenced the practice of social work in the field of domestic violence, since feminists identified their personal experiences of violence being embedded in social and political structures (Fawcett and Waugh 2008; Morley 2014: 32). The hard-fought consciousness raising feminist campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in the establishment of women's refuges, and placed policing and criminal sanctions as a response to domestic violence firmly on the social and political agenda (Murray 2002). This led to the introduction of the first stand-alone domestic violence legislation in Queensland, the Domestic Violence (Family Protection) Act 1989, which challenged the traditionally held views that women were the property of their husbands and established the need for governments to act in order to more effectively protect victims from further abuse (Page 2015).

Since that time, neo-conservative governments have sought to de-gender and de-politicise domestic and family violence, resulting in the de-funding of feminist services and the reducing of domestic violence to a relationship problem rather than a gendered human rights abuse (Phillips 2006: 192). 'Best practice' responses are therefore widely contested and highly political and partly because of this, the helping professions, including social work, cannot necessarily claim a proud history of supporting women and children's safety and autonomy (Laing and Humphreys 2013: 2). However, critical and progressive forms of social work have always advocated a research-informed and critically reflective approach to practice that champions women's and children's rights, whilst simultaneously holding perpetrators accountable.
Recent media coverage and renewed government interest in family violence prevention with related injections of funding have placed this issue at the forefront of discussion and debate, and have served to reinvigorate community responses which seek to change the societal structures implicated in producing the violence. This paper will highlight the importance of structural analytical approaches to understanding domestic and family violence, in order to review existing responses and strengthen their effectiveness. It is argued that critical reflection, which unearths and challenges dominant assumptions about gender, power and violence can foster shifts in individual and community awareness, ultimately contributing to social change.

**Patriarchy In Neoliberal Contexts**

Neoliberal contexts emphasise individual responsibility and valorise economic solutions over all other reasoning (Wallace and Pease 2011: 132). Within these contexts, structural/feminist understandings of domestic violence that explicitly link gender and power, have been displaced by understandings that cast domestic violence as a private trouble. This apportions responsibility (and blame) to individual families, and privileges individualised (and psychologised) practice responses to domestic violence (Featherstone 2004: 7; Morley and Macfarlane 2008: 31). Indeed, ‘feminist backlash,’ which suggests that feminist analysis has become redundant in responding to domestic violence, has been prevalent in popular culture and social media over the last two decades (Phillips 2006: 194).

However, the role of feminism in redressing gender inequality is far from over. Recent research undertaken by the Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence (STDFV 2015) suggests that the majority of domestic and family violence continues to involve violence perpetrated by men against women and children in their homes. Domestic and family violence persists as a significant social issue: the number of reported incidents continues to increase with police responding to over 180 incidents of domestic and family violence every day across Queensland. In addition, 58 per cent of all homicides are domestic homicides (STDFV 2015: 6). The annual cost of domestic and family violence to the Queensland economy alone is estimated to be between $2.7 billion to $3.2 billion (STDFV 2015: 6). Given these figures, family and domestic violence remains a significant social issue.

Recent changes in social awareness emerging from government-initiated research appear to have promoted greater consensus that the elimination of domestic violence involves changes to our ‘culture and attitude’ as well as the reform of legislative and individualised responses (STDFV 2015: 2). Critical social work, which privileges an analysis of power and examines the interface between person and environment, highlights the ways in which gender and particularly feminist analysis of gender continues to be of central importance in understanding and responding to domestic and family violence (Fraser and Craik 2009: 228). Cultural change requires a critical examination of the impact of social and political structures, in order to identify discursive practices, such as patriarchy, rooted in those structures. Patriarchy is a general term referring to societies organised on the basis of male domination, where men benefit from institutional power in ways that disadvantage women (Orme 2013).

Whilst patriarchy accords economic, social and political privileges to men, the unequal distribution of power harms both men and women. Hence, it is in the interests of both men and women to challenge the harmful effects of patriarchy (Pease 2000: 129-130).

**Domestic And Family Violence In Global Contexts**

All known societies are patriarchal to some extent, albeit to varying degrees (Ciccodicola 2012: 160). Violence against women is therefore global and shaped by different cultural contexts (Fontes and McCloskey 2011: 151). If we take a macroscopic look at our world, the United National Development Program (UNDP) shows the impact of patriarchy on women in a global sense is profound. It estimates that 60 per cent of the world’s chronically hungry people are women and girls; 800 women die each day from preventable causes in pregnancy and childbirth; and in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, 80 per cent of all jobs for women are in the informal economy (UNDP 2014).

This economic disparity, reinforcing unequal power relations between men and women (the same unequal power relations implicated in producing domestic and family violence), is also reflected in politics. Women hold only 21 per cent of the world’s parliamentary seats (UNDP 2014). Women continue to be under-represented in ministerial positions, with only five countries having ever achieved gender equality at Cabinet level (Caramani et al. 2011: 873). Such under-representation in political systems globally correlates with women’s over-representation in violence statistics: three out of every ten women report having experienced physical violence and/or sexual assault by an intimate partner, despite significant cultural barriers to such reportage (UNDP 2014).

Gendered health differentials have also been widely described. Approximately 68,000 women die from unsafe abortions each year, comprising one in seven of all maternal deaths worldwide (UN Women 2011). In 2009, women represented 53 per cent in developing countries and 21 per cent of developed countries of the 33.3 million people living with HIV. Most HIV-positive women were infected by husbands or long-term partners, and in India, 90 per cent of women with HIV contracted the disease...
in a long-term relationship, indicating that women's lack of decision-making power in relationships may further increase their risk of infection (UN Women 2015).

Whilst domestic violence has now been made illegal, 603 million women live in 125 nations where domestic violence is still not regarded as a crime (UN Women 2011). Rape in marriage is criminalised in 52 countries, however 2.6 billion women live in countries where marital rape is still not illegal (UN Women 2011). Women's structural position of disadvantage, or gender inequality, has been recently identified across a wide range of cross-cultural studies as a causative factor of domestic violence. That is 'societies with stronger belief systems about male dominance' are positively correlated with a higher incidence of violence against women (Wall 2014: 7). Gender inequalities also lead to beliefs and attitudes of male sexual authority over women. This promotes a sense of male entitlement, which enables and legitimises demonstrations of power against women (Jewkes 2012: 24). Most significantly, the report found that these beliefs are also more likely to be reflected at a societal level such as in political and economic systems (Wall 2014: 7), confirming that violence against women is not just about the oppression of individual women but a much broader human rights abuse issue.

Domestic And Family Violence In The Australian Context

If we take a look closer to home, Australian women continue to have low representation in the legal system and even lower representation in the political system. For example, the new Turnbull Government has announced that just six out of 21 members of Cabinet at the Federal level will be women. However, this is a significant improvement from the previous experience under the Abbott Government in which Afghanistan had more female representatives in Cabinet than our single, token, white middle class female (Kenny 2013). We still, however, have some way to go to meet Canada's standard, that has now achieved an equal number of women including one Muslim woman (Murphy 2015).

Discrimination, exploitation and abuses against women are enshrined in legislation and underwritten by social policy (Morley et al. 2014: 49). These are both a cause and a consequence of the impact of patriarchy. For example, underemployment and poverty are both simultaneously risk factors for domestic violence as well as consequences of it. Certainly, domestic and family violence is the primary cause of homelessness for women and children in Australia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2014: 7). It is also well known that some women will stay in violent relationships to avoid the poverty that often accompanies a decision to leave (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2014: 7).

Social policies from both major parties in the last few decades have largely reflected a commitment to keeping women in the home, content to exploit the unpaid domestic and childcare work in the private sphere. Those that do return to work, do so on a part-time or a casual basis, to workplaces that are mostly not 'family-friendly', which results in greater pressure on family roles, and increased likelihood of psychological distress for women (Homelessness Australia 2013). The blocking of paid maternity leave, and then the overt attack, constructing women as 'double-dippers' for accessing both employer and government contributions to paid parental leave, resulted in nearly 50 per cent of all mothers losing some or all of their 18-week government paid parental leave (Ireland and Wade 2015). Despite the existing legislation making men's rates of pay the same as women's for equivalent work, women are consistently paid 17.6 per cent less than men which over an average working lifetime would mean the woman worker earns more than one million dollars less than her male counterpart (Cassels et al. 2009: 24-34). This also has major implications for superannuation, which means many working women will face living in poverty during retirement. Older women are often forced out of the workforce early, have insufficient superannuation to fund the cost of living and as a result are much more vulnerable to homelessness (Homelessness Australia 2013).

These represent just a few examples of how Federal Government policy has restricted and controlled women, relegating them to a secondary position in society in relation to men: the same secondary position which sanctions and reinforces the conditions, values, and beliefs that allow violence against women and children to occur. Recognising the direct links between the socially and politically disadvantaged position of women, and women's personal experiences of violence points to the need for structural changes. Progressive forms of practice have always advocated a research-informed and critically reflective approach to practice that champions women's and children's rights, whilst simultaneously holding perpetrators accountable and seeking to change the societal structures implicated in producing violence (see for example, Laing and Humphreys, 2013: 12; Fraser and Craik 2009: 236-238). As such, our focus can never just be the victim/survivor, or perpetrator we are working with; our interventions must also focus on transforming the social structures implicated in causing domestic and family violence.

In acknowledging domestic violence as a gendered social issue, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull recently announced a $100 million funding package to 'stop violence against women'. This is a welcome initiative in an area that has been profoundly underfunded for decades with Turnbull stating, 'Violence against women is one of
the great shames of Australia. It is a national disgrace' (Ireland 2015). He also commented ‘... violence against women begins with disrespecting women. And so this is a big cultural shift’ (Ireland 2015).

Indeed, the Prime Minister’s acknowledgement of domestic and family violence as a gendered issue represents a profound ideological shift from previous conservative governments that have sought to degender and de-politicise domestic and family violence. It also allows the nature of the problem to be properly characterised and responses, which focus on systemic support and intervention as well as cultural change, to be discussed (STDFV 2015: 7).

A Critical And Reflective Approach To Domestic and Family Violence

This policy platform has been further endorsed in Queensland with the recent release of the Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence (STDFV) Report Not now, not ever, identifying that domestic and family violence is a ‘violation of basic human rights’ that disproportionately affects women (2015: 7). This is not to say that men cannot be victims, and all forms of domestic and family violence are unacceptable. However, when we take into account the severity of the violence, the frequency of the violence and those who are losing their lives or are living with a permanent disability because of the violence, overwhelmingly women are the victims of male perpetrated violence (STDFV 2015: 7). Adopting a critical approach to domestic and family violence includes the understanding of intersectionality, which identifies other social divisions determining differential distribution of social, economic and political power contributing to inequalities. These divisions such as social class, ethnicity or race, sexuality and gender identity, ability and age, compound the oppression due to gender inequality, and influence the way women experience the violence (Webster and Flood 2015: 16). For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island women are 35 times more likely to be hospitalised for domestic violence than the general female population (STDFV 2015: 50). Understanding intersectionality therefore, means acknowledging that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to responding to domestic and family violence is limited and may exacerbate the oppression experienced by those in need of assistance.

Critical social work approaches also acknowledge a direct link between the continued prevalence of domestic and family violence and community attitudes and beliefs that create, as a leading Government commissioned report refers to, ‘a culture that justifies, excuses, perhaps trivialises or even condones or encourages domestic violence’ (STDFV 2015: 8). The report further asserts that as a result, ‘attitudes in our society about women require fundamental change’ (STDFV 2015: 10). The ‘how’ we go about this cultural change has been the topic of ongoing debate. A progressive way of understanding the ‘how’ in cultural change goes much deeper than a traditional response such as designing a state-funded communication strategy or education campaign. While the state may play a role in leading cultural change, we need to first make visible – through critical reflection – the harmful attitudes and constructions of gender so that we can challenge them.

Critical reflection uncovers the ways in which our values, beliefs and assumptions have become infused by dominant ideologies including patriarchy. As such, critical reflection enables us to understand how the internalisation of dominant/subordinate gendered power relationships operate to reproduce oppression. By uncovering the ways we participate in and reproduce those dominant ideas and practices that reinforce hegemonic constructions of masculinity and femininity, we are connected with a sense of agency, both personal and collective, that can be used to challenge and resist them in ways that become a vehicle for social transformation (Fook and Gardner 2007: 51). In this way, social change begins in people’s everyday lives, including for example family roles and workplaces, and while social structures will influence people’s circumstances, knowledge of social structures, and how to negotiate them can assist people to change oppressive social conditions (Mullaly 2010: 63).

Ken Lay (2015: np), the Chair of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Advisory Panel on Reducing Violence against Women and their Children, believes that the current research demonstrates that ‘we develop male privilege early’ and that we confuse ‘cultural values with biological ones’ in order to justify male violence and encourage ‘girls to feel complicit in their own abuse’. Therefore, in order to participate in cultural change, leaders must critically reflect in order to identify the way their assumptions shape values and attitudes in relation to domestic and family violence. In his previous role as Commissioner of Victoria Police, Lay worked hard to improve the culture of policing in relation to domestic and family violence. He cites critical reflection as a useful tool to help identify what needs to change so that there is consistency between their public statements and private behaviour in order to mentor young people in cultural change. Lay (2015: np) suggests that critical reflection is both ‘vital and in short supply’ and is the necessary first step towards building the cultural change needed to eliminate domestic and family violence.

Critical reflection provides an opportunity for us all, including community leaders and decision makers, to acknowledge the ways in which resistance to engage
with feminist understandings and responses to domestic and family violence results in maintaining the status quo, and its associated patriarchal inequalities (Phillips 2015: np). Critical reflection and analysis can assist us to work towards arresting the ever-increasing rates of violence against women, by elucidating the ways in which society sanctions women’s inequality in relation to men. By exposing the deeply entrenched patriarchal perspectives and discursive practices that benefit men and oppress women, we have the ability to change them. The power in discourses that reinforce patriarchal and establishment understandings of domestic and family violence is the extent to which they remain unchallenged (Fook 2012: 75). Critical reflection provides us with the opportunity to expose and challenge the cultural constructions of gender power relationships that are harmful to both men and women in order to reconstruct a gender relationship based on equality.

When critically reflective processes aimed at challenging patriarchy are enacted at both personal and political levels, the potential to create social change and reduce the causes and consequences of domestic and family violence become more possible. It is pleasing to see this kind of change now occurring at the structural level with the recent Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence making recommendations to include a staged process for the introduction of mandatory social work (or equivalent) qualifications for all family violence practitioners by the end of 2020 (Royal Commission into Family Violence 2016). This makes a strong statement about the need for practitioners to link the personal with the political, reaffirming a feminist structural analysis of domestic violence, involving critical reflection on both the ways direct services are offered, and on how broader commitments to promoting social and cultural change through education and policy development are practised.

Conclusion
This paper has highlighted the importance of using structural approaches and critical reflection to understand and inform critical social work responses to domestic and family violence. This critical approach explicitly links gender and power in making effective and relevant responses to the issues of domestic and family violence. Reflecting on the centrality of feminist thinking in understanding and responding to domestic and family violence is vital if our practices are to remain relevant and potentially socially and politically transformative. This is particularly important to acknowledge, given that in recent years there has been a shift away from feminist principles in the human service sector due to privileging social policies and practices that are individualised, clinical and apolitical (Morley and Macfarlane 2008; Morley 2014). This anti-feminist approach to social policy has effectively dismantled much of the infrastructure that feminists have fought to establish. Disturbingly, this has the capacity to effectively ignore the social, political, historical and gendered causes and consequences of domestic violence, and recast it as a private, individual problem – instead of a community problem (Morley 2014: 202-203). Critical reflection provides an opportunity to reframe and enter into dialogue about alternative ways of responding to domestic and family violence, holding feminist perspectives core to our understandings, with a commitment to changing the social conditions that support and sanction violence against women.

References

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