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How Child Protection Workers Support or Further Victimize Battered Mothers

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This study explored battered mothers' perceptions of their interactions with child protective services (CPS) workers to increase understanding about how child welfare workers and policies can have negative as well as positive impacts on women's and children's lives. The research was guided by two feminist frameworks: structured action theory and social entrapment theory. Twenty women participated in the in-depth, qualitative interviews. Most felt misunderstood and unsupported by their CPS workers and thought that this treatment directly harmed them and their children. Many batterers manipulated caseworkers and escaped sanctions, which contributed to negative consequences. Some women received helpful responses from their caseworkers and viewed such support as invaluable. Implications for social work practice are discussed.

Keywords: *battered women; child protection workers; failure to protect; domestic violence; battered mothers*

Each year, more than 3 million children witness their mothers being abused by an intimate partner (Carlson, 1984; Straus, 1992), and the overlap between woman battering and child abuse has been estimated to be between 30% and 70% (American Humane Association, 1994; Edleson, 1999, 2001; Messinger & Eldridge, 1993), depending on which research methodology was used. There is a growing literature on the negative effects of domestic abuse on children (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Davidson, 1995; Edleson, 1999) as well as a debate about whether to consider the witnessing of abuse a specific form of child maltreatment (Edleson, 2004; Mills et al., 2000). This debate is based on findings that many children who have witnessed abuse against their mothers experience some of the same psychological and behavioral problems as children who have been abused themselves (e.g., Mathias, Mertin, & Murray, 1995). However, it is also important to note that a significant proportion of children whose mothers are abused exhibit few or none of these problems (Christopoulos et al., 1987; Graham-Bermann, 2001; Grych, Jouriles, Swank, McDonald, & Norwood, 2000; Hughes & Luke, 1998; R. McDonald & Jouriles, 1991; Sullivan, Nguyen, Allen, Bybee, & Juras, 2000).

In spite of the equivocal findings on the effects of witnessing mother abuse, as well as the complexities and social norms involved in determining whom to hold responsible for the child witnessing the abuse, more and more states are treating a child's witnessing of domestic abuse as a form of child maltreatment deserving of intervention by child protective services (CPS) agencies (Edleson, 2004). Unfortunately, the unintended consequence

of these policies has often been the further victimization of women and their children (Spears, 1996). Implicit in many CPS policies regarding children who have been exposed to abuse against their mothers is that the mothers can and should choose to end the abuse being perpetrated against them. Such patriarchal ideologies are widespread in the legal response to domestic violence (Czapanskiy, 1993; Freeman, 1982; Jacobs, 1998). According to Epstein (1999), women are valued for and judged against three maternal stereotypes: (a) the all-sacrificing mother, (c) the all-knowing mother, and (c) the nurturing mother/breadwinning father. In this structure, it is expected that the all-sacrificing mother will overcome any obstacle, no matter how impossible, to protect her young; the all-knowing mother will intuitively know everything about her children and, therefore, be held to a higher standard of blame than her male partner, whom society accepts as ignorant in the ways of children; and in the nurturing mother/breadwinning father dyad, the mother is expected, as her sole activity, to raise children, and the father is expected to provide the resources needed to sustain the family. These stereotypes hold women to a higher standard of caregiving responsibility than their male partners and generally place them in no-win situations when it comes to caring for their children.

The CPS policy that expects women always to end relationships with abusive men also ignores the reality that many batterers escalate their violence and control tactics when women attempt to leave (American Psychological Association, 1996; Bachman & Saltzman, 1996; Browne & Bassuk, 1997; Fleury, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2000; Mahoney, 1991). Illustrative of social entrapment theory (Ptacek, 1999; Stark, 2007), many perpetrators capitalize on social and institutional failures to protect women and use their children to manipulate, harass, or threaten the children's mothers after the relationships end (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Beeble, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2007; Hester & Pearson, 1993; Saunders, 1994; Shepard, 1992). There are other factors that women must consider when deciding whether to end abusive relationships, such as whether they can afford to support themselves and their children on their own (Davis & Srinivasan, 1995; Lloyd & Taluc, 1999; Mullins, 1994). There is no one simple course of action, then, for many women who are trying to decide how best to protect themselves and their children.

Both Edleson (2004) and Garbarino (1995) have taken issue with the idea of treating the witnessing of domestic abuse differently from many other negative events to which children are exposed. Garbarino pointed out that children who are exposed to street and school violence are also at risk of many of the same effects as children who witness abuse against their mothers. Yet agencies do not attempt to hold parents accountable for the exposure of their children to these other types of violence. No neglect or child abuse charges are levied against parents in this situation, because the level of danger is considered to be beyond their control. No one asks, "Why don't you just leave?" as it is accepted that the parents are unable to escape the economic entrapment of their situation. In addition, Edleson (2004) noted that parents are not referred to CPS agencies for smoking in the presence of their children even though the children are exposed to secondhand smoke, a known health risk.

Regardless of whether exposure to domestic abuse should or should not be considered a form of child maltreatment, an increasing number of CPS agencies across the country are intervening with families when such exposure occurs (Edleson, 2004). As Enos (1996) and others have pointed out, if such interventions are carried out by social workers with little understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse, children will be wrongly removed from their mothers' care, and their mothers will be punished for their own victimization. (This is not to say that removing children from homes in which they are physically or psychologically at risk is never warranted. There are, of course, instances in which removal would be

in the best interest of the child.) Well-informed and empathic caseworkers, on the other hand, would be expected to be in a position to offer invaluable assistance to victims of domestic abuse and their children. A number of targeted training programs of CPS workers across the country have been designed to achieve this outcome (e.g., Magen & Conroy, 1998; Mills et al., 2000; Mills & Yoshihama, 1997), with some evidence that they have increased caseworkers' understanding of and empathy toward this complex issue. Whether this understanding has translated into more effective services has not yet been demonstrated.

Messerschmidt's (1997) feminist theory of the synergistic relationship between structure and action (structured action theory) provides a lens through which to understand CPS practices and survivors' responses to them. Structured action theory posits that institutionalized social structures influence social behavior and vice versa. In this context, the CPS response to survivors of abuse would be expected either to constrain or to expand mothers' choices and behaviors, which would then influence later responses by CPS and, hence, mothers' subsequent social behavior either positively or negatively.

The purpose of the study presented here was to explore battered mothers' perceptions of their interactions with CPS workers to gain an understanding of how child welfare workers and policies can have both negative and positive impacts on women's and children's lives. Certain properties of qualitative methodology made it well suited to this study. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), qualitative methods effectively facilitate research that (a) delves in-depth into complexities and processes; (b) focuses on little-known phenomena; (c) seeks to explore where and why policy, scientific and local knowledge, and practice are at odds; and (d) studies an issue for which relevant variables have yet to be identified. This study was rooted in the grounded theory approach of using data to generate new understanding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), rather than to substantiate a preconceived theory.

Method

The study involved a purposive sample of women who shared a history of domestic abuse, who were mothers, and who had experienced a recent interaction with CPS only because they were victims of domestic violence. Additional criteria for eligibility were that the women were not accused of child abuse and had no history of either substance abuse or mental illness.

Local service providers and legal aid attorneys identified potential participants who met the criteria and invited them to meet with the first author to hear more about the study. Women who expressed an interest in participating were interviewed in the office of their local provider of domestic violence services for both their comfort and safety. The interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours and were audiotaped. The women received \$25 gift certificates in appreciation of their participation.

The interviews followed a semistructured guide that focused on the history of the violence; the women's perception of their children's exposure to violence, attempts to protect their children, and interaction with CPS and other related systems; the interaction of CPS and other related systems with the women's assailants; the consequences of these interactive experiences; and what actions by CPS and other systems were helpful to the women and what could have been more helpful. However, the interviews were conversational, allowing the participants to frame the flow of the interviews on their own terms. This strategy was critical in staying true to feminist theory by empowering the participants to tell their stories in their own words (Reinharz, 1992). Probes explored and helped to determine

the accuracy of the first author's understanding of the participants' accounts. The participants were allowed—and, in fact, encouraged—to talk at length about their lived experiences. Saturation began to be apparent at the time of the 16th interview, and subsequent interviews yielded little new data. The final sample included 20 women. The interviews were transcribed by a neutral third party with significant experience working with the target population. The transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy by the first author.

Data Analysis

In the first coding phase, the data were broken down into smaller parts and explored for commonalities and differences (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Data that were similar in nature or meaning were then combined into categories. Categories that shared similar or related properties were later coded into concepts. After the first author deconstructed the data within each category, she used axial coding to begin to connect the coded categories into themes that were identifiable across the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The credibility of the interpretations of the data was enhanced by the use of negative case analysis (searching for exceptions to the inferences of the study) and external audits (verification by qualified experts that the interpretations appeared reasonable and logical). The first author convened a confirming group of 5 women who were survivors of domestic abuse and now in stable situations to review general themes that emerged from the data. These women were asked to review the list of core concepts and compare them to their own experiences. Some of the women's comments were so poignant and reflective of the themes that their words are included in this article.

Results

The 20 women in the study ranged in age from 21 to 52, with a mean age of 33 years. Fifteen women had been married to their assailants, 1 had been dating the assailant, and 4 had been in an intimate relationship that involved cohabitation. The length of their relationships with their assailants ranged from 2 months to 24 years, with a mean of 9.8 years. Half the sample was White, and the other half was Black.

Of the 20 women, 10 reported that their children had been removed and placed in foster homes, 2 reported that their children were placed with the perpetrators' families, 2 reported that their children had been placed with the perpetrators, and 1 reported that her children were being cared for by a family friend. Five women were late in the process of having their parental rights terminated, and 5 were at risk of having their parental rights terminated. These latter 5 were attempting to satisfy CPS and court requirements to regain custody. In addition, 4 mothers had full custody, and the remaining 6 had some custodial rights at the time of the interviews. Fourteen of the perpetrators had at least some custodial rights, up to and including sole custody, and the other 6 either had their rights terminated or were at risk of termination at the time of the interviews. The women were given aliases to protect their privacy.

The findings are organized into three sections. The first section describes the unhelpful or unfair treatment that the women reported receiving from CPS workers, the second section presents examples of helpful and supportive responses, and the third section presents the women's recommendations for how CPS caseworkers can respond appropriately and helpfully to families in which the mothers are being abused by their intimate partners or ex-partners.

Unhelpful and Unfair Treatment by CPS Caseworkers

Sadly, the majority of the women reported having been treated callously by their CPS caseworkers. They talked of being quickly and unfairly blamed for their children's ordeals and treated as though they were grossly neglectful mothers. At the same time, the women whose children were removed from their homes were given little, if any, information about their children's well-being. The mothers' clear fears and concerns for their children in these situations were often minimized or belittled. The women also spoke of having numerous sanctions and requirements placed on them either to retain or to regain custody of their children, although the perpetrators received no such sanctions. These themes are described in more detail next.

Blaming mothers for their abuse. Of the participants who knew which person had reported them, CPS had been contacted by a teacher (n = 3), the police (n = 12), a neighbor (n = 4), a relative (n = 1), or by the victim herself (n = 6). Some of the women who reported the violence were stunned by the investigating CPS workers' responses. All but 4 expressed amazement that they were immediately blamed for the perpetrators' violence. Two comments were as follows:

They treated me like I was a monster mother who hated her kids. Hell, why would I ask for their help if I was the one hurting them? (Evelyn)

I told them [CPS] "I didn't have to call you. I could have ignored it like some people would. But I didn't, because that is my daughter."...My kids have always been more important to me than anything or anybody. (Amy)

Eleven participants believed that the CPS workers thought that they had mental health issues. As Terri put it,

They called me dysfunctional. I had to have two psychiatric evaluations. I passed both. When they couldn't get around the fact that I was sane, they started testing me for drugs. When I passed those [tests], they didn't have much. So they said I was probably "one of those women who are just naturally attracted to abusive men." Yeah...like anyone signs up voluntarily for that!

Seventeen participants described being questioned about why they reported the abuse to CPS and what role they had played in the abuse. All said that they were surprised that they were being blamed for something over which they had no control. Two representative comments were as follows:

I called them to report his treatment of the kids. Nobody would help me, but I thought maybe they would at least help the kids. So I called...I made the decision to call and followed through on it. Then when they show up, they accuse me of being part of it. I wind up having my kids taken away. I am *not* the enemy! If I was, why would I have called them in the first place? I'm *not* the enemy! The court papers say that I failed to protect, that I probably would return to him—yeah, right—and that in spite of the fact I'm an educated woman, I could not be trusted to act in the best interest of my children. (Terri)

There is never going to be a time where I doubt my children or where I am going to pick somebody else over them. They have to know that! Protective Services has done nothing but question where my motives are: Am I going to side with him eventually? Am I going to pick him

later over my kids? When he is let out of prison, will I talk to him again? Even after everything they have been told, and everything I did to make sure he went to prison, they are still threatening me. (Amy)

Seventeen participants voiced their frustration when faced with expectations that they should have been able to stop the violence and were angry that the workers had ignored their efforts to protect their children. Many said that they had done everything they could and that if they could have made the abuse stop, they would have, as the following comments illustrate:

They [CPS] said I failed to protect them. Well, they weren't there when I arranged for them to stay at Mom's because I knew it [the beating] was coming. They weren't there when I hid them out at a friend's to prevent him from killing us all. They have no clue what I did...where were they when I needed their help? (Catherine)

What was I supposed to do? I couldn't make him stop...No matter what I tried, it didn't work. He did what he wanted, and nobody could help me. I got the PPO (personal protection order). I called PS (protective services) and the cops. I took the beatings to spare my kids. I tried to keep peace in the house. I tried to protect them, and now they blame me? The [CPS] caseworker said it was my job to control him and my kids. How could I do that? They could have helped, but instead they just blamed me and took my kids. The judge said he expected me to do whatever it took to protect my children. I'm telling you I did just that. Whatever it took. (Terri)

Of the 10 women who were implicated in their abusers' violence, most of the White women but few of the Black women voiced anger or surprise over that implication. All 10 participants expressed confusion about what more they could have done to protect their children, as the following comments show:

[When he was finally charged], they charged me with failure to protect. We were charged at the same time. Every court date we had to go together, you know, because the court ran concurrently, so when he showed up, I had to show up. [Sarcastically] It was fabulous. (Catherine)

I don't understand how I could have done anything differently at that time. The cops wouldn't arrest him. PS wouldn't talk with him. They just said I needed parenting classes. I said, "Trust me, I'm not the one who needs parenting classes." They told him I said that. I paid for that comment for a long time. They were the ones who failed. They failed to protect any of us! (Terri)

Dismissing the mothers' concerns for their children. Although the mothers were expected to care for and about their children as mothers, when the children were removed from their care, little concern was given to the emotional trauma that the mothers experienced as a result of losing their children. Five participants expressed their panic and grief about not knowing how their children were, whom they were with, where they were, or if they were being comforted, as the following illustrates:

I was beside myself. My kids were God knows where. God knows who they're with, if they're all right...My son didn't have his medicine,...the baby didn't have my breast milk. She'd never had formula. Did they know that? I called and called. No one would tell me anything. Sometimes they would thank me for my concern, like I was reporting a missing stop sign or something. Most of the time, they never even called me back. I begged them to tell me if they were all right,...to come pick up the breast milk I'd saved. I begged them to come and get his

medicine. He has seizures without it. No one would listen. It was like I was talking to a brick wall. (Confirming group member 2)

Eleven participants believed that they were deliberately kept in the dark about their cases and were given conflicting information from their workers. This resulted in many surprises in court for the mothers, as the following three comments show:

She (the CPS worker) told me that she thought I was doing a great job with my parenting plan. Everything she told me to do, I did. So I went into court feeling really positive. When she got up on the stand, she said I would probably seek out another batterer and so my ability to parent my kids was unlikely. I said to my lawyer, "That's not what she said!" but I never got a chance to question it. (Confirming group member 2)

The first time I knew I was being charged with neglect was when I got to court. They handed me the papers right there just before the hearing. My attorney acted like he knew, but no one ever said anything to me. I thought I was going to testify about the assaults. I knew nothing about losing my kids until right then and there. (Geena)

I found out he had been molesting my daughter in the courtroom. The CPS worker testified that she had taken my daughter to the doctor, and real matter-of-fact like, she said there was no question that penetration had taken place and that [my daughter] said it was her daddy. They gave the judge a report from the doctor while I was sitting there, destroyed, [in] disbelief, stunned. My attorney just sat there. I said "Did you know about this?" but he didn't answer me. No mother should ever have to go through that. I will never forget that moment—never. (Evelyn)

Placing extensive requirements on the mothers. Seventeen women stated that they were perplexed by the extensive requirements that the systems placed on them, whereas their perpetrators generally escaped responsibility. They saw this situation as evidence that there were two sets of rules and that they were on the short end of the deal. These requirements were legal agreements between CPS and the women and were used to evaluate the women's fitness to continue to parent their children. No parenting or counseling plans were required of the abusers, even though in most cases, the perpetrator had joint custody. The women said that they felt punished for something the batterers did and angry at the lack of any meaningful sanctions to change the perpetrators' behavior. However, they were placed in a situation in which they had no choice but to sign the agreement or lose their children, as Stephanie noted,

I had all these things I had to do. I was accused of being a bad mother. I had to "earn" my kids back. Nobody from CPS even talked to him about what he did. If I failed to protect my kids, then he is responsible for putting us all in that situation. Wouldn't you think somebody should tell him it's his fault? They ordered me into counseling...where's his counseling? He's the one with the problem....If we both have equal rights as parents, which is what the court said, and he beat them and I didn't, why am I ordered into a parenting plan in order to have them in my home? He has to do nothing and gets them without question.

To make matters worse, 13 workers never even confronted the perpetrators regarding their violence and the effect of that violence on the children or adult victims in the home. This failure to confront the abusers further condoned the abusive behavior and supported the victims' belief that they were alone and without support.

Although they had no history of substance abuse, 5 participants were required to complete drug-testing regimens that sometimes went on for years, despite a history of negative tests. Sometimes the perpetrators created this situation by filing false substance-abuse claims against the mothers. In some cases, the perpetrators' substance abuse was reason enough to have the mothers not only tested but also tested repeatedly, as the following comments indicate:

I had to go to testing once a week. My ex told them I had a drug problem. They gave the kids to him based on his assertion that I used drugs. I don't use drugs and never have. I have never flunked a drug test. I went once a week for 8 months. They took his word for it. He beats me up, accuses me of being an addict, and gets the kids. How is that right? It took me a year of parenting classes, drug testing, counseling, and work-first requirements to get my kids back. (Confirming group member 1)

I have to do a random drug test every week. I have to call and tell them my name and tell them I'm [calling about] the drug screen, and if I get picked that day, I have to go down and take a drug test. I've taken four, and they have all come back negative, you know. (Geena)

Some plans included requirements that appeared to have had little or no connection to the mothers' fitness as parents. Consider Qui'Ana's experience, as follows:

I used to have bad teeth. But I knew that Medicaid didn't pay for dentures. So I couldn't get my dentures, so she court-ordered me to have my teeth pulled. I had 30 days to get them pulled. I was told that I had to have my teeth pulled because they were unhealthy, and if I was unhealthy, I couldn't care for my kids right. I was doing drops [drug screening], so I couldn't take medication for the pain. I didn't dare take the chance of dropping dirty. I was in drug testing at the time, even though I have never used drugs. I got tested twice a week for a year and a half. With having to get tested, I had to have my teeth all pulled without any pain killers after. So anyway, I had to go to work and tough it out.... You know, the holes where the teeth were, I had gauze wads in my mouth...couldn't talk...the smell of food made me sick. I had to go to work after because I needed to prove I could work and provide for them. I had the surgery, got an abscess...I mean, my face was out to here, and I had to go through that surgery. It was very painful. The poor people at the dentist's thought the guy was killing me. That was two rough weeks,...but I did it. I'd do anything to get my kids back.

Helpful and Fair Treatment by Caseworkers

Although the many negative responses the women received from caseworkers were considerable and sometimes devastating, a number of mothers also spoke of the helpful and supportive treatment that they received from their CPS workers. The most common themes arising from these experiences were that the caseworkers (a) were fair and supportive, (b) kept the women informed about their cases and their children's welfare, (c) offered practical information and referrals, (d) intervened and advocated on their behalf, (e) held the abusers accountable for their behavior, and (f) kept the children with people the mothers trusted if the children were removed from the home.

Providing fair and supportive responses. For some mothers, just having a caseworker refrain from immediately blaming them for the abuse brought a sense of relief. The women who said that their workers believed and supported them indicated that such support was a critical factor in their ability to make positive life changes. As Rita put it,

The most helpful thing was this last worker, he believed me. Just to hear him say he believed me...that was the most help ever because then I knew there was hope that someone would be able to help us. He was the first person...of all those people I told...he was the first to believe me. I can trust him. He trusted me. That was the beginning of our healing process.

Six participants were unsure of themselves and their ability to provide for their children with limited resources and stated that they were often exhausted from the process. The workers who offered encouragement and support were seen as partners in safeguarding the children and a source of strength and hope, as the following comments indicate:

She said that I wasn't a bad mom. She said she knew I loved my kids. In group, I hear other women talk about how they were told how bad they were...what a failure they were as moms. I was just so lucky that she got my case. She's never accused me or said I was bad. (Confirming group member 4)

In [county name] I had a worker who wouldn't return my calls, wouldn't answer any questions...just no help at all. When I got here, the case was transferred to this county. My new caseworker is really fabulous. She's fair, she listens, she offers encouragement, and whatever help she can get for us, she does. (Confirming group member 2)

Keeping the women informed. The participants who received information on what they could expect next and the steps involved in the CPS processes spoke of how this information reduced their anxiety and distrust of the system. They also noted that this type of treatment encouraged them to cooperate with CPS. As Rita stated,

The hardest thing is that things happen that you might not know about. Like they have these steps that they have to go through, and I have these things that I need to do. If he didn't explain the steps to me, you know, the things that we would be doing, I'd be lost.

Providing information and referrals. In addition to providing emotional support and encouragement, some caseworkers offered practical assistance and referrals. Such help ranged from providing bus tokens to helping women obtain safe and affordable housing. Some of this practical assistance made a great difference in the women's lives and sent a message that the women were not alone, as the following comments illustrate:

I needed everything: a house, a car, food, everything. They made sure I got what I had to have. I'm still working on a car, but until then, they give me bus passes when I'm short. (Confirming group member 4)

My worker is fabulous. If I need something, he is right there. He helped me get into transitional housing, he hooked me up with employment counseling, he made sure we knew where to get food if we needed it. He's just super! (Barbara)

Intervening actively on behalf of the mothers. The women were extremely grateful to the workers who advocated on their behalf with other systems or even with their families or the perpetrators' families. They said that because the caseworkers were taken more seriously than they were, having them intervene not only felt emotionally supportive but also was also more likely to achieve the desired goals, as the following comments show:

He [the CPS caseworker] talked to the police. He explained that I was in danger and needed to have police protection. He asked them to do whatever with patrol cars to keep a watch on the house. He told them I got a PPO and that he hoped that they would make sure that if he (the abuser) came to the house or tried to contact me in the shelter, they would arrest him. (Barbara)

My worker...she took me over to the courthouse and helped me get the PPO. When we went in to talk to the judge, she came with [me]. He listened to her talk about how I am in danger, and the kids are in danger, and he believed her. When I had asked him by myself the year before, he said no. With her there, I got my protection order. I was scared to go to the court. I felt like it would just make him (the abuser) more angry and that he'd get to us and maybe even kill us. My caseworker drove me to the court and told the judge that she needed him to grant me temporary sole custody and to do whatever he could to have the police keep an eye on my house, in case he tried to get back in. She was terrific. (Confirming group member 2)

Some of the CPS workers even advocated with the women's in-laws to ensure the women's protection from harassment and threats as a result of their cooperation with CPS and law enforcement. As Barbara stated,

My caseworker actually went with the police to them (the in-laws) and said that if they continued to call and harass me, keep threatening me, he would see that they were prosecuted. The calls immediately stopped. No more calls in the middle of the night...no more calls at work;...they just stopped. That was the extra mile. He'll never know how much that meant to me.

Holding the abusers accountable. The participants were grateful to workers who confronted the abusers with the abusers' responsibility for the situation. Three women and one confirming group member indicated that workers who confronted the abusers bolstered their belief that there was hope for them, as the following comment illustrates:

Just to hear someone stand up to him...tell him he had no right to treat us like he did. That was so healing. Nobody ever challenged him before. My worker actually said "Mr. [husband], your behavior toward your wife and these children will not be tolerated. You can and should go to prison, and if I have anything to say about it, you will." Wow, that felt so good....She gave me hope. (Confirming group member 4)

Placing children with trusted relatives or friends. Two participants whose children were removed from their care said that they were relieved when their children were placed with individuals they had used to safeguard the children from the abuse. These women also indicated that this placement made them more likely to work cooperatively with systems as a result of the consideration, as the following comment shows:

The best thing they (CPS) did was to let my mom and dad take the kids. You know, at least it was with people they knew and a place they were familiar with. I understand that they needed to like figure out what happened, make sure I wasn't hurting the kids and stuff. I was just so thankful that I knew they were with people who cared about them. (Confirming group member 5)

Participants' Recommendations

The previous sections described various forms of treatment that the women received from their CPS caseworkers that were either unhelpful or helpful to their situations. Many of the negative responses to them appeared to be in response to one or more of the maternal stereotypes described by Epstein (1999): that mothers must be all-knowing, all-sacrificing, or all-nurturing. On the other hand, helpful responses appeared to reflect a view of the mothers as competent and whole adults who needed emotional and practical assistance. Toward the end of interviews, the participants were asked whether they had recommendations for CPS caseworkers on the basis of their own experiences. They offered a number of specific

suggestions that they believed would enhance the safety and well-being of other mothers and their children. Most of the suggestions clustered into one of the following eight themes.

“Don’t assume I’m the enemy.” The participants were unanimous in stating that they felt at times as if the CPS workers believed that they condoned and, in some cases, contributed to the perpetrators’ violence. They asked instead that they be considered partners in the effort to safeguard their children. As Faith noted,

Please don’t treat me like I’m the enemy. I’m not. I want everything good for my kids. If you do, too, then we should be able to work together. I’ll do whatever you say I need to; just don’t think I’m against you. I’m not.

“Don’t issue threats up front.” Threats issued immediately made the participants believe that they needed to defend themselves, and some said that this feeling kept them from cooperating with CPS. They expressed the concern that decisions were being made without workers having critical information that may trigger a different result.

Right off the bat, it was “We’re going to have to take the kids.” They didn’t know anything about what was going on. I just panicked...I mean, it was like “Wait a minute...Do you even want to know what’s going on here for real?” They need to step back and get some truth first. (Confirming group member 2)

“Show some empathy.” The participants stressed the importance of CSP workers recognizing that mothers are also victims and in need of help. An empathic response was important for the women to be able to feel hope that they could escape safely with their children and receive support along the way. As Nancy put it,

They [CPS] need to realize the woman is [also] in this....The children aren’t just the only victims, and if the woman is having it hard, that’s gonna make it hard on the kids. The last thing you need is somebody to blame you—to act maybe like you’re just dirt. I did protect my kids. They have a good mom. I just need somebody to understand that I had no choices. I was stuck. I needed help and support to get out, not a lecture.

“Don’t label me or my children.” The participants were further victimized when they were described as defective or dysfunctional. At times, these labels were used in front of their children, as this comment shows:

In court and in the reports, there were all kinds of names for us. We were “confrontational, dysfunctional...ineffective.” We were labeled like meat. I mean, that’s so hurtful to hear your kids and yourself...your family life described in labels. We’re people. We’re not problems. (Confirming group member 2)

“Respect my culture.” Four of the 10 Black participants and 1 White participant requested that cultural considerations be made when placing their children and indicated that services need to be individualized according to each family’s situation. As 1 Black participant stated:

Being Black, there are some things that are what we do. It’s not that I think I know better than anybody else, but I teach my kids to be proud of who they are. When they went to another family, [the family] was White. I’m not saying that they was bad, but they didn’t fix foods my kids was used to. They missed our Christmas family dinners and church. They missed Kwanzaa.

Those are important things. They mean something to us as a family—a Black family. I don't think that a White family could give them what they was used to. (Confirming group member 1)

“Explain what's going to happen.” The participants believed that an understanding of the CPS processes would allow women to cooperate and make decisions that are best for them and their children and would limit mistrust and misunderstandings, as the following comment illustrates:

Here you are...you think you might lose your kids. You don't understand what the meetings (CPS hearings) are about. You don't know why you're going to court or what will happen. Somebody says, “Sign this or you lose your kids.” You sign it, but you don't know what it means. If they can just take a few minutes and say, “OK, this is what will happen...or this is what might happen”...at least then you can be prepared. (Confirming group member 1)

“If you have to remove my kids, place them with my family or those I know I can trust to care for them.” A number of participants indicated that if children needed to be removed, the workers should consider placing the children with individuals who had provided a safety net prior to CPS intervention.

Sometimes they don't think they have a choice. They think it's best to take the kids until it all gets worked out. I understand that's their job. But when there's family that are willing to take the kids, do that. If they go into foster care, then they lose all their security...family's a security for them. I had a worker rip my baby from my arms. No bottle, no blanket, none of her toys. She went someplace with people who didn't know what she liked, what her routines were, how she did things. She wasn't even a year old. She must have been terrified. I cried and cried for her. I knew she had to be scared to death. She didn't trust people she didn't know...you know, she was at that age where they don't want nobody but their mama. Now why would they do something like that? Who does that help? (Confirming group member 1)

“If you need to remove my kids, keep me informed of how they are.” The participants requested that workers who remove children stay connected to the mothers, giving them periodic information on how the children are and the status of their cases. The mothers who had this type of relationship with their CPS workers reported less anxiety and more incentive to cooperate with services, as the following comment shows:

Just don't leave me in the dark. That's the worst thing—not knowing. I got to know that my kids are OK...that they are eating, sleeping, going to school, getting comfort and love. They are with people they don't know. What is being done to comfort them? How are they? Are they OK?...Are they sick?...Do they know what's happening? Are they crying? Are they together? It was the worst kind of nightmare—the wondering. If they can keep somebody from going through that,...that would be good. (Confirming group member 2)

Discussion

More and more CPS caseworkers are required to intervene in child welfare cases involving domestic violence. Consistent with facets of structured action theory (Messerschmidt, 1997), this article has shed light on how caseworkers' responses can either support or further victimize battered women and their children. Many of the CPS workers who were

described in this article held the women responsible for the abuse of their children. This assumption of guilt was based on the fact that the workers apparently believed that the mothers should be able to control the assailants (the all-knowing mother stereotype), and if they did not, it was because they chose not to. Given this belief system, the CPS workers threatened and intimidated the participants and treated them as perpetrators rather than as victims.

The CPS workers' treatment of the mothers then influenced the mothers' behaviors either positively or negatively, which then influenced further social actions. For example, many participants were required to complete parenting agreement plans that included counseling, parenting classes, extensive drug screening, and psychological testing. Such plans were far less likely to be required of the perpetrators, even though most of the assailants were the fathers and were still involved with the children. The assailants' motives and fitness, however, were generally not perceived as requiring a parenting plan, perhaps because CPS workers see the victims as more manageable and less of a threat to their own safety than the assailants (Farmer, 1997). However, K. McDonald (1998) might argue that this approach fulfills society's need to punish women for not living up to role expectations set in patriarchal norms. The fact that the fathers were rarely sanctioned by CPS supports earlier research by Appel (1997), Enos (1996), and Scott (1996).

The participants were devastated at the charge that they were unfit parents, unwilling to protect their children, and willing to sacrifice them to their assailants. This was clearly a personal blow to the women who had, by their accounts, spent most of their waking moments in fear and struggling to find a magical combination of strategies that would safeguard their children, as society expects of them. The women who had their children removed and placed with strangers consistently reported that they were extremely worried about them and frightened about who was caring for them and how they were doing. Some went more than 3 weeks without knowing where their children were, if they were all right, and what they could expect in terms of a legal ruling on their rights. This is an example of another catch-22 situation that the women expressed. They felt blamed by CPS for not caring about their children when in the abusive relationship yet were punished for their caring when they attempted to gain information from CPS regarding the children's welfare.

Some women reported that they were told by CPS workers not to call the office, to wait for information, and to "stop bothering the staff." One worker told a participant that if she continued to call, "It will go very badly for you." Sometimes the first time that the women knew that they were being charged with anything or even that charges were possible was when they got to court for what they believed was their assailants' hearings. By withholding information, CPS again displayed the belief that the women could not be trusted and punished mothers for behaving as one would expect a concerned parent to respond.

Women of color are more likely to have their children removed than are their White counterparts (Bograd, 1999; Hill, 2002). In addition, Black women are known to be more likely have their children placed in homes with White foster parents. However, in this small study, no difference was found in this regard, perhaps because of the small sample or because both the Black women and the White women were, for the most part, poor. Another observation made by the first author was that the Black women were far less apt than the White women to be surprised or angered by their treatment, victim blaming, oppression, or lack of support from the system. They seemed to expect such treatment, whereas the White mothers seemed more shocked when they were treated unfairly.

The participants indicated that workers who blamed them for the abuse, accused them of not caring about their children, and failed to recognize the assailants' behavior for what

it was were the issues that often kept them and their children in peril. They believed they were in a catch-22 situation, which many described as “damned if I do and damned if I don’t.” They were confused as to why they were seen as part and parcel of the violence and frustrated at not getting the help they needed to protect their children.

Some women, on the other hand, reported receiving helpful and supportive treatment from their CPS caseworkers. One participant indicated that the worker (whom she credited with saving her life) told her that he recognized her situation as a result of a course on domestic abuse that he had taken in college. This was a tool that he had found outside the realm of orientation training for his position. This finding is consistent with the findings of Aron and Olson (1997), who found that most workers have few tools and references to be effective in helping women and children safely escape abuse. Other investigators have also noted the need for domestic violence training of CPS workers (Lyon, 1999; Magen & Conroy, 1998; Mills et al., 2000; Mills & Yoshihama, 1997).

The women said that helpful workers did the following things: believed them, confronted the perpetrators, offered services and referrals, engaged with and advocated for them with other systems, protected them from harassment from the assailants’ families, provided information on processes and expectations, offered encouragement, placed the children with those whom they trusted if the children had to be removed, maintained contact with them after the children’s removal, and testified in court on the dynamics of abuse. Women who were fortunate to have the support of educated CPS workers indicated that the support of those workers was the primary reason that they were able to leave the relationship, and some credited these workers with saving their lives and the lives of their children.

The findings from the study should be considered within the limitations of the methodology. The sample was small and, as with all qualitative research, has inherent difficulties with replication. Absent in this work are the voices of the children and the CPS workers. The accuracy of the information provided by the participants was dependent on the participants’ ability and willingness to be honest in telling their stories. Likewise, the first author had to rely on recruiters from victim services to avoid hand-selecting cases that are not representative of most abused women and their children. This study represents the experiences of 20 women in one midwestern state. Other researchers, however, have corroborated some of the women’s experiences.

Beyond giving voice to survivors, this study attempted to identify issues that may assist CPS workers to support survivors and their children in ways that lead to their safety, self-sufficiency, productivity, and ability to create and thrive in a healthy environment. The participants clearly identified suggestions that they felt would assist women and children who need and seek safety. They asked to be treated as partners in securing a safe environment for their families. They asked not to be threatened and that systems understand that batterers can and do manipulate workers and systems. They asked that they not be labeled and that workers pay attention to their cultural realities. They asked that they not be subjected to sanctions to which their assailants were not subjected and that parenting plans should be reasonable and relevant. They also requested explanations of processes and expectations. They asked that they be credited for the things they did to protect their children and that their children be placed with individuals whom they knew could be trusted. The participants requested that they be kept informed and have access or referrals to resources that would allow them to escape. Above all, they requested that individuals in systems understand that the person who should be held responsible for the abusive behavior is the individual who chooses to abuse.

Conclusion

There is no argument that some adult victims of domestic violence also abuse their children (Magen, 1999). It is also accepted that some women choose to return to their violent relationships, although they have the means to leave and financially sustain their families without fear of their assailants. In these extreme cases, if the children are endangered, removal for the sake of the children is warranted. Some participants in the study were themselves victimized by an abusive parent, and one wished that she had been removed from her childhood home. However, a mother's ability to care for her children has been shown to change dramatically when the abuser is removed from the home and she is protected from him and supported in her effort to become self-sufficient (Enos, 1996; Humphreys, 2000). CPS workers deserve access to accurate information about the dynamics of domestic abuse and how to deal appropriately with such cases in ways that maximize the safety and well-being of the victims. Policies and procedures should reflect the complexity of domestic abuse cases and not hold mothers responsible for the actions of their abusers. Such policies and training programs would ensure that workers make informed choices and decisions (McGill, Deutsch, & Zibbell, 1999) that hold the perpetrators responsible for the violence and engage the resources and support that victims need to improve their situations. CPS workers have a great deal of power over the lives of battered women and their children. With that power comes the responsibility to become informed about the dynamics of domestic abuse, to work with mothers to create and implement plans to improve their and their children's lives, and to hold perpetrators accountable for their abusive acts.

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