

Practitioners' Constructions of Parent Abuse

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Drawing on data collected as part of a qualitative study on parent abuse, this article explores how child to parent violence is constructed by professionals working within the three related domains of youth justice, domestic violence and child protection. The article, a discussion piece, charts the continuities and contradictions contained within practitioners' understandings of this form of family violence, focusing on how the problem emerges, the causal explanations employed and their impact on practice responses.

Keywords: Parent abuse, child protection, domestic violence, youth justice.

Introduction

International evidence suggests that in advanced welfare states the abuse of parents, most frequently mothers, by their adolescent children is increasingly prevalent (see further Holt's article in this Volume). In the UK however, parent abuse¹ remains one of the most hidden forms of family violence. By way of opening up discussion of this important issue in an earlier article, Hunter *et al.* (2010) theorised how the problem was conceptualised within the three interrelated domains of youth justice, family/domestic violence and social care. An examination of relevant legal and policy instruments revealed that other forms of family violence, including child abuse, intimate partner violence and elder abuse, are located within a dichotomous 'victim/'perpetrator' framework. The abuse of parents by their children does not fit comfortably within such a framework and as a consequence there is a notable silence about this type of family violence within policy statements and practice guidance. It is simply not recognised as an issue requiring a solution.

In the absence of any formal recognition of parent abuse, the UK evidence base regarding prevalence and context remains weak and undeveloped. In order to begin to address the empirical research lacuna that surrounds this complex issue, this article reports findings from a qualitative case study exploring how the problem is constructed from the perspective of professionals working in the fields of youth justice, domestic violence and child protection. The article starts with a detailed account of practitioners' views with the analysis focussing on how different professionals conceptualize parent abuse. In particular, attention is paid to the continuities and discontinuities reflected in different practitioners' perceptions and understandings of this hidden form of family violence. The second section of the article focuses on the explanations offered to explain why young peoples' relationship with their parents may become abusive. The article concludes with a discussion about the consequences of the lack of policy guidance and the impact this has on practice responses.

The study methodology

In seeking to explore the way in which parent abuse is constructed within the different domains of youth justice, domestic violence and social work, an exploratory qualitative methodology was adopted focussing on one city in the UK. Approval to conduct the research was provided by the Local Authority Ethics Management Group in accordance with the National Statement of Ethical Conduct. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with front-line officers and managers working in a variety of settings, including child protection, youth justice, parenting organisations and domestic violence agencies. As a way of foregrounding discussion, at the start of the interview participants were shown Howard and Rottem's inclusive definition of parent abuse based on any acts of domination or coercion which reflect: 'an abuse of power perpetrated by adolescents against their parents, carers and/or other relatives including siblings' (2008: 11). The sample consisted of six professionally qualified social workers, four domestic violence practitioners and four practitioners engaged in youth justice and parenting interventions. These data were further supplemented by discussions with three parents who had experienced abuse from their adolescent children. Following initial analysis of the interview data, a focus group was held with participants to discuss the emerging findings. All participants' details have been anonymised. Thematic analytical methods were used to identify the dominant categories with attention paid to the logic, internal consistency and the inter-relationship between themes contained in participants' narratives.

Constructions of parent abuse

In discussing the nature and extent of parent abuse, it was apparent that practitioners drew on their respective professional fields of knowledge, which, in turn, reflected the varied social and historical context within which different services to young people are delivered. Commonly however, participants' narratives were uncertain and contained conflicting statements. A framework for understanding how individuals manage tensions arising from the adoption of apparently contradictory belief structures is provided in Thapar-Bjorkert and Morgan's (2010) work on Victim Support volunteers' responses to domestic abuse. Drawing on Billig *et al.* (1988), Thapar-Bjorkert and Morgan suggest that, in practice, understandings of social problems are informed by intellectual belief systems developed through formal training and professional knowledge supplemented by more 'common sense' understandings of the social world. It is not unusual for conflict to occur between these two belief-systems, resulting in individuals simultaneously holding opposing positions. The following section of the article explores the continuities and contradictions in practitioners' constructions of parent abuse, paying particular attention to the way in which understandings of the problem differed according to professional background and context and/or were informed by 'common sense' understandings.

Social work responses

A striking feature of social workers' narratives was their lack of familiarity with the term 'parent abuse'. Although all those interviewed had some experience of this form of family violence, their constructions of the problem reflected a lack of clarity and were marked by hesitancy and contradiction. During the interviews, it became apparent that many social

workers experienced difficulty in reconciling the idea of abuse perpetrated by young people with their professional notions of 'safeguarding children in need':

I think we are so focussed on the child, which is a good thing because that's our job and we are taught at a very early stage in our career that it's the package around the child, it's the best outcome for children, it's about the child, but then what do you do when that child is the perpetrator? That's very difficult to deal with and it doesn't sit comfortably and it makes you a bit torn in all directions. (Senior social worker)

Reflecting on tensions between their professional training and more 'common sense' understandings, a number of those interviewed were reluctant to label the behaviour as abusive preferring to describe the problem in terms of 'challenging behaviour' or 'poor parenting'. As Amanda explained:

Well to be honest I've not really thought about it, when you talk about parental abuse, that's why on the phone I was 'well I haven't had no cases like that' but then when I sat and thought I thought 'well actually I have' . . . but no it's not, I don't feel it's recognised as parental abuse, it's more referred to as 'this young person's got really challenging behaviour' or 'this young person's got emotional issues, let's refer them to CAMS. (Social worker)

In a similar vein, Jane, a newly qualified social worker, stated 'parent abuse' was not a term she had heard before: 'to be honest I never thought of it like that'. She felt that in practice the issue would be [re]framed in terms of a history of abuse towards the child:

I think you just wouldn't use it [parent abuse] because sometimes you might get a case where there's actually been a history of abuse towards the child in the past but it hasn't been picked up on quick enough and it's come back to social care where the children are now so out of control and abusing the parents, like my boys are, and so you don't call it parent abuse, you call it poor parenting. (Social worker)

The labelling of adolescent violence in this way is problematic since, as Downey (1997: 70) points out, it situates the problem as a symptom of individual failure rather than locating it within the wider spectrum of family violence, including intimate partner violence, child abuse and elder abuse, which is understood in terms of gendered relationships and associated structural failure. The instance of parent abuse presents a challenge to conventional family power relations in which parents are construed as the *agents* of power in contrast to the *determined* child (Holt, 2011: 8). The complexity inherent to parent abuse was recognised by social work participants who perceived it to be a very difficult and challenging area of practice which transgressed culturally specific notions of good parenting.

Domestic violence responses

Practitioners working in the field of domestic violence were more ready to acknowledge parent abuse as a form of family violence and were very aware of the prevalence of the issue. Drawing on domestic violence paradigms, they provided straightforward accounts of the ways in which abuse by children towards their parents was understood within

their daily practice. Their narratives contained frequent references to the parallels and perceived links between domestic abuse and parent abuse. A strong theme emerging from these interviews was recognition of the stigma and shame associated with this form of family violence, and as a consequence it was perceived to be an issue that was particularly difficult to identify. Not only were parents often reluctant to discuss their child's abusive behaviour, but also in the absence of public recognition of the issue agencies working with families often failed to identify where parent abuse was occurring and this contributed to the issue being concealed and 'kept under wraps':

I think people just need to be aware that [parents] will hide it and hide it and hide it absolutely till they just can't stand it any longer and I think that's the difficulty. Often an agency can work with a family, they can have gone through and through and through and come out of the other side and still nobody's noticed and picked up because the right questions are not being asked and I think the situation as a whole is very much kept under wraps. (Domestic violence practitioner)

A further reason given by domestic violence practitioners for the lack of awareness of parent abuse focussed on the perceived conflict experienced by parents when seeking help in managing their child's abusive behaviour. It was recognised that in families where there had been a past history of intimate partner violence, parents were acutely aware of the damaging impact of these experiences on their children. As a result, mothers often felt responsible for their child's behaviour and were reluctant to contribute to negative labelling of their child. As Joanna explained:

where there's been a history of domestic abuse the chances of particularly teenage sons going on to abuse their mothers has probably always been relatively high and the mothers haven't, for all the reasons, the same reasons that they historically didn't feel able to tell people what was happening in domestic abuse, feel ashamed and unable or have really divided loyalties about whether or not it's the right thing to do to tell anyone what their teenage children are doing. (Domestic violence practitioner)

In making sense of this form of abuse domestic violence, practitioners drew parallels with the historic reluctance of statutory agencies to acknowledge intimate partner violence and as a result felt there was an urgent need to increase awareness of the severity of the issue. Speaking out was seen as an important method of validating parents' experiences and thus reducing the stigma, shame and guilt experienced by those being abused.

Youth justice responses

Like domestic violence practitioners, those working in the field of youth justice, including parenting practitioners and the police, were all too aware of the problem of parent abuse. There was general agreement amongst this group of practitioners that while it was not a 'new' problem it was one that had become more visible:

You can go back a long, long way, going back to 1984 ... [it] was more of a one off, it wasn't something that happened all the time. Now it's more and more, it seems to have got more and more prevalent as the years have gone by. (Police officer)

When asked why this change had occurred, a number of possible reasons were referred to. The notion of parental responsibility has been a persistent theme within the youth justice policy of successive administrations as evidenced through the introduction of Parenting Orders in 1998. Accordingly, as an increasing number of young people have been drawn into the criminal justice system there has been a corresponding increase in the range and type of 'early intervention' programmes, including the provision of parenting interventions (see further Condry and Miles's and Holt's articles in this volume). Reflecting these policy developments, a number of the youth justice participants were involved in delivering specialist programmes to support parents of young offenders and it was thought that this work had raised the profile of the service resulting in increased referrals from the police and other agencies. As a parenting worker explained:

We started to see quite an increase over quite a short period of time, I don't know why that was or whether it's because people felt that it's ok for me to speak up, they may have been advised by somebody else that 'you are actually being abused by your child, this isn't something that should be allowed to happen, you can phone the police if you feel at risk'. (Parenting practitioner)

Across the sample of practitioners, conceptualisation of parent abuse reflected different professional orientations. At the same time however, it was apparent that there were a number of shared themes. Thus, despite a lack of public recognition of parent abuse, practitioners reported it as being a feature in an increasing number of cases, with the extent of the abuse often only emerging when families were referred to agencies in connection with other concerns.

Practitioners' understandings of the causes of abuse

Turning to the question of why parent abuse occurs, practitioners' understandings focussed on three inter-related explanations. The problem was frequently attributed to poor parenting, which given the highly gendered nature of the reported cases usually meant mothering. Further, it was associated with previous experiences of other forms of family violence/abuse and was thus constructed as a result of learnt behaviours. Finally, the perceived increase in this form of family violence was constructed as being linked to wider social and cultural factors, including changes in family structures and the high levels of aggression and violence promoted in popular music and media imagery.

Parenting deficit

Conceptualising parent abuse as a problem of parenting was a feature of many social workers' narratives. Although cloaked in gender-neutral language in practice, it was usually mothers who were held responsible for failed parenting. For example, when reflecting on a case in which a young person was described as being completely out of control and a danger to himself and others, a senior social worker graphically described the problem in terms of the mother's failure to set boundaries and exercise control:

I think a lot of that is because he's never heard [the word 'no'] and his way of reacting to it is to physically attack somebody, but he's never had repercussions for that so he doesn't know the consequences of what it is he's doing because she's protected him and *she's created almost*

like a monster really because he's got no insight into what he's done and the consequences of doing that. (Social worker)

Edenborough *et al.* (2008: 465) highlight how such mother-blaming permeates dominant discourses, with mothers often assuming blame for their own victimisation or fear that others will blame them. Such fears appear to be justified. Although ostensibly rejecting as inappropriate the use of a dichotomous victim/offender paradigm, it was not uncommon for social workers to use rhetorical devices in which parents were constructed as being complicit in their own 'victimisation'. In some accounts, the problem was directly attributed to parental failure. For example, Jane, a newly qualified social worker, clearly articulated the view that, in a case she was responsible for, poor parenting was the root of the problem.

[The parents] they're always like 'so and so's been doing this, he's been doing that, he's been asking for money again, he's wrecking the house, he's doing this'. They don't actually recognise that the reason that they're doing this is because of the poor parenting that has been put in place from years ago. (Social worker)

In order to reinforce and give authority to her judgement, Jane then went on to recall the Chair of the Family Case Conference's response to the parents:

the parents are sitting there in the case conference saying 'oh he's doing this and nicking our money' and the chair's actually turned round and said 'it's poor parenting, you can't keep blaming the children for their behaviour, it's as a result of you not looking after them properly'. They just can't see it, it's the children are doing all the bad things.

Although for this practitioner locating the problem in terms of a parenting deficit made sense in terms of her professional orientation, it did not fit so easily with her common sense 'zero tolerance' approach to abuse. Thus, in subsequent discussions, she articulated a conflicting view, stating that where parents were subjected to the threat of or use of violence there was a need to challenge the young person:

it's still abuse I think and if he's a teenager as well, he's old enough to know what's right and wrong; he'd need to be spoken to.

Conflict between professional values and more common sense understandings was also expressed by Dawn who, when recounting events that had occurred in a current case, commented on the lack of clear guidance available to her and the inadequacy of traditional social work approaches. Adopting a parodying tone, she criticised the policy framework in which she was expected to work:

It is very difficult and again that's where there needs to be more resources really put in and more notice taken because very often in all families it's 'the child's never in the wrong, it's always the parents that are at fault and he's exhibiting these behaviours because obviously you've not parented appropriately when he was younger or she was younger'. So it's always the parents that need to change not the child. (Social worker)

Practitioners operating in youth justice or domestic violence organisations were more reluctant to frame the problem in terms of a parenting deficit, with a number explicitly rejecting the notion that parent abuse could be explained in terms of failed parenting. For example, Joanna, a parenting worker, was at pains to point out she always started by asking the parent what they thought the underlying issues were:

I never see it as a parenting problem and I always say that, because especially some of the single mums, they've been shat on from a great height, they've been told they're crap for a long time and some of these women have had extremely volatile, terrible experiences, you're not going in to kick them further. (Parenting worker)

Previous experience of domestic violence

Regardless of professional orientation, there was unanimous agreement across the sample of practitioners that parent abuse was commonly associated with earlier experiences of domestic abuse. A number of reasons for this association are suggested by Cottrell and Monk, including 'the influence of direct male role modelling; the idealisation of the abuser and anger at the mother for failing to protect the family' (2004: 1082). Very similar explanations were volunteered by our sample of practitioners.

While many respondents rejected a simple 'cycle of violence' explanation, it was reported that a particular feature of such cases concerned the high levels of anger exhibited by adolescents who had witnessed domestic abuse. Sometimes the anger was directed specifically at the abused parent for failing to stop the violence, but in other examples aggression was also focused on younger siblings:

There's usually a lot of anger-based, particularly if it's young males that are coming in with their mum, they feel quite angry about the situation, they're not quite sure how they fit into their family now, they're trying to take on the father's role, they've often seen the abuse that's been happening and so they're angry that mum's not managed to stop it and quite often will lash out with that anger. (Domestic violence practitioner)

There is some evidence in the wider literature that youths who have witnessed domestic abuse and go on to abuse their parents have limited emotional attachment to their parents (Agnew and Hugley, 1989; Cottrell and Monk, 2004). This was not a view shared by practitioners in our study. On the contrary, they felt that a common feature of such cases was a particularly intense and emotionally charged relationship between parent and child. A possible explanation for these apparently contradictory findings is provided in earlier research by Harbin and Madden (1979) who suggest that abuse can occur when an adolescent has had to assume an independent or adult role before they are ready. In these circumstances, the young person may remain emotionally dependant on the parent and find it difficult to establish a separate adult identity. Such dependence fits uncomfortably with emerging adulthood and so abusive and violent behaviour may be used as a 'primitive distancing mechanism from the parent/victim' (1979: 1280).

Wider structural factors and influences

In addition to referring to specific interactive factors that are associated with child to parent abuse, reference was also made to a wide range of cultural and social factors which were

perceived to create a context within which family violence occurs. In particular, a number of practitioners commented on the high levels of violence and aggression promoted in popular music and media imagery, which were thought to be powerful influences on young people. Further, it was felt that the gendered nature of violent and misogynistic lyrics and images reinforce the message that it is acceptable for men to control and dominate women.

I think a lot of it's the control, in a lot of the situations parents have split up, he wants to be the man of the house, he thinks he can do whatever, quite a few of the young men have quite a low opinion of women. (Youth justice practitioner)

Practitioners also made reference to changes in the structure of society with an increased focus on consumption. This factor was thought to impact particularly negatively on families living in poverty where young people had less opportunity to participate in activities of interest to them and acquire desirable high status goods. As Cottrell and Monk (2004: 1086) point out, within such environments young people may feel alienated and act abusively as a means of expressing their frustration and anger. Interestingly, although poverty and structural inequalities were seen as contributing factors, parent abuse was not perceived to be a class-specific phenomenon. Rather a number of practitioners were at pains to point out that they believed it happened across class divides, but that it was less readily visible in middle-class families who had greater resources. As one senior social worker pointed out, 'if you steal something from your parents and they're loaded then they don't notice it quite so much'.

In exploring practitioners' constructions of causal factors, there was evidence of the influence of professional orientation, with social workers more likely than other professionals to give causal primacy to parental failure while those working within domestic violence agencies were more likely to highlight the damaging impact of previous experiences of violence. At the same time, it was apparent that discussions about the causes of abusive behaviour were wide ranging, with many participants wary of ascribing the behaviour to a single cause:

I could say there are the classics that you can see, the chaotic family, unemployment, all the rest of it, and, yes, there is, the domestic abuse does occur there, and in my experience because that's the majority of my clients, that's where I see it, but I have worked with other people where they haven't fitted into that box at all. (Youth justice worker)

Practice responses

Earlier work suggests that parents suffering from parent abuse find it very difficult to access professional support to deal with their child's abusive behaviour (Nixon and Hunter, 2009; Tew and Nixon, 2010; Holt, 2011). The findings from this study provide some indications as to why this may be the case.

None of the study participants was aware of any policy or practice guidance on how to respond to cases of parent abuse and achieve positive outcomes. As a result of this policy silence, there was a tendency for the issue to be marginalised within mainstream practice with an associated failure to recognise the severity of the abusive behaviour and the consequential need for direct interventions. For example, Liz, a social worker, recalled

the following case in which a teenage boy was reported as being abusive towards both his sister and mother:

The reason she rang was that her son had hit her, he'd punch her . . . I didn't have that [case] for long, ended up closing it because we didn't have any more incidents and the young girl had moved herself out somewhere safe and things had calmed down, but with that one I didn't really put any support services in place. Mum didn't really request that she wanted any. (Social worker)

In this example, although the mother had explicitly sought help to deal with her son's violent behaviour, the problem was framed simply as a child safeguarding issue, and once the daughter left home no further interventions were provided. Even where the severity of the problem was recognised, many practitioners reported that they lacked the knowledge and experience to respond in an authoritative and professional way. Further, there was widespread confusion and lack of understanding of the respective roles of different agencies, which meant that on occasions inappropriate referrals were made.

The lack of shared definitions and understanding of the issue was felt to contribute to the failure of agencies to work together and in the absence of a co-ordinated framework it was difficult to put together multi-agency support plans. Indeed, a number of participants cited cases which had resulted in perverse outcomes. Thus, in a case involving a lone parent mother and her fourteen-year old son, where there had been severe and repeated acts of violence, when the mother threatened to walk out of the family home she was informed that she would be prosecuted for abandonment:

I struggled with this one, so I phoned social care, they 'oh yeah right' by this time mum's on the phone saying, 'I'm walking out, I'm going to stay with my sister, he can live on his own.' He was only fourteen, so social care said, 'If she does that we'll report her to the police and we'll get her arrested for abandonment' and it was awful, there were walls wherever I went. (Youth justice practitioner)

Across the three domains of youth justice, domestic abuse and social care differences in the knowledge paradigms employed could result in parents being given conflicting advice. Typically, in cases involving physical violence, social workers advised parents not to retaliate but to contact the police, whilst the police and youth justice agencies held the view that criminal action was neither an effective nor appropriate response; rather what was needed was intensive family support.

Many practitioners were aware of the need for improved service provision to support parents and young people, but felt constrained by lack of resources. The negative consequences of failing to intervene and challenge abuse within the home were also highlighted as an area of concern. Not only was parents' sense of failure and powerlessness reinforced, but also the message given to the young person was that they were invulnerable to external constraints:

That's almost saying 'well if your husband or partner attacks you or vice versa, we'll arrest them but it's ok for your child to do that' and again it comes back to what message is it sending to that young person, it's saying 'yeah that's fine' and then that's giving them a feeling of being more in power over that relationship. (Social worker)

One of the key messages arising from this research is the need for parent abuse to be formally recognised as constituting a form of family violence that requires public intervention. Firstly, the issue must be addressed in policy guidance. Secondly, as Cottrell and Monk (2004) point out, multi-agency policies should be developed so that parent abuse is responded to in a consistent manner. This requires service professionals to be educated about the full range of contributing factors common to parent abuse so that interventions can be designed with sensitivity to the specific contexts in which abuse is occurring.

Conclusions

While the limited nature of this qualitative study means that the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population, it does provide credible and convincing accounts of the varied ways in which practitioners working in the field of youth justice, domestic violence and social care interpret the problem of parent abuse. The analysis highlights a number of shared themes. Firstly, despite the lack of visibility of parent abuse in respective legal and policy codes, all those interviewed recognised parent abuse to be a significant practice issue, which was understood to occur when young people seek to dominate and control their parent/carer. However, the lack of clearly agreed guidelines on how to respond to this form of family violence contributed to the issue being marginalised within mainstream practice, with a tendency for agencies not to recognise the severity of the abusive behaviour and the consequential need for direct intervention.

It is clear from the reflections of practitioners included in this study that parent abuse is a complex and contested site of practice. While it is recognised as constituting a social problem, there is a lack of clarity as to whether it is a social problem requiring public intervention and, if so, what sort of interventions would be most effective. Although there are very few descriptions or evaluations of interventions to tackle this complex issue, the international evidence suggests a dual approach is most successful (Cottrell and Monk, 2004, Edenborough *et al.*, 2008). Programmes should be designed to both provide parents with strategies to help them deal with the abuse without feeling blame or personally responsible for the behaviour, combined with therapeutic interventions to assist young people to accept responsibility for their behaviour.

Note

1 Definitional issues associated with the terms 'parent abuse', 'child to parent violence' and/or 'adolescent to parent violence' are discussed in the Introduction to this special section.

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