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Introduction: Exploring Parent Abuse – Building Knowledge across Disciplines

Caroline Hunter* and Judy Nixon**

*York Law School, University of York
E-mail caroline.hunter@york.ac.uk

**Sheffield Hallam University
E-mail j.nixon@shu.ac.uk

There is an extensive body of literature on the ways in which the family home is often a site of conflict and discord rather than security and safety. Much of this work has focussed on the problem of domestic violence perpetrated by adults and how the state should respond to it (Home Office, 2009). Another form of family violence however, that of the abuse of parents (or those occupying a parental role) by their adolescent children, has not received such public (or academic) recognition (Hunter *et al*., 2010). In the UK, the issue of parent abuse remains one of the most unacknowledged and under-researched form of family violence.

This themed collection of articles, based on presentations made at a two-day Symposium held at Sheffield Hallam University in March 2010, seeks to begin breaking the 'veil of silence' that surrounds parent abuse both through a consideration of conceptual difficulties inherent to the issue and by analysis of research-based evidence. The unifying focus of the collection is a shared exploration of the phenomena of parent abuse across the three interrelated domains of youth justice, child and family welfare and domestic violence. More specifically the contributions to the themed section seek to:

- explore the various constructions of parent abuse and responses to it in the domains of youth justice, domestic violence and child and family welfare;
- examine how relevant professionals conceptualize the problem and the implications of these conceptualizations in terms of choice of legal and policy responses;
- consider the policy and practice implications of emerging research findings for practitioners;
- provide an overview of the diverse and discrete methodological approaches adopted in relation to international studies of parent abuse and suggest how research approaches might be usefully developed in the UK.

The articles should be read in the context of a resounding policy silence in the UK on the abuse of parent(s), or those occupying a parental role, by their adolescent children. In seeking to make visible the violent abuse of parents by troubled adolescents, there is an associated need for greater clarity about the different ways of conceptualising the problem. In each of the three interrelated policy realms of youth justice, child welfare and domestic violence, the behaviour of the child/young person and that of their parent[s] is constructed in ways which inform the assignment of culpability and responsibility. A unifying feature of the formal legal and policy frameworks employed in these domains is the use of polarised conceptions of 'victim' or 'perpetrator'. As a result, it is not recognised

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as an issue requiring a solution. By way of opening up discussion about this important albeit hidden issue, this collection of articles shares a number of cross-cutting themes.

Definitional problems

There is no single or simple definition of 'parent abuse', with the term variously employed to cover a wide range of different behaviours. Harbin and Madden, who are widely attributed as the first researchers to identify and label this form of family violence, employed the term 'battered parents' to describe acts of 'actual physical assault or verbal or non verbal threats of physical harm' (Harbin and Madden, 1979). In this definition, the focus was on physical violence 'carried out with the intention or perceived intention of causing another person to experience pain or injury' (Ulman and Straus, 2003: 42). Subsequently, it has been acknowledged that parent abuse may also consist of non-physical verbal and psychological forms of abuse. Reflecting on more inclusive approaches, Cottrell and Monk (2004: 1080) define 'parent abuse' in terms of 'any actions by adolescents that are intended to cause financial, psychological, or physical harm to parents and/or step-parents'. A similarly broad definition of 'child to parent' abuse is employed by Howard and Rottem (2008) incorporating any acts of domination or coercion. Here it is argued that what critically distinguishes parent abuse from other troublesome behaviours that could be seen as falling within the range of 'normal' adolescent challenging behaviour is the abuse of power perpetrated by adolescents against their parents, carers and/or other relatives and siblings:

> It occurs when an adolescent attempts physically or psychologically to dominate, coerce and control others in their family. It takes a number of forms. The most commonly acknowledged forms are physical violence, destruction of property and/or possessions, threats and intimidation, psychological, emotional and social abuse, financial abuse and sometimes sexual abuse. (Howard and Rottem, 2008: 11)

Within this special section, reflecting differences in disciplinary approaches, the problem is labelled in a number of ways with the terms 'parent abuse', 'adolescent to parent violence', 'mother abuse' and 'child to parent violence' all employed to refer to this form of family violence. Whilst the terminology employed differs, a shared theme running through the contributions is the need to adopt a carefully nuanced definition of the phenomena that differentiates abusive acts from challenging behaviour that may fall with the norms of adolescent responses. All the contributors share an inclusive approach reflecting a concern with a multiplicity of adolescent behaviours occurring within a range of familial relationships. Most importantly, it is acknowledged that parent abuse is not just violence, and nor is it just towards parents. In this context, Wilcox, in her article exploring whether parent abuse is a form of domestic violence, calls for the adoption of a self-definitional approach to include any behaviour that makes 'others in the family feel threatened, intimidated or controlled by it' (Paterson *et al*., 2002: 90).

Gendering parent abuse

Scrutiny of the international evidence suggests that parent abuse is both increasingly prevalent and a gendered issue, with mothers more likely to be abused by their (most

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frequently male) adolescent children (Downey, 1997; Cottrell and Monk, 2004; Kennair and Mellor, 2007; Howard and Rottem, 2008). Within the UK however, there has been a failure by both policy makers and academics to recognise the gendered dimensions of this form of family violence. Thus, in the UK domestic violence consultation paper: *Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls* (Home Office, 2009), which explicitly states that violence against women and girls is unacceptable, 'whatever the context, whatever the circumstances', there is a silence about this form of family violence. Equally, a recently commissioned ESRC Violence Research Programme exploring a diverse range of types of violence to the person fails to identify mother abuse as a particular form of interpersonal violence (Stanko, 2006). Even the growing body of work on gender-based violence, which reflects 'newer' and extended notions of what constitutes gendered violence, does not identify the abuse of mothers by their adolescent child(ren) as an emerging area of concern (see Pantazis and Bibbings, 2005).

While addressing these gaps are beyond the scope of the articles in this themed section, in her evaluation of family support services for young people on 'the edge of care' Biehal reports important empirical evidence on the gendered nature of parent abuse. Amongst her sample of young people, abuse was reported as being more likely to be directed at mothers (82 per cent) than other family members. Within the domain of youth justice, Condry and Miles also highlight that it is primarily mothers who are subject to parenting interventions, with parenting practitioners reporting that adolescence violence to mothers is a widespread problem. The influence of gendered power relations evident in cases of parent abuse is also considered by Wilcox in her exploration of whether parent abuse is a form of domestic violence. Baker importantly reminds us, however, of the dangers of gender stereotyping being applied, particularly to adolescent boys.

Challenging practices

Recognising parent abuse as a problem requiring a public solution represents a real challenge to policy makers and practitioners, since, as Downey (1997: 77) points out, 'adolescents do not fit the typical conception of a perpetrator and parents do not fit the idea of the physically and socially vulnerable victim'. In exploring practitioners' conceptualisations of parent abuse, a number of authors comment on the challenges posed by what appears to be a confusing reversal of traditionally accepted family power relations (Tew and Nixon, 2010). For example, Condry and Miles point out that youth justice parenting interventions are premised on the assumption that parents can assert power and control over their children. Such assumptions do not fit comfortably with the instance of parent abuse which foregrounds the multiple ways in which parental relationships can be disrupted. Nixon's study on practitioners' constructions of parent abuse evidences the difficulty social workers experienced in reconciling the idea of abuse perpetrated by young people with their professional notions of 'safeguarding children in need'. In seeking to manage tensions arising in cases involving parent abuse, it was not uncommon for the problem to be reconfigured as one of poor parenting, which given the gendered nature of the reported cases usually meant mothering.

For domestic violence (DV) practitioners, responding to parent abuse presents a slightly different set of challenges. Baker makes the case for rejecting deterministic 'cycle of violence' causal models. Nonetheless, increased attention has been given by DV practitioners to meeting the complex needs of children who have witnessed violence.

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Thus, Wilcox suggests that, while parent abuse is recognised by domestic violence practitioners, current guidance inadvertently underplays the potential for children to have ambivalent feelings towards both the abuser and non-abusing parent. As a result, the issue of parent abuse has received little attention and DV practitioners reported they have limited knowledge and experience of how best to respond to disclosures of parent abuse, and may, as Baker suggests, fall back on 'common sense' deterministic cycle of violence explanations.

It should also be recognised that it is not only practitioners and policy makers who face challenges in conceptualising and addressing parent abuse. Researchers seeking to undertake research in this field also face a series of methodological challenges. In critically reviewing methods employed by international scholars, Holt's article focuses on the difficulties that arise in researching an issue that we have trouble naming. As a result of these challenges, currently the evidential base regarding prevalence and causation remains weak and under-developed. Drawing on Kennair and Mellor's (2007) comprehensive review of the international body of research, Holt's article provides a useful introduction to the ways in which current understandings of parent abuse have opened up different theoretical and methodological territories. She concisely describes the usefulness and limitations of analyses of criminal data, large-scale epidemiological surveys, interview data from clinical groups and case studies and typologies derived from clinical samples. Holt's article concludes with a call for a new trans-disciplinary approach within which to establish an entirely new way of theorising and researching parent abuse.

The evidence from the articles by Nixon, Hunter and Piper and Condry and Miles is that for practitioners working with families, parent abuse is a real and common problem. However, as these articles suggest those practitioners find very little support in practice, policy or law in tackling the issue. Hunter and Piper explore how the law fails to address the issue, suggesting possible ways forward and also making the case as to why law is important in opening up both a framework and sometimes a compulsion to action. Condry and Miles indicate the need for policy development in this area to be bottom up and then shared between practitioners.

As with any emerging body of work, these articles raise more questions than answers. There is an urgent need for academics, policy makers and practice professionals to both think more deeply about how this kind of familial violence is currently understood and to develop robust conceptual and theoretical frames for understanding this issue. We hope this collection of articles will stimulate further discussion and debate.

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