

The Experience of the infant and mother in Women's Refuge

This research is concerned with how refuge is provided to and experienced by the preverbal infant who enters into women's refuge accommodation with their mothers as a consequence of fleeing family violence. The literature reveals a certain amount of information specific to the infant affected by family violence and homelessness, but little to no research on infants within the refuge setting nor their experience of such. This study involves ten infants, ten mothers and thirteen staff and key informants from eight women's refuges within Australia, England and Scotland. To ensure that the infant remained at the fore of this enquiry, an 'infant led' qualitative research approach was undertaken. This involved utilising an 'intersubjective' approach through 'infant observation' techniques and drawing on a constructivist grounded theory methodology in its implementation and analysis. This offered a non-intrusive as well as flexible way through which to access not only the world of the infant, but the largely hidden world of women's refuges.

This research found that infants were not seen as being capable of possessing their own subjective experiences and consequently were often lost from view. The provision of refuge to the infant was considered to be the mother's responsibility, by staff, and the mother herself. However, what capacity the mother possessed for this was impacted by her own past and current trauma. Only when the infant was seen to have obvious difficulties was assistance given, and from outside, specialist workers. The adults in refuge appeared to find it too painful to see or even think of the infant as having their own subjectivity or traumatic experiences. Furthermore, the significance of the now 'absent' father was discounted, leaving no place for processing this complex relationship. The catalyst for every mother entering refuge was, however, the relationship their infant offered which gave mothers the greatest hope for creating a different future.

Key Words

Infants

Women's Refuge

Service Delivery

References

(Bunston, 2015; Bunston & Glennen, 2015)

Bunston, W. (2015). Infant-led practice: Responding to infants and their mothers (and fathers) in the aftermath of domestic violence. In N. Stanley & C. Humphreys (Eds.), *Domestic violence and protecting children: New thinking and approaches*. UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Bunston, W., & Glennen, K. (2015). Holding the baby costs nothing. *DVRCV Advocate*, Spring/Summer, 46-49.

Learning Objectives

Undertaking ethical research that privileges the perspective of the infant

Enhancing the bonds between infants and mothers impacted by family violence

Supporting Women's Refuge practices