A Qualitative Exploration of Maternal Identity Processes and Intimate Partner Violence: Becoming a Stronger Mother

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Presentation Outline

• Literature of IPV, maternal identity and turning points
• Research Questions
• Qualitative Study Methods
• Results: Qualitative categories and subcategories
• Discussion of findings
• Recommendations
“Domestic violence is an everyday reality which affects women’s experience of motherhood” (Kelly, 1994, p. 52) and creates distinct caregiving challenges for mothers (Davies, Sturge-Apple, & Cummings, 2004)

• Children under 5 years of age are disproportionately overrepresented in IPV (Fantuzzo, 2002)

• Negative effects on child social and emotional development are well documented (Geffner et al., 2003; Koverola et al., 2005).
... “An internalized view of self as mother... sense of .... competence... a congruence of self and motherhood...” (Mercer, 1995) ... intertwined with the mother-child relationship (Mercer, 2004)

... it is a source of positive identity and also vulnerability as the abusive partner often attacks it or mothering ability (Mullander, 2002).
Literature: Turning Points

• Realizations or “dramatic shifts in beliefs and perceptions” and a lowered willingness to tolerate IPV, especially the impact of IPV on children (Chang et al., 2010).
  • Fear for child safety is a commonly noted turning point that can act as a restraining or a driving force to leaving (Lindgreen & Renck, 2008)
  • Realizations or “Waking up” to the “unnaturalness” of her situation and the affect of IPV on her children (Lutenbacher, Cohen, and Mitzel, 2003)
  • Few researchers have looked at maternal identity and turning points to leave IPV
Research Questions

Our Project: In Her Own Words

1) Explore mothers descriptions of how IPV affects their maternal identity and the mother-child relationship

2) Highlight turning points to leave the IPV situation.
Study Methods: The Sample
(Letourneau et al., 2013)

- Types of Abuse:
  - Physical (95.9%), Psychological (98.0%), Sexual (31%), Mutual (22%)

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<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. Sample Descriptive Data</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mother’s age (years)</td>
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<td>Child’s age (months)</td>
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<td>Length of mothers’ time with abuser (months)</td>
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<td>Household income before tax</td>
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<td>Length of child’s exposure to violence (months)</td>
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<td>CES-D score</td>
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\( {\text{CES-D} = \text{Center for Epidemiological Studies–Depression scale.}} \)
Study Methods: Analysis

• Qualitative content analysis of verbatim transcripts from the primary study
• Focused on the mothers’ descriptions
• Line-by-line coding of transcripts was completed with Nvivo 10 software.
• Analysis identified categories, subcategories and patterns or themes related to maternal identity and turning points
Results: 4 Main Categories

1. Diminished mothering: Interrupted Mother-child relationship

2. Effect on child

3. Turning Points

4. Becoming a stronger mother
Results: 1. Diminished Mothering:
   A. Interrupted mother-child relationship

Too stressed

Unable to soothe

Unable to bond

Becoming a stronger mother
Results: 1. Diminished Mothering: A. Interrupted mother-child relationship

NB-28: “Um, I don’t even think he really knew that I was his mother practically. ... I wasn’t showing love for him ... I was just trying to keep peace all day long ... so basically all <child> really got for that first three months was food and he was put in his crib to sleep ... Yeah. We didn’t really get to bond the first three months at all.”

NS-76: “Ah, the attention and affection that he did get from me was when things were calmed down .... Um, there was no real encouragement to progress ... for him, ... we didn’t really teach him stuff. Um, I didn’t know what to teach a child .... he was a living doll for me as sad as it is.”
Results: 1. Diminished Mothering:
   B. Partner Diminishes Maternal Identity

Unreal expectations

Criticisms

Partner 1st

Harsh parenting

Becoming a stronger mother
Results: 1. Diminished Mothering:
B. Partner Diminishes Maternal Identity

NB-24: “I was trying to breastfeed and he would be over my shoulders telling me how I couldn’t do it ... that I was starving my kid and everything else, had me all stressed out about that.”

NS-58: “A lot of my focus ...[and] energy and things went into him and he just pretty much drained me .... Like most of the time I felt like I was living with two children. It felt like he was a rebellious teenager pretty much ... and sometimes when he would take off for days and I didn’t know where he was or what was going on. It’s hard to focus on <child> and take care of him.”
Results: 1. Diminished Mothering: B. Partner Diminishes Maternal Identity

- ... we would sit at the table and ... tell <older daughter> .... “sit there until you’re finished”, ... scream at her and said to her a couple of times like if she didn’t answer him right away like, he’d say “are you deaf?” ... if he asked her a question and she [didn’t understand his question] ... he’d say “Well what are you, stupid”? NB - 21

- All kinds of intimidation and he used to say things to <child 1> ... that just really, [were] not appropriate and you know, sort of hurtful. ... he threatened to put him in the trunk [of the car] if he didn’t behave. ... another time he said to <child 1>, ... ‘oh I don’t want him, I don’t want him, we’ll just put him up for adoption or put him in a foster home’ NS - 53.
Results: 2. Affect of IPV on Child

- aggression
- crying
- sensitivity

Becoming a stronger mother
Results: 2. Affect of IPV on Child

• ... if he was around she was either really, really clingy or didn’t want anything to do with anybody at all, she was very violent, very aggressive, hollered, screaming, because that is what she was seeing. NB - 26.

• Well the first three months he got hit twice because I was carrying the baby and ... and I got slapped across the face once and <child> got the last tail brunt of it. So I think that’s affected him and he’s scared ... if he sees yelling on the TV ... of loud noises, like Tickle me Elmo petrifies him because it’s too loud. Nb - 28.
Results: 3. Becoming a Stronger Mother

Realize responsibility

Stronger as a mother

Taking action
Results: 3. Becoming a Stronger Mother

I try to think probably it just made me a lot stronger .... To be able to sit there and establish what I wanted and what I needed and what was best for me and my daughter rather than what’s best for this person who is injuring me and my daughter’s relationship. So … I think I cope pretty well. NS-70

Like towards the end of it … I stood up for her… and I think it shocked him, ... “don’t say that to her. Don’t call her that. Don’t ask her, don’t ... ask her if she’s deaf... I don’t ... agree with stuff like that and I started to stand up and I ... think the guilt kind of overwhelmed me ... because I thought ... if you can’t stand up for yourself, you’ve got to stand up for them. You know what I mean? NB - 21
Results: 4. Choice to Leave/Turning Points

- Choosing child
- Empathy and love for child
- Wanting better for child
- Child & Serious IPV incident

Becoming a stronger mother

For the child

Leave
Results: 4. Choice to Leave/Turning Point

NS-54: “I screamed at the top of my lungs and <child>dropped his cheerio’s. I remember thinking, ‘Where is he going to stab me? How much is it going to hurt? What’s going to happen to <child>?’ Then he was sitting on me with the knife...he was like, ‘Why would you do something so stupid? I’m taking you down to the basement. Your mother can find your dead body’....”

NB-30: “I was in love and there was nothing I wanted to change. ... after the little one came in to the world, after 6 or 7 months. That was when it got really serious. I had made a big supper, Mr. had come from work...When he arrived, ... He was angry. I got the police after him, I didn’t want anything to do with it anymore.”
Results: 4. Choice to Leave/Turning Point
“eyes are opened”

NS-59: “My eyes were, after having a baby were more wide open ...Like I could see what everybody was telling me. Like why I should be out of this relationship. Why I should leave. Meaning like the whole mothering thing kicked in and it was like, “Wow. I’m responsible for a whole ‘another being and he can’t be around this type of situation”...I can’t have him witnessing me getting hurt and crying all the time.”

NS-75: “The only time [child] was around it was when I realized how serious it was and that was the final step. ... a bit of yelling from my ex-partner, he would start sucking his soother extra fast and extra hard and that, he looked tensed and scared and so we would never, make sure that would never happen. Um, and when the actual physical violence was presenting, when the baby was in my arms, he.. you could just feel, I could sense he was very scared and I wouldn’t want that to happen again.”
Discussion: Child at the Centre of Leaving

• Experts to date have focused on child safety as the main driving and restraining force for leaving (Lindgreen & Renck, 2008)

• In contrast, findings from this study underscore how the mother’s caring about the child and wanting a better future for their children act as ‘turning points’ or catalysts to leave

• The category of ‘Becoming stronger as a mother’ is similar to the ‘self-efficacy and power’ (Chang et al., 2010) and “Waking up” to the “unnaturalness” of her situation and the affect of IPV on her children (Lutenbacher, Cohen, and Mitzel, 2003).
Discussion: Service Provider Recommendations

- The findings provide greater knowledge about the dynamics of maternal identity and the mother-child relationship that can be used to inform counselling of women in IPV.

- Interventions are needed that expedite and support the process of ‘becoming a stronger mother’ so the woman safely overcomes partner control and can leave.

- Social support for mothering improves depression and lowers stress.

- Greater awareness, consideration and interventions are needed that address the issue of IPV, mothers and children.
The mothers’ stories describe how they overcame the IPV and diminished maternal identity for their children, so they could have positive interactions and experiences, be safe, and have a brighter future than if she had remained with her partner.
Thanks for listening!

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