



Uncovering *Maternal Alienation*:

a further dimension of
violence against women

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Abstract

This thesis uses a feminist framework to explore one of the little-documented aspects of violence against women - the alienation that has occurred between women and their children. The alienation has come about not just as a 'by-product' of abuse, but because wedges have been deliberately put in place between mothers and children, in a context of abuse against the mother and/or the children. I developed the term *maternal alienation* for this phenomenon, which was defined as the phenomenon of children being alienated from their mothers, within a context of abuse, through the deliberate use of tactics such as mother blaming. The term was developed in response to the invisibility of this phenomenon in professional discourse and practice.

Nine open-ended interviews and two focus groups were held with women, most of whom were mothers, and a thematic analysis of the interview material was undertaken. This analysis documents women's experiences of the strategies and tactics used by abusers in *maternal alienation*, and establishes that these are deliberate and are intended to punish, control and inflict hurt on the women. These tactics deflect responsibility for men's violence in families onto mothers, by portraying mothers to children, families and communities in demeaning and blaming ways. The images of mothers and fathers that emerges from the analysis are explored, in relation to wider social and cultural discourses that shape 'common knowledge' and inform professionals' views and beliefs about mothers, and to a lesser extent, fathers.

The thesis concludes that *maternal alienation* is built on two powerful foundations - the privileging of the male voice, and the extensive mother blaming present at macro and micro levels - in cultural discourses and in families. It suggests that maternal alienation is one way in which children are initiated into and coached in dismissive and blaming attitudes and behaviours to women.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Anne Morris

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Chapter One

Introduction to *Maternal Alienation* as a Further Dimension of Violence Against Women

My interest in *maternal alienation* came out of my experience as a practitioner working with women who had suffered the effects of being alienated from their children, but had found no-one who could acknowledge and name this phenomenon. As I worked with these women, I discovered the depth of their grief at losing their children, compounded further by the mother blame they encountered from those around them, which fed their self-blame as mothers. It seemed ironic that such a source of profound grief for women did not even deserve a word that identified their experience. As Liz Kelly says, "in order to define something a word has to exist with which to name it....What is not named is invisible and, in a social sense, nonexistent" (Kelly, 1988, 114).

Therefore I developed a term, *maternal alienation*, to identify what women had described to me. *Maternal alienation* referred to the phenomenon of children being alienated from their mothers, within a context of abuse, through the deliberate use of tactics such as mother blaming. *Maternal alienation* appeared to be used by men in a number of different abusive contexts, and constituted a

further type of abuse of women and children. In order to explore its occurrence, I needed to look within a broad spectrum of violence against women, a 'continuum' of abuse (Kelly, 1988). Such a continuum acknowledges the interconnectedness of what are often analysed as specific forms of abuse such as emotional, physical and sexual abuse (against women and children). For the women who participated in this research, the perpetrators of abuse are the fathers of the women's children, all of whom are or have been in intimate marriage relationships with the women. The concept of a continuum of violence also allows a consideration of the extent to which institutional structures and the practices of health and legal professionals contribute to and thereby 'perpetrate' this violence which contributes to the alienation between women and their children. This research identifies these factors and opens the way for further study of how *maternal alienation* is reproduced in professional discourse and practice.

While using the concept of a continuum to broaden the context of violence and abuse, I also want to narrow the focus of this study to, firstly, identify *maternal alienation* and secondly, demonstrate that deliberate strategies are used, by those who violate women, to alienate them from their children. I wish to demonstrate that *maternal alienation* is yet another strand within the complex web of gendered violence. This study aims to make visible men's abusive actions in alienating their children from their mothers, and identifies how men's strategies draw on popular cultural and professional discourses about 'proper' mothering and also about men's 'rights' in relation to 'his' property of wife and

children. I will argue that these social and cultural frameworks both support and camouflage *maternal alienation*.

I further suggest that the process of mother blaming is central to *maternal alienation*. In order to understand this, it is necessary to consider how mother blaming is built into dominant discourses of mothering and mothers. These dominant ideas are readily accessed by male perpetrators of abuse, and used as part of an arsenal of strategies in abuse. They are also reproduced in professional and legal theory and practice. It is this seamless use of mother blaming across a spectrum of both personal relationships and structures of power, that has made mother blaming almost invisible to those outside feminism. My consideration of the literature bears out the near-invisibility of *maternal alienation* within it, which perhaps points to ways in which this study corresponds to earlier feminist studies of mothers of sexually abused children, that first recognised and critiqued the prevalence of mother blaming in so-called 'objective' psychiatric, psychological and social work discourses, and the invisibility of women's experiences within them (Breckenridge & Bereen, 1992; Humphreys, 1990; Hooper, 1992; Johnson, 1992; Freer, 1995).

This thesis will identify some of the complex factors that are at work in *maternal alienation*, and the ways in which these subjugate the experiences of women and children. To do this is to challenge cherished ideas of family relationships, and the nature of some men's relationships with their children. Such an

examination may shake some dominant beliefs about the benevolence of fathers. It also reverses the customary direction of the professional gaze, which usually scrutinises and attempts to regulate mothers. In recognising the existence of *maternal alienation*, and its deliberate use, and pointing to the ways in which male perpetrators draw on popular cultural and professional discourses, it is hoped that this study will contribute towards the recent trend in feminist and cross-disciplinary research towards more nuanced and sophisticated understandings of violence against women (Radford, Kelly & Hester, 1996; Dobash & Dobash, 1998).

Chapter Two explores several areas of the literature relevant to a study of *maternal alienation*. In particular, the chapter examines the feminist and pro-feminist literature on violence against women, and writings on constructions of mothering and their connection with mother blame. Chapter Three describes the methodology of this feminist research. Chapter Four presents each woman who was interviewed as a case study, and flags some of the themes emerging from their stories. Chapter Five takes up these themes and focuses in detail on the strategies used by perpetrators to alienate children from their mothers. The images of mothers and fathers that emerge from this analysis, and the findings about whose voices are privileged, are explored in the latter part of the chapter. Chapter Six draws some conclusions and delineates some possible areas of future research.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

Having developed the term *maternal alienation* to describe the phenomenon of children being alienated from their mothers within a broad context of abuse, I hoped to find a description of it in the feminist and pro-feminist writing on violence and abuse against women. I explored these writings and the literature on the cultural discourses of mothering and mother blame, both of these areas relating to understandings of constructions of gender. Some literatures hint at and perhaps even imply that maternal alienation exists, but I have not found any studies that actually named it. While maternal alienation has not been named within these literatures, each area of writing describes a context for it and so contributes a further dimension to an understanding of maternal alienation. Thus it is in the intersection of these literatures that I believe I will be able to locate and describe what has previously been unnamed. From this location, I intend to offer some understanding of maternal alienation and its links with mother blaming discourses.

I surmise that maternal alienation is not visible in the relevant literatures for a number of reasons: the inter-connectedness of mother blaming with constructions of mothering, rendering mother blame difficult to recognise; the

resistance of professional and legal practitioners to scrutinising male behaviour (Collier, 1995); constructions of men and fathers as 'family men' within the law, who are 'responsible and respectable' (Collier, 1995), preventing such men being identified as 'malicious' or 'conniving', and capable of manipulating their children so as to abuse their wives, or ex-wives. Ironically, while maternal alienation had not previously been named or described, I believe it had already been colonised and utilised against women - by ideas of 'parental alienation syndrome' and 'malicious mother syndrome', that have arisen in USA in legal and psychiatric discourses. I shall review the writings on these in this chapter.

The feminist writings on violence against women offer a starting point for establishing a context for maternal alienation. I had expected to find a recognition of the phenomenon that I have termed *maternal alienation* within the feminist literature that explores the enmeshing of male violence against women with societal constructions of gender. While such a recognition is not there, it is nevertheless useful to explore the writing on the gendered use of violence to understand how it is that women are often alienated from their children, and can be blamed for the abuse against them and their children. Child abuse is often recast by professionals as 'maternal neglect', "when the violence of others towards children is redefined as a mother's failure to protect her child(ren)" (Thorpe, 1996, 109).

Feminist and pro-feminist literature on violence against women in intimate relationships

This literature explores the many forms and dimensions of male violence towards women, and draws attention to the deeply entrenched cultural beliefs that allow this violence to continue. Dobash and Dobash, well-known for their on-going research on violence against women, see the wider context of abuse as based in gender relations, and as “composed of responses from social agencies and general beliefs and attitudes about the relationships between men and women, husbands and wives, and about the use of violence to achieve various aims” (1998, 9). They argue that it is important to understand the individual, interpersonal, institutional and ideological context of violence to explain its emergence and continuation (1998, 10). While violence and its context of cultural beliefs and patterns have many elements that are specific to particular cultures and eras, they also have commonalities over time and place, a factor that is borne out by some studies of violence against women. Dobash and Dobash, describe the accounts of violence across the world, that “reveal patterns strikingly similar across countries even as they reflect important and distinct cultural differences” (1992, p.5). With this in mind I will be referring to literature from the English-speaking world, aware that there are trends and patterns in cultural discourses that can be both similar and different in Australia, Britain, United States and Canada.

Michele Bograd points out that at the time of her study of physical 'wife abuse' (1988), there was no unified feminist approach to violence against women. Yet, she argues, what feminist researchers had in common was their attention to the ways in which physical violence is culturally and socially supported and maintained within heterosexual relationships. She finds four major dimensions which are common to all feminist perspectives on 'wife abuse':

(1) the explanatory utility of the constructs of gender and power; (2) the analysis of the family as a historically situated social institution; (3) the crucial importance of understanding and validating women's experiences; (4) employing scholarship *for* women (1988, 13-14).

This feminist approach, which seeks to understand violence within its socio-political and cultural context, differs from explanations of violence involving problematic, 'psychopathic' individuals, a point of view more often found within the psychological and psychiatric literatures. Breckenridge points out that psychological explanations of incest and child rape serve to minimise its occurrence. She argues that later research has contradicted the idea of an 'incestuous personality' who commits incest, and shows that "misrepresenting the child sexual assault offender by classifying him as 'abnormal' or 'deviant' belies the research findings which establishes the offender's "capacity to be ordinary"" (Breckenridge, 1992, 23). A feminist approach, in recognising the "normative factors at work" in child sexual assault (Finkelhor, 1984, 35) re-locates the problem from the 'deviant' individual offender (an approach which supports a professional blindness towards cultural and social contexts) to

problematic constructions of gender and gender relationships which engender and support violence.

The tendency to individualise the problem of violence has marked some mainstream approaches to the so-called 'victims' of violence, which theorise that a certain type of woman, or certain formative experiences, 'attract' some women to violent relationships. Feminist researchers take issue with this for a number of reasons. One is its victim-blaming tendencies, and the tendency of such 'diagnosis' and 'therapy' to reproduce abuse against women. Radford *et al.* argue that this tendency to view violence as an individual problem has increased in the 1990s:

What was in the 1970s a feminist struggle for recognition of the prevalence and social meaning of sexual violence has in the 1990s become an arena of increasingly individualized frameworks and practices. Sexual violence has become the vehicle for the production of a multitude of syndromes and disorders, all of which require 'treatment'. They also serve to dis-locate such violence from its social, powered, context. As the list of diagnoses expands, and the variety of therapies to help us 'recover' or 'heal' mushroom, some feminists are asking 'how did we get here?' (Armstrong 1994). Rather than enabling women and children different ways to understand their experiences, allowing them to see themselves as one of many, and encouraging them to become part of a collective resistance to sexual oppression, what is increasingly on offer are personal (and even lifelong) 'journeys from victim to survivor'. (Radford *et al.* 1996, 11)

Other writers that have challenged the individualist treatments of 'victims' include Rummary, who examines the "structural violence as embodied in traditional

psychiatric labels and mental ill health" and argues that "systemic violence plays a crucial role in allowing interpersonal violence to continue, partly through the processes of silencing and discrediting", and through the ways in which "women and notions of madness...intersect with constructions of femininity" (1996, 150). Rosewater's view is similar, when she describes how professionals' constructions of women who have experienced violence mean that "the victimized woman is viewed either as 'crazy', with her tales dismissed as ravings, or as inadequate and provoking the violence in her life" (1988, 200).

The framework invariably used by feminist writers, therefore, includes a consideration of the social and cultural context within which violence takes place. However, within this framework, feminist approaches vary, for example in the scope of their studies of violence against women. Bograd uses a feminist analysis to study particular forms of male violence, restricting herself to a focus on physical violence. Breckenridge goes further towards broadening the scope of study when she argues that it is crucial for feminists to align child sexual assault with sexual violence generally (1992, 35). Other writers have broadened this spectrum of violence even further, for example, Stanley and Goddard argue, from a social work perspective, that the fragmented nature of research and practice fails to take into account the many forms of violence that may be occurring simultaneously (1993). Kelly, in her feminist research in the late 1980's, also takes issue with studying the major areas of abuse separately, developing instead the concept of a continuum of sexual violence. She uses 'continuum' to mean "a continuous series of elements or events that pass into

one another, and are connected by the basic common characteristic that physical, verbal, and sexual coercion and assault are employed by men against women" (1988, 115). Kelly argues that using the concept of a continuum allows women to acknowledge a range of male behaviours as abusive, that otherwise would not have been named because they fall 'between the cracks' of specific forms of abuse. Kelly points out the importance for women of naming and defining their experiences, whereas the exclusivity of specific terms might leave women unable to articulate their experiences of abuse.

The processes for women of recognising and articulating their experiences of abuse are complex and fluid, and Kelly's work stresses the importance of women having access to words and meanings that allow them to speak of their abuse. Without words and definitions available to them, these experiences become lost to women. Kelly recognises that a part of this complex process is women's confusion when their experiences of abuse intersect with what is seen as 'appropriate' or 'accepted' behaviour in men. I would argue that women may be less confused and more able to speak of their experiences of abuse when they have access to an analysis of violence which understands the use of violence, power and control as linked to social constructions of dominant masculinity. Added to the intricacies involved in naming and defining women's experiences of abuse is what Kelly sees as the part played by forgetting and minimising:

Over time, women often remember more details of what happened to them, and so redefine events in new ways. At the same time, redefining what they have

experienced often enables them to remember more of the abuse. This process can be extremely distressing and painful. But through the process of redefinition, women began to focus on and validate their own feelings and reactions (1988, 128).

Further to this, Kelly argues that conceptualising violence as a continuum “enables researchers to develop wider definitions and new names for forms of sexual violence that more accurately reflect women’s experiences” (1988). I consider that this opens a space for naming maternal alienation, a term that signifies certain experiences of women and children that have to this point remained un-named, ways of stealing the mother from the child, and the child from the mother. This space can be widened and filled out in more detail by referring to what has been written about men’s violence, based on studies of men who perpetrate violence and abuse.

Studies of violent men

Ptacek interviewed men who had been part of the *Emerge* program in Boston, (an organisation offering counselling for violent men). He describes how most men tended to excuse themselves for their abusiveness (meaning that they denied full responsibility), and offered justifications, using ‘socially approved vocabularies’, in an attempt to normalise their behaviour. Part of this process is ‘victim-blaming’ with the men claiming their violence was provoked by women. Trivialisation of the woman’s injuries was common, with the men maintaining that the woman’s fears and their descriptions of the violence were exaggerated.

Trivialisation occurred where there were verifiable injuries to the woman, but the invisible injuries were completely denied, including, "the instilling of fear, the humiliation, the degradation, the assault on her identity as a woman" (Ptacek, 1988, 147). The study reveals that the men established a pattern of "intentional, goal-oriented violence", a deliberate strategy, "motivated by a desire to silence their partners; to punish them for their failure as 'good wives'; and to achieve and maintain dominance over these women" as well as intending to hurt and frighten them (150-1). Ptacek's findings are consistent with Dobash & Dobash's opinion that "violence might be functional, intentional, and patterned" (1998, 141), and "it is the outcome that is valued and at stake (getting what he wants, not letting a woman win an argument, ensuring that she is isolated from other men and from others who might intervene on her behalf)" (1998, 168).

It is this intentional, functional use of violence to achieve certain ends that I find interesting, because it is consistent with what I define as *maternal alienation*, which involves similar intentional, goal-oriented behaviour, indeed a deliberate strategy, which is similarly motivated by a desire to punish, control and hurt. Women with children commonly have a strongly invested sense of identity and self-worth related to being a mother, which makes mothering an easy target for men who wish to injure and punish, and to inflict "an assault on her identity as a woman" (Ptacek, 1988, 147).

Lundgren's study of abuse against women in a small group of Christian couples gives another flavour to the theme of men's sense of entitlement to punish

women. Lundgren studied a particular fundamentalist Christian community of the Norwegian state church, yet her depiction of the process of abuse can perhaps have wider ramifications for our understandings of men's sense of entitlement to punish. Lundgren's study develops and enriches this picture of male control. For Lundgren, the man ceases to act as an individual through his use of violence, and becomes the idealised 'Man/Husband'; whereas the woman becomes erased through a process of adaptation to seeing herself through his eyes:

....('it is not my hand that strikes') or 'God' ('then I become the Lord', i.e., the one who controls life and death).....(T)he man gradually creates his masculinity by symbolically 'becoming' God, and the gender construction of the woman takes place on the terms of the abuser. Through this process of compulsory adaptation, the woman's space for femininity is reduced to a minimum, and she is gradually effaced and 'killed' as an individual woman. (1998, 171)

Her hands are powerless while his are free; he uses his eye visually while denying her visual communication. The eye - in combination with the hand, the strap, and the penis - provides endless sources of imagery or 'natural' safeguards against chaos, of order and structure, and of keeping the woman in her place: an erotic masculine realm that disintegrates her as an individual woman. This leads to physical and psychological 'disintegration' - she is crushed both as a biological and a social sexual/gendered being (180-1).

Lundgren, like Ptacek, notices the assault on the woman's identity as a gendered being. While neither of these researchers identifies maternal alienation as such, I would nevertheless argue that it is consistent with their

picture of violence as a deliberate, goal-oriented strategy, aimed at the feminised individual identity of the woman.

Using Kelly's continuum approach to violence and abuse, I have explored the literature on child sexual assault to fill out a picture of maternal alienation. Studies of men who perpetrate child sexual abuse add a further dimension to understanding the violence done to the relationship between mother and child, and therefore, I would argue, to both mother and child.

Studies of male sexual assault of children

Research by Conte, Wolfe & Smith (1989) describes the process that perpetrators use to groom a child for sexual abuse by destroying the child's relationships of trust. Wyre describes these tactics also, from his work with perpetrators of child sexual abuse (1993). Thorpe points out that perpetrators are responsible for destroying trusting relations between mothers and children, putting barriers between them so that the child does not confide in the mother, and the mother is not 'available' to her child should she disclose abuse (Thorpe 1996, 121). Here we have an overt reference to what I refer to as maternal alienation, although it is not so named.

Laing & Kamsler describe the ways in which children are alienated from their mothers, when they speak of "the offender's power in shaping the perceptions of

his victim and the mother". They argue that mainstream theories of abuse, such as the 'dysfunctional family' approach camouflage the offender's powerful role. These discourses, they maintain, mask the reality that "the relationship problems between mother and child victim which are so commonly seen after incest is disclosed, are more likely to be the result of a campaign of 'disinformation' orchestrated by the offender, under the cover provided by the secrecy which he imposes on the victim. The offender's actions create a context in which the mother and child are blind to his role in creating the difficulties in their relationship" (1990, 169). While not actually naming it, this is one of the few direct statements of maternal alienation to be found in the literature on violence against women and children. It refers to the ways in which maternal alienation is both a deliberate strategy used by the sex offender, and is reinforced by mainstream professional theory and practice.

Laing's later research adds further detail to the offenders' "extensive array of tactics by which they had planned and implemented the sexual abuse and attempted to avoid detection" (1999, 147). She discovered from offenders' own admissions that these tactics included "dividing mother and victim, creating opportunities to be alone with the child, making the child feel complicit, giving money and presents, reminding the child of the consequences of disclosure, being hard on the child to avert suspicion or, alternatively, showing favouritism to the child, actively interrupting attempted disclosures and exploiting the child's curiosity about sex. The most common tactic acknowledged by the men was that of dividing mother and victim" (Laing, 1999, 147). I would suggest that

similar tactics are used by men not only in child sexual abuse, but within a broader spectrum of abuse against women and children.

As these writers demonstrate, studies of offenders have illustrated offenders' use of deliberate and manipulative intentions to destroy a child's relationships of trust, and perhaps also, as Armstrong maintains, "break the thing that would hurt his wife (or ex-wife) the most" (1996, 117). It is curious, therefore, that this evidence is generally ignored and replaced by such pervasive mother blaming within mainstream literature and practice concerning child sexual abuse, as a number of feminist researchers and writers in the last decade have emphasised (Humphreys, 1990; Hooper, 1992; Johnson, 1992; Freer, 1995). I suggest that this mother blaming derives partly from the phenomenon of maternal alienation, resulting in both offenders and children blaming the mothers for men's sexual abuse of children - and to a great extent the mothers themselves have been co-opted into seeing themselves as culpable. But at the same time, this mother blaming has operated as an elaborate smoke-screen, closing off opportunities for recognising maternal alienation as a further abuse of women and children, while also reinforcing it. This mother blaming literature is, I would argue, an example of what Dobash & Dobash calls "narrow and self-referential" (1998a, 1) tendencies within subdisciplines "to make definitive statements and seek rigid and untimely closure" in theorising (21). Because maternal alienation is intricately bound up with mother blaming discourses that operate at personal and structural levels, it is appropriate to examine some of the writings about mother blaming, particularly within professional discourses about child sexual assault.

Mother blaming within the context of Child Sexual Assault

It is curious that, within the area of child sexual assault, where it is generally accepted that 95 per cent of offenders are male, there is such pervasive blaming of women within professional discourses. Hooper explains this as "reflecting the relative power of the different interest groups" involved, in particular the lack of power of women and children over how sexual abuse has been defined. She points out that "the main focus has shifted from the surveillance of sexually abused girls in the early part of this century towards the surveillance of the mothers of sexually abused children in the later part" (1992, 1). Hooper is one of a number of feminist researchers over the last decade who have drawn attention to both the extent of this mother blaming and its lack of a basis in empirical studies. Johnson, who also conducted research in this area, concurs that, "most information about mothers came from second- and third-hand sources: the father, the daughter, or the professional working with either one" (Johnson, 1992, x), not from actual studies of mothers of children who had been abused.

In the mid 1980s, Johnson interviewed six mothers of incest survivors in the United States, to find out from them their points of view, feelings and experiences. She re-interviewed these women six years later. Her study is one of the earliest to attempt to challenge professional stereotypes of 'the incest mother' as "collusive mother", "powerless mother", "protective mother" as "cold, detached, unfeeling, and uncaring" (1992, 16). While valuable in opening up

space for women's own experiences after discovering that their children had been abused, Johnson's study still sits within the dominant frameworks that she attempts to critique. From this ambivalent position, she makes statements such as:

It is tempting to defend the mothers I got to know so well against the prevailing stereotypes about them. And I find myself feeling a certain ambivalence between what I have come to understand about their lives from their perspective and a responsibility to acknowledge that all parents, as adults, must be held accountable for what happens to their children when they are innocent children. (105)

In attempting little more than a tokenistic deconstruction of discourses of mothering, Johnson seems unable to move far beyond a mainstream position. She tends to totalise the identity of these women as 'mothers', and ends her study by summarising her view of them as, "The mothers in this book are women you might easily know and like" (126). I would see Johnson's work as sitting more within frameworks that seek to 'normalise' the incidence of incest, rather than allied to a feminist perspective that privileges women's meanings, thereby creating "'loud' spaces where women's voices can be heard" (Freer 1997, 5), and in being heard can challenge destructive stereotypes.

In Britain, Hooper also conducted a study of mothers of children who had been sexually abused, interviewing fifteen women, with the dual aims of demonstrating "the complexity of mothers' responses and the way they are embedded in the

social relations within which child sexual abuse occurs", and contributing "to more realistic expectations of and appropriate help for mothers, and hence also for children who are sexually abused", because "working with mothers to enable them to support their children has become a central task for workers involved in child protection" (Hooper, 1992, vii-viii). Hooper's study has gone some way towards deconstructing some of the mother blame in this area, by highlighting some of the unrealistic expectations of mothers in a society that offers little support to mothering. She opens up the area of difficulties between mothers and children in this context. "Many children experience feelings of anger and betrayal at their mothers for not having protected them from abuse. Girls who are sexually abused by their fathers are often angrier with their mothers than with the abusers". Hooper explains this as possibly "partly the result of children's fantasies that their mothers are all-knowing and all-powerful, derived from their early experience of total dependence on them". However, she modifies this position by surmising that daughters' anger "may relate as much to the reality of their mothers' relative powerlessness, as to the illusion of their power" (1992, 5-6). Later in this study, Hooper puts forward another view, that comes closer to recognising the fact and effects of a deliberate strategy of alienation manipulated by the abuser:

In four cases, the abusive man had appeared to 'take over' the child, drawing her into the secrecy surrounding the abuse and excluding the mother. One woman ('AN') described this: 'They shut everybody out of everything'. 'PE', who felt her partner had set her daughter up as 'the woman of the house' in

competition with her, described the effects of the secrecy on her own relationship with the child:

Obviously me and K were growing further apart, he was putting her against me ... it was getting to the point, if I told her off, they'd both sit there laughing at me, together. It was as if they'd sort of ganged up on me, sort of thing, and I couldn't say nothing to her any longer, without him intervening. He'd completely taken her over, he wouldn't even, if I bought her anything he used to get angry, and I just couldn't do nothing. (PE)

(Hooper, 1992, 38)

Hooper expands on these depictions of how offenders manipulate children in sexual abuse: "Children's descriptions of the victimisation process illustrate the way in which such 'special' relationships are constructed, with abusive men manipulating children's estrangement from potential sources of support.....Study of abusive men shows they are fully aware of this process..." (Hooper, 1992, 38). Hooper's finding, like Laing & Kamsler's statement referred to earlier, is one of the few references in the literature to what I have termed maternal alienation.

Humphreys' Australian study of twenty-two women whose children had been sexually abused, also challenges the prevailing professional mother blaming discourses and beliefs. From a focus on the women's 'subjective experience', she argues that one could not understand these women without seeing them within their social and cultural context. She concludes that, "the path for the mother of the sexually abused child was a lonely one. Yet her plight, and that of

her child is socially structured by attitudes and social practices which surround the prevalence of child sexual assault in secrecy. Mothers cannot be expected to take on alone and unresourced the full burden of responsibility for problems which ensue in the aftermath of the disclosure of child sexual assault" (1990, 419). Presumably, some part of these 'problems' is due to the 'estrangement' between mothers and children that she explains as "a culturally constructed problem ...a particular problem in the sexual abuse situation in which the child's enforced need to keep the secret creates barriers with the mother" (398), an explanation that draws our attention to alienation, while directing us away from the deliberate tactics of the abuser to achieve alienation.

Freer, in her Adelaide study of women whose children had been sexually abused, explored "the myriad ways in which the discourse of mother-blaming is inscribed on women's lives and reproduced within our culture and, more particularly, within the culture of therapy" (1997, 6). She states that the "negative and damaging long-held assumptions" about such women were directly contradicted by the information gained from the interviews (5). These assumptions constitute many of those professional discourses referred to by Johnson, Hooper and Humphreys, as well as by Breckenridge and Bereen (1993) in their study of the attitudes of professionals working in this area. In contrast to these beliefs, Freer found that the women in her study were "striking in their courage, honesty and ability to create respectful relationships with their children despite the abuse" (1997, 26). She also found that "the blaming and

misunderstanding of these women was in direct contrast to the invisibility of the responsibility attributed to the men who perpetrate abuse" (1995, 77).

It is interesting that once this mother blaming had been challenged, it took a new form in professional discourse and practice. Humphreys, in her later research, found that:

as an alternative knowledge developed which challenged the notion of the 'collusive' mother, literature on the 'falsely accusing' mother in divorce cases became a new focus. Thus began a new way of speaking, which again undermined the mother of the sexually abused child. Given the intensity of the earlier attack on mothers for their *lack* of protection of their sexually abused children, the undermining of women in the divorce context who attempted to protect their children seems somewhat paradoxical. (Humphreys, 1999, 35-6)

This theme will be taken up in more detail in the section of this chapter on *'Parental Alienation Syndrome', 'malicious mothers' and family law*.

The researchers in this area all point to the way in which experiences and relationships within abusive contexts are embedded within cultural discourses and beliefs. One cannot understand mother/child relationships and their vulnerability in contexts of abuse, without looking at the constructions of mothers and mothering that underpin these relationships, both in general belief and in professional discourses. Focussing on these discourses may also help us understand how mother blaming has remained a camouflaged activity to those outside feminism.

Constructions of mothering, and mother blaming

Wearing (1984) carried out a study of the ideology of motherhood as held by groups of working-class and middle-class women in Australia. Most women she interviewed believed that "a 'good' mother is always available to her children", is unselfish and needs to be with her children when they are young (1984, 72). Obviously, motherhood carries with it all sorts of moral beliefs and imperatives for women:

So central are the associations of responsibility, morality, and caring to the dominant cultural meanings of mother that for a woman to risk seeing herself or being seen as irresponsible toward her children would be to risk far more than an inadequate role performance(it would).... implicate her whole moral character" (McMahon, 1995, 234).

This is at once the power and the cost to women of mother blaming and maternal alienation.

In the main, feminist writing on mothering and motherhood make the historical and cultural context of mothering visible, an approach which challenges the dominant view of motherhood as a biological relationship beyond history, culture and gendered politics. Motherhood has been a contested site within feminism, as some feminists have argued that through the institution of motherhood women have been oppressed and disadvantaged in a patriarchal society, while

others have not wished to devalue identities, experiences and ways of caring that some women find rich and rewarding. McMahon attempts to summarise these feminist approaches to motherhood:

The early analysis of the oppressiveness of motherhood was followed by feminist analysis that validated women and their work, qualities, and experiences. Negative conceptualization of motherhood, it was felt, reinforced a masculinist cultural devaluation of all things feminine and did a disservice to women, to the goal of gender equality, and to the need to transform society into a more caring place (1995, 9).

She continues:

The challenge facing feminist analysis became one of valuing women's social capacity to care and/or their biological capacity to give birth, while resisting having these capacities considered definitive or 'essential' or best in what it is to be a woman (1995, 9-10).

In questioning the presumption that mothering is natural, Smart (1996) focuses on the supposedly naturalistic chain of events leading to motherhood: heterosexual intercourse, pregnancy, birth, mothering and motherhood, and demonstrates how each link in this chain is in fact socially, not biologically, constructed. Smart argues that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries an increasingly centralised and policed system prevented women escaping motherhood. Corresponding with these developments, according to Smart, motherhood became established as a legal and social institution through

struggles during the nineteenth century by firstly, early feminists, and secondly, philanthropic organisations.

Before the middle of the nineteenth century, Smart argues, motherhood, and therefore mothers, had no legal status. "Only fathers, and hence fatherhood, existed in law. The father gave a child his name, his inheritance, his religion, his domicile; in fact everything a child was granted was treated as coming from the father" (Smart, 1996, 44). This was challenged by the struggle of early feminists who "forced onto the public agenda the beginnings of an appreciation of the work of caring and the importance of mother-love for the welfare of children. These feminists were actively engaged in the social construction of motherhood as a recognized institution. They demanded institutional recognition through the law, and they constructed an ideology of motherhood that rendered mothers as caring, vital, central actors in the domestic sphere" (Smart, 1996, 44-5). Philanthropic organisations, and later, professions including social work, health and the 'psy' disciplines, worked in a different way to impose specific standards of mothering on working class women through education, child protection legislation, and so on. "A whole range of persuasive policies was gradually brought to bear on working-class mothers to alter their mothering practices. These strategies were strongly supported by ideologies of motherhood that expressed *natural* characteristics of mothers as coinciding with a class-specific, historically located ideal of what a mother should be" (45). Thus Smart attempts to demonstrate how the growth of a more centralised state was able to create and impose normative standards of motherhood, with "little appreciation of

diversity or even of the difficulties faced by working-class mothers" (45-6). In fixing these normative ideals of motherhood into policies, it became possible to speak of 'good' and 'bad' mothers. Smart describes the many changes in the rules of what constitutes 'good' mothering - from breast-fed to bottle-fed, schedule-feeding to demand-feeding, swaddling to not swaddling the baby, and placing the baby on its front, and then on its back, to sleep. In Smart's words:

These rules can be seen in Foucaultian (sic) terms as the calibrations of good motherhood. Initially they covered mainly physical matters of diet, warmth, immediate environment, and physical development. Later these calibrations were extended to include the immense realm of the psychological care and nurture of the child. Thus the good mother was no longer simply the one who fed and cleansed properly, she would be inadequate if she failed to love *properly* and express this love in the *correct* fashion. (46)

The argument that discourses of motherhood have been used as a means of socially validating or invalidating some women and some forms of mothering, has been taken up by a number of feminists. McMahon argues that "post-World War II U.S. society structured maternal identities through class, race, and heterosexual identities and, in doing so, constructed many white unwed mothers as 'non-mothers' and many unwed black mothers as 'problem mothers'. Indeed, many of the debates over the new reproductive technologies are implicitly about establishing social claims to parental identities, often couched in the language of biology" (McMahon, 1995, 18). Franzblau, in her critique of attachment theory, argues that constructions of motherhood and government policies served to regulate women: "Maternalist policies in the USA impacted upon women in two

ways: (1) they restricted a woman's right to determine when, how and with whom to have or not have children; and (2) they influenced the definition of what constitutes good caregiving for the children of these women" (26).

Beliefs or ideologies of mothering prescribe how 'good' mothering should take place. Hays describes the contemporary model of motherhood as "an ideology of intensive mothering" which expects mothers "to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children" (1996, x). She analyses the advice given to mothers in child-rearing books:

Mothers are faced with a plethora of advice admonishing them to be at once nutrition experts, psychological counselors, and cognitive development specialists. Spock, Brazelton, and Leach, along with their coworkers in the advice business, tell mothers to be constantly attentive to the child's needs, to be alert to each new developmental stage, and to learn how to read the child's cries and to organize the child's play activities. If mothers fail in the task, other 'experts' may charge them with child neglect, emotional abuse, and 'toxic parenting' or denounce them for creating a 'dysfunctional family' (Bradshaw 1990; Forward 1989). (Hays, 1996, 71)

Mother blaming walks hand in hand with such regulation of mothering. As Smart puts it,

The significance for Foucault of normalizing discourses is the way in which degrees of adherence to the rules are secured by the stigmas and impositions placed upon those who disregard them. Thus we can think in terms of 'tests' that were and are imposed routinely to discover whether mothers meet or fail the

standards of motherhood. There are now myriad ways of failing and, as the range of expertise on motherhood expands, so there are added new dimensions of success and failure. (1996, 47)

Within the history of motherhood, as McMahon describes it, the child during the nineteenth century had "gradually acquired a culturally sacred value" (1995, 27). This is part of what Hays describes as the 'cultural contradictions' of motherhood - that in a market-driven, efficiency-conscious world, children are "sacred, innocent, and pure, their price immeasurable, and decisions regarding their rearing completely distinct from questions of efficiency or financial profitability" (Hays, 1996, 54). McMahon points out that through the almost exclusive attachment of mothers to children, as it developed in the isolated, nuclear-family households of modern Western societies, the mother/child relationship became scrutinised by professionals, so that women could increasingly be "regulated through discourses of precious children and proper motherhood" (McMahon, 1995, 28).

Bowlby's 'attachment theory' became popular after World War II, and while it valued mothers for the importance of their bonding to their children at birth, it also gave "rise to an orthodoxy about the need for mothers to stay by their young children almost constantly" (Smart, 1996, 52). Birns calls it "an inoculation model of parenting: love (i.e. early attachment), like inoculations against measles, provides lasting protection" (1999, 18). While, as Birns argues, many studies have invalidated Bowlby's claims, 'attachment theory' remains popular in

'commonsense' understandings of mothering as well as in some professional practice. It has the effect of "blaming mothers and the quality of their care for all the problems of their children", and minimising all the other factors that impact on children, some of which Birns names as "poverty, racism, poor schools, access to guns, violence on television and inadequate health care" as well as "social class, temperament and fathers' role" (Birns, 1999, 19).

The 1970s, according to Smart, marked an extremely important time for motherhood, with positive changes in psychological, welfare and "moral/legal" discourses about mothering, meaning that "motherhood stood on the threshold of independence (from the governance of men and marriage) and in sight of a proper means of economic support" from the welfare state (1996, 54). These developments led to the blurring of the boundaries between 'good' and 'bad' mothering, and the beginnings of mothering escaping the "normative constraints of psychological and moral orthodoxy" (55). However this promise did not hold. Smart seems to have missed the irony that this 'high point' of mothering required women taking complete responsibility for their children (and therefore sole blame), a situation that perhaps created the possibilities for men's rights movements to emerge. Smart describes the rise of these men's and fathers' rights movements in the 1980s and 90s, challenging the status of the lone mother. "These movements sought, on the one hand, to eradicate the husband's financial responsibilities for his former wife and, on the other, to increase his rights in relation to his children.....these claims were enhanced by a revival of psychological studies that purported to prove the link between the

absence of the father and delinquency in the child" (54). Smart sees this "reconstitution of fatherhood" as having important consequences for motherhood, "because it has not been a radical reconstruction of men's responsibilities so much as an attempt to demote the significance of the mother who was thought to have become too powerful in the 1970s" (55).

It would seem that fathers' rights movements were not seeking sole fathering, but a return to sex roles which give mothers the responsibility/blame/care for children, and fathers the authority to oversee 'their' women and children. It has been argued that the creation of new 'syndromes', such as 'parental alienation syndrome' and 'malicious mother syndrome', is directly related to the rise of fathers' rights and the re-institution of these 'sex-role' values. Within this re-positioning of mothers, McMahon's comment seems pertinent: "Mothers are no longer portrayed as self-sacrificing and all-loving but as untrustworthy or potential enemies of their children" (1995, 190). Such a discourse about mothers is the starting point for this study: the irony of the situation where women/mothers are positioned as capable of knowingly and manipulatively harming their children, whereas the substantial evidence for such conscious strategies by fathers remains unacknowledged. This depiction of mothers and fathers seems to reach fever pitch in legal arguments concerning child custody, and the use of pseudo- psychiatric discourses about mothers' malice, which bolster these claims.

'Parental Alienation Syndrome', 'malicious mothers' and family law

To venture far into this literature is beyond the scope of this thesis. However mention must be made of the ways in which ideas of maternal alienation have already been colonised in the creation of 'Parental Alienation Syndrome' which has been used in custody battles in the United States. 'Parental Alienation Syndrome' is a term coined by Richard Gardner to describe the brainwashing of a child by one parent, ninety per cent of whom are said to be mothers, to alienate the child from the other parent. This is a syndrome, according to Gardner, that arises in custody disputes, and usually involves a mother's accusation of child sexual abuse against the father. The criteria Gardner used to determine whether PAS is present was his previously developed 'Sex Abuse Legitimacy Scale' (SALS), tests for determining the fabrication of allegations of sexual abuse. Gardner asserts that the first step towards treatment for PAS is removal of the child from the mother's home and placement with the father. (Gardner, 1987).

Turkat has created a similar syndrome which he calls 'Divorce-Related Malicious Mother Syndrome'. Malicious mothers, he asserts, "not only try to alienate their children from their fathers, but are committed to a broadly based campaign to hurt the father directly". They are "skillful liars, highly manipulative, and quite adept at recruiting others to participate in the campaign against the father"(1997, 19).

Gardner's PAS and SALS have been widely discredited by Gardner's peers working in this field, yet they still carry weight within the U.S. courts (Dallam, 1998; Sherman, 1993; Wood, 1994; Myers, 1997; Berliner & Conte, 1993). Myers points out Gardner's bias against women: "this gender bias infects the syndrome, and makes it a powerful tool to undermine the credibility of women who allege child sexual abuse" (Myers, 1997, 137). Sherman argues "No matter what a woman would do, under [Gardner's] writings, she is going to do something wrong unless she disbelieves her child" (Sherman, 1993, 46). Gardner's critics agree that his theories, which continue to carry weight in the US courts, have promoted a legal backlash against mothers. They argue that Gardner has in effect reframed mother blaming discourses and child sexual abuse to assert that "the problem is not the sexual abuse of children but 'vengeful wives' and 'hysterical mothers'" (Chenoweth, P.R. quoted in Dallam, 1998). Once again, by redefining abuse in this way, the perpetrator of abuse is taken out of the equation and the mother is demonised as the abuser. No longer fitting the 'collusive mother' picture, the mother of the sexually abused child who speaks out to try to protect her child is re-framed as the 'malicious mother'.

These trends are matched by similar tendencies in family courts in Britain, Canada and Australia (Dallam, 1998; Bridgman-Acker, 1998; Wallbank, 1998; Smart & Sevenhuijsen, 1989). Wallbank has documented how women who speak out in the Family Court in the U.K. to protect their children from men who were either abusive to the children or themselves, are "constructed as wilfully depriving their children of the right to contact with their father", and "are

subjected to the court's often vehement disapproval" (358). The judges tend to minimise the violence or abuse suffered by the woman or her children and the women are 'castigated' by judges for being 'implacably hostile' to ex-partners. Wallbank reports that while women are scrutinised closely for their mental state, men's often violent behaviour is not scrutinised. As Humphreys points out:

Focusing on the mother and her inadequacies, rather than on the offender, has a long tradition within the literature on child sexual abuse. Divorce is similarly an arena in which powerful emotions are unleashed and where women are frequently construed as self-seeking and vitriolic, and as disadvantaging men by their claims for custody and financial settlements (Humphreys, 1999, 46).

The ways in which the men's violence is ignored, while orders are made for contact with violent fathers against the wishes of the mothers who are constructed as 'implacably hostile', also begs the question of how women and men, and specifically fathers and mothers, are constructed in the law.

Collier, in his study of masculinity, law and the family explores constructions of men and fathers within the law. He says:

Yet notwithstanding the clear evidence of the scale of men's violence in the family, the law has historically shown a marked resistance to recognising and responding to the extent of the social problems associated with the socially destructive aspects of modern masculinities. Judges have resorted to various excusatory and explanatory ideologies of male violence in order to construct men's familial violence through reference to protectionist and paternalist notions of women as men's property. (1995, 250)

Within these beliefs, as Humphreys indicates, "by statute....and through dominant professional values and practice, the notion is perpetuated that all contact with fathers in the wake of divorce is beneficial to the child" (Humphreys, 1999, 45). Men's use of violence as a means of establishing their authority over 'their' property is consistent with the law's view of what constitutes reasonable male behaviour. As Scutt points out:

Men's groups organise around these issues [of custody and property] with an identical rationale for both areas: antagonism is expressed against the notion that the female partner has entitlements to property, and against her 'entitlements' to the children. Children are conceptualised as property, being 'balanced off' against assets, as if granting a woman custody of the children *and* some of the matrimonial property means the male partner is being unfairly deprived. The notion remains that a legal *entitlement* of the female partner (under the *Family Law Act*) to property of the marriage necessarily deprives the male partner of *his* property (Scutt, 1991, 192).

The rendering of mothers as 'malicious' and 'implacably hostile' - implying that these women are dangerous to their ex-partners and children - and of 'family men' as 'safe' in legal discourse (Collier), might lead us to believe that women are powerful players in the legal system, a conclusion that is strongly contradicted by women's experiences of the court system. A study of women who had gone through family law processes in Canada found that "the men in their lives who were controlling during a relationship continued to control and intimidate them during the family law process" (Bridgman-Acker, 1998, 78). The women in this study expressed feelings of being marginalised and de-powered in

a system of family law, where "legislation, policy, professionals, and their opponents in this adversarial system of family law make their ability to mother their children a continuous and long-term up-hill battle" (76). As Humphreys reminds us, "popular myth has it that men are disadvantaged when applying for a residence order for children in divorce proceedings. However, when contested cases are analysed separately, it is clear that men have an equal chance of gaining custody and a greater chance if they have already taken a new wife and established a new family" (1999, 44-45).

This thesis sets out to establish that male perpetrators of abuse use various tactics such as mother blaming to alienate children from their mothers. The writings and studies on PAS and the court system illustrate the ways in which this mother blaming is used powerfully in medical/psychological and legal arenas to actually separate mothers from children - surely the final goal of the strategy of maternal alienation.

Maternal alienation

Within this review I have investigated the literature in a number of different areas, in an effort to locate the concept of maternal alienation. I have searched the feminist and pro-feminist writings on violence against women, which includes studies exposing the strategies used by men who perpetrate violence, including child sexual abuse. I have established that an analysis of maternal alienation needs to be seen within a context of power and gender relations, and associated

social and cultural beliefs and practices that maintain the use of violence against women. I have identified the broad spectrum of a 'continuum' of male violence within which to investigate maternal alienation. This includes a recognition of systemic violence against women, which includes the medicalisation and pathologising of women who have been the victims of violence, and also their treatment in courts of law. Although later feminist studies seek more 'nuanced' approaches to male violence than in the past, they do not recognise maternal alienation as one of many strategies used in abuse. The writings on men who perpetrate violence go further towards pin-pointing maternal alienation, in that they establish that male violence towards women is deliberate, goal-oriented behaviour used to intimidate, punish, control, injure 'their property', and attack women's gendered identity. Descriptions of offenders' 'grooming' of children for child sexual abuse come closest to an identification of maternal alienation.

I have also examined feminist research that challenges mother blaming within professional discourses in the area of child sexual abuse. These writings explore the extensive and pervasive use of mother blaming, and its effect of deflecting responsibility for abuse away from the men who perpetrate it. Through constructing mothers as "collusive" and "powerless", professionals have effectively blamed the non-offending parent in incest and excused the male offender. The feminist researchers who exposed these 'myths' drew different portraits of mothers, based on the women's experiences. As the picture of the "collusive" mother was challenged, another portrait arose, as from the head of the Hydra, the "falsely accusing" or "malicious" mother. This area of research

was followed by an examination of constructions of mothers and mothering, which showed how the regulation and scrutinising of mothers, which is strongly allied to mother blaming, has become part of the context of mothering in western nuclear families of the late twentieth century.

I have also examined some of the writings on 'Parental Alienation Syndrome' and 'Malicious Mother Syndrome', and the construction of mothers, and to a lesser extent, fathers, in the law. These syndromes utilise ideas of "malicious" and "manipulative" and "vengeful" mothers who 'falsely' make accusations of child sexual abuse against their ex-partners. While attracting much criticism from psychiatric and psychological experts on child abuse, these syndromes seem to sit harmoniously within an adversarial legal system that constructs mothers as "implacably hostile" and scrutinises their mental health, while depicting 'family men' as "safe" and "respectable", a system which tends to support the 'rights' men may seek to exercise authority over 'their' family as property.

While PAS appears to be a similar concept to maternal alienation, I argue that it is entirely different. PAS constructs women as manipulative, pathological, vengeful and malicious within the courts, when they act to protect their children. Yet there is much evidence that men manipulate children and systems in their favour, assert their rights to win at all cost, and to punish 'their' family members for 'wrongs' they have defined. Yet constructions of dominant masculinity, and

even of men who perpetrate abuse, manage to avoid the descriptions of "manipulative", "vengeful" and "malicious". A man is constructed as angry in reaction to being 'wronged' or 'provoked', and his behaviour is therefore seen as a 'normal reaction', while the malicious woman's 'alienating behaviour' is constructed as unprovoked and therefore malicious. Perhaps such gendered constructions not only render maternal alienation invisible, but also unmentionable, because there has not been language with which to speak of men's deliberate use of alienation; and inconceivable, because dominant discourses preclude an understanding of it. These are questions which this thesis will explore, by referring to women's own experiences of having their children alienated from them by male perpetrators of abuse, and, (although it is only indicated in a study of this size), of seeing professional workers and structures of power collude with and support this alienation.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This research project was set up as a partnership between the Department of Social Inquiry (Gender Studies) at the University of Adelaide, and Northern Women's Community Health Centre. It incorporates aims appropriate on the one hand to a Women's Health setting, and on the other, to feminist scholarship. Since a feminist philosophical and ethical position underpins both supervising bodies, there were shared understandings of the project. "If one begins inquiry with what appears problematic from the perspective of women's experiences, one is led to design research *for* women" (Harding, 1987, 8). Nevertheless, there can be tensions in so-called 'action research' in the relationship between social science and social action, as Dobash & Dobash point out: "We argue that a relationship between research, beliefs, values, and social action is inevitable; however, the nature of that relationship is not a straight-forward one" (1988, 51). They continue:

The social scientists who would do action research enter the arenas of other researchers, grass roots activists, legislators, policy makers, and agency practitioners. To study the social problem and provide a contribution to the changes necessary to develop meaningful proposals for solutions necessitates the entrance of the social scientists into the political world of ongoing social change. Despite all protestation to the contrary, social research and political

issues are inevitably related. Yet, social science is largely lacking in models of how to develop scientific work within this context, how to analyze the social and political consequences of the messages inherent in research, and how to participate with community groups and social agencies in the collective creation of social change (53).

My motivation for this research grew directly from my experience as a practitioner. I had recognised the issue of maternal alienation in my work in counselling and conducting groups with women who came to the Health Centre. It was listening to women's experiences of interpersonal and institutional mother blaming that provided the framework for my own thinking about maternal alienation. Bearing in mind Dobash & Dobash's position that it is "unethical to use community groups in a predatory manner, as mere avenues to research subjects, or sources of information, to be used solely for professional ends and discarded once the research results are in" (1988, 69), it seemed appropriate to conduct this project as a piece of action research, aiming for social change, valuing and promoting community consultation and participation, as well as adding to feminist scholarship. Reinharz emphasises this 'dual vision' as a vital part of feminist research:

The international feminist community remains concerned that social research both contribute to the welfare of women and contribute to knowledge. This is the dual vision - or dual responsibility - that many feminist researchers see as part of their multiple responsibilities (1992, 251)

In keeping with these principles, I devised methods for gathering data that minimise the imposition of structure and meaning from me, while creating a space in which women can use their own descriptions of their experiences. The methods I use acknowledge Reinharz's description of some feminist approaches to interviewing women: "A woman listening with care and caution enables another woman to develop ideas, construct meaning, and use words that say what she means" (1992, 24).

Method

As Harding points out, "One distinctive feature of feminist research is that it generates its problematics from the perspective of women's experiences. It also uses these experiences as a significant indicator of the 'reality' against which hypotheses are tested" (Harding, 1987, 7). With this in mind, I employ open-ended interviews to enable women to describe and define their experiences of *maternal alienation* in their own words. It is generally recognised that semi-structured interviews allow the researcher the opportunity to explore new areas and generate theory (Reinharz, 1992, 18). As *maternal alienation* had not been recognised in the literature, these type of interviews were ideal in that they allowed the generation of new questions in response to the emergence of unanticipated material.

Interviews

The women who participated in individual interviews had learned about the project in a number of ways. Some had been, or were currently, clients of the Women's Health Centre, who, after hearing about the project, asked if they could take part. Others were workers in the field who approached me because they were interested to talk about their own experiences of *maternal alienation*. Other women contacted me after I had circulated information to other agencies. All participants were informed about the project, given a copy of the Participant Information Sheet and two Consent Forms to sign (see Appendix One and Two). The interviews lasted about an hour, were recorded and transcribed (with the women's permission).

Overall, I conducted nine interviews with women. Six of these interviews were conducted individually with mothers who had been alienated from their children by past male partners to whom they had been married. Two further interviews were conducted with adult survivors of child sexual abuse, one of whom had previously been interviewed as a mother. The woman interviewed solely as an adult survivor of child sexual abuse was able to describe the alienating strategies put in place by an abusive uncle as well as her father. Another of the interviews was held with a mother and her adolescent daughter together, talking about the alienation in their relationship that had been put in place by the husband/father. I began the interviews asking women to talk about their experiences of being alienated from their children, (or mothers, for those women who were

interviewed as survivors of child abuse). While I had a reminder list for myself of the themes I wanted to explore, the interviews were open-ended and interactive.

Although most of the women in this small sample were mothers, it was nevertheless useful to include in this study women who were positioned as alienated daughters. It appeared that as mothers, women were better positioned to be able to recognise alienation and its effects on their relationships with their children, while as daughters this knowledge was less accessible to them in understanding their relationships with their mothers. Thus a tension became obvious between these two positions which the women hold simultaneously as mother and daughter. Harding points out that these 'fault lines' or "fragmented identities are a rich source of feminist insight" (1992, 8). They brought into focus certain discourses and constructions of mothering which were identified during the analysis of the transcripts. This will be discussed in greater detail through my analysis of the material.

The women interviewed all expressed their gratitude at being able to speak at length about their experiences of maternal alienation. Most women said that these interviews represented an opportunity to tell these stories, and develop further meanings and understandings about them. For both survivors of child abuse, the interviews provided a rare opportunity to uncover the strategies used in alienation, which made it possible for them to begin to reframe their understandings of their abuse and their relationships with their mothers. This

was an unforeseen result of designing and conducting research in non-exploitative and respectful ways that are characteristic of feminist research.

Profile of the participants

All the women interviewed were 'white' women, one from a British/European background, while the rest were born in Australia. In a study of this size it would not have been possible or helpful to have interviewed a range of women from diverse cultural backgrounds. Therefore the experiences of this group of women cannot be generalised to other cultural groups. Within this sample, there was, however, a mix of heterosexual and lesbian and bi-sexual women, although all the experiences of maternal alienation they described derived from heterosexual relationships.

The women were fairly evenly divided between working class and middle class backgrounds. Of the seven mothers interviewed, one had been educated and employed as a health professional since early in her marriage (although this had been interrupted by child-minding), two had begun tertiary education in the few years before the break-up of their relationships and one of these women was working as a health professional. Three women began tertiary education after their relationships ended, and one of these was working as a health professional. The remaining woman was unemployed, but had become involved, since the break-up of her relationship, in what she saw as self-education through books, groups and courses offered by the Health Centre. The woman interviewed as an

adult survivor of child sexual abuse was working as a health professional. The women's stories will be described in greater detail in Chapter Four.

Focus groups

Wilkinson argues that focus groups provide a particularly appropriate means for conducting and developing feminist research. Their benefits include "addressing feminist ethical concerns about power and the imposition of meaning; generating high quality, interactive data; and offering the possibility of theoretical advances regarding the co-construction of meaning between people" (1998, 111). I conducted two focus groups with each of two existing support/action groups for women survivors of domestic violence. I found that the focus groups provided women with opportunities to reflect on each other's experience, and to co-construct meanings around the alienation of children from their mothers. The participants also encouraged one another to speak about the mother blaming they encountered in schools, from health professionals, friends and family, and in the Family Court. They supported one another in expressing their disbelief at the inability of professionals to see, or deal with, maternal alienation.

There was a greater 'mix' of cultural background in the focus groups, with one group having several women from a British/European background as well as those who were Australian-born. All the relationships which these women described were heterosexual. As with the individual interviews, all participants of the focus groups were informed about the project, given a copy of the Participant

Information Sheet and two Consent Forms to sign (see Appendix One and Two). The group interviews were recorded and transcribed, with the women's permission.

Group A

As a practitioner, I had been involved for a short time in facilitating an ongoing group for survivors of violence, in a disadvantaged area of Adelaide. This group asked to participate in a focus group for this study, as many of these women had experienced mother blaming from the health and welfare workers they had encountered. Within this group, there was one woman who had a very strong and clear example of how her children had been alienated from her. The main discussion of the group centred around her experience, but in reflecting on her experience, other women described some experiences of how this had occurred within their violent relationships with men. They also described experiences of blatant mother blaming within systems such as the welfare and court systems. While individuals from this group could vividly describe their experiences of mother blaming, they also gave voice to many expressions that were at times woman-blaming and mother blaming, particularly when they spoke about their own mothers. They seemed unaware of the inconsistency of voicing these beliefs while simultaneously expressing their sense of injustice at the mother blaming they had encountered. This seemed to evidence yet again the isolated and non-interactive nature of many of the dominant beliefs and discourses in

circulation, that contradict women's experiences, yet are not re-evaluated until they are able to be de-constructed.

Group B

This is an ongoing group for survivors of domestic violence that I approached to ask if they would participate in a focus group. They were keen to be involved in this research, as they had been aware for some time of the existence of maternal alienation, which they called 'parental alienation' from their awareness of 'Parental Alienation Syndrome'. Many of these women worked within this group as 'activists', sending letters to the papers and to politicians, speaking at conferences and training courses. A number of these women could speak articulately of their experiences of maternal alienation as mothers. There was a mother and daughter present, who together gave a picture from two perspectives, of the tactics used by the father/husband to alienate the children against the mother. However, there was one very marked example of maternal alienation within this group, where the effects of alienation had been almost totally successful in breaking the children's relationship with their mother, and shaping their loyalties to their father, despite - or because of - their father's blatant violence.

A curious variation on this theme also emerged, in one woman's experience of spending her childhood in an orphanage in the U.K., where she was told terrible stories about her mother. It emerged during the group that these stories, of her

mother being a 'bad mother', and a prostitute, were almost identical to those told to the mother of one of the other participants in the group. This woman's mother had also spent her childhood in an orphanage, where she had been trained to hate her mother. Yet in her late sixties, she had begun to establish a relationship with her mother, and had discovered that these stories about her - also as a prostitute - had been totally false. These two stories bring into focus dominant discourses about 'bad' mothers, that appear to be easily accessed by both individuals within systems and within families, and this will be explored later in the thesis.

It was interesting to compare these focus groups, as Group B, with their greater awareness of the tactics used by perpetrators of abuse, did not give voice to mother blaming discourses in the way that Group A did.

Analysis of the data

A thematic analysis of the interview texts was undertaken. Particular attention was paid to the characteristic strategies that women reported as part of the process of alienation. This analysis is largely descriptive and documents in detail a process which has to date largely been ignored. A further level of analysis was undertaken to identify and document the impact on women of the strategies that were utilised against them. Of particular interest is the ways in which the women's feelings and reactions link to images of women as mothers, daughters, sexual partners, wives. Conflictual or contradictory experiences and

expressions are utilised as points of discussion, reflection and theorising, drawing attention to the framing of women's experiences by particular discourses, and women's resistance to these. These themes will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Chapter Four

Women's Stories

All the women interviewed for this research spoke in different ways of their passion to have maternal alienation identified and acknowledged in women's lives. They all stated that they wanted to talk about their experiences of this so that other women would not have to go through what they had experienced. They described their experiences of being alienated from their children as extremely painful. A part of this pain was due to the invisibility of the processes and strategies through which alienation had taken place. The lack of recognition and understanding that they consistently encountered in friends, family and professionals compounded their experiences of isolation, self-blame (as mothers) and their grief.

From hearing these stories it became obvious that the degree of alienation that the women experienced with their children varied. Some stories showed that the success of the tactics used to alienate children from their mothers was sometimes total and at other times less successful. This variation in the 'success' of alienation even varied within families. More often, in families with children of both gender, it tended to be the boy who became more alienated from his mother than his sister had been. But this was not always the case. A

possible area of future research could be to focus on the factors that contribute to this variation in the 'success' of maternal alienation, but it is beyond the scope of this study to do this.

While alienation was painful to the women, their stories also spoke of how they had moved on in their lives, resisting notions that women alienated from their children were 'failures' as women. All of these women had accessed education and some had found employment that gave them greater choices, higher status and a richer quality of life than they had experienced when they were in relationships with the men who had alienated them from their children.

This chapter will introduce the women involved in this study and in doing so, will 'flag' some of the issues and themes highlighted by individual women and focus groups. This will be followed by a description of the themes that emerged from a thematic analysis of the interviews.

Meeting the women

'Anne'¹

Anne is a woman in her early fifties, who lives on her own and relies on a government pension for her income. At the time of the interview she had been separated from her husband for twelve years. He had been emotionally abusive

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout.

to her, and she spoke of how she had not been able to recognise this as abuse, because at that time she had not had opportunities to "learn about abuse". She described her close relationship with her two daughters who were ten and twelve at the time of separation. Within months of the break-up, her relationship with her younger daughter had been destroyed and she went to live with her father. She remained hostile to Anne and rarely had contact with her. Anne's relationship with her elder daughter was more complex, and took longer to break down, but she eventually followed her younger sister to live with her father, and ceased contact with her mother. At the time of the interview, there had been some reconciliation between Anne and her elder daughter, but a short time later, her daughter broke off all contact with Anne again in what felt to Anne like a replay of the first break-down. Anne was convinced that this had been due to her ex-husband's influence, as he had only recently found out about the reconciliation between them.

Anne had suffered many health problems over the period of her marriage, and always visited a G.P. about these. She spoke of her anger that not only did her G.P.s not recognise her depression and other health problems as being related to the relationship she was in, but they also pathologised her, which robbed her of the possibility of understanding her health problems within a wider context. This theme of how the medical profession had contributed further to her subjugation was an important part of Anne's understanding of her situation.

Anne had been put on a number of tranquilisers during her marriage, and saw herself as being dependent on these for some years. When she separated from her husband, she took herself off this medication. She went to a counsellor who helped her understand her relationship as emotionally abusive, but the alienation of her two daughters was not identified as a dimension of the abuse. Consequently, she felt a great deal of guilt and blame about the alienation, as though the breakdown of these relationships reflected her failure as a mother. This belief was reinforced by her family, friends and neighbours, doctors, and by the Family Court, which uncritically listened to her ex-husband's account of the marriage and her mothering, and also to that of her youngest daughter, who she felt had been coached and "brainwashed" to tell "outright lies" about her. The Family Court awarded custody to the father.

'Jenny'

Jenny is a woman in her late forties who had left an abusive marriage ten years before. Both she and her ex-husband are professionals working in human services. When she left the marriage she hoped that they would be able to share equally the care of the children, a girl of twelve and a boy of eight. What happened was that he "used every trick in the book" to stop her contact with her children, while telling them that their mother had abandoned them, and that if it hadn't been for him, "they would be living on the streets". She barely saw her daughter over the period of a year, but somehow her son managed to have more contact with her. Over this time, her ex-husband "assaulted her using the Family

Court system". Jenny says, "It was like being repeatedly raped through the court system in the most vile way". After leaving her marriage, Jenny began a relationship with a woman. Jenny described how her ex-husband tried to use this as a means of turning her children against her and of gaining support for himself through the court system. In the face of these tactics, Jenny withdrew from the case, which meant that he gained custody of the children. Ten years later, he has still tried to use the Family Court system to intimidate her.

Nevertheless, Jenny managed to keep her relationships with her children alive, and as they got older they sought her out. Her daughter eventually came to live with her for some years, and her son had reasonably regular access. But Jenny talked about their father being "so punishing all the time. He's kept this relentless stuff up, and used the children as a way of getting at me and punishing me". Recently, he had managed to have her daughter "feeling really angry towards me as if somehow I had confused her, and that I had somehow blackened his name towards her. It then really created a wedge between us, whereas we'd been quite close".

'Hannah'

Hannah is a woman in her late forties who has a son of fourteen years. Seven years before the interview she had left her marriage, in which her husband had been physically violent as well as emotionally abusive to her. Her son went to

live with his father six months before the interview, and Hannah felt that he was alienated against her to the point, sometimes, of hatred.

Since leaving this marriage, Hannah completed university studies and is now working professionally in human services. She maintains contact with her son, despite his hostility, and finds that there are some things they can share. She spoke about the campaign that her ex-husband had carried out against her, both during and after the marriage, where he would draw friends, family and neighbours, as well as their son, into a "game" of blaming and humiliating her, usually around her "bad mothering" or "bad housekeeping". Hannah felt she had been unable to leave this relationship because of her lack of knowledge about violence and abuse, her isolation and lack of support, and the lack of acknowledgement of her predicament by family and friends. On two occasions she asked professional workers for help, and she felt that they blamed her for the problems in the marriage and with her son. These factors had made it impossible for her to leave. Hannah finally felt able to leave this relationship after a single conversation with a woman who made it clear that she believed that Hannah's marriage was abusive.

'Carol'

Carol left a physically and emotionally abusive marriage seven years before. Within this marriage, she had been physically assaulted, beaten and raped. Her ex-husband beat her severely during both pregnancies, and attempted to murder

her by strangulation. He was also violent to the children - a son who was seven and a daughter who was five at the time of separation. He is a professional man, in a profession with high status and income and easy access to the court system. Carol, on the other hand, lives below the poverty line in public housing, and has been unable to access reasonable financial support from him for the children. She has, in the last few years, begun tertiary education herself. She says that after she left the relationship "there was definitely an escalation in the parental alienation...and it's still going on."

Her son has been living with his father for about three years, and since then, according to Carol, her ex-husband has incurred "twenty-six incidents of contempt of court, or breach of the order", which the Family Court has done nothing about. Carol's daughter has not been as susceptible to the alienation as her brother, and is living with her mother. She is aware of her father's violence, which she has witnessed on many occasions. While her son seemed to have 'forgotten' his father's violence for some time, it looks as though he is starting to change towards Carol, and be more appreciative of her, and less admiring of his father.

Carol has been attending a group for survivors of domestic violence for some years, and through this group has become aware of the many aspects of abuse and violence, including maternal alienation, which the group has called 'parental alienation'. This group was interviewed as Focus Group B in this study.

'Esther'

Esther had been in a physically violent marriage, in which her ex-husband had also physically abused their two children. She spoke a great deal of how she had tried to stop the violence directed at her son, who was six when the relationship with her husband broke up, about thirteen years ago. She also has a daughter who was about two at this time. Esther and her ex-husband are professionals working in human services. Her ex-husband has done further specialisation, and works in an area of high status and high income. He now works with young people at risk.

Esther's story is challenging in that it raises questions, like the other women's stories, about how a father can be both an abuser and a hero to his children. Her story also illustrates how difficult it is to get professional workers to act to protect children when the status of the father/perpetrator is high - echoed also in the stories from other women. Even though Esther's profession is also a high status one, her treatment by professional health workers indicates that, as a woman, she does not hold anything like the same influence and power that her ex-husband holds.

Esther describes how, from the time her son was three weeks old, "his father started smacking him for crying. He said he couldn't help smacking him..... He would squeeze his neck and leave finger prints on the neck". This abuse continued for years. Esther reports that, "after we separated, about every

second or third access, my son said his Dad had hurt him, or he had marks on his neck. I thought, if I don't report it and something happens to him, like he gets killed or he keeps getting hurt, I could be responsible. But my husband told everyone it was just me wanting revenge, and that I'd made it up." Yet from the age of eleven her son went to live with his father, and has had little contact with her since. When he does have contact, he acts as though he hates and despises her.

Esther's ex-husband said to her when their daughter was a baby that "if I ever have to get up to her in the night, I'll strangle her...But (her daughter) told me this year, 'My first memory I've got of anything is of her Dad shaking her.'" Yet at the time of the interview, her daughter was planning to live with her father, and physically attacked her mother, telling her how much she hated her.

Esther describes her ex-husband as being extremely convincing. "And his job, having learnt hypnotherapy he used to brag to me that he could make anyone do what he wanted. He'd say., 'First you have to say something that muddles them, and then you say something else'. He was very confident and he was very intelligent. Basically, he was very sneaky and clever, and he could get people to do what suited him."

'Nora' and 'Bernadette'

Nora is a woman in her forties with three children and a foster child. She and her youngest daughter, Bernadette, have been building a closer relationship in the last year, after being alienated by Bernadette's father, and they were interviewed together for this study. Nora was born in the U.K. and migrated to Australia with her husband. Her marriage had been emotionally abusive, and Nora found out that her husband had been sexually abusing their eldest girl and the young foster child that was living with them (and still is living with Nora). She left her marriage six years ago, after seeking support from a Women's Health Centre. The counselling and groups she attended enabled her to identify the abuse she and her children had been suffering. She also went back to school, and has recently begun studying at university.

Her two eldest children have been quite alienated from her, and continued to live with their father for some years. Her youngest daughter, Bernadette, recently left her father's house and has slowly regained a relationship with her mother. Nora describes how their relationship has changed: "Now it's an honest relationship, there's no going behind each other's back. I can trust Bernadette. I know that she's not going to go home and say, 'Well, Mum's doing this', and then the wrong definition will get there. It's just trust. And we can just talk. But before, she'd just fly off in a mood, or say something nasty, you know, and be on Dad's side all the time."

'Dolores'

Dolores was interviewed twice, first as a mother, and then as an adult survivor of child sexual abuse. She has two children, a boy who is fourteen and a girl of twelve. She left her marriage about two years ago, and her ex-husband's violence and campaigning against her have escalated since then. Her son has joined his father in blaming Dolores for everything that has happened. He wants to live with his father, but his father goes through times of saying he can live with him, and then refusing to even see him or his daughter. This appears to have made his son even more anxious to be with, and identify with, his father. When living with Dolores her son has been difficult and abusive in a number of ways that replicate his father's abuse, making both Dolores and her daughter frightened. Eventually he went to live with Dolores' mother, where he was at the time of the second interview.

Dolores had returned to school while still in her marriage, and is now studying at university. Her daughter lives with her, and seems to see through her father's tactics to punish and gain control, and has become much happier after the marriage split-up. Dolores is now in a relationship with a woman.

While Dolores had been able to name many of the tactics her ex-husband used to alienate her children and family and friends against her, she had not been aware that similar tactics may have been used by her step-father, who had sexually abused her, to put a wedge between her and her mother. Dolores

stated that the interview with her as daughter gave her an opportunity to see her abuse in different ways, and to re-evaluate her relationship -which had been "difficult" - with her mother. This example throws into relief some of the possible differences in perceptions between the positions of mother and child in abuse, and the differing knowledges available from these positions. It also raises issues about the importance of helping survivors to re-frame their understandings of abuse by recognising the strategies used by perpetrators, which, in Dolores' case, had kept the perpetrator's actions invisible by alienating her from her mother.

'Mary'

Mary is a woman in her late forties who was interviewed as a survivor of severe and on-going sexual abuse from her uncle. Mary is a professional woman working in human services. She has, at various stages of her life, attempted to work through elements of the abuse she suffered. This has enabled different views of her abuse, and her relationships with her mother and father (who both died when she was young), to emerge.

The interview for this study provided another opportunity for her to re-claim alternative knowledges and memories of her life that contradicted the powerful messages she had received from her uncle. She also realised during the interview that her father had been physically abusive of her mother, and recognised a number of ways that he had conscripted her and her sister into his

justifications for his behaviour. She realised that in many ways, this had been more powerful in alienating her from her mother than the tactics of her uncle (and aunt). "They couldn't put the wedge that was put between us and my Mum - I don't think we would have believed it.... It was the way my father blamed my mother for everything and had me trying to rescue him all the time that was all so confusing." She recognised many levels at which her mother had been blamed and despised, and how this had - for a lifetime - hidden from her many memories, that she now re-claimed of her mother, as a loving and constant presence in her life. From being able to name the tactics and effects of maternal alienation, Mary was able to remember much about her mother that had been hidden from her by dominant views crafted by her father and her uncle. Thus, in the interview, she remembered and spoke about her mother's wit and fun, her unselfishness, her attempts to keep her children safe while being ignored and humiliated by the authorities who should have acted to protect Mary and her siblings, and her obvious love and devotion, through difficult times, for her children. "You remember that there was this rich and wonderful life and love that was there all the time and never disappeared. But how you can just forget it, or it doesn't seem to touch you. It's all the other stuff that's more powerful."

Chapter Five

Strategies used in *Maternal Alienation*

The thematic analysis of the interviews draws out the specific elements involved in maternal alienation. The interview material was examined to elicit particular strategies that the women described being used to alienate their children from them. The strategies were grouped into themes that were found to be common to the women's stories. However, isolating one theme from another can reduce to simple formulae what is in fact a complex web of influences, in which individual strategies act together to further reinforce one another. Such a web of strategies, made up of words used in conjunction with actions, form powerful accounts of 'realities' that, when they intersect with dominant discourses, allow these accounts to masquerade as truths, and thus overshadow those less powerful realities of mothers and children. Therefore, it is helpful to remember that these themes do not act in isolation but in potent combinations.

This chapter will examine these themes and relate them to the broad areas under discussion in the review of the literature, Chapter Two.

Strategies used by perpetrators to alienate children from their mothers

The women who were interviewed were asked to talk about strategies they had been aware of that had been used to alienate their children from them, or alienate them from their mothers. While all the mothers involved were able to describe strategies used by their ex-husbands, they felt that they only witnessed a small part of them. Therefore, it was useful to also look at strategies from the point of view of daughters who had been alienated from their mothers, to enlarge the picture of what had been said and done. The strategies described fall into a number of categories, suggesting that similar strategies are utilised by the number of men spoken of in this study, even though these men, and their women partners, come from a range of differing backgrounds and circumstances. This suggests that these messages belong to broader societal discourses about mothers and fathers, that alienating fathers are readily able to access and reproduce.

I have further divided these strategies into three categories: *what he said in denigrating the mother*, and *what he said in elevating the father/alienator*, and *what he did*. These categories are, of course, imperfect, as there was some material that straddled across categories, and where I used my judgement to place the material in one category rather than another.

What he said - denigrating the mother

'Your mother doesn't love you'

This statement attacks the dominant beliefs that "responsibility, morality, and caring" are central to mothering (McMahon, 1995, 234), so that an unloving mother carries associations of immorality, irresponsibility, and is a failure as a mother. All the women interviewed said that their husbands had told their children that their mothers didn't care about them. Nora explains that her ex-partner "used to say to the children that I cared more about the foster child than what I cared about my own children". Nora's daughter, Bernadette, reported that she believed her father when he said this, and that her elder sister became very angry with her mother because of it. A participant in Focus Group B² tells, "my boys get told I just don't care enough about them".

One participant in Group A shows how this tactic was given a twist by her ex-partner, who told her that "mothers don't hug their sons and don't show them affection"; however he told her sons that the reason she didn't hug them was that she didn't love them. The same man "was telling the boys that 'your mother only goes to work so she doesn't have to spend time with you - she doesn't love you'", but "he was the one that told me I had to go to work if I wanted money for food".

² For a discussion of the focus groups, see Chapter Three.

Jenny describes the ways her ex-partner manipulated events to stop her seeing her two children after she left, but, as she explains, "over the entire ten years, he has always told the children that I abandoned them. He's told them, but for him, they would be living in the streets", which led to his gaining custody of the children.

Anne describes the way her daughter changed after a holiday with her father: "She just glared at me with such hatred in her eyes that I have never seen in that child before. That child only had love before then." Anne believes that, amongst the many tactics the father used to alienate her daughters, what worked most dramatically was his telling Cheryl that her mother had tried to kill her and didn't love her:

Over that weekend, because from what I learnt, Cheryl had actually told me on the phone, 'Daddy got very drunk'. And the whole swimming centre was up there....and they had a big party.....And I believe that's when it happened, that he told Cheryl that I tried to kill her at birth and I didn't love her.

Mary, as a child victim of sexual abuse from her uncle, describes how successful this strategy had been in alienating her from her mother, so that "when she did do things, you know, I thought she was sucking up". One particular memory she had of her uncle using this strategy was:

When I was thirteen, he was going on and on about how much my mother would never know me, but he knew me, he knew everything about me, he knew me

inside out, he was inside me, he knew my every thought. He absolutely knew everything about me, and there was nothing I could ever do that he wouldn't know, or that I could think that he doesn't already know. Then, he said, that's where my mother doesn't care and doesn't know me and doesn't love me, hates me and wants me dead....And then he talked about how it was going to end up, that she would end up murdering me. I was actually arguing with him about how much she loved me, and he just turned it all around and proved that it was, you know, how much she hated me, and that it was tricks, and - yes, I despised her.

While a child is being told that his or her mother doesn't care enough, the implication is that, in contrast, the speaker does care. This is explicit in Mary's example, given above, and is also expressed in an example from Sharon, a participant in Group A, whose daughters were sexually abused by their father:

There was one thing that he used to say to her. He used to give her money, and he used to tell her that I had given him the money to give her so he could have sex with her. A lot. That gave him permission to do what he wanted with his daughter. And that was the thing that Dads did to their daughters to show their love. That Mum doesn't do it because Mum doesn't love you.

'Your mother is crazy'

Being labelled insane or crazy was another common theme described by most of the women in the study. As well as carrying a stigma of deviance and pathology, it implies that the mother could be dangerous, should not be believed or trusted, and that her judgement is wrong. Once again, the label crazy implicitly bestows on the name-caller the qualities of sanity, rationality, safety, trustworthiness and normality. Sharon, whose children were sexually abused by their father, said

that he told her children that she was crazy. Marilyn from Group B explained that,

I have had no psychological problems or alcohol problems or anything like that. The father is the one who's had long-term drug abuse, has always been into grass, has a terrible alcohol problem....I've always been insane, according to him. And he has continued on over eighteen years of saying that I'm the one that's sick.

However the issue of being called crazy is complicated even more by the effects on women, and their children, of being told they are crazy. Jane from Group B talked about how the emotional abuse she had been subjected to twenty years before, and her husband's calling her insane, had made her believe she was crazy:

So he sent me off to the doctor and said, 'You know, you need help, you just can't cope' and all the rest of it. And it wasn't physical abuse, it was emotional - all the way, and put-downs, and all this, and a lot of manipulation. I didn't know where I was - I was just, back then, so naïve.... The doctor actually put me in hospital, because he just drove me to that. So, anyway, I was in this private hospital and he came in one day and he said, 'I'm divorcing you and I'm taking the children. You'll never see them'. Shock, horror. I just went downhill for a while, and I just asked the psychiatrist just to give me an injection because I didn't want to live any more. But anyway, I got over all of that, and got out, and got some help on a one-to-one - realised that I wasn't mentally ill - I was just very emotional through the children and didn't really have a lot of support back then.

Nevertheless, while Jane continued to live without further intervention from mental health services, Jane's boys were told by their father that,

Mum was very, very ill, and she would be on medication for the rest of her life. And she would never be able to look after her children.

Hannah's son was told that his mother was crazy. Hannah described how her ex-husband's harassment of her must have looked to her son, Steve, and how it would have re-inforced this story of her being mad, while his father was sane.

He used to follow me around the house. I used to try to escape, but he'd follow me until I vomited. He wouldn't stop until I'd be vomiting, then he'd laugh at me. What Steve would see is this jovial(ity).

Mary remembered her father calling her mother crazy when she confronted him with his affairs with other women:

Well, he'd just - either he'd say 'that's absolute rubbish, that's all lies, and what are you going on about? What are you - crazy or something? Your mind, the things that you think, are absolutely disgusting'.

Yet after her parents died, Mary found evidence of his many affairs with women, and revised the relationships she had with both of them, based on his accusations that her mother was mad.

Esther's ex-husband not only convinced his own two children that Esther was mad, but brought a whole community of people into the story:

Even the lady that my son stayed with for quite a few years said that my husband's new wife had said to her that I'm quite loopy. That's what they said, even though I've worked full-time or part-time at a professional job.

Esther had, on a number of occasions, reported her ex-husband's abuse of his son to doctors and welfare workers, but these reports came to nothing, and Esther discovered that her ex-husband had been telling the authorities involved that she was mad and dangerous, and was acting out of revenge. Esther found that this reputation continued for a decade amongst a large group of influential people who worked in these areas. While it protected her ex-husband from being detected as a perpetrator of severe abuse against his children, the story has had serious implications for Esther:

When I overheard this conversation where this high up person in the hospital said [of Esther], 'Oh, she mad and dangerous', I actually went in to his superior and talked to him about how this was the same person from the child abuse case ten years ago, and my husband must have talked to him after. He just said to me, 'I know you've had such a bad experience with what happened when your son was attacked and they didn't believe you, and then with your heart problem in Intensive Care, and how you hadn't been believed'. They'd torn up my ECG - the one the ambulance officer had done where it showed my heart was stopping. And I was left in casualty screaming and passing out for quite a long time - I think about an hour. Then I was in Cardiac Intensive Care for two days once they realised. But he just said to me, 'You've had such a bad time of

people not believing you'. I think he was aware that there was something in my notes that my husband had said to people at some time early on.

As Esther's example illustrates, perpetrators' accusations that their wives are crazy fit well with medical and individualist treatment models, in which, as Rosewater and Rummery have explained, the intersection of femininity and insanity acts to normalise women as 'crazy'. Such an authoritative discourse explains much of women's behaviour by pathologising it and situating it outside rational behaviour, based on presumed male norms. This discourse appears to be so much a part of everyday intercourse, that assertions that all women are somewhat (or potentially) crazy become 'truths', inviting no scrutiny. Such a use of traditional psychiatric labels can be seen as systemic or structural violence against women, which Rummery argues "plays a crucial role in allowing interpersonal violence to continue, partly through the processes of silencing and discrediting" (Rummery, 1996, 150).

'Your mother is lazy' - work and money

Women's caretaking work in families and communities commonly goes unseen, unacknowledged and unvalued. Such a social landscape in which women's unpaid work is invisible makes women an easy target for accusations of being lazy. All the mothers in this study reported that this accusation was used against them. Ellen from Group B talked about her father's use of this as an excuse for his violence against her mother, and how, even though she believed her father was responsible for his violence, she blamed her mother to some extent:

He used to go on about the same things, whether it was the cooking or the cleaning or the top of the fridge. Or the fact that Mum didn't work, that she was lazy, or whatever, that I'd still remember thinking, 'Jeez, if Mum perhaps did try a bit harder...it wouldn't be so bad'.

Hannah too thought this was a clever tactic for her ex-husband to use, as his complaints ate away at her relationships with her son and her parents, and were used to involve the neighbours and friends against her. "He always complained about those very activities that a mother should be doing...Anything around my mothering or my being a housewife, that's what he focussed on". He would say things like, "here I work hard, and she's not even working". They would sit and have a glass of wine with the neighbours, and "it didn't matter how many were there, they'd all join with him, and I'd be the only one. I'd be isolated...I was this person who wasn't looking after him, after he did work hard."

Moreover, some women were aware that this tactic involved turning facts on their head. For example, Marilyn from Group B, whose children were told by their father that she was a 'cash-cow', meaning she only had children to get money from the government, said,

Well, I'm so concerned about the way that reality gets turned around, so that it's just all fabrication, that I've written down and been able to find everything to confirm that what I'm saying is the case. That I'm the one who worked for fifteen years, and that I had a very low superannuation pay-out, and that he demanded

that I pull out of superannuation, which I did, and then he took it away and I never saw it again. It's over \$100,000.

Anne's elder daughter told her some of what her ex-husband had been saying to both girls:

Judy would come home and tell me things like, 'Look, when we were sitting in the car waiting for Cheryl to come in, Dad would say you stole everything from him. That he worked and you didn't. That you lived off of him. That you made him live such a bad life. That you wouldn't let him come back home'.

Dolores faced aggression, resentment and abuse from her 14 year-old son, who echoed his father in blaming his mother for a multitude of things. Dolores described this:

[My son believes that] it's my fault because I haven't got a job that we haven't got money. [He's] actually switched from it's my fault that we've left your father and we haven't got money. It's now, it's my fault because I haven't got a job and we haven't got money. So that's an interesting shift, I think...Because I think his father's been saying, 'She could work if she wants to. If your mother worked, I wouldn't have to pay maintenance. Why is she studying? She's living off the government.' I've heard him say, 'Dad said you could work. Why don't you get a job?'

Carol's son told her, "Dad can't wait for you to finish your degree and get a job, because then you can pay him maintenance." Carol is a student living in public housing, and has received no child support from her ex-husband, who has a well-established professional career in an area of high status and high income.

Name-calling

A number of insults and put-downs were used by men to describe children's mothers to them in demeaning ways. These were potent weapons, as they created an aura of disgust, so that the mothers became objects of revulsion. Both Ptacek and Lundgren characterise male violence against women as involving an assault on the woman's identity as a gendered being. Lundgren describes this process as one in which the woman "is gradually effaced and 'killed' as an individual woman" (1998, 171). All the women interviewed for this study reported that tactics targeting their identity as women were used against them. Hannah pointed out that her ex-partner's "strategy of dehumanising me" always elevated him. He would often say, "You're on the rags again". Dolores heard from her son, that "his father tells him, 'She's more of a man than I ever was'". She also describes that,

after our relationship broke up and he was having time with the kids, he would often say bad things about me. I know that I was 'the bitch'. That was my name. It was never, 'how's your Mum?' It was always, 'how's the bitch? What's the bitch doing?'

This was echoed by other women in individual interviews, and in both focus groups a number of women spoke about being called "the bitch".

Carol described how every time her children had access with their father he took them for a drive past a huge billboard illustrated with a picture of a gorilla:

It was an advertising thing, and the gorilla was then nicknamed 'Carol'....But also, the thing about this particular person is that he is intelligent, and he can be very funny, so the children were very sucked in to the stuff that he did because it was really funny to be so disrespectful of Mum. It was all sort of a great big joke.

Marilyn, from Group B talked about her ex-husband putting tape up on the toilet wall, which said, 'Mum's farts are the worst ever'. This couldn't be taken down, "so you had to look at that all the time". Once she had left him, he put up in his house, for the children to see on access,

a sign of - a picture - a caricature of a woman with wild hair, wild eyes, looking really crazy, and written on that is, 'Just remember, this is what Mum looks like', and my telephone number written in his handwriting on it.

He also told the children that their mother was Hitler, Mussolini, and "he wasn't going to eat anything that I cooked because I was trying to poison him. And that I was trying to use all of these other methods of killing him".

Sharon from Group A heard that her ex-husband, who was sexually abusing his daughters, had been telling them she was a slut. While saying that he had to have sex with them because their mother "wouldn't do it with him", he also made up a story that their mother was having an affair.

After I'd left my ex-husband, [two friends] Sue and Bruce moved some stuff for me....and my daughter just exploded and said, 'It's true what Dad said', and I said, 'What's that?' She said, 'You are having an affair with Bruce. They wouldn't take any money off you for moving, so how are you paying Bruce?' She was only about twelve at the time. I just looked at her - I couldn't believe the stuff that was coming out of their mouths, that their father over this period of time had brainwashed these two little girls.

Yet the same girls applied completely different rules to their father who had been having an affair. "It's alright for Daddy to have somebody else, because that's what men do".

'She's a bad mother'

The accusations of being lazy, of not being a good housekeeper, of having children so as to get money from the government, of not caring about her children, and of being crazy, all add up to being a 'bad mother'. In addition to these accusations all the mothers in this study were accused of being bad mothers. These words seemed replete with meaning, and signified, without need for further detail, condemnation for failing to act as a good mother would. Such suggestiveness shows the potency of dominant constructions of 'good mother' and 'bad mother' as moral categories, with implications that communities and families need to police and scrutinise women to regulate and judge their mothering. Mary describes how her abusers used accusations of bad mother to great effect:

It's like there's a whole lifetime where I felt that I wasn't loved and she was bad in some way, or not a good mother. I think that was what was said, 'if she was a good mother'....but I can't remember what else. There were always these references about 'if your mother was a good mother, she would have', or she this or she that. I think they just all blurred in until it was like I was brainwashed, or conditioned or something. She could have hung from the rafters by her toes, and it wouldn't have sunk in.

'She's to blame'

Related to the label of 'bad mother' is the phenomenon of mother blame. Every woman interviewed knew that her children were told that "she was to blame". Furthermore, all the women experienced systems as echoing this message. As one of the group participants said, "Mothers just get the blame all the timeThe males don't get the blame". Dominant discourses of parenting have high expectations of what a good mother should do based on "an ideology of intensive mothering" (Hays, 1996, x), but neither prescribe nor regulate what fathers do. These discourses separate out bad mothers from good, and blame and punish those mothers deemed bad. Men's blaming of their children's mothers re-inscribes these women in these dominant ways, and passes unnoticed as both male and systemic violence.

Hannah explains that all her husband's communications were about blaming her. "Everything's blame. No matter what's happening. It's never him." Carol gives an example of this:

I was always blamed if anything ever went wrong with the kids. There was one occasion when Peter had an asthma attack.... and he ended up in hospital. [My ex-partner] said to me in front of the doctor, 'It's all her fault - she doesn't make him wear slippers.' It was the middle of Summer when he had the attack, and it had nothing to do with having cold feet...It was bizarre.

All of the men spoken about told their children that their mothers were totally to blame for "splitting up the family". Dolores describes the effect on her son of this mother blaming, which was continued by her ex-husband's family. "If James spent twenty minutes with that family, he comes home and punishes me, because 'it's all my fault'". Mary also describes the effect on her relationship with her mother:

It was the way my father blamed my mother for everything and had me trying to rescue him all the time that was all so confusing. It was what he did that made it so we couldn't reach out to Mum.

The women found that they were also being blamed for all sorts of things that looked ridiculous to them, but nevertheless influenced their children strongly against them. Dolores explained that her ex-husband:

has a brother and two sisters. And just after we separated, his other sister separated as well. Then his parents had a huge fight with the granddaughter. Then his brother, who is gay, split up with his partner. So nobody in the family was talking to each other. And that was my fault.

Anne was accused by the Sports Club of stealing bingo tickets, based on a rumour that was started, Anne believed, by her ex-husband. "Later, the head of the association came and said, 'No, it wasn't you. 'We found out who it was'. But didn't say who the rumour was started by". But her girls continued to believe their mother had stolen the tickets. "They weren't told anything different. My ex-husband's got a way of letting little hints come out very subtly without giving an explanation afterwards".

Carol described how her son, Peter, told her "to fuck off and he never wanted to see me". Then she discovered that,

I was being blamed because a member of ex's family had had a visit from the Police looking for drugs, and I was being blamed for that. I was subsequently investigated by a Police Inspector,...and it was proven that I didn't have anything to do with it. But I didn't see Peter for months after that, because he believed it.

Hannah explained that a powerful effect of the violence against her and of being constantly told that she was to blame, was to "self-police". She would find herself worrying about "what I did wrong as a mother, and what I do wrong, and how bad I am". She pointed out that this focus on her meant that she and the people close to her became so involved in scrutinising her, they never looked at her husband's behaviour.

What he said - elevating the father/alienator

As well as using blame and insults that denigrated the mothers, the men that were spoken of in these interviews used strategies that elevated themselves in certain ways. They emerged from their own portrayals as victim/heroes, wielding a potent mix of unpredictable and punishing behaviour, with a refusal to accept responsibility and a need for sympathy. In their self representation to their children, all the men spoke of themselves as victims, needing support from their children - support that had been denied them by their wives. Echoing some of the women who spoke about this tactic, I have called this "the poor me" strategy. All of these men were better off financially than their ex-wives, many of whom lived below the poverty line. In some cases, the men had well-established careers in the highest income brackets, yet most of these men persuaded their children they were poor, and had been impoverished by the children's mothers.

'I'm poor - your mother took everything from me'

Esther's ex-husband has a career with high prestige and high income, yet Esther says that he has managed to convince his children that he is poor. Anne heard her ex-husband tell her daughters,

that I'd stolen everything from him - furniture. He worked but I didn't. I've got everything and he's got nothing. He played on the 'poor me' bit.

Sharon from Group A had a similar experience when her two daughters chose to live with their father, who had sexually abused them:

The whole time they were there, he wouldn't support them. I had to send them money. I think he threw out all of the stuff that they took with them - their bags, their clothes. I remember speaking to T on the phone one night and she said, 'Mum, I need some money for school right away'. And I said, 'ask your father'. And she said, 'Mum, Dad said you earn about six hundred dollars a week, and Dad can't afford it because he's buying a house. Dad's given you all this money anyway that you've got stashed somewhere, and it's all our money anyway'.

'Poor me - I need you to look after me, especially if you are female'

The men appeared to bond with their daughters in ways that set them up as replacement spouses, to look after them. The "poor me" strategy was a key part of this. The men tended to bond with their sons in different ways, where they joined around their common male-ness, with contempt for things female, particularly their sons' mothers. While I have used a separate category called *buying children*, it is important to keep in mind that the ways men did this tended to change with the child's gender, so that a daughter was treated in ways that cultivated her as a replacement spouse, while a son was treated in ways that reinforced male bonding.

Anne's daughters were told that their father had nothing:

He couldn't manage on his own. He had no furniture, he had no clothing, he didn't know how to do things, he didn't know how to cook, he didn't know how to clean. Poor Daddy, all by himself, all alone. You know, Mum's fine, she's got everything.

When Anne's elder daughter, Judy, moved to her father's house, she became like a replacement spouse, and did all the housework and cooking.

Nora commented to Bernadette that when she lived in her father's house "you were the housekeeper". And Bernadette reported that when she tried to leave her father's house, "everyone was against me, like, 'Don't leave Dad, he needs you'". Bernadette recognised that these were similar tactics to the ones used against her mother when she left.

Mary remembered that from the age of two, her father would threaten to commit suicide, and was:

going to jump off a cliff and take me with him, and I'd have to talk him out of it. He'd talk about the troubles with Mum. I was supposed to be magic and special. That's what Dad would tell me, and that I had to fix it up.

Ellen from Group B remembered that her father used to tell her that because things weren't working out with her mother, he would have to move out and into a caravan:

At that stage, even though I wanted the violence to stop, I didn't want him to actually move out, and I got upset. And he used that quite often as a way of - almost as a threat sort of thing, that he was going to move out into this caravan.

Jenny and Esther speak of their sons having to look after their fathers. Jenny believes:

What fuels a lot of this is that men get off the hook a lot, as women know. Everyone is supposed to look after men. Children and women are supposed to look after men. Even boy children are supposed to look after men, and definitely, my son has emotionally cared for [his father] - definitely.

Esther discovered years after her son moved to his father's house that her son's father:

had actually cried and begged him to live with him. It had just happened about three months after the maintenance went up from eighty dollars for the two children to two hundred and twenty dollars.

Since then, Esther has seen her son only a handful of times.

In Anne's and Sharon's cases, where there were only two girls in the family, both fathers managed eventually to successfully alienate their daughters from their mothers. Where there were boys and girls in a family, the father was more often successful in alienating his son than his daughter, perhaps because in these

cases the fathers used tactics of male bonding with their sons, which excluded their daughters.

Male bonding - with sons

Where there were girls and boys in the family, the boy was often singled out for special treatment by his father. This was usually based on their common maleness, which was reinforced by excluding and deriding female family members, particularly the mother. Esther talked about her ex-husband "working on" her children one by one to influence them to live with him. Her daughter, who was younger,

had to watch her father take out her older brother for years when he was trying to work on him...She didn't know why he never took her out, but he did all this male bonding to him to try and talk him into it first.

Esther believed that part of this male bonding was based on father and son laughing at her:

It got to the stage where he'd laugh at me with my son, like when I had to borrow an old car. My car was at the crash repairs. I could see him saying, 'Look at that hobo', and they both laughed at me. He told my son that I don't like boys or men - that I hate them. That was another thing to bond with him.

There was a smaller number of boys who had not been so alienated from their mothers, such as with Marilyn's son, Frank, where the father had had less

access to Frank, but is now seeking custody of him, and Jenny's son, who resisted his father's attempts to alienate him. In contrast, Carol's son, Peter, succumbed to his father's tactics, but recently appears to be resisting them to a greater extent.

What he did

'Buy' children - I've got much more to offer - more money, good time, no discipline

While the men pleaded poverty because their wives had 'taken everything' from them, they also offered bribes to their children, to gain their loyalty. This was a potent combination because it implied that while these men were poor, they were also generous, unlike the children's mothers, who were poor but were portrayed as "mean", and unwilling to buy special things for their children. Hannah talked about the impact of her ex-husband's buying things for his son:

One of the strategies was that he'd buy him things. He would abuse us for months, and then on a day of indefinable cause or whatever, he'd go out and buy Steve a Mercedes-Benz toy car. That would last for a day and a half, and then straight back to the violence.

Now, years later Steve lives with his father who is:

setting up this pad out the back in the shed. And when I say shed, it's a double garage on the beachfront. That beautiful unit on the beachfront, with an eighty-

five thousand dollar renovation being put in place in a month or two. So this is where the money is, you see, for Steve. And I read something [that Steve had written] in his school around how he now lives with his father. He's a lot happier, because 'when I was living with Mum we were poor'.

Carol described the competitiveness involved in her ex-husband's buying things for the children:

He's got more money and resources than me, so it's quite easy for him to lay on entertainment. It's like it's become a competition for who can lay on the best entertainment. He only does it so that he can stop Peter spending any hours at my place, not because he particularly wants to.

Peter went to live with his father at a time when Carol was "literally destitute":

I wasn't receiving any child support at all, and I was only working part-time...Financially, I just couldn't provide Peter with things like a go-cart and a sailing boat...I think Peter was just seduced by all the stuff that they had.

Anne describes her ex-husband's "bribing" of her daughters from the time of the separation:

He bought Cheryl everything she desired. From the very beginning [of the separation], Cheryl wanted, Cheryl got. Then it got to the stage that if Cheryl wanted to go out at night - didn't matter where she was going - she went. ...Now he allowed Cheryl at ten to go out to nightclubs - drinking, smoking, going half-dressed, make-up out of this world. If she wanted to dye her hair purple, he let

her dye her hair purple. In fact, he took her to the bus stations so she could get the train into town.

This was echoed by Esther's story of her son being "allowed to do whatever he wanted at his Dad's house". But, returning to Anne's account, while Cheryl got everything she asked for, her sister, Judy, who continued to live with Anne, was not given gifts, and always returned from access visits feeling sick and unhappy. But Anne believes her ex-husband:

must have started to see he was losing Judy, because Judy started going less and less to see him....That's when he started getting the gifts for Judy.....The more she sort of backed off, the more he had gifts.

Nora and her daughter Bernadette talked together about how Bernadette's father used to take Bernadette out to cafes, leaving Nora at home. Nora recognised that Bernadette was being treated as a replacement wife: "And it was like, who's he married to? Is it Bernadette?" Bernadette was not as aware of this and answered, "I just liked being taken out".

Marilyn from Group B spoke about her ex-husband's tactics with Frank, the youngest child, the only one still living with his mother. Marilyn described her ex-husband as a chess-player, who worked out his strategies in detail. When he began proceedings in the Family Court to have Frank live with him, he started to buy him things:

but of course, Frank could only have them if he went to their place..... and Frank, for instance, is absolutely besotted with his cars. And the last visit that he had with his Dad, his Dad sort of has kept his cars hostage, and refuses to return them. And he knows that that is, I mean, that if there's anything close to Frank's heart, it's all these little matchbox cars.

Another speaker in the group continued:

you would think that would actually have a reaction of alienating Frank against his Dad, but in a way, it's actually been incredibly strategic, because when Frank gets interviewed by an independent psychologist, Frank says he wants to go to his Dad's place, and then he tells his mother later, 'I just say that so I can go and get my cars back'. But it gets interpreted that Frank wants to see his Dad, wants to spend time with his Dad.

Dolores said:

I don't know for how long he was doing it, but every time the kids went there, my ex-husband would say to them, 'Come and live with me'. And he would promise them things, you know, 'You can have this'. They got a motor bike each. 'I'll take you motorbike riding all the time', 'I'll give you extra money', 'I'll take you out', 'you can have all sorts of things, I've got money - your mother's got no money. Come and live with me'.

Stop mother having contact with children

Marilyn found that when her two eldest children went to live with their father,

he never let them come back to see me....even though the court case has occurred. He just didn't let them go to the family therapist, which was going to enable the contact to resume.

Jenny found that her ex-husband,

wouldn't let me see them, and they wouldn't be there when I got there... I got a rented place, and I was trying to have the children come. I had rooms for them to come and stay. My daughter wouldn't ever come and stay with me. It amounted to the sum total of a year when I really hadn't seen her beyond just a glimpse at the door, and occasional moments with her, his power was so strong.

As for Jenny's son:

I also know that his father used really cruel tactics with him too. He would keep him from me at times when he was crying to come with me. His father would just laugh and not let him come with me.

Carol feels that stopping contact with her son is,

the most damaging thing that's happening now, because I think it's the time that you spend with your children is what they remember, and what you do during that time.

Carol's ex-husband managed to stop any contact for six months. She experiences these tactics as "relentless, ongoing", and points out that "there's just no respect or consideration given to the idea that that is the time Peter could

spend with his mother and sister". Peter's father would do things like arrange fishing or skiing trips at the time that Peter was due to have access with his mother. "On the day of hand-over, he takes Peter for a fishing trip, and they drive ten hours down the coast, so I just don't get him." This has been the pattern for every holiday for three years, so that Carol has not had Peter stay during the holidays, even though they have a court agreement that she is supposed to have him for half the time. This man used many ways of denying Carol access with her son. He would bring "crowds of teenagers to harass me at the hand-over". When Carol's parents went to pick Peter up when Carol had been in a car accident, he refused to allow Peter to go with them. Carol's ex-husband told her "I've got absolutely no interest in you having a relationship with Peter at all, and I don't intend to do anything at all to facilitate access - nothing".

Threaten or punish children who don't comply

Carol spoke about the ways her ex-husband punished his daughter for being loyal to her mother. This involved treating his two children "in a hugely differential way." For example, over Christmas four years before,

her brother had been given a two hundred and fifty dollar pair of roller blades, and she wasn't given anything. And she was told that she didn't visit often enough to warrant being given a Christmas present. At the same time, his new de facto wife was given a mountain bike, and her children were given presents, but he didn't give his own daughter anything. Last Christmas, a similar thing happened. He bought her a thirty dollar dress. Peter got another pair of two

hundred and fifty dollar roller blades, and everybody else in the house got another expensive present, except her.

Jenny sees her ex-husband's punishing attitude towards his children as keeping alive an "either-or choice" where they are forced to choose between him and their mother:

He has really made it conditional that if the kids want anything to do with me, they'll be punished for that. The minute my daughter came to live with me, all her privileges were revoked because - and she told me this - she had come to live with me. All sorts of things were withdrawn from her because she'd come to live with me...so he's really into conditional love.

Bernadette reported that her father threatened her with, "if you don't conform, I'm not going to pay your private school fees".

Marilyn's story illustrates how the father can influence his other children to punish their sibling. She said that her youngest child, Frank, asked her "what's the word traitor?" after having access with his brother and sister, who live with his father. After she told him what it meant, he explained that his older brother calls him a traitor. "His Dad tells him to say that. And Frank is now starting ... to think back on all these words that have been used on him, and asking me what they mean."

Mary remembered occasions when she was not compliant with her father's wishes, and he called her a betrayer. One of these times was when she was twelve, and it was two weeks before her mother had a baby. Her father was driving with Mary, her sister and mother in the car:

He was driving, speeding along and passing all these cars. He passed a whole line of cars in peak hour traffic - he just drove on the wrong side of the road, speeding along, and doing about one hundred and twenty miles an hour or something. I was looking at the gauge, and we were terrified. This car came, and there was no way we couldn't hit it. Dad veered off and the car went through a paddock. Mum was fast asleep because she had toxemia - she was really sick with the baby. She fell full on and hit her head and knees..... Dad made out something else had happened. He took us out and said, 'Don't you tell your mother what happened!'. And then he tried bribing us when we got to this store.... with all these fruits that we loved.

However, Mary told her mother what had happened. Her father reacted, saying to Mary:

'I'll never trust you, you're a betrayer'. He called me a Judas all sorts of things - he was really angry with me. He would have just had Mum think that out of thin air she'd gotten cut. She could have lost the baby or anything.

Hold out 'carrots'

Jenny describes her ex-husband's tactics that keep his children bound to him:

You can almost see him holding something up here and getting them to jump, and then he makes it that bit higher. ...I remember [my daughter] coming off the phone and crying to the point of dry retching over things that he'd done like that. Just what he used to do to me. He's an absolute skilled master of the mind games....True to those tactics, he just puts enough out there to keep you interested and think you might be getting something. He'll just be completely absent emotionally,...and just be punishing, so punishing all the time. But she holds open a door for the possibility of him being the Dad she would like him to be. If there's a shred of a suggestion that that's possible, in her heart of hearts, that's what her little girl self still wants. She wants that Dad.

Ellen described something similar in her brother's attachment to her father. "He always tried so hard to get on Dad's side, and Dad consistently treated my brother terribly." Dolores's son was treated in similar ways by his father, which appeared to bind him closer to his father.

Tell children to defy mother

All the mothers described this as a tactic of maternal alienation. Such tactics did not stop at portraying either parent in particular ways, but progressed the tactics into coaching children to replicate the violence and acts of disrespect carried out by the father. Telling the children to defy their mothers recruited them into participating in the abuse of their mothers. It appears to have encouraged in the children a sense of entitlement to abuse. I suggest that for some of the boys involved, this recruitment process became a rite of male initiation, and signified a part of their taking up what they consider to be their male prerogatives.

To escape the violence from her ex-husband once she had discovered that he had sexually abused their youngest child during access visits, Marilyn and her children stayed in a women's shelter, where her children began to calm down and feel safe without their father's influence. But her ex-husband applied to the Family Court, and the children were ordered to see their father. Marilyn describes what happened:

Within days [of seeing him again] they were saying that they wanted to go and live with Dad. That they didn't have to do anything that I told them to do. That anything that I told them to do they were going to do the exact opposite, and that's what Dad had organised for them to do. And that I wasn't to be trusted, and all those things. And then they started physically attacking me as well.

This campaign worked and the two older children went to live with their father, and Marilyn detailed the effects of his access with Frank, the youngest:

Frank was wetting the bed, had night terrors and everything all of the time whenever he was going over to see his father....And was telling me things the father's told him - that he has to live with Dad, that Dad's going to die soon, that Mum's mad, that - it's just pages and pages and pages of madness that Frank has been told to do to me - to say he hates me, and many other things.

Esther heard her ex-husband encourage his son who "would spit on me and not let me walk around the house". Her son would say "If you make me have a bath or shower this week, I'm going to live with my Dad." Dolores' ex-husband told her son, "You don't have to do anything [your mother] tells you to do. You can

do whatever you like to do. You're thirteen. She's got no right to tell you any more what to do".

Involve community, neighbours, her family, in denigration

Many of the women described a pattern of behaviour used against them by their ex-husbands to isolate them from family and friends. This appeared to be an extension of the campaign to alienate their children from them, and more often than not caused serious and long-lasting breaches between the women and their families. Community and family condemnation of these women appeared to prove to their children how blameworthy and contemptible their mothers were. Such condemnation bolstered their fathers' voices and authority by providing larger audiences of disapproval and blame of their mothers.

Anne's husband had little to do with her family while they were married, but Anne describes that after their separation:

I learned about all the different visits that [my father] and my ex-husband had had, and my brothers had all had - oh, they had parties, they did barbecues, they had dinners. They had a whale of a time!

Anne had enjoyed reasonable relationships with her family, but after this, "they completely turned on me. None of them have ever said I was abused. It's just me, I was wrong all the way through." But there was more than this:

The thing that hurt me the most was when I learnt, just after my father had died, that my ex-husband was having an affair with my sister...She was the only one left of all my family that believed in me.

Esther's explains that her ex-husband also "talked with my brother and sister and turned them against me". Before that he "didn't really like my sister or brother at all, but after the separation, he tried to become good friends. My brother is overseas most of the time. When he comes over to Australia, he visits my ex-husband and not me". Esther's brother told her "I've made the child abuse all up, and that I must hate men, and all this sort of thing".

Mothers, fathers and the privileging of some voices over others

The analysis of the interview material highlights many differences between the behaviours of mothers and fathers towards their children. The mothers in this study expressed their overriding concerns for their children, whilst simultaneously experiencing hurt and grief about the breakdown of their relationships with them. By contrast, the men spoken of in this study appear to their wives to use their relationships with their children as tools to punish and hurt their wives. They form exclusive relationships with their children that compete with other family relationships, particularly with relationships with mothers. McMahon refers to an argument put forward by Lyons to throw some light on these gender differences:

Lyons (1983) argues that individuals show a preference for using one of two distinct ways of describing the self in relation to others. Women, she notes, tend to define themselves in terms of connectedness with others; men more frequently use characterizations of a separate/objective self. Men and women seem able to employ either mode of self-definition but show a preference for one mode rather than the other. Interestingly, Lyons discovered that regardless of gender, individuals who described themselves primarily in terms of connectedness with others used an ethic of care and responsibility in making moral decisions. Those who describe themselves in separate/objective terms more often use an ethic of justice and rights in their moral thinking (McMahon, 1995, 26).

I would argue from the analysis of the material that this ethic of justice and rights also relates to competitive ways of being, that can be played out in men's relationships within families. Furthermore, that an ethic of justice and rights can manifest, with abusive men, in a belief in their entitlement to judge and punish, and to place themselves and their rights uppermost, regardless of the consequences to others. Men's rights movements in the last decades have certainly used this discourse of rights to gain more advantages for themselves. It could be that such a sense of entitlement in men who abuse adds one strand to the complex social web that privileges fathers' voices and perspectives over those of mothers.

Mothers who participated in McMahon's study spoke of their sense of a "distinct maternal identity and a distinct maternal consciousness" separate from simply a parental identity, and most certainly different from a paternal identity. They saw their male partners as not having undergone "the moral transformation of self

that was occasioned by the women's connectedness with their children. And not having undergone such a transformation, these men, as fathers, were considered by the women to be less responsible, less conscious of their children, or to some of the women, more selfish than were the mothers" McMahon, 1995, 261-2). These women's views of the differences between mothers and fathers are given further support by the findings of my research on maternal alienation.

The interview material certainly illustrated the general privileging of men's voices over those of mothers in children's understandings of, and loyalties to, their parents. Indeed, a recurring theme in the interviews is children's sense of loyalty to fathers over mothers, even when they acknowledge their father's abusiveness. For example, Anne's daughter, Judy, told her mother that she had started to see that her mother hadn't been solely to blame, and that her father had abused her mother, and she even saw ways in which he emotionally abused her as well. But, in Anne's words, "She still says her father is her father, and she loves her father because he's the only one she's got". Yet Judy had cut off all contact for years with the only mother she's got.

Ellen thought that her brother's tendency to side with his father related to the conditional nature of their father's love:

He knew that Mum's love was unconditional and wasn't at risk, but Dad's was. So he could alienate himself from Mum and blame Mum...but he can't blame

Dad totally, because, jeez, if you do that, my Dad's just a bastard and doesn't love me...maybe it's easier to blame the person who isn't really the perpetrator.

Another group participant added, "kids know what their Dad is capable of, and they are frightened".

Images of mothers

The picture that emerges of these women as mothers shows them consistently putting their own wishes second to their wish to do the best thing for their children. One would think that these women might have reacted to their ex-husbands' abuse by undermining their children's relationships with their fathers. In fact, the opposite seems to be the case. Esther said her ex-husband:

always said that I'd influenced them while they were with me, but he never thought he'd influenced them. I said I haven't got the skills at influencing people, and I haven't tried to - I think it's good for them to see both parents.

One might also think that these mothers might react to the hurtful behaviour of their children by withdrawing from them and punishing them. This also was not the case with the women in this study. When Dolores' son decided to live with his father, Dolores,

packed him up, and I sent him there the next day, which was the hardest thing I've ever done. I took him there, I gave him a hug, and I said, 'Don't let him turn you against me. Make sure you talk to me. Make sure I get to see you'. That

was really hard. For months it was so hard, because every time I saw him, he was with a member of my ex-husband's family.



Hannah is aware that in order to see her son, she has to stay connected to his father. "And that's really alienating, if I've got to swallow the stuff that he does to keep my connection with my son."

Esther, like the other mothers in the study, talked about her grief at losing her child:

These mothering feelings that you have - he was really special to me...I've got all the memories of when he was a baby...We were really close to each other. I don't think we're ever going to be close again...I used to do everything possible for my children, and then it's like they don't want to know you.

When Anne spoke in the interview about her younger daughter turning against her twelve years earlier, and looking "with such hatred in her eyes", we had to interrupt the interview because she was so upset. When we resumed, she described her reaction to losing her daughter. "I started banging my head against the cupboards, and I would have kept on doing that until I killed myself." Anne said she "would have suicided" if it hadn't been for some friends who stayed with her for several days. However, still "there is that huge hole in my life, which, to this very day, has not gone away, really".

Such reactions of grief appear to re-affirm McMahon's statement about her research with mothers: "I felt almost haunted by the data, which repeatedly pointed to the tremendous significance of children and motherhood in women's lives" (1995, 6). She explains this as "*motherhood as personal character and relationship* that was central to participants' identities" (273).

While motherhood may be central to the identity of many mothers, the mothers in my research did not place themselves centrally in their children's lives, and neither were their contributions to their children's lives highly valued within or outside families. Mary explained that her mother, like the other mothers in this study, did not highlight her part in things, did not claim centre stage, and nobody else acknowledged her contributions to her family's well-being, or her gifts or talents. Mary wondered if this was one reason her memories of her mother had become lost to her:

I don't know why it is Mum didn't figure into those things, but she'd initiated lots of adventure things and that, but never claimed fame or boasted about anything, I suppose....things seemed like they just happened when Mum did them.

This lack of acknowledgement of mothers' contributions sits oddly with children's beliefs that their mothers can - or should - magically fix them up and keep them safe, and that mothers always know what is happening to their children. Dolores believed that her mother must have known that she had been sexually abused, and blamed her for doing nothing. It was only during the interview that she

started to understand how her step-father's story about her to her mother had put a wedge between her and her mother, causing such misunderstanding between them. Mary had a similar idea that her mother should know, and explained that her mother's not knowing about her abuse was one of the reasons she hated her mother:

Part of it, I think, is that she couldn't save me. I used to do things like hide in the cupboard from a young age. I would just beg and beg silently - plead and plead - for her to find me....It was like, if she cared, if she loved me enough, she'd know the truth, and not what they say.

When Mary realised that her mother's positive contributions to her life had remained unacknowledged, Mary re-examined her anger towards her mother for not stopping the abuse perpetrated by Mary's uncle, and not "fixing" Mary's pain:

I'd always be wanting her to stop it, but I didn't know how or what. Most of the time it was just the thinking that maybe she could magically stop it, I don't know, do something about it, but then, I suppose, feeling hopeless that she could because she did go to the police. She did take us to see people.

It was during the interview that Mary remembered that her mother had done many things to try to stop her uncle's abuse - it was the professional workers and institutions that had let Mary down. Perhaps maternal alienation not only obscures fathers' abusiveness in families, but also systemic abuse.

Mary's anger at her mother for not stopping the pain and her uncle's abuse, had its counterpart in the mothers' accounts of being continually blamed for all sorts of things. Therefore, I have included mother blame in this section on images of mothers, for one cannot consider discourses of mothering without acknowledging the powerful discourses of mother "guilt". Within the interviews, all the mothers spoke at length of their experiences of blame from most people, and of how this contributed to their self-blame for most things, including the breakdown of their relationships with their children. One example of this was given by Anne:

At that time I did blame myself for everything , because everybody had told me I was to blame. I was bad....My husband had told me I was bad for sixteen years that we were married. He told me I was bad afterwards. ...My doctors were telling me that I was bad - it was all stress and I've got to pull myself together....My children - one had gone quiet and was getting sick. I thought, well, I'm to blame here, too. The neighbours were all saying, 'Well, what have you done? You've done something, your'e to blame'. My in-laws were saying the same thing. At that time my mother was blaming me. I was doing wrong. My father definitely blamed me.

Anne found that her father and her family all dismissed her as mad, and like her mother. During counselling at the Women's Health Centre, Anne had begun to re-evaluate her relationship with her mother, whom she had previously seen as contemptible. In the interview she spoke about the process of coming to understand how she had seen her mother in this way:

My father blamed my mother completely. Yes, oh yes. He took her to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist said she's mad....We were always told it was Mum. The marriage problems Mum and Dad had, and the way Mum was, was always Mum...it was all Mum's fault, because that's what Dad had told us.

Images of fathers

In contrast to the images of mothers, fathers emerge from this study as vengeful and punishing, self-righteous, centred around having others gratify their needs, competitive to the point of using their children as instruments to punish their wives, and as not being expected or prepared to demonstrate responsibility in relationships. Most of the women said that while their ex-husbands tried to get their children to live with them, they didn't want to look after them themselves. Dolores said, "My ex-husband works from like six o'clock in the morning 'til ten o'clock at night, so he never saw him. I could never understand why he insisted on having him". Esther's ex-husband also didn't want to mind his children himself, but she believes he wanted the children in order to punish her, and to be "the winner". She said,

He had a wife already ready to mind them. He wanted to work full-time. There's no way he'd ever not do that, but I think he wanted to hurt me, largely. He wanted to be the winner. He's quite competitive. The first year [after we separated], if I took the kids to something, he'd take them to the same thing the next weekend.

Hannah spoke of how she had been left to discipline her son, because for her ex-husband, their son, "was a thing, so the idea of disciplining him wasn't a thought", but he would abuse him in various ways:

so when Steve, my son, does something that's not fitting with what ex sees as okay, particularly around material possessions, it's incredible - the nastiness and the hatred and the very bad violence that ends up in hitting.

His father would then buy him things, and "that was his fathering - that was it". Dolores commented on her son becoming "more like his father every day". And because she was "the only person that disciplined, you know, made the rules", her son sneered at her. Carol points out the differences between her mothering and her ex-husband's fathering:

With him there are no expectations that you do much. If you do your homework, you've done it. If you don't you haven't. Whereas, I expected Peter to have structure and discipline in his life....[So Peter concludes that] stay with Mum and it's boring and you have to behave yourself or go to Dad's house and there's loads of money and you don't have to do anything.

Perhaps this permissiveness that the mothers noted could be seen as an easygoing approach. However, such a reading of this behaviour is at odds with the men's punishing approach to their ex-wives and to children who do not comply. Carol tried to understand her ex-husband's behaviour:

I think he was just so angry. And he's still a very angry person, and he's just still hell-bent on punishing me...He's formed a new relationship, so it's really time he forgot about me and got on with his own life. [She believed this was] about him wanting to be the father figure and the more powerful person. He's got very entrenched male, really sexist views about the role of the man and the woman in a marriage. I think he definitely wanted to get the message across to the children that he was the boss...He was definitely a competitive person.

To the world, these men appear at a great advantage to their ex-wives, as some of the women point out. Hannah spoke of her ex-husband as always looking good, never showing a wrinkle, as though his violence nourished him, while she showed the effects of his violence, and was judged by the world for it. Anne describes what happened when she went to two sessions of counselling at the Family Court:

my ex-husband put his story very well forward. Very calm - he was always very calm. To the outside world he was very calm, very polite, a very gentle, nice man, good to his kids. Couldn't understand what was going on.

Group B discussed whether or not the men who had perpetrated abuse against them while blaming them, really believed their own propaganda. One speaker said,

My ex-husband truly, really, honestly believes everything. He's even to the point of believing that he left me. Now he's in the bloody house, isn't he? He's in the house with the kids. Who left who type of thing?

Ellen responded with,

My Dad, he used to go on and on and on about it being Mum's fault, my fault, my brother's fault, whatever, and stayed on that tangent of convincing himself of the situation.... And then, I remember when I had left on one occasion when I was twenty-one, or twenty, he admitted to me then that he knew all along that he was lying. And he didn't say this in front of Mum, unfortunately, but he admitted that he knew exactly what he was doing every step of the way, and admitted complete, one hundred per cent fault.

Esther said that her ex-husband said to her, "I've always admired psychopaths because they never feel guilt".

This 'father doesn't take responsibility' theme is the other side of the 'mother is to blame' picture. Dolores believes that her son, James, thinks his father is being reasonable when:

he tells the kids ...that all he has to do, by law, is pay maintenance. He doesn't have to see them, and he doesn't have to talk to them. He only has to provide for them. That's all his father has to do and that's fine.

When a father goes further than this, he can earn a lot of applause. Dolores talked about her step-father who had sexually abused her and her sister, "but everyone in my family thought he was just the most wonderful person, you know, taking on a woman and her two children and 'isn't he wonderful'." Dolores believed that this adulation, as well as the stories her step-father wove about

her, made it impossible for her mother to believe he could abuse her two daughters.

One cannot do justice to a discussion of images of fathers without acknowledging the many ways that fathers' ways of being, presences and voices are privileged over mothers' presences and voices. Mary spoke about this aspect of her relationships with her father:

He'd make out he was always this hero. Mum just didn't figure herself into anything. She just went into the background or something. Probably because I did feel safe with her, and it was something that you didn't have to think about. You didn't have to think about how you could feel safe. I did with Dad, because I'd be terrified when I went in the car with him that we were going to end up on a cliff somewhere, and suddenly I'd have to be talking him out of killing himself to save his life and my life. But then he'd call me a hero - 'You're magic' - sort of praise me up, and then being really sorry and buying me off.

But her father wasn't just a hero. He was a potent mix of victim and hero, as Mary explains, and this bound his children to him:

All of us were on a quest to save his life - except we didn't know it....Maybe I did know that he wasn't the hero. But we all knew what we had to do so that he wouldn't get upset, or he wouldn't get angry. We all had our little script, our role.

Privileging of men's voices

Mary reflects on how she saw both her parents:

When I think about it, my father wasn't around very much at all, yet it feels like he was always there. My mother was always there, and it feels like we never knew my mother. It was like Mum was housekeeper, or some ethereal something wafting around, that I didn't know at all until my father died...None of it makes sense.

Mary felt that her memories of her mother's place in her life had become concealed. "I have to dig really hard to retrieve the memories, and as I do I can remember lots of things." She then recounted some of these retrieved memories of the time after her father died when they had been very poor, yet her mother had been loving and fun. "She'd make fun out of anything - make something funny...And how even without money, it didn't feel like we were poor...Mum would try hard to make things special".

Mary's experience was that the privileging of her father's voice and point of view robbed her of a knowledge of her mother's presence in her life. Yet the memories of her mother began to come back to her when she had untangled the burdensome demands of her father, and identified some of the strategies he used to undermine her relationship with her mother. Mary felt strongly that the greatest tragedy of her life was not the horrific sexual abuse she had suffered from her uncle, but the stealing of her relationship with her mother. She felt this

had been done by the many tactics used by her father to recruit her into beliefs that her mother was contemptible.

Mary's experience may fill in the unknown aspects of alienation for the mothers in this study. They knew that their voices and viewpoints were rarely taken seriously within their families. For example, Dolores noticed that her son "never takes up my view, my side, never". Anne talked about seeking some support from her father after she left her marriage, because "when I was younger, we were friends". Her father visited her during one of the few access visits Anne had with Cheryl, in which Cheryl "was aggressive, very abusive to me basically....And all my father says is.... I'm doing it all wrong.... He couldn't see what my ex-husband was doing wrong".

The women's stories also suggest that this privileging of men's voices in families mirrors its occurrence in the broader society and within systems. All the women interviewed spoke of their experiences with counsellors, doctors, schools and the Family Court in relation to the alienation of their children and their ex-husbands' attempts to gain greater control over their children. In all cases, the women spoke of these systems affording greater credibility to their husbands than themselves. For example, Esther explained how abuse and maternal alienation "are hidden in our society, and someone might see a woman who looks a bit unconfident, and they don't know what terrible things they've gone through....

The person who's got a full-time job and is most well-known in the community, their voice is often the one that's believed".

McMahon's observation that "mothers are no longer portrayed as self-sacrificing and all-loving but as untrustworthy or potential enemies of their children" (1995, 190), positions mothers in a no-win situation within both social discourses and families. Ironically, their words and actions of care for their children become invisible or are re-interpreted to fit within this discourse, while fathers' manipulation of their children's love and loyalty, to further abuse these women, remains unseen.

Chapter Six

Some Conclusions

"The social and cultural framework in which we act and contemplate is, in a multiplicity of complex ways, also a power-coded framework."

(Lundgren, 1998, 170)

This study was designed to identify and describe the phenomenon whereby male perpetrators of abuse alienate children from their mothers, who are or have been the partners of the men. In this study, all the mothers interviewed had been married to the men who alienated their children from them. While the women interviewed were very aware of the alienation that had occurred, a review of the relevant literature found that this area of abuse of women and children had only rarely been documented and had not been named, meaning that it was virtually invisible. I developed the term *maternal alienation* to identify this phenomenon, and explored its characteristics in nine interviews with women and two focus groups.

In particular, women described the strategies that were used by their husbands (or fathers/abusers for the participating adult survivors of abuse) to divide children from mothers. These detailed descriptions established that men deliberately set out to alienate children from their mothers, using a web of words

and actions that both demean the women and elevate themselves to their children, as well as to the surrounding community, including systems such as the Family Court. The strategies they use are consistent with research findings that men's violence is "functional, intentional and patterned" (Dobash & Dobash, 1998, 141) and can be "motivated by a desire to silence their partners; to punish them for their failure as 'good wives'; and to achieve and maintain dominance over these women" as well as intending to hurt and frighten them (Ptacek, 1988, 150-1). The women interviewed all believed their ex-husbands used maternal alienation as a way of punishing them, of exercising control over their families, and of winning at all costs.

Researchers have also identified the assault on a woman's feminine identity as characteristic of violence against women. This was a potent strategy used in all cases of alienation described in the study, where the men turned their wives into objects of revulsion and disgust, by name-calling about their femininity (such as saying "you're on the rags", or calling her "the bitch" to her children). Furthermore, women who are mothers tend to have a strongly invested sense of identity and self-worth related to being a mother, which makes mothering an easy target for men who wish to injure and punish and inflict a further "assault on her identity as a woman" (Ptacek, 1988, 147).

As well as using blame and insults that denigrated the mothers, the men used strategies that elevated themselves in certain ways. They emerged from their

self-portrayals as victim/heroes, wielding a potent mix of unpredictable and punishing behaviour with a refusal to accept responsibility and a need for sympathy. All the men spoke of themselves as victims whose 'rights' or property had been abused, and who needed support from their children - support (they said) that had been denied them by their wives. The men appeared to bond with their daughters in ways that set them up as replacement spouses, to look after them. They tended to bond with their sons around their common male-ness, with contempt for things female, particularly their sons' mothers.

Both the women's experiences with families, communities and systems/institutions, and the literature on mothers and mothering, speak of extensive and pervasive mother blaming, that acts to scrutinise, criticise and regulate mothers, while deflecting attention and responsibility away from men and fathers. This thesis, in identifying the structural factors involved in maternal alienation, opens the way for further research into the manner in which professional discourses and practice reproduce and support maternal alienation.

Freer commented on mother blaming in sexual abuse, where "the blaming and misunderstanding of these women was in direct contrast to the invisibility of the responsibility attributed to the men who perpetrate abuse" 1995, 77). Mother blaming was found to be an integral part of maternal alienation, and because of its pervasiveness within societal discourses, it easily escapes recognition in personal relationships. This could be understood as "normalisation of violence"

which Lundgren explains is "how violence is seen, justified, and experienced as 'normal' and/or 'acceptable' behavior in the life of a man and a woman" (1998, 170).

This research has found that men deliberately use their children as tools to punish their wives; that far from these families being sites of collaborative relationships based on trust and care, they are sites in which care – demonstrated by all the mothers in this study - is wilfully destroyed by fathers who compete for their children's loyalties and who put their own needs uppermost. In alienating their children from their mothers, the fathers in this study competed with their wives and ex-wives for their children's exclusive affection and loyalty, by breaking down the mother-child relationship. Children who remained loyal to their mothers were punished by these men.

These findings challenge dominant myths that the nuclear heterosexual families of late twentieth century Western society are generally healthy places for individuals, bestowing social and mental health on individual family members; that they are sites in which care for all family members is generated beneficently by both parents; and that collaborative relationships are characteristic of nuclear families. From these findings, the family appears as a site within which children are coached in the replication of prevailing discourses. As Robinson and Robinson explain it: "Relationships are both the targets, and perpetuative agents, of discourses. Familial alliances are particularly strong conduits of

myths of gender, right and wrong, obligation and ambition" (Robinson & Robinson, 1998 64).

Some of the strategies used by the men in maternal alienation coached children not only to see their mothers in particular ways, but also to replicate the violence and acts of disrespect carried out by the father, by participating in the abuse of their mothers. For some of the boys involved, this recruitment process appeared to act as a rite of male initiation, a part of their claiming of their male entitlements. This linking of maternal alienation with adolescent violence to mothers is a possible area of future research.

Within the process of maternal alienation, women's voices, their presence and their contributions to their families, are not only ignored but are re-constructed by both male voices and professional voices, both of which are almost exclusively mother blaming and denigrating of women. Thus we can understand maternal alienation as built on powerful and secure foundations: the privileging of the male voice, and the pervasive socio-cultural discourses of mother blaming. These processes, that protect dominant masculinity from scrutiny and criticism, appear to mirror those that operate to protect male offenders in the child sexual abuse field, subjugating knowledge of male abuse. As Humphreys describes, "the micro-practices of predominantly male offenders, which frequently involve the undermining and blaming of the child's mother...are reflected in parallel practices at an institutional level. This indicates the wider circulation of powerful

beliefs and practices that perpetuate oppressive behaviour towards women and children more generally" (Humphreys, 1999, 43-4).

While mothers are consistently and persistently constructed as malicious, manipulative, vengeful, as, for example, in family court cases in Australia, UK, Canada and US, men, despite the ongoing evidence of male violence and of malicious and manipulative acts by men, are just as consistently portrayed as safe and respectable. This study of maternal alienation can offer some insights and detail on the process of how children are initiated into the "power-coded" gender relationships that are shaped and supported by our social and cultural frameworks.

The women who participated in this study reported that it was important for them to name maternal alienation, and identify and understand the strategies that were used in alienation, strategies that had been invisible until they were described. For the daughters involved in the research, this understanding of the strategies that had been used to alienate them from their mothers allowed them to reclaim their own memories and knowledges that had been subjugated by the stronger voices of their fathers. They also began to reclaim their relationships with their mothers, and to reframe their understandings of the abuse they had suffered. The women's experience that naming maternal alienation allowed alternative knowledges to become available to them, relate to Kelly's finding that experiences of abuse become lost to women when there are not appropriate

words and definitions available to them. Kelly points out that while the process of remembering and naming abuse can be distressing for women, "redefining what they have experienced often enables them to remember more of the abuse", and to "focus on and validate their own feelings and reactions" (1988, 128). For one of the women in the study, her reframing of her relationship with her mother meant that she saw the loss of her relationship with her mother as the greatest tragedy of her life, overshadowing even the horrendous sexual abuse she had suffered from her uncle. In reclaiming loving memories of her mother, she also reclaimed a knowledge that she was loved and was lovable and worthwhile, and reclaimed knowledges and memories of her abuse that acknowledged her own experiences, not the victim-blaming, mother-blaming, abuse-denying versions of the perpetrator that had been privileged over any others.

The interviews and review of the literature undertaken for this study demonstrate that not only children and communities, but also systems and professionals, do not generally challenge this power of the male voice, but more often than not, bolster it. However, if we want to work to restore loving and respectful relations between mothers and their children, we need to understand and begin to de-construct the powerful ideologies of mothering, and mother blame, and destabilise the privileged status of the male voice in women's lives. As a mother and daughter have written, "Not only do mothers and daughters struggle with myths which emphasize the independence so stressed in western cultures, dividing [mothers] from children, but they must

also negotiate myths which set them against each other, enforcing internal misogyny, and undermining a potentially powerful alliance" (Robinson & Robinson, 1998, 64). The women I have interviewed are asking that, as members of a society complicit in these beliefs and practices, we all do this work of negotiating and struggling with these myths, of challenging the pervasive presence of mother blaming within them, and that we make "loud spaces", as Mary Freer (1997, 5) expresses it, "where women's voices", and their experiences, "can be heard".

Appendix 1



THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

Department of Social Inquiry

Womens Studies - Labour Studies

Participant Information Sheet

My name is Anne Morris. I am undertaking a research project both in my capacity as Community Health Worker at Northern Women's Community Health Centre, and as part of my Masters degree in the Women's Studies Department of the University of Adelaide.

This project is to explore women's experiences of being alienated from their children by tactics used in abuse, and to also explore the ways in which professionals and others have responded to this. I will be speaking with six women who, as mothers, have been through these experiences, and a further six survivors of abuse in childhood, in interviews lasting about an hour. The first interview may be followed up by a further interview. These interviews will provide an opportunity for you to reflect on these experiences, and decide if you wish to participate in a follow-up project arising from this research.

The study is completely confidential, so your real name would not be used in a write-up of the research, and what you say will not be reported in a way that would identify you or anybody who you mention.

If you would like to participate in this study, we will organise a time and place that is convenient to you. The meeting would take about an hour, and would be more like a conversation than a formal interview.

I would like to tape your conversation if that is okay with you. The tape would then be transcribed, your name changed, and the tape erased. However, if you do not want the interview taped, I am happy to take notes instead. If you wish to check a copy of my notes before I use them, then please indicate this on the consent form.

If you decide to participate in the study, you are free to change your mind and withdraw at any time. Also you are not obliged to answer questions or discuss any issues that you do not wish to discuss. You may withdraw your interview material up until the time I have finished all the interviews. You do not have to give me any reason if you decide to withdraw from the study.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you want to discuss any of this further. If you would rather speak to my supervisors, you could speak to Heather Gale (Co-ordinator of Northern Women's) or Dr Margie Ripper of the Department of Social Inquiry.

If you find that talking about these issues brings up some distress for you, I can organise some follow-up counselling for you.

Looking forward to hearing from you about this,

Yours sincerely,

Anne Morris

Appendix 2



THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

Department of Social Inquiry

Womens Studies - Labour Studies

Study of experiences of alienation between mothers and children in cases of abuse

Consent Form for Research undertaken by Anne Morris as part of her Masters of Arts (Women's Studies) Degree at the University of Adelaide, and as part of a project at Northern Women's Community Health Centre.

I (print your name)have been provided with a description of the aims and purpose of this research. I give my permission for this interview with Anne Morris of the University of Adelaide and Northern Women's Community Health Centre.

I understand that my name will not be connected with any information that I provide, and that Anne Morris will create a pseudonym to identify me. Neither will the identity of any person or institution I name be revealed in connection with this interview (unless the information I give about the person or institution is already publicly known).

☐ I do not wish the interview to be tape recorded.

☐ I agree to have the interview tape recorded.

I am aware that my participation is completely voluntary and that:

- I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, and that I do not have to give reasons to justify doing so.
- I can withdraw the information that I provide any time during the information-gathering stage of the study.
- I am under no obligation to divulge information or to discuss issues if I do not wish to do so.

I understand that Anne Morris will provide me with information about the results of the research if I so desire.

Please indicate below whether you wish to check the transcript before it is used, and whether you would like information about the results of the study (circle as appropriate):

YES/NO I DO/DO NOT wish to check the transcript.

YES/NO I DO/DO NOT wish to receive information about the results of the study.

If you answered YES to either of the above, please provide a postal address.

.....(Street)

.....(Suburb/Town).....(Postcode)

.....(Telephone numbers)

Signed: (Participant)

Signed: (Interviewer)Date:.....

University of Adelaide, South Australia 5005

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