Optimising the “spaces in-between”
The maternal alienation project and the politics of gender in macro and micro contexts

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Discipline of Gender, Work and Social Inquiry, School of Social Sciences

University of Adelaide

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain any 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 made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the conditions of the Copyright Act 1968.

______________________________  _____________________________
Anne Morris          Date
Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements are due to the Northern Metropolitan Community Health Service and Women’s Health Statewide, who funded the Maternal Alienation Project. Many other organisations and individuals participated in the project, and richly contributed to its outcomes. As well as acknowledging the members of the Advisory Group, and the Reference Group, I warmly thank the participants in the two Working Groups, representatives from the Central Violence Intervention Program, the Northern Violence Intervention Program, and the metropolitan Women’s Community Health Centres (Women’s Health Statewide, Dale Street, Southern Women’s Health Centre, and Northern Women’s Community Health Centre). Thank you all for your collegiality and friendship, generosity of spirit, hard work and – yes, the fun!

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I wish once again to warmly thank the women who participated in the initial research project in 1999. The PhD evolved from your wishes to see positive change.

I want to give particular acknowledgement to my family and friends who provided strong encouragement throughout the project and PhD, and participated in many helpful conversations over these years.

This research has made me so much more appreciative of my own family. It is to my family, and my partner, that I dedicate this thesis, with gratitude and love.
# List of abbreviations

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<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<td>CAMHS</td>
<td>Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service</td>
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<td>CEO</td>
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<td>CRC</td>
<td>Convention on the Rights of the Child</td>
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<td>CSAWG</td>
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<td>CVIP</td>
<td>Central Violence Intervention Program</td>
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<td>DHS</td>
<td>Department of Human Services</td>
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<td>DV</td>
<td>Domestic Violence</td>
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<td>DVWG</td>
<td>Domestic Violence Working Group</td>
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<td>FAYS</td>
<td>Family and Youth Service</td>
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<td>FROs</td>
<td>Fathers’ Rights Organisations</td>
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<td>IVAWS</td>
<td>International Violence Against Women Survey</td>
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<td>MAP</td>
<td>Maternal Alienation Project</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Government Organisation</td>
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<td>NMCHS</td>
<td>Northern Metropolitan Community Health Service</td>
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<td>NVIP</td>
<td>Northern Violence Intervention Program</td>
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<td>PAS</td>
<td>Parental Alienation Syndrome</td>
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<td>PSS</td>
<td>Personal Safety Survey</td>
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<td>RHF</td>
<td>Richard Hillman Foundation</td>
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Thesis summary

The centrepoint of this thesis is an action research project, the Maternal Alienation Project (MAP), implemented during 2002 and 2003 in Adelaide, South Australia. Resourced by two government-funded community health services, it was established to improve organisations’ (health, welfare and legal) and systems’ responses to the newly termed ‘maternal alienation’. MAP was situated within a tradition of feminist participatory and action research. It was designed to work on three levels: practice, systems and policy-making, and research. The outcomes, processes and events of MAP at the different levels of its operation are examined in the thesis through the employment of a gendered analysis drawn mainly from materialist feminism and standpoint theories. Post-project interviews and focus groups provided further data to the fieldnotes written throughout MAP, and the project’s formal and informal documents.

A recent example of a contested gendered concept, “maternal alienation” was first identified and named in 1999 as a component of gender violence (Morris 1999). It forms part of a spectrum of violence perpetrated in households, and had been identified within domestic violence and child sexual abuse. It is a term for the range of tactics used by mainly male perpetrators, predominantly the mothers’ intimate partners and the children’s fathers or step-fathers, to deliberately undermine the relationship between mothers and their children. The mother-blaming discourses and degrading constructions of mothers conveyed to children and those in the family’s orbit are strongly related to wider socio-cultural constructions of women and mothers.

The thesis examines theories of gender, gendered organisations and gender violence. It develops the concept of an abusive household gender regime, characterised by perpetrators’ imposition of a coercive and abusive regime on household members, and particular patternings of gendered relations. Comparisons are made between household and organisational gender regimes, which are also viewed in relation to the local gender order at the time of MAP. It was found that services that lack an analysis of gender are likely to re-inscribe the dynamics of maternal alienation in their responses to families.

Language was found to play a significant part in addressing maternal alienation, particularly in developing congruence between language and women’s and children’s “lived” experiences. The principles that were developed were founded on supporting mothers and rebuilding their relationships with children, and making visible the tactics employed by perpetrators, thereby reducing their power to coerce and increasing their accountability.
The concept of maternal alienation and MAP itself were attacked by a coalition of men’s rights and Christian Right lobbyists. This compromised the operations of MAP, and of its key supporters, managers of feminist and gender-aware organisations. In many ways these attacks, played out at a macro level, reflected the techniques and dynamics of maternal alienation at a micro level.

This thesis raises questions about the strategies that feminist organisations need to develop to more effectively pursue feminist agendas, and to re-invigorate a women’s movement.
Optimising the “spaces in-between”

The maternal alienation project
and the politics of gender in macro and micro contexts
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The pivot of this thesis is an action research project entitled the Maternal Alienation Project (MAP), which was implemented from August 2002 until July 2003 in Adelaide, South Australia. Funded by two community health services, Women’s Health Statewide and Northern Metropolitan Community Health Service, it was established to extend knowledge of a newly recognised dimension of gendered violence termed “maternal alienation”, and to improve systems’ responses in dealing with maternal alienation. As an action research project, MAP was situated within a tradition of feminist participatory and action research.

Maternal alienation was first identified and named in 1999 as a component of gender violence (Morris 1999). It was found to form part of a spectrum of violence perpetrated in households, and had been identified within both domestic violence and child sexual abuse. It is a term for the range of tactics used by mainly male perpetrators to deliberately undermine and destroy the relationship between mothers and their children. The term also refers to the profound and often lasting alienation created in the relationships between mothers and their children by the use of those strategies.

The initial research on maternal alienation (Morris 1999) was based on individual interviews and focus groups with women who had become alienated from their children, and sometimes also from their mothers (as daughters), in a context of male violence in the family. In addition to identifying a repertoire of strategies typically used to undermine mother-child relationships, this initial research documented their devastating effects on women and children. The alienators in this study were predominantly the mothers’ intimate partners, the children’s fathers or step-fathers. Mainly a form of emotional abuse, maternal alienation simultaneously targets women and children. However the degrading constructions of mothers conveyed to children and to others within the family’s orbit are inextricably related to wider socio-cultural constructions of women and mothers. These negative stereotypes of mothers were
paralleled by the positive co-constructions that perpetrators (usually fathers) created of themselves and of fathers in general, in the process of undermining mothers. These also invoked constructions of fathers existing at a macro level.

The initial research also demonstrated that mainstream services, particularly child protection services and the family court, appeared to be influenced by wider dominant discourses about mothers and fathers, and unwittingly re-inscribed maternal alienation in their responses to families. Thus, it was found that while maternal alienation occurs within the micro worlds of families and households, it has resonances with the macro social order, which are activated through the practices of organisations. These, like the MAP itself, operate within intermediary areas between macro and micro social worlds.

The connections between micro processes of abuse in intimate family groups and macro socio-cultural beliefs and attitudes, which were identified in the 1999 study, influenced the design of the subsequent MAP and in turn, of this thesis. MAP’s design derived from a feminist analytic framework, which recognises that the perpetuation of violence against women is founded on deep and pervasive cultural beliefs and attitudes, which are embedded within hierarchical gendered power structures. This implies that attempts to address gender violence should engage with these beliefs and structures at a number of levels. MAP was thus designed to cover three intersecting spheres of engagement: the arena of practice, in which principles of practice were developed for use within organisations to respond to mothers and children who had experienced maternal alienation; the systems arena, which sought to engage policy-makers, government departmental officials and directors of services in collaborative, intersectoral work to improve systems’ responses to maternal alienation; and a scholarly theoretical component, which largely comprised the doctoral research.

As MAP’s project officer I was employed three days a week for eleven months. I was simultaneously researcher, enrolled in a PhD program in Gender Studies at the University of Adelaide, and thus it was decided that my PhD principal supervisor would join MAP’s two funders to become the third “partner” in MAP’s auspicing
group. Although the research component of MAP was designed to be integral to its activities to effect emancipatory change – in the tradition of feminist participatory and action research – the research aspect was not funded within MAP.

While MAP’s two funders, Women’s Health Statewide and Northern Metropolitan Community Health Service, were both founded on feminist principles and an acknowledgement of gender as a determinant of health outcomes, the project also invited representation from mainstream organisations from a number of sectors. Thus MAP included representatives from community and women’s health, the domestic violence sector, statutory child protection services, the Family Court of Australia, Attorney-General’s Department and family and children’s services.

In bringing together organisations and sectors with varying purposes and values, the “spaces in-between” these differences became salient. These were spaces in which divergent and sometimes contradictory paradigms became evident. The spaces in-between offered challenging as well as fresh and creative perspectives, and utilising them became a significant aspect of MAP’s processes.

Within MAP’s practice sphere, two working groups of practitioners used participatory and reflective processes to critically examine their values and develop principles for effective practice responses to women and children who had been alienated from one another. This arena also included professional training for workers from a range of organisations and sectors in Adelaide. The systems sphere attempted to engage with wider organisational change and policy-making through its reference group, consisting of managers, directors of services and policy officers from several sectors. The research element was invoked throughout by the interactive employment of scholarly reflection, reading and writing, and action. This involved initiating emancipatory change by employing the reflective spiral characteristic of action research: planning, action, observing, reflecting and re-planning (Altrichter et al. 1991; Cherry 1999). After MAP concluded, interviews were conducted with individuals and groups that had been connected to the project. Thus the research and analytical engagement with MAP extended beyond its duration.
MAP operated in-between polarities, engaging with the micro worlds of intimate relations and households, and the macro arena of Australian and South Australian public policies and institutional practices, and the gender politics played out in political and public arenas. In raising the gendered issue of maternal alienation from its occurrence in intimate contexts to consideration at a more global level, the project attracted a range of responses from institutions and lobbyists. In a way that none of its participants could have predicted, MAP became a platform upon which the “recuperative” gendered dynamics specific to that time and place were enacted at micro, macro and intermediary levels. When MAP came under fire from men’s rights lobbyists and the New Christian Right at a time when so-called “backlash” politics had gained public impetus, MAP became a battleground in which the contests between these recuperative politics and feminist and social justice endeavours were played out. This provided rich data on gender relations contextualised in a particular time and place. It also generated difficult and painful experiences, which, in turn, offered a further source of data.

MAP was designed to run for three years. However insufficient funding, undoubtedly resulting from its political sensitivity, meant that it was curtailed after eleven months. During MAP, discussions were held with several Aboriginal workers, community women and departmental officials. Similarly, workers from migrant communities participated in meetings. Overwhelmingly, women spoke of recognising the presence of maternal alienation within their communities. In the last months of MAP, representatives from the SA Migrant Domestic Violence Action Group requested that work on maternal alienation be adapted for diverse cultural groups. Unfortunately this could not occur due to MAP’s untimely end. Because of these limitations in time, it was not possible to develop specific understandings of the occurrence of maternal alienation in diverse cultural communities, and to shape practice responses to address these. Thus the relevance to these cultural groups of the work undertaken on maternal alienation is not known. It is to be hoped that these gaps in knowledge will be addressed in the future.
Whilst maternal alienation is a form of simultaneous abuse of women and children, this study focuses on women’s experiences and perspectives, and service responses to women, and only secondarily considers children. This is not to refute the importance of developing understandings and practice responses to children, which is of enormous consequence. It is to be hoped that these perspectives will be developed in future work. Moreover, the study’s concentration on women’s experiences of alienation is not to deny that on occasions women alienate fathers from their children. However this is less frequent, and has different consequences from “maternal” alienation, as the gendered context with which alienation resonates is different for men. For example, fathers are not surveyed, regulated and judged with the same severity as are mothers; furthermore, gendered structures and discourses operating at a macro level do not generate and maintain demeaning images of men as they do of women. Neither is women’s abuse of men at a micro level supported and maintained by macro hierarchical gender structures, as is violence against women.

Grounded in standpoint and materialist feminist approaches, this study has drawn strongly on ethnographic and qualitative feminist and action research methods. Dorothy Smith’s (2005) approach to standpoint theory provides an effective method for making sense of the many strands of data within MAP. Smith’s approach reminds us that knowledge is not a “view from nowhere”, but is situated, as partial perspectives deriving from specific locations of physical space, time and social relations, and shaped through circulating discourses. These standpoints integrate the “everyday/everynight realities” of the material world and people’s practical activities within it, with the socially constructed world (Sprague 2005).

As an action researcher engaged in qualitative research, I have been inextricably immersed in multiple ways in all the processes connected to MAP. This has required a high level of “reflexivity” or self-reflection about my part in the very phenomenon being researched (Darlington and Scott 2002). In particular the complexities of analysing and writing up this study need to be acknowledged. My immersion in the morass of the detail of MAP, my emotional responses and my intellectual engagement combined to make it very difficult to position myself at a sufficient
distance to enable effective reflection and analysis to take place. To accomplish this I literally removed myself from the site of MAP by travelling to London for eight months, where, under the supervision of my external supervisor I was able to gain different perspectives. This experience in the UK widened the scope of this study, to include a range of British research. Indeed, because of the close connections in recent macro gender developments across the English-speaking world, research from these countries are included within the literature review.

In order to address the complexities of the research and of MAP’s processes as an action research project, the conventional form of social science thesis has been changed. This difference in approach extends to the literature review, which comprises four chapters spanning the polarities between micro and macro socio-cultural worlds. These chapters consider a number of literatures, grouped according to their relationship to micro and macro arenas, and employed to build a theoretical foundation for the study.

Following this introduction, Chapter Two engages with terms and concepts related to gender to build a conceptual framework for the study. It considers gender as a significant site of hierarchical power relations. Pervading all social structures and social relations, gender can also be identified as an aspect of organisations; indeed, organisations can be understood as “gendered” in themselves. A notable aspect of gender is its implication in violence, for the majority of perpetrators are men and most victims are female. Chapter Two discusses differing definitions and forms of gender violence, including forms of child abuse, and connections between abuse of women and children.

Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six combine a review of literature with an exposition of the theoretical foundations for this thesis. The chapters do not attempt an exhaustive review of all types of gender violence, but examine selected areas of feminist approaches to violence within a research focus on the micro and macro contexts of gender politics. These provide a background and context not only for maternal alienation, but also for the events and processes associated with MAP. Chapters Three and Four focus mainly on the micro contexts of gender, power and
violence, Chapter Five on organisations which operate between micro and macro arenas, and Chapter Six on the macro context. However, the entwining of the intimate with the global is illustrated by the way that all four chapters cross the divisions between these.

Chapter Three examines recent and contemporary discourses of motherhood, focusing particularly on their connections to mother-blaming, which strongly pervades modern English-speaking societies, and to discourses of responsibility, morality and caring. The chapter continues with a consideration of feminist approaches to selected components of gender violence, including the relationship of violence to the concept of a public/private dichotomy, and the tendency of discourses of gender-neutrality to obscure the presence of hierarchical gender relations. It also considers the significance of creating new language within second wave feminism, and the responses of those opposed to feminism to constrain or reverse the naming of oppression and violence. Their opposition is activated through devices of silencing, subjugation and mythologising, and on a broader scale, in the phenomenon of backlash and recuperative politics.

Chapter Four continues to focus on the micro politics of gender by exploring constructions of fathers and the tensions between these discourses and gender violence. Dominant discourses tend to resist the notion that perpetrators of violence include fathers, despite the continued evidence of their co-existence.

Chapter Five considers the gender politics enacted between the micro and macro realms in comparing three types of human service organisation, women’s services, statutory child protection services and the family court. Women’s services are founded on an analysis of gender, while child protection and family law systems espouse gender-neutral principles. The chapter examines how these three types of services, their policies and practices, are shaped by, and re-create, particular constructions of mothers, fathers and children.

Chapter Six, the last of the literature review chapters, focuses on the macro recuperative gendered politics that form the context in which MAP unfolds. From the broadest sphere, neoliberalism and neoconservatism are considered with public
choice theory, and their impact on managerial bureaucracies, public opinion and
debate. Although strongly benefiting hidden elites of wealth and power, these
movements are accompanied and “legitimised” by their attacks on so-called “special
interest groups”, constructed as pursuing their own advantage at public expense. Such
groups include feminists and social justice advocates. Within this context, the surging
fortunes and influence of fathers’ rights organisations on family law and public
opinion are traced. These and the New Christian Right, strongly connected to the US
Christian Right, became particularly influential during the time of the Howard
Federal Government in Australia (1996-2007). The relationships between these
elements that form the “New Right”, and their impacts in Australia are explored.

**Chapter Seven** describes the research methods employed in this study: feminist,
action and participatory research which contribute to the study’s broad framework,
and methods from ethnography and grounded theory. The chapter discusses some of
the issues raised by this type of research, including the participatory and reflexive
processes that strongly inform these methods, as well as particular ethical issues.

**Chapter Eight** begins an exposition of the body of empirical work of this study. It
examines the contested concept, maternal alienation, bringing theoretical
considerations to bear that develop this concept beyond its initial exposition in 1999.
The concept of parental alienation syndrome (PAS) is explored in relation to maternal
alienation.

**Chapter Nine** details the “rise and demise” of MAP, its threefold structure, the
various groups and activities that occurred within its contrasting spheres, and the
external influences impacting on it. This chapter is based on data from MAP’s formal
documents, taped working sessions, field notes and post-project interviews.

**Chapter Ten** brings social theory to bear in examining the issues generated and
highlighted through MAP’s endeavours to improve practice responses to maternal
alienation, particularly in MAP’s two working groups. The principles of practice that
were initially developed in these groups are discussed. There are a number of ways
that the contested concept, maternal alienation, and the emerging body of knowledge
that has developed, can be understood as feminist “knowledge”.

In developing these concepts further, **Chapter Eleven** explores the significance of language in maternal alienation itself and MAP’s endeavours to address it. The argument builds on Dorothy Smith’s institutional ethnographic approach, which emphasises the importance of women’s everyday experiences. Efforts to counter the effects of maternal alienation require the developing of language that is congruent with, and makes visible, women’s and children’s lived experiences.

**Chapter Twelve** examines the major issues emerging from MAP’s engagement with larger systems. Whilst a schism became evident between the functioning of what I have referred to as the practice and systems spheres, the themes identified from analysis of each of these spheres were also almost entirely different. This chapter locates MAP within the wider gender order, and considers how the strong New Right influence at this time impacted on the reference group at the centre of the systems sphere, and MAP itself.

**Chapter Thirteen** brings together the themes and wide-ranging discussions throughout this thesis to reach some conclusions. The relationships between macro and micro gender contexts are further explored, as well as the valuable insights offered by the spaces “in-between”. Central to MAP’s work was the importance of “languaging” that which had been invisible and unspoken. The chapter also reviews the concept of an abusive household gender regime, developed during the analytical phase of this study. It highlights the ways in which the concept brings under the one umbrella what tend to otherwise be “silo-ed” forms of abuse, such as domestic violence and child sexual abuse. The concept also directs attention to the “fabric” of abuse that is woven within such households.

Chapter Thirteen also considers the challenges and paradoxes confronted by MAP, and draws out the implications for feminist agendas, especially for those feminist researchers, activists, bureaucrats, practitioners and organisations that work within recuperative contexts. Moving from a focus on alienation to the potential offered by alliances, the chapter closes by re-visiting the benefits of valuing mothers for children, for society at large, and for a revitalised women’s movement.

The following chapter commences the work of refining terms and concepts of gender that are employed within this thesis.
CHAPTER TWO

Gender, gendered organisations and gender violence: terms and concepts

This thesis examines the responses to publicising and working with a newly identified form of gender violence, maternal alienation. It is therefore helpful at this stage to explore the phenomenon of gender. Maternal alienation occurs within micro contexts such as families and households, yet it is also connected by many filaments with events and discourses within macro social, cultural and political arenas. These include constructions of men and women, mothers and fathers and the social structures (families, communities, socio-cultural and legal institutions) within which these discourses circulate. Government and non-government organisations that deal with families and communities operate at an intermediary level between the micro and macro. Functioning as the “building blocks” of wider macro systems, organisations “carry out the core functions of social order”, and are the means through which “individuals engage their society” (Netting et al. 2004: 209-210).

In order to provide a conceptual context in which the intimate and global and their interactions can be discussed and analysed, it is necessary to explore theories of gender, gender systems and gendered organisations. This chapter establishes this theoretical foundation before turning to the terms and definitions of gender violence. By clarifying the terms and concepts to be used in this study an analytic vocabulary is built that enables work with data on different levels.

2.1 Gender

2.1.1 Theoretical approaches

Feminist and profeminist gender theorists understand gender as a major site of power relations, and have developed models to analyse its operations, while also understanding it as a fundamental part of people’s embodied experience. They have built a relational understanding of gender that moves beyond particular men and women to an approach in which “gender is seen as a way in which social practice is organized, whether in personal life, inter-personal interaction, or on the larger scale” (Connell 2000: 24). British feminist academic, Stevi Jackson (2006) sees gender as
“persistent and resilient”, yet historically and locally situated as a “social division and a cultural distinction, given meaning and substance in the everyday actions, interactions and subjective interpretations through which it is lived” (2006: 106). Being particularly interested in the ways that heterosexuality depends on and maintains gender division, Jackson explores heteronormativity, “normatively prescribed boundaries of heterosexuality” (2006: 105), or the effects norms have on maintaining particular discourses and practices related to what it is to be a “real” woman or man. Jackson emphasises that while normative heterosexuality marginalises those outside its boundaries, it also regulates those within them. Most importantly, her analysis emphasises the significance of structured inequities: “patterned inequalities in distributions of resources, divisions of labour and hierarchies of advantage and disadvantage, which situate men and women in a hierarchical relationship” (2006: 110). Structured inequalities, rather than difference or identity, are those expressions of gender that Jackson sees as the most significant.

Australian masculinities theorist R. W. Connell (2000) has developed a comprehensive gender analysis that can be used to examine the overall structures and patternings within societies, termed a “gender order”. Connell explains that a gender order is structured in a four-fold way: firstly, the structure of “power relations”, which corresponds to feminist descriptions of patriarchy; secondly, “production relations”, which refer to gendered divisions of labour and their consequences, including the gendered character of capital; the third area named “cathexis or emotional relations” covers interpersonal relationships including sexuality; the fourth, termed “symbolism”, encompasses “the symbolic structures called into play in communication” (2000: 26). Within a “gender order” are multiple “gender regimes”, the term Connell uses for gender configurations structured by specific institutions, and these pattern the “gender relations” operating between specific women and men.

Sylvia Walby (2004) also proposes a model of gender relations with four levels of abstraction. The first level which she calls “gender regime” refers to the overall social system, and has similarities (and differences) to Connell’s gender order (2004: 10). The second level has two dimensions, one being a continuum from domestic to
public, and the second being the degree of gender inequality in particular societies at specific times. The third level deals with “domains” such as the economic (household and market), polity (states and supra-states), and civil society. Walby’s fourth level concerns social practices. These levels could be conceived of as dimensions of the “social regime”, whereby changes within any dimension have impacts on all other areas.

Connell and Walby provide models of gender that can be applied to a society as a whole, as well as to the sections within. While they use different terms and identify different levels or dimensions, their projects are based on similar understandings of gender (Walby 2004), and are consistent with Jackson’s approach. I employ elements of their structural, normative and discursive approaches to gender in this study, and in particular adopt Connell’s terms “gender order” and “gender regime” to give coherence to the macro and micro gender systems respectively.

This gendered perspective will now be employed to focus on two further areas: the gendered nature of organisations; and gender violence and specifically those forms associated with maternal alienation.

2.2 Gender and organisations

A number of gender theorists suggest that not only do gendered processes operate within organisations, but organisations are themselves gendered (Franzway et al. 1989; Weeks 1996; Connell 2000). Connell, for example, argues that institutions are never gender neutral, but are “collective sites of the gender configuration of practice” that are “substantively, not just metaphorically, gendered” (2000: 28). Institutions circulate definitions of masculinity and femininity, create specific conditions for social practice, and specific patterns of practice (2000: 45).

The state also is gendered, as Australian academics Franzway, Court and Connell (1989) argue, and this gendered nature, closely connected to power, filters through all the apparatuses of state. In their study the state is not represented as a unified or coherent whole but rather a complex set of levels and organisations that represent diverse values and interests and which often operate in contradictory ways. Within this complexity, as Franzway and colleagues argue, both what the state is, and what
the state does are gendered (1989: 8-9). They describe multiple connections between the state and the gender order:

These connections appear in the basic constitution of the realm of the state; in the composition of the controllers of the state apparatus; in the staffing of the state machinery and in its internal organisation; in what the state does, who it impinges upon and how. Clearly, the state is deeply implicated in the overall social advantaging of men and subordination of women. The evidence reveals not just a sexual division of labour but, more decisive, men’s greater access to power in and through the state. (1989: 10)

Several years later, Connell extended gender analysis beyond the nation state to the institutions that operate within a global gender order:

… global markets are inherently, not accidentally, arenas of gender formation and gender politics….Then we can recognize the existence of a world gender order. This can be defined as the structure of relationships that connect the gender regimes of institutions, and the gender orders of local society, on a world scale. (2000: 40-41)

Since the state and specific organisations are connected with some men’s greater power, and “domination by men is clearly associated with violence” (Hearn 1994: 736), the theorising of male violence should be a fundamental element of a gendered analysis of social forms, as British gender theorist, Jeff Hearn (1994) argues. Hearn explains that violence is involved in the very activities of organising, forming and maintaining organisations. “Organizations depend … upon obedience to not just authority, but authority that is at least to some degree unaccountable and unjustifiable” (1994: 739), and this is usually men’s authority. He thus suggests that researchers examine the ways in which particular organisations make authority explicit, and how this is gendered. The forms that violence take here are not necessarily clear cut. For example, “in some organizational settings a norm of “non-violence” may mean that social exchanges employing heavy persuasion and other techniques of authority are experienced as violating by those with less power” (1994: 740).

Hearn also considers the many organisations and professions that deal with violence, located differentially in relation to the state. Even though women are present in these organisations and may predominate in areas such as social work and lower and
middle manager levels, Hearn argues that this occurs within men’s domination of higher levels of hierarchies, including the criminal justice system. “The organization(s) of violence thus represent a web of men’s managements of violence, structured through an impressive and overlapping collection of professional cultures, dominated by men” (1994: 746-7). In this gendered culture the interests of management usually prevail.

… organizational and technobureaucratic forces tend to subordinate more radical practice and dilute ideological positions inconsistent with the prevailing political climate (Chevalier, 1981; Etzioni, 1974). According to this “logic”, the interests of management go before innovation, and women-centered work, practice, and politics thus become incorporated within dominant professional and managerial ideologies. (Hearn 1994: 747)

Hearn thus understands organisational structures and processes less as a way to counter violence, than “as a means to managing, masking, and obscuring the pervasiveness of violence” (1994: 751).

Australian feminist academic Wendy Weeks also recognises the presence of violence in organisations, and draws connections between it and violence against women:

Organisations are not free of the gendered power relations, explicit and coercive, or implicit and intimidating, which have been identified in sexual or family violence. Further, organisations are powerful arenas for the gendering processes which recreate and perpetuate gender power, and its most hazardous expression – violence against women. (1996: 69)

From this discussion it is possible to draw together some terms and concepts for use in this thesis. Employing Connell’s term “gender regime” for particular patternings of gender relations, I refer to households in which men use violence as “abusive household gender regimes”. The term “gender regime” can also be used to identify the gendered configurations and practices characterising particular organisations, and in particular to chart the way that violence is implicated within them. This analysis sits within a consideration of the wider “gender order” described by Connell. Weeks’ argument suggests that comparisons can be made between particular household gender regimes and organisational gender regimes. Of relevance is whether particular institutions are involved in reinforcing and solidifying hierarchical gender relations or challenging them. I am interested in examining the specific configurations that
characterise maternal alienation in order to trace its appearance both in household and other gender regimes. This requires a discussion of gender violence.

2.3 Gender violence

2.3.1 Definitions and language

Present approaches to violence against women can be traced to the resurgence of feminism in Western nations from the 1970s, when women in consciousness-raising and other groups recounted their personal experiences of male violence. Early theorising developed largely from these sources of personal experience, as different forms and patternings of gendered violence and abuse were identified and named (see Chapter Three). Feminist activists established community-based services for victims of violence, and also framed gendered violence as a public issue, which needed to be addressed within criminal justice and other systems. Several scholars summarise the developments in the US since the 1970s as shifts from a community to a criminal justice approach, then to a public health perspective in the 1980s or 1990s (Kilpatrick 2004; Tjaden 2005), and from the later 1990s, to a human rights approach (Kelly 2005; Tjaden 2005). Although this broad summary obscures differences across English-speaking countries, it draws attention to the ways in which each framework produces particular definitions that highlight some aspects of violence against women and eclipse others.

In comparing these frameworks, US scholar Dean G. Kilpatrick (2004) uses the definition of violence put forward by the World Health Organization (WHO) as an example of an influential “public health” approach:

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. (Krug et al. 2002: 5)

This definition covers three types of violence: self-directed, interpersonal and collective. Within the area of interpersonal violence, the WHO report identifies four elements: physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence and deprivation or neglect, and further differentiates between family/partner and community settings. As Kilpatrick points out, this definition highlights the intentional use of force or
power within interpersonal violence, where power refers to “acts resulting from a power relationship that include threats, intimidation, neglect and acts of omission” (2004: 1214).

Within this public health approach, intimate partner violence is defined as:

Any behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm to those in the relationship. Such behaviors include acts of physical aggression, … psychological abuse, forced intercourse and other forms of sexual coercion, (and) various controlling behaviours such as isolating a person from their family and friends, monitoring their movements, and restricting their access to information or assistance. (Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2002, cited in Kilpatrick 2004: 1216)

Advocates of a criminal justice approach include in their definition of violence all types of violent crimes perpetrated against women and children, irrespective of victims’ relationships to perpetrators. By contrast, those promoting a public health perspective tend towards a narrower focus on familial and partner violence, but widen the definition to include non-criminal acts that are harmful, such as psychological abuse, and some forms of deprivation and neglect (Kilpatrick 2004: 1217). In an attempt to resolve these differences and obtain data that “capture the full spectrum of acts that are harmful to women” (Kilpatrick 2004: 1225), Kilpatrick proposes definitions of violence and abuse which permit a distinction between violent acts (physical and sexual violence and threats to commit these) and abusive acts (which includes stalking and psychological abuse).

US scholar Patricia Tjaden (2005) adds a further dimension of a human rights perspective to Kilpatrick’s discussion, arguing that this provides the broadest definition of violence against women:

… it includes all types of violent crimes perpetrated against women and female children, as well as psychological abuse, deprivation, and maldevelopment. It would include harmful traditional practices, such as genital cutting, suttee, forced marriages and honor crimes. It would also include state-tolerated and state-sanctioned discrimination that deprives women of their basic human rights. (2005: 219)
Tjaden is concerned that narrower definitions of violence preclude some types of violence from research that measures violence, resulting in under-estimations and lack of information about how violence manifests over women’s lifetimes.

UK researchers, Tina Skinner, Marianne Hester and Ellen Malos (2005) point out that an unintended consequence of a too narrow focus on a criminal justice approach to the definition of violence against women has been the side-lining of support and advocacy work for women. They note that particular times and localities have required different emphases on specific forms of violence, and observe that terms and concepts have changed in response to circumstances. In general they see a broadening of perspectives taking place, which is reflected in the use of the term “gender violence” rather than “violence against women”, although arguably all violence is gendered in the sense that it is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men. While “gender violence” includes all types of violence against women, they point out that the term can also incorporate violence against children and young people, lesbian and gay people.

The significance in using the term lies in the assertion that the violence is in some way influenced by or influences gender relations. The term gender violence therefore includes: heterosexual and same sex domestic violence (physical, sexual, economic and psychological); rape and sexual assault; sexual harassment; prostitution and trafficking; politicised sexual and physical forms of torture and rape in war, civil, communal and inter-ethnic conflict; and violence where women may be the perpetrators but their involvement is still mediated by gender. (Skinner et al. 2005: 2-3)

Drawing on a human rights definition, Skinner and her colleagues maintain a wide scope without setting rigid limits to the definition of gender violence, which accords with Tjaden’s recommendation that as broad a definition as possible be used. This approach provides scope for my study in several ways: it draws attention to ways that gender violence reflects as well as constructs gender inequities; it includes child abuse; it allows for an exploration of the connections between child abuse and abuse of women, and suggests that gender constitutes one of these connections; it does not exclude, but neither does it specify, forms of violence and abuse that take a public or organisational form.
What is not specified in the approach is that violence is intentional, a matter clearly articulated in the WHO definitions. The initial study identifying maternal alienation (Morris 1999) defined it as a form of simultaneous emotional abuse of women and children, in which perpetrators deliberately attempt to undermine the relationships between mothers and their children within a context of familial violence/abuse (see Chapter Eight for a full discussion of maternal alienation). The finding that practices of maternal alienation are intentional and can have serious psychological consequences, means that maternal alienation readily fits within the WHO definitions, which also specify violence that may result in psychological harm. The WHO definition of intimate partner violence explicitly identifies psychological abuse and controlling behaviours, which also typify maternal alienation. Perhaps its close fit with public health definitions reflects the fact that the initial maternal alienation research was conducted within the context of a women’s community health service, where the damaging effects of threatening and controlling behaviours and psychological abuse were recognised. Indeed, maternal alienation sits most coherently within a definition of intimate partner violence employed overwhelmingly by feminist organisations across English-speaking countries. This focuses less on separate incidents of violence, than on violence as a pattern of coercion and control.

Research on maternal alienation revealed the techniques of control used by perpetrators within families or households to undermine mother-child and sibling relationships (Morris 1999). That these strategies occur in both incest and domestic violence can guide our attention in two possible directions: first, to a closer examination of the similarities and differences between alienating practices within child sexual abuse and incest on one hand, and domestic violence on another; and second, to a conceptualisation of an “abusive household gender regime” that may sometimes include practices of maternal alienation. Taking the second option, as this study does, allows one to build a detailed description of the patternings of coercive behaviours employed by perpetrators towards their partners and children, which would include the range of physical, sexual, economic abuses and the techniques of emotional and psychological abuse. It also implies that a “fabric” of coercion and control permeates the household.
Focusing on only one or a small number of components of domestic violence or incest fails to recognise the interlocking nature of abuse within these coercive gender regimes. Several scholars have described this aspect of violence as a “web” of control (Kirkwood 1993; Yoshihama 2005), characterised by a “network of systematically related barriers from which escape is extremely difficult” (Yoshihama 2005:1258). Web-like and interlocking actions, threats and messages were similarly found to be a feature of maternal alienation (see Chapter Eight). Understanding these techniques of control as a regime encapsulates this web-like form. Nevertheless, some definitions of violence and some surveys miss the connectedness of abuse by confining their measurement to particular elements of violence, and to specific “incidents”.

2.3.2 Measuring gender violence

UK criminologist Elizabeth Stanko suggests that the meanings of violence are fluid and “can no longer be conceptualised as fixed, understood and inevitable”. Further “it is only through fluidity of definition that we can think creatively about disrupting violence as a social phenomenon” (2003: 3). The meanings of violence are dependent on its social context, as are the messages that violence gives. Violence is interpreted through individuals’ “age, gender, sexual orientation, identities and personal history. The outcome of violence, whether it is physical or emotional damage, is thus legitimised or condemned, enabling further support for the use of intimidation or punishment or fostering resistance to its resources for legitimacy” (Stanko 2003: 11).

However, fluid definitions and differences in definitions of violence against women, intimate partner violence, and gender violence become problematic when it comes to measuring the nature and extent of violence. The measure of prevalence – the proportion of the population that has experienced violence during a given time frame, and incidence – the number of violent incidents experienced in a given time frame, depend upon precise and agreed definitions which are difficult to reach with these more nuanced understandings. Exactly what is being measured depends firstly on what is included in a particular definition of violence. The types of questions asked, who is asked, the modes of surveillance and the time frames focused on, all add further complexity to the task of measuring the extent of particular forms of violence,
and comparing these across time and place. Yet accurate information is necessary to develop explanations of violence and evaluate policy and practice innovations.

Complex data is needed to test emergent explanations, especially by exploring the correlations with other forms of inter-personal violence and patterns of social relations. The evaluation of new policy developments requires the development of indicators based on definitions that are consistent over time and between countries and based on reliable, regularly collected data. (Walby 2005: 193)

Walby lists five areas of significant difference in the conceptualisation and operationalisation of gender violence that contribute to the problem of collecting consistent data: “first, the range of perpetrators; second, the range of types of violence; third, the threshold at which it is considered “violence” and the measurement of its severity; fourth, the focus on prevalence or incidents; fifth, experiences over the whole life-time or during the last year” (2005: 194).

Differences in definitions and methodologies in research and surveys of interpersonal gendered violence also present a challenge in making reliable cross-national comparisons of violence against women (Walby 1994; WHO 2005). To address some of these problems, the World Health Organization (2005) conducted a multi-site cross-cultural study in ten countries. This revealed substantial differences in prevalence between countries, and between different settings within countries, but nevertheless established that male partner violence is widespread in all the countries investigated. In most settings, 20 to 33 percent of women reported abuse by partners within the previous twelve months.

Comparisons of estimates of gendered violence in Australia, the UK and the US reveal similar trends within these countries. Data from Australia derives mainly from three population surveys: the 2005 Personal Safety Survey (PSS) conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (ABS 2006); the 1996 Women’s Safety Survey (WSS) conducted by the ABS (ABS 1996), and the 2002-2003 International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS), conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology (Mouzos and Makkai 2004). The 2005 PSS found that in the previous twelve months 5.8 percent of women had experienced some type of violence. These figures are remarkably similar to those of the 1996 WSS which estimated that 5.9
percent of women had been physically assaulted in the previous twelve months, in the majority of cases by a man they knew (People 2005: 1). The PSS demonstrated that women were significantly more likely to experience both physical and sexual violence from current or previous partners than were men. 2.1 percent of women from the age of fifteen experienced violence from a current partner, and 15 percent experienced violence from a former partner. The WSS found that 42 percent of women who had ever been in a relationship experienced a violent incident; 33 percent had been subject to physical violence and 18 percent subject to sexual violence after the age of fifteen. With responses to a different set of questions, the 2002-2003 IVAWS reported that around 8 percent of women between the ages of eighteen and sixty-nine had been physically assaulted by a male in the previous twelve months, 3 per cent from a partner or ex-partner (People 2005: 1). A report from the Australian Institute of Criminology released in 2003 found that three-quarters of intimate partner homicides in Australia were of women (cited in Phillips and Park 2004).

In the UK the recent British Crime Survey estimated that 45 percent of women experienced at least one incident of domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking (Walby and Allen 2004), while research in the US suggests that one in two women experience a form of interpersonal violence in their lifetime (McMurray 2005). The World Health Organization reports that violence against women is a major factor affecting women’s health worldwide (WHO 2002).

2.3.3 Domestic violence

“Domestic violence” is the term most often employed in Australia and the UK for violence between intimate partners and ex-partners. Although a gender neutral term, it refers to a gendered form of violence, as it is generally accepted that 90 percent of domestic violence is perpetrated by males (Hague and Malos 2005: 4). The terms “intimate partner violence” and “family violence” are also commonly used in the literature and in practice, with “wife abuse” and “wife battering” having more currency in the US. While the latter terms refer to gender, their very words tend to limit their application to violence against women in heterosexual marriage, obscuring possibilities to examine the fabric of the gender regime within households where couples are not married or not heterosexual, and to explore how others in the
household are affected by this regime; furthermore, it is obvious that “wife battering” invokes only the physical aspect of violence. In comparison with all these terms, “domestic violence” is generally understood to cover a range of abuses, including physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and to also refer to coercive control. It is less frequently used to include perpetration by friends and other family or household members (Hague and Malos 2005: 4). It is noteworthy that, despite decades of research and practice, no terms have been created that perfectly express the complexities of violence and abuse within particular contexts. However the breadth of definition of “domestic violence” allows an analysis of the impacts of violence and abuse on all family and household members. For these reasons I use “domestic violence” and “gender violence” interchangeably, but will make reference to other terms when they are used by authors.1

Much recent writing on gender violence acknowledges both the emotional and psychological costs of violence and abuse, and the significance of emotional and psychological abuse, which is sometimes fused with other forms of violence. This is particularly salient in this study as maternal alienation is a form of emotional abuse of women and children.

2.3.4 Emotional and psychological violence

From her research into women leaving abusive relationships British researcher Catherine Kirkwood (1993) describes what she found to be an intrinsic relationship between emotional and physical abuse:

First, there is a level of abuse which is enacted on a purely emotional level, that is “constant verbal barracking”, which has an intense impact on women and their psychological state. Secondly, there is an emotional impact in the enactment of physical abuse, and the sense that this aspect of physical abuse reinforces or “compounds” the impact of abuse enacted on an emotional level. Thirdly, emotional abuse lays the foundation, within the psychological state of an abused woman, for the way in which she interprets the physical violence which is committed by her partner. … the emotional message carried in violence was that they, as individuals, were of desperately low human value, that they were “useless”. (1993: 44)

1 While both terms are used within the thesis it is to be acknowledged that domestic violence is one facet of gender violence, which takes many forms
While Kirkwood notes that emotional abuse and its injuries cannot be measured or categorised as can physical abuse, she describes six components that make up women’s experiences of emotional abuse: degradation – the “sense that there is something inherent and essential about oneself that is soiled”; fear; objectification, when women are “viewed as objects with no inner energy, resources, needs, desires” and are treated as less than human; deprivation; overburden of responsibility; distortion of subjective reality, involving the “constant shedding of doubt on women’s perceptions by abusers and forceful and continual presentation of conflicting ones” (1993: 46-56).

US practitioner Lundy Bancroft (2002) claims that even when emotional and psychological abuse is used without physical violence, he finds little difference in effect; perpetrators of each have the same attitudes and excuses, and the effects of their abuse on women are similar. Indeed in another publication, Bancroft and Silverman (2002) report that a majority of women find that psychological abuse has a more severe effect on them than physical abuse (2002: 5), a finding reiterated in the WHO Multi-country Study on Women’s Health and Domestic Violence against Women (WHO 2005).

Nordic researcher Eva Lundgren’s (1998) study of violence against women in a fundamentalist Christian community of the Norwegian state church illustrates the merging of sexual, physical, psychological and spiritual abuse. Although many researchers, practitioners and services have in the past isolated these forms of violence, this study demonstrates that perpetrators tend to employ them in combination in a systematic regime of abuse. The web made up of the interlocking practices and tactics of violence and abuse (Kirkwood 1993; Yoshihama 2005) comprises the fabric of the household gender regime. Child maltreatment is more likely to occur in such contexts. This subject will now be examined, with a particular focus on child sexual abuse and incest.
2.3.5 Child maltreatment

A recent report by the World Health Organization (WHO and ISPCAN 2006: 20) notes that violence against children by family members is one of the least visible forms of violence, yet one of the most prevalent, and is a major cause of children’s future ill-health and psychological problems. Recognising its connections to other forms of interpersonal violence, the report stresses that child maltreatment should be viewed within the wider “public health” definition of violence introduced by the WHO, referred to earlier. Here child maltreatment occurring within households fits under the WHO’s category of interpersonal violence, where, similarly to violence against women, physical, sexual, emotional or psychological violence and neglect may occur. Therefore the report defines child maltreatment as:

… all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power. (WHO and ISPCAN 2006: 18)

The prevalence of emotional abuse and neglect of children worldwide is not known.

2.3.6 Child sexual abuse/incest

The WHO report defines sexual abuse of children as:

… the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared, or else that violates the laws or social taboos of society. Children can be sexually abused by both adults and other children – who are by virtue of their age or stage of development – in a position of responsibility, trust or power over the victim. (WHO and ISPCAN 2006: 19)

Several surveys indicate that twenty per cent of women and five to ten per cent of men worldwide report being sexually abused as children (WHO and ISPCAN 2006: 20). However, some researchers suggest that survey data on child sexual abuse may be subject to underreporting and memory failure (Freyd et al. 2005: 501), inferring that these figures may be underestimations. From undertaking a meta-analysis of relevant studies, Bolen, Russell and Scannapieco (2000) estimate that the prevalence of child sexual abuse in North America falls within a range of 30 to 40 percent for girls and at least 13 percent for boys (although this is more difficult to estimate because of lack of relevant data) (2000: 191).
However once again the definitions of what counts as abuse dramatically affects what is being measured. This is illustrated by a study of the prevalence of child sexual abuse conducted in the UK (Kelly et al. 1991) which found that using the broadest definitions of child sexual abuse, which included any unwanted sexual encounter before the age of eighteen, more than half the girls and one in four boys reported at least one incident. However as the definitions became narrower, the numbers also reduced. Thus, if flashing, unsuccessful abuse attempts and less severe forms of abuse were excluded, the prevalence became one in five girls and one in fourteen boys. For more severe types of abuse that are likely to end in prosecution, prevalence was one in twenty girls and one in fifty boys. Girls were two to three times more likely than boys to experience sexual abuse, and were more likely to be abused by a family member. A half of those abused disclosed to someone at the time, usually a female friend or relative, and less than one in ten was disbelieved. Five percent were reported to an agency, and only one in a hundred incidents ended in prosecution.

Kelly, Regan and Burton (2000) in a later study warn that the way in which sexual abuse is defined may also exclude the sexual exploitation of children, about which far less is known. “Most prevalence research does not ask the kind of questions which would reveal sexual exploitation, either as a factor in ongoing sexual abuse or as separate from it” (2000: 74).

Of particular relevance to this thesis is incestuous abuse occurring within the household, which the 1991 UK study (referred to above) found occurred in 2 percent of reported cases, half of which were committed by fathers or step-fathers. However, adding to the complexity of these matters, some researchers argue that when child sexual abuse is committed by family members and individuals known to the child, there is an increased likelihood of “delayed disclosure, unsupportive reactions by caregivers and lack of intervention, and possible memory failure” (Freyd et al. 2005: 501). As a betrayal of trust, the effects of incest can be profound. US psychiatrist Judith Herman describes father-daughter incest as “one of the most unequal relationships imaginable”, and sees it as “a paradigm of female sexual victimization” (1981: 4):
The father, in effect, forces the daughter to pay with her body for affection and care which should be freely given. In so doing, he destroys the protective bond between parent and child and initiates his daughter into prostitution (1981: 4).

2.3.7 Concurrent abuse of women and children

The WHO report emphasises that child maltreatment of all types often occurs alongside other forms of violence such as domestic violence. Further, there has been recent recognition of ways that domestic violence itself harms children, leading to its treatment as a child protection matter (Humphreys 2007). However, there are many professional and organisational barriers to recognising and addressing the combination of abuse/violence of which both women and children have been victims.

…there is a potential structural problem which lies at the heart of responding appropriately to the needs of a child living with violence and abuse as well as to those of the adult victim who is usually also the child’s mother and primary caregiver. (Humphreys and Stanley 2006: 36)

Historically there has been a tendency to consider child sexual abuse and incest as abuses that occur separately from domestic violence, creating many obstacles to understanding the ways that child abuse, child sexual abuse and domestic violence may be perpetrated by one man in a single household. These gaps in understanding lead to addressing child abuse separately from woman abuse, which in turn impacts on the safety of women and children. So long as these abuses are considered separately there is little opportunity to recognise and gain greater understanding of the characteristics of the abusive household gender regime: the interlocking ways that perpetrators, whether they still reside with the families they target or not, create a systematic web of control and coercion, using techniques of maternal alienation, threats, emotional abuse, physical and sexual violence towards partners, ex-partners and children. Such systematic patterns point to the usefulness of an overarching concept, such as the abusive household gender regime, to understand and address the concurrence of these different forms of violence within the family. Chapter Three reviews the literature that further illuminates these matters.
CHAPTER THREE

The micro politics of gender I: Women, mothers and gender violence

This and the next chapter review the feminist literature that casts light on the ways that gender, power and violence operate in an abusive household gender regime. While the main focus is on the micro politics of gender, it is not possible to understand these without reference to the macro operations of gender and power in the gender order, as explained in previous chapters. While gendered constructions of women and men, mothers and fathers, operate within the macro gender order, they are manifest in micro contexts, where they take forms such as those manipulated by perpetrators of maternal alienation. Moreover socio-legal-cultural constructions of mothers and fathers, women and men, form the lens with which outsiders view household gender regimes. This is the case, for example, with those professionals whose clients are household members, so that the discourses and practices of professionals and their organisations constitute another arena that traverses the micro and macro operations of gender and power.

The chapter begins by reviewing analyses of the institution of motherhood, ideologies of mothering and contemporary constructions of mothers. While these characterise the macro gender order they provide a backdrop to, and a means of understanding, what happens within micro gender regimes. Selected areas of feminist research on gender violence are then reviewed, including the significance of feminist naming of violence and the operations to silence and subjugate this knowledge. Violence against women and children was formerly considered “private”, and remained unspoken and hidden from view until identified by feminists, who demanded that men and governments become accountable for gender violence. This review concentrates on aspects of the literature that developed from the 1970s onwards, the so-called “second wave” of the women’s movement, although it is acknowledged that feminists in English-speaking countries at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries were concerned about men’s violence to women and children.
3.1 Motherhood, mothering and mothers

3.1.1 Constructions of mothering and mother blaming: An overview

Since the 1970s feminists have theorised motherhood in several contrasting ways, although in general these have examined the historical and cultural contexts in which mothering occurs, and challenged mainstream views of motherhood as a biological relationship outside history, culture and gendered politics. Mainstream medical, psychological and sociological disciplines have tended to approach mothering from the perspective of child development, presenting western, white middle-class mothers as the norm and considering them “as functions (or, more frequently, dysfunctions) of a child’s developing psyche” (Adams 1995: 414). Within this perspective, mothers outside the constitution of normal motherhood are generally represented as dysfunctional and dangerous. By contrast, feminist writing explores the institution of mothering from the perspective of women, and as a site of the production and enactment of gender and gender relations. Early second wave feminists emphasised the ways in which the institution of motherhood within a patriarchal society oppressed and disadvantaged women. Some feminists who were mothers experienced this approach as dismissive of the importance of mothering, and in turn developed analyses that honoured positive perspectives and experiences of mothering (Adams 1995), celebrated mothers’ contributions to caring work and the qualities of caring, a position consciously contrasted with masculinist tendencies to devalue women and women’s work. In the 1990s North American researcher Martha McMahon (1995) suggested that the challenge facing feminist researchers was to value women’s particular contributions in mothering while resisting any explanation of these caregiving capacities as biologically based or essential characteristics. Much contemporary feminist writing has focused on the normative construction of motherhood as ideology, and its role in the surveillance, regulation and control of mothering as social practice. At the same time feminist philosophers have sought to move the values and practices associated with mothering and the private into the heart of debates about ethics and what it is to be human.
3.1.2 Responsibility, morality and caring

A number of studies emphasised the core role of discourses of morality and responsibility in regard to motherhood. In an early study into Australian working-class and middle-class women’s beliefs about motherhood, Betsy Wearing (1984) identified a prevailing ideology that stressed the moral imperatives and responsibilities of mothers in caring for and protecting their children. A decade later Martha McMahon’s (1995) North American analysis of the experience of middle-class US mothers also uncovered the centrality of morality to ideologies of contemporary Western motherhood, a phenomenon that has no parallel in constructions of fathering:

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 moral framing will be an important theme in subsequent chapters.

3.1.3 The historical construction of motherhood

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the ideology of morality and responsibility that dominated discourses of motherhood shaped a duality based on the distinction between “good” and “bad” mothers. Canadian researcher Molly Ladd-Taylor (2004) suggests this dualism partly emerges from the mother worship of late nineteenth century, in which mothers as “angels of the home” were assigned to the domestic realm to nurture and protect their families from the “heartless” public worlds of business and war. Adoration of this idealised (middle class) mother relied on women’s confinement to an infantilised, passive, weak and captive ideal (Francus 1994). The shadow side of mother worship was, and is, mother blame, aimed at those without the resources or desire to remain within these confines.

In Australia, mother worship took the form of the bourgeois ideal of the virtuous and dutiful mother. As Australian feminist Anne Summers (1975, 1994) describes, this ideal became realisable after the 1840s for single British working class women, who were brought to Australia to marry and civilise the “wild colonial boys” (hence
Summers description of them as “God’s Police”). With the opportunities offered by the new colony, this enabled “the family”, built on the cornerstone of mother and homemaker, to be established extensively and rapidly. By the 1880s the ideology of the Australian bourgeois family was strongly entrenched, and “respectable” women were firmly confined to the private realm of the home as wives or daughters.

The institution of motherhood was also shaped by the strategic work of early feminists, known as maternal feminists, at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century in Britain (Smart 1996), US (Ladd-Taylor 2004) and Australia (Summers 1975, 1994; Lake 1999). Maternal feminists challenged mothers’ lack of status and rights within the law, and stressed the importance of mothers’ nurturing for children’s welfare. “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).

Cleverly drawing on the image of the selfless mother which had discursively confined women to the private domestic sphere since the industrial revolution (Eyer 1992: 9), they cast themselves as “social mothers” to propose the liberation of women into the public sphere of political power, by both emphasising the need for women’s wisdom in the political sphere and the need for governments to take some responsibility for services to support mothers and children (Lake 1999; Ladd-Taylor 2004).

As a result of their efforts in Australia, working class mothers in the 1890s and early twentieth century were instructed in child care in newly established baby health clinics and free kindergartens with their associated mothers’ clubs (Summers 1975, 1994). Australian maternal feminists continued their work throughout the 1920s and 30s, promoting a maternalist welfare state that would protect the vulnerable, and provide economic support and custody rights for (white) mothers (Lake 1999).

Aided by the parallel work of philanthropic organisations and new professions such as social work, health and the “psy”2 disciplines, middle class standards of “good” mothering formed the basis of a developing ideology of motherhood. These were

2 Psychology and psychiatry.
imposed on working class women through education, child protection legislation and
government policies (Smart 1996: 45), shaping the duality of “good” and “bad”
mothers (Ladd-Taylor 2004).

Ladd-Taylor (2004) argues that the waning of US maternalism in the 1920s resulted
in the extension of mother-blaming into the middle classes, and the tenor of mother-
blaming generally becoming more vicious: “Childrearing advice, which had once
idealized mother-love, now characterized it as a ‘dangerous instrument’ and
‘stumbling block’ to child development” (2004: 10). This affected women’s influence
in the public sphere also, where “claiming political authority on the basis of
motherhood was no longer a winning strategy” (Ladd-Taylor 2004: 10).

3.1.4 Good mother/bad mother duality and normative
motherhood

The good mother/bad mother duality has continued to be a major discursive element
in the construction of motherhood, and remains a powerful means of socially
validating or invalidating some women and some forms of mothering in Australia and
English-speaking countries (Franzblau 1999). McMahon argues that after World War
Two, “U.S. society structured maternal identities through class, race, and
heterosexual identities and, in doing so, constructed many white unwed mothers as

Constructions of motherhood based on exclusive normative standards ignore the
diversity of mothers and the complex and disabling environments in which many
mother, recognising only “good” and “bad” mothers, measured against an ever-
changing array of rules that form the contours of “good” mothering. Dictated by the
“scientific” evidence of professional “experts”, the rules constituting good mothering
are in flux, and are often in contradiction from one decade to the next (Eyer 1992;
Hays 1996). As Smart explains:
These rules can be seen in Foucaultian 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. (1996: 46)

Sharon Hays (1996) in the US and Jill Matthews (1984) in Australia also emphasise the movement from expectations of physical to psychological care by “good” mothers. For example Matthews claims that once the high infant-mortality rate declined, mothers’ “ignorance, negligence and dirtiness” (1984: 180) was no longer the focus of blame, but mothers were held responsible for children’s psychological health. If mothers were judged to not adequately fulfil these demands, “‘experts’ may charge them with child neglect, emotional abuse, and ‘toxic parenting’ or denounce them for creating a ‘dysfunctional family’” (Hays 1996: 71). This is the contemporary model of motherhood in many western countries, an ideology and practice of intensive mothering which expects women to expend immense time, energy and money in childrearing (Hays 1996: x). Expectations of intensive motherhood create “myriad ways of failing and, as the range of expertise on motherhood expands, so there are added new dimensions of success and failure” (Smart 1996: 47).

Such highly prescriptive regulatory regimes operate hand-in-glove with mother blaming, yet do they adequately explain the power of the “bad” mother which has become an iconic figure in the late twentieth century? For as Ladd-Taylor observes, “Bad mothers are all around us” (2004: 7), and no longer need “good” mothers against whom they can be contrasted. Contemporary mothers appear to have lost their status as worthy of respect, as negative depictions of mothers have moved along the continuum from “inadequate” to figures who are potentially dangerous to their children (McMahon 1995: 190), as evidenced by recent Canadian research into mothers under duress (Greaves et al. 2004). Greaves and colleagues found that while the media ignored women’s material experiences of mothering they sensationalised mothers in difficult circumstances, so that children were typically depicted, “as being at risk and mothers were predominantly portrayed as the risk” (2004: 19).
The monstrous mother

The question remains as to how these discourses of monstrous and harmful mothers can be accounted for if they cannot be adequately explained as the result of regulatory and punitive regimes of motherhood. The history of Western culture has strongly expressed characterisations of the maternal as monstrous, such as Homer’s “seemingly uncontrollable nature of femininity”, which becomes the focus of “male disgust with, and fear of, sexuality and reproduction” (Francus 1994: 829). Of course as feminists have documented, the Christian tradition sustained a disgust for and scapegoating of womankind, which contributes to Western attitudes to women, and in which the image of the fertile female has often been coupled with the monstrous (Francus 1994). Literary scholar Marilyn Francus suggests that the monstrous fertile female became a significant aspect of British literary works of the seventeenth and eighteenth century (in the work of Pope, Swift, Spenser and Milton), arguing that this exemplifies: “the patriarchal fear of that female power, [reproductive capacity] and the responding strategy of deionisation, which looks to justify female containment as a social and moral imperative” (1994: 829).

The literati of the seventeenth and eighteenth century employed accepted masculinist symbolism, the logos (word), light and purity as symbols of “masculine” rationality and order. They contrasted these with imagery of the monstrous feminine, which embodied their detestation of the growing movement towards mass publication, including an increasing amount of literature by women authors. The “shadowy wombs and dens of the monstrous mother function as images of entrapment and intellectual deception” (Francus 1994: 832), and threaten the masculine authority, sublimity and order of literature, the realm of “logos”. These literati depicted maternal monsters as animals, “particularly dragons, dogs, and asses”, which “perform acts of mothering that are presented as physically disgusting or psychologically damaging, and often both” (Francus 1994: 830). Thus the image of the monstrous mother who violates the rules of proper passive feminine behaviour acts as a metaphor for threats

to masculine harmony and order, but also operates as a means of constraining women. Diane Eyer suggests that alongside the cult of true womanhood existing in the nineteenth century, those women who strayed from the constraints of home were depicted as monsters, “semi-women, mental hermaphrodites” (1992: 103).

It is hardly a leap at all from these monstrous creations to the abject pregnant feminine body theorised by Julia Kristeva (1982) in the twentieth century. Kristeva describes the abject as related to perversion:

> An unshakable adherence to Prohibition and Law is necessary if that perverse interspace of abjection is to be hemmed in and thrust aside. (Religion, Morality, Law 1982: 16)

She further explains that “the loathsome is that which disobeys classification rules peculiar to the given symbolic system” (1982: 92). Building on Kristeva, Heather Höpfl maintains that the male realm of the text and the word, symbolically a realm of order, is felt to be threatened by the very presence of women, who represent subversion and disorder. Thus: “The text and, indeed, the organization, are not a place for women with physical bodies which produce menstrual blood, breast milk, maternal smells – women can only be representational” (Hopfl 2000: 101). Representations of women are male constructions.

In summary then, images of maternal monstrosity evoke powerful emotions, positioning mother as the “other” to the fully human (man). These constructions are readily evoked and employed against actual women. When women become tainted by these powerful images in micro contexts and in macro constructions they are unlikely to be perceived or heard as “reasonable” human beings. The tenacity of images of monstrous maternity demonstrates the power of the rhetorical and symbolic. Their currency in contemporary discourses on motherhood belies them being a remnant of a misogynist history, and demonstrates their continuing operation as a form of regulatory power.

Shadows of maternal monstrosity can be traced in theories of mother-infant bonding which profess to be “scientific”, a claim strongly contested by later researchers.
3.2 Mother and child

3.2.1 From mother-infant bonding to intensive mothering of sacred children

US scholar Diane Eyer (1992) undertook an extensive review of the medico-psychological literature on bonding and attachment theories that became popular during the twentieth century. Although related to earlier work on mother infant attachment and deprivation, bonding theory emerges in 1972 with the publication of research by two US paediatricians, John Kennell and Marshall Klauss. Basing their work on studies of animal behaviour and animal instinct, they assert that mothers are biologically primed to “bond” with their babies directly after birth, but if mothers and infants are separated during this sensitive time, mothers may reject their infants. Kennell and Klauss claimed that rejection could result in a mother’s later propensity to abuse the rejected child. This notion was quickly institutionalised and while it resulted in more humane hospital birthing practices, it simultaneously supported further medical and psychological scrutiny and control of early mothering practices. Eyer notes that after a decade of popularity, a number of researchers found serious conceptual and methodological flaws in this research. By this time, however, bonding theory had been taken up avidly by health practitioners and the “psy” professions where it was incorporated into the prevention and diagnosis of child psychopathology, child abuse and child neglect. In this version, bonding theory promotes the notion that while the mother’s success or failure in bonding to her baby is directly responsible for its future psychological well-being, the mother is a passive agent. Even success is a result not of her skills and agency but of biological urges.

Bonding theories were also linked to earlier theories of attachment and deprivation, one example of which was research conducted by British psychiatrist David Levy before World War Two, on the damaging maternal attitudes of overprotection and rejection (Eyer 1992). After World War Two psychiatrist John Bowlby (1951) developed “attachment theory” from his study of child orphans institutionalised during the war. He concluded that children’s future wellbeing depended on their early and continual attachment to their mother, giving “rise to an orthodoxy about the need
for mothers to stay by their young children almost constantly” (Smart 1996: 52). Attachment theory first developed out of psychoanalysis, but during the 1960s Bowlby reduced the theory to connect attachment behaviours to animal behaviour and instinct. Further research was conducted, such as that of Mary Ainsworth (1964; 1969), who developed measures of attachment that could be observed in the twenty-one minute laboratory procedure, called the “Strange Situation Procedure”, the basis of the “Circle of Security” (Marvin et al. 2002) that is popular in many contemporary applications of attachment theory in the US and Australia. Within the circle of security the interactions between mothers and infants are observed by “experts” who assess whether mothers allow their children to both “attach” to them and separate from them “appropriately”, and intervene to change mothers’ responses to their children so they respond with just the “right” balance of attachment and separation.

Some scholars claim that attachment theory was mobilised to support the removal of women from paid work after World War Two when servicemen returned to peacetime employment (Riley 1983; Eyer 1992). Attachment theory has developed in many complex ways since, yet with bonding theory remains popular in “commonsense” understandings of mothering and in mainstream professional practice. Deployed in unsophisticated ways they can be used to blame mothers for the problems of their children, minimising other factors that impact on children, such as poverty, racism, inadequate social, educational and health resources, violence and, critically in the context of this study, the behaviours of fathers (Eyer 1992; Birns 1999). Above all, personhood and social context become marginalised if mothers are perceived only in terms of their capacity to meet the needs of their children.

Bonding and attachment theories have supported the objectification and surveillance of mothers with respect to their impact on children. This correlates with constructions of children as precious and sacred (McMahon 1995: 27), a twentieth century development shaped by a multitude of influences. Through mothers’ almost exclusive responsibility for a decreasing number of children during the second half of the twentieth century, mothers came to be increasingly “regulated through discourses of precious children and proper motherhood” (McMahon 1995: 28).
As the isolated nuclear family became the characteristic household of middle to late twentieth century Western urban societies, mothers found themselves with more responsibility for fewer children and shrinking support and participation from extended families and communities. This shaped what Sharon Hays describes as the “cultural contradictions” of late twentieth century “intensive” motherhood – that in a market-driven, profit-motivated world, children are treated as “sacred, innocent, and pure, their price immeasurable, and decisions regarding their rearing completely distinct from questions of efficiency or financial profitability” (1996: 54). Intensive motherhood, like bonding and attachment theories, encourage the belief that motherhood is a uni-directional relationship, and that children, constructed as precious and as bundles of needs, must have their needs serviced by the carer/mother. These standards of intensive mothering are imposed on all mothers regardless of the context in which they mother, including working class women, women from disabling environments, women from culturally diverse backgrounds and women in violence (Morris 2005).

3.2.2 Connection and separation

Alice Adams (1995) observes that in Euro-American twentieth century culture, bonding and attachment theories provide a potent example of the employment of the themes of connection and separation that pervade mothering theories; the mother constructed by these theories is “as likely to overprotect or reject her child” (1995: 415) with equally dire consequences. This framework underpins the pathological and dangerous mother of contemporary popular culture who is either over-protective (smothering) or non-protective (rejecting).

Adams points out that during the twentieth century mother-daughter relationships were often represented as destructive, and daughters were warned that their development as healthy individuals depended on separation from their mothers. A daughter who was too connected to her mother was destined to replicate:

… [her mother’s] limited identity as homemaker, her economic dependence on men, her annoying and fruitless attempts to live through her children, her years of thankless, stultifying service as wife and mother, and especially her lack of a sense of individual self-worth, the result of her oppression. (Adams 1995: 414)
Thus the distinction between “good” and “bad” mothers becomes irrelevant if all mothers become destructive when their children are too close to them. This position is similar to that of US academic Paula Caplan, who suggests that both sides of the “good mother/bad mother” duality are problematic.

… in the daughter’s eyes, the Perfect Mother myths make all mothers’ good efforts seem inadequate because they’re imperfect, and the Bad Mother myths highlight mothers’ failings and even make some of their strengths or neutral points seem harmful. (1989: 69)

Canadian mother and daughter authors, Robinson and Robinson lament the way in which alliances between women are profoundly weakened by such discourses.

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. (1998: 64)

In summary, good mothers bond to their children, intensively care for them and then relinquish these bonds fully and appropriately to allow independence, obeying the cultural expectation of connection and separation. The limited space between the thresholds of connection linked to the overprotective stifling mother, and separation, linked to the rejecting mother, leave many women open to categorisation as monstrous or pathological. Within this regime of motherhood, there is little expectation that mothers should be affirmed through validating and valuing their actions, through acknowledging and supporting their continuing caretaking work, and through treating them with respect.

Another arena in which mothers have been undervalued and marginalised is within child protection and legal systems, where discursive expectations of motherhood combine with ideas of the welfare of the child and the related notion of children’s rights.

3.2.3 Children’s rights

Consistent with contemporary constructions of children as precious and bundles of needs is the development of a discourse of children’s rights. As part of the international movement for human rights, children’s rights were affirmed in the
revised 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). This convention referred to international and national conditions impacting on children, and sought to address, “exploitative labor conditions, sexual exploitation, refugee status, involvement in armed conflicts, and the juvenile justice system” (Ishay 2004: 301). While the CRC particularly referred to contexts in which poverty and war made children vulnerable to many forms of exploitation, the issue of children’s rights has been taken up within developed countries, particularly by child protection and legal systems, in abstract rather than relational or contextual ways. Ideas of children’s rights in these systems tended to align with constructions of children as independent beings with needs that compete with those of their carers. Canadian researchers Lorraine Greaves and colleagues in their research on mothers “under duress” identified this as a dominant discourse within the public policy documents they studied (2004: 21). While the idea of “the best interests of the child” was central to this discourse, this concept was not defined and was decontextualised from children’s relationships (2004: 21). The authors found that these discourses also pervaded service delivery; the women who were interviewed explained that despite being chiefly responsible for the health and welfare of their children, they were ignored and excluded from key decisions when services intervened. Greaves and colleagues conclude:

By pitting the interests of the child against the interests of mothers rather than seeing them as interdependent, decisions are often made that limit women’s capacity to mother and children’s opportunity to be mothered. (2004: 23)

Yet while important matters of children’s rights and the best interests of children can take forms that marginalise children’s mothers, paradoxically they have also been subverted by men’s movements in ways that have put children at risk of further harm from abusive fathers (see Chapters Four, Five and Six).

3.2.4 Discussion

Regimes of surveillance, judgement, blame and undervaluing characterising contemporary motherhood in English-speaking countries is relevant to the treatment of mothers in the context of maternal alienation, where acts to define, confine and diminish women and shift culpability to them can be traced. Equally in a macro context, mothers can become scapegoats for wider, more complex social problems.
“Standards of femininity, motherliness, virtue, and mental health often have been unrealistic projections that attempt to redress social and professional problems by redefining women instead of tackling the problems head on” (Eyer 1992: 198).

Maternal constructions form one of the planks of degradation and blaming of women. A recent multi-level analysis of domestic violence concludes that public attitudes of victim-blaming are associated with higher levels of condoning violence against women, which in turn is linked to greater prevalence of gender violence (Gracia and Herrero 2006). The following discussion of mothering and gender violence forms a link to the next major section on gender violence.

3.2.5 **Mothering and gender violence**

The fact that women during pregnancy “suffer violence that is more frequent and more severe” and “are more likely to be severely injured” (Radford and Hester 2006: 22), and women may be at greatest risk of violence after giving birth (Humphreys 2006) points to a particularly strong relationship between gender violence and mothering. Women with children are up to three times more likely to be subject to domestic violence than partnered women without children (Mirlees-Black 1999). Women’s relationships with their children provide a particularly potent tool with which abusive men can manipulate women, and gain power and control over them, both within intact families and after separation (Morris 1999; Radford and Hester 2006).

Research in the UK by Radford and Hester (2006) suggests that the majority of women manage to parent well despite experiencing domestic violence. About a third of the women they interviewed believed that the violence had negatively affected their mothering, but “the father’s deliberate undermining of the mother’s relationship with the children had the greatest impact upon women’s confidence in their mothering, especially where women had no help and support outside the relationship” (2006: 28). However in another UK study, women interviewed by Mullender and colleagues (2002) all felt that violence had undermined their parenting, and that anxiety and depression, and the necessity to prioritise their partners’ demands in order to minimise the violence, all diminished their capacity to mother well. Women’s
physical and mental health can be severely affected by violence, yet there is evidence that women’s mothering improves significantly in the first six months after violence has ceased (Humphreys 2006).

In contrast to the accusation of neglect that child protection workers may level against mothers in domestic violence, Radford and Hester found “women’s decisions to stay or to leave were very much influenced by what they thought would be best for their children” (2006: 47); women decided to leave when they saw their children affected by the violence, but resolved to stay when they believed that this offered them better options (2006: 49).

The following section continues this review of literature relevant to understanding an abusive household gender regime by turning to selected areas of feminist approaches to gender violence.

3.3 Feminist approaches to gender violence

3.3.1 Feminist approaches to gender violence: an overview

Since the 1970s, public knowledge about male violence against women and children developed largely from the work of feminist activists in Western countries, who named and made public what had previously been “unspeakable” – women’s experiences of male violence within public and most particularly, private, spaces (Hester et al. 1996; Irwin and Thorpe 1996). In the early days of this “second wave” feminism in Australia, the UK, the US and Canada, the role of consciousness-raising groups was important in enabling women to give voice to their previously silenced experiences of abuse and violence. Having their stories of violence and abuse validated by women with comparable experiences and realising that other women suffered similar abuses made it possible for women to understand their individual violations as related to shared and structured gender oppression. It is significant that it was from attending to the experiences of women that feminists named male violence and traced its dimensions and characteristics (Hester et al. 1996), and this strongly shaped feminist responses to violence. British researchers and activists, Radford, Kelly and Hester summarise the importance of these beginnings:
Women’s experiences of sexual violence as brought to light through, for instance, consciousness-raising groups, the work of rape crisis centres, refuges and advice projects, have made it possible to document otherwise hidden events and social relations. This has enabled feminist researchers and activists to piece together an increasingly realistic and dynamic picture of the nature of sexual violence and abuse. (1996: 3)

Consciousness-raising groups, writing and theorisation in the 1970s and 1980s affirmed that “the personal was political”; that just as women were largely excluded from public structures of power and decision-making, and were oppressed within major social institutions (such as law, education, religion) within the macro gender order, there were ways in which they were oppressed and subjugated within micro or private gender regimes, most particularly the family.

The growth of second wave feminism occurred within a larger global activity encompassing a number of emancipatory and social justice movements that drew attention to the many dimensions of oppression, along axes including class, gender, race, culture, sexuality and “able”-ness. The interconnections between and within these movements, in conjunction with feminists’ growing awareness of the lived experience of women positioned differently in relation to these dimensions, have contributed to increasingly more nuanced and complex analyses of gendered violence (Radford et al. 1996). However, even within a consideration of women’s differing access to power, as British feminist researcher Liz Kelly (2000) makes clear, gendered violence has a specific character that distinguishes it from other forms of oppression, making it “one of the most extreme and effective forms of patriarchal control” (2000: 45):

That women are most likely to be assaulted by a man known to them, and particularly sexual partners, has been one of the most compelling findings of three decades of feminist research on sexual violence. It starkly illustrates a profound difference in the structure of gender oppression compared to other structures of power; not only are women required to live alongside and respect their oppressors, they are expected to love and desire them. (2000: 52)

Kelly’s observation points to the problematic nature of the “private” realm for women, the focus of much feminist theoretical work, and a subject examined later in this section.
In 1988 US feminist Michele Bograd (1988) stated in her study of “wife abuse” that while there was no unified feminist approach to violence against women, there were a number of common factors. Of most significance was feminists’ attention to the ways in which physical violence was culturally and socially supported and maintained within heterosexual relationships. Within this broad framework she suggested four major dimensions that were common to 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)

Despite the expansion of feminist scholarship over the couple of decades since Bograd’s analysis, her framework, for the most part, still applies. As feminists primarily seek to understand violence within its socio-political and cultural context, their approaches have generally differed from mainstream psychological and psychiatric explanations, which have been more likely to attribute violence to “psychopathic” individuals. Feminists within and beyond the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry have critiqued this and the related tendency to pathologise victims of violence. Most feminist scholars and practitioners place an analysis of gender and power central to explanations of male violence against women and children, which they argue occurs within a gender order in which male power and control has been institutionalised at every level of relationship and social structure.

Feminist researchers have argued that the perpetuation of violence against women is founded on gendered power structures and deeply entrenched cultural beliefs and attitudes. US researchers Rebecca Emerson Dobash and Russell P. Dobash explain the wider context of abuse 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). Their argument, that it is important to understand the individual, interpersonal, institutional and ideological context of violence to explain its emergence and continuation typifies the approach taken by much European feminist research on gendered violence, particularly research emerging from the U.K. (Hester et al. 1996;
Radford et al. 2000). This approach also characterises much feminist research in Australia (Thorpe and Irwin 1996; Breckenridge and Laing 1999), and is the approach taken in this thesis.

Many feminists understand the family as complementary to the state (Fineman and Myktitiuk 1994), in the sense that both institutions maintain and support men’s privilege and thus also violence against women (Bograd 1988: 12). Thus feminist work on gendered violence takes into account the ways that the private and public worlds intersect to engender and maintain violence, with gender analysis of the family or gender regime at one end of the continuum, and at the other end, of the state.

In the late 1980s Liz Kelly conceptualised gender violence as a continuum, “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). Extending the use of the continuum, it is possible to theorise the continuities between gender violence occurring within abusive household gender regimes, and discourses and practices occurring in the macro gender order.

Feminist approaches to gender violence, then, have generally sought to address its systemic character. Since the 1970s the growing literature on gendered violence has explored the manifestations and extent of the various forms of gendered violence in particular countries, and has also emphasised violence as a global phenomenon. In line with the growing international movement that recognises inalienable human rights, gendered violence was framed in the 1990s as a violation of these rights, an approach that particularly emphasises the global dimension of violence against women (Walby 2002; Kelly 2005). By contrast, trajectories based on postmodernist scholarship have been sceptical of grand narratives and claims of universality, and have drawn attention to the particularities of time and place and the importance of local contexts. Materialist feminist approaches also work closely with the local and particular, without sacrificing the possibilities, as postmodern approaches tend to do, to recognise wider trends and movements (Jackson 2001). Considering these foci on
the particular and the global, research has demonstrated that while violence occurs within particular contexts of cultural patterns and beliefs and reflects some elements specific to particular cultures and eras, there are remarkable continuities across time and place. Violence and violations occur globally in various forms, intensities, and levels of normalisation, and responses to violence vary according to context. However overall, Dobash and Dobash note that accounts of violence across the world: “reveal patterns strikingly similar across countries even as they reflect important and distinct cultural differences” (1992: 5).

The burgeoning research and literature on gender violence makes a brief summary difficult. I will restrict my attention to several areas relevant to this study: the problematising of the public/private division; the myth of gender-neutrality; the feminist project of naming women’s experiences of violence, and the subsequent subjugation of these experiences, including an examination of the notion of backlash.

3.3.2 The public/private dichotomy

The private/public dichotomy, a construct of mainstream social thought, has parallels with the micro and macro realms that this study interrogates. Arguing that “the personal is the political”, feminists from the 1970s exposed the ways that the division between public and private hid and maintained women’s oppression. They acted to transform “private” matters of violence and abuse occurring in the home into matters to be acknowledged publicly and addressed by public institutions. They sought to break down the division between public and private so that women could enter the public realm traditionally closed to them. The public/private divide was challenged also by a view of gender violence that recognised violence against women as one part of a continuum that included commonly accepted attitudes and behaviours to women (Kelly 1988).

Australian legal scholar Margaret Thornton (1995) traces the origin of the concept of public/private separation to Ancient Greek thought, which expected the Athenian male citizen to exercise dominion over wife, children and slaves, in order to be free to participate in the public sphere. Thus inequality and lack of freedom for women, children and slaves, was part of the condition enabling men to participate as free and
equal citizens in the “polis” or the public sphere (1995: 2-3). The relationship between public and private took on a different hue in classical liberal thought which emerged from the Enlightenment, where it appears as a distinction between public life and civil society, the latter denoting the realms in which individuals and institutions were free from government regulation, including the area of commercial activities. This is a source of later confusion, as within early liberal theory the family was “barely visible” as a part of civil society (1995: 4). Nevertheless, the constitution of the heterosexual, middle-class male as the subject of the liberal state is clear in classical liberal thought; the so-called “rational man” of Enlightenment thought participates unproblematically in public life, and his private life is free from the scrutiny and regulation of the state (Na奸ine 1995; Thornton 1995).

The division between public as regulated and private as unregulated space has become increasingly unclear with, on the one hand, the late twentieth century extension of regulatory regimes to the family\(^4\) and on the other, the parallel development of mega-corporations whose operations occur as a public exercise of power (Thornton 1995: 5). Creating more confusion is the tendency of feminist analyses to conflate both market and government into the public realm (reflecting women’s experience that both have been problematic for women), in contrast to classical liberal views that separate these (Thornton 1995). Moreover, the neoliberal propensity to privatise public authorities and services thrusts what had been public responsibilities into private areas. This occurs in two directions. Firstly, public services are relinquished to private companies, and secondly, as state-provided health and welfare are reduced, public responsibilities are returned to the unseen, unpaid and unvalued area of women’s work in communities and families, such as caring for the ill, the elderly, the disabled and children (Armstrong 2005). Therefore, while attention to the public/private division is a productive feminist concern, it should be realised

\(^4\) See Eisenstein, Z. (1982). “The sexual politics of the new right: Understanding the “crisis of liberalism” for the 1980s”. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 7(3): 567-588. Referring to Reagan policies in the US in the early 1980s, Zillah Eisenstein, points to the contradictions inherent in neoconservative policies, “between a non-interventionist state (cutting social services) and an interventionist state (legislating family morality)” (p. 587), in areas such as abortion, teenage pregnancy and sex education. Similar approaches are also associated with later neoconservative programs in other countries, such as those of the Howard government in Australia (1996-2007). (See Chapter Five of this thesis.)
that this “division” is itself unstable and contested, or at best, fluid, dynamic and changing.

3.3.2.1 Public/private division and gender violence

Feminist critiques of the theoretical division between public and private have highlighted the oppression women experience within the family, such as in domestic violence, and directly connect this to systemic and structural gendered power which in various ways acts to maintain this oppression. These critiques have argued that both formally and informally different rules have applied to public and private violence, as assault and intimidation have been dealt with as criminal acts only in the public arena (Naffine 1995; Hester et al. 1996; Crawley 2000; Kelly 2000; Youngs 2003). For example, recent research demonstrates that the Australian rate of prosecutions of intimate violence offences is low compared to that of violent offences in the public sphere (Douglas 2003-4). This is not peculiar to Australia but is reflective of a global failure to prosecute violence against women and children (Kelly 2000). Feminists in the UK (see for example Hester et al. 1996) argue that such public toleration of gendered violence is itself gendered, being both constructed by and reflective of hetero-patriarchal power relations. This is echoed by the argument of Australian legal scholar Ngaire Naffine, who posits that the point of the public/private dichotomy is precisely that it “leaves man alone” in the private sphere (1995: 26).

Yet while in the private sphere the law might “leave man alone”, feminists have also demonstrated that the idea that the family is unregulated is a fiction (Naffine 1995: 26). The state has long regulated particular types of families, such as working-class, single-parent and migrant families. The early part of this chapter reviewed the ways in which the state regulates mothers and motherhood. Further, the form and structure of “the family” consisting of a heterosexual couple with children, is determined by law:

The private was therefore utterly within (not without) the law, which dictated that certain individuals should be superordinates (men as head of the household), others should be subordinates (wives, children and servants), and still others should be law’s outcasts (homosexuals, who were positively constituted as outlaws and so were both inside and outside the law). (Naffine 1995: 26-7)
This is an analysis held by a numbers of scholars. For example, British scholar, Heaven Crawley, argues that “it is the state which institutionalises and reproduces the legitimisation of social hierarchy; women become the objects of masculinist social control through direct and indirect violence” (2000: 92). She sees the state as gendered and strategic, “in that it acts as the centralised “main organiser” of gendered power through its legislation and policies and the ways in which it is implicated in the construction of the public/private distinction” (2000: 91, her emphasis). Similarly Gillian Youngs in her analysis of Amnesty International’s campaign against gendered violence, concludes that the masculinist goals of control and intimidation “cross the public/private divide” in gendered violence (2003: 1222).

Considering the plight of women asylum seekers, Crawley finds that international law ignores violence within the family, which it treats as personal and private, and justifies in a number of ways. States are not held accountable “even for those violations which are the result of its systematic failure to institute the political and legal protection” (2000: 96-7) to ensure women’s safety and dignity.

North American scholars Fine and Weiss (2000) identify a symbiosis between state and private violence against women which works in the opposite direction, expelling women from the public realm into private violence through the dismantling of the welfare state:

… with no public accountability, working-class and poor women (and men) have been tossed from our collective moral community, in particular by severe curtailments in their access to welfare, shelter and higher education. These very well travelled exit ramps from domestic abuse are under intensive and deliberate destruction. (2000: 1141)

Attempts to make the state accountable for public and private violence against women have increasingly centred in the 1990s on framing violence as a violation of human rights (Walby 2002; Kelly 2005; Tjaden 2005). Feminist work within international fora have built on the already established framework of human rights to advance the case for international and national action against gendered violence. For example the report released by Amnesty International following its international campaign opposing violence against women, applies a human rights framework to
gendered violence, and thereby holds states accountable “for all acts of torture of women, whatever the context in which they are committed and whoever is the perpetrator” (AI 2001: 4). Similarly, the World Health Organization’s report on domestic violence in ten countries states that “it is important that states take responsibility for the safety and well-being of their citizens” (WHO 2005: 22).

3.3.2.2 Public/private: discursive factors

Yet there are further dimensions which should also be considered in addressing gender violence: these are discursive factors that shape women’s positioning within public and private realms. Nineteenth century German sociologist, Ferdinand Tönnies (1957), famously assigned masculine and feminine characteristics to the dual areas he conceptualised, Gesselschaft (society or state) and Gemeinschaft (community), a dichotomy that largely corresponds to the public/private duality. Tönnies work reinforced conceptualisations of public/private as gendered spheres, where the public sphere has been generally represented as superior, embodying “masculine” qualities of rationality, culture and universalistic norms, while the domestic is configured as the feminine realm of nature, nurture, the emotions and particularistic norms. A similar gendered configuration has occurred within the public sphere in the concept of the welfare state. As Australian political scientist Marian Sawer (2003) argues, the welfare state developed in part from women’s increasing participation in the public realm in the twentieth century. Women came to be associated with the “caring” function of the welfare state; however the contemporary “identification of the welfare state as female is sufficient to mark it as inferior, indulgent and irrational” (Sawer 2003: 99) (see Chapter Six).

Australian legal scholars, Thornton (1995), and Naffine (1995) argue that these gendered dualisms have remained dominant in the working of law, despite the changes brought about in the legal system largely by feminists. Thornton posits that they continue to contribute to men’s dominance, rendering man as the sole legal subject:
The public sphere, mediated through law, has enabled benchmark men to construct normativity, like God, in their own image. The seeds of invidiousness associated with the domestic sphere attach to women, who have been marked as its indigenous inhabitants. The stigmata of affectivity continue to detract from the rationality and authority of women and others in public office. (1995: 13)

Similarly Naffine argues that as much as woman is constructed as other and object to universal man, she has not been allowed a distinctly female subjectivity in either public or private domain. In her view woman is not a subject even within the private world, where heterosexual man is subject as husband and father. Yet Naffine argues that to the extent that man defines woman, he is also defined by her, “by establishing the boundaries of his being, by supplying the unreason to his reason, the passive to his active” (1995: 25). Man’s definition as independent and self-contained, sustained by liberal and neoliberal constructions, depends on suppressing his relativity to and definition in relation to women (Naffine 1995: 36).

Naffine continues her argument that as much as the law does not recognise women as subjects it does not acknowledge women’s lived experiences, creating a legal system that treats women as if they are driven by pathology or unreason. This has dire consequences in cases of domestic violence:

… either women act as men are expected to – that is, assert the right of separation and get up and go – or women are regarded (once again) as creatures of unreason. The socially structured, and therefore common, difficulties facing women seeking protection from a violent male partner make little sense to law. (1995: 32)

Naffine’s argument treats the law’s tendency to objectify women as more or less absolute, leaving little space to explore the ways in which recognition of women as subjects has been and continues to be possible within this system. Nevertheless, her approach indicates a way forward that supports the case argued by materialist feminist researchers and activists, that effective theoretical and practice approaches to gendered violence must be founded on an understanding of women’s lived experience (Radford et al. 1996). Thus interesting possibilities for change emerge from this conjunction of the discursive and materialist approaches within feminism.

A further perspective in the relationship between systemic (macro) and personal (micro) gendered oppression is offered by recent research into violence against
women in Nordic countries (Eriksson et al. 2005). While Nordic countries are known for their legislation and public discourses of gender equality and children’s rights, recent surveys indicate that gender violence is as serious and prevalent as in other European countries. Investigating this paradox, researchers suggest some factors that may explain this: the Nordic public focus on consensus and gender-neutrality obscures power inequities in families, including those of gender; without an analysis of power related to the social dimensions of gender, age, culture, sexuality and class, social problems cannot be adequately understood or addressed (Eriksson and Pringle 2005: 9). This view is confirmed by Nordic scholar Eva Lundgren (1995), who claims: “in Sweden, the country that is world champion in equal opportunities, it is almost considered a sin to enunciate the word ‘power’, at least in the same breath with ‘gender’” (1995: 320). Lundgren’s work and the collection of Nordic studies by Eriksson and colleagues referred to above suggest the importance of an analysis of gender and power for identifying and addressing issues of violence.

3.3.3 The myth of gender-neutrality

While feminist and profeminist scholars understand gender as a major site of power relations, principles of gender-neutrality characterise much social policy and major social, political and legal institutions, and until recently gender was largely ignored within mainstream social theory. Jeff Hearn (1998) critiques the ideas of so-called “objectivity” and “gender-neutrality”, pointing out that they have been associated with a social theory and practice that was deeply “male-dominated and masculinist” (1998: 807).

The notion of neutral, given knowledge is not tenable in social theory. The connections between the construction of supposedly neutral knowledge and the practices of the powerful, in this context, men or certain kinds of men, need to be carefully charted, both by social theorists and within social theory itself. … This suggests attention to the processes by which particular subjectivities become objectivity, and how particular forms of supposedly neutral objectivity obscure certain subjectivities, including those of particular groups of men – in other words, to deconstruct the dominant. (1998: 808)

Hearn maintains that the tendency of mainstream social theory to ignore gender power relations arose from men’s theorising of men, which centralises men and
marginalises women. In mainstream social theory the category of men was taken for
granted and remained untheorised, closing off opportunities to examine gender
relations and men’s power. Even when men were theorised, men’s violence or
relation to power were rarely problematised or critiqued, yet Hearn sees these as
deply implicated in men’s gendered practices. Instead, male theorists tended to
reveal their alliance to other men: “The author and the men in the text are recognized
as culturally formed as ‘we’” (1998: 792). Thus Hearn argues that any useful
theorising of men needs to problematise the relationship between men’s violence and
masculinity, a comment that points towards the vexed area of responsibility for
violence that a gender neutral approach avoids.

Critiques of gender-neutrality by feminists and pro-feminists brought about greater
public awareness of gender oppression, leading to the opening of Offices for Women
in the last decades of the twentieth century, for example within Australian and
Canadian governments, and the development of gender analysis tools used in policy-
making (Hankivsky et al. 2004; Maddison and Partridge 2007). However a recent
backlash against women’s improved position, added to the unintended consequences
of equality politics, have led more recently to the word “women” been taken out of
various governments’ policy documents (for example in Australia since the mid-
1990s and Canada in the 2000s), and strengthened a gender-neutral approach (WRC
2006). Feminists are aware that assumptions of gender equality contribute to
“women’s disadvantage in a range of institutional settings” (Gatens and Mackinnon
1998: xiv), and once again render invisible the inequalities and power imbalances
existing between women and men.

… the objectified forms, the rational procedures, and the abstracted conceptual
organization create an appearance of neutrality and impersonality that conceals
class, gender, and racial subtexts. (Smith 1990: 65)

Treating unequals as though they are equal results in these power imbalances
becoming even more deeply entrenched, whilst the language of gender-neutrality
disguises their existence (Crawley 2000; Radbord 2004).

Discussions of interpersonal violence as gender neutral or equivalent (Straus and
Gelles 1990; Straus 2005) is one form this trend has taken, and is exemplified by the
family violence perspective embodied in the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) developed by Murray A. Straus and colleagues (Straus and Gelles 1986; Straus and Gelles 1990). The CTS is the most commonly used research tool in the US to study the prevalence of domestic violence in large samples. All research based on it, and only research based on it, concludes that men and women use violence equally in relationships (Loseke and Kurz 2005). Feminist and profeminist critics (Dobash et al. 1992; Kimmel 2004; Loseke and Kurz 2005) point out that the CTS is a checklist of behaviour that does not take into account the context of violent acts (such as whether violence is used in self defence), the severity of both the violence and its resulting injuries, the patterning of violence within a coercive and threatening regime of power, the inclusion of sexual assault or coercion, the meanings men and women associate with the violent acts, the amount of fear experienced by the recipients including the general context of fear induced by an abusive regime, the under-reporting of men’s violence by both women and men, and the over-reporting of women’s violence and culpability by both women and men. For example Loseke and Kurz note that the CTS has no way of accounting for the evidence that “for every 1 man hospitalized for spousal assault, 46 women are hospitalized” (2005: 89), yet despite these shortcomings, the CTS is the means through which the message of gender symmetry has (re-)entered public belief.

Discussions of violence as gender neutral are also a feature of much policy and practice, often reflecting the unintended consequences of arguments for equality, where equality becomes equated with “sameness”. Portrayals of violence as gender neutral disadvantage women and conceal the fact that most perpetrators of severe and damaging violence are male and most victims are female. The assumption of gender-neutrality further silences and subjugates women’s experience of violence, obscures and maintains unequal gendered relations of power, and negates the need for institutional change. US scholar Nancy Berns (2001) has identified a further swing against women that may accompany a gender neutral approach that represents men and women as equally violent: the tendency to “gender” the blame, diverting responsibility for violence onto women. Chapter Eight argues that parental alienation syndrome (PAS) provides an example of this, where a gender neutral term (parental)
hides a highly gendered concept in which mothers are blamed in ninety per cent of cases (Gardner 1987).

In a parallel way, the use of gender neutral terms within families, such as “parent” rather than “mother” or “father”, conceals the responsibility for care-giving borne mainly by women, especially in relation to children (Pocock 2003). It also masks that the perpetration of the majority of violence within families is by fathers and father figures. Thus policies and practices that refer to parents rather than mothers or fathers form part of a mythology of equality whereby fathers are seen to be more care-giving and mothers more abusive than systematic research evidence suggests, an issue which will be examined in the following chapter.

The investigation into the prevalence of gender violence in Nordic countries, referred to earlier (Eriksson et al. 2005), suggests that an ideology of gender-neutrality is indeed a salient factor that obscures gendered power relations and gender violence. While the issue of so-called gender-neutrality and its effects in hiding the dimensions of gender and power inherent in gender violence have been noted by feminists for over two decades (see for example Bograd 1988), the Nordic research demonstrates its significance, suggesting that the myth of gender-neutrality is a key contributor to the continuation of gendered violence.

A counterbalance to the political impact of ideologies of gender-neutrality is the emphasis on naming women’s particular experiences of violence as a basis for feminist theorising of gendered violence.

3.3.4 Naming as a feminist strategy

As discussed earlier in this chapter, much feminist theorising of gendered violence has developed from attending to women’s lived experience. This is within a “materialist” tradition which is articulated by British scholar Stevi Jackson:

We can see ourselves as located within social structures and cultural categories (of gender, class, and “race”, for example), but as nonetheless possessing agency, interpreting events, applying meaning to them, acting on the basis of our everyday, practical knowledge of the world. (2001: 288)

A materialist approach understands that:
… the present significantly reshapes the past as we reconstruct our memories, our sense of who we are through the stories we tell to ourselves and others. Experience is thus constantly worked over, interpreted, theorised through the narrative forms and devices available to us. (2001: 288)

When narrative forms and words are inadequate to describe particular experiences, these remain unclear and indecipherable. Kelly explains that, “(W)hat is not named is invisible and, in a social sense, nonexistent” (1988: 114). For Dorothy Smith this is true for dimensions of women’s experience “that had no prior discursive definition” (1997: 394). Hence naming became a key aspect of feminist work:

… to find/create/redefine words which reflect and record women’s experiences. Concepts which are now commonplace simply did not exist before the present wave of feminist activism…. Names provide social definitions, make visible what is invisible, define as unacceptable what was accepted; make sayable what was unspeakable. (Kelly and Radford 1996: 20)

US scholar Teresa Ebert describes such new terms as “struggle concepts”, which have “radically altered our understanding of reality and thus our ability to change it” (1993: 34). In constructing “new subjectivities for women” they “revealed the systematic operation of patriarchal social relations” (1993: 34).

Part of the problem of naming and addressing violence, according to Australian academics Sandy Cook and Judith Bessant (1997), is its multi-layered existence, its embeddedness within institutions, its pervasiveness and subtlety. Widening the definition of violence against women allows an examination of violence beyond its more regulated forms. This involves “challenging dominant definitions that refuse to name many forms of violence as such” (1997: 8); what is named as violence affects the strategies developed to eradicate it. Thus Cook and Bessant aim to excavate a history of women’s oppression in Australia, which is “sufficiently inclusive to ensure that the history of violence directed at us can inform the contemporary recovery of women’s agency” (1997: 12).

Feminists’ newly-created concepts and terms are “contested concepts” in several senses. As developing concepts, they are discussed and contested amongst feminists and profeminists, given nuance and depth through evolving understandings, or they may be discarded for more effective terms. Of more relevance to this thesis is the ways in which these terms contest previously accepted orthodoxies about social
realities and relations, and their consequent contestation by those attempting to re-assert those values and power relations.

3.3.4.1 Subjugating women’s experience

As naming violence is a political act that challenges dominant beliefs and power, it is not surprising that it is often confronted with attempts to deny, silence or subjugate what has been named. Cook and Bessant’s approach demonstrates the intrinsic relationship between naming women’s experiences of violence and their silencing and subjugation, which occurs in complex and covert, as well as overt, ways. Kelly and Radford (1996) point out that experiences need to be named before they can be spoken of, yet they warn of “numerous ways in which women’s experiential knowledge is denied, invalidated and forced underground, ways which change and adapt to cultural and political circumstances” (1996: 20). They maintain that through androcentric institutions such as the law and medicine, and also through the media and so-called “common sense”, various forms of masculinist knowledge about gendered violence have been constructed which deny women’s experiences of violence. Thus many women become unable to define male behaviour as abusive, as they “find themselves caught between dominant malestream definitions and their own experiential knowledge” (1996: 21).

Similarly, Australian feminist legal scholar, Julie Stubbs (1997), identifies the multiple barriers women face in speaking of their experiences of violence in a society that denies and conceals violence, and where many women have not been believed, either by friends and family, or by professionals within legal and other institutions. She notes that women who speak out sometimes risk becoming stigmatised and may be at heightened danger of retaliatory violence from their abusers. Assessing the costs and dangers to women and children reporting violence, Kelly (2000) suggests that the barriers may not have been so much that they remained silent, but that they were not listened to. “We have to shift our perspectives from talking about silence to thinking about an unwillingness to hear and or act” (2000: 7).

A number of scholars point to strategies of inclusion and exclusion as a significant way in which women’s experiences are denied. For example, Kelly and Radford (1996) argue that even though androcentric constructions of knowledge about sexual violence take various forms in different disciplines, they all tend to limit what is
defined as abuse through inclusion and exclusion, “including what men define as violating/abusive and excluding much of what women experience as violating/abusive” (1996: 20). Similar accounts are offered by UK sociologist Carol Smart (1989) and several Australian scholars (Carrington 1997; Cook and Bessant 1997). Australian social work academic Jan Breckenridge (1999) refers to the exclusion of women’s experiential knowledge as “silence and subjugation”. One of the strategies of subjugation that she identifies is the recording of violence under other names by professionals. Another is the disqualification of women’s experiential knowledge by labelling it “subjective”, except when it conforms with legal or other professional knowledges, a perception echoed by North American legal scholar Robin West (1997) who observes that while the law acts to protect women from harms that are also seen to be suffered by men, it does not so readily recognise those that are specific to women. Similarly Kelly and Radford (1996) cite the law as one example of a powerful institution that utilises a very limited definition of sexual violence, which excludes much of women’s particular experiences of violence.

Breckenridge (1999) identifies a strategy of silencing experiential knowledge of violence through speaking about violence in “mythologised ways”. She emphasises that mythologised accounts of violence in legal and professional discourses both reflect and create cultural values and attitudes towards women and men, yet their characteristic feature is their “contradictory and unsubstantiated propositions” which become evident when the core assumptions of different professional discourses are examined (1999: 12). Australian feminist counsellor, Fiona Rummery (1996) also comments on the “bizarrely contradictory” nature of the myths surrounding child sexual abuse, including: “It doesn’t happen; it only happens to poor families; it doesn’t happen to THIS family; men do it when their wives are frigid or otherwise unavailable; children are naturally seductive; it doesn’t do any harm; it damages for life” (Linnell & Cora, cited in Rummery 1996: 151). Breckenridge’s comment is relevant here. “It would seem that the only consistent feature of these myths is the patently telling silence regarding the actual experiences of abuse by the victims, and the accompanying silence in relation to the offenders and any responsibility they should assume for their actions” (1999: 12).
One of the achievements of second wave feminism has been its contestation of mainstream professional definitions of gender violence including those of the “psy” professions (Breckenridge 1999), and the naming and identification of experiences of violence that had been silenced and subjugated. However, as mainstream professions and institutions take up the challenge articulated by feminists to respond to violence against women and children, they typically develop these ideas within their own professional discourses, often without an analysis of gender and power (Breckenridge 1999; Peckover 2002). Thus experiences of violence become discounted and behaviour becomes viewed in terms of individual pathologies (Irwin and Thorpe 1996; Breckenridge 1999). This is recognised also in the UK by Hester and colleagues who demonstrate that in the 1990s sexual violence had “become an arena of increasingly individualized frameworks and practices … [and] the vehicle for the production of a multitude of syndromes and disorders, all of which require ‘treatment’” (1996: 11).

Connell also has concerns about, “a tendency in many discussions towards a psychologization of problems arising from gender relations, and a drift away from concern with institutions, power, relations, and social inequalities” (2000: 23). These trends reinscribe middle class heterosexual white men as the “normal” subject, just as he exists within legal-political discourses, as explored earlier in this chapter. Individuals outside this subject position are by definition deviant. Thus within medico-psychiatric frameworks women can be placed in a paradoxical position, as Rummery (1996) argues, for dominant constructions of healthy feminine qualities can equally be viewed as symptoms of psychiatric disorders. Whether women comply with or rebel against oppressive traditional feminine roles, they equally risk being labelled “dysfunctional”:

… compliance with femininity is not necessarily the safer option, as it can imply any variety of mental disorders; but rebellion against it can be seen as signifying aggressiveness, lack of gender identity, and social maladjustment (1996: 155).

Further, when women experience distress and the effects of violence, their “sane, average, even self-preserving responses to situations of abuse or oppression are often used as evidence of their own lack of mental health” (Rummery 1996: 152).
Cook and Bessant, who also name as violence these tendencies to pathologise women’s problems “with devastating effects on the people concerned” (1997: 14), point to similar tendencies within the helping professions generally to create classes of problem women such as single mothers:

This demonizing and criminalizing of women who were already undoubtedly finding it difficult to provide for their children were acts of violence that infringed on the woman’s right to privacy and subjected her to the coercive power of the State. Such violence is rarely named as such and is absent from most standard texts on Australian history and criminology. (1997: 15)

Although absent from mainstream texts, the manipulation of pathologising and blaming constructions of women and mothers by welfare agencies and courts of law had been recognised for some time by feminists as forms of structural or systems violence (Rosewater 1988; Irwin and Thorpe 1996; Rummery 1996).

These discussions of the way in which major social institutions can exclude women’s experiences point to the complex nature of feminists’ relationship with public institutions and the state, another facet to the public-private debate, and a subject which is explored in more depth in Chapter Six. While engagement with the state has been necessary for the progression of feminist agendas, it generally came at a price. For example, Hester and colleagues (1996) found that in the UK when feminist agendas were appropriated by mainstream, often government services, issues tended to be redefined within non-feminist discourses. Australian welfare and legal practitioner, Therese McCarthy (1997), describes this process:

Western feminists have challenged law reformers and policymakers to focus on the crimes previously ignored, such as incest and family violence, partly because victimological and criminological approaches have ignored or distorted gendered analyses of men’s violence toward women. Alternatively, in taking on feminist arguments, they have misrepresented or distorted feminist arguments, which has, in turn, pathologized victims. (1997: 129-30)

These tendencies may mean that in these circumstances feminist ideas have been engaged largely at a surface level, but have not substantially changed attitudes and beliefs, and the policies and practices of the “helping” professions who incorporate them.
Discussion of the literature in this section illustrates the contested character of concepts of gender violence. It reveals the dynamic relationship between the political and conceptual processes of naming women’s experiences of violence, which makes male violence visible, and contestations of this, consisting of an array of strategies that silence, subjugate, exclude, pathologise, individualise, deny and divert responsibility away from men. Silencing and subjugation of women’s experiences of violence has been enacted also on a larger stage, where there have been many and complex attempts to discredit, misrepresent and silence the changes brought about by feminism. The term “backlash” has been adopted by many to denote such reactionary responses, and was given wider currency by US social commentator, Susan Faludi in her book *Backlash* (1991).

### 3.3.5 Backlash and recuperative politics

The collection of essays drawn together by Australian social work academics Jan Breckenridge and Lesley Laing (1999) explore the idea that a backlash operated against earlier feminist reforms. They argue that Australian programs and services largely underpinned by a feminist analysis which had been established to address violence in the 1980s faced backlash in the 1990s, “marked by attempts to silence victims and survivors again, and also to discredit those who believe their stories and advocate on their behalf” (1999: 1). Breckenridge (1999) explains that by the late 1990s the backlash against feminism had eroded the integrity of its substantial achievements in legal and policy reform, and in the provision of women-centred services.

Indeed, within the Australian context, backlash has received powerful support from the growing dominance of neoliberalism and neoconservatism since the mid-1990s (Hancock 1999). Writing in the late 1990s, at the start of the neo-conservative federal Howard government in Australia, Cook and Bessant correctly predict:

> The ascendancy of conservative individualism that promotes minimal State intervention, national competition policy, and marketized models of public policy at the expense of notions of equity and difference will … challenge the progress of previously placed community and government strategies for preventing violence against women. (1997: 18)
However, the notion of backlash is a contested one. For example, sociologists recognise that social movements go through “predictable cycles of attention and controversy” (Finkelhor 1994: 1), and engender opposition as part of these cycles. Further to this, power relations are not “static or monolithic” but are “constantly adapting and responding to social, economic, and political factors” (Pickup et al. 2001: 28). Australian profeminist educational academic, Bob Lingard (2003) situates what he calls “recuperative masculinity politics” within a broader context of uncertainty and inequality arising from the nexus of globalisation and neoliberalism. He posits that a marginalised underclass of men have been produced by the widening gap in the distribution of wealth, which has provoked “a whole range of political backlashes or resentments” (2003: 38), one target of which is feminism and women in non-traditional roles. While this connection is often made by scholars (see for example Flood 2004), it is difficult to demonstrate whether and in what ways this “underclass” of disaffected men is connected with the men involved in recuperative masculinity politics.

Discussing violence against women from the perspective of Oxfam’s international humanitarian relief and development agenda, Francine Pickup and colleagues note that economic and social change is accompanied by a reworking of gender relations, which in turn may bring about a heightened risk of violence against women (2001: 37). They emphasise that such a backlash is not a sign of failure but of success. “It would appear that conflict, violence and struggle over resources are most likely to be reported in the context where the transformation of gender relations and challenge to male privilege has gone furthest” (Kabeer 1998 cited in Pickup et al. 2001: 39–40).

Finkelhor (1994) argues that counter-movements are generally weaker than the movements they oppose. Discussing the “backlash” against child protection advocates, he emphasises that the strength of the initial movement lay in its coalitions between feminists and the child protection sector and its widespread support at public, professional and political levels. By contrast its counter-movement, originating mainly from aggrieved parents and their attorneys, has tended to be weaker, being reactionary and focused on a single issue. He does warn however, that
counter-movements can gain power and influence when an initial social movement has not built a sufficient base of public support; and when a counter-movement is able to form coalitions with stronger movements or institutions such as organised political parties or political interest groups.

Despite these different approaches to the idea of “backlash”, there is agreement that these reactionary and recuperative politics have established momentum and pressure, and have attempted to undermine the gains made not only by feminist activists, but also by other social justice movements, such as multiculturalism, gay rights, Indigenous and refugee rights (Hancock 1999). It appears that “backlash” may begin with contestation over language and concepts, and from there escalate to attacks on professional and personal reputations, take the form of legal challenges, and further intensify to threats and intimidation. At the furthest extreme, it may involve actual violence. Breckenridge (1999) and Radford and colleagues (1996) agree that “backlash” against feminism initially took the form of assertion that claims made about domestic and sexual violence were exaggerated; then these claims and the feminist research upon which they were based came to be openly disputed, and the competence and motives of theorists, researchers and therapists who worked within these frameworks were questioned.

A number of scholars point to the emergence of False Memory Syndrome in the US as a prime example of backlash against findings of widespread child sexual abuse and incest (Breckenridge 1999; Cossins 1999; Dallam 2001). In this case, the habitual denials of male responsibility for abuse discussed in Chapter Four took a public and macro form in the so-called “memory wars”. In 1988 David Hechler described this contestation:

One thing is clear; there is a war. There are those who feel that the country is suffering from an epidemic of child sexual abuse and those who feel that there is an epidemic all right, but not of sex abuse – of “sex accuse”, as some have disparagingly called it. The pendulum has swung too far, they say, and what we see now is a blizzard of false accusations. (cited in Myers 1994: xi)

US scholar Stephanie Dallam’s systematic examination of False Memory Syndrome finds no evidence for this syndrome, or to support its proponents’ claim that there had
been an epidemic of false accusations of child sexual abuse. She found that these claims were “based entirely on the reports of parents who claim to be falsely accused of incestuous abuse” (2001: 29). She argues that without credible data, it “must be recognized as a pseudoscientific syndrome that was developed by an advocacy group formed by people seeking to defend against claims of child abuse” (2001: 30). Nevertheless The False Memory Syndrome Foundation, formed in 1992, had great success in its early campaigns which focused on influencing the media and legal system, aided by its “aura of scientific acceptance” (Dallam 2001: 12).

Indeed the media has played a significant role in disseminating the messages of backlash. During the 1990s the media extensively reported that innocent people who were wrongly accused of incest were being victimised as a result of an “epidemic” of therapy-induced false memories of abuse. It has been argued that, as journalists value what is “newsworthy” over what is true, “the increasing controversy over sexual abuse stimulated by false accusation advocates was made for a hungry press desensitized to stories about abuse” (Kitzinger, cited in Whitfield et al. 2001: 3) Child protection administrator Sylvia Pizzini explains that the media’s approach has made “child welfare social workers and administrators extremely cautious in their decision making. Some argue that this situation leads to a failure to aggressively pursue difficult cases or to take the risk of trying new or innovative approaches in individual cases” (1994: 38)

Another legacy of the “memory wars” is the lawsuits filed against therapists who were accused of implanting false memories in both children and adults (Courtois 2001). US social work academic Jon Conte (1991) and psychiatrist Charles Whitfield (2001) refer to the aggressive legal defences mounted by those accused of child sexual abuse, in which knowledge about child development was distorted and the procedures used by professionals to enable children’s disclosures were attacked. Even though they depended on claims not based on empirical support (called “junk science” by Whitfield), they became effective defence arguments. Parental alienation syndrome (PAS) also developed in this way, as a highly successful legal defence against allegations of child sexual abuse, but one that nevertheless had no empirical
support (see Chapter Eight). These developments had a profound impact on commonsense, professional and legal views that children can be believed when they disclose sexual abuse. They also had enormous effects on clinical practice with children and adult survivors (Breckenridge 1999; Courtois 2001). Katherine Hines (1999), a North American lawyer, finds that attempts to discredit professionals are highly effective: “The nature of the retaliation is such that only a few individuals need be targeted before large numbers of professionals are silenced” (1999: 1).

In 2003 a research report was undertaken in Australia in response to international concern that professionals involved in child protection work were increasingly being subjected to violence, threats and intimidation by perpetrators of abuse and particular interest groups. The authors note that: “Perpetrators of abuse can go to extraordinary lengths to terrorise and discredit those who advocate for abused children” (Briggs et al. 2003: 13) (see also Littlechild and Bourke 2006). Added to tendencies within societies to deny the frequency of abuse, there is “increasing retaliation from interest groups who focus more on adult rights than children’s rights” (Briggs et al. 2003: 13).

While the reaction of professionals to such attacks has often been to withdraw from pursuing difficult cases and to become more cautious, Pickup and colleagues suggest that a different approach is preferable. Speaking from the perspective of development organisations, they urge organisations to find more effective responses to backlash:

The risk of violent backlash is not a justification for development organisations to end interventions that aim to support the empowerment of women. Rather, it is a vindication of the importance of such projects. Increased male violence in the short- to medium-term may be seen as an indicator that a transformation in gender relations is underway. What is clear, though, is that development policy-makers and practitioners need to ensure that all the possible outcomes of a project are explored with the women concerned; … A key aspect of this is to support women in dealing with the risk of increased violence by strengthening their existing networks and evolving strategies to prevent violence. (Pickup et al. 2001: 40)

The suggestion that women’s networks need to be strengthened to withstand backlash concurs with Finkelhor’s (1994) view that movements should seek out alliances and build their support from the ground up. This is borne out by past feminist successes that have largely occurred when feminists worked in connection with networks and movements. Breckenridge (1999) suggests that one of the defining strengths of
feminist success in making women’s and children’s experiences of violence public was its formation into a collective political movement. She argues that in the Australian context, the combination of a grass roots activism with the work of “femocrats” (feminist bureaucrats) in the bureaucracy, and sympathetic political contexts contributed to its success (1999: 21; see also Maddison and Partridge 2007).

It is precisely the absence of a collective feminist movement in Australia since the 1980s, Breckenridge proposes, that has enabled the “backlash” to make successful inroads into feminist gains. Judith Herman also upholds the importance of political action, which she sees as a necessary balance to individual practice: “psychological insight cannot be separated from political insight. And action” (2000: 4). The effort to hold in mind the experiences of those who have been traumatised and violated and not exorcise these painful realisations through cultural periodic amnesia, Herman argues, requires a political movement (1994). Thus, both Breckenridge and Herman maintain that the antidote to violence and the abuse of power and authority is some form of collective activism. Breckenridge points out that without such a movement, “activists and professionals are faced with the prospect of being worn down by the constant assault of backlash politics, largely because they face such attacks as individuals rather than as colleagues in collective action” (1999: 26).

Feminist activism, however, has taken new forms, using available opportunities and means rather than recreating past forms. A productive form of contemporary activism is the utilisation of the human rights framework to advance feminist agendas on gender violence within international bodies such as the Council of Europe and the United Nations (Walby 2002; Kelly 2005). This is a contemporary strategy engendering public and political support, that also builds strong networks and alliances.

The following chapter continues the literature review illuminating the micro politics of gender, by focusing on constructions of men and fathers.
The micro politics of gender II: Men, fatherhood and gender violence

The discussion of literature that illuminates the micro politics of gender continues in this chapter. While the main focus of the previous chapter concerned recent and current discourses of mothering and selected areas of feminist approaches to gender violence, this chapter considers contemporary discourses of fathering, against an examination of the literature on violent and abusive men.

4.1 Gender violence and constructions of fathers

Second wave feminism named the techniques of violence, power and control used by some men, disputed men’s positions and attitudes of entitlement within families and the state, and demanded that men take greater responsibility in families. Smart (1996) argues that these endeavours confronted retaliation by men’s and fatherhood movements in many Western countries in the 1980s and 1990s in an effort to put women “in their place”, and recuperate men’s former status and entitlements; hence the term “recuperative politics”.

Fathers’ rights groups “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” (Smart 1996: 54). This “reconstitution of fatherhood” had important consequences for motherhood, because it did not elevate men’s responsibilities so much as downgrade the significance of mothers who were thought to have become too powerful in the 1970s (Smart 1996: 55). Many populist contemporary constructions of fathers, including those framed through a men’s rights discourse, reflect successful attempts to reconstitute fatherhood as not only positive but indeed necessary to children.

4.1.1 Constructions of fathers

Discourses surrounding fatherhood and fathering lack the regulatory features of discourses related to motherhood and mothering, which are generally prescriptive, negative, judgmental and constraining. Adams argues:
… in theories of mothering, wherever issues of bonding, separation, autonomy, merging, individuation, or symbiosis emerge, the heterosexual male functions as a guarantor of order, a gatekeeper between public and private spheres, while women and especially mothers represent the disorderly matter that must be sorted out, assembled and disassembled, bonded and broken down. (1995: 427)

Michael Flood (2003), Australian academic, posits that the rise of these recuperative movements may also be related to complex national and global economic, structural and social change. Similarly, traditional meanings of fatherhood have changed in response to social, economic and cultural transformations, including changes in family structure, and relationships to fertility, sexuality and gender. Flood claims there are contradictory trends as more fathers are becoming actively involved with their children, while increasing numbers are “withdrawing or being excluded” from parenting (2003: vii). This could be seen as a duality of the good and bad father, except that the bad (separated) father is not constructed as rejecting and monstrous, but as displaced and a victim of feminism or hostile women. While discourses of absent and irresponsible fathers do exist, they are largely excluded from dominant hegemonic fatherhood and linked to marginalised groups, such as black and lower class fathers (Flood 2003: 8).

In 1984, Pleck, an influential early theorist on masculinity, identifies four forms of the “good father”: the moral father, responsible for moral teaching and oversight; the family breadwinner, a development of industrialisation; the gender-role model, particularly for sons; the caring, nurturant father, appearing from about the 1970s (cited in Flood 2003: 7). More recently scholars have noted that two of these father forms have become influential. One is the authoritarian father, derived from the moral father (Connell 2000; Haubold 2003), which R. W. Connell describes as recuperated by “right-wing evangelism”, one of two major fatherhood movements originating in the US. The other is the nurturant father, strongly associated with the mythopoetic variant of the men’s movement, and the form of fathering most popularised by the media in the last decades of the twentieth century.
Influenced by the post-Jungian mythopoetic men’s movement, the father incorporates significant elements of “the feminine” or “the maternal” into the “deep masculine”. Fathers with a discretionary and flexible definition of what constitutes paternal nurturing are competent occupants of the traditionally maternal sphere, without relinquishing their separating function (Haubold 2003: 3).

Both Haubold and Connell stress the lack of historical and theoretical validity of the mythopoetic movement, based on a nostalgic return to an idealised mythical past.

With the aid of the later and crazier works of Carl Jung, this school of thought has constructed a fantasy of the universal “deep masculine”, which is as stereotyped as anything in Hollywood …. Trying to find cross-cultural proof of the deep masculine, Bly and his followers raid non-western cultures for stories and symbols of masculinity which they rip out of context in a startling display of disrespect. The “rituals” invented to fill the void in men’s lives, though they can have an emotional impact, are as authentic as Disney World. (Connell 2000: 5-6)

Australian sociologist, Erika Haubold, notes the dramatic development over three decades from women’s demands “to draw reluctant fathers into co-parenting … to an emphatically defended paternal right and duty to nurture, grounded in an essentialized need of the (male) child for a new mode of paternal care” (2003: 6). This has forced women into “a new identity as ‘gatekeepers’ of mother-monopolized childcare” (Haubold 2003: 6), who fathers are forced to challenge to uphold their “right” to nurture. Further, the vision of nurturant father “allows the fathers to claim the same degree of competence, without the labour of primary caregiving and its social cost” (Haubold 2003: 28), and without relinquishing the privileges of masculinity, which Connell terms the “patriarchal dividend” (2000).

The ubiquitous image of nurturant father does not, however, reflect corresponding changes in men’s behaviour. “Fathers share physical care of children equally in only 1-2 per cent of families, and are highly involved in day-to-day care in only 5-10 per cent of families” (Flood 2003: viii). While research indicates that there are many economic and cultural factors that impede the development of equitable household gender regimes, leading to what Australian academic, Barbara Pocock (2003), calls “the work/life collision”, women still carry out the majority of care-taking in families despite the increase in women’s paid labour participation in the last couple of decades. Pocock reports that between 1986 and 1997 in Australia, men’s contribution
to household tasks had not increased. The slight contraction of the gender gap was
due to women doing less, rather than men doing more. She summarises an extensive
international research literature on household division of labour when she says:

In 1997, despite changes in women’s share of paid work, they continued to
undertake 65 per cent of unpaid household work, and do more of all kinds of
household activities than men … Women undertake around three quarters of
unpaid childcare work, and two thirds of housework. (2003: 26)

Considering the combination of unpaid workloads, the greater amount of voluntary
and community work that women undertake, added to their paid employment, it is
clear that “women are shouldering a greater overall work burden than men” (Pocock
2003: 26).

Thus there is a marked disjunction between the perception and the reality of men’s
engagement with their children. There is a similar disjunction between the
acknowledgement men receive when they do participate in care-taking activities
which is effusive, and the lack of recognition of women’s performance of a much
greater part of this work. Further, there is no correspondence between the heavily
regulated and scrutinised reality of motherhood and that of fatherhood (McMahon
1995; Pocock 2003). Active fathering is something men can opt to do or not without
social disapproval or being constituted as abnormal.

Thus, while popular belief in the importance of fathering has grown, it is not matched
by the reality of fathers’ engagement with their children. Yet one of the powerful
arguments mounted by fatherhood groups, and one that has strongly entered popular
belief is that the absence of fathers in families is the cause of myriad social problems
(Flood 2003). These claims were boosted by the emergence of studies claiming that
child delinquency is caused by father absence (Smart 1996; Flood 2003). Flood’s
review of these studies argues convincingly that the significant factor in shaping
children’s wellbeing is not the presence or absence of fathers, but rather the quality of
parenting and of relationships within the family. The presence or absence of violence
is a notable dimension of this.

Public claims that fatherlessness causes a host of social problems have sometimes
been based on a confusion of correlation and causation, the selective use of
research evidence, and even the repetition of fictional statistics. (Flood 2003: xi)
Nevertheless what one could almost describe as a “moral panic” about father absence has developed in the US, Australia and other English-speaking countries.

One of the many paradoxes of this position is that, while men have appropriated women’s supposedly biological nurturing capacities and can now “mother”, women are considered “incapable of nurturing their own sons” (Haubold 2003: 29). Haubold further argues that extolling the nurturant father exemplifies the masculine “privilege to invent, define and politicize the symbolisms and metaphors of its own exaltation” (2003: 34). In claiming as their own the formerly debased and feminised characteristics of emotionality and nurturance, the fatherhood movement is directly reversing those gendered meanings that shored up male supremacy in the past, in order to gain a tactical advantage in sexual politics.

4.1.2 Fathers as perpetrators

The positive vision of reconstituted fatherhood casts its influence even on those fathers who are violent and abusive. Despite detailed evidence of their violence towards their partners and children, such men are constantly reconstructing themselves, and being reconstructed by others, as good, responsible, caring and loving fathers. There is overwhelming resistance to the co-existence of the concepts of father and perpetrator (Eriksson and Hester 2001; Rakil 2006). Richard Collier, in his study of masculinity, law and the family emphasises these glaring inconsistencies:

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)

Adrienne Barnett posits that in the UK: “Contact with non-resident fathers is presumed to be in the child’s best interests, however abusively the father may have behaved towards the mother” (2000: 129). This bracketing out of violence against women from violence against children reinforces the view that domestically violent men do not pose any threat to their children. However, there is extensive research to the contrary: abusive men “tend to be controlling and coercive in their direct
interactions with children, often replicating much of the interactional style that they use with the mother” (Bancroft and Silverman 2002: 6-7). This view is supported by the findings of British academic, Lynne Harne (2004), who conducted research into the fathering practices of domestic violence perpetrators. Harne found that perpetrators’ ‘masculinised practices of control, dominance and self-interest applied not only to mothers, but also to children and were carried into the familial childcaring context, thus providing them with greater ‘opportunities’ to abuse” (2004: 316).

In order to examine these concepts of violence and fatherhood together, it is necessary to first examine some of the feminist and profeminist literature on men’s violence in households.

4.1.3 Men’s responsibility for violence

While understandings of women’s experiences of being subject to violence have developed from listening to women, much knowledge about the strategies employed by abusive men derives from comparing perpetrators’ reports of their violence with their victims’ accounts. For example, in the 1980s Jim Ptacek (1988) interviewed men who had been part of the Emerge program in Boston, the first US program for abusive men. He found that most men denied responsibility for their violence, and offered excuses and justifications, using “socially approved vocabularies”, in an attempt to normalise their behaviour. They typically blamed their victims, claiming their violence was provoked. They commonly trivialised women’s injuries, maintaining that women’s fears and their descriptions of violence were exaggerated. Trivialisation occurred even where there were verifiable injuries to the woman; not surprisingly, perpetrators completely denied the invisible emotional and psychological injuries, which included the: “instilling of fear, the humiliation, the degradation, the assault on her identity as a woman” (Ptacek 1988: 147). A decade and a half later, Lundy Bancroft (2002), also from the Emerge program, still emphasised that knowledge gained through interviews with partners and ex-partners of abusive men have provided their “greatest education about power and control in relationships” (2002: xx).
The women’s accounts also have taught us that abusive men present their own stories with tremendous denial, minimization, and distortion of the history of their behaviours and that it is therefore otherwise impossible for us to get an accurate picture of what is going on in an abusive relationship without listening carefully to the abused woman. (2002: xx)

A common finding in studies of violent men is that male violence against partners is intentional, designed to control, dominate and/or punish. For example, Ptacek demonstrates 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” (1988: 150-1) as well as intending to hurt and frighten them. Ptacek’s findings are consistent with those of Dobash and Dobash a decade later, that men’s violence “might be functional, intentional, and patterned” (1998: 141). Dobash and Dobash found that violence is outcome-driven: “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). Quantitative research conducted by US academics Richard Felson and Steven Messner (2000) also confirms that male violence against women partners is more likely to involve a motive to control than other types of assaults, and is characterised by “the distinctive prevalence of threats” (2000: 93), suggesting that “indeed there is something special about violence committed by males against their female partners” (2000: 93).

Eva Lundgren’s (1998) study of violence against women in a fundamentalist Christian community of the Norwegian state church adds further nuance to these understandings of violent men’s sense of entitlement, describing a process by which the men she studied use violence to rise above their existence as individuals, to “become” the idealised “Man/Husband”, indeed to become God, “the one who controls life and death” (1998: 171). Their wives become “erased” by the violence, as they adapt to seeing themselves through their husbands’ eyes:

(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. (1998: 180-1)

While Ptacek identifies abusive men’s assault on women’s gendered identity, Lundgren documents the significance and effects of this effacement. In particular she recognises the way in which the life space that the woman inhabits becomes decreased until she may ultimately be erased as a gendered individual. Furthermore, Lundgren’s recognition of the power of the symbolic in regimes of violence is noteworthy. The research by Lundgren and others who detail perpetrators’ strategies in gendered violence illustrate a gendered world of symbols, rhetoric and meaning-making that is erased through a gender-neutral analysis. That is, the myth of neutrality does not just obscure who is the violator and who the violated, but it also hides the mechanisms and forms as well as the significance of its symbolic power.

4.1.4 Links between men’s violence toward women and violence toward children: implications for constructions of fathers

There is abundant evidence highlighting the connections between abuse of women and abuse of children by fathers or father figures in households, yet as already mentioned, constructions of fathers, particularly in their recent idealised form, are kept separate and untouched by this knowledge (Eriksson and Hester 2001; Harne 2004). Further, violent and abusive men commonly receive strong public acknowledgement of their involvement in children’s care, which further contributes to mythmaking about the significance of fathers, even abusive fathers, in families. Bancroft and Silverman observe that abusive men as fathers “attend only to those aspects of parenting that they find enjoyable or that gain notice from friends, school personnel, or other community members, thus allowing them to develop reputations as excellent fathers” (2002: 9). Especially potent are perpetrators’ practices of employing socially approved discourses to construct their image in public and private domains. For example, Bancroft and Silverman suggest that violent men gain strong social approval by describing their behaviour, including their violence, “as a product of the depth or intensity of loving feelings” (2002: 13).
A man who uses power and control in his relationship with his partner is likely to also abuse power and seek control over his children (APA 1996; Kelly 2000; Bancroft and Silverman 2002; Mullender et al. 2002; Eriksson and Pringle 2005). Indeed perpetrators often engage in multiple forms of abuse, against partners and children (Kelly 2000). While the strategies that offenders use “are remarkably consistent” (Kelly 2000: 6) so are the impacts and consequences to the women and children, the excuses, justifications and cultural mythologies employed by abusers to deflect responsibility, the underreporting and obscuring of violence, and the failure of criminal justice systems to effectively prosecute (Kelly 2000: 6).

A paper published by the Leadership Council (2005), a US coalition of academics and professionals who specialise in child abuse, refers to over thirty studies that find a significant overlap (in general, around 40 percent) between domestic violence and child abuse. This paper also cites a survey of 3,363 US parents that demonstrated that the probability of child abuse by a male perpetrator increases from 5 percent with one act of domestic violence to nearly 100 percent with fifty or more incidents of domestic violence (2005: 3). Research by Hester and Pearson (1998) into the links between child abuse and domestic violence found that in over half of the cases in which children had been sexually abused by a father figure, the mother experienced domestic violence at the hands of the abuser.

Moreover, there is overwhelming evidence from studies in Australia, the UK, Canada and the USA of the harmful effects of children exposed to violence directed at their mothers (Parkinson and Humphreys 1998; Edleson 1999; Tomison 2000; Stanley 2003). Edleson’s (1999) survey of research on children who witness domestic violence makes it clear that large numbers of children do witness violence, and that this exposure is likely to continue over the period of a child’s development. Furthermore parents tend to dramatically underestimate the amount and the impact of violence that their children witness. In addition, perpetrators of abuse may abuse children as a way of further abusing their mothers (Hooper 1992; Radford and Hester 2006).
Humphreys emphasises that, considering the myriad ways that children experience domestic violence, distinguishing between children’s witnessing and their direct abuse may not be a meaningful way to understand the severity of its impact (2007: 12). A harmful, and often overlooked, aspect originates from the destructive family dynamics generated by perpetrators, the effects of living in an abusive household gender regime. Thus children’s distress may also derive from their “exposure to a batterer, and to his parenting style, in everyday life; in fact, we believe that the phrase ‘children exposed to batterers’ is often more accurate than the current phrase ‘children exposed to domestic violence’” (Bancroft and Silverman 2002: 2). The many implications for children include:

Batterers tend to be authoritarian yet neglectful parents, with far higher rates than nonbatterers of physically and sexually abusing children. Battering changes the nature of children’s crucial relationships with their mother …. Batterers often engage in efforts to create divisions within the family and can be highly manipulative …. They are more likely than are nonbattering men to seek custody of their children in cases of divorce or separation. (Bancroft and Silverman 2002: 2)

Bancroft and Silverman emphasise that the family dynamics created by perpetrators do not disappear when a mother leaves an abusive partner, but continue through the patterns of interaction that have been established in the household.

Both Bancroft and Silverman, and Harne find that violent men often have a great deal of involvement in children’s care, contradicting popular beliefs that some men’s problematic and abusive fathering is an outcome of having few opportunities to “bond” and participate in childcare. Harne found that having greater responsibility for child caring did not render these men more empathetic or understanding, but provided greater opportunities for them to be abusive. Such abuse occurred “not only in the contexts of ‘discipline and punishment’ but also where, for example, children are being used and manipulated to serve fathers’ own purposes, where children’s own needs and interests are ignored or discounted and where father involvement is merely a matter of whim” (2004: 317). Thus there is a danger to children in models of fathering that harness the “nurturant father” construct to violent or abusive men:
We commonly observe that our clients maintain poor emotional boundaries as parents, expressing to their children their distresses, insecurities, and worries (including how wounded they feel by the children’s mother). Batterers are more likely than other men to use their children to meet their own needs for physical affection or sexual contact, leading to an elevated rate of incest perpetration. (Bancroft and Silverman 2002: 9)

Preoccupied by their own needs, violent men tend not to be emotionally and physically available to their partner or children, “yet may expect their children to be always available to them in ways that can interfere with a child’s freedom and development” (Bancroft and Silverman 2002: 9).

Harne (2004) notes that fathers could be deliberately emotionally abusive to their children, and threaten and intimidate them. This occurred within intact families, but Harne found it “particularly evident” during contact after separation, where fathers’ accounts of their behaviour rationalised their abuse, “through constructs of ‘mother blame’, and there was no acknowledgement that such threats and cruelty could impact on the children themselves” (2004: 342).

The overarching attitude of abusive men is their sense of entitlement, the belief that they have rights and privileges without corresponding responsibilities. Thus they expect family life to revolve around meeting their personal needs, and appear to believe they are “owed services and deference without regard to their own level of contribution or sacrifice” [which may include] “physical, emotional, or sexual caretaking” (Bancroft and Silverman 2002: 7). Harne finds that possessiveness and entitlement are intertwined, and these can also be expressed through discourses of fathers’ love. Thus:

… most men viewed contact as their inviolable right as fathers which could not be interfered with, whatever the children’s views and despite having at times acknowledged that their children were terrified of them and that there had been other harmful impacts as a consequence of their abuse. (2004: 343)

By manipulating a discourse of rights these men also construct themselves as morally responsible fathers (Harne 2004). This is a discourse that is not only articulated by individual men, but is prevalent within fatherhood movements, family law and popular cultural endorsement of dual parenting. Haubold demonstrates how contemporary concern with the interests of the child has been exploited by fatherhood groups who have positioned themselves as sons deprived of the perfect father:
This focus on the deprived sons reclaiming their fathers allows men to reclaim fatherhood or, more precisely, reclaim the son as a benevolent action in the “best interest of the child”. Their own needs, rational and emotional, lose their transparency and transform the conceptualization of future father-child relationships into a “male matter”. (2003: 17)

I continue this review of the connections between masculinity, fathers and violence by examining the feminist and profeminist literature on male sexual assault of children. Recognising that many theorists and practitioners do not draw connections between the perpetration of domestic violence and child sexual abuse (Humphreys and Stanley 2006; Radford and Hester 2006), I nevertheless wish to explore some of the continuities and differences between these forms of male violence. As I have argued, the concept of an abusive household gender regime offers a more comprehensive approach, which makes visible the ways in which the perpetration of domestic violence and forms of child abuse not only coexist but also entwine.

4.1.5 Male sexual assault of children

The most detailed and startling information about the strategies of child sex offenders and the prevalence of their offending has come from perpetrators themselves, some of this information coming to light through the use of polygraph testing (Salter 1995; Hindman and Peters 2001; Salter 2003) and some through offenders’ descriptions while involved in treatment and correction programs (Wyre 1993; Laing 1999). An example of the latter was used in research conducted in Australia by social work academic, Lesley Laing, which describes offenders’ “extensive array of tactics by which they had planned and implemented the sexual abuse and attempted to avoid detection” (1999: 147). Referred to as “grooming” by some researchers (Conte et al. 1989), these deliberate and manipulative techniques are utilised by the perpetrator to establish access and control by undermining children’s relationships of trust. Laing discovered from incest 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. (1999: 147)
Several other scholars have noted this targeting of the mother-child relationship, such as Carol-Ann Hooper, who found that abusive fathers gained power over children by constructing “special” relationships, and by deliberately “manipulating children’s estrangement from potential sources of support” (1992: 38). Thorpe (1996) describes the barriers that perpetrators create between abused children and their mothers so that the child does not confide in the mother, and the mother is not “available” to her child should she disclose abuse, and Wendy Foote (1999) identifies the perpetrator-driven dynamics within families that continue beyond the incestuous abuse.

Feminist researchers have also illuminated the ways in which these destructive, deceitful and manipulative tactics are invisible to those in the perpetrator’s orbit: “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” (Laing and Kamsler 1990: 169), undoubtedly due to his “central role in shaping the beliefs and perceptions of the mother and victim/s about themselves, each other and the issue of responsibility” (Laing and Kamsler 1990: 163), an illustration of social construction at the micro level of relationships and understandings.

Such obscuring of men’s responsibility in child sexual abuse, and more particularly in incest, is a key aspect of its dynamics, as it is in other forms of gender violence. In 1981 US psychiatrist Judith Herman published a major work on incest, which points to the central role of denial by incest perpetrators and society in general:

Denial has always been the incestuous father’s first line of defense. For a long time it has served him well. … With the collusion of the larger society, the incestuous father has thus been largely successful in preserving his secret. (1981: 22)

However with increasing evidence of the frequency of incest, new arguments were marshalled to excuse the incestuous father:

… first, he did no harm, and second, he is not to blame. With monotonous regularity, these arguments appear in every sort of literature on the subject, from the scholarly to the pornographic, showing how widespread is the tendency to defend male sexual prerogatives. (Herman 1981: 22)

Even where the existence of child sexual abuse has been established, there has nevertheless been a history of deflecting responsibility from men to others, such as
blaming “seductive” children and “non-protective” or “collusive” mothers (Humphreys 1999; Laing 1999). Mother-blaming has been a paramount fixation of much professional writing on incest, mothers’ personalities and actions became scrutinised by psychologists and judges, and mothers were judged as creating the familial conditions for incest to occur. In the last two decades a number of feminist researchers exposed and critiqued this mother-blaming, demonstrating that these opinions about mothers were not research or evidence based (Laing and Kamsler 1990; Hooper 1992; Humphreys 1992; Johnson 1992; Freer 1997; Humphreys 1999). Yet despite its discrediting, there is ample evidence that mother-blaming still continues to influence the practices and beliefs of child protection workers (Hill 2005).

Thus mainstream approaches employ many devices which camouflage the responsibility of male perpetrators and the seriousness and pervasiveness of their abuse. Breckenridge (1992) exemplifies this in her argument that psychological explanations of incest and child rape have the effect of minimising its occurrence and deflecting responsibility. She states that more recent research has discredited the idea of an “incestuous personality” in men who commit 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’” (1992: 23).

Another form of minimisation of male violence in families is achieved when incest perpetrators (abusing children with whom they have familial ties) are viewed differently from, and as “less dangerous, more amenable to treatment, and less likely to re-offend” than paedophiles (abusing children outside their families) (Laing 2000: 12). A contrasting trend in the UK, in which policies replacing terms such as “child sexual abuser” with “paedophile”, nevertheless has a similar effect, which is to disguise the fact that the family is the most common context in which children are sexually abused (Kelly and Humphreys 2000). Such obfuscation has the effect of isolating fathers from men’s violence, as has been achieved with domestic violence (Eriksson and Hester 2001). Men’s propensity for violence is then projected onto
marginalised and perverse forms of masculinities. However, considerable research evidence challenges these attempts to minimise fathers’ abuse, or make a special case of fathers who perpetrate within families. Research evidence demonstrates that many incest perpetrators also sexually offend outside their families (Conte 1991), sexually assault women (Conte 1991) and physically assault their partners (Laing 2000), the last point revealing the connections between abuse of women and children within an abusive household gender regime.

In the light of these trends, it is pertinent to quote Herman’s expressions of frustration at the general refusal within popular culture and by many professionals to confront the fact that it is men who are the primary abusers of children:

The enormous difference in the behaviour of mothers and fathers toward their children, by now amply documented, would seem to call for some commentary. Very few investigators, however, have made any attempt to explain why fathers quite commonly molest their children while mothers hardly ever do so. Most authors simply accept this as part of the natural order of things. Others attempt to deny the discrepancy. … Why reports of sexual aggressions by fathers should exceed those of mothers by thirtyfold or more is a puzzle these authorities leave unsolved. …

… Until the resurgence of the women’s liberation movement, even the most courageous explorers of sexual mores simply refused to deal with the fact that many men, including fathers, feel entitled to use children for their sexual enjoyment. (1981: 20-21)

Herman suggested that the subject of child sexual abuse “is entirely enmeshed not only in myth and folklore, but also in ideology” (1981: 3). She argued that a feminist analysis offers the best explanation of a host of factors related to incest, including “why the reality of incest was for so long suppressed by supposedly responsible professional investigators, why public discussion of the subject awaited the women’s liberation movement” (1981: 3). Perhaps it is not surprising that publicly exposing the centrality of masculinity in child sexual abuse confronted a powerful backlash, described in Chapter Three.
4.1.6 Perpetrators’ displacement strategies

The literature examined in this and the previous chapter demonstrates that a fundamental aspect of male violence is its technique of projection – displacing responsibility for violence onto victims. This makes it possible for perpetrators to masquerade as victims and portray their victims as perpetrators, as they do in the techniques of maternal alienation, the creation of false memory syndrome and PAS. While little has been written on this, it is a significant insight that contributes to an understanding of the regime created and maintained by perpetrators, and the pain and confusion of their victims. Bancroft and Silverman have observed that the greater a perpetrator’s sense of entitlement, the more likely he is to claim that he is the victim of the woman’s abuse. “The typical batterer defines his abusive behaviours as efforts to protect his own rights and defines his partner’s attempts to protect herself as abuse of him” (2002: 8). Further, a perpetrator’s portrayal of his partner or ex-partner describe “his own behaviours, but he attributes them to the woman so that he is the victim” (2002: 28).

North American academic, Jane Caputi, suggests that during violence and sexual assault perpetrators transmit to their victims their own unwanted characteristics, feelings and behaviours, their “negative and toxic affects” (2003: 2). This process, which she terms “hierarchical dumping”, occurs in a relationship marked by inequitable power, in which the perpetrator feels relief from dumping his unwanted feelings, while his victim “is literally burdened, ‘dirtied’, and, at the same time, depleted of vital energies” (2003: 2). The North American therapist known for her research into child sex offenders, Anna Salter, recognises that child sex offenders operate in this manner, explaining that “sadists will sometimes project onto victims their own sense of being sick, perverted, or evil” (1995: 116).
4.2 Discussion: micro gender politics

In bringing this literature review of micro gender politics to a close, I draw out some significant themes from this and the previous chapter. Throughout public and private spaces in English-speaking countries the pervasiveness of gendered power, including gendered violence, is obscured in multiple and complex ways. Feminist and profeminist researchers and activists sought to name women’s experiences of gender oppression and violence, and to make visible the gendered tactics and techniques of power and coercion used in both micro and macro spaces. The emancipatory concepts developed by feminists have challenged mainstream beliefs, practices and structures, and in turn been challenged, illustrating the ways in which power is contested through language and ideas. Rhetoric, misinformation, symbolism and myth are influential in creating and perpetuating dominant discourses which masquerade as rational and scientific, and dominate much thinking and practice in systems such as child protection and family law.

Feminists have documented numerous mechanisms on many levels which operate to silence and subjugate women’s experiential knowledge of violence and restore the figure of rational and reasonable man to his position as universal subject of both private and public realms. While Kelly and Radford observe the “numerous ways in which women’s experiential knowledge is denied, invalidated and forced underground”, they understand that these responses “change and adapt to cultural and political circumstances” (1996: 20). Moreover, US feminists Burack and Josephson emphasise that “feminisms are as much in dialectical relation with existing political realities as they are a reflection of many women’s social, economic, and political aspirations” (2003: 8). Within this interplay of power and discourse, feminist, profeminist and to some extent also mainstream understandings of gendered violence have increased and become more nuanced, while systemic attempts to address violence have become part of national and international affairs.

This chapter returns repeatedly to the multiple strategies employed by male perpetrators of violence to assert power and control and escape accountability, which is projected as blame on to others, particularly their violated partners and children.
Lundgren’s (1998) identification of the ways that violent men use symbols culturally associated with masculinity to wield and maintain power and enact violence is highly relevant for this thesis. To uncover these techniques feminists have deliberately turned the dominant gaze away from scrutiny and pathologisation of the victims of violence back to perpetrators. In doing so they describe the very things that mainstream approaches leave blanketed: the techniques by which perpetrators maintain and implement coercive regimes. Turning the gaze on male behaviour is itself transgressive. “Man’s sense of his own autonomy, as that autonomy is currently conceived, also demands that woman can never (be seen to) look back on man and make him the object of her gaze” (Naffine 1995: 36).

Following this review of the micro politics of gender, the following chapter considers the gender politics enacted between micro and macro realms, by examining three types of organisation that deal with gender violence.
CHAPTER FIVE

The politics of gender between micro and macro: A study of three service types

This chapter focuses on the area between the micro and macro arenas by examining three types of organisations that respond to gender violence: women’s services, child protection services and the family court. Child protection and family court services were both identified by participants in the original research on maternal alienation as responding to their circumstances in problematic ways. The chapter examines how the micro dynamics of gender operate within macro structures, and in particular, how constructions of mothers, fathers and children are differently manifested within these three organisational types.

Organisations can be considered the “building blocks” of macro systems. Human service organisations provide services intended to enhance the general well-being of the public, each having a distinct mission and purpose, which shape the way they construct their duties, perceive service users and outsiders (Netting et al. 2004; Martin 2005). Their frameworks and distinctive missions and goals influence their members’ behaviour, and the ways in which they view and treat their clients. Human service organisations are embedded in institutional contexts that provide them with legitimacy, and to whom they are accountable.

The rules and routines that become institutionalized (ongoing, permanent) are relatively independent of individual members of organizations, and indeed, they survive organizational turnover. Long after the original members of an organization have departed, rules and routines that govern members’ actions remain intact. They have a normative quality that makes members feel obliged to comply with them….Because each organization has multiple frames with none of them completely uniform or consistent, members must choose from a range of “appropriate” options reflecting multiple and sometimes conflicting goals. (Martin 2005: 41)

Yet while organisational frames shape members’ actions, they do not rigidly determine them, and some members are able to develop new and improved rules and routines (Martin 2005).
Chapter Two introduced the notion that gendered power relations pervade organisations, which can be understood as gender regimes. In some cases organisations can include the coercive and intimidating gender patterning characteristic of gender violence (Weeks 1996: 69). Patricia Yancey Martin’s research on organisational responses to rape found that, “Organizations routinely instruct, and often require, their members to treat victims ‘unresponsively’, in ways that add to rather than alleviate trauma” (2005: 4). Thus even those officials who are sympathetic and intend to help often continue the harm of rape. This phenomenon suggests that analysis of the ways in which gender and violence are configured in organisations is essential for understanding and improving their operations.

The three types of organisations discussed in this chapter form differing, even contrasting, gender regimes. Women’s services are founded on awareness of gendered power, whilst child protection services and family court are based on gender-neutral principles, however further patternings of gender can be discerned within these organisations, that impact on their attitudes and services to men, women and children.

5.1 Women’s services

Feminists in the 1970s and 1980s in English-speaking countries developed a three-pronged approach to violence against women, which employed research, activism (systemic change through public education and reforms in policing and the law), and the establishment of feminist services and practice for women subjected to male violence as adults and children (Radford et al. 1996). Because they were designed to meet women’s particular needs, the support services developed – refuges, rape crisis centres, community health and legal centres – all operated differently from mainstream, male-controlled institutions. Through these interventions, women entered and attempted to transform the public or macro arena to create systems to respond to women’s “private” circumstances.

These developments became part of a wider movement to establish services to respond to women’s needs that were not addressed by mainstream services. Shaped by 1970s feminist constructions of women, the wider span of women’s community-
based services that formed the women’s sector were generally experienced as liberating and empowering. Their derivation from a social movement contributed to the tendency for workers within these organisations to see themselves as feminist activists as well as employees (Martin 2005). Within the UK these services are referred to as voluntary services, as they are freely chosen by women, in contrast to statutory services. A review of feminist women’s services in Australia\(^5\) undertaken in 1993 identifies three main purposes:

\[\text{… educating women to increase their personal power and control in their lives, and educating the wider community about women’s issues; and initiating social action contributing to policy and law reform, in order to change social arrangements or practices. (Weeks 1994: 36)}\]

Treating women as subjects rather than objects, the women’s sector in the UK and Australia challenged mainstream practices of objectifying and distancing women and regarding them as “other”. Women were treated with respect and without blame, their experiences listened to, and their resilience acknowledged. Through developing a supportive and empowering environment, the women’s sector addressed issues related to women’s physical and emotional health, their needs for temporary or long term housing, access to the legal system, issues for working women, and women’s experiences of gender violence (Pickup et al. 2001).

More specific to Australia was the establishment of women’s community health centres in the 1970s and 80s, a development shared more with the US than the UK (Broom 1991). Australian women’s health researcher, Dorothy Broom, points out that Australia also differed from the UK in the mixed ideological foundations of its refuge movement, whereas Australia’s women’s community health centres remained “explicitly feminist” until “at least the mid-1980s” (Broom 1991: xvi).

The following key features of women’s organisations in the UK also characterise Australia’s women’s sector, particularly the women’s community health services:

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… the provision of women-only services, focus on empowerment and a high level of self-help and service user involvement. Women’s organisations often work at “grass roots” level with the most marginalised people in society and are usually established because a need is identified where mainstream services are inappropriate or non-existent. They have proved to be powerful agents for social change – adding considerable value to the government’s equalities agenda by reaching women and their families otherwise inaccessible to government agencies or who have fallen through the “safety net”. (WRC 2006: 10)

When feminist women’s services first developed in the UK and Australia in the 1970s, it was felt that women needed to be liberated from oppressive features of their roles as wives and mothers. As well as acknowledging their qualities and strengths, women’s services addressed women’s specific needs, which were usually experienced as being in conflict with their traditional family roles. Therefore women’s services did not generally include services for children. As the refuge movement developed in both countries, however, refuges gradually evolved services for children, often in relationship to support for mothers, a development not strongly reflected in mainstream services. Mullender points out that in the UK: “Refuge children’s and outreach workers already undertake a great deal of support of confused and distressed children in relatively informal ways – and they represent a major national resource that is often under-appreciated – but other sources of help are decidedly patchy” (2006: 65).

Australia differed from the UK also in its many women’s services that became funded by government and/or incorporated into mainstream (government-funded) organisations. Subsequently, some tended to become increasingly “professional”, thereby adopting practices of objectifying, individualising and pathologising. Wendy Weeks notes of some Australian services:

One of the contradictions facing women in the established services for families is that they continue to operate on assumptions and policies which are not woman-centred, but are reflections of the gendered state….The contradictions also mean that, for those women’s services which become institutionalised as agents of service provision, with pressures for increasing traditional forms of professionalism and formal accountability, some of the critique of the dominant ethos and practice of community services become relevant to them. (1994: 61-62)

Moreover, the initial close connection between women’s lived experiences of oppression and the services they receive appears to have weakened over time in other
ways. Aris and colleagues (2003) find that even within women’s services in the UK there appears to be less place for users to directly contribute to the improvement of policy and practice. Another facet of the developing women’s sector is that as the three spheres of feminist endeavour (research, practice and activism) tended to separate and specialise, adapting to local conditions and the needs of particular eras, their interconnections became difficult to sustain. Nevertheless a number of contemporary feminist researchers in the UK have maintained their belief in the possibility of the integration of research, practice and systems change (Hester et al. 1996; Radford et al. 2000).

It is revealing that both in the UK where the sector remains largely outside government and experiences persistent under-funding, and in Australia where many women’s services have become absorbed into the public sector (Weeks 1994), the presence of the women’s sector has generally been “routinely overlooked and marginalised because they are women’s organisations” (WRC 2006: 66, authors’ emphasis). Research in the UK has found:

It is not uncommon that policy decision makers and influencers (including voluntary and community organisations) do not know what women’s organisations do, why they are needed, where they are located or indeed that such a thing as the women’s voluntary and community sector exists. The consequence of this is that the women’s sector is overlooked as an important stakeholder. (WRC 2006: 67)

In Australia, the women’s sector has tended to be “grudgingly tolerated” (Broom 1991: 107). According to Broom the women’s community health centres continued to confront the perceptions of their bureaucratic government funders that they were “peripheral at best or irrelevant and wasteful at worst” (Broom 1991: 107). Thus despite the affirming and empowering experiences that women gain from these services, and the specialised knowledge the sector has developed of gender violence and how to address it, the capacity of the women’s sector in Australia and the UK to contribute significantly to interventions addressing gender violence continues to be largely ignored, misunderstood and/or undervalued. This lack of recognition parallels individual women’s experiences within mainstream society of not being heard and believed, and not being adequately acknowledged for their positive contributions (Williams 2005).
5.2 Statutory child protection services

Services responding to violence and abuse, including children’s services such as child protection services, were in part created or adapted to address issues of violence made public by feminists. Like the women’s sector, child protection services have been starved of the resources necessary to make them fully effective (Myers 1994; Humphreys and Stanley 2006). Humphreys explains that child protection legislation allows the state to intrude into family life, providing “a structured and often contested interface between the state and the family”, and ongoing tension between the state’s functions of care and control (2007: 6). Managerial approaches and a minimalist welfare state have tended to shift the balance of these services from family support to gathering evidence for legal procedures.

The child protection system has a history of coercive practices (Humphreys 2007). Even though children in domestic violence have found their mothers to be vital supports (Mullender et al. 2002), child protection services in English-speaking countries tend not to value mothers as potential contributors to children’s safety and well-being. British social work academic, Jonathan Scourfield’s (2003), research into gendered practice in child protection work within the UK uncovers the paradox that child protection work has a long tradition of scrutinising women’s mothering, yet men are the main perpetrators of violence and abuse in families. Similar observations lead Australian social worker Chris Burke (1999) to refer to “the invisible man” who is dangerous yet escapes accountability, and North American social work academic, Jeffrey Edleson (1998) to describe the “gender bias” prevalent in constructions of “responsible mothers and invisible men”. From his interactions with child protection workers in the U.S. Edleson concludes:

I find that the male abuser is almost always missing or invisible. It is true that the legislated goal of child protection is child safety, but how this safety is achieved if the child’s primary caregiver herself is unsafe has always been puzzling to me. It is also puzzling how the mother’s safety can be assured if the person perpetrating violence against her and/or her children is so often left untouched by our interventions. (1998: 294)

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The concept of mothers’ “neglect” is one of the ways in which gender bias is enacted. Only those who are deemed to be responsible can by definition “neglect” that responsibility. By focusing on mothers’ neglect, child protection services often render invisible not only fathers’ responsibility for their children’s wellbeing, but also their abuse and violence (Thorpe 1996). Their focus on mothers’ “failure to protect” propels services into seeing separation as the only option available to women who are the target of domestic violence, despite overwhelming evidence that separation increases the risk of escalation of violence and the possibility of homicide (Humphreys 2007: 13). Humphreys argues that this focus prevents child protection services from coordinating collaborative responses across agencies to ensure safety of women and children. When services focus on women’s deficits and neglect, and threaten women that they must leave abusive relationships but are unable to provide them with safety or support to deal with their situations, they replicate the dynamics of gendered violence. Women can feel intimidated and coerced, undermined and blamed (Roe and Morris 2004; Radford and Hester 2006).

Thus an approach centred narrowly on the child can act against mothers, reinscribing mother-blame, regulation and judgement of mothers rather than supporting and resourcing mothers and their relationships with their children. This approach resonates with constructions of mothers as dangerous, monstrous or neglectful as explored in Chapter Three. It also reflects dominant attitudes in not acknowledging that mothers’ everyday contributions to their children’s physical and mental wellbeing is usually crucial, and generally positive.

Similar constructions of mothers can be found in other mainstream children’s services, as discovered by Australian political scientist Miranda Roe (2006) in her study of services’ approach to women who are mothering in situations of complex disadvantage. Women found that most mainstream services treated them punitively, saw them as incompetent and without valid knowledge or understanding of their own, focused on deficits rather than achievements, and acted “on” rather than “with” them. Roe’s study argues for these services to adopt respectful, supportive and partnership approaches with women, similar to those provided by women’s services. She maintains that by harnessing and resourcing women’s capacities, interventions with women and children will become far more effective.
Just as children’s services and child protection services often separate out children from their carers, they rarely appear able or willing to address the interlocking nature of violence and sexual abuse, and violence towards women and children; subsequently organisations dealing with women and children typically operate independently (Little and Kaufman Kantor 2002; Mullender et al. 2002; Humphreys and Stanley 2006). Some of this fragmentation is undoubtedly the result of differing histories of professional and institutional responses to domestic violence and child abuse (Stanley and Goddard 1993), different legislation governing responses to each (Parkinson and Humphreys 1998), and knowledge construction from different disciplines. Yet the continuing fragmentation of institutional approaches can be perilous. For example Edleson (1999) cautions from the US that defining children’s witnessing of violence as maltreatment would act as a barrier to abused women disclosing domestic violence, and would result in discounting “battered mothers’ efforts to develop safe environments for their children and themselves” (1999: 866).

Similarly in the UK, Mullender and colleagues warn that the split in responses to domestic violence and child abuse mean that mainstream services are likely to focus only on protecting children, with destructive impacts on mothers and children:

… without a raised awareness of the potential for partnership with the non-abusing parent and for tackling the perpetrator’s behaviour can lead to dangerously ineffectual responses both for women and children. Women are left in fear of their lives, opportunities are missed to keep children safe, and dangerous men are avoided. (2002: 1-2)

The absurdity of such fragmentation is that these situations offer far-reaching opportunities to develop systemic responses to families if both child and woman protection are prioritised in responses to domestic violence (Parkinson and Humphreys 1998; Humphreys and Stanley 2006). Such responses could “take into account the full breadth and complexity of the injuries and challenges caused by batterers” (Bancroft and Silverman 2002: 3). Indeed they could address the consequences for women and children of living in an abusive household gender regime. The barriers and supports for such an integrated approach form one of the themes of my research.
However the very institution that one would suppose could exemplify an integrated approach to families wherein the welfare of children is assessed within their household context, has been beset by contests about whose interests it actually serves. I refer to the Family Court as it has developed from the 1990s in the UK, various American states, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where decision-making has centred around notions of the “best interests of the child”.

5.3 The Family Court and the “best interests of the child”

At the intersection of public and private, family and state, macro and micro gendered politics, stands the Family Court, which since the 1970s (at least) has been a notable site of continued gender contestation and struggle. Gender struggles are currently enacted through contests between separating parents for the awarding of “residence” of children, and “contact” with them (formerly known as “custody” and “access”). Thus a discussion of discourses and practices connected to the Family Court in Australia and other English speaking countries is helpful for throwing further light on dominant constructions of mothers, fathers and children in the gender order. Martha Albertson Fineman points out that contrary to the impression given by courts’ gender-neutral and egalitarian language, “the direction of reform reflects gender differentiation historically built up to reinforce and normalize the patriarchal organization of the reproductive family” (1999: 140. See also Fineman and Mykitiuk 1994). An examination of the way the Family Court handles the gendered terrain of separating families throws gendered stereotypes and inequities into relief.

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7 The Family Court of Australia deals with separation, divorce and arrangements concerning children in separating families – residence (custody) and contact (access), and has national jurisdiction which stands above and can over-ride the jurisdictions of Australia’s states and territories, with the exception of Western Australia, which has its own family court system.

Latest developments towards shared parental responsibility within the Family Court have conflated children’s best interests with fathers’ rights to their children (in contact or residency), without reference to the quality of this relationship. The court’s concern with fathers’ rights directs attention away from children’s safety and welfare by appropriating the idea of children’s rights, in particular, their right to contact with both parents (Radford and Hester 2006: 85). Dominant professional values and the law perpetuate the belief that all contact with fathers after separation is beneficial to children, which is particularly problematic in cases of violence, resulting in children being placed at risk (Humphreys 1999: 45).

Research is showing clearly that child contact is being used by men who are violent continually to harass, intimidate, and abuse their ex-partners following separation. Children may therefore be subjected to continued witnessing of domestic violence in spite of parental separation. (Parkinson and Humphreys 1998:154)

More recent research demonstrates that, despite the accumulating evidence of risks to children from contact with abusive fathers, the practice of awarding contact and even residency to these men continues in Australia and the UK (Hart 2004; Brown and Alexander 2007; Humphreys 2007; Harrison 2008).

Barnett argues that the legal construction of the welfare of the child as vitally connected to children’s need for fathers silences alternative views that challenge the importance of fathers in the modern family (2000: 130). She therefore suggests that discourses of “safe family men” and “implacably hostile mothers” are inextricably linked. This connection is confirmed by Wallbank, who documented that women in the UK who struggle in Family Court to protect their children from abusive men, 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” (1998: 358). This practice continues, as recent Australian research documents (Hart 2006). Men’s violent behaviour is ignored, but women’s mental state is scrutinised closely, and their attempts at protection are reconstituted as malice, self-interest or individual pathology (Wallbank 1998; Barnett 2000; Harrison 2008). Parental alienation syndrome (PAS) is particularly influential in providing an appearance of scientific support for these discourses and practices, even though PAS itself has no evidence
base (Myers 1994; Wood 1994; Whitfield et al. 2001). Indeed evidence shows that most mothers, even those separating from violent and abusive men, support rather than undermine their children’s relationships with their fathers (Radford and Hester 2006). Contradicting the claims made in family courts that women frequently make false allegations of violence and abuse, Radford and Hester note that, “women are more likely to under-report domestic violence than they are to exaggerate” (2006: 116, their emphasis).

The language of PAS and related legal and popular discourses which render mothers as “malicious” and “implacably hostile” imply that these women are dangerous and that “family men” are “safe”, creating an impression that women are powerful players in the legal system. A study of women in family courts 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” (Bridgeman-Acker 1998: 78). The women in this study felt marginalised and de-powered and experienced that the family law system made “their ability to mother their children a continuous and long-term up-hill battle” (1998: 76). Humphreys states:

… 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)

When sole fathers apply for custody they are deemed equal with sole mothers, but when reconstituted as family men, are advantaged over mothers. Barnett argues that the nuclear family is reconstructed within Family Courts by maintaining the image of “safe family man”, which depends on ideologically separating the issue of contact from men’s violence (2000: 137).

Abusive household gender regimes are also reconstituted through Family Court decisions. Men who are abusive are more likely than those who are not to be given contact with their children (Liss and Stahly 1993). “Everything that happens to children living in families where there is domestic violence also happens after separation, and sometimes the incidents are worse” (Radford and Hester 2006: 95).
Radford and Hester report that in the UK 94 percent of mothers in one study, and 92 percent in another study were abused after separation through contact orders made in the Family Court. “Violent men are able to use their access to children to track down, find, harass and further abuse ex-partners” (2006: 91). Mothers’ capacity to protect their children from abuse, including sexual abuse, is made more difficult when abusive fathers are awarded contact with their children (2006: 95).

Indeed, as Radford and Hester point out, the tendency of family courts to frame women as the problem rather than violent men, creates situations whereby women and children continue to be abused under legal licence. Courts in the UK and Australia have even jailed mothers who oppose sending their children to contact with fathers who they believed sexually abused them. Extensive analysis of over a thousand court cases in the US (Neustein and Lesher 2005) reveals the extent of judges’ denial of child sexual abuse, and their blame and punishment of protective mothers. Custody of children was consistently awarded to fathers who were accused of sexual abuse.

5.4 Discussion

This comparison of three types of services, those prioritising women, children and men (fathers), reveals the contradictions between them and the difficulties in bringing these arenas into positive dialogue and collaboration with each other. Referring to the different frameworks of domestic violence, child protection and child contact, Radford and Hester use the metaphor of three separate planets, in which “quite different, separate and indeed contradictory ideas and practice approaches” operate (Radford and Hester 2006: 140).

These differences can be explained not only by understanding their different histories and disciplinary backgrounds, but also by exploring the ways in which each service type is informed by specific constructions of mothers, fathers and children, and reveals particular discourses and practices of gender, and configurations of gender relations. At the heart of women’s services is a gender analysis. Child protection and family law systems, on the other hand, operate from assumptions of gender-neutrality, which mask the gendered nature of the very issues that represent their core
work. Child protection services and the family law system both engage in the scrutiny, judgement, blaming and regulation of mothers that characterise contemporary regimes of mothering. They also reinforce concrete contemporary beliefs in the ubiquitous goodness of fathers, and/or ignore men’s violence.

While child protection services typically threaten mothers that unless they leave violent and abusive men their children will be removed, once they separate, family courts often restore children to violent men, without the protective presence of their mothers (Hart 2004; Brown and Alexander 2007; Humphreys 2007). Both practices, curiously at odds with one another, blame and punish mothers, and place children’s safety and well-being at risk. Although child protection services are more focused on children’s safety than family courts, they tend in common with family courts to construct children’s interests in opposition to those of their mothers (Greaves et al. 2004). Yet, as Radford and Hester argue these practices contradict the evidence that “supporting mothers to be safe has been recognized as a particularly positive approach in child protection where domestic violence is an issue” (2006: 140). Roe’s research (2006) suggests that both mothers and children would benefit if service responses that recognised and supported mothers were adapted to children’s settings.

Furthermore, Neustein and Lesher’s study also reveals the role of child protection services in removing children from their protective mothers, denying the occurrence of sexual abuse, and supporting the fathers’ cases for custody, even in the face of substantial evidence of fathers’ abuse.

This review of services suggests that shared constructions of family men as safe or victimised, mothers as lying, malicious and neglectful, and children as needing their fathers, added to the minimisation of mothers’ positive contributions to children, align child protection services and family courts more closely than Radford and Hester’s metaphor of three planets would indicate. These assumptions and practices are maintained, despite the overwhelming evidence that they may endanger women and children. This illustrates the pervasiveness and power of “mythologised” accounts of violence in mainstream services (Rummery 1996; Breckenridge 1999), and their role in maintaining male power. It explains why women in the initial study on maternal alienation found their encounters with child protection services and family court particularly destructive.
Comparisons can be made between these organisational gender regimes and particular household gender regimes. The examination of the literature in this and previous chapters suggests the possibility that aspects of abusive households are shared by some organisational gender regimes.

This chapter marks the intersection of micro and macro gendered politics. The next chapter will examine the area of macro politics of gender.
CHAPTER SIX

Macro politics of gender: Recuperative politics influencing South Australia at the turn of the millennium

This chapter explores the trends in recuperative politics at a macro or public level, that contributed to the politics of gender in South Australia from approximately 1990 to 2004. The concept of recuperative politics is an adaptation of Bob Lingard’s “recuperative masculinity politics”, by which he means: “a masculinity politics which construes men as the ‘victims of feminism’ and which wants to return to a societal arrangement perceived to have existed prior to feminist politics” (2003: 33). I use “recuperative politics” to describe the politics of reaction, sometimes called “backlash”, aimed at reversing the impacts of feminism and other social justice movements. It encompasses the anti-feminist masculinity politics referred to in the first part of Lingard’s definition, but goes beyond these to include a range of actors seeking to reverse changes in the gender/social order.

The chapter, therefore, considers several different but interrelated forms of recuperative politics, which can be characterised as aspects of the “New Right”. It is not my intent to provide a comprehensive analysis of broad socio-economic trends, but to highlight particular aspects that shaped public discourse, and impacted on the policies and practices of the organisations and individuals involved in the Maternal Alienation Project (MAP). Some of these influences were contextual, broad discursive environments and practices, while others played a more direct and confronting role in the unfolding of MAP. Their influence on MAP are examined in Chapter Twelve.

This chapter briefly explores recuperative politics at the broadest level within the movements of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, before focusing on their impacts on bureaucracies and public opinion. This is followed by an examination of the influences of the fathers’ rights movement and the emerging New Christian Right in the public and political landscape during this period. The chapter ends with a consideration of the ways in which these three major movements, neoconservatism and neoliberalism, recuperative masculinity, and the New Christian Right, converged during this time to shape public, political and professional attitudes and responses.
6.1 Neoliberalism, neoconservatism and public choice theory

6.1.1 Neoliberalism and new managerialism

Neoliberalism, with its belief in economic rationalism and the supremacy of the free market was popularised during the 1980s by Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US, and adopted enthusiastically by both the right and left of politics in many English-speaking nations from the 1980s (Hancock 1999). Peter Self (2000), researcher on public administration in the UK and Australia, argues that by the beginning of the third millennium, neoliberalism dominated the economic, social and political dimensions of modern societies.

Neoliberal restructuring of public services, commencing in Australia with the Hawke and Keating Federal Labor governments in the 1980s and early 1990s, included cutting public spending and services, reducing welfare benefits, and increasing privatisation through outsourcing and public-private partnerships. Yet commentators suggest that under these adaptations of neoliberalism, social justice and inclusion were still maintained (Hancock 1999; Cahill 2004). The Howard Federal government (1996 – 2007), a coalition of two Australian conservative parties, extended neoliberal reforms to the extent that some have described these as “neoconservative”.

Definitions of neoliberalism and neoconservatism vary between countries, and the terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Based on market principles, neoliberalism promotes the allocation of resources on the basis of competition rather than equity, and firmly places risk and responsibility for people’s wellbeing on the shoulders of individuals rather than communities (Hancock 1999; Larner 2005). Neoconservatism, described by some as “moral authoritarianism” (Larner 2005: 11), is concerned with protecting existing capital and property interests and re-establishing patriarchal family values. Neoconservatives are likely to favour militarism and nationalism and are usually uninterested in social justice and equity issues (Dorrien 2004). I conceptualise neoconservative trends as constituting part of what I refer to as the “New Right” in Australia.

The neoliberal culture of market ideologies created the “managerialist”, or “new managerialist” state, through the “reorganisation of government itself along market
lines and utilising market motivations” (Self 2000: 2). The managerialist state “dismantled” much of the welfare state through passing to the private sector what had previously been public services. Thus, public provision of services became eroded through their privatisation and deregulation (Self 2000). Whilst this ideology had long underpinned US health and welfare sectors, more recently Australia, the UK and New Zealand moved furthest towards a managerialist state (Desai and Imrie 1998). Self is critical of economic rationalism’s largely unfettered encroachment into all aspects of governance:

Socially the market system is claimed to underpin a robust individualism which defines individual rights, responsibilities and opportunities. Politically the theory requires the state to provide an efficient legal framework for market operations, but otherwise to confine itself to those limited functions which must be provided collectively rather than as the outcome of individual market choices. (2000: 159)

Neoliberalism’s pivotal tenets are individualism and free choice, which explain neoliberals’ fundamental hostility to the Keynesian welfare state. Indeed, social work and policy academics from the UK and Australia, John Harris and Catherine McDonald (2000), argue that the central aim of Britain’s third Thatcher government was to dismantle the welfare state, and diminish the power of welfare state professionals. Thus, the restructuring of government bureaucracies to create a managerialist state redistributed power and funding within government bureaucracies, particularly away from those involved in “social justice” enterprises. Australian researcher in public policy, Linda Hancock summarises the results of these restructures in the Australian context:

- cuts to program expenditures, large-scale downsizing of government departments, reductions in personnel, departmental reorganisations and redefinitions of roles and program priorities within bureaucracy and cost shifting. Notably [cost shifting] from the Commonwealth to the States, from the public sector to the community or voluntary sector and from government to communities or citizens/consumers through increased co-payments or tighter targeting of services. (1999: 7)

An influential ideology contributing to the neoliberal and managerialist worldview is “public choice theory”, which originated in the US. Public choice theory, also known as “rational choice theory”, applies the economic principles of the marketplace to explain how public decision-making occurs. Economists who study behaviour in the
private marketplace assume that individuals act rationally and in their own self-interest, necessarily competing with the interests of others (Shaw 2006). Public choice theorists believe that as most people have minimal knowledge or interest in public decision-making (which is considered to be rational behaviour), the incentives for good management in the public interest are weak; consequently there is little public accountability within public government-based services, unlike the private sector. Lack of public accountability makes bureaucracies vulnerable to the operations of “interest” groups, which are organised by people with vested interests who can “capture” bureaucrats, and gain privileges that are costly to the majority.

However, while public choice theorists assert that democratic processes become distorted by the lobbying of “special interest groups”, and this acts against the “public interest” (Shaw 2006), the groups that tend to be characterised in this way are not powerful interest groups, but welfare groups and their lobbyists. Similarly, bureaucrats who administer welfare programs are believed to be consolidating their own bureaucratic territory in competition with other sectors, rather than acting for the wider public good. Thus within public choice rhetoric, those groups, lobbyists and bureaucrats who are concerned with welfare and social justice issues become positioned as “self-seekers” or “rent-seekers” who line their own pockets at the public expense. This view undermines previous liberal understandings that such groups provide a vital democratic role. Within Australia before the Howard government, public funding of non-government organisations (NGOs) had been seen as integral to the democratic process, enabling small and under-resourced community bodies to represent their constituencies alongside the advocates of wealthy business and other interests. However under Howard’s administration, their lobbying became viewed as selfish “rent-seeking” behaviour, a belief that Australian social theorists Sarah Maddison and Emma Partridge in 2007 found to be “almost hegemonic among the politicians and bureaucrats who determine the nature of government-NGO relations” (2007: 80).

Public choice theorists argue that in order to restrain the “rent-seeking” behaviour of special interest groups and civil servants, they must reduce the size and discretion of
public bureaucracies, and bring them under stronger political control. They assert that smaller government is more impartial and less open to the pressures of special interest groups (Dixon et al. 1998). They thus advocate that, “groups concerned with welfare spending (often pejoratively labelled the “compassion industry”) should be excluded as far as possible from public policy debates” (Mendes 1997: 142). Consistent with this ideology, Australia’s Howard government instituted rules that preclude non-government organisations in receipt of government funding from commenting on government policy (Mendes 1997; Maddison and Partridge 2007).

Scholars point out the irony that managerial administrations’ efforts to monitor “self-serving” bureaucrats in order to achieve “smaller government” in reality resulted in the creation of further bureaucracies. Dixon, Kouzmin and Korac-Kakabadse, academics based in Australia, the UK and Hong Kong, explore the effects of managerialism on the public sector and describe a situation in which “monitoring bureaux becomes (sic) increasingly involved with the minutiae of administration and, thus, a growing demand for control-oriented information” (Dixon et al. 1998:166). This accords with Desai and Imrie’s research into new managerialism in the contrasting contexts of the UK and India. Their findings indicate that service providers are subject to performance indicators “which provide partial snapshots of performance and encourage practices which seek to feed assessments rather than broader policy concerns” (Desai and Imrie 1998: 640). They describe such governance structures as:

… characterised by a series of routinised, process-based functions bereft of substantive policy development and/or engagement. In particular, such functions have been reduced to matters of operational management and compacted into an auditing culture concerned with controlling costs and/or enhancing performance or procedural indicators. (1998: 640)

Desai and Imrie conclude that with these changes bureaucracies have not become the efficient, dynamic and responsive services that managerialism promised, but are marked by, “problems of more bureaucracy, overburdened managers, and systems highly controlled by central state directives” (1998: 642). Resources were diverted by managerial systems from service provision towards auditing processes, yet these new systems of accountability appear to reduce capacity to explore new ideas and deal
with complex problems. Desai and Imrie’s conclusion that the creation of a competitive public administration results in service providers increasingly defending their core business, echoes the work of Clarke and Newman in the UK, who describe service providers being caught up in “parochial conceptions of services, needs and resources” (cited in Desai and Imrie 1998: 642). In short, the requirement of services to demonstrate their achievement of immediate outputs has resulted in fragmented services with short-term goals, rather than services able to tackle broader, long-term issues (Desai and Imrie 1998; Dixon et al. 1998).

In addition to these deficiencies of effectiveness and efficiency, Desai and Imrie argue that managerial systems of government have not become more open, as their proponents would have us believe, but more closed to civil accountability, and therefore less democratic and participative. These assessments accord with Self’s (2000) observation that neoliberal Western nations have favoured capitalism over democracy, and Johnston and Callender’s conclusion that economic rationalist governments and bureaucracies have created “a paradigm of long-term diminishing return for the majority of the polity as the public sector continues to dumb down” (2000: 600).

While neoliberals targeted government services in welfare and social work areas, welfare services and the population groups with which they worked were even more vigorously attacked by neoconservatives. Australian social work academic, Richard Hil (2001), identifies the growing problems of structural inequality, unemployment, poverty, violence and discrimination under neoliberalism/neoconservatism. He cites how Australian governments increasingly directed coercive and disciplinary action at newly re-framed “problem populations”, such as single mothers, the unemployed, Indigenous communities and refugees, the groups that had been re-constructed as “special interest” groups. He believes that these developments within the managerialist state pose particular challenges for social and welfare workers, prompting a rethinking of social work’s theory and practice, to include greater social activism.
Yet Australian social work academic Philip Mendes points out that advocates of economic rationalism more closely represent the “special interest” groups that public choice theorists warn of, and these are likely to gain from managerialist restructuring of government.

Overall, the public choice critique of the welfare state appears more concerned with legitimising the “self-interest” of the powerful and the wealthy and de-legitimizing the agendas of those groups who seek increased government spending, than with genuinely reducing the privileges of special interest groups. (1997: 143)

6.1.2 Hidden elites, hidden agendas

Just as Mendes alludes to hidden agendas within the neoliberal project, two Australian critics of neoliberalism, Johnston and Callender (2000), uncover the key role of wealth and power elites in steering neoliberal economies for their own interests, rather than for “the public good”, a claim supported also by Australian academic Damien Cahill:

… absent from most of the Australian right’s accounts of “elites” are those who own and control major corporations, yet under most definitions of elites, such people would surely be included. Certainly there is evidence that major corporations, through organisations such as the Business Council of Australia, have played a major part in the neo-liberal restructuring of the Australian state, and that they have been one of the biggest beneficiaries of such changes via the decline of wages and increase of profits as a proportion of gross domestic product. (2004: 85)

Such business interests include media owners and commentators such as talkback radio populists who are paid handsomely by large corporations to promote their products and rhetoric (Mickler 2004: 105). Hidden elites constitute part of the “New Right”, to the extent that while they are the major drivers and beneficiaries of neoliberal restructuring, they scapegoat those who lose from a weakened social justice agenda.

A key challenge in attempting to understand their success is to trace how these powerful elites have successfully convinced populations that neoliberal structural change is beneficial to all, while it actually undermines many aspects of the public good. Critics of the New Right have traced some of the strategies by which this has been accomplished. Johnston and Callender (2000) identify two key aspects: the use of authoritative and influential figures to promote their ideas, and the use of rhetoric.
6.1.3 Twin strategies: Authority and rhetoric

The populist media, which employs both of these strategies, has played a major role in promoting New Right ideas in Australia. While using influential figures such as talk-back radio hosts, it has both diverted attention away from the self-interest of media moguls and contributed to the framing of New Right rhetoric as “commonsense”. Australian academic Marian Sawer exemplifies this process: “Talkback-radio hosts promoted the idea that ordinary Australians were victims of ‘tyrannising’ minorities who spent taxpayers’ money on items such as ramps for the disabled” (2004: 39). Neoconservative think tanks comprise another authoritative group that play a significant role in the successful dissemination of New Right discourses. According to Sawer, they took up “Milton Friedman’s challenge to ‘sell ideas like soap’ – by dint of constant restatement, re-endorsement and repackaging” (2004: 38). They worked at many levels, gaining access to professionals, teachers and the media. Sawer points out that their journals, *Policy* (produced by the Centre for Independent Studies) and the *IPA Review*, “specialise in exposing the cosy conspiracy between rent-seeking ‘special interests’ and bureaucrats seeking to maximise their budgets” (2004: 38).

Johnston and Callender argue that the influential think tanks and elites of the New Right have been positioned as powerful opinion leaders, whose authority underpins acceptance of neoliberal ideas that were “not necessarily based on logic” (2000: 597), an observation that points to the contradictions between their message – which extols rationality and choice, and the rhetorical techniques they utilise – which undermine rationality and choice.

Brown and Hogg’s (1996) discussion of the resilience of commonly accepted ideas even when they are contradicted by rigorous research and analysis is also useful in understanding the New Right’s success in using influential networks to promote its rhetoric. Focusing particularly on law and order issues, Brown and Hogg find that “commonsense” views arise from “the constant repetition by popular and authoritative sources of a number of questionable views and assumptions which have assumed the status of a set of givens … [forming] a sort of bedrock of mainstream
policy debate” (1996: 175). Moreover, Kate Sinclair (1995) argues that conservative groups gain credibility “not because of the merit of their complaints, but rather because their messages are associated with established norms that reinforce dominant social preconceptions” (1995: 167). Utilising the authority of established norms, conservative rhetoric becomes embedded in the “common sense”. Johnston and Callender suggest that such impacts on public opinion have serious implications for the quality and ethics of public decision-making.

Thus it appears that the New Right has utilised the authority of influential opinion makers and established norms to successfully “normalise” and “naturalise” their discourses, to the extent that many of their ideas have become part of mainstream discourses. This makes these discourses increasingly difficult to challenge, let alone dislodge (Brown and Hogg 1996; Kaye and Tolmie 1998). The pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas in popular culture may explain why even those governments and groups traditionally opposed to conservative capitalist agendas have adopted neoliberal ideologies.

Suppression and silencing of critical and alternative perspectives, referred to in Chapter Three, appears to be another major strategy of the New Right. A number of commentators have referred to the politicisation of the public service under the Howard administration, and the brutal silencing of points of view contrary to government policy (Lawrence 2006; Marr 2007; Donaghy no date).

These bullying and intimidation tactics, under the guise of preventing breaches of the new Public Service Act 1999, have created a new culture within the public service where independent political views and actions critical of government policy are not only frowned upon, but actively monitored and responded to. (Donaghy no date: 7)

In addition to these strategies, the use of rhetoric is a potent technique in disseminating New Right ideas.

6.1.4 New Right rhetoric, populist discourses and anti-elitism

Johnston and Callender (2000) describe rhetoric as using persuasion, the selective use of ambiguous material to make what is unappealing appear attractive, and the use of myths in ways that seem logical. “By promoting [neoliberal] ideas within a more
value neutral economic frame and marketing the potential benefits for the whole of the citizenry rather than the elite few, global appeal has been strong” (Johnston and Callender 2000: 594). Their view of rhetoric is similar to understandings of ideology described by critical theorists.

Critical theory views ideologies as broadly accepted sets of values, beliefs, myths, explanations, and justifications that appear self-evidently true, empirically accurate, personally relevant, and morally desirable to a majority of the populace, but that actually work to maintain an unjust social and political order. Ideology does this by convincing people that existing social arrangements are naturally ordained and obviously work for the good of all. …Ideologies are hard to detect being embedded in language, social habits, and cultural forms that combine to shape the way we think about the world. They appear as commonsense, as givens, rather than as beliefs that are deliberately skewed to support the interests of a powerful minority. (Brookfield 2001: 14)

The question of how New Right ideology or rhetoric so successfully transformed the Australian ideological landscape is considered in a collection of essays edited by Marian Sawer and Barry Hindess (2004). The essays expose the New Right’s use of populism and anti-elite rhetoric to divert public hostility and criticism from the elites of wealth and power who benefit from neoliberalism to those social-liberal and feminist intellectuals and academics who oppose New Right ideology, labelling them pejoratively as an elite “new class”. Hindess and Sawer summarise this rhetoric as the idea that “the most important problems in Australian society can be traced to the machinations of an unrepresentative cosmopolitan elite” (2004: 2). Derisive terms such as “the chattering classes”, “the latte set” or “chardonnay socialists” enter public discourse in support of this characterisation. The promotion and dissemination of these ideas have shaped a populist response, contributing to,

… a distrust in institutions of representative democracy and in the expert knowledges cultivated in the courts, universities and other public institutions … imposing new constraints on what can be said and what can be heard in mainstream political debate, and on what can be done in terms of public policy. (Hindess and Sawer 2004: 2)

Hindess and Sawer believe that these discourses changed the terrain of Australian public policy making, undermining considerations of gender, race and other forms of difference as important elements of a social justice platform.
This “new class” discourse, like its close relation, public choice theory, emanates from the US. While pillorying social movements such as feminism, environmentalism and multiculturalism, and reducing them to matters of “political correctness”, it hides the self-interest of those promoting this discourse (Cahill 2004; Sawer 2004). This strategy employs rhetoric to attack beliefs and practices it mocks as mere rhetoric. Ironically, as Damien Cahill explains, “it is the Australian right, particularly since the election of the Howard government in 1996, that most closely resembles the key features ascribed to the new class” (2004: 85-6). Whilst new class discourse had been promoted by influential elements within both major political parties in Australia, it became a major discursive strategy of the Howard government (Hindess and Sawer 2004). As Sawer points out:

… core members of this supposedly privileged new class, defined by concern over issues such as the environment and human rights, were the underpaid members of feminised professions, such as social work, teaching and librarianships. So one of the key characteristics of the new class is that it is predominantly female, unlike the elites we have been more familiar with – ones that would not admit women to their clubs. (2004: 35)

The Howard government also actively encouraged the scapegoating of the so-called “problem populations” that Hil identified (2001), groups such as single mothers, Indigenous people, asylum seekers, and welfare recipients. This tactic effectively shifted responsibility and accountability from those with power to vulnerable groups with little power, and by constructing them as deviant and dangerous to the mainstream, marginalised them further. This is indeed an example of systemic violence as articulated by Cook and Bessant, who refer to the “demonizing and criminalizing” of single mothers (1997: 15). (See Chapter Three.) When such rhetoric was combined with dismantling the welfare system that supported disadvantaged population groups, neoliberals and neoconservatives contributed further to the disadvantage of these groups, creating the means to fulfil the New Right prophecies that groups such as single mothers cause social problems (Haubold 2003).

6.1.5 The welfare state as a gendered institution

While R. W. Connell argues that organisations are “substantively, not just metaphorically, gendered” (2000: 28), Marian Sawer (2003) discusses the gendering
of institutions by focusing on the gendered metaphors that are used to describe forms of the state. For example she suggests that the minimal state is seen as masculine, “lean”, “efficient” and metaphorically “muscular” in its capacity to take decisive action. It has been characterised as the night watchman state, concerned with contracts and safeguarding private property. By contrast, the welfare state is generally seen as female, extending the “feminine” qualities of caring and interrelationship to the state. The neoliberal antagonism to the welfare state is also gendered, for described as the “nanny state” it:

… is depicted as incompatible with self-reliant masculinity and, indeed, as emasculating. Real men have to break away from “mother” …. Real men are not entangled in the web of interdependence which is revealed by social-liberal and feminist accounts of citizenship. (Sawer 2003: 102)

It appears that recuperating the masculine from the threats and entanglements of the feminine and the maternal is a project occurring across macro as well as micro politics (as discussed in previous chapters). The erosion of the welfare state, however, is not just an assault on the feminine at a metaphoric and symbolic level, but also impacts strongly on women’s lives at many levels. As Fine and Weiss (2000) have pointed out, curtailing women’s access to welfare, shelter and higher education has removed the well-known “exit ramps” for women in abusive relationships (2000: 1141).

In addition to providing some financial support for women’s caring work, the welfare state gives expression to a community sense of responsibility for individuals and families. Interestingly, comparing mother blaming in the US and Canada, Ladd-Taylor finds that it “is nowhere near as vindictive and mean-spirited [in Canada] as it is in the United States, and it has not set such deep roots in welfare policy and the courts” (2004: 12). She explains the difference as deriving largely from Canada’s welfare state.

It is much easier to be a not-bad mother when one has health insurance, paid parental leave, the possibility of affordable childcare, a reasonably safe environment – and lives in a society where “welfare” is not (not yet?) a dirty word. (2004: 13)
Many proponents of New Right ideas understand that removing welfare benefits takes away women’s choices to leave marriages, abusive or not. This is a matter that US feminist Zillah Eisenstein referred to as early as 1982, in explaining, “the New Right thinks that the welfare state is responsible for undermining the traditional patriarchal family by taking over different family functions” (1982: 567). Similar discourses are also expressed in the submissions of fathers’ rights groups to Australian government Inquiries in the 1990s about changing the family law system. Submissions typically refer to welfare payments to women as “damaging to the family”, (Kaye and Tolmie 1998:182) precisely because they give women an independent means of support.

A group referring to itself as the Men’s Rights Agency, in its 1997 submission to the Australian Law Reform Commission, articulated another argument that genders the state: “[g]overnment has now, by its policies taken over the role of men and is now acting as defacto husband in relation to providing support for women and as defacto father in supporting children of the relationship” (cited in Kaye and Tolmie 1998: 182). Sawer (2003) points out that this discourse, which she entitles “brides of the state”, is the one exception to the female gendering of the welfare state, because the state is depicted as replacing the financial provision of husbands. US minimal state proponent, Gilder, takes this to an extreme form representing the welfare state as a competitor who “cuckolds” male citizens by appropriating their provider roles (Sawer 2003: 101).

6.1.6 Feminist engagements and achievements

The gendered antagonism to the welfare state, connected to recuperative politics, extends to recuperating the state from feminist influences. In Australia women’s participation in the public sphere first occurred in a significant way when sympathetic federal and state Labor governments in the 1970s and 1980s employed so-called “femocrats” – feminist bureaucrats – to develop specific women’s programs and to bring a gender analysis to government policies, programs and legislation (Sawer 1999; Summers 2003). Femocrats created policy machinery to advance women’s agendas in partnership with the women’s movement and those federal and state
governments committed to social justice (Hancock 1999). Women’s policy advice units were established within state and federal government departments to provide expert gender analysis, putting Australia at the forefront of these developments internationally (Donaghy 2003; Maddison and Partridge 2007). However, arguing that such services were discriminatory, the Howard government after 1996 closed women’s specialist units, disbanded women’s advisor positions, and defunded the federal women’s health program (Sawer 2003; Summers 2003; Maddison and Partridge 2007; Donaghy no date).

Prior to the government’s erosion of the women’s sector of public policy machinery, femocrats in women’s units and bureaucracies had maintained connections with a broad sweep of women’s community-based NGOs which constituted the grass-roots women’s movement in Australia (Maddison and Partridge 2007). In addition to their central role in struggles for gender equality, NGOs, “provided a conduit between government and a wide range of women in the community, … acting as ‘indispensable intermediaries’ in consultation on a wide range of policy issues” (Maddison and Partridge 2007: 79). Howard’s administration defunded over eighty peak women’s NGOs, arguing that they did not truly represent Australian women, but instead portrayed women as victims to justify public expenditure and protect femocrats’ salaries and careers (Summers 2003; Sawer 2004). Funding was re-allocated to three conservative women’s organisations to establish women’s secretariats. A clause in their 1999 funding agreements stated:

The Organisation shall not make any public announcement, statement, publish or release any agreement potential produced as part of the national Secretariats Services provided by the Organisation without the prior approval of the Commonwealth in writing. (cited in Maddison and Partridge 2007: 88)

Australia was not alone in reversing the gains made towards gender equality during this period. Canadian feminists Mandy Bonisteel and Linda Green (2005) describe the “shrinking space for feminist anti-violence advocacy” in the Canadian neoliberal environment.
Women’s “shrinking space” occurred alongside the greater space accorded by government and populist media to the claims of disadvantage articulated by the emerging men’s and fathers’ rights groups. While women and women’s groups were increasingly constructed by the New Right as “self-seekers”, men’s groups were portrayed as being “of the people”, or even of the “silenced” people.

Perhaps of most significance in the increasing influence of the men’s rights movement was their endorsement of core values of the New Right. These included the goal of re-establishing patriarchal forms of family with fathers firmly in control of “their” wives and offspring, which resonated with the family values agenda of the Christian Right. Family values rhetoric underpinned a new Australian political party _Family First_, which won parliamentary seats in SA elections in 2002 and the federal election of 2003. Family values agendas also found sympathy with key figures of Howard’s cabinet, white heterosexual, middle-aged, middle-class men with a concern that feminism had “gone too far” and had disadvantaged men. During the early 2000s representatives of fathers’ groups had personal audiences with the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister for Family and Community Services and a number of Senators (Flood 2004: 267). The growing influence of men’s and fathers’ rights groups is illustrative of the opportunistic alliances forged within different and sometimes opposing groups comprising the New Right. The fathers’ rights movement drove legislative change in family law, and in return, the Howard government was publicly endorsed as representing “the people” against the “self-seekers”: single mothers and feminists. Fathers’ rights groups acted, in this instance, as the vanguard of the Howard government’s wedge politics, diverting public attention and anger from its own agendas of industrial and tax reform, and its increased military aggression in alliance with the US.

**6.2 Fathers’ rights groups**

Ironically, while recuperative masculinity politics largely took the form of a backlash against feminism, its emergence has been linked to some men’s angry responses to contradictory changes in economic and social structures. These connections have been made by several scholars of masculinity both in the US (Savran 1996; Messner 1997) and in Australia (Maddison 1999; Connell 2000; Flood 2004).
US scholar David Savran (1996) argues that earlier analysts of masculinity in the USA who focused on the impact of feminism, gay liberation, and the Vietnam War as the causes of changes in gender roles and ideology missed more fundamental structural influences. In the US he sees these as being the severe recession of the mid-1970s and the end of the post-World War II economic boom, the immense upward redistribution of wealth and the transition from an industrial to a service economy. Within this context, Savran argues, North American white men’s resentment of African Americans and women, whose participation in the workforce had grown while white men’s wages decreased, was misplaced; white men’s wages were not being channelled to African Americans but to the already wealthy who, Savran points out, are mainly white. Similarly, based on her research into the men’s rights movement in Australia, Sarah Maddison asserts:

… in coming from anger and bitterness men’s rights men have misidentified the problem and therefore seek change in the wrong direction. In continuing to blame women and feminism, men’s rights men fail to recognise the cultural and social factors that are central to their own processes of collective identity, and toward which they may more productively work for change. (1999: 48)

It appears from these analyses that angry white men’s movements may indeed serve the New Right by creating a noisy sideshow that diverts attention away from the main trends of late capitalism which continue to create structural and economic changes that reduce the stability and quality of life for the majority within western democratic nations.

The fathers’ rights movement in Australia consists of a number of different “angry white men’s” (Sawer 1999) organisations, many of which have formed coalitions under the Shared Parenting Council of Australia and the Fatherhood Foundation. They are connected to a much larger phenomenon of men’s groups which have staked political claims in the US, Australia and other Western capitalist countries.

Assessing masculinity movements in the US from the 1970s, Michael Messner (1997) identifies eight major groupings: “men’s liberationists, men’s rights advocates, radical feminist men, socialist feminist men, men of color, gay male liberationists, Promise Keepers, and mythopoetic men’s movement” (1997: 11). He locates these
within a model that articulates three main positions: anti-patriarchal politics (a small grouping of mainly profeminist men); racial and sexual identity politics; and anti-feminist backlash. There are several variants within the anti-feminist group in the US: The Promise Keepers, a section of the religious right movement with its anti-feminist, anti-gay, pro-family agenda; the mythopoetic movement largely appealing to middle-class white men wanting to bond with men in “reclaiming deep masculinities”; and the men’s and fathers’ rights movement. Similar groupings are identified by Haubold (2003) and Connell (2000).

Messner’s groupings of anti-patriarchal and anti-feminist men’s movements have parallels in Australia. While Australia’s religious right has not traditionally received the political and popular support that it musters in the US, Michael Flood (2004) points to the more recent affiliations between some men’s and fathers’ rights groups in Australia and the Christian Right. He emphasises that within the anti-feminist groups in Australia, men’s rights, fathers’ rights and non-custodial parents’ groups often overlap, and include anti-feminist female members, often second wives of the men, constituting “an organised backlash to feminism” (Flood 2004: 261) and other progressive movements.

Flood identifies four major areas of men’s rights mobilisation: men’s health; boys’ education; interpersonal violence; and fatherhood. The latter two categories tend to overlap in fathers’ rights activities in the area of family law and custody, which is the area in which fathers’ rights groups have had most success. This suggests that it is fatherhood, as Sarah Maddison posits, that is the key site of men’s mobilising, and “of primary significance both to discourses and practices of masculinity and as a focal point for tensions in gender relations” (1999: 44).

6.2.1 Fathers rights organisations and family law in Australia

The persistent lobbying of Fathers’ Rights Organisations (FRO) resulted in dramatic changes in family law in 1995 to enshrine children’s “right to contact” (Flood 2004). Largely as a result of their influence, Prime Minister John Howard announced in 2003 a parliamentary inquiry into the family law system to consider a presumption of joint residence; further changes followed in 2004, 2005 and 2006. Legislative
changes in 2006 finally established a presumption of shared parental responsibility, which could be rebutted in cases where violence had been proved. Nevertheless from 2003 political discussion of these issues makes it clear that the courts had informally adopted an assumption that equal parental responsibility and residence should occur after separation (Brown and Alexander 2007). In effect these changes maintain fathers’ authority within separated families (Barnett 2000).

Within this changed regime, women seeking to challenge the presumption of equal parenting because of issues of violence and abuse needed to argue this within the Family Court. However, they could be fined for making “false allegations of abuse” if they could not “prove” violence against them or their children. They also risked being seen as “the unfriendly parent”, thereby possibly losing residency of their children (Hart 2006; Brown and Alexander 2007). Further, the arrangement of equal parenting became imposed on separating families where in most cases a pattern of joint parenting did not previously exist. Revealingly, while the Howard government largely acceded to the agenda of FROs to give fathers more power over “their” ex-partners and children, they remained uninterested in encouraging fathers in intact families to adopt equal responsibility for caring for children (Pocock 2003). Based on their analysis of submissions to government by fatherhood groups, Australian legal scholars Miranda Kaye and Julia Tolmie (1998) documented widespread support for male post-separation authority over women and children.

… custodial parents should remain subject to the continuing control of the non-custodial parent [which] is reinforced by suggestions [by fathers’ rights organisations] that fathers should be able to withdraw child support whenever it becomes necessary to force mothers to provide access; that mothers should be obligated to send a statement detailing how the child support has been spent to the non-custodial parent for approval; that the obligation to pay child support should be dependent on men knowing the whereabouts of the children (and their mother); that mothers ought not be able to move the children beyond a certain radius of the non-custodial parent without their approval. (1998: 189)

Nevertheless, the fathers’ rights campaign and its contribution to changes in family law were challenged on several fronts. One strong critic, the Chief Justice of the Family Court of Australia from 1988 to 2004, Alistair Nicholson, was aware of both
the presence of male violence in difficult divorce disputes, and the threatening and intimidatory tactics of FROs. For these reasons he became one of their main targets. In 1995 he made a statement that drew attention to the connections between violence in micro arenas and the tactics of FROs:

… some people and some politicians with limited knowledge of the issues involved, tend to latch on to such dysfunctional persons for apparent political gain. This has the further unfortunate effect of empowering such persons to feel that their behaviour is not only acceptable but is the subject of sympathy and approval by politicians and government. It is all too often the experience of this court that its most persistent critics have behaved in a way which cannot stand up to public scrutiny, particularly in relation to issues of violence against women and children. (cited in Dunn 2004)

6.2.2 Fathers’ rights activism and gender violence

The connection made by Chief Justice Nicholson between fathers’ rights activism and violence against women and children is a significant one, and was confirmed by others. FROs argued that women and men are equally violent, but that only male violence is recognised and punished (Kaye and Tolmie 1998: 165). They draw on arguments outlined in Chapters Four, Five and Eight to deny allegations of violence made against men, asserting instead that mothers make false accusations of sexual and physical violence to separate fathers from their children (Kaye and Tolmie 1998: 186).

Australian researcher M.C. Dunn, highlights the “high levels of hate and vitriol against women” (2004: 1) in the writings and websites of FROs, and explores why their “virulent hatred of, and harmful action towards targeted women and their perceived supporters” (2004: 1) is ignored in media reporting.

Dunn undertakes an analysis of the websites of Australian FROs to conclude that while their many public websites generally use respectful language, their closed lists and anonymous message boards commonly express threats and hate language towards targeted individuals (such as ex-partners), professionals and organisations.

In the context of family law where domestic violence and child abuse cases feature more prominently, particularly in the contested cases, the hate speech and the incitement of more “militant” action is an extension of the familial intimidation and violence into the public and political sectors”. (Dunn 2004: 10)
Individuals commonly targeted included academics, the Chief Justice of the Family Court and the Sex Discrimination Commissioner, who were described as: “‘the enemy’, ‘maggots’, labelled misandrists and often slandered using derogatory terms, sometimes with homophobic labels” (2004: 11). FRO members claimed that the courts were controlled by “feminazis”, “feminazi puppeteers” and “legal child abductors”, who commit “crimes against humanity” (2004: 11). Representatives of solo mothers’ organisations were vilified as: “face of feminazi evil, fucking fat slag blood-sucking liar” (2004: 11). When solo mothers’ representatives appeared in the media the websites’ hate-speech escalated into threats and intimidation. The following extract was found on an e-list of one of the FROs: “Lawyer-solicitor-barrister-judge scum mafia are riding on feminazi brainwashing ordinary taxpayers into believing they are neither well-paid thieves nor child abusers” (cited in Dunn 2004: 11).

Dunn points out that FROs’ references to domestic violence and child abuse were based on negating victims’ experiences and reframing violence as false allegations, employing:

… flawed, ill-conceived and invalid rationalisation as social policy solutions particularly when it comes to protecting victims of abuse and violence in familial circumstance. So entrenched is FRAO assertion of false allegation combined with selectivity about data that many FRAO ignore cases of child fatalities, and those women murdered by violent ex-partners even though these mothers do comply with contact-orders even when their safety is at risk. (2004: 16)

The changes to Australian family law from the mid 1990s onwards were contested by many women’s groups concerned about decreasing safety in the family court’s considerations of women and children who were subject to violence and abuse from their ex-partners/fathers. However the defunding of women’s peak NGOs in the 1990s, and their loss of credibility through their constructions as “special interest” groups and “self-seekers” have been major impediments to women’s groups having their arguments treated with the same legitimacy accorded those of FROs. This is particularly telling, as women’s groups’ submissions to government enquiries about family law matters have been on the whole well-researched and “rationally” and “reasonably” argued (Kaye and Tolmie 1998; Dunn 2004; Flood 2004).
6.2.3 **Rhetoric of the fathers’ rights movement**

Kaye and Tolmie’s analysis of Australian fathers’ rights discourse in the 1990s outlines eight major rhetorical strategies that they employed, often in conjunction with and reinforcing one another. These are: “the language of rights; claims to victim status; the use of anecdotes and statistics; the conflation of children’s interests with fathers’ interests; appeals to the notion of the family; negative depictions of women; and the reconstruction of ‘fatherhood’” (1998: 163). The following section expands on some of these devices by also referring to analyses by other scholars.

6.2.3.1 **Rights and equality**

Kaye and Tolmie discuss the FROs’ employment of equality discourse in their assertions that they are discriminated against by systems such as family law. Sawer believes that this appropriation of feminists’ arguments and language of equality was the men’s movement’s strongest tactic (2004: 54). Kaye and Tolmie explain that FROs’ claims are based on “formal” equality, a simplistic perspective that treats all individuals identically, and discounts historical differences in access to power and resources.

> Formal equality arguments obliterate the important and significant work traditionally and generally done by women in the private sphere. Equality is measured only by standards determined by the public sphere; that is, male standards. (Munro 1992: 882)

6.2.3.2 **Claims to victim status**

The competition for victim status is a notable aspect of the FROs’ appropriation of equality discourses, positioning men as “the new victims of gender bias in the state” (Sawer 2004: 54). The construction of men as victims became a strategic strength for FROs, forming one of the planks of their burgeoning influence in Australia in the 1990s, at the same time that women’s claim to be targets of both structural discrimination and male violence came to be used against them. In addition to the mobilisation of discourses of “special interest” groups against women, constructions of marginalised population groups as disadvantaged were condemned by neoliberals as “discouraging personal responsibility for health, safety and financial security, and encouraging dependence on the nanny state” (Sawer 2004: 39).
[FROs] claim that they just want to end discrimination against fathers. They claim that policies that recognise the effect of caring work on earning capacity, as in child support formulae, mean treating women preferentially. In the view of “Dads Against Discrimination” and similar groups, feminists have captured state power and are responsible for policies and legislation that victimise men. (Sawer 2004: 54)

The assertion that “all men” (Maddison 1999: 43) are discriminated against by a system that has been feminised or captured by feminists, mobilises discourses of power that Maddison argues relate purely to individual experience. Flood finds that while the majority of men involved in these movements are white, middle-class, middle-aged and heterosexual, they refuse to acknowledge the structural privilege attaching to their membership of any of these categories (Flood 2004).

Their disavowal of their structural privilege accords with a further device in fathers’ rights rhetoric, which is the rhetorical removal of agency.

Men are presented by most fathers’ rights groups as overwhelmingly being denied custody of the children. It is very rare for groups to address the fact that, in the majority of cases, this was because the father had voluntarily relinquished it, as opposed to having lost it by means of a court order. (Kaye and Tolmie 1998: 173)

Fathers’ rights rhetoric not only positions men as victims of feminism, but also as victims of individual women, described as the “mendacious mother” or the “alimony drone” (Kaye and Tolmie 1998: 175), descriptions which resonate with constructions of “malicious” and “monstrous” mothers.

6.2.3.3 Father “hunger”

An important plank of father rights discourse is the reconstitution of fatherhood, based on an invented past and a moral panic about “fatherlessness” (Haubold 2003). In this discourse fathers are deemed to be crucial to the wellbeing of children, especially male children, and ultimately to the constitution of a healthy society. The notion of fatherhood promulgated by some Christian Right groups, such as The Promise-Keepers in the US, is based on the vision of fathers at the head of “their” families; families in which mothers and fathers play important but complementary roles based on biological or God-given essentialism (Messner 1997; Haubold 2003). Haubold argues that in contrast, men’s rights fathers seek to replace mothers, stating that fathers are essential to children’s emotional development, and that children,
especially sons, experience “father hunger” (Maddison 1999; Haubold 2003), ignoring the importance of mothers to children, and the decades of professional literature extolling this. FROs deployed the conservative argument that fatherlessness is the cause of social problems. Through alarmist rhetoric and distorted statistics, they created a moral panic about “fatherlessness”, stigmatised single mothers, and blamed the lack of a male “father figure” for poor social outcomes of children.

6.2.3.4 Distorted and invented research

A number of scholars have uncovered FROs’ tendencies to distort statistics and research to shore up their claims. Dunn finds that the public statements made by the Fatherhood Foundation and others are,

… characterised by the confusion of correlation and causation, the reduction of multiple social variables to bivariate associations, the highly selective use of research evidence, neglect of contradictory or competing evidence, and treatment of small differences as if they were gross and absolute. (2004: 6)

FROs’ arguments also rely overwhelmingly on anecdotes, and many claims are “presented … as self-evident. In fact, they are almost invariably unsubstantiated” (Kaye and Tolmie 1998: 32). Some claims were found to have no factual basis whatsoever (Dunn 2004; Flood 2004). The tendency to distort research findings and invent “facts” is not unlike the character of New Right rhetoric explored earlier in this chapter, which employs selective material, distortion of research, and the promotion of self-serving “myths” (Johnston and Callender 2000).

Their limited and unreliable evidence base did not, however, disqualify FRO assertions being reproduced as “fact” in speeches given by politicians in parliament\(^9\) (2004: 7). The repetitions of fathers’ rights claims culminated in Prime Minister Howard’s speech of June 2003 in which he outlined his concern about growing fatherlessness and boys’ need for male role models (Dunn 2004).

Kaye and Tolmie (1998) comment that many journalists commonly interview men’s rights activists or repeat their material without providing a counter perspective, as if

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\(^9\) Some of these politicians attended the National Fathering Forum held at Parliament House in February 2003, and the National Strategic Conference on Fatherhood, also held at Parliament House, in June 2003. Both were organised by FROs and were well attended by the media.
to suggest that their views are unbiased, not a “special interest”. Kaye and Tolmie note that this recuperates the male as norm – the notion that men are objective and reasonable and represent universal values (1998: 23).

There is little doubt that, as with neoliberal discourses, the reiteration of FROs’ rhetoric and their persistent and effective lobbying contributed to the acceptance of their positions as “normal” and “commonsense”, and thus made these more difficult to challenge.

FROs have in common with neoconservatives their goal to reconstitute both the heterosexual two-parent nuclear family and heterosexual man as universal subject. This is also a major concern of the New Christian Right, a growing movement within the Australian political and community landscape.

6.3 The Christian Right

The churches in Australia represent a wide range of interests, constituencies and political positioning, ranging from the “right” end of the political spectrum to those concerned about social justice issues, such as the treatment of refugees and other disadvantaged groups, and growing levels of poverty and disadvantage. Australian legal scholar Darryn Jensen (2005) characterises these polarities as a religious “right” and “left”, while also pointing to those not so neatly positioned on this continuum, such as members of the Roman Catholic church who both oppose abortion and advocate for better treatment of asylum seekers. However, Jensen’s analysis fails to differentiate adequately between social justice activists within some “mainstream” churches and the growing influence of a new US-style Christian fundamentalism within the Howard government and the broader Australian community.

The 1990s witnessed a growth of US style evangelical churches in Australia, particularly in the suburban fringes of large cities. One of these, Focus on the Family Australia, founded in 1993, is the Australian form of the US Focus on the Family, a right-wing evangelical movement operating at local, community levels in its “civil war” against homosexual rights, abortion and public education (Diamond 1998: 2). These new churches have been described as “prosperity” churches as they support neoliberal economic policies and pursue their own wealth-creating entrepreneurial
activities. They aggressively lobby government through organisations such as the Australian Family Association, formed in 1980 and the Australian Christian Lobby (formerly Australian Christian Coalition), formed in 1995. Dominated by members of the Pentecostal church, the latter gains little support from mainstream churches, yet it boasts strong relationships with some federal and state politicians (Diamond 1998). Building on the growing influence of Pentecostal and other evangelical churches, the political party Family First was founded in 2001 by Andrew Evans, pastor of the South Australian Assemblies of God church, which also has its roots in the US.

Like its North American counterpart, Australia’s religious right attempted to infiltrate mainstream political parties, gaining a stronghold in the Liberal Party and influencing many within the Labor Party (Maddox 2005). As this influence increased, the Howard government strongly distinguished between the New Christian Right churches which shared their socially conservative agenda, and the older mainstream churches which were powerful members of the welfare lobby and strong critics of the social effects of economic rationalist agendas (Mendes 1997). Mendes documents how successive governments used the arguments of public choice theory to undermine the church’s social justice platform by casting them as “rent-seekers”. However, by contrast, he also finds that governments embraced church opinion when it emanated from the socially conservative elements of the established church and promoted neoconservative agendas, such as the reinstitution of the nuclear heterosexual family, opposition to homosexuality, abortion and euthanasia (1997: 151-2).

However, an exhaustive analysis of the agendas and strategies of the Howard Government undertaken by Australian scholar of politics and religious studies, Marion Maddox (2005), suggests that the Howard government was influenced not only by the conservative values of the US Christian Right, but also by their sophisticated strategies of gaining power. These techniques and values found expression in government language and style as well as its policies. At the heart of these developments was the Lyons Forum, a club or faction within the Coalition Liberal and National Parties, which was formed in the early 1990s by right-wing Christian Members of Parliament. The Lyons Forum drove the New Right agenda of “family values”. Maddox argues that Howard’s return to the leadership of the
Coalition in 1995 and his subsequent hold on power, depended on his willingness to accommodate the Lyons Forum agenda. Maddox posits that Howard and the sixty or so politicians associated with the Lyons Forum steered policy formation, public opinion and public debate.

Maddox clearly traces the Lyons Forum to its predecessors in the think tanks established by the US New Christian Right as a power base to support the Republican Party after its 1993 defeat by President Clinton. She outlines the growing sophistication of their strategies, whereby the “Moral Majority-style pulpit-thumping gave way during the 1990s to a more strategic, neutral rhetoric” (2005: 68), the latter reflected in techniques used by Howard and his ministers. Maddox argues that Howard’s use of “family values” language associated with the US religious right was strategic, being directed at the minority of conservative Christian voters who recognised this language “and correctly decode[d] the associated policy agenda” (2005: 39). However Howard’s avoidance of openly religious language hid this agenda from the wider secular population and neutralised the issue, allowing Lyons Forum proponents to claim their agenda arose from a carefully constructed “mainstream” (2005: 69,77).

By introducing elements of this agenda gradually, the core assertions were discussed and promulgated by media spokespeople, their repetition contributing to their “naturalisation” and subsequent acceptance as “commonsense”. In this way the Lyons Forum initiated changes that included the introduction of stricter censorship, prohibition of gay marriage, restriction of access to reproductive technologies to married couples, the weakening of affirmative action, changes to the tax structure to favour families with stay-at-home mothers, the weakening of welfare for single parents and people with disabilities, and changes to the family law system that strengthened the rights of non-custodial fathers (Maddox 2005).

Despite the impact of these changes, Maddox argues that the Forum’s “most significant achievement was surely not so much in specific policy outcomes as in changing the climate of public debate” (2005: 76), a conclusion also reached by Sawer and Hindess (2004). Maddox argues that the Lyons Forum was most
successful when its influence was least visible. It effectively used right-wing media commentators to sell its “think tank derived slogans” (2005: 94), thereby obscuring their origin. The appeal to vague “family values” is one example of how neutral language successfully obscured the New Right’s rigid, conservative form of “the family”. This is strikingly similar to feminist scholars’ characterisation of the US New Right’s techniques of promulgating their conservative agendas and capturing the agendas of other less extreme movements.

New Right social conservatism is not only central to U.S. domestic politics at the turn of the millennium but is also “centred” as conservatives represent themselves and their commitments as expressions of common sense and popular will that balance political “extremes” of left and right. In fact, …, the rightward movement of official U.S. ideology and policy is driven by concerted campaigns that deny the existence of an ideological agenda, target resources to conservative goals, mischaracterize adversaries’ goals and values, and exploit the conservative moves of more centrist politicians and policy advocates. (Burack and Josephson 2003: 2)

US scholar Valerie Lehr (2003) concurs, in her argument that current US public discussion is carried out within the framework created by the Right, and its central notion of the heterosexual two-parent family. She claims that liberal and feminist critics of the New Right become trapped within the frames set by the Right and thus unwittingly “often reinforce key elements of the Right’s discourse and rhetoric” (2003: 127). US welfare policy researcher Jenrose Fitzgerald (2003) also finds that conservative values and discourses have progressively taken over liberal thinking, so that key elements of liberal discourse, such as an analysis of poverty in welfare debates, have been substantially muted (2003: 95).

The manipulation of a constructed mainstream, “Us”, against the threats of an ever changing minority, constructed as “Them”, is a technique which Maddox, like Hindess and Sawer (2004), and Labor politician and social commentator, Carmen Lawrence (2006) depict as the Howard government’s major successful strategy.

In the magical Howard “Us” and “Them” story, “we” can all identify with the solid mainstream; but the note of fear sounding through the story makes “Us” feel, paradoxically, like a beleaguered minority, threatened with imminent submersion in the rising tide of “Them”. (Maddox 2005: 81)
In manipulating fear and resentment of minority groups, the Howard government employed the discourse of victimhood to great effect, constructing the “mainstream” as victims of marginalised groups. The public platform for minority groups’ own constructions of themselves and their experience was thereby undermined.

Maddox claims that the impact of these devices falls with particular severity on women, as the Howard government justified the erosion of their rights in defence of “the family”. “The sepia-toned traditional family, though making up the ‘mainstream’, is imagined as embattled, its way of life jeopardised by single mothers, lesbians and untamed, fatherless children” (2005: 81).

Thus the New Right and the New Christian Right intersected forcefully in their manifestation in Australian politics in the new millennium, to the extent that it becomes difficult if not impossible to discern where one began and the other ended.

6.4 Discussion

Authority and rhetoric, two key strategies used by the New Right to promote their ideas (Johnston and Callender 2000), are major elements employed within neoliberalism and neoconservatism, recuperative masculinity politics and the New Christian Right. The silencing and discrediting of feminist perspectives in this recuperative gender order reflect the techniques of silencing and subjugation discussed in Chapter Three. The populist media promoted and normalised New Right political discourses, targeting so-called “problem” groups – and shoring up a “beleaguered” and victimised “us”. In this process the populist media (re)-created and circulated gendered stereotypes of victimised fathers and malicious mothers, of children who cannot achieve wellbeing without the presence of their fathers.

However two pieces of research imply that below this public surface, New Right discourses may not be as strongly held as its public manifestation suggests. Research by R.W. Connell and June Crawford (2005) on Australian intellectuals’ views of cultural issues and the direction of cultural change found there was substantial resistance to market ideology and support for public-interest alternatives and a model of “the public good”, particularly with older respondents. This can be read against the findings of Michael Pusey’s (2004) large-scale survey of “middle Australia”, the
middle 70 per cent of the urban population, to discover their views on neoliberal
economic restructuring. Finding that most respondents felt betrayed and unhappy
with neoliberal reform, Pusey identified two main groupings amongst his
respondents. While individuals with tertiary education held more sophisticated
understandings of neoliberal regimes, those with less education looked for causes in
the populist discourses available to them, in which neoliberal rhetoric had become
“naturalised”. The “Battlers”, as Pusey names the latter group, directed their
resentment at the constructed culprits portrayed within the populist media.

Both studies suggest that those individuals with access to alternative viewpoints to
those of the New Right may continue to hold these, but when alternative viewpoints
are not so easily available (through lack of education, or immersion in a
market/populist media environment), the New Right rhetoric is more likely to be
adopted. They also point to another factor. This is that the successful public
suppression of alternative points of view gives the impression that the majority has
accepted New Right ideologies, yet a healthy substratum of alternative viewpoints
continues to exist, at a level that is “below the radar”.

This chapter concludes the literature review of gendered politics related to violence.
The following chapter outlines the methodological approaches employed in my
research on institutional responses to maternal alienation.
Women participating in the original research on maternal alienation had reported that their encounters with services were generally unhelpful and sometimes destructive (Morris 1999). They requested improvements to the ways that services and practitioners respond to women and children subjected to maternal alienation, an appeal that was repeated by women and practitioners who contacted me after publication of the study’s outcomes.

In response to these requests, and with an awareness of feminist researchers’ “dual responsibility” that “social research both contribute to the welfare of women and contribute to knowledge” (Reinharz 1992: 251), a subsequent project, the Maternal Alienation Project (MAP) was established in Adelaide in 2002 and operated for eleven months. An action research project, it developed a relationship between the academy (research and theory) and practitioners, managers and bureaucrats, aiming firstly, to develop tools that practitioners could use to address the effects of maternal alienation on women, children and their relationship; secondly, to educate workers across a number of sectors to become more aware of maternal alienation; and thirdly, to influence highly placed managers, bureaucrats and policy makers to institute broader improvements within the systems of health, welfare and law. MAP’s design was threefold, encompassing research, change at the level of practice, and systems change (Figure 7.1). Reflecting MAP’s major concerns to make connections between theory, practice and systems change, a merged role of project officer and researcher was established, a position that I filled.

The entwining of research with attempts to create emancipatory change is an approach that sits within traditions of feminist, participatory and action research. This chapter explores these methodological approaches and touches on ethnography and grounded theory. It outlines how aspects of each were used in this study, and considers issues raised within the research process.
The project design encompassed research, change at the level of practice, and systems change.

Figure 7.1
7.1 Methodological approaches

7.1.1 Feminist research: Setting the scene

Early second wave feminist theories of violence against women were strongly grounded in women’s experiences. In consciousness-raising and other self-help groups, women gave voice, often for the first time, to their experiences of violence.

We learned in talking with other women about experiences that we had and about others that we had not had. We began to name “oppression”, “rape”, “harassment”, “sexism”, “violence”, and others. These were terms that did more than name. They gave shared experiences a political presence. (Smith 2005: 7)

Theory developed as feminists documented women’s accounts and traced the patterns and extent of gendered violence (Hester et al. 1996) (see Chapters Three and Four). Feminist researchers treated the women they studied as experts in their lives, subjects in, rather than objects of, their research, disrupting the conventional division between researcher and subject which typified a masculinist science. As the majority of feminist researchers envisioned their research as contributing to women’s welfare, a close relationship between feminist theory, practice and activism was fostered. These approaches transformed practices in many disciplines, and required the development of “more diverse methodological and self-reflective skills than traditional methodological approaches [offered]” (Naples 2003: 12).

US feminist scholars Mary Fonow and Judith Cook specify some guiding principles of what they term “feminist methodologies” to be (2005: 2213):

- the necessity to attend to the significance of gender and gender asymmetry in social life and in the conduct of the research;
- the centrality of consciousness-raising;
- challenging the myth of objectivity that assumes that the researcher and researched can be separated from one another, and that personal and grounded experiences are unscientific;
- concern with the ethical implications of research, and the recognition that women have generally been exploited as the objects of research;
- emphasis on the empowerment of women and on transforming patriarchal social institutions.
Allied to a commitment to reflexive methods, feminist researchers generally recognise that “the specific methods we choose and how we employ those methods are profoundly shaped by our epistemological stance” (Naples 2003: 3). Thus it is appropriate at this point to outline my own epistemological commitments. I draw on the traditions of early second wave feminism that emphasised connections between theory, research, practice, and activism or systems change. I thus begin my enquiry from women’s lived experiences, located in specific contexts of times, geographical and cultural space, social hierarchies (of gender, class, race/culture, sexuality), and their mediation by available discourses. This position brings me closest to what would currently be designated a materialist feminism which draws on aspects of postmodern analysis, especially discursive constructions. This combination is not uncommon; Nancy Naples finds that “utilizing discourse analysis within a materialist feminist epistemology … [clarifies] the dynamics of gender, race, and class” (2003: 28-29).

Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith has developed a materialist feminist approach that “takes up women’s standpoint in a way that is modeled on these early adventures of the women’s movement … as a ground in experience from which discoveries are to be made” (Smith 2005: 7-8). Another aspect of materialist feminism is described by US scholar Teresa Ebert as “a political practice aimed at social transformation of dominant institutions that, as a totality, distribute economic resources and cultural power asymmetrically according to gender” (1993: 5). She summarises her project to re-assert a materialist feminism in response to postmodernism.

Feminist theory, I believe, must be a politically transformative practice: one that not only disrupts the specific conditions and features of a racist, patriarchal, and capitalist oppression, but also transforms the systematic relations of exploitation and moves toward producing nonexploitative social arrangements. At the same time, feminist theory needs to be especially self-reflexive and adept at critiquing its own historical situation and limits; at resisting the patriarchal appropriation and usurpation of its oppositional logic; and at insuring that its alternative practices and modes of knowing circulate and are used on behalf of an emancipatory agenda. While many may agree with this principle, its realization is the most difficult and hotly contested issue in feminist theory today. (1993: 12)
The MAP’s combination of research, practice and systems change also situates this study within a tradition of participatory and action research, explored in the following section.

7.1.2 Action research and participatory research

It is clear from the breadth of literature that action research is a wide ranging and growing area of activity (Dick 2004). Generally identified from the 1930s as a form of research used within education and the social sciences that produced knowledge of and through social change, the term has been used to describe activities that are increasingly divergent. Action research, like its close relative, participatory research, is often emergent, and frequently emancipatory, challenging the status quo and structures of power and privilege to bring about greater social justice (Noffke 2004). Indeed action research could be seen as a subset of participatory research.

Following a conference on action research in 1989 in Brisbane, a number of participants sought to define what was common to the approach (Altrichter et al. 1991). They identified that in action research participants employ reflection and action interactively to improve their situations. They learn progressively and publicly in a reflective spiral of planning, action, observing, reflecting and replanning. Action research is strongly collaborative, and involves participants in decision-making, posing problems, gathering data and answering questions. It usually involves power-sharing and the relative suspension of hierarchical ways of working (Altrichter et al. 1991: 8).

This description emphasises the importance of reflective practice. Much of the literature describes the cyclic nature of reflecting on practice, and the resultant changes which impact on theory, a process which has been named “reflexivity”. Its cyclic aspect is in contrast to a linear or staged approach to research. This dynamic process is not necessarily predictable or controllable, allowing “the three strands of research, action and evaluation (to) interact in a way which we picture as like a Russian wedding ring” (Hart and Bond 1995: 54). Approaching action research from the perspective of health and social care, Elizabeth Hart and Meg Bond argue that its reflections on the processes of research and practice are similar to forms of evaluation research.
Hart and Bond identify four different approaches in the history of action research: “the experimental approach associated with Lewin and his followers; the organizational approach associated with names such as the Tavistock Institute; the empowering approach arising from community development; and the professionalising approach identifiable in education and nursing” (1995: 5). They further distinguish several criteria that define action research: it aims to improve situations and involve people, is problem focused, context specific, and involves research in which the subjects of research are participants in the change process (1995: 5).

The extent to which research is participative varies across the continuum of action research. At the more traditional end, “the participation of respondents may be an instrumental technique rather than central to an underlying collaborative philosophy” (Hart and Bond 1995: 57). In more democratic projects, ownership of the process may be shifted from the researcher to the participants, even if this leads to the marginalisation or exclusion of the researcher from the group (Hart and Bond 1995: 56). Within this model, researchers and participants are designated co-researchers and co-change agents. There are also many examples of action research where practitioners become researchers, in order to reflect on and extend their practice, although practitioner research is not necessarily action research. However, “(w)hatever the level and focus of involvement, action research has been developed around the premise that people are to be engaged with, not acted upon, that they are capable of managing themselves in their organisational roles rather than being made the objects of research” (Cherry 1999: 4).

Susan Noffke (1997), an educational research activist from US, also reviews the breadth and history of action research. She follows its development from educators’ attempts “to create a form of social inquiry responsive to the process of education” (1997: 315), and traces it through the educational research of Dewey in the 1940s and Corey in the 1950s. Both men strongly valued teachers’ knowledge and work, and saw action research as fundamental to teaching and to supporting its “constant renewal and rethinking” (Noffke 1997: 315). Noffke identifies three dimensions of
action research – professional, personal and political. She describes professional research as uninvolved in the political sphere of power relations, operating as a “neutral process of knowledge accumulation” which “does not intend to alter the fundamental relationships between” research and practice communities (1997: 306).

In personal research the main benefits are viewed as “greater self-knowledge and fulfilment in one’s work, a deeper understanding of one’s own practice, and the development of personal relationships from researching together” (1997: 306). Political research seeks “to create social change toward greater social justice” (1997: 305). While this could be taken as a typology, they can also be considered dimensions of most action research, with one more in emphasis in specific projects. Noffke argues that projects which do not address social justice should be excluded from the category of action research, and on this basis concludes that what is common to all action research is the interactions between action and research, and projects’ implications for power relations.

Obviously Noffke is deeply critical of depoliticised views of knowledge production in applied research (2004). For her it is essential to ask a number of questions that relate to issues of power: “Who and what is being ‘developed’ and by whom, and, most important, in whose interests?” (1997: 334). She argues that the greatest use of action research is to uncover existing structures of privilege and build an alternative sense of power to confront these. This has implications, she argues, for the democratic and participatory approach that usually characterises action research, for if projects emphasise the need for participants to be in agreement without being transparent about power relations, this can mask their differing interests and goals. Awareness of differences and commonalities is thus critical in undertaking action research. In general she argues for action research that does not just legitimise existing practices and conditions, but transforms through its “dual agenda of interrogating the meanings of democracy and social justice at the same time as we act to alter the social situation” (1997: 334).

Noffke’s interest in engaging with power relations draws on a long tradition within social research and theory, some of which links to Critical Theory, the social philosophy developed by the Frankfurt School from the 1930s. Stephen Kemmis
an Australian advocate of action research in education, refers to Habermas’s articulation of critical theory, in which he argues that critical abilities can be employed for emancipatory ends. This process employs the rigorous critique of existing modes of thought and action in order to develop more rational, just and fulfilling forms of social life (1985: 145). Practitioners can do this by examining their practice through a cycle of self-reflection, similar to that described by Altrichter and colleagues. Kemmis argues that “reflection is action-oriented, social and political. Its ‘product’ is praxis (informed, committed action), the most eloquent and socially significant form of human action” (1985: 141).

US scholar of organisational action research Chris Argyris (2003) is also interested in the potential of action research to promote social justice. He particularly focuses on the inner contradictions that occur in attempts to create justice that lead to unintended counter-productive consequences: “As justice is strengthened, it can also produce knowledge that violates it. As truth is strengthened by the use of the ideas in good currency in the scholarly community, it can also create conditions for limiting truth” (2003: 1178). He employs the concept of “single-loop” and “double-loop” learning to explore this phenomenon. Single-loop learning occurs when social or organisational change is attempted without disturbing the values and beliefs or paradigms that underpin the problem behaviours. Double-loop learning attempts to change both underlying values and beliefs, and problem behaviours. He postulates the existence of “defensive reasoning mindsets”, which he describes as compulsively repeatable anti-learning behaviours.

These may not only characterise managers and workers in organisational hierarchies, but also the researchers who study them. He suggests that this characteristic is related to the “fundamental norm of scientific inquiry [which] is to describe the chosen universe as completely and accurately as possible”. This does not offer possibilities for “creating new, and up to this point, rare, universes” (2003: 1187). In contrast he argues that research should focus on how the status quo can be changed, and on how participants learn the skills necessary for this, including critically reflecting on “their skilled incompetence and skilled unawareness”, but reflects that “In our experience human beings do not find it easy to achieve such learning” (2003: 1188. See also McTaggart 1992).
7.1.3 Action research and feminist research

The significance of action research in confronting structures of power and privilege is a major factor aligning action research to many forms of feminist research, where it is employed to challenge gendered power in particular. Shulamit Reinharz’s (1992) overview of feminist research methods traces the origins of action research to the pioneering work of Crystal Eastman in 1907, which “was designed to change the conditions under investigation” (1992: 177). Research and activism commonly combine in feminist research in the form of “change-oriented research” projects that “attempt to change people’s behaviour while gathering data in traditional or innovative ways. They intervene and study in a continuous series of feedback loops” (1992: 180-1). Feminist research, like action research, tends to collapse the boundaries between researcher and research participants, and treats the latter as experts within their particular situation. As feminist research methods vary according to the types of research questions asked, their methods may not necessarily be participatory. However, the emancipatory vision of most feminist research involves seeing participants as experts, creating more just social conditions, and developing a reflexive approach.

Within the broad frameworks that action and feminist research provide for this study, some qualitative research methods associated with ethnography and to a lesser extent, grounded theory, were employed.

7.1.4 Ethnography and grounded theory

Ethnography and grounded theory employ methods of gathering data common to action and feminist research, such as observation, conversation and semi-structured interviews. Ethnography requires researchers to become absorbed as much as possible into the world of those they research, reducing their appearance as outsiders or observers to those they research. British academic Charlotte Davies offers a broad account of ethnography as:
… a research process based on fieldwork using a variety of (mainly qualitative) research techniques but including engagement in the lives of those being studied over an extended period of time. The eventual written product – an ethnography – draws its data primarily from this fieldwork experience and usually emphasizes descriptive detail as a result. (Davies 1999: 4-5)

Ethnography is not the overarching approach in my doctoral research, where fieldwork did not consist of observing people absorbed in their daily lives, but involved encounters created as part of a change project. Rather than fading into the environment, I was positioned centrally in organising and facilitating meetings. However aspects of an ethnographic approach were adopted, for example in participant observation, which was facilitated by the “insider” status I largely held, based on previous work in women’s and community health sectors. Ethnography also requires reflexivity, where “both involvement and detachment” are necessary, and in which researchers “must seek to develop forms of research that fully acknowledge and utilize subjective experience as an intrinsic part of research” (Davies 1999: 5).

Where relationships between researchers and respondents extend beyond interviews these may be referred to as ethnographic interviewing. Davies argues that this “requires attention to the interview context and the relationship between participants beyond simply what is said” (1999: 95), reflexivity once again.

Sharing a “discovery” approach, ethnography and grounded theory produce and trial ideas which continue to develop during the research, rather than start with a hypothesis to test. The researcher begins with a general interest in certain social phenomena and sharpens and narrows the focus as research proceeds, through a systematic process of exploration of both themes and contradictions. Thus, “theoretical ideas that frame descriptions and explanations of what is observed are developed over the course of the research” (Genzuk 2003: 4).

A form of ethnography that attends to the ways in which power operates is “institutional ethnography”, developed by the Canadian sociologist, Dorothy Smith. She describes this as not just a methodology but a people’s sociology (Smith 2005). Ordinary daily life becomes the site from which social organisation and power relations can be investigated. Smith’s approach has been described by others, particularly Sandra Harding, as “taking up a standpoint in women’s experience”
(Smith 2005: 8), thus creating an alternative to “the objectified subject of knowledge of established social scientific discourse” (Smith 2005: 10). Aiming to “explore institutional regimes from people’s standpoint” (Smith 2005: 71), institutional ethnography recognises the significance of language in uncovering the operations of the “relations of ruling” within people’s consciousness.

The following section examines the ways that these methods, particularly those of action and feminist research, are employed within my doctoral research. Particular issues arising in the research process are discussed.

7.2 Methodology

Consistent with the action and feminist research approaches described, MAP combined individual learning and attempts to create social and institutional change with research about the process of this change-making within a context of gender and power relations. The very processes involved in this form of research challenge “the dualities between “theory” and “praxis”, researcher and researched, subject and object” (L. Richardson, cited in Naples 2003: 13). Thus all that occurred within MAP, as well as interviews conducted after MAP, provided a mass of data that was available for research and analysis. The following section describes the ways in which this data was accessed and documented.

7.2.1 Data collection

7.2.1.1 MAP Documentation

The activities which were organised and implemented within MAP constituted the fieldwork in this research. They consisted of the meetings of two working groups of practitioners, one developing practice approaches for working with maternal alienation where child sexual abuse had occurred (CSAWG), and the other developing practice responses in cases of domestic violence (DVWG); as well as the meetings of an advisory group and of a reference group which was charged with overseeing the project. Documentation included informal summaries or formal minutes for all the regular groups. Both working groups were tape-recorded and either transcribed or summarised for group members as well as for my subsequent analysis.
Fieldwork also encompassed many meetings with individuals situated variously in organisations, including politicians, directors of services, magistrates, policy officers and senior bureaucrats. These meetings involved information-giving, gathering support or recruiting for MAP, strategising and planning, debriefing, reflecting, gathering information. Presentations and training workshops were also delivered to practitioners and managers. Beyond the documentation of the regular meetings described above, I took comprehensive field notes during all meetings and activities. I also notated ideas for how to proceed within MAP, and reflections on the project as a whole. In all, 284 pages of handwritten field notes were produced.

7.2.1.2 Group meetings

The child sexual abuse working group (CSAWG), which was made up of eight counsellors from Adelaide’s four women’s community health services, held seven meetings. On average, five counsellors attended meetings, but changes in personnel made it difficult to sustain developments in thinking and practice. The domestic violence working group (DVWG) consisted of women’s and children’s workers and managers of both the Central Violence Intervention Program (CVIP) and the Northern Violence Intervention Program (NVIP). This group met eight times, and began with a membership of six, which by the last three meetings had grown to eight (as new staff members joined, and the two managers became regular attendees). Numbers at meetings ranged from four (once) to seven. However, developments in thinking and practice were sustained as these members continued to work together in their two teams, and often continued their discussions of practice issues in their team meetings, which proved to be an advantage of gaining the interest and involvement of managers.

Members from both working groups joined other practitioners in the three meetings of the practice-oriented advisory group, a large group with twenty-seven practitioners from a range of government and non-government services, twenty-two of whom attended the first meeting, twenty-one the second and nineteen the third. Meetings were documented through notes and minutes.
The reference group had a different function – to influence systems and policy change through its membership of directors of services, bureaucrats and policy officers. During its ten meetings, membership increased from eight to thirteen. Apart from two members that were fairly consistently absent from these meetings, most attended regularly or sent representatives. Proceedings were documented by notes and minutes.

In the last four months of MAP I found it necessary to use several people as “sounding boards” to debrief and enable me to reflect on events in MAP, to strategise and plan. One of these was my PhD supervisor in Adelaide, who participated in the reference group.

7.2.1.3 Post-project interviews

In addition to this fieldwork accrued during the project, data was gathered in interviews conducted fifteen to eighteen months after MAP had finished. Eleven interviews involved workers and managers who had participated in MAP, with one interview including two people. The interviewees comprised: five practitioners, three of whom had participated in the child sexual abuse working group, one from the domestic violence working group, and one from the advisory group; two managers who participated with their teams in the domestic violence working group\(^\text{10}\); and five reference group members\(^\text{11}\).

Two focus groups were also held with groups who were not so intimately involved in MAP. One focus group of fifteen workers from the NVIP team and their co-located community health violence team included four workers who had worked closely in the project’s domestic violence working group. The second focus group of “shelter” or domestic violence workers from another region of Adelaide, included one member who had attended advisory group meetings, and others who had attended training workshops on maternal alienation. These focus groups provided a means to explore changes in attitudes and practice that had occurred “in the field”, one step removed from direct participation in MAP, with people who had experienced less intensity and continuity in their encounters with ideas about maternal alienation.

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\(^{10}\) One of these also attended several meetings of the reference group as my line manager in the last few months of MAP.

\(^{11}\) One reference group interviewee was a manager within FAYS who attended the advisory group, but also sometimes attended the reference group in place of her colleague.
Interviews with individuals ranged from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half and focus groups from an hour and a half to two hours. Two sets of questions were devised, one for those interviewees who were involved in MAP as practitioners, and the other for those involved in systems and policy change, although many questions were common to both groups (see Appendix 1). While all participants were asked all the questions, interviews were semi-structured, to allow open-ended responses. Discussion and further questions encouraged interviewees to reflect more deeply on the themes they raised.

Questions explored the extent to which participants’ encounters with MAP and the concept of maternal alienation had changed their personal and professional views and practice, the relationship between their personal and professional responses to maternal alienation ideas, what they perceived to be the supports and barriers to change, and their views of future directions in this work. Interviews sought reflections on the concept of maternal alienation, MAP and participants’ experience of the project. Some questions for reference group members focused on MAP in the larger context of systems and structures.

All interviewees were given an information sheet and a consent form which they signed before the interview (see Appendix 2). The interviews were tape-recorded (with interviewees’ permission) and fully transcribed. All interviewees were given the option of having copies of their transcripts for review. Most took up this option, but none sought to alter/correct the content.
7.2.2 Data

Table 7.1 depicts the data and how it was accessed.

Table 7.7 How the data was accessed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>How data collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practitioner working groups</td>
<td>CSAWG: 7 meetings (2-3 hours each; 8 participants)</td>
<td>Tape recorded sessions &amp; summarised transcriptions; field notes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DVWG: 8 meetings (2-3 hours each; 6-8 participants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisory group</td>
<td>3 meetings (2 hours each; 27 members)</td>
<td>Field notes &amp; minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference group</td>
<td>10 meetings (2 hours each; 8-13 members)</td>
<td>Field notes &amp; minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training workshops</td>
<td>11 workshops, ranging from 2 – 7 hours each</td>
<td>Field notes; verbal feedback, written evaluations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forum/Launch of MAP</td>
<td>Day forum, 65 participants</td>
<td>Written &amp; verbal feedback; documentation by observers &amp; group leaders; field notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Launch of MAP resources</td>
<td>47 attendants</td>
<td>Field notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings with workers, managers, bureaucrats, magistrate, politicians</td>
<td>65 people, including 3 politicians, 1 magistrate, 9 senior bureaucrats, workers, managers</td>
<td>Field notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert and key informant interviews</td>
<td>12 (11 interviews, 45-90 minutes each)</td>
<td>Tape-recorded &amp; transcribed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group interviews</td>
<td>2 (1.5-2 hours each)</td>
<td>Tape-recorded &amp; transcribed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project materials</td>
<td>Fact Sheet Working with Maternal Alienation in Domestic/Family Violence and Child Sexual Abuse Project Report Training Video for Practitioners Internal documents for Reference Group</td>
<td>Produced in project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External events related to MAP</td>
<td></td>
<td>Materials produced and publicised by Richard Hillman Foundation; emails; informal and formal communications recorded in field notes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7.2.3 Analysis

Just as the data utilised in this thesis came from many settings, the analysis was multi-dimensional, which allowed triangulation of data. In common with the “discovery” approach of action research, ethnography and grounded theory, this study was inductive, producing and testing ideas which developed during the research. Thus methodology and theory developed alongside the gathering of data and its analysis. The employment of a materialist feminist and standpoint approach brought an analysis of gender and power to the lived experiences of women, for example in illuminating how workers negotiate their personal and professional attitudes to and experiences of being mothers/daughters and/or working with mothers. In addition, interviews, field notes and documents were subjected to textual and deconstructive analysis.

“Participant observation”, as it is described within ethnography, involves the making of meaning – the beginning of analysis – alongside observation:

… a continuous tacking between the inside and the outside of events: on the one hand grasping the sense of specific occurrences and gestures emphatically, on the other, stepping back to situate these meanings in wider contexts. Particular events thus acquire deeper or more general significance. (Clifford 1983: 127)

This description accords with my experience of observing people, processes and events within MAP, as a backwards and forwards, or within-without movement to construct meaning. This is also consistent with the constant process of construction and refinement of conceptual categories found in grounded theory. From the start of MAP I began to identify emergent themes and tested these over time to see if they proved relevant or not as categories for analysis. Writing field notes as a means of reflection can be understood in a grounded theory context as a way of developing theory. In grounded theory also, secondary literature is accessed as it becomes relevant to the research, and is compared to the emerging data as though it is data. Although I had read some of the relevant literature before MAP, I found that the themes that were being clarified from analysis of the data tended to guide my reading, and concurrently the sense I made of events in MAP was framed by my reading.
These reflections were often brought into communications with participants, to test their relevance and usefulness with them.

Consistent with Glaser’s recommendations that researchers should devise questions that seek explanations for differences and contradictions encountered in the data (1992; 1998), later interviews included more probing questions, to interrogate themes identified from analysis of earlier data, and explore some possible reasons for commonalities and differences in interviewees’ responses.

Glaser’s two main criteria for judging the adequacy of the emerging theory – that it fits the situation, and that it helps people to make sense of their experience and manage their situation better – were useful tools in the cycles between action, reflection, reading, reflection, and planning, many of which were undertaken with participants.

A great deal of the analytical work also took place after MAP and the subsequent interviews. The writing up process itself became a vehicle for deepening analysis, and much of this occurred when I was distant from MAP in both space and time. My immersion in the detail of MAP had created a situation where multiple themes could be identified from the project and interviews. Inundated with the detail often characterising ethnographic research, my early analysis lacked a larger theoretical frame that drew themes together into larger categories. My location in London at the Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit for eight months of my writing-up period offered access to more analytic framings, as well as – literally – distance from the site of MAP.

There have been a number of highly significant aspects to the gathering of research data and its analysis, arising from the project’s participatory, action and feminist research methods and design. The remainder of the chapter considers these themes and their relationship to this project.
7.2.4 Participatory and reflexive approaches

Feminist and action research projects adopting participatory strategies can be viewed as a continuum, one end of which involves participants in the design, implementation, and analysis of the research (Reinharz 1992; Darlington and Scott 2002; Naples 2003). Whilst MAP was not fully participatory in this sense, discussions with reference group and advisory group members influenced the design and implementation of the project. The shape of the project for the first year was already outlined and its early termination limited the extent to which the cycle of reflection and planning could be fully implemented. Time limits and the necessity to “deliver” dictated a speedier process, which decreased possibilities for collaboration and group reflection.

A participatory approach was most evident in the reflexive and collaborative style adopted within the two working groups. Nancy Naples notes that the “analytic process can be further deepened when dialogic reflective strategies are adopted. This form of reflective practice is a collective activity involving ongoing dialogue between and among participants and co-researchers” (2003: 31). Like the reflexive loop characteristic of action and feminist research (Altrichter et al. 1991; Hart and Bond 1995; Naples 2003), this approach enabled group members to explore their values and beliefs, and their relationship to practice, to make inconsistencies visible and to interrogate these. Ideas were developed in the groups that the practitioners trialled in their work with clients. Such changes in practice were later examined and helpful and not-so-helpful concepts and practices were identified (see Chapter Nine). The participatory process enabled problem solving and contributed to greater congruence between practitioners’ values and their practice. In all, their work became more skilled, effective and just.

Aspects of MAP were also designed to change systems and policy, and a similar reflective process was intended in this area. It proved however to be less productive, and reference group members were not as interested to work in this way, although reflection on the process and themes of MAP was encouraged through the post-MAP
interviews. Some of the reflection sought was evaluative of MAP, and interview participants were urged to make sense of events and issues related to MAP, and “express their own understandings in their own terms” (Genzuk 2003: 6).

The multiple voices within the two focus groups allowed conversations in which there was a greater capacity for participants to explore issues from many viewpoints, to agree and disagree amongst themselves.

While these facets of the research were participatory, the final analysis of MAP and the development of thinking in the PhD were not. Aware of the power the writing-up process gives researchers, I agonised over the ethical dilemmas involved in shaping the final thesis and its conclusions – the developing of a conceptual framework, the differing levels of analysis to apply, the standpoint(s) from which meaning is to be made of events, what was to be written and what was to be left out.

7.2.5 Writing oneself into the research process

It is obvious that within most research, the figure of the researcher is pivotal, as designer, observer, interviewer, interpreter, theorist and author. Keeping the researcher invisible in this process can be linked to what Sandra Harding terms “objectivism”, explained by Leslie G. Roman as “the stance often taken by researchers in their attempts to minimize or make invisible their own subjectivities, cultural beliefs, and practices while simultaneously directing attention to those of their research subjects” (1993: 279). A contrasting view is that “all claims to knowledge are situated and partial” (Darlington and Scott 2002: 18), and writing the researcher into the process gives some indication of the situated-ness and the partiality of knowledge claims. Australian researchers Darlington and Scott argue: “The qualitative researcher is inextricably immersed in the research; thus qualitative research requires a high level of “reflexivity” or self-reflection about one’s part in the phenomenon under study” (2002: 18). This is certainly applicable to this research, as my central role in MAP as project officer made me highly visible as part of the change process, and open to its effects.
However, writing oneself into the research process is not a straightforward process. My experience was that complex issues arise when “boundaries between practitioner and researcher roles … become blurred” (Darlington and Scott 2002: 21-22). As interviewer/researcher asking those involved in MAP for their perceptions and experiences of many aspects of the project, I was aware that they may have censored opinions that were critical of my role as project worker. Although I reassured interviewees that I wanted to hear their honest opinions, my roles as worker and interviewer may have affected what was disclosed. This is to some extent balanced by the fact that the data derives from a range of sources.

Other complexities arise in the course of finding one or several viewpoints from which to make sense of the data, to theorise, and write about the process. In my case, this has involved a great deal of emotional and intellectual labour, self-scrutiny and examination of motives. As I was personally involved in both the original formulation of maternal alienation and the workings of MAP, distancing myself from an investment in these was difficult and painful. While knowing my experience from the inside, I attempted to see myself and my actions from the outside, and move my perspective to a level at which I could analyse the data, including my thoughts, feelings, reflections and actions, from a metaphorical standpoint “outside”. While aware that “ethnographers in the field and out of it must seek to develop forms of research that fully acknowledge and utilize subjective experience as an intrinsic part of research” (Davies 1999: 5), I tried to avoid the tendency for reflexivity to “result in a self-absorbed self” (Shope 2006: 181) who loses sight of others.

As Janet Hinson Shope notes, “(F)eminist method is about diving into the water and soaking oneself in the contradictions and messiness of research” (Shope 2006). With multiple personal and professional connections to the work on maternal alienation and to MAP, I had certainly soaked in the contradictions and messiness of MAP. My problem was how not to drown in the levels of detail, the personal connections, the contradictions and disappointments. From immersion in the details of MAP, my first attempts to write up MAP were mainly descriptive. I needed to “dry out” and locate myself on firm ground using social theory to make meaning and analyse the many
aspects of MAP beyond my and others’ personal sympathies and antagonisms. “Drying out” was enhanced by being in London for eight months of the analysis and writing up process, in contact with my London supervisor, and literally and figuratively at a distance from the whirlpool of detail. It took the processes of “drying out” and gaining distance before the analysis could begin, in which social theory concepts could be applied in coding and categorising the data. Only then did my writing become sufficiently analytical.

7.2.6 Spaces in-between

In traditional academic research authors speak “from the position of nowhere” (Shope 2006: 163) as though the process of research is a pure conduit to an objective, neutral “truth” accessible to academics. Without reflection on researchers’ personal and structural positioning, structural oppressions and personal and cultural biases are inevitably reinscribed (Naples 2003; Shope 2006). Reflexive research opens up new possibilities as one’s very positionality and participation in what is studied becomes part of the data to be understood. And the conundrum is that as these are made visible, the data becomes less bound by them.

Through my experience within MAP I had a sense of inhabiting “spaces in-between”. The project was positioned between, yet encompassed three distinct areas: the world of (mainly) social work practice, the sphere of theory and research, and that of organisational policy, politics and governance. Another dimension of being “in-between” was MAP’s endeavours to bring together the sectors of family law, criminal law, welfare, child protection, women’s health, domestic violence services, children’s and families’ services. Communicating with many professionals from different disciplines and organisational cultures made me aware of the extent that viewpoints, language and conceptualising are shaped by these contexts. In moving between them, I became something of a nomad with no fixed abode, but with smatterings of language with which to get by in many settings. While seldom comfortable or secure, these spaces were nevertheless creative, opening up new and unexpected ways to experience and understand the world, and offering a place from which to reflect. I learned to use these spaces within training workshops to enable participants to see the
world differently, challenge their beliefs and shift their paradigms and accustomed views, a process connected to “double-loop” learning as explained by Argyris (2003). Much of the analysis presented in this thesis draws on the position “in-between”, sometimes as “insider”, other times as “outsider”, and often straddling these positions. As Naples makes clear, a rigid insider/outsider dichotomy does not reflect the fluidity of the actual experience of degrees of being inside or outside, where one may move between these positions or may simultaneously be both (Naples 2003), as an outsider who is inside, and/or an insider with a standpoint outside.

7.2.7 Researching people in power

While feminist and ethnographic researchers are particularly concerned to attend to power differences when those they research are perceived to have less power, they have written less about the difficulties of studying those with more power (Skinner 2005). In my work involving the reference group and the later interviews with some of its members I encountered this issue, as most held positions ranked higher than mine, and some were responsible for funding the project and acted as my “line manager”. Skinner comments that “powerful” interviewees may have the potential to “hold up the progress of the research, take control of the interview, influence research findings, hold up or quash publications, or affect the future career of the researcher” (2005: 47). While most members of the reference group did not use such power, several of them, and a senior bureaucrat I encountered several times in relation to MAP did try to (often successfully) take control of the interview, meetings and the project. One or two also had the power to determine the fate/funding of MAP affect my career in the ways in which they interpreted my actions. More alert to addressing power differences for those with less power, I was not prepared for dealing with those with more power, and did not have effective strategies in place. The lack of development in this area in feminist, action research and ethnographic methods leaves researchers vulnerable to these problems.
7.2.8 Ethical issues

These matters all involve ethical issues, for “(t)he interconnectedness between the ethics and the politics of research is evident at every stage of the research process” (Darlington and Scott 2002: 22), yet the complex matters discussed earlier are not usually addressed by ethics committees within universities. My research proposal was approved through the Ethics Committee of the University of Adelaide, which concentrated particularly on the content of the Information and Consent Sheets, to be given to prospective interviewees. However, the ethical implications of conducting research within human services organisations, which Darlington and Scott argue are becoming increasingly recognised, were not covered. Such research “entails much more careful negotiation of the respective rights and responsibilities of the organisation and the researcher” (2002: 31). Unfortunately these were matters that were not negotiated carefully at the start of MAP, with far-reaching consequences.

My dual role of project officer and researcher, whilst not uncommon, was a source of discomfort for some connected to MAP. The project officer role was paid and had responsibilities to the organisations which funded MAP. The researcher role was not paid, and was thus seen by those funding MAP as separate and outside their control, and ultimately dispensable. Most other project participants welcomed this dual role, and did not appear to find it problematic. However the spectre of this lack of resolution hung over MAP, and was eventually influential in decisions to discontinue it. The issue became entwined with the question of “who owns the research?” which Darlington and Scott find to be the most fundamental question to be resolved in organisational research (2002: 22). Not fully discussed with the “partners” resourcing MAP at the start, this question was never satisfactorily resolved.

These differences were rooted in a lack of a shared understanding or vision of action research. Once again this required more careful discussion and negotiation (both initially and continuing) than was accomplished. However, it also suggests a weakness within action research, which, with its emphasis on discovery, has been characterised as: “not just the slow shaping of achievement to fit my preconceived purposes, but the gradual discovery and growth of a purpose which I did not know”
(Milner cited in Cherry 1999: xvii). While from the very start MAP’s threefold form was explained, in which research, practice and systems intersect and influence one another, the ways this occurred were yet to emerge. In other words, exactly what the dual role entailed could not be known or specified in ways that met the requirements of funders.

In this thesis I endeavour to make explicit the motivations, thoughts, feelings and experiences linked to my experience of being project officer and researcher in MAP, yet there are facets of this experience that I have decided not to make public. As MAP proceeded, a series of events unfolded which were based on several personal stories and relationships. It is not possible to tell these stories without breaching confidentiality and possibly the basic ethical principle of “do no more harm”. Yet these events stand in the background and I have since developed some analysis of them. This suggests another problem associated with this form of research, for while action research has provided access to intimate details of participants’ lives and responses within a process of personal and political change, their very intimacy and the possible negative effects on people’s lives create dilemmas. With similar awareness, Laurel Richardson asks:

… how is it possible to situate ourselves as participant observers in the lives of others and not affect them? The social skills that we use to do ethnographies attach us to real human beings. They connect us to people in deeply human ways. And then, we become (solo) authors of “true” texts, which have unintended, often hurtful, consequences for those who have trusted us. (cited in Naples 2003: 37)

An issue that developed due to the smallness of the city in which this research took place, and the added fact that MAP had been documented historically in a number of ways, was the matter of confidentiality. There was little point in changing the names of the organisations involved in MAP as they had been acknowledged in the various public documents produced within MAP and about MAP. Further, the history of the organisations that funded MAP is important to an analysis of the processes that occurred within MAP and external events that impacted on it. Unfortunately this means that certain individuals on the reference group and in the working groups can be identified. I have attempted to reduce this problem by not always specifying which research participant is being referred to. For example I have generally identified
participants as “reference group member” or “advisory group member”, although where it is necessary for my analysis I have referred to the “drivers”, who were key members of the reference group. However, throughout the body of the thesis where this specific identification was not needed for the analysis, these players were referred to in more generic ways. This was a deliberate attempt to make it difficult for a reader to trace exactly how particular individuals appeared throughout the thesis. The employment of Smith’s institutional ethnographic approach to analysis, which attends to the structures of gender and power rather than to acts of individuals, also minimises the harm resulting from a reader’s recognition of particular individuals.

Participants in meetings knew that they were taking part in an action research project connected to my doctoral research, and that the content of meetings would form part of the research data. No specific conditions were agreed to with participants about how meeting context was to be analysed and written up, and participants did not see drafts of sections of the thesis that referred to them. Thus it is to be emphasised that the version of events recounted in this thesis is the author's responsibility, and participants may have different interpretations.

A further issue of confidentiality concerns the use of pseudonyms within the thesis. I use pseudonyms in two circumstances. Firstly, to employ the pseudonyms originally used for research participants in the initial research on maternal alienation. Secondly, to distinguish “who is who” when specific players appear and re-appear in complex narratives.

Another ethical aspect to be considered was my history of relationships with people who became involved in MAP, an unavoidable aspect of working in a specialised area in a small city. Some of those connected to MAP had been colleagues and friends. Others became colleagues or friends through the process of working together for many months. US feminist sociologist Nancy Naples has attempted to address this issue, by developing a strong reflective practice:

… that acknowledges how relationships in the field blur what counts as “data”, takes into account the contradictions of friendship in fieldwork, and openly confronts ethical dilemmas faced in fieldwork-based friendships to enhance fieldwork agendas. (2003: 37)
Naples stresses the importance of reflective practices employed at different levels throughout ethnographic research, and these have been helpful practices to adopt: sensitivity to the perspectives of others and how we interact with them; awareness of how we construct our knowledge and of the influences we bring to the research process; and recognition of power dynamics within the research situation, which may influence how problems are defined, who is given credibility, how interactions are interpreted and ethnographic narratives constructed (2003: 41-42, 48). Added to this, as I discovered, is the need for careful self-reflection to understand how one’s loyalties, sympathies and antagonisms toward others can influence one’s actions and conceptualisation of situations. The challenge is to situate oneself at a place where one can analyse the factors beyond these personalised responses.

Taking these matters into account, the aim that has been uppermost in the analysis and writing up of this research has been what Naples expresses as the goal of activist research:

… to produce an analysis that retains the integrity of political processes, specific events, diverse actors, and social context while revealing the broader processes at work that may not have been visible to the individual participants or even to the researcher at the time. (2003: 31)

The following chapter outlines the emergence and development of the gendered concept, maternal alienation.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Maternal alienation: The emergence and development of a gendered concept

This chapter explores the process of identifying and naming a form of gender violence, that of “maternal alienation”. The naming of maternal alienation is central to this thesis, being a necessary precedent to the Maternal Alienation Project (MAP), which sought to bring the findings of the original research to influence the wider “macro” world of practitioners, human service organisations and systems, and policy making. However naming a concept such as this has its difficulties, which are discussed when exploring the contrasting concept, parental alienation syndrome (PAS). This chapter augments the original analysis (Morris 1999) with a stronger emphasis on social theory.

Maternal alienation, like many feminist concepts, can be seen as contested, in the sense that “it is the political character of certain concepts that makes them essentially contestable”, and which transforms divergences in meaning into “an active contest” (Grafstein 1988: 19). It is not that the term is contestable in the sense that there are disagreements about its meaning and extent, but rather the phenomenon it describes, and the particular words used to denote it, are contested.

8.1 Maternal alienation

8.1.1 A particular form of woman and child abuse

For my Masters degree I conducted a small research project (Morris 1999) based on nine interviews and two focus groups with women who had become alienated from their children (as mothers) and/or from their mothers (as daughters) in a context of male violence in their families. An analysis of this data revealed a number of deliberate techniques that the male perpetrators of gendered violence in these cases had employed to undermine mother-child relationships. These techniques are akin to the “grooming” which has been identified in studies of child sexual abuse (Conte et al. 1989). These techniques were employed in both domestic violence and child abuse by the mothers’ intimate partners who were also the children’s fathers or step-fathers. In this small sample, the men had all been married to the women whose mothering they had undermined.
Before and during this study I worked in a women’s community health service as a counsellor, group worker and women’s advocate. Observing practitioners who worked with women and children subject to abuse revealed that they generally assumed that women’s and children’s difficult relationships were a “by-product” of abuse, and/or could be traced to the women’s bad mothering. There is certainly ample evidence that domestic violence interferes with the capacity to mother (Radford and Hester 2006). “Children’s needs for reassurance, attention and support are accentuated in situations of domestic violence, at the same time as the resources of their mothers to meet them are taxed to the limit and invariably depleted” (Mullender et al. 2002: 158). In professional contexts in which mother-blaming often occurs, or in which child protection issues are seen separately from women’s safety in domestic violence (Humphreys and Stanley 2006), the awareness of abused women’s diminished capacity to mother can come to be used against mothers and can undermine their attempts to mother as best they can in difficult circumstances (Irwin et al. 2002; Mullender et al. 2002). The 1999 findings contributed greater depth to an understanding of the vulnerability of mother-child relationships in familial gendered violence, and countered the common tendency to hold women responsible for these difficult relationships (Morris 1999).

It was found that techniques used by perpetrators to alienate children from their mothers can lead to a complete breakdown of their relationships, sometimes for decades and perhaps for a lifetime. For example, Anne12, one of the women interviewed, described her formerly close relationships with her two daughters. When she ended her emotionally abusive marriage, her husband, who had previously had little involvement with his daughters, began a determined and vitriolic campaign to win their affections. This included convincing them that their mother did not love them, that she was insane, and that she had “taken everything from him”, leaving him poor and needing to be cared for. Anne described the change in her relationship with her younger daughter after she had spent holidays alone with her father: “She just glared at me with such hatred in her eyes that I have never seen in that child before.

12 The names are pseudonyms.
That child only had love before then” (Morris 1999: 67). From that point Anne’s daughter cut off all contact with her mother, chose to live with her father, and years later had still not resumed a relationship with her mother.

The women interviewed all believed that their ex-partners targeted their mothering as a way of diminishing and punishing them, of exercising control over their families, and of “winning” at all costs. The women experienced ongoing grief and pain at the loss of their children, which for many mothers is their most significant relationship. Some men had used these tactics for years within their intact families, others began only when women left the relationship. Every woman in the study experienced the campaigns continuing for years. Jenny pondered, “I have thought about the relentless nature of his pursuit of me, which is ten years now. It still seems to be festering along in its full bloom” (Morris 1999/2000: 32).

8.1.2 Naming maternal alienation

While abuse of this type is described within the literature on domestic violence and child sexual abuse it did not have a name. As Liz Kelly (1988) explains, when something is not named, it tends to remain invisible and without substance. Without a name, there is nothing with which to recognise and explore a phenomenon, or validate the experience for others; neither can theoretical understandings of the issue and practical responses to address it develop. Thus I named this phenomenon “maternal alienation”, a conscious attempt to counter the charge made by PAS under the guise of its gender-neutral framing, that mothers are the main alienators of children from the other parent (Gardner 1987). Maternal alienation was defined as a form of simultaneous emotional abuse of women and children in which perpetrators – most often the women’s intimate partners and the children’s fathers or step-fathers – attempt to undermine the relationships between mothers and their children within a context of familial abuse. The interview data was full of rich descriptions of the intricate strategies used by perpetrators, deliberate acts, which when documented, direct attention away from the common focus on the failings of mothers.

This initial study also drew a connection between the practices of maternal alienation within a micro household context, and popular and professional beliefs and practices
within the macro context – the gender order. The messages conveyed about mothers at the household level (re)created over-arching socio-cultural discourses. These were also reflected in professional discourses and practices, which I termed “systemic maternal alienation”. This chapter summarises that material.

The results of the research were published in scholarly journals, discussed at conferences, and formed the basis of training sessions for service providers, mainly in South Australia. Conversations with practitioners suggested that maternal alienation is a common element of a household in which violence and abuse are present.

8.1.3 Maternal alienation, child sexual abuse and domestic violence

The maternal alienation research documented similar strategies used to undermine mother-child relationships by both perpetrators of domestic violence and child sexual abuse/incest. Bringing these practices together in the one term, “maternal alienation”, highlighted the commonalities and connections between forms of woman and child abuse, making it possible to speak of an abusive household gender regime (a more recent addition to this theorising). Although some researchers and practitioners had drawn attention to the way perpetrators of domestic violence and child sexual abuse undermine the mother-child relationship, this had not been examined as systematic in its particularities on the one hand, nor as related to social and structural aspects, on the other.

Previous research on child sex offenders demonstrated their deliberate intentions to destroy children’s relationships of trust, particularly with their mother (Laing and Kamsler 1990; Hooper 1992; Humphreys 1994; Salter 1995; Freer 1997; Laing 1999). This undermining of the mother-child relationship is illustrated by the case of Sharon, one of the mothers interviewed in 1999. After discovering that both her daughters had been sexually abused by their father, Sharon’s younger daughter disclosed to her some of the ways he had manipulated them. In Sharon’s words:
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. … 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. (Morris 1999: 68)

Sharon’s statement also demonstrates the way in which techniques of maternal alienation can be woven together into web-like structures of messages. While sexually abusing his daughters, Sharon’s husband convinced them not only that their mother knew about this abuse, she was also responsible for it, and did not love them enough to act as he did. Thus abuse is “transformed” into a practice that is based in love, a love that their mother denies them.

Maternal alienation is also consistent with the findings of research into domestic violence, such as that of Irwin and Wilkinson who point out: “Abusive partners often isolate children from their mothers in a number of ways, such as involving children in supporting and participating in the abuse/degradation of their mother” (Irwin and Wilkinson 1997: 18; see also Irwin et al. 2002: 18). Mullender and colleagues identify similar processes:

The most common way in which children had been made parties to the abuse involved men deliberately and systematically forcing them to witness the abuse and/or compelling them to listen to accusations about, and the demeaning of, their mothers. In the latter case this could either be in front of the woman, or in a covert attempt to create an alliance with the child against the mother; this had also often been combined with treating children differently from each other. (2002: 162)

Drawing together the strategies used in domestic violence and child sexual abuse/incest thus highlights that similar strategies to those used in child sexual abuse can be employed in domestic violence, as the perpetrator aligns the children he targets with him, breaks their trust in and respect for their mother, and recruits them into his definitions of reality.

8.1.4 Perpetrators’ representations of mothers and themselves

The 1999 study established that men use a web of words and actions that both demean children’s mothers and elevate themselves in their children’s eyes. Through blame, insults and lies, these men painted their wives as unloving, stupid, mad, lying,
malicious and monstrous. Above all the women were blamed for everything negative within their families, particularly the men’s acts of violence and abuse. Bancroft and Silverman also identify perpetrators’ use of contempt, ridicule, and objectification in their communications with their partners (2002: 10).

As abusive men construct negative portraits of women, they simultaneously construct themselves positively (Morris 1999). These men’s stories of themselves and their wives are moral tales in which deficiencies and culpability are shifted from (and by) the man to the woman. (Step)fathers who convince children that their mothers do not love them imply that only they, the perpetrators, care and can be relied upon; as women are depicted as insane, irrational and stupid, fathers become defined by contrast as sane, reasonable and clever. Women are not unaware of these processes; Hannah pointed out that her ex-husband’s “strategy of dehumanising me” always elevated him (Morris 1999/2000: 33). Thus men’s practices enabled them to actively portray themselves as victim/heroes, evoking feelings of sympathy, protectiveness, alongside fear and admiration in their children.

8.1.5 Monstrous and unloving mothers

The messages conveyed through the practices of maternal alienation are potent, but convincing children that their mothers do not love them has particular force, leaving children feeling betrayed, lost and angry. The mother who is seen to not love enough is not just considered a failed mother, but a morally bankrupt person (McMahon 1995), in children’s perceptions worthless, and certainly worth less than their father.

Equally subversive are the practices that represent mothers as monstrous and repulsive. For example, Marilyn’s husband taped onto the toilet wall the message: “your mother’s farts are the worst ever” (Morris 1999: 76). After Marilyn with the three children left this violent and emotionally abusive man, the children were ordered by the Family Court to have contact with him. On contact visits the children encountered: “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” (Morris 1999: 76). Here again is evident the implicit simultaneity of father appearing, in contrast, to be reasonable and reliable.
8.1.6 Fathers as victim/heroes

All fathers in the initial research depicted themselves as good, rational, and above all as a potent combination of victim/hero. The men had well-established careers, some with very high incomes, while their ex-wives lived below the poverty line. Despite this, most succeeded in persuading their children that they were poor, and had been impoverished by the separation. As victims they demanded emotional support from their children – support, they asserted, denied them by their wives. Similarly Bancroft and Silverman explain that perpetrators’ typically overblown sense of entitlement can lead to “role reversal, where batterers expect their children to be responsible for attending to their needs” (2002: 9). In much of the literature on children and childhood, however, role reversal has been attributed almost invariably to mothers.

Through these practices perpetrators reinforce gender stereotypes, typically positioning their daughters as replacement spouses, while aligning their sons with them as aspiring males with contempt for all things female, particularly their sons’ mothers. Boys were pressured to prove they were “men” by mimicking their fathers’ disrespect whilst simultaneously caring about and legitimising their fathers’ feelings (Morris 1999).

These fathers also positioned themselves as heroes to their children. They loom larger than life, partly due to children’s awareness of their unacknowledged power and control. Bancroft and Silverman emphasise: “Children of a batterer are sometimes swayed by his grandiose belief in his own generosity and importance, enhancing their blame of themselves and of their mothers for the violence” (2002: 10). For some children, their fathers were always at the centre of their attention, because to relax their focus on them can become dangerous. Mary exemplifies this when she said of her violent father:

He’d make out he was always this hero. … 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. (Morris 1999: 109)

These fathers also demanded complete and undivided loyalty from their children. They do not tolerate other relationships in their children’s lives, and set out to destroy
children’s relationships of trust, affection and loyalty, even between siblings. Fathers’ acknowledgement was conditional on children behaving as instructed, including behaving in abusive ways to their mothers and to siblings who do not comply with his regime. Such demands construct a bid for hegemonic power within families, and thus these fathers seem to their children to be invulnerable, indomitable and heroic, and yet because they are victims of the children’s “evil” mothers, they are in need of their children’s support. Children can become trapped in this paradox unable to see their (step)father as responsible for abuse.

8.1.7 Fathers’ authority, mothers’ responsibility

The power and authority of maternal alienation lies partly in the ways that perpetrators’ representations of mothers and themselves align with social discourses and constructions of women and men, mothers and fathers. Thus the negative depictions of women which circulate in social, cultural and legal discourses are readily available to these men to exploit, and are also easily recognised by others in the family’s orbit, who may unreflectingly solidify these stereotypes in their assessment of particular women. Women also typically internalise these messages about themselves and so come to believe that they are to blame. Anne’s statement makes this clear:

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…. The neighbours were all saying, “Well, what have you done? You’ve done something. You’re to blame.” My in-laws were saying the same thing. At that time, my mother was blaming me... my father definitely blamed me. (Morris 1999: 104)

These gendered constructions and degrading practices are recreated within the family for a new generation. Fathers’ authority becomes reinforced when children witness outsiders replicating or excusing his behaviour towards their mother. His “truth” thus becomes privileged over their own, even while it contradicts, their experiences of their mother’s love and their fear of their father’s violence. This is a point that Bancroft and Silverman also make, referring to perpetrators’ capacity to “shape the
children’s perceptions of the incident that has just occurred, leading them to form the impression that their mother is aggressive and that the batterer is the ‘nice’ parent” (2002: 16).

Children tend to absorb the batterer’s view of their mother over time; we observe in custody evaluations, for example, that children of battered women sometimes describe her in terms similar to ones that the batterer would use, saying that she “nags”, that she “doesn’t know what she’s doing”, or that “what she needs is a slap in the face”. For similar reasons, children can come to see the batterer as the parent who is most knowledgeable, competent, and in charge. (Bancroft and Silverman 2002: 11)

In social theory terms this represents the workings of hegemonic masculinity within an abusive household gender regime. Within this frame of reference violent and abusive men do not just forcefully construct reality for their children, but also for those outside their families. By contrast, women reported they were rarely listened to and believed within or outside their families. As a consequence they became increasingly isolated and desperate as their families, friends and service-providers adopted their partners’ portraits of them and his versions of events. In place of their voices and experiences, male representations of them and their utterances were often treated as fact.

Thus the dual pillars on which maternal alienation is built are: constructions of mothers as both morally deficient and fully responsible for everything problematic in their families; and the privileged status and moral authority of fathers’ voices. This duality stems from one source: the power of the father’s voice, symbolically linked to the Father’s word, logos, creator of “truth”; it largely excludes the mother’s voice, and in its place (re)creates the all-responsible monstrous mother. Thus the monstrous, malicious, culpable mother can be said to be a masculinist creation.

8.1.8 Rhetorical devices

Continuing reflection on the issue of maternal alienation, particularly as researcher/project officer for MAP, brought a further facet of maternal alienation to my attention. A particularly powerful element is the “web”-like form of its rhetoric, in which alienating messages are constantly combined and repeated. Social work academic in the US and Japan, Mieko Yoshihama (2005), uses the metaphor of a
“web” to describe the various practices and tactics of partner violence and the ways in which they are used to reinforce one another: “Like the strands of a spider’s web, these male partners’ behaviour and words reinforced each other and bound women in a trap from which it was difficult to escape” (2005: 1245). British researcher and practitioner Catherine Kirkwood also uses the metaphor of a web to convey “the fabric of emotional abuse with respect to its delicate interconnections, which afford an overall strength and a capacity to entrap” (1993: 60) (see Chapter Two for earlier discussion of the “web”). The web-like formation of maternal alienation works in a similar way. The combination of verbal messages, threats and violent and manipulative action and the way details are woven as evidence into the fabric of reality that the perpetrator creates, means that his voice and his reality seep into women’s and children’s minds and beings in complex and interlocking, but frequently intangible, ways.

The messages do not require a factual basis in order to be effective, for added to its web-like character is the creation of a moral tale in which the perpetrator becomes victim, and the strength of the emotional responses this elicits. The messages bypass rationality, and work as propaganda, their constant repetition a form of brainwashing. In this way they become more authoritative than children’s own experiences of their mother and of their father’s violence. As they conflict with children’s experiences, these assaults on children’s sense of reality have profound implications for their later mental health and recovery (Bancroft and Silverman 2002: 16).

Thus far the account of maternal alienation gives an impression of the omnipotence of perpetrators; this needs to be balanced by evidence of women’s and children’s resilience and capacity to resist, and their differing vulnerability to maternal alienation. Several children who decided to live with their father and seemed to adopt his behaviours and views changed sometime later and returned to live with their mothers and were no longer so influenced by their fathers. Others remained alienated for their lifetime.

In the initial study women found that having a name to put to their experiences enabled them to see what was going on, stand up to perpetrators’ tactics and develop
some strategies for action. They were able to develop for themselves, and their children, different perspectives to those foisted on them by abusive men. Thus, naming maternal alienation appeared to be a key element enabling women and children to free themselves from its influence.

8.1.9 The significance of naming maternal alienation

The identification and naming of maternal alienation based on women’s material experiences echoes processes of naming in second wave feminist approaches to gendered violence (see Chapter Three). All the women involved in the initial study, and numerous women who made contact with me by phone, email or letter subsequently, talked of a sense of relief when they realised that these tactics had a name. The response, “That’s my life you’ve written about”, was common, and women felt their experiences were validated, now that they had a framework with which to understand their experiences, and language with which to express it. Some revealed that information on maternal alienation helped them realise that practices they had recognised in isolation were part of a systematic attempt to undermine their mothering and themselves as moral beings.

For the daughters involved in the initial research, understanding perpetrators’ practices changed their views of their family life, enabling them to re-evaluate memories and experiences. They were thus sometimes able to recover relationships with their mothers, and reframe their understandings of the abuse they had suffered.

The women’s experience that naming maternal alienation allowed them to develop alternative perspectives relates to Kelly’s finding that experiences of abuse become lost to women when there are not appropriate words and definitions available to them. “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” (Kelly 1988: 128).
8.1.10 Maternal alienation, professional workers and organisations

The original study indicated the ways in which maternal alienation is often supported and replicated within organisations. While maternal alienation was not recognised by professionals, practice intervention with these families typically constituted further abuse for the women, who were held responsible for their families’ “dysfunctional” dynamics, and particularly for the poor mother/child relationship. Women reported judgments from court and welfare services which interpreted the ill feeling between women and their children, and the alignment of children with their fathers, as evidence of women’s negligent mothering and men’s good fathering. Professionals were not alert to the ways perpetrators’ constructions of mothers resonated in social, cultural and legal discursive space, serving to validate perpetrators’ accounts and focus outsiders on mothers’ failings. Catherine Humphreys explains:

… 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. (1999: 43-4)

Thus maternal alienation not only obscures perpetrators’ responsibility for abuse, but also provides them with powerful allies, who take active parts in reproducing accounts whereby moral deficiencies and culpability reside with mothers. These processes have a persuasive effect on family members; for example, Bancroft and Silverman observe that children are often “confused or influenced by the positive public reputations of their battering fathers” (2002: 16).

One aspect of “systemic maternal alienation” is the extensive and pervasive use of mother blaming within professional discourses in children’s services, reflecting the wider context of western contemporary mothering, in which regulation and scrutiny of mothers is paramount (McMahon 1995; Hays 1996; Smart 1996). A number of feminist researchers have explored mother blaming within the child sexual abuse literature and noted how it deflects responsibility for abuse away from the men who perpetrate it (Laing and Kamsler 1990; Hooper 1992; Humphreys 1992; Johnson 1992; Freer 1997; Humphreys 1999). Mothers of sexually abused children have
typically been described in this professional literature as either “collusive” or “powerless”. However, as feminist research challenged the myth of the “collusive” mother, another portrait arose, the “falsely accusing” or “malicious” mother, who fabricates accusations of sexual abuse by a male partner as an act of revenge in Family Court (Humphreys 1999). These constructions also draw on longstanding views on the unreliability of women’s accusations of rape/sexual assault\textsuperscript{13}. The transformation of mothers from complicit and non-protective to “vengeful”, “lying” and “malicious” when they attempt to protect their children demonstrates the irrationality of mother blaming and again suggests that above all, it functions to protect men.

The constructions of malicious and vengeful mothers were given an illusion of scientific validity in “syndromes” such as Ira Daniel Turkat’s (1997) Divorce-Related Malicious Mother Syndrome and above all, in Richard Gardner’s Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS), which has featured significantly in custody disputes in the English-speaking countries (Humphreys 1999; Bruch 2002). PAS is examined here as a particularly influential example of these constructions of mothers and of systemic maternal alienation.

\section*{8.2 Parental alienation syndrome (PAS)}

PAS was proposed by US psychiatrist Richard Gardner as a tool to assess allegations of child sexual abuse made during divorce proceedings. Gardner asserted that accusations of child sexual abuse during relationship breakdown were often fabrications, and in such cases one psychopathological parent, in ninety per cent of cases the mother, manipulates children to hate the other parent. Thus the accounts of women and children are problematised and discredited as pathology.

\textsuperscript{13} The belief that women falsely allege violence by men is not a new one, and has dominated the area of rape and sexual assault for centuries. It persists, despite the lack of evidence that fabrication occurs more often in rape than in other crimes Temkin, J. (1987/2002). \textit{Rape and the Legal Process}. London, Oxford University Press (p. 5).
[PAS] is a disorder in which children, programmed by the allegedly “loved” parent, embark upon a campaign of denigration of the allegedly “hated” parent. The children exhibit little if any ambivalence over their hatred, which often spreads to the extended family of the allegedly despised parent. Most often mothers are the initiators of such programming, and fathers are the victims of the campaigns of deprecation. (1998: 1)

Gardner is one of a number of academics, primarily from psychology and psychiatry, whose field of study is to question the late twentieth century knowledge base associated with child sexual abuse (Myers 1994; Whitfield et al. 2001), reversing both understandings and practices. Thus rather than remove the accused, Gardner insists that the first step towards treatment for PAS is to remove the child from the manipulative “loved” parent’s care (the mother) to be placed with the “hated” parent, the father.

The criteria that Gardner developed to determine the presence of PAS include a test he had previously developed, the “Sex Abuse Legitimacy Scale” (SALS), for use with children to establish whether allegations of sexual abuse were legitimate or fabricated. Neither PAS nor SALS have been validated scientifically, and both have been widely criticised as lacking an evidence base (Berliner and Conte 1993; Bruch 2002). The propositions have not been endorsed through peer-reviewed professional publications, but were promoted through Gardner’s private and self-funded publications (Bruch 2002). Despite this PAS has gathered considerable credibility within Family Courts in the US in large part due to Gardner’s evangelism as an expert witness (Wood 1994; Myers 1997; Dallam 1998). It was also a “world travelling” concept, being invoked in courts in Australia, NZ, Canada and UK to discredit allegations of violence and incest.

Cheri Wood, one of many critics of PAS, emphasises: “while PAS has been admitted in courts, it has not been accepted by experts in the field: psychologists, child abuse evidentiary experts, or child advocates” (1994: 1). North American legal academic, Carol Bruch concurs: “The overwhelming absence of careful analysis and attention to scientific rigor [that] these professionals demonstrate, however, is deeply troubling. … this carelessness has permitted what is popularly termed junk science (pseudo science) to influence custody cases in ways that are likely to harm children” (2002: 383).
Gardner’s argument that allegations of incest during divorce proceedings are mostly false, flies in the face of overwhelming evidence that there are no more “false” allegations within divorce proceedings than outside them (Hume 1995; Humphreys 1999). Indeed US psychologists K. Daniel O’Leary and Kirstin Moerk conclude from reviewing the research literature on the prevalence of child sexual abuse that allegations of sexual abuse are not common in custody cases, only occurring in 0.8% to 4% of cases (1999:138). In her review of Project Magellan, a pilot project with the Family Court of Australia for family violence cases, social work academic Thea Brown also gathered considerable evidence that contradicts the claims of PAS (2003: 3). She confirms that child abuse and domestic violence both contribute to parental separation and may be a response to it, making it understandable and appropriate that these matters would be raised in custody disputes.

US legal scholar John Myers points to the gendered nature of Gardner’s work: “this gender bias infects the syndrome, and makes it a powerful tool to undermine the credibility of women who allege child sexual abuse” (1997: 137). Gardner’s critics worry that PAS has enabled a legal backlash against mothers, who have always been significant in reporting child sexual abuse in families. Some argue that Gardner’s work enabled the recuperation of discourses asserting, “the problem is not the sexual abuse of children but ‘vengeful wives’ and ‘hysterical mothers’” (Chenoweth, P. R. cited in Dallam 1998: 31). Humphreys (1999) suggests that victims of abuse are being re-silenced by a rejuvenated regime of disbelief.

A recent study by US sociologist Amy Neustein and lawyer Michael Lesher (2005) provides detailed analysis of more than a thousand family court cases spanning twenty years in a number of states throughout the US. They found overwhelming evidence of courts’ tendencies to deny sexual abuse, despite strong evidence, and shift blame to the protective mother. In a significant number of cases custody was awarded to the father accused of sexual abuse. “An abuse case is transformed, unofficially, into an inquisition into the complaining mother’s character, with a judge apparently finding so many reasons to criticize the mother that he has not time to investigate whether her charges are justified” (2005: 51).
It is hardly surprising that PAS has proved popular among, and been avidly promoted by, men accused of sexual abuse, men’s rights and fathers’ rights groups and is publicised extensively on their websites. It echoes the aspect of maternal alienation, whereby divorced and separated men can present themselves as victims. The tropes of malicious mothers and victim fathers are readily adopted within Family Courts in English-speaking countries, reinscribing mother-blame, excusing male perpetrators.

8.3 Maternal alienation and PAS

Gendered constructions of malicious and lying mothers and victimised fathers occur at both the level of the household gender regime in maternal alienation and intermediary gender regimes such as in the use of PAS in legal institutions. Manipulation of these gendered stereotypes against women and children in and by powerful institutions can be understood to be a form of systemic maternal alienation.

The negative framing of mothers in PAS formed one aspect of the backdrop to the 1999 study, leading to my crafting of the term “maternal alienation” to contest the claims of PAS. Unsurprisingly, the relationship between “maternal alienation” and PAS has been controversial, and has drawn some critical commentary from academics.

One criticism of the term is precisely its similarity of form to PAS, which could cause confusion, even the impression that maternal alienation was another term for PAS. While the word “maternal” was intended to draw attention to what was in fact a form of gender violence against mothers, concerns were voiced that the term could be taken to mean alienation by mothers. “Maternal” was further intended to point beyond the injuries of individual mothers and children to the ways in which the institution of mothering was targeted, both within household gender regimes and the wider macro gender order. This implicit analysis is not, however, explicit in the term, with critics noting that it gives no indication of who is responsible for this form of

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14 For example, at http://www.deltabravo.net/ umbrella North American organisation named SPARC (Separated Parenting Access and Resource Center). The gender neutral name is belied by a statement on the home page: “Statistics show that custodial fathers are the most likely to encourage a positive relationship between their children and the other parent and to raise happy, healthy children”. This website places “PAS Index” with articles and links to PAS sites as one of only two topics it lists under “Required Reading”.
abuse. An alternative suggestion was “perpetrator-induced maternal alienation”. While making the perpetrator visible is important, “perpetrator-induced maternal alienation” could, through its gender-neutrality, be more easily subverted to the PAS agenda. It might give rise to a proliferation of names diluting the original gendered approach.

The problem that the “doer” of maternal alienation is not explicitly named is possibly also a product of the tendency within the English language to turn verbs into nouns, called “nominalisation”. Thus the actions to “alienate”, which require an agent, become transformed into the noun “alienation”, which is divested of the sense of who performed or caused alienation.

… nominalisation tends to produce two linguistic effects. The first is that agency disappears – whoever or whatever was “doing the thing” becomes either abstract or invisible. The second effect is that reification occurs. The action turns into a thing in its own right. (Peace 2001: 21).

Thus, the act of “alienating” children from their mother involves an identification of agency, but “alienation”, as a verb transformed into a noun, signifies a “thing” rather than an “action”.

Whilst recognising shortcomings in the term maternal alienation, for better or worse, the term has grown in currency in practitioner circles and amongst women survivors of abuse, particularly in South Australia, making it difficult and confusing to replace at this point.

As noted in Chapter Two, most if not all terms for forms of gender violence have their shortcomings, and despite decades of research and practice, no names have been created that perfectly express the phenomena. Perhaps the imperfect term “maternal alienation” is not so different in this regard.

Created as a direct challenge to the claims of PAS, through subverting and gendering its name, maternal alienation’s status as a contested concept is clear.

… when disagreement rises to the level of essential contestability, its logic points to a political disagreement over the explicit control of social processes”, for “politics is the terrain on which competing forces of society collide, where the consequences of conceptions are felt. (Grafstein 1988: 22)
Political philosopher Robert Grafstein posits that contestability relates to “the actual political struggles converting definitional differences into conceptual confrontations and the latter into reorganizations of society” (1988: 25). This is one of the key themes of this thesis.

8.4 Discussion

There are many ways in which maternal alienation is a gendered concept. Children subject to maternal alienation in their families are forcefully confronted with gendered stereotypes that diminish women and benefit men. As developing beings experiencing their earliest relationships, they are exposed to and become implicated in their fathers’ or stepfathers’ abusive and manipulating behaviours, sometimes being coached to degrade and blame women (mothers) and glorify and look after men (fathers), behaviours that re-establish hierarchical gendered relations characteristic of abusive gender regimes. Furthermore, maternal alienation involves continuing assaults both on the gendered identity of individual mothers at the micro level, and on the institution of mothering at the macro level. Maternal alienation occurs within micro contexts of the family or household, but it clearly has parallels to a wider gender order. Macro social, cultural and legal constructions of women and men, mothers and fathers, are manipulated and re-created in micro contexts, and some practices occurring at macro and intermediate levels may also reflect those of maternal alienation. Professionals, institutions and agencies operate between the macro and micro areas of state and family within structures that are also gendered. Initial research on maternal alienation revealed their generally unhelpful responses to alienated women (Morris 1999). Their work with women and children affected by maternal alienation, their responses to the knowledge about maternal alienation and to the Maternal Alienation Project, as well as their connections to the macro gender order and micro gender regimes are explored in the following chapters.
The rise and demise of the Maternal Alienation Project (MAP)

The initial formulation of the concept of maternal alienation, outlined in Chapter Eight, generated some interest from practitioners in South Australia (SA) to take this work further. I developed several proposals for government funding for a project to develop practice responses and facilitate systems change to address maternal alienation. The project was to be connected to a PhD, but submissions did not request any funding for this. However, one proposal, to the Commonwealth Government’s Department of Families and Children, was met with the (informal) response that whilst maternal alienation was an interesting and important issue the organisation would not “fund a PhD”, a hint of themes that were to recur within MAP.

As my applications for external funding were not successful, I approached the directors of Northern Metropolitan Community Health Service (NMCHS) and Women’s Health Statewide (WHS) in 2002, after enrolling in a doctoral program in Gender Studies in 2001. These organisations agreed to fund the early months of the Maternal Alienation Project (MAP), in the hope that external funding would be secured to continue the project, and from August 2002 I was employed three days a week as project officer. MAP was conceptualised from the outset as an action research project within which a PhD was integral. This was seen by these services as a cost effective way of accessing good quality research. WHS, NMCHS and the University of Adelaide therefore became “project partners”, reflecting their shared responsibility to auspice and resource the project.

This chapter details the course of MAP, its structure, groups and activities, and the external influences impacting on it, based on formal documents, taped working sessions, field notes and post-project interviews.

15 Australian post-graduate tuition fees are publicly funded except for a Higher Education Contribution for which scholarships are also available.
9.1 MAP partners

MAP’s three project partners all profess socially just, feminist and gender-aware frameworks. Northern Metropolitan Community Health Service (NMCHS) is a government-funded service with strong links to its surrounding communities, particularly its disadvantaged ones, in the northern area of Adelaide. Women’s Health Statewide (WHS), which had been founded through the women’s movement in the 1970s, developed its state-wide focus in the 1990s, differentiating it from South Australia’s other three government-funded locally focused women’s community health centres. Both NMCHS and WHS draw on the principles of primary health care, valuing diversity, encouraging community participation, and operating from a social view of health which recognises the effects of disabling factors such as social exclusion, disadvantage, poverty, and violence on physical, mental, emotional and social aspects of health.

Both organisations employ a feminist framework for their substantial services to address the effects of gendered violence. This includes the premise that full responsibility for male violence towards women and children lies with the perpetrator. NMCHS’s services to men who perpetrate domestic violence are designed to be accountable to women’s experiences (and children’s, although on the whole they provide direct services only to adults). In 2002 WHS was in the process of redefining its role to concentrate on research and training, particularly for practitioners working with adult survivors of child sexual abuse, and had taken the title of Interim Lead Agency for Child Sexual Abuse. This filled a vacuum which had existed since Adelaide’s rape crisis service relinquished services for child sexual abuse several years before.

Initially MAP was funded and “housed” by WHS and later by NMCHS until its end on 21 July 2003, while the doctoral research and supervision were resourced by the University of Adelaide. The university sponsor was closely involved with MAP, in keeping with the commitment of academics within the Gender Studies Discipline to socially grounded research, and their interest in bridging the areas of practice and the
academy. From the outset, despite the inclusion of the university as a partner, the other partners made a clear delineation between the funded work of the project (three days a week) and the unfunded PhD (two days a week), a tension which made the aim of bridging these spheres problematic.

9.2 Design

MAP was designed to achieve two goals sequentially. Stage one would develop practice models for working with mothers and children who had been alienated from one another within contexts of domestic violence (DV) and child sexual abuse (CSA). Once materials were available, training would be provided across a number of sectors, including health, welfare and legal, to educate practitioners about maternal alienation and practice responses to it. The proposal involved a three year plan to accomplish this across the state.

MAP however took a different course from the neat staged sequence of tasks and was destined to end after only eleven months. The difficulties in obtaining long-term funding built pressure to achieve as much as possible in a short time. Practice responses and professional education proceeded concurrently rather than in sequence, due also to widespread interest from organisations in professional development. The requests for presentations and workshops made it imperative to respond to this interest.

Designed to bridge practice and theory, MAP was first conceived of as dichotomous, but within the first weeks a threefold design was found to better suit its aims to operate across the areas of practice, systems and policy, and research, and to deal with the complexities of linking research to social change.

The three-fold design is consistent with a stream of feminist research that aims to integrate the three areas of feminist endeavour (research, practice and systems change), areas which have tended to be taken up separately after their initial close connection in the 1970s (Hester et al. 1996; Radford et al. 2000). The MAP model is illustrated diagrammatically by overlapping spheres, representing the possibilities for each sphere to influence, interrogate and illuminate the other two (see Figure 1). This
design aimed to maximise the possibilities for collaboration between social research, policy-making and systems, and practice, across a number of sectors and agencies involved with DV and CSA.

At the centre of the systems sphere was the reference group, an influential and diverse group of managers, directors of services, policy officers and the project’s academic sponsor. Their main role was to advocate and lobby within their organisations and networks, find funding for MAP’s continuation, and facilitate coordinated change to better respond to maternal alienation.

Central to the sphere of practice were two practitioner working groups, one focusing on DV and one on CSA. They met with a wider group of practitioners making up an advisory group, several times over the course of MAP.

The sphere of research whilst more limited to the PhD processes, strengthened the possibilities for reflection and analysis. The reflective and critical approach that characterises action research combined with a feminist commitment to accountability meant that all of MAP’s activities were open to critical analysis.

Initially, the project could be described as “traversing the spaces in-between” by firstly, attempting to bridge these three often separated spheres, and secondly, bringing together a range of agencies from differing sectors. However the significance of the metaphor, “spaces in-between”, became increasingly obvious as MAP proceeded, and was reflected in my experiences as the project officer of inhabiting these spaces, in challenging boundaries between theory and practice, between sectors and organisations, and in engaging with and moving between the different organisational paradigms employed by this diverse group of project participants.

9.3 Launching MAP

In MAP’s first weeks a fledgling reference group, yet to include its full membership, decided to launch MAP with a forum, to be widely advertised within the fields of community health, domestic violence, child protection, and related services. Their enthusiasm reflected their view that this was a new and exciting concept of benefit to
organisations. State (Labor) Ministers of Health and Status of Women and their opposition counterparts (Liberal and Australian Democrat) were to be briefed about MAP and invited to attend the forum. A series of meetings with these politicians was organised, although some occurred after the forum.

Six weeks after the project started, representatives from the three auspicing organisations formally presented MAP to an audience of approximately sixty-five people, mainly practitioners. My presentation on maternal alienation, based on the pilot research, was followed by discussions in small groups focusing on particular themes that MAP aimed to cover. This enabled participants to consider the implications of maternal alienation for their different work contexts, and the types of practice tools and resources they might need to address it. This approach began the process of bringing ideas from research into the sphere of practice and vice versa. Note-taking by workers and students at WHS and NMCHS meant that the forum formed the first consultation with practitioners.

Unbeknown to MAP one participant was a spokesperson for the Richard Hillman Foundation (RHF), an organisation that lobbies for men’s and fathers’ rights, including the “Blackshirts”, a fathers’ rights group which had gained much media attention in 2002 for their controversial tactics in exercising their “rights” over their ex-partners and children16. After the forum a virulent opinion piece about MAP was posted on the RHF’s website, entitled “Gender politics must be relegated to status of Holocaust Revisionism” (reproduced in Appendix 3). This piece and letters that followed called on the Premier of SA and Ministers of Health, Education and Welfare to close MAP down.

So while the forum and launch of MAP contributed to publicising the project and increased practitioner interest and involvement, it also attracted the attention of the RHF, whose intervention was to have far-reaching effects on MAP. Thus, before two

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16 The Blackshirts titled themselves after the Italian fascist paramilitary action squads, whom they evoke with their black shirts, facemasks and aggressive tactics against ex-partners, children and the Family Court. Media commentary of the Blackshirts in Australia had been highly critical, noting their verbal and physical attacks on members’ ex-partners, including attempts to kidnap their children who were living with ex-partners. Ellingsen, P. (2002). “The man in black who sees red”. The Age. Melbourne, Fickling, D. (2002). “Cuckolds take their rage to the streets”. The Guardian. Melbourne.
months had passed, MAP was definitely launched, not only within the three spheres of practice, research and systems change, but also on the choppy seas of political controversy and confrontation.

Before outlining the arena of systems change and resistance, the following section examines the practice arena.

9.4 The sphere of practice

Of the various initiatives developed by MAP to improve practice responses to maternal alienation, the most significant were the two working groups. One consisted of practitioners from the Northern and Central Violence Intervention Programs, who were to develop practice principles for working with mothers and children who had been alienated from one another in the context of DV. The second group, made up of counsellors from the four government-funded women’s community health centres in Adelaide, was to concentrate on addressing the effects of maternal alienation on adult survivors of CSA. The groups met monthly, developing an open and collaborative working mode based on the reflexive method common to action research (Altrichter et al. 1991; McTaggart 1992). As project officer I was able to utilise the “spaces in-between” the positions of outsider (in the role of researcher) and insider (from previous employment in women’s health services) in a process that interrogated and made conscious the assumptions underlying practitioners’ work. Using discussions and role plays, the groups explored existing strengths and developed more focused approaches which they trialled with their clients, and discussed, evaluated and refined in subsequent meetings. Meetings were tape-recorded and the summaries shared with participants.

Every three months the working groups met with an advisory group, which comprised practitioners from a wide range of government and non-government agencies. The advisory group’s role was to reflect on and contribute to the progress of the working groups. The following sections give a more detailed account of these groups.
9.4.1 Developing approaches to maternal alienation in domestic violence: Domestic Violence Working Group (DVWG)

Practitioners from the two Violence Intervention Programs in Adelaide formed the Domestic Violence Working Group (DVWG). NMCHS had previously assumed the management of the Northern Violence Intervention Program (NVIP), a program based largely on the Duluth model for addressing domestic violence, in that it sought to integrate the criminal justice system with social welfare services to male perpetrators of domestic violence, their partners and children. NVIP was closely associated with the Central Violence Intervention Program (CVIP), which was situated with the Salvation Army in the Adelaide CBD. Both NVIP and CVIP were sometimes described as two parts of the one program, even though they worked from separate locations, and were auspiced and structured somewhat differently. They both provided services to men, women and children based on the principle that perpetrators were solely accountable for their violence.

The work already occurring at NVIP was explored at a preliminary meeting between the project officer and three women’s and children’s workers who were to participate in the DVWG. They described the NVIP intervention as one where initial interviews usually occurred with women alone, mothers and children being interviewed together in the second appointment, but not generally coming together again until the last session. Finding that conflict between mothers and their children tended to escalate after women separate from their abusive partners, the workers felt that interviewing them together too early could be counterproductive. They explained that women and children tended to blame each other for the difficulties within the family, and women typically did not realise that their children’s behavioural problems were related to the violence in the family. Initially, separate sessions allowed women and children to explore the effects of violence on themselves and one another.

When mothers and children were eventually brought together in NVIP, conversations centred on examining the impacts of violence on the other, a first step towards building an alliance and mutual understandings. The workers often enhanced this work with picture cards such as the “Strength” and “Bear” Cards (St. Luke’s) – cards developed for children with pictures and simple captions that illustrate feelings and
positive qualities. For example, one card is of a gorilla with her arm around a second gorilla who is crying, and the caption reads: “I care about other people’s feelings”. Another shows a kitten playing with a ball of coloured wool with a caption that says: “I am good fun”. These cards are helpful in reframing children’s views of themselves and others, enabling mothers and children to acknowledge and understand each other’s feelings and strengths and break “protective silences” that had prevented them talking openly about their experiences of violence (Mullender et al. 2002: 166-7). It was decided that future meetings of the working group would build on NVIP’s positive work, and focus on developing an alliance between mothers and children.

The DVWG consisted of women’s and children’s workers and the managers from both VIPs. In all there were nine meetings, beginning on 4 November 2002 and finishing in June 2003 with the presentation of a conference workshop. A number of staff changes over this period resulted in changes in membership, however these were not experienced as major disruptions as discussions continued within the VIPs beyond the working group meetings, and became integrated into both programs’ ongoing development.

In its early meetings the DVWG explored the similarities and differences between perpetrators’ strategies in DV and CSA. They discussed whether the metaphor of a web of entrapment and deceit\(^\text{17}\) – which had been developed within the CSAWG – contributed to better understanding perpetrators’ tactics of power and control in DV.

Workers held varying views of this:

Worker A: Children are more likely to talk about those experiences with someone outside – a teacher or someone. A teacher usually knows that violence is happening at home, or other people do, such as neighbours, whereas CSA is much more hidden. And so that image of being trapped in that web of deception fits really well with CSA but less so, I think, with DV.

Worker B: What I like about it is how the subtleties that have happened over time fit with the web. I can see some possibilities in it. (DVWG meeting 1)

At first DVWG members gave little consideration to the possibility that CSA may occur alongside DV, but over time their views of the relationships between DV and CSA developed. The project officer’s connection with both working groups offered a “space in-between”, enabling issues from one group to be discussed in the other, bringing together knowledge of CSA and DV, and revealing a correlation between them.

An important theme explored within both groups was that knowledge of perpetrators’ tactics is a crucial element in helping women and children recover from violence. The inclusion in the VIPs of direct work with perpetrators to address their violence meant that these discussions could be readily applied there. Thus the role of men’s workers in exposing perpetrators’ tactics and passing this knowledge on to the women’s and children’s workers was taken up by the VIPs in their practice with perpetrators. Further possibilities to expand this approach through a workshop with the Director of Cedar Cottage, a NSW program for sex offenders, was planned by MAP but did not occur because of the early termination of the project.

The DVWG’s focus on (re)-building mother-child relationships was supported by the structure of both VIPs, which were designed to work with women and children. Again, discussions in the DVWG could be (and were) immediately applied to actual situations, maintaining a tight relationship between reflection and practice. Moreover the feminist framework of accountability to the experiences of women and children motivated DVWG workers to reflect on and improve their practice.

During the second meeting workers discussed their despondency about how work is undermined when other service providers, such as those from child protection services and the legal system, continue to hold mothers responsible for male violence. They observed that the many gains made by women within VIP are undone when women and children encounter such attitudes. Workers’ despondency alternated with hope that through MAP they could communicate more helpful approaches to other organisations. We therefore decided to present our work at a conference which would include other organisations responsible for welfare of women and children. This goal
shaped the work of future meetings as we focused on how to both develop practice responses to maternal alienation and effectively present these.

This “action” approach was encouraged by MAP’s structure and its goal of “seeding” practice change within wider systems, allowing practitioners and researcher the space to think creatively about how to best achieve change, and then to carry this out. Subsequent meetings became strongly focused as we used role plays to trial, reflect on and improve methods of working with mothers and children.

The group developed three role plays which were to form the substance of the conference workshop. The first was an interview with a mother and child based on a mainstream approach with a counsellor who had no knowledge of maternal alienation. It illustrated how unintentional reinforcement of mother-blaming renders the perpetrator of abuse and his actions invisible while holding the mother responsible, thereby increasing the alienation between mother and child. The second role play demonstrated how a counsellor with an awareness of maternal alienation could work positively with a mother alone, increasing her understanding and therefore her capacity to make choices and take positive action. The third role play displayed how to work with mother and child together, using the Strength Cards to help them identify what they each appreciated and loved about the another. This process supports mother and child to build affirming understandings of one another, by making visible their actions that express love, concern and care, which have been obscured or distorted by the perpetrator. This directly contradicts the messages of maternal alienation.

The role plays continued to be improvised and when counsellors’ questions appeared to be unhelpful, the group consulted “mother” and “child” about approaches they would find more enabling. In playing these roles, the VIP workers located themselves “within” the experiences of mothers and children, gaining greater access by proxy to their experiences, which in turn served to guide and modify workers’ questions. The role plays provided practice at particular questions and approaches and offered insights, which workers could apply in their work.
There were a lot of discussions at some points in the role play about, “where does it go to from here and why? What’s the difference, what’s the critical point here in your response, or the point that you are trying to highlight in the conversation?” In terms of learning, highly important. (VIP manager interview)

During this process, questions were designed for the workshop audience, to facilitate their understanding of the effects of each type of counselling on mother, child and their relationship (an example of using reflective practice within a short workshop). This contributed even more to workers’ understanding of their practice. During the actual conference workshop, the audience participated enthusiastically in these discussions.

Workers reported that over this period they encountered similar situations in their work and were able to adapt the approaches developed in DVWG with what they felt were excellent results. Their increasing skill and confidence in transferring this knowledge to particular situations illustrates the power of participative approaches to enable both discovery and critical reflection.

Just before the conference it had been decided that the workshop – role plays and discussions – would be videoed for future use as a training tool. However, as MAP did not have a dedicated budget the only money available was some limited funding from NVIP. The resulting video was edited, but the poor quality of the recording meant that beyond using extracts within training sessions to demonstrate helpful and unhelpful approaches, it was not released for wider use.

9.4.2 Developing approaches to maternal alienation in child sexual abuse: Child Sexual Abuse Working Group (CSAWG)

The seven meetings of the Child Sexual Abuse Working Group (CSAWG) involved one or two women’s health workers from each of the four metropolitan women’s community health services in Adelaide. Established by local communities of women in the 1970s and 1980s as part of the women’s movement, these services were based on feminist principles and practice. They embrace a holistic approach to women’s health, recognising the health effects of gender inequalities, providing women with information and the capacity to be involved in decisions affecting their life and health, and believing and valuing women. During the 1990s each centre was required to
forgo its independent status in order to receive ongoing government funding, and each became incorporated within larger generic health services. WHS joined with the Women’s and Children’s Hospital, and thereby adopted a state-wide focus. The other three centres were included within three newly formed regional Community Health Services within different areas of metropolitan Adelaide, NMCHS being one of these.

Acutely aware of their feminist principles and specialised women-centred focus, the women’s community health centres struggled during the 1990s to defend their approaches against attempts to absorb them into the mainstream, while also striving to influence the larger organisations of which they had become a part, and systems beyond these. These tensions were similar to those experienced within US feminist services when they negotiated their movement into the mainstream (Martin 2005). While differing in approaches and strengths, the various women’s health services in Adelaide shared their feminist principles and their embattled status. The minimal contact they maintained with each other occurred mainly through regular meetings of their coordinators. Thus the CSAWG did not have the same opportunities as the DVWG to continue to apply and develop their practice together between meetings. To the extent that members trialled ideas and praxis, this occurred as individuals.

The initial meeting of the CSAWG focused on discussing two contrasting papers which I introduced. One outlined the liberating effects experienced by mothers and children when child sex offenders reveal the hitherto invisible tactics they had used to deceive, entrap and abuse them, including those tactics used to undermine the mother-child relationship (see Chapter Four). This knowledge offered opportunities, otherwise lacking, for becoming free of perpetrators’ influence and rebuilding mother-child relationships (Laing 1999). The second paper was written by a family therapist and her client who was an adult survivor of child sexual abuse (Barnes and Henessy 1995), and described their counselling sessions with the client’s mother who had travelled from overseas to attend them. The significant feature of these sessions was the therapist’s encouragement of the daughter’s anger at, and blame of, her mother for her father’s abuse, which was seen as integral to her therapy. The article illustrated the ways in which maternal alienation, which stems from the original
abuse, can be re-inscribed within counselling. It portrays the way that both daughter and therapist can blame and punish the mother if they lack access to a wider understanding of the perpetrator’s full responsibility for the abuse of the child, his simultaneous abuse of the mother, and his deliberate undermining of the mother-child relationship.

CSAWG discussion centred around the workers’ experiences that most adult survivors of child sexual abuse blame their mothers for their abuse more than they blame the men who abused them. Counsellors found women’s “extreme anger” with their mothers difficult to deal with, and some workers also resisted the proposition that mothers may not have been to blame in ways they had thought. The intensity of workers’ responses to this discussion may have reflected their own anger not only at mothers, but also at the perspective put forward by MAP that mothers should not be held accountable for abuse perpetrated by others.

One worker responded that the abused child had a right to safety, which the perpetrator had betrayed, and a right to be protected from harm, which the mother had betrayed. A discussion followed about the construct of the “non-protective mother” invoked here, and so reviled in mainstream literature on CSA.

The group moved on to explore the metaphor of a “web” created by perpetrators, in which each strand is an element of entrapment, a distortion or deceit that is also placed between victims and significant people in their environment. Strands connecting the child with those around her – mother, siblings, friends, neighbours – are constructed and controlled by the perpetrator, who distorts each person’s view of the other. The group discussed this process as integral to CSA and powerful in shaping victims’ reality and that of others around the child. Such an image leads to the question: “to what extent is the victim/survivor’s story the perpetrator’s story, full of his messages, his views, his deceit and serving his purpose?” Participants were interested in how the web could be untangled, to free up memories and perspectives from the distorted reality constructed by perpetrators. This is a particularly challenging task to undertake with victims many years after abuse, because identification of perpetrators’ tactics relies on adult survivors viewing their childhood
memories in a new light, aided by memories of their family members where these can be accessed. When tactics can be exposed nearer the time of abuse through programs working with offenders, recovery of all family members is hastened. This was highlighted in the research on Sydney’s Cedar Cottage Offenders’ Program in the article discussed in CSAWG meetings (Laing 1999).

These conversations allowed a move away from the earlier focus on mothers to the tactics of perpetrators. In contrast to the DVWG, the CSAWG workers found the metaphor of a spider’s web to be a useful image, although some considered they would not always use it directly with clients as it could be experienced as too totalising, allowing too little room for women’s agency and resistance, and ultimate “escape”.

However for some workers these approaches appeared to conflict with their understanding of one of the tenets of a feminist approach – the respecting and validating of women’s “stories” of abuse. Historically, feminist approaches of believing women were significant in challenging mainstream constructions of women as lying and malicious when they reported violence and sexual abuse. They also reversed the mainstream lack of validation and recognition of women’s general experiences. However there are greater complexities within feminist approaches, as clarified by Kelly and colleagues.

Whilst one version of feminist practice recommends listening, recording and a non-judgmental stance, there is another possibility which is to raise/offer different ways of understanding experience. … we see this latter version as feminist practice. … Where women are clearly blaming themselves for abuse, exploring their reasoning in more depth and linking this to the intention and behaviour of the perpetrator(s) can open up different ways of understanding. (Kelly et al. 1994: 39)

The proposition, discussed within early CSAWG meetings, that victims’ “stories” of their abuse may include strong elements that were crafted and constructed by their perpetrators, rather than reflecting “authentic” experiences, would appear to conflict with a feminist approach if one is only aware of the first version of feminist practice. A deeper understanding of feminist interventions would reveal their aim to uncover the ways that perpetrators’ and masculinist discourses can come to shape women’s understandings.
In the second meeting, one member described an adult survivor regaining her voice, despite her mother’s assumed role in “not allowing her voice”, and recounted her conversation with a colleague about the problems of counselling daughter and mother together.

She had never had a voice as a child and she’d been sexually abused by her stepfather. And her mother had not taken sufficient notice of what was actually happening, and she blamed her mother for that. The worker … was saying that it was really important for her to “sit with” her client who was the younger woman, because as a child she never had a voice. And [she felt that] had she tried to sit where the mother was sitting, she might have again repeated what her daughter had experienced in the past of not having a voice being heard. (CSAWG Meeting 2)

Using the authority of a colleague’s words to reinforce her argument, this worker was struggling with MAP’s attempts to envisage a way of working that enabled a counsellor to “sit with” mother and daughter simultaneously, recognising that their conflict was a result of the perpetrator’s actions and the complex operations of maternal alienation. The practice of working with two family members (particularly mother and child) would allow counsellors to more fully excavate perpetrators’ tactics to alienate and entrap, offering further pieces of evidence for a more comprehensive picture of perpetrators’ tactics.

Several others shared the view that it would be “betraying their client” to see her mother differently. However, one participant drew on examples of feminist work with DV, which typically “unpacks” women’s relationship with the perpetrator, and questions women’s beliefs that his behaviour is not abusive, or that she is to blame for his violence. She argued that counsellors could deconstruct CSA survivors’ views of their abuse in similar ways, thus revealing her more complex understanding of feminism, as articulated above.

After this meeting, a worker wrote several emails documenting her struggles with these ideas and stating that she could not change her belief that mothers were to blame if their children were sexually abused.

In an attempt to move forward, the group decided to list the principles of feminist work with adult survivors of CSA. However the concept that mothers are responsible for not “protecting” children re-emerged with the suggestion that they become
responsible through omission if a child is abused. Notions of protective and non-
protective mothers led to discussion of the discursive constructions of motherhood
which render mothers responsible for protection to the exclusion of responsibilities by
other adults, including fathers, family members, neighbours and professionals. This
“failure” of protection by mothers (an act of omission) can override attention to the
act of commission of sexual abuse by perpetrators.

During the fourth meeting one participant discussed a situation in which a client had
disclosed her abuse to her mother but felt her mother continued to behave “normally”,
which her client found “infuriating”. This worker still believed that trying to rebuild
relationships with mothers was not desirable. At this stage a turning-point was
reached. One of the participants related her own history of incest that she felt her
mother knew about but ignored. The complexity of her struggles became evident,
since this was about her story, her relationships. Her disclosure proved liberating for
the group as a whole, which now opened out to explore how expectations of mothers
and wives, often contradictory, vary across time and location. The participant’s
mother seemed to believe that her main responsibility was to protect and look after
the men in her family; it is a more recent idea that children, particularly daughters,
have rights, with mothers left to negotiate the tensions and paradoxes.

The group concluded that the idea that “the mother should know” constructs mothers
as neglectful rather than focusing on the abusing father/partner. Of more relevance
than the question, “why didn’t my mother protect me?” are the questions, “why did
my father assault me?” or, “why didn’t my father protect me?” This discussion was
explored further in a meeting of the advisory group.

From this point a perspective was developed that CSA and maternal alienation
typically produce a negative mother-daughter relationship which needs attention,
support and time to change. Feminist practice also needed to attend to the challenges
and distress faced by mothers, and recognise their (usually) more limited
opportunities to explore and address the abuse.

In the fifth CSAWG meeting it was more evident that workers were trialling different
approaches in their practice. One participant reported that while most women in a
group she facilitated spoke of betrayal by their mothers, none mentioned feeling betrayed by the perpetrator, usually a family member. She had raised the context of mothers’ lives, and particularly how little was understood or known about CSA at the time they had been children. Women began to locate their mothers in context and recognise their limited information and opportunities. Her contribution revealed a dramatic change in her approach.

Another worker reported that an awareness of maternal alienation and the metaphor of the web now informed her counselling. She now asked her clients specifically about the tactics the perpetrator used, including those making the mother appear both sinister and neglectful.

My attempts as project officer to introduce role play as a means of developing practice tools were not taken up, and CSAWG continued to operate through discussion. Ideas considered in meetings were introduced into workers’ practice, which was critically examined in subsequent meetings. CSAWG concentrated in particular on ways of making perpetrators’ tactics visible. Here again it became evident that using these approaches in a shorthand way, without deeper understanding was not helpful. For example, in the sixth meeting a worker, “Jane”, described her client’s reaction to the idea that her father was “invisible”. The client responded that her father was the most visible person in her family, her mother and siblings anticipating his reactions to everything they did, but her mother was invisible. She did not want her father “brought back” into her life. The group clarified that examining his tactics of control did not “bring him back” as a powerful perpetrator, but undermined his power. The discussion continued to consider how the most visible in the family (the perpetrator) becomes the most invisible in family members’ understanding of his abuse and violence.

As Jane asked questions of her client which uncovered the perpetrator’s tactics, her client alternated between anger at her mother and seeing that she was not responsible. Over time, she experienced a great sadness that she had blamed her mother for most of her life. This had carried such energy and shaped her understandings for so long, she wondered what would happen to her now that she had relinquished it.
The approach developed by the CSAWG aligns with a feminist practice that enables women to rethink and reframe events within a gendered understanding of power. These “enormous shifts in understanding” (CSAWG meeting 6) do not occur rapidly but require many counselling (or group) sessions to emerge, a problem in an era of resource-cutting. The decreasing time allowed for counselling, even in the women-focused environments of women’s health centres, works against women being able to so radically change their understandings. The course of CSAWG meetings illustrated that shifts in workers’ understandings similarly require time and careful work.

9.4.3 The advisory group

The advisory group, consisting mainly of practitioners contacted through the launch of MAP, introduced practitioners from a broad range of agencies to the ideas and practice developed by the working groups. The group consisted of about thirty members, although between nineteen and twenty-two attended meetings, which took place three-monthly and lasted three hours. Detailed minutes from each meeting were written up and circulated. In all, the group met three times, meaning that it was still only in its infancy when the project ended, constraining its potential to facilitate wider uptake of the practice developments within MAP.

Meetings offered a larger and more diverse group in which dilemmas and “blind spots” in practice could be identified, and reflexive practice developed. It brought a wider scope of practice wisdom to bear on difficult issues, and provided a platform from which new approaches in thinking and practice could be disseminated more widely. The advisory group, as the only forum in which the working groups came together, fostered a greater appreciation of the commonalities and connections between CSA and DV.

At the group’s final meeting members expressed dismay at the lack of further funding for MAP and asked that their concern be conveyed to the reference group, with their belief that the project needed a project officer to maintain the momentum for change. They stated that having a specific project that developed practice changes highlighted these issues, which would otherwise recede into the background and compete with
other new ideas. Some felt that a lot of good and challenging ideas had been raised, which now had “nowhere to go”.

The reference group received these comments with irritation, and appeared to have limited interest in the views of practitioners. This lack of communication between MAP’s two main bodies was surprising since many organisations had representatives on both groups. Before I turn to an examination of the operation of the reference group, I will describe three further aspects of MAP’s practice orientation.

9.4.4 Workshops with practitioners

Professional development workshops were offered which also extended the influence of MAP to workers in other organisations and sectors. Workshops were delivered to family services, DV services, child protection services, regional forums in which many agencies participated, SA Police, teachers, school counsellors and child care workers. A smaller workshop was facilitated with counsellors and mediators for the Family Court. Professional training sat mainly within the practice sphere, but also spilled over into systems change, especially in regional contexts where agencies were encouraged to collaborate in their responses to families. Workshops employed a feminist framework for understanding gender violence and discourses of mothering as a backdrop to training about maternal alienation and practice responses to it.

The initial research on maternal alienation had raised the question of why daughters, sons and other family members, as well as professionals encountering “problem” families, so consistently adopt fathers’ perspectives rather than mothers’, and distance themselves from mothers, who are treated as abject (Morris 2005). Indeed CSAWG demonstrated the resilience of mother blaming, even within feminist contexts. Therefore exercises were developed to disrupt these tendencies, harnessing the notion of traversing spaces in-between, which encouraged participants to move from accustomed attitudes, beliefs and frameworks to less familiar perspectives.

A particular challenge was the barrier created by the personal/professional division, and the exalted place that professional ideas and practice usually occupy, rendering invisible the ways in which professionals transfer popular discourses and
understandings from their personal lives into their practice. In practitioner workshops attempts were made to “collapse” barriers between professionals and mothers, and between professional and personal experience to create a position from which mothers appear differently. The most potent of these was the Barrier Exercise, derived from an exercise developed by Cathy Humphreys (1994).

The barrier exercise followed a morning’s training in which the messages given in maternal alienation were described and linked to wider socio-cultural discourses about mothers. Two chairs were placed at the front of the room, representing a mother’s and child’s space, on which sat two volunteers from the workshop. All workshop participants had been asked to write down perpetrators’ messages in maternal alienation and hegemonic attitudes that demeaned and blamed mothers. One by one they read these out and placed the written message between mother and child. After this came to an end, in every instance the volunteers who represented the “mother” and “child” expressed their sense of having “entered” the experience of mothers and children subjected to maternal alienation. The “child” typically described his/her anger and grief at not being loved, her loneliness and confusion; “my head is awhirl with all the things you’ve done to me and my dad”, said one “child” to his “mother”. “Mothers” described experiences of despair, self-blame, retreating into themselves, and becoming “frozen” when they perceive that they have no space left as all their actions are used against them. When asked how a worker could help, “mothers” invariably responded similarly to the one who said: “the greatest relief would be to find someone who understood what was going on, and who believed ME”. The “child” most often wanted someone who could help them see that their mother really loved them and was not a monster. Responses from audience participants revealed that on the whole they too entered these experiences, although perhaps not as intensely. They reported that while they recognised these alienating and blaming messages from their work, the exercise enabled them to see their significance and impacts.

Written and verbal feedback and my observations during the workshops suggest that negative and unsympathetic views of mothers changed substantially during these
workshops, and the strongest experience of this was as a result of the barrier exercise. The exercise places the experience of mother and child at the centre, as in feminist practice, through “positioning” participants in their metaphoric space. Many practitioners expressed their shock at being propelled into the experience of the mother, a space they had managed to avoid until that point. Yet women as mothers were the primary focus of these workers’ interventions, suggesting that mothers had been constructed as objects of concern, to be surveyed, judged, blamed and threatened, while the violent and abusive men in these families were ignored or placated (Edleson 1998; Irwin et al. 2002; Mullender et al. 2002). For many practitioners the barrier exercise focused the many points that had been made in the workshop into a dramatic experience, that at least momentarily, changed the paradigm of these practitioners to one where women were subjects with complex experiences. Standing in a mother’s space not only enabled workers to recognise the ways women are constrained in maternal alienation, but also gave them insight into the support they need. This paradigm shift is the starting point for practice change.

Techniques that disrupt habitual beliefs are similar to the action research approaches expounded by Argyris (2003) and McTaggart (1992) which seek to “problematise” accepted values and practices, through a process of “double-loop” learning.

9.4.5 Development of resource materials

Several resources and documents were produced by MAP for the use of workers and women in the community. One was a pamphlet-like document entitled *The Maternal Alienation Fact Sheet* (see Appendix 4), which was distributed to participants and wider networks, and uploaded to the WHS website. Numerous phone calls were received from community members in several Australian states after the fact sheet was circulated, reporting that they found it valuable to have their experiences named and acknowledged18.

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18 The fact sheet was also reproduced in the bulletin of the Victorian Branch of the Council for Single Mothers and their Children, and was made available through the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse.
A training video demonstrating counselling approaches for working with mothers and children subject to maternal alienation was produced from the conference workshop of three role plays developed by the DVWG. The video poses questions about each counselling method displayed and records the resulting audience discussions. However, as described earlier, the video was not circulated because of the poor quality of its recording.

The Maternal Alienation Project Report (Morris 2003), produced at the end of MAP, gave a brief overview of the project’s design, aims, outcomes and recommendations.

Probably of most significance was the resource for practitioners entitled Working with Maternal Alienation in Domestic/Family Violence and Child Sexual Abuse (Morris 2003), launched on the websites of WHS and the Salvation Army (which funded CVIP). It outlines the principles and indications for practice developed through the working groups. Although these ideas were developed in collaboration, they were analysed and written up by the project officer. The principles for practice are discussed further in Chapter Ten.

In its early weeks, MAP prepared a submission to the Family Violence Committee of the Family Court of Australia on maternal alienation. Towards the end of MAP, due to the involvement of the Manager of Counselling and Mediation in the reference group, the fact sheet and a document comparing maternal alienation and PAS were posted on the Family Court’s national database for mediators and counsellors.

9.4.6 Forum on perpetrators’ tactics of control in DV and CSA

One MAP initiative was the plan to hold a workshop to compare perpetrator programs in DV and CSA. The director of Cedar Cottage, a Sydney program for child sex offenders, was asked to facilitate the workshop, based on the program’s intensive work with offenders, who are required to reveal how they entrap children and maintain secrecy19. This more intense focus on CSA perpetrators’ tactics of control, compared to understandings in DV programs, appears to reflect widespread views that child sex offenders are more likely to use manipulative and hidden techniques

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than DV perpetrators. In this understanding, DV perpetrators’ premeditated strategies to control, entrap and alienate are less recognised.

This was a gap in understanding that MAP wished to examine, since perpetrators employed similar techniques of maternal alienation within DV and CSA. The workshop aimed to offer the VIP men’s workers opportunities to adapt methods used in the Sydney program to more readily elicit perpetrators’ tactics of control, including those used to separate mother and child in DV. The work at Cedar Cottage demonstrates that when perpetrators reveal these tactics, women and children are more able to understand his role in the breakdown of their relationship. It was hoped that the workshop could also offer practitioners ideas for how to retrieve these tactics years after the abuse, in their work with adult survivors of CSA and DV.

As all MAP groups were enthusiastic about these possibilities, negotiations began with the program director. Despite this speedy progress the plan met with several barriers among reference group members that eventually prevented the workshop proceeding.

The rise and demise of MAP assumes another dimension in the following section of this chapter, which examines change and resistance in MAP’s engagement with wider systems, and the operation of the reference group.

9.5 Systems change and resistance

Intended as a lever to bring about systems change, the reference group consisted of managers and directors of services from a number of sectors, two policy officers and MAP’s academic sponsor. In addition to the three auspicing partners, WHS, NMCHS and the University of Adelaide (Discipline of Gender Studies and Social Inquiry), members were drawn from key services encountered by women and children subject to violence. These included Family and Youth Services (FAYS), which is the statutory child protection body, The Family Court of Australia, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), the Coalition of Domestic Violence Services, the SA Office for the Status of Women, the Attorney-General’s Department, the Department of Human Services (DHS), and in the latter stages, a regional Parenting
Network, integrating several Adelaide programs for families. The involvement of FAYS and the Family Court were sought as they had been two organisations which women in the initial research had overwhelmingly described as responding to them in problematic ways.

At first the Manager of Counselling at the Family Court indicated that she would not participate as the Family Court did not work collaboratively, but she requested an information session for her Counselling Team, after which she allowed a counsellor to attend the advisory group. However she was encouraged to join by the Family Court’s Violence Committee whose interest was kindled by MAP’s submission, and she became one of three new members attending the third meeting. Membership of the reference group grew over time as more organisations became involved. There was interest to involve educational authorities, and an advisor to the Minister for Education was briefed about MAP. However in MAP’s eleven months of operation there was not the time to involve schools more closely.

With the exception of the Family Court, which was funded by the Federal Government, all organisations in the reference group were state-based. The Coalition of DV Services mainly represented women’s shelters, which were not government run, although they received some (mainly Commonwealth) government funding. The other members were government departments and organisations. The Attorney-General’s Department, responsible for state-based courts including several domestic violence courts and a youth court, operated independently of the federally-based Family Court. Like FAYS, the Family Court, CAMHS, and DHS, it employed a gender-neutral framework, while the remaining organisations professed to use gendered and/or feminist understandings and principles. Within the reference group six member organisations or positions (such as a policy officer for violence against women) espoused a gender-aware and feminist ethos, and five were founded on a gender-neutral philosophy.

20 Although many of these bodies have been renamed and restructured since 2003 and no longer exist in the same form, the names used in 2003 are referred to in this thesis.

21 I have not included myself in this count.
The terms of reference (see Appendix 5) and early discussions made it clear that the role of reference group members was fourfold: 1) develop integrated responses to maternal alienation; 2) provide resources for organisational change to better respond to it; 3) advocate and lobby within their networks to embed these changes within wider systems; 4) share their knowledge about opportunities that MAP could take up, and support the project to do this. This included seeking the funds necessary for MAP to continue for three years.

However as MAP came under attack from members of the New Right, the reference group took the impact, and its capacity to act as a midwife to change became compromised by the effects of being “under fire”. This section documents both its operation and the resistance encountered in MAP’s attempts to bring about change in wider systems. It draws on the detailed minutes taken of reference group meetings alongside my contemporaneous field notes.

Writing this section has been a complex process, given the ferocity of the assaults on MAP and the project officer. While causing the untimely demise of the project, these also affected the reputation of MAP and its project officer. They resulted in tensions between reference group members, and between its key players and the project officer. The complexity of reporting this was compounded by the way the attacks crossed the boundary between professional and personal. The early assaults originated from men’s rights activists and the Christian New Right, but later attacks included individuals who had been connected with me personally. After many attempts, and with the assistance of distance in time and space, I have managed to bring clarity to my understanding by locating myself away from my position as the individual who cared about MAP’s success and who became one of the targets of these offensives, by finding another space from which to reflect and understand, a “space in-between”. For this reason I write these chapters from here onwards mainly in the third person. If MAP had not included its third sphere, that of research and the academy, locating this space for reflection, and tools with which to accomplish this, may not have been possible.
As the tenor and content of reference group meetings were affected profoundly by the attacks against MAP, the following account weaves them together, as “warp and weft”, as it were.

9.5.1 Reference group meetings and MAP “under fire”

Reference group meetings occurred monthly and lasted two hours, ten occurring over the life of MAP. The minutes and agenda were the responsibility of the project officer. At the first meeting, a month after MAP’s beginning, members discussed the proposed forum at which the project was to be launched, and agreed that the SA government Ministers for Health and Status of Women, and their counterparts within the opposition parties were to be invited and briefed about MAP.

A standing item in all meetings was a project report, which informed members about all MAP developments. The report for the second meeting, two weeks after the launch, outlined the conversations held with the two members of parliamentary opposition before the RHF’s attack. The parliamentary representative for the Australian Democrats had been very interested and sent letters of support to three ministers that she thought should sponsor MAP. The Liberal Party representative initially challenged some statements and requested many details, but eventually indicated she also would communicate her support to the Minister for Health.

Despite these expressions of external support, the most pressing business of the second meeting concerned the press release condemning MAP which had been posted on the website of the RHF in early October, an action that shocked members of the reference group. Attempting to discredit both MAP and the research on which the concept of maternal alienation was based, the RHF stated, “Government policy must not be set on the basis of a handful of name-less, face-less, hypothetical or fictitious anecdotes which can neither be qualified nor quantified”. Unsurprisingly, the opinion piece then championed the fathers’ rights movement’s best friend, the discredited parental alienation syndrome (PAS) (Myers 1997; Bruch 2002; Neustein and Lesher 2005). Once again a relationship had been drawn between these concepts.

Reference group members suggested that a “fact sheet” be prepared detailing the evidence and research upon which MAP was based, and the differences between
maternal alienation and PAS. Previous plans to brief several officials from the Department of Human Services (DHS) on the project, as a preliminary step to organising meetings with ministers and advisors, became urgent, and took place after this meeting.

By the fourth meeting in December, the matter of MAP’s short-term funding needed to be addressed urgently, as WHS’s financial support was due to finish in two months. NMCHS responded after this meeting with a decision to fund MAP at three days a week for a further four to five months.

A meeting with the Minister for Health took place in November. She indicated a strong interest in MAP and suggested that it be funded across departments, an idea repeated by the advisor to the Minister for Education. This was reported to the fourth meeting.

Later in November, Pastor Andrew Evans, newly elected to the SA Parliament to represent the Family First Party, a Christian political party advocating their neoconservative “family values”, took up the RHF criticisms of MAP. He initiated a series of questions in parliament to several ministers, but particularly to the Minister for Health. At the same time, threatening emails were sent to the project officer by men’s rights activists, accusing her and MAP participants of being “feminazis” and “nothing more than the worst of de-facto CHILD ABUSERS and MISANDRISTS” (emphasis in the original). Concurrently, the project officer’s car tyre was slashed outside her home.

It fell to DHS staff to prepare responses to the parliamentary questions raised by Andrew Evans MP, and MAP supplied some of this information, which was tabled to the fourth meeting, when members were also told of the “hate email” and intimidation directed at the project officer. Reference group members wanted these incidents reported to the police, which eventually took place.

Due to members’ end of year business, and project officer leave arrangements there was a gap of approximately eleven weeks between the fourth and fifth meetings. Throughout this period however, the lobbying from men’s rights activists and
Andrew Evans’ parliamentary questions continued, focusing also on the “inequitable” funding of services for women compared to men. The tensions that this political action created put the managers of women’s and community services and the DHS policy officer (all of whom were in services/positions that were based on gender-aware and feminist principles) under the spotlight, as MAP metamorphosed from what had been for them a political asset to become a liability. Already aware of the vulnerability of specialist women’s services and policy positions in a strongly recuperative environment, they would have been aware of the dangers of such criticisms to their continuation.

Discussions in the reference group had been driven principally by two, sometimes three, of these players. All were connected to DHS, which as a government department was based on gender-neutral principles, yet they were in positions that took a women-centred and gender-aware perspective. These “drivers”, as I term them, included two MAP partners. As the recognised feminists in the reference group, the “drivers” lead discussions in meetings, and focused on their organisational relationships with DHS, on how to strategically influence key departmental figures, and position MAP within DHS frameworks. Those members who were not connected to DHS raised the issue several times that they felt excluded by the reference group preoccupation with DHS matters and the use of DHS acronyms and jargon.

Undertakings were made to be more inclusive in language and content, but on the whole this did not change. Unfortunately the drivers’ good intentions to ensure that MAP survived within DHS frameworks precluded adoption of the intersectoral approach intended by MAP and supported by the health minister and educational ministerial advisor. As time passed and the concerns of the drivers continued to dominate the reference group’s business, these dynamics tended to push to the outer circle the concerns of the large mainstream, “gender-neutral” organisations that MAP had aimed to influence, as well as the representative of the “feminist” coalition of non-government DV services, representing women’s shelters. This resulted in configurations of “insiders” and “outsiders” within the reference group. The term “drivers” will continue to be used to refer to the three key MAP players connected to DHS who represented “feminist”, gender-aware organisations/positions, and
“outsiders” will be used for those in the reference group whose concerns became more marginalised.

A document prepared by the project officer was tabled to the fifth meeting, summarising MAP’s background and its outcomes to that point. It also documented what was likely to be achieved if no further funding was secured, compared with what could be achieved if the project completed its planned three years. It was decided that MAP’s interim outcomes should be written up and plans made for the following four months. Two of the drivers appeared to want to terminate the project at this time, and focused on how the learning from MAP to that point could be incorporated into programs with which they were associated.

In the fifth and sixth meetings, the theme of who “owned” MAP began to emerge. The drivers argued that MAP was largely seen as the project officer’s personal project. They argued that as a publicly-funded project, MAP should not be closely associated with an individual, but should operate as a standardised program reproducible by other workers. This led to the suggestion that other members of the reference group, particularly the drivers, more openly advocate for MAP. This was hoped to take the focus away from the project officer and circumvent the personalisation of the project. The minutes report that, “the more that other reference group members present material on the project, the less people will associate it just with Anne”. Yet in the following months, there was little evidence that the drivers advocated for the project within or outside DHS. Several outsider members disagreed with the drivers’ approach, but struggled to be heard.

Perhaps related to the public sector regard for standardised programs and processes was the emerging issue expressed by the drivers, that there was a difficulty in reconciling a publicly funded project with research conducted as a PhD. This was expressed as being a conflict of interests for the project officer. Their further concern was that an organisation’s support of one person’s PhD could be seen by other workers as differential treatment, as they were not given the same opportunities to extend their career. The drivers were also concerned about who “owned” the knowledge that was gained through MAP. These issues appeared to be heavily
influenced by DHS bureaucratic interest in what came to be referred to as the “intellectual property produced through MAP”. The problem continued to dog reference group meetings despite the fact that none of these organisations funded the PhD or the time spent doing it.

These developments need to be understood within the larger context. The concern about MAP by senior DHS officials increased as they were required to field a continual stream of regular parliamentary questions and as the men’s rights campaign against MAP continued. In addition, a senior male official in DHS had become personally hostile to the concept of maternal alienation. In a meeting with the project officer and partners, called with the aim of countering the misinformation about MAP being generated by the RHF, this official exclaimed that “women do this [alienation] too”, and referred with energy to his own marriage break-up. The MAP representatives responded that the bitterness and conflict sometimes accompanying relationship breakdown was different from maternal alienation, which occurred within contexts of violence and abuse. However, his continuing hostility to MAP added fuel to growing DHS criticisms, which appeared to underpin the increasing alienation of the drivers from MAP.

The core of the problem was the women-centred focus of MAP. The hostility to it was fuelled by those who saw it as “biased” and “anti-male” compared with, for example, PAS, which professed to be “gender-neutral”. The sensitivity (and vulnerability) of women-centred services to this criticism – which was often levelled at them – no doubt had a part to play in the reaction of the drivers to the “gender-neutral” DHS.

In the final months of the project, the external campaign against MAP became increasingly personalised. Questions in parliament focused on the project officer, and her relationship to a newspaper article that appeared in 2000, which alluded to her Family Court case years before. At the same time, DHS received a number of phone calls from a man describing himself as a friend of her ex-husband, personally vilifying her and calling for her “sacking”. Furthermore, before presenting a paper at a conference in May 2003, she was cautioned by the organisers that they had received a letter warning them that her paper would contain defamatory material for which
they would be liable. Such was the progression from attack on the project to attack on
the project officer, in ways that moved from targeting her work within MAP to her
personal past. The effect of this was to discredit her “objectivity” and frame MAP as
the product of a bitter or obsessed woman, not unlike the malicious mother figure of
PAS. Some DHS officials made comments that the project officer’s commitment to
the project represented her own personal “crusade”. Those organisations involved
with MAP were thereby positioned as in alliance with someone with a personal
grudge. As the drivers distanced themselves from MAP to deflect this criticism from
them, the project officer’s redoubled efforts to advocate for its continuation were
more open to interpretation as “pathological”.

These events follow the trajectory of the “backlash” against feminism noted by
Breckenridge (1999) and Radford and colleagues (1996). They describe a process that
begins with disagreements about feminist accounts of gender violence, then proceeds
to dispute these claims and the feminist research upon which they were based, and
finally questions the competence and motives of individuals working within these
frameworks. It also accords with findings (Briggs et al. 2003; Littlechild and Bourke
2006) that professionals involved in child protection work are commonly subjected to
violence, threats and intimidation by individuals and interest groups.

These attempts to undermine the project officer’s personal and professional integrity
positioned her without a valid platform from which to speak or write, and from which
to be heard as a reasonable person. They resonate with the tactics used in maternal
alienation to undermine women’s credibility and support. They raise questions about
the extent to which the claims made by the men’s rights groups were reproduced
within the reference group even by attempts to refute them. As the political and
public campaign continued, the drivers, those who had been the initial champions of
MAP, increasingly distanced themselves from MAP and the project officer.

Two paradoxes become evident from these latter days of MAP. Firstly, in the face of
such serious attacks on MAP and the services auspicing it, the drivers spent the major
part of the last reference group meetings discussing the two relatively minor
“internal” issues of who “owned” the project and its results, and the perceived
problems of linking a PhD to a publicly-funded project. Secondly, as the drivers began to focus on concluding the project, at the level of practice there was widespread and growing support for MAP, and training workshops were requested at an ever-increasing rate. Interest to work with the ideas even came from the family court and child protection services.

During this second half of MAP the drivers discussed absorbing the work of MAP into other programs, and continuing without a project officer, possibly an attempt to make the work of MAP a “smaller target”. The outsiders in the reference group argued that the practice approaches and system changes which had been initiated by MAP were not yet established enough to be sustained without a dedicated worker. Opinions became more oppositional, making it increasingly difficult to discuss openly the many serious challenges to MAP.

A funding proposal submitted to DHS had been tabled at the sixth meeting, but by the seventh meeting it was already known that this had been rejected, probably because of the politically sensitive nature of the project. The sixth meeting was also presented with a final form of the *Fact Sheet on Maternal Alienation*, which had been circulated amongst workers and managers for feedback. A “mud-map” was also presented that illustrated in colour the sectors and agencies that MAP had contacted, and the snowballing effects of these influences (see Appendix 6).

In an effort to change these difficult dynamics, an item entitled, “Maximising the contributions of the reference group” had been placed on the agenda of the sixth meeting by the project officer. After discussion it was decided that the chairing of the meetings would be rotated, and once again there was an undertaking to avoid DHS acronyms and language.

The sixth meeting also discussed the means of sponsoring the Director of Cedar Cottage to visit Adelaide to conduct workshops with the VIPs on their approaches to perpetrators. Several organisations were interested in being involved in this, as the program at Cedar Cottage was innovative and well respected. Details and possible dates had been negotiated with him. All that was needed was a final agreement from the reference group to set the date, for the project officer’s organisation of the event to proceed. However by the seventh meeting it was clear that these arrangements were
becoming increasingly hampered by a lack of decision-making. As more services wished to become involved, decisions were postponed until more senior managers gave their consent.

In the sixth meeting the university sponsor had put on the agenda for the following meeting discussion of the two issues that appeared to be obstacles for DHS officials: “How do we head off the dismissal of the project because of the PhD? How do we deal with some people’s dismissal of the project because of their reaction of uncomfortability?” The discussion of the first issue during the seventh and eighth meetings stressed that the PhD had never been funded, yet the project benefited from the input of the PhD supervisors and the academically-grounded analysis of gender violence and systems change. The drivers stated that the problem, which seemed to them to be insoluble, arose from having the one person as both project worker and researcher. Of course this is consistent with action research, and had always been integral to MAP’s design. In contrast, the outsiders stated that they appreciated the rigour and up-to-date approach offered by MAP’s relationship with university research. It was not clear at this point where this perception of a problem originated.

The drivers nevertheless articulated it as a reason for no longer funding the project officer to continue the work on maternal alienation. However, in later interviews, several respondents stated that these objections originated from bureaucrats within DHS. The drivers felt there was an issue of “intellectual property” that was problematic, that is, who “owned” the material of the project if it was to be utilised as part of the PhD? The university sponsor pointed out the difficulties that feminist scholars have with views that knowledge is a commodity that only benefits the individual undertaking education. This view was not welcomed by the drivers.

At the seventh meeting it was agreed, after some discussion, that there were no further options for funding, and the next meeting would consider how to conclude the project. Paradoxically, the project report included some encouraging outcomes occurring from changes in practitioners’ practice. There had also been a meeting with the Principal Mediator of the Family Court, in which possibilities for educating counsellors nationally, and for presenting material to judges and registrars were discussed. This was a significant outcome, as it opened doors to work directly within the area deemed most problematic by women subjected to maternal alienation. It was
ironic that this possibility, and the opportunity for the project officer to facilitate a
number of training workshops within FAYS, became possible just as MAP was
finishing. A further irony was that the outsiders, representing mainstream
organisations with a gender-neutral framework, continued to open doors to this work
while the drivers, who worked from a feminist framework, appeared anxious to bring
MAP to a close. The project report made it clear that within the practice area, and to
some extent possibly also within wider systems, the project was moving from
strength to strength, and was on the brink of making significant changes.

These dynamics – the project officer’s diminishing space for action, her decreasing
influence over the course of MAP, and the growing conflicts within the reference
group – were difficult for the project officer to negotiate and understand. The attacks
by the RHF/Christian Right alliance had reduced the space for action of MAP’s
drivers as well as her own. In responding to a number of difficult pressures at a macro
level, they attempted to manage the possible damage to their organisations. These
tensions contributed to an increasing pressure on the project officer to “back off” or
risk being seen as problematic. In not accepting that MAP should end, and thereby
increasing pressure on the drivers who themselves were subject to the attacks from a
macro level, the project officer became increasingly seen as “problematic”.

Not surprisingly, a month before the planned end to MAP, Meeting Eight was a very
difficult meeting with some conflict evident between members. It was chaired by an
outsider, who had latterly become an informal champion of MAP, sensing that the
earlier “champions” had withdrawn their support. She worked hard to democratise the
meeting process.

Again, in contrast to these entrenched conflicts, the project report was full of new
possibilities for the project to make changes on further levels, had it been able to
continue. Practitioners had reported changes in their practice, with resulting positive
and exciting changes in the families they work with. Training workshops had
continued. The Principal Mediator of the Family Court had requested that the Fact
Sheet and a document on the differences between maternal alienation and PAS be
added to their national database.
In discussing how the work of MAP could continue without funding for a project officer, the Chair of this meeting insisted that members should come to the next meeting prepared to demonstrate how their organisation would incorporate and continue aspects of MAP.

At the ninth meeting, only six of the group’s twelve members were present. The urgent business of the meeting involved discussing and planning for a meeting with one of the Executive Directors within DHS that had just been requested by the Minister for the Status of Women who we had been trying to meet with for months. It was agreed that the presentation would focus on how MAP could contribute to various frameworks that were being developed within DHS.

Three members put forward ways that their organisations would continue the work of MAP. MAP was extended by three weeks so that all aspects of the project could be finished. A further meeting was added, and a strategic plan to progress the work was suggested.

Meeting Ten occurred three days before MAP’s end. Six people were present at this meeting, to discuss how the work could continue. The group attempted to evaluate the reference group’s workings. One problem that was discussed was the group’s inclusion of people operating at different levels. Members working at a strategic level were seen to have different interests and ways of operating from those working at an operational level. This appeared to be another way of viewing the oppositions that had developed between drivers and outsiders, as the drivers included strategic managers connected with DHS. It was decided that the group needed to divide into two different meetings in the future – one to focus on embedding change at a strategic level, and influencing DHS, and the other to deal with operational change, including training. The relationship between these two groups was to be explored more, and Terms of Reference drawn up at a further meeting.

Again a member reiterated the point that much of the talk between reference group members was DHS “in-talk” that had the effect of excluding those outside DHS. She said this had been a significant issue for her, and had undermined MAP’s attempt to influence a diversity of sectors and systems. A driver answered that MAP would have
been more effective if it had limited itself to one or two areas within DHS, rather than attempting to work with other government sectors and the non-government sector. The drivers’ hardening of these positions during the course of MAP showed them to be unwilling to work intersectorally. Thus the tensions between drivers and outsiders continued until the end.

One member suggested that the maternal alienation work continue under a different name, thus unwittingly drawing attention to the act of naming as an inherently political act, and giving support to the notion of maternal alienation as a “contested concept”.

No further meetings took place and the minutes of this last reference group meeting were never circulated. The initiative to organise a workshop with the Director of Cedar Cottage, so eagerly embraced and then inhibited by the drivers, lapsed. With the exception of several outsiders, the new ideas and changes of attitudes and practice forged within MAP were almost exclusively taken up and continued by practitioners, not by those with greater status and access to the “corridors of power”: their managers, directors and policy-officers.

The launch of the MAP documents, held two months after the project’s end, was a quiet affair, in marked contrast to the Launch of the project almost exactly a year earlier.

What has emerged most strikingly in writing this chapter, and in the analysis of the course of MAP, is the clear delineation between the areas of systems change and practice, with almost entirely different themes apparent in these spheres. While MAP’s engagement with wider systems brought it and the organisations advocating for it under surveillance and attack and impacted on the functioning of the reference group, changes in practice still proceeded without interruption “below the radar”.

The following chapter focuses on MAP’s practice orientation, bringing social theory to bear in further examining the practice strategies that emerged through MAP.
CHAPTER TEN

Issues and change in practice I

This and the following chapter examine more closely the issues generated and highlighted through MAP’s endeavours to develop practice responses to maternal alienation. This material has evolved through several levels of reflexivity and analysis. A number of insights were initially produced through critical reflection with practitioners in MAP’s working groups. These were trialled in practice and further refined in subsequent meetings. Post-project interviews undertaken months later elicited workers’ reflections on these insights and on the ways in which practice had continued to develop after MAP. A further layer of analysis involved examining all the data in relation to contemporary feminist and gender theory. While this occurred throughout the entire process, it became particularly intense during the writing of the thesis. Thus, there has been a reflexive engagement over time with this material on at least four levels.

The early part of the chapter outlines the principles of practice that were developed to address maternal alienation. The chapter continues by referring to issues that arose in the practice arena, and includes practitioners’ reflections on their changes in practice and understanding. After considering the ways in which understandings of maternal alienation can be seen within a feminist tradition, it explores the manner in which MAP worked in the “spaces in-between”, and the effects of this approach. The chapter concludes by examining the significance of repairing mother-daughter relationships.

10.1 Principles of practice

The practice principles were initially developed within the working groups and written up in MAP’s Practitioner Resource (Morris 2003). However the principles of practice outlined below evolved further than these, through the reflection and analysis that occurred since MAP. One major concept that is discussed in this section, the “abusive household gender regime”, only emerged after MAP.
10.1.1 Fundamental principles

Maternal alienation is built on two foundations: on the one hand, constructions of mothers as morally deficient but nevertheless responsible for everything problematic in families; and on the other hand, the privileged status and moral authority of fathers (see Chapter Eight). This duality can be expressed as a relationship between responsibility and power, in which mothers are seen as fully responsible, while their space for action, or power, is greatly diminished. By contrast, through a regime of coercion and violence perpetrators wield inflated power and eschew responsibility for their behaviour. This responsibility-power relationship (Burke 2003) is reinforced when professional interventions render mothers responsible for matters over which they have little or no control, such as protecting children within abusive household regimes without the supports or resources necessary to do this. Conversely men’s power is reinforced and their accountability diminished when men and their abuse remain invisible in mainstream services, as often occurs in the Family Court and child protection services.

MAP reversed this gendered pattern to create two fundamental principles underpinning all practice responses:

- making visible the tactics used by perpetrators, thereby diminishing their power and increasing their accountability;
- supporting mothers, thereby increasing their power and reducing unreasonable burdens of responsibility. These have been expressed elsewhere as “supporting women and challenging men”. (Burton et al. 1998)

Mainstream interventions all too often result in abused and violated children losing the resource that could most benefit them: the support of their non-abusive parent, their mother. The responses developed by MAP aimed to rebuild mother-child relationships, and diminish the destructive effects of partners’/fathers’ practices. Effective responses from services integrate child protection with feminist understandings of domestic violence (Humphreys and Stanley 2006), as a manager on MAP’s reference group explains:
… we can start to talk [with child protection services] about the need they have to understand domestic violence because if they don’t understand that, they won’t understand this thing called maternal alienation, and they won’t know what to do when the perpetrator isn’t in the room, but the system they’re intervening in is the consequences of what he’s done, as opposed to blaming the woman and child, or the woman. (interview)

Thus child protection needs to include woman protection, an approach that works against the cultural grain in recognising the beneficial role that mothers generally play in children’s lives.

10.1.2 The mother-child system/alliance

Perhaps because the expectation that mothers should always be “intensively” available for their children has become naturalised and taken for granted, few services exist that offer support for mother-child relationships. Mothers and children commonly attend separate services and children’s services typically ignore mothers, sometimes constructing children’s needs as conflicting with those of their mothers. MAP workers found that practitioners of children’s services often sided with children (or fathers) against mothers, replicating practices of maternal alienation.

(Re)-building mother-child alliances is pivotal to effective responses to maternal alienation where violence is recent. With adult survivors of CSA and DV this may not be so crucial, although the case study of Kylie discussed later in this chapter suggests that it can still be significant. Where violence is recent, the effects of abuse, the tactics of alienation, the lack of shared understandings, the dynamics of abusive gender regimes and the adoption of protective silences create significant wedges between mothers and children. They require support and tools, such as the Strength Cards (St. Luke’s), to enable them to speak about their experiences of abuse, but also to articulate the qualities they value and love in one another; they need the means to develop shared understandings, activities and plans for the future.

This is as important as identifying perpetrators’ strategies, for without naming and identifying the material, everyday ways that mothers and children connect positively, these go unrecognised and carry no strength to oppose the constructions of mothers and children and the coercive dynamics established by perpetrators. This is especially the case as societal tendencies render mothers’ care-taking work “natural”, invisible and without value.
10.1.3 Uncovering the tactics used in maternal alienation

The tactics used in maternal alienation effectively project culpability from perpetrators to victims, including mothers. Uncovering these tactics makes perpetrators’ responsibility for their abuse visible, thereby lifting it from the shoulders of victims. It enables mothers and children to recognise the strategies of coercion and alienation used against them, and thus unravel the many misunderstandings created (Laing 1999). Freeing themselves from these lies, distortions and destructive dynamics, enables them to evolve more positive behaviours and attitudes towards one another.

Exposing perpetrators’ tactics clarifies the lack of congruence between their words and their actions, and has the potential to resolve the confusion this creates. This expands the space for family members to express their material experiences more clearly. The sharing of these understandings between mothers and their children brings greater strength and authority to their lived experiences, reducing the dominance of perpetrators’ words.

10.1.4 Developing alternative ways of being

These practice principles enable women and children to re-frame their identities, relationships and histories that were shaped by abuse, and step outside the behaviours they adopted to survive such violence. Remaining aware of the operations of power and abuse within the abusive household gender regime, they can consciously create more positive relationships with one another. Once again, naming and making visible the differences between an abusive and a caring regime are of paramount importance in keeping these possibilities alive and strengthening them against the continuing onslaught of perpetrators.

It can be helpful for women and children to understand how the techniques of maternal alienation may have catapulted them into negative behaviours, trapping them into “playing out” roles assigned by perpetrators. After leaving abusive relationships when perpetrators’ tactics are likely to escalate, women and children particularly need support to maintain positive views of themselves and their relationship. Therefore expressing in language their positive qualities and how they
manifest in their everyday lives is crucial. When mothers and children become witnesses for one another of positive qualities and ways of being, these become strengthened and reinforced.

10.1.5 Household gender regime based on care, respect and balanced power and responsibility

The practices modelled by practitioners in MAP construct and support a household gender regime built on respect and care. This needs to become a rich tapestry of positive communications to stand up to the strength and web-like form of the abusive household regime it seeks to replace.

A household gender regime built on respect and care would be characterised by a realistic and reasonable sharing of power and responsibility, in which each actor’s level of responsibility corresponds to the amount of power he/she exercises. Although children’s power and responsibility increase with age, children also should exercise levels of power and responsibility that are in balance. Children’s experiences of maternal alienation are likely to disrupt this equivalence, encouraging children to employ the greater power and diminished responsibility characterising perpetrators’ behaviour. Practitioners and household members can become aware of the operation of power within households by observing the balance of power and responsibility as they are exercised by each member.

10.1.6 Using authority positively

When maternal alienation takes place, mothers (whose authority has been undermined) are positioned as the ones least able to make changes, as whatever they do, their words are discredited and their actions reviled. Painted as mad, bad, stupid, untrustworthy, their children rarely respect or cooperate with them. Practitioners in MAP found that professional interventions that put pressure on mothers to make changes, such as controlling children’s difficult behaviour, without supporting mothers and children to make such changes, exacerbate this situation. When problems escalate as they often do after this style of intervention, this tends to “prove” to practitioners that the mothers involved are deficient, and in need of programs such as learning “parenting skills”.

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However, practitioners’ authority and power can be used positively to counterbalance rather than support the power and status of alienating fathers’ voices. One of the most potent uses of authority is for practitioners to model respect towards mothers (a disturbingly rare experience for mothers) and “authorise” (give language to and support) alternative constructions of, and behaviours by, mothers and children.

10.1.7 Creating consistency, safety and integrated service responses

As was so often described by MAP practitioners, positive work with families can be rapidly undone by services that are ignorant of maternal alienation and unwittingly reinforce its dynamics. On the other hand, significant changes occurred when MAP practitioners worked with other agencies to address families’ problems. Thus an important principle is to educate all services involved with families about the effects of violence and maternal alienation, so that they too can support families and not become part of the problem. Of course, this goal underpinned MAP’s structure and actions to engage many organisations across different sectors.

Perpetrators maintain control by being inconsistent and unpredictable. Their inconsistency and distortion of reality fractures women and children from their own experience, and from being able to trust themselves or develop a sense of safety. This pattern of inconsistency and individuals’ resultant lack of control is mirrored when services take contradictory approaches. Integrated, consistent, non-blaming and supportive approaches by all services underpin the creation of a new household gender regime built on respect and care, and increase family members’ sense of control, understanding and congruence.

While these practice principles appear simple, they emphasise the differences between feminist approaches which treat women as subjects rather than objects, and mainstream approaches which disregard women’s perspectives yet blame them. They also point to the effects on women and children of pursuing feminist as opposed to mainstream approaches. The following section explores some implications of these understandings of maternal alienation, and practice responses to it, within a feminist framework.
10.2 Maternal alienation as feminist “knowledge”

10.2.1 A “struggle” or contested concept

Knowledge about maternal alienation reveals the connections between differing levels of gender relations, in, for example, the ways that aspects of abusive household gender regimes reflect and re-create hegemonic socio-cultural discourses operating at the level of the gender order. Thus the concept illustrates the dynamic of the feminist adage, “the personal is the political”. A counsellor from the CSAWG stated, “If you take maternal alienation to its logical conclusion it does have the potential to impact on everything”. A number of interviewees referred to the concept as radical or revolutionary, recalling the “struggle concepts” of early second wave feminism that exposed the operation of gender relations, and thereby “radically altered our understanding of reality and thus our ability to change it” (Ebert 1993: 34).

It was primarily the exposition of perpetrator tactics, of power relations and gender inequities that workers felt challenged the status quo, at times bringing about paradigmatic change for people. A DV worker from the first focus group noted: “For me it was a great breakthrough, a whole new revolution!” However, a CSAWG practitioner spoke of the “healing” of women’s relationship with their mothers as radical, in its literal sense of going to the root of things and having the capacity to transform.

As a “struggle” or contested/contesting concept, the concept of maternal alienation brings into relief the intimate connections between knowledge and power. This is evident in women’s experience that identifying maternal alienation expanded their space for action, by clarifying who is responsible for abuse, and making it possible to develop appropriate and effective actions in response. Grafstein contends that contested concepts point to “the actual political struggles converting definitional differences into conceptual confrontations and the latter into reorganizations of society” (1988: 25). Several interviewees testified to this aspect of maternal alienation.
Maternal alienation challenges some very entrenched beliefs and systems, and from the individual, community right through to the most powerful business, education, medical. I mean, it challenges. And it’s much easier to go with what’s the dominant, the patriarchal system than to go this way. (focus group 2)

Similarly, a CSAWG participant was aware that ideas that challenge the status quo tend to confront resistance.

Any work that’s about challenging the effects of violence is taking on well-established views in society. Like we’re saying what is happening now is not okay. And I think there’s some stuff around how much people want to hear that. (interview)

Making gender inequities visible is an aspect of this, as this worker argued: “if you really took maternal alienation seriously then you would have to look at patriarchy, and at that level, about the whole nature of relationships between women and men, and the fact that they’re never even” (interview). She suggested that gender inequity is so entrenched that we cannot know what equity would look like, “where there is not mother blame, where there is not the expectations that are put on mothers” (interview).

Here is the root of the resistance shown by many men to the concept of maternal alienation – the prospect that this awareness could be extended to all gender relationships, to normative heterosexuality, not just those considered to be “deviant” in abusive household gender regimes. This resonates with mainstream resistance to the co-existence of the constructs of father and perpetrator (Collier 1995; Eriksson and Hester 2001). Such resistance negates the need to seriously examine the ways in which violence is integral to hegemonic masculinity (Hearn 1998).

10.2.2 Change of paradigm

As a radical or contested concept, maternal alienation presents the habitual in a new light, reversing discourses or paradigms in which mothers are blamed and fathers’ agency avoided. “What strikes us as the normal order of things is suddenly revealed … as a constructed reality that protects the interests of the powerful” (Brookfield 2001: 16). A focus group participant (group 2) compared this shift in perspective to “looking at a carpet pattern for years, and one day you see an entirely different pattern that was always there, that you hadn’t noticed before. Once you see it, you always see it”. A manager from the DVWG similarly explained how a concept can “flip” one’s view into another way of looking.
… it pulls everyone up short. Like, it literally smacks you in the face with it, and shows the absurdity of another position, or at least deeply questions another position that might be strongly held. [Naming] maternal alienation, I think, has the power to do that. (interview)

A participant from the second focus group described how child protection workers “inevitably” focus on mothers, but are “taken aback” when she asks them, “Where does the father fit into all of this?” The question opens the possibility of a different perspective, another lens through which to look, a shift in paradigm. Such a shift was witnessed on another occasion by a second participant from the second focus group:

I talked to [the child protection worker] about DV and maternal alienation, and it opened up a whole new concept for her. … new information which actually looked at the mother in a different light, and the pressures she was under, and being able to actually talk about this particular woman around the positive things she was doing in the context of all this grief she was under. … [It] gave her a different lens, I suppose for looking at it.

This difference in perspective occurred also when participants from the second focus group introduced maternal alienation into their DV training with police.

I’m amazed at the feedback that we get back from the officers – you know, maternal alienation is this new thing and new concept, but when you put it into context for them they go, “Wow, yeah, we see that all the time.” [We tell them] “Well that’s called maternal alienation, that’s one example.” We then talk a lot about what that means for them to have that tool as well, so next time they get called out, they’ll see it from a different perspective.

A number of interviewees explained that it is the recasting of everyday realities in a different light that keeps this knowledge ever-present. For example a service director who was a member of the reference group found, “it’s like when you learn something new – it’s so clear, it all fits into place quite neatly, it’s something that stays with you in the back of your mind”. Another reference group member referred to this new frame of reference as “a live thing”, that is, a framework she can apply flexibly to her life.

A member of the CSAWG suggested that it is precisely its new and radical character that makes the knowledge about maternal alienation vulnerable as “the ideas are so different and so contrasting from the ways that we’re trained in this society, that they could just slip away again.” She believed the ideas need time and “sustained or
regular reminders” to transform people’s thinking in more substantial ways. This counsellor, Doreen, witnessed fundamental changes in her client, Kylie, after Kylie uncovered the manipulative strategies used by her step-father in his sexual abuse of her when she was a child. Through deconstructing and understanding these tactics, and re-evaluating her relationship with her mother, she completely transformed her sense of herself, and her relationship to her abuser and her mother, but as her counsellor emphasises, this took twelve months of regular counselling.

10.2.3 Deconstructing hegemonic power and reflective critical practice

An important aspect of feminist and action research is to uncover and deconstruct the ways that power and privilege operate, to build more just and emancipatory alternatives (Kemmis 1985; Reinharz 1992; Ebert 1993; Noffke 2004) (see Chapter Seven). Drawing on Dorothy Smith, US feminist sociologist Joey Sprague explains that this is pivotal in distinguishing between knowledge and ideology, where ideology is a system of beliefs and practices that serve those with power.

…in a social context that is organized by unequal power relations, an important criterion for evaluating whether a truth claim is knowledge or ideology is how it deals with power. Frameworks for making sense of the world can either expose relations of unequal power, or they can obscure them. To the extent that truth claims obscure power relationships, they are ideological. (2005: 56)

MAP’s reflexive approach involved unearthing the ways in which gendered power relations infuse professional discourses and practices, and creating practice that more successfully integrates emancipatory understandings and actions. A manager of a DV service (previously a refuge) applied MAP’s approach to her own organisation and found that:

… it’s changed the way we think, which is good. … a lot of our conversations at work we became less judgemental of women and their relationships … we’ve now got a very, very different dialogue. … [We’ve moved from] saying “why can’t she control those children?!” … to “of course” their relationship is disrupted. What’s our responsibility, in terms of a service working with violence and abuse in families, to this woman and her children?”

These observations demonstrate the tendencies of service responses to express hegemonic power and dominant beliefs unless service providers consciously expose
power relations and bring their practice into line with the socially just principles that they espouse. This organisation’s shifting of responsibility from the mother to the organisation transforms the power/responsibility dynamic characteristic of abusive gender regimes and some services. Women’s power is enhanced through workers’ greater understanding and support, and mothers’ burden of unreasonable responsibility is shifted onto the organisation, which – unlike the mother at this stage – has the capacity to make certain changes.

However, it is incumbent upon all who are involved in knowledge creation and practice to continue their critical evaluation of their work. As those who challenge prevailing hegemonic discourses are also capable of creating their own orthodoxies, “those engaged in critical theory building must apply the same standards of critical analysis to their own theory” (Brookfield 2001: 18).

This challenge is relevant to the mother-blame confronted in the CSAWG. To understand this more fully, a wider context of sexual assault services in Australia was canvassed. Questions were asked (by email) of several feminist researchers/trainers who had detailed historical understandings of feminist sexual assault services. Two responded that, in general, workers in feminist services have striven, and still strive, not to hold mothers accountable in CSA, although mainstream services continue to do so. While it has not been possible to gain a corresponding perspective on the history of SA women’s health services, the early close connections between feminist services across Australia suggest that these understandings would have been present in SA, but have been lost in some areas of practice. This may have occurred through feminist knowledge being passed on in shorthand forms, so that the “thickness” of more complex understandings and knowledge become replaced by formulaic expressions. While feminism in the academy is continually being reconstituted and reformulated, the fracturing of academic feminism from feminist practice – a feature of feminism in SA – has possibly left feminist practice with little opportunity to renew, reflect on and re-articulate its assumptions and foundational principles. Rhetoric about reflective practice is part of SA’s women’s community health discourse, but there appear to be few opportunities for workers to engage in this, and perhaps there are also limited
understandings of how to accomplish it. Without critical reflection there is always the potential for habitual and “commonsense” views deriving from dominant ideologies to reassert themselves.

Another area of concern was raised by a manager from DVWG, who had noticed that in another DV service, maternal alienation had become “the explanation for all things that men do with their children against women. It answers all questions”. For workers who did not experience the reflective and critical dimension of MAP, maternal alienation knowledge was “added on” to existing unreflective and incongruent practices. This manager found that some workers rushed to name maternal alienation for women in their first sessions.

… maybe sometimes you need to give the woman space to talk about it a bit more herself before you actually name it, so that she is beginning to unpick it herself, and you’re introducing some questions or some ideas. But not step in and give a name to it really quickly, because I don’t know how that affects how she then might perceive it, or how she then might choose to work on it. (interview)

She also showed concern that women were treated as if they had little understanding and skill of their own.

I believe some women, if you let them talk a bit, actually identify your concept, but not talk about it as “maternal alienation”, and will give you some preliminary understandings of what they’re doing in terms of addressing it. And I don’t get the sense that that’s actually talked about very much, or explored much. It’s always crisis, they’re always “victims”, and we need to educate them. (interview)

This was contrasted with the approach taken within VIPs, where,

… we kind of talked about it more broadly on some levels. We tried to look at how it applied, or how it manifests itself across other things – power, across other gender, across same sex. You know, we looked at it differently. (interview)

Post MAP interviews with practitioners suggest that for many, after integrating into their practice the tools and insights from MAP, reflective practice had again come to a standstill, implying that critical reflection itself had not been incorporated into their practice or work environment.

Reflective practice in agencies such as the VIPs appeared to depend substantially on the organisational culture and the commitment of individual managers to create and maintain this approach. Where such individuals were not present, even when
workplaces espoused the importance of reflective practice, this did not necessarily take place. Unlike the DVWG, members of the CSAWG had little opportunity to work further with their colleagues on issues raised in MAP, no doubt reflecting the different structure of these groups, as described in Chapter Nine. Except for one notable exception of a practitioner who worked in a systems-oriented way, CSAWG members’ changes in understandings and practice appeared to stop with them and not be introduced into their workplaces. This occurred even while on other levels the ideas of maternal alienation spread amongst practitioners across different services.

These observations suggest the need for ongoing or recurrent initiatives that offer critical and reflective approaches with which workers and organisations can monitor and improve their services. Such approaches would need to incorporate Brookfield’s directions that adult learning should “recognize hegemony, and unmask power” (2001: 21).

These observations also raise questions about the constitution of different “feminist” services, as women’s health services appear to display in their approach to CSA an increasingly individualised and psychologised framework that has incorporated within it elements of hegemonic discourses. Such a framework is in danger of losing its wider connection to feminist analyses of structural oppression, power and gender (Hester et al. 1996; Breckenridge 1999; Connell 2000). It is paradoxical that the VIPs, which have historically enjoyed a less direct relationship with the women’s movement, have maintained a more collective focus, and rigour in their understanding of structural power and gender, than have some women’s health services.

10.2.4 Bridging theory and practice to create practice tools

MAP’s potential to effect change through its research and theory component was taken up strongly in the practice arena, where such opportunities were rarely available. As a practitioner from the CSAWG reflected, “How much time do we really have to do good … reflective practice?” One reference group member, a manager closely involved in her organisation’s practice, welcomed the possibilities to bring theory to bear on improving practice in her organisation.
I think it made me sit back and think, “what are the principles that I view my observations of women and their children? And from what framework do those principles come from, and how does that fit with my theories of feminism, my theories of domestic violence?” So, it helped locate my thinking and my support of practice in a more consistent, coherent, framework. … I think developing practice, actually pulling apart practice saying, “this isn’t working, what should we do?” That, I think, takes rigour, in any area of professional work. So I think that constant problem-solving and having a framework to come back to, a theory base, or, perhaps a set of principles – that’s really important. (interview)

A manager from the DVWG applied similar rigour to improve specific aspects of her team’s practice.

… talking to the team and saying, “how do we incorporate this into all aspects of our practice? What does it look like from intake with men? What does it look like in conversation with women? In early engagement? How are you developing it through your case management plan, goal setting, whatever, in therapeutic work and counselling? So we began to tie it in a little, around the whole of our working life with a client. Where does it fit in? Where does it move out? Where is it emphasised? Where do we have no attention to it? Where is it important for a woman that she focus on it, where is it not? Where should men begin to talk about this? How do we begin talking about this to men? (interview)

The coherence in thinking and practice produced by critical reflexive approaches to practice generated what one counsellor calls “thick description”, which filled gaps in common understandings of dynamics of violence, helping her to “articulate the constraints and the barriers” affecting women’s space for action. Most members of the working groups described a similar process in which they gained greater competence and acquired “practice tools”. A tool extends one’s capacity, and offers a more dexterous and skilled relationship to one’s environment. In a similar way, competence invokes Anthony Giddens’ concepts of “tacit knowledge” and “practical consciousness”, in which “knowledge is no longer identified with theory as an intellectual product, but is seen as a process or activity” (Carter 2001: 114). A manager from the DVWG found that for a member of her team, the process of acquiring practice tools involved:

… intense debate around what domestic violence intervention is, and how tools and concepts are located in your practice and reveal themselves in your conversations to clients…. And I think possibly, for [the women’s worker] I reckon it would have enriched her practice, or put new threads into her practice, or given her ideas of, “I can introduce things this way or talk about things this way”. (interview)
As a focus group participant exclaimed, “it’s the knowledge that’s the tool”.

Two counsellors from the working groups integrated the techniques for excavating perpetrator tactics so well into their counselling repertoire that they forgot that these had been developed within MAP. One was Susan, whose changes in practice in the latter part of CSAWG were discussed in Chapter Nine. Her lack of memory of this change may indicate that congruence in one’s practice, the outcome of reflective processes, feels so “natural” it seems to have always been there.

10.2.5 Body of knowledge and research

Most interviewees found that through their reflexive approach to maternal alienation, and through the mutual enrichment of theory and practice, they came to see this emerging work as a “body of knowledge”. Having critically examined their practice and its underlying principles and values, and evolved understandings and practice which were more congruent with women’s experiences and feminist values, practitioners developed a more intimate relationship to this knowledge. Theory and practice entwined, and theoretical ideas became more accessible, through being played with, reflected on, trialled and refined. This body of knowledge became “theirs” and could be employed in various ways.

A number of workers found that having a body of knowledge behind their work conferred authority on their knowledge. Hans Weiler posits that knowledge legitimates power, just as power legitimates knowledge; knowledge “must have a claim to credibility” (2004: 9). According to Sprague, researchers exercise a claim to credibility, “as legitimate producers of knowledge, an authority that is explicitly based on methodology … [and their affiliation] with institutions with some level of credibility in the social organization of knowledge production” (2005: 55). In the case of MAP, its grounded research base and university connections offered a form of “legitimacy”, albeit that its location within Women’s Studies was a less “authorised” site. Workers found such authority enabled this knowledge to stand independently.

It gives me a way of saying, “this is not a personal opinion”, that I can actually connect it to a body of knowledge, a body of research, so people can’t poo hoo you so quickly and easily. (counsellor interview)
A member of the reference group also found it empowering to tell child protection authorities “there is a body of knowledge that we’re basing this conversation with you on”. Another manager explained that the research aspect of MAP gave her and her team confidence to argue against PAS.

… so if someone raises parental alienation, we actually can now go in and say, this is one line of thinking, let us tell you about another line of thinking, and let us guide you to some material on this. (interview)

Such authority was often invoked when workers advocated for women, particularly with child protection workers. A CSA practitioner emphasised,

Some of those things are hard to speak against because they come with such certainty. But with this, one can talk in much thicker, in much wider descriptions, yeah, and you have a body of knowledge behind it. (interview)

The need to evoke authority reflects the diminished power of women who have been problematised, and the workers who advocate for them. Sprague points out that, “People need to make claims that they can speak with authority only when they are silenced; part of being privileged is being able to assume that one has authority” (2005: 79). The manner in which workers deployed this body of knowledge about maternal alienation to gain power and authority for women reveals its political and “contesting” significance.

… because it’s actually something in black and white that can be used to challenge on that professional level, say with the courts, with lawyers, with you know, other services, … you’ve got a term that you can use to argue things, and you’ve got the research that backs it up, and that’s where it can be quite powerful. Whereas before this, you can’t list out, “well this, this and this”, you’ve got no power. (focus group 1)

In contrast to this sense of a solid base of knowledge is the experience of stepping between different worlds and their diverging viewpoints.

10.3 Spaces in-between

Chapter Nine described the project officer’s experience within MAP as one of “traversing spaces in-between”. Communicating with personnel in many organisations across legal, welfare and health sectors offered glimpses of knowledge that emanated from distinct standpoints, and which provided opportunities for reflecting critically on what had become habitual and accepted in one’s own location.
As Sprague notes, new knowledge develops in such boundary crossing, where, “crossing boundaries dividing standpoints and addressing the differences between them is a strategy for building social knowledge” (2005: 74).

The potential that “boundary crossing” offers for enriching critical reflection was illustrated in MAP’s working groups and training workshops where participants positioned themselves “in the shoes of” alienated mothers (and to a lesser extent, children) to see the world “through their eyes”. Haraway emphasises the possibilities within standpoint theory for making empathetic connections with others, so that by imaginatively putting oneself in the position of another, boundaries are crossed and startling insights can result (Sprague 2005: 74). However in the case of maternal alienation, a general distaste towards “abject” mothers first needed to be addressed. This was achieved particularly in the barrier exercise within training, although information about maternal alienation itself also challenged the “abjectness” of “problematic” mothers.

Workers sitting in the chair of “mother” in the barrier exercise were questioned about their experiences of alienation. Without exception, all “mothers” spoke of how the alienating messages brought them to a place of loneliness, despair and hopelessness in which they had no room to move. Further questioning uncovered some of the ways that gendered power operated within abusive household regimes not evident from dominant viewpoints, and thus also exposed discourses (such as mother-blaming and the authority of fathers in conjunction with the invisibility of their abuse) that obscure these workings of power.

Thus traversing spaces in-between became a route to disrupt hegemonic points of view, and find fresh perspectives that offered understandings more congruent with workers’ and women’s experiences, connecting differently situated knowledges and experiences. Another example of boundary crossing was to disrupt the “boundary” constructed by masculinist discourse between personal and professional worlds. Destabilising these oppositional positionings made it possible to critically examine how professional knowledge is inflected by personal experience as well as by dominant, ideological beliefs.
10.3.1 Reconnecting personal and professional knowledges and experiences

Many interviewees described how encountering the concept of maternal alienation led them through a process in which they re-evaluated aspects of their own lives and relationships.

I read about it before I started working here, so I was a little sceptical at first. But since then, I’ve considered my own life and my mother’s life, and friends’ lives and clients, and it’s like, wow! (focus group 2)

A reference group member became aware of its impact on her children and her mothering.

… it certainly made me think about some of the things that I’ve been worried and anxious about in terms of the power dynamics of that situation for my kids, and made me think through some of the strategies that I’ve seen my ex-partner, the children’s father, employ. (interview)

A CSAWG member found that as her awareness of maternal alienation increased, the personal and professional became entwined, particularly around the gendered meanings and impacts of maternal alienation.

… because I’m a woman, because I’m a daughter and I’m a mother, and I’ve had experiences of those tactics being used on me and on my mother. So having experienced that, having witnessed it and remembered witnessing it, now that I can give a framework, that reinforces the possibility for not losing its presence [in my work]. (interview)

A reference group member was explicit that the two strands of professional and personal knowledge examined within MAP contributed to the concept’s power.

With other areas of new or innovative knowledge, usually it’s people who just are the practitioners of it who carry it. But because this is carried at two levels: both at the level of thinking about violence, a strategy of violence; and also thinking on a personal level about the ways in which it might play itself out, either in your relationship of mothering or being a daughter. Or in ways that you relate to other areas of your work, particularly people who are working in the field reflecting on the extent to which their practice is carrying mother blaming. But I think it’s the personal connection that makes it strongest. (interview)

Another reference group member, however, believed that “personal experience is a double edged sword” as it may provide “good insight and good empathy”, while making “it harder to not put your own experiences on top of somebody else’s. … But
I suppose it probably gave me a bit more passion for the research and the work” (interview).

On the whole workers thought that becoming aware of their personal experience enhanced their professional approach, and offered a richer knowledge resource to draw on. Connecting personal experience to professional experience, however, is not necessarily straightforward. The connection between one CSAWG member’s personal experience of incest and her professional blaming of mothers exemplifies the complex interactions of personal experience with dominant discourses of mother-blaming, commonly entwined within abusive gender regimes, and how these impact on professional beliefs and practice. This example demonstrates the importance of critically examining and deconstructing personal experiences. This worker was unable to move from a position of mother-blaming until she brought a different perspective to her abuse and early family, based on contextualising her mother, and integrating new knowledge of how maternal alienation and mother-blaming act to oppress women. During her interview she described how MAP contributed to her seeing her mother differently.

When I looked at the context of some of that stuff, and started to see the things in the background, I saw things that I didn’t see before, because I was so conscious of blaming her for being a bad person. I knew how wrong I’d been.

In turn, this reframing brought about a dramatic change within her practice.

Both Dorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins argue that the conceptual structures created within masculinist social science, disassociated from people’s “everyday/everynight” material reality “claim privileged status as discourses and ignore or demean the voices and knowledge claims of more marginalized and oppressed peoples” (Mann and Kelley 1997: 394). Professional knowledges in legal and “psy” areas are permeated by such approaches. Their appearance of neutrality and objectivity obscures their hegemonic content, and the ways in which they are socially situated and constructed. Smith posits that women’s “bifurcated consciousness” offers them critical vantage points, to illuminate the contradictions between their experiences and hegemonic views. However, as both Collins and Smith point out, the perspectives of the oppressed may also be shot through with hegemonic
discourses. A reflexive and critical analysis becomes crucial to uncovering how
gendered power operates in everyday life, including in women’s and children’s
experiences of maternal alienation. It is a vital tool in exposing the contradictions
between hegemonic discourses and women’s experiences.

10.3.2 Stepping into “abject” spaces
A finding of the initial study was that most people, whether family members or
professionals, resist standing in the shoes of alienated mothers (Morris 1999). When
practitioners in training workshops were asked to describe mothers they encounter
where maternal alienation is likely to have taken place, they typified them as frozen,
passive, incompetent, and “infuriating” because they seem incapable of taking action;
or at the opposite extreme, as angry, resentful, and “unpleasant”. Neither image was
attractive, unlike the men in these families who were commonly described as
charming and articulate. Their descriptions resonate with mainstream professional
approaches, in which mothers are objectified, surveyed and judged, a lens rarely
applied to fathers (McMahon 1995). In a dominant regime of motherhood that allows
little space for women to be judged as “good” mothers, practitioners’ descriptions of
such women as disconnected from their children invoke constructions of the
“rejecting mother” (Caplan 1989; Adams 1995). This in turn appears to validate
professional constructions of mothers as often neglectful, non-protective, incompetent
and as “other”, verging on the immoral, the abject and the monstrous.

Daughters of alienated mothers also expressed their distaste. Adult CSA survivors,
both in the original study and as described by CSAWG workers, indicated that the
women they aspire to become are defined by being as unlike their mothers as
possible. “Daughters” in the barrier exercise responded similarly. Reactions of
daughters and the practitioners described above suggest that alienated mothers are
indeed experienced as “abject”, and are treated as “object” and “reject” (Kristeva
1982). As discussed in earlier chapters, within western gender orders, mothers are
rarely affirmed through validating and valuing their actions, supporting their
caretaking work, and treating them with respect. But for those mothers judged as
“bad”, their abjectness means that people rarely put themselves “in their shoes”, or
“look through their eyes”.

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Yet MAP’s reflective approach aimed to critically examine the constructions of “neglectful” and “unprotective” mothers, and reverse the objectification and punitive treatment of mothers characterising mainstream practice. By “tipping” people into unknown spaces, workshop participants gained a powerful understanding from the “inside”, as it were, of the operation and effects of maternal alienation. Their perspectives became startlingly different, enabling the building of knowledge more congruent with women’s experiences, practice that is more respectful of women and in which women become subjects rather than a/objects. As Haraway posits, to compensate for the partiality of one’s situated view, one can through empathy, view situations from other viewpoints (in Sprague 2005: 43).

10.3.3 Interrelationships between CSA and DV

Another area in which MAP traversed different spaces is through its examination of the interrelationships between CSA and DV. As earlier chapters have outlined, these have traditionally been approached as separate forms of abuse, with differing institutional and theoretical histories. They are further separated by their fragmentation between services, illustrated by the allegorical “three planets” of child protection, domestic violence and family court (Radford and Hester 2006).

Early discussions within both working groups revealed similar divisions played out in the conceptual frameworks used by workers, who tended to limit their view of abuse occurring in the families that they saw to the type of intervention their service was funded for. Thus, even though the VIPs offered an integrated model for many aspects of their work, practitioners tended to think only in terms of DV, and not be alert to the possibility of CSA occurring in families, despite evidence in the research literature of a substantial overlap between these (Hester and Pearson 1998). After discussions in working groups, most workers became more aware that a range of tactics and forms of violence were used in abusive households, which could include both CSA and DV. Most described in post-project interviews that they saw more connections between CSA and DV than they had before MAP. A worker from the CSAWG, for example, noted that,
… often when a perpetrator engages in abusive behaviours towards a child, it’s almost for certain that he also engages in some behaviours that are blaming of the mother as well, so that it keeps her in a place of ignorance, or in a place of not feeling good about herself, so she’s less likely to want to rock the boat, so to speak, or to want to speak up or to ask questions. And so, hence the behaviour would be inappropriate towards her. That’s just one aspect of it. But it’s quite common for perpetrators to be violent or abusive – not just physically, we’re talking about the whole range of violence and abuse – so to use some form of violence towards the mother as well. So they’re very much part of the same thing. (interview)

An advisory group member recognised that the tactics and effects of CSA and DV were very similar, noting that both “create silence for years and years”:

… sexual abuse is considered the worst thing under the sun because it’s calculated, it’s deliberate, it’s planned. For me, domestic violence isn’t a lot different. What I’d like to write about is how it’s planned from the beginning, how women are groomed, in the same way. (interview)

However two practitioners, Larissa from the CSAWG and Kathy, a practitioner who had attended the DVWG for half its sessions, continued to approach CSA and DV as different phenomena. For example for Larissa:

… the perpetration of CSA is not around overt response – it’s often around seduction and collusion. And maybe they use violence in different ways, but domestic violence is an overt use of violence a lot of the time, I won’t say all the time, obviously. … But it just seems to me that there’s a lot more covert violence in CSA. (interview)

Excavating perpetrators’ tactics had become a primary aspect of both workers’ practice after MAP, alongside deconstructing mother-blame with their clients as a secondary concern. They found that skills they used in DV situations could not be so readily transferred to working with adult survivors of CSA, where Kathy, for example, had to find particular ways of introducing the ideas.

In terms of my work with some that were living in domestic violence, … I use [the tools] much more effectively, and actually find it a really helpful therapeutic tool to be using. … with survivors, I really started off by wondering how healthy it was, and I found initially the way that I was using the idea closed down what happened. I was then labelled as not understanding. … and my clients were telling me, “this really isn’t any help”. Whereas now … yes this can be really useful when used at the right time, in the right place, and in the right way. (interview)

Kathy pointed out some of the differences between working with present and past abuse. Possibly Larissa and Kathy had conflated these with differences between DV
and CSA since these often manifest at their workplaces through women in current DV where the issue is immediate, or women survivors of CSA which may have occurred “twenty or thirty years ago”, and where counselling encounters “the layers, the meaning-making that takes place over probably a number of years” (Kathy interview). Kathy learnt to approach the issues of responsibility carefully in CSA, and only dealt with mother blame later. “Maybe that speaks of the depth of the impact and the social construction that goes around it and the depth of the pain, and the invisibility of the perpetrator” (Kathy interview).

Kathy found that MAP’s attention to perpetrator tactics made her aware that violence is not just about “one act or twenty acts, or however many, it’s actually the rest of the twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, how well that’s orchestrated – the power, control, the tactic stuff”. Kathy here describes the web-like coercive patterning that permeates the abusive household gender regime, which cannot be adequately understood when attention is focused on separate forms and incidents of abuse.

Within MAP we struggled to find ways of speaking about the relationships between CSA and DV, such as through the concept of a web of violence and abuse. The term “gender violence” brings differing forms of abuse together as related phenomena, but does not attend to the dynamics and patterning of violence in households, and the coercive tapestry that is thus formed. These shortcomings are addressed by the concept that was developed subsequently, of an abusive household gender regime, linking DV, CSA and other child abuse within the one household (in those cases where they occur together), as a regime constructed by one perpetrator.

The concept of household gender regime also allows comparisons to be made with gender regimes existing at other levels. The following section explores the correspondences between types of household and organisational gender regimes.

### 10.3.4 Relationships between gender regimes

Workers in MAP confronted many examples of mainstream services where their lack of accountability and the effects of their intervention were experienced by women as similar to that of perpetrators’ abuse. An advisory group member pointed out,
The things that are difficult are places that are not accountable for their practice like FAYS, that can’t be made accountable for their practice. You can go to managers, you can complain, you can do this, that and the other, and it doesn’t have any effect. (interview)

Aware of the “unacknowledged effects” of “mothers being held responsible for things they didn’t have actual control over”, this practitioner found it helpful for women to identify how some of this abuse “is absolutely orchestrated through a worker” (interview).

A manager from the reference group conceptualised these “common” problems with child protection workers in organisational terms:

… they don’t have a domestic violence policy; they don’t understand key bits of practice around risk and domestic violence; they still counsel women that if they don’t leave the children will be removed if the situation is dangerous. So they don’t have an accountability model that locates the perpetrator as accountable, because their focus is the child in isolation. And workers tell me that they feel uncomfortable about domestic violence, they don’t quite understand it. So I think that some of what needs to happen is that that issue needs to be addressed, and then I think maternal alienation will fit on that, because … without that other bit of knowledge they will struggle to work out where they’re going to locate the abusive male in the story. (interview)

While interventions by systems and institutions rarely involve deliberate tactics to undermine relationships between women and children, they often have similar outcomes: children may be removed from mothers whose actions are framed in terms of deficiencies. The dominant socio-cultural discourses about mothers and fathers examined in earlier chapters inform the responses of mainstream services, and these are closely related to those manipulated by abusive and alienating men in household gender regimes. These wider discourses are mythologised and ideological, and conceal, while they maintain, hegemonic gendered power. Gender regimes in such mainstream services and abusive households act to reinforce the power of men over women and children, and to authorise their versions of reality, while discounting the voices of women and children.

It became obvious through the process of developing role plays in DVWG that when counsellors do not have an analysis of gender and power as an integral part of their “toolkit”, despite their best intentions, they re-inscribe hegemonic power relations.
For example, the power of naming, or misnaming, women’s material realities in ideological ways that conceal the operation of power (Sprague 2005) is exercised by professionals in institutional regimes, just as it is by men in abusive household gender regimes. There is a difference between these regimes, however, in intention, where alienating men deliberately and strategically target the mother-child relationship.

Another aspect connecting these gender regimes is the responsibility-power relationship that is enacted both by mainstream service providers at their most unhelpful and perpetrators in relation to their victims. In mainstream services and in micro gender regimes mothers are rendered fully responsible for problems within the household, while their power and space for action are diminished by actions and attitudes of professionals and perpetrators alike. Perpetrators and professionals by contrast wield inflated power within a household yet are rarely held accountable for this behaviour.

MAP’s principles for professional intervention are based on reversing these relations so that the power and responsibility of all actors, mothers, fathers, professionals and children, become more transparent and subject to accountability. Through critical reflection, professionals can assess their interventions in terms of whether or not the responsibility and power they exercise are equivalent. If they exercise considerably greater power than responsibility, this dynamic corresponds to perpetrators’ use of power and eschewing of responsibility, and reinscribes victims’ lack of power integrated with culpability.

Even though women make up the majority of child protection workers, they are susceptible to behaviours and discourses of the gender regime in which they work, and the gender order in which they live. Without conceptual tools for critical reflection and a gendered analysis, mainstream workers are likely to continue to replicate them. A reference group member believed that MAP’s most significant contribution was how, “it’s challenged workers to reflect on the way in which their own practices invite them to hear the man’s version of events, or to judge a dysfunctional relationship being somehow the responsibility of the mother” (interview).
Despite these similarities, organisational and household gender regimes are not simple reflections of one another. While women workers in mainstream organisations responding to violence may gain little credibility when they challenge hegemonic beliefs, and while most are in lower positions of power (Hearn 1994), their situations do not correspond exactly to those of mothers. Rather, the sharing of hegemonic gendered discourses within household and organisational gender regimes means that workers can “slip” into administering gendered judgements, punishments and admonishments when they intervene in households, whether these workers be women or men. Thus these positions of power are susceptible to a gendered expression, where women workers entering a household gender regime may adopt and replicate aspects of male gender roles through an exercise of power without responsibility.

10.3.5 Collaborative, interagency work

An important aspect of traversing spaces between was MAP’s work to bridge differences between services and sectors to encourage integrated work and shared understandings of gender violence. This required openness to other standpoints, expressed in differences in language and paradigms. Sometimes it involved imaginatively stepping into the position of practitioners and managers in other sectors to understand their perspectives and dilemmas.

Through her involvement in the advisory group a manager from FAYS had become concerned by discussions about constructions of mothers as “protective” or “non-protective” and workers’ related tendency to place unreasonable responsibility for children’s safety onto mothers, while rendering invisible fathers’ responsibility for violence. She asked to attend a DVWG meeting to “explore” with VIP workers “the idea of the “protective” mother – what that means” (DVWG meeting). She also wished to find ways of working more effectively with the VIPs. A discussion took place in which VIP workers emphasised the need for FAYS workers to be trained to work with women in DV so they understand its dynamics, acknowledge women’s understandings of their situation, and recognise how they endeavour to keep themselves and their children safe.
The FAYS manager responded by organising MAP training for FAYS workers, however due to MAP’s early end, only one training day occurred. She continued her connection with one of the VIP managers, and on taking up a new position within FAYS, instituted DV training, which included maternal alienation information, for her teams.

This illustrates a practical way that differences between child protection and domestic violence paradigms were negotiated. A family court counsellor and manager involved in MAP also worked to bring the insights developed within MAP into the Family Court, as described in the previous chapter. The manager was in the process of arranging training for judges and administrators when MAP finished.

Through a meeting between MAP’s project officer and a magistrate in the DV Court (organised through CVIP), future opportunities were canvassed for discussions with magistrates, including those involved in the Youth Court. However MAP’s early termination also prevented these developments taking place.

A reference group member described the possibilities created by a project like MAP for integrated understandings and work:

… to set up collaborative discussions, which is what you’ve fostered through the workers’ groups and through the stuff you’ve done in different regions, I think that’s a really good way to develop both theory and practice and then to embed it into different agencies’ ways of working. (interview)

The concept of an abusive household gender regime, which provides a framework for holistic approaches to violence within households is again relevant for integrating approaches to violence by organisations responsible for responding to violence. Although the concept had not been developed in time for MAP, it is particularly pertinent for connecting the current typically fragmented interventions following violence, in which mothers and children are dealt with separately. An understanding of a regime of violence highlights the need for women and children to be considered together in addressing the harms done to each as well as to their relationship.
Recovery processes entail assistance not just for individual women or children, but for the relationship between them. This is an essential aspect of domestic violence intervention which has been marginalised through failures to conceptualise domestic violence as not only an attack on the survivor (usually the mother), but also an assault on her relationship with her children. (Humphreys 2006: 30, her emphasis)

Similarly it could be argued that an essential aspect of CSA intervention should be to repair the mother-child relationship. This has been overlooked through failures to understand that CSA not only targets children, but also assaults their relationship with their mother.

10.4 Repairing mother-daughter relationships

Maternal alienation impacts profoundly on relationships between mothers and their sons and daughters. However MAP provided insights only into its impacts on mother-daughter relationships, which are discussed here. Several counsellors found that one of the major issues for women survivors of abuse concerned their relationships with their mothers. Doreen from the CSAWG noted that for Kylie, as for many women she counselled, “that was the issue that was really troubling her… that was what she wanted to work on”.

Where maternal alienation had occurred, the barriers constructed between mothers and daughters became infused with powerful emotion. CSAWG workers were well aware of adult survivors’ extreme anger and disgust with their mothers. Perhaps this has some correlation in terms of its strength with the paralysing regret and self-blame of mothers.

A lot of the times it was hard for mothers to come to terms with anything other than feeling responsible for not having been aware of the abuse and not having seen certain things and not being more attentive or something to the children, taking on a lot of blame. And I know that in the past whatever I tried to say there always, at least in the first instance, there was some sort of resistance or some sort of objection to part of what I was saying at least, where they would try to somehow continue along the path of blame. “Yes but I should have known better” and “if only I did this”, “if only I’d said this”, “if only –” you know. (CSAWG worker interview)

While the intensity of the women’s feelings as daughters mirrors that of mothers’ regret and grief, in the face of such blame and misunderstanding there seems little
hope of reconciliation, for mothers and daughters push in opposite directions. Daughters refuse contact with their mothers, carry a constant sense of betrayal by them, and while they may excuse their abusers, rarely “forgive” their mothers. Mothers, on the other hand become immobilised by their self-blame, regret and extreme grief. Further disjunctions between their positions can only be comprehended by understanding the ways that perpetrators distort and manipulate their relationships, for the “monsters” that daughters hate would not feel such grief and self-blame as these mothers feel. The tragedy of these broken relationships is that mothers and daughters rarely conciliate unless this is mediated by a process such as that developed by MAP, that brings a different perspective to bear, and exposes perpetrators’ role in this process.

While maternal alienation assaults the institution of mothering and the fabric between generations of women, the macro gender order also undermines the possibilities that they could create a supportive and resourceful alliance (Robinson and Robinson 1998: 64). Such barriers between mothers and daughters appear to block profound benefits for both. Counsellors gave several accounts of survivors’ marked recovery after better understanding and conciliating with their mothers. When daughters rebuild or reappraise their relationships with their mothers, “they regain more of a sense of self-worth, as a woman, because by seeing their mother as not being good enough, somehow, because she’s a role model, it impacts on [them] as well” (CSAWG worker interview).

This suggests that good relationships between daughters and mothers may be important for young women’s healthy sense of esteem, and indeed of self. Doreen believed that the recovery she witnessed in women survivors after MAP was strongly related to the repairing of their relationships with their mothers. Rebuilding their relationship with their mother was important because it was constantly on their minds – the issue of why their mother hadn’t protected them, and the injustice that they experience around it was really prominent, it was getting in the way. And so it was healing in the sense that they no longer felt that burden, that murkiness, and that sense of blame, the frustration. (interview)
Mary, one of the women interviewed in the initial maternal alienation study, reported that the privileging of her father’s voice and point of view robbed her of a sense of her mother’s presence in her life. Yet memories of her mother began to emerge when she had deconstructed the burdensome demands of her father, and identified some of the devices 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, achieved by her father’s many tactics to recruit her into beliefs that her mother was contemptible (Morris 1999).

For workers too this was a significant issue. From reviewing her relationship with her mother, one participant “started to think how much the relationship between my Mum and I might have been different if I’d actually tripped over that knowledge before” (interview). Re-appraising relationships with mothers can be filled with regret when, like Susan and Mary, women no longer have opportunities to redress misunderstandings.

Doreen also found that her relationship with her mother changed after she deconstructed alienating tactics used by her father. Subsequently, her sense of self became intimately and fluidly connected with her sense of her mother and other women.

[This] gave me more of an understanding of my mother, and therefore just widened my understanding of how it is for us women in this society. It kind of gives more information around why it is so hard at times to see ourselves as valuable human beings. (interview)
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Issues and change in practice II

This chapter brings a more theoretical perspective to the themes identified in the practice sphere of MAP and discussed in the previous chapter. After considering how gender differences manifested in MAP, the chapter draws strongly on feminist approaches, particularly that of Dorothy Smith’s institutional ethnography, to explore the significance of language, disjunction and congruence in both maternal alienation and the practices developed to address it.

11.1 Gender in MAP

It was not intended that MAP should work almost entirely with women, yet all practitioners in the working groups and advisory group, and all but two members of the reference group were women. Of the two men in the reference group, one never attended meetings. The overwhelming presence of women in MAP was partly a result of MAP’s engagement with the women’s health sector, which were mainly women’s-only services. It also reflects women’s predominance as frontline workers, and lower and middle managers in social work and welfare areas. This in turn illustrates the tendency for women to move into or be relegated jobs characterised by caretaking, other-directed and responsive orientations. Yet, as Hearn points out, despite the preponderance of women, organisations that respond to violence operate within “a web of men’s managements of violence” (1994: 746-7).

Drawing on Dorothy Smith’s standpoint theory, Sprague notes that those lower in social hierarchies “are often the frontline actors of society; their daily practices the fundamental building blocks of how things work” (2005: 76). With women primarily responsible as “frontline actors” for caretaking tasks, men (especially privileged men) are freed to create, and operate within, an abstract conceptual world divorced from women’s “everyday/everynight” realities. Smith (2005) argues that the concepts formed within masculinist social sciences and professional knowledges, abstract forms of knowledge in which the operations of power are rendered invisible, take the place of knowledge arising from everyday reality.
However, if we “begin our research with everyday life as everyday social actors know it, [we can] discover how it is shaped, constrained, and made irrational because of the operation of power relations that are not immediately visible”. This involves “problematizing power and advantage, asking about the mechanisms that sustain privilege and about the consequences of privilege for the broader society” (Sprague 2005: 76). MAP engaged at a number of levels with women’s lived experience. It built upon reports by women who had experienced maternal alienation, which, although deriving from earlier research, informed the work of MAP. It involved women who as practitioners developed perspectives from their “hands-on” work “at the frontline”, which were layered onto their personal experiences as women. It included women higher up in organisational hierarchies, who revealed both their personal understandings of maternal alienation and their views of MAP based on their organisational and structural positioning. The men who encountered MAP generally reacted in two ways. Those who had been “at the frontline” of violence work found that the concept provided a useful framework for understanding and managing behaviours and situations they had observed, as expressed for example by police officers from DV units in one of MAP’s training sessions. Other men, largely those who had not worked directly in responding to violence, were antagonistic and defensive or at best sceptical, particularly about claims that maternal alienation involved intentional strategies of power. These reactions are discussed further in Chapter Twelve.

The following section considers these developments in more detail, and in relation to social theory.

11.2 Naming as emancipatory

Feminists created names for aspects of women’s everyday realities that had been ignored, demeaned or misnamed in traditional masculinist knowledge creation. In terms of gendered violence, these “provide social definitions, make visible what is invisible, define as unacceptable what was accepted; make sayable what was unspeakable” (Kelly and Radford 1996: 20). All interviewees found there were far-reaching effects for both workers and women of naming the tactics, the dynamics and the consequences of maternal alienation.
11.2.1 Congruence with women’s experiences

During a focus group a practitioner described giving the Maternal Alienation Fact Sheet (see Appendix 4) to women she worked with.

I’m watching them as they’re reading it, and they’re going “yes, yes, this is me, this is me” [nodding]. It just slots in for them and they have this really strong connection with what this all means, and they’re able to share it with their older kids. And it’s like, “I’m not going mad”. (focus group 2)

An administrative worker in the first focus group experienced similar responses.

As an admin officer taking lots of calls from women who’ve actually got hold of the Maternal Alienation Fact Sheet, and the relief at the naming of their experiences. And just listening to them say, “finally I’ve got something concrete that I can take and use”. (focus group 1)

These reactions were common, confirming that, as a worker from CSAWG stated, “the ideas fit with women’s and workers’ experiences”. Some interviewees described this recognition as the “aha effect” or “the light bulb goes on”, including a manager from the reference group who recognised “processes that you’d come across both as a manager and also previously in my role as a social worker. So I guess it was an ‘aha’ experience” (interview). Naming maternal alienation provided language that expresses and validates women’s experiences, and with which they can speak about them to others.

Identifying maternal alienation offered women possibilities to understand differently what they had experienced, a reframing of experience that often characterises feminist practice. A worker from the CSAWG explained how previously for mothers in incest:

… there was always a gap there – women could do a lot of work on better understanding violence and abuse, [but] they would always come away with that sense of “well, I’m actually not a really good mother”. There wasn’t really a framework that could explain that. (interview)

Naming is a first step that allows other processes to follow. Many DV workers explained that they previously observed alienating tactics but had not analysed these further, as a practice-oriented manager in the DVWG clarified:
We were picking up stuff, but we hadn’t named it in any way, and we didn’t conceptualise it in any formal way. [The name] allowed us to hang some meat on the bones of things, begin to talk about it in a much more conceptual way, a much more gendered way, talking about techniques and strategies and what we as workers would choose to do or not to do. (interview)

A men’s worker in the first focus group found that identifying maternal alienation highlighted forms of abuse that he had previously been unaware of, in effect making visible what had been invisible.

For me it was a new thought, something that really had not crossed my mind before and it was only when you identified how it actually happens that I began to realise that I’d been sitting in on conversations with men, never realising that what was happening was causing a wedge between the mother and children. That concept sort of grew with me, took a while, but the more I’ve been running groups since then the more it’s grown, and it really stands out like a beacon now. (focus group 1)

Like a key that fits the lock, congruent naming fits the situation and unlocks new possibilities to understand, new perspectives from which social actors can view their situations. Language which “fits” women’s experience as a key in a lock, brings about a coherence between women’s understandings and their experiences and observations – it “makes sense” of their experiences. It is a dramatic experience for women because it stands in stark contrast to distortions of their experiences or misnamings, most obviously those of perpetrators, but also those arising from hegemonic and masculinist forms of knowledge, including professional discourses. Congruent language enables women to replace hegemonic “common sense” which blames women, with their own understandings, based on their “everyday/everynight” experiences.

11.2.2 Misnaming and confusion, clarity and agency

Men who perpetrate maternal alienation wield the power (traditionally conferred on men) of defining people, events and relationships. Their distortions of events, actions and relationships create serious disjunctions between women’s lived “reality” and language, which in the first instance cause confusion. Confusion emerged as a major factor contributing to women’s entrapment and inability to take action, and is mirrored in children’s experiences. Confusion and entrapment, as minimal space for action, are compounded when professionals with little or no understanding of maternal alienation misname difficult relationships between mothers and children as problems caused by mothers.
I’d seen the effects that abuse in relationships had on mothers’ and children’s relationships, and how it was constantly named as [a problem caused by] mothers not being firm enough; and mothers being sent off to do parenting courses. (advisory group member interview)

As explored in Chapter Five, child protection work in English-speaking countries has largely focused on scrutinising women’s mothering but has ignored men, who are the main perpetrators of violence and abuse in families (Edleson 1998; Burke 1999; Scourfield 2003). Jeffrey Edleson’s phrase, “responsible mothers and invisible men” (1998) epitomises this gendered worldview. Their imputing of responsibility to women for the effects of men’s violence leads to constructions of mothers’ “neglect”, rather than clarity about fathers’ abuse. The effects of maternal alienation on mother-child relationships is thus readily misunderstood and misnamed by child protection services as maternal neglect.

As discussed in earlier chapters, women’s attempts to leave abusive relationships and protect themselves and their children are also commonly misnamed within family courts. In their attempts to isolate constructions of “safe family men” from the overwhelming evidence of some men’s violence towards their partners and children, family courts can readily construct women who allege abuse as “implacably hostile mothers” who are “wilfully depriving their children of the right to contact with their father” (Wallbank 1998: 358). The popularity of PAS reinforces beliefs that mothers falsely allege violence and abuse for their own self-interest, flying in the face of the evidence that women tend to under-report rather than exaggerate domestic violence (Radford and Hester 2006: 116). Mothers’ attempts at protection are thus often reconstituted in family courts as malice, self-interest or individual pathology (Wallbank 1998; Barnett 2000).

The dominant discourses operating within systems such as child protection and family law contradict the overwhelming research evidence that children strongly benefit from a primary relationship with their non-abusive parent, that violence is gendered, with men overwhelmingly the perpetrators, and that women rarely exaggerate or fabricate allegations of violence. This suggests that, as Breckenridge argues (1999: 12), legal and professional discourses are full of mythologised accounts of violence which are irrational and lack an empirical foundation. These serve to embed hierarchical power relations within gender regimes and the gender order.
Yet whether misnaming is by perpetrators or professionals, within micro or macro systems, women’s experiences are similarly subjugated. Misnaming is one way in which women’s experiential knowledge is “denied, invalidated and forced underground” (Kelly and Radford 1996: 20), and women become confused as their everyday experience is “constantly being called into question – their own knowledge and their own beliefs and their own reality” (advisory group member interview).

The confusion arising from misnaming initiates a more corrosive process, through which women and children increasingly doubt their own experiences, their sanity and their capacity to act competently in the world. The route from misnaming through confusion to self-doubt maps one of the processes by which women’s life space (Lundgren 1995; 1998) and space for action (Kelly 2002) are diminished. Misnaming functions as a misdiagnosis, and similarly misdirects. It implies particular actions which should be taken, that cannot address the problem because the problem is wrongly diagnosed. Women’s capacity to act appropriately is diminished because what they are told to do does not address the problem. When responsibility is shifted from perpetrators to victims in mythologised accounts of violence, appropriate actions are obscured.

There are other aspects to misnaming that further entrap and decrease women’s space for action: the diminution of women’s human and moral worth. The shifting of responsibility from perpetrators to victims in household gender regimes and beyond, the relentless experience of mother-blaming at micro and macro levels, is compounded by the judging of “bad” mothers as immoral. This leads alienated women to believe not only that they are bad mothers but that they are bad people. The compounding effect of this patterning at many levels is exemplified by Anne’s explanation, reported in Chapter Eight, in which she blamed herself for everything because everyone she encountered blamed her. The common descriptions of mothers as malicious, vengeful and neglectful within services such as family courts and child protection systems intensify women’s confusion about the morality of their actions and reduce their space for action. Women become paralysed by their sense of guilt and the overwhelming burden of blame that they bear. They become paralysed particularly because they are inscribed with the responsibility for actions which are not theirs and over which they have no control.
While misnaming creates confusion for women and children, shutting down opportunities to respond effectively to events in their lives, congruent language opens possibilities for new understanding, clarity, and appropriate and effective action. Workers consistently observed women’s “greater sense of agency” and found they were less likely to return to abusive partners.

… there’s less confusion for them, they’re less able to be muddled by agencies … who describe it differently. They’re clearer. I see them with more determination, and standing in their own knowledge much stronger and so therefore returning [to their violent ex-partners] less easily. (advisory group member interview)

Just as misnaming diminishes women’s life-space, language that is congruent with women’s experience expands it, enhancing space for action. This is the literal meaning of “empowerment”.

11.2.3 Knowing as bodily experience

Comments by three interviewees from the working groups suggest that relationships between language, understandings and experiences may be even further anchored in material reality through embodied experience. One CSA practitioner expressed the idea of knowing as a bodily experience, and the contrasting situation where women’s confusion is experienced as displacement from their bodies.

I speak to women about when they’re trying to get some sense of what is going on from their perspective, not looking through the perpetrator’s eyes. They’re trying to look through their eyes again, and their own feelings and their own body. That’s really a difficult thing, because they talk constantly about confusion. … He was physically in the northern part of Australia, but he was actually in her home in her head. Yeah, like still there, still operating these tactics! But she managed to separate herself out from that. (interview)

Just as others resist looking through mothers’ eyes, alienated women themselves find it difficult to do so. Much has been written about women’s and children’s dissociation from their bodies in response to trauma and violence. However, this may also connect to a lack of congruent language. Women who have internalised perpetrators’ messages can experience them continually “replaying”, displacing their own perspectives. It is difficult to counter perpetrators’ voices without a way of deconstructing them and accessing adequate language to express women’s own standpoints.
An interviewee from the advisory group described how a woman in DV became “caught up in it in her own head, and spends hours trying to mill through, ‘was I bad? is it this?’ … where you’re calling into question all the time your own knowledge and experience and understanding”. Without language that expresses her perspective her internal world is constructed through the abuser, she looks at herself and the world through his “eyes”, his viewpoint. Thus he has penetrated her life space even into her sense of bodily space or integrity. Her reduced life space thus includes her reduced habitation of her own body and thought processes. Making the perpetrator’s tactics visible through language and de-constructing them actually externalises them, freeing space “in her own head”. Having access to language and understandings that are congruent with her experiences restores her bodily space to her.

A manager from the DVWG described workers’ processes of knowing and recognition also as embodied experience. Explaining the increasing interest in the concept of maternal alienation by workers outside MAP, she stated that it “encapsulates something” they witness. “And people working in that area of child protection are going to feel it in their body, if they can’t even say it any other way, they know it on some level of knowing there”. Her statement implies that people feel the congruence of experience, understanding and language as embodied knowing. These remarks resonate with Dorothy Smith’s view that women and frontline actors are immersed in everyday material realities, that privileged men can avoid (2005). Women’s “bifurcated consciousness” enables them to negotiate the two worlds of masculinist knowledge and their own, subjugated material knowledge. Embodied knowing and a sense of displacement from their bodies may be expressions of women’s connections with, and disjunctions from, the everyday realities in which they are situated. When alienated women do not have access to language that embodies their experiences, they may lose their bearings, as expressed in their overwhelming experience of confusion, and their diminished space for action. “Standing in their own knowledge”, as a CSA practitioner expresses it, infers a reclaiming of bodily space and integrity.
A CSAWG member explained how young women survivors of CSA described the effects on them of identifying the tactics used by their abusers and re-appraising their relationships with their mothers.

By dealing with that, and by being able to “free” themselves – ’cause they were the words they used, there was a freedom, a lightening, a sense of understanding, [no longer] murkiness and burden.

Here there is a connection being drawn between congruence of language with experience, and the bodily sensation of being relieved of a burden.

**11.2.4 Languageing relationship repair**

MAP revealed that considerable rebuilding of women’s relationships with their children was achieved through language. Just as the male voice in maternal alienation obliterates voices of women and children, so in countering maternal alienation the material reality of women’s and children’s lives needs to become “languaged”. This entails the identification in language both of perpetrators’ tactics, and the positive aspects of mothers, children and their relationships. Within the limitations of an abusive household gender regime most mothers strive to act protectively and perform everyday acts of caring for their children (Radford and Hester 2006). However dominant discourses and perpetrators’ accounts discount these acts and render them invisible. Part of addressing maternal alienation involves acknowledging these discounted actions and their meanings, raising them from subjugation into validation through language. What has been richly languaged comes under the control of those who language it. In this way women and children become able to recognise the caring that already exists between them. Upon this foundation their positive interactions can be expanded, and negative behaviours and attitudes characteristic of abusive gender regimes can be challenged.

**11.2.5 Naming perpetrators’ tactics**

Women’s grasp of the intentional nature of maternal alienation in DV is particularly helpful in enabling them to make decisions and take action. DVWG members recounted that women had previously excused their partners’ abusive behaviour referring to it, for example, as a result of their immaturity. However, when they
recognised their partners’ deliberate intentions to undermine their relationships with
their children, feelings of betrayal, anger and grief were followed by a process of
reinterpretation. Women were rapidly freed from self-blame and a belief that their
primary responsibility was to meet their partner’s needs. This in turn resolved the
internal conflict between their sense of responsibility to their partner and to their
children (a difficult conflict for women in abusive household gender regimes, and one
which is readily exploited by abusive men). As women sought to repair relationships
with their children their partners often escalated their attempts to alienate, reinforcing
women’s new knowledge and enabling them to take more effective action, such as
leave the relationship.

… a young woman, only in her thirties, managing six children, and is so delighted
to have clarity around the games he plays. … she talks about, “I can see it coming
now, I watch what he does.” And she talks about being more able to counteract it.
(counsellor interview)

After MAP formally ended, CSAWG members continued to work within counselling
and group work with adult survivors of CSA to excavate perpetrators’ past tactics to
entrap and control. One CSAWG participant described the early part of this process,
in which she asks clients:

… what sort of behaviours does he engage in that means that the abuse can
continue to happen, or that the abuse can stay a secret, or that the abuse stays the
responsibility of the child or whoever else is in the family, and not his? … So you
see this puzzled look on their faces. It’s quite interesting! Even though they might
not be quite ready to take it on board because the idea is so contrasting to where
they stand … there certainly is a change or a shift or a move in there. (interview)

This worker, Doreen, noted that as she worked with her young client, Kylie, through
twelve months of counselling, “the tactics that to her had seemed really benevolent
and really positive and helpful in the past, she could now see more about them, she
could see the intent behind some of them”. Kylie experienced notable physical and
mental health improvements throughout this process.

She talked about feeling quite depressed when she first came, feeling quite
confused about the world and people. It’s just a really interesting example of how
that confusion and the manipulative ways that someone is subjected to can have a
huge impact on how one feels. Because the more she was able to unravel that and
understand it better, the clearer and the less depressed she felt. It clearly was having
such a positive influence on her, I would say in every way. (interview)
In a contrasting situation, Doreen discussed a similar process with a mother who sought counselling after her adult daughter disclosed incest by her father, with whom the mother lived.

Just to begin to map the tactics was a really helpful thing for her. It gave her some sort of structure, some sort of way of piecing things together, so that she could begin to see that at least it wasn’t all her fault! So she was able to leave him. (interview)

Much of early feminist critique emphasised the ways in which guilt and self-blame diminish women’s agency. Doreen also found that when women realised that responsibility for abuse rested with abusers their sense of guilt and self-blame, their belief in their moral failure, and the immobilising effects of these, were reduced. Identifying perpetrators’ tactics of control makes clear their responsibility for the abuse and its effects. This becomes women’s own knowledge, as they recognise the tactics from their own experiences, having witnessed them through their own eyes. Identifying tactics of control also clarifies what actions women need to take in response. This mobilises women and widens their space for action.

One focus group participant who worked with mothers and children in a DV service reported that she began holding sessions with mothers and children together which focused particularly on helping them identify and deconstruct perpetrators’ controlling tactics. She found that children as young as four years old could identify these and develop strategies to deal with them in contact sessions with their father. She maintained that within four sessions of working in this way, the destructive dynamics generated by these men were substantially changed, and mothers and children were able to join together to rebuild their lives.

11.2.6 Authorising gendered “realities”

MAP’s two fundamental principles of “supporting women and challenging men” (Burton et al. 1998) themselves require authority if they are to be employed to effectively address the unequal power/responsibility relationship which typifies abusive household gender regimes. The importance of language in giving substance to and authorising particular “realities” cannot be overemphasised. Perpetrators’ language and definitions of what is “real” draw their authority from the traditional
power of the father’s voice, symbolically underpinned by “Logos”, the Word of the Father (see Chapters Four and Eight). The disjunctions between women’s and children’s lived realities and those distorted versions foisted on them by abusive men and hegemonic understandings are powerfully mediated by language.

…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 … [demonstrating] the privileging of the male voice. (Morris 1999: 117)

Embedded within hegemonic discourses, perpetrators’ constructing of “reality” occurs initially at the household level, but is given further substance within wider gender regimes, such as organisations, and the gender order. Feminist language attempts to counter this power through its authority derived from its relationship to women’s material lives, drawing not on the perspective of one woman, but of many whose gender positioning/standpoint has shaped similar experiences (Smith 1990; Smith 2005). Dorothy Smith argues that such experiences function like a map, clarifying the relations of ruling. A worker from the advisory group emphasises “the importance of when you get women together and they all hear the same things, and they go, ‘it’s not just me’”, which validates their experience and brings it into social currency. These social foundations of feminist theory, their origins in women’s shared experiences, confer authority on its concepts.

Strengthened by such authority, women’s connections with their own experience cannot be so easily undermined and rendered invisible. A counsellor reflected that the concept of maternal alienation carried greater authority because it derived from women’s experiences, compared to, “when you have knowledge of your own in isolation, it’s easily disrupted, it’s easily undermined”. Thus whilst the language that describes maternal alienation not only makes women’s experiences and observations visible and “real”, it also validates and authorises them, enabling women to hold on to their understanding and, “over a longer period of time sticking to their views that ‘this is not about me’” (advisory group member).

This congruence between language and experience bears a relationship to the coherence that practitioners developed between the ideas they held about their practice, and its reality. The previous chapter’s discussion of practitioners’
development of competence and gaining of practice tools suggests that through reflective praxis, practitioners’ ideas and practice began to connect more coherently. Moreover, practice is deepened further when the theoretical knowledge with which it is connected is grounded in women’s experience. In this way “living” feminist theory and practice (praxis) that is congruent with women’s everyday lives continue to develop. Such praxis contrasts with masculinist abstract theory and professional knowledges which tend to be divorced from practical realities. Grounded and congruent knowledge brings power; power to understand more, to act more effectively, to make appropriate choices. I have argued earlier that this is the case for women and children. It is also true for practitioners.

The overwhelming character of MAP’s work in the practice sphere was one of overcoming alienation, not only between mothers and children, but also between incongruities that had taken hold in a number of dimensions in the lives and understandings of women, children and practitioners. Languaging the everyday/everynight experiences of women and children raised their material knowledge to a place of recognition and validation, to counter the powerful misnamings and distortions of their lived experiences. Through seeing their lives more clearly, making visible what had been invisible, giving words to what had been unspeakable, their space for appropriate and effective action became expanded.

In contrast to these themes, so strongly characterising the practice sphere, MAP’s work to change systems was marked by divisiveness and difficulty. An exploration of this forms the content of the following chapter.
CHAPTER TWELVE

The Maternal Alienation Project’s engagement with systems

This chapter examines the major issues emerging from MAP’s engagement with larger systems. I have previously remarked on the disjunction between the sphere of practice and the systems arena which included the reference group. This schism was described by a practitioner as “the two solitudes”, a term first created to explain the lack of interaction between the French and English communities in Canada. This illustrated the point that despite sharing a common world, each section behaved as if it existed in isolation. MAP’s schism continued despite a number of attempts to bridge these differences, including regular reports to the reference group on the progress made in working groups, and some of the challenges confronted there. Further to this gulf in functioning, the themes identified from analysis of the practice and systems spheres are almost entirely different. This suggests that different factors or dynamics operated upon and within each.

Focusing on themes emerging from an analysis of reference group processes and endeavours to change wider systems, this chapter locates MAP within wider political projects and negotiations about gender. It begins from the broad perspective of the gender order in South Australia (SA), and considers how its strong New Right influence at this time impacted on the reference group and MAP.

12.1 The South Australian gender order

The gender order, the overarching structure of gender relations and patternings within a society, contains multiple gender regimes – gender configurations structured by specific institutions (Connell 2000) as described in Chapter Two. The constitution of a gender order is enormously complex, with many strands and blocks of contradictory and diverse patternings of gender regimes, gender performance and discourses. It is also dynamic, as continual shifts and negotiations around gender and power take place.
Chapter Six outlines the strongly recuperative character of the gender order in Australia under the Howard neoconservative Federal Government. The Howard Government encouraged alliances between many elements of recuperative politics, and shared a common goal with them: the reconstitution of white, heterosexual man as universal subject and cornerstone of family and society. In widening the public space in which New Christian Right, and fathers’ rights organisations could operate, the Howard government contributed to promoting and normalising their discourses as “commonsense”, making them more difficult to challenge. These processes undermined public discourses and platforms related to social justice and feminism, characterising feminists and social justice advocates as self-seeking “special interest” groups or “elites”. This accompanied the Howard government’s dismantling of women’s policy machinery and infrastructure to consult with women’s NGOs. These influences changed the character of Australian public policy-making and debate (Sawer and Hindess 2004; Lawrence 2006; Maddison and Partridge 2007).

Australia’s recuperative gender order provided the context for events within SA. Although a new Labor Government had been elected in SA in 2002, the Liberal Government before it, and the contemporaneous Howard federal administration created a robust neoliberal and neoconservative environment. Even within Australian Labor governments, neoliberalism and new managerialism had become key influences (Hancock 1999), so the 2002 change of government in SA would not necessarily have brought major changes. Yet the new government provided hope to feminists and women’s services that their space for action would be widened, and some of the effects of recuperative politics reversed. However, while New Right discourse dominated Australia’s public spaces, there was plurality and diversity of discourse beneath the surface, as I argued in Chapter Six. Indeed this is demonstrated by the very fact that MAP was established, and that ideas for change were taken up enthusiastically by practitioners across organisations and sectors, and even by administrators within child protection and family court services.
The following section outlines how the managerialist bureaucracies within SA, a legacy of both Liberal and Labor state governments, impacted on the reference group and MAP, and cultivated a soil that limited their capacity to resist external challenges.

12.1.1 Managerialist bureaucracies and feminist/gender-aware services

From the mid-1990s, the space in which femocrats and other feminists within government were able to pursue feminist agendas dramatically decreased. Neoliberal discourse, heavily influenced by public choice theory, combined with the active politicisation of the public service under Howard to effectively silence gendered perspectives in policy making, leading feminists within mainstream department to hide (Donaghy 2003). The gender-neutrality of new managerial bureaucracies, and their sensitivity to populist attitudes and the media, also characterised state administrations.

Most reference group members identified themselves personally as “feminists” – or in the case of the two men, as “pro-feminists” – although undoubtedly what this meant to each one varied. However, their professional identification as “feminists” or not depended on their organisational positions as managers or directors of either feminist/gender-aware/women-focused services or gender-neutral organisations. Thus personal and professional “doing” of feminism combined in complex ways, creating synergies and disjunctions between members’ personal gender politics and their professional positions. Those within mainstream organisations were rarely visible as feminists in their workplace, and appeared to have been free of the mistrust that had become attached to feminists within gender-specific services or policy-making. The attacks on MAP did not impede the managers of gender-neutral (mainstream) services in their interest to take up the opportunities MAP offered to

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22 Australian political scientist, Chris Beasley, in her discussion of the broad diversity of approaches encapsulated by the term ‘feminism’, suggests that for the general population, “while the term appears to encourage a great many people to express opinions, it is by no means clear what is being talked about” p. ix. Beasley, C. (1999). *What is Feminism, Anyway? Understanding Contemporary Feminist Thought*. St Leonards, Allen & Unwin.

23 For the sake of brevity, from this point I will refer to services with gender-aware and/or women-focused and/or explicit feminist principles as “feminist services”.
introduce “feminist” improvements that could be justified as research-based. This was also true of the reference group member representing non-governmental DV women’s services.

Feminists in government-funded women’s community services were positioned more precariously. Although Adelaide’s women’s health centres had originated in the women’s movement in the 1970s, they had always been funded by government. SA feminist Jocelyn Auer notes the contradictions that existed, “between the attempt to create an organization and service based on feminist principles, within the confines of a government-funded, bureaucratically administered community health programme” (Auer 1990: 207). From the mid-1990s under the SA Liberal administration, each centre was pressured to give up its independent status and become incorporated into community health services or hospitals. Women’s Health Statewide (WHS) before and during the time of MAP operated with some independence from the hospital it had been incorporated into, and its director had adopted a leading role on behalf of women’s services in meetings and negotiations with their funder – Department of Human Services (DHS).

However even in 1990 Auer warned against the dangers of co-option. She relates how after years of hostility from state government health bureaucracies, the women’s health centres had tempered their “firm and visible commitment to feminist principles” (Auer 1990: 215). Their resulting “greater bureaucratic acceptance” encouraged them “to pay greater attention to policy with its enticement of ‘whole system’ change” (Auer 1990: 217). Hostility to the health centres increased again under the SA Liberal government (1993-2002), especially towards WHS, which was more directly involved with DHS (the other centres were protected by being “hidden” within the health services within which they had been incorporated). After a series of attacks towards the end of the SA Liberal government, WHS was threatened with closure. It was only saved by a change of government.

Possibly in response to these threats, at the time of MAP – just after the 2002 change of government – the structure of WHS had become progressively more corporate, with its director becoming even more bureaucratically involved, holding a status
almost equivalent to the Chief Executive Officer of the much larger Northern Metropolitan Community Health Service (NMCHS), within which one of the regional women’s community health services was situated. With this orientation, the WHS director had become increasingly answerable to the bureaucracy of DHS, and decreasingly involved in internal WHS matters. Like the CEO of NMCHS, her role can be described as “strategic”. As both these administrators (two of MAP’s partners) upheld social justice and feminist/gender-aware principles from their organisations’ origins in the community health and women’s health movements, in a gender order that did not value these, they needed to use their influence and networks strategically to position their organisations strongly. Policy officers working on violence against women within DHS\textsuperscript{24} were situated in similarly precarious positions.

The position of these administrators and their organisations parallels that of feminist services in the US that had become incorporated into mainstream organisations, described by Patricia Yancey Martin as walking a tightrope of tension and compromise. They “engaged in ‘unobtrusive mobilizing’ inside society’s core institutions [having] rejected a confrontational, ‘stand outside and allocate blame’ approach” associated with being independent (2005: 99).

… as insiders, many have achieved a measure of respect and acceptance from the mainstream, becoming so familiar as to be no longer newsworthy, becoming so successful as to arouse resentments, angry reactions, and sometimes violent attacks. A movement organization is not a contradiction in terms but it is, by definition, in tension. It is always a compromise between the ideals by which it judges itself and the realities of its daily practices. (Martin & Feree, 1995, cited in Martin 2005: 97)

This accords with the “tightrope”-like experience described by one of the MAP partners.

[What] I’ve learnt about being a public servant and a senior public servant, is you have to manage the big P Politics, and balance that with where your commitments are going, and how you do that can be a very fine balancing act at times. (Reference Group member)

Walking the tightrope between being insiders and outsiders within mainstream systems in which the upper hierarchies are dominated by men (Hearn 1994),

\textsuperscript{24} One such policy officer participated in MAP’s reference group.
feminists can experience themselves as “perpetual strangers within” (Stanley 1995). Institutional ethnography which aims to “explore institutional regimes from people’s standpoint” (Smith 2005: 71) acknowledges that those subjects – usually women – who traverse insider/outside positions potentially gain a wider perspective of the “relations of ruling”. Scholars suggest that it is possible “to work with the centre, whilst maintaining a critical voice and perspective – being simultaneously inside and outside the dominant discourse and institutions” (Kelly 2005: 474). The “outsider” perspective of feminist managers “within” DHS enabled them to work the space they had shaped between the mainstream and their feminist organisations and principles. This involved legitimating those activities that could be connected to government priorities, while pursuing under cover what could not; knowing what to reveal and what not to. MAP “drivers” were initially enthusiastic about being involved with an innovative project that could have conferred greater status on them, but when this project became tainted by the insinuations of men’s rights and Christian Right groups, this creative space was threatened, perhaps even narrowed by the men’s rights/Christian Right alliance, who scrutinised this space minutely. This not only weakened their positions as managers and bureaucrats constantly strategising to keep their positions strong, but also had the potential to undermine their organisations.

I don’t know how many ministerials I did on the topic of that project – half a dozen, easy! I reckon Andrew Evans had it in his diary to hassle us at least six weekly. It was like clockwork. I would get a phone call, “Andrew Evans has asked another question” about maternal alienation, Anne Morris, or the project. He wanted to know the outcomes of the project. When the project stopped being funded, he was still asking questions. I reckon the last one I would have got would have been some time [in 2004]. “What outcomes have you had from maternal alienation project?” I absolutely believe his office had something [reminding] them, “oh we better ask that question about maternal alienation again”.

The managers’ reduced space for action under this scrutiny recalls that of women in domestic violence. Similarly they had to account in detail for how they spent their time and money.

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25 SA Parliamentary representative of the *Family First* Christian Right party.
In their attempts to use the space available to them strategically, the MAP “drivers” attempted to embed MAP in several emerging policy frameworks within DHS. The following extract from an interview illustrates one partner’s approach based on attempting to find a foothold in the ever-changing, restructuring environment of new managerialist systems. This manager discusses how she would try to position MAP at the time of the interview:

I’d embed it so that they can’t isolate it on its own, and they’d have to look at it as part of a broad response to violence and abuse. Although we tried that, but we didn’t do it as comprehensively as now we might do it through that violence committee. That was really in its infancy – I don’t even think it was going then, I think they were proposing it. But you can see how, if you pop it into the whole, you don’t let it be sitting out here alone to be attacked, which is where really it happened. The trouble was then, we were trying to differentiate it so it could get funding, but keep it linked to violence. So that was the tricky thing, ’cause you needed to either differentiate it enough that it was something new and exciting and innovative – that’s what they wanted then – but also make sure that it was linked to the other work that we were doing around violence and abuse. (reference group member interview)

One of the differences that emerges, then, between the practice and systems spheres, was that the feminist drivers of MAP, as outsiders on the inside, were vulnerable to attack when they went beyond what senior male bureaucrats and politicians considered their remit. They became more scrutinised in a public context in which MAP operated under the gaze of hostile opponents, and had less room to move and instigate change than their practitioner employees who operated “under the radar”.

Chapter Three examines arguments that notions of gender-neutrality obscure differences of power, and contribute to women’s disadvantage (Smith 1990; Gatens and Mackinnon 1998). Hearn sees so-called gender-neutrality as produced by a deeply masculinist social theory and practice (1998: 807). The downgrading and/or abandonment of gender analysis within Australian governments may have resulted in part from discourses of formal equality – that one group should not be treated differently from another. However it opened a space for the arguments of men’s groups that they were the victims of the excesses of women and/or feminism, and

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26 Use of the term “drivers” for key members of the reference group, all of whom held positions in feminist/gender-aware organisations/positions, is continued from Chapter Nine.
narrowed the space in which women were taken seriously in voicing their experiences of gender oppression.

Without a gender analysis in which hierarchies of power become visible (Jackson 2006), and without a gendered analysis of violence, the retort to evidence of violence against women can become, “women do it too”, the response of the senior official in DHS who was hostile to the work of MAP. His reference to his own difficult relationship breakdown as a tool to measure the worth of MAP gives strength to Hearn’s suggestion that gender analysts should attend to “the processes by which particular subjectivities [men’s] become objectivity, and how particular forms of supposedly neutral objectivity obscure certain subjectivities, including those of particular groups of men” (1998: 808). One of the partners referred in her interview to the damage done to the reputation of MAP and the project officer by references to the project officer’s marriage breakdown in parliamentary questions, and from callers to DHS. She indicated that, “there were some insinuations that you were biased because of your previous [personal] experience”. Significantly, while these labels became attached to the project officer – a woman and feminist – they did little damage to the reputation of the senior male bureaucrat mentioned above, about whom the same interviewee remarked, “I suspect [he] wouldn’t change his stance ever – it’s a personal stance he’s got” (reference group member interview).

Examining MAP within the wider gender order and the gender regime of DHS makes more visible the complexities and resonances of discourses and negotiations of gender and power across many levels of the gender order. Complex, diverse and contradictory though these elements are, it is nevertheless possible to see the gender order as a matrix, in which these multiple events and discourses are in relationship to one another, rather than being isolated phenomena. Thus the resonances between the senior bureaucrat who was hostile to MAP and the more extreme recuperative politics of the RHF played their part in MAP’s demise. With an appreciation of the matrix, making it possible to glimpse some of the ways in which patterns and clusters of influences occurred, it becomes important to further unpack some of these.
The SA Labor party gained the numbers to form government in 2002 only by enlisting the support of the Independent parliamentary member, Peter Lewis. In return, Labor agreed to implement some of his concerns and made him Speaker of the House of Assembly. Labor’s hold on government depended on Peter Lewis’s ongoing support. The fact that Lewis was a Patron of the Richard Hillman Foundation undoubtedly gave the RHF’s campaign against MAP greater impact. A reference group member believed, “when [DHS] saw the connection with the Richard Hillman Foundation I think they were quite nervous, and even though they said they had no money, they could have found forty grand [to continue funding MAP]” (interview). Adding further complexity was the opportunity that the RHF’s attack on MAP represented for the *Family First* parliamentary representative, Andrew Evans, in providing a tool with which he could attack the fledgling Labor government. He may well have capitalised on the RHF’s relationship with Peter Lewis to try to create a wedge between Lewis and Labor. The following section examines the tactics used by the RHF and their allies against the project, and in particular focuses on the RHF’s website statement attacking MAP. The section compares these strategies to the alienating tactics used within abusive household gender regimes.

### 12.1.2 Men’s rights, the New Christian Right and MAP

The RHF’s headline to its website attack on MAP, “Gender politics should be relegated to the status of Holocaust Revisionism”\(^{27}\), begins its strategy of distortion and “misnaming”. It sweeps away language as a means to clarify, illuminate, and engage in rational public debate, substituting language as brutal “name-calling” propaganda. MAP’s gender awareness, dubbed “hate politics” by the RHF, is constructed as equivalent to lying about the murder of millions of people who belonged to hated minorities. The fact that MAP’s project officer was Jewish (though possibly unknown to the RHF) adds a further twist to this attack. The RHF’s use of forceful propaganda-like communications that strip away a sense of congruence with people’s lived reality recalls tactics of maternal alienation: the message aims to stir emotion and moral outrage, subverting rationality.

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\(^{27}\) See Appendix 3
By drawing a parallel between men and the murdered millions in the Holocaust, man as “victim” is made manifest on the public stage. Of course such victim-construction exploits and trivialises the horror of actual Holocaust victims. Employing victim status is a rhetorical device typical of fathers’ rights discourse (Kaye and Tolmie 1998: 163), as well as of maternal alienation.

Referring to its stance as “proper”, “balanced”, representing “community”, and engaging in “debate”, the RHF attempts to align itself with balanced and reasonable debate, which is startlingly at odds with the tone of its message. Like the alienating father, who represents himself as balanced and rational, RHF positions itself with enlightenment values and the public good, and thus with what is fair, reasonable and legitimate. By contrast MAP and feminists are depicted as biased (an accusation that RHF tried to “prove” by excavating details associated with the project officer’s marriage breakdown some sixteen years earlier). They represent both MAP and the project officer as engaging in “hate politics” and having “no legitimate place” in the formulation of public policy. These descriptions gain power by evoking the gendered symbolism that masculinist discourse traditionally employed to describe man – logos, order, reason – while simultaneously depicting “transgressive” women as monstrous and in need of constraint. In declaring that feminists have no rightful place in public policy-making, the RHF echoes the New Right’s agenda to return women to the private sphere.

The RHF’s concern about MAP’s use of “tax-payers money” for its “vested interests” echoes the New Right’s employment of public choice theory rhetoric to cast those who represent women and marginalised groups as selfish “interest groups”, hijacking public money. Employing discourses of rights and equality characteristic of fathers rights’ rhetoric (Kaye and Tolmie 1998: 163), this argument is used to compete for what is viewed as rightfully theirs (an entitlement of men and fathers). In focusing on women’s projects as “vested interests” the RHF turns the public gaze away from their pursuit of men’s interests. It also corresponds to alienating fathers’ depiction of mothers as selfish, and stealing money that rightfully belongs to him and “his” children. Once again a moral tale has been constructed with men as the wronged but heroic champions of the good, and women as immoral and vengeful agents, in need of constraint.
The RHF’s declaration that feminists have “formulated and shaped the directions of our child protection services”, an enormous inflation of the women’s sector’s influence and resources, is a reference to these services’ responses to address child abuse, which men’s rights groups claim involve false accusations against caring family men. On another level these correspond to discourses promoted by PAS that mothers falsely accuse men of violence and abuse to enact revenge and gain custody, in turn evoking masculinist discourses that women who allege rape are likely to be lying and vengeful. The declaration also appropriates the arguments and language of gender equality developed by feminists, in the assertion by fathers’ rights activists that they are discriminated against by institutions such as family law and child protection (Kaye and Tolmie 1998: 163).

The RHF’s statement that, “Government policy must not be set on the basis of a handful of nameless, faceless, hypothetical or fictitious anecdotes which can neither be qualified or quantified”, not only attempts to discredit the initial research on maternal alienation, but, significantly, describes the very tactics employed by men’s and fathers’ rights groups to influence government policy. A number of scholars have noted men’s rights groups’ reliance on distorted and sometimes fabricated research and statistics, and their substantial use of anecdotes as evidence in their submissions to influence policy making and legislation (Kaye and Tolmie 1998; Kaye and Tolmie 1998; Dunn 2004; Flood 2004).

These attempts to discredit the initial research were continued by RHF’s assertion that the material on maternal alienation was just “one academic’s opinion”. In discrediting knowledge claims as the opinion of one person – and as critics later claimed, a flawed person – this tactic attempts to undermine the authority that research on maternal alienation could claim as a “body of knowledge”, which, as I have argued, was one of the strengths recognised by practitioners and managers involved with MAP. It also sweeps away the claims for feminist knowledge creation grounded in lived experience, articulated by standpoint and materialist feminisms.
Standpoint epistemology argues that all knowledge is constructed in a specific matrix of physical location, history, culture, and interests, and that these matrices change in configuration from one location to another. … This locatedness gives access to the concrete world. … Knowing is … partial, local, and historically specific. (Sprague 2005: 41)

The RHF’s claim that “this project makes no attempt to conceal its agenda of regulatory capture of public institutions such as Family and Youth Services (FAYS) and Family Court, but with a distinct anti-male bias” is similar to the previous extract in unintentionally providing a description that more accurately applies to the men’s rights campaign fought nationally and in the states over the previous decade (with an anti-woman bias), than of MAP with its budget limited to employing a project worker for three days a week. The RHF’s accusations lend support to suggestions that perpetrators’ depictions of those they malign in maternal alienation, are a form of so-called “dumping” (Caputi 2003) that reveal more about the “dumper” than those dumped upon. Bancroft and Silverman point out that perpetrator’s descriptions of their partners and ex-partners are actually their own behaviours attributed to the woman, with him transformed as the victim of these (2002: 28).

Moreover, the use of the word “capture” in the RHF sentence above, echoes once again the New Right spin on public choice theory, in which groups of people with vested interests “capture” bureaucrats, and gain privileges that are costly to the public and at odds with the public interest. The RHF statement refers to this discourse again in its direction to politicians that, “tax payer resources must not be siphoned away into forums with vested interests”, and its description of, “the multi-million dollar industries in child protection and domestic violence reserved exclusively for women and, purportedly, children”.

Just as neoliberal discourses become influential through employing the key devices of authority and rhetoric (2000), so also the RHF lobbying depended on its evoking of authority and rhetoric. In addition to the rhetorical devices described above, is the RHF’s appeal to the most powerful authorities in SA, the Premier and Ministers, and its alignment with (at least) two other members of parliament. Its command that the Premier and Ministers “withdraw their support” and “distance themselves from” MAP also correlates with perpetrators’ use of structures of power, such as the family
court and professionals, to buttress their own power and control in households, authorise their distorted constructions of reality, and continue their efforts to remove their partners from their children and others. The device further parallels perpetrators’ attempts to isolate and publicly humiliate their partners.

In summary, while typical of the messages promoted by the fathers’ rights movement and evoking neoliberal and New Right discourse, the RHF statement is also revealingly similar in tone and structure to the tactics of maternal alienation. Its attempts to portray MAP and feminists as dangerous throw more light on men’s rights activists’ own behaviours and motives than on those they attack. This reversal is also reminiscent of maternal alienation and gender violence in general.

The sustained scrutiny of MAP through the RHF campaign and the *Family First* questions in parliament maintained the pressure on those who had to answer for MAP – those I have referred to as the drivers within the reference group. Once the target changed to a focus on the project officer, the drivers also attempted to distance themselves. Drawing an analogy with maternal alienation, the New Right campaign succeeded in alienating key MAP stakeholders, within and beyond the project, and to some extent winning them over to their version of reality in regard to the project officer. Like the dynamics of maternal alienation, the focus came to rest not on the motives and behaviours of the external lobbyists but on the object of their campaign: initially MAP, and subsequently the project officer.

Drawing on Kandiyoti and Carole Pateman, Nazli Kibria argues that women use various strategies to maximise resources in patriarchal systems that reveal the blueprints of a “patriarchal bargain”, that is, “the ways in which women and men negotiate and adapt to the set of rules that guide and constrain gender relations” (1990: 9). Perhaps the key stakeholders in MAP also felt coerced into making a “patriarchal bargain”, to distance themselves from MAP sufficiently to protect their work and their organisations, and perhaps also the Health Minister to whom they were answerable, herself a feminist committed to maintaining the women’s community health sector.
Sometimes it can become hard work and probably take up more time than it normally would, if it’s a contentious issue, and is likely to hit the paper or you know, make the minister look bad. Basically, as a public servant you’re the minister’s. She or he, but in this case she, is your employer, so that’s the tricky bit. (reference group interview)

The drivers’ space in which they could work to progress their feminist and social justice agendas had been narrowed by the scrutiny of, initially, men’s rights activists, followed by the Christian Right and DHS bureaucrats. One partner recalled in the post-project interview the pressure she felt from senior DHS bureaucrats that created “a dilemma with what could and couldn’t be”. Both partners recalled in interviews that it was DHS that first raised the two diversionary issues that demanded increasing time in the reference group and created tensions between members: who “owned” the project, and the “problems” of linking a PhD to a public-funded project. The following section considers these dynamics.

12.2 Reference group dynamics

Despite the enthusiasm for MAP’s bridging of theory and practice shown by practitioners and the “outsiders” within the reference group, the driver reference group members became increasingly wary of the research side of MAP. The reference group was unable to productively steer a path through the problems raised by the perceived conflict between MAP’s public service funding and its relationship to what was expressed as an individual’s personal benefit through a PhD.

The connections between the practice and systems spheres on one hand, and research on the other, or between the funded project and the unfunded PhD, constituted one of those constructive “spaces in-between”, in which innovative and insightful advances could be made that add value and richness to all three spheres. This is the capacity that action research offers to progress emancipatory agendas (Kemmis 1985; Noffke 1997; Noffke 2004). Maximising the connections between these three spheres is also reminiscent of materialist feminist work on violence against women (Hester et al. 1996). Significantly, while one driver acknowledged the contrasting paradigms that collided in bringing public sector organisations together with the university, the drivers paid scant attention to the different frameworks in which the reference group’s outsiders operated. Rather than these differences being an opportunity to productively challenge the taken-for-granted perspectives of each organisational culture, this, like the “problem of the PhD”, became a source of unresolved tension.
The productive space “in-between” had been narrowed by the close scrutiny of MAP by DHS bureaucrats with their economic rationalist and gender-neutral discourses, a situation that was created by both the external attacks on MAP and what was referred to by one reference group member as the “DHS inwardness” of the drivers.

Indeed the dilemmas dominating the reference group in the latter part of MAP appear to have been exacerbated by this “DHS inwardness”, which hampered the capacity of MAP’s drivers to consider how MAP might have related to other government departments and sectors, including Federal government and non-government sectors. One of the outsiders commented on the effects of this orientation.

I think some of the more interesting work the group could have done got tied up in the internal machinations of DHS. I think it stopped some of the more interesting conversations that we could have had. It took up too much time – a lot of conversation about who was sitting on what committee and what they were doing – and was at a tangent to the project. And the project had a scope beyond DHS, in that you were trying to talk to other systems outside DHS. (reference group member interview)

She believed also that the DHS inwardness did not help MAP find funding, because at that time and place DHS was due to be fundamentally restructured, and “towards the end of DHS they really closed up. We couldn’t get any funding anywhere” (interview).

The uncertainties arising from the constant restructuring of SA government departments under managerialism meant that efforts to improve systems responses and bring about co-ordinated or integrated change may have been lost as the bureaucratic ground continually shifted. It appears that if the MAP drivers had succeeded in embedding MAP within DHS structures, and advocated effectively with individuals within DHS, this may have been for nothing. After MAP concluded, DHS was completely restructured:
Who knows who will be there in another six weeks? It could be someone different all over the place. So you just wait for that to pan out. All the senior jobs are currently being advertised. Quite clearly that’s a bit of a barrier, because whenever you’re reforming and restructuring, people who you want to influence are not listening about issues like this. They’re busy either thinking about their own jobs, … I guess it’s thinking about organisations that can push these barriers, getting a place at the table. A lot of the things we all set up have all gone, because of the restructuring. So I think that’s a big barrier in terms of ensuring some coordinated approach. And just when you think you’re getting coordinated then they change the departments again. (reference group member interview)

The particular problem of “who owned the research products associated with MAP?” appeared to stem from DHS, where, according to a reference group driver some time after MAP, there had been a history to their suspicion.

DHS [had entered into] partnerships with academics, where the academics basically built their research lives on what [DHS] would consider was DHS shared intellectual property. So there was this whole thing about who owns this piece of work. Does the academic own it or does DHS own it or do they part own it because they funded this academic to do it? They were very unwilling to do something again which might say, “who owns the intellectual property?” (interview)

Although this problem had originated with doctors who had worked in partnership with public hospitals for decades, “it was nursing and social work-type people or social science-type people that were suddenly being put under the microscope” (reference group member interview). This brings a gender and power perspective to this “problem”, which DHS seemed unwilling to confront with the more powerful (and more often male) doctors.

Nevertheless, these views of research and learning as commodified reveal the strong influence of economic rationalist and managerial frameworks. Rather than a resource for the public good, the addition of the research dimension of MAP was perceived as “a qualification that can be exchanged for higher salary and status” (Brookfield 2001: 11).

However, while these matters occupied the drivers increasingly in the latter part of MAP, their views were not shared by the more numerous outsiders, as expressed by the following interview extract.
There were a lot of discussions about where PhDs sat within department policy. I think there were two things there: I think some of it was that you were passionate about the project, and in some ways at that time you were the project, you were the resource, you were the person with the body of knowledge, and wanted to keep it going. At another level, there was a whole lot of personal stuff going on too about, you know, the fact that it was a PhD research and how did that sit with policy? And this couldn’t be seen to benefit one person over another, that I thought obfuscated the issues, which were: well, yes, this is new information, here’s someone working, there are real benefits to have this located in research – the positive part of things being personal. But it got bogged down in a whole lot of bureaucratic stuff.

(refference group member interview)

As this interviewee emphasised, the project officer was indeed strongly implicated in MAP – she had carried out the initial research on maternal alienation, and was the one employee who managed and facilitated all aspects of MAP. However since funding could not be found, and as the drivers felt MAP had become too strongly identified with her, they believed the work should progress without a designated project officer. Again the outsiders had a different view.

I think you need champions to progress anything. But it’s pretty clear to me that in fact you’re the champion and in fact you are the person in Adelaide, … and there’s probably no one else. I wouldn’t want to go and talk to anyone else about it. … So I think, like any change and any practice development, you need someone who’s identifiable, who becomes recognised as someone who you can go to for advice or information, who can provide the resource. (interview)

Another difficulty that emerged in the reference group was the difference between the project officer’s expectations of how the group should operate, and the “reality”. MAP was formed to challenge unhelpful organisational and professional responses to violence and abuse and develop new approaches. Based on a recently articulated gendered concept, MAP embodied an innovative approach – its whole “raison d’etre” was change. Employing collaborative, participatory and democratic approaches, the working groups in the practice sphere had generated fresh ideas and translated them into practice. They had achieved this through a reflexive process, an approach that depends on trust and empathy (Hjorth and Johannisson 1997: 6). These were modes of working in which the project officer’s skills and experience were strongest. The project officer expected reference group members to collaborate similarly and reflect on their processes in achieving their goals, in keeping with feminist democratic modes of working. However, reference group drivers tended by contrast to “manage”
and “steer” MAP, and jostle for power. The project officer’s expectation that the members of the reference group were the servants of the project (“public servants”) contrasted with the attitude of the group’s drivers, that they were the employers and they needed to maintain control, to the point of terminating MAP. Since two of the drivers funded MAP, they were indeed employers. However, this mode of operating strengthened over time, so that, as one of the outsiders observed, instead of working collaboratively within the reference group, the drivers “dominat[ed] everything by the end of the project” (interview).

It appeared that the close connections maintained between MAP’s drivers and DHS polarised this tension. The contradictions between MAP’s critically reflective approach and the standardised non-individuated mode of operating characteristic of government bureaucracies became manifest as perceived problems with who “owned” the project and outcomes of the research, and as tensions between a commodified view of knowledge acquisition and a feminist view of research as potentially emancipatory. Women’s services and even community health services had originally operated in more democratic and participatory modes. However the difficulties in resolving these differences suggest that managerialist discourse and practice had seeped into these organisations, or at least into their management. Perhaps this was an effect of their “patriarchal bargain” to maintain credibility within the managerial and masculinist bureaucracy.

Another contrast between the systems and practice spheres of MAP is evident in the area of congruence of language, in “languaging” what had been hidden. While the practice sphere work reveals the salience of making visible what had been rendered invisible, giving language to that which could not easily be named, the operations of the reference group worked in the opposite direction. Reference group members’ over-focus on relatively minor issues, in the face of difficult and intimidating external threats, obscured the problems MAP faced. The lack of the drivers’ open discussion of these issues, both in the reference group and later in interviews, is paradoxical.
And I suppose I’m still naïve enough to believe that we should be able to speak truth to power, and that we can bring change. And there’s something about seeing the way this project, where there was acceptance of this project and it was funded, and that somehow there could be campaigns which had cost to you. And questions of safety, you know. All that says to me there’s something wrong here. And there wasn’t open discussion about that. I wonder if we’ll ever get an open discussion about what actually happened. And it’s almost like there still are two solitudes. There are those of us who work with the ideas and those who don’t. And what does that mean? And to have that amongst kindred services is a cognitive dissonance experience. (CSAWG member interview)

The rise and demise of MAP gives weight to Hearn’s analysis that in the gendered culture of bureaucracies concerned with addressing violence, the interests of masculinised upper management tend to prevail, subordinating radical practice and diluting “ideological positions inconsistent with the prevailing political climate” (Hearn 1994: 747). However it remains paradoxical that the two large mainstream organisations, Family Court and FAYS (child protection) had begun to introduce material on maternal alienation to their staff, including a training day for some FAYS staff, that showed all the signs of progressing positively if MAP had continued.

12.2.1 Challenges for feminist leadership in a recuperative gender order

After only a matter of decades since their establishment as community services “at the cutting edge of innovation and challenge” (Weeks 1994: x), women’s community health services in SA still struggled with their relationships with mainstream bureaucracies. As Wendy Weeks asks,

… how is it possible for feminist services not to lose their impetus and philosophy in the context of the gender power relations inherent in our structures and everyday practices, the priorities of the state and the dominant models of service delivery?

(Weeks 1994: 3)

Australian feminists’ success in progressing feminist agendas was founded on the interaction between the women’s movement and the state, between the grassroots movement and “femocrats” within government machinery (Watson 1990). However these early achievements occurred in a gender order that was generally sympathetic to feminist and to broader social justice agendas. The recent incorporation of women’s services into the mainstream within a recuperative gender order poses new challenges
to women’s services. The development and uptake of innovative practice approaches in MAP suggests that work “at the coalface” appears not to have suffered as much change as leadership models for managers of these services.

The rise and demise of MAP pose questions about how feminist managers and bureaucrats – “outsiders” inside – operate effectively to promote feminist agendas in this environment.

I suppose one of the challenges has been to deal with the backlash issues. … And I think that’s a perennial problem: how do you actually address that a) proactively? b) safely? and see so that people personally don’t get attacked? But I don’t know whether anyone’s worked that one out yet. But I suspect [the backlash] could be managed by taking a tangent approach. I think it’s about finding the right allies.

(reference group member interview)

The dilemmas faced by the drivers in MAP in progressing feminist agendas in a recuperative gender order, resulted in them searching out a space “in-between” for their endeavours in ever-shifting sands. They were not able to strategise minutely in the narrowed space available, without broader feminist strategies that can work “in-between”. A member of the advisory group pointed to the ten-year plans developed by right-wing think tanks, arguing that feminists also should be strategising ten years ahead. She believed that feminists should anticipate and take into account “the backlash”, and develop strategies to address this. She argued that within this context feminist managers and bureaucrats should be the champions of feminist developments such as maternal alienation, and have strategies to progress these.

This raises questions as to whether such strategies consist of keeping change “below the radar” in a gender order influenced by recuperative politics. As one of the partners suggested, “the way it’s happened, as it turns out, is actually a fairly wise way, because it [MAP] sort of dipped down but it’s still developing at worker level” (interview). Ironically, MAP’s gulf between practice and systems change served to protect the changes that continued at worker level.
I’d say it got around the social work field fairly quickly, at least the notion of maternal alienation. So it was moving through circles fairly fast and then you have an opportunity obviously to discuss, and plug people into a website or whatever. So it’s a bit like wildfire in terms of it catching on. I don’t know how necessarily a lot of people are viewing it, other than my friends were interested to hear about it. These were all people that were working in child protection, social work. So they were interested in knowing how it sat in child protection, not necessarily domestic violence at all. But when we talked about it, they said they could see what the connection might be. There wasn’t terribly much antagonism towards it, there was much more of a ready acceptance or an, “I want to hear more about this”, which was good. (DVWG worker interview)

In eschewing a reflective and frank approach in reference group meetings, the drivers lost the opportunity to pose these questions and call on the wider experience and wisdom of group members to strategise more effectively. As a group we missed the possibility to reflect on our thinking and actions, and to trial different approaches to find those that would be most effective in this environment. Ironically, as MAP concluded, the drivers appeared unaware of the ways in which they had become caught up in dynamics similar to those enacted at a household level in maternal alienation.

The following chapter draws together the many themes that have emerged through this consideration of the rise and demise of MAP, to draw some conclusions.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

From alienation to alliance: Some conclusions

This study engaged with an emerging conception of a “matrix” of gendered social life, a gender order in which the permutations of gender politics at multiple levels are in relationship with one another, even if only through occurring closely in time. With MAP as its focal point, the study was located in a specific time and place, embedded in a local gender order in which attempts to re-inscribe white men as the norm had a temporary resurgence. Employing a feminist framework for gender violence, the focus of this thesis moved between an examination of the micro world of gender politics and the macro gender order, and explored the multiple and nuanced connections and communications between these. However, as standpoint theorists argue, all knowledge is situated and partial, and “constructed in a specific matrix of physical location, history, culture, and interests” (Sprague 2005: 41).

At the centre of this research was a new gendered concept, maternal alienation, which had been identified from accounts of women’s experiences of alienation from their mothers, or daughters, within households. MAP was established to introduce this concept into the intermediary arenas of organisational practice in health, welfare and law, and the wider sphere of systems and policy-making. In the process of developing feminist practice principles for addressing maternal alienation, the concept itself became enriched and nuanced.

13.1 Significance of language

What emerges markedly from this research is the significance of the relationship between language, understandings and material experience, in particular the importance of their congruence, in enabling women and children to rebuild their lives and their relationships in the aftermath of violence.

The thesis argues that the naming of maternal alienation was a political act. Its initial naming situates this project within a feminist tradition in which new terms were created to express women’s lived experiences, for which there had not been adequate language. This enables that which is “pre-discursive” – silenced and subjugated forms
of knowledge – to be born into social existence as concepts and discourses. These “struggle” or “contested/contesting” feminist terms and definitions offer women access to different perspectives from which to view and understand the “relations of ruling”, and thus challenge hegemonic power. In speaking the (previously) unspeakable, the gender relations otherwise confined to the micro arena and the intimate become public – they enter the global. The acts of naming and describing maternal alienation sought to move contestations of power and gender relations from the micro to the macro arenas, and in turn, from the realm of language back to actual gendered arrangements in households and organisations (see Grafstein 1988). MAP’s confrontations with several forms of recuperative politics demonstrate concretely the political dimension of this work.

As stated previously, the significance of language also pervaded the micro aspects of this project. Language had been the medium of alienation, of misnaming and distortion of women’s and children’s experiences. Language also worked to free women and children from these distortions, enabling them to develop alternative perspectives of their experiences, and to envisage and initiate more positive and respectful relationships. By identifying and understanding perpetrators’ strategies to maintain power, control and secrecy, to alienate, undermine and distort, women and children gained greater awareness of their situation, which gave them choices, expanding their space for action.

Just as the male voice in maternal alienation obliterates the voices of women and children, so in countering maternal alienation the material reality of women’s and children’s lives needs to become “languaged”. “Languaging” what was unspeakable and unthinkable – both in identifying the abusive strategies of perpetrators, and in recognising the “manifest” ways in which women care for and support their children – makes these matters “real”.

Through this process women’s more “solid” connection to their own knowledge even penetrated their experiences of embodiment, so that women could understand their situations “through their own eyes”, rather than through those of their abusers, and could more firmly “stand in their own knowledge” in the face of opposition.
13.2 Developing concepts: household and organisational gender regimes

The construct of an abusive household gender regime that was developed within this study resonates with the early work of Liz Kelly (1988), in which she takes issue with studying the major areas of abuse separately, developing instead the concept of a continuum of sexual violence. She argues that this enables women to acknowledge a range of male behaviours as abusive, that otherwise would not have been named because they fall between specific forms of abuse. The concept of an abusive household gender regime offers similarly a tool with which researchers, practitioners and policy-makers can understand more profoundly and holistically the effects of a coercive regime on all household members. The term elevates, and is congruent with, household members’ everyday lived experiences of abuse and violence, by incorporating all aspects of living within this environment. Thus the patterned ways in which power and gender are enacted and the forms this takes discursively, are more readily exposed. They thereby become available to be understood as a tapestry, or web, of interweaving and reinforcing strands, whose interlocking character entraps those situated within.

The concept of gender regime (Connell 2000) also provides a conceptual tool to bridge the intimate and the global, the micro and macro. It enables a comparison between gender regimes at the level of the household with those at the intermediary level of organisations, and the dynamic and ever-changing relationships between these and the gender order – the “spaces in-between”. Through a theory of gendered institutions, scholars have mapped how gender power is created and maintained, “through institutional processes, practices, images, ideologies, and distributional mechanisms”, and how “organizational practices play a central role in recreating and entrenching gender hierarchies, gender symbols, and gendered identities” (Hawkesworth 2006: 213). I have argued that employing the conceptual tool of gender regimes makes it possible to identify the particular ways in which gendered configurations within some organisations responding to violence have a relationship to the gender patterning within the very households they encounter. These tools have the potential to provide material to answer the questions Hearn asks about how these
organisations make authority explicit, and how this is gendered (Hearn 1994), and even further, how the particular gender configurations found within organisations impact on households and their members.

Here again, the analysis outlined in this thesis suggests that scholars attend to the tapestry between differing levels of gender regimes, and also to that between these and the gender order. I argue that, just as using the concept of a “fabric”, “tapestry”, or “web” of family life illuminates more aspects of abusive households, further aspects of the gender order will become perceptible through conceiving of it as a multi-dimensional “matrix”. This is a concept that future scholars may wish to explore.

13.3 Implications for organisations addressing maternal alienation

The work on maternal alienation identified deeply embedded hierarchical gendered practices and discourses at micro, macro and intermediary levels. This implies that the organisational responses to maternal alienation need to engage with these practices and discourses at their roots. The fundamental principles of practice developed within MAP called for practitioners to become aware of and thence challenge the gendered status quo: the privileged status of men’s voices, and the moral authority of fathers, enhanced by dominant tendencies to render men’s violence within families invisible; and complementary constructions of mothers as morally deficient and culpable. MAP reversed this gendered configuration to create two fundamental principles underpinning all practice responses:

- making visible the tactics used by perpetrators, thereby diminishing their power and increasing their accountability;
- supporting mothers, thereby increasing their power and reducing unreasonable burdens of responsibility.

However these principles cannot be adequately practiced without a co-ordinated response to violence. The knowledge developed within MAP reinforces researchers’ arguments that it is essential for children’s well-being and safety that child protection becomes integrated with protecting women (Irwin et al. 2002; Mullender et al. 2002;
Radford and Hester 2006; Humphreys 2007). In most cases, the future well-being of children and young people will be greatly enhanced by supporting their relationships with their mothers, and assisting women to deal with the effects of violence on their lives and the lives of their children – on all the levels at which it has impacted. Children’s safety from violence and its effects cannot be secured while ignoring the safety of their primary caregiver. Further, coordinated service interventions are needed to effectively address the subtleties and entwining of violences that create the tapestry of abusive household gender regimes.

For collaboration to be successful, it is necessary that mythologised accounts of violence and demeaning gender stereotypes are challenged across those sectors and organisations that respond to violence, and beyond these, within the gender order. There are obviously substantial challenges in bringing together services such as women’s services, domestic violence services, child protection and family court, when they are built on such contradictory discourses of violence and of family members. As Humphreys emphasises, “effective coordination (or integration in some circumstances) is a major project that requires significant time, resources and development” (Humphreys 2007: 19).

13.4 Implications for a preventative approach

The approach developed within MAP provides not only a “primary” response to women and children in the aftermath of violence, it also offers preventative strategies on a number of levels. In leading to a range of positive outcomes for women and children, and resourcing women to be the supporters of their children, MAP’s approaches would remove many from the need for recurring services. Table 13.1 outlines how particular practice strategies might impact within a preventative, early intervention framework.
Table 13.1 The impact of practice strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Changes to service response</th>
<th>Early intervention/prevention outcome</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother and child alienated by strategies of perpetrator of violence.</td>
<td>Support mothers and children to understand this and then build a new alliance, to re-form as a family.</td>
<td>Prevention of family breakdown and youth homelessness in aftermath of violence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children unable to access their mother as main supporter due to maternal alienation.</td>
<td>Models of Practice that enhance mothers’ support of their children, and allow children to access their mothers as the main agents of their own protection.</td>
<td>Decreased need for statutory bodies to be involved in protecting children. Decreased need for other services to be involved in the future (mental health, drug &amp; alcohol, criminal justice, etc).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demeaning and disrespectful attitudes to women are taught within families.</td>
<td>Work with children, young people and women on gender stereotypes, especially how they construct mothers.</td>
<td>More positive community attitudes to women, more realistic perceptions of mothers/motherhood, better future relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children coached to commit acts of abuse and disrespect to their mothers.</td>
<td>Explicit work with children and young people, facilitation of discussions between women and children.</td>
<td>Decreases in adolescent violence to mothers. Decreases in violence against women in future relationships. Decreases in abuse of elderly women by adult children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate responses by agencies which blame women and further damage family relationships.</td>
<td>Professional training across services and sectors providing new models and tools.</td>
<td>Increased safety and well-being for women and children. Decreased family breakdown post separation. Decreased reception of children into care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaps in knowledge of DV perpetrators’ deliberate use of strategies to manipulate, punish and control.</td>
<td>Enhanced perpetrator programs which explicitly address ways children are abused, manipulated and alienated from their mothers.</td>
<td>Increased effectiveness of programs. Decrease in children being used in custody disputes, and/or as a route to tracing/controlling the woman.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of knowledge of maternal alienation in Family Court.</td>
<td>Training for Family Court officials.</td>
<td>Better living and contact arrangements for children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of knowledge in criminal justice system of DV perpetrators’ deliberate use of strategies to manipulate, punish and control.</td>
<td>Training for professionals in criminal justice system.</td>
<td>Better understanding amongst police officers and prosecutors resulting in enhanced law enforcement and appropriate sanctions and controls on perpetrators.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
13.5 Gender analysis

This thesis has argued that, despite individual workers’ good intentions, without a means of analysing gender and power relations and transforming their practice accordingly, and unless these approaches are upheld within organisations, masculine authority and the culpability of women are re-inscribed again and again by services. This draws attention, once again, to the interconnections between household and organisational gender regimes. It suggests that workers and managers within organisations require a means to review their policies and practices, in a critical reflective process that transforms these to cohere with their emancipatory intentions. I argue that this cannot be produced adequately in a gender-neutral framework, which masks the operations of gendered power. Power in all its forms needs to be exposed in the interests of equity and justice.

13.6 Spaces in-between

The concept of spaces in-between became, in many ways, a leitmotif of MAP. These spaces disrupted categories generally defined as contrasting or oppositional, such as personal and professional knowledge; micro gender regimes and the macro gender order; and DV and CSA. Attending to the spaces in-between allowed an examination of the connections and differences between these contrasts. By tracing the manifestations of gender violence through the intimate to the global, it is possible to identify their interconnections through diverse levels of household and organisational gender regimes and the gender order.

Spaces in-between offer less accustomed perspectives, disrupting one’s “normalised”, taken-for-granted, situated viewpoint. They are fluid spaces, with an absence of the rigidity that can characterise accustomed perspectives. The metaphor of “space” is apt, as perspectives or standpoints are vitally connected to one’s position in social relations and social structures. To shift position and move into another space, even empathetically, offers the possibilities of gaining different perspectives that deepen and enrich understanding. When practitioners in role plays and in the barrier exercise entered the spaces in which women and children were positioned by maternal alienation, they gained insight into their experiences of maternal alienation. This
involved them approaching, and beginning to comprehend, the “abject” and “rejected” space of the alienated mother. From these spaces they comprehended how they could intervene respectfully and effectively with mothers and children.

A willingness to step into spaces in-between and not rigidly stand by one’s accustomed paradigms was found to be a significant part of working collaboratively, an achievement that the reference group as a whole did not attain, although individuals within it did. This undermined MAP’s goal to develop collaborative or integrated responses to gender violence and maternal alienation. The “naturalism” and “rightness” of DHS frameworks to those within it contributed to their unwillingness to try other perspectives. This is paradoxical, as managers of feminist services are adept at working the space between their own service’s principles and mainstream bureaucracies as “outsiders within” (Kelly 2005).

MAP’s threefold design was created to maximise the intersecting of practice, systems and research, so that each could inform the other, yet generate new and unexpected knowledges. As project officer I operated within and between these spheres, communicating information and perspectives from one to the other. Traversing the spaces in-between sectors and organisations as insider/outsider entailed continually negotiating language and conceptual frameworks, bringing insights and tools from one sphere to challenge, illuminate, engage with, or contrast with the other. Moving “in-between” carries risks of being seen in all spheres as an outsider, as someone whose ideas are not relevant, or as someone who transgresses the more subtle organisational “rules”. Yet it also provides many opportunities – possibilities to both embrace the viewpoints of self and others and stand apart from them, and recognise and deconstruct their gendered and “power-ed” constitution.

Finally the spaces in-between are used to look “between” what is more obvious, such as “between” the individual incidents of DV or CSA. Thus it becomes possible to see the tapestry formed by coercion that becomes the everyday life for women and children, to comprehend the web that entraps and in which many strategies of violence interweave, to define the patterning of gendered behaviour that forms the abusive gender regime.
13.7 “Rhetoric”: gendered symbols in gender contests, and “authority”: knowledge claims and power

Johnston and Callender’s (2000) claim that a combination of rhetoric with authority served to “naturalise” neoliberal ideas and bring about their acceptance as truth has implications for the study of gender. This thesis has interrogated the multiple ways in which power and knowledge entwine, and how they are used to claim authority in gender contestations. The crucial question of what counts as valid knowledge, and precisely whose knowledge is considered valid, was contested repeatedly throughout MAP.

Contestations over power and knowledge were shown to occur within abusive household gender regimes in perpetrators’ imposition of their versions of “reality” on household members and those associated with them. Perpetrators’ naming of “truth” is self-serving, enhancing their power and undermining the validity of alternative points of view, subjugating the “everyday” knowledges of women and children. Perpetrators’ constructions of reality are further “authorised” when professionals, invoking macro gender discourses and mythologised accounts of violence, similarly misname the realities of women’s and children’s lives.

Workers consistently observed that employing MAP’s practice principles enhanced women’s greater sense of agency, and women were less likely to return to abusive partners. Just as misnaming diminished women’s life-space, language that is congruent with women’s experience widened it, enhancing space for action, and literally “empowering” women. However for women’s “lived” knowledge to have continuing validity in the face of masculinist and hegemonic knowledge, it must carry authority. I have argued that whilst masculinist knowledge derives its authority from men’s higher status and their traditional power to name reality combined with their mobilisation of hegemonic gendered discourses, the authority claimed by the body of knowledge about maternal alienation derives from its relationship to the “lived” experiences of women. I have further argued that feminist knowledge draws authority from the discipline of research that underpins it, and its association with the academy, the traditional producer of authorised knowledge. MAP also developed the strategy of using workers’ authority to strengthen women’s and children’s alternative knowledges, and support gender regimes based on care and respect.
This study of maternal alienation and MAP provides examples of the ways in which rhetoric can be mobilised to silence and invalidate the concepts and actors that challenge the status quo. Words and symbols are the tools of these gender contests. The battleground is not littered with spatial bodies, but with discourses, and is embroiled with battles over whose accounts of “truth” carry authority. Here is to be found, in the potent conjunction of rhetoric and authority, the intersection of the discursive (rhetoric) and material (authority). The RHF, like other fathers’ rights organisations, accompanied their gendered rhetoric with threats, with verbal and sometimes also physical violence. They also harnessed the authority and power of politicians to do their will. By contrast feminist authority within MAP was asserted, as in standpoint and materialist feminisms, by re-establishing the congruence of lived experience within the realm of language, and by founding knowledge on women’s shared experiences. It is also true that MAP attempted, with less successful outcomes, to garner support through gaining the power and authority of (women) government Ministers. However this strategy did more to illustrate the fragmented and weakened networks between women at this time.

The RHF mobilised – in a brutal and un-subtle way – a rhetoric that employed gendered symbols that have circulated for centuries. RHF evoked enlightenment symbolism associated with the masculine – balanced and reasonable debate, the public good, fairness and legitimacy, in dramatic contrast to the character of its delivery. They also mobilised gendered discourses to construct feminists as monstrous and in need of constraint, invoking traditional symbols for women who challenge masculinist boundaries. The symbols culturally associated with masculinity and used to wield power and enact violence (Lundgren 1998) are available to men in both micro and private, and public and macro settings. This illustrates how, throughout the gender order, men exercise “the masculine privilege to invent, define and politicize the symbolisms and metaphors of its own exaltation” (Haubold 2003: 34).

A gendered world of symbols, rhetoric and meaning-making, therefore, plays a vital role in maintaining the realm of men’s power and violence. This argument explains
the significance of mythologised accounts of CSA and DV in upholding masculinised perspectives in mainstream popular and professional discourses, and the central role of the denial and deflection of men’s responsibility in these myths. The deployment of these discourses in attempts to reassert masculine privilege, witnessed in association with MAP, illustrates once again the conjunction of the discursive and the material, of rhetoric and authority.

13.8 Displacing stigma and responsibility
In this thesis it has been argued that the New Right’s rhetoric shifts responsibility and stigma from powerful hidden elites to less powerful “victim” groups. This strategy also characterises perpetrator behaviour in micro contexts, which involves perpetrators displacing their own characteristics onto their targets. This gender patterning at many levels suggests that not only are constructions of violated women as culpable or pathological created by men and serve their interests, but also that the very descriptions of these women that are found in dominant discourses are expressions of the characteristics of men and depictions of the operations of systemic gendered power. These portraits of women feed into cultural myths about abuse and violence, and contribute to further victim-blaming. From this premise, it can be argued that an examination of malestream constructions of women may discover the actual characteristics and behaviours of abusive men, which are denied and displaced. Similarly, an analysis of New Right descriptions of the groups they attack may divulge information about the character of the New Right.

13.9 Challenges and paradoxes in the systems area
The study of MAP identifies the ways in which the external assaults on MAP, feminist services and the project officer corresponded to the dynamics found within abusive household gender regimes. They also paralleled the effects of these regimes on women, including the narrowing of their space for action, the directing of the judgmental and punitive “gaze” onto them, and their isolation from support.

The attacks were able to take root within the existing weaknesses in the reference group and further erode the group’s capacity to respond effectively to MAP’s challenges. It represents a major irony in a project beset by paradoxes, that what
proved to be such an outstanding success in the practice sphere – building congruence between language, experience and understanding, making visible the hidden relations of power, critical reflexion and the use of participatory and democratic modes of operation – represented a gap and failure in the systems sphere. Without a critically reflective approach and the possibilities this offers to employ “double-loop” learning to reflect on underlying values and beliefs, projects are more likely to produce unintended counter-productive results (Argyris 2003). In contrast to the practice sphere, lack of open discussion in the reference group appears to have constrained its members’ capacity to find more constructive responses to the external attacks, to widen their space for action. At the very least, it removed the possibility to discuss the options available to MAP, and to devise together more effective strategies. Noffke (1997) maintains that awareness of differences and commonalities, and transparency about power relations are critical in action research, otherwise participants’ differing interests and goals can be masked. It appears that the reference group’s inability to rise to this “dual” challenge, “of interrogating the meanings of democracy and social justice at the same time as we act to alter the social situation” (1997: 334), weakened its capacity to steer a path through the difficulties that MAP encountered.

A further paradox in the systems sphere was the openness of the representatives of the Family Court and child protection services to the ideas of maternal alienation, and their interest in introducing MAP’s principles to their organisations. This may have become possible because reference group members’ personal identification as feminists was not visible in their professional status, and they were not targeted in the various attacks on MAP. This demonstrates the readiness that individuals within mainstream organisations may have to adopt new perspectives, when these “make sense” to them, and are strengthened and authorised by research. It offers hope for the potential for effective collaboration between women’s services and mainstream institutions.
13.10 Implications for feminist agendas

13.10.1 Challenges of mainstreaming

SA’s women community health centres have never had an easy relationship with the government bureaucracy that funds them (Auer 1990). However this thesis argues that the precariousness of feminist services has not lessened under managerial bureaucracies, in which directors of these services have become more strongly identified with bureaucrats, and caught up in their short-term funding initiatives and regular restructures.

The weakening of social justice/feminist platforms, and the undermining of a feminist presence within these masculinised bureaucracies in the 1990s formed the context within which MAP drivers continually attempted to establish and re-establish strong positions for themselves to gain (ephemeral) leverage and power in an insecure, ever-changing environment. However with a weakened connection to a grassroots feminist movement, or even to a community base, directors of feminist services had little to bargain with. When MAP appeared to offer an innovative approach that could provide leadership in the sector, this promised to confer strength and status on those championing it, but when MAP transfigured into a political “hot potato” it became too damaging for them to be identified with it. “Mainstreaming is essential to influence the state, and be “where the action is”. The pitfall of mainstreaming is institutionalisation” (Weeks 1994: 3). This is the tightrope that is walked in patriarchal bargains, and presents a continuing challenge to feminist services that are incorporated into mainstream systems. It suggests that to restore their strength and capacity to pursue feminist agendas, these services need to rebuild their constituencies, both their community base, and their connections with the women’s movement, which has since found new forms and ways of operating.

However feminist organisations also need to be alert to the dangers of co-option, the ways that hegemonic approaches can be absorbed into their organisations, their operations and ways of thinking, with or without their awareness (Auer 1990; Weeks 1994). Moreover, as the example of MAP illustrates, feminist organisations and their directors continue to be marginalised and disadvantaged in Australia within neoliberal
and neoconservative environments, and their capacity to lead in the area of gender violence is not acknowledged. This reflects the positioning of mothers within their families by mainstream services.

13.10.2 Backlash

This study has drawn attention to the ways in which attempts to challenge hierarchical and oppressive gender relations eventually confront counter-attempts to “recuperate” these threatened privileges. Pickup and colleagues emphasise that such counter-movements are not a sign of failure but of success, and are most likely to occur “where the transformation of gender relations and challenge to male privilege has gone furthest” (Kabeer 1998 cited in Pickup et al. 2001: 39-40). Rather than withdraw in response to backlash, these writers encourage organisations to evolve more effective responses, including strengthening networks and forming alliances.

These possible directions for feminist agendas are strengthened by Finkelhor’s (1994) warning that while backlash movements tend to be weaker than those they oppose, they can gain power and influence when an initial social movement has not built a sufficient base of public support. The attacks on MAP occurred at a time when there was little public sympathy for feminism, in part due to the shaping of public opinion by New Right rhetoric. At the same time, under the Howard administration, and with its blessing, fathers’ rights organisations and the New Christian Right had formed temporary alliances based on their common promotion of “family values” (restoring men’s authority in families). Thus recuperative movements had strengthened through developing their networks and alliances, and cultivating public support, which corresponds to the second part of Finkelhor’s warning, that counter-movements gain strength when they form coalitions with stronger movements or institutions such as political parties or interest groups. Both elements of Finkelhor’s warning throw light on how women’s services involved in MAP were weakly positioned, particularly in relation to the strengthened “backlash” that MAP encountered.
13.10.3 Strengthening networks, alliances and community foundations

Finkelhor points to the need for emancipatory movements to seek out alliances and build their grassroots support. He refers by way of illustration to the movement to address child abuse, whose strength lay in its coalitions between feminists and the child protection sector, and its widespread support at public, professional and political levels. The importance of network-building for social justice movements has been emphasised by a number of scholars and activists. It has been argued that one of the defining strengths of past feminist success in placing gender violence on the public agenda was its form as a collective political movement. In the Australian context, the connections between grassroots activism and the work of “femocrats” in the bureaucracy, and sympathetic political contexts contributed to this success (Watson 1990; Breckenridge 1999; Maddison and Partridge 2007).

Referring specifically to women’s community health centres in SA, Auer has similarly identified two key strategies for sustaining a commitment to feminist principles while working within the state.

The first is in holding and developing the community base for women’s health, to be kept in touch with the reality of women’s lives and to maintain an independent power base or constituency. The second is the continuing development of broad but sympathetic alliances thereby maintaining a strong power base”. (Auer 1990: 217)

Considered in relation to these suggestions, WHS appears to have been weakly positioned. Not only had WHS diminished its connection to a grassroots community base, particularly in transforming from a regional to a state-wide organisation in the mid1990s, but within MAP itself the drivers within the reference group did not take up the opportunities presented to form alliances and develop a coordinated, intersectoral approach. These considerations suggest that if the drivers had developed strategic alliances within the broad group of mainstream services involved in MAP, and positioned MAP within intersectoral frameworks instead of putting all their eggs in the basket of DHS, they and the initiative they had championed may not have been as vulnerable.
Perhaps a consequence of these developments was the differences in the direction of accountability that could be discerned between practitioners and directors of feminist services. The developments within the practice sphere illustrate that practitioners in feminist organisations understood accountability to be related to the quality of their practice and its results for women and children, a legacy that has continued from the women’s movement. However their “strategic” managers, less connected to their workers and the communities they “serve”, and more identified with their funders, appeared to have a different relationship to accountability. Their actions suggest that they were more conscious of the need to be accountable and answerable to their funders, which involved them in trying to negotiate an ever-changing set of rules. Indeed accountability appeared to have devolved to surviving the next restructure.

13.10.4 Factors supporting emancipatory organisational change

This analysis of MAP offers some insight into the factors that can support emancipatory change in professionals’ attitudes and practice, and within and between organisations. It is crucial that change projects challenge existing power relations, and that participants learn the skills necessary to accomplish this (Noffke 1997; Argyris 2003). Analysis of MAP’s change process highlights the following implications for organisational change.

- Analysis of gender and power need to be an integral part of improving practice and organisational processes. It is essential that the ways that power and gender are embedded and enacted within organisations are identified, problematised and challenged. This would involve scrutiny of the manner in which less powerful perspectives are silenced and subjugated, and how authority and violence are expressed and masked within organisations and bureaucracies.

- Techniques such as role plays are helpful tools that enable participants to position themselves within unaccustomed “spaces in-between”, including empathically stepping into the shoes of those whose perspectives are marginalised. To be successful, this may necessarily involve experiencing some “shock” at having accustomed perspectives “flipped over” (DVWG member interview) and experiencing the “taken-for-granted” differently, which occurs in paradigm change.
Employment of critical reflection/reflexion to painstakingly examine and re-align practice with the emancipatory values and principles that organisations (such as feminist services) espouse. This may involve converting “shorthand” ideas to “thick descriptions” in which all details are thought through and translated into their implications for practice. Change processes must include “double-loop” learning – the interrogation of underlying values and beliefs. By identifying and interrogating the incongruence that exists between the stated values goals and practices at all levels of the organisation, congruence between values, practice, language, understanding and lived experiences is built.

New knowledge needs to carry “authority”. For feminist theory and practice, authority derives from knowledge and language based on women’s experiences and standpoints. Connections to scholarly research are valuable not only for the rigour this brings to knowledge creation, but also for the authority it bestows.

Time is needed for critical reflection to be consistently employed, and changes in practice and understanding to deepen to produce effective practice “tools”.

Managers at all levels of organisations should be integrally engaged in change processes, and reflexive conversations need to be built into organisational practices at all levels.

MAP demonstrated the importance for practitioners to be allowed the space in which they can exercise their professional skills and decision-making capacities, protected from the negative aspects of managerialism, which has created environments which are “intrinsically antagonistic to thoughtful practice” (Pietroni 1995 cited in Dolan et al. 2006: 18). As those with grassroots experience, practitioners’ knowledge and praxis should be respected as a source of important information that should contribute to the decision-making processes within organisations, and their accountability to the communities they serve.

For effective collaborative and coordinated services, these approaches need to be extended across agencies and sectors. Alongside the development of service agreements, coordinated services require regular and sustained training and planning that is shared across intersectoral and inter-organisational levels. These should include opportunities for critical reflection on values and practices.
Workers and managers, like the community members they “serve”, require a sense of security and safety for them to embrace change and critical reflection. This is difficult to guarantee in managerial contexts where structural change is a constant. Emancipatory and just practice needs to be protected to continue and develop “under the radar”.

For accountability and justice, organisations should be strongly connected to the communities they serve. Their advisory structures need to include representatives from their service-users, and organisations should develop tools of accountability and ongoing communication with their service-users.

13.10.5 Championing new feminist concepts and movements

As one reference group member stressed, “I think you need champions to progress [new concepts and movements]”. Practitioners in feminist services expected that the championing and mentoring of emerging issues such as maternal alienation comprised part of the responsibilities and roles of their managers and directors. “There needs to be mentoring of those emerging issues – pathways have to be made for them to move through” (advisory group member). The unfolding of MAP has illustrated the challenges for directors of feminist services in championing such emerging issues. One suggestion from this research is that, within Australia, feminists convene forums to consider how these challenges could be taken up.

One interviewee from the advisory group felt very strongly that the reference group should have predicted that MAP would have confronted resistance, and should have had strategies in place to deal with this. She emphasised that just as the New Right built its foundations through employing think-tanks and long term strategies, feminist services should consider establishing their own “think-tanks”, and should be planning and strategising for “ten years ahead”.

13.10.6 Reconnecting research, practice and activism

The five preceding points indicate the importance of reconnecting the three major arenas of feminism: research, practice and activism. Critical reflection and practice are strengthened, as the example of MAP illustrates, by their links with research, and with the insider/outsider perspective that interrogates taken-for-granted ideas and
practice, and re-invigorates approaches. Feminist services require the power base formed from connecting with communities and grass-roots movements. As well as providing foundational strength, these ensure that services and “femocrats” have external “reality-checks” and channels of accountability to their constituencies. The authority, vitality and relevance of feminist research and praxis derive from their roots in the lived experiences of women. Developing and working in partnership with feminist research units (“think tanks”), and progressing feminist agendas through taking initiatives, rather than being on the defensive, requires the combined commitment and capacities of researchers, activists, administrators and practitioners.

These alliances, both within feminism, and with strategic partners and allies outside, have been successfully forged in contemporary feminist movements. For example, advancing feminist agendas on gender violence within international bodies is a contemporary strategy engendering public and political support, and generating strong networks and alliances (Walby 2002; Kelly 2005).

However much disavowed in the academy, violence against women has, over the last twenty-five years, become an organising focus throughout the globalizing women’s movement. Several commentators (see, for example, Sen 2003) suggest that the networking and coalition building involved – one focus of which was the human rights campaign – have not only renewed the vibrancy of second wave feminism, but also on occasion made real the optimistic ambitions of international sisterhood. Indeed, many commentators attribute the success of this process to the consistent and unitary message that the women’s sector presented; a not inconsiderable achievement in a social movement known for its fractious disagreements. (Kelly 2005: 474)

The example of MAP profoundly illustrates the urgency for (South) Australian feminists, and possibly those beyond, to begin the network- and coalition-building to re-develop a vigorous contemporary women’s movement.

13.11 Back to the beginning: Revaluing mothers

Whilst maternal alienation tears at the fabric between generations of women at a micro level, the macro gender order reinforces alienation through undervaluing and undermining mothers, and sets mothers and daughters against each other, “enforcing internal misogyny, and undermining a potentially powerful alliance” (Robinson and Robinson 1998: 64). This obstructs the passing on of women’s support, wisdom and resilience to daughters and sons. What is transmitted to daughters in their place is
evidenced in their sense of worthlessness as women, “because by seeing their mother as not being good enough … it impacts on [them] as well” (CSAWG worker). Indeed the results of MAP’s work suggest that positive relationships between daughters and mothers may be critical to women’s healthy sense of self.

Through ignoring, rejecting and subjugating women’s standpoints, experiences and contributions, opportunities to address gender violence and child abuse in more effective and humane ways are squandered. Firstly, healthier social outcomes would result from valuing mothers, and resourcing rather than constraining them. Secondly, corresponding macro change would be enhanced if women’s perspectives, and women’s services that elevate and respect these, were valued and moved from the margins to the centre of work to respond to violence. Women and women’s services have the knowledge needed to lead effective responses to violence against women and children.

The work on maternal alienation makes visible the processes that destroy alliances between women at their roots – between mothers and daughters. A revitalised women’s movement, founded on alliances between researchers, activists, administrators, practitioners and diverse groupings of women, must surely include alliances across generations: re-framing, understanding and valuing relationships between mothers and daughters. A feminism renewed in this way, like Kylie, embraces the politics of possibility, of wholeness and well-being.

She saw herself in a more generous and positive way. So I would say her self esteem, her sense of self, increased as a woman, as a mother herself, as a daughter. So she felt more connected to a good feeling of herself. There was more clarity in her thinking. She felt really uplifted and even physically, she regained a sense of energy, a sense of wellbeing. She certainly was visibly becoming more looking forward to life, less depressed. Certainly, there were lots of changes. And it came to the place where she was able to say, “I feel like I’ve worked this out. I feel like I don’t have any more need to do work on it.” She had reconnected with her mother. (Doreen interview)
Bibliography


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Appendices
Appendix 1

Interviews for PhD Thesis
Anne Morris
2004 /05

Interviews with workers

1. Introductory

Would you fill me in on when you first came across the idea of maternal alienation, and if you can remember what you thought of it at that time?

Has that changed? How?

In what ways have you been working with the idea of maternal alienation?

What has this experience been like?

Has the knowledge of maternal alienation had any impact on you personally?

What impact?

What was it about working with the issue that made the impact?

2. For those in a working group of MAP

Would you describe to me your experience of being in a working group of MAP?

Would you describe to me your experience of developing practice approaches for addressing maternal alienation?

What made this work well?

What hindered it from working well?

More generally, what did you find helpful in your experience of the Maternal Alienation Project?

What did you find difficult or unhelpful about the Maternal Alienation Project?
3. Professional arena

Has the issue of maternal alienation had an impact on your professional work? What impact? What was it that made the impact?

Has it been easy or difficult to take up these new ways? How? Why?

Do you think you’re working differently with clients?

Do you think there are differences in the changes clients make?

Are there any tools or methods that have been particularly useful to you and your clients?

Have there been any stumbling blocks for you in this process of learning about and using the idea of maternal alienation? What are they? (personal, organisational, professional, framework you work with, unease about what you might open up for people, not enough tools,)

What is it that challenged you?

What if anything could be changed to help this?

4. Understandings

Would you say that you understand mothers in violence differently now? What difference? What brought this about?

Would you say you understand the relationship between mothers and children differently? What difference? What brought this about?

Would you say you understand violence against women and children differently? What difference? What brought this about?

Would you say you understand perpetrators differently? What difference? What brought this about?

Would you say that you have a different understanding of any of the human services practice relating to DV, mothers and children, child protection?

Anything else?
5. *Systems Change*

Would you describe yourself as being an **advocate** for maternal alienation in your workplace (networks)? How was/is this for you?

Do you think work on maternal alienation should be **taken further** in your workplace?

  - In your sector?
  - More generally?

How?

  - What would assist?

Have you seen other developments happening more widely concerning maternal alienation (outside your workplace).

  - What are they?
  - What contributed to these developments?
  - What hinders them?

6. *Finally*

(At end: Are there any other questions you think I should have asked?)

Is there anything else you want to say about the issue of maternal alienation and your experience of working with it?
1. **Introductory**

Would you fill me in on when you first came across the idea of maternal alienation, and if you can remember what you thought of it at that time?

Has that changed? How?

What do you think now?

Did the knowledge of maternal alienation have any impact on you personally?

What impact?

What was it that made the impact?

2. **Reference Group experience**

Could you describe to me your experience of being on the Reference Group?

In what ways do you think the Maternal Alienation Project made a positive difference?

How did the project achieve this?

In what ways do you think the Maternal Alienation Project failed?

How could this have been more positive?

What do you think were the challenges the project faced?

How do you think the project could have dealt with these challenges more effectively?

How do you think the structure of the MAP worked to help the project?

How do you think the structure of the MAP hindered its work?

In what ways do you think the project officer helped the project achieve positive change?

In what ways did she hinder this?

In what ways did the Reference Group help the project achieve positive change?

In what ways did it hinder it?

Why do you think the MAP failed to gain more funding?
3. **Systems change**

In your own (area of work) (organisation) (networks) **have you seen the issue of maternal alienation taken up** since the Maternal Alienation Project?  
In what way?  
What do you think brought this about?  

**Or**  
Why do you think the issue hasn’t been taken up?  

Have you **advocated** for better understanding of maternal alienation and better services since your involvement in the project?  
Why/ why not?  
How?  
What was your experience of advocating like?  

4. **Understandings**

Would you say that you understand **mothers in violence** differently now?  
What difference?  
What brought this about?  

Would you say you understand the **relationship between mothers and children** differently?  
What difference?  
What brought this about?  

Would you say you understand **violence against women and children** differently?  
What difference?  
What brought this about?  

Would you say you understand **perpetrators** differently?  
What difference?  
What brought this about?  

Would you say that you have a different understanding of any of the **human services practice** relating to DV, mothers and children, child protection?  

5. **Your organisation**

Would you say you understand the **role of your organisation** in addressing violence against women and children differently?  
What difference?  
What brought this about?  

Anything else?  

Do you think work on maternal alienation should be **taken further** in your workplace?  
In your sector?  
More generally?  
How? What would assist?
6. **Finally**

(Are there any other questions you think I should have asked?)

Is there anything else you want to say about the issue of maternal alienation and your experience of being involved in MAP?
Appendix 2

Individual and Organisational Change
in relation to the concept maternal alienation

Information Sheet for Interviewees

My name is Anne Morris. I am undertaking research for my PhD (in Gender Studies, University of Adelaide). I will be conducting interviews and focus groups which I would like to tape and analyse to identify how workers deal with new information on maternal alienation. The research aims to understand how practitioners and managers have responded to the concept maternal alienation and the process of developing improved services to clients.

I would like your permission to conduct an interview with you either individually or in a focus group. Your permission for this is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from the research at any time. If you participate, you can choose not to answer questions or discuss matters you don’t wish to discuss.

All your identifying details will be kept confidential. Names and other details that could identify you will be changed in all write-ups of the interview material, and pseudonyms will be used. I would like to tape interviews and transcribe parts of these tapes. Tapes and transcripts will be kept locked in a secure location and destroyed 5 years after the PhD is completed.

I can give you a copy of the transcript of your interview for you to check if you wish.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you want to discuss any of this further. If you would rather speak to someone else, you can talk to my supervisor, Dr Margie Ripper (see below). If you wish to make a complaint or speak to someone independent of this project, see the attached Independent Complaints Procedure Statement for how to do this.
Contact Details
Anne Morris
Gender Studies and Labour Studies
University of Adelaide
8303 5071
0421 019 790
anne.morris@adelaide.edu.au

Dr Margie Ripper
Senior Lecturer
Gender Studies and Labour Studies
University of Adelaide
8303 5947
Margie.ripper@adelaide.edu.au
Individual and organisational change in relation to the concept *maternal alienation*
Research undertaken by Anne Morris for PhD
(Gender Studies, University of Adelaide)

Consent Form for Practitioners & Managers

- I, ……………………………………………………………………………………………… (please print name) consent to take part in the research project *Individual and Organisational Change in relation to the concept maternal alienation.*
  - Individual interview
  - Focus group

- I acknowledge that I have read the attached Information Sheet for Interviewees.

- I have had the project, so far as it affects me, fully explained to my satisfaction by the research worker. My consent is given freely.

- Although I understand that the purpose of this research project is to improve the quality of organisational responses to maternal alienation, it has also been explained that my involvement may not be of any benefit to me personally.

- I have been given the opportunity to have a member of my family or a friend present while the project was explained to me.

- I have been informed that, while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal details will not be divulged.

- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and that this will not affect my treatment by services, now or in the future.

- I understand that I do not have to answer questions I do not wish to answer.

- I understand that if I do not want my interview taped, the interviewer will take notes instead.
  - I DO
  - I DO NOT wish to have my interview taped

- I understand that I will be given transcripts of my interview if I wish.
  - I DO
  - I DO NOT wish to a transcript of my interview.

- I understand that I will be provided with information about the results of the study if I wish.
  - I DO
  - I DO NOT wish to receive information about the results of the research.
If you wish to receive a transcript of your interview or be informed about the results of the research, please provide contact details. Transcripts will be given to you personally, not sent in the mail.
Address and/or phone numbers or email address:

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........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

9. I am aware that I should retain a copy of this Consent Form, when completed, and the attached Information Sheet.

........................................................................................................................................

   (signature)  
   (date)

WITNESS

I have described to ........................................... (name of subject)
the nature of the procedures to be carried out. In my opinion she/he understood the explanation.

Status in Project:

........................................................................................................................................

Name:

........................................................................................................................................

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........................................................................................................................................

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   (signature)  
   (date)
Appendix 3
Richard Hillman Foundation Website Posting
06/10/02

Gender Politics must be relegated to the status of Holocaust Revisionism
Posted by kalston on Sunday, October @ 06:17:33 EDT

The Richard Hillman Foundation Inc. is calling for the Premier, the Hon Mike Rann, and his Government Ministers, the Hon. Lea Stevens, Dr. Jane Lomax Smith and Stephanie Key to immediately withdraw their support for, and distance themselves from, the Maternal Alienation Project launched recently in partnership between the Northern Metropolitan Community Health Service, Women’s Health Statewide (WHS) and the University of Adelaide, Gender Studies Team.

Sunday, 6th October, 2002

Richard Hillman Foundation Inc
Via:
FalseAllegations @yahoogroups.com

RHF Inc believes that, without proper and community debate, gender-based, hate-politics of this type has no legitimate place in the formulation of our social and public policy and should be afforded the same credibility as is Holocaust Revisionism.

Social Worker and spokesperson for the Richard Hillman Foundation Inc., Ms Matilda Bawden said, ‘Abuse and Alienation are serious issues in all cases of family breakdown and official acknowledgement of this is long overdue. However, they are perpetrated by both genders, against both genders and across all age and socio-economic groups. Accordingly, taxpayer resources must not be siphoned away into forums with vested interests which will ensure that some forms of alienation or systems abuse become officially acceptable (ie. against fathers) by claiming to combat others (ie. those against mothers).

‘Most people will point to either examples of inadequate interventions where evidence of abuse and /or neglect was clear and self-evident, or examples where excessive interventions have been forced upon families where abuse and neglect is highly doubtful, to highlight systemic injustices. That is only to be regarded as symptomatic of systems where accountability is poor, at best’.

RHF Inc believes that greater funds and resources should be channelled only into areas which will promote greater scrutiny and public accountability of those same systems, such as the current Child Protection Review headed by Robyn Layton QC, which the Foundation believes is grossly underfunded and under-resourced given its importance to the community. Instead, the Maternal Alienation Project makes a mockery of the current Review since it is geared towards bypassing this process of input and evaluation to implement practice models which will necessarily pre-empt/over-ride any recommendations which one might reasonably expect to be covered by the Review.
Ms Matilda Bawden said, ‘Government policy must not be set on the basis of a handful of name-less, face-less, hypothetical or fictitious anecdotes which can neither be qualified or quantified. In fact, this project makes no attempt to conceal its agenda of regulatory capture of public institutions such as Family and Youth Services (FAYS) and Family Court, but with a distinct anti-male bias, based on little more than one academic’s view of the world’.

RHF Inc. claims that the project is fundamentally flawed and intellectually dishonest on a number of fronts. Firstly, it is based on the premise that the concept of Parental Alienation is one which has been designed solely to serve the “men’s rights movement” to oppress mothers. Ms Bawden said, ‘if “maternal” alienation has been such a problem, why is it that despite all the Government funding and resources that are poured into women’s legal, educational, social and administrative services, it has taken over twenty years to bring this to light? What prevents mothers from applying the concept of Parental Alienation to legitimately address their perceived oppression, without having to resort to inventing their own unique terminology/language?’.

Secondly, it claims that the majority of contested cases before the Family Court involve, or are disputed on the grounds of, domestic violence and that women are victims in all or most allegations of domestic violence. Ms Bawden said, ‘Yet, if we accept this, why is it that after more than two decades of a Sole Custody presumption by the Family Court where over 90% of all custody cases result in Sole Custody being awarded to the mother, many Federal politicians are now starting to accept that a Rebuttal Presumption in favour of Joint Parenting by the Family Court needs to be enacted, as being in the better “interests of the child”, and many members would now support such legislation in principle?’.

RHF Inc. sees this project as a fearful and reactionary response to a rapidly-growing, community-driven backlash against outdated thinking about the role of fathers within the family unit. The gender-feminist mantra which has formulated and shaped the directions of our child protection services over the last two decades would also have us believe that:

- Children never lie,
- Three in five women have been sexually abused at some time in their life,
- 97% of domestic violence offences are perpetrated by men, and
- Every male accused is a perpetrator, paedophile and predator.

But when examined up-close, these throw-away premises prove time and again to amount to little more than furphies which prop up the multi-million dollar industries in child protection and domestic violence reserved exclusively for women and, purportedly, children. The result of this trend has seen:

- FAYS adopt the position that it owes no Duty of Care.
- Single parent families almost treble in 30 years
- Male suicides in Australia, due to relationship breakdown, placed at three men a day, and
• Custody and access disputes within the Family Court making up one of the top five issues that elected members are contacted about by their constituents every day, it would appear that the systems which have been based on such falsehoods are at serious risk of imploding in on themselves.

RHF Inc is urging all Ministers to properly turn their attention to publicly funding and endorsing only those projects, policies and practices which will promote healthy attitudes within the community towards committed, stable and long-term relationships, as the viable alternative to the hetero-sexual-bashing, hate-politics which has permeated the directions of many public institutions.

For further information, please contact ……..
Appendix 4

Maternal Alienation Fact Sheet

What is maternal alienation?

Sometimes a man who is violent within his family alienates children from their mother as an ongoing part of that abuse. He often isolates his partner from any sources of support, and is skilful at convincing her family, the neighbours, the children’s school, and any professionals involved with the family, that she is mad or bad. This type of abuse has been called maternal alienation.

It generally occurs within a context of violence against women and/or children, and is a term for both

- the range of tactics used by men to deliberately undermine and destroy the relationship between mothers and their children
- the profound and often lasting alienation created in the relationships between mothers and their children by the use of those strategies

Maternal alienation

- is simultaneous abuse of women and children
- is a form of emotional abuse
- occurs within both domestic violence and child sexual abuse

Men who alienate children from their mothers usually manage to convince the children and all those involved with the family that they are blameless and misunderstood, and the mother is to blame for all the problems. In this way, maternal alienation successfully hides the man’s responsibility for the violence and abuse, and directs people’s attention towards the so-called ‘bad’ mother. The man who uses these tactics remains ‘invisible’.

What is the evidence for it?

.... In the area of Child Sexual Abuse

A number of researchers and practitioners in the 1990’s researched the tactics used by child sex offenders to isolate and entrap the child he was abusing. They found that the offender's greatest concern was to break a child's trust in her/his mother.

"The most common tactic acknowledged by (sex offenders) was that of dividing mother and child" (Laing, 1999, 147).

"the abusive man had appeared to 'take over' the child, drawing her into the secrecy surrounding the abuse and excluding the mother" (Hooper, 1992).

"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" (Laing & Kamsler, 1990, 169).

"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).
... In the area of Domestic violence
Recently there has been concern about the damaging effects of domestic violence on children, and some understanding of the manipulation of the mother-child relationship by men who use violence and abuse.

“Many practitioners and women commented that the undermining of the relationship between women and their children is a common behaviour perpetrated by men who are violent” (Irwin, Waugh & Wilkinson, 2002, 129).

Maternal alienation is deliberate and intentional. This element of intention has long been recognised as an aspect of violence against women.

Gendered violence is intentional and patterned, and aimed at achieving certain outcomes (Dobash & Dobash, 1998, 141; Ptacek, 1988, 150).

Through "the instilling of fear, the humiliation, the degradation, the assault on her identity as a woman", (Ptacek, 1988, 147), perpetrators of violence set out to punish, to inflict injury, to silence, to isolate and to maintain dominance and control over their partners. Maternal alienation uses all these ingredients of violence against women, in a form that is directed also against her relationship with her child.

... From 1999 Research on Maternal Alienation
In 1999 a research project was carried out in the north of Adelaide to investigate what had been perceived as an aspect of violence against women and children. This phenomenon had not received adequate recognition, and during the research, the term maternal alienation was coined to name it (Morris, 1999).

The research identified a number of tactics commonly used by men to destroy the mother-child relationship. These were based on both

- demeaning the mother as a figure to be despised
- elevating the father as both a victim and a hero (Morris, 1999, 1999/2000).

Maternal alienation is a powerful strategy of abuse. Its power is drawn from the tendency in our society to trust and believe what men say over and above what women and children say. Its power is also drawn from the tendency to give more credibility to those who appear logical and calm, over those who seem distressed. People who have been traumatised usually convey their testimonies in emotional and apparently incoherent ways, and what they say is often painful to hear (Herman). On the other hand, those that use power and control over others often speak logically and articulately, and so may be more likely to be believed.

Thus professionals and non-professionals alike may take up a man’s explanation that the mother is to blame for problems in the family, while he has been misunderstood and wronged. Indeed, the research found that, lacking an understanding of maternal alienation, service providers across many services and sectors tended to believe the man and often acted to exacerbate the family situation (Irwin et al; Morris, 1999).

When and where does it occur?

It appears that maternal alienation is a common element of domestic violence, as well as a part of child sexual abuse. The men who perpetrate maternal alienation may not be the fathers of the children involved, but are the perpetrators of abuse against that woman and/or her children. The targets of maternal alienation are the mother and her children.

In some families, men use maternal alienation as one of the modes of abuse that is ongoing in that family, so that children grow up continually exposed to these demeaning messages about, and behaviours to, their mother.
In other cases, maternal alienation begins when a couple separates, and a man may use maternal alienation as a strategy to gain control of the children, and to isolate and punish his ex-partner. Involvement in Court processes such as those to determine contact and living arrangements is one major forum for the use of these tactics. It is also common when maternal alienation is used at these times, for a man to attempt to turn a woman’s family and friends against her, as well as her children, and to try to involve other services such as Child Protection Services against her as well.

**Don’t women do it too?**

Most domestic violence and child sexual abuse is perpetrated by men (Irwin and Thorpe). Similarly, most ‘successful’ perpetrators of parent-child alienation are men. When women try to alienate their children against their father, societal structures and beliefs make this difficult for women to achieve successfully. People are more ready to hear and act on negative and blaming stories about women than about men. These views can be reflected by service providers that become involved with family members (Irwin et al; Edleson; Morris, 1999; Humphreys).

Also making it less likely for women to act to as alienators is their concern to support their children’s relationship with their father, even at a cost to themselves (Irwin et al; Mullender et al). The recent study by Mullender and colleagues reported that:

"what was remarkable...was the extent to which mothers were willing to maintain a variety of forms of contact between the children and their fathers, making judgements more on the basis of the children's wishes and interests than their own safety. This finding is consistent with that in earlier studies...thus demonstrating a pattern in women's decisions about contact that is at odds with what the courts frequently assume" (198).

**Who are affected?**

As maternal alienation is simultaneous abuse of children and women, both children and women are affected by it. The effects can last a lifetime.

**Effects on children:**

- Children are divided from their mother, and are blocked from accessing her as a loving and nurturing parent
- Children’s trust in loving relationships is undermined
- Children are affected in many ways by being used as ‘pawns’ in the man’s long campaigns against mother and/or child.
- Children are trapped in a world created and controlled by the abuser
- Children are often coached into perpetrating abuse and violence against their mother – and this may affect their later relationships with other women
- Children are punished for not participating in abuse against their mother
- Children often cannot heal from the effects of being subject to abuse while they are forced to adopt the ‘realities’ of the perpetrator
- Children are caught up in a primary relationship with a parent who is inconsistent, tyrannical and puts his needs above those of his child. He may continue his abuse against the child
- Children often take up the role of carer for their father, and subjugate their needs to his
Effects on women:

- Women often blame themselves, and see themselves as the person others see them as – that is, as the person portrayed by the man who abuses her.
- Women are isolated and alienated from their family and community – sometimes for the rest of their life.
- Women feel enormous grief and pain at ‘losing’ their children.
- Women find that they have little room to ‘move’ – whatever they do, their words and actions are re-interpreted by the abuser (to children, family, community, professionals).
- Women are traumatised by continual emotional abuse and the undermining of their relationships and attempts to communicate.
- This constellation of effects impact on women’s ability to represent themselves well in forums such as the Family Court.

What is being done about it?

Maternal alienation and its devastating effects on children and women need to be understood by more people. If more people and more services to families recognised it, something could be done about it. These people and services include:

- Families
- Neighbours
- Schools
- Police
- Community Health workers
- Judges and Magistrates
- Lawyers
- Family Court officials
- Child protection workers
- Child-care workers
- Child Health workers
- Domestic violence services
- Religious leaders

People and services involved with the mother and/or children can make a positive difference if they:

- support the mother to help her rebuild her relationships with her children. This enables her to support and protect her children in the future, as well as helping her overcome the effects of violence and abuse herself. The latest research points out that good practice for better child protection should be built on supporting the mother, (Irwin, Waugh & Wilkinson, 2002; Mullender, Hague et al, 2002) not blaming or punishing her further (Edleson, 1998).
- understand and make visible the role of the man who uses abuse in this way. The invisibility of the perpetrator of abuse is an unhelpful, even dangerous tendency (Edleson, 1998) and is a strong factor in services not being able to address his continuing campaign against mother and child.

A project called the Maternal Alienation Project was set up in Adelaide in August 2002 to inform professional workers about maternal alienation and develop tools for addressing its effects on children and women. This project, set up as a partnership between Northern Metropolitan Community Health Service, Women’s Health Statewide and University of Adelaide, needs further funding to complete its work as planned.
Where can I find out more?

There are some publications that are helpful (they have been referred to in this fact sheet):


You can contact:

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Appendix 5

Maternal Alienation Project
Reference Group
Terms of Reference

Meeting Frequency
The Reference group will meet monthly from September 2002 until the end of the project.

Membership
The Reference Group will consist of managers representing the following organisations:

1. Women's Health Statewide
2. Senior Project Officer, Maternal Alienation Project
3. Department of Social Inquiry, University of Adelaide
4. Senior Policy Officer, Interpersonal Violence, Department of Human Services
5. Northern Metropolitan Community Health Service
6. Office for the Status of Women
7. Family And Youth Services
8. Coalition of SA Women's DV Services
9. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
10. Family Court
11. Attorney-General's
12. NW Children & Families Integration Programme
13. Professor Liz Kelly, CWASU, London Metropolitan University, U.K.

Role
The Reference Group will support the Maternal Alienation Project to achieve its outcomes, particularly in the area of systems change. It will achieve this by:

1. Promoting the project within the members' services and networks, and disseminating information that becomes available from the project.
2. Undertaking responsibility for achieving adequate funding for the completed project.
3. Providing advice on the evaluation of the project.
4. Supporting the Project Officer in developing strategies to operate successfully at all levels of the project to achieve the project's outcomes.
5. Recognising opportunities that may exist locally, statewide, nationally and internationally, to promote the project and maximise its outcomes, and assisting the Project Worker to take advantage of these opportunities.
Appendix 6
‘Mud-map’ of MAP’s areas of influence