

**A multitheoretical perspective for addressing domestic and family violence: Supporting fathers to parent without harm**

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Published

2021

Journal Title

Journal of Social Work

Version

Accepted Manuscript (AM)

DOI

[10.1177/14680173211028562](https://doi.org/10.1177/14680173211028562)

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# **A multi-theoretical perspective for addressing domestic and family violence:**

## **Supporting fathers to parent without harm**

### **Abstract**

**Summary.** Domestic and family violence remains a significant challenge to family wellbeing. The risk of serious harm from domestic and family violence is disproportionately carried by women and children, yet often the complex reality of family life means that many families have ongoing contact with their abusers. Responses to this problem are frequently siloed across child protection and specialist domestic violence services, leading to a lack of holistic intervention. More recently, there has been increased attention on addressing the role and behaviour of abusive fathers, especially where fathers remain in families or have ongoing contact post-separation through coparenting. This paper offers a systemic approach for understanding and addressing such families.

**Findings.** An integrated theoretical framework is proposed, which draws together key tenets of feminism, family violence and intersectional theories within a systems-oriented model. It frames families, inclusive of fathers, within their eco-social contexts, highlighting factors that exacerbate domestic and family violence, and those that increase family safety, which has strong applications for social work practice.

**Applications.** An integrated theoretical framework offers an approach for social workers for understanding domestic and family violence in a broad-based and holistic manner, and for developing coordinated family-focused interventions while concurrently addressing related child welfare concerns and family safety. A range of considerations for case management of families are explored, which, while relevant

to most intact families or those who have continuing contact with perpetrators, holds particular relevance for marginalised families that present with complex needs and experiences of disadvantage.

### **Introduction**

Domestic and family violence is a problem that impacts on families whether living together, or separated, and is understood as aggressive, violent, coercive or controlling behaviours between partners and between parents/caregivers and their children, including exposing children to violence or abuse (Queensland Government, 2016; World Health Organisation, 2020). The focus of this article is domestic and family violence perpetrated by fathers, hence perpetrators will be referred to as fathers, though we acknowledge that all humans have the capacity for violence.

A major challenge for domestic and family violence interventions focused on women and children's safety lies in complexities arising from families having ongoing contact with perpetrators. This presents a major risk to women and children, as evidenced by domestic and family violence registers and homicide rates (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018; Brown & James, 2014; Scott & Crooks, 2007). A pertinent focus for responding to risk lies in effectively addressing offending fathers.

There is something of an impasse both theoretically and in practice where families maintain contact with fathers who have perpetrated violence, yet this is a lived reality for a large number of families and there are complex reasons why this occurs (Holt, 2015; Mayer, 2017). It is not always simply a matter of choice to separate from a violent father. This decision is affected by complexities of trauma, compound disadvantage, interactional and cultural dynamics that are the lived experience of families attempting to manage safety. For support services, ongoing family contact is often seen as less than ideal, but it is a circumstance they must

address in their daily work (Humphreys et al., 2018; Tsantefski et al., 2018).

Currently there are few interventions that address whole-of-family complexity and safety when families choose to stay together or have continuing contact (Humphreys & Campo, 2019).

Where children are involved, a multipronged and integrated response is required to ensure safe contact (Eckhardt et al., 2008; Humphreys, et al., 2019). Much of the work involves addressing fathers to shift patriarchal entitled attitudes towards more child-centred parenting and respectful coparenting, while also addressing underlying issues such as mental ill-health. However, historically, support services for domestic and family violence-affected families have not had mandate nor resource-capacity to engage fathers. Further, child protection services have traditionally focused interventions on mothers as primary carers (Humphreys & Bradbury-Jones, 2015), despite fathers often remaining involved with their children.

A general shift in addressing fathers has been to clearly assign responsibility to them for their behaviour (Safe & Together, 2016). However, it is well documented that engaging fathers around their abusive behaviour is challenging (Lilley-Walker et al., 2016). Many do not see their behaviour as more problematic than that of their partner (Kelly & Westmarland, 2015; Stanley et al., 2012). Further, interactional family behaviours are complex, with some potentially increasing survivors' vulnerability to abuse and others reducing or mitigating them. However, exploration of interactive factors is controversial because it can lead to assumptions of cause and effect or provocation (Brown & James, 2014). It is important to stress that women and children are never to blame for an aggressor's behaviour (Mayer, 2017). There has also been reticence in considering the role of family dynamics and functioning, possibly due to concerns about diluting father responsibility, despite

interactive family dynamics being influential over safety and wellbeing. Not considering factors that may promote safety while contact between known perpetrators and their families continues is also replete with risk (Holt, 2015).

It is argued as highly relevant to examine how interactional dynamics may exacerbate the risk of violence or abuse (Heise, 1998; Winstok, 2007). Within social work practice in the domestic and family violence service sector, addressing interactional and family system factors is complicated by conflicting theoretical perspectives, values and debates over how best to frame and respond to the problem within families. This paper proposes a multi-theoretical perspective which facilitates exploration of family and other system interactions to broaden praxis paradigms, exploring its applications for social workers engaging with violence-affected and marginalised families.

### **Theoretical approaches for understanding and addressing domestic and family violence**

Prominent theories of relevance which address domestic and family violence are feminist, family violence and intersectional theories. Each theory offers a critique that is important and relevant for understanding domestic and family violence in couple and family relationships. Colonisation theory also has credence, especially for First Nation communities. It is an intersectional issue that, while not the focus of this paper, needs to be considered in an integrated approach to domestic violence. Overarching, these identified perspectives may address some of the complexities and safety concerns that families present with. However, they also diverge substantially in conceptualisation and responses to families that choose to stay together, or where fathers remain in contact with their children, as supported by

many family law rulings (Easteal et al., 2018). A central feature absent from individual theoretical perspectives is a focus on the complex dynamics and the unique ecosystem characteristics of families, which have capacity to exacerbate or ameliorate domestic and family violence. These are more effectively identified using systems theory, which is also considered a salient approach. Preeminent domestic and family violence theories have been largely polarised from one another which has reinforced the separation and siloing of responses to mothers and children and to fathers as perpetrators, even when families remain together. This complicates holistic service-responses to families which, it is argued, would be better addressed using family systems analysis.

### **Feminist theory and its limitations for continuing family contact**

Feminism as a theoretical framework encompasses a broad school of thought (Phillips, 2006), addressing gender equality and promoting equal rights and opportunities for men and women. In general, feminist perspectives critique patriarchy and the assertion of male dominance and power over women as a socially institutionalised norm (Brown & James, 2014; Lawson, 2012). Feminist constructions generally understand domestic and family violence as a continuing pattern, featuring physical, psychological, emotional, and more recently acknowledged, financial, social and spiritual abuse (Brown & James, 2014; Morley & Dunstan, 2016). Gendered-lens feminist perspectives centre on the causal motivation for men's use of violence as exertion of power and control over women, including the socialisation of men into attitudes of male superiority and the oppression of women within a supporting socio-structural context (Featherstone & Fraser, 2012). However, there are many schools of feminism. Some First Nation and Black feminisms broaden from general tropes to include contextual factors which are

considered to oppress and marginalise women, including historical and present-day trauma, colonisation and systemic disadvantage (Hooks, 1982; Lucashenko, 1996); and these perspectives that have created a foreground for intersectional perspectives.

Feminist approaches generally acknowledge ongoing family violence as an untenable context for family members, while also accepting that separation does not always make families safer, especially where perpetrators continue to have access to their children and children's mothers, post-separation (Katz et al., 2020; Safe and Together Institute, 2016; Smith & Humphreys, 2019). As a limitation, general feminist conceptions of domestic and family violence do not focus on interactive family function. Though some feminisms accept eco-social contextual factors as influential over abuse, these are not generally explored to identify potential avenues for increasing safety (Mayer, 2017); as promoted within systems theory.

Consideration of interactive dynamics as a cause for domestic and family violence may be seen by some feminists as collusion with and dilution of men's responsibility. The risk of colluding when addressing men's violence against women is significant, but so too is the risk of negating burgeoning perpetrator behaviour-change where it may improve family safety (Hearn, 2012). Further, while there may be a propensity for some feminist theories to spotlight the violence and control of male perpetrators as a central if not sole focus for intervention, avoidance of other influencing factors becomes problematic when seeking to promote safer interaction in intact families. Of course, any intervention that addresses family interaction alongside father violence requires his readiness to take responsibility (O'Leary, Day, Foster & Chung, 2009) and the centrality of this cannot be overstated.

### **Family violence theory and its limitations for continuing family contact**

Family violence theories, while not in direct conflict with feminist theories, offer alternative perspectives on domestic and family violence that locate the primary instigation for abuse within the systems individuals participate in (Lawson, 2012). These range from: family systems (exchange theory and social control theory); a family's socio-cultural ecosystem (ecological theory); the resources an individual has access to (resource theory); to, the subculture-system's norms of violence (subculture-of-violence theory) (Jewkes et al., 2015; Lawson, 2012).

Family violence theories, in general, focus on structural causes of domestic and family violence, such as fertile cultures of multi-system violence. These are predominantly gendered, characterised by male entitlement, and expressed through tactics of coercion, manipulation and control (Brown & James, 2014; Graham-Kevan, 2007). Violence is understood as emerging relative to the purpose it serves socially. This includes violence related to fighting for scarce resources, identification with a violent subculture, or violence as instrumental for maintaining control or equilibrium within couples, families and cultures (Lawson, 2012). Some family violence theories are heavily critiqued for arguing gender-symmetry in couple violence, indicating that there are equal rates of violence perpetration across genders (Babcock et al., 2005; Kelly & Westmarland, 2016).

Like feminist theories, family violence theory interpretations about the nexus and perpetration of domestic and family violence do not account for dynamic inter- and intra-system factors exacerbating violence, except within a limited scope. If attribution for the spectrum of domestically violent behaviour is limited it is argued that interventions will potentially miss important violence-triggering and -reducing interactions; which systems theories readily identify. They may also fail to empower



perpetrators towards making important shifts in their attitudes and behaviours; thus, interventions are unlikely to move survivors towards increased safety. This raises particular concerns for the application of family violence theory perspectives when families who have had substantial experiences of domestic and family violence remain together.

A small number of family violence theory-based frameworks support the exploration of contextual life factors as influential on violence outcomes, for example, the risk-needs-responsivity model that is frequently utilised for case management of criminal justice offenders (Radatz & Wright, 2016). However, the interactive dynamics between factors are not a focus of the risks-needs-responsivity framework. By contrast, highlighting the value of family interactions, Winstok (2007) identifies the ways that interactional contexts can impact on violence. It is one perspective that attempts to situate interactional patterns as contributing to violence, creating a “ripple effect” of possible violent outcomes. Considering the wider ecological context, applying systems theory offers an opportunity to advance understanding of behaviour displayed in family interactions.

### **Intersectional theory and its limitations for continuing family contact**

The concept of intersectionality was initially developed in the US to understand the experiences of women of colour affected by victimisation and criminal justice interventions (Crenshaw, 1991). Over time, this group has widened, and intersectional theory offers an opportunity to better understand the experiences of marginalised families affected by domestic and family violence. Acknowledging the intersection of domestic and family violence with other complex family needs and stressors, it provides a perspective on a fathers’ use of violence that echoes some

family violence theory principles (Crenshaw, 1991). It describes violence and disempowerment as resulting from cumulative experiences of compounding inequity and vulnerability (Cho, et al., 2013; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005a; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005b).

This perspective frames the dominant feminist concept of domestic and family violence crossing boundaries of race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation, as minimising the significance of the diverse vulnerabilities experienced by individuals at the margins of society (Crenshaw, 1991; Nixon & Humphreys, 2010; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005a). This perspective is acknowledged by First Nation Australian scholars who emphasise the compounding effects of colonisation, disempowerment and marginalisation that can affect survivors and perpetrators (Atkinson, 1990; Lucashenko, 1996).

Intersectional theory includes distal intergenerational abuse, disconnection from land and/or slavery involving violent, hostile, inhumane treatment and hopelessness as well as general racism and classicism (Al'Uqdah et al., 2016; Lucashenko, 1996). Some of these factors are also explained and explored within colonisation theory as features of oppression which have special relevance for First Nation populations (Brownridge et al., 2017; Curthoys, 2020). Considering the intersection of multiple identities and the unique scope of abuses experienced by individuals that disempower and increase their vulnerability, theorists argue for more holistic and empowering responses to domestic and family violence (Lucashenko, 1996; Morley & Dunstan, 2016; Nixon & Humphreys, 2010; Tsantefski et al., 2018).

While intersectional theory, in practice, centres on supporting survivors of abuse, this is directed towards the most vulnerable, marginalised individuals and families (Morley & Dunstan, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991). Our assertion is that this lens

should be applied to understanding survivor experiences, perpetrator behaviour and family interaction more broadly, recognising that many families experiencing violence who are visible to social services have complex and nuanced factors of vulnerability and disadvantage, even when they do not present as the most marginalised (No to Violence, 2018). It is argued that, where families stay together or have ongoing contact with a father who has behaved abusively, there should be a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of intersecting risk factors associated with their degree of marginality, as supported through a family systems analysis.

Regardless of the framework applied, working with families where a father poses a high level of risk, characterised by male entitlement and motivation to maintain power and control over his family is cautioned against. Such men, sometimes described as “intimate terrorists”, are intransigent and resistant to change and remediation (Ferraro, 2017; Gondolf, 2011; Johnson, 2008); and, therefore, are beyond the scope of the proposed theoretical framework. While there is much interest and burgeoning investment in programs to address this high-risk subgroup of perpetrators, (Ferraro, 2017; Johnson, 2008) supporting their continuing contact with their families currently presents untenable risk, even for the integrated theoretical framework which focusses on addressing marginalised families and fathers.

**An Integrated Theoretical Framework, underpinned by Systems Theory, for  
augmenting understanding and practice in domestic and family violence  
contexts**

Systems theory has long been applied within therapeutic contexts to understand problems with family functioning and relationships. It involves multilevel analysis of families, identifying the spectrum of factors and interactive dynamics that

impact on functioning. Where domestic and family violence is a presenting issue, systems theory has been largely dismissed as an option through extensive critiques (McGregor, 1990; Shaw et al., 1996). Feminist critiques suggest systems theory does not adequately acknowledge the gendered nature of violence and fails to address prevalent gendered-power dynamics (Brown & James, 2014; Mayer, 2017). Intersectional perspectives sit in conflict with systems theory in specifying the nexus of difficulty for domestic and family violence as emerging from the multiple levels of abuse, oppression and disempowerment rather than the cumulative interactional experiences of families within and between systems. While systems theory has the most symmetry with family violence theories, its narrowed focus on specific systems excludes many family violence theory explanations, for example, violence emerging to manage scarce resources or perpetuate violent subcultures.

Though not traditionally valued as a domestic and family violence theory, systems theory is proposed as a foundational structure for the integrated systems framework. When informed by seminal and relevant tenets of feminist, family violence and intersectional theories including, importantly, a gendered perspective, however, an integrated theory founded on systems theory can facilitate a comprehensive, cohesive view of families experiencing domestic and family violence. Significantly, systems theory supports an understanding that family dynamics and system interactions are very influential over the functioning of families (Heise, 1998; Vertere & Cooper, 2001).

Systems theory presupposes individuals as socially constructed through interactions with the systems they are born into (Friedman & Allen, 2014). Foundational to an integrated theoretical framework, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory conceptualises a complex matrix of systems comprised of

microsystems (where individuals situate, such as within family and close friendships); mesosystems (individuals that families participate with that represent systems beyond the microsystem, such as school teachers, child protection workers and co-workers); exosystems (systems that indirectly impact on microsystems and mesosystems, including societal institutions of health and welfare such as schools and child protection services); and macrosystems (economic, legal and political systems that shape beliefs, ideologies and behaviours of societies) (Bronfenbrenner, 1981; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). A dimension not visually represented in Bronfenbrenner's model, the chronosystem considers the dimension of time and its impact on external and internal human development (Kruger et al., 2016).

Bronfenbrenner's model views family systems as affected by their own internal interactions and interactions with other systems in their broader ecosystem over time. This includes interactions with systems they are not directly involved in; where change in one system can cascade, impacting on inter-related systems. These interactions are a core focus of the integrated theoretical framework.

Phenomena that impact on family systems are described as horizontal and vertical stressors (McGoldrick et al., 2013). Borrowed from McGoldrick and colleagues' (2013) Lifecycle Model, within the integrated theoretical framework, horizontal stressors and supports are developmental and unpredictable interactions and life experiences; while vertical stressors and supports are interactions with historical concerns passed on through family systems, such as systemic advantage and privilege, or systemic disadvantage and structural violence, including intergenerational violence and disadvantage. The conflated model illustrated in Diagram 1, depicts the integrated systems framework. Underpinning practice applications of the integrated theoretical framework is consideration of how a family

system experiencing domestic and family violence might be addressed, considering the vertical and horizontal stressors and supports which may help or hinder their proactivity and wellbeing.

\*rough position for Diagram 1. Integrated Theoretical Framework

Integration of theory aims to improve the accountability of fathers in taking responsibility for their families' safety, which is especially important given their frequent continuing presence in families. Underpinned by clear feminist values, the integrated theoretical framework can guard against collusion or avoidance of responsibility for perpetrators. Feminist understandings of violence entitlement and coercive control can be employed to target relevant patterns of behaviour (Callaghan et al., 2018); supporting perpetrators to take responsibility for changing entitled attitudes, controlling and/or violent behaviours. Such an approach addresses a father-perpetrator's safer engagement with his family by undertaking a foundational analysis of contextual factors and stressors that facilitate, exacerbate or contribute to abuse. Further, intervention can include support for families to access therapeutic care to address trauma-related recovery programs as well as engaging fathers in supporting their families' recovery.

### **Applying an integrated theoretical framework to the domestic and family violence context**

Using an integrated theoretical lens, families are perceived as being significantly impacted by the actions of perpetrators and by broader eco-social factors including historical trauma and compound disadvantage. Reflecting feminist theories, the integrated theoretical framework represents fathers using power,

coercion, control and perceived entitlement within family systems, creating harm and/or fear for family members (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018; Crowley, 2017; Herrenkohl et al., 2008; Taylor, 2019; Wendt et al., 2015). This can be understood as an expression of lateral violence theory, where some men who are disempowered or victimised within broader society seek identification with male power in their families (Jewkes et al., 2015). This is a significant challenge for the family system, moving it towards increasing difficulty.

Reflecting family violence and intersectional theories and considering the chronosystem of fathers, the cooccurrence of male violence and inequality may influence a father's violent behaviour. It acknowledges factors such as a history of childhood trauma, modelled male entitlement and/ or a culture of toxic masculinity as contributing risk factors that interact with experiences of marginalisation and disempowerment (Murrell et al., 2007; World Health Organisation, 2018). While not excusing violence or aggression, these factors represent possible unconscious drivers of abuse which must be addressed concurrently with fathers' conscious attitudes and behavioural choices.

Abusive patterns of interaction can sometimes be reinforced by a father's coercive control and violence towards his family, which generally results in distress and trauma, causing dysfunction in the microsystem. A father may justify his violence, for example, as a way to maintain the status quo, assert his authority, or as reactive and unplanned behaviour. A mother may be influenced in her responses in a number of ways that may be responsive to this abuse. For instance, she may be influenced by the verbal insults she experienced in her family of origin, to resort to her own defensive verbal strategy; or she may utilise her knowledge of prior strategies that have placated or diverted his attention away from abuse (Pollack,

2004; World Health Organisation, 2018). In line with feminist understanding, verbal insults should not be construed as excusing physically violent responses.

Rationalising problematic interactions as the cause of violent behaviour can create collusion with the perpetrator, but identifying interactional patterns that escalate risk of violence also requires perpetrators to develop insight into ways of changing their behaviour.

It requires work with the whole family system to understand complex interactional patterns. There are dynamics, for example, that may influence escalation and the trajectory of outcomes which provide useful understandings of ways to divert violence. Reflecting intersectional theory, adding to an interactional malaise are cumulative vertical stressors such as unemployment, financial debt, homelessness, child protection investigations and disability care needs, which compound background stress (Humphreys et al., 2018; McGoldrick et al., 2013; Stover et al., 2013; Tsantefski et al., 2018).

Sometimes fathers make efforts to isolate their families to ensure that violence and resulting family dysfunction does not come to the attention of mesosystems or exosystems (Day & Bowen, 2015; Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research, 2018). Reflecting feminist theory understandings of men's strategies of abuse, blaming, gaslighting and instilling fear are understood as behaviours that fathers use to ensure that their behaviour is kept covert, and responsibility born by suppressed mothers and children. Compliance from family members who hope this will lead to a reprieve from abuse, is a typical response to violent, coercive and controlling behaviour, and is an example of a family's internal adjustive coping. Children and their mothers may also create adjustments in their interactions to prevent further violent behaviour, inadvertently supporting a father's



belief in his entitlement to behave this way. They may, alternatively or concurrently, seek alliance from (external) mesosystems including extended family, friends or school staff who may act to condemn or sanction a father's behaviour, or provide practical support to harmed family members (Humphreys & Bradbury-Jones, 2015; Pels et al., 2015; Wendt et al., 2015).

Research on abusive fathers highlights their strategic manipulation of service systems to ensure that abuse remains undetected or is framed as caused by mother's behaviour. Reflecting intersectional theory understandings, systems (exosystems and macrosystems) that are blind or unable to see through fathers' strategic system manipulation may intentionally or unintentionally collude with and compound a father's violence (Higgins & Kaspiw, 2008; Mandel, 2010; Kaspiw et al., 2009; Rendell et al., 2009).

Also reflecting intersectional theory, exosystems and macrosystems can be mixed in their capacity to stop domestic and family violence and, at times, have compounded survivors' oppression, for example: courts endorsing violent fathers' applications for domestic violence protection taken retributively against their partners; or child protection services holding mothers responsible for their children being exposed to domestic and family violence, resulting in them being removed from mothers' care (Easteal et al., 2018; Heward-Belle et al., 2018). Effective law enforcement responses at a mesosystem level, conversely, might empower women and/or connect them with salient supports that hold abusive fathers accountable. Many marginalised families, such as First Nation Australians and ethnic minorities, have had experiences of structural oppression, and some interventions have further entrenched this. Further, marginalised groups often experience differential outcomes to mainstream populations when engaged with criminal justice systems. Social

workers must be mindful of such histories and experiences and work respectfully with families', ensuring their ready and willing participation – in short, “doing with” rather than “doing to”.

As illustrated, using an integrated theoretical model allows for a whole-of-family framing which describes the nuances of context-specific family violence and its impacts over time. It facilitates the mapping of domestic and family violence, highlighting families' interactions across systems. In turn, this holistic picture can facilitate practitioners' development of well informed and salient family-system interventions which incorporate interactive domains and have a trained focus on father-engagement and mechanisms for safety monitoring. While this framework may not be suited for work with fathers who exhibit high levels of controlling abuse and lack commitment to change, work with moderate-level offenders who exhibit complex disadvantages, such as those described herein, and who display openness to change in order to support their families are considered appropriate.

As mentioned earlier, a foundational aspect of work with families using the integrated theoretical framework is securing the motivation of fathers to engage with change for their families, acknowledging the significance of harm caused through their actions, regardless of underlying factors. Father-perpetrators' motivation to change has been well documented as often prioritised towards desiring a relationship with their children (Humphreys et al., 2019). Therefore, engaging men around goals of becoming a better, safer, and more nurturing father are significant (Meyer, 2017; Stanley et al., 2012). However, this motivation should also be leveraged to concurrently address his violence, control and abuse towards his children's mother, which is considered a feature of supportive parenting. Motivation

of father and family and the promotion of safety form key aspects in the application of this framework to social work contexts.

### **Implications of an integrated theoretical framework**

It has been proposed in this paper that it is possible to converge key aspects of feminist, family violence and intersectional theories to create an integrated systems-based ecological framework that has constructive applications to both theory and intervention. Some of the difficulties in building integrated theory and intervention approaches reflect the political and gender nature of domestic and family violence. Political action and ideology centred on feminist theory were necessary to bring attention to domestic and family violence. As a result, the development of services has held an accountability to the women's movement and feminist standpoints. Services are now quite advanced in their responses, but practice also points to the irretractable issue of families often remaining in contact through couple reconciliation or other continuing family contact. Recognition of this challenge to the safety and wellbeing of families is not new but, as increasingly integrated service approaches become more sophisticated, the need for a more integrated theoretical framework that does not sacrifice sound foundational theoretical principles of effective domestic and family violence work is critical. Important also are its salient practical applications to social work.

In line with intersectional theory, it is important to consider the dignity, participation and empowerment of marginalised families, such as those to whom this theoretical model most clearly applies, who often experience disempowerment and oppression when engaging with the social services sector. An integrated response to impacted families should involve case management that is informed by the

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identification of nuanced need, explored through respectful dialogue and taking into account the diverse and complex needs, strengths and readiness of individuals. This may involve creating access for families to a range of interventions with trustworthy services and programs. It is recommended that six key considerations be attended to, as discussed below.

First, a father's willing and active participation in change must be ascertained and his engagement in relevant behaviour-change work secured as a foundational premise for family work. This might involve supporting him to address underlying mental health concerns, a history of trauma and/or PTSD. Within an integrated theoretical framework, a father's choice towards aggressive and/or violent responses must be addressed as a central problem for the family system. In practice, an integrated response should involve the formulation of individualised referral pathways into interventions for perpetrators. This may engage fathers with domestic and family violence-informed counselling or men's behaviour change programs. These should be overseen through case-managed and collaborative service responses that ascertain perpetrators' engagement in taking responsibility for their attitudinal and behavioural choices which have led to family violence and abuse. Responses to father-violence where families continue to remain together should also involve input from and coordinated engagement with criminal justice and legal systems as a father's behaviour reaches relevant thresholds. There are concerns that further contact with these systems may compound fathers' experiences of oppression and marginalisation, particularly for those of First Nation or ethnic backgrounds, who often experience negative outcomes. While a higher priority should be given to the safety for mothers and children who are experiencing violence and oppression at the hands of fathers/partners, these complex factors should be

given strong consideration. In principle and practice, family safety and recovery should be prioritised over a father's continued family engagement and concerns for his empowerment.

Second, a thorough understanding of the family context across systems (microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems and macrosystems) and changes to these over time (chronosystems) should be ascertained to develop a well-informed and family-collaborative intervention plan. Involvement of all family members in informing an emerging picture of family complexity is important. However, the voices of mothers and children are considered highly valuable for developing a clear understanding about the nuanced nature and impacts of family violence on survivors, and the mandate for social workers to advocate for these is highlighted. Further, women's reports are generally considered across the literature and in practice to be more reliable than fathers' (Trounson, 2017; Kelly & Westmarland, 2015). Since it is usually the safety of women and children which are of concern, their perceptions regarding their safety, how to proceed, and whether an intervention yields benefit are highly relevant. Overall, a converging picture taking into account the experiences of all family members is advised in order to develop a rich and textured understanding to inform emerging interventions and case management.

Third, social work practitioners should consider how family-identified interactional patterns which exacerbate or reduce violence and abuse, as seen across their chronosystem, may be utilised to increase safety for family members. Utilising a systemic integrated theoretical framework, some intermediate risk can be addressed by considering both violence-reducing and -exacerbating family interactions. Case management should engage impacted mothers with women's domestic and family violence services, including domestic violence counselling and

recovery groups as determined in collaboration with mothers, where the re-establishment of safety may occur. However, case work should also explore safety planning with mothers, considering safety-increasing and violence-reducing behaviours, informed by a mother's in-depth understanding of a perpetrator's prior behaviours. For fathers, in addition to perpetrator programs, case managers may refer them on a perceived-needs basis, for one-to-one domestic and family violence-informed or other mental health support counselling that will support them to develop behaviours that are non-abusive and promote proactive health management specific to their individualised concerns. With an extended understanding of interactive factors, both perpetrators and their partners may be supported to develop nuanced changes in their interactions that are responsive to unique relationship dynamics; capitalising on safety-promoting behaviour and reducing interactions that are known to exacerbate violence.

Fourth, social workers should consider how family-identified mesosystem supports and stressors impact on violence and abuse across the chronosystem and how these may be addressed. For mothers and fathers, the range of concurrent life stressors they identify can be addressed within case management approaches to help reduce family stress and difficulty. This may include addressing stressors such as unemployment, debt and financial insecurity, unsupportive or risky family relationships and friendships, impending legal issues, substance abuse and insecure housing. While engaging family members with relevant support to address these factors does not directly target abusive behaviour, systems theory indicates that, unaddressed, these factors interact with and contribute to stress which may spill over in increased family violence. Through addressing cumulative issues with relevant intervention, complex stress may be reduced and experiences of coping and

personal empowerment increased, therein reducing the likelihood of spill-over abuse. It is important to reinforce that such approaches are not recommended where fathers are motivated to coercively control and abuse their partners and children for instrumental rather than reactive reasons.

Following the identification of ecological stressors inherent in families, case management approaches should capitalise on existing strengths that improve safety and wellbeing. This may involve engaging supportive extended family members and friends who may mentor, provide childcare, or support relevant skills development for specific family members etc. It may also involve seeking further support from already-engaged services or accessing others to improve family coping and wellbeing. Through reducing complex family stress and increasing coping and empowerment, families may benefit in the reduction of stress-related reactive abuse from perpetrators.

Fifth, case management for families using the integrated theoretical framework should also emphasise the importance of trauma recovery, and planned interventions should address this goal. Recovery for families may include time apart for mothers and children from perpetrators, which may need to be facilitated. It may require the separation of fathers from their families for a period of time, even if longer-term goals are for reunification. Programs aimed at addressing domestic and family violence trauma recovery should be engaged for impacted mothers and children where needed and motivation to engage exists. Though referral for mothers has previously been discussed, services that provide therapeutic intervention for children impacted by family violence should be standard referral pathways.

Sixth, regular safety assessments of perceived and actual safety for families interacting with perpetrators are relevant for ensuring family safety and recovery.

This should involve gathering relevant information from family members and services to develop an informed and accurate picture of risk-related factors. This may sometimes involve practitioners contacting police services, even where this may cause ruptures to alliance. While building a foundation of trust with families is an essential component of positive engagement when applying the integrated theoretical framework, practitioners should prioritise safety.

Finally, determining what children and partners value in terms of future connection and contact with a previously abusive father is highly relevant for helping social workers determine the staging and phasing of interventions, as is maintaining their confidentiality in order to uphold safety (Kimball, 2016; Trounson, 2017). Mother and child perceptions are likely to be dynamic over time and require active monitoring alongside risk-assessment, through regular check-ins with family members.

### **Limitations of the framework**

This framework has a number of limitations. It has limited utility for childless couples, as it centres on family safety. While it focuses on fathers as perpetrators of abuse towards women and children, making it appear less relevant to same-sex couples with children, it actually holds the same utility where one partner is the predominant perpetrator of violence. However, it is important to reaffirm that the framework has limited applicability for families where fathers exhibit severe unilateral violence and are motivated to control and abuse their family members.

In applying the integrated theoretical framework, fathers' motivation to change is viewed as an essential precursory factor, as is families' motivation to participate in accessing support; thus, it has limited applicability where fathers or their families are reluctant to engage. However, it is considered to have strong utility where families



are at the nexus of compounding inequality and disadvantage and are motivated to access support.

### **Conclusion**

A number of concerns have been raised in this article surrounding systemic responses, particularly criminal justice responses, to marginalised individuals and groups, notably First Nation Australians, young offenders and culturally diverse groups. A clear social work value is to do no harm, but recognition of systemic failures and prejudices such as institutional racism requires practitioners to be ethically conscious of how they engage families in a system whose short comings have a disproportionate negative impact on vulnerable groups. This concern highlights the need, not for social work to be a custodian of the system, but an advocate for continued reform.

There remains a need for the integrated theoretical framework to be evaluated for effectiveness as a guide for social work practitioners in targeting improvements in coparenting and family functioning where domestic and family violence has been a historical issue. Priorities in practice to address family violence still need to focus on improving outcomes for women and children and further research is required to determine the framework's suitability in differential practice responses with affected families.

In conclusion, the holistic whole-of-family approach which the integrated theoretical framework offers, developed in response to unique family system needs with a focus on addressing the abusive behaviours and attitudes of fathers can capitalise on existing interactive family and broader system strengths to promote agency, recovery, safety and family wellbeing, while monitoring risk.

No funding was received towards the production of this article.

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