Ways of Knowing About Domestic Violence:

A critical review and discussion of the literature

Violence, Abuse & Neglect Prevention Service Wentworth Area Health Service
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Executive Summary

The aim of this paper is to expose the complexity of domestic violence with a view to promoting the need for more relevant interventions by NSW Health with families who experience violence. This paper uses insights from post-modern theory about knowledge to make sense of why some claims about domestic violence are dominant in NSW Health and others remain less visible.

The paper reviews and critiques claims made about domestic violence that are currently dominant in the field. These claims have emanated from feminist theory and the disciplines psychiatry and psychology. This research aimed to destabilise popular claims including:

1) domestic violence happens because of power inequalities between men and women,
2) women are powerless in the face of violence,
3) women don’t do violence or, the violence women do isn’t serious,
4) the legal system is an appropriate avenue for preventing all forms of family and domestic violence.

The claims about domestic violence evident in theories including trauma and attachment theory are also considered and it is discussed how these popular theories are both enabling and limiting for understanding and responding to family and domestic violence. The paper argues that claims emanating from feminism and the disciplines of psychiatry and psychology only provide partial accounts for the phenomena domestic violence. That is, they do not adequately explain why domestic violence happens nor do they adequately account for developing responses to domestic violence that are effective and sustainable.

The paper also features ways of knowing about domestic and family violence that are less visible in NSW Health. These ways of knowing consider the intersections between class, race and family violence. It is argued that these intersections are rendered invisible in current policy and debate because they destabilise the dominant claims regarding why domestic violence happens. Criticism is made of the universal risk theory – the claim that all women are at risk of violence because they are women - and it is argued that while domestic violence does happen across the social spectrum, it does not happen with the same frequency. There are significantly higher
levels of violence among indigenous Australian families and among families who experience relative economic and social deprivation in our society. This indicates that systems of power and oppression outside gender richly inform the occurrence of violence in the home. It is stated that an acceptance of this issue – that poverty and other forms of oppression are contributing causes for violence - renders the argument that domestic violence is a legal issue a disjuncture between the underlying causes of violence and policy response.

Innovative developments in responding to family violence in indigenous communities are also canvassed in the paper. These developments have been authored by indigenous people and accommodate the complex issues contributing to high levels of violence in Aboriginal communities including, of course, the effects of colonisation. It is argued that there remains a paradox in the NSW field of domestic violence that complexity is accommodated with regard to the issue of violence among indigenous people but is not accommodated when understanding domestic violence in non-indigenous communities.

Based on a critical review of the literature the paper concludes by making the following recommendations for Health policy and practices in the area of domestic violence.
Recommendation 1

That NSW Health develop policy about domestic violence that acknowledges domestic violence as a complex issue which can occur due to a number of reasons in different contexts. Specifically, structural inequalities including race and class issues need to be acknowledged alongside gender inequalities as a cause of violence in the home.

Recommendation 2

That NSW Health policy about domestic violence use gender-neutral language when referring to those who both do and are victimised by violence. Even if more women then men are victims of domestic violence, gender-neutral language can accommodate the fact that women do use violence and that men are victimised by domestic violence.

Recommendation 3

That NSW Health services develop practice and health promotion initiatives aiming to encourage respectful relationships within families and also encourage non-violent alternatives to dealing with conflict.

Recommendation 4

That NSW Health services develop practice initiatives that accommodate the multiple levels of violence in families. Workers should recognise that one form of violence in a family is sometimes an indicator of others.

Recommendation 5

That NSW Health services and relevant departments develop family and domestic violence policy and practice in consultation with the communities who are affected by them. This will involve a process of suspending the knowledge a service or worker might have about domestic violence with the aim of hearing contrasting knowledge that the consumers may have about the nature of violence in the home.

Recommendation 6

That further research is done in the area of family and domestic violence. Specifically, further research should be done in the area of women who use violence to enable a better and more diverse representation of this issue.
1. Introduction

For years many researchers have called for a comprehensive approach to family and domestic violence (Tomison 2000; Heise 1998; Gilligan 1996; Seth-Purdie 1996). Increasingly areas of Australian public policy, notably that written for the problem of indigenous family violence, are making links between aspects of family and domestic violence that until now have been treated in isolation effecting separate sets of policy, protocols and service provision for the respective form of violence. It has come to the attention of researchers and workers that one form of violence experienced by women and children is a likely indicator for another form of violence being present in their lives (Tomison 2000; Gelles & Straus 1979, 1988) and that some social groups in society are more exposed to violence than other groups (Memmott et al. 2001; Hood 1998). This research was funded to promote the need for developing comprehensive interventions in the area of family violence through making visible the complexity of violence in the home.

Despite the consistently high levels of violence in addition to data indicating family violence is a complex phenomena, there is resistance to understanding and working with family and domestic violence in a comprehensive multi-dimensional way. In most services, ‘domestic violence’ continues to be responded to as a separate problem with separate policies and interventions. This research understood the resistance to changing ways of working with domestic violence as a feature of the political processes involved when making meaning or having knowledge of the social world.

To date researchers in the area of family and domestic violence have focused on one of three areas of explanation: sociopolitical explanations including feminist theory, individual explanations including psychopathology and systemic theories which focus on interpersonal family dynamics (Maurico & Gormley 2001). This paper will review explanations these three areas offer for understanding family and domestic violence. Additionally, ideas outside of these areas will be discussed. In the paper, attention will be drawn to the way knowledge about family and domestic violence is historically and socially specific and a framework will be provided for understanding why competing theories about family and domestic violence are viewed as incommensurable by different social groups.
1.1 Resources for the project

The project was made possible via funding for a Domestic Violence Project/Research Officer in the Violence, Abuse & Neglect Prevention Services (VANPS) Wentworth Area Health Service. Susan Evans was employed in the position of project/research worker and had responsibility for conducting the research and writing the paper. A reference group was formed for the purposes of accountability and support for this position. The members of this group have a range of experiences and research interests that assisted the process of the project. Members of the group included Karin Lines, Director VANPS; Louise O’Brien, Senior Lecturer University of Western Sydney; Deanne Dale, Team Leader VANPS; Patrisha Parish, Consultant VANPS and Jane Ussher, Associate Professor University of Western Sydney.

1.2 Background Information & Research Methodology

The brief for the project was to undertake research in the area of domestic violence with the aim of making recommendations about Wentworth Area Health Service’s service provision in this area. An expectation was that the research be extensive in scope so that more recent ways of understanding and working in the area of domestic violence are made visible. Given this expectation, it became clear that the focus of the research become ‘family and domestic violence’ as increasingly literature refers to the intersections between different forms of violence in the home.

It is important to convey that the methodology for the project was developed from the assumption that neutrality in the research process and in reporting research findings is not possible and even undesirable. What is desirable is that the research process, values and perspectives of the researcher be made explicit so that the evaluation of the research can be made accordingly. The research employed a method of documentary analysis. In this paper, content of formal studies, professional papers and other literature is discussed and critiqued using insights from post-modern and critical social theories. The discussion intends to inform the reader of the many layers to be negotiated in an effort to understand and respond to the problem of family and domestic violence and make recommendations about future directions of working in this area.
Primary values informing the research include a belief in the value of all people and a desire for a world without violence. The theoretical perspectives informing the research will be discussed at some length in the following.

1.3 Theoretical Influences and Concepts

It is important to discuss in brief the theories informing the research project as these theories will determine what kind of knowledge the author believes can be achieved in the research process in addition to what language and structure is used to convey knowledge. The main theories informing the project are postmodern theories and critical social theories. These theories have been used in the selection of information to be used and inform the discussion of this information. Post-modern and critical social theories lend a wealth of ideas to critique ‘commonsense’ ways of knowing about family violence that materialize in the practices of Health workers.

A common theme in both postmodern and critical social theory is power. Critical theorists have traditionally focused on power relationships within society and exposed the forces of hegemony and injustice. These theorists assume that thought is mediated by power relations that are social in nature and that certain groups in society are privileged over others (1994:139). An example of this kind of theorising is Marx and Engel’s (1947-8) Communist Manifesto. This work is concerned with the history of class struggles and specifically how in the age of capitalism the struggle is between the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, exploiting the proletariat who have nothing but labor power to sell. Feminist theory as critical theory has also focused on power relationships within society. For example, a popular feminist position on domestic violence includes locating the abuse of women in a historical and political context as part of the systemic subjugation of women (Walker 1990:83).

The nature of power is also discussed in postmodern theory. Michel Foucault’s discussions of power are one of the most well known within the literature referred to as postmodern or post-structural. It is of note that Foucault conceptualises power as something in the hands of those who seem powerless and not only in the hands of those who seem powerful. Power is viewed in relational terms and is not static.

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1 Distinctions made between groups who ‘have’ power or don’t ‘have’ power are also problematised in critical social theory. Because this school of theory is questing for emancipatory knowledge and what ought to be done in the social world it is crucial to accommodate the oppressed having power (Crotty 1998:155) or the potential to access power.
Foucault would not say that one group of people has power, for example men, while another group is powerless, for example women. This project will use insights about power derived from post-structural theories to bring attention to the limitations of grand narratives that claim to explain violence.

A further theme featured in the project informed by both postmodern and critical social theory is discourse. The understanding of ‘discourse’ in the project has been influenced by Foucault and is being applied as a tool to make sense of ideology and the material effects of ideology. ‘Discourse’ refers to an embodiment of meanings and practices that exist in relation to competing knowledges and this relation is characterized by struggle. Also, each discourse has its own distinctive set of rules or procedures that govern the production of what is to count as a meaningful knowledge statement (Flax 1992, Agger 1998). It is a central tenant of this project that discourses make truth claims via the inclusion and exclusion of knowledge. What has counted as truth about family violence has been the effect of specific kinds of techniques and discursive practices deployed by government and social groups staking claims on knowledge. In order to emphasise the discursive production of the ‘truths’ espoused regarding family and domestic violence I will use the term ‘knowledges claims’ when referring to these ideas. The term ‘knowledge claim’ suggests a disregard for fact and a concern with the political processes of producing knowledge. In brief, then, using a discursive approach is more than a concern with causes of family and domestic violence or ways of intervening in violence in the home. To make sense of these forms of violence this paper scrutinizes the discursive constructions of family and domestic violence and discusses the conducts or interventions they warrant, that is, the material effects of these discourses.

The literature accounting for family violence is voluminous, fragmented and controversial with competing theories and solutions. This research has approached this predicament through the lens of approaching a discursive field; a site where knowledges are constructed through the operations of power that in turn allow for the possibility of truth claims such as feminist and psychiatric discourse. Discursive fields contain a number of competing and contradictory discourses with varying degrees of power to give meaning to and organise social processes. These operations of power

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2 The term discursive field is a derivative of Foucault’s discourse in addition to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of field. Bourdieu discussed the literary field as a social space that situates the agents who contribute to the production of culture via a power struggle (Macey 2000:128).
have made it possible for divisions between types of violence to be constructed which effect ‘hierarchies’ of violence to exist in knowledge and practices.

A review of the literature reveals that many theorists and workers seeking to understand or intervene with family violence are not informed by a single theoretical position. For example, a mental health worker working with a woman living in an abusive relationship may draw from psychological theories in addition to feminist theory in her practice with the woman. Here, the worker considers there is a number of causes of the violence experienced by the woman. The information in this paper, however, is structured to expose the different discursive positions groups or individuals take in the field of family violence. While concepts elaborated within one discourse may be taken up and rethought with another effecting greater understanding (Macdonell 1986: 3), this is not generally the case because integrating the constructions of some discourses may be impossible. For example, an understanding that a male does violence as an expression of an inner biological drive and the violence is outside his control seems incommensurable with a position that men, as rational beings, make choices to use their power to dominate women. The implications arising out of these positions, which are discursive positions, would be generally irreconcilable. It might be observed that this irreconcilability seems evident in the NSW context regarding domestic violence. The mental health field, via the dominant ways within that field of seeing violence, intervenes in a largely separate way to the legal system that is based on the premise that individuals are rational actors. The dominant players or disciplines in the domestic and family violence field including the mental health system, the legal system and the women’s sector, rarely reveal ambivalence in their knowing or remain unwilling to ‘know’ about violence differently. This is in spite of a mass of literature that acknowledges the complex and multifaceted nature of family and domestic violence. Exposing this complexity is an aim of this report.

1.4 Methodological Issues

The decision to do documentary research using a qualitative framework was informed by both theoretical and epistemological principles of the project in addition to the nature of the topic. It should be noted that this paper does not systematically evaluate the methodology of the formal studies and experiments reviewed. At times brief
comments regarding sampling methods are made to assist the reader in locating the context of these studies.

1.5 Parameters of the research & terms used

The act of giving a name to phenomena is political because names indicate what is included and excluded. The term *family and domestic violence* is used in the report to accommodate a concern with the various forms of violence that can occur in the home. *Family violence* is a term that denotes many forms of violence: between partners, toward children, elder abuse, sibling abuse and violence done by children toward parents (Gelles & Loseke, 1993). *Domestic violence* is a term used in the Australian context to describe a situation where one partner in a relationship attempts by physical or psychological means to dominate and control the other (Kirsner 2001:7). Most significantly it is a term that signifies violence done to women by their male partners. The naming of violence between partners has been keenly debated in the field and continues to be a controversial in a climate where the inclusion of difference or ‘other’ is a political trend. According to the Victorian Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre, the term *family violence* a more inclusive one and preferred by Indigenous communities in Australia to the more popular term *domestic violence*. In the US literature use of the term ‘family violence’ would signify an alliance with those theorists who do not privilege gender in their analysis of why violence happens. This report uses the phrase *family and domestic violence* to include violence done in the home by those family members who do not represent the white male breadwinner - the codified ‘wife basher’ featured in dominant domestic violence narratives. The term *experiencing violence*, when used in the paper refers primarily to the person victimized by the violence but at times is also accommodating the person doing the violence. While other forms of violence including child abuse will be featured in the discussions, the bulk of the report discusses violence done between partners. The reasons for narrowing the focus of the literature review and discussions to this aspect of violence in the home include time restraints of the project and the limited data available that use more eclectic understandings about forms of violence.

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3 Pam Greer, consultant for violence against woman in indigenous Australian communities, prefers the term ‘domestic violence’ so there is no confusion with it. Domestic violence means ‘when a partner hits or abuses you’ (2001:14).
1.6 The aim of the research

This paper discusses the dominant discourses in Health about family and domestic violence and makes efforts to destabilise such ways of knowing on the basis of their simplicity or on the basis of the exclusions these discourses make. The aim of this report is to prompt public debate, particularly within Health. The report does not attempt to evaluate interventions currently used by Health with people who have experienced violence in the home. The research was instead concerned with what knowledge and beliefs about the cause and processes of family violence have affected such interventions.
2. Gender and Violence

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will look at the claims made by those writers in the family and domestic violence field whom identify as feminist theorists. Claims made during the ‘second wave’ of feminism are now dominant in the discursive field of family and domestic violence. These claims have been made ‘truths’ and are produced and reproduced via policy and practices in Health and many non-government organisations.

There is a mass of material written by women and men who identify as feminist. This material is diverse and it is more appropriate to talk about feminist theories than refer to this material as homogenous. Despite the complexity and diversity of feminist thought, literature does refer to ‘feminist theory’ or state that a position is a ‘feminist’ one. This may be due to not wishing to interrupt the text with qualifications or it may be because ‘feminists’ are seen to have some common ground or share at least some assumptions. This paper will at times make reference to a singular ‘feminist/ism’ for either of these reasons. The following section does not aim to review the masses of information (statistics, theory, journal articles, policy) generated by feminists over the past 30 years about violence against women. Instead, salient claims weaving through the information generated will be discussed.

With regard to domestic violence, Walker claims “a feminist position starts with a validation of women’s experience, expresses anger at the range of victim-blaming stances… and is determined to locate the abuse of women in its historical and political context as part of the systematic subjugation of women” (1990:83). While there is no singular feminist position, Walker’s statement captures three themes common to feminist approaches to knowledge regarding domestic violence. One, authority to speak is given to women who have experienced the abuse. Two, there is a focus on the social context and the personal is politicised in this context. Three, in most feminist analysis (Berns 2001, Bograd 1990, Dobash & Dobash 1998) domestic violence is understood to be intrinsic to a system of male supremacy or patriarchy. Researchers in the field of domestic violence who identify as feminist focus on gender to explain the problem of violence. Some feminists in the field view unequal relationships between men and women to be the most important cause of violence.
while accepting that other causes exist. Others, however, convey that violence is caused exclusively by male dominance in the home and that ‘a feminist approach’ sufficiently explains domestic violence (Kurz: 1993, L. Walker: 1979).

2.2 Historical overview

The impact of feminist thought in the field of domestic violence took different forms in Western countries. In Australia the women’s movement comprised different groups of women having various ideas regarding what constitutes important issues for women. Common to most women within the movement, however, was a view of patriarchy as trans-historical. Liberal feminists and radical feminists as two distinct women’s groups within the movement had different perspectives in responding to violence (Carmody 2001). Liberal feminists believed that all women could achieve the rights and liberation from oppression within the Western capitalist tradition. Liberal feminists took action by getting involved in mainstream politics, forming groups such as the Women’s Electoral Lobby in 1972 to advocate for women’s interests. The fruit of this lobbying was the growth of government-sponsored campaigns in addition to some legal reform throughout the 1980’s in the area of domestic violence. Radical feminists in the 1970’s took action in the form of street protests and taking vengeance on men who had committed violence against women. In radical feminism at the time, the family was identified as a central locale of oppression needing to be completely eliminated (Reade 1994:210). Solutions proposed by radical feminism operated around women withdrawing into a separatist existence to avoid male influence, demonstrated in the development of non-government feminist refuges for women escaping domestic violence. Maintaining a distance from government enabled these feminists definitional control in the area of domestic violence despite ongoing difficulty with funding. While liberal feminists’ alignment with the state enabled more services to be funded, a struggle for dominance in regards to defining violence in the home and how services should respond to it was the inevitable outcome of such an alignment.

In retrospect we can see how the combination of feminist grass roots activism and the work of femocrats in the bureaucracy has led to a pervasive feminist ‘flavour’ in NSW domestic violence policy and practice. It has been observed that the influence of feminism in shaping policy and practice in the areas of sexual and domestic violence
in NSW is ‘astonishing’ (Breckenridge & Laing1997: 21). The Keys Young report to the National Crime Prevention 1999 commented on the growing convergence around ‘the feminist analysis of power and gender’ informing service delivery in the area of domestic violence. The Keys Young report also made recommendations that funding be made available as a priority to programs promoting a feminist philosophy. The limitations of employing this strategy will be discussed in the paper.

2.3 Definitional Issues

The way we define something shapes knowledge creation and therein the action we take. The struggles of the 1970’s up until today shows that the exercise of naming and defining a phenomenon such as violence in the home is a political act which has material effects (policies and practices). As discussed above, second wave feminism saw gender inequality as the reason for the violence being done in the home. Hence the violence was named ‘wife abuse’, ‘violence against women’ and in the USA ‘wife battering’. The naming is an extension of the knowledge second wave feminism constructed about violence in the home; that violence is a husbands’ means of obtaining dominance in a patriarchal marriage (Martin: 1976) and a tool used to oppress women and children.

2.4 Salient issues in feminist knowledges about family and domestic violence

In order to review and discuss some of the feminist contributions to the area of violence in the home this section will consider six themes salient in feminist literature, with the themes having been constructed via a content analysis of the literature. The main idea or knowledge claim discussed within each of themes was initially expressed during the period of what is referred to as second wave feminism. The body of the discussion within each theme involves a review of the claim and a critique of the claim using insights from more recent feminist theory and post-modern theories. Essentialist claims presented in earlier feminist literature regarding men and women are now recognised as passé in most feminist theory. Recent feminist writing about violence in the home is careful in making a distinction between men and the social constructions of masculinity and gender. There is a greater attempt in recent feminist writing to include race, class and forms of structural subordination as intersecting
with gender. Another theme in recent academic feminist theories of violence is acknowledging women’s agency within contexts of oppression.

Despite these changes, the author has chosen in this paper to ‘dredge up’ and discuss earlier claims made by feminists. These claims continue to feature, sometimes very prominently, in policies available to NSW Health workers in the family and domestic violence field. Such claims also inform the practices and language used by some workers in the field. Most obviously, the hegemony of gender and essentialist claims about men’s power as a causal explanation for family violence still feature in current policy and workers language. The following discussion is written with a view to destabilise this knowledge that is dominant in current policy and practice.

2.4.1 Domestic violence happens because (all) men have more power than (all) women

Del Martin’s (1976) influential book *Battered Wives* described violence in the home as a husband’s means of obtaining dominance in a patriarchal marriage. This claim regarding the function of male violence has been visible in literature both inside and outside feminism since. The primary focus of second wave feminist theory was the wider social and political context and in relation to violence, why men as a group directed violence toward women. A typical feature of second wave radical feminist claims regarding violence was that male violence against women is part of a bigger system of controlling women (Walby 1992:3). Statements made in the period include: ‘all men can potentially use violence as a powerful means of subordinating women’ (Bograd 1988:14, my emphasis), ‘sexual violence is the outcome of men’s power as men and women’s resistance to it’ (Kelly 1988) and ‘men as a class wield power over women’ (Bograd 1988:14). These claims suggest a tendency toward essentialism or an understanding that men’s masculinity is fixed and men’s actions are a result of biological determinants including the inherent potential for violence. As referred to earlier, a strategy employed by radical feminists during this period was segregation from the mainstream where heterosexuality was assumed to be a ‘normal’ path of sexual development for women. An extreme claim emanating from radical feminism is that heterosexuality is oppressive ‘by it’s very nature’ because the act of

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4 For example; ‘Domestic violence has a long history, originating in gender differences between male and female’ (current WAHS Health Domestic Violence Policy and Protocol Book, published 1990) and
heterosexual intercourse involves a woman’s body being invaded, an expression of the power men have over women (see Summers 1975: 202). Burstow, a self-proclaimed radical family therapist demonstrates how her practice is informed by this way of knowing when she comments that ‘feminist therapy\(^5\)’ is incompatible with working with heterosexual couples because this therapy can only serve the woman in the partnership therefore, a therapist not doing heterosexual work is “a totally acceptable position” (1992: pp.98, 99). Rhetorical devices evident in second wave feminist literature to effect attitude change in society include appeals to ‘sisterhood’ (homogeneity among women) and stressing the relationship between all women and violence as a fact in their lives\(^6\). While the slogans and claims of second wave feminism were developed to challenge the wide acceptance of violence toward women, the oversimplifications have had ramifications. The propensity toward totalisation, that is, claiming authority to speak for all women about all men in addition to the reductionist attempts to cite violence against women by men as the single site of women’s oppression has resulted in a different yet equally rigid discursive situation (Burton 1998:183) in the effort to stop violence in the home.

In hindsight we might say that second wave feminist campaigning to change popular beliefs about domestic violence paid little attention to the processes by which the parameters of violence against women were defined in addition to insufficient regard for who the victim was or what context she lived in.

It is only very recently that more culturally diverse research is being conducted in understanding relationships of power and subordination. Assertions that power operates in a linear, ‘top down’ fashion have been interrogated by postmodern theories. Feminists who do not identify as white and/or middle class have debunked gender as the dominant way to identify the self or as the best way to understand violence in the home (see Lawrie’s comments, Section 4). This is because a conceptualisation of gender as the primary—if not only - foundation of abuse

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\(^5\)In this paper ‘victims’ refers to women who have experienced violence', draft of NSW Health 2001 DV Policy.

\(^6\) Feminist therapy, like feminism, is not homogenous but takes a variety of forms. Perhaps Burstow’s understanding of ‘feminist therapy’ has been influenced by some radical feminists view of what feminism is. For example, Denise Thompson says it is pointless to name other feminisms because radical feminism is ‘feminism per se’ and other forms of feminism are only a ruse for male supremacy (2001:3).

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"In this paper ‘victims’ refers to women who have experienced violence", draft of NSW Health 2001 DV Policy.

Examples of this claim in classic texts include “whether it is in the workplace, on the street, or in the home the threat of violence stays with (women) wherever we happen to be” (Guberman & Wolfe)
mitigates consideration of other factors as significant in theory building around family violence (Kanhua 1996). The absence of ‘other’ factors causing violence in the home in earlier feminist theory has served functions for a number of interest groups. Constructing gender as the ‘cause’ of domestic violence has created a universal risk theory for all women who potentially can be abused by all men. This universal risk theory, that violence can happen to all women because they are women, is an attempt to make reality more palatable. To single out an abused woman who is also poor, drug-addicted or in a racial minority group might for some targeted groups be less palatable. To say that violence can happen to all women because they are women helps protect negative aspects of an already stigmatised and oppressed group such as indigenous communities in Australia where levels of violence are greater than other communities. To assert that patriarchy is the reason why violence in the home happens and not class or race is to excuse the role of governments who can shape policies that help combat economic inequality or racism. Making knowledge claims about why violence happens via excluding some information and including others serves an array of interests.

Several women who identify as non-white have discussed how the privileging of gender in feminist social analysis is problematic. Lucashenko (1993) canvasses the ‘misinformation’ that continues to separate black and white feminists in Australia. She writes that the myth of equalitarianism – that all women are basically similar with superficial differences in class, race and age – and universal claims about the common ‘powerlessness’ experienced by women made by early feminists are getting in the way of resolving race divisions in Australia. Ang’s analysis of more recent feminist literature – which generally features a concern for differences among women - brings attention to the surreptitious way that gender and ‘woman’ as an essential category is smuggled back in to discussion (1995:59). Ang contends that whiteness remains the norm against which all ‘others’ have to be specified in order to be represented, that the voice of the ‘Other’ (black, working class, disabled) once raised cannot be assimilated into a new more totalised feminist truth and that more recent feminism has not resulted in feminist consensus and never will (p.66-67). Ang’s argument is that

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1985:9) and “rape is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear” (Brownmiller 1975:5). Both quotes cited by Burton 1998:184. According to Devery 1992, women living in poverty are seven times more likely to be killed by a partner than women who are not living in poverty. Issues of class will be discussed more thoroughly later in the paper.

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feminism must recognise the limitations and partiality of its politics. While some members of the population have gained safety from family violence through the women’s movement privileging gender as a cause, many people whom are categorised as ‘Other’ remain in predicaments as dangerous and vulnerable as before. The position that feminist theory can only partially explain family and domestic violence is a basic contention of this paper.

2.4.2 Violence that women do is different to violence that men do
There has been much debate in the USA family violence literature about the National Family Violence Surveys conducted in 1975 and 1985 under a team facilitated by Murray Straus and Richard Gelles. The controversial finding of these surveys was that women are as violent as men in the home. This finding is at odds with a feminist analysis of gendered violence: feminist constructions of domestic violence emphasize gender and power, including the claim that the overwhelming majority of victims are women and perpetrators are men. This discussion will not detail the criticisms of the survey, the main criticism levelled at the surveys measuring the incidence of violence between couples and not the motives, context or harm caused by the violence. The focus of this discussion is the claims making activities of earlier feminists in response to claims that women are violent.

Accompanying the view that violence is gendered and perpetrated overwhelmingly by men existed a belief, for some feminists, that women are not violent. In her book on lesbian battering Hunt writes, “(violence done by lesbians) is painful. It challenges our belief of a lesbian utopia. It contradicts our belief in the inherent non-violence of women” (1986:224). A more mainstream claim made by feminists regarding women doing violence is that this violence is qualitatively different from men’s violence because it is motivated by self-defence (Dobash & Dobash 1998, Kurz 1993, Bograd 1990). Using data including data from the National Family Violence Surveys, the claim that the violence women do is self-defence gained momentum. This claim is congruent with a second wave feminist construction of women as powerless victims who are smaller than men and correspondingly that men are strong, powerful agents. Perhaps because of a belief in women as incapable of violence or due to anecdotal

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8 See Dobash & Dobash 1992, 1998 for a thorough critique of the CTS from a feminist perspective.
experience of being abused or working with abused women in refuges it was necessary for feminist theorists to construct a woman’s violence as self-defence and therein acceptable. Whether this was the reason or not, the issue of women doing violence has remained extremely controversial. US feminists have argued that the work of family violence researchers who name that women do violence, like Straus and Gelles, is a political counter-movement to feminist constructions of domestic violence (Berns 2001:276). Action taken up against these researchers has included threatening phone calls and bomb threats (Lucal 1995).

A review of the literature around the issue of women using violence reveals the little knowledge we have about violence that women do. The formal studies done are limited due to methodological issues: studies using large samples do not discuss the meaning of the violence done by women and phenomenological studies are often limited regarding representation or how we can generalise the findings. In his recent evaluation of the literature Straus notes that findings from a survey of ‘family problems’ will differ from findings based on women’s shelter/ refuge statistics because these studies are concerned with different aspects of domestic assaults (1993:77) thus bringing attention to definitional issues.

Another way of understanding why there is a paucity of literature around the issue of women using violence is to understand the efficacy of social movements, like the women’s movement, for naming and making social problems visible for the wider community. So far violence done by women has not been successfully constructed as a social problem. Dominant constructed images of women as passive, dependent, physically timid and living in a context informed by patriarchy have successfully enabled violence men do to women to become a social problem. The same images that make ‘violence against women’ recognisable as a social problem appear to make the recognition of ‘abused men’ impossible. Such images get in the way of an acceptance that women do do violence in the home. Betsy Lucal suggests a number of reasons why ‘battered men’ have not been recognised as a social problem including the lack of social movement behind the construction, less media attention and current stereotypic images of men (1995: 100). She observes that even if we could know that women do violence toward their partner at similar levels to men, ‘battered men’ will

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9 The results of the National Family Violence Surveys showed men had higher rates of dangerous behaviour, men are more likely to do damage because of size differences and that wives are more likely to use violence against a violent partner than a non-violent one (Saunders 1988: 95-97).
not be recognised as a social issue (p.108) and corresponding policies and practices will not develop. While Lucal’s point is noted, this situation should not get in the way of more research being conducted on violence that women do. Bringing ideas into language and making them visible often can have material effects.

This research has been informed by a position that recognises women as capable of perpetrating violence in the home. An aim of this paper is to make visible the complexity of violence in the home, which involves destabilising current popular perceptions of partner violence - the male is a ‘perpetrator’ and the wife a ‘victim’ - toward a view of violence as a complex and diverse phenomenon. The theoretical justification for feminists’ need to encounter that women are doing violence is related to the wider feminist project of reconstituting images of women. For however long that feminism retains gender at the centre of analysis and issues of race, class, disability remain on the margins it cannot be representative. Likewise, feminism will be limited to the degree that it fails to give account of aspects of women that might seem undesirable or criminal. The task of representing women who do use violence is a necessary one and will need to be a joint project resulting in a better understanding of the links between women’s agency, complicity and victimisation (Ashe & Cahn 1994: 191).

Informing the claim ‘the violence women do is different to the violence men do’ is an assumption that domestic violence, when perpetrated by men, is a homogeneous range of activity; that there are similarities in the motivations for and process of all men doing violence. Johnson & Ferraro (2000: 948) advise against making careless generalisations between one context of domestic violence and another. They say that partner violence cannot be understood without acknowledging distinctions among type of violence, motives of perpetrators, the social locations of both partners and the cultural context in which the violence occurs. To expand this argument, Johnson & Ferraro construct a theory of four different ‘types’ of violence which occur in the home based on their own and others’ research findings. This work is controversial because it makes correlations between violence that women do with violence done by men. According to Johnson & Ferraro, the four types of violence commonly grouped under the label ‘domestic violence’ which occur between couples include:

a) ‘common couple violence’ where both partners are involved and the violence arises out of specific arguments, b) ‘intimate terrorism’ which is a pattern of violent and
non-violent behaviours that indicate a general motive of one partner to control the other, c) ‘violent resistance’, generally done by women toward violent partners and d) ‘mutual violent control’ which is described as “two intimate terrorists battling for control” (p.950). Johnson & Ferraro’s work is included here as an example of theory developed that recognises distinctions in what we refer to as ‘domestic violence’. A limitation of this theory is that the categories constructed with the purpose of bringing attention to the need for making distinctions between different types and contexts of violence may themselves become prescriptive and limiting for our understanding.

2.4.3 A victim of violence is powerless (woman) and the perpetrator powerful (man)

The context of earlier feminist claims making in domestic violence was a society that minimised and denied the level of violence perpetrated against women and children in the home. Other voices in the discursive field of family violence promoted a victim blaming theory, attributing women who ‘choose’ violent partners to pathology or poor attachment\(^\text{10}\). In response to this situation a common assertion made in earlier feminist writing was that all women are powerless in the face of all men both in and outside the home. Power in these accounts is understood as something people have or don’t have. Power is enacted in a linear fashion – a man has power over his wife. The perpetrator is depicted as an evil monster that willingly uses power over his partner. The victim is depicted as pure, innocent, blameless and passive in the face of violence (Lamb 1999: 108).

However unforseen, there have been damaging consequences to early feminist constructions of all women as powerless or less powerful than men. Many questions have been asked about the meaning of power and who has more or less power in society. The notion that all women are (equally) powerless when compared to all men marginalises the experience of powerless felt by women from ‘Other’ race and class groups. Aboriginal women have commented on the comparative power white women have to black men and women (Lucashenko 1993: 22). bell hooks has succinctly commented that oppressed people often cannot afford to feel powerless. The claim that all women are powerless compared with men has more to do perhaps with the

\(^{10}\) See section 3.
limitations of a white feminist ideology that does not adequately accommodate the experiences of ‘Other’.

Post-modern and post-structuralist writers have offered alternative ways of viewing power and powerlessness. These writers contend that the boundaries of the world and things in the world, including the self, are permeable and contestable. Power is viewed as relational and mediated differently in different contexts. Violence could be then viewed as a way of ‘doing power’ in a relationship, a phrase I use in the paper because it destabilises the rigid commonsense view of a person having power over someone who does not. In her analysis of sexual violence as a scripted drama or language, Marcus (1992) makes an appeal for women not to see violence as a fixed reality of their lives. Marcus’ interest is in how language employed by institutions enables violence to happen. For example, if women are constructed as passive and powerless by dominant discourses than they may act out this script in the face of violence because it seems there are no alternatives. Marcus says, “rapists do not prevail simply because as men they are really, biologically or unavoidably stronger than women. A rapist follows a social script – as does a victim enacting the conventional gendered structures of feeling action skewed against the victim’ (p. 390). The dominance of the ‘passive victim’ script can make it difficult for women who do experience violence to identify as victims because their experience of violence differs from these constructions. Mahoney recounts the words of a woman interviewed who had experienced severe violence; “Strong women do not get involved in abusive relationships. I am a strong woman therefore I was never involved in an abusive relationship … my experience is not that experience’ (1994: 62). To take a position that recognises the agency of women is crucial for working with family and domestic violence. This position is defiant to commonsense constructions of being a victim and the capacity for agency: you are not a victim if you have agency. Policy that is written for the area of family violence must emphasise the agency of women and men in relationships and be careful not to construct people as powerless in their situation. Workers too, in the way that they speak must be careful to address agency and strengths in clients’ lives. A way forward is to recognise that the language we use, in written form and speech, has a powerful impact on the way people experience their lives.
2.4.4 Wife-abuse is very different to other forms of family violence

Feminist literature has treated the subject of violence against women in the home as a discrete activity that is qualitatively very different to other violence happening in the home. The constructed divide between violence against women and other forms of violence is part of the wider debate about how we account for violence and claims made by feminism that gender inequality is the primary cause of domestic violence. As discussed earlier this definitional process is one of inclusion and exclusion.

What is the agenda for feminist theorists who continue to exclude or minimise what is now a wealth of literature on the links between child abuse and violence against women or even, violence in the home and violence in the wider community (Gilligan 2001)?

To differentiate violence against women from other forms of family violence remains the dominant position in feminist literature. Dobash and Dobash view other forms of family violence as possible areas of study however say it is misleading and inaccurate to study male abuse against women under the same umbrella (1990: 110). It has been a concern for feminist activists and theorists that grouping violence against women under the same umbrella as other forms of violence in the home would effect violence against children becoming a priority and energy to stop violence against women would be reduced (Walker 1990: 89).

Studies in Australia focusing on violence against women offer various reasons for limiting their work on violence specifically to this area, however, these reasons should be considered in the light of recent theory development demonstrating a relationship between different ‘types’ of violence in the one family. Tomison has claimed there is a growing body of evidence that suggests different types of violence may occur simultaneously in the same family and that one ‘type’ of violence may be a strong predictor for another (2000). Tomison reports that in a Victorian investigation of 213 actual or suspected child maltreatment cases one third of the family homes were characterised by one or both parents being verbally and physically abusive toward the other (1995). Cases where domestic violence was identified were significantly over-represented in cases labelled physical abuse (37%), emotional abuse (69%), neglect (38%) and sexual abuse (20%). Despite what Tomison considers statistical under
representation of the latter, one fifth of sexual abuse cases occurred in violent families (2000: 6). It should be noted that Tomison’s discussion about the intersections of violence is different in focus from the many other Australian discussions dealing with child exposure to domestic violence as a form of child abuse. He is concerned with the existence of multiple forms of abuses occurring simultaneously in a family environment. Tomison suggests that the dominant understandings of how domestic violence is a child protection issue exclude an appreciation that women are also responsible for perpetrating violence toward children and I would add it may exclude an appreciation that children are effected by violence some women do to their partners also. Tomison argues for greater cross-sectoral acknowledgement of the various forms of family violence and the development of an overarching National Framework of Violence Prevention, encompassing the prevention of all violence.

2.4.5 Domestic violence is a crime and should be responded to using the conventional legal system

There is no unanimous position within the women’s movement regarding the role of the law in responding to domestic violence. While the justice system is considered by some feminists as the most appropriate way to respond to perpetrators of domestic violence, others bring attention to the inadequacy of this system in deterring further violence and the role of the legal system in silencing women who have experienced violence and constructing them as helpless victims. These issues will be discussed in brief here.

It is the result of successful advocacy efforts by the women’s movement that many jurisdictions now treat domestic violence as a crime in Australia (Hatty 1991). Conversely, the partnership with the law in bringing about reform has led to some feminists adopting traditional judicial discourse about crime and punishment. Law reforms in the area of domestic violence have included police responses becoming more aggressive and an increased likelihood that men who do violence in

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11 There is much controversy around reporting an accurate incidence of sexual abuse in our community. The remarkable difference in incidence rates has much to do with definitional and methodological issues in data gathering.

12 Tomison (2000:3) argues that even after allowing for gender and reporting biases that effect available data it is apparent that mothers and other female caregivers are responsible for significant proportions of reported physical abuse and the neglect of children.
the home being arrested. The assumption behind these reforms is that controlling crime, in this case the crime of partner abuse, is essentially a matter of increasing the social costs of doing the crime to the point of deterrence (Seth-Purdie 1995-96). Informing this assumption is a liberal-humanist belief that humans are rational and make choices to bring about ends. Feminist claims about the nature of violence, that men use violence instrumentally as a means to dominate women, are complimentary to legal discourse in this regard. Sharing this assumption has enabled feminist knowledge claims about domestic violence to ‘fit’ with legal discourse effecting practices including the Court Support Scheme and feminist legal centres specialising in violence against women. Heather McGregor is an Australian feminist advocate who strongly supports the appropriateness of the criminal justice system in responding to domestic violence (1990). McGregor’s thesis is that therapeutic methods of responding to domestic violence are inappropriate and have had ‘no effect in halting violence’ (1990: 68). She states that domestic violence must be named as a crime and dealt with via the criminal justice system, inferring that this method of response will have greater chances of stopping violence against women. McGregor cites studies done in the US (Sherman & Berk 1984) showing that police arrest is the intervention most likely to reduce the re-occurrence of violence. But is this the case? In a later publication, Sherman (1992) discusses some limitations in arresting perpetrators of domestic violence and brings attention to a particular group of offenders, characterised as ‘unemployed/underclass’, where arrest led to increased levels of violence. Another way of saying this is that structural issues, including class relations, impact on how men respond to arrest. Police arrest or incarceration of a man who has used violence against his partner may not bring about change in behaviour, it may indeed exacerbate the violence13.

The law has been criticised by feminists on a number of issues including discursive claims regarding the ‘neutrality’ of the law that can represent men and women’s interests indiscriminately. Feminists have argued that under this guise of neutrality, the law upholds assumptions about the world that privilege a white, middle class male view. Another area that has been interrogated by feminist theorists is the claim emanating from legal discourse that the law is driven by the truth. This is a body of criticism having rich implications for the plight of women, children and men who

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13 See Niehoff’s comments about the effects of prison in Section 3.
have experienced violence and appear in court. Mawson (1999) observes that despite the claim that the court allows for things to be represented themselves, rules of evidence dictate how knowledge is brought to the court. A woman’s story of the violence she has encountered, for example, is not told the way she might like or it does not simply represent itself. Her story, ‘the evidence’, is presented through legal discourse that includes and excludes aspects of the story to determine what meaning can be made. Other feminists have directed critique at the constructions of women as ‘victims’ in the law (Mahoney 1994). To prove a woman is a victim or not a victim is of course, central to the outcomes for the woman. This construction of woman as victim does not accommodate the complexity of how a woman has responded to violence, for example, how she had agency and was at times able to resist the violence. Despite legal reform in the area of domestic violence that has occurred largely in response to feminist activity, the legal system continues to misrepresent the experiences of women who have experienced abuse (Beaman-Hall 1996), and fails to accommodate the complexity of violence in the lives of families.

2.4.6 ‘The’ feminist intervention: refuges for women

The refuge movement evolved out of feminist knowledge claims made in the second wave of feminism. A contention of feminism in this time was that the only option for a woman in a domestic violence situation was to leave her home and enter a refuge (Walker 1990: 6). In Australia, refuges were synonymous with the fight against domestic violence and were constructed as the feminist intervention. The philosophy of feminist refuges – providing a safe place for women away from the oppression of the marital home - was informed by radical feminist principles. ‘Elsie’s’ was Australia’s first women’s refuge, opened in Sydney in 1974. Elsie’s was an initiative of a collective of women and initially had no government funding. Within 5 years of Elsie’s opening there were about 100 women’s refuges operating in Australia and 93 of these had government funding (Hopkins & McGregor 1991).

Feminists involved in the early stages of the refuge movement had powerfully constructed the solution to domestic violence; freedom from violence entails leaving the abuser. Apparently, women who left the home were to embark on the realisation of freedom along the trajectory of refuge then halfway house then finding their own

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14 About half of these refuges were feminist in orientation (Saville: 1982).
home. This situation, however, does not reflect the experiences of most women when they have experienced violence in the home. Studies have found that 50%-60% of abused women return to live with the partner who abused them (Peled et al. 2000: 9). Research also shows that separation from the abuser does not end the violence and leaving the home may be more dangerous than staying. The pervasiveness in our society of the earlier feminist construction that women will leave their abusive partner and not return is realised in the stigmatising of women who choose to stay with their abusers. When a woman does choose to stay it is assumed she is trapped in the relationship against her will or she doesn’t have a choice. While this is the case for some women, it is not the case for all women and it is these women who frequently fall between the gaps in service provision. The construction that all women should leave relationships where there is violence is materialised in the practices of counselling services; many services stop intervention or ‘refer on’ women and children who live in what is deemed an ‘unsafe’ situation. This practice occurs in part because of entrenched beliefs around necessary conditions for empowerment; feminist knowledge claims have influenced workers to believe that empowerment starts when the woman leaves the home. However, women use their agency and have strategies for survival while in the relationship. Some women may choose to stay in the relationship to maintain what is experienced as positive and find ways to lessen the abuse. These women would find the feminist and professional construction of the solution to violence as excluding their way of being.

It is necessary for workers to become aware of the limitations in what has been constructed as ‘solutions’ to domestic violence. Services need to develop practices that can accommodate the complexities of families who live with violence. This can occur only when it is recognised that a feminist explanation for violence in the home, while important, is partial.

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15 Some services are overt on their policies re not working with clients who are ‘unsafe’, in other situations intervention stops because a client doesn’t attend a service that makes little effort to accommodate her experience.
3. Psychological and Psychiatric Perspectives of Domestic Violence

This chapter will review and discuss contributions from within the disciplines psychiatry and psychology to understanding family and domestic violence. The beginning of the chapter will reflect on some of the political processes involved when using knowledges espoused by these disciplines in understanding violence. The body of the chapter comprises a review of the current literature relevant to family and domestic violence emanating from these disciplines including a description of the practices different perspectives warrant. Following this will be a discussion and critique of the theories and ideas reviewed. The theories reviewed in the chapter were chosen either on the grounds of saliency in the psychiatric and/or psychological literature or with a view to foregrounding ideas that have been less visible in the discursive field of family violence.

In *The Birth of The Clinic* (1963, trans. 1973) and other works (1961, trans. 1967), Foucault goes about dismantling the notion that knowledge arises out of things or that knowledge reflects a things essential truth. Foucault conveys that what is regarded as medical knowledge is not from something lying within the physical body; instead such knowledge is constituted within the discourse designated by the term ‘medical knowledge’ (Colwell 1995, p.158). Medicine and psychiatry were recognised by Foucault as disciplines. The term ‘discipline’ is used by Foucault to refer to a field of knowledge with explicit and implicit rules that enable and constrain the production of what is to count as truth within that field of practice. As disciplines, medicine and psychiatry have benefited from the power to define what is and what is not deviant or unproductive behaviour having constructed what constitutes ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ human behaviour.

Many theorists, particularly feminist theorists, have interrogated the way medicine and schools of psychology legitimate their claims (see Russell 1995; Lines 1996). These claims are made under the rubric of objectivity: historically these disciplines assume the capacity to stand outside a situation and assess what is true. This is realised in the methods employed by these disciplines in research. With some
exceptions, research in the fields of psychiatry and psychology is characterised by the positivist epistemology that involves hypothesising, measurement, statistics and a regard for facts. A further feature of most psychiatric/psychological literature is a focus on the individual as the unit of study.

The imprint of these knowledges in the field of family violence remains a formidable one. The claims of these disciplines have been legitimated through the acceptance, in some practice, of constructs including the ‘battered women’s syndrome’ and ‘rape trauma syndrome’. These labels focus on the person who has experienced the abuse and do not accommodate the person responsible for the abuse nor the context where the violence occurred. Another way that the knowledges of psychiatry, in addition to psychology, maintain dominance in the family and domestic violent field is the high profile of these disciplines in the NSW Department of Health, a major provider of services. Via Health and other services these disciplines continue to stipulate what ‘recovery’ means for people exposed to family violence, how this is assessed, who has the authority to assess it and what happens to victims who have not recovered (Foley 1996: 173).

3.1 Discourses in the psychiatric and psychological literature

This research is informed by a perspective that causes of family and domestic violence cannot simply be ‘uncovered’. Instead, the field is viewed as a complex site characterised by discursive practices, competing knowledges and forms of social control that enable and constrain what can be known about causes of violence. There are a number of different criteria that can be employed when identifying discourses in the field of family and domestic violence (Dell & Korotana, 2000; O’Neill 1998). A popular way of distinguishing between psychological understandings of domestic violence is to separate perspectives that focus on the individual’s intrapsychic or psychobiological processes from those perspectives that are concerned with systems and dysfunctional social relations (Maurico & Gormley 2001, Dell & Korotana 2000). O’Neill (1998) identifies five distinct discourses in the field of domestic violence. Four of the discourses O’Neill identifies will be mentioned here as an introduction to

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16 For example, phenomenological studies in psychiatry and psychology employ interpretative methodologies, not positivist.
the assumptions about the nature of violence weaving through the psychiatric and psychological theories reviewed in the chapter.

**Discourse 1: Pathology.** In this discourse, domestic violence is understood and constructed as being an abnormal phenomenon explained through pathological causes of behaviour. Violence is symptomatic of an underlying pathology. The perpetrator in this scheme of events is not to be held responsible for the violence and can only manage his symptoms to the best of his ability (p.460). This discourse informs theories in this chapter that refer to mental illnesses including depression, personality disorders and pathological dependency. This discourse also informs theories reviewed which attribute childhood experiences of attachment or trauma to why adults use violence toward their partner.

**Discourse 2: Violence as an expression of inner tension.**

During the pre-Enlightenment era of the 16th and 17th centuries humans were considered to be at the mercy of inner emotional forces and passions. This worldview has contributed to what O’Neill refers to as ‘Romantic expressive tension discourse’ that constructs violence as a manifestation of high degrees of inner tension or personal frustration. Violence is the *expressive* form of this inner tension. Theories informed by this discourse may discuss violent people as being subject to inner forces over which they have little or no control. This discourse is evident in psychobiological theories where men are constructed as naturally aggressive, governed by raging hormones or use aggression against women due to reproductive striving (see Smuts 1992). O’Neill considers instinct theories of human aggression including Freud’s (1915) thesis that innate aggressive tension in humans enables our survival are informed by this discourse.

**Discourse 3: violence as an instrumental strategy.** This discourse reflects an Enlightenment view of human beings. The Enlightenment is commonly referred to as the age of reason, and thought emerging from this era is critical of traditional authority and superstition (Macey 2000). Enlightenment theories of violence assume then that people are rational and in control of their goal directed behaviour, violence is discussed as *instrumental* or as a means to an end. Theories informed by this discourse may discuss violence as a strategy to assert dominance over another, to remove stressors or to enhance one’s self-esteem. Most obviously, feminist socio-political theories of violence as discussed in the previous chapter are informed by this discourse. This discourse features in a number of articles reviewed which were critical
regarding using a systems approach when working with families where there is violence.

**Discourse 4: Violence as learned behaviour.** This understanding of violence is a development of the persuasive discourse in the social sciences that all behaviour is learned from experience, the ‘nurture’ aspect of the nature/nurture debate. Several theories reviewed in this chapter are informed by this discourse.

It will be apparent that any one theory or discursive practice discussed in the following may employ constructs arising out of more than one of these four discourses. For example, an anger management program for perpetrators of violence assumes that violence is instrumental and also that it is a learned behaviour.

The organisation of the theories reviewed in the chapter is influenced by Dell & Korotana (2000) and others who have distinguished between: (1) theories assuming that intrapsychic deficits increase the likelihood that a man will be violent and/or that a woman will be prone to be in a violent relationship and (2) theories that articulate a systemic understanding of violence in which violence is construed as a product of dysfunctional social relations. Part 3.2 will review biological theories, trauma and attachment theories, social learning theories and theories that use the lens of pathology to understand violence. Part 3.3 will review more traditional family systems theory and more recent systemic theories that are referred to as ecological or ‘multidimensional’ in the literature. I will then draw together the themes of the section and make some comments about the constructions made in the area of violence by psychiatric and psychological theory.

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**3.2 Theories focusing on an individual’s deficits to explain violence**

17 Most psychological theories distinguish between violent behaviour and victim behaviour. I use the term ‘and/or’ to accommodate how some adverse conditions might have implications for both doing
3.2.1 Biomedicine

A dominant strand of psychiatry is biomedicine. A fundamental assumption of a biomedical approach in contemporary psychiatry is that mental illnesses are biochemically based and can be treated by biochemical means (Lines 1996, pp.128,131). In other words biomedical psychiatry asserts that mental illnesses, and violence is likely to be considered the symptom of the illness, are caused by neurophysiological, hormonal or genetic factors\(^{18}\) and can be treated via neurochemistry or psychopharmacology. Criticisms of biomedical approaches to mental illness bring attention to the invisibility of socio-political issues in biological accounts. In her book *The Biology of Violence* (1999) Niehoff argues the case for neuroscience and biology informing our current understanding of violence. Niehoff brings attention to the way adult social interactions including violence build on templates laid out by both first exchanges and ongoing interactions between brain and environment. Over time repeated experiences of encouragement, anxiety, conflict or danger lead to adaptive responses not only at a behavioural level but at the level of cell and synapse, shaping neural activity to meet the demands presented by the environment (p.51-52). In her book, Niehoff challenges common assumptions people may have about a biological perspective of violence. She regards biology as an explanation not an excuse for violence. Further, she claims biology is an opportunity to set back the clock and undo the biological damage caused by a childhood exposed to violence. Her opportunity argument is developed in a discussion about the elasticity of our brains and the way behaviour is developed not determined. Niehoff’s comments about change opportunities bring attention to the need for an accommodating external environment. She states that relentlessly hostile environments overrun a persons stress response mechanisms, commenting that the prison environment is therein the worst for stopping violence. “Our correctional system reproduces all of the ingredients known to promote violence: isolation, discomfort, pain, exposure to other violent individuals and general insecurity. In our prisons we have created a laboratory that predictably reproduces and reinforces aggression”(p.294). Niehoff’s answers to the problem of violence include a range of treatment strategies; cognitive behavioural therapy, pharmacology and building non-

\(^{18}\) Or a combination of these causes.

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Hostile communities\textsuperscript{19}. The administration of drugs (pharmacology) and provision of cognitive therapies are the material effects of biomedical claims about what causes violence.

### 3.2.2 Social Learning Theory and Trauma theory

Theories including social learning theory (Bandura 1973, 1977) and to lesser degree, trauma theory are psychological attempts to explain the phenomena ‘transmission’ with regards to why \textit{men are violent to their partners}. That is, these theories offer explanations for the relationship between being abused as a child and using abuse in adult life. The behavioural model of learned helplessness (Walker, 1979) and the construct ‘battered women syndrome’ are ways of explaining why \textit{women are in violent relationships}. ‘Battered women syndrome’ is a term used to describe the complex pattern of PTSD- like symptoms displayed by women have been exposed to partner violence (Foa et al. 2000). These theories will be reviewed in the following pages.

Bandura’s social learning analysis of aggression claims that witnessing parental violence predisposes some young males to abusive behaviours as adults (Carden 1994). Bandura claimed that the transmission of violent behaviour, that is, the way witnessed behaviour evolves to behaviour oneself exercises, occurs through \textit{learning}. He discusses the processes of vicarious reinforcement of violence on the person. It is learned that violence is the way to resolve conflict or maintaining control and power in relationships. Social learning theory implies that cognitive processes (attitudes, beliefs, expectations) drive the enactment of violence in relationships. Learned helplessness was concept named by L. Walker in the 1980’s that shares many features of social learning theory. These material effects of these knowledge claims include psycho-educational groups for women who live with violence and men who do violence.

A theory that is gaining increased exposure in psychological and social articles addressing the issue of violence against women is trauma theory and the construct Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This theory, now the basis of a large body of literature, functions to provide a biological \textit{and} social explanation for why women

\textsuperscript{19}Niehoff’s attention to context contrasts many neuro-scientific approaches that do not consider the
stay in violent relationships. Van der Kolk (1995) claims that research on humans and other mammals have demonstrated that trauma has long term effects on the neurochemical response to stress (for a review on the psychobiology of trauma see van der Kolk 1994), so that people exposed to overwhelming trauma go into fight, flight or freeze responses from the least provocation (p.3). Freud was among the first to observe specific symptoms following a trauma. He believed the symptoms of traumatic neuroses were caused by a fixation to the traumatic moment, a claim that continues to inform current trauma theory. According to McCann & Pearlman (1990) an experience is traumatic if it is sudden, unexpected or non-normative; exceeds the individuals perceived ability to meet it’s demands and disrupts the individuals frame of reference and other psychological needs. Symptoms of PTSD include the following: recurrent and intrusive recollection of the traumatic event; intense psychological distress upon exposure to stimuli that resemble or symbolise the traumatic event; numbing; restricted range of feelings or affect; inability to anticipate the future; difficulty falling or staying asleep; aggression against self and others; hypervigilance; exaggerated startle reactions (van der Kolk et al, 1995). There is a growing body of research looking at the relationship between domestic violence and PTSD20, an area of study that has become popular following the establishment of the relationship between PTSD and the trauma involved with going to war and sexual abuse. Housekamp & Foy (1991), using a sample of women utilising services for domestic violence, found that approx. 45% of these women had PTSD symptoms. Kemp et al. (1995) conducted a study to examine the relationship between more severe experiences of domestic violence and onset of PTSD. The study found that women are at increased risk of developing PTSD when violence was more extensive21 and when women have experienced abuse prior to their most recent abusive relationship including in their childhood. That is, they potentially may already be living with symptoms of PTSD. The material effects of trauma theories include ‘talking therapies’ which are likely to be longer term and other treatments including Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (Shapario).

20 Empirical studies in this area have sampled only women who have already experienced violence and are therefore concerned with PTSD as an effect of domestic violence, not a precursor to violence.
21 The author’s state more extensive abuse refers to more physical and verbal abuse, more injuries, greater sense of threat and more forced sex.
3.2.3 Attachment theory

John Bowlby, considered the leading proponent of ‘attachment theory’, has stated that the horror we have about violence in the home done by adults can be mitigated by our increasing knowledge of the kinds of childhood these adults had that are doing violence (1984:9). Bowlby has developed his thesis about attachment in early years to make sense of why there is and continues to be family violence. In earlier work, Bowlby has discussed attachment as a vital biological and psychological function that is indispensable for both reproduction and survival. When a child’s attachment behaviour is responded to unwillingly the child is likely to become anxiously attached and unconcerned about the troubles of others. According to Bowlby, the behaviours a child has developed in response to poor attachment with caregivers carry beyond childhood and effect adult relationships. Van der Kolk et al. (1995) also claim that an expanding body of research has shown that disturbances in childhood attachment bonds can have long-term neurobiological consequences. Bowlby brings attention to several findings that support the hypothesis that men who do violence and women who live in abusive relationships ‘are ill treated and battered children now grown up’ (p.22). Based on his own and others’ research findings that violence is an inter-generational phenomenon, Bowlby advocates for interventions where support is given to pregnant women who identify as having experienced poor mothering. Bowlby’s knowledge claims about family violence, in short, that ‘violence breed violence’ have been widely criticised by particularly feminists for the implied trajectory between experiencing childhood violence and doing violence when older which is perceived as avoiding the perpetrator’s responsibility. While Bowlby’s theories could accommodate a relationship between poorer adult relationships as a result of attachment problems, it is problematic to conclude also that poor attachment (say anxious or avoidant attachment) in childhood implicates violence in adult relationships.

A repertoire of syndromes or disorders influenced by trauma and attachment theories have developed and now have a language in the field of family violence. These ‘new’ ways of understanding why women and/or men stay in violent relationships include traumatic bond theory (see Carnes: 1997), the Stockholm Syndrome (Montero: 2000) and adaptations of object relations theory (Zosky: 1999). Features of these theories
include violent couples being bonded via their psychological deficiencies characterising ‘insane’ loyalty/attachment despite emotional pain and severe physical consequences. Another key feature of these theories is the role of perception shaped by early childhood experiences of caregiver or ‘objects’, that is, they discuss the role of ‘internal working models’ (Bowlby: 1980) in the intergenerational transmission of abuse. Because of these early childhood experiences a woman who is being abused may perceive she is being loved by her violent partner, may perceive there are more gains than losses in the relationship or has cognitive dissonance with regards to her partner’s violent behaviour. The focus on adult attachment style as one variable in making sense of family violence was featured in several articles reviewed for this study (Maurico & Gormley: 2001; Kesner et al: 1997). According to these articles, the adult attachment style reflects the internal representation of self/other originating in early relationships that continues to regulate attachment behaviour through to adulthood. These theories discuss how an insecurely attached adult23 who demonstrates more anxiety and/or avoidance in their relationships is at greater risk of becoming violent toward a partner.

I will now briefly canvass that main ideas found in ‘resiliency theory’, a body of theory that has developed in response to assumptions in attachment and trauma theory. For the purposes of this study the term resilience refers to the process of, capacity for and outcome of successful adjustment despite challenging circumstances. Heller et al (1999) conducted an extensive review of the literature on the protective factors believed to contribute to resilience in children and adults. Protective factors associated with resilience24 included dispositional qualities of a person such as highly developed cognitive skill, sense of self worth and an internal locus of control, and also spirituality (promoting a sense of meaning to one’s life). Other protective factors contributing to resiliency included the presence of a sensitive and emotionally responsive caregiver in earlier life. Also, the availability of support from people other than a maltreating parent sets the stage for one being able to use external supports in

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22 Aspects of the ‘Families First’ program in NSW, including providing support for ‘at risk’ parents (men and women), has similarities with Bowlby’s advocated intervention.
23 As one variable. These theories discuss other contributing factors to violence being used.
24 Heller et al comment that the field must go beyond focusing on single resilience factors to considering developmental processes. For example, protective processes may support the development of self-esteem and an internal locus of control, which are arguably a mediating effect of any type of risk.
Involvement with a community, for example: religious, school or recreational group have all been related in the reviewed literature to the development of resilience in the face of maltreatment. An understanding of resilience is necessary to understand why some people, children or adults, who have experienced abuse appear to cope better than others. For example, the research done on the impact of violence in the home to children tends to show that children experience problems, however, data also indicates that a significant proportion of children exposed to violence do not seem to be depressed or have behavioural problems, they appear more resilient. Theorists or resilience claim that the factors mentioned above mitigate negative effects of abuse and neglect.

### 3.2.4 Psychopathology

The relationship between mental illness and family & domestic violence is, to say the least, a controversial area. The controversy has something to do with the tension between an Enlightenment discourse of violence, where humans are viewed as rational, possessing the ability to choose doing violence for some ends, and a pathology discourse where violence is a symptom of an illness and a person doing the violence cannot take full responsibility for their actions. O'Leary (1993) has argued that psychopathological factors do influence the capacity for violent behaviour and that these factors become more relevant given a greater level of violent behaviour. Based on his own and other’s research, O’Leary has constructed a map showing family violence and mental illness as aspects of a continuum. O’Leary argues that at the lower end of the continuum, representing minimal levels of aggression, the role of psychopathology is relatively small and at the severe end of the continuum, representing severe levels of violence the percentage of men who have poor mental health is much higher than levels found in both general populations and maritally discordant populations (p.26). A number of other theorists reviewed for this study consider mental illness as having some significance as a contributing factor to partner

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25 In a recent court case requiring expert opinion regarding the effect of domestic violence on children, Dr. Jeffrey Edelson states that at least half of children exposed to domestic violence have few or no problems compared to children not exposed. He also argues against naming children witnessing domestic violence ‘maltreatment’ because of resilience factors shown by children who do and because this label would not, for example, credit mothers’ efforts to create safety for her child.

26 O’Leary accommodates a range of experiences and disorders under the label ‘psychopathology’. These include alcohol abuse and a range of personality disorders. Differentiation among the kind of mental illness/psychopathological state is not made clear.
violence (Dutton 1998, Flournoy & Wilson 1991) and regarded the relationship as having some significance. Clinical classifications and diagnoses employed in the literature that describe a violent man’s illness include passive-aggressive personality disorders, depression, antisocial personality disorders, neurosis, paranoia, sadism and alcoholism (O’Neill 1998: 461).

In contrast to the paucity of literature available on men, violence and mental health there is an abundance of literature looking at the relationship between women who have been abused and mental illness. The controversy in this literature is whether mental illness predates or is an effect of the violence experienced. While earlier Freudian masochistic theories are now less visible in the literature, more recent theories including the still popular cycle of violence theory proposed by Walker (1979, 1986) are unclear about whether a woman’s mental health is a causes or an effect of violence. Empirical studies using women who have been in abusive relationships suggest that these women have higher rates of depression, PTSD, affective disorder, substance abuse, panic disorder and anxiety than general populations of women (Dienemann et al. 2000; Lundy & Grossman 2001).

Among most researchers the relationship between mental illness and the onset of violence in the home is not clear. Those who are critical about the relationship bring attention to the moral implications of highlighting such a relationship, arguing that men who do violence must take responsibility for the violence. Others draw attention to the relatively high levels of violence in our communities and relatively low level of psychopathology in the effort to question the relevance of pathology for understanding violence in the home. There are further debates around what constitutes ‘serious pathology’ with attention to evidence suggesting relatively few people involved in abusive relationships can be diagnosed as suffering some form of serious psychopathology (Feldmann & Ridley: 322). For example, does alcohol abuse constitute ‘serious pathology’ or can we understand this practice better using a social lens? If one was to answer the former then it can be said that the relationship between mental illness and the onset of violence is a sound one given that a salient characteristic of men who use violence is higher alcohol abuse27 (Tolman & Bennet 1990). The material effects of psychopathological claims regarding why men (and

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27 The relationship between alcohol use and violence is controversial. It has been documented, however, that alcohol is a causal factor for Aboriginal men in Australia doing violence (Keys Young 1998).
women) are violent include a range of practices within the mental health system; residential psychiatric units, psychiatric treatment, medications, cognitive group therapies and the Mental Health Act.

### 3.3 Systemic and social psychological theories

The following section will review more traditional systemic theories in addition to recent macro system theories of family violence. While it may be argued that significant differences separate these theories, this study combines them because of evident similarities. These similarities include viewing violence as part of a **process** and the reference to wider systems individuals and families interact with in the respective bodies of theories.

#### 3.3.1 Traditional systemic theories

Traditional systemic theories feature in most social psychology textbooks and have links with what is referred to as family therapy in the literature. Straus’ (1973) general systems model of violence between family members was the first theoretical application of a systems perspective toward family violence (Gelles & Maynard 1987). He accounted for violence in the family by viewing the family as a goal seeking adaptive system where violence is a systems product. Features of systems theory as applied to family violence that have developed since Straus’ initial theory include: 1) viewing family violence as a process of family interaction and therein having a focus on circular not linear causality to explain violence, 2) the idea that violence is somehow functional from the families’ point of view and 3) consideration of the role of inter-family communication in family violence. These features represent a significant departure from a psychopathological model focusing on the individual. Practitioner users of a family systems approach view the family as the meaningful focus for intervention. Proponents of traditional systems theory approach to family violence use terms such as ‘conjugal violence’, ‘violent-prone system’, ‘battering relationship’ to distinguish their view of violent relationships from the more traditional perpetrator/victim dichotomy. A systems view, then, is at odds with a lineal view of power where a man has power over a woman. It is this feature of systems theory, when applied to domestic violence, that has evoked much criticism (see McGregor 1990, White 1986). I now discuss two
themes in the systems literature: the circular causality of family violence and the role of communication in family violence.

Domestic and family violence as a process of family interaction where causality is circular: A systemic view of family violence holds that violence is not just an outcome, but part of an ongoing process of family relations (Gelles & Maynard, 1987). A family systems approach to the area of family violence might typically involve talking with a family about the roles, rules, boundaries and communication patterns set up over time to assist understanding of how violence became part of the family system and why it is needed for the functioning of the family. There is a focus on patterns of interaction leading up to and including the violence. Questions are asked about what is happening ‘between the couple and around the couple’ when the violence occurs (James & McIntyre: 1989). Instead of assuming that one member of a couple (male) has lineal control over another (female), systems theory is concerned with the family as a cybernetic system where “no individual in the system has total power over the system of which he or she is part” (Bateson 1972: 438). Studies that accommodated a systems view about circular causality were reviewed for this paper.

The findings of a study by Cantos et al (1993) which explored how both members of a couple attribute violence in their relationship was that both women and men were found to be more likely to blame their spouses, not themselves, for causing violence. Cascardi & Vivian (1995) did a similar study with the aim of measuring the nature of the violence and the gender differences regarding attribution. Their findings supported the viewpoint that spousal violence may be an outgrowth of conflict between both partners in which each actively contributes, albeit not symmetrically, to the escalation of violence (p.282). These studies are informed by ideas from systems theory about the process of violence in relationships. Other studies reviewed looked at the relationship between mutual verbal aggression and escalation of violence. Heise (1998) discusses a range of studies showing that frequency of verbal disagreements between couples is strongly related to the likelihood of physical aggression.

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28 The majority of these studies were based on attributions of violence, that is, the researchers were not present during the violence and results were based on interviews with couples who identified as having violence in the relationship.

29 Using a sample of 139 couples referred to a mandatory domestic violence service.

30 If the violence continued across time, however, men appeared to accept more responsibility for the violence.

31 Semi-structured interviews were held with 62 couples attending a voluntary clinic specialising in working with domestic violence.
Communication theories: Researchers in the field of communication view communication as joint ventures and meaning as jointly created. A communication approach views abusive and violent acts as the ‘dark side’ of communication and assumes that people who do violence are communicatively incompetent (Cahn, 1996). Grounded within a systems perspective, this approach gives primary attention to the patterns of interrelating with one another, claiming that when violence occurs it is not an isolated event in people’s lives but embedded firmly in the processes of interpersonal communication which people use to regulate their daily lives (Rogers et al, 1996: 220). Communication theory has gained some dominance in the field of family violence through claiming that interactions between couples with a history of violence have distinguishing characteristics from couples where there is no history of violence. In a review of the literature on interactions between couples living with family violence Cahn states that problem solving discussions between these couples appears more negative and emotional; that these couples’ behaviour is characterised by rigidity and predictability; and that interaction patterns for these couples reveal abusers and often victims manifest few constructive communication, negotiation and argumentation skills (p.12). Two themes discussed in the communication literature which will be discussed briefly here are the usefulness of making distinctions when understanding violent interactions and the role of verbal abuse in the attempt to understand the process of family violence.

A claim in the family violence literature gaining more visibility is the importance of making distinctions between different types of violence used within the partner relationship. Communication theorists find it useful to make distinctions between instrumental abuse behaviours (where violence is a means to an end), relationship abusive behaviours (stemming from other oriented concerns) and identity abusive behaviours (stemming from self oriented issues).

Based on his own research, Cahn hypothesises that the dimensions communication theorists use (instrumental, relationship and identity) to understand violent interactions may help the wider project of understanding family violence in the following way. “If future research relates degree of abuse to the three dimensions of communication, investigators might find that low levels of abusive behaviour (including verbal aggression) may be associated with instrumental dimension, whereas high levels of abuse (such as severe physical aggression) tend to be
associated more with relationship and identity dimensions. For example, parents may punish children for instrumental purposes but sexually or physically abuse their children for relationship and identity purposes” (p.17). Prince & Arias (1994) have conducted a study to measure if violence used by men was for instrumental purposes, that is, was violence used as a means of gaining control over their partner or situation. An outcome of the study was that the role of control in violence is a complex one, some men in the study viewed violence as instrumental and other as cathartic or expressive.

According to researchers in the communication field (Marshall & Vitanza 1994), communication studies of violence may be helpful for gaining a better insight to the role of verbal aggression in family violence. Understanding more about verbal aggression could be helpful for intervening in forms of violence where it appears that verbal aggression is a catalyst to physical aggression and may destabilise the assumption that verbal abuse is not as serious as physical abuse which can enable more inclusive interventions when working with families living with violence32.

3.3.2 Ecological models for understanding and working with family violence

In recent years many theorists and people working in the field have come to realise that no explanatory theory on it’s own is able to adequately explain or list the necessary conditions for domestic violence to occur. In response to this realisation, several theorists have developed models that are multi-levelled or ecological in the way domestic violence is accounted for.

Heise’s model (1998) includes four different components: individual (ontogenic), micro-system, exo-system and macro-system. These systems are ‘nested’ in each other and interact with each other to explain how domestic violence can occur. In this theory, Heise incorporates a number of competing knowledges about the nature of violence. For example, she draws from attachment and trauma theories in taking into consideration abuse as a child (ontogenic level) to combine with feminist theories that have brought attention to male dominance in the home and wider society (micro and macro systems). This model, according to Heise, will help activists and researchers understand ‘real life’ and the complex reasons for why domestic violence occurs (p.285). Foa et al. (2000) developed a conceptual model designed to enhance
understanding about women’s influence on the course of or cessation of partner violence. This model incorporates two spheres: the psychological and the environmental - portrayed as relational systems impacting on a woman's experience of violence. Psychological factors in the model include a woman’s trauma history, psychological difficulties including depression and substance abuse, the nature of the violence, negative and positive schemas and resilience factors. Environmental factors in the model include a woman’s interpersonal contacts, legal and institutional resources and level of contact with partner (pp.76, 80). The authors contend that this model because it combines psychological and social factors is comprehensive and provides a more thorough understanding on the role women play when they have been abused.

3.4 Discussion

The aims of this discussion are to highlight themes emerging from the chapter and develop some of the ideas arising from the theories reviewed.

A theme emerging from some of the theories reviewed is the importance of making *distinctions* when trying to understand violence in the home. The label or term ‘domestic violence’ signifies a fairly homogenous view of violence in intimate relationships. The term obscures that the experience of violence and what is contributing to the violence is complex and multi-faceted. Regarding the relationship between mental illness and perpetrating violence, O’Leary (1993) has suggested that psychopathological factors may be more relevant when explaining more severe levels of violence in relationships. Cahn (1996) has argued that making distinctions between instrumental and expressive forms of violence may help in developing more effective interventions for couples who have attach different meanings to why the violence happens. Prince & Arias (1994) have also recommended that intervention options for violent men should take into account the different *functions* of the violence. For example, if it was considered that violence for *some* people is expressive, and we knew who these people were, than an intervention like teaching anger management skills - based on social learning theory- would not be offered as it is likely to have little impact and other forms of intervention could be done.

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32 Verbal aggression contrasts the use of physical aggression in that it is equally likely to cause harm by and to females and males (Marshall & Vitanza 1994).

*Domestic Violence: a critical review and discussion of the literature*
A review of the work by Bowlby and van der Kolk functions in the chapter to maintain the visibility of a relationship between childhood trauma / attachment and violence in adult relationships. This paper takes a position somewhere between the claims of Bowlby and his critics; it is informed by ideas regarding human agency however accommodates that experiences in early childhood do impact the decisions we make in later life. Numerous studies have reported that abusive males are more likely to have been abused as children or are more likely to have witnessed parental aggression than males who don’t use violence. A range if studies show between 60% to 80% of males who use violence come from violent homes (Feldmann & Ridley 1995). With regard to PTSD, it can be argued that this construct both limits and enables conditions in this field. Applying this and other ‘disorder’ labels to women may have enabled more understanding of women’s experiences and more credibility for women’s accounts in spheres including the law however, these labels are limiting too because they convey that a person’s experience is pathology when in part it might be the effect of structural and social inequalities that could be responded to more appropriately outside the disciplines of psychiatry or psychology.

What is obvious when doing a review of the literature is the dearth of information on the relationship between PTSD and men who do violence. Several studies reviewed (Maurico & Gormley 2001; Goldstein & Rosenbaum 1985) did not use the language of trauma yet discussed the men having symptoms which could be construed as PTSD. Goldstein & Rosenbaum found that abusive men have significantly lower self-esteem than non-abusive men. An additional finding, which is significant for this discussion, was that abusive men were more likely to interpret their wives behaviours as damaging to their self-esteem. Other findings claimed that men who do violence: (a) report higher levels of arousal in response to conflict scenarios (b) have greater generalised level of angry affect and (c) tend to label forms of emotional arousal such as hurt, fear, and jealousy as anger (Feldmann & Ridley 1995: 326). However, while the construct PTSD applied to particular men who do violence may be enabling in increasing understanding about their behaviours, it is likely that an application of this label would also have limiting functions. In a study involving interviews with thirteen men who do violence to their partners, O’Neill (2000) found that these men understood their violence either through the lens of pathology, that is, that they are abnormal or discussed themselves as at the mercy of inner forces. What was absent in the men’s narratives was the notion of choice, that they had agency. Providing the
label PTSD for some who do violence may get in the way of their cultivating a sense of agency and responsibility for their actions.

The concept ‘agency’ was discussed in the previous section with regard to early feminist theory not accommodating a victim of violence (woman) having agency. Similar critiques have been made of psychological theories that construct a victim as lacking agency, for example, the assumption that an anxiously attached child will have poor adult relationships. The concept ‘resiliency’, as reviewed in this section, is a helpful one because it offers a new lens for looking at the effects of abuse or poor attachment in both early and later life. The resiliency literature uses the language of people being challenged and affirms their reparative potential; it is a strengths based approach. A limitation of the resiliency studies, however, like the bulk of empirical psychological and psychiatric research reviewed for this section, is the epistemology informing the resiliency research. Characteristic of a positivist approach, these studies construct the people who are studied as objects. Life events happened ‘to’ the objects of the research and the researchers / practitioners measure and evaluate outcomes for these people. That is, the researchers or practitioners can make judgements around what has enabled resiliency that may not accommodate what a person who has experienced violence perceives as a strength or support.

With regard to the ecological systemic models reviewed (Foa et al.2000; Heise 1998) it is important to recognise that these models differ from the majority of theories reviewed in this section in that they were developed via a rigorous review of the literature that ‘crosses’ disciplinary boundaries. A strength of these models is that visibility is given to issues as diverse as class, mental illness, gender relations and attachment in the attempt to explain domestic violence. A limitation of these models, however, is the overload of information they contain that has been massed in the effort to be comprehensive. The overload of information makes one question how such models could be applied to practice given the lack of appreciation by the authors about the political barriers to combining knowledges about domestic violence in practice. That is, perhaps some of the theories or discursive formations combined by these theorists in their respective ‘ecological’ models are incommensurable in practice. A further limitation of the models reviewed is the failure to adequately account for children or other family members who may be implicated in the violence.

There is almost no mention of the dynamic between partner abuse and the effects on...
children. The status of these explanatory models will have to await further empirical analysis.
4. Other Theories of Violence

This section of the paper is mainly concerned with the relationships between class, race and family and domestic violence. The studies reviewed in this section could be grouped as ‘sociological studies’ but not exclusively so, studies using a feminist approach reviewed earlier in the paper could also be accommodated as sociological approaches. A main feature of using a sociological approach to family and domestic violence is locating the violence in a social context. That is, questions are asked about the systems of power (race, class, gender, ethnicity) and oppression (class stratification, prejudice, gender inequality) that might inform the violence being done. There has been much empirical sociological research done in the field of family violence over the past 30 years. While sociological research can employ qualitative and quantitative methods, research done which is recognised as sociological in the family violence field has used quantitative approaches, for example, the National Family Violence Surveys conducted in the United States in 1975 and 1985 by Straus et al. Typical features of these studies have been measuring variables and therein trying to explain how different characteristics of people (age, race, class, gender, lifestyle issues like alcohol use) intersect with experiences of violence. An assumption of these studies is that social characteristics of people contribute as causal factors for violence. Qualitative studies using approaches such as phenomenology have been less visible in mainstream discourses on violence in the home. This section will review also how this approach can contribute to knowledge.

Prominent feminist theorists of domestic violence Dobash & Dobash (1990:116-117) are critical regarding what ‘sociological research’ has to offer the field33. They comment that demographic studies undertaken by sociologists regarding characteristics of perpetrators or victims of violence at best can only describe a list of individual characteristics of people who are studied and at worst have no explanatory potential about violence in the home. Liz Kelly has also rejected that researching social characteristics contributing to a woman being victimised is of any benefit. She suggests that differences between women’s experience of violence is one of degree not kind (1987:59), retaining a conventional feminist position that the problem of

33 Dobash & Dobash’s understanding of sociology seems however limited in this, given the breadth of methodologies and content areas which can be accommodated within the discipline of sociology.
violence is a problem of gender inequality where all women are subordinated by a system of male supremacy. This section is included because sociological research has offered knowledge about violence. For example, this body of research has ‘found’ that some groups in society are more likely to perpetrate or be victimised by violence and that structural inequality contributes to violence being done. Sociological research has indicated that levels of family violence are higher in families where poverty, low income and unemployment are factors (Hood 1998; Johnson 1990; Lupri 1990). Other studies have found that levels of family violence are considerably higher in Australian Aboriginal families (Memmott et al. 2001) when compared to non-indigenous families. Obviously, not all families who are poor or not all indigenous families experience violence in the home. However, a framework for violence informed by the strong correlation between structurally oppressive systems (class, race) and higher rates of violence can speak about the absence of violence in these families as an achievement, given the extreme difficulties faced. If we have evidence and can accept that poverty and other forms of oppression or deprivation are contributing causes for violence, then the argument that family and domestic violence is a legal issue becomes a disjunction between the underlying causes of violence and the policy response to it. A legal response would then need to be regarded as a limited response. Likewise, a medical treatment model would then need to be regarded a limited response. This section aims to make visible findings from studies that further highlight limitations of a feminist or pathological model for family violence.

4.1 Class and inequality

In the following I review empirical studies that identify a relationship between class and family violence. While the findings of these studies do show a relationship, there is a dearth of theory that discusses class and violence in the home. I also then, consider what might contribute to blocking such knowledge being developed. Class has been a foundation for the development of sociological theory and was theorised extensively by Marx and Weber in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It remains, however, a difficult concept to define and sometimes dismissed as irrelevant for understanding social inequalities or divisions in society (see Walby

34 The author takes the position that it is possible to discuss increased rates of violence among marginalised groups without further stigmatisation. This is necessary for developing a comprehensive understanding of violence.
The agenda that class is irrelevant has been particularly strong in Australia, in political circles Australia is characterised as a ‘classless society’ or that we are a ‘comfortable’ society. Also, it is much more common in the Australian context to use the framework of gender and ethnicity to make meaning of unequal opportunity and social problems; the term ‘class’ has become almost antiquated. This section will make visible that class remains a central tool for understanding inequality and an essential tool for understanding and working with family and domestic violence. Before considering a relationship between class and violence in the home I will discuss how class has been understood in social theory with a view to operationalising this elusive concept.

Most contemporary studies of class and stratification use insights from Marx and/or Weber and discuss people’s relation to modes of production. For example, Anthony Giddens’ (1976, 1980) theory of ‘class structuration’ discusses the market situation and ensuing divisions within techniques of production (eg. manual vs. non-manual work) and authority relations at work (eg. management vs. field workers). The literature on class also develops Weber’s concept of status. Here, ‘status’ refers to the unequal distribution of honour rather than the unequal distribution of economic rewards. Different occupations (doctor or cleaner), ethnic groups (Aboriginal or Croatian), religious groups (Mormon or Moslem) and styles of life (buying the *Telegraph* vs. the *Herald* or living on the ‘North Shore’ in comparison with the western suburbs of Sydney) are accorded levels of prestige, honour or dishonour by society. Also, belonging to a certain status group has material effects; one either has improved or limited access to things defined as desirable in society. All of these concepts are central when understanding class. It is inadequate to look only at one’s relation to production or one’s income level to determine class affiliation because these measures may not indicate who does or does not suffer from the hidden injuries of class bound up in the dis(honour) of affiliation with a certain status group.

The relevance of social class has generally been construed in the family and domestic violence literature as a factual one, that is, collecting better and more data will resolve the issue. This position is informed by a belief that causes of violence in the home can simply be ‘uncovered’ with no regard for the politics involved when constructing knowledge. In contrast, this research is informed by the view that knowledge claims in the area of family and domestic violence are made for political reasons that serve a number of interests. The way that information is conveyed and structured in texts
reveals what information an author is trying foreground. It became a concern when reviewing literature for this paper that the issue ‘class’ is generally backgrounded or dismissed despite empirical evidence demonstrating a clear connection between domestic violence and low income\textsuperscript{35}. McKendy’s (1997) ideas around how ‘class’ is undermined in domestic violence texts was an useful tool to make sense of the way class was constructed in the literature reviewed. He discusses how the feminist ‘universal risk theory’, where all women are at risk of being victimised by violence because they are women, renders invisible any class issues that contribute to violence. McKendy regards the ‘universal risk theory’ as an \textit{incorrigible proposition}, a proposition preserved in the face of empirical evidence to the contrary by discrediting the research on methodological and conceptual grounds (p.141). For example, studies done on women who have experienced domestic violence frequently use samples of women who are in refuges or who have accessed government services like the police or Centrelink. When evaluating such studies, one might comment that the findings are non-representative of women from middle or upper class families’ who are likely to access other services or have other supports. Instead of drawing some assurance from the findings having validity, given similar findings by other studies demonstrating a relationship between class and violence, accepting the feminist universal risk theory warrants one concluding that additional research is needed so the ‘truth’ can be discovered. A finding that does not privilege gender inequality as the reason for violence, it may privilege some other form of structural inequality, is made irrelevant in this process and is (again) rendered unimportant for understanding family and domestic violence. In the dominant construction of domestic violence, poverty, substance abuse and compound disadvantage are dismissed as no more than excuses for men’s behaviour (Watson 2001). The findings reviewed for this section, however, convey that class richly informs violence in the home being done:

- Through examining data from the US National Crime Survey of 59,000 households Schwartz (1988) found a highly significant relationship between income level and spouse assault. Also, the data collected in the survey shows

\textsuperscript{35} In addition to my anecdotal experience that clients from less privileged backgrounds are over-
that low income ‘wives’ are more likely to receive more serious injuries than women with higher incomes and that women with lower educational attainment are more likely to be seriously injured in assaults than women with higher levels of educational attainment.

- Johnson (1990: 173) conducted telephone interviews with 61,000 Canadian residents and concluded that women in low income households were significantly more likely to reveal they had been victims of physical and sexual assault by a spouse or former spouse.

- Lupri (1990) did a study in Canada using self-administered questionnaires with a sample of 1,834 women and men. He calculated that the rate of wife abuse for men with incomes of less than $20,000 was double that for men with incomes of $60,000 or over.

- According to a 1993 telephone survey of 12,300 Canadian women conducted by Statistics Canada: “women with a household income of $15,000 and over reported 12 month rates of wife assault consistent with the national average, while women with incomes under $15,000 indicated twice the rates of national average” (cited by Rodgers 1994).

- Administering the Conflict Tactics Scale to a sample of 604 women in Toronto, Smith (1988, cited by McKendy 1997) discovered that the chances of a low-income woman being severely abused in the past year or ever, exceeded those of a ‘well to do woman’ by ten times.

- A greater severity of violence inversely correlates with class level (Straus 1991).

An Australian study by Mary Hood (1998) looking at the relationship between poverty, unemployment and all types of child abuse used a sample of 500 referrals made to the Child Protection Service at Adelaide Women’s and Children’s Hospital. Her findings indicate that “many more of the children reported to the official agencies for assessment of abuse come from poorer families … (who) tend to live in the more poorly resourced suburbs known to have residents with lower socio-economic averages” (p.30). Hood brings attention to how the claim ‘child sexual abuse happens across all social classes’ is assumed to mean ‘child sexual abuse happens at the same rate across all social classes’ and discusses why feminists were active in constructing

represented in the violence-specific practice environments I have worked in.
these claims. She also observes that this logic has ‘spread’ to the way we understand other kinds of violence, that is, because violence happens across the social spectrum it is assumed violence happens with the same frequency across the spectrum. Hood’s findings, in addition to the other findings canvassed here, indicate that class remains an important factor informing the frequency and possibly the type of violence done in the home. The centrality of class for understanding violence was visible also in many non-empirical works reviewed for the paper. For example, James Gilligan’s (2001, 1996) theory of violence is that structural inequality, or relative deprivation, is the main cause of behavioural violence. This is not because those who are unemployed or who are of a lower class are essentially more violent, but that these people are more likely to be disrespected and treated as less than human particularly in societies with significant class disparities. According to Gilligan, the feelings of shame and worthlessness that come from such treatment make violence more of an option for these people. In both works, he reviews several studies using large samples that have found a causal relationship between high economic inequality or unemployment levels and rates of violence in societies. For Gilligan; relative poverty and other forms of structural inequality do not merely correlate statistically with some other factor that causes violence, these issues correlate with violence because they increase the probability that individuals exposed to them or who experience them will be subjected to shame, “from which they do not perceive themselves as having any means of rescuing themselves except by violence” (2001:66). Gilligan’s ideas have been reviewed here to demonstrate how class as a form of social inequality can feature in theories of violence. While Gilligan’s theory is complex and foregrounds important issues, a criticism is that he pays insufficient attention to the role of human agency.

4.2 Race and ethnicity

Class affiliation is not the only factor that structures economic inequality in our society. Race, ethnicity, ability, gender, sexual orientation and religion also structure who can access or have limited access to social resources. Crenshaw (1994) has promoted the concept ‘intersectionality’ for making meaning of how we experience

36 Discussed in section 2, ‘Gender & Violence’.
37 It is appreciated that Gilligan’s theory is macro and not of domestic violence per se, however, links can be made between violence in the home and all forms of violence (see essays in Steger & Lind 1999).
the social. An example of applying this concept would be to understand the experience of a black woman with a disability exposed to violence not simply via making an addition of gender + race + ability but accommodating the complexity of how the combination of these structures of oppression are written on her and inform her experience of violence. Accommodating this complexity calls for a more expansive vision of who ‘all battered women are’ (Kanuha 1996) and therein, who perpetrators of violence are. Greater efforts to consider the relevance of social characteristics including race, gender, class for the problem of violence have been undertaken in the Australian context to a limited extent. With the exception of studies done by Aboriginal scholars and/or in consultation with indigenous people, little research on violence in the home among ‘different ethnic groups’ is available (Seth-Purdie 1995-6). Studies reviewed for this project included:

- A study conducted in the ACT revealed that people from NESB are over-represented among people accessing domestic violence services when compared to the general population (McIlroy 1995).
- In 1995, the Office of Multicultural Affairs conducted 16 discussion meetings with people from Vietnamese, Arabic-speaking, Jewish, Greek and Filipino backgrounds living in NSW with a view to learning more about relationship issues for these communities. While some of these people indicated violence was a problem in their communities, particularly among newly arrived immigrants, other claimed that the incidence of domestic violence was ‘exaggerated by the government and the media’ (quoted by Bagshaw et al. 2000: 92).

There is insufficient data available to make comparisons about the extent and nature of violence among these communities and the broader population not identified as ‘non-English speaking background’. However, there is some indication from studies that patterns of violent behaviour among ethnic communities were present before they settled in the country and that violent behaviours can be exacerbated by the stresses of migration (Seth-Purdie p.47).

The NSW Aboriginal Family Health Strategy advocates for an appreciation of how issues including institutionalised racism, unemployment, lack of adequate housing and a history of systematic breakdown of families have shaped indigenous communities and contribute to violence being done in those communities. Here, race is not a ‘causal’ factor for family violence but influences how it is done and why it is
done. It has been documented that rates of violence in Australian indigenous communities are disproportionately higher than rates of similar types of violence in the non-indigenous population (Memmott et al. 2001). It is important, however, to appreciate that it is an absurdity to discuss the unusually high levels of violence among indigenous people without reflecting that these people are, and have been for over 200 years, subjected to far more violence from white people than they have themselves have done to each other or non-indigenous people.

South Australian government statistics suggest that incidences of domestic violence among the indigenous population are likely to be 7 to 16 times higher than rates among the non-indigenous population (cited in Bagshaw et al. 2000). In an address to the NSW Domestic Violence conference 1991, Carol Thomas brought attention to how Aboriginal people have been the victims of violence since Australia was colonised by white people, inferring that it is since the invasion of Australia by white people that violence has become a problem for Aboriginal communities (p.88), a claim which destabilises the universal risk theory promoted by some feminists. Thomas also brings attention to the special needs of Aboriginal women within the wider ‘special needs’ of indigenous people. She cites studies finding Aboriginal women are 28 times more likely to die as a result of homicide than any other person in Australia (Payne 1990) and that the number of Aboriginal women in Queensland and Northern Territory who have died through violence exceeds the total number of deaths in custody in those states (Atkinson 1990). It is important then, when understanding violence done to Aboriginal women that the intersections of gender and race/ethnicity are accommodated. Violence against Aboriginal women must be understood in the context of a society that largely tolerates the subordination of, and violence toward, Aboriginal people.

Indigenous people have advocated that they author the solutions to the problem of family violence in indigenous communities. An enabling factor of indigenous communities having ownership of this process is that the definitions, causal theories and intervention practices can be constructed in a way that accommodates how indigenous people know about the problem of violence38. This way, theories which privilege gender or pathology dominant in mainstream Health discourse do not need

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38 This does not imply that ‘indigenous people’ are a homogenous group. Like any ‘community’ or social group there are diverse and at times conflicting ways of seeing the world among Aboriginal people.
to remain central when developing policy for Indigenous families. This way the problems of alcohol use and domestic violence, generally accepted as having a relationship of direct correlation in Aboriginal communities (Bagshaw et al. 2000), can be addressed as part of the same approach or policy. At the 2002 Expanding Our Horizons conference in Sydney, Aboriginal Justice Advisory Council member Rowena Lawrie commented that recent NSW Aboriginal Family Health policy is a landmark achievement because gender is not at the centre. She conveyed that family violence in indigenous communities is a response to a number of issues including colonisation, mental health and access to alcohol and other drugs. Lawrie said also that Aboriginal communities consulted in the development of the policy indicated that bringing down rates of offending as well as rates of victimisation was important. The aboriginal communities asked also for an approach that deals with why people offend and that interventions be developed that meet the causes of offending which are very complex. Mainstream NSW Health domestic violence policy would do well to learn from and apply insights from Aboriginal Family Policy with regard to this.

4.3 Phenomenological contributions

The term phenomenology literally means the ‘study of things shown’ (Macey 2000). Phenomenology was a major strand within twentieth-century continental philosophy originating in the work of Husserl and developed in the works of Heidegger, Sartre and Levinas. A major theme in phenomenology is the promise of having direct knowledge about experiences of the here and now, ‘back to the things themselves’, via a process of bracketing out preconceptions and assumptions that get in the way. The significance of phenomenology for understanding the social world is the focus on human experience as the primary source of knowledge. Phenomenological methods involve obtaining rich descriptions of the universal structures of a person’s subjective orientation in the world (Luckmann 1978), that is, from their viewpoint. These methods contrast those used in the bulk of studies reviewed in this paper on the grounds that reality and knowledge about violence, in phenomenological studies, is based on how people who have experienced it see it to be and the meanings these people make.

Jane Gilgun (2001, 1996) has developed theory and ideas around interpersonal violence over the past 16 years derived primarily by qualitative life history interviews.
she has conducted with men who have done violence. Gilgun has ‘immersed herself in the worlds of informants’ to learn how these men have made meaning of their violent behaviours and has constructed theory around issues including what men who use violence want and what these men believe can be gained through violence. The rich descriptions Gilgun has gathered about the nature of interpersonal violence from these interviews convey there are complex and varied reasons why men use violence and that meaning these men attach to violence is complex and can change over time.

Gilgun’s descriptive approach, like most interpretative approaches, can accommodate multiple perspectives regarding interpersonal violence and can hold simultaneously competing explanations for violence. The following exert is from a discussion Gilgun had with a man who murdered his fiancé, knew he would go to prison for the murder and subsequently murdered his children. He says,

“Well I killed my children out of, ah, out of my, uh, deluded thinking of, ah, a concern for their future…How they will live and who will take care of them. I can’t, I can’t provide for their future, and uh, I don’t want them to be miserable. I don’t want them to be bopped around in foster homes and county this or that, or be abused, separated and blah blah you know, and what will the outcome of the kids be? With all my drugged up thinking I thought they would be better off dead you know.” (2001:18).

While there are limitations of carrying out qualitative research such as Gilgun’s, this way of studying the social world would have much to offer the current policy and practice field of family and domestic violence given the impasse to integrating different ways of knowing and the failure of current practices in decreasing levels of violence in our communities or homes. There seems a need for policy makers and workers to understand what it is that women, children and men who experience violence feel is their major source of suffering from their own point of view. There needs to be further debate about what kinds of violence Health and the wider sector are trying to prevent; are we trying to prevent what we purport to prevent – the violence that people suffer from the most? Likewise, as Gilgun’s work has tried to do, we need to understand more the meanings those who use violence attach to their behaviour so greater efforts can be made to prevent violence.

39 Limitations include the time required when conducting qualitative research and difficulties in making generalisations for the wider community.
5. Final Discussion

5.1 Destabilising knowledge

This paper was written with the aim of destabilising dominant Health discourses around family and domestic violence. The current perspectives on domestic violence are too narrowly conceived. Research methods, theories of violence and policy debates must be broadened if we are to respond to domestic and family violence more effectively. A basic presupposition of this research is an abandon of a single theory that can explain violence in the home. Philosophically this is informed by the view that an explanation of causality for an action must hold for every such action to be adequate. From this premise, criticism can be made of theories that allege to explain domestic violence when in fact these theories or discourses privilege some features of the social world and make others invisible. Specifically, this paper has criticised claims in some feminist and medical models of domestic violence that are dominant in current Health discourse regarding how to know about and respond to violence.

The main claims and criticisms made in the paper included;

1. The claim that gender inequality is an adequate theory for, or even the most significant cause of domestic violence.

Before the 1970’s, it was assumed in the Australian context that families were caring environments where violence did not occur and when it did, was the result of individual pathology. Feminist activists at the time constructed a theory for domestic violence to promote both visibility and a re-interpretation of the problem of domestic violence; claiming that domestic violence is the means by which men control women. This claim has led to a universal risk theory; all women regardless of race, class, ability or ethnicity are at risk of being abused by men. This claim is flawed and misleading. Despite evidence suggesting that women from a broad range of social groups do experience domestic violence, there is strong evidence that the *frequency and extent of violence experienced by women from lower class groups and some racial groups is higher*. For these groups, forms of oppression other than, or in addition to gender may be the cause of violence.

Criticism of privileging gender as a category in feminist theory is well founded. Spelman (1990) has argued that we cannot talk simply about gender differences...
because gender identity is always structured in the context of class and racial distinctions. She says that if we are going to talk convincingly about the difference gender makes, we better be able to isolate it from the differences class and race make, and we can do this best by talking about gender relations between men and women of the same class and race.

This claim that gender inequality is an adequate theory for or even the most significant cause of domestic violence has also got in the way of making connections between domestic violence and other forms of family violence. For however long gender continues to be privileged as the cause of domestic violence in policy and practice, efforts to make links between domestic violence, child abuse, sibling abuse, elder abuse and other forms of violence in practice will be thwarted.

Also, policies and practices that privilege a patriarchal system as the cause of domestic violence can have the ramification of promoting disrespectful relationships between men, women and children (Watson 2001). Health policy should consistently promote respectful relationships within families and communities across all policy areas.

2. The claim in some feminist theory that women are powerless in the face of violence.

This claim, promoted during the second wave of feminism, has led to the construction of women as passive and without agency. However, some women who experience violence demonstrate considerable agency in their efforts to resist or limit the effects of violence for themselves and/ or their children while staying in their relationship. Policy and practices must accommodate the diversity of women’s experiences and women’s agency in their situation to enable more effective and appropriate interventions.

3. The claim in some feminist theory that women do not use violence, or that violence used by women is not serious.

This paper addressed why the violence women do has not been recognised as a social problem and explored how the construction of women as inherently non-violent, passive or weak can get in the way of accepting that women use violence. Most significantly, we do not know much about women’s violence. Ashe and Cahn (1994)
have recommended that the study of women’s violence should recognise the links between women’s agency, complicity and victimisation.

4. The claim that domestic violence, both perpetrating and experiencing this violence, is aberrant behaviour and a form of pathology that can be treated as an illness.

Several theories reviewed in Section 3 of the paper make claims that violence is a disorder or an illness and therein distinctive from ‘normal’ behaviour. Relatively few people involved in an abusive relationship, however, can be diagnosed with suffering a form of ‘serious pathology’ and there is no consensus on what pathology is. Labels applied to those who experience violence such as ‘battered women’s syndrome’, ‘PTSD’, ‘anxious/avoidant attachment’ also construct distinctions between normal and aberrant behaviour. These labels are problematic because they divert attention from the context of the violence; where it is happening, who is doing the violence in addition to the larger structural causes of violence. These labels are also problematic with regard to the material effects of such labelling. Women and men who experience violence and have been labelled as having Post Traumatic Stress Disorder may be treated by workers as if they had no agency or as if they cannot take responsibility for their behaviour. These people may in turn believe or act as if they are helpless in their given situation. This paper has also brought attention to how words used to describe the problem of violence can suggest a lack of agency and that a person’s identity is totally absorbed in doing or being victimised by violence. The references to ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’, however succinct, construct a person who is nothing more than this feature of their lives. Developing and using a language that accommodates agency is important.

5. The claim that the conventional legal system is adequate and appropriate for preventing all forms of domestic violence.

It has been argued in the paper that ‘domestic violence’ is a complex experience. We can make distinctions between different forms of and contexts of violence. Given this complexity of violence, it seems inadequate to have a static, homogeneous way of responding to violence. In the NSW context the uniform response involves punishing perpetrators of domestic violence via legal processes, providing therapy for victims of violence and on a smaller scale, using a combination punishment/therapy approach
for some perpetrators of violence. It has been canvassed that the prison environment, itself a violent institution, may exacerbate and not reduce violence. Section 4 also brought attention to how structural forms of oppression; including unemployment, poverty and racism correlate with domestic violence. If this is recognised, then the position that domestic violence is a crime and a legal issue becomes a disjuncture between the underlying causes of violence and policy responses to it.

5.2 Foregrounding knowledge

A further purpose of this paper was to foreground theories of domestic violence that are not dominant in Health discourse. Section 4 canvassed some less visible ways of knowing about violence in the home, considering the relationships between class, race and violence. This section also highlighted how different approaches to developing knowledge about violence, like the phenomenological approach, might assist us at this point of theory development in terms of providing richer descriptions of what meaning people attribute to the violence they do or are victimised by. In section 2 the voices of coloured women and feminists who have grappled with the limitations of early feminist claims about violence were fore-grounded. Here, the intersections between gender and other forms of social inequality experienced by women were made visible. Also it was argued that there be acknowledgement that feminist theories, via their politics, can only partially account for violence in the home (Ang 1995). Section 3 discussed how more traditional psychiatric and psychological theories like neurobiology and attachment theory, have been developed and combined with other theories to explain violence. This section also discussed the contribution of resilience theories, which can contribute a strength-based approach to working with violence in the home. Theories that are ecological or multi-dimensional were also reviewed (Foa et al. 2000; Heise 1998). These theories combine several theories or ways of knowing about family and domestic violence. Multi-dimensional theories accommodate explanatory models for violence as diverse as male power, poor childhood attachment and post-traumatic stress disorder. While the effort to broaden debates around domestic violence is a strength of these models, the multi-dimensional theories reviewed are overloaded with information to the extent that the models become unclear and violence remains unoperationalised. This may get in the way of multi-dimensional models such as these being employed in the current field.
5.3 The Politics of Knowledge

In the introduction it was stated that ‘discourse’ for the purposes of this paper, refers to an embodiment of meanings and practices that exist in relation to competing knowledges and practices. A central tenant of this paper has been that discourses make truth claims about family and domestic violence via the inclusion and exclusion of knowledge. What has been regarded as truth or fact about domestic violence is an effect of specific kinds of techniques and discursive practices used by social and professional groups staking claims on knowledge. For example, during the 1970’s feminists wished to undermine or destabilise the dominant discourses available to explain violence in the home. Feminists have fore-grounded the structural issue of gender and claimed that domestic violence is a way all men control all women. This claim made invisible issues around men’s individual pathology, substance abuse and other disadvantages experienced by men and, if discussed, these issues are construed by many feminists as mere excuses for the violence men do. Other discourses around domestic violence have privileged individual pathology and claimed that violence happens because one is unwell, has experienced traumatic childhood events or ambivalent attachments with parents and this has resulted in doing violence.

From a post-structural perspective, a multi-dimensional or eclectic position is not a simple position to take because sometimes the constructs and implications that arise out of the different discourses are incommensurable with those from competing discourses (O’Neill 1998). For example, there has been much debate on the efficacy of ‘perpetrator programmes’ here and in other western countries. For those who accept a feminist construction of the problem of domestic violence, programs which do not adopt a zero tolerance, feminist analysis of the problem are doomed to fail. For those who accept that violence is the result of trauma or poor childhood attachment, programmes not addressing these issues would be considered defective. The discourses informing these respective positions – with contrasting beliefs about why violence happens- make it impossible to use a common evaluative tool when measuring the efficacy of men’s programs or even to have a dialogue around the issues.

Regardless of this situation, decisions have been made and will continue to be made in Health and other sectors about how the problem of domestic violence is to be formulated and what interventions should take place. Inevitably this has involved and
will continue to involve foregrounding some discursive formations about violence instead of others. However, researchers, policy writers, management and workers should be made aware of the competing knowledges available about domestic violence to enable critical perspectives regarding why some claims are considered more true than others.

5.4 The position informing this paper

It is necessary to locate the argument and claims of this paper in the discursive field of family and domestic violence. This position has informed the discussion throughout the paper. It has been contended that the fierce struggle between the competing discourses dominant in the domestic violence has effected silencing of differences and an absence of debate. Currently we have a very narrow construction of domestic violence in Health policy and practice. The construction of domestic violence as an effect of a patriarchal system where women are dominated and controlled by men is a limited and partial explanation and must be combined with other understandings of violence. Likewise, the construction in some areas of Health of domestic violence as a form of aberrant behaviour informed by individual pathology must also be recognised as limited. The material effects of these discourses; treating perpetrators of violence through the legal or mental health systems, may be enabling for some who experience violence but limiting or damaging for others who experience violence. A main thesis of this paper is that the narrow construction of domestic violence in Health ignores structural causes of violence other than gender inequality. In particular this paper has fore-grounded studies concerned with the intersections between family violence, poverty and other forms of relative deprivation because these intersections are not visible in dominant construction of domestic violence in most Australian literature. Despite the little information we have about such correlations due to the limited funds and resources made available for such research, this paper has argued that structural systems of class and race – and their intersections with other systems of oppression – significantly inform violence being done in our homes and communities.
5.5 Recommendations for Health policy and practices

Based on the information about family and domestic violence reviewed in the current study, the following recommendations are made for making changes to Health policy and practice in this field:

1. That NSW Health develop policy about domestic violence that acknowledges domestic violence as a complex issue which can occur due to a number of reasons in different contexts. Specifically, structural inequalities including race and class issues need to be acknowledged alongside gender inequalities as a cause of violence in the home.

2. That NSW Health policy about domestic violence use gender-neutral language when referring to those who both do and are victimised by violence. Even if more women then men are victims of domestic violence, gender-neutral language can accommodate the fact that women do use violence and that men are victimised by domestic violence.

3. That NSW Health services develop practice and health promotion initiatives that aim to encourage respectful relationships within families and also encourage non-violent alternatives to dealing with conflict.

4. That NSW health services develop practice initiatives that accommodate the multiple levels of violence in families. Workers should recognise that one form of violence in a family is sometimes an indicator of others.

5. That NSW Health services and relevant departments develop family and domestic violence policy and practice in consultation with the communities who are affected by them. This will involve a process of suspending the knowledge a service or worker might have about domestic violence with the aim of hearing contrasting knowledge that the consumers may have about the nature of violence in the home.

6. That further research is done in the area of family and domestic violence. Specifically, further research should be done in the area of women who use violence to enable a better and more diverse representation of this issue.
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