

**THE NEED FOR INTERVENTION SERVICES FOR CHILDREN FROM ABUSIVE
HOUSEHOLDS AS PERCEIVED BY THEIR ABUSED MOTHERS: AN EXPLORATORY
STUDY.**

By

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ONLY A CHILD

Only a child can create a father and a mother out of a joy and a yearning.

Only a child can breathe Life into a group of kin.

Children come from a secret place where Time runs into the world.

Have you asked a child what is in that place?

Children show love- with no demand for anything in return.

*Have you felt this to give you Strength and Joy - but also make you
vulnerable?*

Children show you your worst weaknesses- without incriminations.

Have you felt this to make you an angry warrior - with no-one to kill?

Children show you your own past reflected in the present.

Have you listened to the difference?

*Children show you something you have never seen before-
an ozone-gap in the newspaper - a computer game- a punk hair-do-
- a sword in a stone.*

Have you asked and learned- instead of giving answers?

Children come from a secret place where Time runs into the world.

They bring questions to hidden answers - and answers to hidden questions.

*The one who wishes to learn something about Life should not slight such a
source.*

*Use your time - for all of a sudden the Child will have disappeared -
into an Adult.*

(Trond-Viggo Torgersen, The Norwegian Commissioner for Children in Ekberg, K. and P.E. Mjaavatn (eds.)
(1993), *Children at risk: selected papers*, p.v. The Norwegian centre for child research.)

DEDICATED TO BLANCHE AND NICHOLAS MENIGO AS
WELL AS TO THE CUNNINGHAM AND BOREZ FAMILIES

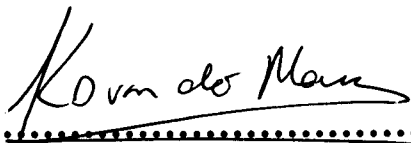
ABSTRACT

The high incidence of domestic violence both internationally and locally begs the question as to the impact on and need for intervention services for the children growing up in violent homes. In response to this need for services in this area, the National Institute for the prevention of Crime and Rehabilitation of offenders, Women's Support Centre (NWSC) is currently considering the extension of their current services to the children of their clients who have been exposed to domestic violence. So as to promote and inform more effective intervention services in consultation with the community, the current study explores the range of needs of the children of abused women, establishing whether there is a need for services and how the NWSC can best go about meeting the identified needs as identified by abused mothers who are stakeholders in the NWSC. Action research, community psychology and ecosystemic principles play a central role in this research. Participants were all NWSC clients who had experienced abuse in their intimate relationships and who are mothers to children who had been exposed to the domestic violence. Data was collected from two sources, that of Needs Assessment forms (consisting of open-ended and multiple choice questions) and three open-ended, semi-structured 90 minute focus group interviews which were run at the centre. In both cases, there was collaboration with and input by NWSC staff, one of whom co-facilitated in the focus group interviews. Twenty-one women completed the needs assessment forms. Thirteen women participated in the mixed-race focus groups. In this study commonly observed short term effects include deficits in functional and emotional capacity, psychosocial functioning and the implementation of inadequate coping- and problem-solving strategies. Reported long term effects include a propensity to either commit (or be the object of) violence and abuse in subsequent intimate relationships, or to become prone to conduct problems and substance abuse. In addition, many children are involved in multiple ways in the abuse- either by being physically or emotionally abused themselves, being identified as a precipitant for the abuse, or intervening physically or verbally to stop the abuse of their mothers. Children are therefore never mere witnesses. However, not all children are condemned to become abusers themselves or to manifest with maladaptive coping mechanisms in response to their exposure to domestic violence. This is evident in several reports of children's displays of resilience despite their adverse home and family circumstances. The great degree of overlap of coping mechanisms between different children suggests that such variable

responses are more likely a function of individual attributes and personality characteristics and the degree of available external support systems rather than a function of age or gender per sé. Overall, the findings highlighted that there is a definite need and overwhelming support by NWSC clients for the proposed extension of the NWSC programme to ^{improve} include intervention services for children. These findings also expanded on the existing body of local knowledge on the impact of domestic violence on children by identifying a number of ameliorating and exacerbating influences which mediate its impact and help inform the implementation of future community relevant programmes with such children. Maternal education and support such as the counselling which the NWSC can hopefully provide are amongst such processes which can help to ameliorate the impact of domestic violence on children and foster greater resilience. A number of recommendations are made regarding parent-child programmes, community, legal, government, societal interventions and future research. Ecosystemic theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the impact of domestic violence on children and for informing interventions which address the multiple systemic levels both within and outside of the family which contribute towards the creation and perpetuation of domestic violence. With the extension of intervention services to the children of abused women, the NWSC with the support of its client stakeholders has the potential to contribute much of value in this regard.

DECLARATION

The author hereby declares that this whole thesis, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is her own work.



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Karen van der Merwe

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. OVERVIEW OF THE PROBLEM OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON CHILDREN

Despite findings indicating that parents in abusive relationships often have a reduced ability to meet their children's developmental and emotional needs (Elbow, 1982), researchers and professionals alike have generally expressed little concern about the impact of domestic violence on children - except when the violence involves the **direct** sexual or physical abuse of children (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990; Padayachee, 1994). The paucity of studies in the area of children exposed to domestic violence within the South African context in particular, points towards the need for further research on the subject. The findings of the few studies that have been conducted in South Africa (Hill & Keen, 1993; Hude, 1994; Lawrence, 1984; Maconachie, Angless & Van Zyl, 1993; Padayachee, 1994; Visagie, 1994, for example), highlight a combination of behavioural, emotional and relationship problems, psychosomatic illness and feelings of confusion, disequilibrium and frustration experienced by and associated with children exposed to domestic violence.

As the most vulnerable members of a family or community, children growing up in violent homes do not necessarily have to be abused themselves to have their lives impacted upon by violence in their childhood environment (Angless & Shefer, 1997; De Sousa, 1991; Shefer, 1995). Mere exposure to domestic violence may give children the impression or message that violence within the family is socially acceptable and morally fair (Visagie, 1994). A culture of violence both within and outside of the home context may thus be reinforced. Whereas the direct expression of physical and/or sexual violence towards children in such families is a common practice (Angless & Shefer, 1997; Padayachee, 1994; Shefer, 1995), more research is needed to gain insight into the needs of children who may not have been directly abused, but whose lives have nevertheless been impacted upon by growing up in homes where domestic violence occurs. This thesis will therefore focus on the needs of the latter so as to better inform intervention strategies and services in this regard.

1.2. MOTIVATION FOR THIS STUDY

The National Institute for Crime prevention and Rehabilitation of Offenders (NICRO) Women's Support Centre (NWSC) is a non-governmental organization in Cape Town that deals primarily with women who have been physically, sexually and/or psychologically abused within the context of their intimate relationships. The majority of clients seen present with issues surrounding domestic violence for which the NWSC provides individual and/or group supportive, legal and crisis-intervention counselling on a short- or long-term basis.

Over the years, several NWSC clients have expressed concern about the effects exposure to violence within the home was having on their children (Durra, 1998, for example). In response to the expressed need for services for children in this area, the NWSC is currently considering the extension of their current services to include the children of NWSC clients who have been exposed to domestic violence. For the purposes of the present study then, the scope will be restricted to an exploration of the perceived needs of and impact on children who

grow up in violent homes as reported by their mothers. The fact that this study will be located within a South African context will also hopefully highlight some of the trends for children of different ages and sexes and so help inform the NWSC about possible intervention and service-provision strategies relevant to the local context. So as to promote more effective service-provision and intervention, research is needed around 1) the *range of problems* which children from violent households can be expected to present with, as well as 2) the *specific range of needs* of the intended local target group of the children of NWSC clients.

1.3. SYNOPSIS OF THE CURRENT STUDY

In summary then, the initiative for the present study was born out of concern for the following factors:

- With the increasing rates of reports of domestic violence in South Africa comes the increased likelihood of children, the secondary victims, being exposed to and impacted upon by domestic violence.
- The findings of various studies on the negative impact of domestic violence on children growing up in violent households.
- The repeated requests over the years by NWSC clients for services for their children.
- Establishing what the extent and range of needs of the children of abused women are as reported by their mothers, the current clientele and stakeholders of the NWSC.
- Establishing community collaboration and consultation to establish how best the centre can go about meeting identified needs.

Some of the literature pertaining to the topic of domestic violence together with terminologies and the theoretical considerations of the current research will be introduced in Chapter Two.

Chapter Three deals with the methodological approach of this research and illustrates the value of an action-research model which in itself forms part of an ecosystemic framework and community psychology principles of participatory "person-in-context" research.

Chapter Four examines the results of the analysis of the Needs Assessment Forms and relates this back to the relevant findings in the literature.

Chapter Five documents the interpretation and analysis of the data and emergent themes from the focus group interviews and links these to pertinent literature. It also outlines the research (and researcher) process.

Chapter Six contains concluding comments and summarises the research findings. It also outlines some of the limitations of the current research and suggests possible future avenues for research and intervention strategies.

CHAPTER 2: THEORISING VIOLENCE AND THE FAMILY

2.1. CONTEXTUALISING VIOLENCE WITHIN THE FAMILY

Before exploring the various theoretical frameworks for understanding the evolution, maintenance and impact of violence within the family, it is important to attempt to define what constitutes the terms family and family violence.

2.1.1. Defining the family

Zilbach (1986) defines the family as "a small natural group in which the members are related by birth, marriage, or other form which creates a home or functional household unit" (p.6). Taking this definition one step further, Combrinck-Graham (1989) contends that the term "family" should also encompass the complex biopsychosocial influences (such as the influences of the nuclear or extended family, school and socio-cultural-political contexts) on a child's development. The context of every family is thus couched in, shaped and produced by multi-familial and intergenerational processes as well as the emotional atmosphere and systems of values, attitudes and beliefs which precede it (Hurst, Sawatzky & Paré, 1996). The fashion in which power is conceptualised in a broader social context is thus a critical pre-requisite for the analysis of violence in the family (Miller, 1989 in Combrinck-Graham, 1989; Lazarus, 1988).

2.1.2. Defining domestic violence

Because the family is a microcosm of society, the prevalence of violence in a particular society is invariably linked to high levels of domestic violence. Therefore an understanding of violence in the home lends itself to a better grasp of violence in the wider social context. Indeed, the family can be regarded as a 'cradle' of violence because experiences of violence in childhood and in family life are invariably socialized into a cycle of violence within the wider society in many forms (McKendrick & Hoffmann, 1990, p.164).

It follows that whether violence in the family in its broadest sense is viewed from a feminist perspective (as a gender-defined issue where the male exerts his abusive physical and economic power over women and children), or from a perspective which argues against social control and intervention by state agencies which critics claim threaten the autonomy and rights of already disempowered families, how family violence is in the end defined is clearly influenced by how it comes to the attention of those who try to define it (Angless & Shefer, 1997; Duncan & Rock, 1994; Miller, 1989 in Combrinck-Graham, 1989; Segel & Labe, 1990). There is therefore no consensus regarding clear definitions of the terms "violence" and "abuse" and they are often used interchangeably. Consequently, there is often a blurring of the definitions of violence so that domestic violence is often loosely interpreted and equated with violence within the family.

Woman abuse (considered here as being a subdivision of domestic violence) can be defined as the set of actions leading to a woman being hurt, violated and abused by the man she knows intimately -most commonly a boyfriend, husband or lover with whom she shares her life- within a context of coercive control (Campbell & Lewandowski, 1997; De Sousa, 1991). The abuse can be of a verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, economical

and/or emotional nature. Consequently, woman abuse can range from situations where the woman is physically beaten, slapped, hit, kicked to where the man ignores her emotional needs, makes her feel useless, denigrates, swears and shouts at her, uses money to undermine her or where he rapes, indecently assaults and sexually abuses her (De Sousa, 1991; Shefer, 1995). The impact of such abuse on the woman herself has been related to increased depression, anxiety symptoms, physical injuries as well as hearing, vision and concentration difficulties to name but a few (Campbell & Lewandowski, 1997; De Sousa, 1991).

With the occurrence of woman abuse comes the additional possibility of other types of abuse occurring where the children either become direct victims of physical, sexual, verbal or emotional abuse themselves or are indirect victims who witness parental violence (Mathias, Mertin & Murray, 1995). Because behaviours do not necessarily have to be violent in order to be judged as encompassing abuse (Kashani, Daniel, Dandoy & Holcomb, 1992), the terms "violence" and "abuse" are both applicable when referring to woman abuse and its direct and indirect impact on the lives of abused women as well as their children.

Contrary to notions of peaceful, idyllic family life then, there is a greater likelihood for people to be killed, physically beaten up, assaulted, hit, or spanked by other family members in their own homes- so much so that the family can easily be considered as being society's most violent institution (Gelles & Cornell, 1990; Shefer, 1995). Gelles and Cornell (1990) go on to blame the idealization of family life for people's tendency to either turn a blind eye towards family violence or to condone it as a necessary part of child-rearing and family interaction. Instead of the family being a warm, stress-relieving, intimate haven, in reality it can often be a space fraught with danger where violence is normalized as both a practiced and learned behaviour (Angless & Shefer, 1997).

For the purposes of this study, the terms "domestic" and "family" violence will be used interchangeably to refer specifically to incidences of woman abuse. Woman abuse in turn will be defined as encompassing male violence (of either a sexual, physical, verbal, psychological, attitudinal or emotional nature on any combination thereof) towards female partners where both partners are also caregivers to one or more children. Different theoretical frameworks for understanding the evolution and maintenance of domestic violence will be discussed in the next section.

2.1.3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR UNDERSTANDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

From the literature pertaining directly to the topic of domestic violence, four main theoretical frameworks for explaining the aetiology and perpetuation of violence within the home emerged. Kashani et al. (1992) summarize these along the following lines:

1) *The psychopathological model* incorporating personality and psychiatric disorders which, as intrapsychic characteristics, are thought to determine family violence.

2) *The social learning model* which argues for the intergenerational transmission of violence as being a socialised behaviour which children learn from their parental role models and then practice in their own relationships.

3) *The aversively stimulated aggression model* which focuses on the intent of the abuser to inflict pain.

4) *The systems model* emphasizing the existence of dysfunctional family relationships where family violence occurs as a product of the reciprocity and inter-relatedness of individual family members and their biopsychosocial contexts.

Whereas each of the aforementioned theoretical frameworks shed light on different aspects of domestic violence and its maintenance, they too have their shortcomings. Many criticisms have been lodged against the different theoretical models. For example, the main criticism of psychopathological model is its apparent failure to explain why violence occurs in the absence of mental illnesses or specific personality disorders. That the social learning and aggression perspectives fail to account for why some individuals with family violence in their histories manage to suppress aggressive behaviour or why there is such a diverse range of symptoms amongst children exposed to violence has been another source of heated debate (Kashani et al., 1992; Silvern & Kaersvang, 1989). Notwithstanding the fact that each of the aforementioned theoretical models in isolation provides a useful, though limited perspective of the occurrence and maintenance of domestic violence, the current author proposes that a more integrated biopsychosocial model incorporating all of the aforementioned perspectives would be a truer reflection of the complexities of human existence and multidetermined nature of social problems such as woman abuse and its impact on children.

Since human existence is a complex interrelation of numerous social, political, cultural and economic systems, it follows that such factors overlap with family life and human development and shape the quality of life for both children and families (Emery, Cummings & Fincham, 1992; Garbarino, 1977 cited in Gelles & Cornell, 1990). Whatever occurs within the context of the family is thus a reflection of the wider social context. Domestic violence can be viewed as one such social symptom which impinges upon the relationships and functioning of both parents and children. The relationship between marriage, parenting and children's functioning is therefore a complex one (Cowan, Cohn, Cowan & Pearson, 1996; Emery et al., 1992). Children both influence (and are influenced by) their parents' marriage and relationship (Ambert, 1992; Cox & Paley, 1997). Whereas it is stressed that children's behaviour does not create or provoke the violence in itself, their behaviour may on occasion create stress in a family system (which is already highly stressed because of impinging external influences such as macro- and exosystemic factors to be discussed in detail later) so that this is then violently reacted to (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993). However, the responsibility for choosing violence as a response falls on the shoulders of the violent person rather than on the shoulders of the children (Grusznksi, Brink & Edleson, 1988).

Of the different theoretical frameworks, a perspective embracing systems and ecological principles seems to come closest to providing the most comprehensive biopsychosocial explanation for the manifestation and

maintenance of domestic violence and its impact on the development of children growing up in such homes. Also, unlike other theoretical models which assume inevitable negative expectations of children and families exposed to violence and serve to perpetuate the intergenerational transmission of violence across ecological systems (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993), a systems framework acknowledges that individuals within systems have the potential to respond differently. The possibility of children displaying resilience (a term to be discussed in more detail later) in the face of adversity within the home is therefore taken into account. Furthermore, an ecosystemic perspective does not resort to reductionistic thinking where complex relationships (such as those occurring in families where domestic violence occurs) are simplified to basic elements (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 1997). Instead, they are viewed as complicated systems which both influence (and are influenced by) other systems in complex ways. Any family system is therefore viewed as more than the mere sum of its constituent parts.

For all of the aforementioned reasons, an ecosystemic perspective was employed for the purposes of this study so as to better understand the occurrence and maintenance of domestic violence and its impact on children, and to inform possible intervention strategies.

2.1.3.1. Ecosystemic perspective

The ecosystemic perspective encompasses an amalgamation of ecological and systems theory (Barker, 1968). The main contention of this perspective is that individuals and groups are embedded in a social context and are linked at different levels in relationships which, though interdependent, are in a constant state of flux and influence each other in a mutual manner. The term *dynamic* refers to the constantly shifting (as opposed to static) nature of the aforementioned *interactions* (how things can influence each other). The term *interdependence* refers to the situation where multiple elements are needed for obtaining social functioning or physical survival (Donald et al., 1997; Dowling, 1985). The ecosystemic perspective bears much relevance to the topic at hand (of how violence within the home impacts on children's functioning) in that it promotes a more holistic understanding of how complex levels of interaction between and within systems impact on the development of children in particular (Tyler, 1992).

Bronfenbrenner (1986) defined these different relationship levels in terms of the *macrosystems*, *exosystems*, *mesosystems* and *microsystems*. The *microsystem* encompasses the family itself as well as school and peer groups where children are closely involved in everyday activities, roles and relationships. The *mesosystem* (comparable to the local community) reflects the interactions between the family, school and peer group systems which influence a child's perceptions and responses within different contexts. The *exo-system* includes other systems where a child may not be directly involved, but which may influence and be influenced by the child's microsystem. For example, the child may not be directly involved with the parental workplace, but if father works long hours and brings his stress home and takes it out on mother, this impacts on the child. The exosystem most often encompasses formal and informal social structures such as the absence of emotional and material support structures (in schools, religion, neighbourhoods, workplaces, peer groups), the lack of

availability of community services and resources, high unemployment rates and socio-economic stress. The *macro-system* represents dominant cultural and societal values, structures and beliefs which can serve to foster and tolerate violence and which influence and are influenced by all other levels of the system. The following table depicts a pictorial representation of the various systems to which a child is exposed and learns from.

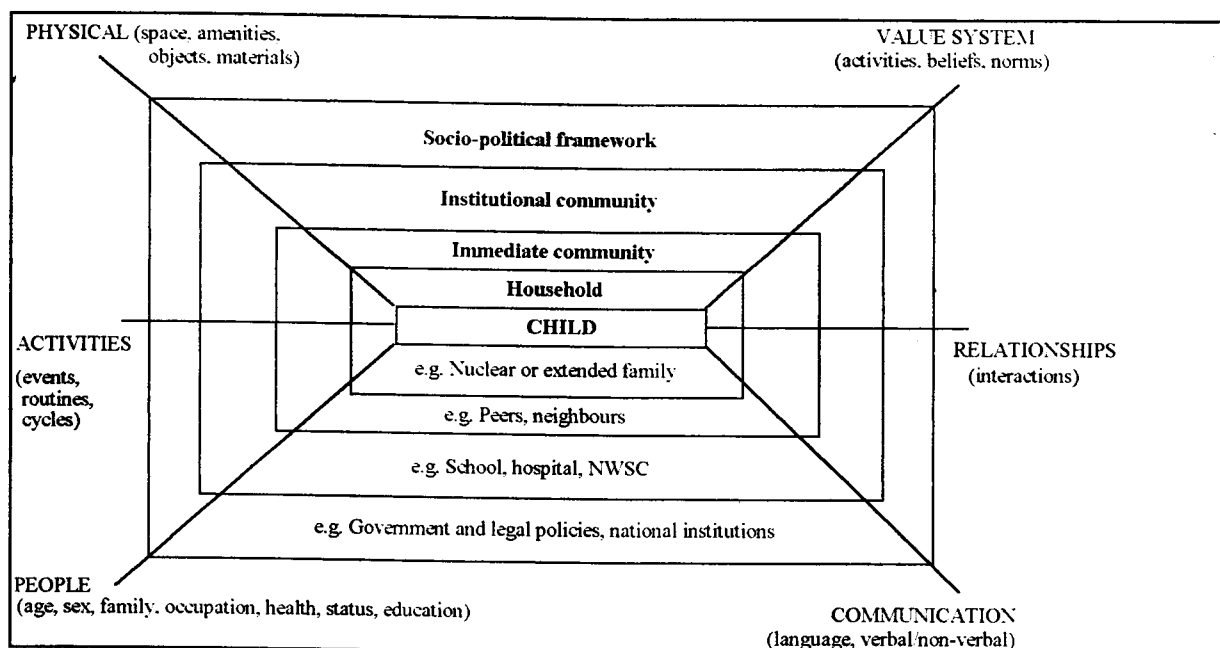


Figure 2.1. : The multiple ecologies and learning environments to which children are exposed

[Adapted from UNESCO- the learning environment of early childhood in Asia (1988 p.23) in K. Ekberg & P.E. Mjaavatt (eds.) (1993), *Children at risk: selected papers*, p.337. The Norwegian Centre for child research.]

All of the aforementioned levels can therefore produce adverse consequences in the functioning of the immediate *family micro-system* (components associated with parenting styles, family dynamics and the developmental and psychological histories of parents which are brought to the family ecosystem) and vice-versa so that family violence is made possible and has an impact on every part of the family as a whole (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Cowan et al., 1996). The complex interactions of each of the aforementioned levels can consequently be related to the setting up and maintenance of circumstances which may foster domestic violence and impact on children's development. The basic tenets of the respective ecological and systemic theories will be outlined briefly.

2.1.3.2. Ecological theory

According to ecological theory, interdependent relationships exist between different organisms and their physical environment. Part-whole relationships are emphasised. Whereas, all these relationships are viewed as a whole, each part plays a vital role in the maintenance and sustaining of cycles of life, death and regeneration which all ensure the survival of the whole. These ecological principles draw an analogy to a spider's web:

The spider's web is a whole. Anything that happens in any part of the web (like a fly being caught in the threads of one part) is felt in all other parts. The fly being caught keeps the system going (feeds the spider). But in the process, the web has been broken and must be repaired. The fly has died, and this affects other systems- and so the cycle continues
 (Donald et al., 1997, p.34).

From this it follows that when there is harmony in relationships and cycles within the whole, the whole can be sustained and can adjust to temporary changes if it can timeously recover its equilibrium (a state of dynamic balance). *Ecological dissonance* occurs when there is major discord so that interdependent relationships are disrupted and the recovery of the whole may be under threat (Donald et al., 1997). Therefore individuals are involved in interactive environments on multiple levels of organization in the social context such as the family, school, community and society. Each level interacts with every other level in a *reciprocal* manner - meaning that each level influences and is in turn influenced by other levels within the total ecological system.

2.1.3.3. Systems theory

According to systems theory, various levels and groups within the social context constitute *systems* which contribute towards the functioning of the whole and are simultaneously dependent on the interaction of all parts (Tyler, 1992). The family is one example of such a system. Despite being composed of individual family members, the functioning and characteristics of a family as a whole will centre around the sustaining of its characteristic patterns in a constant pattern of dynamic tension and adjustment. Family members both shape (and are in turn shaped by) these patterns. Consequently, tensions in family *subsystems* (different overlapping parts within a family such as parents, grandparents and children) influence the family as a whole. The family in turn may interact with other levels outside of it such as other families (parallel systems) and wider systems such as schools and churches. Cause and effect relationships are seen to occur in cycles rather than in a unidirectional manner (Marvin & Stewart, 1990). The cycle of violence occurring in families where woman abuse occurs is an example of how such circular relationships impact on (and are in turn impacted upon by) the functioning of individual family members and other work, school or social systems outside of the family.

It follows that in families where domestic violence occurs, there is increased likelihood of triangulation - a process whereby two-person relationships become so unstable and intense that a third person, most often a child, is drawn (or triangulated) by the parental twosome, thereby diluting anxiety and regaining some semblance of stability (Hurst et al., 1996). Through the aforementioned triangulation process, the children may therefore become objects of parental projections and serve as a channels for the conflict in the parental dyad. In such families where there are such dysfunctional dynamics, one can therefore expect an increased tendency towards the development of a range of dysfunctional family interactional patterns and manifestation of symptoms, especially in the children which may manifest in other systems such as the school and peer group.

Other important aspects for understanding systems, centre around the *goals and values of the system*, *communication patterns* and *roles within the system*, *boundaries* around systems and subsystems and the *developmental changes* which occur in human systems over time. *Goals and values* of a family may be of an overt nature (for example to survive economically), or of a covert nature (for example, to maintain male domination). *Ways of communicating* become established over time both within the system and in relation to other systems. For example, communication patterns may be clear and direct (without contradictory messages and directly addressing the person involved with whom there is a difficulty), or may be the direct opposite - unclear and indirect so that there is a contradiction between what is said and what is conveyed. The latter type of contradictory communication where, for example, the father says he loves his wife but then proceeds to abuse her is a primary example of a fairly common scenario in families where domestic violence occurs. The adequacy of communication affects the functioning of the system and subsequent interactions.

Roles of family members refers to defined patterns of relating which family members adopt within the family system and how they maintain the covert goals of the system. These roles (such as parent, caregiver, child, breadwinner, peace-maker, problem-solver and blame-taker) may be overlapping, even contradictory at times. Subsequently, a child may be expected to take on both the role of child and parent and parent-child boundaries and roles may become so blurred or reversed that children may either take on parental duties which are in excess of the child's developmental capacity or they may try to protect their parents from themselves (Elbow, 1982; Sroufe, 1989). *Boundaries* between a system and its subsystems, and between a system and other systems may be of a closed or open nature. Whereas closed boundaries are more rigid and inflexible to change, open boundaries around a system or subsystem are more flexible and adaptable. Also, as time passes, all human systems also undergo *developmental shifts* in different parts of the system. One thus needs to take cognizance of how the nature of these developmental changes affect the functioning of the system as a whole as well as influencing its interaction with other systems in a cyclical manner.

Drawing together the ecological and systemic strands once again, ecosystemic theory provides a useful means of describing the processes characterizing domestic violence and explaining how the violence is managed and stabilized through various causal flows, feedback systems and system goals. Following an ecosystemic perspective then, individual and families are embedded in a larger network of social systems and can never be understood outside the context of those systems (Cox & Paley, 1997). Family violence can thus be explained as being a system product rather than a result of individual psychopathology (Giles-Sims, 1983; Straus, 1973 cited in Gelles, 1993). The interconnectedness of individual psychological development, social context and the systems within it is therefore highlighted so that developmental challenges are inseparable from the challenges of social issues and special need (Donald et al., 1997).

In essence, an ecosystemic perspective emphasises the manner in which the different levels of a system in the social context influence (and are influenced by) one another in a continuous process of dynamic balance, tension, and interplay (Donald et al., 1997; Hancock, 1993). The adoption of such an ecosystemic perspective

highlights the interaction between different levels of a system which can in turn contribute towards the aetiology and maintenance of domestic violence and its impact on the developmental process of children in different ways. Ecosystemic ideas will be the thread running through this exploration of domestic violence and its impact on children.

2.1.4. Domestic violence in South Africa

At present there are no reliable South African statistical databases which can provide a clear focus on the problem or credible prevalence estimates of the national scope of the problem. The inadequate quality of statistical information on domestic violence in South Africa is thus a major obstacle to obtaining a clear picture of the magnitude and prevalence of the problem of domestic violence in South Africa (Gilbert, 1996). Of the South African literature consulted where statistics were available, however, there appears to be accumulatory evidence of the increasing prevalence of woman abuse in South Africa (Padayachee, 1994; Shefer, 1995).

Maconachie et al. (1993) for example, point out that woman abuse (also known as spousal, domestic, family or marital violence or abuse) is one of the most pervasive forms of violence used against any individual in South Africa. Statistics reported by two Cape Town-based organisations indicate that roughly one in every six women is subjected to domestic violence and that 80% of the cases dealt with by social work agencies reveal abuse of women (Coordinated Action for Battered Women, 1989; Rape Crisis, 1990 cited in De Sousa, 1991). Lawrence's (1984) findings that woman abuse was the second most frequently reported crime in Mitchell's Plain is a further example of the magnitude and prevalence of the problem of domestic violence in one Cape region alone.

As Gilbert (1996) points out, violence against women together with other forms of violence cannot be separated from the broad ideological, social and political context in which it occurs. Whereas there appear to be few local studies in this regard, studies such as those of Lindblad-Goldberg and Dukes (1988) bear relevance to and draw important parallels to the South African context. According to the study of Lindblad-Goldberg and Dukes (1988), which outlines the stressors facing black, low-income, single-parent families in America, the manner in which a family responds to and experiences stress is dependent on the interactions between and within multiple elements. Such elements include:

- The frequency, magnitude and other characteristics of the stressful event or situation.
- The family's positive/negative/neutral definition and perception of the event.
- The degree of mutual support within the family's social support network system.
- The family's internal resources.

The prevalence of such psychosocial stressors in any one socio-political system can thus have far reaching effects on the quality of family life per se.

Keeping in mind the parallels between the black, low-income, single-parent families in America and the largely black, low-income South African majority, the effects of "Apartheid" (as well as the transitional post-Apartheid era) on the functioning of the families of all South Africans within the South African socio-cultural-

political-historical context, cannot be overlooked. It has, for example, been purported that the incidence of domestic violence has been exacerbated by a history of police brutality and migrant labour which were almost commonplace occurrences (Gilbert, 1996). In view of South Africa's socio-political history filled with violence, racial divisions, forced removals and separations, the disempowering effects of the aforementioned on the functioning and coping mechanisms of family systems can perhaps be better understood.

This is not to say that domestic violence is more prevalent amongst families who are black and of low socio-economic status as this is not the case - domestic violence is in fact widespread across all socio-economic and racial groups in South Africa (De Sousa, 1991; Gilbert, 1996; Segel & Labe, 1990). Nor is it to say that domestic violence in South Africa is a direct product of the evils of Apartheid. Rather, the purpose is to illustrate that such social, political, historical factors and systems all interact and impact on family functioning. So whereas the aforementioned available South African prevalence figures for domestic violence transcend categories of race, class, culture, colour, religion and creed, with increased external pressures from socio-political-historical systems (and their after-effects) there is a greater likelihood for the setting up of conditions which facilitate the incidence and maintenance of domestic and family violence.

In this sense, violence in South Africa can be seen as being "rooted in the social context and related to problems such as poverty, unemployment, poor housing, rapid urbanisation, gender inequalities, erosion of family life and 'social decay' in a society in transition" (Gilbert, 1996, p.870). Woman abuse is but one example of such violence. The impact of such violence on the children of abused women is but another example of the systemic reverberations, mutual reciprocation and transmission of values and practices which filter down from socio-political-cultural-historical systems to families, fathers, mothers and children.

2.1.5. Children and domestic violence

In the same way that the term "violence" is a function of the values and position of those who attempt to define it, there has also been little consensus about what constitutes the term "child". Definitions have ranged from where the broad developmental period of childhood extends between birth and 18 or 19 or even 22 years of age (Duncan & Rock, 1994; Child Act 74 of 1983 for example) in some instances. Yet the concept of a child in the South African context varies to the extent that children continue to be regarded as children for as long as they are unmarried dependents- even when gainfully employed (National Children's Rights Committee Supplementary Draft Report, 1998). Within the scope of this study, the range of what constitutes a "child" will be extended to dependents up to the age of 25, regardless of whether or not the individual is engaged in gainful employment.

In view of the limited available local figures for the prevalence of family violence, existing statistics are most likely underestimates. Consequently, there may be many more children than are currently identified who may be suffering the effects of domestic violence (Miller, 1989 in Combrinck-Graham, 1989; Wolfe & Korsch, 1994). According to international trends, children who have been physically and sexually abused are usually

the ones who first come to the notice of the helping professions and are targeted for interventions. This trend is no different in South Africa. However, it is important to note that as the most vulnerable members of a family or community, children growing up in violent homes do not necessarily have to be abused themselves to have their lives impacted upon by their childhood environment (Angless & Shefer, 1997; De Sousa, 1991; McCloskey, Southwick, Fernandez-Esquer & Locke, 1995; Padayachee, 1994; Segel & Labe, 1990; Shefer, 1995). The degree to which children suffer from the effects of domestic violence is hence not limited to direct physical or sexual abuse, but includes the indirect impact of witnessing the violence inflicted onto others (as in the rape of their mothers or violence against household and personal property) as well as the more pervasive emotional sequelae of such interpersonal patterns typical of the system of violence (Humphreys, 1991; Wolfe & Korsch, 1994). In further support of this, it has been purported that children in households with domestic violence are *never mere witnesses to the violence* but are very often involved in various ways in the incident either by directly calling for help, being blamed for causing the abuse or by being physically abused themselves (Fantuzzo, Boruch, Beriana, Atkins & Marcus, 1997).

Despite the recent increase in awareness and publications around the topic of wife assault and the literature reflecting that prolonged exposure to domestic violence may hold far worse ramifications for children than the break-up of the family (Angless & Shefer, 1997; Emery et al., 1992; Fantuzzo, DePaola, Lambert, et al., 1991; Jaffe, Hurley & Wolfe, 1990; Shefer, 1995), the occurrence of actually leaving the abusive relationship appears to be less frequent amongst women who are bound by small children and who are more hopeful of change (Maconachie, et al., 1993). Not knowing what a serious threat this poses to the health and well-being of many young children, many women unwittingly remain trapped in the abusive relationship because of the deeply entrenched belief that children need both their parents and that the family should not be broken up (Angless & Shefer, 1997; Maconachie, et al., 1993; Shefer, 1995).

Whereas many parents may minimise or deny the presence of their children during violent assaults (asserting they were sleeping or playing outside), the exact degree to which children see or hear of the abuse of their mothers is an unknown entity (Humphreys, 1997). There are also findings which indicate that the many of the children in such homes could give detailed accounts of violent episodes their parents were unaware they had noticed (Humphreys, 1991; Humphreys, 1993; Jaffe, Hurley & Wolfe, 1990; Wolfe & Korsch, 1994). This suggests that children are more often aware of the abuse of their mothers than parents care to acknowledge, much less report. Mothers tend to develop concern about the effects of the violence on their children only once the children have also become targets of violence, began imitating the batterer's behaviour at home or school or began informing the abuser about the mother's misdeeds and joining in the attack on mother (Smith, Berthelsen & O' Connor, 1997; Wolfe & Korsch, 1994).

It follows that despite research into the impact of wife assault on children who are directly affected by domestic violence, there is relatively less research around children who may witness or overhear violent episodes and notice the bruises, injuries and emotional sequelae of fear, pain and intimidation in their mothers (Jaffe, Wolfe

& Wilson, 1990). One reason for this reduced focus on children who witness family violence may be that such research represents "a special case of counting the hard-to-count and measuring the hard-to-measure, that is hard-to-count incidents and hard-to-measure activities that occur in families that jeopardize the health and psychological well-being of children." (Fantuzzo et al., 1997, p.121). Both researchers, health professionals and parents alike appear to find it easier to acknowledge the impact of domestic violence on children where there are more visible, concrete effects such as bruises, broken bones or evidence of sexual trauma in the children concerned. Discerning the more indirect emotional and psychological sequelae appears to be a much more complicated process.

Whether or not they are themselves abused, children raised in relationships where domestic violence occurs can be viewed as experiencing one of the most insidious types of abuse (Myers & Wright, 1980 cited in Alessi & Hearn, 1984). With all the energies of the parents embroiled in personal battles surrounding domestic violence, the emotional needs of the children growing up and living in violent homes and families are often forgotten. In view of such omissions, such children are often rendered the "forgotten", secondary victims of domestic violence (Elbow, 1982; Grusznski, Brink & Edleson, 1988; Jaffe, Hurley & Wolfe, 1990; Humphreys, 1993; Padayachee, 1994; Shefer, 1995).

2.2 CURRENT DEBATES

Since the available published research on the impact of interparental violence on children is as yet fairly limited, some reliance is made on types of work which can begin to inform about some of the possible effects. Such sources include:

- Literature on the relationship between physical and emotional problems and stressors such as divorce and maltreatment (Masten, Best & Garmezy, 1990; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, for example).
- Children's responses and sensitivity to divorce, separation and the level of conflict and discord within the home (Watt, Moorehead-Slaughter, Japzon & Keller, 1990, for example).
- Studies of adults who reported violence in their families of origin (Collings, 1995; Miller, Downs & Testa, 1990, for example).
- Research studies on children living in homes where interparental violence has occurred (Wolfe & Korsch, 1994 for example).
- Retrospective accounts of batterers and victims (Visagie, 1994 for example).

Without going into an exhaustive review of all the literature in this regard, some of the main areas of debate will be outlined.

2.2.1. Causality

One of the biggest sources of contention in research focusing on the impact of domestic violence on children surrounds the assumption of direct causality between family and child distress without considering the multidetermined nature of child problems (Emery et al., 1992). Although data suggest that the exposure to domestic violence may have an indirect, but significant effect on children, a *direct* causal link between family

violence and child adjustment problems has yet to be established. Caution must therefore be exercised before making assertions of causality from presentations of evidence of risk or correlations (Emery et al., 1992; Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson & Zak, 1985).

From the literature reviewed, areas of debate include questions as to whether such associated effects are the sole result of children witnessing marital violence (or are caused by concomitant stresses in addition to the witnessing) and whether children from abusive homes are destined to become abusers themselves.

2.2.2. Child witnesses of woman abuse

Whereas some studies have found that the mere act of witnessing violent events is enough to cause childhood development problems, other authors disagree.

Authors like Myers and Wright (1980 cited in Alessi & Hearn, 1984) argue that the prime candidates for psychological scars are children who witness the abuse (or aftermath thereof) on their mother and subsequently suppress their own needs and become embroiled in a conspiracy of silence so as to avoid another possible confrontation. Since the occurrence of children witnessing domestic violence has been identified as being an almost commonplace event (Wolfe & Korsch, 1994), and since the home can be considered children's primary source of education, it follows that exposure to domestic conflict and violence can impact on how children learn to relate to other people, their development of a self-concept and sense of self-control, and their subsequent ways of interacting with dating and marital partners.

On the one hand, the witnessing of recurrent violent events by children has, for example, been associated with an increased likelihood of repeated exposure to disruptive, emotionally charged family atmospheres (rife with a range of threats of harm, suicide or violence by the abuser and parental conflict over childrearing) that may fail to provide proper stimulation and opportunities for undertaking developmentally- and age-appropriate tasks (Watt et al., 1990; Wolfe & Korsch, 1994). Their school performance, social camaraderie and skill development often suffer as a result. On the other hand, Jouriles, Barling and O' Leary (1987) suggest that the mere witnessing of interspousal aggression is not necessarily significantly related to child behavioural problems. Instead there exists the possibility that marital discord only correlates with child problems when the discord is expressed in an overt, hostile manner or is concomitant to additional family stressors (Rutter, 1979 cited in Jouriles, Murphy & O' Leary, 1989).

Although there is no clarity in the literature on whether the mere witnessing of domestic violence impacts negatively on children or whether there are indeed other multiple contributing factors which have not been identified, it has been suggested that children who only witness violence show less severe effects than children who both witness violence and are directly victimised (Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980 cited in Berman, 1993). Whereas, children from homes where both physical and verbal abuse occurs have been found to show more severe effects than children from homes where only verbal abuse occurs, children experiencing both

verbal and physical abuse and have to move to a shelter show the most severe effects (Fantuzzo et al., 1991). Other studies have discovered that outcome measures for children were not affected by whether or not a child had witnessed the spousal conflict. Instead, direct parental abuse of the child was found to contribute towards the development of behavioural problems, maladaptive behaviour and aggressive responses to conflict in such children (Mathias et al., 1995). The exact degree to which there is a solid relationship between marital discord and child adjustment problems requires further clarification in future research. This is a gap the current research aspires to explore further.

2.2.3. Maternal functioning

Despite such disclarity in the research, what is evident is that domestic violence impacts on mothers and children alike. The findings of McCloskey, Southwick et al. (1995) support the hypothesis. In their study where abused women and their children were interviewed about both the political and domestic violence they had witnessed and experienced, they found that maternal *mental health and maternal employment* were mediating factors for the children who have had such exposure. The aforementioned maternal stresses may therefore impair maternal effectiveness and functioning so as to contribute towards inconsistent, understimulating or inappropriate maternal attention and parent-child interaction (Cowan et al., 1996; Westra & Martin, 1981; Wolfe and Korsch, 1994; Wolfe et al., 1985). The increased likelihood of abused mothers having to leave their familiar, familial homes for shelters or other accommodation to escape the violence has also been identified as having a negative impact on children's adjustment, behaviour and academic performance (Wildin, Williamson & Wilson, 1991).

In one of the few studies considering the child's viewpoint of his or her experiences in a household where domestic violence occurs, Ericksen and Henderson (1992) highlighted themes around powerlessness, fear, vigilance and uncertainty evident in these children's discourses around their home life and experiences. Coping strategies employed by these children include seeking out solitude, using fantasy, avoidance, disengagement, overcompliance, and turning to toys or a friend to comfort themselves- especially since they were reluctant to discuss experiences with their already over-burdened, often emotionally unavailable mothers (Ericksen & Henderson, 1992).

Thus, children raised in abusive homes are often seen to be in as much crisis as their mothers, having experienced disruption in their support systems and accompanying intense feelings of fear, anxiety, loss, pain and feelings of separation, shock, guilt, aggression, rejection, passivity and hostility (Alessi & Hearn, 1984; Humphreys, 1991). Consequently, adjustment problems among children who have recently witnessed marital violence can perhaps be more fully explained in terms of maternal stress (that is, maternal health, stressful life events, financial and housing difficulties and family crises which in turn impact on parenting abilities) than on the basis of witnessing alone (Jouriles et al., 1987; Wolfe et al., 1985). The co-existence of any number of adverse factors in childhood may therefore increase the likelihood and risk for the development of mental

health and behavioural problems. Domestic violence is but one example of such a source of stress which has been associated with both long- and short-term sequelae in the children of abused women.

Violence within the home does not only impact on the maternal functioning of abused women, but also impacts on their children and their anxieties. Such anxieties include uncertainty of their mothers' condition and circumstances, concerns about potential or actual health hazards related to the violence at home, and worries about their own possible abandonment (Humphreys, 1991).

What is apparent is that in families where domestic violence occurs, both deliberate and unintentional demands are made on the children from those families. These demands may include that the children have to be emotionally controlled and subdued in order to avoid an exchange with a potentially angry, abusive parent. At the same time, they may also be required to be hypervigilant and potentially emotionally hyperreactive to possible indicators of conflict (Thompson & Calkins, 1996). The children of abused women are therefore rendered increasingly vulnerable to the aforementioned stressors because of their dependent positions and their related reduced ability to process or cope with such situations as effectively as adults (McCloskey, Figueredo & Koss, 1995). Consequently, growing up in an abusive household has often been documented as contributing towards a heightened susceptibility to emotional neglect, an increased risk of physical abuse and/or neglect, exposure to the "cycle of violence" where interparental violence may be modelled and violence is viewed as the only means of conflict resolution (Carlson, 1984; Wolfe et al., 1985; Wolfe & Korsch, 1994).

Some studies like that of Grusznksi, Brink and Edleson (1988) cite several common responses displayed by children from abusive homes. These include the following:

- They nearly always believe on some level (or have been told) that they are responsible for the violence between their parents and may then try to change their behaviour to try to end the violence by trying to intervene in the violence, trying to protect the victim, or taking on the parenting role with mother to regain some semblance of control by identification with the powerful father.
- They often aim to keep the family violence a secret because of fear of punishment from the abuser, ignorance about legal rights and community resources, or shame about how others would respond should they find out- isolation often results.
- They may become chemically dependent in an attempt to take control of the situation and to lessen their own pain.
- They may themselves be at risk of becoming victims of violence either inadvertently (when trying to intervene or protect mother), or directly (when they become the direct targets of parental aggression and frustration) or when their fathers use them to create indirect threats of violence aimed at their mothers- feelings of hopelessness, fear, anger, tension and anxiety are often the result whether or not the children are physically abused.

- Emotions often may be bottled up as children may be told not to cry and may in themselves see the futility of the open expression of feelings at home- the honest expression of anger (which from experience has been most often associated with violence) may be especially problematic.

Further support for the existence of the complex influences of multiple factors is exemplified by the body of conflicting findings about the relationships between the identified factors and the outcome of domestic violence on child behaviour and adjustment. Whereas some findings suggest that interspousal aggression correlates with the frequency and severity of child problems (Wolfe, Zak, Wilson & Jaffe, 1986), others have found that interspousal aggression also correlates with general marital discord (Rosenbaum & Leary, 1981 in Jouriles et al., 1989), and that general marital discord contributes unique variance to the prediction of problematic child behaviours such as inadequacy-immaturity, child conduct and personality disorders (Jouriles et al., 1987; Jouriles, et al., 1989). As if the complexity of such inter-relationships is not complex enough, research focusing on the topic of the children of abused women appears to be further complicated by the fact that violence itself is rarely an isolated variable and often co-exists with many other variables associated with dysfunctional families such as multiple separations from and disruptions in the children's home and work routine (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990).

Despite the suggestions that marital aggression is indeed associated with a wide range of child problems, "it is unlikely that a single psychological process is responsible for all the associations" (Jouriles et al., 1989, p.455). It is more likely that amongst other factors, the presence of conflict within the immediate family system has a ripple effect both on the marital quality, parental efficacy and levels of emotionality within the family as well as the quality of parent-child relationships - all of which interact with developmental and personality factors of individual family members to influence the domestic atmosphere and degree of problematic behaviours perceived in the children growing up in such homes in particular (Meyer, 1988). As yet there seems to be little clarity on the exact relationship between the aforementioned factors and problematic child behaviours except that the presence of domestic conflict and aggression increases the likelihood of the development of child problems. The co-existence of any number of adverse factors in childhood may therefore increase the likelihood and risk for the development of mental health and behavioural problems. Domestic violence is but one example of such a source of stress which has been associated with both long- and short-term emotional and behavioural sequelae in the children of abused women.

Rather than separating the outcomes associated with children's exposure to domestic violence into the oversimplified polar opposites of witnesses versus non-witnesses, it appears to make more sense to perhaps acknowledge that the impact on children varies along a continuum affected by multiple variables of which maternal functioning has only been identified as being one. This contention of the researcher is borne out by findings that the impact of experiences of domestic violence on children varies according both to the number of additional stressors on the child *as well as* the age and sex of the child, and the level of available social and emotional support (Berman, 1993). The intensity and frequency of the violence and parental responses to the

family dysfunction is an additional determinant of outcome (Carlson, 1984). In addition to being the possible direct targets of physical abuse by either the abuser of the mother or the abused mother herself, these children may also be the targets of emotional abuse where they face excessive criticism and unrealistically high expectations which may leave them with battered self-esteems (Grusznksi, Brink & Edleson, 1988; Fantuzzo et al., 1997; Wildin et al., 1991). Every family member is thus a potential victim of domestic conflict.

2.3 METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There are several possible methodological reasons for the confusing, contradictory body of literature researching the effects of children's witnessing abuse. These include:

- The confounding effects of children who both experience child abuse and witness spousal abuse.
- The fact that some studies treat broad age ranges as homogenous groups.
- Not matching non-violent comparison groups on socio-economic, family composition, ethnicity, culture and level of family discord levels.
- The fact that most children studied have been from shelters for abused women and thus may not be representative of the population experiencing spousal violence.
- Studies have usually relied on the mother's reports of children's behaviour which may reflect more negative (or positive) responses because of the associated crisis surrounding the abuse and mothers possibly being in denial about the effects on the children.
- Many studies have used retrospective designs sometimes with non-standardised measures, no baseline data and insufficient sample sizes.
- The possible inherent negative bias of mothers' reports of their children's levels of maladjustment, particularly towards their sons who as males may remind them of the perpetrator.

(De Sousa, 1991; Fantuzzo et al., 1991; Graham-Bermann, 1996; Hilton, 1991; Lindquist, 1989 cited in Berman, 1993; Mathias et al., 1995; Sternberg, Lamb, Greenbaum et al., 1993; Wolfe et al., 1985).

Overall, variations in magnitude and nature of the impact of domestic violence on child development therefore appear to depend both on the type of domestic violence experienced and on who the source was who provided information about the child's adjustment (Sternberg et al., 1993). With regard to the utility of maternal reports in research, assertions have been made that figures given by women who report that their children were witnesses to violence or its after-effects are for a number of reasons considered likely to be distortions (most often underestimates) of the actual prevalence. Maternal reports of children witnessing violent incidents may be affected by the fact that abused mothers:

- (1) may themselves have been too stressed to clearly recall the presence of the children and their witnessing of the immediate violence or the aftermath thereof
- (2) may be reluctant to disclose their worries about their children for fear of being accused of abusing their children/ being a bad mother/ not being taken seriously
- (3) may have had clinical levels of depression, anxiety or other trauma-related incidents which may have coloured their perceptions of their children's behaviour

4) may project their own guilt and frustrations onto their children so that they may judge their children's behaviour more harshly than an objective observer would (De Sousa, 1991; Fantuzzo et al., 1991; Graham-Bermann, 1996; Hilton, 1991; Lindquist, 1989 cited in Berman, 1993; Mathias et al., 1995; McCloskey, Figueredo & Koss, 1995; Sternberg, et al., 1993; Wolfe et al., 1985; Wolfe et al., 1986).

Nevertheless, depending on whether the developmental concerns expressed about children/are accurate/are simply expressions of parental anxiety, parental input and information about their children may be a useful adjunct to standardised developmental screening (Glascoe, Altemeier & MacLean, 1989). The ideal manner of broadening an understanding of the impact of domestic violence therefore appears to be to incorporate input from parents as well as other sources such as teachers and significant others in the child's life as well as obtaining input from the child itself. This ideal situation where there is input from multiple sources seldom occurs in research, however.

Despite numerous controversial issues there does, on the whole, appear to be congruence in relation to evidence of the associated deleterious effects of domestic violence on children while they are developing as well as the effects it can possibly have on their future family life and the development of communication and other skills for successful living (Gleason, 1995; Wolfe et al., 1985). The documented range of problems manifested in children who are exposed to domestic violence will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

2.4 ASSOCIATED PROBLEMS

The term "psychopathology" is not only problematic because it seems to suggest a biological and psychological explanation for certain conditions to the exclusion of larger contexts along the biopsychosocial continuum (Combrinck-Graham, 1989), but it focuses on deficits and disorder. It is of note that the practice of the identification of psychopathology is also influenced by the professional's positioning on the biopsychosocial continuum. Careful consideration of both the position of the professional diagnosing and defining the associated child problems together with the impact of multiple biopsychosocial influences on both children's strengths and vulnerabilities is therefore required to avoid an unbalanced, negativistic perspective focusing on just the deficits associated with exposure to domestic violence. In order to attempt to be balanced, ideally all aspects of children's responses to domestic violence will be looked at. Whereas this section will deal specifically with the documented maladaptive coping strategies with which children exposed to domestic violence seem to present, the next section of resilience will focus on the adaptive coping strategies employed by such children in the face of their adverse home circumstances.

Whereas children's responses to their mother being abused can generally be seen to be a function of the age, gender, stage of development and role of the child in the family, other factors such as mother's response to the violence, the frequency and severity of the violence, social and economic disadvantage, repeated separations and moves and special needs of the child which are independent to the violence (such as learning disabilities) also play a part (Humphreys, 1993; Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990). It has furthermore been hypothesised that an

aggressive father may influence developmental delays and that such children may deliberately inhibit obtrusive behaviours such as assertiveness, speech and gross motor activities in a bid to avoid being abused themselves (Westra & Martin, 1981).

Despite relatively congruent findings about the range of behaviour problems in research, there are no **typical** responses or reactions to domestic violence (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990; McCloskey, Figueredo & Koss., 1995). The range of responses include:

- poor frustration tolerance and impulse control
- adjustment problems manifested as internalised symptoms such as sadness, withdrawal, somatic complaints, fear and anxiety
- adjustment problems manifested as externalised symptoms such as aggression, cruelty to animals, disobedience and destructiveness
- martyr-like, long suffering behaviour; depression
- stress disorders; pre-delinquent and delinquent behaviour
- absences from school; financial and emotional dependency
- use of drugs/substances; sexual acting out; running away; isolation and loneliness
- poor self esteem; taking on parental role; learned helplessness; increased social and peer isolation, poor social skills or complete identification with peers
- bargaining with parents; attempts to prove self; feelings of powerlessness (from revised table of Boyd & Klingbeil, 1988 in Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, p.31).

Although children have no typified reaction to domestic violence, the literature does reflect a similar range of disruptions to normal developmental patterns and associated behavioural, cognitive and emotional problems—some of which are analogous to those of children who have been physically abused and/or are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms with dissociation and defenses against recall and resolution which can be pathological (Jaffe, Hurley & Wolfe, 1990; Silvern & Kaersvang, 1989). As with physically abused children, the reactions of children chronically exposed to violence at home may be characterised by any combination of cognitive, conduct, intellectual academic, emotional, social and/or physical or developmental problems to be discussed later.

2.4.1 Behavioural, cognitive, emotional and social problems

The range of possible behavioural problems include higher levels of behavioural problems and lower ratings of social competence in the children of abused women than in the comparison group of children from non-violent homes (Wolfe et al., 1985). Emotional problems such as anxiety, enuresis, depression, insomnia and suicidal ideation have been reported (Gleason, 1995) as have increased incidences of drug and alcohol abuse, drug dealing, prostitution, assaultive and aggressive behaviour, truancy, running away, poor peer relations, behavioural problems at school, at home and in the community as well as attention-seeking behaviour (temper tantrums, swearing and destructiveness) to compensate for the lack of attention and affection from the parents

(Angless & Shefer, 1997; De Sousa, 1991; Gleason, 1995; Shefer, 1995). Behavioural problems are also often associated with problems around parents' problems with child management, school and peer relations (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990; Lawrence, 1984). For such children, confusion, insecurity and divided loyalties between parents is another common phenomenon as are feelings of fear, anxiety and hypervigilance about when the next violent episode may occur (Jaffe, Hurley & Wolfe, 1990). Strategies employed by children of abused women may therefore range from avoidance of conflict situations (for example running away or out of room when violent episodes occur), to extreme compliance and cooperation, to hypervigilance, to directly intervening in parental conflict (Thompson & Calkins, 1996).

Several possible emotional problems such as tension, inability to relax, guilt about incapacity to protect the mother, withdrawal, poor concentration and scholastic difficulties, depression (as manifested by constant crying, nightmares, disturbed sleeping and eating patterns), physical effects involving the somatisation of ongoing emotional stress such as headaches, stomach-aches, nailbiting and vomiting have been observed in children from abusive households (De Sousa, 1991). Many of these studies were limited and contradictory, however, as they either relied solely on maternal reports and did not evaluate the children directly, had no comparison group or failed to consider the impact of family instability, socio-economic status, the child's stage of development or other influential factors in the methodology (Humphreys, 1997).

From the discussion thus far it is evident that the environmental circumstances around domestic conflict exact extraordinarily strong, but inconsistent emotional demands (arising from both environmental stressors as well as from intrinsic vulnerabilities) which often go beyond that which is developmentally appropriate for children whose capacities for emotional regulation may as yet be inadequate because they are as yet undeveloped and still in a state of emergence. Consequently, even when a child attempts to cope constructively with those demands, there may be a reduced likelihood of optimal strategies to emotional regulation being accessible to them (Thompson & Calkins, 1996).

Yet other findings indicate that children from violent households tend to have cognitive deficits in the processing of social information and fail to attend to relevant cues, tend to attribute hostile intentions to others and lack competent behavioural and problem-solving strategies for solving interpersonal problems (Dodge, Bates & Pettit, 1990 cited in Berman, 1993; Gleason, 1995; Jaffe, Hurley & Wolfe, 1990). Their understanding of the world is impacted upon, reducing both these children's ability to cognitively process the world they live in and translate these thoughts into effective communications with others as well as contributing towards delays in the development of motor skills (Gleason, 1995).

In a study of children from a shelter between the ages of 2.5 and 8 years, Westra and Martin (1981) found that these children had significantly poorer cognitive, verbal, motor and quantitative abilities than would be expected of the normal population. They also found evidence of personality problems, hostile-aggressive behaviour, hearing problems and articulation deficits which they hypothesised were underestimates of the

actual prevalence of psychological and developmental problems amongst children of abused women. The reduced generalisability of such findings because of the previously mentioned methodological shortcomings of many studies on this topic- such as small sample sizes and absence of a control comparison group in studies like the latter- does, however, heighten the need to make cautious interpretations.

There is also the increased likelihood of these children who worry about the safety and potential aggression of family members to come across as depressed and angry individuals, which may further impact on school behaviour and performance as well as social relationships (Graham-Bermann, 1996). Hypervigilance may also undermine more constructive alternative coping strategies by maintaining an ongoing focus of the child's attention onto the circumstances which precipitate and follow on from marital conflict, further increasing the likelihood of the child not being able to avoid getting directly involved in the conflict. This in turn may increase the chances of emotional, even physical harm befalling the child both in the home environment as well as in other contexts (such as school) where the child may come across conflict (Thompson & Calkins, 1996).

Too few studies have been done with regard to the impact of domestic violence on children on the development of academic, cognitive and motor skills to say with any clarity whether such assertions are indeed generalisable to the universe of children exposed to domestic violence. Gleason's (1995) study is one of the few studies which focus on skill development and developmental delays in such a sample of children aged between 7 months and 16 years (as measured by the Vineland Adaptive Behavior scales and Connors Parent and Teacher Rating scales) rather than an examination of mere behavioural difficulties. It is furthermore not uncommon for children from abusive households to blame themselves for and feel guilty about the occurrences because of the family's incapacity for examining the real underlying factors (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990). Positive gender identification with either the abuser or the abused may also play itself out in the classroom by displays of hostility towards teachers of both sexes and/or negative views of the opposite sex (Shefer, 1995).

In all of these cases children exposed to domestic violence tend to take on undue responsibility for marital harmony contributing towards inappropriate guilt when such strategies fail to stop the violence at home. Such behaviours can also spill over into the community and school contexts and may be manifested in the form of fights with peers and other externalised behaviours which can lead to problems in school adjustment as well as the aforementioned emotional difficulties which impact on their self-esteem and confidence in the future (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990). As a result, distraction and inattentive behaviour may manifest in the classroom (Wildin et al., 1991). Learning problems may also manifest themselves in abused women's descriptions of their children as being hyperactive and having defective concentration and perseverance (Gleason, 1995). Long-term patterns of developmental and psychological problems associated with prolonged exposure to domestic violence include antisocial and/or self-injurious behaviour and conduct disorder (Wolfe & Korsch, 1994).

Other possible social effects include the inability to respect rules of what is "right or wrong", which may possibly lead children to resort to socially deviant behaviour such as lying, cheating, stealing and violence in

order to survive and to get what they want. This may have a lasting impact on children's schooling and their later ability to trust and commit themselves in intimate, particularly sexual relationships (De Sousa, 1991). At school for example, children exposed to violence may appear inattentive, distracted and tired, owing to a preoccupation with the abuse, sleeplessness from a fight or hyper-vigilance at night after violent occurrences (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990). The study of Wolfe et al. (1986) of children between the ages of 4 and 13 who had recently been exposed to violence lends support to this. They found that these children had fewer interests and social activities, reduced school performance and increased adjustment problems in relation to children from non-violent homes (Wolfe et al., 1986).

The response patterns of children include a tendency to either internalise or externalise the violence. Three early reaction patterns to family violence are conceptualised by Berman (1993). There is an *externalising reaction* where the child's behaviour is that of victimiser of others. There is also an *internalising reaction* where the child's behaviour is that of victim. The third reaction is where the child is *resilient*. The victimiser role results from role modelling and learned behaviour within the family context where violence is a means of power and control, where men are the powerful victimisers and women the nurturant victims, and violence is conveyed as an appropriate way of problem-solving/conflict resolution and treating the ones you love and where the greater community's apparent reluctance to intervene, conveys a support of the violence (Berman, 1993). According to Smith et al. (1997), children's responses to domestic violence can also be slotted into the following categories:

- emotional distress (the "fright" response)
- physical intervention (the "fight" response)
- withdrawal to a safer place (the "flight" response)
- Acting out or distracting behaviours

The literature has also differentiated children's responses according to gender.

2.4.2 Gender related differences

Children's responses to violence appear to be further differentiated along the lines of gender. The findings in this regard have varied greatly, however. Whereas males tend to throw temper tantrums and be aggressive and disruptive, females tend to display passive, clingy, withdrawn, dependent behaviour (Jaffe, Hurley & Wolfe, 1990). Girls may end up being acceptant of violence in subsequent relationships whereas boys may believe they have the right to abuse their partners (De Sousa, 1991). Kolbo (1996) also found that children exposed to domestic violence (boys especially) were more likely to have a damaged sense of self-worth particularly when they had little support available to them.

It has been suggested that the rate of wife-beating in sons of batterers is dramatically higher than for the sons of non-violent fathers (Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980 cited in Humphreys, 1993). Sex role socialisation has thus been seen on occasion to increase the probability that more girls than boys may identify with the victim -

role of their mothers and display symptoms of learned helplessness (Berman, 1993; Jaffe, Hurley & Wolfe, 1990). The findings are on the whole are conflicting, however.

On the one hand, boys have been found more likely to be provoked into displaying externalised impulsivity, overt anger, non-compliance and physical aggression in response to witnessing interpersonal aggression, to be less verbally expressive and more likely to be diagnosed with conduct disorder than are girls who present with more internalised problems such as anxiety, depression and fear (Berman, 1993; Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990). On the other hand, in comparison to the control group, girls in the domestic violence groups were reported by their mothers as having more problems and being more depressed than boys in these groups were (Sternberg et al., 1993). To make matters even more confusing, clinically significant internalising behaviours such as sadness, frequent weeping, social withdrawal and somatisation have also been found in school-aged boys (Wolfe & Korsch, 1994).

Although, the available research on the reduced quality of life for girls who have been exposed to marital conflict is limited (Bennett, 1991), links between exposure to family violence and behaviour problems have been related to girls (Kolbo, 1996). The aforementioned link suggests that girls in that study had particular cumulative vulnerabilities or stressors which were insurmountable even with support. Yet other studies have found heightened adjustment problems and internalising symptoms in boys (rather than in girls in violent families as well as both boys and girls in non-violent families) (Graham-Bermann, 1996). This suggests that boys may be more vulnerable to negative adjustment in stressed families. Yet other findings suggest no gender differences in the number of behavioural problems experienced by males and females (Mathias, et al., 1995).

Despite the lack of clarity as to whether qualitative differences between the boys and girls exposed to domestic violence actually do exist, the degree to which exposure to such conflict is a major source of stress in these children's lives is clear. In addition to variation in reactions to domestic violence along lines of gender, children's responses to exposure to domestic violence can also be differentiated according to the age group and stage of development of the child. Once again, there is great variation in studies taking the aforementioned factors into consideration.

2.4.3 Age-related differences

That there are shared characteristics in the 2-17 year old age group reflects the degree of overlap between the coping strategies employed by different age and developmental levels. Documented responses in the 2 to 17 year olds include:

- problem-solving techniques involving hitting
- the use of abusive language and aggression toward peers/adults/animals/inanimate objects
- regression in areas where they previously made high developmental gains
- somatisation
- high levels of anxiety (such as nail-biting)

- feelings of guilt and responsibility and divided loyalty and ambivalence towards the parents (Alessi & Hearn, 1984; Wolfe & Korsch, 1994).

2.4.4. Infants and preschoolers

In general, infants of abused mothers tend to regress to earlier stages of functioning, suffer from poor health, somatic complaints, weight problems and disturbed sleeping and feeding patterns. They may also experience disrupted attachment and are at greater risk of being injured during a violent episode. Mood-related and anxiety disorders manifested as crying and sadness are common in children over 18 months of age (Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990); Wolfe & Korsch, 1994). Preschoolers commonly display signs of terror in the form of shouting, hiding away, shaking, stuttering and excessive screaming (Alessi & Hearn, 1984; Angless & Shefer, 1997; Shefer, 1995; Wolfe & Korsch, 1994).

Whereas younger children tend to show a heightened sensitivity to the negative effects of interspousal domestic violence than do older schoolgoing children, preschool children tend to display increased behaviour problems such as irritability, fearfulness of being alone, relative openness about the family violence and lower self esteem than children of a school-going age (Alessi & Hearn, 1984). Many such children are too young to even seek out or consider alternatives to a pervasive sense of feeling unsafe in their own homes and living in anxious fear of the next violent episode (Wolfe & Korsch, 1994). The negative impact of the psychosocial and emotional stressors associated with domestic violence on the behaviour and development of such children at this particularly sensitive developmental age cannot be ignored.

2.4.5. Older children and adolescents

There is a tendency for older children aged between 7 and 12 to have more anxieties about their own vulnerability and that of their fathers (Graham-Bermann, 1996). Heightened anxiety about the safety of other family members such as mothers, brothers and sisters is also common, thereby suggesting a linkage between children's worries, family environments and level of adjustment. Instead of children's behaviour simply reflecting learned behaviour or identification with the same-sex parent, acting-out behaviour may actually represent their attempt to control their anxiety about their fathers and siblings potentially harming others (Graham-Bermann, 1996).

Latency-aged children may also come to emulate the behaviour of their parents as role-models and may come to believe that violence is an appropriate means of conflict resolution (Jaffe, Hurley & Wolfe, 1990). As they get older they may oscillate between feelings of sympathy and anger or hostility towards their mothers. They also tend to be very protective over their mothers and have been found to live with secret hopes that someone might actually discover the violence and rescue them from it (Alessi & Hearn, 1984; Wolfe & Korsch, 1994).

Alessi and Hearn (1984) make several clinical observations of how the children who presented at the shelter, tended to react in crisis. The behaviour of children at primary school level tends to be characterised by

openness about the home situation as well as oscillations between aggressiveness and hostility and an eagerness to please adults and make new friends. In an attempt to reduce feelings of shame and embarrassment, children over 11 years of age tended to be much more secretive to the point of denying the violence within their home situations. Children of a school-going age who are residents in shelters for abused women have also been found to show a higher rate of parental reports of academic problems such as repeating or failing grades, and an increased need of special school services. Behavioural problems such as aggression, neurotic or antisocial behaviours, fears, sensitivity, hyperactivity and suicidal attempts or ideation are also common (Wildin et al., 1991).

The influence of spousal violence on older children appears to be more subtle. Jaffe, Wolfe and Wilson (1990) point out, for example, how adolescent girls from abusive homes have a tendency to be distrustful of men and negative towards marriage, or may become victims of their partners' violence. Some children tend to exhibit greater capacities for coping with anger, they show increased sensitivity and involvement in the conflicts of others and reduced displays of affect/emotion in response to parental fighting (Berman, 1993).

Older children may display anxiety, secretiveness, aggression, ambivalence and/or denial about the family situation. They may also display guardedness about the family situation as well as tendencies towards truancy, running away and ambivalence towards one or both parents (Angless & Shefer, 1997; Jaffe, Hurley & Wolfe, 1990; Shefer, 1995). They may even project blame onto others such as their mothers and participate in abusing the mother after having observed their fathers engaging in many years of doing the same (Jaffe, Hurly & Wolfe, 1990; Wolfe & Korsch, 1994). The latter suggests that with increased chronic exposure to domestic violence, there may be reduced sensitivity to the violence *per sé*.

Whereas some adolescents may respond to the violence with delinquency or by running away or fantasizing about a different life, others stay in the home and respond by becoming peacemakers who try to protect and support siblings (Bennett, 1991; Jaffe, Wolfe & Wilson, 1990). Growing up in a home where domestic violence occurs, is associated with increased parental demands and household responsibilities in an emotionally charged environment. In support of this, one phenomenological study found that adolescent girls exposed to marital conflict have been found to experience a sense of social isolation and heightened awareness of their mother's unhappiness (Bennett, 1991). They also tended to display responses of fear and helplessness as well as a more long-term sense of the loss of family and childhood experiences and of closer relationships to others (particularly their fathers).

Despite the mass of often contradictory findings and arguments about the impact of domestic violence on children of different ages and developmental stages, it is apparent that growing up in a home where domestic violence occurs has the potential to damage the self esteem of all children and to negatively impact on the effective negotiation of developmentally appropriate milestones. This lends further support to the aims of the current research which is 1) to explore the range of adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies displayed by

the children of abused women and 2) to assess with input from the community firstly whether there is a need for intervention and secondly what kind of interventions will be most appropriate in the local context .

Whereas this section focussed on maladaptive coping strategies employed by children exposed to violence within the home, the next section focuses on children who appear to come through the ordeal of growing up in an abusive home relatively unscathed.

2.5 RESILIENCE

Since it has also been established from the literature that there is much variation in individual responses to the stress accompanying exposure to domestic violence, the term resilience can be defined as describing the positive pole of adaptive individual emotional regulation and responses to such stress and adversity (Engle, Castle & Menon, 1996; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Rutter, 1987; Thompson & Calkins, 1996). Resilience is thus concerned with the individual capacity for an outcome of successful behavioural adaptation and internal states of well-being and effective functioning within the environment despite exposure to threatening, challenging circumstances (Masten et al., 1990).

Owing to the complex nature of emotional regulation, emotional regulatory processes can not only buffer psychosocial stressors, but can simultaneously increase children's susceptibility to other risks which, depending on the environmental circumstances, may pose challenges to normal sociopersonality growth. Whereas resilience can thus be viewed as the acquisition of coping strategies for emotional regulation which protect from constitutional or environmental factors, this does not mean that the aforementioned children are not left exposed to other risks (Thompson & Calkins, 1996).

The degree of resilience seems to be influenced by the complex interaction between the presence of cumulative or multiple risks within an environment as well as proximal-risks (such as poor nutrition, parental discord, ineffective parenting and parental antisocial behaviours which impact directly on the child) which mediate distal-risks (such as social class, economic hardship and poverty which are not experienced directly by the child) (Masten et al., 1990). That perceptions of what constitutes risk and resilience and abnormal versus abnormal environments vary, also bears consideration (Engle et al., 1996). As a result of the multitude of definitions, what outsiders view as being harmful, neglectful risky parental behaviour may be considered as being appropriate, beneficial and adaptive behaviour by parents. Similarly, middle class definitions of what constitutes "normal" versus "abnormal" family environments also vary. So what such supposed middle class experts class as an abnormally violent environment (of which children's exposure to domestic violence is a prime example), the children themselves may not experience as being abnormal (Angless & Shefer, 1997). Consequently, middle class assumptions that *all children exposed to experiences* (such as that of domestic violence) *which differ from existing constructions of normality will inevitably be negatively effected by their experiences* do not necessarily hold true. The manner in which biopsychosocial factors interact to provide circumstances which foster and maintain the incidence of domestic violence has already been raised.

Accordingly, children's risk and resilience can be seen as functions of family and societal views which can undermine family and parenting resources and thus influence family settings, structures and dynamics.

When considering research on risks and resilience however, it is critical to remember that within an ecosystemic paradigm outcomes are probabilistic (Kazdin, Kraemer, Kessler, Kupfer & Offord, 1997). Instead of making probabilistic assumptions that children from violent homes are pre-programmed to become violent adults (Belsky & Pensky, 1988), perhaps it would be more appropriate to make the amendment that children who are abused or who grow up in abusive homes are *more likely* to grow up to become abusers because they have learnt that it is acceptable and appropriate to solve conflict by abusing the people one loves (Gelles & Cornell, 1990).

Over the last 20 years or so a vast amount of literature has been generated on children experiencing adversity, in the hope of discovering coping as well as psychopathological mechanisms (McCloskey, Figueredo & Koss, 1995). Notions integrating attachment theory (focusing for example on what mothers and fathers carry internally as working models of intimate family relationships) and the aforementioned systems perspectives (focusing on interpersonal transactions on multiple levels) have been put forward. For example, Cowan et al. (1996) state that instead of being incompatible, attachment and systems theories in combination can enhance understandings of children's socioemotional adaptation in adversity and the mechanisms which reinforce positive and negative intergenerational patterns.

Whereas the claims of attachment theorist, Bowlby (1951) regarding the serious effects of early life experiences on the intellectual and psychosocial development of children were initially regarded as controversial (cited in Rutter, 1980), there now appears to be general consensus that early experiences can and do have important effects. However, contrary to Bowlby's early assertions, contemporary thought asserts that such early damage is not necessarily permanent and that children are generally much more resilient than first appreciated. As a result, there is a greater potentiality that children can recover substantially from early adverse exposure depending on whether or not the deprivation continues (Rutter, 1980).

That children exposed to family violence are at increased risk to develop emotional, cognitive, psychosocial and behavioural problems is not, however, something that can be ignored. The mere absence of an association between family violence and behavioural difficulties does not mean that the children are unaffected and are not experiencing problems in other domains of their development (Humphreys, 1993; Kolbo, 1996). Nevertheless, exposure to violence does not automatically lead to serious behavioural problems and a prediction of the continuation of the cycle of violence into future relationships (Humphreys, 1993; O'Brien, Margolin, John & Krueger, 1991; Rutter, 1987).

Though the research on relationships between exposure to family violence and functional adaptation in children has on the whole been inconsistent and inconclusive, there are studies indicating that there are many children

from violent homes who do not become abusive partners and parents (Berman, 1993; Kolbo, 1996). There have also been studies which found no significant link between exposure to family violence and the development of emotional problems and behavioural problems (Hughes & Barad, 1983; Wolfe et al., 1986). This lends further support to a contention that a number of children in these studies appeared relatively unaffected by their exposure in clinically recognisable ways. Nevertheless, the consequence of growing up in a home where domestic violence occurs cannot in any way be viewed as being a benefit to a child (Humphreys, 1993). Independent of other adverse circumstances within the home, exposure to violence therefore comes with a cost. Any one variable may therefore act as a risk factor in one situation and as a vulnerability factor at another (Rutter, 1987). What is apparent then is that resilience is in part due to a complex interaction of factors or variables where an individual's responses to adverse circumstance is catalytically modified. It is for this reason that the terms "mechanism" or "process" are preferred to "factor" and "variable" (Rutter, 1987).

Once again some of these inconsistencies in findings about there being a relationship between exposure and developmental outcomes may be attributed to differences in research designs, sample selection, description and definition of constructs, informants, comparison groups, measures and instruments. Another confounding issue may be the presence of certain mechanisms which protect some children from the effects while others are left more vulnerable (Kolbo, 1996). So whereas some children will display more resilience than others, in actual fact there is always a cost involved and there are difficulties experienced no matter how these may emerge. Every coping strategy thus has both advantages and disadvantages for psychosocial well-being and represent compromises between extremely difficult emotional demands and inconsistent goals in response to intrinsic and extrinsic stressors experienced (Thompson & Calkins, 1996).

While acknowledging the important formative influential role the family plays on a child when he/she is very young, incidence of resilience has on occasion been attributed to the fact that once the child starts school he/she is presented with the chance of modifying family influence through contacts with society and other contextual levels outside the sphere of the family (Combrinck-Graham, 1989). According to Combrinck-Graham (1989), the "...context alone does not make the individual. Individuals in context have traits, and individual traits will influence the context as the context will influence the expression of these traits. This reciprocity or mutual modification is critical to the family systems viewpoint" (p.74). This contention is especially important when considering the impact of domestic violence and children where, in as much as children growing up in homes where domestic violence occurs are impacted on by their family and other contextual influences, these children's individual traits both impact on and are impacted upon by mutual modification. So whereas the family context can impact significantly on a child's developmental outcome, other systems and contexts such as school or extended family members or support do appear to offer a buffer against adverse conditions within the family system (Kolbo, 1996). Consequently, some children come through the exposure to domestic violence relatively unscathed and manage to display constructive coping mechanisms and resilience in the face of adverse contextual influences.

Although there are no recent local statistics on the topic, according to the available overseas literature, resilient children tend to employ effective coping strategies for the restoration and maintenance of internal and external equilibrium under threatening circumstances and tend to function well academically and with peers (Jaffe, Hurley & Wolfe, 1990). The finding that 50% to 70% of the children from maritally aggressive homes were *not* manifesting problems at clinical levels is consistent with findings of other studies with children in high-risk populations (children with an alcoholic parent for example) where the children emerge relatively unscathed by the experience of adverse factors in their home environment (Humphreys, 1997; Jourile, Murphy & O'Leary, 1989; Wolfe et al., 1985). This allusion to children's resilience (or adaptive, functional coping abilities) in the face of adversity reinforces the need to identify protective mechanisms which buffer children from the negative effects of disruptive home situations. The identification of such mechanisms so as to inform appropriate interventions is an inherent part of the current research.

Given that individual children will react differently, a very pertinent question about the extent of conflict and anger which can be experienced without harmful effects is raised. In an attempt to answer that question, Jaffe, Wolfe and Wilson (1990) are careful to state that continued exposure to strong emotions can at some point become detrimental despite adaptational coping mechanisms (of which resilience can be seen as an example). Despite the fact that there are instances of children developing under conditions of environmental risk displaying better-than-expected social, cognitive and emotional adaptive functioning, there does not appear to be such a thing as an invulnerable child (Radke-Yarrow & Sherman, 1990). Consequently it has to be appreciated that even in the best attempts at emotional regulation where some protection is provided, there is always a cost involved which entails inherent risks to the child (Thompson & Calkins, 1996).

Therefore, when disseminating a view that some children are invulnerable to adversity, there are also ethical issues to consider. This is especially relevant in instances when too much emphasis is placed on the findings of once-off assessments of competence so that high-achieving children may be hastily labelled as being resilient without further consideration that they may suffer from emotional problems and may be distressed despite their adaptive behaviour (Luthar & Zigler, 1991). Such apparently high-achieving children may therefore slip through the gaps when it comes to being targeted for intervention services, whereas the children most likely to receive mental health services are those whose symptoms pose management problems for authority figures (Luthar & Zigler, 1991). Acknowledgement of the operation of multiple forces influencing stress levels, competence and moderating processes involved in resilience, together with the use of multiple assessment procedures are advocated to counter inappropriate intervention and prevention programming.

As Berman (1993) points out, being resilient is in itself not equivalent to being happy and secure, as such children (instead of leaving home) often stay at home despite the violence with a desire to offer protection and nurturance to their mothers and younger siblings. As has already been mentioned, they often have to grow up too quickly and take on parental roles and more responsibilities than is developmentally appropriate. A *compensatory risk mechanism* where a child develops inner characteristics which enable survival of indirect

and direct challenges from the environment (such as family violence, poverty and so forth), could therefore, eventually carry increasing risk for maladaptation under particular circumstances (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Radke-Yarrow & Sherman, 1990; Silvern & Kaersvang, 1989). Any attempt made to cope comprises a combination of protection and vulnerability in dynamic tension with one another which in turn yields a mixture of simultaneously satisfying and unsatisfying, advantageous and disadvantageous outcomes for the individual (Thompson & Calkins, 1996).

It is hypothesised that resilience is more likely to develop when:

- 1) an abused woman continues to be a nurturing parent
- 2) there is strong emotional support from a non-abusive adult who can give meaning to the violent events
- 3) children recognize that their parents' problem-solving skills are ineffectual and therefore attempt to implement more effective strategies
- 4) older children/siblings with natural competencies and feelings of self-worth can fill parenting gaps
- 5) children can learn that respect and love can be gained through nurturance rather than violence
- 6) children can see the negative effects of the violence on their families and can make their own decisions that their future family lives will be different (Emery et al., 1992; Jaffe, Hurley & Wolfe, 1990, for example).

With the latter comes the implication that a positive relationship with one warm, caring adult may have a beneficial, buffering effect on the development of such children and that this may then carry over into their relationships with other figures and mitigate, rather than completely eliminate the impact of domestic violence (Humphreys, 1993; Masten et al., 1990; Musick, Stott, Klehr Spencer, Goldman & Cohler, 1987; Rutter, 1990; Sternberg, Lamb, Greenbaum, Dawud, Cortes & Lorey, 1994). The mother's coping style and the ways in which she attempts to compensate for the father's violence or parental absence may also render a positive, protective influence (Humphreys, 1993).

Other mechanisms which can potentially mediate the effects of stress upon children, all seem to share a common factor in that the possession of such attributes contributes towards an improved sense of personal self-efficacy and self-esteem and seem to lessen the effects of a stressful home environment. These protective mechanisms include family milieu (in terms of the degree of warmth, support and orderliness of the home setting and the presence of good parenting skills) as well as the dispositional attributes of the child such as temperament and mood, age, gender, IQ, curiosity, an internal locus of control, pleasing physical appearance, socially engaging ways, non-aggressive problem-solving strategies and shifting developmental changes in cognition, emotion and socio-cultural context, as well as positive educational and school experiences, religious or church membership and faith in a higher power, socio-economic status and the presence of supportive interpersonal relationships (Engle et al., 1996; Humphreys, 1997; Kolbo, 1996; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Masten et al., 1990; Radke-Yarrow & Sherman, 1990). Resilience, as is the case with adaptation, is always contextual (Masten et al., 1990).

Within a family systems paradigm, the influence of contextual mechanisms or processes which may combine either additively or combinatively helps to explain some of the variance in children's behaviour and attachment patterns (Cowan, 1997). The presence of violence on one level of a system may not condemn a child to having developmental delays for example. With the latter comes the further suggestion of evidence of both vulnerabilities as well as mechanisms at any level of the ecology which may buffer, reduce or amplify the direct and indirect effects on parental behaviour (both of the mother and of the father) on their children's attachment and behavioural patterns and on parent-child relationships as well as their adaptation to the presence or absence of family violence (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Cowan, 1997).

It is also evident that there are several levels of interaction bearing consideration which can provide a combination of ameliorating and aggravating influences on the child's functioning and development. According to Engle et al. (1996), these include interactions between:

- 1) The child and his/her immediate family.
- 2) The different social systems in the child's environment which lend meaning and significance to the child's experience.
- 3) The influences of larger powers such as government, cultural and legal value systems which define the child's environmental climate.

All of the aforementioned therefore hold implications both for one's understanding of domestic violence as primarily being a social problem and for informing the implementation of effective intervention strategies at multiple points to alter the probability of outcomes.

Both long- and short term developmental consequences of growing up in an abusive household can thus be better understood within the ecosystemic framework previously alluded to where the nature of the trauma (and the environment in which it occurs), together with the child's age (and stage-salient competencies which are most vulnerable to disruption), as well as the degree to which caregivers amplify or reduce ill-effects are all salient determinants (Fantuzzo et al, 1997). The ecosystemic perspective therefore both informs an understanding of the impact of domestic violence on children and the implications thereof for the range of intervention strategies to be discussed in the next section.

2.6 INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

Following the previously outlined range of responses which individual children may have in response to exposure to violence within the home, it makes sense that the type and duration of intervention strategies should vary according to the immediacy of the violent episodes, the age, sex and developmental phase of the child, the child's short-term response to the violence (as either victimiser, victim or resilient person) and the stage of recovery of the parents.

As informed by ecosystemic theory, when designing interventions attention should always be given to the three levels of analysis of :

- 1) the individual

2) the family environment and

3) larger government, legal and community institutions- all of which interact and constitute both risk and protective functions (Engle et al., 1996; Kazdin et al., 1997). Furthermore, interventions targeting the individual in isolation of his/her context will be less effective than interventions targeting the relationship systems in which the individual's behaviour is embedded (Cox & Paley, 1997). Clarifying a context for clients is thus a vital first step before the initiation of interventions with abused women and their children can even begin.

In families where there is domestic violence, it can be predicted that there are most probably multiple other problems (such as histories of substance or alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, suicide, depression, divorce, broken marriages, unplanned pregnancies and so forth) which coexist and can contribute towards family members' lowered level of differentiation as well as the transgenerational patterns of behaviour of which the children often show the greatest symptoms (Hurst, et al., 1996; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1988).

Recommendations for multifaceted treatment strategies for ameliorating the effects of exposure to violence and preventing serious adjustment problems include:

- Individual therapy.
- Family therapy.
- Group therapy.
- Play therapy where younger children can communicate and cathart through art, stories or puppets and be taught more functional coping mechanisms and self-esteem building can occur.
- Building on the child's cognitive and behavioural response to domestic violence.
- Improvement of social supports and stability.
- Implementation both immediate crisis-oriented assistance as well as long-term educational goals.
- Cognitive behavioural therapy involving the challenging and modification of maladaptive beliefs and behaviours.
- Exploring the issue of domestic violence and increasing knowledge of the currently available treatment and prevention resources (Alessi & Hearn, 1984; Angless & Shefer, 1997; Berman, 1993; Blau et al., 1993; Engle et al., 1996; Ericksen & Henderson, 1992; O'Brien et al., 1991; Padayachee, 1994; Paré, 1996; Peled & Edleson, 1992; Peled, Jaffe & Edleson, 1995; Stark, Swearer, Kurowski, Sommer & Bowen, 1996; Wolfe & Korsch, 1994).

From an ecosystemic perspective, the ideal intervention with violence would be to eradicate all social ills. But since this is unlikely, the different levels of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention offer a useful framework for exploring strategies which can target areas needing to be addressed by health professionals who deal with children exposed to domestic violence (Gilbert, 1996). Programmes to pre-empt burnout amongst workers involved in the field of domestic violence are also a vital consideration for ensuring more effective provision of

services (Segel & Labe, 1990). The development of effective programmes for the children of abused women are not without inherent problems, however.

Despite such children having been identified as being at risk for future problems, Kashani et al. (1992) caution that the development of intervention programmes may be premature when the identification and understanding of causal factors (as well as outcome research findings on existing) are as yet still incomplete. Since the successes of such interventions are limited, it has been suggested that a much more effective strategy appears to be to try to reduce the extent of exposure to violence to begin with (Engle et al., 1996). Despite a degree of overlap, the different levels of prevention provide a useful foundation for the implementation of intervention strategies.

2.6.1 Primary intervention

The phenomenon of children exposed to woman abuse has not as yet been adequately acknowledged as being a social problem which needs to be addressed accordingly within the three-tiered process of definition, legislation and intervention in this regard (Humphreys, 1993; Peled, 1993; Peled et al., 1995). Primary prevention interventions thus encompass long term preventative strategies such as programmes to eliminate the conditions which encourage the occurrence and maintenance of domestic violence to begin with.

The relevant range of structural, ecological, socio-political and psychological determinants which contribute towards violence should therefore be considered here (Gilbert, 1996). Political restructuring and the implementation of measures to combat poverty, unemployment, housing crises as well as the implementation of more effective, health and social welfare policies and educational systems are examples (Peled, 1993; Segel & Labe, 1990). Advocacy and review of current legislation which tends to allow the effects of domestic violence on abused women and their children to go unchecked, is another avenue for promoting decreased societal tolerance for all types of violence (Gilbert, 1996; Humphreys, 1997).

Reform of the criminal justice system is particularly important. Laws authorising the eviction of abusers from homes should be enforced with greater regularity to pre-empt impoverished women from becoming homeless when they try to flee their abusers (Steinbock, 1995). The lack of government supported shelters for abused women and children is another issue which needs to be addressed and where advocacy may play a valuable role. Keeping in mind the glaring absence of public policy strategies to reduce violence, Peled's (1993, p. 50) reference to the American situation can easily be seen as having equal application to the South African context where:

Given the limitations of the public child welfare system, social intervention with child witnesses of violence can best be carried out by private, non-profit services receiving support from both private and public funding sources. As a society committed to the ideal of "protected childhood", it is our responsibility to stop permitting child witnesses to fall between the cracks".

In the same way violence within the home impacts on both children and mothers alike, homeless female-headed families (where the mothers may have tried to escape the violence by leaving home with their children) and

parent-child relationships are also impacted upon by national and local policies (Steinbock, 1995). Advocacy and sensitivity by multidisciplinary practitioners to the macro-policy issues which account for micro-level problems which put female-headed families at risk is thus recommended (Smith et al., 1997; Steinbock, 1995).

Custody assessments which take into account the risks to both mothers and children are one such important consideration (Smith et al., 1997). The parenting capabilities of abused women should thus be supported rather than sabotaged by legislation which tends to rule in favour of the abusers and avoids funding educational programmes to counter the impact of domestic violence on children (Steinbock, 1995). Improved training of police around issues of domestic violence is another area where effective intervention can be facilitated (Segel & Labe, 1990). Programmes focusing on promoting interpersonal skills amongst children and adolescents within school curricula, that aim to promote violent-free relationships, and to improve communication and conflict resolution strategies, for example, are other options for primary prevention (Wolfe & Korsch, 1994).

School systems represent a platform and area for intervention where awareness-raising of domestic violence, community resources and the implementation of programmes can occur. As self-esteem for these children from abusive homes is the route to their mental health, the degree to which schools can contribute towards either bolstering or deflating the self-esteems of children from abusive homes may be invaluable (Jaffe, Hurley & Wolfe, 1990). The implementation of supervised family life classes into scholastic curricula where parental participation is encouraged are valuable options as are programmes presenting children with an opportunity to experiment with different adult-relationship and child-rearing dilemmas. Issues such as savings, morality and community values can be addressed in addition to scholastic, vocational and sport education. Programmes facilitating positive role modelling of appropriate conflict resolution and assertiveness strategies are also recommended (Humphrey's 1993) ✓

2.6.2 Secondary intervention

Intervention at this level is aimed at promoting conditions for the empowerment of abused women and their children and for preventing the abuse from becoming chronic. Early detection of children exposed to wife abuse who do not yet manifest with major clinical symptoms, together with crisis intervention and case management of existing incidents of wife abuse as well as increased public awareness and community education about the rights of women and children are examples. Crisis intervention, individual and group therapies and marital and family therapy to ensure the physical safety and emotional well-being of the victims and treatment of the perpetrator are other examples (Humphreys, 1993; Humphreys, 1997; Segel & Labe, 1990).

With the increasing evidence about the impact of domestic violence on children, the need for researchers and practitioners to brainstorm and exchange ideas and information about current clinical programmes which have been found to work with these children becomes all the more important (Grusznksi, Brink & Edleson, 1988). No matter what the nature of the intervention, regular follow-up evaluations of the effectiveness of existing

programmes are vital to ensure the provision of effective services (Humphreys, 1997). Worker burnout prevention programmes are one such option which can serve to improve the efficiency of existing services.

Suggested programme emphasis includes:

- teaching children basic safety skills in times of domestic crisis (such as contacting the police)
- exploring the dilemmas children may face in taking aforementioned action (such as conflict around perceived disloyalty towards the father or feeling overly responsible for protecting mother and siblings)
- exploration of the range of feelings around the family situation and parents including feelings of ambivalence, anxiety, guilt, anger, sadness, resentment and confusion
- normalising conflict as a natural part of life, but differentiating between appropriate and inappropriate conflict resolution strategies and modelling more appropriate methods

focus self-esteem building, addressing of associated entrenched perceptions of self-blame and exploration for who is responsible for the violence (Peled & Edleson, 1992).

Parenting support and training about discipline techniques for example is especially important where children exhibit many problem behaviours that may elicit more frequent negative, harsher discipline from the parent which may exacerbate aggressive behaviour (Humphreys, 1993; Smith et al., 1997). Parent-child programmes which assist women in modelling non-violent methods of conflict resolution may help their children to unlearn some of the aggressive means learnt within the home context and can provide the children with support, encouragement and a safe place to disclose and process their personal and affective experiences (Silvern & Kaersvang, 1989; Smith et al., 1997).

Education and counselling programmes for abused mothers may thus indirectly benefit the child by enhancing parent-child relationships and improving mothers knowledge of the impact of the range of influences the different forms of domestic can have in their children (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993). The coordination of services offered both to the abused woman and her children may prove equally beneficial for women and children alike (Peled, 1993). The value of comprehensive combined programmes incorporating exposure to male and female counsellors who respect each other and work together cannot be ignored (Humphreys, 1993).

One such programme is that of the Domestic Abuse Project's six-year old programme of support and education groupwork with abused women and their children which Grusznski, et al.(1988) describe. As outlined by the latter, the chief characteristics of this project are as follows:

- the children's leaders for each group usually consist of a male-female team who may also be doing concurrent groupwork with the children's parents
- the programme runs on a 10-week basis of an hour a week for younger children (where the focus is mainly on group activity) and an hour and a half for teenagers (where the focus is mainly on group discussion)
- each session usually consists of an activity, the covering of one or two major topics, ending off with a routine checking or evaluation activity

- one hour family sessions (the presence of the male abuser depends on the wishes and ensured safety of the relevant family members) may occur at the end of each of the aforementioned sessions where children and group leaders review for parents the material covered in the session of that day and recommendations are made by the group leaders
- whereas the initial focus is usually on ice-breaking and information-provision about definitions of violence, rule-setting and the building of group cohesion rather than self-disclosure of personal information, there is a progression towards greater personal self-disclosure about emotions and individual home contexts as time goes on
- other topics include domestic violence, establishing responsibility for the violence, issues of shame and isolation, safety plans, gender role issues, conflict resolution and self-esteem building.

2.6.3 Tertiary intervention

This level of intervention aims at assisting those acutely needy individuals and those whose lives have already been affected, often irreversibly, by violence so that the goal of intervention is to rehabilitate the children to the maximum level of functioning possible with the limitations of disabilities (Humphreys, 1993; Humphreys, 1997). The identification and referral of women and children incurring physical injuries to social services is one option, whereas documentation and reporting by health professionals of all episodes of violence or suspected child abuse and neglect is another option to prevent children of abused women being victimised by prolonged legal and custody disputes (Humphreys, 1993).

For example, health professionals can provide testimony in custody cases where the children are ironically placed in the custody of the batterer or in foster-care (because the mother is not able to provide accommodation because of financial reasons or because she may have developed a substance problem associated with having been abused) that the awarding of such custodial/visitation rights to the batterer should either be avoided or only made with careful consideration of the full impact this will have on the children and parent-children relationships in particular (Humphreys, 1993; Humphreys, 1997; Steinbock, 1995).

2.7 CONCLUSION

The literature covered in this chapter illustrates the existence of much controversy both around definitions of family and domestic violence as a societal problem, and for understanding the evolution and impact of such violence on the children growing up in such homes where their mothers are abused.

Evidence of both positive and negative associations related to children's exposure to domestic violence emphasises the need to avoid probabilistic assumptions that children cannot display resilience in the face of adversity. Overall, variations in magnitude and nature of the impact of domestic violence on child development appears to depend both on the type of domestic violence experienced and on who the source of information about the child's adjustment was. Individual intrinsic determinants (such as the age, developmental level and gender of the child) as well as extrinsic determinants (such as protective and risk-inducing mechanisms in the

child's environment) also play an important role in the outcome of children's exposure to adverse circumstances within the home.

Inconclusive findings in the existing body of literature exemplify both the complexity of the issues around domestic violence as well as the need to explore various ways of understanding the problem. A more coherent body of research is thus required to increase understanding of the problem at hand and to inform the implementation of more effective programmes for the children of abused women. The lack of local published research on the topic is highlighted. The current research, couched within an ecosystemic perspective, aims to investigate the impact of domestic violence on children located within a South African context and to inform potential avenues for intervention as perceived by their abused mothers.

The following chapter looks at methodological issues and delineates the action-research and community psychology principles which form an integral part of this research process.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION OF METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

If I had to choose one strategy that would encourage prospective inside research to adopt, it would be to relate the research report to the pragmatic concerns of the institution (Bell, 1993, p. 57).

Private and public institutions are increasingly calling for research to focus on tackling real-world social problems (Bond, 1990; Hedrick, Bickman & Rog, 1993). The current research initiative was born in response to this call for more socially relevant research. Over the years, more and more NWSA clients have voiced their concerns about the real-world social problem of domestic violence being a major source of distress for their children and themselves. In doing so, they have informally expressed a need for services for their children. This project therefore emerged from the NWSA's desire to formally assess whether the extension of their present day counselling services to include services for children of abused women is indeed warranted. The research focus therefore involves an exploration of the perceived needs of children impacted upon by domestic violence as reported by their abused mothers and how NWSA can best go about meeting identified needs.

Traditionally, research methodology has been based on the positivistic tradition of reductive experimentation which separates the object and the subject and assumes universal statements of truth which presume that human nature and behaviour are uniform (Dawes & Donald, 1994; Hoshmand, 1989). Whereas quantitative research focuses more on finding statistically significant relationships, linear effects and universal facts in a bid to answer single questions, qualitative research doubts the value of a scientific approach with human beings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rather than seeking to determine kernels of truth about people's lives as reflected in their self-narratives, qualitative research focuses on understanding the richness of individuals' perceptions and experiences of the world (Bell, 1993; Gergen, 1988; Hedrick et al., 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1984). A qualitative approach therefore embraces concepts of *induction*, *holism* and *subjectivism* (Mouton & Marais, 1990). The term *induction* refers to the researcher's attempts to understand a situation without imposing pre-existing categories of meaning and expectations on the setting. *Holism* (where the whole is considered to be greater than the sum of its parts) considers context as all-important. The researcher must attempt to gather numerous aspects of the situation in order to get a better idea of the whole picture of social dynamics of a particular situation or setting. *Subjectivism* focuses on the experiential states of participants and their perceptions of a situation. There is less reliance on the researcher's theoretical units and more room for the discovery of emergent meaning categories, unplanned backlooping and decisions to change course (Hoshmand, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher is thus allowed greater flexibility to adjust to the complexities and unpredictability of human experience.

Although quantitative paradigms which place the researcher apart and above those who are being researched have been criticised (Bond, 1990; Serrano-Garcia, 1990), qualitative research is not without its own

shortcomings. One of the shortcomings of qualitative paradigms is that such naturalistic inquiry is not an easy task. Qualitative studies can be time-consuming. Schedules inevitably slip owing to the often unpredictability of human, logistical and other contextual features. The personal feelings of the researcher around fieldwork such as anxiety, fatigue and inadequacy may also impact on research outcomes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Inherent bias in the discourses and perspectives may arise from the researcher's prompts. Alternatively, the interactions of varied personalities of participants may inhibit the expression of particular responses (Fontana & Frey, 1994). This may influence criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of research findings. Focus groups are one such qualitative option where the emergent data, though rich and diverse, should be generalised with caution. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, a qualitative paradigm comes with many advantages. Qualitative methodology is more adaptable to dealing with multiple realities which are less aggregatable. It is also more sensitive to the interaction between mutually shaping forces and value patterns encountered in the real world. Furthermore, it takes into consideration the nature of researcher-researched transactions which can influence the extent to which the description of a phenomenon is biased (Hedrick et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mouton & Marais, 1990). The context in which research occurs is therefore an important aspect within the qualitative paradigm employed here.

Community Psychology is also deeply concerned about research issues concerning how and where research is done, as well as by whom and for whom (Serrano-Garcia, 1990). These are all issues which will be discussed in the reflexivity section in chapter five. In as much as the implementation of community psychology theory has become more prevalent and relevant to research within the South African context, the present study was couched in an action-research perspective. Jackson and Van Vlaenderen (1994) contend that research should ideally be action-oriented, informative, liberating and empowering rather than a situation which increases the power differential between the "researcher" and the "researched". It may be argued that the present study, by facilitating reduced researcher-researched power differentials and by creating an atmosphere in which NWSC clients could actively participate in and express their perspectives about the needs and impact of domestic violence on their children, was consistent with the community psychology perspective embracing the notions of *collaboration, empowerment and participatory* research outlined by Rappaport (1990) and Rodwell (1996), for example. Owing to limitations in space, there is no allowance here for a detailed description of community psychology and all its accompanying concepts. However, some familiarity with the concepts most pertinent to the present study is required.

Action or participatory research refers to the dynamic cyclical process where people's experiences and ideas can be used to develop and improve existing services and so bring about beneficial changes in people's lives and the systems in which they live. As a model of inquiry the pragmatic focus of action research is on needs assessment, problem diagnosis, planned interventions and evaluation of changes (Epstein, Quinn, Cumblad & Holderness, 1996; Nuttall & Ivey, 1979 cited in Hoshmand, 1989). Although action research is used primarily within educational settings, it is appropriate in any setting which requires specific knowledge for specific problems within specific situations, or when a new approach (such as the proposed extension of NWSC services

to children) is to be introduced into an existing system (Bell, 1993). In essence, action research can be described as being:

an on the spot-procedure designed to deal with a concrete problem located in an immediate situation. This means that the step-by-step process is constantly monitored (ideally, that is) over varying periods of time and by a variety of mechanisms (questionnaires, diaries, interviews and case studies, for example) so that the ensuing feedback may be translated into modifications, adjustments, directional changes, redefinitions, as necessary, so as to bring about lasting benefit to the ongoing process itself (Cohen & Manion, 1989, p.223).

The term *collaboration* refers to the researcher's attempts to reduce the inherent power inequalities between the researcher and the researched and so combine scientific and popular knowledge (Bond, 1990). This is considered critical to the community psychology perspective. In keeping with the aforementioned principles of collaboration and participatory research, the researcher also took cognisance of the potential of NWSC clients as a community to identify its own problems, needs, resources and capacity for social, political and ideological development and allow them to participate in the development of future action plans for intervention (Serrano-Garcia, 1990). The concept of empowerment itself is according to Rappaport, Swift and Hess (1984) easier to define in its absence, in terms of "powerlessness, real or imagined; learned helplessness; alienation; loss of control over one's life" (p.3). This sense of powerlessness is often viewed as an attitude of being, incorporating past experience, ongoing behaviour, and continuing cognition reinforced by and embedded in the fabric of social institutions. Inherent in the concept of powerlessness are feelings of self-blame, generalized distrust, alienation, deprivation of social resources, economic vulnerability and helplessness (Kieffer, 1982). For the aforementioned reasons an *empowerment agenda* (a term which embraces collaboration between the researcher and the researched, facilitation and participatory competence) was considered to be fundamentally important to the process of attempting to address the very real issue of domestic violence and its impact on children growing up in abusive homes.

Not only can such an *empowerment agenda* simultaneously return power and voice to the participating abused women, but it can also create an improved awareness and understanding of the plight and needs of their children which can inform intervention strategies. This raises the subject of praxis, the circular relationship of experience and reflection through which actions evoke new understandings, which in turn provoke new and more effective actions (Kieffer, 1982; Serrano-Garcia, 1990). The process of action research is thus an ongoing one which takes into consideration issues of praxis described earlier. In keeping with such an action research paradigm, the current research aimed to elicit information which is pragmatic, relevant and appropriate both at a NWSC organisational level as well as for the community of abused women it currently serves. Community participation and collaboration in the identification of needs and generation of suggestions for intervention services for addressing those needs was thus a vital part of this research. Following the guidelines of Krueger (1994), the use of focus group interviews and needs assessment forms in this study can thus be seen as a means of keeping to a participatory research agenda that provides a forum for abused mothers and can provide insights into how future interventions with both abused women and their children might operate.

3.2 AIMS / OBJECTIVES OF THE CURRENT RESEARCH

3.2.1 Broad aims

The broad aim of the present exploratory study was to investigate maternal perceptions and feelings regarding the following questions. What is the impact of domestic violence on children? What effects or range of problems can one expect to see in children exposed in domestic violence? What coping mechanisms or resilience are displayed by children in such adverse conditions? Is there a need for psychological and supportive services specifically directed at children from violent homes?

3.2.2 Specific aim

Exploration of the aforementioned areas leads on to and informs the primary aim and focus of this study which was to answer a number of questions. Is there a need for specialised intervention services in the Western Cape for the children of the abused women who are clients of the NICRO Women's Support Centre (NWSC)? What are the needs of the children of NWSC clients as perceived by their mothers, and how could the NWSC go about realistically meeting these needs? For example, what type of services do mothers think their children need and what would the services look like? Would children from abusive homes be able to make use of services given the chaos in their mothers' lives?

3.3 POPULATION AND SAMPLING *out!*

Participants consisted of individual clients (that is, women who had all experienced abuse in their intimate relationships and who were mothers to children who had been exposed to the domestic violence). Twenty-one women completed the needs assessment forms. These women were all NWSC clientele as recorded in the agency's files and had all been for at least one consultation specifically for individual, group and/or telephonic counselling between January 1996 and January 1998 and were all residents in the Western Cape region. The following table lists captured background information of the respondents of the needs assessment forms.

Table 3.1 : Background information of needs assessment form respondents

Age	>19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	<60
	0	4	5	6	6	0

Language	English	Eng & Afr	Eng & Xhosa	Eng, Afr & Xhosa
	12	6	2	1

Marital status	Single	Divorced	Married	Living with boyfriend	Widowed
	1	5	12	3	0

Employment status	Employed	Unemployed
	12	9

The number, age, sex and education/work status of the children of the needs assessment forms are represented in the following table.

Table 3.2. : Number, age, sex and education/work status of children of respondents

Respondent	Number of children	Age and sex of children	Education/Work
1	2	Male (18), male (12)	Matric, std. 4
2	3	Female (21), male (19), female (17)	University, unemployed, matric
3	2	Male (12), female (5)	Std. 4, pre-primary
4	2	Female (17), male (14)	Matric, std. 5
5	2	Male (7), female (4)	Grade 1, at home
6	3	Male (26), male (24), female (20), male (18)	Admin work, technikon, unemployed, matric
7	5	Female (15), male (6.5), male (1 year 9 months)	Std. 8, grade 1, at home
8	2	Male (20), male (14), female (10)	College, std. 7, std. 3
9	4	Male (10), male (8)	Grade 5, grade 3
10	4	Female (11)	Unknown
11	2	Female (21), male (17), male (10)	Admin work, matric, std. 3
12	2	Male (3)	At home
13	3	Male (9), female (7)	Grade 3, grade 2
14	3	Female (24), male (20), female (17)	University (post-graduate), university, grade 11
15	3	Male (18), female (15), male (11)	Matric, std. 6, std. 3
16	3	Male (27), male (25), male (15)	Self-employed, computer graphics designer, grade 10
17	4	Male (23), female (20), female (18), male (15)	Carpenter, receptionist, unemployed, std. 7
18	1	Female (10)	Std. 3
19	3	Male (20), male (18), male (16)	Technikon, matric, std. 8
20	1	Male (15) from previous relationship	Std. 7
21	1	Female (5)	Pre-primary

Thirteen women participated in the mixed-race focus groups (one "African" woman, two "White" women and ten "Coloured" women). Following the conventions of the Country report on the convention on the rights of the child (1997) and the National Educational Policy Investigation (1993 cited in Dawes & Donald, 1994), the terms "black" (referring to the general disenfranchised majority in South Africa), "African" (referring specifically to black Africans), "Coloured" and "White" are recognised and rejected by the author as being offensive apartheid racial classifiers. Nevertheless, this nomenclature is used in the text of the current research to reflect the strong correspondence between such terms and the different levels of socio-economic status, tensions and divisions which still exist in South Africa today. Although all of the women could speak English, their first languages were either English, Afrikaans or Xhosa. Their ages ranged between 28 and 50 years. The following table represents a breakdown of the number, ages and sexes of the children and marital status of participants of the focus groups.

Table 3.3. : Breakdown of number, age, sex of children and marital status of participants

Participant	Number of children	Age and sex of children	Relationship status
A	3	Female (16), male (8), male (6)	Married to abuser for 14 years, currently divorced
B	3	Female (30), male (29), male (25)	Married to abuser for 33 years, still in the same relationship
C	2	Female (6), male (2)	Married to abuser for 7 years, currently separated and in process of getting divorced
D	2	Female (16), male (13)	Married to abuser for 22 years, currently divorced
E	2	Male (21), female (13)	Married to abuser for 21 years, separated from abuser for the last 6 months
F	3	Male (19), male (15), female (6)	Married to abuser for 20 years, still in the same relationship
G	5	Female (26), male (25), female (24), female (20), female (19)	Married to abuser for 26 years, divorced from abuser for last 4 years, but only moved out 4 months prior to research
H	2	Male (18), male (16)	Married to abuser for 18 years, husband died 1 month after she left him
I	4	Female (22), male (18), female (15), female (13)	Currently divorced
J	4	Female (21) from previous relationship, male (10), male (9), female (5)	Married to abuser for 11 years, currently living separately on the same premises
K	2	Male (13), female (2)	Still married
L	2	Male (16), female (12)	Married to abuser for 7 years, divorced last 8 years
M	3	Male (17) from first marriage, male (14) and girl (9) from second marriage	First marriage to abusive husband lasted 10 years. Second marriage also to abuser. Currently divorced from third husband who was also abusive

To qualify for participation in the focus groups, participants had to conform to the following criteria:

- For logistical purposes all participants had to be able to converse fluently in English or Afrikaans or at least be able to understand English.
- They had to sign a consent form indicating their agreement to participate and their acknowledgement that the interviews were to be taped (See Appendix for copy of needs assessment form).
- They had all been NWSC clients who had at least one biological, adopted or step-child who had to be 25 years old or younger and is/was living with his/her mother within an abusive household.
- The women had to have been involved in an abusive spouse-like relationship (between an adult male and female rather than between juveniles)- this included women who were formerly married to an abusive spouse, currently married to an abusive spouse, or co-habitants living together at the same address.

Mothers who reported that their children are/were experiencing sexual and/or physical abuse within the context of domestic violence were intended to be excluded from participating in the study as such cases are outside the handling capacity of the NWSC and are, by law, immediately referred to statutory agencies. Before initiating the research, the researcher outlined several issues, definitions and limitations in the research design. Firstly,

since sexual and/or physical abuse falls under statutory jurisdiction and is generally not part of the caseload to be dealt with by NWSC, the original intention of the researcher was to limit the exploration of the impact/associated/perceived effects of domestic violence to those children who had only witnessed or been emotionally or psychologically affected by exposure to domestic violence. However, the imposition of such separate categories emerged as being somewhat idealistic. This was especially evident as highlighted in maternal reports and in the literature (which emphasise that many children exposed to domestic violence become victims of physical or sexual abuse themselves). Also, despite knowing about the set age parameters for what would define children in this research, some mothers also discussed the observed effects of domestic violence on their individual children who fell outside of this range. In view of an action-research model adopted which permits flexibility, allowances could be made for this unforeseen occurrence. The information which emerged about children older than 25 years actually added to the research in that it expanded the knowledge on some of the more long-term effects associated with childhood exposure to domestic violence.

Secondly, whereas the decision to use mothers as informants has its advantages as it enables exploration of the experiences of children too young to speak for themselves or unable to recall the nature of early experiences of exposure to violence (Hilton, 1991), the fact that, in essence, the voices of children in this research were silenced except via the reports of their mothers may cast doubt as to the accuracy of these renditions. Although the sole reliance on maternal responses has been criticised in the literature, the sample chosen for this study was one of convenience. Accessing the abused mothers of children was less problematic than accessing the children themselves. Also, the need to obtain parental consent before conducting research with minor children could be avoided. Prospective problems were inherent in the selection.

The researcher also took cognisance of the possible occurrence of *sample bias* (where persons electing to participate may be those who find talking about their feelings in their own words quite compelling and may relish the opportunity of being allowed a space to ventilate their concerns and feelings) and *response bias* (where the response patterns of participants may have been influenced by subtle social cues about what responses are desirable or by unconscious cues by the researcher to which participants may be sensitive) (Harvey, Turnquist & Agostinelli, 1988). The importance of *contextual, researcher and participant effects* were also taken into consideration in the analysis of findings. According to Mouton and Marais (1990), the aforementioned effects can be defined as follows:

- *Contextual effects* refers to spatio-temporal factors determined by historical, socio-cultural, political and economic factors and the context within which the research occurred.
- *Researcher effects* refers to the interaction between characteristics such as the image, age, race, gender and affiliation of the researcher and those of the participants.
- *Participant effects* refer to the aforementioned characteristics relating to the researcher as well as to effects of the levels of motivation of participants, the emotionality evoked by the topic, and the natural decay in participants' ability to remember relevant past events with the passing of time.

3.4 INSTRUMENTS

Since "needs" are ultimately a question of values and philosophy which technical methods can neither identify nor analyse completely and since every method of data collection has inherent problems of discovery and analysis which no one method can adequately treat (Mouton & Marais, 1990; Witkin, 1984), the researcher took care to include multiple data sources (focus groups and needs assessment forms) to increase the reliability of the research findings. The rationale behind this was to attempt to compensate for the respective shortcomings of each method in isolation.

By giving voice to abused women, the current clientele of NICRO who have some investment both in the organisation and in their own children who have been exposed to domestic violence, the hopes of the researcher were threefold. Firstly, the researcher hoped to elicit a variety of perspectives to *establish whether there is indeed a perceived need for the proposed extended programme*. Secondly, it was hoped that the emergent perceptions of the impact of the children of these women who have been exposed to domestic violence will *help expand the existing body of knowledge of the impact of domestic violence on children in the local context*. Lastly, the researcher hoped to *highlight any ameliorating or exacerbating factors with respect to the impact of domestic violence on children and so help inform the implementation of future community relevant programmes with such children* based on both the oral and written input of their mothers. The nature and content of each of the two data collection instruments will briefly be outlined.

3.4.1 Focus group interviews

Some of the criticisms of focus groups and their generalisability have been mentioned previously. Nevertheless, the utility and value of focus groups for the eliciting of spontaneous and expressive responses within exploratory research cannot be disputed (Stevens, 1996; Stewart & Shamdansi, 1990). It was not the aim of this research to make generalisations, but to explore and describe the range of perceptions of abused mothers around the research topic. By giving people the opportunity to make attributions in their own words, a greater degree of personal reflection and self-report was facilitated than which other methods may have constrained (Harvey, et al., 1988). Also, unlike the case with individual interviews, focus groups have the advantage of facilitating interaction amongst group members and the generation of a multitude of ideas and perspectives. When utilised in semi-structured format as in the current research, there is also the added advantage of establishing a framework beforehand so that analysis is greatly simplified, especially when research is time-limited (Bell, 1993).

The focus groups consisted of open-ended, semi-structured interviews conducted over three, 90 minute sessions. A loose structure and guiding framework was therefore facilitated. In this way the researcher could ensure that the most important aspects of the research were covered without compromising participants' freedom to discuss additional areas that they considered to be important. The questions focused on several broad areas that explored:

- 1) abused women's experiences of domestic violence and its impact on their children

- 2) perceptions of their children's responses to the exposure to domestic violence
- 3) whether there was a perceived need for NICRO to implement intervention services for children of abused women and perceptions around the advantages and disadvantages of implementing such a service.
- 4) ideas and suggestions about logistics, and the content and nature of intervention programmes

3.4.2 Needs assessment forms

The second means of data collection was an anonymous and confidential needs assessment form (See appendix) that was drawn up in consultation with the NWSC staff and with much reference to the literature. As pointed out by Raeburn and Seymour (1979, p.291), in any system "a balance has to be found between 'consumer wants', the opinion of management, and the realities of resource shortages and constraints. But in all cases, priority is given to the consumer input, and ongoing monitoring of this input is essential. All action proceeds on the basis of needs ascertained from the people most affected by the system, primarily their consumers". A *needs assessment* is thus part of a programme-planning-implementation-evaluation cycle that includes the following stages:

- the identification of critical or unmet problems/needs that should be addressed by new or revised programmes/service
- the search for appropriate alternative solutions
- programme installation
- implementation and evaluation (Witkin, 1984).

The needs assessment forms consisted of a combination of open-ended and multiple choice questions which were subsequently reviewed and refined in collaboration with NWSC staff members. The forms consisted of four parts: 1) demographic variables such as age, first language, employment and marital status, 2) information about the nature and duration of the abuse and abusive relationship, 3) information about the perceived adaptive and maladaptive responses of the children of abused women, and 4) establishing whether there exists a need for services for children and eliciting suggestions about what kind of intervention programmes would be most appropriate. English and Afrikaans versions of the forms were made available. Arrangements were made for staff to distribute and collect the forms to NWSC clients.

3.5 PROCEDURE

Authorisation for carrying out the study was obtained from the NWSC. Using an exploratory approach, a supply of needs assessment forms (with covering letters about the purpose and nature of the study) was made available at the NWSC reception/waiting-room area over a three-month period. With the assistance of NWSC reception-staff, forms were to be distributed over a three-month period to all presenting clients for immediate completion and return. Completed forms were to be stored in a box-file made available to reception staff and collected for analysis at the end of the aforementioned three-month period. This way, instead of contending with the notoriously high costs and poor return-rates associated with postal distribution of questionnaires, the researcher hoped a prompt, efficient return-rate would be facilitated. Furthermore, any of the perceived risks of

an abusive partner intercepting posted material were rendered negligible and the safety of the woman and her child/children would not be unnecessarily threatened by participation in the study. The distribution and collection of the needs assessment forms was not without problems, however.

What eventually emerged, was that because of various logistical constraints (such as a lack of support from some of the counselling staff in the distribution and collection process; completed forms which were reported to have been inadvertently thrown away by cleaning staff at the NWSC; some of the clients to whom the forms were distributed, had little education and poor literacy skills and found the content and language of the form too complex, emotionally evocative and time-consuming to complete) the original plan for dealing with the needs assessment forms had to be updated. Subsequently, after consultation with a senior staff member, it was decided that each of the counsellors at the centre was asked to disseminate and collect a quota of five needs assessment forms each from their clients who were known to have children. This also proved problematic as counsellors seemed to be resistant and showed little enthusiasm towards doing this. Subsequently, the intended response rate for the needs assessment forms was not met. Also, the intended time period over which these forms were to be made available at the centre had to be extended from a three-month to a five-month period. In response to the lack of support from counselling staff in this venture, the NWSC staff member with whom the researcher had liaised throughout the initiation and implementation of this research then suggested that some of the volunteers contact clients telephonically and complete the needs assessment forms in that way. The latter issues will be discussed in more detail in the reflexivity section in the next chapter.

In addition to the information from the needs assessment forms, three 90 minute focus groups were run over two consecutive days at the NWSC at 4 Buitensingel in Cape Town to further ascertain the needs of the aforementioned children as reported by their mothers. The original intention was for each of the three focus groups to consist of six to eight participants. However, owing to a number of unforeseen complications (such as counsellors not nominating suitable candidates for participation, and participants who had promised to attend, but in the end had failed to do so) the eventual numbers for each group ended up being five, six and two respectively. Another problem emerged when, owing to unforeseen circumstances, some participants arrived late for the focus groups and others had to leave before 90 minutes dedicated to the group had expired. Here, once again, the flexibility advocated by the community psychology and action research models proved containing for the researcher. Insight into research in the real world (as opposed to research within sterile experimental conditions) was gained.

Keeping true to a community psychology perspective and to Krueger's (1994) collaborative focus between the researcher and the staff of the NWSC, the groups was facilitated by a full-time NWSC social worker and the researcher. On the positive side, such collaborative efforts not only facilitate the likelihood that the results of this study will be used because of the involvement of critical stakeholders in the process, but can be a potentially empowering process and opportunity for staff to learn a new skill (Krueger, 1994). On the negative side, the process of reviewing and receiving input and manpower can be time-consuming and the research

process is likely to get bogged down at several points (for example, the schedules of researcher, participant and NWSC staff involved with the research process may clash and so forth).

Participants for the focus groups were initially intended to be randomly selected from those women who indicated to their counsellors that they are prepared to participate in the study. When this plan failed because of various logistical constraints and a lack of support from some of the counselling staff for assisting in the selection process, initial contact with participants was eventually made by my co-facilitator, a NWSC staff member, or the researcher. Participants who were willing to participate and who fulfilled the set criteria were contacted by phone to confirm the times and dates of the focus group discussions.

At the start of each focus group, the researcher introduced herself, her co-facilitator (the NWSC social worker) and the other participants. The topic and objectives of the research were presented both in oral and written form (see Appendix). Each woman gave written consent for participation in the study (see appendix) in which she also had to acknowledge in writing that she gave permission for the session to be taped and the content to be utilised in the final report. Confidentiality of personal identity in the final report was assured as far as possible. Furthermore, participants were informed that should they wish to have additional support, counselling or interventions regarding personal or parental concerns after participation in the study, they could obtain this from their case managers (NWSC counsellors) or be referred to other sources. Participants were provided with refreshments at the end of each session.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

A descriptive analysis of the Needs Assessment Forms was undertaken to ascertain participants' demographic and biographical data as well as mothers' perceptions around the need for and type of services required for their children as well as any trends surrounding the sex, ages and range of reported symptoms and behaviour of children from abusive households.

For the focus groups, data was collected by means of audio recordings of the three groups run. The audio recordings were transcribed before analysis of the raw database provided by these transcriptions ensued. After multiple readings of the transcriptions, emerging themes and factors that influenced the interview process were documented.

Rather than selecting either discourse or content analysis (Antaki, 1988; Harvey et al., 1988; Gergen, 1988; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1988), the researcher chose to adopt a method that draws on both of these which Wilbraham (1994) referred to as thematic content analysis. Classic content analysis sees language as being a transparent representational medium to indicate something lying "beyond the text" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p.41). Furthermore, it involves the generation and imposition of categories which can be reliably coded and used for testing hypotheses. The main limitation of content analysis as a method is that it involves the imposition of pre-determined categories into which the data are expected to fit. Discourse analysis

on the other hand, rather than focusing on phenomena or objects as pre-existing entities, focuses on the active, constructive and constructed nature of language (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Powers, 1996). "Realities" presented are viewed as formulations constructed by discourses, and the discourse analyst regards the function of discourses drawn upon to be particularly important.

Unlike the approaches of classic content and discourse analysis, the thematic content analysis approach provides the opportunity to reflexively examine the emerging themes and to expose distinctive coherencies, contradictions and overlaps between and within emergent themes. Although Wilbraham (1994) points out that thematic content analysis can be understood as operating within the hermeneutic, ethnographic approaches to content analysis, she goes on to point out that thematic content analysis allows for fairly flexible usage of semantic units of analysis, the incorporation of multiple themes (and subthemes) which may overlap and enable the previously mentioned examination of multi-thematic contradictions and inconsistencies. It is for these reasons the researcher felt that the thematic content analysis approach was appropriate for the current research. In keeping with this, a "data driven approach" was adopted for the coding of the emergent themes. As far as possible, broad themes were extracted from the transcript data itself before attempting to identify and code themes. In other words, rather than imposing pre-ordained categories on the data, allowance was made for the data to "speak" as it were. After several more readings, refinements and revisions, consensus was finally reached between the researcher and my co-facilitator and several broad, often overlapping themes were identified- which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

3.7 ETHICS APPRAISAL

In the spirit of transparency associated with a community psychology perspective, all participants were presented with verbal information about the purpose, nature and logistics of the study (See Appendix). Participation in the study was on a voluntary basis with informed consent. All responses were quoted anonymously/ names were changed so as to protect the identity of participants. In designing this study, the researcher was aware of the ethical considerations involved in researching domestic violence and considered it vital that back-up counselling was made available to provide women who participated in the focus groups with support for re-evoked memories of the abuse. Therefore, at the close of each group session participants was informed that should there be any personal or parental concerns arising from participation, that additional support or counselling could be obtained from their case managers (NWSC counsellors) or by referral to other sources. On completion of the study, the NWSC will be provided with a copy of the thesis. Participants were also informed that they too could have access to a summarised copy of the findings if they so desire or read the full completed report at the NWSC.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS OF NEEDS ASSESSMENT FORMS

4.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the results of an analysis of the twenty-one needs assessment forms.

4.2. THE NATURE OF THE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

According to ecosystemic principles individuals are not only influenced by each other, but they are also influenced by the overall systemic environment which in turn is dependent on the individual within the system and the nature of actions between them (Tyler, 1992). In an attempt to elicit the characteristics of family contexts where individuals are exposed to domestic violence, the following information emerged.

Of the 21 respondents, 38% (n=8) had left the abusive relationship and 62% (n=13) were still in the relationship. The length of time for which respondents had been in the abusive relationship ranged from a minimum of 5 years and a maximum of 27 years (a total of 312.5 years and a mean of 14.9 years of abuse amongst them) during which they and one or more of their children had been exposed to domestic violence. All of the women reported that they had endured verbal/emotional, and/or physical and/or sexual and/or financial abuse by their partners. The latter findings concur with suggestions in the literature that the family can easily be considered one of society's most violent institutions (Gelles & Cornell, 1990; Shefer, 1995). Given the interdependence of family relationships (Cox & Paley, 1997; Lazarus, 1995), conflict within the marital dyad is likely to extend to other parts of the system such as the parental and child subsystems. This was borne out in the current findings.

4.3. PARENT-CHILD CHARACTERISTICS AND INTERACTIONS

In addition, it was found that the manner in which parent-child interactions occurs appear to be as much a function of individual attributes as of the complex reciprocal interactions which the literature asserts to be characteristic of family systems in which domestic violence occurs. As represented in the following table, it was found that children's characteristics could be differentiated along the lines of gender. However, the degree of overlap between the genders suggests that such descriptions are perhaps also a function of parental biases rather than of gender alone. Children perceived to be more difficult were generally described in more negative terms by mothers. The reverse held true for children with more positive attributes who were perceived as exacting fewer demands from parents.

Table 4.1. : Children's characteristics

Daughters	Sons	Shared characteristics of daughters and sons
Helpful	Responsible	Outgoing
Understanding	Hates father	Shy, introverted, withdrawn, quiet
Demanding	Rebellious	Talkative
Passive	Difficult, demanding	Easy to get along with
Cries	Struggles to sleep	Get depressed
Peacemaker	Nervous, irritable	Angry
Ambitious	Lazy	Lacks self-confidence
		Struggles at school
		Aggressive
		Attention-seeking, clingy, insecure

Generally speaking, mothers described their daughters as being passive and more likely to resort to crying. Sons were generally described as being more hostile (especially towards their fathers) and prone to rebelliousness and sleeping difficulties. There was, however, also a degree of overlap where both daughters and sons shared more negative characteristics (such as being angry, depressed, aggressive, introverted and attention-seeking) as well as positive characteristics. This suggests that although general trends could be discerned, the variation within the categories for children may have more to do with their individual personality traits and coping resources rather than as a result of gender variables alone. The range of different personality characteristics reflected here is also consistent with ecosystemic principles in the sense that children's different personalities influence parental responses towards them and vice versa. For example, regardless of gender, some children were described as more talkative and easier to get along with than others. In accordance with this, such children with more acceptable personal attributes were perceived in a more favourable light by their mothers than those children with more problematic traits. For example, some mothers reported that they did not know how to handle their sons whose difficult behaviours made mothers shout more. In this respect, child (and parenting) behaviour can be viewed as a product of the mutually regulating process in the caregiving relationship (Cox & Paley, 1997). Parent-child interactions and responses differed accordingly.

Although 48% (n=10) of mothers reported that they never felt angry with their children for upsetting the abuser or provoking him into being abusive, 33.3% (n=7) reported that they sometimes felt angry towards the children and 14.3% (n=3) of mothers reported that they often felt angry with the children. One mother failed to respond. Mothers reported that their anger translated into them being emotionally, verbally or physically abusive to their children at times. Of the participants, 43% (n=9) reported that they have been emotionally/verbally abusive, 14.3% reported exercising physical abuse and one mother reported she had been both emotionally/ verbally and physically abusive towards the children. This can perhaps be better understood in the light of existing literature which suggests that abused mothers vent their frustrations on their children at times (Smith et al., 1997). Alternatively, they may deliberately try to silence their children as a means of