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Building a Community of Practice for Transforming ‘Mothering’ of Abused Women into a ‘Mutual Care Project’: A New Focus on Partnership and Mutuality

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Abstract

The current child protection and women protection frameworks tend to polarize the wellbeing of women and children. Abused mothers are often considered ‘inadequate’ or ‘incompetent’ if their children fail to achieve socially desirable outcomes. Conversely, children are seen as a burden on abused women in cases where women are ambivalent in respect to their mothering experience. Yet abused women need extra care and support to be competent again in the post-separation context, while children can serve a protective role for their abused mothers. This study employs Cooperative Grounded Inquiry (CGI) for working with abused Chinese women in Hong Kong and their teenage children in order to nurture a community of practice for transforming mothering into a mutual care project. Through partnering with teenage participants for setting care goals and care plans, abused women became aware of how they had monopolized the care work at home while teenage participants recognized how they could contribute to designing and accomplishing care plans. The findings shed light on the cultural fit of ‘community of practice’ in Chinese familial societies, and demonstrate the potential of ‘doing family’ for expanding post-separation protection for abused women and their children. In this article, ‘community of practice’ is proposed as an approach for helping narrow the gap between child protection and women protection systems.

Key Words:

Post-Separation, Mothering, Community of Practice, Domestic Violence, Children Participation

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Introduction

The discordance between the women and child protection systems has polarized the wellbeing of both women and children. The problem is rooted in the systems' historical cultural differences which are embedded in the feminist movement and the discourse of children's rights respectively (Hester, 2013). Women displaying ambivalence and inconsistency in respect to their mothering role risk having their children removed by the child protection system (Featherstone et al., 2014). Whereas the women protection system focuses primarily on women's individual empowerment and perpetrator intervention, while children and mothering are usually not on the intervention agenda (Hester, 2013). These non-aligned domestic violence services frameworks limit the protection work within the mother-child dyad, creating a tendency to promote attaining the wellbeing of one at the expense of the other (Lonne et al., 2009).

Despite the persisting systemic conflicts between women and child protection systems, we have also observed a thriving body of literature calling for reconciliation of the benefits of abused mothers and their children in the post-separation stage at both the practice and culture level (Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Humphreys, Thiara & Skamballis, 2011; Katz, 2015; Morris, Humphreys & Hegarty, 2015). This paper joins the same venture suggesting that building 'communities of practice' for users and practitioners (abused women, children, and practitioners from both domestic violence services and the child protection system) can create the space for acknowledging the wider context of relationships in supporting both abused women and children in the post-separation stage. It echoes the notion that that social workers and social services should transcend the individualized framework in service provision, so as to take care of the ecology of the family as a counter response to the neo-liberalization of welfare (Featherstone et al., 2014; Houston, 2014).

Post-separation service for abused women in Hong Kong

As stipulated in Hong Kong's official handling procedural guidelines, domestic violence services terminate when 'violence subsides' (HKSAR, 2014a). Lacking a clear definition of when violence subsides however, separation and divorce are often considered signs of the cessation of violence. The Victim Support Programme which provides limited post-

separation services, such as emotional support and escort to judicial proceedings including divorce, custody and application for an injunction order, is currently the only service that targets post-separation support. Despite some emerging initiatives, crisis intervention is still at the heart of the domestic violence services in Hong Kong.

This study employed Cooperative Grounded Inquiry (CGI) to work with abused Chinese women in Hong Kong and their teenage children for developing appropriate services to meet their post-separation needs (Kong, 2015; 2016). Through partnering with teenage participants in articulating post-separation experiences, setting care goals and care plans, mothering was identified in the inquiry group as one of the major barriers to the post-separation wellbeing of both. The power difference embedded in mothering and the monopolization of care work by mothers were challenged by teenage participants, contributing to different forms of partnership in designing and accomplishing care plans. The findings shed light on the cultural fit of 'community of practice' in Chinese familial societies, and demonstrate the potential of 'doing family' for expanding post-separation protection for abused women and their children. In this article, building a 'family-like community of practice' through implementing CGI is proposed as an approach for helping narrow the gap between child protection and women protection practices.

Mothering predicaments in the context of domestic violence

Becoming 'competent mothers' in the context of intimate partner violence is challenging, as a result of the complex power dynamics and the physical and psychological distresses caused by the violent relationship. Abusers' attempts to undermine the mother-child relationship could have a strong impact on women's confidence and actual performance in their mothering practices (Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Radford & Hester, 2006). Undermining strategies involve repeated accusations and criticisms against women's fidelity and competency as both a wife and a mum (Humphreys et al., 2011). Nonetheless, Eriksson (2008) also recognized that children can be drawn into coercive or controlling practices against their mothers as direct abusers or supporters of perpetrators. Coercion and control can extend to the post-separation stage through custody and parenting (Hayes, 2012; Jaffe et al., 2008) such that the mother-child relationship is then turned into a battleground.

In addition to the disturbed mothering, abused women are subject to stricter monitoring of their childcare by care practitioners in shelters (Krane & Davies, 2007). The normative expectations on mothers and ideal motherhood can become a particular form of vulnerability experienced by abused mothers in the post-separation stage (Eriksson, 2014). As mothering experiences are framed by women protection and child protection services as either 'restraining' to women's autonomy or 'fulfilling' achievement at all time (Featherstone, 1997), the mothering ambivalence experienced by abused women can barely be acknowledged in formal services. For example, both love-hate and fulfilling-restraining emotions towards childcare could happen in cases where abused women were made pregnant by forced sex/marital rape (Radford & Hester, 2006).

The conflicting discourses embedded in the different planets of domestic violence service (Ericksson, 2008; Hester, 2013) also create double bind situations that accentuate the mothering ambivalence in the post-separation stage. Child protection services and child custody are informed by the conflicting protective and developmental discourses of childhood. They subject abused mothers to constantly fear failing to protect or failing to put children's benefits first by sending an ultimatum of child removal or court order for compulsory father visitation (Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Scourfield, 2001). Women and child protection services, that run on diverse goals of increasing women's autonomy and strengthening child safeguarding, further entrap women in the choice of either a 'good woman' or a 'good mum'.

Mothering Responsibility of Abused Women

Gender and kinship are the major intersecting factors which reinforced responsibility put on mothers to protect children. The gendered nature of parenting positions mothers/mothering at the centre of parenthood, while kinship ascribes a parent status to fathers who abuse their partners (Eriksson, 2008). In this way, abused women are carrying more responsibilities while sharing relatively fewer rights over parenting after separation, particularly following the increasing popularity of co-parenting (Radford & Hester, 2015). Mothers are therefore exposed to blame for failing, while the risks of 'fathering' to both abused women and their children in the post separation stage can go unrecognized.

The way motherhood is constructed further generates contradictions with the victimhood construct (Eriksson, 2014). The incompatibility of 'ideal victim' and 'competent mother' creates a predicament for abused mothers, as they may risk losing their legal and tangible protections when they display sufficient skills and strengths in mothering their children. Competent mothers are subjected to higher expectations of making rational choices for themselves and for their children whilst being expected to display independence in surviving violence and its aftermath. Within this restrictive construction of mothering/motherhood, competent mothers' vulnerability to continued coercive control and their difficulties recovering from trauma remain invisible. Recognition of abused women's mothering ambivalence and the persistent threat of abuse in the post-separation stage might paradoxically set off the alarm bells of the child protection services.

Unpacking mothering ambivalence and the interlinked wellbeing of abused women and their children opens up a window of opportunity for us to reconcile the polarized needs of abused women and their children in the post-separation stage of intimate partner violence. Buchanan, Wendt & Moulding (2014) argue for the need of a nuanced understanding of maternal protectiveness in the context of intimate partner violence rather than either idealize or demonize abused mothers. It not only halts women-blaming, but also helps communicate the violence positively with their children and hence leading to a closer filial relationship. Humphreys et al. (2011) proposed a multi-layer model of 'readiness to change' - organization, social worker, women and children- so as to address the impact of intimate partner violence on the mother-child relationship. While, Katz (2015) realized that social workers' role in the recovery is usually short-term whereas mothers and children are more likely to be each other's long-term recovery promoters in the post-separation stage. However, these attempts are operated majorly within the mother-child and user-formal service dyadic relationships, but seldom acknowledge the role of informal familial-like support in post-separation recovery for both abused women and their children. With the involvement of women survivors and their children in collaborative knowledge making and service development, this study aims to generate knowledge for supporting both abused women and their children by drawing support from the wider relationship web.

Methodology

Cooperative Grounded Inquiry (CGI) hinges on the merging of Cooperative Inquiry (CI) and some modified techniques from Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) (Kong, 2015; 2016). The methodology recognizes the validity of different forms of knowing, including 'propositional', 'practical', 'experiential' and 'presentational' knowing, which are perceived as the multiple strands of intelligibility that give our dynamic social lives some order (Heron & Reason, 1997; Schatzki, 1996). Reflection-action-reflection cycles underpin a continuous process of learning in action. CGI values situated knowledge, promotes egalitarian participation and emphasizes cooperation in knowledge building – women and teenage participants were engaged in this inquiry as equal partners to research and change the problems with the initiating researcher. Therefore, in this paper, when teenage participants' views are discussed as expressions directed to non-teenage participants - adult women participants – the term 'us' is employed to refer to women participants and the initiating researcher-participant to denote this equal partnership.

Practising CGI led to the formation of a 'community of practice' (CofP)–

'An aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations—in short, practices—emerge in the course of this mutual endeavour. As a social construct, a CofP is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992, p. 464)

The concept of CofP effectively encapsulates the interactive relationships among meaning making, identity, participation, practices and learning, which constitute this inquiry group (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). The concept of CofP sustained by the practice of CGI also finds its cultural fit in Chinese societies as it resembles the traditional Confucius and Taoist culture which celebrates the notion of 'within the four seas, all men are brothers' and sees the universe as children of Tao and Nature (Saso, 1999, pp. 5-6).

Transferability of knowledge generated through this type of inquiry depends on generality rather than generalizability (Glaser and Strauss, 2009). The interlinking conceptual entities

discovered about the phenomenon under study can be useful in other contexts, when researchers are able to demonstrate the fitness of those previously generated concepts to new data. Application of the findings in this study must take into account that the 'children' participants were teenagers who might have very different developmental needs and who may place greater priority on personal autonomy in daily care practices. Women's ethnicity should be also taken into account in applying the concepts generated in this research as the prevalence of familial mentality is a cultural characteristic of Chinese (Holroyd, 2003).

Data Collection and Analysis

The practitioner-researcher worked with the women and teenage participants for 6 months collecting different forms of data, including conversations, observational data, experiential data and interactive data. Each participant kept a personal diary to document their own learning experiences, observations, reflections, feelings, desires and visions for post-separation services. Photos, drawings, documents, videos and audio recordings were produced during the inquiry for maximizing inclusivity of different forms of data which could reveal different forms of knowing.

CGI, like other participatory research, relies on genuine efforts to achieve participation and democratization of knowledge making (Sullivan, Bhuyan, Senturia, Shiu-Thornton, & Ciske, 2005). In addition to GTM's constant comparative, intuitive hunches and experience-based interpretation of data employed by women and teenage participants were also part of the data analysis when they were verified by further evidence in the inquiry. This is consistent with GTM's approach for examining the theoretical fitness of preexisting concepts in making sense of data.

Gaining Entry, Recruitment and Consent

In this inquiry, one of the authors' personal networks with a local survivors' group was chosen as the recruitment site because some of the group's active members expressed a strong interest in developing services for formerly abused women. This fitted the basic recruitment principle for participatory research, of 'drawing the common souls' together. Target participants' consent to participate in the introductory session was obtained beforehand. Consent to participate in this CGI was obtained from the 6 women participants before their participation in the inquiry group, while one potential participant turned down

the invitation because of a mismatch between what the group was doing and her expectations.

Teenage participants were formally recruited after 3 months into the inquiry, when the developing knowledge about post-separation recovery pointed to the importance of involving women's children in daily care and knowledge making. Before engaging children formally in inquiry, women participants agreed on the following points: (1) children's participation in the group had to be entirely voluntary: Parent participants should not attempt to force their sons/daughters either verbally, by punishment or by reward to attend the group meetings. (2) Parent participants should be ready to listen to children's view on their experiences, including how they went through the violence and related experiences. Parents were made aware that children could volunteer views that were unexpected and even in contrary to their own views and lived experiences. The mothers agreed that they should not act in a way that caused harm, threat, or discomfort to children for any of the views they expressed. (3) Children were equal partners with whom women participants had to collaborate with full respect and recognition of their views and knowledge. On the basis of these agreements, we proceeded to invite interested teenage children to design the consent-giving mechanism. It eventually led to the replacement of the one-off approach in consent-giving with a continuous consent-seeking process which helped monitor the potential abuse of authority by their mothers. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of York for involving both abused women and children in this study.

Participants

Table 1. Demographics of participants

By the end of this inquiry, 7 women participants (practitioner-researcher, HL, NF, PF, YY, KW and YT) and 4 teenage participants (Yuen, Dai, Bui and SY) were officially involved (see Table 1). 2 out of the 7 women were born and educated in Hong Kong, while the others were all born and educated in mainland China. The ages of women participants ranged from their late twenties to mid-sixties. The teenage participants were all born in mainland China and educated in Hong Kong from late primary or early secondary education onwards. Teenage participants were aged 11-17 at the moment the inquiry began.

Findings

In the inquiry, the practice of motherhood extended beyond the traditional 'family' unit, and into the family-like inquiry group. 'Doing family' in the group enabled women and teenage participants to receive more mutual support in the process of recovery, echoing the emerging stream of family studies which focus on the displaying/doing of family (Smart, 2007; Ribben-McCarthy, 2012). Within the group, the family-like community of practice nurtured through this inquiry yielded a shared view that that families were not limited to the household, but rather the kinships people make with others outside their bloodlines.

Displaying a Community of Practice of Yat-Ga-Yan (一家人, 'we are a family')

YY: This is called the 'Green Home'. Green colour represents health, meaning that everyone here in this group has to be healthy. We shall stay with each other as if we are a family. In this 'home', I hope that everyone can have food, clothes and love (27 Jan 2013).



In this CGI, women participants engaged with one another for improving the welfare of separated abused women in Hong Kong and for bringing about equal participation in domestic violence service development. Through the sharing of languages, kinship, identities, stories of migration/victimization/surviving, dining habits, and parent-son/daughter practices, women participants began to construct meanings about their 'togetherness' in familial terms. Participants prompted and performed 'cooking and dining together', 'sleeping in each other's home', 'taking care of each other's sons/daughters' and 'remembering each other's personal habits' as practices of 'doing family' (Smart, 2007).

'Doing family' as proposed by Smart (2007) is to say kinships are not born out of birth origins, but constantly performed through family and intimate practices. These theoretical insights help us make sense of how the community of practice sustained by this CGI is transformed into a site for family practices, such as 'sisterhood', 'motherhood', 'children-hood' and 'brotherhood' (with the sons of women participants). It serves as the context for the construction of knowledge through familial terms guided the reproduction of familial practices, constituting a family-like community of practice. The family-like community of practice simultaneously served as a background against which other problem-solving

practices were understood, such as identity (trans)formation, care and service rendering, partnership making and responsibility-sharing.

Yat-Ga-Yan (the same family) was a term consistently employed by participants to make sense of the relationships with each other, in particular when conflicts were intense. This suggested that the preservation of togetherness, occasionally at the cost of individuality (by ignoring differences and withdrawing personal opinions), was shared among the different family practices. The intersecting practices of 'Yat-Ga-Yan' and equal participation turned out to yield democratized filial relationships, creating a platform for re-examining the unhelpful power imbalances embedded in mother-son/daughter and adult-child divides, and hence moving towards developing mutual care.

Partnership-Making with Teenage Participants

All the mother participants were experiencing different degrees of tension in their filial relationships during their post-separation lives. Trust, support and understanding embedded in the 'Yat-Ga-Yan' practices enabled the group's collective effort in learning how to make partnerships with teenage participants, as a means for women to reconcile with their loved 'children'. Partnership-making started when Yuen, a 12-year old teenage participant, first challenged the taken-for-grantedness of adults' knowledge as fuller, better, and more privileged than 'children's' with his mind-map about the impact of intimate partner violence on children (fig. 1).

Fig. 1 Mind-map prepared by Yuen

As the mind-map revealed the unnoticed problems and needs of young members who had witnessed intimate partner violence, women participants began to realize the value and validity of the knowledge held by their sons and daughters. After reading Yuen's mind-map, participants said the following:

'Don't think they are little, they know a lot.' Said YT.

'They know better than us how to use mind-map. We don't know what it is but it is just something they are very used to in school. They can do better than us.' Said NF.

Having learned about the previously undermined ability of teenage participants, women participants became more willing and motivated to give more value to the views of whom they had previously called 'children'.

Unpacking and revisiting the family life experiences

'Invitations to partnership' from teenage participants were frequently demonized in authoritarian family practices. Digging out 'invitations to partnership' and identifying partnership making and breaking strategies in daily care practices enabled women participants to reframe their children's 'disturbing' and 'mischievous' behavior as calls for autonomy. Through examining the mother-son/daughter stories and their failures in partnership-making with teenage participants, we realized that the lack of intimacy was a major factor in the failures.

'There were a lot of changes in life not just for me but for him as well in leaving the abusive relationship... he used to be very close to me when he was little. He was so lovely and adorable. I ran a beauty salon in mainland China before I came to Hong Kong. GW (son of PF) loved playing around in the salon after school and we always had lunch and dinner together... but now, I don't even know if he has been back home or not. We rarely dine together. He didn't enjoy having meals with me probably, I don't know. He sometimes came back with some girls and I just didn't like him doing this. That's my place. He shouldn't have treated it like a hotel.' PF kept complaining about the problems of her son. (8th session)

The breakdown of intimacy was experienced not just in PF's relationship with her son, but was shared across many women participants' mothering experiences. By articulating further the disrupted mother-son/daughter lives, we discovered that many of the mother participants had the experience of projecting their anger and bad moods onto their children.

Reflecting on 'critical parenting incidents' led to our discovery that sons/daughters were usually the last resort for emotional support and ventilation in the post-separation context. Women realized that the years of social isolation which accompanied intimate partner violence had deprived them of reliable relationships for emotional support. Sources of stress that abused women encountered in the process of separation included financial hardship in 'home building', divorce, custody and parental visitation, and maintenance arrangement procedures. Women claimed that these post-separation difficulties usually drove them to the verge of 'mental breakdown'. In highly stressful situations, women participants found themselves often speaking aggressively to their sons and daughters.

The disruptive post-separation life can sometimes trigger mother participants' hostility towards sons/daughters when they fail to meet their expectations. Examples of this kind could be identified in many family life practices, and one of the most often cited experience was 'waking "the children" up for school'.

'...when I am tender to her, she is tender to me. I normally call her "babe"...and if I asked her to wake up by saying something like, "babe, wake up!", she would softly respond with a "yes" ...she might also say "Good morning, mama"...(however) if I happened to be unhappy at the moment, I would have said "SY, you have to wake up now!" and she would curl around the blanket and refuse to wake up... Sometimes, she would ask angrily "why did you call me like that?"... If I had added her surname in front of her name (calling the full name is a way to distance oneself in a relationship), she would be even angrier!' said YT and many participants immediately added in their examples. (7th session)

These snapshots sensitized the inquiry group to the role of name calling for intimacy building between the women participants and their sons and daughters. By analyzing the examples of 'waking up the children for school', we found that name calling which highlighted filial intimacy could result in more 'cooperative' relationships and reactions. In contrast, name calling that implied alienation and strangeness could lead to what women participants would call 'uncooperative' behaviors. Identifying partnership-making and breaking strategies (Fig. 2) enabled the women to initiate further negotiations for collaboration in daily care.

Fig.2 Diagram on Partnership-Making/Breaking Strategies with Teenage Participants

From 'Mothering' to 'Mutual Care Practices'

By continuously promoting partnership-making strategies, three forms of collaboration were successfully negotiated in the group. These were 'opinion giving', 'partaking', and 'collaborating' (Table 2). While, maintaining openness in negotiating the form of collaboration could increase its adaptability to the changing relationships and life situations encountered by participants. For example, when the trust between Yuen and women participants was not yet built, opinion giving created the opportunity for him to contribute his ideas while observing how the women participants respond to his views. Otherwise, rigid

adherence to a form of collaboration could break the partnership and discourage participation of the teenage participants, who would either refrain from volunteering their thoughts or terminate their participation completely.

Through 'partnership-making' and negotiating the forms of 'collaboration', many problems which were initially considered problems of women participants were seen through a new lens and transformed into 'our' problems. Working with teenage sons and daughters of formerly abused women in problem solving shed light on alternative solutions for post-separation care and protection. It further led the women participants to view their sons/daughters not as the source of problems but as a support which brought mutual benefit. The redistribution of responsibility for problem solving and the emergence of new solutions could not have been possible without involving teenage participants' and their ways of doing things.

Table 2. Different Forms of Collaboration Negotiated with Teenage Participants

'Opinion Giving'

The first successfully negotiated partnership came when Yuen presented his mind-map to us (women participants) and invited us to listen to his views on the needs of 'children' of formerly abused women (Fig.1). Continuous partnership-making and attentive positive responses that followed encouraged him to take up the 'advisor' role in learning about the service needs of separated abused women and their children. The mind-map was repeatedly employed, with the permission of Yuen, by women participants on various occasions, such as during a government public consultation on domestic violence services in Hong Kong and in composing the statement for advocating the United Nation Convention for Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and children's participation in Hong Kong.

'I am here to advise you on how to write it. Of course, sometimes, I will tell you what the better terminologies are.' said Yuen (dated 17 March 2013)

During this process, we realized that teenage participants in our inquiry group were keen on using compact expressions and even metaphors for expressing their views. Women participants had to continually consult our 'advisors' for unpacking the meanings of their ideas. In this 'opinion giving' partnership, we also observed how Yuen and Dai became increasingly trustful of our commitment to sustain the partnership on equal terms. In this form of collaboration, teenage participants usually did not participate in actions for making

change, but advising women on the action plans, so that 'children's voices' can be represented in the solutions/actions born out of this mother-son/daughter collaboration. For example, the focus of inquiry was transformed from (1) working with formerly abused women to working with both women and their sons/daughters, and; (2) from meeting the service needs of separated abused women to meeting the service needs of both women and their sons/daughters. The partnership built during the inquiry process brought to the surface the power imbalances embedded in the adult-child division.

'Partaking in Actions'

'Partaking in actions' is a form of collaboration that entails a share of responsibility for taking action to change the problem. Whereas 'opinion giving' presumes no role for teenage participants in making changes to the situation. 'Partaking in actions' engaged teenage participants not only in speech acts (presentational and propositional knowing) but also in other forms of knowing in the cooperative problem-solving process, such as practical and experiential knowing. For example, teenage participants participated in game preparation and delivery in the group meetings, taking care of young children during outdoor activities, and doing online research for improving our team dance performance.

During the Mother's Day Event, Siu and Dai stayed behind to contribute to whatever they could see a role for themselves, including packing gifts and preparing flowers. Siu and Dai also offered companionship and cared for the younger children, who were sometimes prone to misbehavior, such as pouring water on others, covering the floor in glitter powder and damaging the cards made by other children. In reflecting on Siu and Dai's sacrificing their playing time, both mother and teenage participants perceived these as being very different from their 'normal practices'. Siu who was described by YT as angry and bad tempered was extraordinarily gentle and patient to young children. When she returned from a long wait for the mother who did not want to play with her son, she said,

'I just didn't want him to stand there alone waiting. So, I stood with him, waiting.'

This demonstrated to women participants that teenage participants were sensitive to the needs of other children and knew what to do to support them. Siu who had been hesitant to join our group eagerly told people that by the end of the event that she had become a member of our inquiry group. Dai, who always kept an eye on the safety of children during

the 'card making' session, decided to stay although he revealed that 'the computer game was so tempting'. The altering of 'normal practices' by teenage participants was unanimously agreed to be the teenagers' valuable effort in making a difference in the life of other abused women and their children—'action for providing care and services to formerly abused women' not just our (women participants/mothers) concerns, but also theirs.

'Collaborating'

Collaborating is a state where teenage participants are willing to undergo the whole process of inquiry with women participants, beginning from identification of problem to the reflection-action-reflection cycles that followed. Teenage participants in a collaborative partnership not only execute the action plans devised by women participants, but also share decision making power, including taking on the responsibility of designing, implementing, and improving the outcomes of the solutions as co-constructed in the previous inquiry meetings. In this inquiry, 'mothering' was the only issue addressed in a 'collaborative partnership' with teenage participants.

Sharing the transition stories of Yuen on 21 April 2013 led to a breakthrough in the women-teenagers partnership in the inquiry group as it expanded the scope of collaboration to involve teenage participants from problem identification to solution design and implementation.

'I can never understand why you divorced my dad? If you didn't divorce him, I would have been doing very well in the same school, living nicely in the same big house and could play guitar with him. Why? Why did you just go away with uncle D?' Yuen stared at YY and questioned. Surprisingly, YY was very composed and calm. She replied, *'Son, do you know, when I left your dad, he had already sold everything he had on gambling. I had been working to support the whole family including your paternal grandmother for a very long time. I had at that time been sacked from the industry and I could no longer bear all the debts. The big house you fancy was not there! It was not there already! At that moment, I met uncle D who promised to take care of both of us. I just thought, I was a divorced women with a son...he did not mind about all these...'* Yuen was very shocked. I could tell from his face. He was gobsmacked and immediately grabbed a smartphone for

GAMES. I finally understood why he loved computer games so much because this was where he could escape from all the life disturbances and chaos. A couple of us asked Yuen nicely to put down his phone and talk to us. We still had to look for practical solutions. (Field notes, dated 21 April 2013)

Since that time, Yuen decided he would try harder to achieve better academically because he believed his frustration was the main source of his academic underachievement, rather than his inabilities. In order to reach his academic goals, Yuen invited us to watch him and to remind him if he got too stuck into his computer games again. He agreed to add a password lock to the computer, but felt this was not enough because he was 'weak in self-control' and 'need(ed) someone to monitor' him. In the end, he promised to work with us to make his study plans work. Sometimes, Yuen would report back to us on how the agreed measures were going in practice and we would evaluate them in the group meetings.

Yuen then took charge of reviewing what we had learnt when the inquiry was approaching the end. He facilitated our discussion on different strategies in relating to and supporting sons and daughters after leaving abusive partners.

Fig. 3 Pictures of Yuen Collaborating with YY to Review Women's Parenting Strategies

As we fully acknowledged teenage participants' capacities for reasoning, making good choices, and taking action to solve problems, women participants were also more aware of how to sustain partnership in daily interactions. The sustained partnership encouraged Yuen to be a regular partner whenever we had 'parent-son/daughter relationship issues' on the group meeting agenda.

On the grounds of this regular partnership, women were more willing to negotiate their mothering goals with their sons and daughters and to define problems together. More importantly, women and their sons and daughters could work together to design and implement strategies or measures to realize their goals. Through collaborating with teenage participants, we had transformed 'mothering' into 'mutual care practices' that ensured care was rendered to both the mother and the child through their collaboration.

A Preferential Typology of Mother-Son/Daughter Care Practices

With the particular contributions from HL, who had very different mother-daughter practices,

and Yuen, who had lived experiences to evaluate the value of different alternative practices, we finally conceptualized four types of 'mother-son/daughter care practices', namely 'single-log bridge', 'liquid iron', 'collagen', and 'concrete' (Fig. 4).

**Fig. 4 A Preferential Typology of Parent- Son/Daughter Care Practices
(constructed with women and teenage participants)**

Yuen described how mothers' predetermining of the care goals is like forcing their sons/daughters to walk on a single-log bridge across a river, which leads to only one destination. 'Single-log bridge mother-son/daughter care practices' usually included tough strategies, such as 'scolding', 'punishment' and 'use of mother authority'. The mothers' obsession with their dreams and their own 'mothering agenda' was identified as a major contributor to 'single-log bridge' practices.

Successful experiences suggested the presence of a high degree of flexibility in mothers' relating to their sons/daughters and in negotiating the goals and objectives of a family life practice. Choices (and also the choice to say no) were always available in this kind of practice, and soft strategies, such as 'opinion giving', 'suggesting' and 'inviting', were more likely employed. Yuen named this kind of mother-son/daughter care practices as 'collagen' because of its supportive attitude and the employment of largely soft and flexible strategies. HL's mother-daughter care practices were rated by Yuen as his most preferable form of practices. By comparing his experiences with the available concepts, Yuen evaluated his 'mother-son care practices' with YY and conceptualized it as 'liquid iron'. In that the mothering strategies looked soft but were still quite tough in practice. When YY asked Yuen which type of mother-son/daughter care practices he preferred the most, Yuen came up with a fourth concept, 'concrete'.

The term 'concrete' is composed by the words 'water' and 'mud' in Cantonese. These two components represented the two distinctive characteristics of 'concrete' mother-son/daughter practices. 'Water' symbolized the ability to 'mix', 'mingle', and 'merge' with sons/daughters, while 'mud' represented the substances mothers could offer to build up their sons/daughters according to the strengths and dreams they have, and bring their ability to another level. This form of practice was distinguished from 'collagen' because of its 'son/daughter-centred' orientation. Although this concept was not generated from lived experiences of any participant in the group, it was still highly valued because it provided an

anchorage for understanding teenage participants' preference in collaborating with their mothers. This was seriously considered as an option for mothers who were still struggling to find their sons/daughters' preference (i.e. KW, PF and YT).

A New Focus of Domestic Violence Services: Mutuality and Partnership

Shifting the focus to mutuality and partnership building between abused mothers and their children is a constructive response to the problem of polarization and extreme individualization in domestic violence service provision. This new focus allows us to see, in this inquiry, much of rejection/uncooperative behavior of teenage participants as 'invitations for partnership'. Responding properly to children's invitations for partnerships can not only free up children's caregiving potentials, but also improve the quality of mother-son/daughter relationships (Katz, 2015; Buchanan, Wendt & Moulding, 2014). Rather than blaming abused women for children's undesirable outcomes that stem from their witnessing of violence (Krane & Davies, 2007), we bring the developmental needs of women and children to the foreground through partnership building at the post-separation stage. Improved filial relationship provides the context for effective mothering which is positively associated with children's development of self-regulatory abilities and emotional and behavioral adaptation after witnessing intimate partner violence (Martinez-Torteya et al., 2009).

This inquiry casts light on the value of carrying out care beyond the mother-son/daughter relationship. It juxtaposes the globally developing trend of promoting children's agency through nurturing caring relationships around them, so that they could model safety and support their abused mothers in the post-separation context (Morris, Humphreys & Hegarty, 2015; Katz, 2015). The supportive and family-like community of practice (CofP), consisting of other teenage children of abused women, other women survivors and a social work practitioner-researcher, rendered the frustrated mother-son/daughter relationships a chance to be unpacked and responded with attention and care. The unmet physical, emotional, and social needs of both women and teenage participants in the post-separation stage were then handled with the different expertise, abilities and experiences of participants from diverse backgrounds. This approach takes the caring responsibility beyond the mother-son/daughter dyad, and facilitates both mothers and children's post-

separation recovery through practices of doing family, such as sisterhood/brotherhood constructed with other survivors, friends and neighbours. Ensuring abused mothers' recovery also increases their capacities to take care of their children's psychosocial needs and recovery (Goldblatt et al., 2014), leading to a positive recovery cycle of both.

Nonetheless, in this CGI, the intersecting familial and partnership-making practices democratized the authoritarian and hierarchical mothering practices performed by most of the women participants. Practising partnership making revealed the problematic nature of the 'mothering discourse' which emphasizes controlling, monitoring and managing problematic children. This 'single-log bridge mothering' was criticized by teenage participants to be the main source of mother-son/daughter relationship problems. Not only does it undermine positive filial relationships, but also constrains 'children's' developing sense of self and autonomy particularly in their teenage years. Hence, capturing the possibilities in making partnerships with teenage children helps challenge the hierarchical familial structure prevailing in Chinese family practices (Holroyd, 2003), and enables mutual care between abused mothers and their teenage children.

This study further suggest domestic violence services to be rendered beyond the social worker-abused women-children triad to engage other women survivors and their teenage children in a CofP that is dedicated to solving similar problems together, for protecting both mothers and children. This practice avoids polarizing of the interests of women and children, and actively engages them in taking up responsibilities to care for each other and solve problems together. This approach integrates with the developing domestic violence literature on post-separation recovery which perceives children as active social agents who act, react, and associate with their mothers and care practitioners, in promoting one another's wellbeing. This study agrees with the proposition that mothering stories would grow fuller if we could explore how children impact upon mothers, rather than focusing narrowly on how mothering/mothers impact on children (Featherstone, 1999).

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