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Schools, separating parents and family violence: A case study of the coercion of organisational networks

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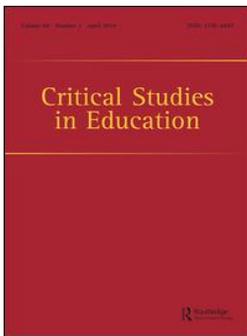# Schools, separating parents and family violence: a case study of the coercion of organisational networks

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Schools, separating parents and family violence: a case study of the coercion of organisational networks

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers how complex family circumstances such as parental separation, custody disputes and family violence intersect with the organisational cultures and everyday practices of schools. In particular, we are concerned with the ways that coercive control – a strategy used predominantly by men to dominate, control and oppress women in the context of intimate partner relationships – can be deployed to manipulate and coerce the organisational networks of schools into furthering abusive agendas. Informed by cultural theory and research from sociology of education, legal studies, criminology and family violence, we show how what we term the 'coercion of organisational networks' (CON) both relies upon and exploits systemic misogyny and gendered unequal relations of power. These issues underpin institutional strategies often used by schools to keep parents – and mothers, in particular – at a distance. When affected by separation, divorce and family violence, being positioned in problematic terms can create additional risks for women and children. We argue that without adequate understandings of coercive control as practices within a broader constellation of systemic misogyny and gender inequalities, and in the absence of organisational cultures committed to addressing these, schools are considered complicit in perpetuating family violence and its effects.

Parental separation and family violence: key considerations for schools

When parents of school-aged children separate or divorce, schools are often confronted with complex challenges for which they may be insufficiently prepared (Cooper et al., 2012; Eriksson et al., 2013a, 2013b; Sterne & Poole, 2010). This can particularly be the case in situations when custody disputes and/or family violence[1] is a factor, and to date only limited research considers how these issues cross over into the domain of schooling (Cooper et al., 2012; Daly, 2009; Davies & Berger, 2019; Eriksson et al., 2013a, 2013b; Sterne & Poole, 2010). In this paper, we offer an interdisciplinary case study analysis from ongoing research conducted in Australia, and now extended internationally, to consider

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how abusive practices in family life can be deployed to manipulate and coerce the organisational networks of schools.

We focus specifically on coercive control, described as a form of interpersonal abuse and micro-regulation used predominantly by men to entrap women in everyday life (Downes et al., 2019; Stark, 2007, 2009a). While such forms of violence are the subject of a substantial body of psychological research, recent sociological studies highlight the gendered nature of practices such as the domination of women's lives through coercive control (Anderson, 2009; Saltmarsh et al., 2020, 2021; Walby & Towers, 2018; Walby et al., 2014), and attempts to undermine women's confidence in their own sanity through practices known as 'gaslighting' (Sweet, 2019). These studies locate such practices within a broader constellation of cultural politics, systemic misogyny and gender inequalities. Here we draw on that literature, in dialogue with scholarship from feminist legal studies, criminology and family violence, to show how what we term the 'coercion of organisational networks' (CON) can be operationalised by abusive men in schooling contexts. We argue that the organisational networks of schools can be subject to manipulation and coercion by abusers, resulting, in some cases, in schools facilitating abusive agendas. Hence, schools, like police, social services, courts, and other institutions, can become complicit in perpetuating family violence and its effects.

We situate the paper in the context of two key domains, the first of which is post-separation family transitions and family violence. The OECD estimates that approximately 56.2% of divorces involve children under the age of 18 (OECD, 2015). However, other types of parental relationship dissolution are not included; hence, the number of children affected is far higher than official figures suggest (Mahony et al., 2015). While not all families who separate are affected by violence, the scale of the issue suggests nonetheless that school awareness is crucial. While no conclusive data pertaining to numbers of children affected by family violence are available, estimates range between 133 and 275 million children worldwide annually (Pinheiro, 2006), with numbers generally considered to be much higher (UNICEF, 2006; WHO, 2021).

Family violence is a particular concern where separating parents have custody matters before the courts. Legal studies research from the United States, for example, highlights disproportionate levels of domestic violence among divorcing couples seeking court-ordered custody orders (Greenberg, 2005; Jaffe et al., 2003). Levels of domestic violence among these couples are more than thirty-six times that of divorcing couples generally, and 'approximately seventy five percent of the contested custody cases that require judicial intervention are cases in which there is a history of domestic violence' (Greenberg, 2005, p. 411).

Further, the most dangerous time for women and children fleeing family violence is immediately prior to or following separation (Greenberg, 2005; Morgan & Chadwick, 2009). This includes danger of physical violence, ongoing coercive control directed at children, who may themselves be subject to micro-regulation, social isolation, undermining of relationships with the other parent and family members, and/or being manipulated by the offending parent (Humphreys et al., 2019; Katz et al., 2020). The period following parental separation is also a period of greater risk for parental abductions of children. As La Kam notes, 'The most vulnerable time for these abductions to occur is at the onset of a dissolution of a marriage or separation, either before or following a custody order rendered by the courts' (La Kam, 2016, p. 99). Similarly,

many paternal filicide cases motivated by revenge-retaliation directed at former partners, occur just prior to or immediately after separation, often in connection with custody disputes (Declercq et al., 2016; O'Hagan, 2014). Schools may be unaware of these risks, just as they may be unaware of the circumstances of students living with family violence (Davies & Berger, 2019).

The second domain pertains to how schools respond to challenges posed by post-separation transitions where family violence is a concern. This may be complicated by parents' and children's reluctance to disclose family violence (Stanley et al., 2012), and by social and cultural views that these are private family matters beyond the school's remit (Colpin et al., 2004; Cox & Desforges, 2018). For separated parents, assumptions of idealised, heteronormative two-parent families may negatively impact on home-school communication and parent-school engagement (Cox & Desforges, 2018; Kainz & Aikens, 2007; Pushor & Amendt, 2018; Saltmarsh et al., 2020, 2021; Vincent, 2017). Similarly, broader normative views about what counts as 'good mothering' also shape deficit views of mothers seen as inadequate or failing in their parenting responsibilities (Peters, 2012; Saltmarsh et al., 2020, 2021; Vincent, 2017), negative views of mothers leaving intimate partner relationships (see Garrett, 2016), or reluctance to take women's concerns about family violence seriously (Anderson, 2009; Epstein & Goodman, 2019; Saltmarsh et al., 2020, 2021).

Schools may be reluctant to address issues arising from jurisdictional, legal and procedural matters considered outside their expertise (Colpin et al., 2004; Cooper et al., 2012; Eriksson et al., 2013a, 2013b; Katz, 2016), including custody disputes, access and care arrangements (Colpin et al., 2004; Cooper et al., 2012; Cox & Desforges, 2018; Mahony et al., 2015; Øverland, et al., 2012; Sterne & Poole, 2010; Storksen, et al., 2012), or safety concerns associated with family violence (Daly, 2009; Eriksson et al., 2013a, 2013b; Markström & Münger, 2018; Münger & Markström, 2018, 2019; Saltmarsh et al., 2020, 2021; Sterne & Poole, 2010). Teachers and school staff also need adequate training in recognising and managing the needs of children experiencing family violence (DeKeseredy et al., 2017; Katz et al., 2020; Miller & Smolter, 2011; Monk, 2017; Schandorph Løkkegaard & Elklit, 2017), and more detailed knowledge about and confidence in relation to relevant school policies, processes and management (Davies & Berger, 2019; Sterne & Poole, 2010).

We concur that greater school-based awareness and knowledge are important. However, if schools are to be part of the solution, attention must also be directed towards understanding and addressing why and how coercive tactics might gain a foothold in their organisational networks. In the following sections, we offer an interdisciplinary discussion of coercive control, and a conceptual framework, informed by Michel De Certeau (1984) for understanding the permeability and co-implication of individual tactics and institutional strategies. Through a case study analysis involving one family's experience of post-separation coercive control, we show how schools can be drawn into abusive agendas and become complicit in perpetuating family violence.

Coercive control, schools and the coercion of organisational networks

Feminist legal and family studies, criminology and family violence research have much to offer the field of education in terms of understanding the complexities and potential risks

posed by more challenging post-separation family transitions (DeKeseredy et al., 2017; Demir-Dagdas et al., 2018; La Kam, 2016; Stark, 2007, 2009a). These fields provide valuable insights into the ways that children's lives and schooling contexts can be impacted by family violence, including violence that does not necessarily inflict physical injury (Appleton & Sidebotham, 2017; Callaghan et al., 2018; Katz et al., 2020; Münger & Markström, 2019; Schandorph Løkkegaard et al., 2019). Coercive control is a particularly pervasive form of family violence (Anderson, 2009; Stark, 2007, 2009a), definitions of which vary and are the subject of ongoing debates (see Walby & Towers, 2018). Here we work with Stark's (Stark, 2007, 2009a; 2009b) use of the term to describe practices of domination and control that are grounded in gender politics:

> . . . because coercive control takes the enforcement of gender stereotypes as its specific aim, the degradation of femininity as a major means, and reinforces sexual inequality in society as a whole in ways that constrain women's opportunities to "do" femininity, it is about the construction and deconstruction of gender identity in ways that other forms of violence against women are not. (Stark., 2009b, p. 1511).

Stark locates schools, along with churches and workplaces, within 'the broad continuum of institutional sites where coercive control is constructed' (Stark., 2009b, p. 1515).

For Stark, coercive control is a form of 'calculated, malevolent conduct deployed almost exclusively by men[2] to dominate individual women' that is particularly harmful, involving what he aptly describes as 'women's entrapment by men in personal life' (Stark, 2007, p. 6). Coercive control can involve a range of strategies, including depriving women of food, money and resources, using threats, surveillance, stalking, intimidation, humiliation, financial exploitation, isolation from family, friends and community, and micro-regulation of women's clothing, communication, childrearing and everyday activities. While such strategies are damaging in many ways, for Stark:

> . . . the primary harm abusive men inflict is political, not physical, and reflects the deprivation of rights and resources that are critical to personhood and citizenship . . . its key dynamic involves an objective state of subordination and the resistance women mount to free themselves from domination (Stark, 2007, p. 5).

Women seeking to leave these relationships risk resistance from their abusers, and also from other individuals and institutions shaped by social and cultural norms of gender inequality (DeKeseredy et al., 2017; Monk, 2017), underscoring observations that 'Abuse and violence are profoundly gendered, with structural gender inequality deeply affecting efforts to intervene in and prevent violence' (DeKeseredy et al., 2017, p. 140). Men who use coercive control rely on these gendered norms and structural inequalities to maintain control over women, sometimes even after relationships have ended. In other words, ' . . . coercive control is personalized, extends through social space as well as over time, and is gendered in that it relies for its impact on women's vulnerability *as women* due to sexual inequality' (Stark, 2007, p. 5).

Systemic misogyny and gender inequalities enable further abusive strategies such as 'custody stalking', 'paper abuse' and 'procedural stalking' (DeKeseredy et al., 2017; Elizabeth, 2017; Miller & Smolter, 2011; Schandorph Løkkegaard & Elklit, 2017) after relationships have ended. Sometimes this involves former partners undermining women's credibility by making false claims that initiate or manipulate police investigations, child protection involvement and/or custody proceedings. At other times, it

involves threats of or initiating legal action, using courts, police, schools and other systems to deplete women's financial and emotional resources. Some men also target professionals in schools to create favourable impressions of themselves at mothers' expense, with the ' . . . apparent aim in performing 'admirable' fathering to community/professional audiences . . . to emphasise their role as 'caring', 'concerned', 'indulgent' and/or 'vulnerable-victim' fathers, making ex-partners seem like perpetrators or deficient mothers' (Katz et al., 2020, n.p.).

Schools are critical, given the intersection of their professional and community networks and information flows within and between them. We suggest the term 'coercion of organisational networks' (CON) in reference to abusive fathers' attempts to influence these interconnected school stakeholders, using them to create pervasive, negative views of their former partners, and advancing their interests by taking control of the narrative. Unlike procedural and paper abuse or custody stalking that typically takes place via the court system – where women are more likely to encounter social workers, mental health practitioners or legal professionals intermittently, and in contexts that are largely separate from their everyday communities – the CON within school settings mobilises interconnected individuals with whom mothers and children must continue to interact in multiple, regular and ongoing ways.

Targeting schools with accusations of maternal abuse, neglect or incompetence attempts to conscript school staff into facilitating the abusive agenda, particularly in jurisdictions where schools are bound by mandatory reporting legislation, and where parents are legally entitled to access records and reports prepared by school counsellors, nurses and others that pertain to their child. CON may also involve manipulating children, influencing their understanding of events through mother-blaming, undermining mother–child relationships (Katz, 2016), or actively coaching them to make false allegations against the non-abusive parent. This can also negatively influence the attitudes and perceptions held by teachers, principals, counsellors, school support staff, and other parents (Katz et al., 2020). This has been shown to prevent some women from custody and care time with their children. For example, mothers in a recent UK study (Monk, 2017; Monk & Bowen, 2021) attributed the lack of support they experienced across a range of professional settings to:

> . . . professionals' ignorance of perpetrators'/fathers' strategies to sabotage their relationships with their children, disbelief in this phenomenon, and a tendency to believe their abusers instead. The women described how professionals' belief in their abusers' narratives led to the women being blamed for a host of allegations made by the perpetrator/fathers, who also manipulated children into making false accusations against their mothers, which included charges of child sexual abuse (Monk, 2017, pp. 285-286).

In schools, the success of these strategies relies on and deploys entrenched mother-blaming discourses (see Peters, 2012; Saltmarsh et al., 2020, 2021; Vincent, 2017; Vincent et al., 2010) that work to the disadvantage of women falsely accused.

While this raises important questions about professional knowledge and awareness, it suggests too that the gender politics of school cultures merit closer attention. Awareness of and strategies for assessing risks associated with CON, together with addressing misogyny and gender bias, are necessary to prevent schools being conscripted or coerced into facilitating these abusive tactics. It is worth noting, too, that for many parents,

schools 'are a common meeting place, a source for community knowledge, and a point of departure for the development of parental friendship networks, and reciprocity in child care and support' (Witten et al., 2007, p. 141). The impact of sabotaging women's reputations and relationships within these important sites in the everyday lives of women and children who have typically already been subjected to forced isolation from familial and social relationships, therefore, should not be underestimated. Monk's research also underscores how coercive skills can be used to exploit a range of systemic, organisational, social and cultural norms and practices, manipulating individuals and institutions into supporting their agendas:

> The reported tendency of some professionals to believe perpetrators/fathers over mothers suggests that coercive controllers are able to exploit/manipulate systems/workers and capitalise on mother-blaming structures/practices. This would make workers complicit in perpetuating abusive men's narratives and assisting them in strategies to intentionally divide women and children rather than addressing the problem. Collusion with perpetrators/ fathers was reported by participants, who also described threat-induced complicity, professional apathy, and unwitting involvement in abuser's strategies (Monk, 2017, p. 287).

These forms of CON, and the range of responses to them, merit careful consideration in the context of schools. As the social institution that often has the greatest contact with children over time, schools can make a significant difference to children affected by family violence (Sterne & Poole, 2010). However, this requires staff to have 'an adequate level of knowledge about all forms of child abuse, especially about domestic violence and how to identify it' (Münger & Markström, 2019, p. 387). To this we would add the need to address gender bias against mothers within organisational cultures, and to explicitly account for coercive control and school-based CON in policy and procedures.

Toward a conceptual framework of permeability: Contexts, strategies and tactics

Our analysis is grounded in theoretical insights that understand policies, procedures and everyday practices of schools as implicated in the production of school, professional and parenting cultures (Saltmarsh, 2015a, 2015b; Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2019; Saltmarsh et al., 2019; Saltmarsh et al., 2020, 2021). The work of Michel De Certeau (1984) shapes our thinking about parent–school interactions, interpreted in terms of institutional *strategies* used by schools to keep stakeholders at a distance from the operations of power, and *tactics* used by parents in their efforts to effect change. For De Certeau, 'a tactic is determined by the *absence of power*, just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 38, original emphasis).

These ideas are useful for exploring how policies and practices produce cultures predicated on unequal power relations between parents and schools (Saltmarsh, 2015a, 2015b; Saltmarsh et al., 2020, 2021). However, strategies and tactics are neither fixed nor impermeable, and the persistence and effectiveness of each relies upon the interplay of the interpersonal, cultural and systemic *across* as well as *within* contexts. In the context of intimate partner relationships, coercive control operates not just as a means of abusing, undermining and dominating an intimate partner, but also as an interpersonal strategy for reinscribing male entitlement and power over women. It does so by disenfranchising

women in the domain of private life. This takes place against the backdrop of broader hierarchical patriarchal structures and beliefs that idealise heteronormative relationships and the 'nuclear family' as a social institution that is at once public and private.

These strategies, though, can be deployed as tactics when men seek the assistance and validation of institutions such as schools, police, social services and courts, where their success at domination and control on an individual level is less assured. Lacking a 'proper place' within these institutions, and potentially subjected to scrutiny, resistance or unfavourable judgement, their interpersonal strategies comprised of coercive techniques are transposed into a set of tactics for infiltrating, manipulating and co-opting institutional networks and cultural practices to their own ends. A strategy thus reconfigured becomes 'A tactic [that] insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily', and once insinuated 'must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities"' (De Certeau, 1984, p. *xix*).

These individual strategies for manipulating women reformulated as tactics for manipulating institutions can take multiple forms, including making false allegations, denigrating and/or gaslighting that undermines women's credibility and mothering; misleading, garnering sympathy from, and/or bullying and intimidating professionals; or exploiting policies, processes and procedures in ways that favour or advance their agendas (Campbell, 2017; DeKeseredy et al., 2017; Eriksson et al., 2013a; Monk, 2017; Monk & Bowen, 2021; Sweet, 2019). Such tactics become the ground upon which the CON creates opportunities for abusive men to continue controlling family narratives and women's lives via the very institutions in which they themselves have no 'proper place' from which to operate.

The success of their efforts relies on the permeability of both strategies and tactics to broader cultural norms, assumptions, beliefs and practices, and the extent to which these in turn permeate institutional, systemic and relational operations of power. Schools may already be well versed in gendered deficit discourses of parents (Goodall, 2021; Saltmarsh & McPherson, 2019; Saltmarsh et al., 2020, 2021), hence receptive to abusive tactics 'actively employing mother-blaming by exploiting other mother-blaming institutions and practices' (Monk & Bowen, 2021, p. 23). Under such conditions, the boundaries between the abusive tactics of individual men and already established patriarchal and misogynist strategies of institutions are particularly porous.

This permeability also relies on cultural norms that render mothers especially vulnerable in terms of how they are perceived and treated by child protection, police, family courts and other social systems when navigating paths away from family violence. Where schools may lack professional knowledge and institutional will to resist the disadvantageous positioning of women in these ways, they create opportunities for abusive *tactics* to be taken up and operationalised within their institutional *strategies*, cultures and organisational networks. For CON to be operationalised, a coercive agenda need only be given credence by a small number of influential school staff. The tactic no longer needs to be continually employed by the abusive individual in his dealings with the school, precisely because it becomes embedded within the strategies of the organisational network. Once the *tactic* is effectively transformed into an institutional *strategy*, it can operate independently of the abuser.

Coercion of organisational networks: A case study analysis

In researching parents' experiences of engaging with schools following separation or divorce,[3] we are conducting anonymous, in-depth, qualitative telephone interviews with parents recruited through parent organisations. Interviews are audio-recorded and transcribed, and participants with ongoing safety concerns reviewed manuscripts prior to publication. The study has since been extended to interviewing school staff, and is also being extended internationally. Data discussed here come from one of four initial interviews, with two fathers and two mothers, conducted just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. While each family's circumstances are unique, their stories are nonetheless situated within everyday discursive norms and cultural practices encountered by many. We chose to analyse this story as an individual case in order to show how its complexities and specificities are located within, highlight and are impacted upon by broader constellations of cultural and educational practices (see, for example, Youdell, 2006).

We interviewed Bernadette,[4] who had left a long-term relationship with her three children's violent father the previous year. She had moved to a nearby regional city and enrolled her daughters in new schools – the two youngest in primary school, and the eldest, Kate, in secondary school. Shortly thereafter, she learned that the children's father had been coaching them and making secret arrangements with counsellors at their new schools, attempting to formally document false allegations of abuse against Bernadette. Around this time, court issued Protection Orders[5] prohibited him from approaching Bernadette, the children, the schools and the family home for a period of five years. Both schools were notified and provided copies of the relevant documentation.

The following week, the father arrived unannounced after school and took the children from the playground. For schools, such situations can be highly complex. Policies and procedures about matters such as releasing children into the care of a parent can be particularly difficult 'because often times the chain of custody for the child can be uncertain, especially during the onset of a custody dispute' (La Kam, 2016, p. 118). In this case, the father was not prevented from leaving school grounds with the children. Following a visit from police, he agreed to return them to Bernadette's care several days later, but returned only the younger two, withholding Kate and subsequently notifying her school that she now lived with him. This prompted Kate's school to abruptly discontinue communication with Bernadette:

> My daughter was abducted by her father in direct contravention of our parenting agreement and the Protection Order that named my daughter as a protected person from her father. The minute, he notified the school that she was in his care they were very clear that they were only dealing with him in relation to our daughter and if I wanted that to be altered it was my responsibility to go through the court process and provide them with the outcome of that before they would make any changes to their communication with my daughter's primary caregivers.

Bernadette initiated custody proceedings and waited two months for the court hearing. Meanwhile, Kate's father prevented her from seeing or having any meaningful contact with her mother and sisters. During this time, the school declined Bernadette's numerous requests for information about Kate's progress and wellbeing.

> When I contacted [the secondary school] to obtain information about my daughter's counselling sessions I was explicitly told by the school that they only provide that information to the primary caregiver - despite the fact that her father had her in his care without my consent and in contravention of the Protection Order.

The school refused to provide information about whether or how Kate's wellbeing was being supported. When asked whether she was continuing to receive routine information such as school newsletters and academic progress reports, Bernadette replied:

> I was not . . . All routine contact was redirected to her father's email address and it was on me to initiate contact with the school if I wanted information, which was refused.

Bernadette made repeated, unsuccessful requests for information, and asked to arrange to meet with Kate in the office or together with the school counsellor. She sought assistance from several key personnel, including:

> . . . the entire office admin team, both Year 7 welfare officers, two school counsellors, the Year 7 Deputy Principal, the whole of school Deputy Principal and the Principal of the school.

Despite previously being on very good terms with the school, Bernadette assumed, based on comments the father had made both to her and to the children, that his false allegations had instigated the school's change of attitude. Bernadette also encountered what she considered sexist attitudes from school staff who dismissed her concerns and treated her like a 'hysterical stupid housewife', a 'hysterical ranting woman' or 'some sort of dumb teenage mum'. While these experiences correspond to gendered cultures of 'mother-blame' (Peters, 2012; Vincent, 2017; Vincent et al., 2010), they are also consistent with La Kam's (2016) observation that parents who have had a child kidnapped or withheld by the other parent are likely to encounter social stigma and reluctance on the part of others to intervene. Consistent with participants in Monk's study, Bernadette encountered a combination of 'complicity, professional apathy, and unwitting involvement in abuser's strategies' (Monk, 2017, p. 287). In 'the interaction between the systemic and the interpersonal' (Stark., 2009b, p. 1514) Bernadette was confronted with obfuscatory, hostile and accusatory attitudes from school staff, despite the history of abuse proven in two courts:

> They were also extremely hostile to me following this, and MULTIPLE staff members pressured me to accept that my 12-year old could decide where she lived based on what her father had said to them, completely disregarding the history of abuse, coaching, psychological manipulation and family violence.

Such attitudes highlight the extent to which abusive tactics in the CON rely on and reflect assumptions and attitudes grounded in systemic misogyny and mother-blame within and beyond schools.

In addition, a common misconception about children abducted by a parent is that 'simply because the child is with a parent or relative, the child is safe from harm' (La Kam, 2016, p. 101). Similarly, assumptions that family violence occurs primarily between adults, contribute to a tendency to conflate parental separation with children's safety. This 'fails to take account of post separation contact arrangements for children which often include high levels of unsupervised contact and residency with fathers who use

violence' (Humphreys et al., 2019, p. 327). La Kam notes that '[p]eople predominately evaluate risks through their personal intuition of a situation' (La Kam, 2016, p. 119); hence, professional assessments of risks in such cases may fail to reflect the seriousness and potential danger of residing with an abusive parent.

Further, research on parental coercive control of children points out that prolonged exposure to coercive control has the effect of limiting children's 'space for action' – in other words, 'their freedom to say and do things and to meet their own needs without worry or fear' (Katz et al., 2020, p. 3). For twelve-year-old Kate, who had already endured a lifetime of her father's coercive control, out-of-school time was now spent solely under his unsupervised control. At school, the counsellor, office staff and male gatekeepers from the leadership team facilitated the father's efforts to keep Kate isolated from her mother and sisters. Her compliance with his demands that she express a preference to remain living with him is hardly surprising, given that pervasive constraints on 'agency and voice often contribute to a profound disempowerment, loss of self, and loss of confidence in victims/survivors' (Katz et al., 2020, p. 4).

Bernadette emphasised that the attitudinal changes she encountered involved more than one staff member, and were consistent among school employees with varying levels of responsibility. She concluded that the whole network of school personnel had been mobilised against her, even those with whom she had previously had regular and amicable interactions:

> After my daughter was abducted I spoke to one admin lady, Sarah, who had previously been extremely understanding and helpful. She suddenly was extremely cold with me. Whereas previously I received very frequent communication from Sarah and the Deputy Principal, we were on a first name basis and even were able to recognise each other's voices without identifying ourselves. Once my daughter had been abducted, I couldn't reach Sarah or the Deputy at all. Suddenly I was transferred to staff I didn't know every time I contacted. Sarah pretended she didn't even recognise me (even after one time I took my younger 2 girls to the office to collect their older sister and Sarah knew them both by name AND age, and gave them both treats for being so good in the office) – it was so clearly a set up. Suddenly I didn't know Sarah or the Deputy – I was just an estranged parent who seemingly had no right to be enquiring about the welfare of my child.

Incorporating an abuser's tactics into institutional strategies illustrates the 'calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power . . . can be isolated from an "environment"' (De Certeau, 1984, *xix*). Although the family court eventually ordered Kate's immediate return to Bernadette's care, the school's strategies regarding Bernadette remained problematic. Her endeavours to ensure that Kate would receive ongoing support from the school counsellor after these traumatic events continued to be used to further the father's agenda. Following Kate's return to her mother's care:

> I provided the school with the orders immediately after receiving them and requested counselling for her due to her condition upon return (extremely distressed and exhibiting physical indications of an eating disorder along with comments made by her that indicated self-harm at school). I needed to withdraw my consent for her to attend counselling at school shortly thereafter following a discussion with my daughter whereby the school counsellor had encouraged her to continue building a case for her to reside with her father . . . In fact, the school counsellor advised [Kate] that anything she said would be

used in a 'court file' to make sure she could live with her dad if she wanted to. I placed her in private counselling with a child psychologist following this.

The counsellor's persistence in supporting the narrative that Kate might still want to document a desire to live with her abusive father even after these experiences and court judgements speaks to the effectiveness of his manipulation of key staff. Prior meetings he had arranged with the counsellor had offered opportunities to present preferred narratives about himself as a caring and concerned father (Katz, et al., 2020; Ptacek, 2021) trying to protect his children from what he claimed was Bernadette's abuse. The CON persisted, despite Kate's deteriorating mental health, including an eating disorder and self-harm that developed during and after being withheld by her father. His coercive tactics had become so effectively incorporated into the school's institutional strategies, that his agenda was perpetuated despite its damaging consequences to Kate's mental health and wellbeing.

While the school resumed providing Bernadette with routine information, her requests for meetings and information about Kate's progress and wellbeing at school remained unacknowledged even when requested in writing.

> They sent out the routine emails that all parents get. Anything pertaining specifically to my daughter I had to request. I gave up eventually. There's only so many voice mails and messages and emails you can leave before it becomes an exercise of futility.

Bernadette concluded that the school's hostility and unresponsiveness to her was deeply entrenched, contributing to an unsafe educational environment. That being the case, she moved to another city and enrolled her children in new schools. Such was the effectiveness of the transposition of abusive tactics into organisational strategies, that Bernadette's treatment by the school effectively mirrored many of the practices that had caused her to flee a coercive controlling partner – isolation, denigration, gaslighting, undermining of her credibility and parental relationships, discounting, discrediting and silencing – with no practicable alternative other than leaving.

Conclusion: Answering back to coercion and complicity

This paper makes a case for understanding how parental separation, family violence and coercive control cross over into the work of schools, and for interrogating more closely how schools might be complicit in violence that occurs in the contexts of home and family life. In many cultures, there is hesitation on the part of parents and educators about crossing perceived boundaries between the professional role of schools and the private sphere of family life. However, we show here that these boundaries are more porous than may be assumed, owing in no small measure to gendered discursive and systemic norms that position women and mothers within profoundly unequal relations of power – whether in personal relationships and family life, when engaging with institutions such as schools, or in navigating broader social contexts.

Our concerns here are twofold, and relate, firstly, to the ways that the lives of families and the everyday practices, policies and procedures of schools are co-implicated. As has been argued elsewhere, these everyday 'ways of operating' (De Certeau, 1984, xx-xiv) map onto grids of intelligibility and organise networks of relations within which cultures of parenting and of schooling take place (Saltmarsh, 2015a, 2015b). While most parent-

school engagement discourse relies on idealised notions of heteronormative nuclear families (Cox & Desforges, 2018; Kainz & Aikens, 2007), there is a tendency to pathologise, judge and blame those who fall outside these utopian ideals (Pushor & Amendt, 2018). This tendency in turn rests on systemic gender inequalities, together with often deeply entrenched stereotypes and negative views about women and mothers. This combination creates particular challenges for mothers living with or fleeing family violence, and maintains barriers to safety planning and support-seeking even in schools where they might otherwise have expected a constructive response.

This raises a second concern of a more theoretical nature, which is the extent to which the organisational strategies of schools are permeable to the interpersonal strategies and tactics of men who use coercion to punish and control women. Informed by Michel De Certeau (1984), our case study analysis traces this permeability in action, and shows how strategies used in personal life to isolate, punish and control women, are converted into tactics as these men seek to coerce schools into supporting these agendas. We elaborate the concept of 'coercion of organisational networks' (Saltmarsh et al., 2020, 2021), showing how a repertoire of coercive techniques – isolation and humiliation of women through lies and false allegations, undermining women's mothering, men performing themselves as 'caring' and 'concerned', and deploying processes and procedures to shore up positions in unequal power relations – are used as tactics to manipulate school networks and organisational cultures. The effectiveness of these tactics is reliant on existing misogynist beliefs and gender inequalities, hence can be taken up and transposed into institutional strategies that schools then use to isolate, punish and keep mothers 'in their place'.

This has implications for professional preparation and professional development, and points to a need for schools to more adequately account for the ways that gender, power and violence shape the everyday assumptions, norms and practices of their organisational cultures. The international research literature from diverse disciplinary fields, including sociology of education, feminist legal studies, and gender studies concerned with domestic and family violence, makes clear that the issues documented and analysed here are, in broader global contexts, the source of risk, distress and lasting harm to women and children around the world. However, our study shows that without better understandings of coercive control as practices within a broader constellation of systemic misogyny and gender inequalities, and in the absence of organisational cultures committed to addressing these, schools are complicit in perpetuating family violence and its effects in the lives of women and children.

Notes

1. We use the term 'family violence' throughout this paper, in line with guidance from the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP). This term encompasses a range of other terms such as domestic violence, intimate partner abuse and child abuse, and includes 'any violence or abuse that is occurring within a family' (RACGP, 2014, p. 2). Family violence may include some, or all, of the following: physical abuse, emotional abuse, child sexual abuse, adult sexual abuse, economic abuse, social abuse, or neglect, all of which 'involve an abuse of power' (RACGP, 2014, p. 3).
2. While not all family violence is perpetrated by men, we note that coercive control is used almost exclusively by men as a means of controlling women through threats, humiliation,

intimidation, exploitation, isolation and domination. While there are some documented examples of women's use of coercive control (see, for example, Robertson & Murachver, 2011), according to Stark (2007), there is no corresponding counterpart to this form of coercive conduct in the lives of men.

3. For more detailed discussion of methodology and ethical considerations, please see (Saltmarsh et al., 2020, 2021).

4. To protect participant anonymity, pseudonyms were discussed with participants and used to refer to all people, schools and geographical locations. Participants with ongoing safety concerns were also offered the opportunity to review manuscripts prior to submission.

5. We use the term 'Protection Order', reflecting nomenclature in the Australian state where university ethics approval was obtained. This does not indicate of the location of participants or events.

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Code availability

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Authors' contributions

The authors' contributions are accurately reflected in the order of authorship. All authors are contributors to project design and management, data collection and analysis, and manuscript preparation.

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Disclosure statement

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