Children’s Experiences of Domestic Violence

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Domestic violence: A widespread problem for children

• 29.5% of young people under 18 have been exposed to domestic violence during their lifetime (12% of children under 11, and 17.5% aged 11-18) – 5.7% of children each year (Radford, Corral, Bradley, & Fisher, 2013)

• Research evidence suggests that its psychosocial impact can be severe.
Impact of domestic violence on children

• higher risk of mental health difficulties throughout their lives (e.g. Bogat et al, 2006; Fergusson, et al, 2005; Meltzer, et al, 2009; Mezey et al, 2005; Peltonen et al, 2010)

• Possible lasting neurological impact, with far-reaching implications for young people’s lifelong wellbeing (Anda et al., 2006; Choi et al 2012; Koenen et al., 2003).

• increased risk of physical health difficulties (Bair-Merritt et al 2006)

• Psychosocial impact – interpersonal, educational, criminalisation
The lasting impact of domestic violence on children

• ‘witnessing’ domestic violence is at least as impactful for children as being directly physically abused (Moylan et al., 2010; Sousa et al., 2011).

• Domestic violence and abuse pervades the family and has a negative impact on patterns of relating throughout the household (Cooper & Vetere, 2008).

• correlation between children’s experience of domestic violence, and their experience of direct harm (62% of children who experience domestic violence experience both) (CAADA, 2014)

• Risk of homicide significantly increased for child “witnesses”

• Need to trouble the idea that children are “witnesses” not victims.
Review of 177 scientific articles – ‘child*’, ‘domestic violence’
General critiques of literature on children’s experiences

• Pathologising: this literature focuses on the **damaging impact** of domestic violence, but not on what **helps**, or how children **cope**

• Primarily quantitative – questionnaire driven

• Quantitative measures - the vast majority were not completed by child

• Small number of qual studies

• Children’s voice obscured and elided in research

• Child rendered passive, lacks agency or capacity to resist
• Recognising children’s experiences of domestic violence and abuse is an important concern in working effectively with them as victims and survivors *in their own right* (Mullender et al., 2003; Øverlien, 2011).
Our work: The UNARS project

- Our focus is on children’s capacity to voice their experiences
- We are interested in how children cope, their ability to be resilient, their sense of agency
- 110 children in Greece, Italy, Spain and the UK
- Interviews, drawings, photos
- 10 week interventions with small groups of young people, focused on agency, resistance, resilience
- Focus groups with professionals and carers
- Policy analysis
- Training programme
Children’s voice in domestic violence
Managing disclosure

• The young people we spoke to had highly crafted accounts of their lives, structured around practices of safe disclosure, strategic telling, and NOT telling
• The dangers of speaking out, the dangers of staying silent
• Stories are (consciously) managed by children
• Produces challenges in ‘hearing’ children’s point of view
• The key lesson children learn from abuse is the danger of speaking out. Speaking out draws unwanted attention and consequences – from the abuser, from social services, from bullies, from unwanted helpers.
That which must not be named....

• Avoidance of naming violence as violence

• “Rachel: OK, so you mean, ((err)) do you mean other things have happened other than the situation with your dad? “

• Sophia: ...Something happened to my mum...

• Nancy: the accident scared my mum, and she didn’t like it
Violence is a lesson in learning to be quiet

Int: When .... you knew that your step-dad was coming round, did it feel different then?

Sophia: Yeah.

Int: What did it feel like then?

Sophia: Like “Oh no, I’ve got to keep my mouth shut and I can’t say anything”.

Lucy: I’d always hesitate of what I would say...even if I said “Hello”, I’d always think before like, is he just going to shut me out? Is he going to respond in a nice way, or be angry or anything like that? I’d always think ahead of what I was saying.

- Monitoring and self-regulating
- Aware of their environment, and of shifting atmosphere, moods
- Clear strategies for keeping themselves safe
- Learning to manage what you do and do not say, who you speak to, and how you speak, is a clear strategy that children use in coping with domestic abuse on a daily basis.
- Children’s accounts here are not dissimilar from those of adult victims of domestic abuse
Embodiment: Bodies as Sites of Control, Sites of Resistance

**Int:** ...in what ways can you stick up for yourself?

**Ali:** I dunno, punch people, you learn how to run as fast as you can, you learn how to hide, you know how to block what’s happening, you know you say, ((erm)) ((.)) ((arr)) you’ve got a piece of metal coming onto you, you know if you tense your muscle it hurts more, if you relax it, it hurts less, so you learn, like, with a wet thing, if it’s wet, you know how to angle, if you like, err, if you’re getting a wet towel slapped at you, you know how to angle and tense just ((demonstrates the most protective position by angling her arm)), not like that, or like that, like that. You get tense just in the middle. You know how to lessen the pain by tactics you use, like with a punch, if you punch like that ((demonstrates punching)) it will hurt less than if you punch like that ‘cause you’re getting the bone, so you learn how to avoid things, and angle it so it hurts less

**Int:** How do you learn that?

**Ali:** I dunno, you just do tests and trials (Alison, 15, UK)
Constrained use of space

*Int: ...what rooms felt safest for you?*

*Isabel: My room, bathroom and the stairs*

*Int: Why did they feel safest?*

*Isabel: Because they’re places that he hardly ever goes*

- sense of constraint extends into children’s use of physical space
- Children have clear strategies for managing their use of space
- Keep out of the way of violent parent
- Keep safe and secure
- Safe vs risky spaces
- Shifting use of space
- Shared areas of the house unsafe, spaces in which they were particularly careful
Monitoring and use of space

• Knowing safe and unsafe spaces and times enabled them to move in and out of these spaces to keep themselves out of harm’s way:

• very conscious strategy of monitoring – ‘sneaking’ downstairs to check if it was peaceful, and making use of the shared spaces if it was safe.

• carefully attuned to the atmosphere of the house, and if a fight was imminent she would remove herself and her brother to one of the safer spaces in the house.

• Int: So you were scared about going home and when you were actually there, what was it like?

• Rachel: I went straight upstairs to my bedroom, ((umm)) I’d sort of like sneak downstairs and check that no one was arguing or anything and if it was all OK, I’d come downstairs and sit down ((umm)) ((.)) and watch TV with my brother ((umm)) but if there was an argument I’d run downstairs, grab my brother and take him upstairs.
Monitoring and use of space

• Post violence – monitoring of space continues
• Outside world as hostile space, constant awareness of risk and danger.
• Again, this has echoes of the experiences of adult women in abusive relationships.
• If you read the two extracts – one is from a child interviewee. The other is from an adult interview. Can you tell the difference?

Yeah, it was, it was like, ((erm)) you didn’t really wanna go outside ‘cause like, every time you did you were like, is that him? Is that him? And you just, even like now, when I go in the car park and it’s dark ‘cause I’m taking the rubbish out, it’s still like, is he still there? Or is someone there watching us or something?

Int: So you’re checking all the time?
Yeah.

I’ve put the phone in and I take my mobile to bed every night. I keep doors wide open so I can hear all through the house and I sometimes just don’t sleep anyway. It comes in fits and starts. I have panic attacks…. All my doors have got bolts on and clip-ons, and locks and bolts and more bolts and all my windows are nailed shut.
Using Space: Dens and Hideaways

Dens and Hideaways

• **Int:** “You know you said that when you go to your dad’s and if there’s fighting, you go to a “tight space”, why a tight space?
  
  **Nancy:** That way they, they couldn’t get to me
  
  **Int:** Who?
  
  **Nancy:** Everyone. It means like, they can’t come and start bothering me, which means I feel safer, which means when I feel calm, I go back, ((.)) and being in a tight space it feels like part of a game, like being in a cave”

• **Int:** “Was there a particular space in the house that you felt safest?
  
  **Jess:** Upstairs cupboard
  
  **Int:** Why did you feel safest there?
  
  **Jess:** Because it was dark and I could close the door behind all of it.”

• **Lizzy:** “…he’d take her into the living room and sometimes I had to hide in a tiny cupboard with little like piles of blankets and stuff in there and just hide in there and then I just, there was a neighbour next door and every time that he used to start I used to get out, I used to run over to the other people.”

  
  **Int:** “So when there was fighting in the house, where would you go to?...
  
  **Rachel:** My brother’s room.
  
  **Int:** You went to your brother’s room?
  
  **Rachel:** Yeah, we used to hide under the bed ((jovial)) and stuff like that ‘cause he had his little den built and we used to hide in there.”
Not being heard

Would they have listened to me? I’m a child.

(I wished) Well, that they had asked me...or explained... in a ‘light’ way...(I needed) Explanation and help

“They didn’t ask me anything, nor reassure me...only my mum”

“They forget about the others and that is a mistake”

“I told my aunt but she wouldn’t believe me, to whom she was going to believe to her son or to me?”

“I felt, I felt alone, I have always felt alone, I always felt alone even by being here I felt alone”
Getting the story right....

Int: Not nice? And if you had to explain the story of your family, so your story, what would you say to me?
Beth: ((umm)) ((…))
Int: So what would the story of your family be?
Beth: ((.)) now, now or?
Int: Well what you’ve experienced with your family in the past and now, yeah

• She hesitates to tell the story. Double checks WHICH story we want to hear.
• Importance of telling the ‘right’ story.
• Learned to speak to an audience?

Ali: if you wanna know a (my) story, f*ck off and read my file.
Int: Read your file?...Why? How?
Ali: 'cause it's all written down((.)) and that's one story and people can read the same story..And if it's written down, you can't get anything wrong.

• The production of a version of the family history that is authorised and stable
• Variability in the story is seen as untrustworthy
Children as agents

- strategic behavior to de-escalate violence
- “Just getting a drink”
- ‘He used to be like standing in the corner shaking or crying or something ((umm)) so I’d like grab his hand and he’d be screaming and I’d just like run and take him upstairs and then I used to like, not so I’d get hurt but try and stop the row, like try and tell them like, “Stop it, Marcus is really upset,” and stuff like that and they’d stop but like as soon as I went back upstairs it just started all over again.’
Children as agents

• Young people also reported their own active involvement in managing the abuse, through disclosure and help seeking.
• Independent and deliberate action to intervene in the violent situation,
• She removed herself from the home where the violence was taking place
• She identifies that she and her mother need support and intervention, and as an active subject and agent, seeks out assistance from others.
• Not the actions of a passive witness

• Lizzy: Yeah, I went to the neighbours and asked them to ring the police and, yeah, I was only about seven so
• Int: And did they do that?
• Lizzy: Yeah, the police came and my nan came and she came and picked us up and took us to her, her house.
Emotion and subjectivity

Okay Nancy, so we’re here with your picture of your family. To start with could you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Nancy: I’m the youngest. I’m the scaredest.

Int: You’re the scaredest?

Nancy: ((smiles)) I’m scared about everything

Int: You’re scared about everything?

Nancy: (Nods), I love animals, I run away from arguments so I don’t get hurt ((.)) Umm.

Nancy: Me being like ((.)) cowardly, and being, like when people start being nasty to me, I like, I feel like I’m shrinking ((gestures with her body shrinking with her hands))

Int: You’re shrinking?

Nancy: Yeah, like getting smaller and smaller and they’re getting bigger and stronger, and my, sometimes, my family come up and stick up for me, and braver, and they make the other person feel all sorry and scared and they go away and leave me alone.

Nancy, 10 years old
Comfort and Self Soothing

• Int: So it sounds like all the fighting really does upset you

• Nancy: Yeah, that’s why, and when my dad got me this owl duvet and when

• Int: A what?

• Nancy: An OWL duvet

• Int: Oh, an OWL duvet

• Nancy: I go upstairs and I go under it and I play with the owls ‘cause I like animals, and the owls make me feel as if I’m in a forest, and I make a game of it
Paradoxical Resilience

It has not been easy to take a picture of a bee. But for me it is important. For me, the memory of the bee sting is very painful. Although I have never been stung. It was my mother who told me to say that, if someone at school had asked me why I had a red cheek. ....

But now I no longer think about that bee, but about the flower: a psychologist told me that the bee stings only for defence and that the whole day it travels from flower to flower. So I do not want to think about the sting, which has always made me so afraid, but to travel among the flowers, free and happy.
Service responses

• Several young people noted that, while police did respond to calls for help, the response was sometimes ineffective.

• Rachel reports that her expectation of police response is very low, leaving her feeling fearful of the consequences and impotent to do anything about them.

• She found her father’s arrests ‘nerve racking’, not because he was being punished, but rather because she expected him to be released quickly, and that he would interpret the release as a ratification of his own actions.

• On the one hand, she has called the police, and sees their immediate response as important in terms of keeping her and her family safe.

• On the other hand, she does not feel she can exert her own need for a more satisfactory solution on the police, nor can she rely on them to follow through on that promise of keeping her safe.

• Risk of being seen as ‘responsible’ for calling the police.

• The experience of the children we interviewed does not bear up a strong sense that policing functions as an effective safety net for them.

• Further, as a witness, positioned as ‘collateral damage’ in domestic violence, Rachel has no legal recourse in her own right. She is not perceived as the victim.

• Rachel ((umm)) ((.)) Well, ((.)) it’s nerve racking ((umm)) and quite scary but ((umm)) when they are putting him in the police car you can just basically, you know that it’s going to happen again really ‘cause I think he knows that’s he going to be like let off with it and he’s going to be out in one day, he’s just going to carry on doing it, that’s what I kept on thinking, ‘cause he’s being let off and he’s just going to carry on.
Service responses – feeling unheard

Maria: She calls the Police, and they came. you could tell from far away that my mother was stoned, they realised that but none of them came to talk with me, or rather they came to see her, no one wanted to talk to me.

Int.: Do you believe that they just focus on the adult?

Maria: (She answered straight away) Yes

Int.: Would you have liked that someone had asked you?

Maria: Yes, besides, when I said what was happening no one believed me

• The responding officer discounted the child’s account
• Frustration for children of not being heard or being
Emma: No, because the time that I did talk about it was when we did get the help but I talked to a teacher thinking I’d be able to trust her and she went straight to the headmaster and all the stuff started going on where the headmaster like threatened my mum saying, “If you don’t sort this out, we’ll ring child services,” and all that stuff, my mum could have had us taken off her ’cause of that. ……((Erm)) I can’t remember what I said, I think I said something like, I think I had like a bruise on me or something and I told a friend what happened [Int: Yeah], and she made me tell this teacher and then that’s how it started, just ‘cause I talked about a little bruise that I had on my arm.

… I did get a bit of hassle of people ‘cause they found out as well, just normal people in my Year (at school) … but, I talked to her about it and then she started telling other people and then that’s how it got round the school kids and I had a lot of problems because of that. They was like, “Haha, your stepdad hates you,” ((mock nasty tone)) and all this stuff
Service responses

Paul: Yeah, cause we stopped talking to ((social worker)) because she told our dad stuff we’d said. And he got very mad.

Int: why is it important to you to keep things private?

George: Well, cause then other people won’t know and they won’t get angry about things that you said about them.
Jess: When I was in school he was in national newspapers and my teachers would bring cut outs of what my dad had done, hence why I changed my name to Clark when I was in year eight. Because I still think it’s really disrespectful for the teachers to approach me and Sam and say, “Is this your dad?” Because that’s nothing to do with them so we changed our name. … I was like, “Right, I’m not going to defend my dad because I don’t like him” but to approach a thirteen year old and a fifteen year old, you don’t do that… Yeah. ....And then mum got the backlash because it was her husband, our supposed to be dad, is the talk of the block and for the teachers to talk about it.

• Inappropriate adult responses, that fail to take seriously the impact of difficult family life on children.
Children as victims of domestic violence?

• Most domestic violence legislation and policy represents domestic violence and abuse as something that occurs between two adults in an intimate partnership.
• For example, The UK Home Office provides a clear definition of domestic violence as:
  • “Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality.” (Home Office, 2013 p. 2).
• Children are absent as victims from such legal definitions.
• Children are not recognised in policy or in criminal law as direct victims of domestic violence. If they are discussed at all in domestic violence policy, it is as witnesses or as ‘also affected’.
More than ‘collateral damage’

- Children are described as ‘witnesses’ to domestic violence or ‘exposed to domestic abuse’
- This results in a framing of children as living with abuse, affected by it, but not as its **direct victims**.
- The historical definition restricts our legal understanding of domestic violence to intimate relationships, predominantly in adult dyads.
- The implication of this framing of domestic violence is to reproduce, discursively, conditions in which children are only ever positioned as ‘collateral damage’ in the policing and management of domestic violence.
More than ‘witnesses’ to violence

• When we talk to children about domestic violence, it is clear that it is not something they ‘witness’ from a distance

• Passive framing

• To genuinely help children deal with and recover from domestic violence, we need a policy framework that sees children both as victims and as active beings, making sense of and working with their experiences of domestic violence (Mullender et al., 2003; Overlien & Hydén, 2009; Carolina Øverlien, 2011)

• Legislative frameworks that do not recognise the real impact of domestic violence on children, and that do not take into account children's capacity for meaning-making in adverse situations and agency in relation to them are inadequate to support children who have experienced domestic violence.
• Services for young people remain largely a ‘bolt on’ to existing domestic violence services, with many children not receiving any specialist support after experiencing domestic violence and abuse, and only 9% of children who have experienced domestic violence in the UK have access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services for mid to long term support (CAADA, 2014b).
More than witnesses to violence

• The legal framework does not adequately acknowledge the impact of domestic violence on children

• It does not recognize their personhood and capacity for agency.

• Focus on the intimate dyad neglects the impact of coercive control and violence on the family as a whole

• It is important to recognize, both legally and in work with families affected by domestic violence, that the exercise of power and violence in abusive and controlling relational dynamics can be troubling and distressing for children.
More than witnesses

• A shift to recognize children as equal victims in the crime of domestic violence and abuse has two important implications
  • it requires that we listen to children who experience domestic violence and abuse,
  • and it creates space to recognize their own creative and agentic strategies in response to abuse and control within the family.

• It opens a different discursive space in which the child is recognized as being as important as the adult antagonists in our responses to domestic violence and abuse.

• Should result in a more responsive service response
When we make space for children to speak....

I’m a bit confident talking about stuff.

I: How does it give you confidence?

C: I can speak more about what I want to do, and so I don’t feel trapped inside anymore, and what I want to do.

Not to bully people because it’s not right and because you got bullied in the past it doesn’t mean that you can take out how you feel on others. Because I used to take it out on my brothers when I felt unhappy.

So has that improved for you?

Yeah, me and my brothers get on well.

.... Because when I first started coming here I thought we were going round and talking about our feelings and that and it just made me come out of my little bubble.

Because it made me happier so I can get outside and do things, like activities, talk about how I feel and what life ahead of me holds so I can say, “I’m going to try and aim for this in the future” and try and aim for what I want.

It feels like how I feel and that I don’t have to be afraid any more.

Afraid of what?

Talking.

Talking about what?

My dad and things at school.
Conclusions

• Young people are not passive witnesses to DV. They are reflexive, meaning making, and agentic in their experiences of their family.
• Their emotional life in relation to DV is complex and multifaceted.
• Accounts of their experiences are multi-layered and the emotional nature of their experience is not written ‘on the surface’.
• Children have been silenced historically by insufficiently responsive professional practice and legal frameworks.
• It is surely time that this changed?
Finding us

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