

## Chapter 7: Beyond Vulnerability: Working with children who have experienced domestic violence

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This chapter explores children's experiences of domestic violence. Academic research on domestic violence tends to focus on children as damaged by domestic violence, with an extensive consideration of the negative impact on children's mental health, social, interpersonal and educational outcomes. This literature establishes children living with domestic violence as a vulnerable group, in need of significant intervention and support. This construct of vulnerability extends into professional talk about children's lives, with mental health, social work and domestic violence support professionals describing children as vulnerable, damaged, and needy - often inevitably so. In contrast, we argue that framing children as "vulnerable" functions to undermine agency, and can render children voiceless in specific contexts. Gatekeeping practices intended to protect vulnerable children have an unintended consequence of preventing them from articulating their own experience. We present examples that challenge the positioning of children who experience domestic violence as vulnerable and damaged, and that highlight young people's capacity to articulate their experiences of violence, its impact, their coping practices, and their capacity for agency. In doing so, we challenge the notion of a single developmental trajectory for the construction of healthy or adaptive identities (Burman, 2008; James & Prout, 2015), arguing instead that children who experience domestic violence find ways of managing their familial experiences using a range of paradoxical resiliencies.

## Passive and Silent: The Academic and Professional Construction of Children's

### Experiences

The negative psychological, social and educational outcomes of children's experiences of domestic violence are now well documented in social science research. Children who experience domestic violence are at greater risk of a range of mental health difficulties (Meltzer, Doos, Vostanis, Ford, & Goodman, 2009), and poorer health outcomes (Hornor, 2005). There is an association between 'exposure' to domestic violence and other forms of child abuse (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009), including an elevated risk of being murdered by the perpetrating parent (Devaney, 2008; Jaffe, Crooks, & Wolfe, 2003). Children who experience domestic violence are also more likely to experience a range of educational difficulties (Byrne & Taylor, 2007), and are more likely to be involved in bullying, both as victim and aggressor (Baldry, 2003). It has been suggested that some of these challenges are a result of neurological changes as a consequence of early exposure to violence (Peckins, Dockray, Eckenrode, Heaton, & Susman, 2012; Saltzman, Holden, & Holahan, 2005).

Whilst the negative impact of domestic violence on children is indisputable, we suggest that the over-focus in psychological literature on the damage done produces an individualising and pathologising account that renders children as passive witnesses, and that this is ultimately unhelpful to their recovery (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015). They are described as 'witnesses', 'exposed' to domestic violence, and damaged by that exposure. The language used to describe children who live with domestic violence strips away a sense of them as meaning making beings (Callaghan, Alexander, Mavrou, Fellin, & Sixsmith, 2016), who have a capacity to experience what is happening in their families and to find ways to respond to and resist the coercive interactions that characterise those experiences (Callaghan, Alexander, Sixsmith, & Fellin, 2016). In addition, much of the research on the mental health and wellbeing of children who experience violence has been conducted using quantitative measures, often with adult informants, with the effect that children's

voice is often omitted from such research entirely (Callaghan, 2015; Eriksson & Näsman, 2012; Eriksson, 2012; Øverlien, 2009). As a consequence, this research renders children as passive in two ways – both through the way they are described, as damaged objects, collateral damage in adult violent interactions, and through the denial of their capacity to articulate and reflect on their own experiences.

Research that focuses on children's actions and strategies for coping has tended to focus on a traditional approach to resilience as individual 'coping despite adversity' (see, for example, Gewirtz & Edleson, 2007; Howell, 2011; Martinez-Torteya, Anne Bogat, von Eye, & Levendosky, 2009). Children's coping is still framed in this approach as relatively passive. The factors that are seen as 'making' children resilient include temperament (Martinez-Torteya et al., 2009), positive and supportive educational contexts and supportive friends and/or parents (Kassis, Artz, & Moldenhauer, 2013; Kassis, Artz, Scambor, Scambor, & Moldenhauer, 2013), the chronicity of the violence (Martinez-Torteya et al., 2009), the child's relationship with peers and their social skills (A. H. Gewirtz & Edleson, 2007) and the child's emotional self-control (A. H. Gewirtz & Edleson, 2007; Kassis, Artz, Scambor, et al., 2013). However, mental health literature focuses very strongly on the coping, parenting practice (A. Gewirtz, Forgatch, & Wieling, 2008; A. H. Gewirtz & Edleson, 2007; Kassis, Artz, & Moldenhauer, 2013) and mental health of mothers (Levendosky, Leahy, Bogat, Davidson, & von Eye, 2006; Martinez-Torteya et al., 2009; Whitaker, Orzol, & Kahn, 2006) in determining children's resilience. Children's wellbeing and mental health therefore is ultimately understood as being dependent on good mothering (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Lapierre, 2008), in a literature that overwhelmingly assumes that women are the victims and men the perpetrators of domestic violence. This produces a mother-blaming discourse that locates victimised women as responsible for children's mental health, and removes the focus away from male violence and its implications for women and children (Callaghan, 2015) as well as from other contextual, social, service and policy issues (Callaghan, Fellin & Gale, 2016). These different contextual levels are obscured by these victim blaming and individualising discourses which reiterate developmental

psychology's preoccupation with the facilitating role of the mother (Hays, 1996; Shirani, Henwood, & Coltart, 2011). They also reproduce a model of parenting, commonplace in developmental psychology, that positions children as passive recipients of parenting practice (Burman, 2008), neglecting the relational and intersubjective nature of children's experiences of parenting and of coping (Callaghan, Alexander, Fellin, & Sixsmith, 2016; Cooper & Vetere, 2008; E. Katz, 2015; Swanston, Bowyer, & Vetere, 2014). In contrast, we argue that children's coping and resilience is relational, contextual and locally produced, and that children are agentic in the way they manage, live with and recover from domestic violence.

Throughout this chapter, we draw on the small but significant body of qualitative literature on domestic violence, which focuses increasingly on the importance of understanding children's direct accounts of their experiences (Bowyer, Swanston, & Vetere, 2013; Mullender et al., 2003) and on recognising and supporting children's capacity for agency (Callaghan, Alexander, Sixsmith, et al., 2016; Eriksson & Näsman, 2012; L. F. Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2006; Øverlien, 2014). We anchor our argument in examples from published papers and reports from Understanding Agency and Resilience Strategies (UNARS), a four nation European study. The examples are from our interviews with children about their experiences of coping with domestic violence.

### Talking about it: Children's ability to articulate and reflect on their experiences

Reading academic research and policy documents in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, one might be forgiven for imagining that the problem of children's representation and voice in research and service development and delivery has been resolved. Slogans like 'no decision about me without me' and the emphasis for instance in research funding applications on meaningful participation by children in all aspects of research suggests empowered and vocal children are engaged in all these processes. These developments have resulted in growing recognition of children's capacity to reflect on their experience, and their right to be heard (Einarsdottir, Dockett, & Perry, 2009; Skelton, 2008).

However, research and practice in violence work in particular still privileges adult voices (Callaghan, Alexander, Mavrou, et al., 2016; McGee, 2000; Øverlien, 2009).

One of the things that really surprised us as we developed our work with children was the extent of the gatekeeping we experienced, in all four European countries. We had expected adult caution about children's involvement, but the challenges we had in recruitment extended beyond that to significant blocking of children's participation. McGee (2000) suggests some of this reluctance arises from the illusion that children 'do not know' about the violence, and needed to be sheltered from that knowledge, whilst Lombard (2015) found that professionals expressed reluctance to 'open a can of worms'. Both these viewpoints rest on a presumption of 'innocent childhood' (Burman, 2008), idealizing children as vulnerable, helpless and in need of protection, discourses that were reiterated in our focus group interviews with professionals who worked in the domestic violence sphere (Callaghan & Alexander, 2015). This denied children the right to be heard about their experiences, as they were deemed 'too vulnerable' to participate, effectively reinforcing a view of their passivity, lack of agency and lack of emotional competence (Alexander, Callaghan, Fellin, & Sixsmith, 2016; Callaghan, Alexander, Sixsmith, et al., 2016a). This is illustrated very clearly in our analysis of children's practices of disclosure about domestic violence (Callaghan, Alexander, Mavrou, et al., 2016). A significant number of children reported that they had made a conscious choice not to tell others about the violence they were experiencing, because they had experiences of not being taken seriously, or of their accounts being disbelieved or dismissed. They suggested that they were 'only children' and unlikely to be heard. This is poignantly described by Elda (17, Italy):

*Elda (17, Italy): I felt helpless, passive and fragile*

*Int: What made you feel that way?*

*Elda: My age*

*Int: Why?*

*Elda: It is a constraint. No one listens to you if you're a little girl*

In this extract, it is clear that Elda's helplessness is not 'personal', she is not suggesting that she is a passive, fragile or helpless person. Rather, she suggests that her sense of passivity was constituted in her interactions with adults – that her age, her positioning as a 'little girl' functionally silenced her, making her unable to help herself. Elda's vulnerability, helplessness and passivity is accomplished *relationally* (Callaghan, Alexander, Mavrou, et al., 2016). It is clear that it is not (just) the violence in her family that disempowers her; rather it is the failure of adults to hear her account – this failure to hear silences and disempowers children, increasing their sense of isolation and their challenges with trust (Buckley, Holt, & Whelan, 2007).

In a context where coercion and violence often already silences children, our professional failure to allow children to speak, and to listen when they do, teaches children that their experiences and accounts are not valued (Vetere & Cooper, 2005). This can place children at risk, as, for example, their views of violent encounters are not sought, and their disquiet about post-separation contact are not heard (Morrison, 2015). Further, in a culture where a therapeutic discourse of personal development predominates, and our wellness is dependent on our willingness to 'talk about' and 'talk through' our experiences (Callaghan, Fellin, & Warner-Gale, n.d.), silencing this group of children positions them even more strongly as pathologised and deviant, and prevents their articulation of the complex ways in which they are able to cope and retain a sense of agency.

Despite these constraining adult discourses, we found that the children we interviewed were extremely articulate, and able to tell us their stories in phenomenologically dense, complex and detailed ways. They were also not unduly distressed by the interviews, and were able to reflect on their experiences of coping with violence and those of other people, as well as to critically comment on contextual, policy and service issues. They were able to explain very difficult experiences to the interviewers, to make use of vivid images, metaphors and even humour. Most children also appeared to find the interviews supportive and even enjoyable, and generally appreciated the

opportunity to speak openly –often for the first time- about their experiences and reported that it was an empowering experience. In common with Evang & Øverlien (2014), we also found the children were very active in the interviews, making clear decisions about what and how they would say, taking control of the interviews in various ways (e.g. one young boy took the recording device away from the interviewer, and held it up to his mouth to ensure that points that were particularly important to him were heard).

Hearing children’s stories requires that we listen to more than just their words. Extra-normative experiences are often not easy to put into words, and are recounted in “constrained articulations” (Callaghan, Gambo, & Fellin, 2015), listening not just to what they say, but how they say it, how they embody their stories, how they act, and what they will not say (Callaghan et al., 2015). It is important to recognize the limitations of voice, and that we can only say that which it is contextually possible to articulate (Unterhalter, 2012) – it is difficult to talk about experiences that are culturally extra-normative and for which there is not an easily available language. In addition, such experiences are often inarticulable as ‘family secrets’, which children often feel they are not allowed to discuss and which are usually family. For example, in this extract Rachel (11, UK) talks about having to step in and tell her parents to stop fighting, because they were upsetting their little brother (Callaghan, Alexander, Sixsmith, et al., 2016b). Asked how she felt, she says:

((erm)) I felt that, ((.)) I don’t really know a word to describe it really ((umm)) for them, for me to have to tell them to stop and them not stopping themselves, it was quite like, ((.)) I don’t really know a word to say it ((erm)) ((.))

She lacks access to a language to express the experience of having to intervene to ask a parent to behave like a parent. The experience she is communicating here is not merely the content of ‘I had to tell them to stop’, but also the lived experience of being contextually required to care for her brother in a context where her parents were failing to do so. In her hesitations, the break down of her speech, she communicates more about that experience than her words do. The experience is

communicated as constrained articulation, in the silences, the style of speech, the way she held her body as she spoke, and not so much in the speech itself.

### Embodying agency and resistance

When considering how victims cope with violence, how they maintain a sense of self in the wake of coercive control and physical attacks, psychological research has tended to focus its attention on emotions, cognitive styles, social skills and social support and thus has fragmented their (coherent) lived experience into separate components (e.g., cognition, emotion, personality) (Galbusera & Fellin, 2014). In focusing separately on the intrapsychic and the interpersonal factors, such research has largely neglected the experience of violence as something that is embodied and that occurs in material space (Callaghan & Clark, 2007). Violence and control are physical and material experiences, and it therefore makes sense that our resistance to such control and violence might also take place in embodied ways. Perhaps because our heteronormative, patriarchal and ableist assumptions about family life tends to presume that women and children are both emotionally weaker and less physically competent, we overlook or underestimate how they might use their bodies and the spaces of home and of the outdoors in agentic ways that are protective and resistant.

In our interviews with children, 'home' was an important, but fraught space for children. Home is culturally constituted as a place of safety in the western imaginary (Mallett, 2004) and as the 'right' place in which to raise children (Dorrer, McIntosh, Punch, & Emond, 2010). However, homes are often more complex and ambiguous spaces for individuals, particularly when characterised by conflict, emotional upheaval or violence (Graesch, 2004; Harden, 2000; Wilson, Houmøller, & Bernays, 2012). Home is not always a space in which children feel a sense of 'belonging', but can be

an ambiguous space that creates “belonging and/or ... a sense of marginalisation and estrangement” (Mallett, 2004, p. 84). This was certainly the experience of home that the children we interviewed described: on the one hand, they talked about home as dangerous, threatening and unpredictable; on the other hand, it was a space (or there were spaces within the home) that they felt they could reclaim, and in which they could re-constitute a sense of control and agency (Alexander et al., 2016). This is illustrated in the extract below from our paper on children’s embodied experience of domestic violence, in which we argue that through children’s sense of themselves as corporeal agents -because of the grounded and embodied nature of our being in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology aims at understanding the embodied language rather than the abstract and de-contextualized text: body and language are intertwined and inseparable. Working through this lens, children’s experience of the home constitutes it as both a space of oppression and of resistance:

*Emma (aged 16): Yeah, it was like you had a high rise bed, had like a desk and a wardrobe ... That kind of thing, so you’d have like a little gap behind there, used to have a little light down there ((laughs)).*

*Int: So you literally hid in there?*

*Emma: Yeah, ((pointing to her drawing of a map of house)) so like where my room is in here, the bed would be against this wall and I’ll have a chest of drawers there and I used to hide behind this little, there, where my bed used to have a gap behind.*

*Int: And that’s when he was there, and you were there on your own?*

*Emma: Yeah, just used to hide down there, and sometimes he’d come in my room and start shouting at me but he wouldn’t know where I am ((laughs)).*

If we only focused on the elements of coercion, control and fear when reading this extract, we might overlook the way that Emma uses the material spaces of home to resist the perpetrator’s controlling and oppressive behaviours. She has found a way to ‘escape’ within the physical spaces and materials of the home, inverting the sense of the home as a dangerous space, by creating within it homely spaces of safety. This use of dens and hiding places was described to us by many of the children we spoke to, in all four European countries. Children described ways that they made their dens safe and homely by populating them with objects they associated with friends and loved ones,

or with comfort. Emma's story illustrates how she used the small, constrained space to stabilise the un-safety of the home.

In the extract, Emma describes a safety strategy used by many of the children we spoke to – the use of dens and hideaways, small spaces into which adults could not easily enter, where they felt contained, and could hide until things calmed down. These safe, small spaces were often in children's rooms or in outside rooms (e.g., sheds) – spaces that they defined as their own, and where the perpetrator did not often go. Emma has restored some (very limited) sense of control, over one space in the home, undoing in the smallest way what Wardaugh (1999) has described as the experience of being 'homeless at home'. Even though she is frightened, and hiding, she nonetheless finds in this experience some expression of agency and resistance. She sees herself as 'fooling' the perpetrator, as successfully evading him ("he wouldn't know where I am"). This sense of her 'gesture of defiance' (Hebdige) is expressed in her laugh, as she describes how he does not know where she is. Trawick (2007), talking about children living through the 1997-98 armed conflict in Sri Lanka noted that children described the worst parts of their experiences, not as the exposure to violence, but the loss of control over their use of space, and their loss of autonomous movement. Restoring some sense of mastery over the home space, however small that might be, is a powerful resistance to the loss of control children experience when violence and coercive control occurs.

Untangling children's sense of their own agency and capacity for resistance from the dominant representation of them as passive witnesses to violence, or as helpless victims, requires that we attend carefully to their experiences and sense-making, and that we understand how they make use of space and place. Attending only to their cognitive or affective processes, or measuring their capacity for 'resilience' through standardised questionnaires will not enable us to access or understand their located and contextual experiences of agency and resistance. Children's use of space and place is important in understanding their experience of the world (Holloway and Valentine, 2000), and in making sense of how they grow and change over time. For some young people, 'home' isn't a straightforwardly positive space, rather it is a space they make and remake, and for others, 'home' does not match adult definitions of what home is. For instance, some of the young people we spoke to who had transitioned from refuge into 'settled housing', felt nostalgic about the refuge space which they saw as 'home'. The people they bonded with in refuge were experienced as 'family', because of the sense of connection, protection and community they built together within the refuge environment. Children do not live their emotional lives intrapsychically, rather their emotional experiences are materio-psychosocial. Their resistances to domestic violence

and coercive control exist not just in their inner worlds, or in their relationships with others, but in their embodied, spatial and material worlds too. This has powerful implications for those who wish to intervene and support children during and after domestic violence, but these implications are often undertheorised in social and mental health practice with children and families (Callaghan, Fellin, & Alexander, 2016).

## Emotional and relational responses to violence

Literature on children's mental health and psychological development when they experience domestic violence has documented extensively the negative psychological effect of domestic violence on children. One of the mechanisms through which this damage is presumed to occur is through the impact of domestic violence on children's emotional development. Located within a 'deficit model' (Mullender et al., 2003) this research tends to presume that children who experience domestic violence will have difficulties with emotional recognition and regulation, and sets out to test this hypothesis in a range of ways. For instance, after administering a picture stimulus story-telling task with two groups of children (one group who had experienced domestic violence, and another who had not), Logan & Graham-Bermann (1999) found that, whilst all children expressed more negative emotion than positive, and all children were more likely to identify and express non-affiliative than affiliative emotion, children from families where domestic violence had occurred were less likely to express affiliative emotions. They concluded that children who have experienced domestic violence may have an inhibited ability to express emotions in a relational context. Similarly a study of children who had experienced 'interadult violence', (Maughan & Cicchetti, 2002) found significantly more children from families affected by domestic violence had dysregulated emotion patterns (L. F. Katz, Hessler, & Annett, 2007). Does children's emotional competence mediate the relationship between DV exposure and later social and behavioural adjustment? Katz, Hessler and Annett, 2007) found that children from homes with higher rates of domestic violence were less emotionally aware and had higher rates of emotional dysregulation, and that these emotional difficulties mediated the relationship between domestic violence 'exposure' and internalising problems as well as social difficulties. Based on these kinds of findings, researchers have concluded that children who experience domestic violence are more likely to be 'emotionally incompetent' (L. F. Katz et al., 2007).

What unites these studies is the acontextual approach taken to understanding and measuring children's emotions as individual and isolated processes. In the Logan and Graham-Bermann study,

the researchers coded emotional content in the stories simply as 'positive, or 'negative', 'affiliative' or 'non-affiliative'. This strips out the meaning of the emotions described, and the context in which they are located, reducing them to abstract and isolated categories produced by the researchers. Using a story task and assuming that that is a realistic measure of children's real-world is a further factor when considering the validity of this approach. Maughan and Cicchetti staged angry, neutral and conciliatory interactions between a researcher and the child's mother, in an experimental setting. Given that the children in the study had observed significant violence at home, the ethics of this experiment is surely questionable, and it seems likely that watching a stranger argue with their mother would understandably be more distressing for children who have experienced domestic violence. Placing the child in an unfamiliar context and subjecting them to such a stressor surely makes their struggle in controlling and regulating their emotion reasonable and understandable. The artificiality of the situation also presumably produced the interaction as puzzling for the observing child, who presumably could see no cues for the hostile interaction witnessed. In the Katz et al study, children's emotions were measured using the child and adolescent meta-emotion interview, a 20-40 minute structured interview, in which they were asked 16 questions about anger, and then the same 16 questions about sadness. Questions included items like: "What does it look like when you are angry? Is there anything you do to get over feeling angry? Can you give me a recent example of a time when you were angry? In that incident, what happened, who did and said what, how did you get over your anger?" (L. F. Katz et al., 2007, p. 570). Asking children such abstract questions assumes that emotions can be reasonably isolated from their social, material and relational context, and are appropriately understood in such a disembodied, intellectual way. None of these approaches takes seriously the located nature of children's meaning making, or the contextual-relational experience of emotions (Ugazio, 2013). Abstracting emotion from the context in which emotions are felt and lived simply cannot be a valid measure. Emotions are central and dynamic elements of people's experiences, a way of feeling and knowing that are constituted in context and interaction. Such knowledge and feeling is always grounded in a world of contextual meaning and practice (Polanyi, 1996), all our knowledge is either tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge, always.

In contrast to this reading of children as 'emotionally incompetent', our research has explored the complex, nuanced and highly located emotional work that children do when they experience domestic violence. Emotions are understood in our work as embodied, relational and contextually located (Callaghan, Alexander, Papathanassiou, & Mavrou, n.d.). Children are acutely attuned to their relational context, constantly scanning adult reactions, working to 'read' their emotions, and respond in a way that will keep them and others safe. As Swanston et al. (2014) suggest, children are

like “miniature radar devices” as they are always engaged in an attempt to predict the unpredictable. Consider, for instance, this extract (Callaghan, Alexander, Sixsmith, et al., 2016):

*Lucy (Aged 13) 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.*

Whilst Lucy may not be labelling emotions, she does describe herself as acutely attuned to the emotions of those around her. She is engaged in constant monitoring and reflection, adapting her own emotional responses to the perceived mood of the perpetrator. Consider the complexity of the emotional and social world that children who experience domestic violence inhabit. After all, familial relationships where there is violence are not just characterised by violence, but by a range of difficult and complicated interactions, allegiances and secrets. If we look once again at Rachel's quote, we begin to see the challenges of attempting to capture children's rich emotional experiences through qualitative means:

*Rachel: ((erm)) I felt that, ((.)) I don't really know a word to describe it really ((umm)) for them, for me to have to tell them to stop and them not stopping themselves, it was quite like, ((.)) I don't really know a word to say it ((erm)) ((.))*

Rachel is aware that there is no language available in everyday English to describe this experience. Indeed in any language, it is difficult to conceptualise how a child might communicate this. Rachel is able to narrate the experience through a kind of “constrained articulation” (Callaghan et al., 2015). Her emotions are expressed not in what she can say, but rather what she cannot say – it is contained in the silence, in the breakdown in articulation. As she says, so eloquently “I do not know a word to say it”. How could such emotional experiences be conveyed in a fixed response questionnaire, or in an abstract set of responses to a structured interview about a particular labelled emotion? The emotional worlds of children who experience are extra-normative, and not easily accessible to everyday language and labelling. This does not mean they are emotionally incompetent – rather, they show evidence of great awareness of their own and others' emotions, very detailed and complex emotional labour, caring for others, and managing their own emotional reactions (REF).

While the developmental and psychological literature on emotions suggests children lack the ability to regulate their emotions, the children we spoke to were able to self-soothe. This was often achieved through their use of material space and objects – they would position themselves in small, quiet spaces, where they could feel safe and could calm themselves down. They would use outdoors

spaces – sheds and trees – as places to reflect. Paul (9) describes how, when he’s upset, he goes outside:

*there’s like this slide. And I go to that. And sometimes I like to climb on it, and go to the top. And there’s like a tree. And I go and sit there for a while. (Paul, 9)*

This is a highly competent, but very located strategy for managing emotional distress. In taking himself out of the situation he is stressed by, he is giving himself the space and time to reflect. In taking up a high space, he is creating both a sense of safety (being out of the way of conflict) and a meditative or reflexive space. He puts a little distance between himself and the world, while he calms himself down.

These extracts illustrate that children have complex emotional coping strategies, that enable them to maintain a sense of agency, to manage their emotional responses, and to self-soothe. They are reflexive emotional labourers, working to care for themselves and for those around them. Of course, we are not suggesting that they cannot be volatile, distressed or angry, nor are we suggesting that their reactions are not sometimes indicative of the harm domestic violence has done to them. However, we are suggesting that in using methods that neglect children’s own articulations of their lived experiences of violence, psychological researchers are imposing adult and normative versions of what it means to be ‘emotionally competent’, that do not take into account the complexity of the relational context in which children who live with domestic violence function. The effect of this is that they underestimate children’s capacity to reflect on, articulate and cope with difficult emotion. Whilst children’s coping strategies in these situations are not always optimal, they do offer a starting point from which to build, which makes sense to the child, and that fits in the narrative of their lives. Emotion coaching or emotional skills training that is rooted in abstract and decontextualized readings of ‘good ways’ to do emotions (L. F. Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2006) cannot be sufficiently sensitive to, or respectful of, the work children have already done to enable themselves to cope with the difficult and at times overwhelming emotions they feel when domestic violence occurs.

## Conclusions

In this chapter we have summarized the qualitative body of literature on domestic violence, to show how it challenges the positioning of children who experience domestic violence as only vulnerable and damaged. The dominance of the idea that experiences of domestic violence places children at risk of pathology and of intergenerational transmission of violence reiterates the developmental assumption that only normative, nuclear family practices produce ‘normal’ children, and that there

is a single, universal way to 'do' childhood. By illustrating the diverse forms of experience and coping that children in contexts of domestic violence live through and enact, we have deconstructed the assumption of a single normative developmental trajectory for children's wellbeing and functioning, constructed as an individual and acontextual journey (Burman, 2008; James & Prout, 2015). We have argued that children who experience domestic violence create multiple, sophisticated and idiosyncratic ways of managing their personal and familial experiences. These act as situated resiliencies, and operate on both on a verbal and embodied level. Their resilience and resistance strategies are located and embedded in the very environments they live in (Ungar, 2015, 2016) and reflect their life contexts and experiences, rather than following a particular and universalized resilience that might be defined as 'health despite adversity'. Children's resources are built on the constraints they have experienced – they cope *in context*, not in some abstract and universal sense; as a consequence, these resiliencies can thus seem paradoxical in their manifestation.

This assumption of vulnerability is maintained by caregiver and professional discourses about children's damages and deficits, which further fuel the self-fulfilling prophecies of Intergenerational transmission, rather than attempting to deconstruct it by envisaging alternative stories of competence, creativity and resilience. In contrast, we have argued that helping children to share, notice and value their located and contextual competence and skills - despite the family, professional, institutional and policy hindrances they faced - will foster hope and confidence in their abilities to build stronger and healthier identities and relations.

Our chapter has also highlighted young people's capacity to articulate their experiences of violence, its impact, their coping practices, and their capacity for agency. These voices and experiences are often neglected and further silenced by adults and professionals' assumptions about children's vulnerability and the potential traumatic effect of telling their story. Constructing children as "vulnerable" functions to further undermine their sense of agency, control and self-esteem, and perpetuates their feeling of being voiceless and powerless in their life contexts. Gatekeeping practices intended to protect vulnerable children have an unintended consequence of preventing them from articulating their own experience. In contrast, our data suggest that interviews can be affirming, empowering and constructive experiences of being heard and listened to.

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