

# article

## Researching violence with children: Experiences and lessons from the UK and South Africa

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The impact of violence on children's health and development has had growing attention in global and national politics. Research on children's experiences of violence has increased in recent years, and this article aims to add to this literature by highlighting key messages and learning points from the experiences of researchers who have worked with children and violence across the different contexts of the UK and South Africa. As qualitative and quantitative researchers, our concepts, aims, methods, resources and approaches were very different, but we all faced similar challenges in working with children and violence in contexts where adults' views about what violence counted predominated. We argue that children's participation in research and highlighting children's own understandings, agency and negotiations in relation to violence are crucial for challenging sometimes unhelpful taken-for-granted views about the impact of violence on children's lives.

**key words** childhood • cross-national research • child abuse  
• family violence • domestic violence • independent migrant children

### Introduction

Violence against children is a global problem with a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of children and young people (Pinheiro, 2006). In 2012 it was estimated that there were 95,000 children who died as a result of homicide, accounting for one out of every five homicides across the world in that year (UNICEF, 2014). While many international conventions and treaties, such as the 1989 United Nations

1 Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), have set out state responsibilities  
 2 to protect children from all forms of violence, monitoring exercises on progress and  
 3 implementation indicate that much remains to be done (WHO, 2014). Uncovering  
 4 the extent, nature and impact of violence against children across different contexts  
 5 continues to be a challenge for policy, practice and for research.

6 This article brings together researchers who have employed different methods  
 7 of researching children and young people's experiences of violence and adversity  
 8 across the different contexts of the UK and South Africa. It builds on our previous  
 9 individual work on theory and methods of research with children (Radford, 2012;  
 10 Cluver et al, 2013; Lombard, 2013, 2014, 2015; Katz, 2015a, 2015b, 2016; Meinck  
 11 et al, 2015a). Young people's position in childhood has an impact on how they  
 12 construct and understand violence, and how adults position children – in an often  
 13 contradictory way – as 'victims', 'perpetrators', 'survivors', 'agents' and 'participants' in  
 14 research. Drawing on five different studies (see Table 1), we reflect on learning from  
 15 our experiences of conducting research with children, how children are positioned as  
 16 research participants, as social actors, and how adult researchers recount what they say.

17 Although as researchers each of us approached our particular studies using different  
 18 methodologies, informed by a range of different concepts and theoretical approaches,  
 19 we all had the shared understanding of how cultural and social contexts contribute to  
 20 experiences and constructions of 'childhood' and 'violence'. James and Prout (1997)  
 21 theorise childhood as both a social institution and as being defined by the actions of  
 22 individual children. For Jenks, childhood is a,

23  
 24 ... social status delineated by boundaries that vary through time and from  
 25 society to society but which are incorporated within the social structure and  
 26 thus manifested through and formative of certain typical forms of conduct.  
 27 Childhood then always relates to a particular cultural setting. (Jenks, 1996: 7)

28  
 29 As such, it is important not to imply that the definitions and experiences of children  
 30 and young people are timeless and universal, or that age defines experience and  
 31 knowledge. The concepts of 'childhood' and 'age' vary across time, space and cultures  
 32 (Christensen and James, 2000), with childhood embraced as a social construction  
 33 'constituted at a particular moment in time and point in space' (James and Prout, 1997:  
 34 28). Understanding the context from which knowledge about children's different  
 35 experiences of 'childhood' and 'violence' are produced was a feature of all the five  
 36 research studies. Culture, time, space and place influenced, in different ways, how  
 37 we each approached the design, conduct and interpretation of meanings derived  
 38 from our research in the different contexts in which we were working. Proximity  
 39 and distance, as temporality (age, notions of childhood and adulthood) and spatiality  
 40 (home, public space, location of violence, etc) (Lombard, 2013) were concepts that  
 41 had resonance for each of the studies.

42 The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined violence as being:

43  
 44 ... the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against  
 45 oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results  
 46 in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm,  
 47 maldevelopment, or deprivation. (quoted in Krug et al, 2002, 1084)

1 Violence may be physical, sexual, psychological or involve deprivation and neglect.

2 Another shared concern among all contributors was a commitment to hearing  
3 what children and young people themselves say about violence, recognising their  
4 agency (James et al, 1998) as participants in the research process as well as in relation  
5 to making sense of their experiences of victimisation and as perpetrators. Social  
6 constructions of childhood in Western philosophy and social policy have drawn  
7 extensively on the positioning of children as either vulnerable, as 'victims' of violence  
8 and abuse, or as dangerous (Jenks, 1996; Radford, 2012). The positioning of children  
9 as victims, which is reflected in the 1989 UN CRC, tends to be very dominant in  
10 shaping how governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the global  
11 South frame children (UNICEF, 1989). This poses a challenge for research on violence  
12 against children as 'Child abuse is real but it is equally a device for constituting a  
13 reality' (Jenks, 1996: 95). Perceptions of violence change over time, across cultures,  
14 according to context and according to whose voices are heard when defining what  
15 is legitimate, what is normalised or what counts as violence or abuse. Adults have  
16 historically shaped the definitions of crime and violence so that across time, different  
17 settings, contexts and relationships, many acts of violence towards children and young  
18 people have not been recognised as 'crimes' or 'violence' (Finkelhor, 2008; Radford,  
19 2012). Violent and abusive adults in particular try to deny, cover up or define their  
20 behaviour as something other than violence. Consequently this makes the process  
21 of identifying and recognising child abuse and neglect within research and in child  
22 protection services more difficult (Brandon et al, 2008). Adult researchers occupy  
23 positions of power when reporting what children say about their experiences of  
24 violence. Adult perspectives on what type of violence and which incidents matter  
25 have predominated research.

26 On the other hand, in some contexts, as we show, concerns about children's  
27 vulnerability as victims of violence in need of adult protection can divert attention  
28 from children's own strategies, capacities and agency. Some forms of violence against  
29 children, sexual abuse or sexual exploitation especially, evoke strong emotional  
30 responses from adults. Concerns about children's vulnerability to violence can shift  
31 the focus away from the multiple and compounding adversities and challenges a  
32 child may face, such as poverty, discrimination or lack of citizenship. Keeping sight  
33 of how context would influence what adult researchers hear and understand and  
34 what children are able to say was relevant for all contributors. Each of us faced  
35 similar challenges in identifying approaches that were relevant, meaningful, ethical  
36 and respectful for researching violence against children across the different contexts  
37 in which we were working.

## 38 39 **The five studies**

40  
41 In the rest of this article we draw on experiences gained from five different research  
42 studies to highlight the importance of using appropriate theoretically informed  
43 methodologies when talking to young people about violence. The five studies had  
44 different objectives, resources and constraints. Two were large-scale epidemiological  
45 surveys carried out by research teams, one with a sample drawn from the general  
46 population in the UK (Radford et al, 2011, 2013) and the other conducted in two  
47 South African provinces: Mpumalanga and Western Cape (Meinck et al, 2015a,  
48 2015b, 2016). Three of the studies were conducted by solo researchers and employed

in-depth qualitative methods. Two of these took place in the UK and one in South Africa. Lombard explored children's perceptions of men's violence towards women. Katz (2015b, 2016) interviewed mothers and children about how living through domestic violence had affected their mother and child relationships. Mahati (2015) used ethnographic methods in a South African border town to research aid workers and independent migrant children's understandings of childhood and vulnerability (an independent migrant child is a child who is living apart from or who has no adult carers). Table 1 summarises the key features of the five studies.

Despite the differences in design, purpose, methods and contexts, similar issues emerged causing us all to confront in some way our personal understandings of researching violence and childhood. We discuss:

**Table 1: The five case studies**

Title	Author	Purpose	Methods	Sample	Context
<b>Young Carers Study</b>	Franziska Meinck	Investigate prevalence, incidence, risks and impact of HIV and violence as well as access barriers to abuse response services	Epidemiological prospective survey of young people using assisted paper-based questionnaires followed up one year later	3,515 vulnerable children and young people aged 10–17	Two South African provinces of Mpumalanga and Western Cape
<b>Child victimisation in the UK</b>	Lorraine Radford	Investigate prevalence, risks and impact of past year and lifetime experiences of childhood victimisation and help-seeking	Epidemiological cross-sectional household-based survey using interviewer-assisted and audio computer-assisted self-interviewing techniques	6,196 participants randomly selected from UK household postal address file; 2,160 were parents of children aged 0–10, 2,275 were children and young people aged 11–17, 1,761 were young adults aged 18–24	All regions of the UK
<b>Domestic violence and mother-child relationships</b>	Emma Katz	Investigate the impacts of domestic abuse on supportiveness between abused mothers and their children, focusing on children and mothers' agency	In-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews, informed by the feminist ethic of care and child-centred approaches	Volunteer sample of 15 mothers and 15 children and young people aged 10–20 recruited from domestic violence services	Domestic violence services in the Midlands region of England

Title	Author	Purpose	Methods	Sample	Context
<b>Young people's understandings of men's violence against women</b>	Nancy Lombard	Investigate young people's understandings of men's violence against women	Qualitative and participatory methods that included an exploratory questionnaire and friendship-based focus group discussions using vignettes	89 children and young people aged 11–12 recruited from five primary schools	Glasgow, Scotland
<b>Migration, childhood and vulnerability</b>	Stanford Mahati	Explore aid workers and independent migrant children's understandings of 'childhood' and 'vulnerability'	Ethnographic. Field-based observations and interviews	Volunteer sample of approximately 20 aid workers and 100 independent migrant adolescents from Zimbabwe recruited in a border town	Musina, a South African border town with high levels of violence and crime

- How different ways of conceptualising children and adults inform the methods that we used, the questions that we asked, and the ways that we produce and understand findings.
- The different contexts in which research with children takes place and how methods of participation influence what can be done and our perceptions of meanings.
- The view that research with children on violence is inevitably difficult, harmful and young people are reluctant to take part.
- What violence in children's lives gets discussed in research, and how this relates to the positioning of 'childhood' and 'violence' in different contexts.

### Asking about violence: child victimisation in the UK

All contributors to this article faced the problem of asking children and young people about experiences of violence in a context where what is recognised as childhood violence has been largely defined by adults. The purpose of Radford's study was to conduct a survey of children's experiences of abuse and neglect to measure the prevalence, impact, risk and protective factors and sources of help or support accessed. The survey was to be conducted in randomly selected households across the UK. This raised ethical issues regarding the safety and privacy of child informants as well as methodological issues about who to ask, what to ask and how to ask.

Who should be asked about experiences of violence in childhood is now a less contentious area of debate in research. Earlier research on violence in childhood was largely based on the accounts of adults, partly due to the belief that it would be 'unethical' to ask children themselves (Cawson et al, 2000). Recognition of children's rights has encouraged more direct research with children and a growing awareness that the ethical issues are important but can be addressed, especially if children themselves

1 have meaningful participation in the research design. Radford's research was committed  
2 to this direct approach. Parents of children aged under 11, children aged 11–17 and  
3 their parent and young adults aged 18–24 were interviewed. As described in other  
4 publications (Radford and Ellis, 2012), a rigorous, ongoing process of ethical scrutiny  
5 was set up. Young survivors gave expert advice on ethical procedures for follow-up and  
6 support for children at risk. Support for children, young people and adults was given  
7 through an established network of contacts with Childline, the NSPCC National  
8 Helpline, independent counselling and child protection services.

9 How and what to ask children in a survey is crucially important as the questions  
10 asked limit what can be said, raising the possibility that children are only able to give  
11 partial accounts of their experiences. Questions can often be framed by an 'adultist'  
12 agenda rather than by issues that matter to young people themselves. A number of  
13 systematic reviews of the global prevalence of violence against children have been  
14 undertaken (for example, by Barth et al, 2013; Stoltenborgh et al, 2013). These show  
15 wide variations in findings, and there is consensus that this is mostly due to the  
16 conceptual and methodological differences that exist across different studies. Lower  
17 rates of violence against children are typically found if definitions of violence employed  
18 in surveys are narrow (Andrews et al, 2004). Many studies have focused on just one  
19 type of behaviour, for example, a child's exposure to domestic violence (Meltzer  
20 et al, 2009) or parental violence excluding physical discipline (Stoltenborgh et al,  
21 2013), yet it is increasingly recognised that different types of violence may co-exist  
22 and overlap (Finkelhor et al, 2009). While much research on child abuse and neglect  
23 has focused on violence from caregivers or from adults, child protection policy and  
24 practice increasingly recognises that for a considerable proportion of cases of sexual  
25 and intimate partner violence towards children and young people, it is peers who  
26 are responsible (Barter and Berridge, 2010). Lower prevalence rates for children's  
27 experiences of violence are found if the focus of a survey is 'child abuse and neglect'  
28 (seen largely as only violence by adults), 'child maltreatment' (which includes some  
29 violence by peers *in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power*; see Krug et  
30 al, 2002), 'violence against children' (all acts adults define as being 'violent') or 'child  
31 victimisation' (all forms of interpersonal victimisation by adults or peers likely to  
32 cause potential or actual harm; see Finkelhor, 2008). Victimisation researchers argue  
33 that violence perpetrated by other young people is not necessarily less harmful than  
34 that perpetrated by adults, and there is evidence to support this (Arseneault et al,  
35 2006; Finkelhor et al, 2006). As experiences of violence often have overlapping and  
36 accumulative impacts, it is important for prevention to study and understand how  
37 these influence children's vulnerabilities (Finkelhor et al, 2009).

38 The UK survey was therefore designed to ask children and young people about  
39 all their experiences of victimisation, during childhood and in the past year, building  
40 into the study questions about harm caused, help sought and overall wellbeing so  
41 that relationships between experiences, subjective wellbeing and outcomes could be  
42 explored. In a context where violence is unrecognised, children and young people  
43 may be unable to name their experiences as 'violence'. Following advice from a  
44 group of international academic experts, age-appropriate, standardised measures of  
45 child victimisation that ask directly about specific acts experienced and that have  
46 been validated in research were selected (Finkelhor et al, 2005). The measures were  
47 tested in advance first, with a group of children who had experienced a high level of  
48

1 violence, with parents, and then with over 300 participants from randomly selected  
2 households.

3 As was the experience for all contributors to this article, decisions about the method  
4 of asking about violence are influenced by context, practical, methodological and  
5 ethical considerations. Three common approaches have been taken in national surveys  
6 of violence against children – using an interviewer-administered questionnaire, a  
7 self-completion paper questionnaire and Computer-Assisted Self Interviewing  
8 (CASI) and Audio CASI (ACASI) methods, where the interviewee is handed a  
9 laptop computer and is asked questions on screen or via headphones for ACASI, and  
10 responds directly on screen rather than being directly asked by an interviewer. Each  
11 approach has advantages and disadvantages. Interviewer-administered questionnaires  
12 allow an interviewer to pick up and respond to the participant's own questions,  
13 uncertainties, concerns and any signs of distress. However, in the context of a home  
14 where the victim and perpetrator may both be living, the questions themselves could  
15 be difficult to ask, even if a perpetrator is not actually in the household at the time of  
16 interview. Asking a participant about experiences of violence in a private way may be  
17 less upsetting than asking them directly face-to-face. The ACASI and CASI methods  
18 have been used in other household surveys, notably the Crime Survey in England,  
19 and have shown higher rates of response for sensitive questions about violence than  
20 interviewer-administered methods (Mirlees-Black, 1995; Burton et al, 2015). The  
21 CASI method allows faster and simpler navigation through a complicated survey  
22 where many of the questions might not be relevant to an individual. ACASI gives  
23 the child some control over the interview process allowing them to skip questions,  
24 answer or not answer, without the adult interviewer knowing. Radford found the  
25 method also gave young people who wanted to talk in private about issues raised  
26 in the survey an opportunity to ask for this without alerting others who may have  
27 been present in the house.

28 The power relationship between an adult interviewer and child research participant  
29 is an important issue influencing what might be said in any research with children.  
30 Where a large number of interviews have to be gathered in a limited time frame,  
31 the ACASI method enables a private space to develop between child participant and  
32 adult interviewer. In this space there is scope for the child participant to have some  
33 agency and control over what is and is not said. There are many limitations in the  
34 data achieved from surveys with pre-defined questions, but setting up the research  
35 in the way described provided an opportunity for children and young people to tell  
36 us about the range of experiences of victimisation they had and what was harmful,  
37 thereby challenging some common assumptions about certain forms of victimisation,  
38 such as peer victimisation, being harmless. Asking about all types of victimisation  
39 also highlighted how children who experienced 'polyvictimisation', that is, several  
40 different types of victimisation, at home, at school and in the community, had the  
41 poorest outcomes (Radford et al, 2011). Asking about past year experiences further  
42 allowed the researchers to explore patterns of victimisation for different age groups  
43 and genders, challenging common assumptions that adolescents are less at risk. Other  
44 contributors to this article faced different constraints and had different opportunities  
45 influencing how they asked young participants about experiences of violence and  
46 how they positioned themselves as adult researchers working within the context of  
47 adultist child protection frameworks. The next case study of research by Meinck also

1 found that children often want to be involved and to be asked their views about  
 2 experiences of violence  
 3

### 4 **Positive aspects of research participation: Young Carers Study**

5  
 6 While all five studies considered the importance and practicalities of children's  
 7 participation in research, Meinck's study, part of the Young Carers Study, is used to  
 8 illustrate the benefits of participating in research on violence. Children's participation  
 9 is a fundamental right, although in research, participation should be meaningful,  
 10 respectful, ethical and safe for the children involved (Lansdown and O'Kane, 2014).  
 11 This is particularly so for children who have experienced violence where there are  
 12 risks associated with being publicly identified as a victim. Similar to the previous  
 13 case study, Meinck and colleagues were tasked with collecting data on children's  
 14 experiences of violence via a household survey, but in the low resource settings in  
 15 rural and urban areas of South Africa. The Young Carers Study sought to investigate  
 16 the impacts of HIV and violence on children in a prospective cohort of vulnerable  
 17 adolescents. Prevalence, incidence, perpetrators, locations, risk factors of child abuse  
 18 victimisation and barriers to services were examined. Children aged 10–17 ( $N=3,515$ ,  
 19 57% female) were recruited from four health districts in randomly selected census  
 20 enumeration areas using door-to-door sampling in two provinces: Mpumalanga  
 21 and Western Cape. Participants were re-interviewed a year later to investigate the  
 22 temporality of predictors of abuse.

23 In contrast to the previous case study, participants in the Young Carers Study had  
 24 limited access to support and advice services. Electricity was not always available,  
 25 making it difficult to use CASI delivered via laptops or tablets, so paper-based  
 26 questionnaires, designed as teen magazines, were used. General literacy levels within  
 27 the population were low, so there were challenges in using a self-administered paper  
 28 survey. Employing interviewers to help young people with the survey raised concerns  
 29 from expert reviewers of social desirability bias – young people might give answers  
 30 they thought the interviewer expected. Social norms about what counted as 'violence',  
 31 what was acceptable, justifiable or an everyday experience, would influence what  
 32 could be said. Furthermore, South Africa has a mandatory reporting law stipulating  
 33 referrals for all children at risk of significant harm, and this might deter disclosure  
 34 in interview.

35 However, following a pilot and consultation with child protection professionals  
 36 and the study's teen advisory group, an interviewer-assisted approach was selected  
 37 as the best option in this context. Young people completed a one-hour interviewer-  
 38 assisted questionnaire in the local language of their choice (Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho,  
 39 Swati, English and Tsonga). Interviewers were selected for their empathy and trained  
 40 in working sensitively with vulnerable children. Participants were interviewed in a  
 41 place of their choosing, such as, under a secluded tree to ensure confidentiality where  
 42 households offered little privacy. Participants were granted confidentiality throughout  
 43 the study unless they were considered to be at risk of significant harm or requested  
 44 help. In these instances, referral options were discussed with the young person, and  
 45 their wishes were considered throughout the referral process. These processes were  
 46 carefully planned and set up considering the often considerable disjuncture between  
 47 ethics committee requirements and on-the-ground availability of services. Referral  
 48 processes were designed to cater for the specific context in which services are often



1 overburdened and service delivery hampered by overworked and under-resourced staff  
 2 (Cluver et al, 2015). Thus, human resources and transport were made available by the  
 3 research project to facilitate access. It was project policy to set up close collaborations  
 4 with existing local services to insure sustainable use while recognising that accessing  
 5 services would become more difficult for participants at the end of the project due  
 6 to unavailability of transport. Children were accompanied to the services by their  
 7 original interviewer, where appropriate and requested. This enabled them to navigate  
 8 the various services and maintain a continuing relationship with the person they  
 9 disclosed to in the first instance. In total, 664 referrals were made to a wide variety  
 10 of services including child protection, HIV testing and counselling, antiretroviral  
 11 adherence counselling, immigration, birth registration, infectious diseases, mental  
 12 health, women's shelters and rape crisis.

13 Much has been said about the potential harm of conducting research with children  
 14 and young people on sensitive topics such as violence, and university ethics committees  
 15 typically focus on what cannot be done (Graham et al, 2012). The Young Carers  
 16 Study found that there are positive aspects to children's participation in research on  
 17 violence that need to be considered when weighing up a study's benefits and potential  
 18 for harm. Previous investigations on child participation in research has shown the  
 19 following benefits for young people (Lansdown and O'Kane, 2014):

- 20
- 21 • it can provide information and insights into children's lives to inform legislation  
 22 and policy, services and outcomes;
- 23 • children empowered by participation can become effective advocates for the  
 24 realisation of their own rights;
- 25 • children acquire skills and competencies through participation;
- 26 • it leads to better child protection because children involved are better able to  
 27 articulate their concerns;
- 28 • it promotes civic engagement and active citizenship;
- 29 • it builds accountability and promotes good governance.
- 30

31 All of these potential advantages are relevant to children's participation in research on  
 32 violence. Adult researchers' expectations regarding children's experiences of taking  
 33 part in violence research may well change if they ask participants for feedback on  
 34 positive and negative experiences. Asking about violence can improve child safety.  
 35 Many child rape victims in the Young Carers Study disclosed their experiences for  
 36 the first time to the research team. They felt comfortable to disclose because they had  
 37 the undivided attention of an empathetic adult and did not have to fear judgement  
 38 or victim blaming.

39 The other studies similarly found that children's participation in research on violence  
 40 can be a positive experience. Radford found that the majority of children and young  
 41 people reported their involvement in the survey had been positive and worthwhile  
 42 (Radford and Ellis, 2012). Mahati helped children who wanted his assistance to report  
 43 their problems to service providers but did not report a case if a child feared that  
 44 doing so would compromise his or her security. In Katz's study children and mothers  
 45 benefited from the opportunities the interviews gave them to identify ways in which  
 46 they had supported each other through domestic violence. This was not something  
 47 that the participants had given in-depth thought to before they were interviewed  
 48

(Katz, 2015b), and it may have helped them to recognise their own strengths and abilities to play a positive role within their families.

Talking about violence can be a positive, empowering experience for children. It can help to challenge unhelpful assumptions about violence and shift norms or behaviour. As Lombard's research with children in schools shows, it can be helpful because it validates experiences and names them as 'violence'. Lombard found that when violence was not named by those in authority (usually teachers or parents), then the young people were more likely to normalise such behaviours. For the majority of young people 'real violence' was physical, resulted in injuries, happened in a public place, between adult men who were sanctioned (sent to jail). Children's experiences of violence were less 'real' as they generally lacked these essential elements. If this same sequence was replicated at school, for example, if boys physically fought in public, if they were told by teachers or playground assistants that their behaviour was wrong and were chastised for it, both boys and girls termed this 'real violence'. However, girls had been pushed, shoved, kicked, followed, called sexualised names by their male peers, but these experiences did not fit the standardised constellation structure of 'real' violence: age (adult), gender (man), space (public), action (physical) and crucially, official reaction or consequence. Time and time again the girls, when they approached teachers or those in authority, were dismissed for telling tales, ignored because of the 'trivial' nature of their complaint or relayed that old adage, 'he's only doing it because he likes you'. Girls' experiences were minimised and the behaviour normalised (Lombard, 2015).

Lombard's work shows the value of questioning violence as 'everyday interactions' that are normalised (Dobash and Dobash, 1992). The feminist project of 'naming' involves 'making visible what was invisible, defining as unacceptable what was acceptable and insisting what was naturalized is problematic' (Kelly, 1988: 139). All of the case studies discussed here confirmed the importance of the naming process for young people, enabling them to voice their own concerns, using their own language and on their own terms. Enabling children to name experiences as 'violence' helps us all to understand and challenge what has happened to them, to move 'private' acts into the public domain, and to shift the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

## **Conceptualising adults and children: domestic violence and mother-child relationships**

Katz's research with children and mothers illustrates how theory can inform the design of the research, the questions asked about experiences of violence, and how researchers position children in relation to these experiences. Katz's study of the relationship between mothers and children is situated within an area of research that has traditionally positioned both children and adult women as 'problem' victims of domestic violence (Radford and Hester, 2015). As Katz (2015a) explores, much previous research into domestic violence, children and mothers has focused on the adverse impact of abuse for children and the consequences of their mothers' (limited) capacity to parent. While it is, of course, urgently necessary to recognise and be prepared to act on the harm caused by men who are abusive towards children and partners, it is an unhelpful child protection strategy to ignore the agency and efforts already made by adults and children trying to cope. Katz (2015a) observed that

1 within this literature on domestic violence and children, parent–child relationships  
2 are often constructed as unilateral dependency relationships in which children,  
3 who are vulnerable, are/should be receivers of care from the parent, most often  
4 the abused mother, who should provide it (Callaghan, 2015). The gendered nature  
5 of this positioning of mothers and children in the context of domestic violence is  
6 rendered neutral in much of the child protection literature where only ‘parents’ are  
7 mentioned. A child supporting a mother is often seen by adult researchers as a role  
8 reversal, ‘parentification’ and overburdening of children with adult responsibilities  
9 (Katz, 2015a). Drawing on knowledge gained from the fields of childhood studies  
10 and developmental psychology (Morrow, 2003; Oliphant and Kuczynski, 2011),  
11 Katz’s starting point was that children are active agents within their families, and that  
12 mutually supportive parent–child relationships are commonplace within families.

13 Katz conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 30 participants (15  
14 mothers and 15 children and young people aged 10–20) to explore whether mutual  
15 support between a parent and child was also commonplace in families affected by  
16 domestic violence. All of the participants had separated from perpetrators of domestic  
17 violence (the children’s fathers/father figures), and were in the process of recovering  
18 from their experiences at the time of interview. Taking an approach that sought  
19 to understand children and mothers’ agency and their strengths in the context of  
20 violence and adversity, Katz asked questions about how mothers and children actively  
21 supported one another’s recovery after domestic violence (Katz, 2015b), and gave  
22 her participants the opportunity to discuss the positive and negative aspects of this  
23 support. Doing this enabled her to gain an understanding of how children felt about  
24 the practices of supportiveness in their mother–child relationships.

25 Children and young people’s accounts did not support the unilateral dependency  
26 view of their relationship with mothers or the parentification thesis. Most of the  
27 young people interviewed by Katz spoke very positively about the close and mutually  
28 supportive nature of their mother–child relationships: “We’ve helped to make each  
29 other feel better; we’ve given each other support throughout the whole thing” (Grace,  
30 aged 14). Children’s appreciation of mutually supportive mother–child relationships  
31 was particularly evident in their responses to the question: ‘If you had to imagine a  
32 really good relationship between a child and a mother, what would it be like?’

33  
34 ‘Bonded – she’s always there when you need her, and you’re always there  
35 when she needs you.’ (Joe, age 14)

36  
37 ‘Being able to trust them; being able to tell them what’s going on in your  
38 life; being able to support each other through everything.’ (Grace, age 14)

39  
40 Katz’s efforts to ask strengths-based questions also helped to increase many of the  
41 participants’ sense that they were having a positive impact on their mother–child  
42 relationships. Some research participants realised during their interview how much  
43 they had done to support their mother–child relationship (2015b), and this potentially  
44 increased participants’ sense of self-efficacy (Tew et al, 2012). By enabling children  
45 and young people to talk about their agency, Katz was able to propose that a more  
46 nuanced, bilateral model of mother–child relationships could usefully be adopted in  
47 future research with children and domestic violence.

1 Taking account of children's agency in response to experiences of violence was a  
2 feature in different ways across the other four studies. Children and young people  
3 exercising their agency through help-seeking and support was a core theme for  
4 Radford, Lombard and Meinck. Questions about risks and protective factors, in  
5 addition to questions about the prevalence and impact of experiences of violence, were  
6 included in the surveys by Meinck (Meinck et al, 2015a) and by Radford (Radford  
7 et al, 2011). This enabled experiences of individual, relationship and community-  
8 level strengths to be investigated, with scope to inform safeguarding strategies that  
9 build on and enhance these strengths. Radford's research asked children and young  
10 people about help-seeking and included questions about their own actions and use  
11 of informal support such as peer networks, identifying the importance of peers in  
12 the process of recognition, naming abuse, resisting and finding help and support  
13 (Radford et al, 2011). Meinck's research had a longitudinal perspective, enabling her  
14 to re-interview participants 12 months after the initial survey to identify change over  
15 time and to establish temporality (Meinck et al, 2015b). From this emerged findings  
16 on informal, peer support, and a girl's own agency in establishing protective networks.  
17 Peer support acted as a protective factor against sexual violence for girls, and was found  
18 to moderate the relationship between baseline assault and subsequent sexual abuse.

19 Lombard's study showed support networks could develop as part of the research  
20 process. In talking about everyday sexism and harassment, the girls in her study were  
21 able to highlight that their experiences were not individual or isolated incidents.  
22 Girls were able to 'name' and recognise their own experiences from the narratives  
23 of their peers. This collective consciousness was a critical step in making sense of  
24 individual disadvantage and wider inequalities in the present and future lives of these  
25 11-year-old girls.

## 26 27 **Violence in contexts of migration, childhood and vulnerability** 28

29 Like Katz, in Mahati's research young people's agency in the face of violence was a key  
30 area of concern. Mahati's study of childhood and vulnerability was situated in a South  
31 African border town, characterised by high levels of violence, poverty, unemployment  
32 and large numbers of undocumented economic migrants from Zimbabwe and other  
33 African countries. Using ethnographic methods, Mahati conducted interviews in  
34 situ (Anderson and Jones, 2009), cumulative, serial qualitative interviews (Murray  
35 et al, 2009), and observations with migrant children and young people, and with  
36 humanitarian aid workers. These methods led to independent migrant children being  
37 keen to participate in the study and reporting feeling empowered by the chance to  
38 discuss their experiences at their own pace, under their own terms and conditions.

39 Mahati's starting point was to develop an understanding of the types and nature  
40 of violence in the area (Mahati, 2015). One of the storylines that emerged told of  
41 independent migrant boys who worked as human smugglers sharing the workspace  
42 with adult smugglers and magumaguma<sup>2</sup> around the South African and Zimbabwean  
43 border. They deceived migrants without proper documentation that it was safe to use  
44 pathways in the bush to cross the border (see Rutherford, 2008; Mahati, 2012, 2015).  
45 State and non-state actors, including independent children and migrants, narrated  
46 'harrowing stories of kidnap, being stoned, stabbed by knives, savagely beaten up,  
47 robbed of all the money they had, raped, gang raped and hearing that migrants were  
48 killed by magumaguma' (Mahati, 2015: 23). Magumaguma often forced migrants to

1 commit heinous crimes at gun or knife point against fellow migrants with independent  
2 children as witnesses or forced participants. In one incident, 'a boy aged 15 was forced  
3 to have sex with his mother as the other siblings and migrants watched. Overwhelmed  
4 by shame, the boy soon after arriving disappeared from his family. Other migrants  
5 heard him vowing never to see his mother again. This encounter with magumaguma  
6 turned him into an independent migrant child' (Mahati, 2015: 24). Situations like  
7 this influenced independent children's perceptions of themselves as victims and  
8 participants in violent acts.

9 For humanitarian aid workers at the border, the way migrant children were  
10 represented and understood in terms of childhood and vulnerability was shaped  
11 by the violence they were exposed to or perpetrated. Mahati found contradictory  
12 approaches to childhood, gender and vulnerability among the humanitarian aid  
13 workers. The presence of independent children, particularly girls, in the border town  
14 often disturbed humanitarian workers, generated heated discussion among themselves  
15 and between them and the children. Sexual violence often dominated discussions on  
16 violence and crime. Young female migrant children were generally viewed as more  
17 vulnerable to violence and compelled to behave 'appropriately' or in girl/woman-like  
18 ways. Humanitarian workers were often quicker to intervene to protect migrant girls  
19 in violent spaces than migrant boys. Migrant boys were seen as less at risk, especially  
20 from sexual violence, when living in dangerous environments, stronger than girls and  
21 better able to protect themselves. Migrant boys often reinforced this point by making  
22 their own efforts to 'rescue' migrant girls by quickly reporting to intervention agents  
23 to place them in places of safety.

24 Aid workers often associated childhood with 'innocence', but understandings  
25 of childhood tended to be situational: they shifted between official and unofficial  
26 interactions with children. The dominant official position for aid workers was that  
27 children would behave in child-like and non-violent ways. But not all independent  
28 children behaved as expected, a situation that was at times normalised by aid workers  
29 during unofficial interactions with children. Some humanitarian workers tried to  
30 understand and sympathise with children who committed acts of violence, highlighting  
31 their innocence as children, lack of choices and structural inequalities. Faced with  
32 peer pressure, a critical shortage of food, jobs and pressure to send remittances to  
33 parents and siblings in Zimbabwe, some independent children were seen as engaged  
34 in 'survival violence'. Independent children's behaviour fell, as Droz said, 'outside  
35 traditional moral values and social structures, and [they] develop[ed] violent and  
36 illegal strategies to survive' (2006: 352).

37 Some children, by their own admission, said they engaged in violent criminal acts  
38 to eke out a living. But they did not see themselves as weak or as 'victims', labels they  
39 often embraced during official interactions with aid workers as they sought to access  
40 aid. "We might be children but we live at this border. We know how to survive here",  
41 explained a 13-year-old boy. Thabo, aged 15, said if migrants they were smuggling  
42 across the border tried to refuse or reduce the amount they were supposed to pay him,  
43 he often responded by speaking in a menacing voice. He also revealed that sometimes  
44 in the spirit of bravado, he took on the persona of magumaguma and threatened to  
45 stone migrants refusing to cooperate. The migrants, not sure of their surroundings  
46 in the security zone, would immediately honour the deal.

47 Undocumented migrants who ignored children's advice were violently robbed,  
48 raped, and even killed by magumaguma. The official position that the children who

1 committed these dangerous acts of violence were victims of structural inequalities  
2 was difficult for aid workers to sustain. They rationalised that since these children  
3 were engaging in criminal and violent activities, they should be characterised as such.  
4 This worked to legitimise aid workers' non-intervention when they received reports  
5 of children being violently beaten up by the police. Independent migrant children  
6 who worked as human smugglers were seen as people who, due to 'self-destructive  
7 agency' (Gigengack, 2008: 216) and gullibility to peer pressure, made poor choices.  
8 Drawing from the dominant discourse of protecting children's 'best interests', this  
9 resulted in removing them from a corrupt and dangerous environment and sending  
10 them to 'places of safety' where aid workers assumed 'in loco parentis' status. But  
11 these intervention efforts and understanding of children's best interests were often  
12 rejected by some of these children as they meant removing them from their sources of  
13 livelihood, the primary reason for migrating to South Africa. This exposes the challenge  
14 related to understanding and dealing with independent children's vulnerability.

15 In a related matter, Mahati found tension between independent children and aid  
16 workers' understanding of situations, with the latter often viewing children's actions  
17 using the lens of internationally accepted norms of childhood (dependant, with family,  
18 needing protection), which sat uneasily with the context in which the children lived.  
19 Paradoxically, this lens shifted the focus from the interconnected structural inequalities  
20 (of violence, poverty, lack of citizenship, etc) towards 'expected' norms of behaviour  
21 for children (for example, non-violence). Enabling young people themselves to talk  
22 about their experiences challenged commonly held views of children, particularly  
23 those with 'out of home' childhoods (Mahati, 2015), as either victims or misguided  
24 perpetrators of violence, and opens the way to explore more nuanced and contextual  
25 approaches to understanding children's needs. This case study reinforces the point that  
26 researchers should position children as competent social actors and use methodologies  
27 that enable them to explore different and often contradictory life-worlds.

## 28 29 **Learning from collaboration**

30  
31 Much has been learned in the past few years from the shift in focus from research  
32 *about* children towards research *with* children that recognises children as active subjects  
33 who shape the world in which we live. Lived experiences of childhood have an  
34 impact on how children and young people experience violence and understand  
35 it. These experiences are not homogeneous and are influenced by time, place and  
36 context. Reflecting on what we learned as adult researchers using different qualitative  
37 and quantitative methodologies and across different contexts has given us a greater  
38 appreciation of how things could be done differently. We all faced similar challenges  
39 over how to make the research child-friendly, how to make it participatory, how to  
40 deal with ethical issues, how to adapt it to the context in which we were working,  
41 and how to create an environment in which children and young people could talk or  
42 have a voice. While researchers have rightly stressed the ethical risk of harm to children  
43 raised by research about violence, it is important to also take into account that having  
44 the opportunity to name experiences as violence can be a positive and empowering  
45 experience. Researchers need to ask children and young people more often about how  
46 they feel about having taken part in research. For each of us, children's participation  
47 in the design and creation of the research was crucial for understanding the context  
48 and for challenging taken-for-granted views about the nature of violence, the impact

1 on children and their relationships with peers and with adults. In particular, whatever  
 2 methods were used for the research, highlighting children's agency in violence helped  
 3 us to ask questions about their own understandings, resources and coping responses  
 4 in context, opening doors to new knowledge that can inform better prevention and  
 5 response. This is crucial for informing policy and practice responses in all settings,  
 6 but especially where access to support is limited.

7  
 8 **Notes**

9 <sup>1</sup> Corresponding author.

10 <sup>2</sup> Mostly male criminals who way-lay undocumented migrants using illegal entry points  
 11 on both sides of the Limpopo River, and violently rob people of their valuables such as  
 12 mobile phones, clothes and money.

13  
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 17 University of Witwatersrand for hosting the event.

18  
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