

“I try to think about something else”: Children’s understanding of their situation and well-being when having experienced intimate partner violence

Anna Georgsson Staf

Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, 2013

Avhandling för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i psykologi, som med vederbörligt tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakulteten vid Göteborgs universitet kommer att offentligen försvaras fredagen den 13 december kl. 13.00 i sal F1, Psykologiska institutionen, Haraldsgatan 1, Göteborg.

Fackultetsopponent: Professor Gunnar Carlberg, Ericastiftelsen, Stockholm

Föreliggande avhandling grundar sig på följande artiklar:

- I. Georgsson, A., Almqvist, K., & Broberg, A. G. (2011). Naming the unmentionable: How children exposed to intimate partner violence articulate their experiences. *Journal of Family Violence*, 26(2), 117–129.
- II. Georgsson, A., Almqvist, K., & Broberg, A. G. (2011). Dissimilarity in vulnerability: Self-reported symptoms among children with experiences of Intimate Partner Violence. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 42(5), 539–556.
- III. Staf, A. G., & Almqvist, K. (2013). How children with experiences of intimate partner violence towards the mother understand and relate to their father. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (published online) <http://ccp.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/09/26/1359104513503352>
- IV. Staf, A. G., & Almqvist, K. (2013). I do not like to do so but I have to: Understanding of anger and peer conflicts among children exposed to intimate partner violence (submitted manuscript)



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Abstract

Staf, A. G. (2013). *“I try to think about something else”*: Children’s understanding of their situation and well-being when having experienced intimate partner violence. Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

The aim of the research for this thesis was to explore how children describe their experiences of violence and their situation after experiencing violence against their mother. Witnessing intimate partner violence (IPV) is a frightening experience that affects children’s development and well-being. Despite an increased interest in how IPV affects children, only a limited number of studies are based on children’s reports. How people remember and integrate stressful life events have implications on their physical and emotional well-being. It is thus important to find out how children exposed to IPV understand and handle their experiences.

The research was based on data gathered from a group of children whose mothers signed up for a group activity for abused women and their children. *Study I* examined the experiences of IPV from the perspective of children. Most children confirmed that their mother had been the victim of abuse but had difficulties describing these experiences. Narrations were often incoherent and difficult to fully understand. In contrast, most of the children seemed to find it easier to describe their own actions during violence and conflicts. *Study II* examined children’s own reports of symptoms. Children with experiences of IPV reported more symptoms overall than non-exposed children. The relationship to the abuser and children’s symptoms was different for boys and for girls. This meant that girls who had continued contact with the abusive father reported a higher rate of mental health problems. Among children with experiences of custody disputes or other judicial processes, age rather than gender was connected to differences in self-reported symptoms. Younger children with experiences of judicial processes reported more mental health problems than did those with no experience. The aim of *Study III* was to describe how children understand and relate to their father. The children’s understanding was built on different versions of the father and his actions: those experienced by the child and those recounted to them. Children conveyed a sense of being trapped or entangled in a conflict and they seemed to deem it was unsafe to express their own needs and desires. The aim of *Study IV* was to learn more about how children exposed to IPV understand their own anger and conflicts with peers. The results show that children with experiences of IPV consider anger and conflicts to be complicated. Children’s understanding of protesting as being meaningless or their anger as uncontrollable could make withdrawal or aggression perceived necessary.

The complexity behind children’s thoughts about and reactions to IPV was clear in all four studies. Fear of not being believed has been described as preventing children from disclosure. For children participating in the presented studies though, the violence was already acknowledged; still they had obvious difficulties in revealing experiences of violence. Although parents were separated and the violence assumed to have ceased, the consequences of IPV still affected the children’s lives.

Keywords: children, intimate partner violence, qualitative research, trauma symptoms, anger, peer conflicts

Anna Georgsson Staf, Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, Box 500, SE-405 30 Gothenburg.

Phone: +46 317 86161696. E-mail: anna.georgsson.staf@psy.gu.se

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