

Chapter #11

IDENTIFYING VIOLENCE

Research on Residential Care Girls' Recognition of Violence

Helena Parkkila, & Mervi Heikkinen

University of Oulu, Finland

ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is the violence descriptions and definitions of girls aged 14-18, who currently live in child protective institutions under the legal responsibility of the public authorities. A total of fifty-seven individual interviews for target group girls were conducted in nineteen residential care institutions in Bulgaria, Finland, Italy and Catalonia, Spain, in the spring of 2013. With the aim of drawing up a general picture of violence recognition among girls, we use a feminist theoretical discussion and definitions of violence to address the gendered and sexualized forms of violence described by the interviewed girls. In all of the countries concerned, the interviewed girls described physical, mental/psychological and verbal violence. The results of this study suggest that there are gaps in girls' recognition of sexual violence and violence towards oneself. Girls in residential care institutions are vulnerable to violence due to their age, gender, race and previous and often cumulative victimization with respect to various forms of violence. The study contributes to the development of participatory research methods within a feminist social psychology, by presenting a standpoint on the research making process, in particular by focusing on experiences of marginalized girls in residential care institutions and to their empowerment.

Keywords: gender violence, child welfare institution, girls' empowerment, participatory method, feminist epistemology.

1. INTRODUCTION

When offered the chance to participate in a project researching the violence experiences of young girls who currently live in residential care institutions, I was a little shocked: was I ready to confront my own past as a seriously troubled girl? A host of doubts and dreadful visions came to mind. I was afraid that, because of my past, I would be given only limited access to the residential care institutions in question – that the institutions would lack trust in me, perhaps viewing me as a questionable contact for the girls. My personal experiences of residential care represented a drawback which made me doubtful of the success of my collaboration with the institution's workers. However, with my supervisor's encouragement and the view that everyone has 'a past' I embarked on my own journey towards empowering care.

From the feminist epistemological point of view, a situated knowledge and a situated knower are central conceptualizations grounded in the epistemic privilege one has due to membership of a certain group (e.g. Harding 2004). In our study, an access to a residential care institution was crucial as well as building a mutual trust with girls who currently live. Because of one's past we had the possibility to ensure that the voices of the girl residents are heard and properly understood. As a result, the epistemic privilege in question promotes for a deeper understanding of society through social psychological research by being inclusive of the potentially marginalized. Such studies are likely to provide important knowledge how the kind of marginalization can be overcome, while offering a representation of the social world in relation to universal human interests. For a feminist

researcher, this represents an ethical possibility as well as a challenge – while providing access to informants in a qualitative scientific inquiry; it also confers an ethical responsibility to provide knowledge that hopefully leads to the improvement of the informants' situation. As a supervisor of a study, one can have a standpoint to support studies which aim to responsibly contribute to academic knowledge based on marginalized viewpoints, in order to fill certain gaps in knowledge production.

Residential care institutions are long-term care giving facilities where children and youth may live instead of their family home. Children may be placed to residential care as a government action as a last resort, for their own safety and well-being or the safety or others. Reasons behind of the placement may vary, but generally parents may have been unable to provide sufficient care for children and/or children are removed from abusive or unfit homes. Thereupon children and youth who are living in residential care institutions are under the legal responsibility of public authorities. In our study we examined violence recognition of adolescence girls who are living in residential care. In this group of girls the multiple risk factors of violence such as gender, age, possible parental neglect, self-harming behavior intersect. The girl's inequality circumstances makes them essentially invisible and vulnerable in efforts of addressing violence against women.

Since people in general are prone to social influence and to follow internalized cultural norms we wanted to know; how a girl's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors related to violence are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied gendered presence of others. In the interviews girls gave varying accounts when describing their life events and experiences of violence and its consequences. Based on the data, we can say that, to a certain extent, violence – including violent behavior towards oneself – has become a normalized element in the girls' lives. Our study was conducted from the viewpoint of feminist studies inspired within the scope of social-psychology, with the aim of grasping the social construction of gender and its influence on gendered violence experiences and gendered violence recognition in particular.

In this chapter, we present our research results on residential girls' statements and potential silences on the subject of violence. Additionally, we illustrate how researchers' own standpoints can be of benefit in the research making process and can create an empowering outcome for both sides. The study was conducted under an Empowering care – project 2013-2014 funded by European Commission DAPHNE programme in order to disclose information that would help in the development of empowering training for residential girls, in order to enable them to protect themselves and their peers against violence.

2. FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE TO RESEARCH ON GENDER AND VIOLENCE

In line with other feminist violence research, we understand violence as an action or structure that diminishes another human being and based on which various forms of violence are conceived as a means of seeking control over another person. Violence can involve physical, verbal, and emotional abuse of power at the individual, group and social structural levels (Kelly 1987; Sunnari, Heikkinen & Kangasvuo, 2003). Violence can be approached as a continuum within a certain social sphere as a structure for action.

According to Kappeler (1995) this would mean that the key to violence prevention does not lie in allowing certain forms of violence and prohibiting others, but in supporting the development of non-violent agencies and non-violent structures for action. With respect

to gender violence, this refers to social relationships based on the perceived differences between the sexes that are thoroughly defined as power relationships (Sunnari et al. 2003).

By sexual violence, we are referring to violence in which sexuality is used to construct and maintain inequality and to threaten and oppress the other, particularly women and girls. On the other hand, violence against women is defined by The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women as 'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life'. In various studies, gender and sexual violence is identified as one of the greatest obstacles to gender equality and the realization of human rights and capabilities (Nussbaum 2005; Kelly 2005). Violence is not just a phenomenon that is coincident with some part of life, but is cumulative during an individual lifespan – reappearing in various forms and various life sectors and through different perpetrators (Kelly 1987).

In the UN's in-depth study on all forms of violence against women study (UN General Assembly 2006) various factors why girls are vulnerable for violence are identified. Within this framework, violence against girls needs to be understood as a gendered phenomenon rooted in the patriarchal system in societies. Many girls in residential care institutions have also indeed experienced violence (Goodkind, Ng & Sarri 2006) and/or committed acts of violence (Schaffner 2007) before entering child protective or juvenile justice institutions. It is evident that they also face violence within the institutions (Uliando & Mellor 2012).

When researching the violence experiences of girls, it is important to pay attention to what they identify as violence. However, research on minor girls' perceptions of violence are somewhat limited, as discovered by Herrman & Silverstein (2012), who nevertheless stated that the girls seemed to conceptualize violence based on whether they were the victims, perpetrators or witnesses, or a combination of these. Herrman & Silverstein's study (2012) was based on a purposive sample of 32 young women aged 12-18 who were either incarcerated, affiliated with the juvenile justice system, or self-identified as living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The researchers discovered that, according to the girls, violence is learned, contagious and unstoppable. Violence was considered necessary in order to manage stress and conflicts and was connected to other forms of crime. Violence was also associated with *belonging*, in which gangs and peers provided a sense of belonging which may have been missing at home.

In a Flores' (2006) research on the perspectives of two adolescent girls concerning the challenges, fears, hopes, risks, and pressures they have experienced when growing up in a violent urban environment, girls defined violence as *murder, fighting, cutting, shooting, and gangs*. Based on their study on Youth action strategies in violence prevention, Carroll, Hebert & Roy (1999) reported that young people tend to accept violence when engaging in self-defense, revenge and in times of intense stress, although girls were more likely than boys to view violence as unacceptable. This is also supported by the research conducted by Murray (2008) in which, for some women, a sense of belonging, particularly to family and place, was a barrier which prevented them from leaving a partner despite intimate partner violence. Conversely, Goldweber, Waasdorp & Bradshaw (2013) found that violence led to a lower sense of belonging to a school environment.

Studies of the violence definitions and perceptions of girls in the context of dating propose that young girls are not always able to define their sexual encounters as violence. For instance, Sears, Byers, Whelan & Saint-Pierre (2006) discovered that the definition of an act as one of violence is dependent on the context, and that girls tended to describe various behaviors as abusive if the impact was negative, but that the girls did not mention a

sexual aspect in connection with this. Thongpriwan & McElmurry's (2009) research supports this finding; they stated that sexually violent acts were rarely included in the definition of dating violence by Thai female adolescents. These two studies propose that, when interpreting data on the subject, we should take serious account of these girls' reluctance to define their sexual encounters as violence.

Girls also tend to individualize their violent experiences rather than considering them an expression of systematic gender inequality (Chung 2007). Chiung-Tao Shen, Yu-Lung Chiu & Gao (2012) discovered that, in the Chinese context, dating violence was considered highly acceptable in certain circumstances among adolescents. They pointed out that traditional gender role beliefs and attitudes were used to justify such violence. Honkatukia, Nyqvist & Pösö (2007) found that, in Finland, the violence definitions of young people living in child protective institutions included generally accepted cultural norms, including using violence as a method of solving problems or for gaining something – which were already subject to criticism by society. Violence was nevertheless also viewed as an instrument for reinforcing collectivity, belonging and sharing among peers.

3. RESIDENTIAL CARE INSTITUTION AS A RESEARCH CONTEXT

I looked at the young girl in front of me and listened to how she had decided that her life and future were already predetermined due to her friends and relatives and their violent behaviors.

Sara: *No but... There is no way back in my life. Think of my relatives, my family and friends, that there is no way back, you are what you are.*

Helena: *No, I can tell you for a fact that it is not like that. Look at me for instance.*

Sara: *Well yes... ok...*

In that moment, I realized that I was exactly where I needed to be and was able to make use of my own past, perhaps as a tool in initiating self-empowerment.

Our point of view is that of feminist social-psychology at the crossroads between the individual, organization, and culture. We aimed to disclose the violence perceptions of girls living in residential care institutions. Secondly, we sought to explore the violence experience of the young girls in question, whether these had been personal experiences, committed against others or themselves, or observed as a bystander in any sector of life: at home, in school or during leisure-time. By comparing the girls' definitions and experiences, we sought to uncover potential challenges involved in the girls' violence recognition.

The research data was collected as part of an Empowering Care project in order to create an empowerment program for girls living in residential care institutions. Residential care institution as a research context is a very demanding due to their strict restrictions over the girl's self-determination and outside affiliations. For instance in Finnish residential care institutions the features of "total institution" (Goffman 1961) are still present in the girl's perceptions, however there are clearly more humanity rather than totality in the nowadays institutions (Kaukko & Parkkila 2014).

Influenced by participatory research methodologies, this approach had the aim of furthering their self-empowerment, which will help them to protect themselves and their peers against violence. The data collection was conducted simultaneously in four project partner countries: in Bulgaria, Finland, Italy and Spain during the spring of 2013. In each country, individual half-structured interviews were conducted with the purpose of obtaining information on the violence experiences of girls aged 14-18 who live in residential care institutions. The data in our article consists of the girls' quotes regarding their violence

definitions and experiences in both English and the native language of each country involved – Bulgarian, Finnish, Italian, and Catalan. The data was analyzed based on an approach inspired by qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000) and hermeneutical analysis focusing on girls' meanings of violence.

In Bulgaria, the data was collected in a single residential care institution, with fourteen girls being interviewed. This was unlike the case of Italy; where the fieldwork involved 11 institutions in a single Italian region and interviews with a total of 15 girls. In Catalonia, the fieldwork was conducted in five different institutions and a total of 17 girls aged 13-18 were interviewed. In Finland, the fieldwork was done in two closed residential care institutions, with 11 girls taking part in individual interviews. The leading author of this article collected the data in Finland.

Ethical issues were carefully pondered with regard to the participation of minor girls from residential care institutions. At all times, the girl's participation was voluntary and based on her informed consent; depending on the country, such consent was obtained from the girls, their legal guardians and/or the manager of the institution.

4. IDENTIFIED GAPS IN GIRLS VIOLENCE RECOGNITION

When looking at the girl's violence definitions, in Bulgaria the girls' describe violence as *an act in which somebody is forcing one to do something against one's will*. This act was mainly considered to be sexual and in most cases physical. Only three girls included the mental aspect in their violence definitions. In Finland, the girls used highly abstract terms, "*mental and physical violence*" in defining violence, but also employed more tangible descriptions such as, "*Hurting someone, not necessarily physically, but words can hurt too*". Seven girls described violence as being twofold i.e. both physical and mental, three girls considered violence to be strictly physical and only one girl added a sexual aspect to the definition, alongside the physical and mental aspects.

In Italy, only two girls, who had additionally experienced sexual violence mentioned sexual violence in their definition of violence. Also, just a few of the girls used abstract concepts when defining violence; instead, they used descriptive verbs based on which it was possible to interpret the kind of violence they were referring to. In Spain, the researchers reported that the girls mainly used a twofold definition of violence: mental and physical.

With respect to the girls' violence experiences, according to the Bulgarian field researchers every girl had experienced violence at some level. However, in the data only a few of the girls were themselves ready to admit that they had had violence experiences. In such cases, the violence tended to consist, say, of witnessing a fight between other children or experiencing violence at the hands of a worker in a previous residential care institution. All of the girls have evidently been neglected at some point of their lives. The workers confirmed the occurrence of some of the violence experiences referred to by the girls, such as witnessing and undergoing violence in institutions, and incidences of domestic and sexual violence in a few cases.

The researchers from Bulgaria stated that the girls had been freer in answering questions regarding an active involvement in violence; the girls had taunted other people, screamed, broken things and so on. On most occasions, the girls had expressed a desire for revenge and stated that they would beat other people if they could, but tended to downplay these statements afterwards. In the Bulgarian report, the researchers also indicated that 11 girls out of the 14 interviewed had had negative thoughts about themselves and had wanted to hurt themselves in moments of desperation or as a form of punishment (both against

themselves and the person who had caused them pain). The Bulgarian researcher stated that a large number of the girls had made a suicide attempt or at least had thoughts involving self-harm and suicide.

In Finnish data, nearly all of the girls had been approached by adult men making sexual suggestions, but the girls themselves did not recognize this as sexual harassment. According to the workers, the girls typically perceived sexual abuse as “normal relationships”, but conducted with much older adult men. This may be a hallmark of a sexist atmosphere in which women’s roles are normalized consisting of acting as sexual objects. One third of the girls had been raped or sexually abused by male acquaintances, but only half of the girls recognized this as sexual violence. A few of the girls also had learned to make use of their own sexuality in order to obtain things for themselves. This could be considered self-directed sexual violence.

All the girls in Finnish data had experienced mental violence from family members, friends, school peers, dating partners or a residential care worker. Being well-hidden, the mental violence was not regarded as such by most of the girls without prompting. Sexual violence was mainly perpetrated by half-known male acquaintances. Nearly all of the girls had experienced physical violence at the hands of family members, boyfriends, or half-unknown male acquaintances. Physical taming procedures employed by residential care workers were considered physical violence by some of the girls. Seven girls had used physical violence against others. In two such situations the girls had defended themselves physically against family members. Furthermore, almost all of the girls had engaged in self-harming and had used violence against themselves in the form of self-cutting and destructive behavior, but this seemed to be largely unrecognized as a form of violence. Additionally, all of the girls experienced problems with substance abuse.

In Italy, two thirds of the girls spoke openly about facing multifaceted physical and psychological violence and almost all of them also had experiences of sexual violence, but in a few cases the girls did not want to mention the sexual aspect of their experiences to the researcher, even when the residential care workers were already aware of it. One third of the girls had either been seriously neglected at home, controlled by a boyfriend, or had witnessed or experienced mental violence. In the violent experiences of nine of the girls, the perpetrator had been a family member (the mother, the father, a grandfather, or a sister or brother), and around a fifth of the girls had experienced violence committed by an outsider (a neighbor, teacher, or human trafficker). One third of the Italian girls had also experienced violence where the perpetrator had been a boyfriend who was mainly restraining the girls’ freedom and independence.

According to the field researchers in Spain, the girls had suffered from physical, psychological and sexual violence. In several cases, they had suffered from more than one form of violence, either perpetrated simultaneously and by the same aggressor, or by different people throughout the girls’ lives. In most cases, the violence had occurred in the family, being perpetrated by fathers, stepfathers, uncles, grandfathers and sometimes also by the girls’ mothers. In some cases, violent acts had consisted of school bullying or had been committed by a boyfriend.

Gender-based violence can constitute a normalized part of cultures and behavior, regardless of the fact that it violates the rights of girls and women. With respect to the perpetrators, the Italian and Spanish data revealed the perpetrator as mainly being a family member, but the Italian data also recorded unknown perpetrators. In the Finnish data, the type of violence committed was dependent on the identity of the perpetrator: sexual violence was mainly committed by half-known male acquaintances while mental violence was visible in every sector of life. In Bulgaria, perpetrators of violence were mainly invisible due to limitations in or total lack of knowledge among the residential care social

workers and the girl's themselves.

The data revealed that in Finland, Italy and Spain, girls mainly defined violence in a twofold manner, as both physical and mental. As in Chung's (2007) research, the girls did not necessarily view a male's controlling behavior towards them as violence, but this was mainly interpreted as protecting and loving behavior. The girls also tended to individualize their violent experiences, rather than considering them as an expression of gender inequality. In most cases such individualization tended towards a belittling of their own violence experiences. The girls in Bulgaria more frequently defined violence as sexual violence compared to the girls in the rest of the countries, even when, according to the workers in Bulgarian institutions, the girls were inexperienced in dating relationships. Besides the Bulgarian girls, only three girls mentioned the sexual aspect in their violence definitions. According to our study this is an indication, that the girls' ability to recognize or to name different kinds of violence is limited. Our findings are in line with previous research e.g. Sears et al. (2006) and Thongpriwan & McElmurry (2009).

5. DISCUSSION

All forms of violence are damaging, for all people. However, being exposed to violence during a phase of life when one is more fragile and where ongoing development and identity building are pivotal can have extremely severe consequences. Violent experiences can lessen an adolescent girl's basic trust, while having a negative effect on their body image and sexuality. Furthermore, the consequences of violent experiences such as social stagnation, isolation and rejection have an even longer-term negative impact on girls. (Wiklund, Malmgren-Olsson, Bengs, & Öhman 2010, 219.)

With the purpose of furthering the residential girls' self-empowerment process in terms of violence protection, *we therefore needed to explore the girl's violence descriptions and perceptions*. Based on our study, our main result is that the girls' ability to recognize or to name different kinds of violence is limited. Our most significant discovery *related to the way in which sexual violence in its various forms was not recognized by the girls*. The girls also had experiences of self-directed and collective violence, but they only referred to violence in interpersonal sectors. In preventative work there is therefore a clear need to raise awareness of violence in the wider context of violence among young girls. However, the most crucial gap to fill consists of raising awareness and knowledge of sexual violence; this is the form of violence typically faced by such girls, but they don't recognize it as violence.

With respect to the empowerment program, which was the primary goal of data collection, we consider the ability to relate or re-label one's experiences to be a strong aspect of empowerment (see also Heikkinen, Pihkala & Sunnari 2012, 188). Being properly cared for cannot be superseded as a crucial aspect of empowerment, as it can be considered not only a prerequisite for survival, but also as a prerequisite for human development and well-being. Relationships consisting of solidarity, care and love can help to establish a basic sense of personal importance, value and belonging, a sense of being appreciated, wanted and cared for. These three basic prerequisites are most visible when they are absent, as in the lives of the girls whose experiences are recorded in our data.

We did benefit from the main results of the research when building a caring context for the empowerment program, in which the residential girls' authenticity and feelings of belonging appear as the ability to share one's experiences and display vulnerability, which would in turn support their individual imaginative and thinking processes in terms of violence recognition and protection.

Despite my negative expectations, I was given a very warm welcome by the residential care institutions. My past made my participation in the project more appealing to the girls, with some participating solely for this reason. From the professionals' point of view, in a sense I was expected to understand all of the perspectives in the child protection process, which I indeed did. This made the professionals feel safer during their participation.

Girls in residential care institutions are vulnerable to violence due to their age, gender, race and their previous and often cumulative victimization with respect to various forms of violence. There therefore seems to be a need to approach the violence experiences of girls more longitudinally and holistically than we were able to in this study. It is also important to study social structures, i.e. those embedded in the residential care institution in which girls' group experiences were formulated as part of this study.

There is also a need to develop more creative and better functioning ways of collecting information from people who have no recollection or knowledge of their previous experiences and lives, or who have limited ability to express themselves in traditional ways. In our project, the fact that the data was in different languages represented something of a challenge. However, the use of alternative and non-verbal approaches would make such data more authentic and accessible, regardless of the nationality of the analyzer.

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AUTHOR(S) INFORMATION

Full name: Helena Parkkila, MA, Doctoral Student

Institutional affiliation: Women's and Gender Studies, University of Oulu, Finland

Institutional address: Faculty of Education, P.O.Box 2000, FI-90014 University of Oulu, Finland

Short biographical sketch: In my doctoral thesis I study: ‘Possibilities and challenges in non-violence and belonging – Reflected through the experiences of adolescence girls who live in Northern Finnish residential care institutions’. My theoretical focus is on feminist psychology and feminist violence research. Additionally, I have personally lived in a residential care institution as a adolescence girl and I have managed to benefit this personal experience in the research.

H. Parkkila & M. Heikkinen

Full name: Dr. Mervi Heikkinen, Postdoctoral researcher

Institutional affiliation: Women's and Gender Studies, University of Oulu, Finland

Institutional address: Faculty of Education, P.O.Box 2000, FI-90014 University of Oulu, Finland

Short biographical sketch: My research is concerned with how gendered and sexualized bodies take shape within organizations throughout a lifespan and how these bodies are regulated with organizational policies; and how violence and a threat of violence shape ones' understanding about self and the development of one's capabilities within various organizations and in everyday life; as well as possibilities of education to cultivate compassion.

I have 14 years of hands-on experience on national and international mainly European research, development and education projects. The projects are related to gender equality promotion in education and labor market, gender equality and diversity planning, gender desegregation, gender equality work within organisations, gender and sexual violence and its prevention, sexual harassment and its prevention.