



Violence in children's narration

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Abstract

The article examines how children exposed to violence in their own homes talk about violence and what they say about it. The aim is to highlight the methodological challenges of studying narratives told by young children and to present findings concerning children's narratives about violence. The data was collected at a shelter for battered women run by the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters. It consists of videotapes shot at the sessions (20) of two therapy groups for children who have been exposed to domestic violence. The participating seven children were 4-9 years old. The analysis aimed to look at the words and expressions used by the children to communicate about violence. The children's narration reveals a variety of violent relationships and demonstrates context-bound rules governing violence. The remarks suggest further research in this area.

Key words: children's narration, violence, home, therapy group

Introduction

The wide discussion on the definition of violence (e.g. Ashworth & Erooga, 1999; Nyqvist, 2001; Hearn, 1998; Forsberg, 2002) demonstrates that violence is not an easily definable problem. Herzberger (1993, pp. 34-36) holds the opinion that the difficulty of defining abuse constitutes one of the major problems for research into the abuse of children. For example, the findings of studies investigating the incidence of abuse vary a great deal depending on how abuse is defined and how the data has been collected (Creighton, 1998, pp. 12-15). If one looks at earlier studies on children's experiences of violence (e.g. O'Keefe, 1994), a viable solution would seem to be to delimit the examination of violence to something predetermined in one's own study. However, studies focusing on children's own views have shown that the definitions given by children may differ considerably from those that are customary to the adult way of perceiving things (Mayall, 2002, pp. 112-139).

Since I have at my disposal a corpus of data which is rich in children's talk on violence, I will in this article make use of this data and examine what children exposed to domestic violence say about violence in therapy group sessions.¹ As I am interested in the ways in which violence appears in children's narration, I will examine what kind of words children use when describing violence and what kind of things get an emphasis in children's descriptions about violence. When doing so, I will try to demonstrate, on the one hand, the methodological challenges that children's narratives bring to the research, and on the other hand, the importance of children's narration in constructing understanding about violence.

Method

Data and analysis

The data of the article consists of videotapings shot at the sessions of two therapy groups convening at a shelter for battered women. The research data has been drawn from the corpus of data accumulated in the Finnish nation-wide anti-violence project called "Child's Time" (1997-2001), carried out in shelters for battered women run by the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters and focusing on developing the work done with children suffering from domestic violence and abuse. The videotapings were shot by project workers. The group work was influenced by Peled & Davis's (1995) manual "Groupwork with Children of Battered Women: A Practitioner's Manual".

The groups were made up of children exposed to domestic violence. Six of the seven children who took part in the group work had been at the shelter with their mother because of the violent behaviour of their father. While at the shelter, the shelter professionals had talked with them about their situation and made the assessment that they might benefit of taking part in the work of a children's group. They did so with the permission and backing of their parents. The groups convened once a week and the children came to the shelter from their homes to attend the sessions.

The groups are supportive by nature and they focus on processing domestic violence. The children are supported in finding words for their own thoughts, feelings and experiences. The groups also seek to strengthen children's own survival strategies (Oranen, 2001, pp. 35-36). The first group consists of two four-year-old girls. It convened nine times for one hour at a time under the supervision of two women therapists. Eight of the sessions were videotaped. The other group consists of two boys (6 and 7 years) and three girls (6, 7 and 9 years). The nine-year-old girl quitted the group after the first session. One of the therapists is a man, the other a woman. This group convened twelve times for an hour and a half at a time. All sessions were videotaped. All in all there is 26 hours of videotaping and 455 pages of transcribed text of the sessions of the two groups.

The therapy groups are part of the lives of the children in the data, not situations arranged for the purpose of conducting research. Hutchby and Moran-Ellis (1998, pp. 13-14) emphasise the analytical value of these kind of situations when children are being studied, because they allow us to look closely into the processes of narration and meaning-making that unfold naturally in the children's lives. For example Gardner (1998) has studied interaction between speech-impaired children and their therapists in the speech therapy clinic, Danby and Baker (1998) have studied teachers and children in kindergarten play situations and Silverman, Baker and Keogh (1998) have been interested in the participation of children and adolescents in institutionalized interactions and they have studied interactions recorded in parent-teacher meetings. In this study the therapy situations are exceptional situations for the children, but they have been arranged for a purpose other than research and can therefore be regarded as natural situations.

The importance of conducting research on natural situations such as these has been emphasised in social sciences on a wider front (Silverman, 2000). In this article, my analytic attention is specifically focused on the language that is used in telling about violence. I have used both the videotaped data and the transcribed texts when doing the analysis. Narrative research has played a role in making me see the importance of narration and research into narration (Engel, 1995; Hänninen, 1999). My method of analysis has been influenced by discourse analysis, making me focus my attention on the content of the children's narration, on the ways of narration

and on the interactional nature of narration. Discourse analysis regards language as central for constructing meanings, but at the same time, it sees that meanings are constructed in other phenomena as well, in action for example (e.g. Jokinen et al., 1999; Burr, 1997; Silverman, 2000). This means that my study belongs to the tradition of research that Juhila (2004) calls the third generation of research into face-to-face interaction. In this tradition the attention of research on professional helping work is often focused on how and what kind of meanings about the problems and things under discussion are generated in interaction. Besides talk about violence, the data contains a great deal of talk about things that have to do with the children's lives or the concrete activities of the group. At the beginning of my analysis, I viewed the videotapes of my data several times and made observation notes about the progress of each meeting in order to get an overall picture of my data. My notes include descriptions about those present, about the activities, about what was said, about the atmosphere, about the use of the physical space and about my own impressions. After this phase I started to work with the transcribed data. I picked out all the violent passages from the transcribed texts which, according to common everyday thinking, including cultural understanding, were related with processing of violence. To get some kind of understanding of the vast data, I first gleaned all the violence-related passages of conversation for each child in which the child him/herself took part. Examining the conversations on an individual basis helped me form a picture of each child's participation in the discussion about violence. Many of the discussions are such by nature that all the children of the group, as well as both therapists, take part in them. In some only a few children are active. The data also includes passages in which the discussion mainly takes place between one child and one therapist. The four-year-old girls speak clearly less about their experiences of violence in their group than do the older children in the other group.

After parsing the discussions in this way, I started to systematically examine the themes tackled during the discussions and tried to find what was peculiar to the central themes. At the analysis stage it became very clear to me that children's narration is very distinctive in character, and this had an impact on the progress of the analysis. In the following chapters, I will first describe what kind of challenges children's narration sets to research analysis and how it is possible to locate analytically important passages by means of individual words describing violence. Next I will describe the language and other means that the children use when communicating about violence. After this I will move on to examine what kind of picture the children's narrations construct of violence. Violence is present in the children's talk as descriptions of a variety of violent relationships and context-bound rules about the use of violence.

Methodological challenges of studying young children's narratives

Inspired by new sociological childhood research, I am interested in what children tell about violence. It is much because of this tradition that research is interested in what different things look like from a child's perspective and that it takes children seriously as informants (e.g. James & Prout, 1990; Mayall, 2002; Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998; Hallett & Prout, 2003). When children have been studied, the methodological challenges that researchers have faced have concerned the reaching of the children (e.g. Mason & Falloon, 2001), the finding of working research methods (e.g. Mauthner, 1997), the interaction of the research situations (e.g. Lahikainen et al., 2003) and various ethical issues related with the research process (e.g. Alldred, 1998).

The methodological challenges of this study are located especially in the analysis of children's narrations, related in natural situations. They can first of all be located in the variety of ways the children use to communicate about their experiences of violence. Secondly, the stories of

violence are fragmented, and thirdly, the group activity has its impact on how children talk about violence. I will now move on to examine these challenges in more detail.

When children communicate about violence, they use a wide range of ways. In addition to words, children resort to drawing, playing and body movements when telling about the violence they have been exposed to. Narration about violence is also often created in interaction with other people and the physical setting, as well as with one's physical being. Children's narration can be direct narration, narration relying on non-verbal communication or narration utilising imagination. Direct narration means that the child relates his or her experiences of violence mainly by means of language. In narration relying on non-verbal communication, the talk is created in relation to non-verbal communication, such as drawing. Narration utilising imagination happens by means of playing or story-telling, for example (Eskonen, 2001). When analysing children's narration, one should try to observe not only what is spoken, as a linguistic approach would allow us to do, but the narration as a whole. This kind of research tradition is poorly developed in social sciences.

Children's ways of communicating about violence are fragmented. Individual sentences and short discussions are problematic from the viewpoint of research methodology. With just little pieces of narration at his or her disposal, it is occasionally very difficult for the researcher to form a coherent whole about what has happened and what the child is talking about (cf. Saarenheimo, 1997, p. 75). The researcher may wonder: Doesn't he remember? Can't he or doesn't he want to tell more about what has happened? Forsberg too (2002) has pointed out how distinctive the nature of children's narration is in her study on feedback discussions between children and shelter professionals. According to her children are enigmatic, brief and 'forgetful' in their narration. However, fragmented narration is not only characteristic of children. Adults' spontaneous talk can also be fragmented and thematically inconsistent. Even adults' talk is often full of "obscure, repetitive and fragmented details and passages that are to a different degree and in different ways meaningful" (Saarenheimo, 1997, pp. 65-66). In special circumstances fragmented narration may become dominant, like in connection with severe mental problems (Holma, 1999). Writings dealing with trauma and remembering have also highlighted the impact on one's mind that traumatising events, such as violence in close relationships, can have. Traumatization can, for example, affect how things are remembered and how they are narrated (e.g. Mollon, 1998).

The fragmentation of children's narration can also be examined, as has often been done, from the viewpoint of their development. According to research, children remember very early on incidents from their own life and are able to tell about these incidents even after a long time has passed since they happened (Fivush, 1993, p. 6). Children under two and a half are, however, still highly dependent on other people when reminiscing things and telling about them. Interaction with other people constitutes thus an important context for a child this young for the construction of narration. Children learn to talk about things in interaction with people close to them. Interaction creates the framework for the development of memory and narration (Hudson, 1990, pp. 166-194). Two separate processes that supplement one another are related with the development of autobiographical memory of children under school age. As they grow up, children learn various narration frameworks for telling about things. With these frameworks children are able to construct consistent narrations of past incidents, which enables them to better and better independently tell about incidents that have happened in their lives. Another process connected with the development of children's memory is that the focus of their attention starts to shift from the customary on to the uncustomary. At the outset the focus of small children's narration is on the customary features of things, and it is not until later that they begin to focus on what is special about the incident. An adult can help the child's remembering and narration by posing questions and giving clues. If the help offered to the child is inconsistent, it will cause that the child's narration also becomes inconsistent. This

explains in part that children's narrations can simultaneously be very detailed, and yet, inconsistent (Fivush, 1993, pp. 17-18). The fact that children seldom tell their story in chronological order may amplify the impression of the narration being fragmented. How long and how detailed the narration is is related with what kind of topic the child is covering. For example, when the matters are difficult, children tend to be very brief (Engel, 1995, pp. 90-109). Domestic violence can be considered exceptional as a theme for discussions between parents and children. The parents may speak very 'violently' during the incidents of violence, but the incidents are not opened up later by speaking about them with the children. According to Laaksamo (2001, p. 107), domestic violence often entails that the parents do not speak about violence with the children, and in this way, the children adopt the habit of keeping silent about violence, and therefore, they do not learn how to speak about violence. Fivush (1998), who has conducted research on children and reminiscing of traumatic events, maintains that hiding, shame and keeping silent about things have an impact on what kind of shape the memories take in people's minds. The things that we keep quiet about turn into fragmented memories that keep haunting us from time to time, arousing negative emotions.

The fragmented nature of children's narration creates special challenges when data consisting of children's talk is being analysed. The problems caused by this can be eliminated by delimiting the study in advance to comprise only children who are old enough, or by supplementing the information provided by children by adult information, so that the researcher can construct a more complete whole of the phenomenon. In studies that belong to the tradition of new childhood research, the special nature of children's narration has been brought out as a methodological issue chiefly in connection with the collection of data (e.g. Mauthner, 1997; Ritala-Koskinen, 2001; Kirmanen, 2000). These studies focus on how research methodological solutions can influence how children talk about various things. Short replies, fragmented descriptions and 'I don't know' answers have been associated with problems related with the situation in which the replies were given. The idea behind this is that in another situation the children might produce better answers. However, the distinctive quality of children's answers does not merely reflect the situations in which they were generated. Children's narration also contains features that are typical of children, and these features need to be observed in the analysis of the data. The fragmented nature of children's narration is a methodological challenge to this study. I do not seek to explain the reasons behind the fragmentation. Instead, taking the challenge seriously, I focus on what kind of picture of violence the children's fragmented narration reveals.

The group situation has its impact on how the children talk about violence and on what they say about it. The data of this study was collected at sessions of therapy groups meant for children exposed to domestic violence. In these groups, there is space for the children to talk about their experiences related with violence. However, time and space do not as such support children's narration. Children need a model and a framework to be able to talk about violence. In the group, the actions of the therapists and the descriptions of violence related by the other children may provide a solid discussion context that supports a child's own remembering and narration. The children take actively part in the versatile group activities. In the sessions, 'how are you doing' inquiries vary with games, rehearsals, plays, pottering and having a snack, so that each session is different. There is a great deal of talk about violence during one session, and much less during another. Sometimes there is an intense discussion on violence, sometimes it is only referred to with one word or one sentence. The discussions are often constructed so that one of the children first mentions something about violence, and then the others join in and tell about their thoughts. The narration of the data has a strongly inter-actional nature.

To be able to analyse the content of children's narration on violence, a researcher needs to pay close attention to the way in which the children tell their story. The analysis of the form and

content of narration go side by side. Taking seriously all the challenges children's narration brings out, the following paragraphs will demonstrate the results of the analysis which aimed to be sensitive to the ways children narrate.

Results

Expressions of violence

Typical of this data is that when there is talk about violence it is often a description of an individual incident. Many of the children have one incident that they often talk about. Sometimes the description is very brief and becomes crystallised in a few words, such as 'she was bleeding', 'he pulled my hair'. Even though the vocabulary the children use when describing violence is wide, it does not include the concept of 'domestic violence'. Epstein and Keep (1995, pp. 44-48) have made the same observation about the vocabulary of English-speaking children involved in domestic violence when analysing 126 phone calls to the British ChildLine. The things the children described in this study were very similar with the ones that came up in Paavilainen's study (1998, p. 77) on the means of physical violence against children in Finnish families. I will next examine what kind of words the children use in the therapy sessions to describe violence and what does this tell us about the nature of the violence the children go through.

The children describe violence either by a single word or an expression. Some examples are: to bully, get furious, argue, slap, beat, kick, smack, threaten, yell and chuck. Some of the words describe the nature of the violent situation on a very general level, and some are very concrete, revealing a specific act. Examples of expressions describing acts directed at the body are: to twist someone's fingers, to pull someone's hair, to grab by the ear, to beat someone up, to bounce on someone's belly, to fart on the face and to pour Tabasco into someone's mouth. These expressions show that physical violence can be directed at very many places in the body, the pain can be caused by a wide variety of sense experiences. Expressions that reveal the means of violence are for example: to hit around with a knife, to stab with a knife, to beat with a fist, to hurt with an object, to push at the door, to threaten with a knife and to throw things. The array of weapons used with the purpose of hurting is huge, quite harmless objects may become effective weapons in a violent situation. Children also use non-verbal means to tell about violence. They demonstrate what kind of movements and sounds were connected with the situations. The child may, for example, show a specific kick, adding the appropriate sound effects to his demonstration. The children also describe things that have not necessarily happened in real life. Situations in which children describe their revenge phantasy against their fathers are examples of imaginary situations related with violence.

The violence the children describe is chiefly physical by nature. They show places in their own body that have been hit. A bruise may still reveal a past incident. The violence the children describe varies from slight to life-threatening. The rawest violence in their descriptions has been committed by fathers. These acts are sometimes so serious that outside help is needed; the police or a doctor is contacted. The emotional aspect of physical violence becomes evident in descriptions of emotions, which the children describe in many different ways. Sometimes they use words. A six-year-old boy describes the feelings that bullying might create in him: "I'd cry so that the earth would shake and break." The emotion may be evident in the way the child has acted; one example of this is the feeling of fear that a child has displayed by going into hiding in a threatening situation. Emotions connected with violence can also be interpreted 'between the lines', in the tone of voice, for example, which can be very emphatic

when a child speaks about violence. The way in which the children act when narrating can also reveal emotions connected with violence.

The time and place of violence become defined in the children's descriptions. The most common scenes for violence in these descriptions are home, day care centre and school. If the violence has taken place at home, the children often tell in which room it happened. At moments of violence children's experience of time changes (Husso, 1997, p. 92). Time defines the element of danger, placing it at a particular moment. The children are occasionally very specific about the time, especially in cases in which the violence is related with a special point of time. One child tells that her father grabbed her by the hair on Mothers' Day and by the ear on New Year. Other expressions used to describe points of time are: today, in the daytime, at night, during a break, at breakfast, in the winter, in the summer, always, occasionally. The children also define periods of time during which there has been no violence, by saying for example the following: 'Mum hasn't bullied anybody in three weeks.'

The variety of violent relationships

Violence is present in the lives of the children in many different relationships. They tell about having experienced violence at home and in relations with friends. They examine violence also as a wider cultural phenomenon. They, for example, reflect on violence that takes place far from them. Some of the themes they mention are the refugee problem and the Nazi attitude towards violence. The impact of violent entertainment is also discernible in the children's talk: they describe with excitement violent event chains in various games and programmes.

Table 1
Relationships in which the children have told they have experienced violence

Person committing violence – target	Girl 4 yrs	Girl 4 yrs	Girl 6 yrs	Boy 6 yrs	Girl 7 yrs	Boy 7 yrs
Father – mother	X	X	X	X	X	X
Mother – father	X					
Father – child him/herself		X (threat)	X	X	X	X
Mother – child him/herself		X (threat)	X	X	X	X
Father – sibling		X (threat)			X	
Mother – sibling		X (threat)			X	
Sibling – child him/herself					X	X
Friend – child him/herself			X	X	X	X
Child him/herself – friend				X	X	
Teacher/day care centre employee – child him/herself	X				X	
Child him/herself – animal						X
Animal – child him/herself	X	X				X
Grandparent – animal						X
Outsider – outsider				X	X	X

Table 1 shows the relationships in which the children have experienced violence. In the majority of cases, the information gathered in the table has been clear, the child has said at least once during the therapy that he or she has experienced violence in the said relationship and he/she has also indicated who was violent towards whom. In some instances the definition of violence has not been so clearly decipherable. On occasion the children use the kind of expressions that do not clearly reveal who is committing the violence and who is the target. When saying, for example, that mum and dad were fighting, the child does not tell what kind of fight it was or how mother and father acted during it. In some cases it is not totally clear whether the child is speaking about violence or not. For example, the children often use the word 'bully' when describing their experiences. Sometimes they may later specify what they mean, and sometimes it is up to the researcher to interpret a child's words in relation to the specific situation in which he or she says them. When we look at the table below we should bear in mind that the child has not necessarily mentioned in his or her narration all the relationships in which he or she has experienced violence. Despite its possible deficiencies, the table shows how very varied the relationships containing violence are. The table also reveals that the position of one and the same child to violence can change: he or she can either be a witness to violence, an abused child or/and a violent child.

There can be one or several violent persons in a child's life, and the violence can be targeted at one or more persons. However, there are huge differences in the graveness of the experienced violence. The fiercest violence in the children's descriptions is committed by fathers. The physical injuries and the fact that the rest of the family have had to flee to escape the father reflect the fierceness of the violence. When telling about a violent mother, the children often use the word 'bullying', and the researcher gets the impression of heavy-handed disciplinary methods, such as shaking the child by the hair.

My data has been collected in groups where the children have their parents' permission to participate in the group and to talk about violence. The children talk surprisingly freely about the violence that has taken place in their homes. The occasional obscurity and incoherence of guilt issues that the violence involves may, however, be related with the power relations within the family and with the fact that the violence happens in relationships which contain very controversial elements. Many studies reveal, for example, that children also connect positive features with their violent fathers (Peled, 2000).

Responsibility for violence is not a simple issue. Children are angry with their fathers, but have mixed feelings about their fathers' culpability. It is clear to an outsider on the basis of the children's descriptions that their fathers often act unjustly, and yet, this is not self-evident to the children. It is not always easy to know at what point the violence began, and the different parties may define the starting point differently. The child who takes on the guilt may see the beginning of violence in his or her own behaviour, even if neither the victim nor the guilty party saw any connection between the child's behaviour and the beginning of violence. According to Laaksamo, children are often confused about whom to blame for the fights because, besides violence, they hear accusations and receive other controversial signals (Laaksamo, 2001, p. 105). The following example describes how difficult it may be for a child to judge who is the guilty party each time. The quarrel resulting in violence began with a very customary kind of disagreement. Tomi feels that he is to blame too for the beginning of the quarrel because he was playing a game that caused disagreements.

Example 1.² Therapy group II, fifth session. Present: four children (Aino, girl 7 yrs; Essi, girl 6 yrs; Tomi, boy 7 yrs; Janne, boy, 6 yrs³), woman therapist (T1) and male therapist (T2). The children and the therapists sit at a round table. The children are drawing and talking about the violence that has happened at home.

- Aino: You mean that it was the children's fault that.
- Tomi: Do you know what I thought back then when we had those fights?
- Aino: What?
- Tomi: It was this thing that when I got this new game, you know, mum didn't like it very much, so that's how the fight started then. It was this, what was it now (pause) Action Game Four. You just had to hit these men with a sword, mum didn't like it. That's how the fight started at home.
- T2: Did it, did the fight develop into a fight between your mum and dad (pause), so that mum and dad started to fight?
- Tomi: Well, mum didn't like the game and dad always likes games where you have action and you go to places and you have to twist all kinds of levers and stuff.
- T2: Hmm, and then they had, you know.
- Tomi: They had a fight over the game.
- T2: A fight over the game, because you had been given a game.

Context-bound ethics

When talking about violence in group situations, the children often talk about how acceptable violence is in different situations. Because of this it is warranted to analyse closer the children's thoughts about the rules of ethical nature concerning the use of violence. By rules of ethical nature I mean the logic that the children seem to apply when talking about violence, i.e., the acceptability of violence varies from one situation to another in their talk. In the analysis, this kind of rule was identified when a child made a statement about the use of violence.

The rules are often bound by the context, the same rules do not necessarily apply in different situations. The violence that is acceptable in one situation may be condemnable in another. On the basis of the children's narration, we can think that the ethical codes are different in different relationships. The controversial nature of the norms governing the use of violence can be examined from the viewpoint of the development of morality. Children adopt moral norms in everyday interaction with the family members. They internalise rules and expectations regarding behaviour from their parents (Emde & Robinson, 2002, p. 262). If violence is part of the interaction within the family, it can easily be adopted as a conceivable part of other relationships as well. At the stage of secondary socialisation a child, however, learns that violence is not a commonly accepted way of solving conflicts. Amidst the different cultures of violence, he or she then tries to find his/her own attitude towards violence. In the following, I will examine what kind of things children take up when expressing their views about the use of violence.

The children's attitude towards violence is mainly negative. One of the children captures his attitude in the lyrics of a religious song: 'Violence is injustice'. Despite the negative stand towards violence, the children's narration reveals the controversial attitude towards the use of violence that prevails in our culture. For example, violence is not only acceptable but even admirable as part of entertainment. One of the boys relates a 'cheer' that his sports team uses after a loss: 'We were beaten – one loss, so what'. This cheer strengthens the mood of the team members after a loss. In it 'we were beaten' symbolises the loss of a game, and one has to accept the loss of a game, but does one have to accept being beaten for real? The violence related with Nazism and refugee issues seems to concern these children, as they take up these topics and consider them. The boy who started a discussion about Nazis defines his own attitude towards Nazism by stating that he could not act in the same way. Yet the same child thinks that we can kill an abandoned cat because no one owns it.

The children's negative attitude towards violence is not necessarily manifested at the level of concrete actions. The rationality and irrationality of the use of violence vary in the children's

descriptions depending on the situation. In the following example Tomi explains the irrationality of his own use of violence by saying: 'It was a dumb thing to attack him, 'cause he's been taking judo lessons.'

Example 2. Therapy group II, second session. Present: four children (Aino, girl 7 yrs; Essi, girl 6 yrs; Tomi, boy 7 yrs; Janne, boy 6 yrs), woman therapist (T1) and male therapist (T2). The children and the therapists are sitting at a round table drawing. Tomi has a moment ago finished a drawing depicting his feelings when he got a black eye.

T1: It may be that we are, it may interest this group what happened to that eye.

Tomi: I dunno, a stick hit it (Tomi leans on to the table with his arm).

T1: What stick?

Tomi: It was like this, me and this little Aaro, we were playing ice-hockey and he started to boss around and then we had a little fight.

Janne: He got angry and hit you.

Tomi: I started to flail around a bit, and then he started to do the same.

T2: Hmm.

Tomi: It was a dumb thing to attack him, 'cause he's been taking judo lessons (Tomi straightens himself and says this with an emphasis).

This passage exemplifies the fact that it is no use fighting someone who is stronger. A similar kind of subordination to a stronger person's actions is evident when the children talk about their father's violent actions. The comment, made at another therapy session, 'whatever dad did to me, I'd let him do it' reveals how the children in a sense have to accept even their parents' wrongful behaviour. If a child acts against his or her parent's will, he/she may get in trouble. The child who made the above comment was afraid that his father might take the PlayStation away from him.

When life at home is tinged with violence, violence may be part of one's life outside of home too. This does not mean, however, that violence would inevitably be part of all relationships and interactional situations. Through a socialisation process a child can learn that violence is not part of a particular relationship. The children say that it is important that various communities have rules to govern violence. In addition to the mere existence of rules, it is important that there are certain measures that are taken when someone does not abide by the rules.

Discussion

I have in this article examined what children exposed to domestic violence communicate about violence in therapy group sessions focusing on this theme. The analysis revealed that the children of the data talked a great deal about violence. They used different ways to tell about different kinds of violence that they have been exposed to in several relationships. There may be huge qualitative differences in the violence a child is exposed to. Even though the child may have experienced violence in many relationships, the violence related with a specific relationship may be dominant for him or her as an experience.

All in all the methodological challenges experienced in this study argue that we need a holistic approach in studying children. Holistic approach means, first of all, that children are taken seriously as active informants for they have a great deal to tell about violence. Secondly, it means that research observes the versatility of children's narration and that it is sensitive to their scarce words. Thirdly, it is important to reflect how various corpuses of data are being collected and in what sort of contexts children are given a chance to generate knowledge

about different things. The choice of research methods may substantially influence the picture that is being generated about children and childhood. For example, if a child is observed and heard in his or her natural setting, different things may become central than would in an interview outside of his or her familiar surroundings, even though the theme would be the same. Fourthly, this study suggests to examine the information generated by a child in relation to his or her experience world. This can be done by placing the talk into a context outside the speech situation. The idea behind contexting is the assumption that children's narrations have a specific experience background. Contexting seeks to create a framework to the things children narrate about. It is the researcher's task to decide on what level the contexting is done. It can be for example done in relation to a theoretical framework, institutional knowledge or information received from the child's parents. The risk with contexting is that meanings are being attached to a child's narration from outside, and this external knowledge may lead us to hear something other than what the child is actually saying.

The real, the possible and the imaginary violence become entangled with one another in the children's narrations. In this data, the share of imaginary violence is marked in the narrations of the four-year-old girls in particular. These four-year-olds talk about violence chiefly by means of puppet theatre performances. Jeff Hearn maintains that, besides the real incidents that have taken place in the past or in the present, violence includes the threat of violence. Violence may be entangled with many everyday things and be present in many different situations both as action and as talk (Hearn, 1998, pp. 15-17). A single experience of violence in a relationship may bring the shadow of possible violence into that relationship. The threat of violence will be present in the relationship thereafter, even if there never were any more incidents of violence. Children who have been exposed to violence in close relationships can become sensitive to perceiving violence in other interaction relationships. They can interpret various situations as having an air of violence. According to Fredriksson (1999), children who are sensitive to violence can experience threat in many social situations that other children consider neutral. Hence the sensitivisation to perceiving violence can happen simultaneously with the normalisation of violence. Therefore practitioners in social welfare and health care should never ignore messages that children give about any kind of experiences of violence.

In the context of social policy, the findings about the context-bound nature of children's violence reveal that a child who in one situation experiences that violence is wrong may in another situation feel that the use of violence is justified and sensible. It is important from the viewpoint of education and societal peace that the rules governing violence could be experienced by a child as congruent. It is also important that the adults working with children take a stand on what is right and what is wrong. Every child has a right to receive information about violence being morally unacceptable. The message that we are not allowed to hurt one another is vital in creating a safe environment in which to grow up. Talking about the rules of violence again and again is also important. It is not self-evident for every child that violence is wrong. Many children, such as these ones studied here, live their childhood in families where violence is part of the interaction. It is particularly these children that set a big intervention challenge to our schools and social services system. It is possible to replace violent relationships with non-violent ones. The rebuilding of rules of violence can happen, for example, in interaction with the kind of people who, with their behaviour and talk, convey the message of non-violence.

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Notes

1. The article is part of a wider study on examining violence in children's close relationships.
2. The data includes a number of passages in which the children tell about the cruel violence they have experienced at home. The intention of the examples chosen for the article is not to demonstrate how cruel the violence is, but rather to represent other things that have come up in the analysis.
3. All the names in the examples have been changed to prevent recognition.

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