CHILDREN'S EMBODIED EXPERIENCE OF LIVING WITH DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Abstract

Children who experience domestic violence are often described in academic and professional literature as passive victims, whose 'exposure' to violence and abuse at home leaves them psychologically damaged, socially impaired, inarticulate, cognitively 'concrete' and emotionally 'incompetent'. Whilst we recognise the importance of understanding the hurt, disruption and damage that domestic violence can cause, we also explore alternative possible ways of talking about and thinking about the lives of children who have experienced domestic violence. We report on interviews and drawings with 27 UK children, using interpretive analysis to explore their capacity for agency and resistance. We explore the paradoxical interplay of children's acceptance and resistance to coercive control, paying specific attention to embodied experience and use of space. We consider how children articulate their experiences of pain and coercion, how they position themselves as embodied and affective subjects, and challenge Scarry's (1985) suggestion that embodied pain and violence are inexpressible.

Keywords

domestic violence, interpersonal violence, children, embodiment, child witness, children exposed to domestic violence

Introduction

In *The Body In Pain*, Scarry (1985) explores the intersections of embodiment and subjectivity in the experience of physical pain. She argues that the pain experienced by those subjected to violence and coercion 'unmakes the world'; it destroys the subject's capacity to reason and reflect on the world, because pain annihilates –albeit temporarily-

the victim's capacity for symbolic expression: pain "resists objectification in language" (p. 5), and that it is therefore not communicable or articulable to others, because it has no external referential content:

> Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned. (Scarry, 1985, p. 4)

Focusing specifically on the experience of torture, Scarry explores how violence and control function to deconstruct the prisoners' voice, by inflicting pain that is language destroying. The experience of pain becomes all consuming, and when sufficiently extreme 'becomes' the world of the person who experiences it. Like other theorists of the body (Akrich & Pasveer, 2004; Blackman, Cromby, Hook, Papadopoulos, & Walkerdine, 2008), Scarry is concerned with understanding how embodiment and subjectivity intertwine, how the experience of pain affects subjectivity, how subjectivity is produced in and through the infliction of pain, and how pain desubjectifies the victim (Lee, 2005).

The experience of pain is usually invisible, bounded in the body of the sufferer, and incommunicable to others. Scarry argues that torture makes pain *visible,* a kind of tableau of suffering. By turning the sufferer's pain into a visible, tangible phenomenon, the spectacle of torture functions to confirm the power of the torturer and the regime they represent. In torture, the unbearable nature of the pain underscores its incontestability. This in turn highlights the apparent incontrovertible power of the regime, in its ability to produce pain,

to render pain visible as a symbol of its power, and in so doing to entirely objectify the person who suffers the torture. Everything that matters to the person disappears in the sheer urgency of the pain – "the created world of thought and feeling, all the psychological and mental content that constitute both one's self and one's world, and that gives rise to and is in turn made possible by language, ceases to exist" (p. 29).

Whilst Scarry's analysis opened up a space in which we could begin to conceptualise the intertwining of subjectivity and embodiment, she has nonetheless been criticised for her reliance on an ultimately dualistic notion of body and subject, of materiality and language (Blackman, 2008; Lee, 2005). In suggesting that the self is 'unmade' because pain overwhelms the ability to articulate, returning the person to a prelinguistic object state, she draws on a problematic concept of the body, as pre-semantic, and pre-subjective. The body as object predates embodied subjectivity in her account – the self is 'unmade' because violence destroys the subject's capacity for representation. Being 'inarticulate' is presumed by Scarry to be pre-subjective. However, as Akrich & Pasveer (2004) have suggested, pain makes the body (normally obscured as the organ rather than the object of perception) more visible – it makes itself present. Thus it is not so much that the subject disappears, but that the embodied form of subjectivity becomes more apparent. In contrast, Lee suggests that "the concept 'body' is no more inert than its sex, ethnicity, sexual identity, political status, or ability…(B)odies are linguistic: posited as canvas for cultural and political inscription, bodies are neither merely canvas nor mirrors, but rather sites of inscription, exchange and regulation, dissent and satire" (Lee, 2005, p. 289).

Attempts to articulate pain take place within an interactional context. Articulation of experience does not just rely on the capacity of the individual in pain to speak. Weiss (2014) suggests that difficulties in communicating experiences of violence may not just be about the failure of subjects to articulate, but that the issue may also be with listeners' capacity to listen, to empathise and to *receive* the experience. In this sense, she suggests the experience that Scarry communicates must be understood as intersubjective. Scarry's formulation of pain risks some totalisation and universalisation of the victim's experience, in her notion that meaning-making is (albeit temporarily) disrupted, and subjectivity obliterated in acts of extreme violence. Lee (2012) challenges this analysis, describing holocaust survivor Tova Friedman's account of the meaning of the number tattooed onto her arm as an Auschwitz prisoner. While the stated intention of the regime was to strip her of her name, her identity, she refused this account of the meaning of the tattoo. In the aftermath of the holocaust, she refused to remove this mark, seeing it as a continuous reminder to the world of the regime's abuse, and of those who had not survived. In this sense, the victim's body is articulate; it expresses a meaning that exceeds the intention of the torturer. The pain inflicted on the body does not unmake the world: rather the victim-survivor is able to articulate and signify a world that has been inscribed on the body that accuses the abuser; it reminds us that the abuser has sought to obliterate the embodied subject, but that they have survived (Lee, 2012). Exploring the relationships between embodiment, pain and subjectification, Lee (2005) suggests there must be a way to "'deconstruct the body' without desubjectifying the subject" (Lee, 2005, p. 278). She argues that Scarry's account of embodiment, pain and subjectivity relies on the very dualisms of mind and body, self and other, that it seeks to deconstruct.

In this article, we explore Scarry's arguments about pain, embodiment and subjectivity, extending them to a consideration of the context of domestic violence, to explore whether her work helps us to make sense of children's experiences of this other context of coercion, violence and control. Children who experience domestic violence are much talked about in academic literature, which generally documents the damaging impact of violence on them. They are described as being at increased risk of negative psychological, relational and educational outcomes (Bair-Merritt, Blackstone, & Feudtner, 2006; Baldry, 2003; Black, Sussman, & Unger, 2010; Bogat, DeJonghe, Levendosky, Davidson, & von Eye, 2006; Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Lepistö, Luukkaala, & Paavilainen, 2011; Meltzer, Doos, Vostanis, Ford, & Goodman, 2009; Siegel, 2013; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2010), and of direct violence, like child abuse, child homicide, and future involvement in violent relationships (Bourget, Grace, & Whitehurst, 2007; Devaney, 2008; Jouriles, McDonald, Slep, Heyman, & Garrido, 2008). This literature provides needed insight into the harm children experience when domestic violence occurs in their family. However it also tends to perpetuate a representation of them as passive *witnesses* to adult violence – exposed to violence, damaged by violence, and relatively helpless in relation to such violence. Further, most of this research, while being *about* children rarely focuses on their lived experience, it is largely quantitative, and based on adult scored questionnaires *about* the child (Callaghan, 2015; Øverlien, 2009). In other words, this literature largely positions children as inert objects, witnessing, damaged, abused. In this kind of research, there is minimal engagement with the emotional life of children; their experiences (including experiences of physical and emotional pain, and coercion) are largely reduced to psychopathological outcomes. Their emotional worlds are seen as restricted, blunted, and they are described as 'concrete', emotionally reactive and emotionally incompetent (Callaghan, Fellin, Alexander, Mavrou, &

Papathanassiou, 2016; Katz, Hessler, & Annest, 2007; Logan & Graham-Bermann, 1999). Some researchers have pointed out the need to shift from this passive framing of children as 'witness' to a more complex understanding of them as both victims and as agents, through an understanding of how children make sense of and work with their experiences of domestic violence (Øverlien, 2011; Øverlien and Hydén, 2009; Mullender *et al.*, 2003; Authors *et al.*, 2016b; Authors, 2015). As Øverlien and Hydén (2009) suggest, children do not 'witness' domestic violence: "Children who experience violence in their homes *experience* it with all their senses. They hear it, see it, and experience the aftermath." (p. 479).

In domestic violence the power of the abuser is made visible in the violence and control exerted over the abused (Dobash & Dobash, 1992). As in torture, this is achieved through the combined effect of control over physical and relational space, and through the inflicting of physical pain. The experience of domestic violence, and of torture, are distinct, but have clear overlaps that enable us to consider the significance of Scarry's analysis of pain in this context. Feminists have long argued that domestic violence is about power and control (Stark, 2007), and that the pain inflicted by the perpetrator in abusive relationships is just one tool to express that power. Like torture, the point of the violence is not the violence itself; rather it functions to establish the power of the perpetrator to define and control the relationship, and challenges the subjectivity of the victim (Callaghan, Alexander, Sixsmith, & Fellin, 2016a). Establishing power and unmaking the other's selfhood are two interlocked and circular processes. The world of the victim of domestic violence, and their sense of self within that world, is diminished as the power and control of the perpetrator increases, and vice versa. Scarry argues that "The direct equation 'the larger the prisoner's

pain, the larger the torturer's world' is mediated by the middle term, 'the prisoner's absence of world'" (Scarry, 1985, p. 36). Scarry's equation particularly explains the function of coercive, controlling and abusive behaviours in the context of domestic violence. As in torture, where the control of the mundane everyday sights and sounds of the prisoner's environment becomes a part of the torture spectacle, so too in coercive control, the perpetrator "works" to make the prisoner's world 'absent'. Unlike torture, this coercive activity is not always explicit, or even consciously intentional. However, the controlling aspects of abusive relationships increasingly limit the victim-survivor's use of the physical spaces of the home, their access to resources, and their ability to connect to others beyond the home. This control maintains the secrecy and silence that contains and enables the violence. It gradually destroys the world of the victim, encouraging the repositioning of their world as entirely constrained and reduced to the abusive relationship. Like torture, in violent relationships the abuser gains world-ground, as they use the "objects of the prisoner's sentience" to express their power; "the torturer uses the prisoner's aliveness to crush the things he lives for" (p. 37). Much of the psychological impact of domestic violence is explained through this threat of the loss of sentience in the victim, the positioning of the victim as the object of the abuser's violence and control. This reveals the intrinsically political form of violence and coercion. However, Scarry's framing here does, we argue, underestimate the resistant capacity of those who experience violence. In focusing on loss of spoken language as loss of subjectivity, she risks a totalising model in which the victim is rendered entirely passive. This account negates the victim's potential choice of silence as a means of survival. It also obscures the complexity of an interaction in which violence is often used against a victim whose voice in some way threatens the perpetrator – as a way for those who lack the capacity to establish a strong moral ground verbally to gradually

erode the capacity of their victims to speak out, or to articulate a world view beyond that of the regime. This is partly because Scarry's account neglects the experience of torture as it is embedded in both (or all) actors' histories, treating them as isolated individuals in a manner that reifies their encounter, cutting it off from both life story and connection to the social world beyond the prison walls.

When violence occurs in the home, this does not just take place in the intimate dyad – it pervades the family and has a negative impact on patterns of relating throughout and beyond the household (Cooper & Vetere, 2008; Dallos & Vetere, 2012; Øverlien, 2013; Vetere & Cooper, 2006). Violence, coercion and intimidation are often directed at both the adult and child victims of domestic violence (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a; Dallos & Vetere, 2012), and at times, abuse, threats and manipulation of children is used as a strategy to intimidate and control the partner (Hester, 2000).

Contextual meaning-making is the fulcrum of the systemic model developed by Valeria Ugazio (2013). In Ugazio's account, experience is always contextual, embodied, and relational (Ugazio, 2013). By extension, emotions too are contextual, corporeal and intersubjective processes (Lindquist et al, 2012). Embodiment, emotional experience and subjectivity intertwine as intersubjective, intercorporeal experiences, constituted in interaction, not in isolation or in a-priori states (Ugazio,2013). Adopting a contextual approach means that pain and suffering, as well as resistance to that suffering, must be understood as constituted intersubjectively in the multiple (often ambivalent) relations within families, cultures, belief systems, and values, as located, emotional and embodied experiences. In addition to challenging the notion that a pre-embodied (and pre-social) state exists, Ugazio's framework allows us to take into consideration the complexity of

subjectivity as it is constituted in familial relationships, their contextual embeddedness. This opens a space in which we can consider how a child's sense of self, their 'mental health', and their capacity for agency and resistance emerges in complex materio-spatial and psychosocial contexts, not in linear dyadic encounters (e.g. abuser and abused, or perpetrator and witness).

As stated earlier, our aim in this article is to explore children's accounts of their experience of emotional and physical pain, in situations of domestic violence. We argue that their experiences of such pain, and their capacity to resist it, are always located in embodied and interactional contexts. Whilst Scarry's theory that the self is unmade through the act of violence enables us to see beyond the 'mere' act of physical violence to consider its constitutive role in subjectivity, extending Scarry's account of the body in pain to domestic violence does risk the reproduction of child (and adult) victims of domestic violence as passive recipients of abuse. By incorporating Ugazio's semantic and consequently intersubjective account of embodiment, we enable a space in which children's embodied subjectivity is co-constructed in corporeal and material interactions that are conversational and semantic. The family is a fleshy, psychosocial and semantic entity, in which an embodied, relational subjectivity is constituted. Children's capacity to maintain a sense of agency, and to resist the coercive and controlling interactional patterns in the family are also understood in relation to this contextualised, relational reading of embodied subjectivity.

Method

The project 'Understanding Agency and Resistance Strategies' is a four nation European project exploring children's capacity for agency, resistance and resilience in situations of domestic violence. This article is based on the analysis of interviews completed with children in the United Kingdom.

Interviews were conducted with 17 girls and 11 boys (aged 8-17 years), recruited through specialist domestic violence services. Interviews incorporated family drawings, photographs and spatial maps (Bridger, 2013; Gabb & Singh, 2015) and explored with children their experiences of living with and coping with domestic violence. Non-normative and stigmatised experiences are often difficult to articulate (Authors *et al.*, 2015), and using visual methods in conjunction with the interviews proved a fruitful way of supporting children in expressing these complex, conflicted experiences, for which there was sometimes not an easily available language. Scarry suggested that arts and visual communication might function as a tool to overcome the inarticulate nature of pain. Children's visual imagery was embedded within interview transcriptions and the analysis of text and image proceeded simultaneously, to avoid any treatment of image and text as separate forms of 'data'.

We used Denzin's (2001) *Interpretive Interactionism* to analyse the interviews, as this enabled us to explore the interface of the personal and social in participants' life stories, to develop an understanding of how lived experiences of pain and resistance are constituted in social and political contexts. This sensitivity to the personal-social nexus was particularly useful, as children's experiences of domestic violence are lived at the interface of the personal / private (the domestic, the family) and the social and political. Transcripts were

coded independently by two members of the research team, then compared to enable the refinement of the coding process, as researchers built consensus about the interpretation. Transcripts were considered first separately, and then together, to enable contextualization of the accounts, and to consider patterns of meanings and experiences as they were constituted across children's accounts, and within specific interpersonal, social and political contexts.

The research project was ethically complex. As researchers we were mindful of the way that children were positioned as vulnerable and negatively impacted by their experiences of domestic violence: asking children to articulate their experiences might be risky or subject them to secondary traumatisation (Eriksson & Näsman, 2012; Morris, Hegarty, & Humphreys, 2012), but we were also committed to facilitating their ability to articulate and make meaning of their own experiences (Houghton, 2015; Skansvors, 2009). Several steps were taken to protect children involved in the research, including ensuring that they understood the focus of the research, and had access to questions before the interview so they could make informed choices about involvement; structuring interviews to take into account the developmental level of the young person, and ensuring that researchers were responsive to children's cues and interactional styles in the interviews (Pascal & Bertram, 2009), and using a range of creative techniques to support the interview, when children wanted to use them (Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin, & Robinson, 2010). Children were only interviewed if they had left situations of domestic abuse, and if professionals working with them assessed them to be safe to work with (Morris et al., 2012). If children were distressed, or if the researchers had concerns about their wellbeing, specialist domestic violence workers were accessible for consultation and if necessary, immediate referral. Before each interview, there was an initial meeting with children and

their (non-violent) parent (in this sample, all mothers), in which the purpose of the research was explained. A cooling-off period of at least 24 hours was agreed, and written and verbal informed consent was secured from willing parents and assent from willing children (Eriksson & Näsman, 2012). To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms have been used, and identifying information in all data have been omitted or altered.

Analysis: Subjectivity, use of space, and the wounded body

A major theme in our analysis of children's accounts of domestic violence was the importance of embodiment in both their narratives of coercive control and violence in the family, and in their resistances to such violence and control. Children's descriptions of violence in the home, and of coping with violence suggests an embodied subjectivity, constituted in relation to an intertwining sense of coping and of damage.

The experience of violence is an always-embodied and always-emotional one. For children who live with domestic violence, the embodied nature of their experiences is not always evident. Because they are typically described as 'witnesses to domestic violence', children are framed as relatively detached from the direct experience of violence, which is seen as taking place in the intimate adult dyad. However, children who experience domestic violence live in households pervaded by dynamics of coercion (Cooper & Vetere, 2008) and flooded with anxieties about aggression and violence: their experiences are characterised by emotional and physical pain, and control. The material and spatial experience of domestic violence has consequences for the way they understand themselves as embodied and affective beings:

> *Lizzy: ((.)) Yeah. ((err)) ((.)) I don't really know, I just hoped that it wouldn't happen and when it did, then I'd just go into my panic, and then I'd do*

whatever I do every time, but then I'd just come out of it and try to get on, I just tried to block it out all the time, so.
Int: When you say, "Go into my panic," what does that mean?
Lizzy: Like, I used to like, shake, like really bad.
Int: So the shaking.
Lizzy: Yeah, I used to shake. And I just like, try to, ((laughs)) like my brain stopped working and it was just like, what's happening, after?

In this extract, Lizzy (aged 14) describes her emotional reaction to the violence unfolding around her. Her experience of violence is characterised by a sense of being entirely identified with 'her panic' and 'coming out of it and trying to get on' by 'blocking it out'. Lizzy's account here seems to fit to some extent with Scarry's view of violence as 'unmaking the world', as disrupting the person's very subjectivity, reducing her to inarticulateness. But is she reduced to corporeal materiality, to object, as Scarry suggests? Scarry understands speech as constitutive of the self – it is the means by which the person extends beyond the limits of the body, to occupy a larger psychosocial space. Stopping speaking, becoming entirely body, speechless and inarticulate is, according to Scarry, imitative of death, dehumanising. In this extract, Lizzy suggests that, when violence occurs in her home, her brain 'stops working' and she loses her sense of a joining narrative, disrupting her ability to speak or function with any lucidity (she suggests she is confused about what happens afterwards). This suggests that there are elements of children's experiences of domestic violence that, for them 'unmakes the world'. However, children's reported experience is not quite this totalising. As Lizzy demonstrates, children are often acutely aware of and able to articulate complex lived and embodied experiences. This is more consistent with Akrich & Pasveer (2004)'s suggestion that pain overrides the tendency for our body to be relatively invisible as the organ of perception, as pain makes the body more present to the subject. Whilst there may be a temporary breakdown in the ability to directly articulate the

experience in words, nonetheless the experience is part of our representational processes, and Lizzy is able here to articulate the experience quite competently when looking back on it. This experience underscores the importance of understanding embodied experience as historically located within the life stories of the interacting subjects. This experience the bodily both overpowering our sense of selfhood, and as inscribed as a pivotal, epiphanic moment in the construction of our sense of self is articulated by Hannah, (aged 11):

> *When I'm annoyed it's horrible, it's not like other people, it feels like my mind's blowing up and let's just say it feels like I've been chopped into cubes, glued back together and been blown up. That's what it feels like when I'm annoyed.*

This extract illustrates the sense of embodied emotional experience as highly disruptive and overwhelming. Her description is of her mind rendered as object, being violently chopped apart, reformed and then blown up again. This graphic description of the emotional experience of rage suggests a moment in which Hannah does, indeed, experience herself as inert object. However, she is also, reflecting back on the experience, able to articulate the experience in colourful and detailed ways. That she is able to articulate the experience so graphically when looking on it retrospectively does suggest a knowing subject, experiencing the sense of being overpowered and objectified by the intensity of her emotion.

We therefore suggest that children are not rendered entirely object by their experience of violence and control in their family relationships. , Indeed, it is often in their accounts of embodied experience that we find traces of their capacity for resistance to violent control, and to the way that violent control threatens to objectify them. It is in moments of being positioned as material, as object, that they are also able to assert their subjectivity, their agency, their capacity to resist.

For instance, a strong feature of our interviews with two brothers, George (11) and Paul (9), was their presentation of their wounds, their literal display of physical woundedness. Both brothers drew attention to scars and marks. These were not necessarily the immediate consequence of violence in the family, but were marks left by risky activities, accidents and relatively ordinary childhood bumps and bruises (see (Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016b),for a more detailed analysis of sibling interactions in relation to this interview). However, in this extract, a specific scar is identified as symbolising the victim status of the younger brother, Paul. As you read the extract, take note of the way that Paul and George's accounts intertwine, as two different explanations of Paul's scar emerge:

Int: Oh, that looks sore.
Paul: yeah, that was an accident. That was on purpose yesterday.
George: That cut down there. You remember when that happened.
Paul: climb, climb, climb. Fall down.
Int: From where?
George: Did he really… ? ((unclear)) If that was me, yeah [
Paul: [From a window
George: That was me, was annoying me. And I punched him in the face.
Paul: A window.
Paul: I got very angry. And I went upstairs. And I climbed out of the window. I was using some rope. And about half way I fell down.
Int: Oh.
George: you mean you tried to jump and kill yourself.
Paul: Yeah.
George: you didn't want to be alive. He got half way, and then he let go. And he he fell.
Paul: Blood shot there.
George: Blood shot.
Paul: the next day I had bloodshot on that eye.

Initially, Paul has shown a cut from an accident the day before, but George uses this exposure as an opportunity to draw the interviewer to a different kind of wound, one that is revealed as evidence both of the brutality they have experienced, and of Paul's specific status as wounded victim. They give varying accounts of the incident, with Paul narrating an

accident, in which he 'fell down', and George telling the story of how Paul 'tried to jump and kill himself'. In many senses the younger brother's wound here signifies for both brothers their father's brutality, which is marked on Paul's body. This embodied subjectivity is constituted intersubjectively, intercorporeally (Blackman et al., 2008; Ugazio, 2013), in the interactions between the brothers, and in the way that these interactions are embedded in turn within familial and cultural contexts that entrench perceptions of masculinity as macho-ness. This is asserted in the fraternal relationship, and both brothers' capacity for both conformity and resistance to violence in the family are constituted psychosocially, intercorporeally and intersubjectively.

In some senses, this narrative of Paul's apparent woundedness supports Scarry's account of the tortured body, in which she suggests that the body signifies the stripping away of the individual's personhood, and that its woundedness symbolises and materialises the institutions that tortured it. Paul becomes positioned as the desperate, suicidal victim, with his body indelibly marked with a wound that bears testimony to his victim position, and the concomitant stripping away of his agency. Lee (2005) suggests that the agency of the aggressor is manifest in the woundedness of the victim:

> *The tortured body speaks through the subject's attempts to protect herself, through her compliance, and through the physical space she occupies while she endures being beaten. Her very comportment signifies the institutions and practices reinforced in the violence acted out against her. (p. 289)*

At the same time though, the wounded body also actively bears testimony to the act of violence that has produced its scars. It is not a mere object that absorbs blows and is marked by violence. The display of the wounded body is also an active communication from the victim to the world, about the violence they have experienced. In the case of the two boys interviewed here, they displayed their wounds and scars, with a sense of pride, as

evidence of both their hurt, and of their survival. Wounds, in this sense are not inert or silent marks – they are articulate and have the potential to express agency. They are simultaneously marks of victimhood, and badges of pride. They are symbols, not only of violence, but of the ability to endure, to survive.

However, it is important to note that, whilst Paul accedes to his positioning as victim, nonetheless his apparent attempted suicide resists this positioning in a range of ways. His fall / jump from the window drew attention to the safeguarding concerns that attended his ongoing placement with his perpetrator father after his mother was removed from the marital home. The wound, in this sense, signifies both his abjection as the victim of violence, and his resistance, as an agent able, through his embodied action, to resist that victimisation, and to call attention to his experience of violence. The wounded body here functions simultaneously as subject and object, with the embodied subject taking up multiple positionings as both victim of violence and as agentic resister. Nonetheless this capacity for agency is constrained by relational dynamics, and familial and cultural norms about embodiment, gender and the meanings of victimhood and of resistance.

The complexity of body-object / body-subject is perfectly illustrated in this quote from Ali (aged 15), talking about the ways that she is able to 'stick up for herself':

> *Ali: I dunno, punch people, you learn how to run as fast as you can, you learn how to hide, you know how to block what's happening, you know you say, ((erm)) ((.)) ((arr)) you've got a piece of metal coming onto you, you know if you tense your muscle it hurts more, if you relax it, it hurts less, so you learn, like, with a wet thing, if it's wet, you know how to angle, if you like, err, if you're getting a wet towel slapped at you, you know how to angle and tense just ((demonstrates the most protective position by angling her arm)), not like that, or like that, like that. You get tense just in the middle. You know how to lessen the pain by tactics you use, like with a punch, if you punch like that ((demonstrates punching)) it will hurt less . than if you punch like that 'cause you're getting the bone, so you learn how to avoid things, and angle it so it hurts less*

Int: How do you learn that?
Ali: I dunno, you just do tests and trials

In Ali's account, we see clearly how the violence she has experienced is embodied by her – how her comportment reflects, symbolises and resists the violence of the perpetrator. She has adapted her body's responses to the violence of her abusive father. However, her body is not merely reflecting violence in this extract – she is neither a passive recipient nor transmitter for the message of his coercive and violent behaviour in her family. Even in the moment of her most abject victimisation, she narrates a resistant sense of subjectivity. Her personhood is reasserted in her ability to adapt her body to the blows, to minimise their impact. She has learned to do this, she tells us, through repeated experiences of victimisation ('tests and trials'). But in learning how to angle her body 'just so', she is able to hold onto a sense of self as resistant, as coper, as agent. She endures, but resists. Her embodied experience, her comportment both reflects and resists the institutional forces that act upon her. In this sense, Ali's account here exemplifies Lee's (2005) challenge to Scarry, that there is nothing necessarily inert about the body. Lee questions whether violence can "*'deconstruct the body' without desubjectifying the subject?* Can it reconstruct the body and resubjectify or rematerialize the subject in ways which conform to the subject's own intent?" (Lee, 2005, p. 285). While on the one hand, Ali's body is entirely the object of violence, entirely identified with the pain, on the other hand, even as it is rendered victimised object, she re-constitutes her body as able to resist, rematerializing the subject and reasserting her own intentionality, to protect herself and resist her father's oppressive actions. Ali here evidences that her sense of self as subject is constituted in embodied interactions – her sense of who she is is both 'affected' by the experience of pain, and 'effected' through it, (Lee, 2005, p. 278), such that she is both subject and object, both

conscious and embodied, not merely reduced to non-linguistic materiality. These symbolically concatenated experiences of oppression-resistance are not easily expressible in words – this is captured in the performative elements of Ali's account, her gestures, her showing of it 'just so'.

Children's embodied experiences of managing domestic violence extended into the material spaces of the home (Alexander, Callaghan, Fellin, & Sixsmith, 2016). In the extract below, Lizzy describes her experience of living in her home after the perpetrator had been removed, and the house had been 'target hardened' (adapted to make the home safer):

> *Lizzy: ((erm)) ((..)) The outside rooms ((felt unsafe)), like the kitchen and the living room, these two ((points to picture)), because this is the place that he usually come over and got in, and …. Yeah. So this one had the balcony door, and that's, he could climb over there, so that, he could get in easily there. Outdoors had alarms on, our windows had alarms on, 'cause the police come and fitted them on… Yeah, so if someone tried to break in, the alarm'd go off…. Yeah. We didn't have them ((alarms)) before, but because the windows kept getting smashed in and forced in, we had alarms put in, and then after that we thought the door was safe, so after that we got an alarm put on there…. It was really, really loud ((laughs)). [...] He used to, like, like smashing the win…, like smash the windows, and we could hear it from my mum's room, so it was quite….*
> *Int: And when that happened, what did you do? ((.)) What was the immediate thing that you thought to do?*
> *Lizzy: ((.)) Get out.*
> *Int: Get out?*
> *Lizzy: Yeah, ((.)) but ((erm)) if he was here ((points to entrance)), then we'd have to wait till he goes around and then quickly run up, and…*
> *Int: So what is here? ((.)) Is this the entrance to the flat?*
> *Lizzy: Yeah, it's like a buzzer, and then there's the door there, the door's there that you can, you could keep on latch, so if you wanted to get in and you can't, the key at night time, some people left it on the latch, and most of, and he could get in sometimes, but ((erm)) [...]*
> *Int: And what would, what would happen then?*
> *Lizzy: We'd just have to lock all the doors and call the police.*

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

For Lizzy, the house is marked with the experiences of violence and intrusion. She can identify specific areas that feel unsafe – the outer sections of the house, the areas the perpetrator had previously broken into. Here, the ordinary materiality of the house – the windows, the doors, the rooms he had broken into – has come to signify the violence itself. At points of invasion, if unable to escape the home, Lizzy and her mother had to retreat to the inner 'safe' rooms of the house, and lock themselves in, awaiting rescue. The windows, the doors, the too loud alarms all symbolise the experience of intrusion, violence and fear. They become, as Scarry suggests, the weapons that inflict pain, imbued with a certain level of agency, signifying the perpetrator, the violence, and the fear. This is clear in Lizzy's description of the 'too loud' alarms, that shatter her sense of peace, and unsettle the homeliness of the home in which she is supposed to feel safe. The home became a prison – there was no way to get out.

However, to only focus on the oppressive materiality of the home would risk missing children's capacity to use this same material space as a way to secure a sense of safety, and to resist the oppressive actions of the perpetrator. Children described a range of ways in which they 'escaped' within the home, and used its physical spaces and material objects to manage the abuser and transform their experience. Consider for instance, this extract from Emma's interview (aged 16) [INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]:

> *Emma: Yeah, it was like you had a high rise bed, had like a desk and a wardrobe … That kind of thing, so you'd have like a little gap behind there, used to have a little light down there ((laughs)).*
> *Int: So you literally hid in there?*
> *Emma: Yeah, ((pointing to map of house)) so like where my room is in here, the bed would be against this wall and I'll have a chest of drawers there and I used to hide behind this little, there, where my bed used to have a gap behind.*
> *Int: And that's when he was there, and you were there on your own?*

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

Here, Emma describes a safety strategy used by many of the children we spoke to – the use of dens and hideaways, small spaces into which adults could not easily enter, where they could hide until things calmed down. These safe, small spaces were often in children's rooms or in outside rooms (e.g., sheds) – spaces that they defined as their own, and where the perpetrator did not often go. Wardaugh (1999) has suggested that the experience of domestic violence is one of being 'homeless at home'. When the safe spaces of the home are unsettled, when they become a part of the experience of torture and violence, this contributes to the disruption of our sense of self, by re-signifying the safe spaces of home, remaking them as dangerous, as weapons of violence.

This is clearly evidenced in Lizzy's account of the invasion of her home, in the extract above. However, Emma illustrates how this unhoming of the home is not total in experiences of domestic violence. She is able to find a tiny little crack of the house that still *homes* her, where she feels safe, secure and able. Her capacity for agency is expressed, even as she cowers in a tiny space behind her bed and cupboard. She is able to fool the perpetrator. She is able to hide from him. And the triumph of her capacity to resist him is captured in her laugh. In *The Body in Pain*, Scarry suggests that domestic space, 'the room' is a space that enlarges the body, houses us, keeps us safe and warm. We tend to *identify* with our homes, to see them as extensions of sense of self. Our subjectivity is contained and bounded in the material spaces of home. Mallett (2004) argues that our sense of 'home' occupies a particular place in the Anglo European imaginary, with home conceptualised as an intimate, private space, associated with comfort and belonging. However, when

disrupted by violence, or by other experiences that unsettle this sense of belonging, home can, Mallett argues, become a space of marginalisation and estrangement. In our interviews with children, home-and family relations- emerged as a complex and ambiguous space for children – on the one hand a dangerous space of violence and threat, on the other hand, a space in which they could reclaim a sense of agency, and that enabled a capacity for resistance (Alexander et al., 2016; Callaghan, Alexander, et al., 2016a, 2016b).

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we have explored children's capacity for agency and their use of space, focusing specifically on their experiences of embodied pain and domestic violence. We concur with Scarry that pain can be impossible to express and share verbally, and that this can contribute to obscure or minimise these experience. This is, we argue, a particular problem for children, who are often denied a sense of agency and voice, and whose lived experiences of domestic violence are often reduced to descriptions of them as 'witnesses' or 'exposed' to violence. Such descriptions position children as damaged but passive, and can de-subjectify them further. Failing to hear children's experiences of domestic violence contributes to their invisibility in academic, professional and policy discourse, further victimising and isolating those who have lived them and enlarging the (illusion of) power of the perpetrators. As Scarry argues, making these experience visible is crucial in order to draw political attention and intervention. By adopting visual and embodied methods in our interviews we aimed to facilitate the articulation of these experiences of pain, working with children to make them sharable and visible.

Our work disrupts taken-for-granted assumptions, embedded in academic research, professional practice, and legislation, that children who live with domestic violence are passive witnesses to adult aggression, and are helpless, damaged victims. Instead, by adopting a systemic perspective, we suggest that, whilst domestic violence certainly has a potent negative impact on children, they are able to find -within their relational contexts- complex ways to hold onto a sense of an agentic self, who is able to resist (even if in quite small, gestural ways) the violence that they experience.

Our interviews with children who have lived with domestic violence add further to Lee's (2005) argument that Scarry asserts a too neat separation of mind and body, obscuring the complexity of embodied subjectivity for those who routinely bear the wounds and scars of various forms of structural violence:

> *This is not to say that violence does not have the capacity to debase the subject, but that the notion that mind is debased against a body which retains some semblance of stability is itself misguided; violence reaffirms the unmarked perpetrator as the paradigmatic subject in virtue of his (body's) construction even while it circumscribes the other of his 'rational self' as other. (p.291)*

In domestic violence, the body of the victim bears the scars and wounds that simultaneously express their woundedness, and implicate and accuse the perpetrator (Lee, 2012). Through verbal, visual and enacted accounts the children we interviewed similarly position their embodiment and materiality not (just) as wounded, inert victimhood, but also as a potent site for resistance and the construction of a sense of self-as-subject within their relational contexts. Further, children's use of space expresses the sense of constraint that characterises the spatial experience of domestic violence, and the material spaces of home come to signify the perpetrator and the violence. Simultaneously, though, children are able to use the material spaces of home to enable gestures of defiance (Authors, 2007), and re-

forge and recreate a sense of 'home', through movement and use of space that enables a sense of control, and redresses some of their material experiences of power imbalance. This capacity for resistance is apparent when children's embodied experience are read as meaningful, intersubjective and contextual, a lens that requires that we attend to the systemic-contextual elements of children's accounts (Ugazio, 2013).

Scarry, in her analysis of the experience of pain through torture, focuses on a form of violence that imposes silence and undermines resistance in the broader population through the violent control of the tortured few, in order to impose a (relatively impersonal) regime's will. In contrast, in situations of domestic violence, whilst the function of violence is still to control and to impose the will of the perpetrator on the victims, the relational and emotional context is very different. While domestic violence has many features in common with Scarry's analysis of torture, the meaning of pain and violence is shaped too by the relational aspects of the violence – not just by its political nature. In domestic violence, the political implications of coercive control and of the violence itself is clear, but this is located in a complex interpersonal situation in which it is perhaps not (just) the victim who experiences powerlessness or who has 'run out of words'. As Elie Wiesel suggests, violence in close and intimate relationships may function as a form of communication for a person who cannot find words: "Violence is a language. When language fails, violence becomes a language; I never had that feeling. Language failed me very often, but then, the substitute for me was silence, but not violence." (Wiesel, in conversation with Moyers, 1991). Children who experience domestic violence are able to return this often wordless communication, finding strategies to articulate their woundedness, and their resistance to victimisation, in embodied and material strategies that enable them to express and resist the coercive control of the perpetrator. A failure to 'hear' children's corporeal resistance entrenches the

idea of passive and docile victims. Our work illustrates the need to explore the pained body as more than absence of subjectivity, as more than silenced or inert, and to enable a more nuanced recognition of the body's complex semiotic capacity to communicate beyond voice. Rather than being entirely 'unmade' by the violence, rendered silent and as object, their corporeal resistance in body and space speaks volumes, articulating, and therefore establishing, the very subjectivity that language of violence seeks to undermine and control.

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