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Notes for presentation at VIA

## INTRO

Slide 1

The basis for this paper is the initial literature review for my PhD thesis which is looking at the long term impacts upon adults who as children, experienced domestic abuse but more specifically their use of resistance strategies, the development of resilience and agency.

There is much literature on the impact domestic abuse has on children from pre-birth to late teens but largely there has been a void in acknowledging children's resistance to violence and abuse and even scarcer, is any literature which examines the effects this has on later life.

Predominantly the existing children's literature focuses on what Anderson (2012) refers to as the detection of

'problematic functioning: cognitive, emotional, and behavioural effects, rather than recognizing what children do when violence occurs.'

O'Brien (2013), Anderson (2012) and Ai and Park (2005 cited in Aisenberg and Ell, 2005) acknowledge just how little we understand about any long-term effects of 'witnessing' domestic abuse in the home.

I will return to the term 'witnessing' in a bit.

The literature that does exist has many limitations. It largely ignores female offenders and male victims of domestic abuse, children's own voices and is almost entirely focussed on physical violence. Early studies measuring children's experiences of domestic abuse focussed upon seeing violence. The victims (women) were asked to report on whether or not the child had witnessed the abuse (violence).

Studies in which children were directly listened to found that they experienced violence in many ways: 'hearing, smelling and seeing the aftermath of violent episodes (Øverlien and Hydén, 2007 cited in Callaghan and Alexander 2015).

Research into children's experiences of abuse has been undertaken largely by psychology and medicine rather than social work. A study by Cunningham and Baker (2004, cited in Callaghan and Alexander 2015) indicates this to be as little as 20% of the available research.

## Search Results

Slide 2, 3 and 4

This brings me to my own search so far.

There is little consensus in agreed terminology which makes for a more complicated strategy in trying to identify all of the possible literature. For example in searching the phrase '*A retrospective examination of resistance, resilience and the development of agency in adult survivors of childhood domestic abuse*' my data set contains 31 synonyms for the term 'resistance' alone!

Slide 3

As William Shakespeare said in Romeo and Juliet:

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

We academics like a good grapple over our no/men/clature and a good case in point is the term 'witness'. Callaghan and Alexander (2015: 2) argue that referring to children as witnesses implies an almost incident status which denies children a voice to accurately present their own experiences and 'articulate the ways that they cope with and resist such experiences'. Humphreys (2010) and Powell and Murray (2008 cited in Callaghan and Alexander, 2015) call for a broader definition to incorporate 'living with, being exposed to or being affected by.' Edelson (1999) states that issues often ascribed to being a child witness of domestic abuse may in deed, be more closely aligned to having been a direct victim of the abuse themselves. On the issue of terminology used in the literature a child who has 'witnessed' domestic abuse is defined by Kolbo (1996 cited in Edelson 1999: 845) reflects on a study which examined 60 child witnesses which failed to acknowledge that all but 2 of the participants were actually direct victims.

A number of authors (Richards 2011; Bedi and Goddard 2007; Gewirtz and Medhanie 2008; Kantor and Little 2003 cited in O'Brien 2013) have argued for a new concept of 'childhood witnessing':

'A definition that captures the entirety of the childhood experience of hearing violence; seeing violence, being forced to spy on a parent; being made to participate in an assault; being used as a weapon or hostage; attempting to intervene in order to defend a parent and/or to stop an assault. In addition, in the aftermath of the abuse, patching up an injured parent's wounds, having to telephone for emergency assistance, and dealing with the abuser's oscillation between a parental caring role and a parental perpetrator role.'

Other researchers including Eriksson et al., 2005; Hester and Radford, 1996; Hester et al., 1999; Källström Cater, 2004; McGee, 2000; Øverlien and Hydén, 2007; Peled, 1998 (cited in Øverlien and

Hydén, 2009) advocate for the term 'experience'. Studies in this field tend to concentrate upon the perspective of the child. The child is not passive but 'an active agent in his or her life where the violence becomes an important experience, forcing the child, in many instances, to act' (Øverlien and Hydén, 2009).

Slide 4

### **The Experiences of Children within the Literature**

Slide 5

- Children classed as invisible or secondary victims Daniel 2010, Eriksson & Näsman 2010
- Children seen as passive recipients Callaghan and Alexander 2015, Katz 2016
- Children are negatively affected Black, Sussman and Unger 2010, Becker 2010, Daniel 2010
- Limitations and bias Anderson 2012, Katz 2016, Daniel 2010

Callaghan and Alexander (2015) highlight the tendency in agencies dealing with domestic abuse to try restoring a 'normative childhood'. This model fails to fully recognise or respect the paradoxical ability of some children to cope, to develop agency and resist domestic abuse.

They argue for a more rounded recognition of children's experiences of domestic abuse, to recognise children as direct victims and not as witnesses or additional to adult experiences.

Elsewhere in the literature the call to respect children as 'social agents and...active constructors of their own social worlds' is echoed in Överlien, C. & Hydén's research which gave credence to children's own perspectives, meanings and interpretations.

Space for children to discuss and try to rationalise their experiences of abuse can be limited. Leira (2002 cited in Eriksson & Näsman, 2010) refers to a 'cultural taboo' as one which fails to address violence and abuse within family settings. The opportunity for child victims to understand the abuse they have experienced and have such experiences validated being reduced.

Daniel (2010) also talks about the second class victim status often afforded children whereby children are seen as secondary to the partner experiencing the abuse or invisible.

This is an issue which has been borne out in my own practice experience as an Independent Domestic Violence Advocate (IDVA). Often we would receive a copy of the 10 point plan police log detailing initial call-in describing often very violent situations (property being destroyed, very loud verbal abuse and/or physical violence). Point 4 of the 10 point plan would often read 'children seen safe and well asleep in bed'.

The literature pertaining to the negative and often long-lasting effects that growing up in a domestic abuse household is well detailed.

Van den Bosse and McGinn interviewed children, many of whom reported having to maintain a constant vigilance, which, as one participant described, "robs you of your childhood." Another participant discussed experiencing the world via the reality of the abuser, of the abuser 'running the show' and of his 'ever present control'.

Other studies detail links between children's experience of domestic abuse to various behavioral problems (particularly physical aggression and noncompliance), anxiety, depression, difficulty concentrating, low self-esteem, sleeping difficulties, and re-victimization (Cummings, Peplar, & Moore, 1999; Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990; Kolbo, Blakely, & Engelman, 1996; McGee, 1997; Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2001). In addition, witnessing parental violence has been found to be a significant predictor of posttraumatic stress disorder (Kilpatrick, Litt, & Williams, 1997). Cited in Black, Sussman, and Unger, (2010).

Maker et al. 1998 – 'Adult women, on the other hand, more often tend to be the recipient of abuse in intimate relationships'

Moon 2000 (lower self-esteem\*)

Clements et al. 2008 Forstrom-Cohen & Rosenbaum 1985, Russell et al. 2010 (depression\*),

Henning et al. 1996 & Von Steen 1997 (social problems, intimacy issues, anxiety\*)

Strauss 1992 and Silvern et al. 1995 (psychological distress\*),

Dick 2005 – 'Men...less likely to be married, and if they do marry, they are more likely to be divorced or separated'

Murrell et al. 2005 , Dick 2005, Henning et al. 1996 – 'men are more likely to show violent and aggressive behaviours in intimate relationships, especially if they witnessed the abuser using weapons (Henning *et al.* 1996; Dick 2005; Murrell *et al.* 2005).

Isolation

The isolation that children lived with as a result of perpetrators'/ fathers' controlling tactics severely limited children's opportunities to create resilience-building relationships with non-abusive people outside their immediate family. KATZ 2016

## Children, DV and PTSD links?

'There is evidence that some children exposed to domestic violence display PTSD symptoms or meet the criteria for the disorder (c.f., Graham-Bermann & Levendosky, 1998; McCloskey & Walker, 2000), but whether such vulnerability persists in adult profiles is unknown.'

Becker (2010)

## Limitations and Bias

I referred earlier too much of the literature examining the male perpetrator/female victim dynamic and of the literature that does exist in relation to how domestic abuse impacts upon children there is a bias in the focus towards examining physical aspects of domestic abuse and how this impacts upon children. Reflecting on his experiences as a child, John expressed his lack of confidence in the system's exclusive focus on safety. "I just don't know if a system has it within itself to customize what the child needs. The focus would've been on my physical safety, but my emotional safety was really what was killing me" (Van den Bosse and McGinn).

Katz (2016) advocates adopting models which incorporates more than just the physical incident. Moving away from the physical emphasis can enable studies of domestic abuse to examine children's agency, coping strategies, knowledgeableness and the active roles children adapt in such situations. Clarke and Wydall (2015) describe how 'children who witness adult violence in the home...are rarely passive observers... they experience it from the position of subjects and not objects' (cited in Katz, 2012).

There is also a bias in much of the literature which tends to inherently assume a child growing up with domestic abuse will 'follow predictably negative trajectories' (Daniel, 2010: 232).

Another issue is that much of the existing research assesses the impacts of domestic abuse on children from other perspectives and do not include the voices of children themselves. For example Katz (2012) indicates that when children have been asked to score themselves along with their caregivers they tend to score themselves much lower in respect of clinical trauma symptoms.

Narrowing the research focus to a limited and frequently contextual understanding of what being resilient means has all too often restricted our understanding of what happens in children's lives to how they have been damaged by the process. This reductionist approach fails to recognise the creative, agentic and dynamic ways with which a child may cope (Katz, 2012).

## Passive vs active responses

Earlier we looked at some of the negative impacts growing up with domestic abuse. Some of the research suggests that children who adopt more passive strategies to cope have links to higher incidents

of mental health issues (Ayers et al., 1996; Kerig, 2003; Sandler et al., 1997), active coping strategies however are associated with fewer mental health problems (Överlien, C. & Hydén, 2009).

Amelioration of the threat posed to child witnesses can be developing what O'Brien (2013) refers to as 'adaptive coping strategies'. Identification of strong and supportive relationships and a safe haven out with the family setting appear to be an essential aspect facilitating their ability to cope and 'lead a rewarding adult life' (O'Brien, 2013: 95).

### Coping strategies

Authors such as Hester and Radford (1996), McGee (2000) and Överlien and Hydén (2009) and Mullender et al. (2002) discuss active coping strategies such as identifying a place of safety for the parent who was being abused to go to or using their own physicality to prevent abuse from occurring. Other strategies such as playing along with the psychological abuse of the abuser whilst acknowledging it to be untrue were felt to minimize harm and de-escalate situations (Överlien and Hydén, 2009).

Ornduff and Monaghan (1999 cited in Överlien and Hydén, 2009) found that disengaging on an emotional level was a technique more commonly adopted by children who were younger in age and possibly helped prevent themselves being direct targets for abuse, for example hiding, actively not listening and blocking out noise/sights. Some children phoned the police knowing that the abusive parent might be arrested. Children might cope by indulging in violent fantasies of rescuing the abused parent and fighting, even killing, the abusive parent.

## **Adults who experienced domestic abuse as children**

Slide 6

A more accurate indicator of agency and empowerment should take account of resistance strategies and how people mobilise themselves in response to the situation (Hossain, 2012).

- Survival strengths Anderson & Danis, 2006; Anderson 2012
- A paradoxical resilience Callaghan and Alexander 2015
- Time and Space usage Katz 2016; Anderson 2012; Callaghan and Alexander 2015
- Active resistance Anderson 2012; O'Brien 2013

A study by Anderson (2001, cited in Anderson and Danis, 2006) called for a broader definition of resilience to extend beyond a set of competencies which enable someone to survive in difficult circumstances and incorporate the 'survival strengths' i.e. the tools that afforded them some protection. A nexus between strategies of coping and resisting such abuse was felt to be a life-long process.

In a study of resilience in adult daughters (of abused women) by Humphreys (2001) resilience factors in childhood such as not attaching blame to themselves for the abuse, vocalising their own feelings, accessing support and being watchful were described. Additional factors in adulthood which supported their resilience were accessing therapy, being adaptable and perseverant, having hope and being optimistic

Other studies (Bancroft & Silverman 2002; Clements et al., 2008; Graham-Bermann et al., 2009; Mullender et al., 2002; cited in Anderson, 2012: 53) have founds links between resilience and economic status, the availability and accessing of support mechanisms, and problem solving ability (of parents),

Children employed strategies such as limiting their own expressiveness (i.e. not saying or doing certain things) to avoid harm



Katz's work (2016) indicated that children 'and mothers' were not passive recipients of abuse. Chances to resist abusive actions and behaviours were taken when they presented. Being subversive: when the abuser was absent or sleeping (going to see a film, shopping and generally spending time together),

As children they were very aware of their physicality, location and space. What space was available to access was used as a means of escape and to proffer some safety and respite amongst the chaos. They were conscious of certain locations within the home as being particularly unsafe areas (typically shared living spaces) and prone to a greater level of control and regulation by the abuser (Callaghan and Alexander 2015).

### Perception of child as 'parenting' as problematic not agentic

Children who experience DV are known to take on strong caring relationships in the family, and these caring relationships with other family members are typically problematised as 'parentification' in the DV literature (Goldblatt, 2003; Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008; Katz, 2015; Mullender et al., 2003). Children's caring is typically described as a premature adult role that 'robs' children of their sense of childhood. This representation of caring relies heavily on constructs of normative childhood (Burman, 2008) that position alternative roles for children as necessarily problematic.

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