

Safe and unsafe spaces:

Using drawings and photos to explore children's sense of safety in domestic violence

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Beyond passive victimhood

Children who experience domestic violence are capable of creative and contextually located forms of resistance and resilience, that enable them to retain a sense of agency, despite living in families permeated with coercive and controlling behaviours.

Dominant professional and academic discourses position children who have experienced domestic violence as passive observers of abuse, 'wounded' by the things they have seen (Øverlien 2013, Callaghan et al 2015a, b, 2016 a,b).

Research has emphasised the negative psychosocial impact of domestic violence on children, but does little to enable children to speak directly about their experiences. This literature's pathological focus and adult-centric form can underestimate children's capacity for agency, and obscure the complexity of their coping strategies.

The Understanding Agency and Resistance project (UNARS) project challenged this representation of children, exploring ways of facilitating children's voice, and articulating their situated and self-experienced coping strategies.

OBJECTIVE: To explore how children represent embodied and spatial experiences of violence, and how children use their material experiences to produce resistant embodied agency.

Method

Interviews were conducted with 107 children and young people, aged 8-18, in Greece, Italy, UK and Spain. In addition to typical semi-structured interview techniques, where participants preferred, they had access to photo elicitation, free and guided drawing as part of the interview (Bridger, 2013; Gabb and Singh, 2014).

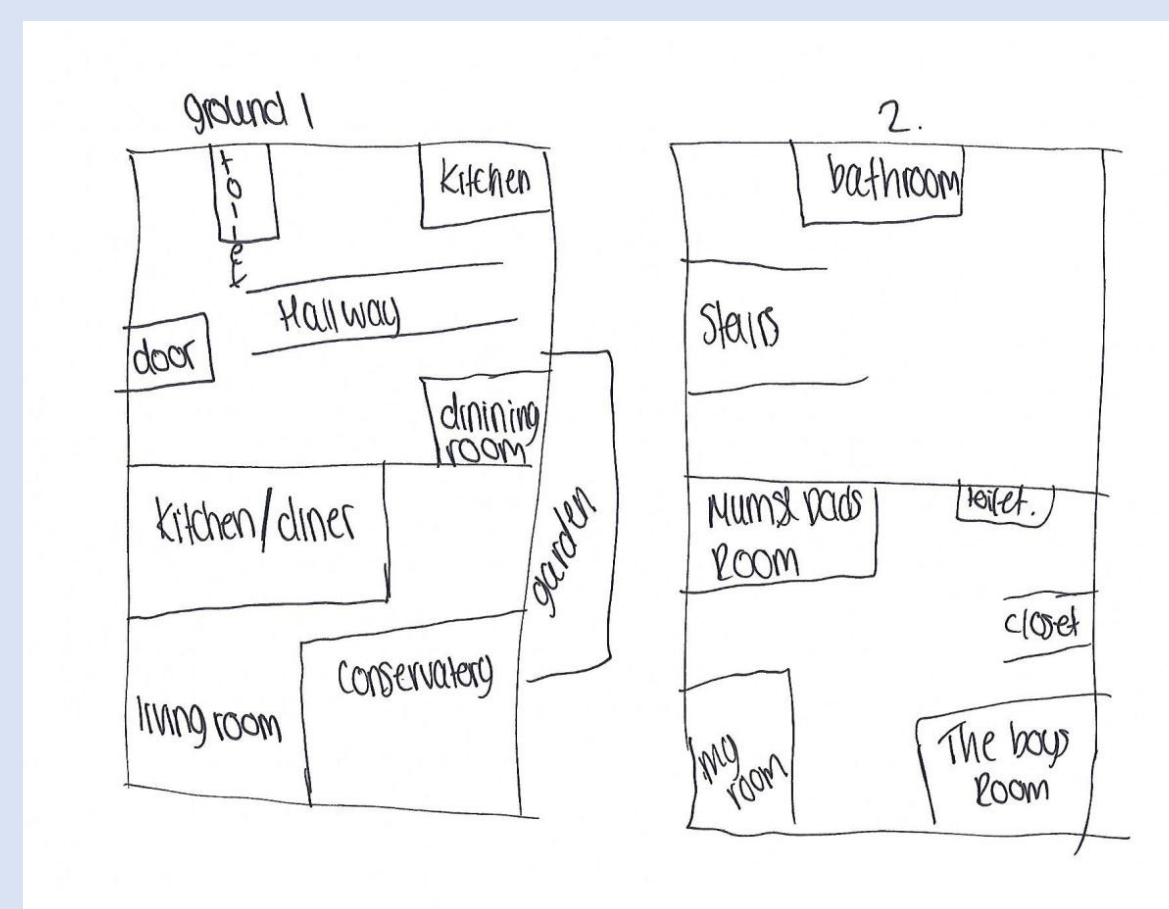
Why use creative methods?

Domestic abuse occurs in the interface of the psychosocial and material spaces, in the control of space, relationships and bodies. We suggest that children's management of abuse is not therefore always (or even mostly) verbal – they learn to cope by using the spaces around them, and their own bodies. Consequently, it is important to use methods that are able to support children in articulating their material, affective and embodied experiences.

The normative account of domestic violence positions children as passive witnesses. It also highlights young people's experiences as pathological, and positions their experiences as *outside* the normal range of childhood experiences. Extra-normative and counter-hegemonic experience can be difficult to articulate verbally (Callaghan, Gambo and Fellin, 2016a). Photo elicitation, drawing and other creative approaches enable articulation of complex self accounts that extend beyond the dominant categories of 'witness' and 'victim', and can enable children to account for subjectivities that exceed normative constructions of childhood.

Creative methods enable an articulation of spatial and systemic dynamics, helping us to explore to enable children's resilience and resistance as contextual and processual, not just individual (Gabb, 2014, Ungar, 2008, 2015). They enable articulation of embodied and emotional experience not always easily accessible to language (Banks, 2001). They enable children to re-vision the world and spaces in which violence took place, supporting their narration of located memories.

Risky Spaces



Well when it ((violence)) would happen with (older brother) it was always in the bathroom, but with mum, it was always in the kitchen, the garden, living room – all downstairs basically. Downstairs was never safe if Dad was about because they'll be an argument. He'd make an argument out of an old argument, so downstairs was all his power, I suppose. (Jess, 18)

Lucy: I'd always hesitate of what I would say...even if I said "Hello", I'd always think before like, is he just going to shut me out? Is he going to respond in a nice way, or be angry or anything like that? I'd always think ahead of what I was saying

Constructing safe spaces

Map of Rachel's Home and Garden



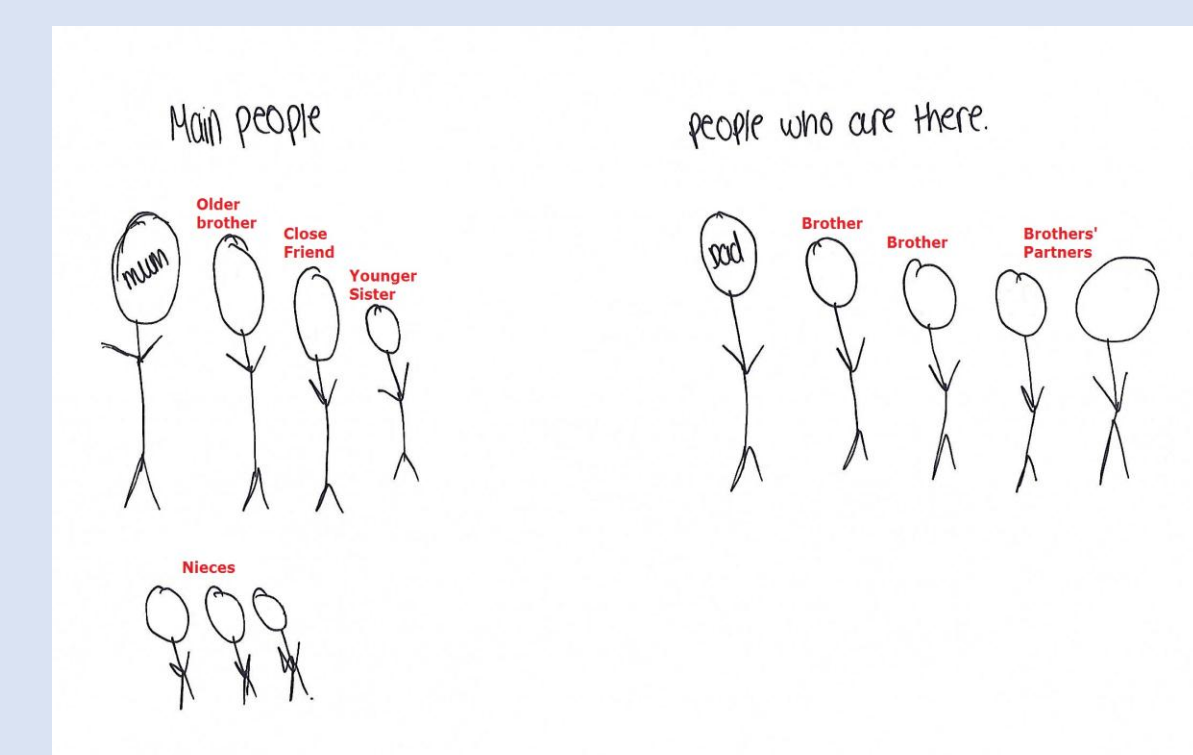
...sometimes we'd go into the garden when they were fighting and like I'd push Marcus on the rope swing and ((umm)) I'd like lay on the hammock and stuff, we'd like get the net and go like fishing in the pond and stuff trying to catch the fish ((said with joy)). (Rachel, aged 11, UK)

A fantasy of home in which she re-captures idyllic normative childhood.

From the window of my room I always used to see the roofs of the neighbours. During the winter they were full of snow and it was beautiful to look at them all.

Often I also went out of the window, on the roof up to the neighbour's balcony; there were stairs there, and I would go out to my friends. My parents got angry every time they discovered what I did. But they do not know how many times I went out without them knowing! (Aldo, 14, Italy)

An escape route, and a hidden gesture of defiance.



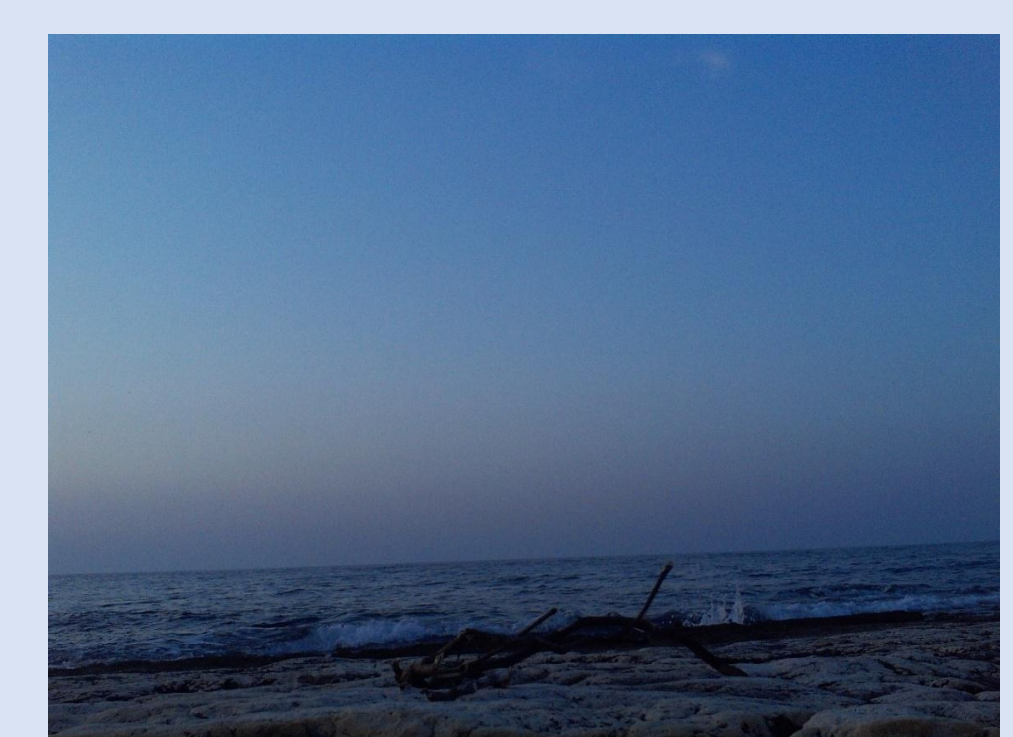
Jess, Family Drawing

Familial divisions are represented and constructed through boundary lines and the creation of 'sets' She redefines 'Family' by including her friend

"She's not even family, but I class her as family, I class her as my sister because she's always there for me, she's been there through everything, but them ('People who are there') they just don't bother." (Jess, 16, UK)

Yeah, that's why, and when my dad got me this owl duvet and ... I go upstairs and I go under it and I play with the owls 'cause I like animals, and the owls make me feel as if I'm in a forest, and I make a game of it. (Nancy, 9, UK)

Constructing safe material spaces, through play and materio-relational objects.



Here I'm fine. You know? And when I'm out of here I will be better (Amaya, 17, Spain)

Outdoor spaces as spaces of wellbeing, and as a resource for the construction of a sense of self as 'ok'.

Conclusions and Implications

Creative methods support the articulation of embodied and material forms of resistance and coping. They enable children and young people to articulate developmentally and socially non-normative experience.

Creative methods offer a valuable basis from which to explore children's own contextually located coping resources. We have developed a manualised group based intervention for children (7-11) and young people (12-18) based on these and other creative methods to build on and transform established 'paradoxical resiliences'.