



# The dead end of domestic violence: Spotlight on children's narratives during forensic investigations following domestic homicide



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## ABSTRACT

The current study provides an in-depth exploration of the narratives of children who witnessed their father killing their mother. This exploration was conducted using a thematic analysis of the children's forensic interviews based on seven investigative interviews that were conducted with children following the domestic homicide. Investigative interviews were selected for study only for substantiated cases and only if the children disclosed the domestic homicide. All of the investigative interviews were conducted within 24 h of the domestic homicide. Thematic analysis revealed the following four key categories: the domestic homicide as the dead end of domestic violence, what I did when daddy killed mommy, that one time that daddy killed mommy, and mommy will feel better and will go back home. The discussion examines the multiple layers of this phenomenon as revealed in the children's narratives and its consequences for professionals within the legal and clinical contexts.

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## Introduction

Shaw (1987) refers to children who have witnessed their father killing their mother as "orphans of justice," meaning that when a man kills his spouse, he essentially orphans his children. In particular, following the murder, the children lose both parents: one through death and the other through incarceration in a prison or psychiatric hospital.

Few studies have been conducted on children who witness their parent being killed by the other parent. One study discussed the emotional consequences of witnessing the homicide of a family member (Clements & Averill, 2004) and elaborated on its profound effect. Another study (Lev-Wiesel & Samson, 2001) aimed to assess long-term consequences through adults' drawings and elaborated on the multilayer effect of the traumatic experience. Other studies have focused on interviewing and intervention aspects with these children (Black & Kaplan, 1988; Pyoons & Eth, 1986), stressing the complex challenge of communicating with them and pointing to the study of drawings as a useful strategy in these cases. In addition, Kaplan (1998) wrote about the complex decision making of professionals in terms of the children's best interest in replacement issues and the challenging expert testimony following these incidents.

Some researchers have correlated domestic homicide to domestic violence (Olszowy, Jaffe, Campbell, & Hamilton, 2013; Websdale, 1999). Given this possible relation, it is important to further explore the research that has been conducted with respect to children who witness domestic violence.

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Information about children who witness domestic violence in Israel is not recorded and therefore underestimated. In the United States, 15.5 million children live in households in which domestic violence occurred at least once within the past year (McDonald, Jouriles, Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, & Green, 2006). Prevalence estimates indicate that between 16 and 30% of all children in the United States witness domestic abuse (Osofsky, 2003). Furthermore, 20% of adults report having witnessed parental violence as children (Kashani & Allan, 1998; Mignon, Larson, & Holmes, 2002). Some researchers have found that children in domestic-violence families witness the violence in 70–85% of the occurrences (Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990).

Impressive research efforts have focused on the consequences of witnessing domestic violence for children, mainly through quantitative studies, documenting short- and long-term consequences in various domains of children's lives, including their physical or biological functioning, behavior, emotions, cognitive, development, and social adjustment (Edelson, 1999; Eisikowitz, Winstok, & Enosh, 1998; Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003). Many researchers have compared children's witnessing of domestic violence to abuse (Adams, 2006; Carroll, 1994; Copping, 1996; Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003; Logan & Graham-Berman, 1999). Some researchers suggest that witnessing family violence as a child may predispose individuals to behave violently later in life (Kashani & Allan, 1998). Furthermore, studies have documented internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Higgins & McCabe, 2003; Kashani & Allan, 1998; Lemmey, McFarlane, Willson, & Malecha, 2001; Manetta & Pendergast, 2003) and gender differences (Jaffe et al., 1990), which indicate that boys become more violent (Pelcovitz et al., 1994) and girls experience additional victimization.

Other researchers have reported neurobiological and physiological effects such as somatic complaints, sleep disturbances, temper tantrums, and eating disorders (El-Sheikh, Harger, & Whitson, 2001; English, Marshall, & Stewart, 2003; McGee, 2000; Mignon et al., 2002; Saltzman, Holden, & Holahan, 2005). As in abused children, consequences have been found for cognitive development, including poorer verbal skills (Huth-Bocks, Levendosky, & Semel, 2001; Medina, Margolin, & Wilcox, 2000) and difficulties in memory retrieval (Orbach, Lamb, Sternberg, Williams, & Dawud-Noursi, 2001).

In addition, researchers have documented emotional consequences (Silvern et al., 1995) such as higher levels of depression, lower self-esteem, trauma-related symptoms, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Bevan & Higgins, 2002; Graham-Bermann & Levendosky, 1998; Kilpatrick & Williams, 1998; McCloskey & Walker, 2000; Reynolds, Wallace, Hill, Weist, & Nabors, 2001; Russell, Springer, & Greenfield, 2010; Somer & Braunstein, 1999). Focusing on social adjustment, researchers have reported difficulties in intimate and peer relationships and violence in these relationships (Baldry, 2003; Dick, 2006; Lemmey et al., 2001; Lichter & McCloskey, 2004; McGee, 2000).

The contribution of these studies is meritorious and significant to changing attitudes, policy and practice toward viewing children as having experienced domestic violence and not simply having been exposed to it. Significant and novel findings have also been gathered from qualitative studies that have aimed to further enhance the understanding of children experiencing domestic violence. Some studies (Buckley, Holt, & Whelan, 2007; Eriksson, 2009; Gorin, 2004; McGee, 2000; Stanley, Miller, & Richardson-Foster, 2012) have tried to assess the disclosure of domestic violence by children and have documented that children are usually reluctant to disclose these incidents because of their fear that the abuse will escalate at home (if the perpetrator will not be removed), their fear of stigma, and their fear of social workers' intervention (fear of being removed from home).

To elaborate on the disclosure aspect, some researchers have examined children's experiences following the involvement of police, showing that young children's perception of police intervention is an indicator of the seriousness of incidents, whereas adolescents are more critical about the intervention (McGee, 2000). Moreover, Mullender and colleagues (Mullender, Hague, Iman, Kelly, Mlos, & Rea, 2002) documented that certain children wanted the police to remove the perpetrator from their home; these children also reported that police rarely spoke to them following the incidents. These perceptions are crucial according to a previous study by Finkelhor and colleagues (Finkelhor, Wolak, & Berliner, 2001), who documented that children's willingness to call the police is mediated by their attitudes and expectations concerning the police. A recent study strengthened this important correlation using children's narratives (Richardson-Foster, Stanley, Miller, & Thomson, 2012).

Furthermore, the experiences of children after witnessing domestic violence were studied by McGee (2000), who identified the emotions of fear, sadness, anger, and powerlessness in children's narratives; these reports have been strengthened by the results of retrospective studies (Hoglund & Nicholas, 1995; Joseph, Govender, & Bhagwanjee, 2006), which document feelings of shame and anger among adults who experienced domestic violence as children. Another qualitative study (Peled, 1998) explored children's experiences following domestic violence and identified several themes among the children's narratives. The children addressed the issue of living with a secret and elaborated on the complexity of living in a conflict of loyalty between the father and mother. The children also reported living in terror and fear for themselves in response to their father's aggression. Lastly, in their narratives, the children addressed living in an aggressive and dominance-oriented context. Phillips and Phillips (2010) carried out an ethnographic study that explored the way young people aged 10–17 years who experienced domestic violence perceive their experiences. These young people emphasized in their narratives their need to be like other children with different experiences and hoping they would be viewed as having more than the domestic violence issue in their lives.

With respect to children's experiences, another study explored (Överlien & Hydén, 2009) how children react during domestic violence incidents. The authors identified an important component of the model established by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) that distinguished between emotional-focused coping (managing and reducing stress) and problem-focused coping (changing the problematic situation). Among seven children, Överlien and Hydén, 2009 identified the following

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