

Chapter

ETHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN RESEARCH WITH CHILD VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE – MAPPING THE FIELD IN PORTUGAL.

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ABSTRACT

Research with children who are victims of domestic violence necessarily involves careful methodological and ethical consideration. This encompasses an analysis of research planning, procedures and techniques, taking into account study objectives and the unique characteristics of participants. In this chapter we intend to discuss the relevance of methodological and ethical aspects in the studies on violence involving children and how these requirements may affect research validity in this domain. More specifically, what methods to use (qualitative vs quantitative), sampling strategies and informants, how to determine risks and benefits for children or how to deal with informed consent. The role of ethics committees in assessing compliance with fundamental ethical assumptions and contributing to ensure the quality of research is also debated. We conclude this chapter with a quick review of methodological options and ethical framework of a set of studies conducted in Portugal on violence involving children and young people (up to 18 years old)

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in the context of intimate partner violence, among parents or caregivers. Most studies are exploratory in nature and use nonprobability samples. Mainly focused on participant's perceptions, they lack clear definitions of violence while ethical requirements are insufficiently described and rarely discussed.

Keywords: Children; Domestic violence; Ethical issues; Methodological issues

INTRODUCTION

Research on child and youth victimization has been prolific worldwide, with most international studies focusing on particular forms of individual victimization, such as physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, bullying, or exposure to intimate partner violence of parents or caregivers (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005a; Sani, Caridade, & Oliveira, 2019). Conducting studies on the phenomenon of victimization is critical for understanding the factors that can mediate and/or moderate the impact of adverse experiences on children's physical and psychological development (Almeida & Sani, 2014). In addition, practices and programmes to prevent and reduce violent and criminal behaviour and its consequences are increasingly based on scientific evidence (Sani & Caridade, 2016; 2018). Nevertheless, conducting research with children on sensitive topics is fraught with ethical and methodological challenges (Martins, Oliveira & Tendais, 2018; Martins & Sani, 2020). On the one hand, we must consider their characteristics as minors and the power relationship between parents and their children, sometimes in a context of conflicting interests. On the other hand, the extensive use of certain types of research designs at the expense of others (more frequently retrospective and transversal than longitudinal) (Sani & Gonçalves, 2007) and the predominance of non-probability sampling methods, with implications on results and their scope. Traditionally, research on child and youth victimization, focused on its impact on children's development and behaviour, has been based on adult reports, whether parents or caregivers (Holden, 1998). However, in the last three decades, improvements in children's rights called into question that children cannot be legitimate and reliable informants of their experiences, giving rise to participatory research (Fernandes, 2016). Accordingly, we have followed this line of research, giving voice to children considered at risk (Azevedo & Sani, 2017; Caprichoso, Sani, & Almeida, 2016; Melo & Sani, 2019; Sani, 2011; Sani, Martins, & Azevedo, 2019), insofar as to deal effectively with ethical aspects involved in research with children who are victims of violence or crime is critical to the validity of investigation..

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN

In the past few decades, many regulatory authorities (e.g., American Psychology Association; Council of Europe; Nuffield Council on Bioethics) have established ethical guidelines and procedures for scientific research. There are fundamental points of consensus regarding research, including when carried out with children, namely: search and data collection should be necessary and justified (Fraga, 2016) (e.g., guided by the participants' needs, or by the value it yields for the purpose(s) for which it is collected, namely, generating new insights into a phenomenon and its prevention). The main objective of research must seek new generalizable knowledge (Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2015), a condition that must be clearly exposed in the research protocol. Thus, conducting an investigation including children should serve not only the individual interests of participant(s) but also those of society in general.

In addition, every research project has to consider maximum benefits and minimum risks, both for participants and the communities involved (Diekema, 2009; Fraga, 2016; Newman, Kaloupek, Keane, & Folstein, 1997). This means that researchers should demonstrate that they are widely knowledgeable about ethical principles, complying with and respecting them, and explaining to participants the benefits that can result from their participation in research. All these aspects must be written in the protocol to be submitted to a Research Ethics Committee approval.

Besides, it is necessary to obtain valid and voluntary informed consent, which should be thought of as a process rather than an event (Diekema, 2009). During the course of research, the researcher must be available to explain research procedures, to answer any questions, and to clarify the issues that involve sensitive personal, family or social information. Information must be given in an accessible language so that the child, parents or legal guardians understand the study and the child's participation in the research. These adults should feel free to withdraw consent for their child participation in research at any time, without any consequences for them or other parties involved. Additionally, children should also have an active participation, showing their assent.

In regards to ethical research guidelines (Barnard, Drey, & Bryson, 2012; Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2015), there is evidence that legally competent children (in different jurisdictions children can be deemed competent at different ages) should give their assent to participate in research (Marsh et al., 2019). In addition, some authors claim that, for children without recognized legal status, if the assessment shows that they express an understanding of the research and willingness to express their opinion, despite their lower maturity, they should have

the opportunity to assent to participate in research (Marsh et al., 2019; Powell & Smith, 2006).

Beyond general ethical principles, researching with children involves specific challenges, especially when studies encompass scenarios of increased vulnerability such as those involving potentially traumatic experiences such as violence (Caprichoso et al., 2016; Cater & Øverlien, 2014; Newman et al., 1997). In these cases, it is of paramount importance that the researcher is able to assess the subject's vulnerability and predict the impact of the methodologies used in the study. Children are different in age, maturity, needs, skills and experiences. Thereby, the researcher is responsible for ensuring that any child participating in the investigation will not experience any harm when sharing their experience.

Talking about a traumatic event necessarily involves evoking it. Even if participants initially consent to the process, they may later feel uncomfortable and further strains such as fear of failure, perceived threat to their self-esteem, invasion to their privacy, conflict, and guilt or shame for reporting sensitive and private experiences (Mudaly & Goddard, 2009). Researchers must be attentive to this process, and to all the actions that may have these effects on children, and should be available to help them dealing with their feelings and exercise their right to refuse to participate in research. Communication between the researcher and participants should be open and the child must be comfortable enough to continue or end this collaboration, without feeling any constraint. In addition, we can involve those responsible for the child, holding parallel meetings with them and always guaranteeing the presence of a safety figure previously identified by the child during the research process (Fraga, 2016).

In order to minimize the risks of displaying an inappropriate research conduct, especially with certain groups (e.g., children who are victims of violence), research may contemplate intervention suggestions, in order to protect participants' rights and to safeguard their well-being (Cater & Øverlien, 2014; Mudaly & Goddard, 2009). For example, when we ask children to express themselves about their feelings of safety, we should support and provide them with strategies to promote their sense of being safe and secure. Empirical evidence on this matter suggests that to think about the experience of victimisation can be beneficial for participants, who can counter negative mood states and obtain immediate psychological support (Mudaly & Goddard, 2009; Newman et al., 1997). However, such a solution can also rise further issues about the researcher's neutral position and its impact in research. To avoid this possibility, support may be offered by elements outside the research team. This commitment can and should be made at the inception of the study, when signing informed consent.

To guarantee the safety of everyone involved in research, researchers are trained to inform participants about their rights and help mechanisms, to provide assistance at any stage of the process, including after the end of research or after the dissemination of results, if needed (Fraga, 2016). Such a condition may imply choosing judiciously the researchers in charge of the study and training them in the legal procedures to be enforced in situations such as those involving violence and crime against children (Azevedo & Sani, 2017; Gonçalves & Sani, 2013; Tomás et al., 2018).

It is also important to consider other specificities linked not only to the characteristics of the population, but also to the social and cultural contexts in which they are inserted. There is a significant cultural variation in the way childhood is perceived worldwide (Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2015), which in itself creates difficulties in determining the standards ethically appropriate for carrying out research involving children. Only an assessment of each case, involving the child's interpretation, may reflect a real respect for the individual participant. It is also important to carry out inclusive studies, which consider the involvement of participants with particular features such as children with traumatic and other victimization experiences, with disabilities, and other potentially excluded groups.

Methodological options represent an ethical approach to conducting research (e.g., research design, techniques and procedures). Therefore, advances in methods and their use when studying children involved in violence should be considered (Cummings, Goeke-Morey & Dukewich, 2001) in that double sense, both methodological and ethical.

The limitations of research in the area of child victimization have been widely debated (Holden, 1998; Sani & Gonçalves, 2007), namely, the inaccuracy or inconsistency in the definition of variables under study (e.g., types of violence; the nature of abuse; the context of occurrence) that may affect the generalization of results and the construction of explanatory models for the phenomena. In addition, other methodological insufficiencies have ethical implications. This is the case of the lack of accuracy in sampling (e.g., small convenience samples) and the predominance of qualitative methodologies, with retrospective and cross-sectional research, generally based on the hetero-report of caregivers instead of self-report of children, as privileged informants.

Participatory research (Fernandes, 2016) with children and young people, based on an interpretative perspective, focused on the subject and his choices (cf. Barra & Pinto, 2020; Sani, 2011) has contributed to the co-construction of scientific knowledge of childhood. This perspective usually relies on the Action Research Model, often oriented to promote change, participants' self-awareness and social development (Almeida & Freire, 2008). Recently, methodologies that favour

children's perspective, taking into account all applicable ethical and deontological requirements, have made a significant contribution to research in the area of child victimization.

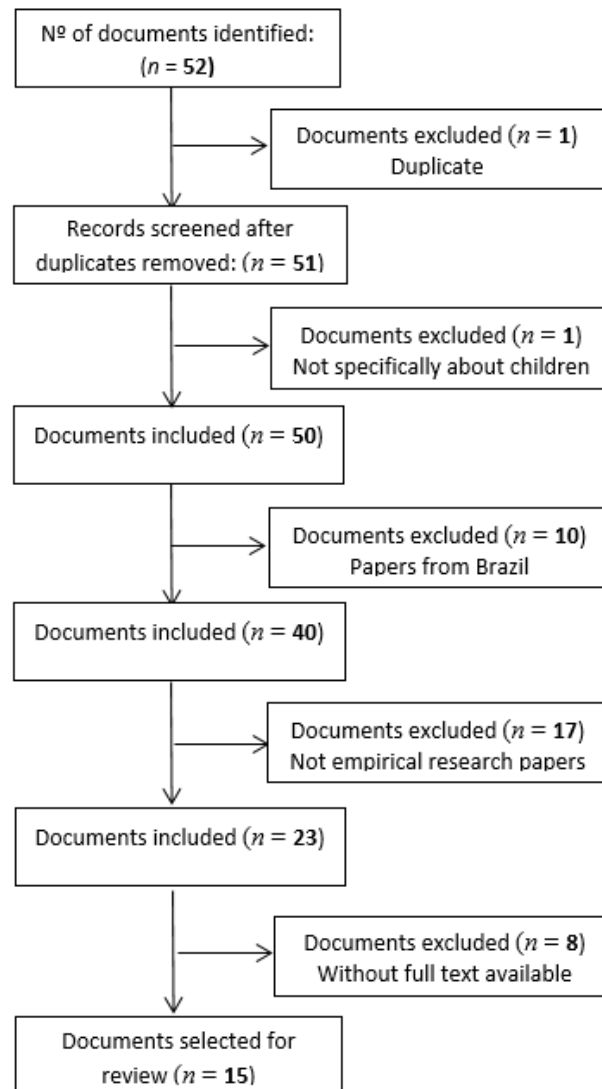
In this paper we propose an empirical analysis of the above mentioned issues, by mapping the studies on victimization of children and young people up to the age of 18, in the context of interparental violence, registered in an open access portal that aggregates the scientific content of the institutional repositories of the national higher education institutions and other organizations I&D of Portugal.

METHODS

This search was conducted in the database RCAAP, a portal aimed at gathering, and indexing open access scientific and scholarly publications available in Portuguese and Brazilian institutional repositories. Although it may not include the totality of scientific publications of these two countries, given the high number of repositories of scientific research institutions and document types included in RCAAP, it is believed to be a significant sample of the universe of national research. To identify the target literature, the following keywords were used: In Portuguese (“violência doméstica” OR “violência interparental” OR “exposição a violência doméstica”) AND “criança”; in English (“domestic violence” OR “interparental” violence” OR “exposure to domestic violence”) AND “children”. This search took place during October of 2020. Documents included in this review were: i) Portuguese; ii) published as chapters of books, academic thesis or in journals; iii) empirical research studies; iv) on violence involving children aged under 18. Several exclusion criteria were defined: i) documents prior to 2000; ii) reports and conference objects; iii) without abstract and full text; iv) theoretical articles; v) focused on adult violence; vi) documents from non-Portuguese databases.

An initial set of 52 documents was identified (cf. Figure 1). To verify their conformity with our inclusion and exclusion criteria, their titles and abstracts were scanned, resulting in the exclusion of 8 without full text available, 17 documents that were not empirical research papers, 10 from Brazil, 1 document that wasn't specifically about children, and 1 that was repeated.

Figure 1: Flow of the Rapid Review



A total of 15 articles were included in this review (cf. Table 1).

Table 1. *Characteristics of the selected studies*

	Author(s)	Type of document	Objective(s)	Methods	Sampling	Participants	Ethics
1	Almeida, H., André, I., & Almeida, A. (2002)	Article	To characterize child abuse in Portugal	Quantitative Questionnaire	Probability sampling	755 child and youth services	No information
2	Coutinho, M. & Sani, A. (2008)	Article	To explore how children exposed to domestic violence build their representations of family violence and the influence of these perceptions on their psychological functioning	Qualitative Semi-structured interview	Non-probability sampling	9 children (exposed to DV*)	No information
3	Trindade, J. (2012)	Post-Doc thesis	To explore how child protection professionals perceive cases involving children and youth victims of domestic violence.	Qualitative Semi-structured interview	Non-probability sampling	6 professionals (child protection)	No information
4	Trovão, J. (2012)	Master thesis	To assess the attitude of paediatricians and their compliance with procedures for reporting domestic violence	Quantitative Questionnaire	Non-probability purposive sampling	89 professionals (paediatricians)	No information
5	Chaves, E. (2013)	Doctoral thesis	To analyse the impact of interparental violence on child's development and on their adaptation to social environment	Qualitative Semi-structured interview Questionnaire	Non-probability sampling No information	8 parents 8 children (exposed to DV*)	No information
6	Correia, A. (2013)	Master thesis	To characterize the intervention received by children in domestic violence shelters	Qualitative Semi-structured interview	Non-probability purposive sampling	11 professionals (DV shelters)	Hierarchical authorizations Informed consents Ethical rational
7	Gonçalves, M. (2013)	Master thesis	To explore the representations and procedures of professionals involved in criminal cases where children and youth victims of domestic violence are involved.	Qualitative Semi-structured interview	Non-probability purposive sampling	12 professionals (multidisciplinary)	Informed consents

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8	Sousa, T. (2013)	Master thesis	To characterize the perceptions of children and young people exposed to indirect victimization and its impact	Qualitative Semi-structured interview Document analysis Questionnaire	Non-probability purposive sampling	4 children (exposed to DV*)	Parental consent Child assent Ethical rational
9	Baptista, C. (2014)	Master thesis	To analyse the impact of domestic violence on women's parenting and the impact of exposure to violence on their children's behaviour	Mixed methods Semi-structured interview Questionnaires	Non-probability purposive sampling	68 women (victims)	Hierarchical authorizations Informed consents
10	Castro, J. (2017)	Master thesis	To understand the relationship between domestic violence and school performance	Quantitative Questionnaire	Non-probability purposive sampling	108 children (at risk school)	Hierarchical authorizations
11	Santos, A. (2017)	Master thesis	To examine the levels of externalization and internalization symptomatology in children directly and indirectly exposed to domestic violence	Quantitative Questionnaires	Non-probability sampling	162 children (exposed to DV*) their mothers (victims of DV)	Informed consent
12	Guedes, A. (2018)	Master thesis	To study the contribution that artistic languages may give to promote the relationship mother-child in domestic violence shelters	Mixed methods Questionnaire Semi-structured interview Logbooks	Non-probability sampling	12 women victims 18 children (exposed to DV*)	No information
13	Marques, D. (2018)	Master thesis	To explore the role played by social workers in shelters for victims of domestic violence	Qualitative Semi-structured interview	Non-probability sampling	19 professionals (social workers)	Informed consent Ethical rational
14	Sani, A. & Carvalho, C. (2018)	Article	To characterize domestic violence cases reported to police, from the point of view of children's involvement.	Mixed methods Document analysis	Non-probability sampling	167 police case records	Hierarchical authorizations
15	Sani, A., Martins, P., & Azevedo, V. (2019)	Book Chapter	To explore how children portray the role of shelters for victims of domestic violence	Qualitative Semi-structured interview	Non-probability purposive sampling	10 children (exposed to DV*)	Parental consent Child assent

DV* - Domestic Violence

RESULTS

Type of document

The documents reviewed include 11 thesis (9 master Theses, 1 PhD and 1 Postdoc), three articles and one book chapter, between 2002 and 2019.

Objective(s)

Of the 15 documents, 5 were focused on professionals' practices and perceptions; 4 addressed the impact of exposure to domestic violence on children's development, behaviour or achievement (one of which also assessed the impact of domestic violence on mothers' parenting practices); three approached the perceptions of children victims; two intended to characterize the cases of domestic violence that involved child abuse; and one focused the relationship mother-children

Methods

Eight documents used qualitative research methods; four adopted a quantitative approach, and three mixed methods. Semi-structured interview was the most frequent data collection instrument (n=10), followed by questionnaires/scales (n=8) and document analysis (n=2).

Sampling and Participants

Of the 16 studies, all but one used a non-probability sampling technique. Among the four quantitative studies, sample sizes varied between 89 and 755 and, in mixed methods studies, the number of cases ranged from 30 to 167. Of the eight qualitative studies, samples sizes varied between 4 and 19. Children participated in seven of the 15 studies. In three studies, samples were constituted by children and adults (their parents). Of these, in two, adults are proxies or informants of children's behaviour.

Informed Consent/Assent

Six of the studies, three of which involving children, did not mention any information regarding ethical requirements observed with participants, namely

requests for hierarchical authorizations and informed consents/assents. In a study with children, only the request for hierarchical authorization of the organization where the study took place is referred, and in another one, it is not explicit whether children gave their assent along with the consent of their mothers.

DISCUSSION

Study focus

The studies included in this review were mostly focused on the characterization of cases of violence, especially from the participant's perceptions, whether adults (professionals or victims) or children. Secondly, they were also interested in professional practices. These objectives are congruent with exploratory and descriptive research.

Study design

In our review, most studies are exploratory, which reflects the incipient level of research in this field in the studied sample. Inductive data analysis procedures were dominant, in addition to equally incipient contributions from a theoretical and conceptual point of view. Non-random sampling and small sample sizes are congruent with this research design. Nonetheless, some studies were found to omit information on basic parameters such as sampling methods and target groups.

Target group

In most studies, the key term “violence” was not defined. In addition, the type of children's exposure to violence (direct vs. indirect, kind of violence, intensity, length) was never explained. Furthermore, children who were directly involved as participants or who were indirect object of the research in the studies reviewed were recruited according to different criteria: children exposed to domestic violence, children at risk in schools, involved in child protective services and welfare services, and children in hospitals. As mentioned elsewhere, the findings of these studies, where the extent to which children are subject to violence and abuse is not always clearly operationalized, are hardly comparable (Martins & Sani, 2020).

Ethics

Given the sensitive subject covered by these studies – domestic violence - and the ethical requirements recognized in research with children, the almost absence of description and analysis of the ethical issues involved in conducting these investigations reveals an important limitation of most of them. In addition to non-compliance with basic requirements, such as information on informed consent for some of the studies reviewed, only three make some considerations regarding some ethical issues involved. Nevertheless, there is no discussion or explanation on choices made in the study and their ethical and validity implications.

Limitations

Although this review focused exclusively on publications indexed on a single portal – RCAAP – giving the wide range of repositories of scientific research institutions aggregated, it may provide an illustrative sample of research in Portugal in this domain. However, we emphasize the limited number of studies identified according to the defined criteria. While being a formal research requirement, it is believed that the availability of full texts may have eliminated relevant research already published or in the process of being published. In this sense, this review was not meant to be exhaustive. Considering the ethical and methodological challenges of research involving children exposed to violence, it sought to describe the existing studies from this point of view. The issue of quality of research was not specifically addressed. Thus, it was not our intention to analyse theoretical frameworks, research designs appropriateness, nor the quality of instruments, implementation protocols or of the data collected, even though the description of parameters in these dimensions may have implications regarding research quality.

In the future, expanding the range of data bases under examination, as well as conducting more focused and in-depth analyses of the quality of research in this field, will allow monitoring research progress, its scope and limitations.

CONCLUSION

Prevention of violence against children involves potential risks for the safety of all involved and ultimately may be ineffective. It is therefore crucial to be based on sound data.” (UNICEF, 2014). Knowledge acquired in research with children who are victims of violence or crime is essential to improve protection and prevention responses to child abuse, but it has also contributes for researchers to

learn how to balance children's rights to the protection and the rights to self-determination and participation (Mudaly & Goddard, 2009). Monitoring the quality of data produced and their limitations allows planning research in this field and thereby strengthen and correct their shortfalls in order to base intervention programs and policies.

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