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Abstract

Children and young people's experiences with abuse and maltreatment: meaning-making, conceptualizations and responses

Abstract: *Exploring children and young people's own understanding of experiences with abuse and maltreatment is an important part of taking their right to participation seriously. By applying a narrative theoretical framework, this paper explores and analyzes young people's and young adults' stories of being the target of violence and abuse as children, and their meaning-making and definition of such experiences, then and now. The overall findings show the participants' varied and nuanced perceptions of what constitutes violence, much dependent on contextual, relational and temporal aspects. Furthermore, many participants reported psychological and emotional abuse and neglect to be the most hurtful of their experiences of maltreatment. Finally, the analysis sheds light on how responses to abuse and maltreatment change and depend on the children and young people's definition of their situation through time and context. The paper contributes with qualitative knowledge to the social work research and practice field, on how abuse and maltreatment unfold in and affect children and young people's lives seen from their own points of view.*

Key words: Child abuse and maltreatment, family violence against children, children and young people's perspectives, social work.

Introduction

Prevention and protection of children and young people[i] from abuse and maltreatment within the family are among social work's core mandates. Social work theory and practice should include children's own perspectives on such experiences, to accommodate the practice guiding principle of person-in-environment. This paper explores young people's, and young adults' meaning-making and definition of the abuse and maltreatment they experienced as children, as presented and discussed in a qualitative interview setting. We also investigate how their actions and responses to violence were dependent on their meaning-making. Thus, we not only describe the abuse they experienced, but also analyze theoretically *their* interpretations of it. We argue that children's and young people's definitions and understandings of their situations and their subsequent coping strategies are important knowledge for social workers to incorporate into their investigations and customized interventions.

Child abuse and maltreatment: research and conceptualization

Child abuse and maltreatment is an extensive research field covering a range of topics, including risk factors, prevalence, child abuse outcomes, professional responses and the overlap with domestic violence, to name a few. Prevalence studies often map different types of maltreatment, following a classification of the four most common types: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional/psychological abuse and neglect (e.g., Butchart et al., 2006; Kloppen et al., 2015, Stoltenborgh et al., 2015). According to some recent literature reviews, the dominant research focus during the past few decades has been on child sexual abuse, with least emphasis on emotional and psychological abuse and neglect (e.g., Behl et al., 2003; Jones et al., 2016; Kloppen et al., 2015; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015).

Within the international body of research, defining child maltreatment is challenging. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2002) underscores that global research must consider the differing standards and

expectations of parenting practices among cultures worldwide. International conventions establishing universal standards for children's right to well-being and protection do not reflect the complex circumstances in children's lives (Imoh, 2013; Nadan et al., 2015). Furthermore, rapidly changing global demographics resulting in contact among diverse populations emphasize cultural conflict in many domains, including the issue of child abuse and maltreatment (Nadan et al., 2015: 41). In addition, discrepancies between professionals' and lay people's definitions complicate the disclosure of children at risk of abuse and maltreatment (Calheiros et al., 2016; Malley-Morrison and Hines, 2004). In other words, social, cultural and contextual aspects shape our understanding of what constitutes maltreatment. Moreover, *experiences* of abuse and maltreatment may be affected by the social and cultural norms defining it (Hacking, 1991: 253-254)

The research field is a multidisciplinary enterprise, mostly dominated by psychology and social medicine Øverlien, 2010). Thus, terminology and conceptualizations vary greatly (Holden, 2003; Lewis-O'Connor et al., 2006, Øverlien, 2010, 2012). Malley-Morrison and Hines (2004: 4) stated that difficulties in defining abuse, neglect and maltreatment long have challenged workers in the family violence field. Moreover, in the past few decades the overlap between domestic violence and child maltreatment has drawn increased attention (e.g., Hartley, 2002; Osofsky, 2003; Postmus and Merrit, 2009), raising the question of whether domestic violence should be included in the definition of child maltreatment (e.g., Calheiros et al., 2016; Postmus and Merritt, 2009). Several researchers have suggested that experiencing domestic violence should be considered a fifth type of child abuse (e.g., Holden, 2003; Kloppen et al., 2015), which may be potentially as harmful as being the target of violence (Callaghan and Alexander, 2015; Holt et al., 2008; Øverlien, 2010).

Narrow definitions may embrace only physical violence (Isdal, 2000), omitting psychological and emotional abuse, such as threats, harassment and verbal humiliation (Heltne and Steinsvåg, 2011). However, definitions that are too wide may render the concept imprecise (Näsman et al., 2010: 24). In the

Norwegian context, Isdal's (2000) conceptualization is often applied. He emphasized the effect of violence and abuse, rather than the violent act itself, and defined violence as:

> Any action targeted at another person, which…hurts, frightens or infringes upon, makes the other person do anything against their will, or stop doing anything they want (Isdal, 2000: 36) (author's translation).

Although somewhat broad, Isdal's definition covers a range of behaviors, and therefore is useful in our investigation of what young people experience as violence and abuse.

Aim of the paper and relevance to social work

Several researchers have called for children's participation in research on domestic violence and child maltreatment (e.g., Callaghan and Alexander, 2015; Eriksson et al., 2010; Holt et al., 2008; Mullender et al., 2002; Øverlien, 2012). As the participants in this study were young people and young adults at the time of the interviews, the question of who was speaking is relevant: Was it the adult voice speaking about childhood experiences, or did the adult tell the story as the child would have told it (Shaw and Holland, 2014: 180). Addressing how they interpreted experiences of abuse and maltreatment both *now* and *then*, the participants presented their here-and-now perspectives, as well as they talked about how they as children experienced it.

Applying a narrative approach to explore how meaning-making is intertwined on a psychological and sociocultural level, we sought to investigate the participants' understanding and conceptualization of violence and abuse through time and context. This analytical approach gave voice and weight to young people's perspectives, which again opened the way to understandings beyond professional conceptualizations. We argue that the analysis extends social work theory and practice, as it supplements existing knowledge of prevalence, risk factors and pathological outcomes. Social work practice and theory need qualitative information about people's experiences, and how phenomena such as abuse and

maltreatment unfold and affect children and young people's lives. Understanding people within their social and cultural context, as well as their definition of their situation, lays the foundation for social work interventions with violence against children within the family.

Theoretical and analytical framework: a narrative approach

We understand sense-making as an *individual process intertwined with the collective level of meaning*; therefore, we consider stories of child abuse and maltreatment not only as personal narratives but as having a robust life beyond the 'self' (Riessman and Quinney, 2005: 393). In other words, sociocultural perceptions of what violence *is*—its meaning and definition—affect individuals' understanding and interpretations of their personal experiences. A narrative approach that incorporates not only the psychological work on the subjective level, but also the social and cultural aspects of meaning-making has guided our analysis.

As a theoretical and analytical term, narrative is about how a story is told in a particular way, for whom it is constructed and for what purpose. In addition, we pay attention to what cultural resources the narrator draws upon and takes for granted, and what the story accomplishes (Riessman and Quinney, 2005: 393). In this study, these narrative principles led our analytical attention to several other contextual levels: the relationships and social systems in which the participants were embedded as presented in their stories, as well as the wider societal context where collective meaning is produced.

One accomplishment of narratives is to:

> …make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding story. We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives (Polkinghorne, 1988: 150).

According to Polkinghorne, the temporality and dynamic character of narratives are central. First, a story is built up along an axis of time, usually around a plot embedded in the timeline and with relevant events unfolding before and after the plot. Second, a narrative may be continually revised with changing circumstances in the narrator's life or the context for the telling. Therefore, we attended to the psychological, cultural and social links within the story and the functions and purposes these fulfilled (Mishler, 1999: 63). A personal narrative establishes positions from which the narrator acts and speaks, that relate to the narrator's sociocultural context.

To look for collective or cultural meanings embedded in personal narratives implies a search for canonical meanings, the shared systems of meanings that a cultural community takes for granted. According to Bruner (1990: 77), the construction of a narrative also requires a sensitivity to what is canonical, and what violates canonicity in human interaction. The violations are what require explanations and promote reflections in a story, whereas the cultural obviousness remains implicit. Accordingly, we searched for silent and invisible references as well as for explicit and reflected ones in the stories about violence.

Methodological considerations

Recruitment, selection and data

We designed this study to include subjects of both young women and men with diverse social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Data was collected from interviews with 13[ii] young people, five males and eight females. All participants were between the ages of 17 and 30, except for one who was 35[iii]. Three of the male participants were minority ethnic and two were majority ethnic. Among the females, three were minority ethnic, one was of mixed ethnic origin, and four had ethnic majority background. The participants' family backgrounds varied in economic and educational status. According to the

participants' stories, several parents struggled with mental illnesses or other health issues, such as drinking problems. A few of the minority ethnic participants had refugee backgrounds, and those who came from families with higher academic education in their country of origin had experienced a steep drop in their social status in Norway.

The study recruited participants through family welfare centers, women's shelters, therapists, client organizations, NGOs and universities/colleges. Some organizations recruited participants on behalf of the project leader by handing out written information about the study. A number of the young people and adults heard or read about the study and sought to participate. These individuals also received the information letter before meeting with the researcher. The interviewer ensured that the subjects were thoroughly informed about what their participation involved by reading through the consent form together with the participant, and describe what they would be asked about. The consent form emphasized the obligation of the researcher to report serious concerns regarding the participants' life or health, provided such information was revealed in the interview and the participant was under age.

The descriptive information about the study used the term 'family violence', and contained examples of what *could* be perceived as violence. Therefore, some preconceptions of violence were communicated, although the information emphasized that the study's purpose was to investigate young people's *own* understandings of the phenomenon.

To encourage participants to talk freely about their experiences, the interviews began with questions about their everyday lives (Gulbrandsen, 2012; Haavind, 1987), allowing the interviewees to initiate the pace with which to approach the topic of violence. The interview questions were designed to explore conceptualizations, and questions about definitions often led to reflections about what constitutes violence. As a result, the data consisted of detailed stories including contextual, relational and temporal descriptions of the subjects' experiences.

Analytical procedures

The analytical questions guiding our readings of the interviews were (1) How did participants present their experiences of abusive and violent episodes; (2) what meanings did they attribute to their experiences and (3) how did they deal with the abuse and violence?

With this analytical approach, we conducted vertical readings (Haavind, 2000) to code prominent themes in each interview. For example, one participant frequently stated the hurt she experienced from the lack of acknowledgement from her father. We coded this issue as 'lack of love and recognition'. Next, we conducted horizontal readings (Haavind, 2000) to identify similarities and differences across the stories. This procedure uncovered how social and cultural resources could enable or constrain the participants' stories (Chase, 2005: 657). The codes from the vertical readings, enabled us to cluster the codes into larger topics. For example, we identified the code, 'lack of love and recognition', in several interviews, expressed in different ways. Through multiple readings we organized the larger topics into three main themes: (a) nuances and negotiations in making sense of abuse and maltreatment; (b) the most hurtful experiences and (c) dealing with violence and abuse. Our analysis was based upon the whole of the empirical data, with specific young people serving as examples of our analytical points.

Analysis

Nuances and negotiations in making sense of violence

The young people's stories reflected different views on what constitutes violence and what can be accepted and not. The issue of *intention* behind the abuse was prominent in a number of interviews. Moreover, intention was in some cases linked to contextual features, such as the relationship in which the abuse occurred and the wider sociocultural frame, that is, whether parental behavior was defined as 'normal' or deviant.

Tina's (27) story exemplified a defining process utilizing a retrospective lens in the interview setting. She did not address the issue of violence at first, nor did she necessarily define her experiences as violence. Her main message was that she had never felt loved by her father, which had been a hurtful experience for her. She frequently talked about how her father would pick arguments with her. When asked to elaborate, Tina initiated a discussion of what counts as violence.

> *Interviewer: When you say you argued a lot, what do you mean? How was the arguing? Was it verbal?*
>
> *Tina: He never hit me, if that's what you mean. Actually, I have never thought of Dad as a violent person. But looking back, there have probably been violent situations. A lot of verbal arguing. (…) I've never gotten a black eye, but I have been scared of crossing the line. Even if we argue I do know where his line is. I always have to monitor him, like 'how far have I pushed him now?' And there have been times where I have crossed the line and I think he has been on the verge of becoming physical [violent].*

Tina did not initially define her father's behavior as violence; however, during the interview, her understanding of her experiences changed. She followed up this reasoning by relating an episode in which her brother had teased their father, resulting in their father's chasing him and throwing a wrench at him. Then she said:

> *As I've said, I've never thought of Dad as a physical violent person. He has never really hit us. (…) But thinking back … I'm thinking that it might be a form of violence (…) when he ran after my brother. Actually, I would say that maybe that's a little violence.*

As Tina discussed whether her father's behavior was violent or not, interactional, contextual and temporal aspects of the definition process were evident. The interview context became a part of the meaning-making process as Tina engaged in a negotiation about what she had experienced. By saying 'he has

never hit me', she defined violence as physical aggression. Although she admitted being afraid that her father would become physically violent had she pushed him too far, she did not seem to define this implicit threat as violence. Thus, she was somewhat hesitant to frame her experiences as violence, going no further than to define them as 'a little violence'. The line between what constitutes violence and what does not appeared to be unclear.

In contrast, Tanushan (20) redefined his experiences as not constituting violence during the interview. Although he had defined his parents' treatment of him as violent when he was a child, he argued in the interview that their actions did not count as violence because they had been unaware that their behavior was wrong. The meaning of the violence had changed through the lens of time: Tanushan now understood that his parents thought they were doing the right thing, whereas when he was a child, he thought they did not love him. The idea that what seems as violence can make sense if it has an explanation appeared to affect both Tanushan's definition and his experience of it.

To Mariam (29), intention and severity were crucial to how she perceived the abuse. When she traveled to her country of origin, she discovered that the abuse she had experienced from her foster family in Norway (who had the same ethnic background) was contrary to parental practices there:

> (…) there are different degrees of how hard you hit children. Back there, they don't do it to be mean, (…) but because they have been brought up like that themselves. That's child-rearing, when children won't listen, they have to feel the pain to listen. I have seen that. Not with my mother, but with my father. But this guy [foster father]… he was mean, he didn't regret and for each punch he didn't care. (…)

First, Mariam talked about intention and severity. According to her, hitting a child hard reflected cruel intentions; hitting with a stick was less severe because it was motivated by good intentions. Second, she addressed the contextual 'normality' of physical punishment, noting that parents had experienced this

discipline method when they were children; thus she implied that in this context, the practice was 'normal'. The intention behind the hitting was embedded in the shared system of meaning. However, Mariam perceived her experiences with her foster father as deviant because she believed he intended to be cruel. In addition, his abuse occurred in a cultural context (Norway) in which corporal discipline and punishment were not condoned, and therefore, she perceived his actions as unacceptable. Also, addressing the relational aspects, she pointed out that he did not regret his treatment of her, implying that his discipline was not based in love and care.

Nora (17) stressed the quality of the relationship in which the abuse occurred as significant to whether violence was acceptable. Her mother had African origin, whereas her father had Norwegian, and her mixed background appeared as an important element in her reasoning.

> *… and my dad was native Norwegian (…) and he was the one using power. (…) Yes, they [immigrant parents] hit their children, but they can be totally amazing parents even if they hit their children. Because they have learned that that's how you do it [child rearing]. But they can have a totally different warmth than in the cold Norwegian families. (…) You see, it is rare that immigrant parents hit their children like that [like her father hit her]. They only hit with a hand or… I would say that the type of violence I have experienced … I don't see that as more common within immigrant families than in Norwegian [families]. Because in the Norwegian … there is often alcohol too. And when you do it [use violence] in a Norwegian family, there is something really twisted about you. Because it has nothing to do with your culture. So then they are sick.*

With this statement, Nora emphasized her father's ethnicity, using it as a counter narrative to the majority societal notion of immigrant parents. She seemed to want to prove that her Norwegian father was worse than immigrant parents who use corporal punishment: She challenged the notion that immigrants are bad parents because they may hit their children by comparing such treatment with the severe violence she

experienced from her father. Thus, she tried to balance the stigmatizing image of immigrant parents by explaining that 'mild' forms of violence could be acceptable in the context of a warm relationship, whereas the violence she had experienced in her Norwegian family was unacceptable because it was severe, and lacked cultural explanation. Thus, according to her narration, violence within ethnic majority families needed explanation, but supposed corporal discipline among immigrant parents was 'normal' and acceptable within their particular context.

These analyses indicate the nuances and variations in perceptions regarding what constitutes violence, and what can be accepted and not. The participants' personal perceptions of their experiences appeared to be linked to sociocultural interpretive systems: If it was perceived as 'normal' to the parents to utilize physical punishment, the intention behind this behavior was not perceived as cruel; however, in a cultural context in which such practices were not socially acceptable, physical abuse of children was considered denigrating and a violation of the child's safety and well-being.

The most hurtful experiences

Overall, many participants described non-physical violence and abuse as the most hurtful experiences. From a professional viewpoint, these empirical descriptions qualified as psychological and emotional violence, abuse or neglect. When participants defined such experiences as abuse, they used the term 'psychological violence'. However, not everyone defined these experiences as violence; some simply discussed them within a narrative of hurtful experiences, and others explicitly identified them as the *most* hurtful experiences, even more hurtful than physical violence.

Permeating Tina's (27) story was not the fear of physical punches, but the longing for her father's love and recognition. She underscored that her father never was engaged in her life: He did not attend school events or asking her how she was doing, and she said he never told her that he loved her:

(…) …but what has been the worst is not the fear that he is going to hurt us [physically], but that he has been terrible at saying things to me. (cries) (…) He could call me stupid, dumb. Question how smart I was. Those sorts of things. Made me feel incompetent. (…) I never felt loved. That he did not really love me.

Although Tina did not explicitly label the emotional neglect and lack of fatherly love as violence, her described experiences aligned with how other participants defined psychological violence, such as name-calling, devaluation, denigration and lack of recognition. If we apply narrative principals to how Tina told her story and what the telling accomplished (the way she talked about her experiences, the time she spent discussing them, and her emotional state—she frequently cried), then we can deduce that this experience—not the potential for physical harm—was the severest hurt in Tina's life.

Tanushan (20) also emphasized the hurt of emotional abuse. He said that the physical pain from his parents' punches faded, but their words and treatment of him did not fade as easily. As an example, he related a time in primary school when he and a couple of peers went missing on a school trip. The boys' parents were notified, and when the boys finally returned safely to school, all the parents were there anxiously waiting for them, except for Tanushan's. As soon as word came that the boys were safe, his parents had gone home. He described watching the other parents run towards their children, relieved that they were safe. Tanushan said he had a difficult realization when he observed the parental love his peers received and he did not. In addition, when he got home, his parents physically punished him for going missing in the first place. He went to his room to reflect:

And then I started to ask myself these existential questions, 'Why are they [his parents] like this' and 'they don't really like me. This only proves that they don't like me'. And those sorts of things. I was only, I mean I was only in sixth grade, so I did not see the whole situation. I only saw it from my situation.

The combination of his parents' not being at the school when he returned and the punishment he received caused Tanushan to feel unloved, a feeling that he described as more painful than the beating. However, he seemed to define his parents' actions differently as a young adult than he did as a young child. Citing his young age and lack of perspective on the larger situation, he implied that his interpretation of his parents' actions at the time were immature. This perception of his own inability to see the whole situation as a child appeared a thread in Tanushan's story. He presented himself as someone who had come to understand his parents' difficulties. For instance, his story contained implicit references to his family's poor financial resources and stressful life situation. Such contextual circumstances appeared to constitute an explanation for the treatment he had received, and contributed to Tanushan's redefinition of his experiences.

Tanushan and Tina are only two of many participants who addressed the idea that psychological and emotional abuse can leave the sorest wounds. Linda (35) also stated that words hurt more than punches, even if she had suffered severe physical violence. When asked how she would define her father's saying nasty things to her, she said:

> *I have called it psychological violence. Perhaps you could call it psychological abuse, violence, I don't know. It is … It is like, instead of physical, it is like he punches with words, sort of. They hit you in the stomach, in the heart. You destroy the soul, when you hear so many nasty things. So yeah. Psychological violence or abuse, it is really the same.*

Linda concluded that violence and abuse are the same because *the effect is the same*. The abusive words appear as physical punches to the soul. Linda's statement represents an empirical conclusion to the overall finding of what sort of maltreatment hurts the most. Emotional and psychological pain did not fade as quickly as physical pain; instead, it appeared to leave traces and damage to these individuals' selves.

Although invited to talk about experiences of abuse and maltreatment, not all participants addressed the topic explicitly; however, their decision to participate in the study can be understood as having experienced *something hurtful.* Whether they emphasized physical violence or neglect, emotional abuse and the pain of not receiving love and recognition, they all responded to the question of what violence was *to them*. Taking a narrative perspective of these participants' stories, we can identify a counter narrative to the narrow and perhaps most common cultural notion of violence as physical aggression. According to the young people's stories, psychological and emotional abuse was just as harmful. Whether or not they defined their experiences as violent did not appear significant.

Dealing with violence and abuse

How affected children and young people make sense of abuse and maltreatment may influence their perceived choices and possible actions. A fundamental principle in social work person-in-situation. Accordingly, we viewed the participants' stories of what they *did* in the face of violence as dependent on their interpretation of the situation. In other words, their meaning-making created a space for possible responses to the abuse.

Based on their narratives, these individuals coped with abuse differently according to their age at the time. As young children, many said they hid in their rooms, tiptoed around to avoid triggers, and were on guard to monitor the abusive parent. At an older age, some chose more confrontational or drastic actions. With age, their understanding of the situation changed and shifted the space for action.

Ingrid (20) related several things she did to avoid her mother's abuse. She described her mother's 'screaming, yelling and slamming of doors' as 'outbursts', which could go on for days. As a child, Ingrid hid in her room or ran out onto the playground to escape experiencing these outbursts. She learned to tread carefully around the house, making sure there were no breadcrumbs lying around, that the room temperature was not too cold or too warm, as such things could provoke her mother. Her protection

strategy was to eliminate triggers to violence. Ingrid's approach was similar to stories several other participants told.

As a child and a teenager, Ingrid sought to call attention to her experiences at home by cutting herself and showing her wounds to her teachers. Although she tried to reach out for help to trusted adults, Ingrid said the Child Protection Service (CPS) did not take her story seriously. As a result, she chose not to speak with the CPS again to protect herself from the pain of not being believed.

The issue of disclosure, which was prominent in several stories of responding to violence, appeared closely connected to the participants' understanding of the situation and their age at the time. Kristoffer (22) discussed how his response changed with time, age and the revision of the situation. At first, he tried to avoid disclosure:

> *(…) Nobody noticed. I was good at hiding it. I made things up, because I was afraid to say anything. The CPS came to our house. (…) So before they came, an hour before, we sat there and … That the family should stick together, you know. That 'you can't say anything, we will beat you.' So yeah. A lot of threats so that we wouldn't say anything. So when the CPS came, we sat there with fake smiles …*

Faced with threats of punishment if he were to disclose something that could split the family, Kristoffer stayed loyal to his parents. However, he changed his strategy as he grew older and as his perception of the situation changed. He said that his parents, who were from the Middle East, refused to allow him to have girlfriends, hang out with Norwegian friends or party, and physically punished or threatened him if he disobeyed. For a long time, Kristoffer tried to adjust to his parents' expectations. To avoid punishment, he said he lied about how he spent his leisure time. In the end, he reached a turning point when he faced a forced marriage to a woman he did not know. Believing his life would be in danger if he defied his parents, he decided to run away from his family.

Other participants also related dramatic confrontations when they could no longer tolerate the abuse. Sander (18) related a particular episode that triggered a confrontation with his father and Sander's decision to take action to stop the abuse:

> *When we came home from a vacation two years ago, then ... It became really bad at home. Mom had picked some stones from the beach that she wanted to decorate with or something. And he was sitting drinking booze when he got home, getting himself all worked up and again, the verbal harassment, why we were so stupid and yeah ... (…) Then he got up, grabbed those stones and smashed them in mom's head. (…) And when he did that, then ... I snapped. But I have never dared to do anything to my father. So I said, 'I'm calling the police', then he ran away and I haven't seen him after that, before the trial.*

Earlier in the interview, Sander talked about notifications to the CPS in which he lied about his family situation to avoid inciting more of his father's violence and out of fear that Sander would be removed from his mother and the family split apart. With a strong desire to protect his mother, Sander said he never would have been able to live elsewhere, knowing that his father could beat his mother. The episode with the stones represented a limit for Sander, and a change in his dealing with the violence. The result of his direct intervention saved his mother and ended the violence. His father was convicted and no longer allowed near his family.

From a narrative perspective, these stories about how the individuals dealt with abuse and violence reflect first how meaning-making processes may lead to different actions. Second, through these stories, the participants presented themselves as *able* to take action in the face of abuse, which is a counter narrative to the idea of children and young people as passive victims.

Discussion

Similarities across differences

The most striking observation from our analysis was the similarities across the interviews, despite the diversity of the participants. The overall finding that psychological and emotional abuse represented the most hurtful experiences did not appear to relate to gender, social, ethnic or cultural background. Neither did the definition of violence or the participants' actions to deal with the abuse. However, we did identify a pattern related to temporality and age: The participants' understanding of their abusive situations often changed over time and with age; as they grew older and as they redefined their situation as intolerable, most of the participants changed their response strategies and attempted to escape the violence.

Three overall findings from this study contribute to research in child abuse and maltreatment. First, psychological and emotional abuse and neglect, and not necessarily physical abuse, constituted the most hurtful experiences in the participants' narratives. This finding underscores the need to prioritize research into this type of maltreatment and to counter the misconception that psychological and emotional maltreatment have fewer consequences (Behl et al., 2003). Overlooking this area of abuse in research may tend to reinforce this misconception, and ultimately lead to overlooking the children and young people affected.

Second, the nuances in the participants' perspectives on what violence *is* confirms the difficulty in pinning down a universal definition of child abuse and maltreatment. Such a definition risks failing to capture the complexities of children's lives across different contexts and circumstances, and therefore, contextually adjusted conceptualizations may be more helpful.

Third, the various ways our subjects dealt with violence, which in some cases may appear dysfunctional to a clinical eye (Callaghan and Alexander, 2015: 38), reveal important knowledge concerning the

resources children and young people have to cope with abuse and to protect themselves. Researchers and professionals should not overlook such resources, but rather acknowledge and address them as coping capacities in their social work practice with family violence cases.

Different narrative patterns

Although we discovered more similarities than differences in our overall findings, one difference is important to point out: the difference in how the participants used sociocultural systems of meaning to make sense of the abuse they experienced. Specifically, references to the collective level of meaning were more explicit among the minority ethnic participants' stories than those of the majority ethnic. First, the minority ethnic participants drew upon sociocultural meanings from their parents' countries of origin, which offered an alternative meaning of the physical abuse experienced, compared with the Norwegian sociocultural context in which all physical punishment of children is forbidden by law. On a personal level, the minority individuals could use this alternative sociocultural meaning to manage their experience psychologically. Second, precisely because the majority culture defines corporal punishment of children as a violation to sociocultural norms (cf. Bruner, 1990), defining the abuse within an alternative system of meaning (their parents' country of origin) also offered an explanation on the collective level of Norwegian society. Because of the minority ethnic participants' somewhat marginalized position, they appeared to demonstrate a stronger awareness or attentiveness to understanding abuse on an individual level, as well as how the collective society would perceive their experiences. Thus, their narration can be interpreted as an effort to manage their parents' abuse on both levels.

In comparison, the majority ethnic participants demonstrated much less effort to manage their parents' abuse and appeared simply to accept the maltreatment as deviant without any explicit explanation, at least not at the collective level. However, several made either implicit or explicit references to their parents' alcohol misuse or mental problems in their narratives, which sometimes served as explanations and other

times as contextual information without explicit function. We interpreted these references to reflect the explanation of parents' violence against their children within the collective system of meaning: Child abuse is considered a severe violation to the majority cultural norms of child rearing, and according to Bruner (1990) such violations need explanations. Within the majority ethnic culture, the 'normal' explanation to such deviance is precisely alcohol misuse and mental issues with the parents. Therefore, the majority ethnic interviewees were likely to have taken this collective explanation for granted, and to refer to it without any effort to explain.

These differences in narrative awareness between minority and majority ethnic participants are important to be mindful of because they demonstrate how personal meaning-making can be dependent on ethnic position within the wider sociocultural context and the available explanations for experiences. In addition, these findings shed light on structural differences in approach, which social work is mandated to prevent and combat. Viewing child abuse and maltreatment as different depending the family's minority or majority ethnic background may result in misconceptions and poorly customized interventions. According to findings in this study, similarities appear to be more common than differences, independent of diverse backgrounds.

Concluding remarks

Exploring and including children's and young people's judgments and definitions of their situations is an important part of taking their rights seriously in social work research and practice. However, the analysis of negotiations of 'acceptable violence' does not legitimize abuse or the acceptance of 'mild' violence as long as it 'makes sense' to the affected individual(s) or is tolerable to them. The impact of abuse and each child's reactions and responses are individually and socially situated, and should be considered in tailoring interventions to the affected child's level of understanding and particular circumstances (Mullender et al., 2002). Even as we recognize the severe damage that abuse and maltreatment cause, we

endorse the perspective that children are not simply passive victims, but rather are capable of coping, maintaining agency and resisting violence (Callaghan and Alexander, 2015: 13). Knowledge of and attention to these capacities can have great significance to social work practitioners, especially in disclosing abuse and customizing interventions.

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[i] We use the term 'children' and 'young people' interchangeably, however when specifically referring to judicial status/children's rights, we consider 'young people' to be included in the term 'children'.

[ii] Initially, our selection consisted of 14 participants; however, we excluded one interviewee from the study because this person did not seem to understand the implications of participation. Therefore, we determined that this interview did not meet the ethical demands of informed consent.

[iii] Although we initially wanted to recruit participants between the ages of 16 to 23, we had to raise the upper age limit to ensure the recruitment of enough participants. Thus, we considered a few participants were young adults; however, their experiences with family violence were as children and young people.