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# **Introduction: Positioning the student perspective on doing research.**

**Claire McLoone-Richards**

ORCID number – 0000-0002-1933-8074

## **The rationale and the context**

This book is an important critical study companion for those students and practitioners who are new to the experience of conducting research on domestic abuse (DA) or sexual violence (SV). It will be of importance to anyone interested in women's studies, gender studies, and it relates to the disciplines of health, education, social work, sociology and criminology. The unique aspect of this book is that the chapters will present a range of student-practitioner research from their different multi-disciplinary settings, offering rich insights on ethics and research practice based on the experiences of each author. Therefore, the publication seeks to offer useful perspectives for understanding the theoretical frameworks that underlie gender-based violence (GBV) and showcase appropriate research methodologies within each chapter. It is necessary and perhaps urgent to re-examine the cogency and relevance of theories, debates and contentious issues about DA and SV, and the critical overlaps with these concerns. The reader will be invited to consider concepts and contexts of DA and SV which are familiar to them as a student and as a practitioner. Additionally, the reader will be encouraged to consider aspects and themes which are less familiar in terms of theory, research, and practice. There will be a constant thread of critical reflection to invite the reader to consider their own positionality to the unfolding discussions within each chapter, and how these may relate to their professional practice, their research, and their professional values. Consequently, each author speaks in their 'voice' to share their own critical insights on ethical dilemmas and their positions as novice researchers. Importantly, most of the contributors for this book are new to the process of writing for publication, and their valuable work is celebrated as an inspiration to aspiring researchers, writers, and activists in the field of violence studies, nationally and internationally.

The book as a whole covers the following:

- i) To offer a critical examination of the ethical and moral challenges in conducting research about domestic abuse or sexual violence from the perspectives of student-practitioners and novice researchers within various professional disciplines.
- ii) To articulate the dominant theoretical frameworks that have sought to offer explanations about domestic abuse and sexual violence within the research problems presented by the student-practitioners.
- iii) To evaluate through the literature and research the significance of legislation and policy provision within the UK in service provision and interventions for victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse and sexual violence.
- iv) To show case best practice examples of research studies on domestic abuse and sexual violence based on the experiences of student-practitioners.
- v) To promote a critical appraisal of the self and the positionality of the practitioner as researcher, through reflection on their personal and professional development.
- vi) To reflect on the impact of the shadow pandemic on the experiences of vulnerable individuals as victims of abuse and trauma and the challenges of conducting research ethically and safely.

## **Naming and defining abuse and violence**

There are debates and tensions in academia, policy provision and practice about how to name, define and distinguish experiences of GBV, DA and SV. For example, we see frequent references in the literature to concerns such as intimate partner violence (IPV) (Potter *et al.*, 2020; WHO, 2021), violence against women and girls (VAWG), (HM Government, 2021), battered woman syndrome (BWS) (Rothenberg, 2003; Walker, 2006), sexual violence (SV) and adolescent dating violence (Hellevik & Øverlien, 2016; Bundock, Chan & Hewitt, 2020), sexual aggression (Edwards *et al.*, 2015; Barbaree *et al.*, 2018) and gender-based violence (Casey *et al.*, 2018; UN Women, 2022). From the outset of this book, it is important to highlight that GBV does encompass the concerns of DA and SV. These experiences implicitly and directly demonstrate the impact of the global reach of patriarchy, and its facets of

male privilege, gender inequalities, the abuses of male power and the abuses of such power within male dominated institutions worldwide, over women and children. Notably, Article 1 of the United Nations (UN) *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* states how GBV is manifested and experienced by women:

‘any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.’

(UN 1993:Article1)

The cogency of this definition speaks to anyone who identifies as female, and its inclusivity is an important stance in not conforming to binary definitions of gender and sex. The definition broadly considers all forms of abuse and its occurrence within and beyond the domestic sphere, and while this definition refers to women, it is critical to recognise that victims of GBV include individuals of all ages from infancy to old age. Further to this point, the concept of the intersectionality of violence (Crenshaw, 1991), albeit not explicit in the above definition, prompts a more critical understanding of other overlapping discriminatory factors such as race, disability and sexuality that can compound women’s experience of oppression and abuse. The preparation of this book recognised the absence of a focus on men as victims of DA and SV, and it is important to be mindful of the growing body of research that indicates the increasing incidence of DA against men, especially in western world contexts. However, it was not intentional to exclude the perspectives of male victims of abuse, but the final selection of research chapters was primarily and largely focused on the gendered nature of violence.

For the purposes of this book and in the interests of clarity and consistency in terminology, there is consistent reference to DA and SV within the chapters to follow, while acknowledging the specificity of the gendered nature of the perpetration of violence. The new legal definition in England and Wales for DA, is cited within Part 1 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 as follows:

This section defines “domestic abuse” for the purposes of this Act.

Behaviour of a person (“A”) towards another person (“B”) is “domestic abuse” if -  
A and B are aged 16 or over and are personally connected to each other, and  
the behaviour is abusive.

Behaviour is “abusive” if it consists of any of the following –

physical or sexual abuse;

violent or threatening behaviour;

controlling or coercive behaviour;

economic abuse;

psychological, emotional or other abuse;

and it does not matter whether the behaviour consists of a single incident or a course of conduct.

(Domestic Abuse Act, 2021)

Notably, the above legal definition remains gender neutral to ensure that all victims of domestic abuse are recognised and identified within the legislation and to ensure protective responses for their welfare.

In terms of SV, the World Health Organisation (Krug *et al.*, 2002, p.149) defines as follows:

‘any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting including but not limited to home and work.’

This definition is adopted because of its clear and detailed descriptors for what constitutes SV, there are common threads of coercion linked to the previous cited definitions of GBV and DA, and once again, there is recognition of the many settings and contexts where SV may occur. The gender-neutral definition seeks to include all victims of this violence, but it does have limitations in not recognising the experience of child sex abuse and its many forms. This latter concern is beyond the scope of this book and indeed, it is an area which is problematic for novice researchers in terms of the ethical challenges, with the necessary skill and expertise in conducting research on this highly sensitive subject. The point on research ethics and sound ethical research practice will be discussed further in Holly Taylor-Dunn’s chapter. In this book, the terms GBV, DV and SV will be used interchangeably and in recognition and response to the collective research themes in the subsequent chapters.

## **A theoretical framework for research**

In adopting a framework for the analysis of GBV, the book has a particular leaning towards the social sciences which will become apparent in the forthcoming chapters. Each author is mindful of a gender-standpoint in their writing, particularly through a sociological or psychological lens. The reader will be introduced to a range of different theoretical perspectives that seek to understand the causation of GBV in all its forms. At this point there is a focus on two specific theoretical perspectives which remain particularly influential in the study of DA and SV, and which are threaded across the book chapters. These are the socio-ecological model (Dutton, 1988; Heise, 1998, Krug *et al.*, 2002) and Feminist theories (Walker, 1979; Crenshaw, 1991; Harding, 2009; bell hooks, 2015).

### **The socio-ecological model**

Bronfenbrenner's original Ecological Framework for Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005) is rooted in the many versions of the ecological model to understand and analyse the behaviours of people within the contexts of their family life, their community and the context of wider society. The ecological model was applied to domestic abuse (Carlson, 1984; Dutton, 1988) which was subsequently advanced by Heise (1998) with a focus on the nature of GBV, and in 2002, the World Health Organisation launched a report on the first global study on the impact of violence on the health of the individual. This seminal report included an ecological model of violence (Krug *et al.*, 2002) which highlighted the relationship between the causes of violence and prevention approaches to all types of violence. This socio-ecological model offered a critical means of understanding the significance of the social environment and the influential factors, either positive or negative, which have a crucial impact on the health and social outcomes of the individual. For instance, by placing a woman as a victim of DA in the centre of her world, the ontogenetic factors considered include the influence of issues such as her personality and personal disposition, childhood experiences, drugs and alcohol or mental health concerns. There is opportunity to consider the effects of her intimate partnership and her interpersonal relationships in her home life in terms of risk to her safety and well-being (Micro-level); and her community as a source of support or

concern for her (Meso-level), while the wider society examines the infrastructures of legislation, policy to hold perpetrators of abuse to account, and where there are sanctions against all forms of GBV, with appropriate services for victims (Macro-level) see Table 1 below.

**Table 1** A socio-ecological approach – Contributing factors to violence against women

Ontogenetic	Micro-system	Meso-system	Macro- system
Early childhood trauma	Strict gender-norms	No or failed sanctions to challenge abusers	Devaluing women
Poor parenting experiences	Family stress	Honour codes of conduct for women and girls	Impunity – limited legal prohibitions to all forms of violence
Emotions - poor self esteem	Opportunity – women as easy targets	Poverty	Patriarchy and reinforcement of privilege
Masculine control	Rewards for violence- getting demands met	Discrimination and lack of equality	
Alcohol abuse	Collusion and peer approval	Male privilege and entitlement	

Source: adopted from Hagemann-White *et al.* (2021)

A study by Hagemann *et al.* (2021) was originally commissioned by the European Union in 2010 to offer an overview of the factors which influence the perpetration of violence against women and children, was further reviewed in 2021. Table 1 demonstrates the different contexts of the world of the victim of GBV, where the ontogenetic lens of life history identifies the possible negative influences of growing up exposed to abuse and violence. While the immediacy of the family unit and how this is experienced in the micro-system highlights the influence of familial, sibling and wider family relationships. The meso-system recognises the impact of institutions such as schools, places of worship and the interaction with the local community where violence is approved or condoned. Finally, the macro-system indicates the significance of wider society and the infrastructures of law and order and protective strategies for victims, or the lack thereof.

## **Feminist theoretical perspectives**

It is important to note that the concept of Feminism can still be misunderstood or misinterpreted in broader societal terms, even today. But bell hooks (2015) eloquently described feminism as 'a movement to transform society by eradicating patriarchy, by ending sexism and sexist oppression, by challenging the politics of domination on all fronts' (p.50). However, there are many different divisions, debates and aspects within feminism which have endured and developed in responding to the diverse changes within society, such as culture, race, sexuality, gender, class, politics, poverty and the environment. Feminist scholarship soared in academia during Second Wave Feminism in the UK, USA and across Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, when there was an upsurge in the closer scrutiny of women's lives, their home lives, their working lives, their public and political lives. Traditional research methodologies which were deemed largely positivist (quantitative) by design, shifted to newer research methodologies which were more interpretative by design, focusing on qualitative data and thereby capturing the voices and the stories of women's lives. Consequently, feminist studies on family life began to unravel and identify concerns of domestic abuse, rape and child abuse and neglect as part of the research narratives.

However, there remains a longstanding tension of a dichotomous position between feminist scholars and other social scientists, who are indeed sensitive to the feminist position. Yet, in terms of GBV, specifically DA and SV, many feminists will argue that men are the perpetrators and women are the victims (Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Pagelow, 1984; Walker, 1989). This dominant perspective prevailed in academic and social discourses based on the impact of patriarchal structures, its institutions and the impact on women. In the 1980s, research in the USA began to challenge the view of 'gender asymmetry' of violence (Straus, 1979; Straus *et al.*, 2006), when research conveyed that women could also be physically violent in their intimate relationships, hence the focus on the 'gender symmetry' of violence, showing that men could similarly also be victims of DA and women could be perpetrators. However, those who advocate the feminist viewpoint, such as Dobash and Dobash, Wilson and Daly (1992) were critical of the blunt instrument of the Conflict Tactics Scales used in the research which primarily focused on domestic violence, and which overlooked critical aspects of the contexts of violence and others forms of

abuse within the intimate relationship. Undoubtedly, if the consequences of violence are injuries and homicide, the data reminds us consistently that women are mostly the victims.

In summary to feminist perspectives on research, Storkey (2018) helpfully alludes to some common ground between feminists, firstly that gender is a social construction and therefore affects many of the social institutions that govern our lives as human beings. Secondly, Storkey adds that these constructs of gender are influenced by differing cultural contexts which means that people learn to adopt and behave in specific dominant gender roles of being male or female. Finally, and critically, gender has a political dynamic which can render women as less powerful or vulnerable in certain social contexts. This is particular to societies where women are valued less as human beings, where they experience inequalities in health, education, work and a political life, which therefore increases their vulnerabilities and their risk of being victims of violence and abuse.

## **Introducing the book chapters**

There are 12 chapters to follow this introduction, chapter 1 focuses on the specific topic on the ethics of conducting research on DA and SV. Chapters 2 to 11 inclusively, will present a range of research themes, with key issues on the research process, the ethical considerations of the research study and reflections on the experiences of the novice researcher. The concluding chapter of the book will offer an overview of some of the key messages on conducting research on DA and SV for those who are new to research, including recommendations for students and practitioners in going forward with their prospective research in their studies or as part of their practice-based research in their professional role.

Chapter 1 by Holly Taylor-Dunn, as mentioned, focuses on the ethical and methodological considerations for conducting research on DA and SV. The chapter is essential reading for every student and novice researcher, as it helpfully highlights and discusses some of the key ethical issues and challenges in researching DA and SV. There is a consideration of the important contributions feminist research methodology has offered in underlining the criticality of safe and sound approaches to promoting the voices of victims and survivors of abuse, while ensuring the self-care of the researcher also. The chapter concludes with an overview of guidelines for

new researchers in considering their next steps to embarking on their research study. Neelam Rose's chapter offers an interesting and challenging perspective on her identity as a researcher in examining the tensions and racialisation of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) within media narratives, which had some influence on professional and public discourses. Her research experience also highlighted the importance of balancing the subjective and objective positionality of her research identity and emphasises the importance of both perspectives within the research process. In the chapter by Emma Jane Noble, there is an overview of her unique study, focusing on the concern of adolescent digital dating abuse. This is one of the first quantitative studies within the UK exploring young people's attitudes towards online dating abuse. The research offers some valuable insights on the ethical dilemmas and approaches in conducting an online survey relating to this sensitive issue. In chapter 4, Malin Lunde Jensen shares her experiences of reflecting on the research process, which essentially developed and enhanced her social work practice in Norway. There is particular underlining of how a practitioner's subjective response to a victim's trauma should not obscure the lived experience of the victim, or there is a risk of failing to support their needs. This learning is prompted by her study which examined perceptions of stalking and harassment behaviours in the UK, including a consideration of the influence of factors such as gender, stranger or ex-partner perpetrated behaviours and the impact of alcohol on stalking and harassment behaviours.

The next two chapters by Sophie Heritage and Jade Jeffrey focus on issues of victim blaming responses by professionals and the public in contexts of DA and SV. Heritage's chapter specifically identifies concerns related to victims' tonic immobility, or "freeze" responses to sexual violence. As a survivor of rape, her powerful insights from the lived experience of recovering from this trauma, provide a potent narrative of judgement and blame by others. This was a key motivation to the theme of her research and her data identify the prevalence of blaming attitudes particularly when victims of rape have not shown active resistance to their abusive perpetrator/s. Jeffrey's chapter examines the concern of secondary victimisation by women who attempt to access justice for the crimes of domestic abuse and sexual violence perpetrated against them by men. Her research involved the participation of women's advocates and individuals working within the legal systems of England and

Wales. There are resounding messages from practitioners about the need to improve justice for women, including a need for more victim-centred approaches to reduce the risk and impact of re-traumatising victims after the event of the violence itself. The following chapters by Ayla Nasuh and Katharine Jones take a closer look at the experiences of practitioner responses to families affected by domestic abuse. Nasuh's research underlines the necessity in understanding the distinction between women who are "fleeing" or "leaving" an abusive relationship. Her study captures the narratives of child protection social workers who are involved in complex assessments of the needs to safeguard children, while attempting to support mothers as victims. Herein lies the tension, as women frequently perceive social work practice as being punitive and controlling which can mirror some of the behaviours of their abusive partners. Nasuh's chapter offers helpful considerations in balancing the rights of children, alongside support advocacy for mothers, with greater focus on the accountability of fathers as perpetrators. Jones also identifies tensions in the statutory requirements of child protection specific to social work, and the experiences of women recovering from the trauma of DA. Her study calls for greater recognition of trauma-informed responses and how these may not tally with the expectations and timelines of child protection assessments and action plans in contexts of mothers' parenting capacity. There are hints of how the family courts and other agencies approaches are indicative again of the secondary victimisation of women, a subject explored previously in Jade Jeffrey's chapter.

In the chapter which examines the experience of sleep deprivation as a form of coercive control, Suzie Richards' research provides troubling and chilling evidence from her interviews with women as victims of DA. Her position as a feminist researcher emphasises the critical importance of the safety and welfare of research participants and giving voice to the surrounding silence of the narratives of women. Richards also reflects on the theme of the researcher being truly present in containing the experience of women in telling their stories of abuse, while also recognising the need to process and seek research supervision and support as part of her selfcare too. Dave Aitken's chapter describes the good practice responses to DA by the Army Welfare System (AWS) founded on the Safe and Together Model (Safe and Together Institute, 2021). He carefully details his research conducted within an organisation which perhaps is seen as private and impenetrable to outsider

academic contact or scrutiny. Indeed, he reflects on how he managed his own anxieties through the research process from an *Insider* research perspective, despite the AWS having a separate and distinctive autonomy within the military. The researcher as an Insider is an issue that Emma Jane Noble also discusses in her chapter in her role with an institution of Further Education, and it is interesting to see the emergence of this theme across several of the following chapters. Finally, Sarah Pugh considers the complexity and the challenges of policing coercive controlling behaviours in cases of DA. Her study investigated police officers' awareness and responses to this crime since the introduction of the Serious Crime Act 2015, as she was troubled by the low rates of convictions. Because of the research, Pugh recognises the lack of true understanding of what coercive control is and the problems associated with the effective gathering of evidence for this crime. The issue is further intensified by victims' lack of recognition or fear of reporting this crime. Her research concludes with several insightful considerations, including a need for more effective police training on the detection and acquiring evidence of the crime that is coercive control.

The brief conclusion chapter echoes some of the key messages from the shared research experiences within the book chapters. There is an opportunity for the reader to carefully consider the new understandings and meanings for conducting research on GBV, and their own positionality as a newcomer to the research experience. It is hoped that the chapters will enable the reader to think further on those issues that concern or trouble them related to the study of GBV and their professional practice. Importantly, that the chapters can inspire and offer confidence in going forward to start your research study.

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