Introduction

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General Introduction

This book on 'Participatory research on child maltreatment with children and adult survivors: Concepts, ethics, and methods' aims to explore, develop and share theoretical concepts, ethical considerations and research methods critical to collaborating in research with children and adult survivors of child maltreatment and violence. This introduction highlights the needs of children in contemporary society; provides a brief introduction to concepts underpinning children's participation in society and in research generally; and goes on to identify some key challenges for children's participation in research on the sensitive and painful topics which are the focus of this book. This introduction concludes with a synopsis of how the authors came to be collaborating on this writing venture, and an outline of the three sections and 16 chapters which comprise this book. The book offers a comprehensive and multi-faceted picture of how children and victims' right to express their opinions on the violence affecting them can be effectively gathered and fruitfully applied, using methods and perspectives drawn from various disciplines. We trust that it will be a valuable resource for the development of research, practice, teaching and the management of services.

Needs of Children

Children face a range of detrimental behaviours and acts such as sexual and physical assault, neglect, psychological harm, and witnessing violence in varied settings such as home, schools, community and online (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020a). Accordingly, in this book, we adopt a broad understanding of child maltreatment that covers all forms of physical and emotional ill treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, or commercial or other maltreatment, and exploitation resulting in actual or potential

harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power (WHO, 2020b).

Global estimates suggest that more than half of all children aged 2–17 years – or 1 billion children – experienced interpersonal violence in the past year (Hillis et al., 2016). In the European region, an estimated amount of more than 55 million children younger than 18 suffer from child maltreatment, which causes the deaths of 700 children younger than 15 each year (Pritchard & Williams, 2010; Sethi et al., 2013, 2018). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child abuse prevalence is still not fully actualised, yet it is expected that the rates will stabilise at a higher level than before the pandemic (WHO, 2020a).

Interpersonal violence against children by parents or other caregivers, peers or strangers continues to be a serious global public health and social problem (Hillis et al., 2016). Experiences of violence during childhood can bear acute and long-term negative consequences for individuals along the life course, including developmental deficits, mental and physical health problems, poorer educational prospects and reduced earnings from employment, thus imposing profound economic, health and social burden on societies (Sethi et al., 2013, 2018; WHO, 2020a).

The 2030 *Agenda for Sustainable Development*, adopted by all United Nations (UN) member states in 2015, includes an urgent call to action for all countries to eliminate violence against children, as explicitly indicated in Target 16.2: 'end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children'. As a way forward, the WHO's national recommendations call for countries to prioritise the collection of data on violence-related indicators to serve data-driven national action plans to prevent and respond to violence against children (WHO, 2020a).

In addition to positioning data collection on violence against children as a precondition to effective response and prevention measures, the international community has emphasised the importance of placing children at the heart of these research efforts, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 44 (UN, 1989), UN study on violence (Pinheiro, 2006), and UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015), and suggested including children in research on violence 'through their ethical, inclusive and meaningful participation in evidence-based initiatives' (WHO, 2020a, p. 80).

Yet to date, the scientific investigation of children's reality of different forms of maltreatment is still marked by the streetlight effect – i.e. we seek the truth under the light, where the process of seeking is easy. We persistently ask parents and professionals in different roles about what forms of violence children experience and what help children and survivors of violence need, rather than looking where the truth is: children and survivors.

This book provides significant knowledge, based on strong evidence, embedded in the European context about participatory research on child maltreatment and violence with children and adult survivors. Together, the chapters of this book generate a colourful mosaic of contexts, theories and methods relating to children's and adult survivors' participation in research about their adverse experiences. It is expected to enrich the ongoing debates about ethical concerns, challenges and benefits of participatory research in the field of

child maltreatment and violence and point to further directions to achieve progress.

Children's Participation in Society

According to the UNCRC (UN, 1989), children are both deserving and capable of participating in decisions concerning their life. Accordingly, children's participation is a process by which children express directly, individually or in a community, their opinions and decisions on matters that concern them according to their age and maturity (UN, 1989). Participation involves empowering children by considering them active agents and allowing them decision-making power that is usually preserved for adults (Shier, 2001; Sinclair, 2004; UNICEF, 2019). It is an interactional process in which children continuously engage with others, mostly adults, to achieve shared goals in a way that promotes mutual respect and dignity (Casas et al., 2008; Chawla, 2001). Such forms of participatory interactions are opportunities for children to construct meaning, share decisions and play a useful role in their community (Casas et al., 2008; Chawla, 2001).

A well-established conceptualisation of participation views it as a multidimensional construct with different degrees (Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001). Most notable is Hart's (1992) ladder of participation, which describes eight levels of children's participation, starting with the three non-participatory levels at the bottom, i.e. manipulation, decoration and tokenism, and moving upward to more meaningful participation through assigned but informed, consulted and informed, adult-initiated shared decisions with children, and child-initiated and directed to the final level: child-initiated shared decisions with adults (Hart, 1992). Subsequently, Shier's (2001) model of children's participation was designed to extend Hart's (1992) work and provide practical tool that can help professionals build an action plan to promote children's participation in different areas. Shier's (2001) tool presents five levels of participation: children being listened to, children supported in expressing their views, children's views being considered, children being involved in decision-making processes and, finally, children sharing power and responsibility for decision-making. In addition, each level can be evaluated by the degree of commitment to children's empowerment via openings, opportunities and obligations by which the participation becomes built into the system. Together, Shier's (2001) model provides an ordered sequence of 15 questions that can help professionals decide on the level of commitment to participation and the next steps to achieve greater participation.

Children's Participation in Research

To fully understand children's experiences, they must be involved in research (Greene & Hill, 2005). To achieve this scope, the scientific community must create participatory spaces and provide support and guidance to children (Smith & Bjerke, 2009). Valuing different levels of children's participation, this book considers that good practices of children's participation in research happen when

research is done with children, rather than on or about children (Smart et al., 2001). Doing research with children is about more than ticking a box or reinforcing the opinions and views of adults; it is also about including them in different stages of the research process and making sure their opinions and collaboration are included in decision-making. Children may take roles as research advisers, data collectors, co-researchers or lead researchers (Cuevas-Parra, 2020).

Under the influence of the sociology of childhood, traditional research methods have been updated and included in the new paradigm of participatory research, by which children are invited to take part independently or in cooperation with adult researchers in different phases of the research: identifying and phrasing the research questions, planning the research instruments, testing the instruments, collecting data from other children and stakeholders, drawing conclusions and recommendations, disseminating the results of the research and planning to act to address the problems revealed by the research (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Larkin et al., 2014; Larkins, 2022). Involving children in roles that recognise their contribution to the accumulation of knowledge is a recognition of their value and capabilities. Therefore, researchers who want to make sure that children's participation is real need to focus on establishing a trusting and comfortable situation to help children get involved in the research process (Barriage, 2021).

In this book, children's and adult survivors' participation in research is defined as any research that entails a degree of collaboration between those undertaking the research and those who are typically the focus of the research (Pain, 2004).

Participation of Children and Survivors in Research on Maltreatment

From early ages, children directly or indirectly experience some forms of violence – affecting themselves, their family members, their peers or other people in their surrounding – and develop knowledge about it, which elicits some forms of behaviour and is embedded in their knowledge about self and the context of their lives.

The global commitment reinforced by the UNCRC (UN, 1989) to guarantee children's right to protection from maltreatment (Article 19) and right to participate in decisions about their life (Article 12) demands that researchers conceptualise new research paradigms that allow children to participate as experts informants on their victimisation experiences and as agents of knowledge construction who can contribute to the design, application and evaluation of research and dissemination of evidence-based knowledge.

The issue of participatory research with child victims has generated ongoing debates (Bovarnick et al., 2018; Kiili & Moilanen, 2019). It involves arguments rooted in the sociology of childhood, which recognises children as rights-bearing agents capable of reflecting on the realities of their lives and proposing solutions, alongside claims that children are less capable than adults regarding recalling details of victimisation, exaggerating, avoiding or imagining elements of the

experienced events, or being retraumatised by recalling them (Bovarnick et al., 2018; Kiili & Moilanen, 2019; Sammons et al., 2016).

Expressing opinions about maltreatment might be difficult, especially for children who experienced violence because it involves contradictory emotions and risks or seems a betrayal of a person towards whom they feel ambivalent, both loving and being angry at them. Their capability to express themselves is often hindered by feeling powerless and dependent. Their agency might diminish, being influenced by the context of authoritarian and patriarchal norms and values, lack of resources and support, conflictual and abusive or neglectful parenting, or marginalisation and discrimination in their communities (Blanchet-Cohen, 2009). Therefore, researchers should contemplate what kind of methods they design and how they mobilise children's agency to get their meaningful cooperation in researching different aspects of violence that affect them (Jamieson et al., 2021).

This Book

This book is dedicated to sharing theoretical concepts, ethical considerations and research methods critical to collaborating in research with children and survivors of maltreatment and violence to reveal their authentic experiences. It is designed to purposefully address the challenges discussed in the literature about involving children and adult survivors in research about maltreatment so to contribute to the development of effective and ethical participatory research practice.

The book integrates theoretical and empirical knowledge developed by European scholars that have as a common focal topic the participation in research of children and survivors of violence that covers different forms of child abuse and neglect in the family, school violence, abandonment, institutionalisation, violence in deprived communities, exposure to life as a refugee and being left behind by labour-migrant parents.

The authors of the book are members of a pan-European network, Euro-CAN on Multisectoral Responses to Child Abuse and Neglect in Europe: Incidence and Trends (Euro-CAN), supported by the European Cooperation on Science Technology (COST Action 19106). The authors gather in a designated working group aimed to promote children's participation in research on violence in any of the many forms it affects children's lives in their families, institutions or communities where they live to help them live a better life. The authors represent varied disciplinary backgrounds, including education, psychology, paediatrics and social work. They are academic researchers, professionals in medical or social services and activists in civic associations of children and survivors of violence.

In sum, this book offers a comprehensive picture of how the concepts of child agency and victims' right to express their opinions on the violence affecting them can be fruitfully applied, using sound research methodologies drawn from different disciplines and developed by a range of professions.

Overview of Sections and Chapters of This Book

This book features 16 chapters organised in three sections.

Section 1

Section 1 establishes the overall grounding of participatory research with children on maltreatment experiences by touching on theoretical, methodological, ethical and contextual aspects. The first chapter is dedicated to theoretically debating the main concepts developed in the framework of childhood studies: children's participation rights, children's agency, and the views of adultism and childism. Chapter 2 reviews existing literature on participatory research with children and examines such research projects as those conducted by the EURO-CAN network, aiming to present the key features of participatory research with children.

Chapters 2, 3 and 5 paint comprehensive pictures about the cultural and social factors and formal policies and procedures that promote or hinder children's participation in research on violence. Chapter 3 discusses the main principles that guide child participation in research from the point of view of children's rights, how data should be protected and ethical considerations, including topics such as parental consent requirements and the consequences on the right of children to be heard.

Chapter 4 is an analysis of the evolution of different ethical approaches, mainly regarding the concepts of children's gatekeeping: What are the consequences of asking parents or care personnel for informed consent when studying children's experiences of family or institutional violence? The theoretical concepts introduced in this section are returned to and applied in the subsequent chapters of the book, through their critical examination and reflection on research involving children on maltreatment. Chapter 5 deals with cultural factors affecting the participation of children victims of child abuse and neglect in research, analysing the example of Turkey, with its collectivist culture.

Section 2

Section 2 presents a diversity of approaches useful to promote the participation of children of different ages and in different life contexts (Chapters 6–12). To enhance the practical value of knowledge, the book presents pioneering examples of effective participatory research initiatives with children from Sweden, Spain, Portugal, Iceland, Hungary and Romania as contributions to the discourse on child maltreatment. It demonstrates that despite the barriers imposed by extensive data protection regulations and caregivers taking advantage of their rights to act as gatekeepers, participatory procedures in research planning, data collection and the interpretation of results are beneficial in establishing a more reliable understanding of children's reality struggling to survive violence, discrimination and neglect.

This section includes chapters that explore the experiences of adult survivors of childhood abuse, long-term consequences of violence, and survivors' views on the support and the treatment they received from professionals. Readers will learn about what enhances healthy survival strategies and how professionals can better engage in child-centred supportive approaches, serving children's interests better. The section reflects on varied methodological approaches to participatory research, covering a large range of age groups and research typologies.

Readers will have the opportunity to understand how interviewing children and youth in foster care in Spain became a relevant participatory tool (Chapter 6). In Chapter 7, authors from Sweden present how their research centre (Barnafrid) involves children with refugee backgrounds in research and development activities. They describe the Barnafrid methodology, which can become a working model to understand the experiences and needs for safety of refugee children, in the communities they live in. Chapter 8 outlines the contribution of Hungarian foster kids for collecting young people's views on everyday life topics, and then develop digital tools considering the children's opinions and needs.

Details on innovative community work with young people expressing their feelings through artistic means are revealed by authors from Iceland in Chapter 9. Children's capacity to become co-creators of research methods is demonstrated by Romanian researchers working on the topic of children left behind in transnational families by parents migrating for work (Chapter 10). Portuguese colleagues discuss the opportunities put in place by participatory action research with children affected by community deprivation (Chapter 11). Examples of how Sweden promotes children's inclusion in research on violence and how children's voices have been articulated in different public enquiries that involve multiple societal sectors such as social welfare services and health care can be seen in Chapter 12.

Section 3

Section 3 approaches research on childhood maltreatment from the perspective of adult survivors of violence, remaining in the framework of participatory research. It presents how research with adult survivors of violence enhances child-centred participatory practices by building on adult survivors' retrospective accounts (Chapters 13–16).

This section discusses different ways to conceptualise survivors' contributions to knowledge accumulation on childhood maltreatment. Chapter 13 analyses models of working with mental health adult patients to capture their retrospective accounts of childhood maltreatment and Chapter 10 presents a contribution from Denmark. Chapters 14 and 15 (both from Germany) discuss the functioning of adult survivors of childhood violence in research projects. This is seen as differing in the degree of participation, inclusion and instrumentalisation. The roles attributed to adult survivors also vary depending on how their ways of expression are perceived; the adopted methods, like empowerment; or the use of creative practices with a therapeutic function (Chapter 14).

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) survivors often reject research designs that ask them to passively respond to surveys. The authors of Chapter 14 explore why working with artists and art to capture sexual abuse is an approach that allows more freedom of expression and opens new communication dimensions for survivors of sexual abuse. Chapter 15 presents the approach of an association of survivors aiming for agentic participation in research. Their method encourages survivors of violence to participate in all phases of the research process in a way that may empower participants. Chapter 16 explores how researchers can give voice to the survivors of institutional abuse in Italy and other countries and how their contribution can be capitalised by raising community awareness of system violence with help from the survivors.

Recommendations

This book demonstrated that children can and are generally willing to voice their experiences of child abuse, neglect, abandonment and other forms of violence if they understand the meaning of the research, and are given the skills and support to express themselves and feel safe. It also suggests several steps to advance the inclusion of children in research so that it could more effectively serve the universal goal of eliminating violence against children.

First, while children are typically mostly involved in the stage of conducting the study, we recommend that children should play a leading role in all phases of the research from the early stages of planning the research to the final stages of disseminating its results. This will allow a rebalancing of the power between adult researchers and child participants throughout the whole research process.

Engaging children in decisions on the research questions could advance empirical investigation that addresses problems that are important to children from their perspective. Studying issues that children prioritise as significant could benefit the development of more pertinent and appropriate solutions and interventions so that the systems built to protect children will meet their mission.

Also, the inclusion of children in designing the research methodology could promote the establishment of facilitating conditions for data collection and maximise the potential for children's participation. Children's input can stimulate innovative child-appropriate data collection strategies which follow the natural ways children interact with their environment.

In the long term, taking a children-led approach to framing the research may facilitate children's narratives on violence as well as those groups that are typically less involved in research such as young children or children with disabilities.

It is also suggested that greater attention should be given to the inclusion of children in disseminating research results. Scientific evidence presented through this book makes a case for the benefits of providing child decision-making power and control over approaches to distributing research findings. Through research, children develop the skills and agency to advocate and act for changes in their environments including families, institutions and communities.

Given the vulnerability of children in general and victims of maltreatment and violence in particular, it is recommended that research be built on strong ethical grounds. It is important to ensure children's participation or non-participation is a free choice and not a product of adult manipulation or gatekeepers exercising their power. In some cases, this may involve waiving parental consent. It is also recommended to put in place clear institutional safeguarding procedures, for example, repeatedly and deliberately presenting the option to stop participation at any time they want or train children to express their needs to the field researchers so support could be immediately provided.

When we consider research with CSA survivors, there is a similar situation with the children's case: often the studied population is only a passive agent, and the researcher decides the research question, design, methodology and procedure. The lack of participatory research with CSA survivors about child maltreatment is an indicator of how much more information on how to do so is needed.

The recommendations are in three directions. Firstly, it is important to conduct more participatory research with adult CSA survivors to prove their benefits when they participate in research. The lack of knowledge on the level of benefits for the studied population should not be an impediment to not conduct such participatory research. Hence, the opposite. Other populations in vulnerable situations have been included in research since a long time ago, and all the studies point out how useful it is for the participants and how rich the research is when they participate. Once the evidence on the benefits of participating is established, it will be a good piece of information to find and encourage adult CSA survivors to participate in research about child maltreatment.

Secondly, as mentioned before, some ethical issues should be taken into account. The researchers must protect adult CSA survivors when participating in research, avoiding retraumatisation and considering all the risks taken.

And thirdly, the main recommendation for research with adult survivors of violence and its practical implications taking into account their opinions regarding the key aspects of how to involve children who sadly are victims of child maltreatment. In retrospect, adults can have important inputs for research and policies on how to approach, involve, motivate, help and empower children who lived similar experiences to them. There are no better experts than the children and survivors: we cannot overlook their voices and decisions.

The last recommendation would be to consider cultural factors when doing research on child maltreatment with children and survivors. In some cases, there is a genuine resistance against considering children good enough to participate in research as main characters. This resistance is rooted in familial, institutional and societal traditions. These cultural values which hinder research on the topic of violence against children are the same values that maintain the violence itself.

Therefore, we need guides for researchers and experts to help identify cultural barriers and find solutions to overcome them. Identifying these values and finding ways that allow children's voices to be heard in societies with traditional and patriarchal norms can bring forward the values of children's right to protection and self-expression to the attention of the communities.

Finally, a word of caution is required. Researchers should not take the potential benefits of children's participation for granted. Rather children's feedback and reflections about their participation experience should be deliberately and explicitly sought, particularly when exploring difficult life experiences such as maltreatment. To advance meaningful, ethical and effective research with children, more evidence-based knowledge is required about the experience of participation in research from children's perspectives.

Conclusion

We hope that the authors of these chapters succeed in sparking readers' interest and motivate them to take inspiration from the research examples presented in these chapters. We invite our readers to reflect on the challenges of involving children and adult survivors of maltreatment in research on their harmful experiences of abuse and neglect and the consequences of such adverse experiences. We hope that the book also highlights effectively the advantages and positive effects that participation as a human right and as a valued endeavour of scientific knowledge accumulation can bring to the community of helping professions.

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