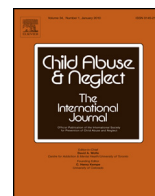




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## Child Abuse & Neglect



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

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### ABSTRACT

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

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### Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

actions taken during incidents of violence: turning on music, reading a book, and closing one's ears; whereas others try to rescue their mother or call the police. Physical intervention by children between the mother and father has been documented (Hester & Radford, 1996; McGee, 2000; Mullender et al., 2002). Children were observed to have imagined such actions during a future violent as turning the father in, beating him up or separating the parents. The researchers emphasized that the same child can use different strategies in different situations.

In the crucial study by Mullender et al. (2002), it was noted that culture and ethnicity necessarily have a profound effect on the way children perceive domestic violence experiences and that children's cultural background cannot be overlooked.

Children can experience domestic violence as a traumatic event that can have profound consequences in different areas of their lives. Studies such as those outlined above enhance our knowledge and understanding of these children as well as the intervention strategies that can be implemented.

Witnessing one parent kill the other can be a continuation of long exposure to domestic violence or a completely new and unfamiliar traumatic experience for children. The current study is an in-depth exploration of the narratives of children who witnessed their father killing their mother. This exploration was carried out through seven investigative interviews that were conducted with children following the murder of their mother by their father. The aim of the current study is to explore, through a phenomenological approach, the way children experience these incidents.

## Method

### Sample

The current study focuses on seven investigative interviews conducted with children who witnessed their father kill their mother. These seven interviews were conducted in Israel between 2009 and 2012. Investigative interviews were selected for study only if they were part of substantiated cases, meaning that there was clear evidence in these cases (e.g., suspect admission, another eyewitness testimony, physical evidence) that the father was the one who killed the mother and that the children witnessed this incident. In addition, only interviews in which the children disclosed the domestic homicide were selected. All of the investigative interviews were conducted within 24 h of the domestic homicide. Regarding the context of the interviews, the forensic interviewers interviewed the children in their new placement (in the house of a family member or in a temporary out-of-home placement, such as a shelter) with no other person in the room.

The ages of the children ranged from 4 to 7 years, and there were five girls and two boys. All of the suspects were the children's biological fathers. The children's identifying personal details and all other people involved in the incidents are concealed in the presentation of the findings.

### *The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Protocol*

All of the investigative interviews were conducted by five well-trained investigative interviewers in Israel. All of the interviewers had similar professional backgrounds, including bachelor's degrees in social work and at least three years of experience with investigative interviews. All of the investigative interviewers were familiar with the NICHD Protocol and received systematic training on the protocol.

The NICHD Protocol was designed to translate professional recommendations into operational guidelines and guide interviewers in using prompts and techniques that maximize the amount of information elicited from free-recall memory (Orbach et al., 2000). The NICHD Protocol has been found to elicit richer testimonies from children of all ages in response to free-recall invitations (Lamb, La Rooy, Malloy, & Katz, 2011). The protocol has been implemented in the United States, Israel, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Canada, and follow-up studies have systematically indicated significant improvements in the quality of investigative interviews (Cyr & Lamb, 2009; Lamb, Orbach, Hershkowitz, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2007; Orbach et al., 2000; Sternberg, Lamb, Orbach, Esplin, & Mitchell, 2001). In addition, the NICHD Protocol has beneficial effects on credibility assessment (Hershkowitz, Fisher, Lamb, & Horowitz, 2007), the elicitation of investigative leads (Darwish, Hershkowitz, Lamb, & Orbach, 2008) and case disposition and resolution (Pipe, Orbach, & Lamb, 2008).

The current study illustrates an application of the NICHD Protocol with interviewees other than alleged victims of abuse, i.e., alleged child witnesses of domestic violence. The NICHD Protocol guidelines were disseminated according to the suggested structure. All of the investigative interviews with the children were videotaped and transcribed. The length of the interviews ranged from 25 min to 40 min. The transcripts were collected by the researcher after all of the identifying details were removed.

### *Ethical approval*

Because the study is based on confidential files containing highly personal information, the author made a concerted effort to conduct the research in keeping with ethical standards. Thus, the author requested authorization for the study from the research board of the Ministry of Welfare in Israel. The investigative interviews that were provided did not include the names or identifying features of the children, parents or other people and places involved in the incidents. The study was also approved by the manager of the investigative interviewing unit in Israel and by the University of Tel Aviv's ethical board.

### Narrative analyses

The analysis strategy chosen to address the research objective was thematic analysis (Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. Because interest lies in the content of speech, thematic analysis interprets what is said by focusing on the meaning that any competent user of the respective language would find in a story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Reissman, 2008). Thus, great efforts were made by the research team to ensure that the themes identified would address patterns that also can be identified by other readers.

Within the context of phenomenology, thematic analysis focuses subjectively on the human experience (Morse, 1994). This approach emphasizes participants' perceptions, feelings and experiences as the paramount object of a study, and the research question addressed might be broad. In the current study, the aim was to characterize how children who witnessed their father kill their mother narrate their experiences.

In the current study, the data analysis was inductive rather than deductive. In an inductive approach (Reissman, 2008), the themes identified are strongly linked to the data because the assumptions are data-driven. Thus, coding is performed without attempting to fit the data into a pre-existing model or frame. In addition, the thematic analysis applied in the current study was semantic rather than latent. With semantic themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Reissman, 2008), the researcher attempts to identify the explicit and apparent implication of data and does not look beyond what was said.

Two different members of the research team and the author carried out a thematic analysis of all seven interviews independently. After each one of team members identified key categories within the children's narratives, they discussed the categories together and formulated themes that are representative of the narratives and distinct from one another. The following four themes were identified: the domestic homicide as the dead end of domestic violence, what I did when daddy killed mommy, that one time that daddy killed mommy, and mommy will feel better and will go back home.

## Results

### *The domestic homicide as the dead end of domestic violence*

Exploring the children's narratives through all seven investigative interviews revealed that all of the children were exposed to domestic violence on multiple occasions. The children's descriptions of these incidents were generic, indicating difficulties in elaborating on episodic abusive incidents.

*"Daddy is doing to mommy not good things all the time; I will tell him that when he will get back."* (Interview D)

*"Daddy is nervous about mommy many times, all the time, because she was late from work, and because she did not make him food, and because the food is not good."* (Interview B)

By closely examining the children's narratives, it can be observed that the extent of domestic violence was often extreme. According to the children's narratives, there were previous incidents in which their fathers severely attacked and injured their mothers:

*"After my birthday, daddy was upset with mommy so he hit her on her face and she was bleeding and the policemen came and took her and then she came back home."* (Interview A)

*"One night, daddy strangled mommy and I heard her crying."* (Interview C)

Focusing on the domestic violence incidents and on whether the children were abused during those incidents, all of the children, with no exception, denied that they had been abused and stated that neither their father nor mother ever hit them:

*"Daddy never hit me and mommy either; they are very good parents."* (Interview A)

*"Nobody is hurting me at home."* (Interview C)

*"Daddy is only hitting mother; he is not hitting me."* (Interview D)

However, the children did report that their siblings were violent toward them:

*"But my big brother is terrible and hurting me all the time. One night, he came to me and strangled me and told me 'you see that I am stronger than daddy, and I can kill you if I want'."* (Interview B)

*"My siblings are hitting me all the time, but when daddy is home, they do not."* (Interview E)

The children's narratives surrounding this theme emphasize the influence of domestic violence on the family dynamic. The fathers often hit the mothers, and the children—despite having difficulties in identifying the different incidents—indicated so on multiple occasions. Moreover, in their narratives, the children alluded to additional incidents in which the abuse of their father toward their mother resulted in severe injury for the mother. The children's narratives indicated that the dynamic surrounding the domestic violence they witnessed was strengthened through their siblings' violence toward them. Amazingly, all seven children related instances of abuse from their siblings and at the same time were strongly reluctant to admit and denied any possibility of being abused by one of their parents.

### *What I did when daddy killed mommy*

When the children further elaborated on the domestic homicide, they struggled to distinguish it from other abusive incidents; according to their narratives, the immediate contexts of the incidents were similar, the dynamics between the parents were similar and the children's behavior was similar. There was no sign for the children that something else was going on, and they all reported acting in the same way as they did in other incidents:

*Mommy was late from work and daddy was nervous and started to curse her. . .when she got back home, he looked at me so I took my siblings to the room and he started doing his thing. . .* (Interview A)

*"Mommy looked at me so I took the baby and went to my room and then I heard her crying and daddy was screaming, I sang a few songs till the noises will stop. . ."* (Interview C)

It was evident from the children's narratives that they all followed a routine during these violent incidents; they all knew how to identify the starting point of the domestic violence, what needed to be done, and when and who they were responsible for. Sadly, the specific experience did not develop the way they were used to.

### *That one time that daddy killed mommy*

Although the children did not play an active role in the domestic homicide, they all witnessed the actual act of their father killing their mother. There were various ways in which the children witnessed the incidents:

*"I waited for it to end and then I got outside the room, because it was silence, and I saw daddy sitting on mommy and putting the knife in her tummy."* (Interview A)

*"I heard mommy crying in the night, so when she stopped, I went to see her but daddy was on the top of her strangling her, her eyes were open but she was not looking at me."* (Interview B)

*After a few songs, there was a silence so we got outside and saw mommy with blood, and daddy was next to her and he told me I killed mommy and now I will kill myself, go to your room, so I took the baby and went back to the room.* (Interview C)

*"I was sitting with mommy on her bed and daddy came with the knife, he hurt mommy and there was blood. . ."* (Interview D)

*"It was in the kitchen, daddy took the knife and put it on mommy, then she fell down and now she is sick."* (Interview E)

As indicated by the children's narratives, the children responded and behaved as they did in other instances of domestic violence. They all had cues to signal them when the situation would be over (e.g., silence, number of songs), but on this final occasion, the end was different for them. In each previous incident, they were used to seeing their mother again; this time they saw her, but not as in previous incidents.

### *Mommy will feel better and will go back home*

Immediately after the domestic homicide, the children returned to the "scene of the crime" within their own home; nothing prepared them for the dead end of the long period of domestic violence they experienced. Seeing their mother dying or bleeding, the children were faced with the horror:

*"After I saw daddy killed mommy, he told me that he did not kill her, that she died alone."* (Interview A)

*"Daddy was crying because he was sad that mommy was sick and died, and he was sorry that he killed her."* (Interview B)

According to the children's narratives and records, some of the children were taken to family members directly following the domestic homicide, and others were taken to welfare organizations. The children's narratives highlight their attempt to understand and make sense of what happened:

*"So now mommy is cleaning the house because all of the blood. It is very dirty. . .mommy is alone now. . ."* (Interview C)

*"I will tell daddy to treat mommy nicely when she will return from the doctor."* (Interview D)

*"When mommy will return from the doctor, I will make her happy so she won't cry again."* (Interview E)

The emotional state of the children following the domestic homicide was also evident in the forensic interviewers' assessments following the forensic investigations. For all seven children, different forensic investigations identified their emotional state to be one of what can be considered dissociation and disconnection to the incidents. All of the children were smiling and cooperative with the interviewers, answering their questions and responding with smiles.

## Discussion and practical implications

The aim of the current study was to characterize how children who witnessed their father kill their mother narrate their traumatic experiences during forensic investigations. Thorough thematic analysis was conducted on seven investigative interviews with children. Four themes were identified from the narratives: the domestic homicide as the dead end of domestic violence, what I did when daddy killed mommy, that one time that daddy killed mommy, and mommy will feel better and will go back home.

Before exploring the identified themes, the children's young age deserves discussion. Although the sample in the current study included only seven children and did not aim to be representative, the children's ages raise some questions: Are fathers more willing to commit domestic homicide with younger children present than with older children present? Would the consequences of such incidents differ if older children were in the house? Although there are no answers to these questions, this study may shed light on the dynamic within these families.

The first theme that was identified was "the domestic homicide as the dead end of domestic violence." All seven children reported that the domestic homicide was not the first time that the father had acted aggressively toward their mother. Furthermore, all of the children reported previous incidents in which their mothers had been severely attacked and injured by their fathers. These children's reports indicated an escalation in the domestic violence dynamic that resulted in a murder rather than the murder as a single violent incident. The children's description of the domestic incidents were provided in generic language, and the children struggled to identify and elaborate on episodic incidents, what might be identified as script memory. Previous studies (Erskine, Markham, & Howie, 2002; La Rooy, Malloy, & Lamb, 2011) have indicated that many times, when facing multiple incidents, children and adults have difficulties in identifying incidents and describing them.

When asked to further elaborate on the abusive incidents, all of the children reported that the fathers did not abuse them. Previous studies have documented that children who witness domestic violence are at greater risk to experience abuse (Higgins & McCabe, 2003). It is possible that the children did not disclose that their fathers abused them due to a profound conflict of interest and feelings of loyalty toward their fathers. Consistent with this explanation, previous studies have found that children who are suspected victims of abuse by a parent are reluctant to disclose abuse (Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003; Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Lamb, 2005; Usher & Dewberry, 1995; Wyatt & Newcomb, 1990), even when there is strong evidence suggesting that abuse occurred (Hershkowitz, Orbach, Lamb, Sternberg, & Horowitz, 2006; Katz et al., 2012). Within this context, it is important to note that the children were also reluctant to admit and denied any abuse by their mothers.

Although the children denied any abuse by their fathers or mothers, they disclosed violence between their siblings. The children's reports are in line with the reported consequences of witnessing domestic violence for aggressive behavior (Higgins & McCabe, 2003; Kashani & Allan, 1998; Lemmey et al., 2001; Manetta & Pendergast, 2003) and clearly shed more light on the consequences for the relationship between siblings, their dynamic and the way the children contend with the routine of aggressive behavior. As one of the children stressed in his narrative: "My siblings are hitting me all the time, but when daddy is home, they do not."

With respect to the second them, what I did when daddy killed mommy, all of the children reported that the homicide incident did not differ from previous domestic violence incidents. These reports also stress that the homicide was not a silent incident in the house. Moreover, the children reported that they knew what to do when the incidents began: "when she got back home, he looked at me so I took my siblings to the room and he started doing his thing. . .", "Mommy looked at me so I took the baby and went to my room . . . I sang a few songs till the noises will stop. . ." The children seemed to have developed a routine around these tragic experiences; they knew how to identify when such incidents would occur, their responsibility and when the incidents should end. It is important to stress that the children who provided these narratives were very young, aged 4 to 7 years, and were already well familiar with the expectations for them, their responsibilities and potential ways of calming themselves and their even younger siblings. The children's way of coping to this tragic life routine has been previously documented in abused children narratives (Katz & Barnett, 2013).

The convoluted sibling relations in these families are evident in the children's narratives. On the one hand, the children describe violence between siblings; on the other hand, the children describe the way they protected one another when their father was aggressive. A previous study (Katz, 2013) that explored the narratives of abused children who survived an attempted filicide addressed the strong relationship between siblings in these families, using the theme, I am alive thanks to my siblings. In their narratives, the children described how their siblings did everything in their power, and more, to protect them. Sibling relationships in the context of maltreatment are an understudied area that requires further exploration.

The theme of "the time that daddy killed mommy" refers to the horrific memories harbored by the children from the time when their mother was killed by their father. Children witnessed their mother being strangled or stabbed by their father in their home; thus, the children's narratives open a window to understanding this tragedy. Based on the reports of the forensic interviewers, it is important to stress that the children reported their traumatic experiences while smiling to the forensic interviewers, without indicating difficulties in cooperating or discussing these catastrophic incidents. This observation might be surprising given the horrific descriptions in their narratives; however, it is consistent with previous studies (Katz et al., 2012; Sayfan, Mitchell, Goodman, Eisen, & Qin, 2008) that documented that although children reported rather difficult and traumatic experiences during forensic interviews, they did not display emotions such as fear or sadness by crying but simply smiled. One of the explanations for this gap between verbal language and body language is the fact that

forensic investigations are too challenging. In the context of forensic investigation, a child is required to report a traumatic incident and also serve as a competent interviewee. It might be that due to this challenge, the experience of difficult feelings and even being connected to the tragic experience is too demanding. With respect to this study, another explanation may be that the children did not understand the terminal consequences of the homicide, which is further elaborated in the following theme.

The confusion and misunderstanding of the children were exemplified by the theme “Mommy will feel better and will go back home”: “So now mommy is cleaning the house because all of the blood it is very dirty. . . mommy is alone now. . .”, “When mommy will return from the doctor, I will make her happy so she won’t cry again.” Although all of the children elaborated on the moment when they saw their mother being killed, it was evident that the children did not understand the meaning of this incident. This lack of comprehension may be due to their young age, which influences their understanding of death (Bonoti, Leondari, & Mastora, 2013; Crenshaw, 2005) and even their grasp of the idea that their mother who was alive before no longer is. Beyond the development explanation, it might be that the characteristics of the traumatic loss and the short time that had passed since the incident (a few hours) made it harder for the children to understand and digest the consequences of the incident. It is also important to note that when witnessing the domestic homicide, some of the fathers provided the children with distorted explanations for what they saw, which may have interfered with the children’s accurate understanding of the homicides.

Confusion about the father’s act was also evidenced by statements such as, “I will tell daddy to treat mommy nicely when she will return from the doctor,” “ter I saw daddy killed mommy, he told me that he did not kill her that she died alone,” and “Daddy was crying because he was sad that mommy was sick and died and he was sorry that he killed her.” The children witnessed their father kill their mother, but how can they truly understand or accept it? Moreover, how can they handle the loss of both of their parents? The unbearable emotional burden following this traumatic witnessing becomes even stronger given the responsibility that these children might feel, as one of the girls stated: “When mommy will return from the doctor, I will make her happy so she won’t cry again.”

Focusing on children’s narratives following the experience of domestic homicide, the current study shed light on the tragic phenomenon of children witnessing domestic violence, specifically their father killing their mother. The information that was gathered from the children’s narratives can enhance the work of practitioners in different contexts. Regarding the forensic context, the current study illustrates how the NICHD Protocol can be disseminated with children as witnesses. In addition, the current study strengthens previous notions concerning children’s script memory of multiple incidents and their emotional behavior during a forensic investigation. For practitioners within the clinical context, the current study emphasizes the tragic consequences that domestic violence might have and, more importantly, on the profound effect domestic homicide can have on children. The children’s narratives provide practitioners a unique opportunity to learn from these experiences and modify their interventions accordingly. The current study should also further enhance the efforts of policy makers contending with the issue of domestic violence and domestic homicide and should definitely promote their efforts in better addressing this tragic phenomenon while taking children’s voices into consideration.

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