



Addressing Post-Separation Parental Stalking: a Multimethod Qualitative Approach to Producing Knowledge of Stalking in Children's Lives

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Accepted: 21 March 2023 / Published online: 5 April 2023
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Abstract

Purpose Based on our research, the purpose of this paper is to examine the production of knowledge about children's exposure to parental stalking after their parents have separated. The paper addresses the following questions: (1) What dimensions of knowledge has the multimethod qualitative approach produced in our research? and (2) What methodological choices are conducive to conducting ethically sound research on parental stalking? The aim is to contribute to the methodological and ethical discussions in social science research on children exposed to stalking as a specific form of domestic violence and abuse.

Method We utilized a multimethod qualitative approach in studying children's exposure to parental stalking. The approach produced five dimensions of knowledge: (1) practice wisdom, (2) experiential knowledge, (3) contextual and situational knowledge, (4) socio-structural knowledge, and (5) norm-related knowledge, which all were important in studying children's exposure to parental stalking.

Results In conducting an ethically sound study, the central methodological choices were as follows: employing child-centered practice, respecting intergenerational dialogue, forming trusting relationships with professionals, and valuing different types of knowledge and realities by using a multivoice approach.

Conclusions A multimethod qualitative approach enables rich dialogue through which knowledge of parental stalking can be constructed. We argue that the approach makes it possible to bring children's marginalized voices into the academic and professional discussions on parental stalking and thereby to advance the realization of the rights of children who are subjected to a parent's stalking behavior.

Keywords Parental stalking · Methodology · Ethics · Multimethod qualitative approach · Children

Knowledge of children's experiences of domestic violence and abuse has increased over the last decades in social science research. This development owes to the fact that children are increasingly seen as active agents and valued as knowledge producers in domestic violence research (Arai et al., 2021; Callaghan et al., 2018; Cater & Øverlien, 2014; Eriksson, 2016; Morris et al., 2012; Mullender et al., 2002; Swanston et al., 2014). Researchers increasingly collect data directly from children instead of their abused parent (see Øverlien, 2010), or even engage children as co-researchers

(Bradbury-Jones, 2014). The increased interest in children's experiences of domestic violence and abuse has necessitated the development of many methodological and ethical approaches in research involving children (Cater & Øverlien, 2014; Christensen & Prout, 2002; Morris et al., 2012). Despite the progress, collecting data directly from children or with children is still relatively uncommon and challenging because of practical issues, institutional review board approvals, or other gatekeepers between children and researchers (Miller et al., 2022). In this paper, we examine the production of knowledge about children's exposure to parental stalking after their parents' separation. Our aim is to contribute to the methodological discussions on children exposed to domestic violence and abuse by presenting an example of how children and their perspectives can be

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included in highly sensitive research under the auspices of the gatekeepers (Miller et al., 2022).

Unlike many other violent crimes, stalking is not a single act but a pattern of behavior with dynamics that can change over time. It consists of intense, pursuit-oriented, repeated, coercive, and controlling behaviors—such as following, harassing, and threatening—that cause fear and distress in its victims. It may include visual or physical proximity; non-consensual communication; and verbal, written, or implied threats (e.g., Fissel et al., 2020; Logan & Walker, 2017; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2014). Stalking behaviors can be difficult to identify, for single acts that may appear as routine and harmless to outsiders are not necessarily perceived as such by the victims (Scott, 2020). Moreover, post-separation violence may escalate and even end up in homicide (e.g., Abrunhosa et al., 2021; DeKeseredy et al., 2017; Spearman et al., 2022).

The prevalence rates of stalking vary according to the samples. A meta-analysis ($n = 175$) shows that lifetime prevalence in stalking estimates ranges from 2% to 13% for males and from 8% to 32% for females (Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007). The most prevalent form of partner stalking is male perpetrators targeting their female partners (e.g., Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007; Fissel et al., 2020). A Finnish population survey revealed that 7.4% of women and 2.6% of men have experienced stalking perpetrated by their current or ex-partner (Siltala et al., 2022).

When the victim and the stalker have joint children, the parties are often legally forced to stay in contact with each other, which may increase the frequency, intensity, and severity of stalking (Wolf et al., 2021). Custody issues and contact arrangements create an arena for the perpetrator to contact and harass the ex-partner (Bendlin & Sheridan, 2021; Bruno, 2015; Humphreys et al., 2019; Zeoli et al., 2013). The stalking parent may manipulate the service system and take legal action, such as filing lawsuits concerning child custody and making false reports by accusing the other parent of child abuse (Miller & Smolter, 2011; Spearman et al., 2022). The parent may also deceitfully appear as an “admirable” and “concerned” parent (Katz et al., 2020). By and large, the contexts in which these behaviors take place can make them threatening and offensive experiences for children and the abused parent (Logan & Walker, 2017). Nowadays digital communication and surveillance through different devices, apps, and social networking forums provide numerous ways for perpetrators to stalk their victims—even without the victim’s knowledge of being stalked (Woodlock, 2017). The use of technological devices and online media can make the stalking parent omnipresent in the lives of children and the abused parent (Nikupeteri et al., 2021; Dragiewicz et al., 2022).

Stalking targeted at the other parent also harms children. Perpetrators often exploit children in the process: They can

be targets of stalking, and even death threats may be made against the abused parent or the children themselves. There already exists established knowledge that a parent’s stalking behavior causes feelings of insecurity and fear in children and severely constrains their everyday lives (Nikupeteri & Laitinen, 2015; Elklit et al., 2019; Schandorph Løkkegaard et al., 2019). According to Elklit et al. (2019), the outcomes of parental stalking cause complex, multiple-event, and continuous trauma in children. In their study of 57 children, 56% met the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder. Overall, parental stalking appears as a complex phenomenon in children’s lives and challenges us to examine children’s perspectives to form a picture of how it appears in their lives, what its consequences are, and how children can receive help.

Our study is based on a Finnish research project “Children’s Knowing Agency in Private, Multiprofessional and Societal Settings – the Case of Parental Stalking”. The project’s research design emphasised the need to approach stalking through a socio-ecological model that addresses the various contexts of children subjected to stalking. Furthermore, the behavior and actions of individuals are connected to a multi-layered social world (e.g., Pells et al., 2018), and capturing these layers in research required multidimensional data gathered through various methods from several sources (see e.g. Pamphilon, 1999). The project was informed by the framework of gendered violence involving gender relations, power relations between adults and between children and adults, and domination as key factors (e.g., Weber & Thomas, 2021). The research was grounded on the principles of children’s rights and the sociology of childhood, which highlight the importance of children’s experiences, knowledge, and agency in their own lives and in societal and professional practices (James & Prout, 1997; Richards et al., 2015). This multidisciplinary (social work, education, and law) research project was conducted in close co-operation with professionals working at the national Stalking Support Center, which provides services for victims and perpetrators of stalking and gives training and consultation to other professionals. The educational background of the professionals is in psychology, social work, and psycho-/family therapy. Altogether, the research team included the researchers and nine professionals. The work was motivated by an emancipatory research interest. Our shared goal was to produce knowledge of post-separation stalking from children’s perspective and to bring children’s marginalized voices into the academic, professional, and public discussion on domestic violence and abuse. The broader aim of the project was to promote social and moral justice for children exposed to stalking by their parent and to advocate their rights.

In order to gain knowledge of how stalking appears in children’s lives and how it is recognized by professionals

and addressed in professional and societal contexts, we have acquired different types of knowledge through listening to children themselves and collecting a range of information from the adults with whom they interact (see also Clark, 2001; Hunter & Brewer, 2015; Sternberg et al., 2006). Our endeavor to study children's experiences can be considered a particularly demanding one—even in the context of domestic violence and abuse—as many of the children live in insecure, high-risk circumstances where their life or their mother's life may be threatened (e.g., DeKeseredy et al., 2017; Øverlien, 2013).

In this paper, we focus on the methodological facets of conducting the research. The purpose of this paper is to elaborate a qualitative approach to producing multidimensional knowledge of parental stalking. This paper seeks answers to the following questions: (1) What dimensions of knowledge has the multimethod qualitative approach produced in our research? and (2) What methodological choices are conducive to conducting ethically sound research on parental stalking? We argue that a multimethod qualitative approach makes it possible to bring children's marginalized voices into the academic and professional discussions on parental stalking and thereby to advance the realization of the rights of children subjected to a parent's stalking behavior.

Multimethod Qualitative Approach in the Production of Knowledge of Parental Stalking

Our research design was based on a qualitative approach to multimethod research, where multimethodology is considered as a strategy to study children's exposure to parental stalking (e.g., Hesse-Biber et al., 2015; Mik-Meyer, 2020). In our view, the complexities relating to children's exposure to parental stalking are better understood if information is obtained from multiple sources, which may produce different angles and nuances regarding the phenomenon (Mik-Meyer, 2020; Sternberg et al., 2006). Whilst "mixed methods" refers to combining the qualitative and quantitative methods, "multimethod" is often referred to as combining various methods within qualitative studies (Hunter & Brewer, 2015; Mik-Meyer, 2020). In our research project, the various qualitative methods were based on feminist methodologies that look upon knowledge as being socially constructed; concern power inequalities between men and women and other oppressed groups; question oppression inherent in children's everyday lives; and aim to access and highlight subjugated knowledge and to produce knowledge supporting the dispelling of oppression experienced by various groups (e.g., Hesse-Biber & Griffin, 2015; Weber & Thomas, 2021). Basing the qualitative methods on the

same epistemological and ontological perspective served to enhance the quality of the research (Mik-Meyer, 2020).

One of the arguments for the advantages of a multimethod approach is that it enables one to collect as many voices and features from the participants' social worlds as possible so that the analysis can be as multifaceted as possible and, hence, corresponds to the multi-layered and complex social world (Mik-Meyer, 2020). The strengths of research integrating multiple methods include the following: illuminating the complexity of the phenomenon (Boddy et al., 2021), achieving a rich account (Sade-Beck, 2004), increasing the layers of meaning that often remain hidden and undifferentiated (Hesse-Biber & Griffin, 2015), deepening an understanding of the studied phenomenon (Tierney et al., 2019), and increasing the credibility of the study findings (Pratesi, 2012). It has been stated that research designs combining multiple methods are the strongest ones, as all data collection methods have their own strengths and weaknesses (see Esterberg, 2002).

Rather than triangulation, we used the concept of crystallization as a guiding metaphor in order to include different kinds of data and multiple perspectives regarding stalking and for producing research outputs. Crystallization conveys the prismatic nature of work building on multifaceted knowledge (Ellingson, 2009). It provided a means to understand how the different methods fit together and how they can inform one another in the research process. Employing the multimethod approach enabled us to create an understanding of parental stalking based on juxtaposed dimensions of knowledge, and the different experiences, perspectives, and contexts were set in conversation rather than compared with one another (Boddy et al., 2021). Moreover, crystallization enabled to use multiple genres of representation concurrently with scientific texts. For example, the storybook "A Fairytale for Chameleon and Other Stories for You" that handles post-separation parental stalking can be read by parents and children and used as a tool in therapeutic processes with them (see also Ellingson, 2009). The book was planned by the professionals together with a word artist based on the research findings.

Dimensions of Knowledge about Parental Stalking

We produced knowledge of parental stalking in our research project by using different kinds of data ranging from personal accounts to documented data, by employing a variety of data collection methods, and by seeking the voices of research participants who hold different standpoints as regards parental stalking (Hunter & Brewer, 2015). This multimethod qualitative approach produced the following five dimensions of knowledge that play a significant role in

creating knowledge of parental stalking: (1) practice wisdom, (2) experiential knowledge, (3) contextual and situational knowledge, (4) socio-structural knowledge, and (5) norm-related knowledge. Each dimension raises particular methodological questions. We describe the dimensions of knowledge, the method of knowledge production, the focus of knowledge, and methodological considerations in Table 1 and elaborate them further in the paragraphs that follow.

Practice Wisdom

Practice wisdom was a cornerstone of our research on parental stalking. From the outset, the central strategy of the study was to plan and conduct it with people who best know the phenomenon (Miller et al., 2022). Practice wisdom emerged through our collaboration with professionals working in the Stalking Support Center and with young experts by experience who have experiences of parental stalking. The wisdom involved the professionals' reasoning based on their experiential knowledge and practical reasoning aimed at conducting an ethically and morally sound study that contributes to society by improving the lives of stalking victims (see Massingham, 2019). The professionals were our link to two young people who participated in the study as experts by experience. It was important to involve the young persons in an empowering way and to consider their personal experiences of their father's stalking (also McCarry, 2012).

The dialogue with the professionals and young people was a significant asset in defining a shared ethical ground for conducting the study with children who live under risk, in considering the practical meaning of research ethics when studying parental stalking, and in examining the application of general values to the specific circumstances of stalking (Christensen & Prout, 2002). The central methodological considerations were as follows: What cultural and phenomenon-driven factors must we recognize in the research process and how can we study children's perspectives without further risking their lives? The knowledge gained from the discussions with the young experts by experience and professionals gave us a perception of the risks and consequences of stalking for children and their mothers (Morris et al., 2012). We noticed early on that the research can be acceptable only if the scientific value of the expected results outweighs the risks caused for the children (Cater & Øverlien, 2014). Practice wisdom was crucial in recruiting the mothers and children to the study and in developing data collection methods that are appropriate for the children in terms of their age and unstable and threatening circumstances. It also enabled us to get a more nuanced understanding of how the children deal with stalking experiences and how they understand their family situations. Overall, the professionals' practice wisdom enhanced the careful planning and implementation of

the research process (see Powell et al., 2020). Their engagement in the study also enabled the children to benefit from participation, through which their voices were heard and their perspectives understood and valued.

Experiential Knowledge

Children's experiential knowledge plays a fundamental role in creating an understanding of how they experience stalking. Our starting point was that even very young children can provide insights into their daily lives under parental stalking (e.g., Irwin & Johnson, 2005). This dimension of knowledge emphasizes children as victims per se when one parent is subjected to violence by the other parent. Children's perspectives are considered unique and they are valued as knowing agents amid domestic violence (Arai et al., 2021; Callaghan et al., 2015; Cater & Øverlien, 2014; Eriksson, 2016; Mullender et al., 2002). The focus of experiential knowledge is children's subjective experiences of parental stalking and the meanings they assign to these experiences. The interest is in children's phenomenology as subjects in their own worlds (Sommer et al., 2013; Pratesi, 2012).

Experiential knowledge was produced in the project through interviews with 18 children and young people (aged 4–21 years), three therapeutic action groups for 13 children (aged 2–12 years) comprising 28 sessions, one art and action-based therapeutic group for six children comprising eight sessions, and one child-and-mother therapy process comprising ten sessions. In all the cases the stalker was the child's biological father or stepfather. In most cases the stalking was still ongoing, as the dynamics of stalking behavior can escalate, deescalate, or change otherwise over time (Logan & Walker, 2017). For this reason, the professionals monitored the children's situations carefully. The themes of the interviews were formed through collaboration between the researchers and professionals as follows: children's experiences of stalking; their emotions, relationships, resources and needs for help; and their encounters with professionals. The activities in all the therapeutic action groups included drawing; painting; discussion; making a collage; and listening to music, stories and drama, giving the children a chance to reflect on their own experiences and to explore their own understanding of the family situation (see also Clark, 2001). The children produced knowledge as individuals and together with siblings and peers. This dimension of knowledge provided detailed descriptions of how the children experience stalking and generated pure, unmediated knowledge (see Wyness, 2013).

When collecting data, the critical methodological questions were, how can we approach the children for research purposes and how can we assess and implement their protection under a potential risk of threat? The methodological questions required acknowledging the vulnerability of

Table 1 Dimensions of knowledge and central methodological considerations

Dimension of Knowledge	Method of knowledge production	Focus of knowledge	Central methodological considerations
Practice wisdom	Co-operation with young experts by experience and professionals working in the Stalking Support Center	Parental stalking as a specific form of domestic violence and abuse	What cultural and phenomenon-driven factors must be recognized in the research process? How can we study children's perspectives without further risking their lives?
Experiential knowledge	Interviews with 18 children (aged 4–21) Three therapeutic action groups for 13 children (aged 2–12), comprising 28 sessions altogether One art- and action-based group for 6 children (8 sessions) One child-and-mother therapy process (10 sessions)	Child's subjective experiences and meanings they assign to them	How can children be approached for research purposes? How to assess and implement children's protection under a potential risk of death? How to bring together children with different backgrounds?
Contextual and situational knowledge	Interviews with 23 mothers exposed to ex-partner stalking	Making meaning of parental stalking in children's broader life and family context	How to create shared meanings between mothers and children without misconstruing children's experiences?
Socio-structural knowledge	Survey directed at professionals (n = 74); includes responses to four open-ended qualitative questions regarding children's rights in cases of parental stalking and coercive control	Professional perceptions on children's possibilities to get help, and their positions and agency in the service system	How to attain knowledge from frontline professionals on the obstacles to and possibilities of safeguarding children's rights in the multiprofessional field?
Norm-related knowledge	Court cases (n = 139) on stalking collected from district courts between 2014 and 2017 in Finland.	Parental stalking as a judicial issue and judicial evaluation of children's actual exposure to stalking	How are children's positions and voices addressed and valued in legal proceedings?

children who need support and help and balancing between the children's competence and vulnerability in data collection (Cater & Øverlien, 2014). In terms of the studied groups, the question was, how are we to handle the topics and bring together children in different situations? After joint planning of the themes, the professionals set up procedures and activities for the groups so that the children were able to feel confident and secure during the sessions (see more Nikupeteri et al., 2022). Co-operation with the young experts by experience and professionals and the gained practical wisdom guided our decisions in data collection. For example, the dialogue convinced us that the children and their mothers should be contacted and the data collected by the professionals instead of us, because this was the best way to guarantee the children's safety, which was our joint priority. Thereafter, the researchers listened to the recorded interviews and watched the videotaped group sessions and the professionals' reflections on them.

This form of knowledge enabled us to micro-zoom in on the children's subjective experiences (Pamphilon, 1999; also Pratesi, 2012). The interviews with the individual children and groups enabled us to study the children's emotional complexity regarding the phenomenon expressed in the children's own words. We were also able to pay attention to the pauses in the children's narration, the characteristics of their voices, and their inactivity/action in the group sessions. The therapeutic group sessions and the interviews showed, for example, that even children in the same family may experience parental stalking in different ways and that the intensity of their feelings of fear and security varies. In the art- and action-based group, the children wrote a bedtime story and created an animation together with text and media artists. Narration in the third person gave the children an opportunity to create a happy ending to a difficult situation. In the mother-and-child therapy process, experiential knowledge was produced by observing the parent and child discussing and interacting, which enabled us to gain access to the child's views also through the mother and to generate knowledge about the child-mother interaction (Irwin & Johnson, 2005). Through the collected experiential knowledge we could point out the emotionality and affective complexity of the children's immediate experiences (see Pamphilon, 1999).

Contextual and Situational Knowledge

Contextual and situational knowledge was collected through interviews with 23 mothers who were exposed to stalking by their ex-partners. The mothers' accounts created a contextual picture of the parental stalking and the children's situations by presenting the mothers' personal experiences of being stalked, the ways in which children were involved, and the ways in which the perpetrators also affected children through their mothers. The mothers reflected on their children in the

context of stalking and gave insights into support and services needed to protect them (also Swanston et al., 2014). They were able to describe their children's experiences in a broad timeframe and thus provide longitudinal insights into their situations (see also Mik-Meyer, 2020). This dimension of knowledge enabled us to define the meaning of parental stalking in the children's lives and individual children's situations in their family contexts. It illustrates the meso-zooming in on parental stalking in terms of how children are positioned in their families and considered in help-seeking processes according to their mothers (Pamphilon, 1999).

Within this dimension of knowledge, mothers try to understand their children's perspectives—their experiences, utterances, and actions—in the family situation. The mothers took on the child's perspective, carefully observed their children's experiences and actions, and interpreted these through empathetic imagination (Sommer et al., 2013). They also helped us deepen our understanding of what their children had said (also Tierney et al., 2019). In some cases, the mothers were able to complete their children's accounts, as the children might only have had a partial picture of the father's/stepfather's stalking behavior. By supplementing their children's stories, the mothers added information, for example, about interventions by the police and the service system. The mothers explained some terms or the significance of people involved in the child's narration as an aside to the researcher, providing important details about the child's world. The mothers also supplemented some of the accounts where the children possibly regarded the father's behavior as "caring", while the mother regarded it as part of his coercive and controlling strategy (Katz et al., 2020). Thus, the mothers enabled us to enhance our understanding of the complexity, severity, and harmfulness of parental stalking for children.

The key methodological effort here was the creation of shared meanings between the mothers and children without misconstruing the children's experiences, as the mothers' contributions to the study potentially influenced the children's perspectives or sought validation of their experiences. We acknowledged that there was a need to manage the power discrepancies between the children and adults (Cater & Øverlien, 2014), and we therefore endeavored to value each voice—both the children's and the mothers'—as valid and meaningful in its own right (Swanston et al., 2014). This required us to have an interpretative attitude and to respect the child's utterances and world of meanings as objects of study per se instead of subjugating them to the ways in which adults construe children's lives (Sommer et al., 2013).

Socio-Structural Knowledge

The socio-structural knowledge gained through our study was based on Finnish professionals' perceptions of children's

exposure to stalking. The knowledge was produced by means of a qualitative survey conducted in connection with a national webinar on stalking and coercive control organized by the Stalking Support Center in December 2022. The survey had four open-ended questions regarding children's rights in situations of stalking and coercive control: (1) How would you describe children and young people's rights and position in situations of post-separation stalking and coercive control? (2) What services, procedures, and professional practices contribute to helping children and young people in situations of post-separation stalking and coercive control? (3) What are the central problems or challenges in helping children and young people in situations of post-separation stalking and coercive control? (4) How should the service and judicial system and professional practices be developed so that children and young people's right to protection, participation, and adequate services is realized?

The invitation to the webinar was directed to all professionals and other people interested in the topic, as we know that stalking concerns multiple professions (see e.g., Schandorph Løkkegaard et al., 2019). For the most part, the participants consisted of child protection workers, lawyers, and shelter workers who encounter victims and perpetrators of stalking, as well as professionals who develop services for victims of domestic violence at the national level. We received 74 responses to the survey. The central methodological question was how to gain knowledge from frontline professionals on the obstacles to and possibilities for safeguarding children's rights in multiprofessional fields. As the participants in the webinar all dealt with stalking and found it a cause for concern, the respondents had a rather thorough understanding about the challenges related to stalking and the degree to which children's rights are realized in the service system (see Scott, 2020).

The acquired socio-structural knowledge enabled us to recognize and bring forth power dynamics and imbalances caused by cultural, societal, ideological, and institutional factors in children's lives. The survey responses pointed out many power imbalances in children's lives and that children are in a subjugated position because of their age, their dependency on parental care, and a prevailing cultural emphasis on the rights of parents instead of children. The socio-structural knowledge shed light on children's possibilities to receive help and on the obstacles to and possibilities for realizing their rights from the perspective of professionals.

Norm-Related Knowledge

The dimension of norm-related knowledge augments our understanding of how children's exposure to stalking is evaluated in the legal context. This knowledge was produced through court cases on stalking collected nationwide from

Finnish district courts between 2014 and 2017. As stalking was criminalized in Finland in 2014, the data cover the first four years after the new legislation entered into force. During this period, there were 139 court cases that involved a relationship (dating, cohabitation, or marriage), separation/divorce, and one or more children. The data cover all the court decisions and trial materials, including the pre-trial investigation records, such as psychological assessments, witness examinations, SMS messages, emails, and photographs. The knowledge production focused on parental stalking as a judicial issue from children's perspectives. It increased our understanding of how children are involved in stalking cases which go to trial, how children's exposure to stalking cases is evaluated, and what aspects and whose perspectives are considered in evaluating the cases. These macro level data shed light on how children are involved in the judicial processes and how their actual exposure to stalking is judicially evaluated. In terms of children's exposure to parental stalking, the main consideration here was how children's positions and voices are addressed and valued in legal proceedings.

The norm-related knowledge enabled us to macro-zoom (Pamphilon, 1999) in on children's exposure to parental stalking and to search for collective meanings of stalking in children's lives. In gathering the data, the children were approached collectively. However, the individual child situations were also recognized, enabling us to see the variety of the children's positions and the legal responses to their involvement in cases of parental stalking. The court cases gave us a general understanding of how children are considered in stalking-related criminal proceedings. In most stalking cases, children are relegated to the background in court proceedings and their views or experiences are not acknowledged regardless of their involvement in the stalking (Koulu et al., 2022). The acquired data added valuable insight into the dilemmas that children and their mothers must tackle in encountering professionals, in having the perpetrator penalized, and in receiving justice (see also Mik-Meyer, 2020). The case data were particularly useful in producing macro-level knowledge of children's position in stalking during the first four years after its criminalization in Finland.

Central Methodological Principles in Studying Parental Stalking

The multimethod qualitative approach enabled us to base our study on sound empirical data and investigate children's individual experiences of parental stalking and its consequences for them. It also allowed us to situate the children's experiences into broader societal, cultural, and family contexts, according to which the children's needs

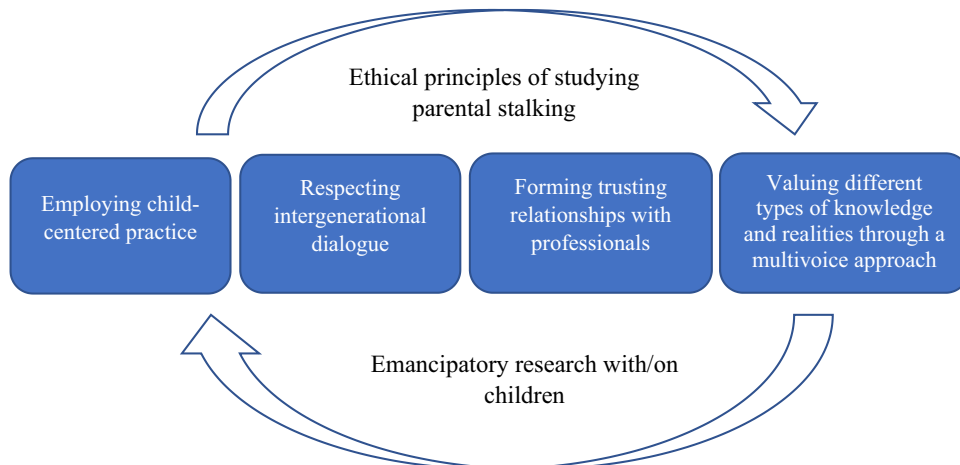
for help and support can be identified and addressed. The central methodological principles of our study were as follows: employing child-centered practice, respecting intergenerational dialogue, forming trusting relationships with professionals, and valuing different types of knowledge and realities through a multivoice approach. These are illustrated in Fig. 1.

We first needed to carefully consider the most important ethical principles concerning the study. From the outset, the practice wisdom of the professionals and the young experts created the ground for an ethically sound study, as it enabled us to take collective professional responsibility and to evaluate the ethical aspects of the study (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Powell et al., 2020). The ethical commitments were based on considering the social and cultural positioning of children whose lives may be at stake because of violence (see Christensen & Prout, 2002). This included many practical considerations, for example, where the data was collected, how the children reached the data collection location securely, how the meetings were organized, and how security and safety was ensured during them. In making the relevant decisions, the children's right to both agency and protection was acknowledged (Cater & Øverlien, 2014; Morris et al., 2012; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). When collecting the data, the children were allowed to exercise their artistic and oral agency and space was provided for their action. This enabled everyone to express themselves, even those who were not verbally able to process their potentially traumatizing experiences. In the course of the study, we, as researchers, also started reflecting on our own subjectivities and limits of knowing. This required "reflective responsibility", that is, we did not apply ethical guidelines in a routine way, but took active responsibility by anticipating potential forthcoming issues that might challenge us in conducting an ethically sound study (Cater & Øverlien, 2014) and in making informed methodological decisions concerning the intricate context of stalking (Isham et al., 2019).

Our study builds on child-centered practice. Although studies related to children have strengthened their participation in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and children are regarded as relational beings and actors in their own right (James & Prout, 1997), we have also discussed critical aspects related to child-centeredness and children's participation in studies. For example, we have considered the following: Who benefits from engaging children into a study (McCarry, 2012), how to engage professionals when involving children in research on a sensitive topic (Vaswani, 2018), what are the limits of children's voices (Spyrou, 2011), what is the interdependence between children and adults (Wyness, 2013), what are the power relationships between children and adults, and how are children's voices represented (Horgan, 2017)? We paid attention particularly to the imbalance of knowledge between children and adults, as we could not assume that children have all the information needed for evaluating their security owing to the subtle and hidden nature of stalking. Basing our study on child-centered practice required assessing the related risks and benefits throughout the research process, particularly the potential consequences of participation (Morris et al., 2012; Powell et al., 2020), as parents' separation is a risky environment for both children and their mothers (Abrunhosa et al., 2021; DeKeseredy et al., 2017).

In addition to child-centered practice, the study is based on intergenerational dialogue, for when studying such a sensitive topic, attention must also be paid to the context and the people who are involved in children's lives (Powell et al., 2018; Richards et al., 2015). As argued by Richards et al. (2015, p. 78–79), greater recognition of interdependency in relationships would enable a shift in ethical approaches from the current emphasis on the agency of the individual to a focus on relationships, emphasizing nurturance and ethics of care. In our study, intergenerational dialogue highlights the reciprocal child-mother relationships (Tisdall & Punch,

Fig. 1 Methodological choices in conducting ethically sound research



2012), but generally also relationships between children and adults, as the perpetrator may use friends, family members, and professionals to gain information or access to the mother and children (e.g., Logan & Walker, 2017). In line with Sommer et al. (2013), we were interested in both the “children’s perspectives” and the “child perspectives”. According to their theory, “children’s perspectives” refers to the view or stance of children “inside out”, representing their experiences, perceptions, and understanding in their lifeworld. The focus here is the child as a subject in his/her own world, which is what adults try to understand. The “child perspectives” refers to using methods “outside in”, meaning that the perspective directs adults’ attention towards an understanding of children’s perceptions, experiences, and actions in their world. The child perspective is created by adults who deliberately seek, as realistically as possible, to reconstruct children’s perspectives. Adults play a role as partners, collaborators, actors, and meaning makers by endeavoring to understand and interpreting what children say about their lifeworlds and by creating a picture of children’s processes and positions in the service system (Clark, 2001; Wyness, 2013). In capturing the perspectives of children, intergenerational dialogue enabled us to develop a richer understanding of the children’s experiences of parental stalking in multi-level contexts (see Swanston et al., 2014), generated new insights into the situated complexity of the families (Boddy et al., 2021), and enhanced the integrity of the children’s perspectives rather than compromised them (Irwin & Johnson, 2005).

Forming trusting relationships with the professionals was a precondition for being able to understand stalking as a specific form of violence (see Gibbs et al., 2013; Powell et al., 2020). To gain access to people who are hard to reach, it was important to form partnerships (Miller et al., 2022) and to work with the professionals, who were already connected with and trusted by the children and mothers (see Gibbs et al., 2013; Israel et al., 1998). In terms of the children’s experiential knowledge, forming partnerships lent itself to context-sensitive ways of producing knowledge and reaching an understanding of how an individual child experiences parental stalking (see also Ellonen & Pösö, 2011). It also enabled context-sensitive conceptual analyses, such as identifying the father’s “admirable” behavior and “concern” for the children as being part of his coercive and controlling behavior (Katz et al., 2020). The relationships provided a context for information exchange and dialogue, which afforded opportunities to convey the purpose, potential benefits, detailed planning, and rigor of the research, and to listen to and address concerns about the potential risks of conducting the study (Powell et al., 2020).

Valuing different types of knowledge and realities through a multivoice approach was the central principle of our study. Accordingly, we examined the different types of knowledge

and realities produced by the children, mothers, and professionals (see e.g., Sternberg et al., 2006). The multimethod strategy enabled us to search for issues that obstruct children’s access to power and resources and to broaden our understanding of the complexity of parental stalking by studying it across different settings where children’s lived experiences and professional evaluations of their exposure to stalking encounter (Boddy et al., 2021). Moreover, the strategy enabled us to form a multifaceted picture by combining experiential knowledge, professional perceptions, and legal practices from children’s perspectives instead of examining them separately, as is often done in studies on stalking (see e.g., Chung & Sheridan, 2021; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007; Scott, 2020). Overall, our research provides an example of how extended epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) can be utilized in the study of domestic violence and abuse.

In terms of the emancipatory research interest, the multimethod qualitative approach was advantageous and contributed to the accumulation of knowledge about this under-explored phenomenon (see Guba & Lincoln, 2005). The methodological choices enabled the production of various dimensions of knowledge and challenged the traditional ways of producing knowledge by giving credence to children’s marginalized voices through a number of channels, such as therapeutic processes and arts (also Isham et al., 2019).

Emancipatory research also highlights the ethics of dissemination, to which special attention should be paid in research concerning children, who are a powerless group in society and do not have the same possibilities as adults to challenge the existing power imbalances and other conditions in their lives (Morrow, 2008). The research has played a significant role in Finland in addressing parental stalking, in increasing professionals’ awareness of it, and in developing services for children experiencing it. Close collaboration with the professionals at the national Stalking Support Center and their involvement in conducting the study has been crucial to the practical implementation of the research findings, as the professionals have employed them further in developing working methods to help children. The professionals have also utilized the findings in the training of social and health service professionals; police officers; and kindergarten, school, and judicial personnel. Scott (2020) argues that it is important that researchers collaborate with governmental, community, and voluntary organizations to design and evaluate interventions and to raise awareness of stalking. Ultimately, these collaborations can improve the effectiveness of interventions aimed to protect and to provide appropriate support for victims of stalking. In our study, the members of the project’s steering committee enabled deeper engagement in service and policy development, as there were members involved who act in positions through

which they can take the results into societal policy-making and effect change at the political and administrative levels. Particularly in the context of research on a sensitive topic, a multimethod approach requires one to consider the researchers' relationship with possible partners and the societal and contextual factors that are conducive to conducting the study successfully (also Miller et al., 2022). We already had a history of research collaboration with the professionals, so we did not have to start building trust from the very beginning, which helped us significantly in conducting a rigorous study. And thanks to the Finnish context, our research was facilitated by positive attitudes toward research on domestic violence and abuse and by the fact that children's wellbeing was considered an issue of importance. Furthermore, we gained access to various materials for research purposes, for example classified court decisions, after completing the ethical evaluation and gaining research permits. On the whole, when studying children's experiences on parental stalking, one needs to consider the particular context of the study and the way in which the violence and abuse relate to structural factors (see Pells et al., 2018).

There are some limitations regarding the use of a multimethod qualitative approach in studying parental stalking. Although child-centered practice was crucial to conducting our study, we must acknowledge that when using a multimethod approach that includes the voices of parents and professionals who decide what help the children receive, there is a risk that the research process and the reporting of the findings deteriorate further the situation of the children in their subjugated position. In order to maintain the child-centered focus, the dialogue between our interdisciplinary research team, the professionals, and the young experts by experience was very important, as it supported our continuous evaluation of what we were doing and how we went about doing it. As for conducting a multimethod study as part of a short-term project, the collection of data was time-consuming and there was little time to combine the variety of data for rigorous analysis and to write down the findings (see also Mik-Meyer, 2020; Pratesi, 2012).

In our study, many of the methodological decisions can be questioned, as they may not comply with the shared understanding and procedures of studying vulnerable groups, such as children who are still experiencing stalking by their parent. Many ethics committees could consider this a risk for the children and their mothers. Also, the professionals who recruited the children and collected the data could be considered coercive in that the children might have felt compelled to participate in the research to continue receiving support or to please professionals. However, having reviewed our research plan and data collection procedures, the research ethics committee stated that in our case, the scientific value

and co-operation with professionals throughout the research process outweighed the possible risks.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the production of knowledge of post-separation parental stalking, particularly the methodological aspects of studying children's exposure to it. Our study shows that a multimethod qualitative approach contributes to rich dialogue through which knowledge about parental stalking can be constructed. Utilizing practice wisdom and various other dimensions of knowledge can reveal the complexity of parental stalking, enhance our understanding of it, and reveal children's position and rights or the lack of them. We argue that a multimethod qualitative approach makes it possible to bring children's marginalized voices into the academic and professional discussions on parental stalking. This promotes social justice by advancing the realization of the rights of children who are subjected to a parent's stalking behavior.

Funding Open Access funding provided by University of Lapland. This work was supported by the Academy of Finland under Grant 308470.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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