



# Methodological and Ethical Issues Related to the Study of Domestic Violence and Abuse

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On 7th April 2011, the Council of Europe, an international organization focusing on human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, adopted the “Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence.” Commonly referred to as the Istanbul Convention after the city where Ministers signed the document, the convention provides a comprehensive legal framework and policy approach to combatting gendered violence for 46 member states, covering approximately 670 million people. By the end of 2022, the convention had been ratified by 38 European states, meaning that those states are legally bound by the provisions of the convention, which introduce a range of measures in respect of the “four Ps”: Prevention, Protection and Support of Victims, Prosecution of Offenders, and Integrated Policies. Importantly, Article 11 of the convention establishes obligations in relation to data collection and support for research, and one outcome of the convention is the shaping of the research agenda in respect of gender-based violence in Europe.

Since 2015 researchers, policy makers and service providers have met biennially at the European Conference on Domestic Violence to discuss how research can inform our understanding of, and response to, domestic violence and abuse. The 2021 conference, hosted by colleagues in Ljubljana, Slovenia, was the inspiration behind this special issue. While there is considerable focus in research on the

issues that need to be researched, the conference also highlighted the importance of considering the ethical dimensions of research designs and approaches, and the potential for different methodologies to extend our insights. Focusing on these important aspects of how we do research can ensure that the highest standards are met regarding the integrity of the research process, the robustness of findings, and the ability for research to better elucidate the realities of those experiencing domestic violence and abuse. It can also help better support governments and agencies seeking to prevent and address all forms of gender based violence.

Of course, looking at issues about the ethical dimensions of research and innovative methods is not restricted to Europe. As such, in this special issue we have contributions from across the globe – highlighting the benefit of international conversations on these issues, and the importance of cross-national learning.

One of the most serious consequences of domestic violence and abuse is homicide. Internationally there is growing interest in understanding who is most at risk of being murdered, who is most likely to pose a risk of homicide, and how we might learn from such tragedies to develop better approaches to prevention and intervention. AbiNader et al. (2023) report that among homicides in the United States, intimate partners kill almost 50% of female and 10% of male victims. This critical review summarizes opportunities and challenges when examining intimate partner related fatalities using two large national datasets. They argue that using such large administrative datasets can yield useful insights and resource efforts to prevent such deaths. This theme is picked up in the article by Giesbrecht et al. (2023). The Canadian Domestic Homicide Prevention Initiative with Vulnerable Populations examined intimate partner domestic homicide with a focus on four specific populations: Indigenous; immigrant and refugee; people living in rural, remote, and northern areas; and children exposed to domestic violence. Not only is the issue of defining intimate partner domestic homicide complex, but complexity also

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arises in how we define specific populations that experience different risks, barriers, and vulnerabilities to intimate partner violence and intimate partner domestic homicide.

There has been recent work in the United Kingdom looking at how researchers can be better supported to consider the ethical dimensions of undertaking research on domestic violence and abuse. Such considerations are necessary to account for the particular dynamics and risks associated with domestic violence and abuse. This recognises that good research should consider the motives, consequences, and context in which abuse and interventions take place. The Research Integrity Framework on Domestic Violence and Abuse (Women's Aid et al., 2020) emerged from discussions between academic researchers and organisations with a long and successful record in raising awareness about domestic violence and abuse, and in influencing change. It highlights that the ethical dimensions of research are not only about how knowledge is created, but also about how the findings from research are used. There is a real concern that the research process, including the dissemination and use of findings, can be blind to the consequences for research participants (both individuals and organisations) of participating in research, and that findings may be taken out of context or even misused to support activities that may well be laudable, but impinge on the integrity of the original work. The thoughtful co-production of such a framework increases the potential for ethical and responsible context-specific research and policy engagement to challenge the intersecting structural inequalities which impact on, and often exacerbate the experience of domestic violence and abuse.

In this special issue, Larance and Kertesz (2023) invite us to consider risks embedded in the creation, development and use of intervention and research tools to be used against the very people they are meant to support. In their article, they present and discuss the C-ABI assessment tool, developed by practitioners for women who have survived and caused harm, and are entering anti-violence intervention programs. They found that implementing research and intervention tools requires careful consideration of the potential ethical implications, particularly when working within carceral systems of power, to ensure the well-being and agency of women are prioritized and not compromised by the misuse or misinterpretation of research findings.

The parallels between practitioner and researcher engagement with tools and data, and the risks of (mis)use of research findings are also a theme in the paper by Cook et al. (2023). They analyze the similarities between practitioners undertaking domestic violence fatality reviews, and researchers collecting and analyzing data from said reviews. By employing the Research Integrity Framework (Women's Aid et al., 2020) they identify guiding principles to aid

practitioners and researchers in navigating the shared challenges they face, and foster meaningful dialogue between the realms of system responses, practitioners, policy makers and researchers.

Beyond practitioners and researchers, domestic violence research is significantly shaped also by the funding landscape, as put forth by McGregor et al. (2023), whose focus is on participant recruitment. The paper explores power dynamics, participation barriers, payment practices, and the inclusion of perpetrators as participants. It argues that current practices may lack transparency, perpetuate marginalization, and silence victim/survivors. The paper highlights the need to redistribute power, address barriers to participation, the development of payment protocols, and the need for transparent and honest accounts of the decision-making processes related to and beyond participant recruitment as a central element of research design.

It is argued by Sánchez-Prada et al. (2023) that decisions linked to research design and measures are not merely technical, but predominantly ethical. The authors of this article identify that a substantial amount of scientific literature on intimate partner violence against women continues to overlook the gender perspective in research design and result interpretation. The gender-blindness impacts validity of results and the authors emphasize the need for multi-method approaches to address issues of construct underrepresentation and variance in construct-irrelevance. They advocate for incorporating the gender perspective as a fundamental explanatory factor and call for transparency in presenting the theoretical assumptions and use of measures in how research is reported.

Schucan Bird et al. (2023) have used the Research Integrity Framework (Women's Aid et al., 2020) supplemented by additional themes identified in wider literature to ascertain ethical priorities in domestic violence and abuse research. The authors applied the framework in a systematic review examining empirical research on informal social support interventions regarding domestic violence and abuse. The study identifies priorities for researchers to enhance the ethics of systematic reviews in the field of domestic violence and abuse. Those undertaking systematic reviews are encouraged to actively engage with ethical issues at each stage of the review process, including consideration of reviewer positionality and reflexivity.

It is encouraging to note that in the field of domestic violence and abuse there is a broadening of the methodologies, research designs and methods that are being used to both understand the nature of domestic violence and abuse, and to evaluate whether approaches and interventions are delivering the anticipated benefits. This includes work looking at enhancing current approaches to data collection and analyses. While there is a growing body of research on

the prevalence, dimensions and consequences of domestic violence and abuse, there are still disagreements about the symmetry across genders, the nature of impact of domestic violence and abuse on adult and child victims, how such impacts might be moderated by other characteristics, such as age, disability or ethnicity, and circumstances, such as poverty or being displaced. As such, the contributions to this special issue on measuring domestic violence and abuse are particularly important. Hester et al. (2023) analysed questions on domestic abuse in the Crime Survey for England and Wales and found that the current questions do not capture well the different ‘abuse profiles’, and are not specific enough to better inform policy and practice. The authors propose changes to the questionnaire that would allow a new comprehensive approach to domestic abuse surveys to be developed. Skafida et al. (2023) analysed seven longitudinal and multiple cross-sectional population-based surveys in the UK that asked about experiences of intimate partner violence and abuse. They evaluated the questionnaires to analyse the strengths and limitations of existing data on intimate partner violence and abuse in the UK. The main contribution of the analysis is a comprehensive list of recommendations to help develop future iterations of the same surveys and to inform the design of new research focusing on intimate partner violence and abuse.

Moving onto other research designs, Kurdi et al. (2023) examine implementation fidelity drawing on the evaluation of a UK-wide, manualized child abuse and neglect prevention program (including experiences of domestic violence and abuse) for elementary schools to assess how implementation fidelity can inform program development. The analysis shows that, in addition to the content of the programme, the importance of the delivery setting and staff engagement play a key role in creating a suitable space for the program’s key messages to be received and absorbed. The authors conclude that in order to ensure implementation fidelity is measured within evidence-based programs and interventions, developers need to further develop their intervention manuals by establishing and highlighting the essential components of an intervention.

Continuing with the focus on children, Robinson et al. (2023) explore the perspectives of children and young people with disability who experience domestic and family violence. Their article explores methodological, ethical and practical challenges to centring the voices of children with disabilities in research about domestic and family violence. The authors call for collective attention to frameworks for supported decision-making and child ethics to progress inclusive research which recognises the importance of participation for children and young people with disability.

In terms of new frontiers in research design, Neubauer et al. (2023) focus on systematic secondary data collection,

using computational text mining methods. This method offers the ability to access existing or new datasets which are too large to analyse manually, for example social media postings, police incident reports, case summaries, Electronic Health Records or routine data collected by organisations supporting victims of domestic violence and abuse. The included studies showcase different models and techniques which can be used for research, as well as a variety of datasets and evaluation mechanisms which maximise the innovative nature of this new, interdisciplinary area.

Another systemic review was conducted by Tracy et al. (2023). They have focused on studies that developed or implemented a systems science approach, such as agent-based modelling, systems dynamic modelling, social network analysis, microsimulation, systems mapping, and group model-building. The aim was to investigate the risk of domestic violence, outcomes associated with domestic violence, and/or interventions to prevent domestic violence or mitigate its consequences. They conclude that the main advantages of systems science approaches for the study of domestic violence and abuse include the ability to account for the complex, non-linear, dynamic processes that characterize domestic violence and the broader context in which it occurs.

Participatory research and the co-production of knowledge is having a moment, with, for example, funders of research increasingly requiring that research studies are developed in conjunction with those being researched, and those who are the intended beneficiaries of this research. Within the wider field of gender-based violence there has been a long tradition of survivor led organisations and survivor informed research. This is borne out by the articles in this special issue. A coveted goal, participation might not always be truly meaningful; can lead to oversimplification, or even misrepresentation; and, issues of consent, confidentiality and anonymity might be more overlooked than in non-participatory research. Cullen et al. (2023) present on a youth participatory action research approach, building on experience from a research study designed to understand the clinical competencies required for professionals working with childhood experiences of intimate partner violence. Their findings highlighted important strategies for meaningful youth engagement in youth participatory action research, centred around respect, safety, diversity, relationships and processes.

Beyond participatory research as a method, issues of ethical considerations linked to participation and experience (in research and beyond) of participants are particularly central to another four papers in this special issue.

Nyklová et al. (2023) sketch three different research approaches, most notably experimental research, through the practice of the theatre of the oppressed, to investigate

their advantages and drawbacks in the realm of qualitative research with survivors of gender-based violence, and identify key questions that need to be addressed before engaging in research. Their findings affirm the continued importance of ethical considerations advocated by proponents of feminist participatory action research, emphasizing the need to consider the social contexts of violence and adapt research designs to align with ethical principles. They conclude that researchers should strive for research designs that directly empower survivors.

Empowerment of participants is one of the leading themes in the findings presented in the article by Dragiewicz et al. (2023). The authors conducted a study to investigate the benefits and harms stemming from survivors' participation in research. The findings revealed five themes, including reflections on recovery and personal growth, supporting other women, rejecting victim-blaming, empowerment, and the significance of timing. Overall, all participants reported positive experiences of participation in research, but the authors observed variations in participant narratives across different service cohorts, emphasizing the importance of considering recruitment methods associated with various stages of trauma.

Competency frameworks are the starting ground for the paper by Scott et al. (2023). The authors identify that traditional 'expert practice' models are not aligned with perspectives in the intimate partner violence field, which aims to centre survivor experiences and value non-professional knowledge. The authors developed a model, highlighting nine areas of capability shared by specialists in intimate partner violence services. The authors maintain that the integration of research, practice knowledge, survivor perspectives, and service provider voices can provide a deeper understanding of the knowledge and skills possessed by intimate partner violence specialists.

That knowledge is undeniably a matter of ethical dimensions, is demonstrated in the paper by Nikupeteri and Laitinen (2023), who explore and discuss methodological choices that are necessary for conducting ethically responsible research on parental stalking. They present their study, where they were prioritizing child-centred practice, fostering intergenerational dialogue, establishing trusting relationships with professionals, and valuing diverse knowledge and realities through a multivoice approach. They found that the multimethod qualitative approach they employed, facilitated meaningful dialogue and the construction of knowledge about parental stalking, allowing marginalized voices of children to be included in academic and professional discussions and advancing the rights of children affected by a parent's stalking behaviour.

In conclusion, there has been a welcome increase in the quantity, quality and diversity of research exploring the

varied dimensions of domestic violence and abuse. New methods and research designs have extended the ways in which we are able to better understand the many facets of such abuse, and to inform how we should respond. Alongside this growing methodological plurality and rigour, there has been a welcome engagement with how ethics and ethical frameworks, attuned to the particularities of the dynamics of gender-based violence, have been developed. These discussions rightly extend beyond the conduct of research to also incorporate who commissions, funds and benefits from research, and the ways in which research findings are used. Domestic violence and abuse is about the misuse of power, and researchers need to be mindful of how the research process itself does not become exploitative.

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