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**‘Draws on qualitative interviews with children who have participated in social services’ investigations regulated by Swedish family law’**

**‘What notions of the child, “ideal” victims, girlhood and boyhood may mean for professionals’ approaches to children “witnessing”, or exposed to, violence’**

# Girls and Boys as Victims: Social Workers’ Approaches to Children Exposed to Violence

This article explores what notions of the child, victim, girlhood and boyhood may mean for social workers’ approaches to children ‘witnessing’ or being exposed to violence. The discussion draws on qualitative interviews with children who have participated in social services’ investigations regulated by Swedish family law. The analytical framework combines a care perspective focused on the vulnerable position of children exposed to violence, and a rights/participation perspective focusing on children’s agency and rights to participation. Drawing on children’s narratives, it is shown how social workers create at least four different victim positions for children in the investigation process: protected victim, invisible victim, unprotected victim and victim with participation. Thereafter, it is discussed how child positions and social work approaches may be linked to a wider cultural context, in particular notions of ‘ideal’ victims, age and gender. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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**T**his article explores what notions of the child, ‘ideal’ victims, girlhood and boyhood may mean for professionals’ approaches to children ‘witnessing’, or exposed to, violence. Over the past few decades, children exposed to violence—typically, their father’s violence against their mother—have gained increased attention, in research, as well as in policy and practice. Since the 1980s, research from a range of countries, as well as evidence from women’s refuges, has shown that men’s violence against

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women is an issue of direct concern for children (Edleson, 1999; Eriksson, 2007; Hester *et al.*, 2006; Kitzmann *et al.*, 2003). Most of the research on children exposed to violence has been focused on the short- and long-term effects on children's health and well-being (e.g. Kitzmann *et al.*, 2003; Wolfe *et al.*, 2003), the development of specialist support and treatment interventions (e.g. Cohen *et al.*, 2006; Graham-Bermann and Hughes, 2003), how intervention systems work or do not work (e.g. English *et al.*, 2005; Hazen *et al.*, 2007; Hester, 2004) and, to some extent, on children's experiences of support from social welfare agencies (e.g. Mullender *et al.*, 2002). However, the social interactions between children exposed to violence and professionals involved in their lives have received relatively little attention. Furthermore, the importance of age, gender and other social identities for professionals' interventions into these children's lives has not been discussed to any great extent. The aim of this article is to address this gap in knowledge through an exploration of professionals' approaches to children exposed to violence and discussion of how these approaches may be linked to notions of 'ideal' victims, age and gender. The discussion draws on some of the results from a qualitative research project in Sweden exploring how children with a father who is violent to their mother experience and deal with encounters with social services' professionals carrying out court-mandated family law investigations. In Sweden, these investigations form a part of the proceedings in legal disputes between the parents (Eriksson and Näsman, 2008a).

### **Analysing children, violence and social work practice**

So far, the production of knowledge on children exposed to violence has primarily drawn on established theories of child development, socialisation and/or trauma and coping (e.g. Cohen *et al.*, 2006; Graham-Bermann and Hughes, 2003; Kitzmann *et al.*, 2003; Wolfe *et al.*, 2003). On the whole, children's own views and interpretations have not been central (with some notable exceptions, e.g. McGee, 2000; Mullender *et al.*, 2002). However, many Nordic researchers currently working in the field are influenced by the 'new' sociology of childhood (e.g. Alanen and Mayall, 2001; Cater, 2004; Eskonen, 2005; Forsberg, 2005; James *et al.*, 1998). The research underpinning the article follows this trend, and a key concept is children as social actors, both in the sense of actors in the research process—they are included as informants—and in the sense that children are conceptualised as social actors in relation to other social actors.

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**'Family law thus opens up the opportunity for children to be perceived as subjects and parties to the case'**

### Care and Rights

A wish to involve children in research and the conceptualisation of them as social actors does not, of course, exclude the possibility that they may need protection and support from adults. In regard to this particular group of vulnerable and victimised children, Halldis Leira's (1990/2002) discussion about children's need for recognition and affirmation of experiences of violence forms the point of departure. Leira argues that in many contexts there are cultural taboos against talking about violence in the family and in the private sphere. As a consequence, children's opportunities to interpret and make sense of their experiences become limited. In order to be able to work through what they have seen, heard and felt, and to find strategies to deal with their life situations, children need to be able to get their experiences recognised and affirmed; they need to get them validated, according to Leira (1990/2002). This is the case, regardless of whether we encounter these children as social workers or as researchers.

It can be argued that children's *participation* can create opportunities for validation of experiences of violence and, following from that, for support to children's recovery after exposure to violence (Eriksson and Näsman, 2008a). Participation appears as a fundamental right in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child. Although the convention is not part of Swedish law, the principles relating to the child's best interests and children's right to express their views have been included in Swedish legislation. Since 1996, professionals who, in the context of legal disputes between the parents, have carried out investigations of the child's situation<sup>1</sup> have been obliged to document the child's views and present them to the court, unless it is clearly inappropriate to talk to the child (Föräldrabalken [The Children and Parents Code] chapter 6, para 19). Family law thus opens up the opportunity for children to be perceived as subjects and parties to the case. However, in many cases this approach has not been put into practice (Dahlstrand, 2004; Eriksson, 2003; Röbbäck, 2008). Children's competence in regard to their participation and the value of their opinions in decision-making processes have been questioned.

Such questioning can be found in society more generally, both in Sweden and in many other countries (James and James, 1999). This questioning points to a double-ness in regard to the perspective on children, constructing them as, on the one hand, subjects and, on the other hand, objects. The double-ness has been expressed as the tension between a 'rights' principle and a 'welfare' principle (Neale, 2002). However, in the Swedish

<sup>1</sup> These professionals are usually social workers specialised in family law. The closest equivalent in the UK is CAF/CASS professionals.

debate about democracy and welfare, welfare has to a large extent been defined as the resources to which the individual has access in order for him/her to control his/her own life. Thus, in this discourse, *welfare is not an antithesis to agency, but includes agency*. Therefore, the label *care principle* has been chosen to name a needs-orientated perspective on children, constructing them as objects for adults' care and control, in contrast to the *principle of participation*, constructing children as citizens and actors (Eriksson and Näsman, 2008a). The point of departure for the discussion below is that care and participation, respectively, can be combined in a double approach to vulnerable and victimised children (Eriksson and Näsman, 2008a; 2008b).

### Victimhood, Age and Gender

The overall theoretical approach of this study is constructionist and draws on gender studies, research on violence and victimological research, in addition to the sociology of childhood. It is presumed that the social workers that the child informants talk about are drawing on culturally well-established notions of, among other things, age and gender when interpreting and interacting with the interviewed children. Since the social workers in these particular cases have not been interviewed, the suggestions regarding their interpretations primarily draw on previous research about this group of professionals in Sweden (e.g. Eriksson, 2003, 2005; Röbbäck, 2008).

The analysis was carried out in two steps. The first step focused on the investigators' approaches, as they came across in children's narratives. The concept of *approach* refers to the child's description and interpretation of social workers' perspective on the child, the child's possibilities to influence the situation and the extent to which the child was focused on by social workers. From the approach follows the position ascribed to the child, the degree of participation given to the child and the different dimensions of participation: that the child gets *information*; that the child is also *consulted*; that the child is allowed to take part in the *decision-making*; and that there is space for the child's own *initiative* (Eriksson and Näsman, 2008a; Hart, 1992). Furthermore, different investigator approaches create different opportunities for validation of children's experiences of violence.

The pattern emerging from the first step of the analysis is that social workers tend to approach the children as protected victims, invisible victims or even unprotected victims. They do not seem to position children as victims with participation. Furthermore, children who are actively striving for a higher degree of participation in the investigation process may encounter disqualifying

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and invalidating social work practices if they claim that they do not want to see their violent father. The two children in the sample that most clearly described problematic social work practices and an approach positioning them as unprotected victims were two boys, of approximately ten years of age. The second step of the analysis takes this finding as the point of departure and discusses what notions of the child, ‘ideal’ victims, girlhood and boyhood may mean for social workers’ approaches to children ‘witnessing’, or exposed to, violence. Age and gender are combined in an intersectional perspective (Eriksson, 2003; 2008a; Krekula *et al.*, 2005).

### **Methods and Materials**

The empirical material consisted of a set of semi-structured individual interviews with children whose father had been violent to their mother and who had experienced a family law investigation process and talked to social workers carrying out the court-mandated investigation. In the interviews, the children described and interpreted their own encounters with family law social workers and their participation in the investigation process. The analysis focuses on the child positions constructed in the interaction between children and family law social workers as they came across in children’s narratives. The focus here is thus exclusively on the children’s perspectives, and the accounts of social work practice are derived from children’s accounts.

The ethical practice combined the care and participation principles at each step of the interview process (Eriksson and Näsman, 2008b). After choosing some children for recruitment, and after their mothers had given their consent, consent was also sought from the children themselves. The mothers were asked to inform their children about the research project; if the children agreed to meet the researchers, they were provided with more information about the project and what it meant to participate (Mullender *et al.*, 2002). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were approved by the informants. This kind of practice, first developed within feminist research (Roberts, 1981; Kelly, 1988), is, of course, well known to anyone conducting research with children and it follows the principle of participation (Thomas and O’Kane, 1998). However, it should be noted that the oral information given to the children included some indication of the interviewer’s knowledge about the history of violence. By letting the children know that we were aware of their difficult experiences and, when possible, also giving some concrete information about what we knew, we tried

to make it possible for the children to feel that they could talk to us about these experiences, if they wanted to. The aim was to create an open context of awareness (Glaser and Strauss, 1964) and a shared definition of the situation (Schutz, 1967), in regard to both the aim of the interviews and the history of violence. In particular, we wanted the children to know that we knew about their experiences of violence. During the interviews, we continuously reflected on the problems that are created through the imbalance in power in the child–adult relationship (Eriksson and Näsman, 2008b). We were also prepared to forge links with helping professionals if necessary. However, children's needs for further help and support never became an issue, which probably had to do with the recruitment process.

The sample consisted of 17 children, ten boys and seven girls, aged eight to 17 years. Out of the 17, 14 children were interviewed (one over the telephone) and three preferred to answer questions with the help of a questionnaire developed from the interview guide. Of the 17 children, three were recruited through professionals working in the field, while the other 14 were recruited through a follow-up of court orders between 2003 and 2006. Children were selected and contacted through the residential parent. In addition to the criteria that there should be some information about violence and that the children were living with their mother, the selection focused on children aged seven or older, cases where the social services had conducted an investigation and cases where no other circumstances argued against contacting the children.<sup>2</sup> In some cases, where we attempted to contact the children, the mother declined participation in the project, primarily due to the fact that the children had gone through many investigation processes and needed peace and quiet. In one family, the children declined participation after receiving information about the project. The recruitment process and selection of informants meant that children with experiences of very serious violence or problematic encounters with authorities may be under-represented in the sample. The sample of children was diverse with respect to socioeconomic groups, and approximately a third of them had one or two parents born outside Europe. Their experiences of violence ranged from being present at severe physical attacks on their mother and/or being victims of physical violence themselves, to experiences of threats and harassment towards their mother.

The interviews were conducted between two weeks and two years after the children's encounters with the social workers. The

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<sup>2</sup> In some cases, the court order made it clear that the children in question were in a very difficult situation, and in some cases the children and their mothers had protected names and addresses. In these cases, the children were not contacted.



**‘To what extent had the children’s own thoughts and feelings associated with the violence been discussed?’**

**‘Children said that they had not talked to social workers about the violence’**

latter was the case when it came to some of the older children in the sample. It was clear that some children had shared their story with other people prior to the interview. This may have helped them to tell us their stories in a rather focused way. Furthermore, and as discussed in the previous section, children exposed to violence may need a process of validation to be able to define their experiences as violence—and to talk about them as such. Therefore, it was considered an advantage to the study that some children were ‘out of’ the life situation with violence and had had opportunities to work through their experiences.

### **Social Workers’ Approaches to Violence-Exposed Children**

The research project was particularly concerned with the extent to which topics such as vulnerability, fear and protection had been on the agenda in the children’s encounters with social workers. To what extent had the children’s own thoughts and feelings associated with the violence been discussed? The patterns found in the interview material can be described with the help of two continua. The first concerns the extent to which the violence had been mentioned in the investigation sessions with the child. This ranged from a relatively high degree of discussion about the violence, to violence not being mentioned at all. The second continuum concerns the extent to which the child was protected from further experiences of vulnerability and violence and ranged from a situation where the child was protected from further experiences, to a situation of continued vulnerability or exposure to violence for the child. The interpretation of the child’s situation draws primarily on what the child in question was saying. Additional information accessed through the mothers and the court orders was used to provide further details about some of the things the children were telling us about, as in the case when a child experienced violence against his father’s new partner, which is one of the cases discussed below.

### **Protected Victim**

Some children described themselves as protected from further experiences of violence. In some cases, the protected situation was due to the fact that the child did not see their father at all; in other cases, contact with the father was not associated with violence. At the same time, the children said that they had not talked to social workers about the violence. Among professionals working on legal disputes between parents, the notion

that they should not 'involve children in parents' conflicts' can be identified. Instead, children are presumed to benefit from being protected from what is happening 'between the parents' (Eriksson, 2003, 2005; Röbbäck, 2008). Against the backdrop of such notions, it becomes important to protect children from 'problems' in the parents' relationship, and this is not least the case when children are perceived as already in a vulnerable situation due to a legal dispute. The child's position seen here is thus the position of a *protected victim*.

Catherine (all names are fictitious), aged ten, was one of the informants whose narrative illustrated this kind of approach. She had not talked to social workers about her father's violence against her mother and she said that: 'they probably did not want to ask directly about it'. Cathrine was consistently positive about her experiences of social workers and the investigation process. However, the position as protected victim could also be problematic for children. Nine-year-old Martin exemplified this point. He said that he had been told that he could not decide about his own situation, as he was too young. Martin really wanted to see his father more often and he was very unhappy with his situation. He also said that he did not really know why he could not see his father as much as he used to do:

*Why did it change then?*

Martin: Because, I don't know

*You don't know why it changed?*

Martin: No.

*Nobody has told you why?*

Martin: Er, no.

*No*

Martin: In a way surely because I wanted to since it was one time when I was going to bed [mm] I heard dad and [new partner] argue, and you know they move, you could hear wherever they were, you could.

*Okay, then they did not think that it was good that you were staying so much with your dad?*

Martin: Eh, I think so.

One possible interpretation of Martin's account is that the adults around him have recognised his vulnerable position and tried to protect him from further experiences of violence—this time violence against his father's new partner, not his mother. At the same time, this topic does not seem to have been discussed with Martin sufficiently for the outcome of the family law process to be clear to him—that is, why he was to see his father less than he wanted to. He talks about the outcome as being linked to his father's violence but, according to Martin, this has not been explained to him very well. A low degree of participation and inadequate information about the reasons behind the court's decision can thus

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**'A low degree of participation and inadequate information about the reasons behind the court's decision'**



**‘His father’s violence was not a central topic of conversation at his encounters with social workers’**

**‘The child is forced into the position of *invisible victim*’**

make both the court order and the life situation hard for the child concerned to understand.

### **Invisible Victim**

Other children describe actions and ways of encountering them that make their own experiences of violence invisible, in spite of the fact that they still find themselves in a difficult situation. One example is ten-year-old Bill. When the legal dispute started, he had not seen his father for a number of years, and in the research interview he repeatedly stated that did not want to see him; he was still very afraid of his father. According to Bill, his father’s violence was not a central topic of conversation at his encounters with social workers and they even questioned whether he actually remembered it. Instead, the social workers talked about unimportant issues: ‘then he started to talk about sport, school and things like that; I thought, but did not say, why are you talking about things like that?’. The outcome of the legal process was that Bill had to see his father, so forcing him into a situation which might be defined as psychological violence against the child:

Bill: . . . the first time after I had met him I started to feel sick, started to have stomach ache; I went to the loo, I vomited, but they came again because they did not care about how I felt [*Interviewer: No*] No, if I felt good, if I felt sick, I should go there anyway. Even if I felt sick I should go there anyway. I could have stomach ache, I could feel sick, I could [. . .] it could be anything, but they said ‘you should go there anyway’.

When the child’s experiences of, and feelings associated with, the violence remain invisible or are invalidated, when the violence—including its consequences, such as fear—is not allowed to figure as a topic of conversation in the dialogue between child and social worker, and the child simultaneously finds her- or himself in a vulnerable situation, the child is forced into the position of *invisible victim*.

### **Unprotected Victim**

However, when Bill’s description of his own actions is also taken into account, it does not seem totally justified to characterise the position he has taken as ‘invisible’ victim. During the interview, Bill repeatedly described how he had tried to communicate to adults that he was afraid of his father:

Bill: I say it every time: 'I do not want to see you'. I said it in front of him, in front of [one of the social workers] or anybody who came with me. I said: 'I do not want to see you. I do not like you. I am afraid of you. I feel sick when I see you'.

The position that comes across is rather the position of an *unprotected victim*; according to Bill's account, his continued victimisation was made visible to professionals around him but he was left without protection. In Bill's case, the extent to which his vulnerability was actually a topic during the investigation is difficult to say. However, this clearly was the case for nine-year-old Johan. He described how he had told the investigator that his father had hit him<sup>3</sup> and that this social worker had brought up the topic of his father's violence against his mother. Furthermore, he described telling the social worker that he was afraid of his father. In spite of the fact that the violence against both mother and child and the child's fear were talked about with the social worker, too little was done to protect Johan from further violence. A little bit further on in the interview, Johan described repeated violence against himself as a direct consequence of the investigation process:

*You say that you trusted her [the investigator]; were you in any way afraid that mum or dad would find out what you had said?*

Johan: I was scared that my dad would because, when he got to see the papers about what I had said, he got angry and hit me then too.

When social workers make violence visible by asking and talking about it, but the handling of the child's life situation makes her or him vulnerable to further abuse, the child is positioned as an *unprotected victim*. It is not possible to know exactly what the social workers in Johan's case had done to safeguard the child when informing the father about the child's views. However, it is clear that whatever measures were taken, they were insufficient. When the violence against the child became known, one possible intervention could have been to refer the case to the child protection section of social services (Socialtjänstlagen [Social Services Act] chapter 5, Paragraphs 1 and 11). On the basis of the information available about this particular case, it can be claimed that neither this nor any other intervention to increase safety was implemented. A lack of intervention can thus be considered to have directly contributed to the child's continued victimisation.

### Victim—With Participation

The validation of children's experiences of violence *as violence*, and as something unacceptable, requires a different kind of

<sup>3</sup> All physical violence against children is banned in Sweden, including 'smacking', which has been illegal since 1979.

**'His continued victimisation was made visible to professionals around him but he was left without protection'**

**'When he got to see the papers about what I had said, he got angry and hit me then too'**

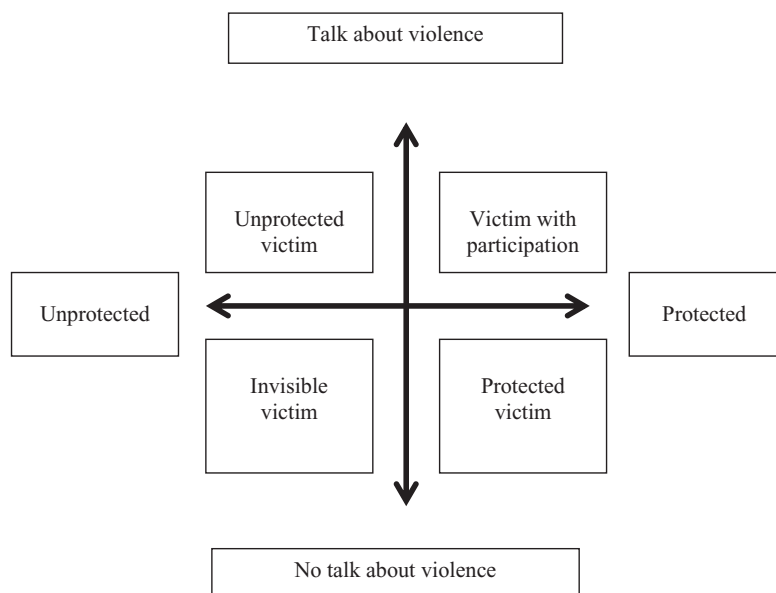
**'A lack of intervention can thus be considered to have directly contributed to the child's continued victimisation'**

**‘The child’s feelings and thoughts associated with the violence must be talked about’**

**‘Annelie’s account also depicted the most advanced attempts from the investigator to provide information and feedback’**

approach from that described above. Firstly, the child’s feelings and thoughts associated with the violence must be talked about. Secondly, the child’s situation must be handled so that he or she is protected. Annelie, aged 13, offered an example of such an approach. She was protected and, even though she does discuss experiences of violence in detail in the interview, she describes how she has talked to the social worker about her father’s behaviour and what she thinks and feels about that. The child’s position emerging from this narrative is as a *victim with participation*—participation, in the sense of being involved in a dialogue with the social worker about experiences of, and feelings about, violence and in the sense of receiving information about the social worker’s knowledge about the history of violence. Annelie’s account also depicted the most advanced attempts from the investigator to provide information and feedback to enable the child’s participation in the legal process. For example, unlike a large proportion of the children in the sample (including some children older than herself), she described how she was allowed to see the text that the social worker had written after the encounter with her, as well as other parts of the draft report to the court. In this sample, she was the only child who described this level of information about the process.

In summary, when the different aspects of the approaches to children are combined, four different social positions become visible, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Approaches to children

### Disqualifying and Invalidating Practices

The pattern emerging from this analysis is that these social workers have tended to approach the children as protected victims, invisible victims or even unprotected victims. They do not seem to have positioned them as victims with rights to participation, which is the child's position presumed by the Swedish legislation. This is true regarding both the overall investigation process and, more specifically, the approach to the children's experiences of violence. What is also clear is that children who are actively striving for a higher degree of participation in the investigation process may encounter resistance if they claim that they do not want to see their violent father (for an elaboration, see Eriksson and Näsman, 2008a).

How can these patterns be explained? One interpretation may be that the investigators' point of departure is a general and abstract 'developing child' (e.g. James *et al.*, 1998), presumed to need two parents (and parents with different genders) in order to develop in an optimal way (Eriksson, 2005, 2008a; Röbbäck, 2008). The investigators do not come across as using a traumatised or victimised child as their point of departure; the child's need for contact with the violent father is placed centrally, rather than any need for protection and space for recovery. Another possible interpretation is that the investigators have used a future-oriented perspective and emphasised children's futures as adults, rather than the intrinsic value of their childhood. The abstract notion of the developing child may thus have been allowed to overshadow a particular child's wishes and feelings in the here and now.

However, it can be argued that the constructions of the child may not be sufficient as an explanation. The child positions outlined above are analytical categories; they draw on patterns found in the empirical material but are not descriptions of individual children per se. In some cases, the particular informants seem to 'match' one or a couple of the positions quite closely, in other cases they do not. The sample is also rather small and it is very hard to assess the extent to which it is possible to generalise the patterns found to a larger population of vulnerable children involved in investigation processes. Even so, the two children in the sample who most clearly describe a disqualifying and invalidating approach are the two boys, of approximately ten years of age. If this is *not* a coincidence, how could it be explained? Could it be due to the widely disseminated notion among social workers in Sweden (Johansson, 2006) that boys in particular need 'male role models' and to have contact with their fathers? Another explanation—outlined below—is how notions of the child, of 'ideal' victims, and of girlhood and boyhood coincide and interact.

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**'The abstract notion of the developing child may thus have been allowed to overshadow a particular child's wishes and feelings in the here and now'**

**‘Categories of “victim” and “perpetrator” tend to be constructed as a dichotomy’**

**‘Children are positioned as competent informants in the investigation process, with a unique knowledge about, and ability to describe, their own lives’**

### **Notions of Age, Gender and ‘Ideal’ Victims**

In Sweden, children who ‘witness’ violence are increasingly defined as crime victims, in policy, research and practice (Eriksson, 2007, 2008b; Proposition 2005/06:166). However, the meaning given to the position of victim in the context of family law proceedings is not given. The relationship between the category of victim in a criminal law sense (a crime victim, i.e. someone who has been harmed and has legal rights to redress) and victim as identity, social position and cultural phenomenon is neither simple nor without ambiguity. An important theme in the debate about victims and victimisation is how the categories of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ tend to be constructed as a dichotomy, as mutually excluding categories defined in relation to each other, where the ‘victim-like’ (the ‘ideal’ victim) cannot simultaneously be ‘perpetrator-like’ (Christie, 1986). Furthermore, characteristics associated with ‘ideal’ victims (such as passivity, dependence and helplessness) conform to well-established cultural constructions of ‘child-like’ and femininity, while characteristics associated with perpetrators (such as agency, dominance/control and violence) conform to well-established constructions of ‘adult-like’ and masculinity, the latter in particular when it comes to violence (Hearn, 1998; Pringle, 1995). It should be emphasised that this discussion is about dominant constructions of ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’. Such characteristics do not necessarily correspond to the actual behaviour of women and men, or girls and boys.

Consequently, notions of the ‘ideal’ victim may (especially in conjunction with the care principle) make it easy for social workers to view children as (crime) victims; a more ‘child-like’ child implies a more ‘victim-like’ victim. At the same time, constructions of children as incompetent may help adult investigators to disregard what children defined as victims say about their lives, or to protect them from speaking about their situation at all (c.f. the position of protected victim). Secondly, through the wording of the Swedish family law (The Children and Parents Code), children are positioned as competent informants in the investigation process, with a unique knowledge about, and ability to describe, their own lives. They are expected to take part and make their voices heard because they are active subjects, not passive objects; they are constructed as actors in the same ways that adults are. This construction of children could possibly strengthen children’s position as experts on their own vulnerable lives. However, the victim–perpetrator dichotomy also means that a very ‘adult-like’, competent and active child may not seem like a victim at all in the eyes of social workers. If this is the case, it is precisely the child’s participation and competence which is undermining the child’s status as a victim.

### Girls and Boys as Victims

The picture becomes even more complex when gender is considered as well. Drawing on the existing Swedish literature on children at risk, at least two different cultural constructions of girlhood and boyhood can be outlined (e.g. Lagerberg and Sundelin, 2000). On the one hand, girls are expected to be more relationship orientated and dependent, to take more responsibility and mature earlier (be more competent) than boys and to internalise problems. Boys are expected to be more activity orientated, to be physically more expansive, to mature later (be more incompetent) than girls and to externalise problems. These presumptions about girls and boys can be found in an everyday context, as well as in research. The pervasiveness and status of these notions as natural and self-evident truths may make it difficult for professionals to recognise and verbalise how they shape the interpretations of a particular child.

On the other hand, girlhood and boyhood are also constructed in a more explicitly gender-neutral but implicitly gendered way. The care principle places the relationship between child and adult centrally, but not the relationship between girls and boys; here, girls and boys are 'children', rather than 'girls' and 'boys'. However, the construction of the (incompetent) child produced through the care principle seems to come closer to constructions of boys (presumed to mature later and be more incompetent) than the construction of girls (presumed to mature earlier and be more competent). In this implicitly gendered construction of children, it is the 'boy' that comes across as the model for the 'child', not the 'girl'.

The notions discussed above are also analytical categories, separated from each other to be clearly visible to the reader. In everyday life, when social workers interpret a particular girl or boy, these categories can be expected to be intertwined with each other. The question then becomes: how do they interact when the investigators interpret a particular child? In the interview, the boy that describes the most problematic practices (Bill) presents himself (Goffman, 1959) in a way that does not conform to notions of the 'normal' child, a 'real' victim or a 'normal' boy. He presents himself as an independent and competent party to the case who demands participation, and, at the same time, he presents himself as someone who in a very explicit—competent—way can talk about his own fear of his father. None of this fits neatly with notions of child-like children or victim-like victims. In addition, Bill also describes himself as highly uninterested in talking about such things as leisure-time activities. Instead, he has tried to place his and his father's relationship and his own emotions centrally. Here, Bill does not come across as a

**'These presumptions about girls and boys can be found in an everyday context, as well as in research'**

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**‘Would it have been easier for Bill to get his voice heard if he had been a ten-year-old girl’**

**‘To approach vulnerable children as victims *and* actors seems to be a challenge for social workers’**

**‘Especially hard for social workers in Sweden to recognise “age-inadequately” competent boys as victims’**

very boy-like boy either. Finally, his clearly expressed fear and victimisation may undermine his status as a boy-like boy even further.

It is not possible to say how the investigators would have encountered Bill if he was a girl. However, a girl in the same situation could possibly have been more culturally intelligible to social workers. Not least, expectations that girls are more mature and relationship orientated could make a difference; a girl who acted like Bill would also deviate from notions of ‘child-like’ children and ‘victim-like’ victims, but she could possibly pass as a ‘normal’ (and girl-like) girl. Would it have been easier for Bill to get his voice heard if he had been a ten-year-old girl, extensively and competently describing her fear of a father who had been violent to her mother? It is hard to say. However, the patterns in the interview material raise the question of whether notions of children, ‘ideal’ victims, girlhood and boyhood in some instances make it especially hard for social workers in Sweden to recognise ‘age-inadequately’ competent boys as victims in this particular context.

#### **Concluding remarks**

While children’s participation is often associated with their citizenship and rights, it can be argued that, within a care perspective, participation can also be defined as something central for children. It can create possibilities for validation of children’s difficult experiences and, following from that, support for children’s recovery after violence and abuse. To approach vulnerable children as victims *and* actors seems to be a challenge for social workers. At the same time, such a double approach may offer opportunities to support the child through the investigation. However, if a child-empowering practice is to be developed, an ongoing reflexivity is clearly needed regarding notions of the child, ‘ideal’ victims, girlhood and boyhood, and the interpretations of, and approach to, a particular child exposed to violence. Culturally well-established notions of children, ‘ideal’ victims, girlhood and boyhood may make it especially hard for social workers in Sweden to recognise ‘age-inadequately’ competent boys as victims, perhaps in particular when the boys do not want what adults think they need: to see their violent fathers. Whether these suggestions are valid beyond this sample, beyond the context of Sweden and in other cases of violence in families—for example, in cases of child sexual abuse—remains to be explored through empirical research. However, these interviews with violence-exposed children raise questions about the role of age and gender in social workers’ approaches to children and different children’s

opportunities for protection, participation and validation of experiences of violence.

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