De/gendering violence and racialising blame in Swedish child welfare:

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De/gendering Violence and Racialising Blame in Swedish Child Welfare – What Has Childhood Got to Do with It?

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Abstract:

This article is a critical interrogation of how gender and power figure in Swedish child welfare policy and the discourses on violence in intimate relationships vis-à-vis children exposed to violence. Drawing on feminist violence research, critical childhood studies, and intersectional perspectives, we identify a differentiation with racialised undertones in the understanding of violence as a social problem when related to children's exposure. While predominately gender-neutral discourses of social heredity and epidemiology run through the material for the seemingly 'universal' child, forms of violence ascribed to the presumed cultural Others link to gender, structural power, and sexuality. The article concludes that gendered articulations of violence are restricted yet pivotal if children's exposure is to be linked to issues of inequality and power. However, when gendering interlinks with racialisation, problematic differentiations of violence, childhoods, and children are produced.

Key words:

gender-based violence; racialisation, feminist theory, social problems; childhood

Key messages

- Gendered articulations of violence are pivotal if also children's exposure to violence is to be linked to social justice issues.

- Racialisation is indicated when gender, sexuality and power are linked to the culturally Other but not the 'general' child.

Introduction

Through a process covering at least the last four decades, intimate partner violence has gained a recognised status as a public, power- and gender-related problem – as men's violence against women – for the political agenda in many parts of the world (Council of Europe, 2011; Dobash and Dobash, 1979; Kelly, 1988; UN, 1993). In Sweden, this has been particularly evident since *The Protection of Women's Integrity Reform* in 1998 (Government Bill, 1997/98:55). A key feature of the reform is the explicit recognition of violence against women in intimate relationships as gender based. In the wake of this reform, the victimisation of children living with men's violence against women has also increasingly been recognised, for example through the definition of children 'witnessing'[1] violence as crime victims[2] in their own right in the Swedish Social Services Act (Eriksson, 2010; SCS 2001:453, 5:11 §). Since 2006, children are also granted the right to crime victim compensation from the state (SCS 2014:322, 9 §).

Recognising intimate partner violence as primarily violence of men against women implies tackling gender-power imbalances as the solution for eliminating the problem. This approach politicises violence as a social justice issue, rather than viewing it as an individual and private problem. It also stresses that violence in intimate relationships should be treated differently than many other crimes (cf. Government Bill, 1997/98:55). Yet, gender perspectives

on violence compart only one of many explanatory models for violence in the 'discursive battlefield' of violence research, policy, and practice in Sweden as elsewhere (Agustín, 2013; Hearn, 1998; Steen, 2003). Considering the recognition of gender-based violence in politics at a national level in Sweden and in many other countries, in relation to children's exposure too, approaches to intimate partner violence within the child welfare context under study constitutes a particularly interesting case to explore. Social work and child welfare are commonly seen as multi-disciplinary (Anbäcken, 2013; National Board of Health and Welfare [NBHW], 2018; Pringle, 2016) in which structural approaches to violence coexist with psychosocial and individual models (e.g. Eriksson, 2010; Eriksson et al., 2013; e.g. Hearn, 1998; Knezevic, 2017; e.g. Steen, 2003). As a result, there are many explanatory models for understanding violence as a social problem within this field. This article is in alignment with feminist contributions that challenge gender- and power-neutral understandings of violence, including explanations on individual and psychosocial levels of analysis, for their tendency of 'degendering the problem and gendering the blame' (Berns, 2001; Hughes and Chau, 2013). 'Degendered' understandings disregard a structural explanation for a gendered social problem and instead portray abused victims – typically women – as responsible for the very violence they are exposed to. However, less attention is paid to the relationship between constructions of violence as a social problem and the discursive construction of childhoods and children's exposure (although see Eriksson, 2009, 2010; Knezevic, 2017).

Departing from this concern, we examine the Swedish child welfare guidelines for assessing 'children in need', BBIC, abbr. 'Children's Needs in Focus'. We explore how the discursive construction of violence as a social problem works in tandem with constructions of children and childhoods in the domain of child welfare in Sweden. The analysis takes the discussion within critical childhood studies as a point of departure, specifically debates on children as subjects, rather than passive recipients of adult cultures, as well as emerging feminist

postcolonial debates about childhood, gender and race (Alanen, 1992; Castañeda, 2002; Burman, 2017; James and Prout, 2015; Knezevic, 2020; Thorne, 1987; Wells, 2017). Children are usually linked to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) but have limited access to citizenship (Lister, 2007) as well as gender equality policies (e.g. Lundqvist and Roman, 2009). While the figuration of the child is disconnected from the societal, and depoliticised (Burman, 2017; Castañeda, 2002; Mayall, 2000), childhood is paradoxically enough envisioned as a temporal marker of social formation and change, including holding potential for improved gender relations (Berns, 2001; Burman, 2017; Formark and Öhman, 2013). When deprived from gender, or other categories of power, such as class, race and sexuality, the inequalities that children may face in their different social positions are obscured (Eriksson, 2009; Knezevic, 2020). Given the tendency to depict children in universalising terms, as genderless and asexual (Angelides, 2004), we consider the meaning given to children's exposure to violence and to what extent it is understood as an issue of gender inequality and power.

This study is also a contribution to research on the gendered and racialised construction of victimisation. Such research highlights the complex interrelationship between constructions of gender-equality issues and gendered constructions of victims while also discussing 'culturalisation' and how gender intersects and interacts with other inequalities, such as race (Brah, 2001; Crenshaw, 1991; Eliassi, 2013; Mohanty, 1986; Njambi, 2004; de los Reyes, 2005; Wikström, 2014). We argue that the discursive construction of a problem as gendered or degendered is helpful in understanding the context of, and conditions for, politisation of inequalities in childhoods, and more specifically different children's access to social justice discourses of equality and power.

De/gendering Violence – What has Childhood got to Do with It?

In Sweden, the hegemonic discourse on gender equality has been described in terms of 'equal as the same'. It emphasises the same possibilities and same rights for women and men, girls and boys, although the conditions may look different (Formark and Öhman, 2013). This *gender-neutral* approach (Wikström, 2014) resembles Ronkainen's (2001) concept of *genderless gender*, denoting settings in which '[g]ender neutrality is the norm also when speaking about equality issues or phenomena that obviously have to do something with gender […]' (Ronkainen, 2001, p. 95).

Previous research has indicated a complex interrelationship between gendering and recognition of victimisation in the context of exposure to issues that are recognised as gender- and equality-related (Berns, 2001; Eriksson, 2009; Hughes and Chau, 2013). As Wikström (2014) shows, there is a tendency to discard problems as gendered when both men and women are victimised. A *gender-specific approach*, hence, only 'recognises' problems as gender based when (adult) women are facing them. Thus, it emphasises gender difference rather than sameness (Pringle, 2016; Wikström, 2014). For support and protection to take place once a gender-based problem is recognised as such, a prerequisite for recognition of victimisation is that the victimised subjects are acknowledged as gendered in the first place. A gender-specific approach to social problems may result in a degendering of victimisation, when those not seen as bearers of the gender category – typically men – are exposed to them (Wikström, 2014). Thus, research shows limitations to, yet prerequisites for, recognising a subject as gendered in order to gain the status as victim of a gender-related problem. What we here call processes of *de/gendering* – the process of constructing a problem as gender neutral (degendering) or gender related (gendering) – is tightly interwoven with constructions of those subjected to it (Wikström, 2014).

The categories of gender, age, class, and race, are usually assigned to the 'deviant' bodies. Hence, children and older people are ascribed the age category, and women the gender category, and so forth (Castañeda, 2002; Wikström, 2014). As already mentioned, the general 'child' is approached in similar universalistic ways, and is thus rendered genderless and asexual and deprived of categories of power. This makes it important to look at the interplay between processes of de/gendering of (child) subjects and the problems they are facing.

De/gendering, as scholars show, work in tandem with other processes, such as racialisation (Brah, 2001). When explicit gendering of violence does occur, it is not unusual that these practices are condemned as 'barbaric' and ascribed to non-Western contexts (Mohanty, 1986; Njambi, 2004; Wikström, 2014). What remains unexamined, however, is how to understand childhoods in these contexts, in particular considering the ambivalent relationship between childhoods and politicised issues, categories of power and (adult) social group- or identity markers such as gender, and race.

Methodology

The empirical basis for the exploration is the guiding documents for child welfare practice, the Swedish framework for assessment 'BBIC', published by the National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW). The documents consist of a basic reader (handbook) aimed at child welfare workers, and additional material clarifying how the BBIC model is to be used in practice. BBIC is used on a nation-wide scale and in almost every municipality in Sweden (Knezevic, 2017). It is inspired by the British Integrated Children's System (ICS) and 'adapted' to the Swedish legislation (NBHW, 2006, 2018). Since 2006, the guiding documents have had two major updates (2013 and 2015). The latest edition from 2018 is accessible online (NBHW, 2018).

In the three versions of BBIC documents analysed in this article (NBHW, 2006, 2013, 2018), intimate partner violence is a 'standard' problem recurring throughout the texts. It is

common to mention violence together with other issues rather than discussing it as a distinct problem requiring special management or understanding. Our analysis of violence thus started with an analysis of the description of social problems in general. Rather than identifying distinct comprehensive theoretical concepts or models underpinning BBIC in relation to violence, we refer to theoretically and/or disciplinary grounded influences or elements (e.g. Hearn, 1998). For this task we *analyse discourses* (Bacchi, 2005) and use the concept of *discourse*, here loosely defined as 'a *particular* way of representing the world (or parts of the world)' (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 143). In focus are the discourses in BBIC that are identified as central for addressing the problem of violence where particular attention has been paid to the location of childhood therein (e.g. Castañeda, 2002; Knezevic, 2017; see also Alanen, 1992; Burman, 2017; James and Prout, 2015).

Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to be?' approach to policy analyses (1999) was used as inspiration when identifying and mapping out the discourses. The approach consists of a set of questions to use when critically reviewing policy. The following questions were posed to the documents: What presuppositions or assumptions underpin the representation of violence as the 'problem'? What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently? What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'? Previous theorisations on violence at different abstraction levels – that is structural, psychosocial and individual levels – formed a backdrop for the analysis, especially in distinguishing statements in relation to the causes or outcomes of the problem (e.g. Hearn, 1998; e.g. Steen, 2003). We paid special attention to how the discourses mutually construct violence, children and childhoods, by looking at how and where children and childhoods appear (see Castañeda, 2002, for an overview), and which children figure in the different discourses (Knezevic, 2017, 2020).

The first step of the analytical procedure consisted of several re-readings of the BBIC documents (NBHW, 2006, 2013, 2018), focusing on constructions of social problems. Excerpts from the BBIC texts were discerned that explicitly address intimate partner violence, and violence and children. The second step of analysis identified discourses concerning violence as a social problem, by a reading the excerpts against the different 'set of theories' on violence found in violence research. We identified social heredity discourse and epidemiological discourse. The detection and naming of the discourses was based primarily on linkages to the theoretical and/or disciplinary legacy. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, explicitly mentioned in BBIC, is here read as both a distinct discourse on social problems (here referring to the psychosocial model) and a broader framework encompassing multiple levels of analysis. The latter ranges from the individual level to that which could be seen as a counterpart to structural models in feminist violence research, the so-called 'macro level' (cf. Hearn, 1998; NBHW, 2018; Steen, 2003). It is thus in principle possible to use ecological systems model to include structural relations of power, in the analysis of children's vulnerability. However, through the analysis it became clear that such uses of the model tend to be absent in the BBIC documents in relation to men's violence against women. Through these readings, we identified patterns of degendering or gendering, which in turn formed the starting point for a third step of analysis. To grasp patterns regarding gendering, excerpts that addressed different conjunctions of the words 'sex/gender' [*kön*], 'girl' [*flicka, tjej*], 'boy' [*pojke*]), 'mother'/'woman'/'women' [*mamma/kvinna/kvinnor*], 'father'/'man'/'men' [*pappa/man/män*], and 'power' [*makt*] were added to the initial excerpts, and were translated. At this step, a cultural discourse was identified.

Degendering Violence – Degendering Children

At the time of writing, the most recent version of BBIC (NBHW, 2018) brings up a wide range of forms of violence that children can be exposed to apart from 'witnessing' intimate partner violence: 'physical violence', 'sexual violence', 'honour-related violence', 'dating violence', 'violence between siblings' and 'medical violence' are mentioned. When articulating a problem, the very naming of the violence as well as those involved in it tends to give a gender-neutral impression. Under the heading 'Safety' and the subheading 'protection against physical and psychological violence', violence against children is divided into three categories:

> There are different causes behind violence. A way to understand causes behind violence and to assess the level of severity in relation to the child is to categorise the violence:
>
> - Controlling measures of discipline caused by the parent's positive attitudes regarding physical punishment as a method of upbringing
> - Situational violence, commonly triggered by stress
> - Repeated and systematic violence (often in conjunction with violence between adults)
>   (NBHW, 2018, p. 65)

The 'multicausal' description of violence against children (e.g. Hearn, 1998, pp. 30–31) comparts three forms: child abuse as (excessive) fostering, child abuse as a one-time event, and 'repeated and systematic' child abuse in combination with 'violence between adults'. This suggests that systematic child abuse may be easier to recognise where there also is 'violence between adults'.

In BBIC, 'violence between adults' is attached to gender-neutral wordings such as 'violence in the family' ([v]åld i familjen), 'family violence' (familjevåld), 'violence between the parents' (våld mellan föräldrarna) (NBHW, 2018, pp. 64, 46, 49). In the sections about 'protection factors' and 'risk factors', it is for instance stated:

Serious conflicts between adults as well as the normalisation of one parent's control over the other parent increase the risk that the child will experience or witness violence. If a parent subjected to violence finds it difficult to protect the child in a situation where she or he is subjected to violence her or himself (neglect) it will increase the risk for the child further. (NBHW, 2018, pp. 65–66)

The policy documents indicate a gender-neutral approach regarding violence. It is expressed in both the bidirectional description of violence 'between adults' and the unidirectional counterpart: 'one parent's control over the other'. While a power relation is indicated (normalisation and control), in none of the sentences are the abuser or the abused addressed in gendered terms. The text gives an impression of violence as coming from either a generic subject or no subject at all, nevertheless falling under a gender-neutral twosome, that is the capacity of parents to exert control over, and 'protect' from, violence. Violence thus tends to be depicted as something abstract that the 'parents' ought to protect the child from, not an act by an embodied, gendered subject. The construction of violence is thus informed by 'genderless gender' (Ronkainen, 2001) – a gender-neutral approach aligned with a *social/family conflict discourse* rather than structural explanations that link violence to power *and* gender (e.g. Hearn, 1998; Kelly, 1988; Walby, Towers and Francis, 2014). The BBIC construction of the problem is thus in sharp contrast to depictions of gender-based violence as 'men's violence against women' found in for example the government's previous plan of action (Skr. 2007/08:39) and current ten-year national strategy against men's violence against women and honour related violence (Skr. 2016/17:10).

Within the gender-neutral approach to violence, the abused parent – typically the mother – is still regarded as the 'protective' parent held responsible for children that should be protected (e.g. Edleson, Gassman-Pines, and Hill, 2006; Hester, 2004, 2011; Hughes and Chau, 2013). In BBIC, this gendering of blame becomes apparent in the discursive construction of the problem as controllable or something that ought not to be repeated even though research on gender-

based violence points to the contrary (e.g. Walby, Towers and Francis, 2014). In addition, expectations on both parents to protect children from violence or exercise control over the problem, or, '[a]ssur[e] that conflicts in the family are resolved without violence' (NBHW, 2006, p. 56), distributes equal responsibility for tackling the problem, hence equal blame to the parent using violence – typically the father – and the one subjected to it – typically the mother.

In BBIC, violence is also associated with particular families with 'multiple problems'. This topic links back to early BBIC documents and the transferral of the English policy to Sweden (NBHW, 2006). Mainly four standard problems fall under the 'multiple problems' category: 'overlapping' or 'multiple' (or 'co-occurring') problems of violence, substance misuse, mental health problems and 'other serious adversities in the family'. This can be read as an indication of the kind of 'holistic' approach to 'psychosocial problems' which is the common approach and problem term used in BBIC ('ecological systems model'), where different problems are added to each other.

> Violence in the family is always a serious factor that often co-occurs with other problems, such as
>
> e.g. addiction and mental health problems [note to reference]. The *family's background and situation*
>
> also includes the occurrence of developmental disabilities or other cognitive difficulties, serious
>
> disease or injury, addiction, criminality and violence between the parents. […]. It is especially
>
> serious if there is addiction or mental health problems in combination with violence between the
>
> parents [note to reference]. (NBHW, 2013, p. 53; see also NBHW, 2006, p. 35)

The ecological systems theory that underpins BBIC enables explanations that may link to the family, the network, the group, or the society as it includes various levels of analysis (cf. Hearn 1998). The way the ecological systems model is used, it enables an additive approach, while simultaneously holding structural explanations separate from individual-centred explanations. Put differently, the passage above illustrates a 'holistic' understanding that includes different levels, yet still enables individual explanations for violence. While never explicitly mentioning causes, this additive or multicausal approach nevertheless implicitly suggests links to

pathologies and thereby *biological, psychological,* and *psychoanalytic* individual-centric theories about violence in intimate relationships (Hearn, 1998; Steen, 2003). Rather than linking violence to common patterns in the society (Government Bill 1997/98:55), focus is on deviances and situations that are located outside the societal norms, for example disabilities, diseases, addictions, to mention but a few. How structural power relations shape the individual level – for example how men may 'do' gendered inequality through dominance and violence in relation to a woman partner – remains unclear in the BBIC version of the ecological systems model. Hence, even though BBIC draws upon a theoretical model with potential in dealing with structural issues and provide structural explanations, what seems to be accentuated above is a persistent gender-neutrality and a 'social' dimension that is reduced to a dynamic between individuals ('family climate'), alternatively 'a particular kind of *social individual*' (Hearn, 1998, p. 24). Furthermore, when violence is more easily recognised in cases where other problems are co-occurring, problems may be understood in terms of addition and clustering where *quantity* determines the severity.

The Victim as Abuser

Another aspect where gender neutrality may be problematised is the foregrounding of women's violence and distorting its presence or extent (Berns, 2001). In BBIC, this issue of women's violence is brought to the fore implicitly as the framework is predominately worded in a way that omits gender.

> Violence in the family is also associated with a risk that the parental capacities are affected also when it comes to the parent subjected to violence. A parent subjected to violence often experiences a high level of parenting stress, which may cause them to use an increased degree of psychological and physical violence against their children. (NBHW, 2018, p. 65).

In BBIC, a logic where the abused are depicted as prospective perpetrators also applies to children:

> The child can also subject other children to the same thing as they have experienced themselves –
> for example sexual abuse (NBHW, 2018, p. 36)

If both accounts above are contrasted to a gender perspective which states that gendered power is the main explanation for violence in (heterosexual) intimate partnerships, in BBIC violence comes across as abstracted and self-reproducing. While there still is a remaining link between the problems that parents experience and those that their children are facing in sections of the text, such as the one quoted above, this depiction merges cause and effect. It seems as if it is the violence *per se*, rather than power, which generates even more violence. Hence, problems are depicted as of a contagious-like cumulative nature in interactions between family members. The problems are, if read this way, formulated within an *epidemiological discourse* (cf. O'Donnell, 2016) with the core idea that a problem is spreading as a contagious disease over time, and from person to person.

Feminist theory implies a structural reading of men's violence against women *and children*, that is expansion of victims and violence due to gendered forms of inequality. In BBIC the expansion of victimisation blurs the line between victims and abusers as victims are viewed as potential abusers and abusers are viewed as previously victimised (Knezevic, 2017). This indicates the kind of subjectivities the wording 'family violence' may produce.

The Abuser as Former Victim

A discussion about children's exposure to violence was already addressed in the works of the key Swedish child psychiatrist Gustav Jonsson in the late 1960s. Violence in the family figures as one of the features in his theory of social heredity and in his studies of the lives of 'delinquent boys' (Jonsson, 1967). Delinquency is explained by tracing the problem back to parents being

exposed to child maltreatment in their own childhoods. Also in BBIC, the *social heredity discourse,* linking to social learning theory and, in turn, to socio-biology, psychology and psychoanalysis places the 'root' of the problem in childhood as a formative phase of life during which the child is socialised into a certain behaviour but where socialisation is reduced to the family (Alanen, 1992; Hearn, 1998; Knezevic, 2017).

> Risk for the child: To have parents who have been victimised when growing up

> An adult person's capacity to be a parent can be influenced by his or her own experiences from growing up. (NBHW, 2018, p. 28)

There is an intergenerational transmission of social problems at stake, which links the (past) childhoods of parents to the (present) childhoods of children but also to the (future) adulthoods that yet are to come (for a critical overview, see Knezevic, 2017; Hearn, 1998). Children are deprived of subjectivity in such interlinkages and discursive constructions of violence. This is because parents' childhoods are viewed as determining the childhoods of their children, including children's behaviours. Parents' upbringing serves as an explanation for the adversities in present childhoods, rather than social inequalities.

A second form of social problem transmission is expressed in relation to 'family background' (NBHW, 2013, p. 53, 2018, pp. 28–29) in more general terms, as *all* accumulated experiences of the family. It follows that knowledge can be gained about the child by gaining the picture of the accumulated experiences of the family as a unit.

> The family background and background of individual family members can be of central importance for the child. Some family members could have been grown up in a completely different environment than the child […]. It could be because family members have been forced to leave their country of birth due to war or other difficult life circumstances. Family members could have been subjected to abuse or neglect. Parents could have been growing up with violence, addiction, mental health problems, or other serious difficulties within the family, which means that they carry with them negative experiences, which may influence upon them in their own parenthood […] several

factors may affect both the child and parental capacities, e.g. the number of children in the family,

if there are one or two parents, if there is a new family constellation with step parents and step

siblings, if there are adults or children in the family with serious illness or gross impairment or if

there are honour-related values within the family. (NBHW, 2013, p. 53)

The particular 'holistic' approach to social problems shaping the policy documents can be read as an expression of a social heredity discourse and intergenerational transmission of problems (e.g. Hearn, 1998; Knezevic, 2017), in this case of the violence that '[p]arents could have been growing up with'. Thus, 'family violence' may be a result of additional social problems in the same families, alternatively problems in a parent's childhood biography. Violence is thus associated with 'problem families', rather than with structural forces (see Lambert, 2019). As seen in the quote above, previous violence is one of the factors for present risks. Thus, the victimisation of the abuser is simultaneously the (adult) victim's responsibilisation. The absence of a gender analysis makes this discursive construction of the problem possible (e.g. Hearn, 1998). When constructed this way, violence happens at a life stage and is reoccurring at another, but it remains unclear who the perpetrator is in any of them. The only thing clear is that there is a possibility to occupy one of the positions of perpetrator or victim, or possibly that both positions are occupied simultaneously (cf. previous section).

The social heredity discourse, when co-existing in BBIC with an epidemiological discourse, can be read as a necessity if violence is to be primarily delineated to families with specific 'factors': families with previous difficult experiences, or those living in constellations that break away with the nuclear family ideal, the unhealthy ones, or parents with a cognitive disability. However, while all these 'factors' link primarily to different circumstances, contexts and situations, violence gets a more explicit value-laden meaning in the context of families with 'honour related values'.

Gendering Violence – Gendering Racialised Children

In the first version of the BBIC primer, only one sentence was worded in a way that aligns with the idea of violence as having something to do with gender relations, that is men's violence against women, albeit with 'genderless' children:

> Children who have witnessed violence against their mom are at risk of being subjected to violence themselves by their dad or step dad. These children risk being subjected to more violence the older they get. (NBHW, 2006, p. 29).

While the wording acknowledges that fathers are those who most often are abusive and violent, there is no explanation for why this may be the case. Thus, the statement is open for interpretation both to deterministic gender-difference analyses and to gender-power analyses. Furthermore, this one sentence is an exception in BBIC as a whole and similar accounts are absent in the more recent versions which do not include 'mom' or 'dad', only a degendered 'parent/s' or 'partner'.

It is in the very variation in how gender is articulated that the incoherence in the conceptualisations of violence in BBIC becomes accentuated. The BBIC documents show, overall, an absence of discussion of both gender *and* power. Power (unidirectional control), while at times mentioned, remains restricted to degendered adults and children (see NBHW, 2018, p. 54). Hence, what tends to remain absent is a simultaneous gendering of the problem, victims, and perpetrators.

However, especially the most recent versions of the document mention *both* power *and* gender, and the unidirectional approach prevails. This is in the case of the 'honour-related violence':

> Children may also be subjected to honour related violence and oppression, which among other things is characterised by it being collectively practised. This means that there can be several perpetrators for example in the closest family and that the surrounding is sanctioning or coercive. The control of

girls' and women's sexuality is central as well as the view that the choice of partner is a matter for

the family's or the wider collective, not the individual. […]

Both girls and women, boys and men are subjected to honour related violence and the perpetrators

may be both women and men. Homo- and bisexual persons as well as transgendered persons can be

particularly vulnerable. (NBHW, 2018, p. 53)

In BBIC, the most explicit gendering that is in alignment with structural power perspectives

occurs in relation to a specific form of violence: 'honour-related'. In this case, gender neutrality

and degendered language shifts to 'boys' and 'girls', 'women', 'men', even

'boyfriend/girlfriend' and 'sister' (NBHW, 2018, p. 53). This is one of the rare times when

'boys' may control 'girls', that is, 'sister or cousin'. It is also the one example when violence

links to sexuality both as control over sexuality and as violence against 'transgendered persons'

and 'homo- and bisexual persons'. The link to gender identities and sexuality also indicates a

reading of violence as structural, gendered and power related. Here, a gendered problem is a

problem for both men and women, boys and girls, albeit in different ways, hence beyond the

simplistic gender-specific approach but nevertheless unidirectional (e.g. Wikström, 2014).

In this context, violence aligns with other explanatory models than in the case of 'family

violence' of what seems to be presumed ethnically Swedish families. Feminist research has

linked violence to cultural notions of masculinity and femininity among the ethnic majority

(e.g. Hearn, 1998; Lundgren, 1995). Yet, in BBIC, gender based violence is linked to families

that are presumed to be from ethnicities, cultures, and value-systems other than Swedish. We

interpret this model of violence to be primarily written within a *cultural discourse* (Eliassi,

2013; Keskinen, 2011). Thus, when gendered, violence is also racialised (Brah, 2001).

Although the accounts on honour-related violence could be read as linking violence to

structural explanatory models, the texts are still addressing structures of those that do not live

up to a norm (the cultural/ethnic majority). Violence links, to paraphrase Hearn, to 'sub-

cultures' (1998, p. 29), of the excepted few, here reserved for particular non-Western collectivist gendered and racialised Others. BBIC can thus be read as an example of how constructions of social problems may be intertwined with processes of racialised othering (Eriksson, 2005; Eriksson et al., 2013; Pringle, 2016).

At the same time, the dominant conceptualisation of 'family violence' for the 'general' population remains intact and may continuously be treated in degendered terms and as detached from power. BBIC is thus an example not just of the degendering of violence, but also of the racialisation of blame.

Discussion

As shown, the logics of accumulation and spread across generations and family members within the social heredity discourse and epidemiological discourse place childhood at the centre of problem conceptualisation. In these passages, victimisation is intertwined with risk – risk for both exposure and violation. Both future perpetrators and victims, thus, are inscribed in a family (history). This gender-neutral construction of violence interconnects with class and kinship (blood ties), and is primarily located within the nuclear family as a norm. Children in these discourses are disembodied as gendered subjects, hence, degendering of violence as a social problem is tightly intertwined with degendering of children. This is the seemingly universal childhood that critical childhood researchers have contested by showing how it is deprived of context and societal structures, and how it depends on familiarisation of children (Alanen, 1992; Castañeda, 2002; Burman, 2017). This is the depoliticised childhood (e.g. Mayall, 2000).

Is it then problematic to portray violence as predominantly gender-neutral in BBIC and to portray children as predominantly genderless? The issue of whether processes of de/gendering, and consequently de/politisation of problems, are at stake plays a vital part in differentiation of families, and in turn, children. As discussed, childhoods are more politicised

when it comes to the racialised Others. Racialised children may be positioned as beings with gender and sexuality and as shown; it is easier to recognise racialised children as gendered victims. Such a pattern has implications for holding perpetrators of violence accountable: in the case of 'family violence', degendered parents are the perpetrators, while cultural/ethnic minority fathers, mothers, and brothers are prospective perpetrators of 'honour related violence' (Eliassi, 2013; Eriksson, 2005; Knezevic, 2020). Thus, unlike individualised explanation models, the depictions of honour-related violence break with the conceptualisations of social problems as gender neutral. It may be that honour-related violence is a relatively recent discussion in research and provides new perspectives to the field of child welfare. Another explanation is a tendency to ascribe culture and 'values' to the racially Others, thereby downplaying violence in Swedish families as structural macro-level problem. This 'culturalisation' resonates with previous postcolonial theorisations about constructions of progressive and modern Western states (Brah, 2001; Eliassi, 2013; Mohanty, 1986; Njambi, 2004). The gendered dimension of 'culturalisation' discussed here is thus in line with previous research discussing how gender equality and child friendliness are deeply rooted in a national self-image of a Swedish, or Nordic, identity (Keskinen, 2011; Pringle, 2016; de los Reyes, 2005; Wikström, 2014). Furthermore, the findings echo research showing an interconnection between gendered problems and gendered subjectivities alternatively gender-neutral problems and gender-neutral subjectivities (Wikström, 2014). The study's contribution has been to illustrate how this operates in relation to childhoods and children.

Conclusion

Degendering or gendering of violence has clear implications for whether an intervention by the child welfare system is to be seen as a break with an intergenerational transmission of what seems to be a contagious disease, or unequal relations of power and 'values'. This furthermore

highlights the contexts that articulate children's violence exposure as an exposure to inequality, and thereby social injustice.

When the conceptualisation of a problem links to pathologies and cultural 'values' of a deviant few, political aspects of the problem remain invisible, which means that it becomes harder to make visible relations of power between for example the seemingly general children and adults. We therefore argue that an analysis of the discursive construction of a problem as gendered or degendered is useful in understanding politicisation but also racialisation of childhoods.

Given that BBIC is said to be an 'adaptation' to the Swedish context, it is remarkable how little trace can be seen of policy development in Sweden since the late 1990s regarding men's violence against women, or the feminist research underpinning this policy. It suggests, as some researchers have already claimed, that child welfare is its own field of policy, knowledge, and practice, with its own discourses, separate from the field of men's violence against women or gender-based violence (e.g. Hester, 2004, 2011). The analysis presented here calls for a radical rethinking of this field. It is the recognition of the idea that gender-based violence is a social justice issue for children too. But so, too, is racialised othering.

Notes

1. While the concept of witnessing violence has been critically examined in academic discourse both internationally (McGee, 2000; Mullender, et al., 2002) and in Sweden (Eriksson, 2010), witnessing violence remains the mainstream term in Swedish policy.

2. Another term used is 'survivor' (see Kelly, 1988). In this study, we use the terms 'victim' and 'victimisation' which are more common in the analysed documents (NBHW, 2018, pp. 51, 54).

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