

# Children's experiences of grandparents' responses to domestic violence

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# Grandparent-grandchildren relationships

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- Grandparent increasingly important in Western societies
- Demographic shifts give "longer and potentially stronger bonds" between grandparents and grandchildren
- Grandparent-grandchildren relationships:
  1. Direct interaction: social and emotional support
  2. Indirect interaction: social and emotional support
  3. Symbolic interaction: "being there" and representing family genealogy

# Grandparenting in troubled times

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- Most grandparenting research on families with 'normal' troubles, e.g. work-family balance, childcare
- Grandparent research on families in 'troubled times', e.g. divorce, parents unable to care
- Few on grandparenting in the face of domestic violence
- Sandberg (2013; 2015) – interviews with grandparents
  - Want to support, try to protect their abused grandchildren
  - Powerless and anxious of not being able to support and protect
  - Not always supportive: ambiguous responses; ,mainly maternal grandmothers supportive; grandfathers sometimes abusive against the mother

# A relational approach to domestic violence

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- Individuals embedded in relational settings (e.g. Smart 2007)
  - Kinship relationships are negotiated, but blood ties also guiding for individual rights and responsibilities (Finch & Mason 1993)
- Responses to violence (e.g. Hydén, Gadd & Wade 2015)
  - Relates to 'social support' but includes negative and ambiguous actions as well
- Individuals are embedded in space and place
  - Relational proximity/distance
  - Sociospatial responses to domestic violence

# Data and method

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- Ongoing interview study with (currently) eight grandchildren 12-18 years of age
- ‘Moderate’ to severe physical violence against mother (n=7) or father (n=1) from the other biological parent or a step-parent; during some months to all childhood
- Participate in support programs for domestic violence victims in Sweden
- All but one Swedish and Swedish-born parents
- Narrative interviews where the informant is supported to give rich narratives about their experiences

# Children's social and spatial isolation

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- Social isolation in relation to violence
- Many friends and relatives, but no or little knowledge about the violence, few intervened
- Normally a grandparent, and at times an aunt supported the children
- Sometimes social isolation had *spatial dimensions*
- "No, it was pretty subtle, so to say. We lived in middle of the countryside and every time dad assaulted mom we were alone, you know. So I don't remember anyone ever intervening and saying 'what are you doing?'"  
(Anna, 16 years old)

# Grandparents sociospatial responses

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1. A grandparent somebody that the grandchild *goes to*
  - a. in order to get away from the abuse
  - b. in order to relax after the violent events

"It was like coming home, to come home to a wonderful home. It was like she just embraced me, and it was super safe to come to her and if they' d let me I' d probably stayed several nights, but we never did. Sometimes we stayed over, sometimes we went home. But I never wanted to leave, it was always difficult to leave her. Because it was sort of more safe there than at home considering how we lived, it was vary nice to be at her place."

(Anna 16 years old)

# Grandparents sociospatial responses

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2. A grandparent someone that *comes to* the grandchild

a. embodied presence creates safety

"I haven't talked with grandpa about all what happened but it was enough, he saw what was going on. I came there [their house] after here had been a super big fight er something had happened. It was enough that he came and sort of saw that we weren't alright. And then it was sufficient with a hug."

(Beatrice, 15 years old)



# Grandparents sociospatial responses

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## 3. A grandparent someone that *takes the child from the violent home*

Gina: Uh my grandma and I, she's a big part of all that happened during the violence. 'Cause we had to go to her when we heard that the man was detained or was in prison and then we went home to her and was to stay the night there, but the we couldn't anymore.

Lucas: Why not?

Gina: No, because we had to go to a safe house in case anything would happen, so we went to the women's shelter and she was the one driving us there. And she live close by so she came with food and visited us a lot.

(Gina, 15 years old)

# Grandparents sociospatial responses

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## 4. Grandparents sometimes *unable to support due to geographical distance*

Lucas: But your grandpa live so close to you. You lived there and-

Erik: Yeah, but he had the boat and was out for almost six weeks the summer and this happens mostly during the summer. So he was away when everything happens so you couldn't go to him.

(Erik 15 years old)

# Grandparents sociospatial responses

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## 5. Children considered whether or not to involve grandparents (sociospatially)

"I just cried so that I could go to grandma så everything was fine, but in one way I know that I didn't want to leave mom when dad was violent so I always waited until mom could go to grandma. I didn't want to go there alone knowing that mom was alone with dad. I was small but I know I thought like that a lot. I've always wanted to defend mom."

(Anna 16 years old)

# Conclusion

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- Importance of the sociospatial dimensions of grandparent-grandchild relationship negotiations
- Importance of researching troubled times, not only "normal" troubles
- Negotiating kinships responsibilities
  - Grandparents 'being there' : socio-spatial proximity/distance
  - Children's responsibility for involving grandparents – parents as sociospatial gatekeepers