

Confronting Complex Societal Issues Through Research

Dr Teresa Silva



CONFRONTING COMPLEX SOCIETAL ISSUES THROUGH RESEARCH

Dr Teresa Silva at Mid Sweden University has turned her focus from investigating individual risk factors towards understanding how society is contributing to behavioural problems and mental health issues. She is currently undertaking research in a number of critical areas including child protection and domestic abuse against males. This work is providing vital evidence to support the development of interventions and policies that are more effective.

Family Relationships: Risks and Interventions

A range of factors affect our behaviour and mental health, and often we look inward to try to uncover what has caused these issues. Dr Teresa Silva, based at Mid Sweden University, has reversed this focus to examine how societal factors, often beyond our control, can negatively impact our mental health. A key area of her research is family relationships and institutional support to families, particularly those that are dysfunctional. At a young age, children rely on their parents for security and comfort. When this does not exist, long-term emotional issues may ensue. Similarly, in adulthood, our mental health can be affected when our closest relationships become harmful or abusive.

Dr Silva emphasises how important it is that services are in place to provide support if these relationships become dangerous or harmful, ensuring no further damage is done to our mental health. These are usually institutions such as social services or the family/criminal justice system. Much of Dr Silva's research focuses on exposing how these important institutions often

do not take appropriate responsibility for identifying risks and providing effective interventions. This can lead to the most vulnerable members of our society becoming harmed by the organisations that should be there to protect them.

Childhood Emotional Abuse: Parental Alienation

Dr Silva's research underscores the critical influence of parental behaviour on child mental health. In certain situations, particularly when relationships break down between parents, children can become stuck in the middle.

Her recent research focuses on parental alienation (PA for short), which is a form of childhood emotional abuse that occurs when a parent instrumentally uses their child to inflict psychological harm on the other parent. This act of revenge is usually associated with high conflict separation or divorce. Although the main aim of the 'alienating parent' is to inflict sabotage on the relationship between the child and the so-called 'target parent', this behaviour can indirectly cause harm to the child itself.



The key tactics used by alienating parents include undermining the target parent and making it appear as if they have rejected the child. In extreme cases, the alienating parent will fabricate instances of abuse, which sadly, are often successful in ensuring there is a legal separation from their child. Other actions include stopping contact, in person and/or through phone calls and messages.

These manipulative behaviours from the alienating parent often result in the child being resistant to having contact with the target parent. They may even engage in a pattern of verbal abuse and aggressive behaviour towards the target parent. In severe cases, the bond between the target parent and the child is broken, something that is very difficult to mend even with family therapy.



PA can cause the child to experience feelings of abandonment, loss and fear, and Dr Silva notes it can have a tremendously negative impact on their psychological and behavioural development. In the medium to long term, they may have issues with low self-esteem, anxiety and depression as well as displaying violent behaviour, alcohol and substance misuse. Research has also shown that it can also cause problems with relationships later in life including difficulties in forming and maintaining attachments with others, breakdowns and even alienation from their own children.

As PA is very under-researched, we are unable to know the true extent of the negative impact it has on society. There has been much discussion around whether it should be categorised as a psychiatric condition, which Dr Silva believes may have overshadowed work to find an appropriate solution. Currently, there is no consistent monitoring of its prevalence and there are no specialised services in place to address issues relating to PA.

This lack of support can leave target parents feeling hopeless, especially if they have been through numerous attempts to resolve the situation through the family justice system. For some, it can lead to doubts about whether they should continue their fight, whereas for others it can cause desperation, even leading them to undertake extreme actions such as abducting the child or committing violence towards the alienating parent.

Dr Silva believes that prevention and intervention should be prioritised in cases of PA, and that all the professionals involved should take a shared responsibility to find a solution. Her research emphasises that protecting the child must be the main priority, whereas to date, often the focus of family courts has been on finding a legal resolution. She believes it is the responsibility of the family justice system to monitor individuals and ensure that the parties involved are cooperating with

mental health services and attending family therapy as required. Dr Silva has called for more research in relation to PA, particularly around its impact upon children's long-term psychological and behavioural development. She emphasises that only by broadening our understanding will we be able to design and implement effective solutions.

Dysfunctional Families and Social Services

Even when parental relationships have not broken down, dysfunctional family life may negatively impact a child's psychological state. Dr Silva is currently undertaking a piece of research to help identify the risk factors amongst disadvantaged families, which may lead to developmental problems within children. Her latest research is driven by a notable rise in the number of families within a rural region in Sweden, that have had children placed into foster care due to severe dysfunctional family situations.

These children are being placed into care at a younger age than ever before, and policymakers are very concerned about the wellbeing of children in the region. Dr Silva's research will help to provide answers about why these alarming trends have occurred, as well as identify the risk factors involved. The policymakers will then use this information to improve current measures and to inform the development of more effective preventative interventions.

The research will focus on children who have family risk factors that are likely to increase the development of psychological and behavioural issues such as anxiety, depression, self-harm and drug use and delinquent behaviour at a very young age. Dr Silva will utilise data that has been collected by social services, relating to children in very disadvantaged situations that need foster care due to the inadequate conditions in their own families. These data will be compared with data on a school sample of children of the same age and gender.



During her analysis, Dr Silva will evaluate parental competence and use family systems theory to understand the development of pathological relationship dynamics between all the family members. When such dynamics are established, parental bonds and the attachment between the child and the primary caregivers can be heavily affected. As a result, the child might lose trust in adults and find him/herself with no emotional support at a stage of his/her life when it is most needed. Dr Silva's analysis is currently ongoing, with results due in autumn 2022. She hopes the outcomes will help social services to identify risk factors and intervene at an earlier stage in the situations in which families are not able to provide adequate care for their children.

Intimate Partner Violence and the Justice System

Beyond childhood, our most significant relationships are often with our spouse or partners. Dr Silva has researched the impact it can have upon our mental health when these relationships become abusive or violent. This is referred to as intimate partner violence, which is defined as abuse conducted by a former or current partner that can be physical, verbal, emotional, economic or sexual.

Much of Dr Silva's research has been focused on male victims, revealing that law enforcement, the criminal justice system and even family members are less likely to believe testimonies when they are from men. These male victims have often been falsely accused of being the violent spouse and feel discriminated against by police authorities and also in relation to accessing support.

Dr Silva believes another failure of the justice system is the lack of proper assessment of alleged victim credibility, especially when the alleged victim is a female. This is a particularly poignant topic, as it can impact child custody rights. Dr Silva noted that false accusations of abuse are something that can be used as a mechanism within parental alienation to ensure that the target parent does not win custody rights within separation or divorce proceedings.



Whether or not child custody is involved, Dr Silva argues that structured assessments of witness credibility should be undertaken as standard within the justice system. She believes that often statistical evidence is being ignored and emphasises that there are serious consequences of not believing real victims or falsely convicting someone who is innocent. Such consequences affect not just the victim and perpetrator but their families and loved ones as well.

Dr Silva has analysed a real-life case report and demonstrated that undertaking a more structured approach to assessing the credibility of the alleged victim can lead to different judgement outcomes. The case she analysed was a libel claim relating to the actor Johnny Depp who was accused of several accounts of assault by his former partner Amber Heard. The claim was filed against a UK tabloid paper that published allegations in 2018 that labelled Mr Depp as a 'wife-beater'.

Dr Silva used documents that were published publicly to undertake two different structured assessments to verify the credibility of the alleged victim. The first was the Six-Factor Test, which evaluated the plausibility of these allegations whilst assessing with psychological characteristics of the victim and perpetrator. The second was the Brief Spousal Assault Form for the Evaluation of Risk (B-SAFER) Test, which focuses on the analysis of risk relating to the perpetrator's history of violence and psychological functioning.

During the trial, the judge found the alleged victim to be very credible. However, Dr Silva's analysis revealed her testimony to be of low credibility, meaning it is likely she lied about the violence. Dr Silva believes these findings demonstrate the advantage of using structured tools and provide evidence for their consistent usage and implementation across the justice system.

As we have seen, Dr Silva does not shy away from tackling even the most difficult societal issues. By embracing multi-faceted approaches to understanding the complexity of issues such as child protection and domestic abuse against males, her research is providing the necessary understanding and evidence-base to improve interventions and make critical changes at the policy level.



Meet the researcher

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In 2016, Dr Teresa Silva was appointed Associate Professor of Criminology at Mid Sweden University. Throughout her career, Dr Silva's research has focused upon public health, psychology, psychiatry and criminology. Having previously worked in forensic psychology, she completed her PhD in 2009 at the University of Valencia, researching psychopathy within the Spanish juvenile justice system. Currently, Dr Silva is undertaking two active projects. The first is funded by Mid Sweden University and Örnskoldsvik Kommun, in which she is exploring the individual, social and situational factors that may be causing an increase in dysfunctional behaviour among children. The second project is exploring the victimisation experiences of men who have suffered abuse and violence from an intimate partner, and who struggle against the authorities, institutions and society that fail to believe them.

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FURTHER READING

T Silva, [Assessment of credibility of testimony in alleged intimate partner violence: A case report](#), Journal of Forensic Psychology Research and Practice, 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/24732850.2021.1945836>



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