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Article

“I am not a monster.” An affective–discursive analysis of men’s perspectives on their engagement in violence against women

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore how men perform masculinities in their relationships with women and how their behaviour is enabled and/or maintained in modern society. An affective–discursive approach was adopted to analyse six in-depth interviews with men who identified as perpetrators of violence in intimate relationships. The analysis portrays how heteronormative discourses on masculinity frame participants’ understanding of the violence they had committed. However, the most pervasive reference point in the participants’ accounts was the construct of the monster. The participants’ understanding of their violence had an intersectional angle as the monster figured differently in their stories, depending on their social positioning. The middle-class participants believed that the monster essentialised and dehumanised them and called for new ways to talk about violence. The working-class participants experienced their violence as masculinity out of control, referring to past trauma and the intensity of their love for their partners, while dodging accountability for their actions. The findings underline the need for discourses on knowledge that encourage men to take responsibility for their actions without being dehumanised.

Keywords

Perpetrators, masculinities, intimate partner violence, sexual violence, class, affect

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Iceland is often regarded as a front-runner in gender equality (Einarsdóttir, 2020), yet studies show that sexual violence, including intimate partner violence (IPV), is a serious problem in the country (Antonsdóttir & Gunnlaugsdóttir, 2013; Karlsdóttir & Arnalds, 2010; Reykjavík Police Department & City of Reykjavík, 2020). In this paper, we contribute to the scholarship on masculinities and sexual violence and use an affective–discursive framework to explore how men in Iceland who have committed acts of violence against their partners understand and relate to their actions. We draw on Kelly’s (1988, 1996) conceptualisation of sexual violence as spanning a spectrum and her insight that sexual violence is intimately connected with normative heterosexuality. Alcoff (2018) points out that acts of sexual violence take place in a discursive context that shapes what acts are considered violent and frames the victims’/survivors’ and perpetrators’ experiences. In Iceland, as in many other Western countries, sexual violence is interpreted from a range of discourses that are rooted in power structures that implicitly and explicitly signal men’s entitlement to women’s bodies, time and agency (e.g., Pétursdóttir & Rúdólfsson, 2022). As Kelly (1996) stresses, some common forms of violence are likely to be defined by men as acceptable behaviour (e.g., sexual harassment) yet constitute legally defined acts of gender-based violence. What feminist scholarship (Alcoff, 2018; Gavey, 2018; Kelly, 1988, 1996; Lazard, 2020) points out is that

sexual violence cannot be interrogated, except by exploring the gendered context of how it is addressed (or not), framed or even justified by perpetrators and society at large.

In this paper, we ask some feminist questions about men's understanding of violence in intimate relationships with women in Iceland. We are interested in how they relate (or do not relate) these acts to their identities and the affective logic nesting in the discourses on masculinity that they draw on. Our aim is to address the gender politics that facilitate violent action in IPV, as well as to make suggestions for a more just and equal world. The research questions that guide our work are as follows: How do men who have committed violent acts against a partner or a female friend make sense of their actions? How do they think the violent acts reflect on who they are and what they stand for?

Heteronormative masculinities and sexual violence in the Nordic context

Research on men who have been violent in intimate relationships (e.g., Dobash & Dobash, (1979); Gottzén, (2019); Hearn, (1998) Kelly, (1988)) portrays how violent acts are informed by heteronormative power relations. Traditional Western discourses have presented masculinity as agentive and entitled (to female bodies), whereas femininity, especially feminine sexuality, has been constructed as passive, with women playing the role of sexual gatekeepers who have to monitor the sexuality of men (Beres, 2007; Gavey, 2018; Lazard, 2020). In this regard, research points to how IPV can be a way to gain masculine recognition through control and a sense of power in relation to both the self and society (Messerschmidt, 2012; Ptacek, 2021).

Einarsdóttir (2020) argues that as Iceland has been branded a gender paradise, the idea of equality has become an integral part of the national identity. However, the neoliberal

discourse on equality, which flags how empowered women are, sits uneasily with research on sexual violence in Iceland. In this regard, studies show that 22% of women in Iceland have experienced IPV at some point in their lifetime since the age of 16 (Karlisdóttir & Arnalds, 2010). Police records report an increase in the number of rape and IPV cases (Jóhannsdóttir, 2021; Reykjavík Police Department & City of Reykjavík, 2020). Furthermore, the #MeToo movement in Iceland shows how difficult it has been for women to act against sexual violence (Pétursdóttir & Greta Rúdólfssdóttir, 2022). These inconsistencies between perceived levels of equality and high prevalence of IPV are in line with research findings from other Nordic countries and have been referred to as the “Nordic paradox” (Gracia & Merlo, 2016; Holma et al., 2021), which calls for research on the discursive logistics that sustain IPV.

Research shows that discourses on equality have informed constructions of masculinities in Iceland (Jóhannsdóttir & Gíslason, 2018). Younger generations of men embrace equality in relation to fatherhood and are also more ready to discuss and express their emotions.

However, similar to the situation in the other Nordic countries, traditional heterosexual masculine ideals prevail in relation to sex and dating in Iceland (de Boise, 2018; Gottzén, 2013; Gottzén & Berggren, 2021; Jóhannsdóttir & Gíslason, 2018; Ólafsdóttir & Kjaran, 2019). As already pointed out, these are the very same ideals that play a part in sustaining sexual violence.

Analyses of representations of sexual violence, especially rape, in public discourse and court cases in Sweden and Iceland show attempts to divert attention from explanations that focus on heteronormative structures and gendered power relations (Nilsson, 2019; Steinþórsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2019). Rape cases in the media have been framed in such a way that they cast doubts on whether the rape occurred, or it is implied that the victims/survivors are lying.

Victim blaming is persistent within the judicial system as manifested by the limited number of cases reported to the police that result in charges or in court proceedings. Conviction rates are low, and if charges are dropped, this is generally regarded as proof of false accusation by the victim/survivor (Bjarnason & Pétursdóttir, 2019; Nilsson, 2019; Sæmundsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2018). In those cases, the perpetrators are allegedly the ones who become the real victims.

Discursive presentations of masculinity and violence

Masculinities and femininities are fluid and contradictory (Connell, 2005; Paechter, 2007) and intersect with other social categories, such as class, race, age, sexual orientation, which are differently positioned within relations of power (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989).

Accordingly, whereas research points out that men from all segments of society engage in sexual violence (Phipps, 2009; Wacquant, 2009), discourses on sexual violence implicate and represent men differently, depending on their social positioning (Gavey, 2018; Lazard, 2020; Phipps, 2009). Traditionally, men from the working class and minority groups have been more easily aligned than other groups with danger and criminal behaviour, such as violence (de Boise, 2018; Gavey, 2018; Lazard, 2020; Phipps, 2009; Skeggs, 2004). In this regard, men from the working class are positioned as the “Other” in relation to men from the middle class, who are considered intrinsically respectable and morally superior. The privileges accorded to middle-class masculinities allow men characterised by such a status to temporarily take on the masculinities of the Other (e.g., through dress codes and behaviour) but without becoming the Other. In other words, respectable men can reframe their identities, perform as “badass” and cool, but if they are called out for their actions, they can retreat to their structural position of power and the comforts of normative heteromascularity. Bridges and Pascoe (2014) refer to this performance as hybrid masculinity. These men’s middle-class

status thus protects them from being cast as criminal or dangerous. This is reflected in how working-class and/or foreign men are more likely than men from other groups to be charged and convicted of rape (Antonsdóttir & Gunnlaugsdóttir, 2013; Phipps, 2009; Wacquant, 2009).

Lazard (2020) points out how in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement, the notion of perpetrators of sexual abuse as sexual predators has gained visibility. She argues that perpetrators are construed as inherently bad, deviant and abnormal and that heteronormative understanding of men as active and women as passive is perpetuated in the sexual predator discourse. She observes that the way in which this discourse individualises and pathologises perpetrators' behaviour removes it from its gendered patriarchal context. Perpetrators are monstrous men who prey on passive and vulnerable women. Women must be protected from violent men, but discourses and power structures that enable these acts to occur are not addressed.

In Western symbolism, the monster represents the unknown or the Other and is automatically perceived as dangerous or a threat (Shildrick, 2002). Ahmed (2004) points out that a person who is othered becomes abnormal, someone to be feared and avoided, someone “whose proximity becomes a crime against person as well as place” (p. 118). The monstrous Other becomes a sticky surface that attracts emotions, such as anxiety and fear. Occupying that position is something to be avoided and has grave consequences for the subject in question, who is “read as the origin of bad feeling” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 118). The subject's affective response (e.g., fear) thus attaches/fixes the perpetrator (a stigmatised body) to his subordinate position. As a mode of attachment, anxiety overwhelms other affective relations to an object.

Ahmed (2004) argues that anxiety resembles Velcro; it picks up objects in its proximity, and anxiety begets more anxiety .

People experience themselves and self-govern partly through how they measure up to the rules of society (Dean, 2010). In this regard, research from Sweden (Gottzén, 2013) shows that the shame attached to belonging to the category of the monster or rapist compels young men to either distance themselves from their actions (and the shame) or engage with their actions as morally wrong. Being ashamed and owning what they did constitutes an uncomfortable and anxious position that he refers to as “chafing masculinity” (Gottzén, 2019, p. 289-290). The discourse of the predator and its construct, the monster, thus discourages men from reflecting on their actions and masculinity. It is therefore not conducive to bringing changes, neither at the individual nor at the social level.

To explore men’s relation to violence, we adopt an affective–discursive approach (Ahall, 2018; Wetherell, 2012). We draw on Wetherell’s (2012, 2013) insight that discursive practices always have an affective element and are thus affective–discursive. In this sense, through their social meaning making, the discourses “provide the means for affect to travel” (Wetherell, 2012, p. 20), and it is difficult to separate discourse from affect. Certain discursive subject positions or truths may have an affective pull and also evoke different affective responses, which in turn either enable or constrain people’s capacity to act (Ahall, 2018; Ahmed, 2014). As pointed out by Wetherell et al. (2020), this explains how embodied states are entangled with meaning making. We find this approach useful as it draws attention to how taken-for-granted assumptions (e.g., about masculinity) draw the subject in, discursively and affectively. It also asks questions about how particular discursive truths and identity categories may be readily available to the subject, depending on one’s social

positioning. In other words, we are interested in both the larger socio-political context and affective logic that frame sexual violence, but we also want to consider violent men's embodied histories (their lives' trajectories) to address our research questions. We argue that all of these are configured in the men's approach to violence.

Method and data

Our study draws on the data collected by the first author as part of her PhD research. The data consist of interviews with men who all recognised their behaviour as violent. With the help of gatekeepers, prospective participants were recruited from the Icelandic prison system (men convicted of acts of violence), as well as through non-government organisations (NGOs) and a general call (men who self-identified as violent). The research was positively reviewed by the Ethical Board of the University of Iceland, and a formal request to conduct interviews was sent to the National Bioethics Committee and the Prison and Probation Administration. Permission was granted on the conditions that all participants should be able to give their informed consent and that their anonymity would be ensured. Due to the seriousness of the topic, finding participants in a small country such as Iceland (population = 368,000 in 2021) was a challenge. The analysis presented in this paper builds on interviews with six men, aged 18–35, who were willing to share their experiences of being violent towards a partner or a friend in an intimate relationship.

The interviewees were not offered any incentive for their participation. However, all of them mentioned that they wanted to contribute to discussions around gender-based violence and hoped that their stories could be means to “give back” in some way. Additionally, some of the participants were incarcerated at the time of the interviews and might have regarded the interview as a break from their mundane prison life. Other participants were generous enough

to meet with the researcher in their free time. All the men who answered the research call self-identified as cis and heterosexual. The violence that they had committed was different in type or form. The intimate relationships in question, as well as their nature and duration (friends who hooked up, a steady relationship, sharing a house), also varied.

Social class in Iceland is undertheorised, and no official definitions have been provided by authorities. We followed examples from recent research on social class in Iceland (see, e.g., Auðardóttir, 2022) and focused on the occupations and the educational levels of the participants, as well as their parents. The men classified as members of the working class did not pursue further studies after finishing compulsory education. Two of them had traditional Icelandic working-class careers (that do not require formal education), and the third was unemployed. All of them came from homes where one parent (or both parents) was an alcoholic (were alcoholics), and all had suffered neglect as children due to their home situation. Two of the middle-class men had finished secondary school, and the third was still in secondary school, aiming for higher education. One of them had finished a university degree. All of them had one parent (or both parents) who earned a university degree and held a middle-class job that normally provides an income above the legal minimum wage in Iceland. Additionally, these men did not mention neglect or their parents' problems with substance abuse. In line with this we categorise three of the men as belonging to the working class, and the other three as middle class.

In-depth interviews were conducted in 2019–2020, with each interview lasting from 90 to 150 minutes.¹ The aim of the interviews was to understand the participants' experiences from their own perspectives. Certain topics were highlighted and discussed in the natural order they appeared and deemed important by the participants, as follows: childhood; views on

equality, violence, and relationships; and the self-defined violent act (acts). The format of the interviews made it possible to respond to each participant as needed, creating trust between the participant and the interviewer (Clarke & Braun, 2013). The participants placed themselves in a vulnerable position when agreeing to discuss emotionally difficult and (in the eyes of society) condemned acts. Without their honest contributions, there would be no research. We also want to mention that IPV research is a difficult field to navigate in terms of emotional exhaustion. The first author thus followed the protocol for trauma workers and met with a counsellor for psychological debriefing, as well as with her supervisors to discuss the interviews, the research and the accompanying pressure of it all. This was necessary to safeguard her personal wellbeing and to obtain the support needed to continue the research.

In the analysis, we read the interview transcripts closely and repeatedly to draw out how the men constructed and related to violence and the violent man. We studied the discursive resources they drew on in those constructions and how these were entangled with affects such as fear, shame and anxiety. We refer to the participants' various engagements in violence and constructions of the violent man as affective–discursive to capture how the discourses on the knowledge available to the participants draw on social meaning making that is drenched in affect/emotion.

I am not a monster

Heteronormative discourses on masculinity were important for structuring the participants' understanding of the violence that they had committed. The most pervasive reference point in the interviews and in the participants' attempt to explain who they were (or not) was the discourse of the predator, in particular as it materialised in the monster. The monster figured differently in the participants' accounts, depending on their social position and the type and

gravity of their violent act. In other words, there was a clear intersectional angle concerning how the participants made discursive sense of their experiences and in their reflections on how and why the violent event had occurred. This also came across in how they affectively related to the violent event/s and to themselves as perpetrators of violence.

In our analysis, we draw out the different stances taken by the men in relation to violence and, in particular, how that was framed by the monster. These were as follows: i) *Middle-class anxiety about being associated with the monster*, some middle-class participants refused to identify with the monster as they thought that it essentialised them and portrayed them as inherently bad. ii) *Dodging/accepting accountability by referring to discourses on equality* identified how especially the middle-class participants used such discourses to reinterpret their actions and deal with the monster category. iii) *The monster as masculinity out of control: Past trauma and explosive love relations* was the most prevalent among the participants from a working-class background, with a history of violence and crime, and enabled them to dodge accountability by referring to their life history.

(i) *Middle-class anxiety about being associated with the monster*

The participants did not think that their identity and actions could be conflated with the monster. The middle-class men especially believed that it was a discursive category that stripped them of their humanity and separated them from their feelings about the violent event/s. The stigmatisation that followed the monster categorisation caused them great anxiety, which (often) stopped them from fully processing the violent event/s.

In the extract below, a middle-class participant describes his regret about his violent actions but does not think he merits the monster label. Regret calls for the ability to look back,

evaluate past events and empathise with the victim/survivor. Karl refers to his “regret” as a proof of his morality that separates him from the idea of the monster and proves his humanity. He is different from the monsters who are devoid of morality and neither understand nor regret what they have done.

Every time I have talked about it, I have said that what I did was wrong, and I regret it so much. But, at the same time (...), also to show that I am not a monster. I’m a human being. Of course, I regret what happened. (Karl)

It has been noted how connected “respectable masculinity” is with the white heterosexual middle class (de Boise, 2018; Gottzén, 2019; Phipps, 2009). Self-identifying as a respectable man thus grants the subject the comfort assigned to normative heteromascularity. The identification of what the men did as violent, is a disruption of their moral position. It is experienced as “uncomfortable” and as stripping them of their respectability (Reeser, 2017). The middle-class men described their experience of being associated with a violent act as less of a process than a sudden fall in their position. In this sense, they moved from their position of respectability straight into the monster category, where they became stuck. In the following excerpt, Einar captures the severity and the shock of being associated with the monster:

For me, to be branded like this, felt like a death sentence. I didn’t want to exist [anymore]. I felt like I always had to be the first person to tell them about what happened. It was constantly on my mind (...) I did not think anyone could experience this from me. Rapists are other people – bad. Perhaps some alarm bell would have

gone off sooner if I had known that everyone can rape. This is why this concept is so much [of a] problem. It's so monstrous. (Einar)

Einar felt that he had been given the “death sentence” as a good person. As it became public knowledge that he had been sexually violent with his partner, he felt as if the category of the monster had subsumed his identity. There was dissonance between how he had perceived himself and how he was judged. “My self-worth has always been that I am a nice human being; I am good”, he explained, trembling with emotion. He emphasised how he had considered himself not the type who raped but then realised that anyone can rape. Einar found it difficult to find himself on the abnormal side of the binary, in company with the monster, as Shildrick (2002) describes it.

Similarly, in the extract below, Karl describes how he could not relate to the idea of the monster. The stereotypical idea of the stranger who lurks in the dark before he attacks has nothing to do with him. He is not that kind of man:

When people think about violence like this. About rape. And also (...), just when people hear the word rapist. Then they think about this man who jumps out of bushes and attacks the person in question. (Karl)

Einar and Karl described how they lost control of the narrative of the violent act when the news spread in their social networks and how this further added to their state of shame and anxiety and loss of respectability. Einar explained, “I was scared of everyone, sure that everyone thought of me as a creep.” They felt alone and relegated to the category of the Other as their friends had turned their backs on them. The creep is a close relation to the monster

and also a product of the predatory discourse. No one wants to be near the creep, and no one wants to be it. In his reflections on how he could distance himself from the shame and discomfort attached to embodying the monster, Karl emphasised the importance of differentiating between himself as a person (good) and his actions (bad). He was not his monstrous actions: “Victims are not the violence they suffer. I also don’t think I am the violence I committed.” The binary thinking that Shildrick (2002) identifies gives him no space to process what had happened.

Gottzén (2013) argues that shame in this context is connected not only to men’s fears about how society will react to their shameful acts but also to their aversion to being identified with the monstrous subjectivity of the “violator”. However, their insistence that they should not be regarded as monsters but as men who have used violence, serves to minimise the violence when the participants cannot even use the words that capture their violent deeds. When the violence can only be thought about from the vantage point of the monster, men are discouraged from tackling their actions, which prevents them from “owning” what they have done.

To sum up, the middle-class men felt that the monster essentialised and dehumanised them, so they tried to escape the categorisation, with all the anger and anxiety stuck to it. They pointed out the missing discourse that could have allowed men to take responsibility for what they did yet let them continue with their lives and retain some sense of humanity.

(ii) Dodging/accepting accountability by referring to discourses on equality

The participants had different discourses available to them to frame the event and their responsibility for what happened and thus to evade the sticky category of the monster. In this

regard, middle-class men appropriated discourses on equality to dodge accountability and placed part of the blame for the violent event on the victim.

Einar appropriated feminist rhetoric in his attempt to deconstruct the idea of traditional masculinity and recognised many of its qualities as undesirable. He related more to the warmth and openness traditionally associated with femininities and valued discourses on equality, where men can relate to women as equals (de Boise, 2018; de Boise & Hearn, 2017; Gottzén & Berggren, 2021; Jóhannsdóttir & Gíslason, 2018).

Traditionally, men have a hard time showing their feelings and affection. It's considered a weakness, and they are supposed to be strong, which is ridiculous. (...) but I often felt like it was more of a safe zone, [for me when hangin out with] a close female friend. (Einar)

Einar considered himself attuned to the feminine psyche in his communication with women and thus could not understand how he could have violated his partner. "It was very difficult for me to believe her experience, that she could have been afraid of me." For him, he had been misunderstood. The act had not been intentional, and reflecting on what had happened filled him with fear. "This is so hard to live with; there is always this fear that you don't know exactly what happened." The act of violence was explained as a misunderstanding and thus not seriously dealt with.

In contrast, Karl took selective responsibility when processing the events that happened. He clearly stated the importance of believing the plaintiff yet simultaneously cherry-picked the parts of her account that he was willing to believe, excluding the most serious part of the sexual assault. In the quote below, he empathises with how miserable he had made her feel:

I don't know where I would be if I had denied it; my conscience, I think I couldn't bear making someone feel like that and then say she's just a liar. (Karl)

Later in the interview, he contradicted himself as he challenged her account of the rape. He claimed that he did not believe the plaintiff's full account and that she had added some elements to the story that he did not agree with. "It doesn't come up right away; it's something that is added to the case later." He said that this "raises some questions" even though he understands that "people experience (...) things very differently".

We noticed that Einar found it extremely difficult to use the term "rape" for his violent acts. He found it important to define violence in a new way.

I ask myself, seriously, is it OK to use the same word for something that is a misunderstanding (...) and the most brutal violence you can think of? (Einar)

A recurring point he made in the interview was a call for a new framing of rape, one that would include ordinary men:

Misunderstanding in sex is something that can happen to everyone. You don't have to be inherently evil (...). Even though you never thought you would hurt anyone, this can happen. (Einar)

“Rape” is a sensating word, pulsing with pain and anxiety, but necessary for engaging in the seriousness of the violent act/s. Jón similarly described his initial difficulties in categorising his actions as rape:

Of course, I see it as violence, and I feel it’s difficult to use the word *rape*, but of course it is rape because I force myself on someone who is asleep. (Jón)

In many ways, Jón’s behaviour is in line with hybrid masculinity, as identified by Jóhannsdóttir and Gíslason (2018) in the context of Iceland. On the surface, young men accept women’s rights and embrace new modes of being as men, but underneath, they feel entitled to traditional values of masculinity (e.g., men’s wants and needs trump those of women). This was manifested in Jón’s hesitancy to recognise what he did as rape.

Jón described a violation against a female friend, which he initially was unable to categorise as such. However, it left him with an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach, which he later took as a sign that what he did was wrong. He was the only participant who at the time of the interview did not dodge responsibility for his action. Looking back, he could recognise his thought pattern and how he at that time evaded responsibility by thinking:

We are here together. In bed. Even though you said no before. You’ll just throw me off you if you don’t want this. (Jón)

Jón was neither publicly outed nor charged for his violent acts but was confronted by their gravity in a counselling session. Jón was able to look back and explore the power relations that resulted in his violation of his girlfriend. He had acquainted himself with feminist ideas

about sexual violence and reached a clear understanding of what violence is and how it affects others. He explained, “If you hurt somebody, it is important to go to them and take responsibility, to own your shit.” He confessed to his sexual partner that he now recognised his actions as sexual violence and thereby made himself vulnerable. For him, this was the only way he could overcome old harmful patterns of sexual behaviour and thereby show that he had changed. Jón’s development in terms of processing his behaviour aligns with Gottzén’s (2019) conceptualisation of chafing, where men perceive their former violent self as failing to live up to new standards of behaviour. Their history of violent actions presents a discomfort that stays with them.

To sum up, middle-class men appropriated discourses on equality and cherry-picked the actions for which they felt accountable (e.g., rape). As they were unwilling to face the gravity of their actions and did not understand how they had forced their way into someone’s personal space, they were unable to adopt affective practices, such as empathy with the victim/survivor. Only Jón attempted to face up with his violent deeds and used the appropriate words to describe them. Having performed acts that should be unthinkable in societies of equality, the participants had to contemplate that perhaps they were in a position of power in relation to the women in their lives. They had committed rape and thus lived with the discomfort that followed; the chafing sensation (Gottzén, 2019) becomes their emotional baggage.

(iii) The monster as masculinity out of control: Past trauma and explosive love relations

The monster figured differently in the accounts of working-class men, especially those with a history of crime and violent actions, compared with the accounts of most men from the middle class. They identified the monster with masculinity but perceived it as masculinity out

of control. For them, it was also important that we knew they were not the worst monsters. They did not relate the monster to a lack of respectability and did not describe such dissonance between how they perceived themselves and how they were judged, but discussed what made them lose control and therefore act monstrously. They drew on discourses where the cause of what happened was rooted in their life history but were simultaneously adamant that the violence they had committed was a reaction to the situation in which they had found themselves.

All participants described their adverse childhood experiences, such as growing up with alcoholism and/or neglect/abuse. They regarded those experiences as reasons for their substance abuse, which in turn made them lose control. When they lost control, it was not them but the drink or the drug acting:

I wouldn't say I was a violent man, but I did do *this*. It has a lot to do with my drug addiction. (...) it was mainly that. Not mainly. That was it. (Ragnar)

As a way of explaining their violent acts, they circled back to past events for answers. For example, in the excerpt below, Tómas perceives his anger as resulting from trauma. His anger causes him to lose control:

...because of my childhood and all that, which is not an excuse; I am not excusing bad behaviour. But it's the reason why I get very angry sometimes. (...) it builds up, and every now and then, it explodes. Still, I'm always about to explode. (Tómas)

Referring to previous trauma and reflecting on himself as damaged goods helped the participant make sense of his anger. However, at the same time it made it difficult for him to accept responsibility for it. He refers to the trauma he experienced to explain that he does not know how to deal with the feelings of anger that made him lose control; thus his trauma is unresolved. As he does not have the tools needed to deal with it, the trauma becomes a part of his psyche. Research shows that men who use violence have often been exposed to trauma themselves at some point in their life, even though not all men who experience trauma use violence (Jewkes et al., 2015). This is further explicated by Ragnar in the extract below:

I had broken my biggest principle. I saw this when I was younger and took it with me as baggage in life, and I was never going to do these things (to use violence). So, my behaviour really broke me. I have beaten myself up for this a lot, and I still do today.
(Ragnar)

There were many references to traditional heteronormative discourses in the way that gender relations were discussed and explained (e.g., narratives about romance). Emotions such as love or lack of love featured strongly to explain what happened. For instance, Tómas said, “...regarding my girlfriend, I could start a religion around her. Just worship her.”

The love that Tómas described was intense. He put his girlfriend on a pedestal and thereby dehumanised her. She was not a person anymore but a goddess, and he related to her as such. The men defined love and anger in quite similar ways. Both feelings were about entitlement and possession. Love could so easily flip and become anger. In the following excerpt, Óskar similarly describes his girlfriend as addictive and the violence as resting in the intense relationship that had formed between them:

She was just like heroin to me. The relationship was extremely close. (...) The love was extremely strong. But the relationship was tumultuous and destructive. (Óskar)

The way that some participants framed their relations with their partners served to shift part of the blame to their girlfriends. Tómas described his girlfriend as co-dependent and a bit obsessed. She was not playing her part right because when he cheated on her, “she was too quick to forgive” – she should have left him already. Óskar did the same in his description of his relationship as “tumultuous and destructive”. Even though he loved his girlfriend, they never stood a chance of being happy together because their “love was toxic” and their communication was sometimes aggressive, leading her to assault him as well:

She was assaulting me, throwing things (...). I was (...) holding her, and then I released her. Then she started again, destroying things and assaulting me (...). I was just going to show her that I could hit her as well. (Óskar)

In this way, the participants saw their girlfriends as complicit in the violence. This was particularly apparent in the case of Ragnar, who claimed that he never loved his girlfriend and recognised her love for him as needy. He did not shoulder responsibility for his violent act/s as he felt that she should have left him alone.

I started the relationship under false pretences. Because she had an apartment, but I was really never that into her. I’m all messed up, and she attaches herself to me. Trying to save me (...), she always comes to pick me up when I’m wasted. Takes me

home, and then I was sort of forced to be with her even though I didn't want to, and I'm always trying to get away, and she is always looking for me. (Ragnar)

Ragnar described how he was “forced to be with her (the girlfriend)”. He metaphorically referred to her as “cancer” as he could not get rid of her. Ragnar minimised and justified the events that happened as somehow inevitable, as he did not love his girlfriend yet she did not want to let him go. She was no less at fault than him; thus, he justified what happened, without accepting responsibility.

To sum up, the men referred to their previous trauma as causing their (uncontrollable) anger. They did not accept responsibility for their anger/actions but framed the actions in such a way that they could dodge accountability. They deemed their violence as originating from the intensity of their love (or lack of love) for their partner. It was so intense that it easily consumed them and became anger. They were concerned that their behaviour should fit discourses on masculinity, that is, the man who is in control of himself. The monster is masculinity out of control, and when they lose control, it is not their fault.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we have explored how men who have committed violent acts against a partner or a female friend make sense of their actions. The overarching discursive construction that all the participants brought up and engaged in was that of the monster, or the monsterring of violent men. The monster is a sticky category and affects how others relate to the monstrous subject, as well as how the subjects relate to themselves. The monster evokes feelings such as fear (from others), but at the same time, the subject is fearful of becoming a monster, which causes it anxiety. The participants' experience of the monster did have a clear intersectional

angle as it figured differently in their stories, depending on their social status and life history. This came across in the different ways that they made discursive sense of their actions, as well as their varying affective responses to the violent events and the image of themselves as perpetrators.

The middle-class participants felt stigmatised by the monster, which served to essentialise them as inherently bad people. They experienced a fall in their social position, creating dissonance between how they perceived themselves and how they were judged by society. Filled with anxiety, they dodged responsibility by cherrypicking which parts of the narrative to believe, unwilling to identify their actions as violence. In contrast, the working-class participants experienced their violence as loss of control, a reaction to a situation that made them “lose it”, when masculinity is about restraint. In their attempts to rationalise and make sense of what happened, they drew on the therapeutic discourses that located the problem as out of their control. They framed their experiences in a way that helped them question their responsibility – monsters are inherently bad, but they just lost control.

Perpetrators are not likely to step into the monster box willingly; in their minds, they are not the archetypical villain, so why should they? The othering of the monster in contemporary mainstream discussion makes it difficult to relate to it (Ahmed, 2014 ; Nilsson, 2019) and shifts the focus from the violent acts and the social context that enables violent actions to the individual perpetrator. The monster, as a product of predatory discourse, thus plays a role in individualising a societal problem; in psychologising and pathologising the perpetrator, it becomes the cause, and thus, there is no need to look further (Alcoff, 2018; Hearn, 1998; Nilsson, 2019; Steinþórsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2019). Finally, the monster discourse with its

clear binaries between good and bad men does not contribute to an understanding of why men known as good guys do bad things (Nilsson, 2019).

The feeling of having hurt someone is an inescapable part of shouldering responsibility for one's violent behaviour. This has been demonstrated in previous research, where middle-class men experience loss of respectability when outed as violent (Phipps, 2009), as well as the feeling of being stuck with a chafing sensation of pain (Gottzén, 2019) or being in a position of (previously unknown) discomfort (Reeser, 2017). Perpetrators cannot expect that they can leave their emotional baggage behind – rather, they need to be reminded that the anguish they feel is what makes them human; their actions had real effects on their victim/survivor trying to heal the wounds suffered.

Men's discursive framing of their past violent reactions to women has implications for how they affectively relate to the events and whether and how they want to change. The juxtaposition of the different stances taken by the men with their repugnance towards the monster draws out how their social position plays a part in how they make sense of what happened and affectively relate to the violent acts they had committed. We acknowledge that due to the low number of the participants, this study's results should only be interpreted as indicative and that in-depth research on the subject, using a larger sample, is needed. However, the participants' stories offer insights into the gender politics that facilitate violent action, particularly IPV. Their accounts highlight how discourses on masculinity are informed not just by gender relations but also by other categories that distinguish one group from another in society.

It was difficult to recruit men from the upper (middle) class for this study, which in itself was interesting. In the #MeToo movement, women called out privileged men and how they felt entitled to women's bodies in private spaces (Pétursdóttir & Rúdólfssdóttir, 2022). Up to that point, these men had been “untouchable” due to the distancing of accepted masculinity from sexual violence and IPV. In this regard, we are disappointed that our research results show the same blind spots (lack of engagement of men in privileged positions) as we observe in society. We thus call for more research and ingenuity in attempts to ensure these men's participation in studies on sexual violence and IPV.

We also call for new discourses on interpersonal violence that are approachable and supportive for all. Specifically, we propose a discourse that listens to victims/survivors and recognises their pain and need for justice yet also encourages perpetrators to accept responsibility for their violent acts. They would have to live with the pain of having caused someone harm but should also be allowed to move on and become better men. Such a discourse opens new possibilities for perpetrators and individuals experiencing violent thoughts to face their problems head on and seek the help they need. We recommend that efforts to help perpetrators of violence cater to the different needs of individuals. These initiatives must have an intersectional angle and take into consideration the different affective responses of individuals, according to their social positions and the various representations of associated masculinities. Finally, it is important that professionals working with perpetrators of violence show compassion while being mindful of the latent power structures and gendered dynamics of heterosexual relationships.

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Notes

All interviews were conducted in Icelandic. The data extracts in the article have been translated to English by the authors, with help from proof readers, for the purposes of this article. The extracts in the original language appear in supplementary material.

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