Gendered and Structural Violence

The discourse on intimate partner violence in Iceland:
Structural problems and the development of the self

Katrín Ólafsdóttir

Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor

November 2022

School of Education

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Kynjað og kerfisbundið ofbeldi

Orðræðan um ofbeldi í nánum samböndum á Íslandi: Kerfislæg vandamál og þróun sjálfsmyndar

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Abstract

This research is a contribution to critical feminist scholarship on intimate partner violence (IPV). The project adopts the framework of affective–discursive practices to understand how violence thrives and is discursively maintained in Icelandic society, with a special focus on the project of heterosexuality and men who have been violent towards women. The research questions guiding the work are as follows: How do men who have committed violent acts against their female partners make sense of their actions, and how does the experience influence and contribute to the formation of the self, ideas on masculinity and perception of violence? How are normative heterosexual identities constructed and regulated in the context of Iceland, and how does the process relate to violence? How are hidden power relations, produced by (and inherent in) heterosexuality and IPV, maintained, and how do they become part of one's identity?

Critical feminist scholarship points out that IPV must be understood in relation to its gendered context and gender power imbalances, emphasising the importance of an intersectional lens. The mainstream discussion on IPV is generally focused on how well the violent act in question fits normative ideas about such violence, enforcing a stereotypical idea how 'real' or commonly recognised violence is manifested. Furthermore, the discursive framing of violence shapes the experiences of perpetrators and victims/survivors alike. This research draws on Liz Kelly's and Linda Alcoff's understanding of violence as spanning a spectrum where the impact of the violent act on the victim/survivor is central.

The theoretical lens of affective–discursive practices highlights how accepted norms (e.g., violence and gender norms) draw one in, both affectively and discursively. In other words, the research takes interest in both the discursive/cultural/social context of IPV and the affective logic embedded in the participants' understanding. The research data consist of a total of 35 hours of individual interviews with perpetrators of IPV, victims/survivors of IPV and group interviews with young people about relationships and consent.

The results of the research project show, first, that young people draw heavily on heteronormative discourses and gendered norms in their understanding of consent in intimate relationships. Second, the research exposes the differences between the perpetrators' and the victims/survivors' perspectives and understandings of IPV. The perpetrators focus on the individual acts of violence that are unlawful, whereas the victims/survivors experience their relationships as characterised by abuse. The relationship itself becomes an affective–discursive practice informing their experience of violence. Shame also figures strongly in their narratives, traceable through its

regulatory role in sustaining heteronormative practices. Finally, the discursive construction of the violent man as a monster is frequently brought up by the participants who identify themselves as perpetrators. The monster is a sticky category, representing the unknown Other; it attracts emotions such as fear and anxiety, affecting how others relate to the monstrous subject, as well as how the subject relates to oneself. Consequently, it discourages perpetrators from reflecting on their actions and masculinity and accepting responsibility for their violent behaviour. The participants' experience of being identified as monsters does have a clear intersectional angle as it figures differently in their stories, depending on their social status and life histories.

The research project highlights the latent power structures and gendered dynamics of heterosexual relationships and IPV in a country often regarded as a frontrunner in gender equality. The results contribute to the ongoing empirical and theoretical conversations about perpetrators of violence and masculinity, increasing the understanding of the subject matter by approaching IPV from the perspective of affective–discursive practices. The findings may further advise policymakers and inform the public debate on IPV in Iceland, as well as have a beneficial impact on the work of those concerned with the prevention of gender-based violence and the implementation of intervention measures.

Útdráttur

Kynjað og kerfisbundið ofbeldi

Orðræðan um ofbeldi í nánum samböndum á Íslandi: Kerfislæg vandamál og þróun sjálfsmyndar

Rannsókn þessi er framlag höfundar til krítískra femínískra fræða um ofbeldi í nánum samböndum (ONS). Verkefnið byggir á aðferðum hrif- og orðræðugreiningar með áherslu á gjörninga (e. *affective discursive practices*) til þess að öðlast skilning á því hvernig ofbeldi þrífst og er viðhaldið í íslensku samfélagi, en sjónum er sérstaklega beint að hinu gagnkynhneigða regluverki og karlkyns gerendum ofbeldis. Rannsóknarspurningarnar sem reynt er að svara eru eftirfarandi: Hvernig skilja menn sem beitt hafa maka sinn ofbeldi verk sín og hvernig mótar reynslan sjálfsmynd þeirra, karlmennskuhugmyndir og viðhorf til eigin verka? Hvernig mótast hið normatífa, gagnkynhneigða sjálf í íslensku samfélagi, hvernig er því viðhaldið og hvernig tengist það ferli ofbeldi? Hvernig er duldum valdatengslum – sem sköpuð eru af (og rótgróin í) gagnkynhneigðu regluverki og ONS – viðhaldið og hvernig verða þau hluti af sjálfsmyndinni?

Krítísk femínísk fræði benda á að ONS verði að skoða í samhengi við valdatengsl og kynjaðar víddir ofbeldisins, með áherslu á samtvinnun (e. *intersectionality*). Almenn umræða um ONS snýst gjarnan um það hversu vel tiltekið ofbeldisatvik fellur að viðteknum hugmyndum samfélagsins um slíkt ofbeldi, sem um leið rennir frekari stoðum undir steríótýpískar hugmyndir um hvað felist í „alvöru“ (þ.e. samfélagslega viðurkenndu) ofbeldi. Þessi orðræða um ofbeldi mótar bæði reynslu gerenda og þolenda ONS. Þessi rannsókn byggir á skilningi Liz Kelly og Lindu Alcoff á ofbeldi sem skala, þar sem áhrif obeldisverknaðarins á þolanda eru í forgrunni.

Verkefnið byggir á aðferðum hrif- og orðræðugreiningar sem beinir sjónum okkar að því hvernig fyrirframgefnar hugmyndir um ofbeldi, kyngervi o.fl. móta skilning okkar og vekja með okkur ólíkar tilfinningar. Með öðrum orðum þá beinir rannsóknin sjónum að þeim orðræðum og hrifum sem birtast í frásögnum þátttakenda, og þeir nýta sér til þess að skilja og greiða úr reynslu sinni, en rannsóknin leggur áherslu á að skoða menningarlegt og samfélagslegt samhengi ONS. Rannsóknin byggir á yfir 35 klukkustundum af einstaklingsviðtölum við gerendur ofbeldis, þolendur ofbeldis og hópviðtölum við ungt fólk um sambönd og samþykki.

Niðurstöður rannsóknaverkefnisins sýna í fyrsta lagi að skilningur ungs fólks á samþykki í kynlífi í nánum samböndum litast af kynjuðum viðmiðum og normatífri gagnkynhneigðri orðræðu. Í öðru lagi sýnir rannsóknin skýran mun á upplifun og skilningi gerenda og þolenda á ONS. Gerendur einblína gjarnan á einstök (ólögleg) ofbeldisatvik á meðan þolendur greina frá sambandi sem einkennist af stöðugu ofbeldi. Sambandið sjálft verður

þannig að hrif- og orðræðugjörningi sem reynsla þátttakenda af ofbeldi byggir á. Í frásögnum þátttakenda skein skömmin í gegn, en stýrandi mátt hennar mátti skýrt greina í því regluverki sem viðheldur normatífri gagnkynhneigð. Að lokum kom orðræðan um menn sem beita ofbeldi í nánum samböndum sem „skrímsli“ ítrekað fram hjá þátttakendum sem skilgreina sig sem gerendur ofbeldis. Skrímslið er klístruð vera, það er fulltrúi hins óþekkta og verður því fyrir öðrun. Utan á það hlaðast tilfinningar á borð við ótta og kvíða, sem hefur svo áhrif á það hvernig aðrir nálgast og tengja við hina skrímslavæddu sjálfsveru, sem og hvernig sjálfsveran upplifir sig. Þetta gerir það að verkum að gerendur eru tregir til að líta í eigin barm og ígrunda gjörðir sínar, horfast í augu við hugmyndir sínar um karlmennsku og taka ábyrgð á ofbeldisfullri hegðun sinni. Reynsla viðmælenda af því að sýna af sér hegðun sem fellur undir viðteknar hugmyndir um „skrímslið“ ber skýr merki samtvinnunar þar sem það birtist okkur á ólíkan hátt í frásögnum þátttakenda, eftir félagslegri stöðu og lífshlaupi viðkomandi.

Rannsóknarverkefnið sýnir glöggt dulin valdatengsl og kynjaðar víddir gagnkynhneigðra sambanda og ONS í landi sem gjarnan er álitið skara fram úr í kynjajafnrétti. Niðurstöðurnar eru þekkingarlegt og fræðilegt framlag til umræðunnar um gerendur ofbeldis og karlmennsku, en þær auka og dýpka skilning okkar á vandanum með því að nálgast ONS frá sjónarhorni hrif- og orðræðukenninga. Þá gagnast niðurstöðurnar stjórnvöldum og í stefnumótun, þær eru gagnlegar þeim sem vinna að forvörnum og meðferðarúrræðum í tengslum við kynbundið ofbeldi, auk þess að auðga samfélagslega umræðu um ONS á Íslandi.

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List of Papers

The thesis is based on the following articles. As the first author, I collected the data and led the conceptual work, analyses and writing of all three articles.

Article 1

Ólafsdottir, K., & Kjaran, J. I. (2019). "Boys in power": Consent and gendered power dynamics in sex. *Boyhood Studies*, *12*(1), 38–56. https://doi.org/10.3167/bhs.2019.120104

Article 2

Ólafsdóttir, K., & Rúdólfsdóttir, A. G. (2022). "I am not a monster." An affective–discursive analysis of men's perspectives on their engagement in violence against women. *Feminism & Psychology,* https://doi.org/10.1177/09593535221105341

Article 3

Ólafsdóttir, K., & Hearn, J. (2022). "How did this happen?": Making retrospective, present and prospective sense of intimate relationships where men have been violent. Accepted for publication in *Feminist frontiers*, forthcoming.

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1 Introduction

This research project, titled "Gendered and Structural Violence – The discourse on intimate partner violence in Iceland: Structural problems and the development of the self", is a contribution to feminist scholarship on intimate partner violence (IPV). Adopting the framework of affective–discursive practices, my research aims to provide an understanding of how violence thrives and is discursively maintained in Icelandic society, with a special focus on the project of heterosexuality and men who have been violent towards women.

The idea for this project was born from my collaboration with my first supervisor, Dr Jón Ingvar Kjaran, a friend and former colleague when I was teaching in upper secondary school. Both of us were interested in research on the problem of male violence against a partner. At the time, Jón had started a project, researching on perpetrators of violence, and encouraged me to join him in his efforts and apply for admission to the doctoral programme at the University of Iceland, School of Education, something that I will be forever grateful to him. Without his encouragement, I would not have thought of the path of doctoral studies for myself. In collaboration with Jón, I applied for research funds, resulting in a fully funded PhD position, which I have had the honour of filling for the past four years.

IPV has a high prevalence worldwide (World Health Organization, 2021); unfortunately, Iceland is no exception. Research in Iceland shows that 24% of the women have been exposed to sexual violence and 22% have been exposed to IPV at some point in their lives since the age of 16 (Karlsdóttir & Arnalds, 2010). Additionally, statistics from the police in Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland, show frequent police calls relating to IPV (Reykjavík Police Department & City of Reykjavík, 2021). This is somewhat paradoxical in a country that holds the first place in gender equality rankings (Forum, 2021) and is regarded as a frontrunner in women's rights, as men's violence against women is considered "the ultimate manifestation of unequal power relations between women and men" (Einarsdóttir, 2020, p. 147).

The mainstream discussion on IPV has a clear gendered aspect, focusing on how well the violent act in question fits societal norms for such violence (Alcoff, 2018). The more serious the violent act is perceived to be and the more damaging the violence, the more likely it is to be identified as violence in the eyes of the public, as it fits the stories that people see on the news. In this research project, I draw on Kelly's (1988, 1996) and Alcoff's (2018) understanding of violence as a continuum to allow different manifestations and experiences of IPV, making the impact of the violence on the victim/survivor central. Previous research has often focused on individual factors (e.g., past trauma or substance

abuse) when explaining the problem of IPV. However, research informed by feminist epistemology has shifted the focus to the societal context of such violence (see e.g. Alcoff, 2018; Gavey, 2018; Hearn, 1998; Lazard, 2020). In this spirit, this research project focuses on how IPV operates in relation to gendered societal contexts and power imbalances.

The problem of IPV lies at the heart of the presented research – to try and understand it, what motivates and drives it, and how it is constructed. Initially, I wanted to explore violence through the eyes of men who had been violent towards women, and that was where my journey began. From that moment on, the project has grown organically, with my curiosity shifting my focus from one question to the next. I started by interviewing 18–40-year-old men, inside and outside prison, who self-identified as violent, simultaneously asking myself how young people understood relationships, communication and consent in intimate relationships in general. This resulted in my conducting friendship group interviews with young adults. Due to the emotional stress of interviewing men about their violent acts, I found myself in need of talking to victims/survivors of similar violence to ground my research, as well as myself. All of these resulted in over 35 hours of recorded interviews. In analysing the data, I wanted to use a new theoretical approach, focusing on affective–discursive practices, to uncover new perspectives on the problem at hand. Through the process of analysing the data, writing peer-reviewed articles and theorising my results, the focus of the thesis project grew sharper, culminating in this summarising Kappa, where I clarify how this research project adds to existing knowledge on IPV.

This research is very important to me. Identifying as a feminist, I chose the research perspective of this thesis project accordingly. Feminist ideology is transformative at its core, and for me, working on this project has certainly been just that. It is my hope that my results may also be transformative for others. As a child, I was taught social justice and feminist ideology, and it has made me who I am today. Following in the footsteps of second-wave feminists, I have grown to understand that the personal is always political. I believe that the research that I am doing is political in the sense of addressing systemic problems in our society at large. At the same time, it is personal in terms of addressing the violence experienced by women, a group to which I identify as part of. I add the qualifier 'critical' to my feminist approach in order to signal my attempt to radically transform the discipline of the mainstream feminist approach. Consequently, this research is conducted from the perspective of critical feminist theory, emphasising gender and power, and how it relates to IPV.

1.1 The aim of the research project

The overall objective of this research project is to explore the problem of IPV from a critical feminist perspective, using affective–discursive practices as the theoretical framework. When researching IPV, it is important to account for the different forms that

it can take, as well as to be mindful of the intersectional angle of violence and how it is experienced, in order to understand it better. Violence intersects with different social and identity categories, such as class and sexual orientation, to name a few, which are positioned differently within relations of power (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). Hence, individuals who experience or engage in violence are positioned in varied ways by the discourses on violence that implicate and represent individuals differently, depending on their social positioning.

In this project, I bring special attention to the experiences of men who have been violent in intimate relationships, as well as the structures that facilitate and infuse such violence in Icelandic society. To obtain answers, I collected interviews with different groups: friendship group interviews with youth (18 years old), individual in-depth interviews with men who self-identified as having been violent in an intimate relationship (aged 18–40) and individual in-depth interviews with female victims/survivors of IPV (aged 20–40), describing their experiences of abusive relationships. All of the interviews touched on common themes: relationships, communication, sex and experiences of IPV, providing different perspectives on the problem at hand.

To shed light on the research objective, the following questions guided my research:

1. How do men who have committed violent acts against their female partners make sense of their actions, and how does the experience influence and contribute to the formation of the self, ideas on masculinity and perception of violence?

2. How are normative heterosexual identities constructed and regulated in the context of Iceland, and how does the process relate to violence?

3. How are hidden power relations, produced by (and inherent in) heterosexuality and IPV, maintained, and how do they become part of one's identity?

The theoretical object of this research is to gain new perspectives on the problem of IPV, as well as to challenge existing knowledge through the use of new methodological and theoretical approaches. Empirically, the objective is to add knowledge to the field of IPV and about men who have been violent towards their intimate partners, as well as to increase the understanding of the subject matter. The findings may also inform further research in the field. Practically, the outcome of the research may advise professionals and policymakers by providing useful information, as well as have a beneficial impact on the work of those concerned with the prevention of gender-based violence and the implementation of intervention measures.

1.2 Originality of the research project

A large body of qualitative research on IPV has been conducted in the context of Nordic societies, focusing on gendered power dynamics and heterosexual masculinity norms. Research on men who have been violent towards women is an established field of study in Nordic countries but is only an emerging field in the context of Iceland. This research's originality lies first and foremost in bridging gaps in the knowledge on the subject matter, as this study is among the first qualitative research projects to critically examine IPV and perpetrators of violence in the context of supposedly 'gender-equal' Iceland.

Second, the originality of the research lies in its theoretical approach, focusing on affective–discursive practices, a combination of post-structural discourse analysis and theories on affect, and how they relate to IPV. Previous research on IPV and perpetrators has focused on both individual and structural factors when explaining the problem, using a range of theories. However, a lot of issues remain to be uncovered with the theoretical perspective of the present research. Focusing on affective–discursive practices gives researchers´ an opportunity to add the dimension of the affective to the discursive for a richer and deeper interpretation of the data. Working with interdisciplinary feminist theories such as post-structuralism and affective–discursive practices can expand our knowledge of IPV, gaining new perspectives on the problem at hand.

Finally, the multi-layered dataset of the research is unusual. It is my belief that based on a three-dimensional data corpus (the three different groups of interviewed participants), the presented research will provide meaningful insights into the problem of IPV, highlighting the different understandings (and perspectives) of the participants.

1.3 Overview of the thesis

This thesis consists of seven chapters. In Chapter 1, the introduction, I discuss the problem of IPV, which lies at the heart of my research, as well as my research objectives. In Chapter 2, I explain how I understand the concept of violence against women, followed by a discussion on the theoretical foundation of the work in Chapter 3, which is important for the conceptual understanding of the project as a whole. In Chapter 4, I discuss the research that relates to the problem of IPV, the heterosexual project and masculinity, with a special focus on the context of Nordic societies. In Chapter 5, the method chapter, I thoroughly explain the process of finding participants for the research, as well as conducting and analysing the interviews. Researching difficult topics with vulnerable groups requires special attention to ethical issues; thus, Chapter 6 is dedicated to ethical concerns in relation to the research project. Finally, in Chapter 7, I discuss the results presented in each of the articles written as part of this research project, followed by Chapter 7, where I discuss what I have learned, as well as the strengths and the limitations of the research project, and ideas for future research.

2 Understanding violence against women

Following the efforts of first-wave feminists in the early 20th century, violence against women was officially deemed unacceptable by the state in the Global North, which opened legal possibilities for women who suffered violence at the hands of their husbands (Walby, 1990). Later, through the efforts of second-wave feminists, rape was framed as violence. Informing the mainstream debate on what would count as rape and who could be a victim of rape, they focused on the systemic level when theorising about the power of patriarchy (Bjørnholt, 2020). Historically, a broader range of forms of violence has been recognised, with acts previously not regarded as violence now perceived as such (Hearn et al. 2022). Violence against women is no exception.

Violence is a central concept for this research project, focusing on violence against women in intimate relationships. In the context of this study, violence is any coercion (verbal, physical or other) that one partner imposes on the other to whom he or she is bonded through emotion. This is an understanding that takes its point of departure from feminist theory, aiming to include the broad spectrum of violence. The idea of violence as a spectrum originates in Kelly's book, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (1988). In her research on women and sexual abuse, she realised that the entire range of abuse described by the participating women was not reflected in state laws or fully captured by researchers through the analytical tools being used. Therefore, she introduced a way to think of violence as a spectrum, encompassing the different forms of "abuse, intimidation, coercion, intrusion, threat and force [that] men use to control women" (p. 76). In doing so, she opened a possibility to acknowledge the various experiences of different individuals as violence, establishing a link between common forms of violence (e.g., harassment) and legally defined criminal acts of violence (Bjørnholt, 2020; Kelly, 1988, 1996).

A feminist understanding of violence against women does not (always) go hand in hand with a societal understanding of the term, not to mention a legal understanding. Alcoff (2018) calls for a new understanding of sexual violence, a new epistemology of rape, asking researchers and society to focus on the collective knowledge of the problem and the way it has been formed – and might be changed. In her ground-breaking book, *Rape and Resistance* (2018), she describes a rape culture as producing discursive formations where the credibility of rape claims is not organised by logic but by certain frames of reference that the story must fit for one to be acknowledged as a victim/survivor of rape in the eyes of society. These formations inform our decision when certain stories are deemed credible, while others fail the test. These discourses work behind the scenes and predict the criteria under which stories of rape are interpreted, not based on what is true

but what could be true. Drawing on Kelly's theorisation (1988), Alcoff (2018) argues for an understanding of violence that allows different manifestations and experiences of IPV, making the impact of the violence on the victim/survivor central. The works of Kelly and Alcoff offer us an opportunity to grasp the extent and severity of violence for a deeper understanding of the impact of violent acts on the lives of those involved. As such, their works inform my understanding of violence for this research project.

In feminist tradition, violence must be understood as a system if we are to fight it. When explaining violence against women, international research has often focused on individual factors (e.g., related to past trauma or substance abuse) (van Vugt & Pop, 2022). However, research informed by feminist knowledge production and qualitative research methods has shifted the focus to understanding cultural norms, behaviours and beliefs that relate to violence against women (Wemrell et al., 2019), concentrating on its gendered context (Alcoff, 2018; Gavey, 2018; Hearn, 1998). Furthermore, violence must be researched from an intersectional perspective (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989) as the discursive production of violence positions people differently. To effectively analyse violence against women, we must therefore use a lens that directs our attention to the intersecting systems of oppression that partake in it (e.g., patriarchy, racism, class), working both independently and intersecting, shaping and reinforcing the problem of violence against women (Hattery, 2009).

Theorising patriarchy, Walby (1989, 2020) coined the term *gender regimes* when addressing patriarchal strategies for women's subordination and exclusion. She identified six structures of patriarchy that affected one another but were also self-governing, representing the most significant social relations that structured gender relations. One of these structures was male violence against women which would become a resource of male dominance over women. Today, the term is criticised (Hearn, Strid, Humbert, Balkmar, et al., 2022) for being too narrow in its interpretation of violence, limited to interpersonal physical violence. The current understanding of what counts as violence has expanded. Technology has become yet another way to exercise violence, the understanding of the effects of psychological violence and coercion has increased, financial coercion has been recognised, and more.

Expanding on violence against women, Hearn et al. (2016) recognise such violence as structural in its nature. They emphasise that pathological characteristics or past traumas of individual perpetrators are not enough to explain violence. Violence should be conceptualised as a specific form of power, a product of the historical intersection of gender power, social division and ideology (Hearn, 2012; Hearn et al., 2016). Building on Walby's theory of gender regimes, Hearn, Strid, Humbert, Balkmar, et al. (2022) argue that reframing the concept is needed to capture the diverse forms of violence; hence, violence must be researched as a regime of inequality on its own. This is often overlooked by contemporary gender studies and the mainstream social theory, which have not recognised violence as one of the major obstacles to gender equality (Hearn,

Strid, Humbert, Balkmar, et al., 2022). The concept of violence regimes is a useful analytical tool, shifting our attention to the structures that produce and infuse violence in society at large, as well as its material–discursive dimensions (Hearn, Strid, Humbert, Balkmar, et al., 2022).

Different violence regimes understand violence differently; it follows that what counts as violence and what is excluded vary. My present research focuses on violence against women. In the spirit of feminist epistemology, I understand violence as encompassing a continuum, allowing the different manifestations of violence and focusing on its impact on the victim/survivor. Additionally, inspired by the concept of violence regimes, I understand violence as structural in its nature and pay attention to identifying those structures and what produces and informs them, as portrayed in the stories of the research participants.

For the purpose of this project, it is important to discuss the terms *victim* and *perpetrator* that originate from the legal system. It is common practice to talk about a victim as someone exposed to a crime/violence, and a perpetrator as someone committing a crime/violent act. When researching violence against women from a feminist perspective, legal terms can prove to be controversial, suggesting a pre-assigned role that essentialises the individual in question. We have become so used to the concepts that the bodies to which they apply lose their individuality. A victim is portrayed as weak; it is a stigmatised category that surrenders the person in question without agency (Bjørnholt, 2020). Once conflated with the victim, one loses the power to be anything else than the violence to which one is exposed. In the transformative spirit of feminism, it has therefore become common feminist practice to address individuals exposed to gender-based violence, not as victims, but as *survivors* or *victims/survivors* of violence. By making the individuals in question and their experiences of violence central to the debate, we shift the focus back to the individuals behind the encountered violence. This gives the victims/survivors a chance to be something more than bodies positioned as weak; it gives them agency and the ability to forge their own path (Antonsdóttir, 2020; Bjørnholt, 2020). For the purpose of this research project, I commit to the term *victim/survivor* to allow different positions experienced by the participants.

Concerning the term *perpetrator*, a deeper discussion on the terminology used in the IPV research field is needed. The term has been criticised by feminist researchers for detaching the problem of violence against women from its structural background. In his research, Jeff Hearn (1998) uses the term 'men's violence to known women', making the impact on the women and the relationship between the partners central. In contrast, Lucas Gottzén (2019) uses the term 'violent men' in his work.

When starting my research project, I did not like to use the term *perpetrators* to describe the male participants. Instead, I decided to use the phrase *men who commit violent acts against their intimate partners* or simply *violent men*, which I thought would better serve the purpose of the project, my aim being to keep a clear focus on the gendered dynamics

of violence. However, I am not a native English speaker, which presents a bit of difficulty when it comes to terminology. When discussing these concepts with my doctoral committee, it became clear that there were linguistic factors to consider. More specifically, if I would label my participants as violent men, there would be no room for them to be anything other than the violence committed; it would lock them in a single position. The stigmatisation of the violent man as 'bad' and 'dangerous' pre-defines the body in question. Hence, the individual man loses his identity and becomes the violence that he committed. In a research project focusing on the individual's construction of oneself and the structures that inform and enable violence against women, including the experience of men who are violent towards women, that terminology soon became problematic. Finally, I decided to take a step back and use the term *perpetrator*, as it would more likely serve the interests of this research. Other (more loaded) terms might carry preconceived notions about the participants, clouding my judgement when analysing the data. Furthermore, due to its stigmatising nature, the term 'violent men' alienates men who have been violent towards their partners. However, we need them to participate in the dialogue on IPV to expand their (and society's) understanding of the problem of men's violence against women in an effort to minimise it. I discuss this in more detail in my second research article.

3 Theoretical foundations

"… feminism generates new theoretical perspectives from which the dominant can be criticized, and new possibilities envisaged" (Weedon, 1987, p. 6).

The quote above caught my attention when first researching feminist theory and has stayed with me ever since. Feminist theory draws our attention to gender power relations and how they structure all areas of our lives, violence being no exception. It is fitting to take a theoretical point of departure from the cited classic work of Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Post-Structuralist Theory* (1987), one of the most influential texts of the genre, and combine it with affective practices, a theoretical approach that has grown stronger over the past decades. In this research project, I combine feminist discourse analyses and affective practices, accounting for affective–discursive practices and showcasing how the theories intertwine in a "joint, coordinated, relational activity" (Wetherell, 2013, p. 363). My contribution to the research field is therefore not only empirical, uncovering new perspectives on the problem at hand, but also theoretical, adding the dimension of affective–discursive practices, for a deeper, richer understanding of violence against women.

In this chapter, I discuss the theories used in the project and how they combine in the analysis of the data corpus.

3.1 Feminist discourse analyses

Foucault's (1982) post-structuralist concept of power through discourse, and the relationality of power, are essential for the work presented. Not all forms of post-structuralism are productive for feminism (Weedon, 1987), and Foucault has been the object of feminist critique in this regard (Alcoff, 2018; McNay, 1992). Feminists have built on Foucault's work to a great extent, especially to account for aspects of women's historical oppression, viewing the body as produced through power, and as such, a cultural creation (McNay, 1992; Weedon, 1987). However, there are critical limitations to this theory. Feminist have pointed out that the Foucauldian emphasis on power exercised on the body renders it passive, not explaining how the individual may act in a self-governing fashion. Foucault also does not pay sufficient attention to the effects of gender on the body (McNay, 1992).

In this project, I look to feminist post-structuralist readings on how knowledge is produced, for a better understanding of power relations in society. Feminist post-structuralism, different from gender-blind forms of post-structuralism, emphasises the materiality of power (e.g., through social/cultural/economic engagements) and the need

for change at the level of discourse (Gavey, 1989). Foucault argues that discourse is an important platform for social struggle and is the system by which our knowledge is organised (Alcoff, 2018; Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987). However, Alcoff (2018) reminds us that the silences (that which remains unsaid) are equally important to keep the discursive system in check.

Discourses operate through language, meaning and subjectivities, determining how we interpret and judge our experiences. Subjectivities denote our sense of ourselves and how we relate to the world, referring to both our conscious and unconscious thoughts and are produced through discursive practices (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987). The post-structuralist focus on language opens the possibility to view subjectivity as a space of conflicting positions. An individual can hold different positions at the same time (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987), varying in the form of power they occupy and offer to the individual (Gavey, 1989). The position that one holds (and the position that holds one) is (are) open to change, as it is (they are) produced historically and therefore changeable with the discourses that constitute them (Weedon, 1987). Finally, feminist post-structuralism shifts our focus away from the individual as the origin of meaning, bringing our attention to the context of experience, how it is constituted and ideologically maintained. According to these readings, the individual experience is not regarded as authentic but as comprising different subjectivities, desires and behaviours that are (potentially) changeable (Gavey, 1989).

3.2 Affective-discursive practices

Emotion has been studied extensively in different theoretical contexts before the occurrence of the affective turn. The origin of the social theory of emotion is often attributed to Hochschild (1979) and her work on managing emotions, establishing the concept of 'feeling rules' as social norms that portray accepted emotional responses (e.g., how to feel, when, where, etc.). Additionally, feminist research has a long history with emotion, often focusing on disentangling emotion from what is considered feminine (e.g., the body, the personal), while the masculine is associated with reason (e.g., the mind, the objective) (Åhäll, 2018). Through feminist readings of post-structural theories focusing on the subject's body, mind and emotion as governed through discourses (Weedon, 1987), a space opens up to ask feminist questions about the political power of emotion (Åhäll, 2018). Drawing on Wetherell´s (2012) approach, and in the spirit of feminist meaning making, focusing on both body and emotion, my research is conducted through the framework of affective–discursive practices.

The theoretical discussion around the affective turn has been lively over the past decade, with different understandings of what affect is, leading to varying applications of affect as a theory. Affect can be perceived as distinct from emotion, something that comes into being before emotion, focusing on the ability to be affected and to affect (others). As such, affect is viewed as pre-discursive and pre-personal (Åhäll, 2018; Wetherell, 2012).

This model has been the subject of feminist critique by scholars who regard attempts to move beyond emotion, privileging affect, as reinforcing gender binarism between the objective (affect) and the personal (emotion). Additionally, viewing affect as something pre-personal excludes it from its social, cultural and political context (Åhäll, 2018; Ahmed, 2014).

From a feminist perspective, studies on affect offer a possibility to think beyond what we already feel or know. The affective turn can be understood as an opportunity to refocus research on emotion and how it relates to discourse, thereby demonstrating its political power (Åhäll, 2018). A prominent thinker in the field is Sarah Ahmed. Her writings on *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014) have been instrumental for a feminist understanding of affect (even though Ahmed herself always refers to emotion). Ahmed argues that "emotions should not be regarded as psychological states, but as social and cultural practices" (p.9). She understands emotion as something that makes and shapes us (the process of being affected), as well as informs our bodies' orientation towards others (the process of affecting others). To understand emotion, we should therefore ask ourselves, "What do emotions do?" (p.4). To address the feminist politics of emotion, we must therefore acknowledge the affective trajectory that a body brings with it, generating different responses when coming into contact with the world (Ahmed, 2014). As an example, Ahmed's discussion of the Other is helpful. The Other is perceived as someone dangerous and to be feared, and as such, becomes a sticky body, attracting negative emotions. Occupying the position of the Other has consequences for the subject who is read as bad, a stigmatised body, eliciting feelings of fear in others even before it arrives (Åhäll, 2018; Ahmed, 2004, 2014). Drawing on Ahmed´s work, an affective approach that accounts for the social, cultural and political dimensions therefore means that "*that which flows is not affect per se, but objects*" (Åhäll, 2018, p. 40: italics are Åhäll´s).

To social psychologist Margaret Wetherell (2012), researching affect implies coming to terms with the body. Affect is as simple as human emotion but with the possibility to expand the research on it to the embodiment of emotions, their movements and attachments, as well as how they work on and through people. As such, affect becomes a way to study "embodied meaning-making" (p. 4). To map out these processes, Wetherell (2012) introduces the term ´affective practices´, a means to look for patterns in the ordinary and the dramatic, in an attempt to understand how people are moved (or not) by affect. The patterns are multiple and intersecting, sometimes imposed and at other times, only a thoughtless reaction. Wetherell argues that discourse and affect should be studied together; the discursive is what makes affect powerful and "provides the means for affect to travel" (p. 19). The affective–discursive is about reading the body as something more than just a subject formed by discourses, it is emphasising the material while making room for the emotional. As such, affects can be experienced as positive or negative; they can open possibilities, move us or bring us to a halt. Hence, we are situated by affects that can be sites of power. The commitments of affect to ideas and

social positions and the different possibilities to act that they offer thus shape how we live and move through space (Skeggs, 2012). Only exploring discourse means missing out on the affective dimension that provides us with textured research and insights into the complicated processes that constitute social life (Wetherell, 2013). From this perspective, discourse and affect are not easily disentangled as they intertwine in the patterning of everyday life (Husso et al., 2021; Wetherell, 2012, 2013).

Finally, in the feminist post-structural spirit of this research, I am interested in the multiple discourses on violence that underpin and construct it. Discourse determines how we interpret our experiences, constituting different (sometimes conflicting) subjectivities (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987). I am inspired by Ahmed's (Ahmed, 2004, 2014) understanding of the politics of emotion. Drawing on Wetherell´s argument (2012), I understand emotion and affect as part of what shapes feelings and discourse as their means to travel. Additionally, I focus on practices to analyse patterns and the juncture of the social/cultural, the personal and the political (Husso et al., 2021; Wetherell, 2012).

The combined theoretical lens of *affective–discursive practices* is helpful in exploring the logics that frame the participants' understanding when making sense of their experiences and how they constitute their individual selves in relation to discourse (e.g., the discourse on violence). Furthermore, the theoretical lens is helpful in understanding how certain discourses and available subject positions generate different affective responses, intersecting with different social categories and informing the participants' experiences. For example, shame can be both an embodied experience of affect (one feels ashamed, e.g., when not measuring up to societal norms) and a discursive (regulatory) practice (reinforcing societal norms, e.g., on acceptable behaviour). As such, affective–discursive practices form an integral part of researching violence as they allow us to observe otherwise hidden forms of violating practices (Husso et al., 2021).

4 Heterosexuality, gender and the Nordic context of violence

This chapter is an overview of some of the key literature that relates to my research regarding the topic, theory and/or method. I chose this sample as I believe that it best highlights how my study contributes to the research field of IPV. I have divided this overview into three sections. The first section addresses the research on young people, relationships and sex. The second section addresses the research on heteronormative power relations, masculinity and violence. The third and final section addresses the Nordic context of the research.

Internationally, the research field of IPV, perpetrators and victims/survivors is extensive. Previous research has often focused on individual factors (e.g., pathology and substance abuse) when explaining the problem of IPV, generally perceiving IPV as deviating from societal norms. However, feminist epistemology directs our attention to the societal and gendered context of such violence, reminding us that the problem of IPV is structural, taking on various forms in different spheres of society (Gavey, 2018; Hearn, 1998; Wemrell et al., 2019).

In the spirit of the critical feminist perspective of this research project, I focus my discussion in this chapter on structural explanations to best frame my research contributions.

4.1 Young heterosexuality and consent

The discourse on heterosexuality sustains male power in society at large. It draws on normative identities of men as active agents and women as passive, which privilege masculinity while disempowering women. Through this gendered discourse on heterosexuality, young men become empowered by their masculinity, but young women are not empowered by their femininity (Allen, 2003; Connell, 2005; Holland et al., 1998). The gendered discourse on sex is part of heterosexuality. Young men's masculinity is built on positive ideas of their sexuality; they become 'real men' through sexual activity and active pleasure seeking. To be perceived as a 'normal man' therefore implies exercising power over women, albeit not always recognised or desired by the individual man (Gunnarsson, 2018; Holland et al., 1998; Messerschmidt, 2000). Even though it might be constraining to live up to the demands of young masculine sexuality, it rewards young men in a social order that privileges men over women (Holland et al., 1998).

Young women's femininity is built on their submissive role towards men as part of the dominant femininity practice (Connell, 1998; Paechter, 2007). Their femininity is largely

experienced through the male gaze, policing their sexuality (Paechter, 2007). They actively engage in the construction of their femininity, drawn into their own disempowerment through preconceptions of what sex is about, contributing to male dominance by fulfilling men's wants and needs while disregarding their own (Holland et al., 1998).

Harmful masculine ideas are closely connected to power and violence, typically represented by a strong man who is emotionally cut off. This type of male mindset has been associated with more drinking, higher suicidal rates, bullying and sexual harassment (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 1995). Normative ideas of heterosexuality and ideas of hegemonic masculinity are relevant to this research in addressing how young masculinity plays out and gaining a better understanding of young men's socialisation. In Iceland, as well as in the other Nordic countries, gender equality has become an integral part of the national identity, influencing the public discourse on equality (de Boise & Hearn, 2017; Einarsdóttir, 2020). This has implications for the heterosexual discourse, which assigns power to masculinity and simultaneously cites gender equality. Research indicates that young men in the Nordic countries are exposed to multiple discourses on masculinity. They are subject to strong influences from the equality discourse, but at the same time, hold on to harmful masculine ideas, that in turn have impacts on sexual practices, dating and how they view girls (see e.g. de Boise, 2018; de Boise & Hearn, 2017; Gottzén, 2016; Jóhannsdóttir & Gíslason, 2018; Ólafsdóttir & Kjaran, 2019).

Consent determines if sex is consensual or not, but research shows that young people lack an understanding of what sexual consent really means and seldom seek it verbally. Consent is thus most often expressed through body language, reliant on the girl to express it so that the boy can understand it (Beres, 2007, 2014; Hirsch et al., 2019; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). This draws our attention to the tension between the underlying heterosexual gender norms and the inherent power imbalances. Men and boys are supposed to initiate sex, and women and girls are supposed to fulfil their submissive role and respond willingly, making young women especially vulnerable in terms of controlling and/or enjoying sexual encounters (Beres, 2007, 2014; Holland et al., 1998; Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013; Jozkowski et al., 2014).

In the Nordic context, a paradox emerges. As the discourse on sexuality (and consent) is framed by not only heterosexuality and masculinity but equality as well, contradictory ideas emerge. These conflicting discourses operating in society in terms of sex and dating and cited by young people, construct women and girls as submissive and vulnerable, not entitled to sexual desire or pleasure, on one hand, and as equal to men and boys in every respect, on the other hand (Guðjónsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2018; Gunnarsson, 2018; Nielsen & Rudberg, 2007; Ólafsdóttir & Kjaran, 2019). Consequently, young people receive mixed messages when in intimate relationships, citing the discourse on equality while under the influence of normative ideas of heterosexuality. This makes it harder for

them to break from the tradition of heteronormativity than they are willing to recognise, the same ideals that play a part in sustaining sexual violence.

4.2 Heteronormativity, masculinity, violence and class

To reduce violence against women, we must understand the structures that sustain it. International feminist research shows unequivocally that the inherent power imbalances infuse such violence in society, more precisely, the project of heterosexuality and the oppositional, hierarchical, gender power relations inherent in it (Gavey, 2018; Hearn, 1998; Holland et al., 1998; Kelly, 1988; Lazard, 2020). Western discourse emphasises masculine and feminine cultural behaviour norms, legitimising heterosexism and the subordination of women. Masculinity is traditionally presented as agentive and entitled to women's bodies, whereas femininity is traditionally presented as passive, especially in terms of sexuality. Femininity is constructed from within heterosexuality and assigned a subordinate position, where unwanted sexual activity is normalised. Additionally, women are drawn in as gatekeepers of sex, forced to monitor not only their own behaviour but also that of men in terms of consent (Beres, 2007; Gavey, 2018; Holland et al., 1998; Lazard, 2020).

Power and control are important features of traditional masculinity, as well as the taken-for-granted acceptance of that power, one form of which is violence (Connell, 2005; de Boise & Hearn, 2017; Hearn, 1998). Messerschmidt (2012) and Ptacek (2021) theorise how violence against women can be a way to gain masculine recognition, bestowing a sense of control and power to the man in question, in terms of both the self and society. Referring to men's behaviour and their enactment of masculinity as *dramas*, Ptacek directs our attention to the different behaviours of men in private and public spaces. He explores how men's search for masculine recognition becomes a driving factor for their abuse. As a result, men's abuse of women becomes a way to conform to heteronormative praxis (patriarchal rule) when the men experience themselves as not living up to the cultural patterns of meaning.

Modern capitalist or neoliberal societies have emphasised women's agency, which ideally should have provided women with a stronger position to call out IPV. However, as feminist scholars have pointed out, the neoliberal framework, with its emphasis on an individualistic understanding of selfhood and of women as entrepreneurs of their own lives, tends to preclude explanations that put violence in a socio-political context (Gavey, 2018; Gill, 2007; Lazard, 2020; McRobbie, 2009). Through this framework, a woman becomes a self-sufficient subject that does not require support. If exposed to violence, it is her problem/responsibility to solve (Lazard, 2020; Pomerantz et al., 2013).

Violence is manifested in different ways, and some violent acts are more easily identifiable as violence than others. IPV is often experienced not only in its physical or sexual form but also in women's feeling of being entrapped, their independence being restricted (Hanmer, 2000; Hattery, 2009; Stark, 2020). Additionally, what counts as

violence changes with time, and a certain behaviour becomes unacceptable as time passes (Hanmer, 2000). This is clearly portrayed in the #MeToo movement. In the past, women were reluctant to report sexual violence and IPV, as thoroughly reported in previous feminist research on violence against women, due to the normalised disbelief in such accounts in the mainstream discussion and society at large (Brownmiller, 2010; Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Kelly, 1988; Lazard, 2020). During the #MeToo movement, women told their stories of gendered sexual harassment and violence, showcasing how historically difficult it had been for women to act against the violence they suffered and to expose perpetrators of violence (Lazard, 2020; Pétursdóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2022).

In the mainstream public debate, the actions of a perpetrator of violence against women are considered the result of individual characteristics. The perpetrator is pathologised and psychologised, with the violence becoming not only a gender-based crime but a resource that can be used to categorise the violent man as the *Other* (Gottzén, 2019). Perpetrators are construed as inherently bad, an individualising discourse that removes the violent act in question from its gendered patriarchal context. The 'monstrous' perpetrator, the violent man who preys on vulnerable women, is in fact a discourse that shifts our attention away from the very structures that enable these acts to occur; thus, they are not addressed in public debate (Lazard, 2020).

Research points out that men from all segments of society engage in violence against women (Lamble, 2011; Phipps, 2009; Wacquant, 2009). However, discourses on such violence, specifically sexual violence, implicate and represent men differently, depending on their social positioning (Gavey, 2018; Lazard, 2020; Phipps, 2009), especially men from groups that are regarded as embodying criminality and immorality (Skeggs, 2004). This is reflected in the overrepresentation of marginalised groups that are charged and convicted of rape (Antonsdóttir & Gunnlaugsdóttir, 2013; Lamble, 2011; Lazard, 2020; Phipps, 2009; Wacquant, 2009), as well as the representation of gender-based violence in the mainstream public debate that reproduces the individualising discourse on the violent man as being of a 'certain type' (Bergren et al., 2021).

'Respectability' is an important mechanism in the development of socioeconomic classes, characteristic of how to belong and be worthy as a member of a certain group (Skeggs, 2004). What has been called 'respectable masculinity' is ideally connected with the white heterosexual middle class and is what separates it from other groups, such as the working class (de Boise & Hearn, 2017; Gottzén, 2019; Phipps, 2009). The discourse on respectability mobilises some men, while it restrains others. Those who identify with the discourse pay scant attention to it; however, those positioned by it or seek to position themselves against it are informed by the discourse in terms of their response to it (Skeggs, 2004). Black men and the working class are more readily categorised as criminal and/or hypersexual. Men of respectability can align themselves with discourses of different classes, but due to the privilege inherent in their position, they gain greater access to power, allowing them to distance themselves from immoral situations should

their personas become conflated with criminal/immoral acts (Phipps, 2009; Skeggs, 2004). Self-identifying as respectable middle-class men thus associates them with the comforts and power assigned to normative heteromasculinity.

4.3 The Nordic paradox and prevalence of IPV

Considerable work has been done in the field of IPV research in the Nordic countries, focusing on heterosexual masculinity norms and gendered power dynamics. The Nordic countries take pride in being among the most gender-equal countries in the world, an ideal that has become a cornerstone of each Nordic country's national identity. In the neoliberal spirit, a narrow understanding of equality, based on metrics and rankings, has been instilled in the Nordic consciousness, resulting in the general idea that equality has been achieved (Alsaker et al., 2016; Einarsdóttir, 2020; Wemrell et al., 2019). It follows that societal acceptance of IPV is low, and such violence is considered a breach of established gender norms, breaking with the larger Nordic equality discourse (Alsaker et al., 2016; Brännvall, 2016; Gottzén, 2013). Neoliberal influences on the equality discourse will have us believe that it trumps the rules of the heterosexual project, portraying women as empowered, strong, and not in need of support. A by-product of the discourse on the strong Nordic women has been identified in their resistance to self-identifying as 'victims', which positions them as weak. The discourse portrays female victims/survivors of IPV as different from 'normal' women who, in turn, are perceived as independent and strong (Brännvall, 2016; Wemrell et al., 2019).

The Nordic equality discourse also becomes problematic when viewed from a statistical angle, due to the high prevalence of IPV in the Nordic countries compared with other European countries (Alsaker et al., 2016; Holma et al., 2021; Karlsdóttir & Arnalds, 2010; van Vugt & Pop, 2022; Wemrell et al., 2019). This phenomenon of the high prevalence of IPV, in combination with perceived gender equality, has been referred to as the 'Nordic paradox', as the prevalence of IPV is traditionally associated with gender inequality (Gracia & Merlo, 2016; van Vugt & Pop, 2022; Wemrell et al., 2019). However, this paradox has been the subject of critique. Humbert et al. (2021) remind us that different kinds of violence are accepted and normalised in different societies and cultures. Additionally, a feminist understanding of violence is broad, which could in turn influence the understanding of violence in societies and cultures where the expectation is that everyone is equal. Hence, violence must always be understood as relational and should be explained by relating it to both cultural and societal factors.

In the mainstream public debate in the Nordic countries, individualistic reasoning on violence against women dominates media coverage, diverting attention from structural explanations of such violence. Rape is generally framed in a way that casts doubt on whether the rape occurred, or it is implied that the victims/survivors are lying (Nilsson, 2019; Steinþórsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2019). In the Nordic legal arena, investigations of IPV and rape are frequently suspended, resulting in the general assumption of the

perpetrators´ innocence (Bjarnason & Pétursdóttir, 2019; Brännvall, 2016; Sæmundsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2018). In those cases, the perpetrators are allegedly the ones who become the real victims (Bjarnason & Pétursdóttir, 2019; Nilsson, 2019). Finally, victims/survivors rely more on explanations based on the perpetrators' pathology and deviance than on structural explanations for the encountered violence (Enander, 2010b; Wemrell et al., 2019).

It is common practice for perpetrators and victims/survivors alike to minimise the severity of the encountered/enacted violence in a relationship due to gendered norms on violence in society, portraying it as shameful (Brännvall, 2016). Research shows that perpetrators hold on to their individual reasoning when explaining and making sense of their experiences, for example, past trauma or substance abuse (Gottzén, 2012; Hearn, 1998; Ólafsdóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2022; Wemrell et al., 2019). They also often involve the victims/survivors in the violence, making them complicit in mutual fights (yet another form of victim blaming) as a way to downplay the severity of the act (Brännvall, 2016; Ólafsdóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2022; Wemrell et al., 2019). This is further connected to prevailing masculinity norms where, on the surface, men relate to women as equals, but on a deeper level, normative heteromasculine values (sustaining and maintaining violent behaviour) are still at work (de Boise & Hearn, 2017; Gottzén & Berggren, 2021; Jóhannsdóttir & Gíslason, 2018).

In the spirit of this project's theoretical lens of affective–discursive practices, it is fitting to end this literature summary with a discussion about *shame*. As individuals, we experience ourselves and self-police, partly through how we measure up to society's rules. When we overstep boundaries, we feel shame; as such, shame becomes a strong self-policing construct (Dean, 2010; Shefer & Munt, 2019). In his research on shame and how it relates to perpetrators of IPV, Gottzén (2013, 2016, 2019) highlights its double function. The perpetrator feels shame when his persona is conflated with the monstrous other of the violent man; he then either tries to distance himself from the violent act (through individualising explanations) or engages with the violence as morally wrong (creating a feeling of discomfort). Additionally, shame has been identified as key to enabling the perpetrator to redeem himself from violence, in the eyes of society (Gottzén, 2016; Shefer & Munt, 2019). Shame figures in the stores of victims/survivors as well. Women experience shame when they are unable to end a violent relationship; in the spirit of neoliberal individualistic womanhood, they feel that they should be strong enough to do so. It then adds to their shame when they cannot leave (Alsaker et al., 2016; Brännvall, 2016; Enander, 2010a; Wemrell et al., 2019). This shows that shame plays a vital role in sustaining heteronormative power relations through its individualising and regulatory function (Shefer & Munt, 2019).

As shown in this chapter, the problem of violence against women and of the structures that facilitate and infuse such violence in society has been the subject of feminist epistemology for quite some time. However, the problem has only been explored to a

minimal extent from the perspective of affective–discursive practices, which allows us to observe otherwise hidden forms and dimensions of violence. Additionally, the heterosexual project and how it relates to violence against women, in the context of Iceland, are under-theorised, especially in terms of perpetrators of such violence. This research project is therefore important in terms of not only its theoretical contribution to feminist research on violence against women but also its empirical contribution to Icelandic research in order to enrich our understanding of the problem.

5 Methods

In this chapter, I discuss the methods chosen for the research project. When selecting methods, it is important to carefully consider the research objective and how it can best be attained. For this research, I used a three-pronged method, collecting interviews with different groups: friendship group interviews with young people, in-depth interviews with men who self-identify as having been violent in an intimate relationship, and finally, in-depth interviews with women who self-identify as victims/survivors of IPV.

From the beginning, I clearly wanted to focus on the micro-level through in-depth interviews, aiming to capture the different perspectives of the participants. The personal is always political; to me, that meant retelling personal stories while being critical of the gendered structures from which they originate. I wanted the participants' voices to echo through my work, creating room for interpretation and showcasing the link between the individual and the surrounding structures that facilitate violence in society.

The mixed-interview method chosen for the research is very well suited to shedding light on the topic at hand due to the multiple perspectives it offers on the problem of IPV, resulting in rich data. Truth is not a one-sided story; rather, there are many complicated and intertwined truths, closely connected to their original surroundings. Qualitative methods, such as interviews, help us find patterns in these truths and are especially fitting for the feminist perspective, as well as research focused on individual narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Brinkmann, 2015).

In the following sections, I discuss the data corpus of the research in detail, beginning with an overview of the interview process and the collected data, followed by a discussion on the different groups of interviewees, the recruitment process and the role of gatekeepers for each group and finally, the analysis of the data prior to the application of the theory. Ethics and my position as a researcher are discussed separately in Chapter 6.

5.1 Feminist interviewing

All of the interviews for this thesis were conducted by myself, the author. The aims of the interviews were clear: to understand the viewpoints of the participants, to gain insights into their experiences as described by them and to meet them on their terms, focusing on their stories, as narrated by them.

The interview process was inspired by the principles of feminist (sensitive) interviewing (Campbell et al., 2009, 2010; Hydén, 2014) on how to cover emotionally difficult topics in interviews with vulnerable communities. For the interview process, this meant that I

focused on being mindful of the hierarchy inherent in interviewing, with the aim of levelling the field as much as possible, while also being mindful of doing no harm. Drawing on methods developed by Campbell et al. (2010), this can be achieved by 1) creating a setting where the participant feels supported, 2) the interviewer showing compassion and warmth, 3) clarifying that the interviewee has a choice during the interview process, 4) consequently creating the interviewee's feeling of being in control of the situation, and finally, 5) providing information on where to seek help if needed, when the interview is over. For all these to be possible, the researcher needs to be comfortable during the interview, so the interviewee feels free to talk, to be empathetic towards the stories of the interviewee, but not too emotional to avoid creating discomfort, and to be understanding but honest to the interviewee (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Campbell et al., 2010; Holloway & Jefferson, 2000).

Additionally, I take my point of departure from Hydén's (2014) work and what she calls *the teller-focused interview*, built on feminist values and her extensive experience in researching violence against women by using qualitative interviews. Emphasising narration and the mutual relational practice between the interviewer and the interviewee, she focuses on supporting the participant to formulate oneself as genuinely (and nuanced) as possible in one's narratives. The teller-focused interview is held on a location chosen by the interviewee. It is usually unstructured, focusing on the participant telling one's story as one sees fit, based on open questions that usually start with the clause, '*Can you tell me…'* to allow a free-form discussion.

Inspired by the principles of feminist interviewing and the teller-focused format, when conducting an interview, I always had an interview guide to follow, highlighting certain themes that I wanted to discuss. However, there was no script or list of specific questions to be followed in any particular order. The themes were discussed in the natural order that they appeared in the participants' narratives to best fit the flow of each interview. The participants were encouraged to discuss the issues they found important concerning the topic each time. This format made it possible for me to respond to each participant as needed, for example, if the interviewee wanted to discuss something outside of the themes I had in mind and they found it important, there was always space and time to do so.

However difficult an interview on violence might be, once a researcher has gained the participant's trust, the latter usually welcomes the opportunity to talk (Hydén, 2014). Research on the rape victims´/survivors´ experience of participating in interview research on rape shows that they find the experience helpful (Campbell et al., 2009). This is also reported by Hydén; the female victims/survivors whom she interviewed shared so much of their painful experiences that she found herself asking if it was acceptable for them to do so. She also interviewed perpetrators, who were adamant about confidentiality, making sure that she was not working with the authorities. Once they felt secure in the

interview setting and sensed her compassion, they became comfortable in sharing their stories with her.

The particular way that the interview was conducted made me feel that the participants experienced me as knowledgeable yet willing to sympathise and recognise their dilemmas, problems and misfortunes. This gave the interviews a powerful emotional effect, felt by myself as the interviewer, as well as by the participants, indicated by their body language, laughter and sometimes crying, even leaving the room for a while but returning and willing to continue. To me, this level of understanding, respect and empathy seemed to break down (at least partly) the power dynamics inherent in the interview process, equalising the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, thus creating an atmosphere of trust. However, it is important to acknowledge that one can never fully know the minds of others or completely erase the power dynamics of an interview.

As previously stated, the data corpus of the research consists of interviews with different groups of individuals. Preparing for and interviewing one group informed my decision to talk with the next. The data collection followed a certain timeline. The data corpus is divided into the three interviewed groups in the order presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Overview of data corpus

Dataset	Collection period	Topic of interviews
Friendship group interviews with youth (18 years old)	Fall 2018	Relationships, negotiating sex and consent
Interviews with 10 men who identify as having been violent in a relationship	Fall 2019 – Summer 2021	Experiences of having been violent in an intimate relationship
Interviews with 12 women who identify as survivors of a violent relationship	Spring 2020	Experiences of having been in a violent relationship

The recruitment of participants, the interview process and the exposed position of the interviewees are discussed separately for each group of interviewees in the following sections.

5.1.1 Friendship group interviews

When I started working on the research project, my aim was to interview men who identified their behaviour towards a partner as violent. When preparing for those interviews and searching for participants, I started wondering how I would contextualise the stories they might share with me. How would I know what could be considered common knowledge of relationships and sex? What discourses are drawn on when situating one´s position in relationships, sex and violence? I decided to conduct friendship group interviews with young people about relationships and sex to learn more about the structures informing their experiences. The primary question was how young people work with consent in relationships, before and during sex, as well as how to address sexual 'grey areas' where the line between consensual sex and coercion becomes unclear (see e.g. Gavey, 2018; Gunnarsson, 2018).

The interviews were conducted in the fall of 2018. I contacted young people, aged 18, in an upper secondary school in Reykjavík where I was working at the time. Through my work there, I had gained the trust of both students and staff, which made it easier for me to obtain permission to conduct my research in the school. Recruiting participants for the research went surprisingly well. All participants volunteered to take part in the research when I invited participants through an open call to co-workers, who then acted as gatekeepers, advertising the research project to their students. None of my own students participated in the project. Finally, I interviewed four groups of friends, a total of 15 participants. Two groups consisted of three people each (group A: two females, one male; group B: three females), one group comprised four people (two females, two males), and one group had five people (three females, two males). All participants were 18 years old, from white middle-class families, and students at the same upper secondary school in Reykjavík. Each interview ranged from 45 to 60 minutes.

When conducting group interviews with young people about sensitive topics, there are a few things to consider; first and foremost, be mindful that the participants feel comfortable with discussing the topic at hand (Morgan, 1997). I decided that the best way to approach the subject of relationships and sex and to ensure that the participants felt comfortable would be through semi-structured[1] interviews with small groups of friends. All of the participants per group had known one another for a minimum of one

[1] Due to the friendship group interviews being the first and only group interviews I conducted for the research project, the question frame was more structured than in the individual interviews I conducted later and followed a more open format of interviewing.

year and considered one another close friends. I imagined that it might be difficult for 18-year-old individuals to share intimate details about their love life with me, a woman in her mid-thirties (at the time). It was my belief that talking about their experiences in a group whose members already trusted one another would make the participants feel safer and thus freer to discuss sensitive topics, such as intimate relationships and sex. Additionally, I had come to know the participants through my work in the field, gaining their trust in the process.

The friendship groups were mixed, girls and boys, a conscious choice I made, hoping that the group interaction would produce data that would be difficult to obtain otherwise. I did this after careful consideration, thinking that mixed-gender groups would procure a more nuanced perspective on the matter at hand. When gender-specific topics were brought up, members of the opposite sexes could address them and discuss their mutual and/or different experiences, commenting on each other's thoughts, thus having an interesting dialogue among friends of both genders. However, it should be noted that common practice suggests that interview groups on sensitive topics be gender specific to allow trust and free communication, more specifically, to allow people of all genders to express themselves freely. In this particular case, I believe that due to the close friendships of the participants, a certain level of comfort was obtained, allowing the positive outcome of a dialogue among friends.

5.1.2 Perpetrators

Men who have been violent towards a female partner in an intimate relationship were extremely difficult to find. After working on acquiring permits and contacting gatekeepers, a process that started in 2018, I finally made contact with ten men who were willing to share their experiences of being violent towards a female partner. The in-depth interviews were conducted from the fall of 2019 to the summer of 2021. The interviews were semi-structured but usually took on a character of open interviews, each lasting 90–150 minutes. The participants were aged 18–40. They were sought within the Icelandic prison system and through non-profit organizations, aided by gatekeepers. My aim was to understand the participants' experiences from their own perspectives, discussing incidents of violence, emotions, the development of the self, their relationships, societal views and so much more, resulting in thick, descriptive data.

Out of the ten men I interviewed, two contacted me themselves after my general call for participants, volunteering to take part (they heard me on the radio, discussing my research, or heard of my research through a third party). Five individuals volunteered to participate after an open call within the Icelandic prison system (with the help of the staff of the Prison and Probation Administration [PPA]). Finally, three persons volunteered after hearing about my research through an activist gatekeeper. Four interviews were conducted in prison due to the incarceration of the individuals in question, and one interview was held in a halfway house where the participant lived at the time, finishing

his parole. The remaining five interviews were held at a place of each participant's choice, which most frequently was my office.

After conducting a remarkable interview with a young male prisoner, I asked if he would be willing to meet with me again for a second interview. When I first met him, he was raw, open and deeply confused about what had happened; only a month had gone by since the act of violence occurred. His case was intriguing but at the same time, so difficult to listen to. The follow-up interview took place six months later, after his release from prison. Through these interviews, I gained an even deeper understanding of the participant as an individual and his experiences. A deeper, more complex picture of the individual and the formation of the self emerged, which helped me understand how his life had been shaped by violence. I tried to schedule a third interview with him, but unfortunately, I lost track of his whereabouts.

When my thesis project started, I aimed to research the experiences of younger perpetrators (aged 18–30), 18 being the age when an individual obtains legal competence in Iceland. After discussing the recruitment of participants with the psychologists and staff of the PPA, it became clear that due to the stigmatisation of IPV, it would be very difficult to find individuals ready to take part in the research. Following their advice, I therefore raised the upper age limit to 40 to increase the possibility of finding participants. Furthermore, in my advertisements for the project, I called for men who had been violent towards a partner while in a relationship, never addressing sexual orientation. However, all of the men who answered the research call self-identified as heterosexual. As a result, the male participants in the research project, who identified as having been violent towards a partner, were all white heterosexual men, aged 18–40.

To establish a connection with perpetrators of IPV who were willing to share their stories, cooperation with gatekeepers proved instrumental. The first important connection I made was with the PPA in Iceland. When the research project was in the works, I contacted the PPA and asked for help in finding participants. The PPA office manager was very helpful, providing information about obtaining official authorisation for the research within the prison system and giving me a letter of cooperation from the director-general of the PPA to secure that authorisation. Later, she established a connection between the head of the Department of Rehabilitation and myself, resulting in my meeting with the psychologists and social workers working directly with inmates. I could contact the staff in an effort to make them personally engaged in the project, advertising it to relevant individuals.

Another important gatekeeper was a like-minded activist who, through their work, has made connections with different groups of men, both in the activist community and with different groups of men trying to find their voice in a society built on equality. After a conversation that was partly about the difficulties of finding participants for the research, they offered to ask around for participants on my behalf, using the information material for the project. Soon, a few participants were added to my list.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the participants' motives for taking part in the research project. The interviewees all expressed their desire to contribute to the fight against violence and work on prevention, but a more personal reason could be detected as well. They all took (partial) responsibility for their actions but also had a version of their story that they wanted to share, after having carried it with them for a (longer) period, weighing them down. It was therefore important to these men to share their version of the events so that as a researcher, I would understand their experience as *they* lived it.

5.1.3 Victims/survivors

Interviewing men who identified as having been violent in an intimate relationship was very difficult at times. I felt a strong urge to hear contrasting stories, so I decided to talk with victims/survivors of similar violence to ground my research, as well as myself. The last part of the data consists of 12 interviews with victims/survivors of IPV. I posted an open call on Facebook, in a group dedicated to activism against a rape culture. The group in question is closed and has strict rules on membership and topics of discussion, often with a disclaimer of trigger warning, due to the group being a safe space for victims/survivors. Consequently, it was important to me to seek the approval of the group administrator on Facebook before posting my call. The approval was easy to obtain from the administrator, who was a feminist activist eager to help the fight against gender-based violence. Within 24 hours after posting the call, over 20 women responded, resulting in 12 interviews with women who identified their experiences within a relationship as violent. They all identified themselves as heterosexual women; they were all white, aged between 18 and 40.

In interviewing victims/survivors, my objective was to gain a deeper understanding of a relationship characterised by a partner's violent behaviour, seen through the eyes of the victim/survivor. Through these individuals' experiences, I wanted to reflect on the different experiences of victims/survivors, on one hand, and perpetrators, on the other hand. Did they tell similar stories of the violence committed/endured, or were there noticeable differences in their experiences and attitudes towards violence? Hearing IPV stories from the viewpoints of the victims/survivors, although they did not suffer abuse from the interviewed perpetrators, would produce a thicker description of a relationship characterised by violence. The idea was to let the voices of victims/survivors serve as a backdrop to the stories of the perpetrators, adding another dimension to the data, with more perspectives on violence.

Each interview lasted about 45–75 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, following roughly the same outline as that of the interviews with the perpetrators. The main themes were how the survivor experienced the violent man's behaviour, the relationship itself and the pattern(s) of violence. Even though the interviewed victims/survivors were not the victims/survivors of the participating perpetrators, interviews such as these can give clues regarding the difference in attitudes towards IPV

between a perpetrator and a victim/survivor and as such, provide important information about being in a relationship characterised by violence. Finally, it is important to recognise that all female participants wanted to share their stories of being subjected to violence so that their experiences might "mean something". As such, their set of testimonies can be regarded as a form of resistance against society's violent structures.

5.2 Analyses of interviews

The data analyses followed the format of thematic analyses, as described by Braun and Clark (2013). The same analytical approach was applied to all of the data. After the interviews were transcribed, I read each interview carefully a couple of times to obtain the big picture of each group of interviews, before starting the analyses. Additionally, as I kept a research journal during the interview process, I read my notes from the time of each interview to refresh my memory of the interview in question and revisit the *feeling* of it. Next, I carefully coded the data, according to best practice, trying to read the subtle undertones in the participants' narratives. Needless to say, the theoretical lens used in the project influenced my analyses, focusing on the discourses drawn on by the participants and in the case of articles 2 and 3, the affective–discursive practices drawn on. Once I determined that my coding had captured the core of the data, I gathered the codes according to content. With the research questions in mind, I started to develop themes. The themes were assigned temporary names, and their content was clarified. Next, I re-examined the themes, keeping in mind whether they needed re-adjustment, focusing on the codes, the research questions and the dataset. Afterwards, the themes were readjusted and assigned new names if necessary. Finally, the data turned from words and stories to rich information that could be used to shed light on the research questions.

For article 3, I additionally focused on how the participants arranged their stories into narratives, following Smith's (2021) guidelines. Focusing on the themes from the thematic analyses, I studied how the participants organised their stories in relation to time, both in each interview and across the interviews, to explore their reasoning. My aim was to disentangle how the participants combined narrative elements to make sense of and build stories from their experiences, focusing on affective-discursive practices.

As explained by Gavey (1989), in a feminist post-structural understanding, an interview is a form of self-report or a discursive production and should be interpreted as such. This means that we should not approach the participants' stories as accurate or inaccurate representations of the incidents that occurred but as discursive productions of the individual experiences. For the data analysis process, in the spirit of feminist post-structuralism, this opens up a way to understand and contextualise the participants' experiences and analyse their affective–discursive context (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1987; Wetherell, 2013).

Finally, in terms of analyses, a few words on social class hierarchy in the context of Iceland are in order. No official definitions of social classes have been provided by the government authorities, and in the Icelandic context, social class is under-theorised. The general assumption is that Iceland is homogeneous in terms of race and class, but it is now proving to be outdated with the diversification of the population, as well as the widening economic gap between the relatively poor and the newly rich (Oddsson, 2010, 2018). However, masculinity in relation to social class has not been researched in the context of Iceland, and research on social class as a sociocultural category informing our experiences is an emerging but incomplete field. For the purpose of this research project, I was therefore particularly interested in social class and its relation to violence and masculinity.

Due to my interest in the socioeconomic backgrounds of my participants and the different positions they offer, I followed the example from recent research on social class in Iceland (Auðardóttir, 2022). By focusing on describing the interviewees and their parents in terms of background (education and occupation), for a clear picture of who they were and where they came from, I was able to bring the social class dimension to my analyses. The young people who participated in the friendship group interviews all belonged to middle-class families. The men and women who participated in the individual interviews came from both working- and middle-class backgrounds.

5.3 A three-pronged method and a developing theory

As described, the research process matured somewhat organically. My knowledge of both the research subject and the theories developed throughout my journey, reaching the point where I am today. In the preceding sections, I have described my data collection process, interviewing different groups for different perspectives on the problem at hand. This process also influenced my theoretical focus, which evolved and became more nuanced as my journey progressed. Drawing on thematic analyses for all of my research papers (adding the narrative approach to article 3), I moved organically from using the post-structural theory only in my first paper, focusing on discourse, to the affective dimension, focusing on affective–discursive practices in articles 2 and 3.

It must be noted that in my written articles, I did not use all of the interviews with the perpetrators and the victims/survivors that I had collected. For article 2, I used 6 interviews with the perpetrators; for article 3, I used 3 interviews with the perpetrators and 3 interviews with the victims/survivors. After I had analysed all my data, I made a conscious choice to explore in detail a limited number of interviews to highlight my analyses. This is demonstrated thoroughly through extracts included in the articles. Afterwards, I re-read all my data, making sure that the interviews I did not use were not outliers, according to my analyses (they were not), thus doing my own quality control.

The results of my friendship group interviews were published in a research article, called "'Boys in Power': Consent and Gendered Power Dynamics in Sex," in *Boyhood Studies* in 2019. The article was co-authored with my first supervisor, Dr Jón Ingvar Kjaran.

The results of the interviews with men who self-identified as perpetrators were published in two papers. I co-authored the first paper, called "'I am not a monster.' An affective–discursive analysis of men's perspectives on their engagement in violence against women," with my co-supervisor, Dr Annadís Gréta Rúdólfsdóttir. It was published in *Feminism and Psychology* in June 2022.

The second paper was based on interviews with both perpetrators and victims/survivors of IPV, which I co-wrote with Dr Jeff Hearn, a member of my doctoral committee. Called "'How did this happen?': Making retrospective, present and prospective sense of intimate relationships where men have been violent," the paper was submitted to *Feminist Encounters* in July 2022 and has been accepted for review.

It has been a true privilege to learn from and work with my doctoral committee throughout the research process. Writing these papers has been the highlight of my journey, expanding my knowledge and understanding of the subject matter each step of the way.

6 Ethics and the researcher's reflexivity

In a research project focusing on vulnerable groups and their experiences, a special chapter on ethics and the researcher's reflexivity is needed. In this chapter, I discuss both formal and informal aspects of ethics, including my own reflexivity on the issues at hand. I start with the section on the formal approval guaranteed for the research project and the process of informed consent. I then discuss how to best safeguard the interests of my participants, as well as the importance of honesty for the project, and finally, reflect on my position as a researcher and what it brings to my analyses.

6.1 Approval of the research design and informed consent of participants

From the beginning of the project, it was clear that I would need official approval for the research design. The proposed participants of the study were vulnerable groups and as such, heavily exposed. I therefore submitted my research proposal to both legal and ethical committees for guidance on best practice and formal approval.

I submitted an application to the National Bioethics Committee (NBC), whose role is to decide whether the proposed research needs special authorisation. This can be the case if the group of research participants in question is exposed and in a precarious position (e.g., perpetrators of violence). After the screening process, the committee concluded that the research could continue as is because of the use of informed consent. However, they did note that due to the sensitive topic of the research, it was important to be mindful of possible ethical dilemmas. The NBC then forwarded my application to the Data Protection Authority, which agreed with the NBC that due to informed consent, the research did not exceed the framework of the data protection law and did not require special authorisation. Finally, my research proposal was submitted to the University of Iceland's Ethical Board, which gave positive feedback, stressing two important things in its review. First, data protection needs to be carefully planned to protect the identities of the participants. The dataset is stored on a separate hard drive, owned by the university and accessible only by myself. Second, I must beware that I might receive information about illegal activities and thus prepare what I would do if that should happen.

When organising and conducting interviews, it is important to follow protocol. First, call for participants. Second, provide interested parties with introductory information. Third, obtain each participant's informed consent before starting the interview. The participants must be informed about the research project and how their data would contribute to it, as well as be made aware of the possible risks and benefits of their participation. Only after providing the interested parties with all this information can the researcher ask them

to sign informed consent forms (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Cresswell, 2014). All participants in this research project were informed about the nature of the research and were requested to give their written consent for participation. However, in the spirit of feminist interviewing (Campbell et al., 2010; Hydén, 2014), for this research, consent is understood as relational, an "ongoing process that does not start and finish with the consent form" (Hydén, 2014, p. 801), throughout the interview and the research process. This was conveyed to the participants, emphasising that they could withdraw from participation in the research at any time. Although relying on informed consent, researchers can never inform their participants about everything that might come up (or not). Something is always up to chance. Therefore, the main rule is when in doubt, always prioritise the participants' well-being.

6.2 Protection of participants in a micro-sized community

One of the most important jobs of researchers is to protect their participants before, during and after data collection (Cresswell, 2014; Hydén, 2014). As previously discussed, in this project, this was done partly by seeking external approval of the research design. During the interview phase, I followed guidelines on feminist interviewing (Campbell et al., 2010; Hydén, 2014) and good practice (Braun & Clarke, (2013). This included providing participants with information on the research project, thus letting them know about the purpose of the study and their role in it. The nature of the topic was sensitive, discussing sex, violence and more. The research protocol is in place to ensure that the participants do not feel pressured to take part in the research, as well as to protect their interests and make them feel as comfortable as possible to share information freely. This way, the interview process is aimed towards the well-being of the participants (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000; Hydén, 2014). For me, this meant providing the participants with information on possible support before and after the interview, as well as being mindful that they fully understood their rights, specifically the right to not discuss certain topics if they came up and the right to stop the interview at any time without any explanation, emphasising the relationality of consent. All of these were done in an effort to prioritise the best interests of the participants.

6.2.1 Hierarchical structure of interviewing

The power imbalance between the participant and the researcher always has an impact on an interview. Typically, it is viewed as hierarchical, with the researcher holding the ropes. However, there are ways to change this for the better through more empathetic interviewing (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Holloway & Jefferson, 2000), following feminist principles (Campbell et al., 2010; Hydén, 2014). I implemented feminist (empathetic) practices throughout the interview process to the best of my abilities, showing compassion and making sure that the participants knew they had control in the interview setting. I took care to introduce myself as a doctoral student and the project as part of my studies, emphasising how grateful I was to the interviewees to be able to learn from them.

I explained to them in detail that they were not obliged in any way to take part in the research, they could stop at any moment without any explanation, and they could refrain from discussing any topic. These efforts made me feel that my participants experienced me as not only sympathetic towards them but also informed about the subject, levelling the playing field to a degree. Following Braun and Clarke's (2013) advice, I was mindful of acknowledging the interviewees' feelings, pausing the interview when needed and asking if they felt alright to continue, if they needed a break or wanted to withdraw from the research. Due to the exposed position of some interviewees, a few breaks in the interviews were needed.

6.2.2 Location of interviews

The location of interviews is important, especially when the subject is sensitive, and can have considerable effects on its dynamics, such as feelings of vulnerability and power imbalances (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000; Hydén, 2014). The emphasis should be on finding a relationally safe space to conduct the interview in order to create an atmosphere of trust. It is therefore important to give the participants a choice of where to meet (if possible). All of the interviews with the young people were held in a meeting room in their school, a place open to both students and teachers, where I believed they would feel as comfortable as possible. I took care to reorganise the room before the participants showed up to enhance their feeling of being in an equal setting. The interviews were conducted during school hours, giving the interviewees a chance to participate in the research easily, while having a legitimate reason to skip their classes held at the same time (this being their incentive to participate).

Most of the interviews with the perpetrators and the victims/survivors took place in my office or in the interview room in the same building. I was mindful of always asking the participants where they wanted to meet. They usually could not think of a place where they felt comfortable to a) meet with a researcher and b) discuss a sensitive topic, after which I offered to meet with them in my office building. I always took time to prepare the room, finding comfortable chairs and keeping water and tissues on hand if needed. The interviewees decided on the interview time, ranging from early morning till early evening. I am aware that the location of these interviews is not ideal, my office or office building, tilting in my direction in terms of comfort. However, due to the nature of the topic, it is understandable that the participants found it difficult to offer alternative locations (e.g., their homes) and might have preferred to meet me on a location associated with a certain degree of professionalism.

As previously stated, five of the interviews were conducted in prison or a halfway house. I gained access to different interview rooms in each prison building, but I could not offer these individuals anything (e.g., water or tissues) or set the mood in any way. Besides wanting to contribute to the research and describe their experiences, I believe that what

drove these individuals to talk with me was the opportunity of a break from the mundane prison routine.

6.2.3 A call for participants

To protect the participants and their ethical involvement in the interview process, it is important to think strategically about how the researcher phrases the information on the information sheets and consent forms. If the information is too specific, the researcher might influence the prospective participant's mind, but the researcher must also be clear about the research topic to avoid misleading anyone (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000). After careful planning, I managed to phrase all my information sheets and consent forms (minor differences according to the group in question) in a similar way, providing a clear framework for the research. At the same time, it did not sound too specific so that people would not be hesitant about contacting me. Holloway and Jefferson (2000) explain the importance of differentiating between the academic domain and the research questions, on one hand, and the information provided to the participants, on the other hand. This makes the conversation more active. From the perspective of feminist interviewing, this means that the interviewer and the interviewee collaborate in their efforts towards a mutual goal but have different tasks in order to gain an understanding of the problem at hand. Hence, it is a relational practice (Hydén, 2014).

6.2.4 Anonymity

It is always important to respect the participants' anonymity, usually by using pseudonyms (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Cresswell, 2014). Due to the sensitivity of the research at hand and Iceland's small population (364,000 individuals), it is vital to keep the participants' identities a secret. This cannot be done just by using pseudonyms; the researcher must be mindful of altering identifying data (e.g., places and events discussed), so these cannot be traced back to the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This can be a challenge in a community that boasts about how 'everybody knows everybody', but in turn, this is what makes it so important. The following are three points of departure that I kept in mind regarding anonymity to protect my participants.

First, the participants share stories of incidents that are all at once personal, hurtful and sometimes even illegal. It is an absolute prerequisite that their identities remain a secret. Perpetrators feel ashamed about their deeds, victims/survivors might not have told other people about their experiences, or young individuals share intimate sexual experiences that they do not want traced back to them.

Second, for both victims/survivors and perpetrators, there are risks involved in participating in the research. For victims/survivors, the risk might be that their abusers would learn about their sharing of stories that the latter might not want to be revealed, or the former might be risking their own emotional relapse. A perpetrator might have difficulties with sharing his experiences out of respect for his family, shame or other

emotional problems. Anonymity and respect for the told story are of utmost importance here.

Third, there is a risk of revealing information about illegal activities. Perpetrators, as well as victims/survivors, might be sharing stories of past illegal activities. They must know that all information obtained in interviews is for research purposes only and that I do not work with the authorities and thus have no obligation to report past illegal activities. Furthermore, it is not a researcher's duty to report plans of future crimes. However, if a person's life or health is at risk, the researcher is ethically (and sometimes legally, e.g., if a minor is involved) obliged to act on the information received. Thankfully, it was not the case in this research.

6.3 Researchers position and reflexive thoughts

When analysing interviews and writing articles based on the data, it is important to ensure that the researcher tells the participants' stories with respect. On one hand, the researcher must report the participants' stories honestly (Cresswell, 2014). On the other hand, it is imperative to keep in mind that the researcher interprets the experiences of others as they tell it. As such, the researcher's analysis sometimes brings out a different story than the one told by the participant (Braun & Clarke, 2013) – a version interpreted through a theoretical lens that stresses different elements of the story, influenced by the researcher's interests and experiences.

So far, throughout the research process, I have tried to be reflexive. I have kept a detailed research diary about the research process, my experiences and feelings when working on the project, as well as literature and theory. This is important because as Braun and Clarke (2013) explain so well, it is through reflexivity that the researcher can identify specific moments or positionings that have shaped one's data collection and analysis. This has certainly been the case for me.

6.3.1 Engagement through interviews

When discussing my relations with the research participants, my position varied, depending on the group in question – young people, perpetrators and victims/survivors. However, my persona and merits remain the same. I am a well-educated, middle-class, cisgender and white woman who just turned 40. I am a proclaimed feminist with visible tattoos. How do all these affect my relations with my participants?

For the first part of my project, my interviews with the young people were conducted in their school, where they felt at home. The participants were informed that full confidentiality would be guaranteed, and it was made clear to them that the circle of trust also applied among themselves. I had come to know all participants quite well through my work, gaining their trust as a teacher in their school. Even though I did not teach the participating students, they knew of me and knew some of my students. I assume that I

had the reputation of being a reliable adult. To me, the trust between myself and the different groups positively affected the power imbalance – the young people seemed unafraid to share information with me. The interviews were held with groups of friends, so trust was already in place among the individual participants before the interview. The outcome was the participants' discussion about their ideas and experiences of relationships and sex comfortably, laughing and smiling while conversing, apparently uninhibited by me, the researcher.

When talking with the perpetrators, the situation was very different. Before conducting the interviews, especially with those in prison, I had feelings of anxiety and fear. I was unsure if I could gain the participants' trust and obtain the needed information; I was afraid that I would feel intimidated or fearful. A lot of weight was put on these interviews, forming the backbone of my doctoral project, so they had to be good. I remember thinking, *Did I aim too high? Was this a mistake?* As soon as I met the first participant in person, I calmed down, and my remaining anxiety helped me focus on the task at hand. These men had decided to meet me and talk about a difficult life experience, which was a big step. I realised that I did not have to be afraid. Many of the participants recognised this as an opportunity to share their side of the story, process it and perhaps even gain some clarity. Some of them were already looking inward, trying to work on themselves; others were involved in programmes for treating addiction, and some were still attempting to just keep going. While some were open to talking about anything, others were raw and emotional, even angry.

When I was conducting these interviews, it was important to maintain professional research standards and be mindful of not upsetting the participants, making sure that they felt at ease. I wanted them to understand that I was willing to listen to their stories and not pass judgement. During these interviews, I did not feel like I held the position of power. Instead, I felt vulnerable going in as a woman talking with men who had been violent towards their female partners. I think that this was inevitable. Braun and Clarke (2013) describe the importance of knowing what to do in these situations before going in. Still, the interviews were hard to predict as every case was different, so I found it difficult to prepare emotionally. When seeking a psychologist friend's advice on conducting interviews under stressful conditions like these, she pointed out that people would tell stories very differently. Some people would draw a person in from the beginning, getting one emotionally involved, while others keep a person at a safe distance. This was true for my participants. Their stories were so intriguing but at the same time, very sad and difficult to hear. I never felt that I was losing control while conducting these interviews, but the information was so tough to hear and process that I would often cry afterward. After one particular case, I remember crying all the way home in the car, bursting into tears frequently over the next few days. The described violence and emotional trauma were so severe, a story told in a way that drew me in closely, that I felt trapped in it. I listened to my friend's advice and met a counsellor for psychological debriefing during

this phase of the research. It helped me leave my work behind and process the emotions that arose in these interviews.

When I called for survivors' participation in my project, I was surprised by the number of individuals who responded. It took me almost a year and a half to find 10 perpetrators willing to talk with me, but in 24 hours, I had made contact with more than 20 victims/survivors and booked interviews with 12. I was very careful to explain to the women that the interview would focus on their experiences of a violent relationship and that the experience of retelling their story might be traumatic. The victims/survivors were happy to share, sometimes offering even more than asked for. I felt that these women really wanted to help me – a fellow feminist and fighter for equality – make a change, with many of them using expressions that indicated their desire for their experiences to be used for "something good". Their stories were hard to hear as well, and at times, the participants burst into tears. I acknowledged their situations, but all of them wanted to continue the interview. Afterward, I would take a moment to collect my thoughts and emotions, focusing on breathing to calm my nerves. I think that my previous experiences from my interviews with the men helped me in the sense that I had more control over my feelings this time around. Nonetheless, a few of the stories, as well as my deep feeling of sadness when I heard them, will always remain with me.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that working on violence is emotionally draining. Soon after starting the interview phase of my research, I started feeling exhausted. Working with material that relies on one's ability to keep it to oneself can feel isolating, and I soon felt emotionally overloaded, the stories I heard still lingering deep in my system. At the same time, the work was life changing in the sense that I was constantly learning new things about not only the research topic, but myself as well, reflecting on my life from a new perspective. I followed a protocol for trauma workers and met with a counsellor for psychological debriefing, as well as with my supervisors to discuss the interviews, the research and the accompanying pressure of it all. This was necessary to safeguard my personal wellbeing and to obtain the support I needed to continue the research.

6.3.2 Positionality

I come from a white middle-class family, rich in educational capital; my parents both hold university degrees and come from a line of well-educated men. For most of my childhood, we lived comfortably in the western part of Reykjavík, am affluent neighbourhood, where I attended school. After finishing high school, I moved to Stockholm, Sweden, where I finished my bachelor's and master's degree in history, before returning to Iceland and adding a teacher certification to my list of degrees. I taught history and gender studies at a high school in Reykjavík for nine years, before switching courses and starting my doctoral studies.

This brief autobiographical excerpt shows the privilege that I have been fortunate enough to enjoy in my life as an educated, white, middle-class and cisgender heterosexual woman. I am also married to my loving husband, and together, we have two boys, forming a real nuclear family. However, being sensitive to the research topic and acknowledging my position and how it can affect my research are not only about ticking boxes but also about acknowledging the structures that frame my understanding. How did I arrive at where I am today? What do I bring to my research?

As a child, I was taught social justice and feminist ideology, and it has made me who I am today, although it took me a few years until I was ready to acknowledge that. When I was younger, the well-brought-up kid that I was, a daughter of a feminist and a social democrat, I remember thinking about equality and its importance. However, feminism was too much for me to acknowledge at that time, too 'out there' for a teenager who was busy with trying to fit in. Feminism finds a person when one needs it (Ahmed, 2017). For me, it occurred in university, when I was living alone in a foreign city. My encounter with feminism was twofold. First, I was reading a lot about feminist theory in my bachelor's programme, learning about systemic injustices, which really spoke to me. Second, I was lonely. I did not speak the language (Swedish), and I felt out of place, producing feelings of great discomfort. This discomfort experienced turned on my radar, making me more aware of other people's discomfort and how they were out of place in different ways, thus opening my eyes to various forms of discrimination and injustice around me. Consequently, I moved back to Iceland as a full-blown feminist, with my killjoy personality (Ahmed, 2017) fully developed.

Following in the footsteps of second-wave feminists, I have grown to understand that the personal is always political. I believe that the research I am doing is political in the sense that it addresses systemic problems in society at large. At the same time, it is personal in the sense that it addresses the violence experienced by women. I take my point of departure from Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), where she states that we who fight for equality are all feminists even though we might play by different rules, according to each one's situation. Feminism is activism – using whatever way one chooses to engage in it. I choose to engage through research, and I hope that my research will contribute to the fight against violence towards women and other minorities who are disproportionately exposed to violence in today's culture.

6.3.3 The privilege of talking about violence

I am deeply aware of my position as a woman and a feminist, and as such, I have strong beliefs in issues of equality and gender-based violence. The feminist perspective of this research is chosen accordingly. What makes research feminist is mainly that it deals with feminist questions about power and power structures (Åhäll, 2018). Nonetheless, it is important to avoid over-interpreting the data to suit one's perspective. While conducting this research, I aimed to be mindful of my position and not to over-analyse or give a

different meaning to the data, something that cannot be supported through clear examples. I am an outsider when it comes to understanding the experiences of male perpetrators of violence; I am neither a man nor a perpetrator. However, I am an insider as well, living in a society characterised by a rape culture (Alcoff, 2018), where women are taught to be afraid of being attacked from a very young age. This gives me an important understanding and a position for my research.

In the context of violence against women, it is important to contemplate who has the privilege of talking about violence. In modern social debate, it has been implied that only victims/survivors should be allowed to talk about the experience of violence. This is not helpful for the mainstream debate on violence, excluding the voices of those who *either* have not experienced violence directly yet live in a society immersed in a rape culture *or* are not ready to share their experiences of being victims/survivors. It is not in the spirit of feminism to force individuals to share the most intimate details about their lives in order to be considered credible sources.

Due to its devastating nature, violence affects not only those who suffer from it or use it but also those who live in a context where violence is perpetrated. I recognise that it is my privilege to be able to research and discuss violence; gaining my research participants' trust to share their stories and experiences with me is a privilege as well. Violence intersects with different social categories, positioning individuals differently, according to the power granted to each. I have tried my best to be respectful of the social positioning of my participants, contextualising, not generalising, reading and analysing all my data with respect.

6.3.4 Embracing my killjoy nature

I started working on this thesis project in the fall of 2019. While I was working on the project, the mainstream public debate on violence against women reached new heights in Iceland. In the summer of 2021, a new social movement, commonly referred to as the second #MeToo movement, grew strong. The movement was heavily influenced by the involvement of feminist activists using their social media platforms to tell the stories of individual women's experiences of violence. The focus was on structural silencing tactics, as well as individual perpetrators, many of them well-known men in Icelandic society accused of sexual violence, harassment and IPV.

When the debate became heated, various experts in violence were called to the table and asked to address the problem in the media. I was fortunate enough to be one of them. I was thrilled to share my research results with the media and the public. At that time, I was finishing my article on perpetrators, so I could refer to the data when answering the questions. I received a lot of positive feedback and useful critique. I learned how to frame my story in a short news segment, think quickly on my feet and respond in a public debate. It was a steep, demanding learning curve, but I will always appreciate it.

What I had not thought through was the backlash that I then experienced. I was prepared to receive harsh critique from those defending the perpetrators, especially on social media. However, I was not ready for and naively did not expect to experience backlash from other feminists. At the back of my mind, I have it written in capital neon letters that feminists do not have to agree but should be constructive when debating, as we all work towards the same goal – equality. When becoming the object of feminist critique on social media, arguing that my work was too sympathetic towards perpetrators, the very thing that I believed I was fighting against, I simply did not know what to do. I was devastated. I started doubting myself. Was I on the right path with my work? Was the critique warranted? Had I fallen prey to my own conviction of holding perpetrators accountable for their actions? Was I not feminist enough?

Again, Ahmed (2017) helped me find my footing. She writes about feminism being engaged with the messy truth of it all. Feminism is about asking uncomfortable questions, making people see that things are not black and white. Feminism should not avoid taking on controversial subjects that thrive in the messy grey area in between the easier black or white positions. One of those subjects is everything that relates to perpetrators of IPV. I was caught off guard, and it made me re-evaluate my work and my feminist position as an individual and a researcher constantly thinking, *Am I doing enough?* I finally realised that I was doing so when I embraced the discomfort of staying in the messy grey era where difficult conversations would take place. That is where the feminist killjoy thrives.

7 Conclusion of articles

In this thesis project, my aim is to understand how violence thrives and is discursively maintained in Icelandic society, with a special focus on the project of heterosexuality and men who have been violent towards women. This aim is achieved in three different research papers published in three journals. Article 1 focuses on youth and how they understand relationships and sex, as well as the power dynamics to which they adhere. Article 2 is about men who self-identify as being violent in a relationship and how they are constituted and informed by the discourse on the predator as a monster. Article 3 tackles the relationship itself and how perpetrators and victims/survivors account for their experiences of being in a violent relationship from a temporal perspective. The research papers inform us on different aspects of violence in relationships and the structures that maintain it. This chapter of the thesis project is an overview of the main findings of each article; however, a detailed account of the results can be found in the full text of each article (see the Appendix).

7.1 Article 1: "Boys in power": Consent and gendered power dynamics in sex

The topic of Article 1 deals with youth and the social norms that dictate the discourses on dating and sex, focusing on how they become gendered sexual subjects through various discourses. The data used for the analyses are from interviews with friendship groups. All participants were 18 years old. Young people are constituted as sexual subjects through the dominant discourses on heterosexuality and consent; together, these discourses form a new dialogue of consent, highly influenced by rape prevention activism, which focuses on conveying the message that sex without consent is rape. How then do young people work with sexual consent? Is there a gendered aspect to it?

The larger discourse on consent emphasises the importance of consensual sex, produced by legal and feminist activist discourses, as well as equality. In the participants' narratives, consent is not mediated verbally; boys shoulder the responsibility of reading their partners' body language. Sex is often viewed as something primitive and spontaneous, while consensual sex is regarded as passionless and boring. This results in a lack of space to seek consent in a formal way if the sex is supposed to be passionate. The participants acknowledge that everything outside the framework of "normal sex" needs to be discussed. However, it can be assumed that even though the participants expressed their willingness to talk about some sexual acts beforehand, there is still a level of shyness related to formulating in words one's sexual interests. The discourse on equality does not seem to have a deeper effect on the process of consent. The heterosexual discourse,

infused with the discourse on equality, highlights the powers assigned to masculinity while downplaying the role of femininity. Boys take on dominant roles in dating and sex and the girls let them do so, taking on a submissive position. At the same time, boys hold on to toxic ideas of power and dominance as active agents of sexuality in intimate relationships, simultaneously citing the discourse on equality.

These discourses convey conflicting messages. On one hand, boys are supposed to be gentle and take responsibility for the sex being consensual. On the other hand, the heterosexual discourse upholds power imbalances in sex, bringing our attention to how exposed young people are to violence in relation to dating/relationships, when encountering sexual 'grey areas' where the line between consensual sex and coercion becomes unclear. Finally, there is also a condition of vulnerability, which can position both boys and girls. Boys can become vulnerable when trying to comply with the heterosexual script and can fail to fulfil their role. Girls risk being slut-shamed when they do not act according to the script; as a result, they make sure to comply.

7.2 Article 2: "I am not a monster." An affective–discursive analysis of men's perspectives on their engagement in violence against women

Article 2 is about perpetrators of violence and how they make sense of their experiences, based on interviews with six men who self-identify as having been violent towards a partner. The focus is on the affective–discursive context that they draw on when making sense of their actions and how they feel the violent acts reflect who they are and what they stand for.

The 'monster', a product of the predatory discourse, is a constant referent to all of the participants in their attempts to make sense of their situation and explain who they are or are not. The experiences of the participants do have a clear intersectional angle as the monster figures differently in their stories, depending on their social position and the nature of the violent act/s, resulting in different discourses available to them to frame the event and their responsibility for what occurred.

Middle-class men describe their experience of being associated with a violent act as less of a process than a sudden fall in position. In this sense, they move from their position of respectability straight into the category of the monster, where they are stuck. They experience a dissonance between how they perceive themselves and how they are judged by society. They appropriate the 'discourses on equality' to dodge accountability and put part of the blame on the victims of their actions. The monster figures differently in the accounts of working-class men, especially those with a history of crime and violent actions. They identify the monster with masculinity but view it as masculinity out of control, when (to them) masculinity is about maintaining control. They discuss what made them lose control, drawing on discourses where the cause of the incident stemmed from their

life histories, but they are simultaneously adamant that the violence they had committed was a reaction to the situation that they were in.

The participants do not identify with the construct of the monster; rather, they use it for explanatory purposes. For them, violence has a broad spectrum, and they do not feel that the context of their act is fully appreciated. Becoming a monster and dropping their moral standing do not align with the participants' self-identity. One is either a good person or a monster; there is nothing in between. They describe their experience as a process, moving from the initial crash with the construct of the monster, getting stuck in it/processing it and finally wondering if they can break free from it. The 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.

The monster is a sticky category and affects how others relate to the monstrous subject, as well as how the subject relates to himself. It also shifts the focus *from* the violent acts and the social context that enables violent actions *to* the individual perpetrator. As a product of predatory discourse, the monster thus plays a role in individualising a societal problem.

7.3 Article 3: "How did this happen?": Making retrospective, present and prospective sense of intimate relationships where men have been violent

Article 3 focuses on relationships where men have been violent, from the perspectives of three men who identify as perpetrators of violence, as well as three victims/survivors. The article explores how they make sense of their experiences – retrospectively, presently and prospectively. There is a clear difference between the perceptions of perpetrators and of victims/survivors of violence experienced in an intimate relationship. While a perpetrator views acts of physical violence as induced by specific events or circumstances, a victim/survivor describes the violence more in terms of a process or system of abuse.

When defining a relationship retrospectively, the interpretation is subject to the passage of time, as well as influenced by dominant discourses that inform the participants' approach to violence, all of which are configured in the participants' narratives. This paper explores how the participants recount and (re)define their experiences of a violent relationship in relation to time and how their understandings have changed in framing their experiences. The relationship, perceived as an affective–discursive practice, figures differently across the three identified phases.

First, recalling love retrospectively, framed in terms of the heterosexual project, becomes an affective–discursive practice. The male participants previously positioned themselves as being in love and good (not deviant) boyfriends, until their girlfriends fell short of living up to their expectations, triggering their need for masculine control. The female participants recognise their boyfriends' deviant tendencies retrospectively, asking themselves if there ever was love between them. Second, focusing on the relationship as violent, in and from the present day, the male participants place the origin of their problems beyond their control, ignoring the gendered context of violence. The female participants previously felt completely stuck in their relationships, positioning themselves as subordinated and relatively weak and enduring the violence designed to increase their boyfriends' control over them. Third, speaking prospectively about the future after the relationship had run its course, the men express their desire to pass as masculine subjects in control. They try to escape being othered as violent men, without demonstrating a deeper understanding of the damaging effects of violence. Meanwhile, the female participants wonder if their ex-boyfriends will ever be able to accept full responsibility for the harm they caused or understand their pain.

Finally, looking back, the relationship itself becomes an affective–discursive practice, informing and constituting the participants' experiences as they re-live and re-feel the violence they encountered, generating different embodied experiences, notably shame. Shame figures strongly in the stories of the participants, sometimes expressed explicitly, sometimes lingering more implicitly in their narration, not fully articulated or understood but traceable through its regulatory role in sustaining heteronormative practices. The participants turn to individual factors when making sense of the violent relationship, and unsurprisingly so. The effects of gender and power relations rarely figure in everyday understandings of violence (Päivinen & Holma, 2017); the same applies to the participants' difficulties in acknowledging the structural factors that facilitate violence.

8 Final discussion

In this chapter, I discuss how the articles in this thesis project relate to one another and draw some common conclusions. I explain the common aspects of the papers, the strengths and limitations of the project, as well as offer suggestions for future research.

8.1 The heterosexual project and structures of violence

The heterosexual project is based on gendered norms and the unequal balance of power and social resources between men and women. Drawing on Connell masculinity theory (2005), it is a structural fact that men, the group in power, are concerned with defending the system, while women, the group lacking power, are interested in change. A system of this kind is unsustainable without violence, usually at the hands of those in power against those without power. Additionally, there are social categories of difference that can improve or be disadvantages to one's position in the group (Crenshaw, 1989).

What all the articles in this compilation thesis highlight is how the heterosexual project informs the participants' experiences of (possible) violence. Even though article 1 does not deal directly with violence, it emphasises how the youth's understanding of consent and sex is built on two paradoxical discourses (the discourse on consent and the discourse on heterosexuality), exposing young women to possible violence as they feel that they must fulfil a submissive role when having sex with a partner. This is no news to those interested in the production of violence in society at large; however, in the context of Iceland, consent is under-theorised. It is therefore important to highlight the fact that even among our youngest and brightest citizens, who grew up submerged in the discourse on equality and feminist campaigns for women's rights, their understanding of equality does not apply to intimate relations. Consent and sex, in the context of relationships among youth, cannot be understood without taking the heteronormative context into account, where men assume the role of active agents of sex and women are their submissive partners, rendering the latter vulnerable when encountering discourses on violence.

This is interesting when compared with article 2, especially the experiences of young middle-class men who have great difficulty in acknowledging the discussed acts as rape. They adamantly state that they believe in equality and would never rape anyone; they know that consent is key to having consensual sex. Yet somehow, they found themselves in a position where consent was lacking, and now, they have to admit that what they committed was sexual violence towards their partners. As active agents of sex, they had intercourse on their own terms, not procuring consent. To them, the monster who rapes women is incompatible with their experience and self-image, creating an extreme

dissonance between how they perceive themselves (as good guys) and how they are judged by society (as monsters).

I would like to draw attention to how the men draw their girlfriends in and make them complicit in their violence, as discussed in articles 2 and 3. This is particularly interesting from the perspective of the heterosexual project and in the Nordic context. A part of the Nordic equality discourse is that due to equality being achieved, perpetrating violence against women is shameful, as well as being violated in a relationship. Men who commit violence thus attempt to shift the focus from their violence to victim-blaming in order to minimise the gravity of the incident (e.g., by making their girlfriends complicit in the act), which also serves to situate their girlfriends as deviant. To the men, especially the participants from the working class, this is important; they lost control and tried to regain masculine control in private through violence.

Finally, as discussed in article 3, the women felt the control of the heterosexual project in various ways, by having sex on their partners' terms, even being raped in their relationships, only acknowledging the experience as violence afterwards, due to sexual norms inherent in the heterosexual project. Additionally, they now describe being humiliated and being called out for not correctly playing their part as girlfriends. Due to shame, a policing mechanism of the patriarchal system, and the fear of being marked as deviant, they felt compelled to stay in the violent relationship.

8.2 Equality in the Nordic context

As widely stated in research projects on gender-based violence in the Nordic context, equality is perceived as achieved in the Nordic countries; however, the prevalence of violence against women remains high. This phenomenon has widely been discussed as the 'Nordic paradox' (Gracia & Merlo, 2016; Wemrell et al., 2019). However, the concept has also been the object of critique for not taking into account the cultural and social factors that relate to violence (Humbert et al., 2021). Here, I briefly explore the meaning of equality for the participants in this project, and how it relates to violence as discussed in articles 1, 2 and 3.

Neoliberal influences will have us believe that the discourse on equality trumps the rules of the heterosexual project. In the neoliberal spirit, equality is perceived as achieved; subsequently, the problem of gender-based violence is assumed to have fixed itself. Feminist epistemology has proven this to be false, explored in many research projects, including this one. It is important not to lose sight of the real problem, involving the patriarchal structures that facilitate and infuse violence in society to maintain its power. The Nordic discourse on equality has only led to superficial changes to the mainstream public debate on violence, identifiable in the prevalence of violence and the push back experienced by activists when campaigning for change (e.g., in the #MeToo movement).

This is further identifiable in the experiences of all three groups interviewed for this thesis project. All of the participants proudly state their feeling that equality is important and has been achieved in Iceland in most respects. However, simultaneously, they draw on individual explanations when discussing their experiences, (largely) not taking gender or structural pressures into account. Even when they can point to structural problems (e.g., the young women in article 1), they still choose to ignore them to avoid being criticised by the patriarchal system. They therefore willingly position themselves as weak rather than risk their womanhood.

8.3 How is violence maintained in Icelandic culture?

IPV is manifested in different ways, and the discourses on violence position people differently. Hence, violence means different things to different people, as discussed in articles 1, 2 and 3. To those who experience violence in their everyday lives, it is normal to look to individual reasoning when making sense of the events that occurred – their experiences being extremely personal. To those who have not experienced violence themselves, it might also be normal to underestimate the prevalence of violence and the danger associated with it, not to mention its long-term effects.

Violence towards women (e.g., IPV) is infused and maintained in today's Nordic society through the heterosexual project, resting on inherent power imbalances between men and women. Men bolster their masculinity by 'being in control' and showing agentive tactics when initiating sex, while femininity is about taking on a submissive position and supporting hegemonic masculinity. The discourse on equality plays an important role here as well. It takes our attention away from the problem of violence, which has become highly stigmatised in a gender-equal society, making it even more difficult to be identified by both individuals and society as a whole when encountered, visible in the backlash against the #MeToo movement, among others.

In articles 2 and 3, theories of affect have proven instrumental for understanding how the individual relates to violence and how discourse materialises through affective-discursive practices. How we are moved and shaped by affect adds a dimension to our understanding. We need to understand not only what positions us (discourse) but also how and why (affective practices). This is particularly true for violence. In articles 2 and 3, my co-authors and I explore how perpetrators of violence relate to their experiences, both affectively and discursively. They all relate their experiences to the construct of the monster and its othering affects, but there is an intersectional dimension to their experiences as well. The affects of shame, as well as the desire to maintain control, figure strongly in their stories, as they try to distance themselves from what occurred. The complex emotional work detectable in their narratives is a good example of how difficult it can be to acknowledge one's actions as violence when one has breached gendered norms of behaviour. This also sheds light on why it is so difficult for perpetrators to accept responsibility for their violent acts. In article 3, my co-author and I explain how the

discourses available to perpetrators portray their acts as shameful; by acknowledging their acts as shameful, perpetrators can earn their way back to good standing in society. However, this opens a possibility for performing shame without any deeper emotional understanding of the harm caused by their violent acts. The discourses available to victims/survivors do not include acceptance or forgiveness, meaning that there is no closure to their experiences, leaving each of them with the feeling that the relationship is, in a way, unfinished.

8.4 A new discourse on violence

Discourses are historical constructions; as such, they can be changed. The results of this thesis project certainly show the needed change in the discourses on violence if we want to fight the problem of violence against women. This is an opportunity to make a change. As discussed in all the articles, the discourses on violence are unproductive in solving the problem of IPV. The construct of the monster alienates perpetrators, they become the Other, which is a hindrance to them to accept their violent behaviour. The discourses avilable to men do not help them to understand the problem of violence, or how to move past it. This further connects to the neoliberal construct of equality being achieved, disregarding the influence of the heterosexual project, rendering women vulnerable when encountering violence. We need a new discourse. There should be room for perpetrators of violence to be regarded as persons and to be heard, but we must also demand that they take responsibility for their actions and not let them get away without going through all the messy feelings that this entails. The discourse should be built on respect for the experiences of victims/survivors. They need to feel safe to share their experiences and have their voices heard. A new discourse on violence also needs to make room for acceptance. There should be a possibility for victims/survivors to accept and find peace with what happened, so they could move on and find closure if they wish. This would allow them to become 'unstuck' and in this sense, finally end their relationships, which for some, feel unfinished.

Finally, violence thrives in a system like the heterosexual project, a product of the patriarchy. In feminist spirit, the only way to stop systemic violence against women and other vulnerable groups is therfor to dismantle the patriarchy. One way of doing that is to change the discourse on violence.

8.5 Strengths and limitations

The strength of this project lies first and foremost in the broad scope of its application, focusing on how violence is maintained in society at large through different structures and researching the problem from different perspectives for a better and deeper understanding of the problem of IPV. My research deals with uncovering the different structures that maintain violence, as well as how they position people in various ways, depending on their social positioning. This has been achievable, first and foremost,

through the data collected for the project by interviewing various groups of people who encounter violence differently in their lives, and as such, are positioned in diverse ways by the discourses on violence.

The chosen theoretical approach is equally important. I strongly believe that this project would not have produced its results without the added dimension of affect to best explore the emotionality of violence. When I first started working on the project, I had not yet encountered theories of affect, so those theories were not applied in article 1. However, with my increased understanding of the theoretical possibilities that affect has to offer, when used in combination with post-structuralist theories, it became very clear that this was the best theoretical approach for my thesis project. When working on article 2 with my co-supervisor Dr Rúdólfsdóttir, a fellow 'affect enthusiast', I really felt my work come to life through the combined theoretical perspective of the work, focusing on affective–discursive practices.

The empirical strength of this paper, built on the diverse groups of participants and the original theoretical approach, lies in a better and deeper understanding of IPV and its different manifestations. As such, the project is an important contribution to feminist research internationally, as well as in Iceland. Internationally, there is a vast field of feminist research on IPV. The contribution of this research project is to enrich our understanding of the structures that facilitate violence, through the use of original theories, in a society known for its gender equality, and as such, often regarded as a role model. However, in the context of Iceland, the research field is emerging. This research makes a contribution with new perspectives on an under-researched problem, particularly the perpetrators of violence, using a theoretical approach that has not been used in the context of violence in Iceland. This has given me the opportunity to uncover new perspectives on the structures that facilitate and infuse violence in Icelandic society, deepening our understanding of its different manifestations. In Iceland, violence against women and in particular, the role of perpetrators, has been the topic of public debate, especially since the emergence of the second #MeToo movement in May 2021, often highlighting stereotypical ideas of violence that my research project has proven to be harmful for our understanding of the problem. I therefore sincerely hope that my findings prove useful for the debate on violence against women and societal understanding of the patriarchal structure of such violence. Societal understanding of the problem of violence is key to changing the discourse and stopping the reproduction of violence in society at large.

Every research project has its limitations. In this case, first, it is important to discuss the number of participants. My original plan for the project was to only interview perpetrators of violence; however, it was clear from the beginning that they would be very difficult to recruit in a country with a micro-population such as Iceland. It took me a year and a half to have ten interviews with men who identified as perpetrators of violence in an intimate relationship. Early on in the data collection period, it dawned on me that the number of

procured interviews with perpetrators might be insufficient for a doctoral thesis. Wondering how this issue could be resolved, I decided to add a complimentary dataset for a deeper understanding of the problem of IPV, a backup plan of sorts to ensure that I had enough data for my thesis project, which turned out to be a great resource. Understandably, this also changed the course of the project, to a certain extent. Starting out as a project on perpetrators of IPV, it ended up as a project on the structures facilitating such violence, with a special focus on perpetrators.

Regarding this project's participants, it should also be stated that they come from a rather homogeneous group, all of them being Icelandic. The participants of the friendship group interviews comprised youth from the same school, all white and cisgender heterosexual from middle-class families. All men and women who participated were also white and cisgender heterosexual from a working- or a middle-class background. Members of the upper (middle) class are not represented in this project even though numerous attempts were made to establish contact with them, as well as with individuals of foreign origin. There is ample reason to believe that individuals from those groups are differently positioned in the discourse on violence compared with this project's participants.

Finally, this loose structure and the singular aim of the project in the beginning can be perceived as limitations in themselves. A more structured thesis around a cohesive dataset might have resulted in a deeper understanding of a single problem. My aim to do a deep-dive project on perpetrators changed; as a result, the project scope widened, which can be regarded as watering down the original goal. My plans for which articles to write and theories to use also changed. However, the expanded dataset allowed me to explore additional dimensions of violence, which I steadfastly claim today as necessary for me to understand the problem. How could I have focused on only one dimension (perpetrators) of such a large-scale problem without understanding the structures that facilitate violence? To me, the broadened scope of the project has elevated it from interesting to fascinating, from researching perpetrators only to a wide-scale focus on the societal structures that we need to change. I believe that it has added value to my study's results, expanding our understanding of the structures that facilitate violence in intimate relationships.

8.6 Future research

The results of this thesis project offer ample opportunity for future research. First of all, as already stated, there are blind spots in the data corpus; men from the upper (middle) class did not participate in the research. This is a privileged group of men who have been untouchable in the public debate on violence against women. For the members of this privileged group, their masculinity is far removed from the predatory discourses on violence, usually associated with the lower classes. For the first time, in the #MeToo movement, privileged men were called out for their behaviour. In the context of Iceland, a second #MeToo movement started in May 2021, calling out and identifying individual

perpetrators of violence, which focused on known men in privileged positions. There is ample opportunity for research on this privileged group of men and how they understand and relate to violence, using the results of this project as a starting point. Furthermore, the #MeToo movement is an example of women's resistance to the systemic violence endured, which would be another interesting point of departure for future research on the structures of violence. Additionally, this research has focused on the heterosexual project and how it relates to violence; hence, all participants of the project are heterosexual. In the context of Iceland, there is a need for research on IPV in other relationship formats, involving participants who identify themselves as queer/non-heterosexual, due to their different positions in the patriarchal dynamics of power and how they relate to violence.

Pathologising of perpetrators is a common characteristic in Icelandic public debate, as shown in article 2, "I am not a monster". The process of pathologising or 'monstering' perpetrators takes on different forms, and in the mainstream public debate, new versions of the monster are frequently identifiable. We need a thorough understanding of the process, and this would be an interesting point of departure for such research to identify different discourses on and manifestations of the monster that serve to mislead the debate and turn the focus away from the real problem (the violence of men towards women) and individualise it. By improving our understanding of the process, we become better equipped to fight it.

Finally, I call for more attention to the possibilities that the focus on affect has to offer in relation to research on violence. To me, affect is a vital part of critical studies; as such, it provides us with opportunities for a deeper and richer understanding of the nuances of violence. It also brings attention to how violence, as a structure, influences not only those who perpetrate or are subjected to it but the society as a whole. These are truths that we can uncover through our closer attention to affect. Violence is one of the major threats currently faced by society at large, in different shapes and forms, and as such, deserves our full attention and efforts to fight it.

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