



Fathers who have been violent

Obstacles and opportunities for change

Rannveig Ágústa Guðjónsdóttir

Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor

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Abstract

This thesis is about understanding change in fathers who have been violent. Fathers' violence against partners and children is an important feminist topic. Focusing on fathers' violence in research and practice is crucial for ensuring the safety of women and children. Men who are violent towards their partners are often fathers, and despite Iceland's reputation as a pioneer in gender equality, this issue is prevalent there as well. While research focusing on fathers' violence and perpetrator programs has shown increased interest in understanding change, there has been little dialogue with feminist affect theories on change.

In this thesis, I give my attention to dominant discourses about fathers and violence, as well as fathers' experiences of their violence, fatherhood and the processes of change. Thus, this thesis engages with contextualizing fathers' violence against women and children and explore their own perspectives and emotional complexities towards their behaviour. Inspired by the work of feminist scholars on poststructuralism, affective dissonance, and discomfort, this research draws on interviews with eight fathers in Iceland who have been violent towards their partners and children. The study suggests that addressing comfort and discomfort is crucial to foster reflexivity, accountability, and potential change from violence. It also explores how these fathers approach fatherhood in their process of changing violent behaviour. The thesis provides insights into possibilities for and obstacles to change for violent fathers, which may be useful for perpetrator programs that intersect work on men's intimate partner violence (IPV) with their fathering skills and capacity.

Additionally, this thesis offers a discourse analysis of how fathers and violence are portrayed in 250 Icelandic media articles from a feminist poststructuralist perspective. The findings indicate that through representation of fathers who have been violent as a certain type of 'strange' and 'dangerous' man, the media fails to acknowledge gendered social norms and structures that continue to produce intimate partner violence against women and children. By critically analysing media representations, the findings contribute to an examination of gendered power dynamics related to intimate partner violence, and the intersection of fatherhood and masculinity within the context of IPV.

The project contributes to the ongoing empirical and theoretical discussion about perpetrators of violence by combining research on fatherhood with feminist research on men and violence.

Útdráttur

Þessi rannsókn fjallar um feður sem beitt hafa ofbeldi í nánnum samböndum og breytingarferli þeirra. Ofbeldi feðra gegn maka og börnum er mikilvægt femínískt umfjöllunarefni. Þekking á og úrræði við ofbeldi feðra er lykilþáttur í að vinna að öryggi kvenna og barna. Karlar sem beita maka sína ofbeldi eru oft feður og þrátt fyrir orðspor Íslands sem leiðandi á sviði jafnréttismála þá þrífst vandinn einnig þar. Þó svo að rannsóknir á ofbeldi feðra og meðferðarúrræðum fyrir gerendur hafi í auknum mæli beinst að því að skilja breytingarferli þá hefur verið lítið samtal við femínískar hrif kenningar um breytingar.

Tvö gagnasöfn voru notuð til að rannsaka feður sem beitt hafa ofbeldi í nánnum sambandi. Eigindleg viðtöl við átta feður sem beitt hafa ofbeldi og 250 greinar úr íslenskum fjölmiðlum. Markmið verkefnisins var að skoða bæði ríkjandi orðræður um feður og ofbeldi og reynslu feðra af því að beita ofbeldi, af hlutverki sínu sem feður og af breytingarferli frá ofbeldishegðun. Þannig nálgast verkið samfélagslegt samhengi ofbeldis í nánnum samböndum sem og sjónarmið feðranna og tilfinningalegar flækjur þeirra gagnvart hegðun sinni. Femínískar kenningar um póstrúktúralisma og hrif, einkum og sér í lagi óþægindi, voru notaðar til að greina gögnin. Þannig eru kynjuð valdatengsl, föðurhlutverkið og breytingar frá ofbeldi skoðuð út frá mótandi áhrifum orðræðna og tilfinninga.

Niðurstöðum rannsóknarverkefnisins eru gerð skil í þremur fræðigreinum. Þær sýna hvernig fjölmiðlar bregðast við óþægilegri umræðu um feður sem beitt hafa ofbeldi með því að einblína á einstaklinga og hvernig þeir eru ólíkir góðum og virkum feðrum. Þannig horfa fjölmiðlar fram hjá samfélagsformgerðum sem eiga þátt í að skapa ofbeldi í nánnum samböndum (fræðigrein eitt). Auk þess varpa niðurstöðurnar ljósi á hvernig feðurnir takast á við óþægindi í frásögnum sínum af ofbeldi, föðurhlutverkinu og breytingum. Niðurstöðurnar sýna að feður geta hunsað óþægindin með því að skipta um umræðuefni, grípa í grín, reiðast, og í einhverjum tilvikum reiða sig á tilfinningavinnu kvenna í lífi þeirra (fræðigrein tvö). Auk þess nálguðust þeir föðurhlutverkið sem verkefni sem ætti að framkvæma í takt við viðtekin viðhorf án þess þó að þeir hlustuðu endilega eftir sjónarmiði barna sinna (fræðigrein þrjú). Hins vegar gátu feðurnir einnig brugðist við óþægindum með því að fara í gagnrýna sjálfsrýni, taka ábyrgð, leita sér aðstoðar (fræðigrein tvö), og eiga óþægileg samtöl við börnin sín um það ofbeldi sem þeir beittu (fræðigrein þrjú).

Með þessum hætti varpar verkefnið nýju ljósi á aðstæður feðra sem beitt hafa ofbeldi með því að skoða ofan í kjölin hvaða samfélagslegu orðræður eru til staðar um þetta viðfangsefni og hvernig það er litað óþægindum og einstaklingshyggju. Þetta verkefni stuðlar að áframhaldandi þekkingarlegu og fræðilegu samtali um gerendur ofbeldis í nánum samböndum með því að tengja saman rannsóknir um föðurhlutverkið við femínískar rannsóknir um karlmennsku og ofbeldi.

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Prologue

On a cold January day in Iceland at the beginning of 2020, I sat across a man and interviewed him about his experience of having been violent against his ex-partner. Even though we were both sitting in rather luxurious chairs that were meant to create comfort in the therapeutic environment where the interview took place, we both fidgeted in our chairs regularly, squirming from discomfort. He was angry and defensive when he told me that even though he had slapped his former partner, it was not like he was ever violent against her, far from it. Although he gradually began to share his story with me, detailing his traumatic life experiences and how he was trying to handle difficult situations related to parenting and custody, he remained fully dressed in his winter jacket the entire time. The thick winter jacket he wore did not seem to provide enough protection, as he frequently crossed his arms over his chest during most of the interview, as if trying to shield his vulnerability even more. My response to his body language was to sit stiffly, with my legs crossed in (slightly too tight) jeans, feeling an uncomfortable sweat start to form as I looked at him, fully dressed, in the warm office. He appeared insecure and a bit awkward, but he was sincere and shared openly during the interview. We even traded sarcastic comments and smiles throughout our conversation.

Of all the men I interviewed, this one did not have the most graphic or heart-breaking descriptions of violence. Yet, I dreaded starting to transcribe this interview more than any other. Despite being the shortest interview, it took me the longest time to transcribe because I found it so difficult to immerse myself in his world. His energy felt incredibly heavy. I had to break the transcription into short sessions with long breaks in between. My inner resistance to transcribing and engaging with this interview both surprised and bothered me. I wanted—no, needed—to finish it quickly, preferably yesterday.

During the first year and a half of my PhD studies, I had gone back and forth over whether I wanted to use affect theories in my project. Initially, the concept seemed overly complicated and philosophical to me. I was not sure how it would be useful and found its popularity rather unappealing. However, during one of those short transcribing sessions—after changing positions countless times, fidgeting with my feet, and scratching the cuticles on my thumbs until they bled—I realized what was bothering me: affect. I was reluctant to transcribe that interview because it forced me to revisit the interview setting in my mind,

reliving the encounter between us and the way his anger, sorrow, frustration, and discomfort affected me.

Despite what I had anticipated, what lingered in me after the interviews was not fear or loathing towards the men I had interviewed, nor, thankfully, co-dependency. Instead, it was their discomfort that stuck with me. Their stories revealed how they dealt with, or often failed to deal with, uncomfortable situations and conversations in their lives and relationships, the discomfort of facing their violent behaviour and taking responsibility for it. What particularly stood out was their discomfort in navigating parenting after using violence. It was profoundly uncomfortable for them to face their actions and emotions, which frequently left them caught in a whirlwind of sorrow, challenges, and discomfort. This discomfort was also reflected in public discussions about men and violence. As I contemplated how this conversation could and should evolve, I felt a strong desire to understand and discuss the role discomfort and its constituents, shame, denial, etc., play in fathers' processes of change from violence.

1 Introduction

It comes as no surprise that being subjected to violence is harmful and has grave consequences for all, especially for children, whether it is violence that one parent uses against another, between parents or directly towards a child. Experiencing violence can take over a child's entire world, impact their education, social skills, and brain function (Hillis et al., 2016; Mueller & Tronick, 2019; Øverlien, 2014). Still, it is the reality of millions of children worldwide (Hillis et al., 2016). Studies that centre the voices of children who have lived with a father's violence reveal that the impact of intimate partner violence goes beyond witnessing violent acts. Instead, intimate partner violence creates an atmosphere and communication pattern that children are forced to live with (Kertesz et al., 2021; Radford et al., 2019; Scott, 2021). It is important that research on fathers' violence highlights the atmosphere and the way communication affects children's lives and well-being. Focusing on the violence of *fathers* is an important part of taking seriously the harm and consequences their violence has on children around the world (Cater, 2004). Although yearly national figures over the scope of intimate partner violence (IPV) in Iceland are scarce, the prevalence of men's intimate partner violence in Iceland has been confirmed (Arnalds et al., 2014; Karlsdóttir & Arnalds, 2010; Samtök um kvennaathvarf, 2024). For most of the women and children who experience violence in their lives, the person who has been violent against them is a man they share a close relationship with (WHO, 2021). Furthermore, men's violence in intimate partner relationships is sometimes triggered or intensified by pregnancy or the birth of the first child (Devries et al., 2010; García-Moreno et al., 2005).

Research on IPV has mostly focused on mapping the prevalence and multifaceted consequences it has on the lives and well-being of victim-survivors and children (rightfully so). This has also been the case in Iceland. The first extensive research project mapping the experience of perpetrators is ongoing and this PhD project is a part of that study¹. Following social movements like

¹ The research is part of a larger project called *Men's perspectives on violence against their female partners: Subjectification, fathering and masculinity*, the purpose of which is to increase knowledge of violence in intimate partner relationships by focusing on perpetrators and the perpetration of violence in Iceland. This thesis has been supported by the Icelandic research fund (196082-051), the Gender equality fund (190156-5501), and the doctoral grants of the University of Iceland research fund (1472304).

#metoo, which are based on decades of feminist struggle against violence and for equality, there seems to be an increased social awareness of the fact that gendered violence and IPV will not be eradicated unless people, mostly men, stop using violence. This means that the attention is turning more to the responsibility of perpetrators, in hope of relieving survivors of the burden and shame they have had to carry. Such a focus is urgent in an Icelandic context since research on fatherhood and intimate partner violence has, insofar as known, not yet been done. Putting an end to IPV requires a focus on those who use violence and the structural factors that shape their behaviour. As research has shown, othering men who have been violent or labelling them as monsters is not helpful for society nor for their desistance process (Bjarnason & Pétursdóttir, 2019; Gottzén, 2017; Ólafsdóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2023). There have been calls for a closer look at the subject position that violent men encounter, and their tendency to produce 'Others' as more violent while presenting themselves as good, non-violent men (Gottzén, 2013). Men can experience tension between their identities as fathers and perpetrators of violence, and many scholars agree that there is thus a need for more intersectional research on fathering and men's violence (Eriksson, 2002; Humphreys & Campo, 2017; Stanley et al., 2012).

The focus on fathers, when addressing intimate partner violence, is crucial for two reasons. First, intimate partner violence is predominantly perpetrated by men, many of whom are also fathers (Lindén & Breife, 2012). The violence they perpetrate has serious effects on their partners and children, impacting the children's daily lives significantly (Øverlien, 2014). Second, fathers are particularly receptive to treatment because their role as fathers can motivate them to change (Lindén & Breife, 2012; Perel & Peled, 2008; Pfitzner et al., 2017; Stanley et al., 2012). Most research on violent fathers comes from fields like social work and criminology, which often focus on therapy models, legal processes, and policies related to penalties, custody disputes, and contact. However, there is a lack of examination of the experiences of violent fathers and the process of change within the context of social structures.

In this thesis, I use different theoretical and analytical approaches to examine the two data sets of this study. Despite mixed research methods, I maintain a qualitative focus (Hennink et al., 2010). Juxtaposing a wider range of perspectives in the study allows for an exploration of fathers and violence from different angles, delving into diverse aspects of language and emotions. This dissertation studies fathers and violence first by exploring discourses on fatherhood and violence by analysing 250 articles from Icelandic media, and by conducting and analysing semi-structured interviews with eight fathers who have been violent in intimate partner relationships.

1.1 Aims and research questions

My overall aim with this dissertation is to contextualise and explore fathers' violence against women and children and explore their own perspectives towards their behaviour. Focusing on fathers who have been violent in intimate relationships will contribute, both empirically and theoretically, to feminist studies, research on violence, masculinity studies and child and youth studies. When it comes to research on men and violence the focus has often been on what causes men to use violence and how violent men account for their violence afterwards (Gadd & Jefferson, 2007; Messerschmidt, 2004), while public discourses have been more interested in finding out what kind of men use violence (Bjarnason & Pétursdóttir, 2019): I rather want to pay attention to their experience of violence and fatherhood. How it makes them feel, how they experience behavioural and emotional change, and how they grapple with discomfort, stigma, and emotional complexity in addressing their violent behaviour. To guide my inquiry, I have formulated the following questions:

1. How are fathers who have been violent against women and/or children portrayed in the Icelandic mass media, and in what ways do these representations reflect or challenge societal gender structures?
2. How do cultural discourses on fatherhood, violence, and change intersect and affectively interact in narratives of fathers who have been violent?
3. How do fathers who have been violent approach fatherhood and their children's perspectives in the process of changing violent behaviour?

The theoretical aim of this research is to contribute to the broader academic discussion by combining research on fatherhood with feminist research on men and violence. I negotiate a theoretical balance between discursive and embodied experiences by drawing on feminist post-structuralism and affect theories. The most significant benefit of integrating these two areas of study is the potential for a deeper understanding of the relationship between fathers and change away from violence. This integration can effectively capture the emotional complexity and nuance that are often difficult to express theoretically. Moreover, it contributes to feminist theories, which have predominantly focused on the experiences of women and children impacted by IPV, by incorporating perspectives on fatherhood within the broader context of masculinity.

The findings are presented in three academic articles written in English. Taken together, the papers shed light on fathers' change from violence as an affective process, intertwined with and influenced by public discourses on perpetrators and fatherhood. The main aims of the articles are to examine the discourses on

fathers and violence in the media and to understand the affective dissonance in fathers' narratives of violence. The first article explores the construction of discourses on fathers and violence in Icelandic media, emphasizing the dichotomy between 'good and involved' and 'bad and violent' fathers. It also discusses the missed opportunities in connecting fathers' violence to societal gender structures and emphasises the role of mass media in perpetuating gendered social norms that contribute to intimate partner violence. The second article delves into the experiences of fathers who have been violent against their partners and/or children, examining how they navigate feelings of discomfort, and how dealing with discomfort can prompt them to reflect on their actions, identity, and privilege. The third article explores how fatherhood can become performative when fathers strive to conform to societal expectations of gender-equal and involved fatherhood. However, this performance may not always involve understanding their children's perspectives. The article also highlights that engaging in uncomfortable conversations with their children has the potential to prompt self-reflection and change in violent behaviour and power dynamics.

1.2 Originality

Until now, there has been little research on fatherhood and violence in Iceland. Outside of Iceland, studies on IPV that have highlighted fatherhood have often focused on how becoming a father can motivate change and on the parenting of fathers who have been violent (Cater, 2004; Eriksson, 2002; Eriksson & Pringle, 2005; Fox & Benson, 2003; Perel & Peled, 2008; Stanley et al., 2012). However, there is limited knowledge about how fathers and violence are discussed in society, and the portrayal of fathers and violence in media has been relatively unexplored, especially in Nordic countries where the focus has mostly been on promoting the role of new, involved fathers (Eydal & Gíslason, 2015; Gíslason, 2018; Þorvaldsdóttir, 2011). Wemrell et al. (2019) suggest that in the Nordic context, discussions and assumptions about gender equality can obscure the connection between intimate partner violence and gendered dynamics of power, making it difficult for both men and women to recognise themselves as victims or perpetrators of intimate partner violence and to seek or receive help. The ideology of involved fatherhood can furthermore divert attention away from holding fathers accountable for their violent behaviour and the necessity of reflecting on and respecting their children's experiences (Holt, 2015).

In therapeutic work with perpetrators of intimate partner violence, assessing and working with a wide range of emotions related to IPV is a crucial aspect of promoting change (Siltala et al., 2021). This is in line with feminist scholars such as Hemmings (2012) and Chadwick (2020), who have theorised change as an

affective and relational process that requires reflexivity. Building on feminist scholars' use of affect theories to explore the perspectives of fathers who have been violent, I aim to emphasise their process of 'meaning making'. Wetherell (2012; p.4) argues that this process is inextricably linked with human affect, and I agree with her that affect is intertwined with the semiotic and discursive. Affect theories (Probyn, 2005; Reeser & Gottzén, 2018) understand the emotional as something embodied, relational and thus as something that has the potential to move us: these theories can provide insight into more complex aspects of men's perspectives of fatherhood, masculinities and gendered power. Bridging empirical and theoretical gaps through intersecting theoretical lenses focusing on fathers and violence will add to an ongoing theoretical discussion both in a Nordic context and transnationally. I hope that the particular understandings generated from this thesis might promote a more nuanced discourse around fathers in society and be of use for people working with perpetrator programmes.

1.3 What do you mean by....?

In this section I will define shortly what I mean by some key terms used in this thesis. When studying fathers who have been violent, concepts such as masculinities, discourse, identities, parenting, desistance, and affective practices such as shame and discomfort are highly relevant. Employing concepts such as these in my analysis is a helpful way to achieve a nuanced understanding of their embodied experiences and how they constitute themselves and are constituted by the dominant discourses. I see my study as a contribution to the ongoing theoretical conversation within masculinity studies, also referred to as critical studies on men and masculinities. *Masculinity* has been defined in various ways by scholars both committed to examining men and masculinity and those focusing on gender more broadly. Masculinity has for example been understood as performative (Butler, 1990), a 'configuration of gender practice' (Connell, 1995; p. 77), with multiple forms that are related to each other within a hierarchy. It has also been explored as an accomplishment (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2000), as hybrid (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) and as separate from male bodies, practices and discourses that individuals can embody in different ways and to varying degrees (Halberstam, 1998). While these different views have all impacted my understanding of masculinity, I mostly draw on a post-structural feminist approach in line with the work of Waling (2019) in my analysis, and understand masculinity as a relational process, not as a determining cause. I find that this perspective on agency and emotional reflexivity can be useful to gain a better understanding of men's complex experiences and enactment of gendered subjectivity.

Within the vast and expanding research field on gender-based violence, disparity exists in the use of concepts and terminology. *Domestic violence* and *domestic abuse* are widely used to describe violence between partners. The focus should not only be on the home, as this tends to exclude IPV in adolescent relationships, intimate relationships where one or both partners live in an institution, or long-distance relationships, among others. I prefer using the term *intimate partner violence* (IPV) because I find it important to specify the emotional space or setting in which the violence occurs (that is, within intimate relationships).

However, some criticise these concepts for not explicitly identifying 'men' as the primary perpetrators and for their definition of intimacy (Hearn, 2020). These concepts are often associated with adult, able-bodied, heterosexual relationships, which I find problematic. The term IPV has recently been more widely used in an attempt to be more LGBTQ-inclusive and to acknowledge violence committed by women. Gottzén et al. (2020) argue that this can obscure the fact that perpetrators are still predominantly heterosexual men and IPV should be contextualised as an expression of inequality and gendered power. One way of achieving this is by specifying that this is intimate partner violence *against women and children*, and this is the focus of this thesis.

In addressing men's violence, I find it challenging to select a term that does not automatically label men as 'bad' or 'dangerous', as terms like 'perpetrator' and 'violent man' tend to do. I prefer to use the term "*fathers who have been violent*," as it is comprehensive and acknowledges the gendered nature of their actions. While I understand that the phrase suggests their violence is in the past ("have been"), I view it not as a definitive endpoint that rules out the possibility of it happening again. Rather, I see it as an acknowledgment that it has occurred, which opens the door for potential change. Although I strive to consistently use this term in my project, I occasionally resort to other terms like perpetrator, violent men, or women batterer, as they are commonly used in the literature I reference. What I appreciate about the term "*fathers who have been violent*" is that it does not erase the men's identity or categorize them as inherently violent but rather frames the violence as a behaviour that can be changed.

Some individuals who have been subjected to violence have expressed that being labelled as "victims" diminishes their strength and resilience, and they prefer to be referred to as "survivors of violence." However, there are others who do not feel a connection to the term "survivor" as they may not feel like they have truly survived, even if they manage to stay alive (Antonsdóttir, 2020; Kelly et al., 1996). I align with the approach of many feminist scholars and use the

combination “*victim-survivors*” (Alcoff, 2018; Antonsdóttir, 2020), despite its length and complexity. I believe using language that does not cause harm or exclusion is crucial, even if it requires more words.

I define *fathers* as individuals who identify as men and have children, whether they became fathers biologically, as stepparents, through adoption, IVF, surrogacy, or by other means. The father position is not a fixed or stable role or identity; it is socially, discursively, and culturally constructed. This means that societal expectations towards fathers, their behaviour, and identity are shaped by the context, time, and culture they live in. Additionally, the term “father” is gendered and used to describe the relationship between a man and a child, whether they are biologically related or not. In this dissertation, I primarily use the term “*children*” when referring to the offspring of fathers who have been violent, irrespective of their age.

Understanding the transition away from violence involves recognising it as a complex process involving *changes* in behaviour, thoughts, and emotions. This process of desistance often involves individuals, in this case fathers, ceasing their harmful actions, developing empathy, acknowledging and feeling remorse for the harm they have caused, and actively working on improving their communication (Päivinen et al., 2020; Stanley et al., 2012; Veteläinen et al., 2013). Ceasing to use violence is not a linear progress forward, but rather a multifaceted one that can involve setbacks. Criminologists have identified factors contributing to this change or desistance, including structural circumstances such as age and subjective factors such as changes in identity and a sense of belonging (Giordano et al., 2007; Maruna, 2001). Desistance primarily refers to behavioural change, specifically the cessation of offending. The literature I draw upon understands change as knowing, thinking, feeling, and acting differently. These elements do not always occur simultaneously, but each contributes to a process of change (e.g. Chadwick, 2020; Päivinen et al., 2020; Stanley et al., 2012; Veteläinen et al., 2013). While I focus on change from men’s perspectives, I believe this change should ultimately lead to more safety for women and children and contribute to broader social change. Given that this thesis is concerned with safer parenting as well as cessation of violence it seems more appropriate to use the term ‘change’ rather than ‘desistance’.

I approach all the theories I use for this dissertation from a *feminist perspective*. This means that they become a way to understand, examine, and deconstruct gendered and intersectional power dynamics. This understanding serves as the foundation for the entire PhD project, form the epistemological basis of the study, and influences the framing of research objectives. I favour feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 1996) and approach knowledge as grounded in

experience and therefore it is always simultaneously personal, political, and situated in societal power structures (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002a). This position emphasises the importance of taking subjectivity into account (Code, 1996), but that does not mean that feminist knowledge is all relative and cannot produce reasonable truth because *“all attempts to produce knowledge of social life are political but the politically committed can still be scientific in the sense of connecting ideas and experience to underlying realities”* (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002a; p. 55, emphasis in original). Taking subjectivity into account requires adopting critical reflexivity, as I have done throughout the whole thesis.

1.4 Overview of the thesis

This thesis consists of seven chapters. In this first chapter, the introduction, I have discussed the importance of focusing on fathers and violence in research on IPV. I have also stated the aim and originality of the thesis along with introducing key terms. In chapter 2, I present a brief reflection on previous literature around fathers, violence and change. I discuss the research methodology, data collection, and analysis in Chapter 3, comparing my research process to brewing coffee. Chapter 4 is dedicated to ethical considerations in relation to the research project. In Chapter 5, I discuss the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of this thesis, which is followed by a summary of the articles in Chapter 6. Finally, Chapter 7 presents discussions aimed at connecting the overall findings by portraying change as an affective process. In this chapter, I summarise both the opportunities for change and the obstacles that hinder it. Additionally, I evaluate the strengths and limitations of the project and reflect on ideas for future research.

Table 1: Overview of the project

	Article 1	Article 2	Article 3
Title	Discourses on fathers who use intimate partner violence: An example from Icelandic mass media	Dealing with discomfort: Affective dissonance in fathers' narratives of violence	Ticking the boxes: Fathers' Performativity, Change, and Intimate Partner Violence
Co-Authors	Jón Ingvar Kjaran	Kalle Berggren	Nicky Stanley
Guiding questions	How are fathers who use IPV constituted within the discourse of fatherhood in Icelandic mass media, and how do those discourses contribute to the stigmatization of fathers who are violent?	How do fathers deal with discomfort in their narratives of violence and fatherhood and what role does discomfort have in their processes of change?	How do fathers who have been violent reflect on their own violence, its impact on children's lives, and its relation to their fathering?
Theoretical framework	Feminist poststructuralism	Feminist affect theories	Feminist poststructuralism
Data	250 articles from the Icelandic mass media	Interviews with eight fathers who have been violent against their female partners and/or children	Interviews with eight fathers who have been violent against their female partners and/or children

2 Fathers, violence and change

"My voice went unheard. My will was disregarded" (Kjartansdóttir, 2020). These are the words of a young person who came forth in the Icelandic media alongside their sibling to discuss their father's violence. They described how important it was for them to have a platform to tell their own story after years of feeling like they had not been listened to or believed. While this thesis has not explored children's perspectives on their fathers' abusive behaviour, it takes the research which has explored these experiences as its starting point.

Focusing on fathers' violence is an important part of taking seriously the harm and consequences their violence has on children (Cater, 2004). When scholars researching IPV have turned their attention specifically towards children they have often focused on child protection and a child's right to live a life free from violence (Bruno, 2016; Eriksson, 2003; Guðmundsdóttir, 2012; Harne, 2011; Krug et al., 2002). Less has been done to lift children's own voices and perspectives of how they experience fathers who have been violent and their relationship with them. This is understandable since such research is emotionally and ethically complex (Lamb et al., 2021).

Men's violence against their intimate female partners has been widely studied (see e.g., Gadd, 2002; Gottzén 2015, 2019c; Hearn, 1998). Since most of these men have children and due to the severe consequences living with violence has on children, a considerable amount of research in the Anglophone world and within the Nordic countries has paid close attention to fathers who use violence (Bruno, 2016; Cater, 2004; Eriksson, 2002; Harne, 2011; Perel & Peled, 2008). I approach fathers' violence based on previous research within critical studies on men and masculinity on the one hand and child- and youth studies on the other. This chapter is not meant to provide a complete review of the literature concerning these issues, rather it can be viewed in line with what Arksey and O'Malley (2005) refer to as a modified scoping study. The selection of literature presented in this chapter is based on the following guidelines:

1. Papers and books that address men's violence or fathers' violence from a similar post-structural or affective theoretical framework as I apply in this PhD project. This work mostly comes from the Nordic countries, the UK and, to some extent, the US and Australia.

2. Papers that are relevant to the research question and, as such, deal with discourses on fatherhood, men's and, in particular, fathers' violence and/or children's perspectives of fathers' violence. More specifically, I searched for work that addressed gendered dimensions of power.

2.1 Children's intersectionality and diverse experiences

Since a child's perception of a parent's violence seems to predict the child's self-concept more than the frequency of the violence (Giant & Vartanian, 2003), research based on children's own perspectives and understandings are crucial to enhance both a theoretical and practical progress. Gaining an understanding of children's perspectives on their violent fathers, why and how it differs requires being mindful of the intersection of various situations and experiences that shape and impact children's understandings of their lives. Åsa K. Cater (2004) has highlighted the problem with oversimplifying the term "children" as a singular group, as children can experience similar situations in different ways. This can hide the diversity of children's experiences based on their location, gender, class, age, religion, disability, sexuality, and ethnicity. As has been shown for intersectionality in general (Crenshaw, 1991), it is important to consider the intersectionality of these factors, as they can overlap and impact each other in a child's understanding of their experiences. Scholars should include a child's perspective that values their competence and agency in creating meaning in their own lives, taking into account the impact of ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion, and disability on children's perspectives (Cater, 2004). Cater (2004) has developed a nuanced understanding of variations in children's descriptions of experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV). By analysing interviews with ten children who have lived with fathers who used violence against their mothers, Cater found that generalizing concepts can be crucial for children in making sense of their understanding of their fathers. She identified three patterns of meaning: children acknowledging the violent father as one kind of father, acknowledging the father's violent behaviour as one part of his multifaceted personality, and distancing the violence from the father's relative goodness. Similarly, research in Iceland has focused on children's perspectives of being subjected to violence at home. The children's perspectives varied from viewing the violent father or father figure as a good man who sometimes lost control to condemning him as extremely dangerous and considering the abusive behaviour a personality trait (Kristinsdóttir et al., 2014).

Children's perceptions of their father's violence can be complex. While they may understand that their fathers were responsible for their violent behaviour and know that violence sets a bad example and is no way to solve problems,

their feelings towards them can be more nuanced, often involving a mix of love and fear (Cater, 2004; Kristinsdóttir et al., 2014; Mullender et al., 2002). Stigmatising violent men as monsters or characterising them as violent and bad can have harmful consequences for children, as their experiences are often more complicated than these generalisations suggest. The importance of listening to children's perspectives on their fathers' violence should not be underestimated, as they can provide valuable insights due to the complexity of their feelings. For example, Lamb et al. (2021) have shown that, regardless of their desire to maintain contact with their fathers in the aftermath of violence, children still wanted reparation. This sheds light on the under-researched area of children's perspectives on fathers' responsibility and their ability to navigate post-violence relationships.

I approach childhood studies from a critical perspective where the focus has often been on viewing children as human beings with their own agency while also recognising that they are often marginalised as a group and have diverse experiences due to intersecting factors (Cater, 2004). A critical view of childhood does, therefore, have much in common with feminist theories on gendered power, agency, and intersectional marginalisation, which form the theoretical foundation for my research.

2.2 Fathers, violence and parenting

Fathers' violence needs to be understood within the context of the patriarchal gender regime, which has historically granted heterosexual fathers the right to dominate and discipline their subordinates, namely women and children (Alcoff, 2018; McCarry, 2010). Feminist scholars have linked the effects of violent and authoritative father figures to men's dominance within patriarchy, harming women and children (Eriksson, 2003; hooks, 2004; Kelly & Westmarland, 2016; Walby, 1989). Masculinity has long been linked to dominance and control, shaping fathers' disciplinary role at home through the use of threats such as "just wait until your father gets home." Fortunately, today, there is a legal and social condemnation of fathers' violence. However, patriarchal power structures persist, maintaining expectations of fathers as authoritarian figures and providers. Cultural norms expect fathers to provide for the family, work long hours, and demonstrate both physical and emotional strength, which often contradict modern ideals of involved, nurturing, and gender-equal fatherhood (Veteläinen et al., 2013; Wahlström Henriksson, 2020). According to Bridges and Pascoe (2014), there are hybrid forms of masculinity. This hybridity refers to the constant adaptation to changes in society by borrowing and absorbing elements of different identities, such as femininity and other forms of masculinity, into their own identity and actions. According to this perspective,

fatherhood can be seen as an ongoing process in which normative expectations continuously adapt to evolving social structures. Hearn (2002) emphasises the importance of examining fatherhood as an ideology if we are to gain a better understanding of men's power and dominant positions in relation to women and between men. Furthermore, he suggests that we pay attention not only to what men and fathers do, but also to what they do not do as much as mothers. The parenting of violent fathers has been identified as a major gap in knowledge, which mirrors a lack of focus on fathers who have been violent in practice (Stanley, 2011). Studies addressing the parenting of fathers who have perpetrated IPV have described them as over-reactive, rigid, neglectful, frequently rejecting, emotionally and psychologically absent (Holt, 2015; Scott, 2021).

It is important to focus on both the concept of fatherhood among men who have used violence and the issue of violence among fathers (Eriksson & Hester, 2001; Eriksson & Pringle, 2005; Stanley, 2011; Stanley et al., 2012). Most of the research conducted on fathers violence originates in fields with clinical or practice experience with this group, such as, psychology (Veteläinen et al., 2013), criminology (Gadd, 2002), social work (Cater, 2004; Harne, 2011; Humphreys & Campo, 2017; Perel & Peled, 2008; Stanley et al., 2012) and to some extent, sociology (Bruno, 2016; Eriksson, 2003; Kelly & Westmarland, 2016). The purpose of this research is to develop and assess therapy models that help fathers stop using violence. The focus has been on determining which methods are effective and which are not, why this is the case, and how fathers communicate in these situations. Scholars in the field of social work have provided valuable insight into how fathers experience and explain their violent behaviour and its impact on their parenting. Furthermore, approaching fathers' violence from a child protection perspective has provided an important understanding of the effects of violence on children, both while they are living with violent fathers and post-separation (Harne, 2011).

Fathers sometimes claim that their abusive behaviour towards their partners does not affect their fathering or relationship with their children. They seem to believe that being present in their children's lives outweighs their attitudes and behaviour towards their child's mother (Alderson et al., 2015; Eriksson & Hester, 2001; Scott, 2021). However, the atmosphere created by fathers' violence has repeatedly been shown to affect children's well-being, regardless of whether they witness specific violent incidents or not (Buckley et al., 2007; Callaghan et al., 2018; Kertesz et al., 2021; Radford et al., 2019). It is essential to consider how fathers' overall communication affects the atmosphere in the home and the child's experience rather than merely focusing on the child's reaction to violent acts. This means rethinking fathers' violence as parenting and

paying attention to the overall atmosphere and communication with which the child lives (Scott, 2021).

2.3 Cultural discourses about fatherhood and violence

There is a significant focus on exploring the role of involved and good fathers as a cornerstone in progress toward equality, especially in Nordic countries (e.g., Eydal & Gíslason, 2015; Farstad & Stefansen, 2015). Discursive production of modern involved fatherhood includes taking parental leave, attending children's leisure activities and school events, expressing love for their children, being active in domesticity, and sharing custody after separation (Farstad & Stefansen, 2015). However, fatherhood is more nuanced and ambivalent than merely being a discursive production. Jóhannsdóttir and Gíslason (2018) showed that the desire to become a good father is prominent among young Icelandic men, indicating the intersection of discourses of masculinity and fathering. The young men interviewed in their study identified strongly with becoming good and caring fathers in the future and associated this role with performing (hetero)masculinity. In the Icelandic context, being an involved and caring father is viewed as a new form of masculinity, affecting men regardless of whether they become fathers or not. Additionally, interviews with parents of young children in Iceland revealed that being a caring father is considered "nothing less than culturally obligatory" (Farstad & Stefansen, 2015, p. 67), but mainly available to men who are born and raised in Iceland, middle-class, able-bodied, and have a support system (Farstad & Stefansen, 2015; Harðardóttir et al., 2023).

The cultural discourse of caring and involved fathers has furthermore been emphasised as a prominent and positive part of men's aspiration to fatherhood in Nordic studies on fathers who have been violent (Kjaran & Kristinsdóttir, 2021; Veteläinen et al., 2013). While co-parenting can be an important area of change for fathers with a history of perpetrating violence (Scott, 2021), increased expectations and demands for involved fatherhood have also highlighted complications around co-parenting in the aftermath of violence. Fathers in Iceland are likely to share custody of their children (Arnarsson & Bjarnason, 2008; Júlíusdóttir & Sigurðardóttir, 2013) and children might thus live with their violent fathers, or experience substantial amounts of contact, whether those fathers are in a process of change or not. While the research discussed above emphasises the parenting deficits of fathers who perpetrate IPV, Gottzén and Berggren's (2021) qualitative case study with two violent fathers shows that it is also possible for men to embrace involved fatherhood, take primary responsibility for their children, condemn IPV, support gender equality, and still perpetrate psychological and physical violence against their

partner. Fathers can thus minimise or deflect attention from their violence by emphasising their involvement as fathers (Gottzén & Berggren, 2021). This is important because simply achieving more father involvement—for instance, spending more time with their children or being more involved in their hobbies or daily routines—does not necessarily guarantee a change of values, attitudes or behaviour. Päivinen et al. (2020) argue for the strategy of positioning which entails encouraging abusive men to put themselves in the position of their child or partner as a means of examining and working with masculinity, fatherhood and violence. Considering the impact of violence on their children is a key component of this approach. This could prove effective since some scholars have found that fathers who have been violent rarely listen to or prioritise the child's needs and even tend to assume that the child's needs, for contact, for example, are the same as their own (Forssell, 2016; Holt, 2018). The value of fathers learning to understand and approach IPV from the child's perspective has thus been emphasised (Alderson et al., 2015; Holt, 2018). As Eriksson and Hester (2001) have noted, raising a child and raising a child who has lived with violence are not the same thing. Repairing a relationship with a child after exposing them to violence must therefore entail taking responsibility both through addressing and acknowledging the violence and by actively working on change (Perel & Peled, 2008).

2.4 Accounting for violence: Navigating shame and identity

While fatherhood has rarely been at the centre of research on men and violence, both men's narratives of how their own violent fathers affected them and their regrets over the impact their violence has had on their children have been prominent in men's accounts of IPV (Cavanagh et al., 2001; Hearn, 1998; Lau & Stevens, 2012; Messerschmidt, 2000, 2004). Integrating the role of fatherhood and the identity of a violent man can prove difficult for fathers who have been violent (Veteläinen et al., 2013). Veteläinen et al. (2013) have shown how fathers often try to present themselves as different from "real" women batterers and as striving to be more engaged in their children's lives. This can prove complicated for the fathers since there is no clear line between traditional fatherhood and "new" or more involved fatherhood. The authors argue that this ambiguity makes it even more crucial to address fatherhood in programs for perpetrators of violence. Pfitzner et al. (2017) and Stanley (2012) are among the scholars who have pointed out the importance of focusing on men as fathers and their parenting in therapy models for men who have been violent since a focus on fatherhood can be a motivator for change and positively influence fathers' engagement with their children. Fathers who have been violent have justified their violent behaviour as the only way they know how to handle difficult

parenting situations (Fox & Benson, 2003; Mohaupt et al., 2020; Veteläinen et al., 2013). Consequently, policymakers and professionals need to pay more attention to the parenting of violent fathers when making decisions about children's safety and well-being has been highlighted (Eriksson, 2002; Harne, 2011).

Due to the widespread condemnation of intimate partner violence in Nordic countries, particularly from a gender equality perspective, men who have been violent may feel compelled to provide culturally acceptable explanations for their behaviour (Gottzén & Berggren, 2021). Even though it is not a comprehensive theory, there is a strong tradition of researching how men account for the violence they have used (Hearn, 1998; Kelly & Westmarland, 2016; Ptacek, 1988). Berggren et al. (2021) have argued that research within post-structural feminism and critical masculinity studies that focus on deconstructing the way men talk about, justify, and explain their violence are often critical of work that emphasises men's experiences and traumas prior to their violent acts. Influences from radical feminism, post-structural feminism, and narrative analysis are prominent within this framework, which is visible, for example, in the focus on how men draw on discourses to explain, confess, and excuse violent behaviour in their narratives and how they simultaneously reproduce those very discourses, consciously or unconsciously (Lau & Stevens, 2012). It is important to pay attention to what men say and which violence they acknowledge, as it provides insight into what is perceived acceptable, shameful, and disgusting by society. Scholars who focus on the way violent men construct and position themselves discursively have shown how a masculine identity is created or maintained in men's discussions of their violence. For example, they often distinguish between "real" men and a category of men who are violent against women. Discursive strategies that men use to avoid being labelled "women batterers" or "violent men" are furthermore a prevalent feature in many studies of men's accounts for IPV (Cannon et al., 2015; Cavanagh et al., 2001; Gottzén, 2019c; Kelly & Westmarland, 2016). In his book *The Violences of Men*, Jeff Hearn (1998) contributed an important insight into how men's explanations of their violence can function as ways to excuse, justify, minimise and deny their responsibility for using violence against their female partners. In Hearn's work, based on interviews with men who had been violent to known women, he showed how the men referred to two kinds of men, splitting their selves into the men who committed the violence and their real selves.

In a similar vein, Lau and Stevens (2012) argue that men who have been violent often distance themselves from their past violent behaviour and the person who committed the violence. They do this in order to present a new and improved version of their real self. By comparing their own behaviour to what they

perceive as real violence committed by "other men," whom they view as the real perpetrators, they manage to place the problematic figure of the "violent man" or the "monster" elsewhere in their narratives (Cavanagh et al., 2001; Gottzén, 2012, 2017). There is increasing interest within feminist research on violent men to address the monster metaphor, both in terms of how men split their identity into monsters and men (Ólafsdóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2023) and the way they avoid being categorised as monsters (Gottzén, 2017).

As O'Hara (2012) has pointed out, it is harmful to view violent men as either monsters or men for all involved—victim-survivors, perpetrators, as well as for society. Stigmatising violent men as monsters discourages victim-survivors from speaking out about their experiences, contributing to a culture of silence (Bjarnason & Pétursdóttir, 2019; Pétursdóttir, 2015; Steinþórsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2019). Categorising violent men as monsters presents them as either immaculate heroes or foul monsters, providing no room for a solution. When individuals are consistently portrayed as monsters or mentally ill, their personal responsibility for their actions is diminished, as is society's responsibility for the underlying factors contributing to a culture of violence. Stigmatising media discourses about violent men may lead to fewer men admitting to being violent and seeking the help they need (Gottzén, 2016, 2017; Hearn, 1998; Maruna, 2001; O'Hara, 2012; Royal, 2019).

Men often try to downplay their violence against women by arguing that they are not the type of man to be violent. They may describe the violence as accidents or "one time only" incidents that are out of character, and sometimes justify it by claiming they were provoked by their female partners or that they are victims of a biased legal system (Gottzén, 2012; LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011; Stokoe, 2010). Not only do men strategically use speech to avoid accountability, but their silence as well. By not naming the violence, forgetting, or denying it, they invalidate the woman's experience. Men may also be reluctant or selective in telling others about the violence, contributing to this silence (Cavanagh et al., 2001). While this research framework provides insight into the moral work of violent men, it has been criticised for not considering the larger social and smaller interactional context, and for writing of all of men's motivations or experiences as ways to oppress (Presser, 2005). The focus on how men account for IPV has also been criticized for disregarding men's individual experiences and risking the perpetuation of a stereotypical view of a woman batterer who refuses to acknowledge his crimes (Berggren et al., 2021).

Another way of approaching men's accounts of violence can, for example, be seen in James W. Messerschmidt's (2000, 2004) work on men's violence, offering a socialist feminist analysis of crime. Messerschmidt's work is valuable

for examining how men's lived experiences impact their violent behaviour. He emphasises masculinity as a central concept and explains how violence can become a means for men to assert their masculinity when they feel they lack other resources. However, critics argue that his work overly emphasizes masculinity as an explanation for violence, neglecting other contributing factors (Berggren et al., 2021). Furthermore, some scholars have raised concerns about Messerschmidt's portrayal of violence as a conscious way of performing masculinity, suggesting that men's experiences of violence and masculinity can be ambivalent (Gadd & Jefferson, 2007).

Many feminist scholars have used the continuum perspective to study violence. They have demonstrated how violence tends to persist and manifest in various forms of control and harm after separation. This is particularly relevant in cases of father's violence, as IPV often continues and may even escalate after separation due to custody disputes (Eriksson & Hester, 2001). The Swedish sociologist Linnea Bruno (2016) showed that fathers' violence against mothers and children continued after separation through their control regarding custody, contact, residence, children's education, and welfare benefits such as financial aid. Her analysis of Swedish court orders revealed that fathers have strong rights to contact, which generally overrides the rights of mothers and children to be protected from violence. However, this is less likely when the fathers are non-Nordic; in those cases, protection more frequently overrode the contact presumption. This demonstrates how discourses of violent men as Other and foreign impact the justice system. Eriksson and Hester (2001) argue that the right of a child to have contact is often treated as the parent's right and the child's obligation in practice. They highlight that the legal consequences are not the same when a child seeks contact and the parent refuses. Harne (2011) adds to this by emphasising that the focus on fathers' involvement and the fear of their absence may overshadow other important factors. Policies and practices, framed as being in "the best interest of the children", can therefore reinforce male authority in traditional family structures (Eriksson & Hester, 2001; Harne, 2011).

2.5 The process of change

Focusing on violent fathers' change away from violence is urgent, because, without change, the violence continues to harm both the men's children and their (ex-)partners (Bruno, 2022). Questions about change have been prominent in research on batterer programmes, which has focused on how violent men cease their abuse and what motivates fathers to change (Dobash et al., 1999; Stanley et al., 2012). Although affect tends to attract little attention in studies on perpetrator programmes, men's complex emotional experiences are often

mentioned (e.g., Hearn, 1998; Seymour et al., 2021). For instance, Siltala et al. (2021) studied a group model for perpetrators in Finland and discussed how emotions can be expressed and addressed in therapeutic treatment for IPV. They suggest that for long-term change towards non-violence to occur, perpetrators must work on their own emotions and behaviour, as well as consider and reflect on the feelings of others.

Addressing their childhood, facing their violent behaviour, and learning to resolve conflict or challenging situations in a more constructive way through group therapy can help violent fathers improve their parenting skills (Perel & Peled, 2008; Veteläinen et al., 2013). Similar to the findings on fathers with substance abuse problems (e.g., Söderström & Skårderud, 2013), violent fathers often genuinely want to become better fathers and have more contact and a deeper connection with their children (Perel & Peled, 2008; Veteläinen et al., 2013). However, Lynne Harne (2011) has listed various reasons that fathers who have been violent give for wanting more contact with their children and argued that these reasons are mostly self-centred. These reasons revolve around (a) ownership or the father's right for contact, (b) the father's need for the unconditional love children give them, or (c) the father's longing to punish the mother and hold on to control. When fathers who have been violent do not take responsibility for, or work on their violent behaviour, it leaves children and victim-survivors in a position where they must deal with the consequences. This can lead to ongoing violence after separation and place the responsibility for managing men's violence and co-parenting on mothers (Bruno, 2016; Stanley, 2011).

Emerging criminological research on desistance from IPV has addressed questions about changing violent behaviour (Berggren et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2015). In this context, Hall and Harris (2022) emphasise the importance of examining the impact of men's desistance processes on their female partners. While intimate relationships can play an important role in the process of changing violent men's behaviour, emotional work may disproportionately fall on female partners to the women's own detriment.

Shame has been identified as a crucial component of the process of change. Bob Pease (2019) suggests that feeling shame is an essential emotional first step for men to acknowledge women's suffering. Although men who have been violent might attempt to move away from shame and turn to denial, it is also possible to sit with it and even embrace it (Gottzén, 2019b). Embracing shame does, however, not necessarily imply that men question their privilege; in fact, it can be a way of attempting to reclaim a lost status or privilege (Gottzén, 2019a, 2019b; Ólafsdóttir & Hearn, 2023; Ólafsdóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2023). In his

analysis of written stories from a feminist anti-violence campaign in Sweden, Lucas Gottzén (2019b) uses the term "chafing masculinity" to describe the masculine position in which privilege, sexism, and violence are neither denied nor completely overcome, but continue to exist and affect the lives of young men in a somewhat uncontrollable and uncomfortable manner.

Representations of IPV in contemporary Nordic society often focus on individualising and pathologising the perpetrator (Gottzén, 2016; Ólafsdóttir & Rúdólfssdóttir, 2023). Ólafsdóttir and Hearn (2023) provide insight into cultural meanings of shame and shaming processes by analysing perpetrators' and victim-survivors' understanding of violent relationships and regulating the heterosexual project. They highlight shame as a complex affective-discursive practice and discuss how perpetrators may perform shame to regain their previous masculine position after committing violent acts, which can be problematic in addressing the structural problem of violence.

Since men's role as fathers can neither be separated from IPV, nor from the impact their violence has on children and victim-survivors, it is important that perpetrator programmes integrate a focus on fathering and parenting skills into their "work" on ending violence. While research on perpetrator programmes tends to focus on recidivism in determining whether certain programmes "work" or not, qualitative studies have raised questions about whether fathers' efforts to change are sincere and whether they truly understand the impact of their behaviour on their children, or if their motivation for change is driven by a desire to maintain control over their relationships with their children and their children's mothers (Bruno & Eriksson, 2023).

Despite the promising findings on perpetrator programs that address both violent behaviour and fathering, such as the Caring Dads programme (McConnell et al., 2017; McCracken & Deave, 2012), Fathers for Change (Stover, 2015) and REAL Fathers (Ashburn et al., 2017), they appear to have a greater impact on fathers' parenting practices than on their attitudes towards gender norms (Ashburn et al., 2017). Additionally, whole family programs have shown promising findings, emphasising a coordinated response to IPV and combining various treatment approaches to work directly and safely with all family members (Radford et al., 2019; Stanley & Humphreys, 2017). However, there are still considerable gaps in knowledge regarding fathers' engagement, which interventions show promise in meeting the needs of victim-survivors and children, and how fathers' violence is actually addressed by these programmes (Radford et al., 2019).

Featherstone et al. (2018) criticise the focus on fathers' violence as a personal deficit that needs to be fixed, arguing that it overlooks broader societal

injustices. They advocate for a shift in focus from individuals to the role of the state in addressing violence and social injustice. Heward-Belle (2016) also question approaches that assume “one size fits all” (p. 13), pointing out that criminal justice responses cannot effectively address all abusive behaviour due to variations in men’s attitudes and beliefs. They propose diverse policies and practices that both hold men accountable for their actions and encourage them to seek help (Heward-Belle, 2016; Rees & Rivett, 2005). To date, relatively little is known about fathers and violence in Iceland, but Kjaran and Kristinsdóttir (2021) suggest that violent men’s roles as fathers is central to their identity and could inspire change.

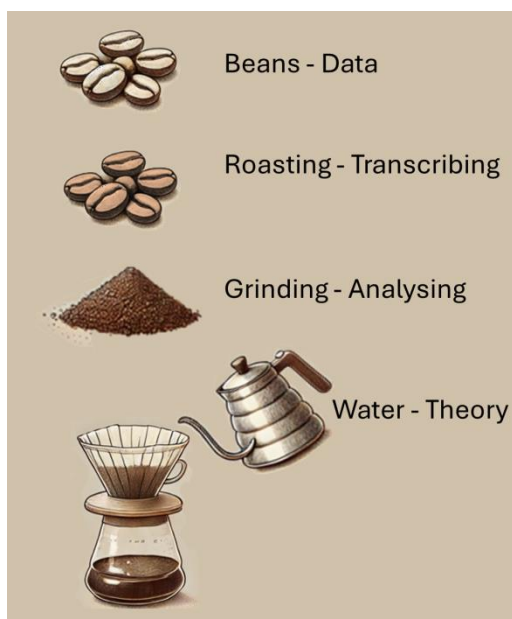
2.6 Summary of key insights

To summarise, research on fathers who have been violent towards their intimate partners primarily focuses on the significant impact this violence has on children who often live in these environments. Most studies concentrate on the violence perpetrated by heterosexual fathers and its implications for both their partners and children, highlighting the gendered nature of power dynamics within families. Additionally, the literature recognizes that these violent men are also fathers, adding complexity to their roles and responsibilities. The consequences of their actions affect not only their partners but also critically influence their children’s emotional and psychological well-being. It is important to acknowledge that children can understand and interpret their experiences with violent fathers. Research shows that it is often the children’s perceptions of the violence, rather than its frequency alone, that shape their self-concept and overall development.

The literature on fathers and violence in the context of change reveals several key gaps. First, while some research addresses children’s experiences with violent fathers, more studies are needed to understand how fathers engage with their children’s perception of their violence, and how it shapes their relationships with their children. Second, there is a need for more exploration into how societal constructs of fatherhood affect men’s emotions, behaviours, and their capacity for change. Much of the literature focuses on violence without examining the complexities of fatherhood identity and how this identity can either facilitate or hinder change. Gaining insights into men’s perspectives on violence, fatherhood, and their motivations for change within a cultural context, as well as their emotional responses, could provide a valuable understanding of the process of change and the challenges they encounter. Addressing these gaps could significantly advance the understanding of fatherhood, violence, and the possibilities for change from violence.

3 Methodological considerations over a cup of coffee

The data for this dissertation consists of 250 articles from the Icelandic media and eight interviews with fathers who have been violent against their female partners. In this chapter, I start by describing the media data. A section on the interview process follows this describing how they were conducted and the analytical procedure. I conclude with a discussion of the ethical implications of this research. Throughout the chapter, I will compare different stages of the research process to brewing coffee to illustrate the different steps of qualitative research, but mostly because it was fun to write.



3.1 A cup of coffee

Before I became a PhD student and a full-time academic, I worked as a barista in a nerdy café in Stockholm alongside research work and studies. I still enjoy making my slow-brew filter coffee in the morning, a skill that has come in handy during this PhD process. When trying to explain the process of this research and how different components contribute to the final result that this thesis has

become, I find it helpful to think about it like making myself a good cup of coffee.

The light-roasted, slow-brew coffee I enjoy is not for everyone, just as research on fathers and violence that draw from feminist poststructuralism and affect theories are certainly not for everyone either. But for me, the quality of both the research and the coffee lies in being mindful of the decisions I make at every stage of the process.

This dissertation is designed as a combination of media and interview studies. Whilst interviews are well suited to study experience, understandings, perceptions, and accounts of practice, media data are suitable to tackle representation, influencing factors, constructions, and dominant discourses (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I analyse language and power in the two separate yet connected data collections, which can be a critical element in connecting knowledge and experience (Fairclough, 2001; Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002b). I base my choice of methods on the epistemological underpinnings of qualitative studies, which view knowledge as socially constructed and relative to context (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Following the work of Chadwick (2020) and Áhäll (2018), I use affects as methodological and ethical tools that create possibilities for feminist research practices. Instead of going into a defensive discussion of why I will not elaborate on the generalizability, validity and reliability of qualitative research methods and the qualitative interviews chosen for this research, I will discuss my methodological decisions and explain the approaches that inspired this project.

Just as a cup of coffee does not brew itself, data does not speak for itself: it is selected (Code, 1996; Livholts, 2015a, 2015b; Longino, 1996; Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002b) and analysis of the research material does not emerge: it is created (Braun & Clarke, 2023). I will not minimise or hide my impact on the research process. I make the coffee, which would taste different if someone else had made it. Instead, I will, in line with Farahani (2011) and Lazard and McAvoy (2020), reflect on my positionality regarding the men I interview and my power to interpret, select and present the data in this thesis.

3.2 Beans — data

No coffee cup will ever become better than the quality of the beans that go into it, nor can interesting research be conducted if the data does not fit the research objectives.

That is why I have emphasised the connection between the individual and the societal structures that influence men's responsibility, fatherhood, and

transformation from violence. Just as the coffee bean is only one part of the coffee plant, the narratives, interviews, and media discourses I work with only offer a small glimpse into the lives of the people they come from. Therefore, they only represent a small part of the problem. If the quality of the coffee is good and the beans are not roasted too much, you might be able to taste different aspects of the bean, similar to what I aim for with the data collected for this project, to look at various cultural and structural aspects of the topic researched.

3.2.1 Media data

The media data for this research was collected from the main media outlets in Iceland and published from 2008 to 2018. This decade was chosen because it involved some years of an adaption period after legal changes to parental leave in 2000. After the financial crash in 2008, there were noticeable social changes in Iceland, which involved an increased focus on fatherhood (Eydal & Gíslason, 2015). Media coverage related to fathers, custody disputes and fathers' rights did, therefore, noticeably surge during this period. Most of the selected and analysed articles were from the last year, 2018 (59), and the fewest from the year 2009 (8) (see table 2).

Table 2: Distribution of newspaper articles per year

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total
Quantity	19	8	13	13	18	27	21	16	31	25	59	250

The media sources analysed were nineteen in total, three came from broadcasting media, five were online newspapers, one was available in print only and ten were available online and in print (see table 3).

Table 3: Overview of media outlets and number of news items

Media	Quantity
Bylgjan	2
Bændablaðið	1
DV	59
Fókus (DV)	1
Fréttablaðið	36
Fréttatíminn	21
Glamúr	1
Hringbraut	1
Kjarninn	7
Kvennablaðið	2
Mannlíf	7
MBL	18
Morgunblaðið	43
Núttíminn	1
Rúv	7
Stundin	17
Stöð 2	5
Viðskiptablaðið	3
Vísir	18
Total	250

The data was collected in the fall of 2019 through the electronic database of the Icelandic Media Watch, which stores and compiles nearly all media publications in Iceland. I used specific Icelandic keywords related to fatherhood such as

"faðir," "feður," "feðrun," "pabbi," "faðir*," "góður faðir," "feður og ofbeldi" (Translation: father, fathers, fathering, dad, father*, good father, fathers, and violence). The search yielded over 40,000 responses for two of the most common versions of the word "father" (i. "faðir" and "föður*"). The first phase of the analysis involved reviewing the numerous articles to identify and save those relevant to fatherhood for further analysis. In the second phase, I selected articles from a larger sample of thousands of news items and interviews based on four criteria: (a) the article's topic focused on fathers or fathering, (b) it included a narrative from a person about their own father or other fathers, (c) it contained narratives from fathers discussing their experiences of fatherhood, or (d) it mentioned fathers who had been violent against a partner and/or child. These criteria helped me narrow down the news items to 250 articles, which formed the basis of the data for my first paper. In the third phase of the analysis, these news items were stored, read, and reread using the analysis software Atlas.ti ² in order to construct themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I created some codes, such as violence, custody disputes, involvedness, stigmatization and connections to a gender equal society, which were both interwoven and lined up against each other, as opposites or an either-or situation. I examined closely what information these discourses entailed about what was expected of fathers and identified the normative power around the dominant discourse of fatherhood. Then, I analysed the different roles that these discourses presented by studying how fathers portrayed themselves in the media. Finally, I delved into how the media constructed the discourse around violent fathers and created three themes: discourse of bad and violent fathers, the contrary "good and involved" and "involved or violent" – never both? The media data analysis was influenced by my feminist post-structural understanding of gender as the main factor contributing to violence against women, while also taking into account how dominant discourses influence gender and interact with class, culture, and other subjective positions and experiences. By placing the text and discursive practices within the broader social context, I aimed to uncover hidden prejudices and discriminations inherent in the dominant ideology (Cameron, 2001; Fairclough, 2013).

3.2.2 Interviews with fathers who have been violent

In this research, I drew on eight interviews with fathers who had been violent against an intimate female partner. Finding participants who had been violent and were willing to participate was challenging so I sought help from gatekeepers to establish a connection with these individuals. Most of the

² Atlas.ti was not used to do any automatic coding.

participants were contacted and offered participation through the Icelandic therapy service Peace at Home (*Heimilisfriður*). The therapy model is inspired by and aligned with the Norwegian ATV (Alternative to Violence), which focuses on providing psychological treatment for individuals who have been violent towards an intimate partner. Heimilisfriður offers both individual and group-based psychological treatment, and it is Iceland's only therapeutic program for perpetrators of intimate partner violence.

I also advertised for participants on social media. One person reached out to me after seeing my advertisement on social media (Facebook and Instagram) that a feminist masculinity activist shared. Additionally, another person got in touch after receiving my advertisement from the spokesperson of Afstaða, the prisoner's association, targeting ex-inmates. The interviews were designed as semi-structured face-to-face interviews. This means that although each interview was unique, I had prepared interview guides to serve as support (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview guide was organized into distinct themes, beginning with a few questions about the participant's background. It then progressed to topics related to fathering, including participants' thoughts on the fathering role, their relationships with their children, intimate partner relationships, societal influences, and masculinity. However, the interviews usually took on the character of open interviews (Creswell, 2009), as participants were encouraged to share what they felt was important regarding each topic, which meant that the themes were discussed in the natural order in which they appeared in the participants' narratives. This approach emphasized narration and the mutual relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, allowing participants to express themselves as genuinely as possible in their narratives (Hydén, 2014). I audio recorded the interviews and transcribed them with the shortest one lasting over an hour, while most extended beyond two hours. To begin with, I used Atlas.ti³ to organize the coding and themes and manage the data. All but one of the interviews with the fathers took place at the office of Heimilisfriður in Reykjavík because most participants were in treatment there and therefore familiar with the place. One interview was undertaken at an office at the School of Education in Reykjavík (University of Iceland). I conducted the interviews between December 2019 and August 2020. I prioritised creating a relaxed and respectful atmosphere where individuals could express themselves freely and be listened to respectfully. During the interview, my focus revolved around tuning into their nuanced truth and reality (Rees & Rivett, 2005).

³ Atlas.ti was not used to do any automatic coding.

3.2.3 No single-issue lives

When I got to know the fathers who took part in this research, a well-known quote by Audre Lorde (2007) stuck with me: “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (p. 138). Although her words were spoken in another context, about the late Malcom X and the struggle against racism, sexism and homophobia, I found it fitting because not even straight white men, such as my participants, live single-issue lives.

The men who participated in the research were fathers aged between 30 and 65. I did not specifically target a particular age group, but it is important to note that age is a variable that needs more attention in research on IPV. This is true both for adolescents and older individuals, as power dynamics, manifestations of violence, and access to resources can differ depending on age (Bows, 2020; Korkmaz et al., 2021). The men interviewed were at different stages in their engagement with therapy. While most of them had some experience and training in discussing their violent behaviour and emotions, their comfort levels in expressing themselves varied greatly. Some sounded almost rehearsed and clearly influenced by the therapy discourse, while others struggled to find words and appeared visibly uncomfortable.

Even though some of the participants had grown up in the countryside, most of them lived in or around the capital city of Iceland. All participants had experienced either violence or difficult communication with their fathers during their upbringing, which had not been addressed. They had limited space to discuss their emotions at home as children. They spoke of having some diagnoses, with ADHD and alcoholism being the two most common ones. Most of them were diagnosed late in life, and for many, the diagnosis worked as a relief or explanation for their behaviour. ADHD and alcoholism are both treated as diseases and obtaining appropriate treatment for these diagnoses can help many people immensely. Gueta et al. (2019) have shown that having a diagnosis and working on recovery, can also be seen as a masculine act and thus recreate notions of what counts as acceptable masculinity. Since these diagnoses are common, it could be argued that they are a more normalised (socially accepted) way for men to address their emotions and explain their behaviour compared to addressing masculine norms, low self-esteem, or harmful homosocial values.

I approach class from a qualitative perspective which does not rely on income numbers. My understanding of class is in line with the work of Auður Magnús Auðardóttir (2021), who has studied the reproduction of classed and gendered power relations among Icelandic parents. Auðardóttir (2021), drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of class as not only economic but also social and cultural,

explains cultural capital as including educational achievements such as university degrees. It is important to emphasize that while men from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more frequently studied in research on men's violence against women, the issue is not solely about poverty increasing the risk of violent behaviour. Rather, as Messerschmidt (2000, 2004) has pointed out, stress factors and trauma related to financial instability, job loss, violence as well as a lack of training in dealing with their emotions and communication can be exaggerated within working-class masculine stereotypes. Class is an important factor in the discussion of IPV. This is not because only men from the lower-middle or lower class use violence; on the contrary, research has shown that IPV occurs at all levels of the socioeconomic ladder (Phipps, 2009; Samtök um kvennaathvarf, 2018). There is a "loud" silence around the violence of upper middle- or upper-class men (Phipps, 2009; Ptacek, 2021). Research often recruits men who use violence from perpetrator programs, which may contribute to the misrepresentation of men with higher socio-economic status in these studies as they have a substantial amount of money which gives them the opportunity to pay for individual psychologists. Men with high socio-economic status may refuse to take responsibility for their behaviour and resist being labelled as "women batterers" since this label is mainly associated with men from lower socio-economic classes or foreign backgrounds (Bruno, 2018; Gottzén, 2015). Moreover, class seems to determine what behaviour is deemed acceptable for men. All the participants came from a lower-middle-class or lower-class background. By that, I mean that their education varied from finishing compulsory school to having finished upper-secondary school; some had vocational education, one had started university studies, and one had finished a university degree. The men I interviewed had various working experiences. Two of the participants were unemployed, two were self-employed and seemed to work sporadically, and the other worked in the tech industry.

I did not ask my interviewees specifically about their sexuality during their interviews, but rather interpreted it from their narratives of relationships with women. However, I realise that my heteronormative assumption of their sexuality could contribute to silencing queer experiences. Additionally, I acknowledge that I allowed my culturally-constructed vision to influence how I interpreted certain identities of my interviewees. I assumed that all the participants were non-disabled because they did not have a visible disability nor indicated it in their narratives. Similarly, I assumed they were all Icelandic based on their whiteness, mention of Icelandic background, and fluent Icelandic speaking ability. I did not inquire about the possibility of their parents or ancestors being from other ethnicities or if they were adopted.

3.2.4 The interviews that never were

I am deeply grateful for the fathers who chose to participate. I consider these eight in-depth interviews a great success, especially considering the small size of the Icelandic population (for further discussion see 7.3) and the turbulent public discourse around fathers and violence. My attempts at recruiting participants to interview did, however, not always work out. I reached out to several potential gatekeepers in addition to those who ultimately helped me with participant recruitment, unfortunately without much success. In some cases, my conversations with potential gatekeepers lasted for months and seemed promising, only to suddenly come to an end. At other times, I did not receive any responses to my emails or messages.

It was a delicate and sometimes complicated ethical process to figure out how often to contact potential participants and when to understand their silence or hesitation as a “no” and stop trying. In addition to the eight fathers who participated in the research, four more contacted me wanting to participate, but either did not show up for the interview or stopped responding. For example, one man who initially showed interest in participating in an interview later backed out. When I called to schedule the interview in the winter of 2020, he had recently realized and opened up about his violent behaviour. This realization overwhelmed him and made him physically ill. He did not feel ready to discuss his experience just yet. Although he expressed a desire to participate in the future, our communication eventually stopped after I contacted him again. There is a lot of shame associated with being a perpetrator of violence. Most people genuinely believe they are good people and using violence does not fit the public assumption of good people. Realizing that you have been violent can be a shocking experience (Gottzén, 2016, 2017, 2019b). This man’s reference to his physical reactions to opening up about his violent behaviour shows that this discomfort is embodied as well as discursive.

Discourses on gender, class, age, disability, race, and sexuality influence both how stories are told and which stories are silenced (Farahani, 2011). I had a long discussion with my gatekeepers on the possibility of interviewing men in their therapeutic program who did not speak Icelandic as their native language, to gain an understanding of experiences of men that are not born in Iceland. However, the gatekeepers strongly advised against it. They argued that they had encountered issues in their therapy sessions when a translator was present. They claimed that having a translator would be too disruptive and that the topic was too complex for the translators to which they had access. After conducting more than half of my interviews, I made an effort to reach out to individuals with a more diverse background. I advertised in groups for immigrants in Iceland,

seeking both participants and gatekeepers. While I received some positive feedback from people in the group, I did not find any participants. Difficulties with visualizing groups that are not represented and what is left unsaid are well known within methodologies that analyse language as Livholts (2015b) has illustrated transparently: “Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of the analytical process in discourse and narrative studies is to identify silences, to take into account what is not spoken or expressed and what is not narrated” (p. 145). While it hasn’t always been included in the published articles, I have actively reflected on what the homogeneity of the participants means for the research. I have made an effort to highlight the underrepresented minorities and to bring attention to the norms and nuances that are often overlooked.

While a study on children’s and mothers’ accounts of violence at home has been conducted in Iceland by Kristinsdóttir et al. (2014), it would be interesting for future research to focus on the perspectives of victim-survivors and children on men’s fathering and processes of change. The initial research plan for this project included a focus on children’s perspectives by re-analysing interviews conducted by my co-supervisor and her research team with children who had experienced violence at home. However, after discussions with my supervisors and research committee, I decided to focus on the data I collected myself. This change was motivated by ethical considerations and the richness of my data, which allowed me to delve into various aspects of the fathers’ narratives. While this thesis may have benefited from incorporating perspectives from mothers or children affected by the violence, I have relied on existing research to enhance my understanding of how fathers’ violence impacts the family atmosphere and parenting practices.

3.3 Roasting – transcribing

Simply buying green coffee beans is not enough; they need to be roasted in order to make coffee. Chadwick (2021) has described transcribing as a crucial part of the analysing process. This procedure takes the data to a stage where it is more workable. It is also an important part of creating meaning through analysis.

I view transcription as a crucial part of my interview and analysis process, a step that connects the two together. Transcription allowed me to revisit encounters and analyse body language, silence, discomfort, connection, and disconnection from a different perspective. Chadwick’s (2021, p. 80) words about her experience of revisiting and centring voices resonated with me: “These listenings were extremely challenging and emotionally exhausting because I was forced to relive and dwell on/with the relational dynamics of ‘difficult’ or painful

interviews.” For the sake of giving a detailed account of the transcription process, I will take an example from an interview with a man I call Anton and how I use brackets and researcher notes to practice embodied listening when transcribing the fathers’ voices. Early in the interview with Anton, I asked him if he could describe how he felt when he became a father. My transcription of his silence exemplifies the interpersonal dynamic of the interview encounter (see Chadwick, 2021, p. 80): “A: *(Long silence. Sighs so loud and deep. More silence!!!! Looooooooong silence)*”. When Anton finally responds, his narrative is filled with silences, hesitations, and emotional body language. To me, these elements are an essential part of his voice and narrative. My notes afterwards provide insight into the dialogical approach I used when transcribing and analysing the interviews.

A: This is a good question. This is something that one has maybe not thought about. (silence). It relates to what I have been discussing with another psychologist that (inhales awkwardly) how closed off I really am, maybe. I just feel like I am maybe sometimes on the verge of being just (sighs painfully) some kind of a psychopath sometimes, regarding emotions. I feel joy and loneliness and grief and stuff. Or, I don’t know about grief, but anyway. Then I (silence) don’t remember it being a special feeling. It just ahh (tears up and tries to swallow) there was just some baby and (grins awkwardly) society really just made sure you loved it and took care of it. And (long silence). But it’s really (long silence). Maybe a bit. It’s maybe ugly to say it, but if men (sighs heavily, swallows, and his voice trembles a bit). Unfortunately, just emotionless. Regarding this. Yes, I just don’t know.

(R.N. This is such a painful listening. He is in such a difficult place and in so much discomfort. I experience him as feeling a bit shaken and somewhat numb due to all the emotions, as people can feel after experiencing trauma. It seems like he might also be dealing with depression, but no matter what it is, I believe he is anything but emotionless. He is literally overflowing and bubbling with emotion when he describes this.)

Since affective atmospheres depend on the baggage we bring with us (Åhäll, 2018; Ahmed, 2014), navigating and reflecting on my own discomfort has been a significant part of the analysis process.

3.4 Grinding – analysing

Grinding is essential for extracting flavour from the bean in water to provide a cup of coffee. The size and quality of the grind significantly impact the taste of the coffee. Similarly, analysis helps determine what is visible and what becomes the focus of the results.

Narratives are always told in a specific context to a particular audience and thus encompass intersectional power dynamics within their stories (Gorman-Murray et al., 2012). There are various ways of doing narrative analysis, but I have chosen to utilize dialogic or performance analysis, influenced by a definition provided by Kohler-Riessman (2008), which emphasises thoroughly examining the content and meaning of the narratives. This decision is mostly based on my argument that a dialogic/performance analysis provides useful tools to analyse affect by focusing on how a narrative is told and the conscious and unconscious meaning-making processes behind it.

In narrative analysis the focus is not on cutting the data into pieces, and possibly taking them out of context, but rather to focus on the individual, narrative, structure, and words. That is done by questioning why the structure of the narrative is as it is, what the narrator gains by telling it, and by telling it this way, how it impacts the listener, how the interviewer and interviewee co-construct the narrative and what is left unsaid. Using a narrative perspective on interviews with men who have been violent entails the interview situation is viewed as a restricted discursive space that shapes what is said, and that the men's account of their action cannot be interpreted in isolation from the interaction with the interviewer (Presser, 2005). I find that taking a narrative approach works well with a sociological perspective on fathers' violence. This means that all the statements need to be studied within the larger social and smaller interactional contexts in which they occur (Presser, 2005).

I examined the influence of my role as an interviewer, considering to whom the participants' statements may be directed, as well as the timing and the purposes behind their utterances. Kohler-Riessman (2008) states that narratives are shaped and received in a cultural context, they are in that sense interactional, historical, institutional, and discursive. Through dialogical narrative analysis, I was able to closely examine specific words, narrative styles, and the performance of identities. By using this approach, I was able to understand how the research participants narrated their experiences within the context and for what purposes, which was valuable for gaining an understanding of their identities. I focused on specific parts of the fathers' narratives that repeated or diverged, paying attention to what they did not explicitly say, as well as references to broader concepts or discourses. Moreover, I draw inspiration

from Chadwick (2020) and employ analytical modes of representation by approaching the lived experiences of the participants as complex and resisting the reproduction of “easy categories” (p.13). The father’s story is not presented as a uniform, static experience independent of relationships with others; instead, their voice often presents contradictions, shifts, and changes (see Chadwick, 2021).

Although the analysis is an organic process and, at least for me, does not follow a linear timeline, the steps I took in analysing the interviews were as follows:

Immediately after the interviews and during transcription, I took researcher notes (R.N.) and recorded memorable moments and potential extracts. Then, I read (and reread) all the interviews, noting factors that struck me as similar or different in the participants’ narratives.

After that, I created summaries for each interview, as well as summaries based on specific topics or affects that stayed with me from their interviews. I made multiple summaries around concepts like discomfort, change, and fatherhood. This process was, however, not strictly linear; for example, I wrote summaries related to fatherhood and performing “good” and involved fatherhood but later decided to focus more specifically on how the participants acknowledged or engaged with children’s perspectives. This led me to revisit the data, analyse it, and write new summaries, examining parts of their narratives that offered insights into this topic. Writing these summaries not only helped me gain a deeper understanding of the data but also provided my co-authors, Kalle Berggren and Nicky Stanley, with insights into the interviews which were conducted and transcribed in Icelandic.

To achieve a “clean” cup of coffee, it is essential to filter out the good stuff. The coarseness or fineness of the coffee grind plays a significant role in determining the final product that is extracted through the filter. Similarly, in my analytical process, I carefully filter out specific extracts and key points based on my theoretical perspective and approach.

4 Ethical considerations

A focus on ethics is a continuous priority throughout the design and implementation of the whole project. Special care for ethical issues has proved effective and essential in research on vulnerable subjects and individuals (Fern & Kristinsdóttir, 2010). Ethics are a process and a social construct, not a fixed entity, which one decides upon in the beginning and therefore it needs to be revised throughout the research process. Ethics are “a process of continual learning” (Frank, 2004, p. 357). In this chapter, I will discuss how I approached informed consent and permissions and then critically reflect on my position as a researcher and my relationship with my participants, particularly on power dynamics and silences. Iceland is a small society with a population of approximately 394,000 inhabitants (as of October 2024). Despite the steady growth and increasing diversity of the population, it remains largely interconnected. Culture can be used to divide people into homogeneous groups, and in Iceland, national discourses and class structures often lead to marginalization and exclusion (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2009). This characteristic has influenced all ethical considerations related to this project.

4.1 Informed consent and permissions

4.1.1 Media data

As the newspaper articles are publicly available material that sometimes led to public discussion and debate, I was not obliged to anonymise those involved in the articles or request consent to use the material. However, in line with Favaro, Gill and Harvey (2017) take on ethics and media data, I have chosen to anonymise fathers mentioned in the data since the subject can be sensitive for those involved, especially considering how small Icelandic society is. I approach the media data and the people involved with respect (see Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). As a result, I do not perceive violence as something that only happens in other or broken families (Cater, 2004). I believe in depicting the complexity of individuals and their situations without stigmatising them or reproducing stereotypes of violent fathers as fundamentally different from “normal fathers”. This perspective aligns well with the methodological offerings of both feminist perspectives and affect theories in their “efforts to complicate comfortable narratives” (Chadwick, 2020; p. 12).

4.1.2 Interviews with fathers who have been violent

According to ethical procedures at the University of Iceland, I contacted the Data Protection Authority to inform them of my plan to request permission to conduct interviews with fathers who have been violent in intimate relationships. I was informed that, due to recent changes in data protection laws in Iceland, I was not required to report the research involving interviews with fathers, since their participation was contingent on giving informed consent. Furthermore, I submitted a research proposal to the Science Ethics Committee of the University of Iceland, which was positively reviewed.

I made sure to prioritise obtaining informed consent from all participants. They were informed about the research, guaranteed confidentiality, and informed of their right to withdraw at any point. Since discussing violence perpetration can be sensitive, I was mindful of the potential impact on my participants and the difficult emotions they might experience (such as insecurity, shame, anger, and regret). I viewed consent as an ongoing process, not limited to the consent form, and remained attentive to any indications that they needed a break or wanted to withdraw from the study (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013; Hydén, 2014). In order to protect the identity of the research participants, specific measures were implemented. When the interview process began, I decided to provide all participants with a pseudonym from Astrid Lindgren's stories both to hold on to the sense that everyone has their story and humanity and to make them less intimidating. Furthermore, their personal information was removed from the data in the transcription process. This further involved changing basic facts in quotes for publication to ensure that participants could not be identified by their behaviour, habits, or specific words, phrases, or locations. To protect their anonymity, I have provided as little detail as possible about the participants and, for the same reason, as little detail as possible about their violent behaviour, albeit what is needed. This approach may limit the research, especially regarding manifestations of masculinities, as a more detailed description of the violence could have allowed for a more nuanced analysis. In weighing my options, though, I opted for this approach to protect my participants' anonymity. All interview data in this research is stored in compliance with the requirements and regulations of the University of Iceland. I am the only person with full access to the data. The interview data will be deleted five years after completion of this project, according to the ethical guidelines of the University of Iceland.

4.2 Researcher position and power asymmetries

There is no coffee without a barista, nor research without a researcher. The researcher's emotions and experiences can be a valuable tool in data collection

and analysis and should not be excluded. Many feminist scholars argue that subjective insights are inevitably woven into the research process and should be acknowledged (Harding, 1996; Oakley, 1981). Subjectivity refers to the idea that what we see and understand is influenced by our identities and experiences—the contexts in which we exist (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2013). I have experience with research interviews on sensitive topics from my previous work (e.g. Guðjónsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2017a, 2017b, 2018). Reflecting on similarities and differences between participants, and what role they play in producing an intersectional analysis, is an important part of situating their experiences and the results.

It is important to reflect on my interactions with both the gatekeepers and the men I interviewed for the research. I made sure to communicate my goals, position, and experience clearly to be mindful of power dynamics. When negotiating access with the gatekeepers, who were psychologists at Heimilisfriður, I emphasised my aim to gain an understanding of the men's experiences and their role as fathers and to counteract the monster stigma of men who have been violent in intimate partner relationships. It was crucial to gain their support and approval as it directly impacted my access to participants. At times, I feared that trying to understand the experience of violent men, feeling empathy for their humanity, or giving their perspectives a space in the discussion would contradict my feminist notion that the voices of victim-survivors should be at the forefront. I do not want to risk ignoring the suffering of those who have experienced IPV with my work, nor do I want to become co-dependent and excuse the violence. Acknowledging a more complex understanding of violence without downplaying the deep effects of violence is a way to respect the perspective of children and victim-survivors themselves.

During the interviews, I began by sharing my own experiences of complex and conflicting close relationships. In the first moments of the interview, power dynamics can be rather skewed. I, as the researcher, may be seen as representing the prevailing societal norms, which often lack nuance and are loaded with sticky shame. Additionally, my level of education might have made interviewees who had not had formal education feel ill at ease. I found it helpful to share with them my aim of illuminating the nuances and countering the monster image, which often sticks to men who have been violent, to set the tone for the interview, and try to make them feel more comfortable.

I had to be very mindful of ethics when deciding what to disclose to gatekeepers and interviewees. It was important to delicately communicate the feminist objectives of my research by subtly incorporating them into my introduction. For instance, I chose to use terms like gender equality and societal

norms rather than feminism and patriarchy, as the latter two tend to elicit stronger reactions. It was a delicate balance since I also needed to ensure that both gatekeepers and participants were adequately and accurately informed in order to give their informed consent. I have had to reflect on the power asymmetries in the interviews regarding safety (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Gorman-Murray et al. (2012) note that it does not only matter how we do research but also where we do it. I conducted all the interviews during office hours when other people were present at the office. This was necessary because I did not have access to the psychologists' building, but also a safety measure. I had received advice from supervisors, family members, and friends about my safety during the interviews. They suggested that I sit closer to the door, keep my telephone nearby, and conduct the interviews in a room where others could hear me. I did consider their advice, but I felt it was important to show the same trust to my participants as they showed me by agreeing to share their experiences with me. I did not feel threatened or afraid during the interviews. Most of the men I interviewed were sincere, and many appeared insecure and vulnerable. I reflected on my presumptions before I entered the interviews both in a research journal and when transcribing. For example, part of my preparation for the interviews was to carefully select the clothing I wore. I made sure to wear somewhat basic outfits, such as a shirt or sweater and jeans, to appear professional but not too formal. I wanted to maintain a hint of girlishness to make the interview setting feel less intimidating for them.

Power dynamics are not clear-cut but multi-layered, intersecting and relational. That means that in addition to the tangible power I have as a researcher in the interview situation, the men I interviewed possess a great deal of power as well. The most obvious power differences that affected me in the situation are interwoven with gender and my history of violence. Especially since the men's narratives and the way they told them evoked embodied memories and experiences of IPV in me. As an example, the men often shared experiences of having used, or were still using controlling ways of communication which sometimes triggered co-dependent and submissive responses in me. Age difference can interlink with gender resulting in a noticeable power difference, making them seem older and wiser, positioning me as a young woman or even girlish. This graspable outsider position is, however, not necessarily a bad thing, as both Farahani (2011) and Gorman-Murray et al. (2012) have pointed out. My outsider position as a woman can be an advantage since men can feel more comfortable sharing emotions and vulnerable experiences with me than they would with a male interviewer. Lucas Gottzén (2019a) has noted in his book, based on interviews with violent men, that since society views violent men as strangers, as men far from and different from "us", it can be complicated to

realise how familiar they are. This resonated well with me because even though I did not know any of the participants (which, given how small Icelandic society is, almost seemed like a miracle), I felt like I did when the interviews started. So much in their utterance, body language, anger, pain, and discomfort reminded me of complex, multifaceted men from my own life for whom I care. I did not have to force or think much about how to react to their unease, aggressive statements or vulnerable self-reflection; my body knew how to listen, when to show empathy, when to smile, when to be sarcastic, when to show shock or worry and how to make them at ease. By that, I do not mean that this was not a genuine response but rather a reflection on where it comes from. We live in a society that unevenly encourages men and women to talk and care about their and other people's feelings. As a young woman, I have societal schooling in encountering men who find it uncomfortable to share and stay in emotions and experiences, and because these are often men that I care about I have learned how to pay attention to and navigate through their discomfort. Even though I find this gendered schooling problematic and am critical of how automatic this response seemed, this was a setting where it actually appeared to be of some use.

Situating myself towards the data has been an interesting journey because my experience shapes the knowledge production, what I see in the data, and how I take the interviews, *but* it also works the other way around. The knowledge I have gained from this research and my insights into the theory, as well as previous research, also influence my interpretation of my experience and my understanding of violence, parenting, society, perpetrators, responsibility, change, and so forth. My intertwined and clashing experiences as a victim-survivor, mother, daughter but also as a teacher and researcher make me able to approach the topic in a nuanced manner, curious yet critical.

In this chapter, I discussed how I have addressed ethical considerations in my research. Although I strive to incorporate ethical reflections throughout this thesis, the next chapter will focus on the project's theoretical framework.

5 Theoretical framework

In my coffee metaphor, I imagine the theory as water. There is no coffee without water. Just as research without theory is, to me, pointless and undrinkable. When the data gets to soak in the theory, I find or brew my way to the result. This thesis draws on feminist post-structural theories regarding the construction and operation of power, particularly through discourses. Additionally, I incorporate feminist affect theories to enhance my understanding of how social power structures are embodied and intertwined with emotions, and how these elements can move us. In this chapter, I will outline the theoretical framework and discuss my understanding and usage of the framework in relation to key concepts.

5.1 Feminist post-structuralist conceptualisations of power, violence and responsibility

The theoretical framework of feminist post-structuralism provides a valuable understanding of power. Weedon (1987) described feminist post-structuralism as “a mode of knowledge production which uses post-structuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change” (p. 40–41). This project is under the influence of a radical feminist understanding of men’s violence against women. Radical feminism, which draws on a Marxist understanding of power, emphasizes the patriarchal hierarchy in which a dominant group (men) controls most forms of power while a subordinated group (women) does not. Scholars within feminist post-structuralism have adopted a more Foucauldian perspective of power and subjectivity, arguing that the Marxist notion of power risks undermining women’s agency and overlooks power differences within and between identity categories (Cannon et al., 2015; Foucault, 1977, 1978; Weedon, 1987). They also point out that the power of discourses shapes our experiences in context and reconstructs historical and cultural norms that influence our subjectivities (Foucault, 1977; Weedon, 1987).

Discourse shapes and legitimises what is commonly accepted as “common sense” in our time. Therefore, it is important to examine discourse within its social context and relationships. By examining the norms presented in discourse, we can identify how individuals are defined, compared, and discriminated against according to prevailing norms. The process of

normalisation, according to Foucault (1977), is a social phenomenon in which we actively participate by constantly comparing ourselves to evolving norms. In her book *Rape and Resistance*, the feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff (2018) looks closely at Foucault's theories and explains that discourses are the background system that organises our knowledge and the practices that relate to knowledge, namely our identities and understandings of ourselves and our experiences. She states that: "The language itself is part of the practice, part of what makes it possible, part of what makes it meaningful, part of what gives people ideas of what they can do and of what they have just experienced." (p. 10). In that sense, discourses determine for us which men can be perceived as good fathers, which can be violent fathers, and how fathers understand their identity and role as parents. Berggren (2014) has noted that while post-structural perspectives have significantly influenced gender studies for almost three decades, they have not been as widely used in critical studies on men. Berggren argues that post-structuralism contributes to understanding masculinity by viewing "men as complex and contradictory, positioned by discourses that construct them as both oppressors and equals" (p. 239). Feminist post-structural theories are particularly relevant in studying IPV, as they help to understand the complex power dynamics at play in relationships (Cannon et al., 2015). This approach is used to examine how societal discourses on fatherhood and men's violence contribute to the construction of masculinity.

Using a feminist poststructuralist approach means that I view discourse, power, and gender as socially constructed, intertwined, and ever-changing. According to this perspective, there is no single or stable universal category of "man", "woman", "father", or "mother" since they are in a constant process infused, changed, and reproduced by past and present discourses (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Waling (2019) turned to both feminism and poststructuralism when she criticized the widely used categorical analysis that views masculinity as something stable or constant, which she points out is often the case despite scholars' "attempts to theorize its fluid multiplicity" (p. 89). She proposes a focus on how men engage with masculinity across time and place and "their capacity for agentive and emotionally reflective choices" (Waling, 2019, p. 102). Masculinity can thus be understood as a relational process for men, not as a determining cause. According to Waling (2019) a poststructural feminist approach to agency and emotional reflexivity can be useful to gain a better understanding of men's complex experiences and enactment of gendered subjectivity. Just as I view ideas, practices, and discourses related to fatherhood as intertwined with processes of masculinity, a feminist poststructural perspective also means that I understand violence as sustained and produced by gendered power structures (see Weedon, 1987). This means that I do not think

violent behaviour is a natural or unavoidable part of masculinity, but rather something that needs to be examined within the context of societal discussions, such as those presented in the media. Both the acts of violence and our understanding of them can and do vary depending on culture and the era. While all individuals, regardless of gender, can both perpetrate and experience violence, IPV is closely connected to gendered power differences and intersectional marginalization (Bjørnholt, 2019; Kjaran & Halldórsdóttir, 2022; Tietgen, 2024). Hearn (1998) argues that referring to men's violence is an important part of pointing out gendered difference and acknowledging the plurality of men's violences.

I understand violence as controlling, threatening behaviour (whether psychological, physical, sexual, financial, or other forms) that causes a person harm and/or fear. I approach violence not solely as bound to a conscious intention, since the consequences for victim-survivors can be just as serious, whether that was the intention or not. The experience of victim-survivors is dismissed and downplayed when the perpetrator refuses to acknowledge or take responsibility for their actions because it was not planned or 'intentional', which can make the consequences of violence even more harmful (Ciurria, 2018). In Iceland, violence in intimate partner relationships is defined by law as behaviour that "threatens the life, health, or wellbeing" of a person with whom one has an emotional relationship. This definition does not solely focus on the intention to cause harm (Almenn hegningarlög nr. 218b/1940). However, the justice system in Iceland appears to emphasise whether there is a conscious intention to harm in cases of sexual violence (Ámundadóttir, 2021), suggesting that the laws may have a more ambiguous definition of violence compared to the interpretation by individual judges within the system. Alcoff (2018) has pointed out that legal terminology related to violence may not always be helpful as it often lacks specific details about the actual events and overlooks the complexity of the experience.

Defining violence is a complex task due to the various ways it has been defined across different fields, historical and cultural contexts, and individual experiences. In some cases, scholars researching violence have limited their view to one theoretical framework, such as purely discursive or material. However, Hearn (1998) argues that this purist theoretical focus is problematic as it does not encompass the whole story. When researching violence, it is important to closely examine societal and historical discourses and take seriously embodied experiences, the consequences of violence, and the continuum of injustice experienced by victim-survivors. Definitions of violence depend on the specific focus of the research, which is why most feminist studies concentrate on

social power dynamics and gendered and intersectional inequalities as the foundation for violence.

Sylvia Walby (1989) includes male violence as one of the “six main patriarchal structures which together constitute a system of patriarchy” (p. 220). She notes that even though not all men actively use violence as a form of power over women, it still has wide and severe consequences on the way women act, feel, and structure their lives. Unfortunately, this continues to affect women’s realities today, just as it did over thirty years ago when Walby wrote her article (Steinþórsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2014). Since then, Walby has developed her understanding and written about violence as a part of gender regimes. Walby (2020) emphasises the importance of gender analysis to theorise violence and conceptualise violence as an institution, while Hearn et al. (2020) argue that violence should be analysed as a regime in its own right, distinct from other institutional domains. Both approaches view violence not as a specific behaviour or characteristic, but as structural and in constant intersection with the power structures of society (Hearn et al., 2020; Walby, 2020). Hearn et al. (2020) suggest that violence should be understood not only within the domain of the nation-state but also as national and transnational. They look beyond direct physical violence and consider threats, structural violence, and power imbalances as important parts of measuring violence. Walby (2020) cautions against defining everything harmful as violence, as it risks blurring all forms of power into each other. This lively and dynamic conversation within feminist studies demonstrates that there is no unanimous understanding of violence.

Theorising fathers’ violence in intimate partner relationships entails analysing multiple systems of injustice. Although I view gender as a core factor and believe that violence cannot be eliminated without addressing gender hierarchies and intersectional power structures, I recognise the importance of addressing both gender and violence as complex, historical, and cultural regimes from various perspectives. However, this approach is challenging as it may lead to a fragmented vision without a clear focus. Despite agreeing with much of the existing literature on violence within gender studies and feminist theories, I find it important to remember that these different definitions of violence do not necessarily contradict each other.

What a feminist perspective on violence brings to the conversation is a focus on power differences and an understanding of experience as situated, influenced by time and culture. Liz Kelly’s (1987; 1988) continuum approach views violence as present in all women’s lives, with forms and definitions varying based on their specific situations. Kelly argues that it is problematic to rank forms of violence. Danish anthropologist Bo Wagner Sørensen (2013)

contributes to the feminist continuum approach by connecting the experience of sexual violence with other forms of IPV. Sørensen found that some women who experienced IPV did not see a distinction between sexual violence and other forms of violence, perceiving them as part of a total "package." This idea of violence existing on a spectrum is linked to the concept of grey zones between heterosexual script and sexual violence, as articulated by feminist scholars like Catharine MacKinnon (1989), Lena Gunnarsson (2018), Linda Alcoff (2018) and Nicola Gavey (2005). They all emphasise the difficulty of distinguishing between sexual violence and "just sex" due to the overlap in societal perceptions and expectations. For my understanding of violence, I find it crucial to consider the grey zones to try to grasp how violence can be complicated. It is embedded in gendered norms and can gradually build up to create a continuum of controlling and demeaning communication patterns, contributing to an affective atmosphere of embodied oppression. Recently, there has been increased attention on the ambiguity in the experiences of perpetrators of violence. Studies have shown that some perpetrators only recognized their violent behaviour in retrospect, often influenced by changing societal discourses and increased awareness of sexual violence. Additionally, societal myths and stereotypes about violent men can impact perpetrators' experiences, showing that identity and behaviour do not always align (Berggren et al., 2020; Ólafsdóttir & Hearn, 2023; Ólafsdóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2023).

I approach responsibility as both an individual and societal concept. The discourse on responsibility interconnects and cites neoliberal discourses which constructs the modern, responsible, and independent subject. For instance, the portrayal of violence as a problem caused by individual men reflects this perspective. As a result, it may seem like the responsibility to stop gender-based violence lies solely with the individual perpetrator. However, this can lead to overlooking how structural factors such as the gender system, class, and socially constructed masculinity influence men's experiences, opportunities, and behaviour. Nevertheless, I do stress the individual responsibility of men to refrain from using violence, and if they do, to recognise their violent behaviour and actively work to change it. In my work, I mainly focus on the individual responsibility of fathers, but I do so based on my belief that gendered violence is a structural problem that also requires societal responsibility in the form of public discussions, policies, resources, and prevention efforts.

The #metoo movement has had a significant impact on societal discourses about violence and the way individuals remember past experiences of sexual contact. This movement has the potential to change the life trajectories of both perpetrators of violence and victim-survivors (Alcoff, 2018). A second wave of the #metoo movement in Iceland, which occurred in the spring of 2021,

focused more on the responsibilities of perpetrators. There was a public debate about how men who have been violent should take responsibility and what that responsibility would entail. Based on this debate, it can be argued that the responsibility for men who have been violent can be summarised in terms of two aspects: acknowledging their behaviour and working on changing their attitudes and behaviour.

As more victim-survivors come forward, we as a society are getting better at not only hearing their voices but truly listening. We are starting to hear more complexity, nuance, variety, and questions. Alcott (2018) argues in her book *Rape and Resistance* that exploring a more complex understanding of sexual violence and rape is not something the feminist movement needs to fear. On the contrary, the idea that violence is straightforward and simple can discourage many victims and children from coming forward because they feel their experience is complex and ambiguous. This can hinder the necessary process of discussing one's experience with others. Working towards justice and providing space for victim-survivors to talk about their experiences is a feminist project I value. Acknowledging a more complex understanding of violence without downplaying the deep effects of violence is a way to respect the perspective of children and victim-survivors themselves.

I believe that just as Alcott (2018) argues that the idea that sex is complex while rape is not is unhelpful, the idea that communication is complex but violence is not is also unhelpful. Alcott (2018) points out that "some incidents are ambiguous" (p. 11), so acknowledging the complexity of experiences does not mean dismissing certain experiences as not violent enough. To truly acknowledge and understand the various forms of violence, including the ambiguous ones, we must recognise that experiences are shaped by social relations, discourses, and available subjectivities. Alcott emphasises that if the public sphere does not strive to understand complexity, voices expressing complexity will be dismissed as denial, lies, or delusion. Engaging in more complicated conversations about violence and experience can be uncomfortable and even painful. Not only are the definitions of violence complicated, but theorising and analysing preventions, interventions, desistance processes, and responsibility can also be ambiguous.

5.2 Theorizing feminism and affect

In the following sections, I will introduce different ways of theorising affect, its relationship to feminist thought, and present my own perspective on this debate.

Affect theories and the broadly adopted term *affective turn* in the social sciences have become popular in response to post-structuralism and its perceived

inadequacy in addressing emotions and affect. Although affect theories and post-structuralism are often seen as opposites, many, including myself, view affect theories as complementing post-structuralism and providing a deeper understanding of embodied experiences, power dynamics, and ways of knowing. As Jóhannsdóttir et al. (2020) have argued: "It is not sufficient to know that people are moved by affects, but one also needs to understand why" (p. 2); I believe feminist post-structural theories can help with this. Similarly, it is not enough to recognise the power of discourses in shaping our understanding of the world and ourselves; it is important to understand how and in what ways they move us. In line with Åhäll (2018), who claims that there is "no feminism without affect" (p.38), I find that drawing on feminist poststructural theories is both political and affective. Similarly, Anca (2019) notes that feminist knowledge is affectively constituted and feminist theories are always intertwined with affect theories. A focus on affects and emotion as a way of knowing and something that moves us is nothing new but something that feminist scholars have been doing for decades (Åhäll, 2018; Parvulescu, 2019). Additionally, the academic discussion on affects often takes place in a very privileged, Western, educated context and vocabulary, even though it frequently draws on the experience of marginalized people, such as Black women (Lorde, 1997) and Indigenous people (Million, 2009). Scholars have debated whether affect should be seen in contrast to the concept of emotion and feelings, or if an understanding of affect and emotion can be combined (Liljeström, 2016). I use affect and emotion interchangeably and see them in line with Jóhannsdóttir et al. (2020), as "different in intensity rather than quality" (p.2).

Definitions of affect have been debated lately and have mainly revolved around the ontological status of affect, as either unconsciously triggered somatic movements that come before discourse and cognition or as enmeshed in discursive practices. Those who theorize affect as pre-discursive and un-mediated, such as Massumi (2002) and Thrift (2004), find this a helpful way to escape the totalising claims of discourse theory and explore affect and emotion without getting stuck in the deconstruction of identity categories for which discourse studies have been criticised. Wetherell (2012) has been at the forefront of those who argue that this view creates problematic dichotomies between bodily affect and emotions expressed in discourse. On the more discursive side of the debate, Wetherell (2012) offers ways of theorizing affect as socially recognizable forms "communicated in ways that engage with and reproduce regimes and power relations" (p.24). My position in this debate stems from an understanding in line with Wetherell's, that discourses are not always conscious, planned, or deliberate. Rather than being merely expressed in discourse, Wetherell (2012) views feelings as "completed in discourse" (p.

24) emphasising the meaning-making embedded in what she refers to as affective practices. Since my data is based on discourses and narratives, I find it methodologically questionable to theorise affect as solely unarticulated, prior to language. I see affect as a social force that is always intertwined with the discursive and meaning-making. It is also embodied in social interactions and can therefore engage with that which cannot be expressed, conveyed, or accomplished through communication (Franzén et al., 2021).

According to Ahmed (2014), affects are both communicated and constituted through culture. Affect is therefore experienced in relation to something or someone. An example of the difference between affect and emotion in intensity rather than quality is that we can feel uncomfortable due to the heat and airlessness of a room. However, discomfort becomes affective when we experience it because of an encounter with other people. Something the person said or left unsaid can trigger affective discomfort, as well as historical discourses expressed in a prejudiced way that is embedded in power relations. Although the discomfort might look similar on the outside, it can, for example, be visible in clutched legs, squirming, sweat, tension, or result in the person leaving the room. The reason for leaving might be very different based on whether you stand up and leave because you were so uncomfortable due to heat and airlessness in the room that you just needed some fresh air, or if you could not handle dealing with your emotions or being confronted in a conversation with your partner. Thus, moving out of the situation is an expression of affective discomfort in practice. Being moved by discomfort is a complex process involving various experiences and engagements which can disrupt our usual thinking and existence (Chadwick, 2020).

The exploration of discomfort, affective dissonance, and shame as potentially productive affective moments contribute to the unlearning of privilege and feminist politics or solidarity (Chadwick, 2020; Gottzén, 2019b; Hemmings, 2012). However, affective solidarity and different ways of knowing are not automatic responses to affective dissonance or discomfort; they can also “reproduce violent structures” (Chadwick, 2020; p.15). I use affect as a theoretical and methodological lens, mainly in article two, to dive deeper into concepts such as discomfort, rage, shame, and how they merge with each other, especially in encounters between fathers who use violence and children.

6 Summary of articles

6.1 Article one

“Discourses on fathers who use intimate partner violence: An example from Icelandic mass media” was published in *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* in February 2023.

Article one was written alongside Jón Ingvar Kjaran, my supervisor, and it examines how discourses on fathers and violence are constructed in 250 articles from the Icelandic mass media. In previous research on fathers and violence, their experiences of stigmatisation and tension between their role as fathers and their identity as violent men have been identified as a potential hindrance for change. By exploring the discursive representations and constructions of fathers and violence in the media, the paper highlights the dichotomy between “good and involved” and “bad and violent” fathers. The positive image of fathers actively involved in their children’s lives is highlighted in the media, emphasising their participation in domestic and caregiving responsibilities. The paper also touches upon the expectations and cultural norms surrounding fatherhood, including parental leave and post-separation involvement. The contrast between violent fathers and “normal” fathers is further emphasised in the media, fuelling an “us versus them” ideology. This is seen, for example, in the way immigrant fathers are often depicted as uninterested and potentially violent, with little positive representation. Positioning involved and violent fathers as different and opposite types of masculinity produces and sustains stigmatised discourses about perpetrators of violence within the context of the Icelandic media. The findings demonstrate how fathers often emphasise their involvement and deny any wrongdoing to distinguish themselves from bad and violent fathers. Furthermore, the media portrays violent fathers as dangerous strangers, emphasising their devious nature and depicting them as always ready to cause harm. This perpetuates the myth of “stranger danger.” Despite the fact that fathers who use violence are not strangers to their partners and children, they are portrayed as “monsters in disguise” within the familiar facade of “normal and good” fathers.

Furthermore, the article addresses the critical role of mass media in perpetuating gendered social norms and structures that contribute to intimate partner violence. By highlighting the media’s representation of fathers who have

been violent as "strange" and "dangerous" men, the article underscores missed opportunities by the media to acknowledge and connect the underlying gendered power dynamics that contribute to IPV. When the media pathologises individuals, characterising them as bad and violent, it contributes to both reducing responsibility of perpetrators and bypassing their emotional reflection.

The paper suggests that it is important for the media and society to navigate a discourse in which children and victim-survivors of IPV are believed wholeheartedly without constituting perpetrators as monsters. While this can undoubtedly prove uncomfortable, it could allow for a more holistic approach toward gender equality.

6.2 Article two

"Dealing with discomfort: Affective dissonance in fathers' narratives of violence" was co-authored with Kalle Berggren a member of my doctoral committee, and was published in *Feminism & Psychology* in July 2024.

In article two, change in fathers who have been violent is examined with feminist affect theories, drawing upon the work of Chadwick (2020) and Hemmings (2012) in particular. Grounded in narratives of eight Icelandic fathers who have been violent against their female partners and/or children, the findings highlight that addressing comfort and discomfort is crucial to understanding their process of change.

The article discusses how men justify or avoid responsibility for their violent behaviour and grapple with discomfort, stigma, and emotional complexity. They struggle with justifying their actions to avoid feeling like "an ass" and being stigmatised as monsters. This discomfort and desire to distinguish themselves from "real perpetrators" can discourage them from seeking help.

The fathers' discomfort was evident when reflecting on their parenting and children's perspectives. The discomfort made some fathers recognise the power imbalance between them and their children. Similarly, other fathers experienced discomfort as a catalyst for seeking help and reflecting on their behaviour. Dealing with discomfort could, therefore, allow the fathers to critically reflect on their actions, identity, and privilege. Discomfort is relational and has the potential to prompt men to reflect on their privilege and violent behaviour, but it requires conscious effort and ongoing practice (Chadwick, 2020; Gottzén, 2019b; Pease, 2019).

The findings of Article 2 shed light on the potential for and obstacles to fathers' changing and moving away from intimate partner violence. While fathers often avoid dealing with uncomfortable emotions and situations, they also attempt to

confront and work through their discomfort as part of their efforts to seek help and self-reflect. This study contributes to the ongoing dialogue on affect, gender, and violence, shedding light on the emotional complexities inherent in processes of change among fathers who have been violent.

6.3 Article three

“Ticking the boxes: Fathers’ performativity, change, and intimate Partner Violence” was published in *Nordic Social Work* in December 2023.

Article three delves into the realm of fatherhood and intimate partner violence (IPV), focusing on the performativity of fatherhood and the potential for change among violent fathers. This article is written in collaboration with Nicky Stanley, also a member of my doctoral committee. Grounded in feminist post-structural theories, the analysis examines the narratives of eight fathers in Iceland as they navigate fatherhood in the context of addressing their violent behaviour. The findings shed light on how these fathers perform fatherhood in alignment with prevailing gender-equal and involved fatherhood discourses to establish themselves as respectable men and avoid shame, while often overlooking their children’s perspectives. Engaging in uncomfortable conversations with their children, however, presents opportunities for critical reflection on their violent behaviour and power differentials, potentially paving the way for change. These insights hold relevance for perpetrator programmes seeking to integrate work on men’s intimate partner violence with building their fathering skills and capacity, offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges and possibilities for change among violent fathers. Furthermore, the study offers a deeper understanding of how the wider cultural context influences the narratives of fathers who have been violent, contributing to cultural discourses on fatherhood, violence, and change.

7 Discussion

In this final chapter, I discuss the findings of the three articles as well as the theoretical and empirical contributions of this thesis. In this thesis, I have explored both the dominant discourses surrounding fathers and violence, as well as the experiences of fathers who have been violent. Revisiting my research questions at the beginning of this chapter may clarify the aims of this thesis:

1. How are fathers who have been violent against women and/or children portrayed in the Icelandic mass media, and in what ways do these representations reflect or challenge societal gender structures? I primarily address this question in the first article.
2. How do cultural discourses on fatherhood, violence, and change intersect and affectively interact within the narratives of fathers who have been violent? This question is explored in the second article.
3. How do fathers who have been violent approach fatherhood and their children's perspectives in the process of changing violent behaviour? I address this question in the second and third article.

While this chapter is geared towards all three research questions, it is not structured as a response to each individual question; instead, it provides a summarized discussion of the main outcomes of all the articles. In this chapter I will also reflect on the strengths and limitations of the work, as well as suggestions for future research.

7.1 Understanding change as an affective process

This project is a theoretical contribution to knowledge on how fathers who have been violent change. Change is a topic that is regularly discussed in critical men and masculinity studies (de Boise, 2022). The thesis specifically examines the dissonance and discomfort experienced by fathers when they realise that their knowledge and emotions are not aligned with their behaviour. By analysing how they express themselves about change, fatherhood, and violence, the research sheds light on the affective and relational processes underlying the desire for transformation.

The importance of considering fathers' emotions in the context of moving away from violence is well-established. Studies on perpetrator programs have highlighted the significance of men addressing their own emotions and being mindful of the emotions of others (e.g. Päivinen et al., 2020; Siltala et al., 2021). However, there has been less exploration of this topic from the perspective of feminist affect theories. It has been argued that considering affect is important in understanding gender-based violence, both as a personal experience and a structural phenomenon, as it plays a role in all types of violence and violations (Hook & Wolfe, 2018; Husso et al., 2021).

Increased knowledge in society about gender-based violence impacts men's understanding of their violent behaviour, and their definitions of violence shift (Berggren et al., 2020; Bornäs, 2022). This can happen with social movements that focus on awareness raising and through therapy (e.g. Päivinen et al., 2020; Pease, 2012; Siltala et al., 2021; Veteläinen et al., 2013). Men can therefore realise they have been violent retrospectively (Berggren et al., 2020; Ólafsdóttir & Rúðólfsdóttir, 2023). When the fathers gain a better understanding of gendered violence and the experiences of their (ex-)partners and children, they could come to understand that they had been or are violent towards someone and feel that this behaviour is socially unacceptable. This could lead to a shift in themselves due to the mismatch between their actions and their awareness and feelings. This process has been described by Hemmings (2012) as affective dissonance. In order for men to be able to empathise with the pain and suffering of women and victim-survivors, Pease (2012, 2019) has argued that they need to feel a sense of discomfort. He notes that although guilt can be paralysing, one should feel guilty if one is complicit in perpetuating inequalities. Pease (2019) states that "challenging privilege and complicity should involve emotions as people connect to their responsibility and culpability in the perpetuation of oppression" (p. 176). What is interesting in terms of the change process is not only what causes discomfort or how it manifests but how they deal with it, what they do when they feel it. I have shown how moments of discomfort in fathers' narratives can offer opportunities for reflexivity, accountability, and change, while also being swiftly ignored or dismissed. The focus on affect does not legitimise fathers to ignore their discomfort, for example, but provides "a different place to start understanding and contesting those actions" (de Boise, 2018, p. 170). As discussed in articles two and three, change is an affective, long-term, and as noted earlier, non-linear process (Berggren et al., 2020).

This dissonance and discomfort are relational. Most of the participants in this research described a longing to have communication with their children, share custody after divorce, and share responsibility for their children's care; these desires can contribute to their change if they engage with their children's

perspectives, experiences, views and opinions, but not necessarily. It is important to emphasise that, even though the relationship with children might motivate fathers to change or impact fathers positively, it is not the children's responsibility to create circumstances for their fathers to engage with their perspectives and change whatsoever.

7.2 Opportunities for and obstacles to change

7.2.1 Opportunities

In agreement with previous studies (e.g. Päivinen et al., 2020; Stanley et al., 2012; Veteläinen et al., 2013), articles two and three demonstrate that self-reflection was a crucial component of fathers' processes of change away from violence. The ability to critically assess their behaviour, consider the perspectives of their children and victim-survivors, and hold themselves accountable were pivotal aspects of this change. Overall, the findings of this PhD project contribute to the existing literature by providing a nuanced understanding of the affective dimensions of fathers' violence and their processes of change, and by emphasizing the significance of attending to comfort and discomfort in this context.

The fathers who participated in this research took various steps to hold themselves accountable. For example, they intentionally pushed themselves out of their comfort zones by pausing, correcting themselves when speaking, and admitting to their violent actions. They also discussed their behaviour with others to ensure they could not deny or ignore it. Additionally, some fathers had sought help and had uncomfortable conversations with their children about their behaviour, making it clear that their children were not responsible for their fathers' violence. This engagement with their children's perspectives could lead fathers towards critical reflections on their violent behaviour and power differences. This also allowed their children to call them out on their behaviour.

Those fathers who had worked on themselves for a long time described change as not restricted to their violent behaviour. It seemed to indicate progress when the fathers allowed the change to spread to other parts of their lives. They not only saw the help they received as promoting change in regard to their violent behaviour but also in terms of their communication, parenting, work, and masculinity.

The main opportunities discussed in this thesis revolve around the process of self-reflection and accountability among fathers who have used violence:

Self-Reflection: Encouraging fathers to critically assess their behaviour and consider the perspectives of their children and victim-survivors is vital for change (articles two and three).

Accountability Measures: The fathers implemented strategies to hold themselves accountable, such as pausing in conversations, correcting their language, and openly admitting to their violent actions (article two).

Engagement with Children: Having uncomfortable but necessary conversations with their children about their behaviour allows fathers to clarify that their children are not responsible for the violence, fostering an environment for critical reflection on their actions (articles two and three).

Broadening Change Beyond Violence: For some fathers, change extended beyond just addressing their violent behaviour; they recognised improvements in communication, parenting, and attitudes towards masculinity, suggesting a holistic approach to personal development (article two).

Therapy and Community: Discussing their behaviour with others helped fathers avoid denial, enabling them to confront their issues more effectively. Therapy with professionals who specialise in working with perpetrators of violence, particularly in group settings for fathers who have been violent, can be effective (articles two and three).

These opportunities highlight the importance of a supportive environment for fathers to engage in critical self-reflection and hold themselves accountable, which can lead to positive changes in their lives and those of their children.

7.2.2 Obstacles

Experiencing discomfort does not automatically produce change; individuals need to actively work on it (Chadwick, 2020; Pease, 2019). As demonstrated in article two, fathers could ignore the discomfort by turning to humour, changing the subject, or getting angry.

Article 1 provides a discourse analysis of how fathers and violence are portrayed in Icelandic mass media, revealing how the framing of "good and involved" versus "bad and violent" fathers in the media contributes to the reproduction of individualized discourses about intimate partner violence against women and children. The impact of stigmatising public discourses that portray fathers who have been violent as the opposite of good and involved fathers was evident in the narratives of the participants, as shown in article two. It seemed to create tension and a desire to avoid being categorised with what they perceived as the

“real perpetrators.” This stigma could also prevent them from recognising and admitting their violent behaviour, which could, in turn, hinder them from taking responsibility and seeking help. This is in line with previous research on men who have been violent.

Gottzén (2017) showed that the steps through what he refers to as “the gate to shame” and into perpetrator therapy can be heavy since men are reluctant to be categorized as “aggressive criminals” (p. 535), as one of his participants described it. Although involved fatherhood can be a motivator for behavioural change (Päivinen et al., 2020; Stanley et al., 2012), scholars have criticised the access that fathers who have been violent get to children and their mothers because it can enable a continuum of violence (Bruno, 2016).

The term “good father” is not universal, absolute, or final. Instead, it is culturally and socially constructed through discourse, laws, and its connection to gender equality. Additionally, the definition of what it means to be a good father varies between individuals. Fathers themselves often have different views on whether they are good fathers and what qualities are needed to be seen as one, compared to the definitions held by mothers, courts, or society at large. Moreover, children also have diverse experiences and interpretations of their fathers. While some may view their fathers as entirely bad and wish to distance themselves from them, others have more complex and ambivalent feelings, seeing their fathers as both good, warm, distant, fun, bad, caring, and mean (Cater, 2007; Kristinsdóttir et al., 2014). Social emphasis on good and involved fathers has performative sides which could prevent fathers from adopting a child’s perspective and having sincere, uncomfortable conversations with them about their violent behaviour. It has repeatedly been shown in an Icelandic context how the Nordic discourse on equality intertwines with neoliberal influences, resulting in individualized explanations (and solutions) for gender inequality and violence (Ólafsdóttir, 2022; Pétursdóttir, 2009; Tietgen, 2024).

I would like to draw attention to the affective ways power structures manifest in heterosexual relationships because they are the soil from which intimate partner violence against women grows. The division of domestic labour and childcare in heterosexual relationships is still disproportionate. Women often take longer maternal leave, handle more of the children’s sick days, and are responsible for tasks such as laundry and the mental load of organising things like presents, children’s clothing, doctor’s appointments, and leisure activities (Kolehmainen & Juvonen, 2018). Women can experience affective dissonance between their expectations of the heterosexual relationship: happiness and their identity: and the unequal reality they live with. They can deal with this in various ways but Jurva and Lahti (2019) have shown that the most promising path is confronting

the affective dissonance to challenge the inequality. However, when men who have been violent discuss what they see as reasons for their violent behaviour, they often refer to feeling challenged by their partners, disrespected or powerless because their partners pointed out injustice or demanded more involvement from them (Hearn, 1998; Kjaran & Kristinsdóttir, 2021; Lau & Stevens, 2012). So even though women face their affective dissonance and try to share their feelings and experiences with their partners, their partners may not necessarily accept them and could react with violence. This affective inequality is also evident after the relationship ends. Hall and Harris (2022) have shown that women continue to endure uneven emotional labour to support men's processes of change. In article two, my co-author and I discussed how the participants often avoided dealing with the uncomfortable emotional baggage of having committed intimate partner violence. They leaned on the emotional labour of the women around them, including mothers, ex-partners, and spouses, relying on them to do the emotional work for them. This allowed the fathers to remain emotionally invested in the comfort of their privilege. I find it important to ground myself in realities of victim-survivors who have been on the receiving end of the father's violence and acknowledge that the fathers process of change often continues to impact women's lives and wellbeing.

7.2.2.1 Aren't they all just narcissists?

Icelandic society has made efforts to involve fathers, for example, by making joint custody the norm after divorce. At the same time, there has been a significant and timely movement and discussion about gender-based violence and responsibility. As shown in Article one, media discourses often focus on individual cases of violence and custody disputes, with an underlying agenda of determining who is the real monster—the violent father or the malicious mother.

Throughout this research process, I have frequently received questions about the fathers who took part in the study. These questions have centred on whether they have experienced violence themselves, struggle with alcohol or drug addiction, exhibit signs of psychopathy, hold different cultural values (are foreign), and comments insinuating that some men are inherently psychopathic or mentally ill. Discussions about narcissists and how to spot them have been prominent in Icelandic society over the past years (Arnardóttir, 2023; Hlynsdóttir, 2021; Magnúsdóttir, 2021; Þormar, 2020), which is why I have sometimes received the question: "Aren't they just narcissists?"

I find these questions interesting because they crystallise the neoliberal explanations and "solutions" of society so well. It individualises the problem but sadly enough does not provide any solutions. Focusing on fathers who have been violent as mentally ill narcissists writes them off—all society needs to do is

to learn how to spot them and stay away. This leaves their children and the mothers of their children in a difficult position, as they are often connected to them throughout life through their children. Hence, by showing the workings of change in men's narratives of fatherhood and violence, this thesis can contribute to conversations of intimate partner violence in a broader social context. Drawing from the research of feminist scholars such as Chadwick and Hemmings on affect and combining it with a post-structural perspective allows for an approach to father's violence as both an individual and socially structured phenomenon. While there is no violence in society without individuals who perpetrate it, there are also no individuals who perpetrate violence without social construction.

Discourses are an integral part of societal development, constantly changing and evolving. Over the five years I have spent researching fathers' violence, I have witnessed a noticeable shift in the discourse surrounding this issue. It has become more visible, yet there is also an increased focus on narcissistic disorder as a characteristic and potential cause of fathers' violence in intimate partner relationships. Pathologising perpetrators of violence is a common characteristic in Icelandic public debate (Bjarnason & Pétursdóttir, 2019; Ólafsdóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2023). The focus on narcissists is one form of this pathologising, and it would, therefore, be interesting for future research to explore how the discourses on narcissists serve to individualise and pathologise the problem of IPV and turn the focus away from societal structures.

To summarise, the main obstacles to change for fathers who have been violent discussed in this thesis include:

Affective Dissonance: The discomfort and conflict between their feelings of guilt or regret and their past behaviours can create significant internal turmoil, making it challenging for them to confront and acknowledge their actions (article two).

Societal Norms and Masculinity: Traditional notions of masculinity can pressure fathers to avoid vulnerability or emotional expression, making it harder for them to seek help or engage in discussions about their behaviour (articles one, two and three).

Long-Term Commitment: Recognizing that change is a long-term process can be daunting. Many fathers may struggle with the sustained commitment required to alter deeply ingrained behaviours and beliefs (articles two and three).

Past Trauma: Personal histories of trauma or abuse can complicate the process, as unresolved issues may trigger defensive reactions when confronted with their own violent behaviours. This also seemed to impact their emotional awareness and the difficulty that some fathers had in expressing and processing emotions (articles two and three).

Fear of Consequences: Concerns about legal or social repercussions from acknowledging past behaviour can deter fathers from taking responsibility or seeking change (articles, one, two and three).

Addressing these obstacles with a supportive framework focused on emotional health and understanding is crucial for fostering meaningful change in fathers who have been violent.

7.3 Strengths, limitations and future research

The empirical strengths of this project lie in increasing knowledge by raising the issue of fathers' violence in Iceland. The emphasis on Iceland, known for its gender equality initiatives, adds contextual depth, allowing for a critical examination of masculinity and violence within a society with progressive gender policies. The aim of this project is not to determine *if* fathers change or find out *which or how many* fathers who have been violent really change. This analysis is an exploration of *how* they change which offers valuable empirical insights into the complexities of change among violent fathers. This qualitative approach enables a deep understanding of their motivations, struggles, and reflections on their behaviour, which can inform practical interventions.

One notable strength of this project is that it draws attention to the issue of IPV within the framework of social structures. Article three highlights a crucial and often overlooked aspect of intimate partner violence (IPV) research—how fatherhood and the role of fathers are intertwined with abusive behaviour. A strength of this paper lies in its engagement with broader cultural discourses surrounding fatherhood and violence, encouraging further discussion on how social representations of fathers influence their identities and behaviours. It raises awareness about how these cultural narratives can both support and hinder change. Article one further underscores the need to connect individual behaviours to broader gendered structures, emphasising how media representations can reinforce harmful stereotypes. Moreover, by focusing on Icelandic mass media, the study provides insights into a specific cultural context, which allows for a more nuanced understanding of societal norms and gender dynamics in the Nordic region.

Another strength of this thesis is the theoretical framework, which consists of a variety of complementary theoretical perspectives. Article two brings a fresh perspective by integrating feminist theories of affective dissonance and discomfort into discussions about fathers' violence. This approach highlights the emotional complexities involved in the narratives of violent fathers. Moreover, applying feminist post-structural theories provides a robust theoretical basis for understanding the performativity of fatherhood. This perspective adds depth to the analysis and allows for a nuanced exploration of the cultural discourses surrounding fatherhood. A feminist post-structuralist framework is also employed to analyse the media depiction of fathers who use IPV, which I believe enriches the examination of the intersection of masculinity and violence. In my opinion, these frameworks complement each other. I feel that drawing on and integrating various theoretical perspectives and fields enriches the analysis and broadens the implications for practice regarding interventions for violent fathers. The insights from this project into the role discomfort plays in accountability and reflexivity offer valuable considerations for intervention programs for perpetrators of IPV and especially those who intersect their work with addressing fathering skills and capacity.

My thesis is a scholarly contribution to fathers' change away from violence both internationally and within Iceland. This is a field that is nearly non-existent in Icelandic academia. My hope is that my findings will be beneficial for Icelandic society in understanding how dominant discourses and feelings of discomfort influence fathers' processes of change from IPV. This understanding is essential for the media, perpetrator programs, policymakers, and institutions that support parents, such as maternity wards and schools.

This thesis is not without its limitations and could have benefitted from a clearer structure and aim from the beginning of the research. The focus of my articles was not yet fully developed when I conducted the interviews. Therefore, the interviews sometimes did not focus deeply enough on the specific subtopics of fathers' change and discomfort. However, I have found that being flexible and reflexive has been a significant strength during this research. For example, by adjusting the focus of the articles to address discomfort and change, aligning with what was prominent and interesting in the fathers' narratives.

Article one focuses primarily on contemporary media representations, which might overlook historical shifts in the portrayal of fatherhood and violence, reducing the understanding of how societal norms have evolved over time. This would be an interesting topic for future research.

I am aware of the limited number of participants, but as the purpose of this project is not to achieve saturation or make generalisations from the results, I do

not view this as a deficit. However, as previously stated, the participants are a homogenous group, and there is a need for research on father violence in the Icelandic context that focuses on upper-class fathers, immigrant fathers, disabled fathers, queer fathers, and rural fathers, for example. Exploring more diverse groups of fathers could provide a richer understanding of how cultural and social contexts affect fatherhood and violence. While the study incorporates a feminist perspective, it might benefit from a more intersectional lens that considers how race, class, and sexuality intersect with fatherhood and violence. I am curious about how different forms of marginality intersect with concepts of violence. There is a noticeable difference in how we perceive, discuss, and address violence based on the socio-economic status of the individuals involved. Factors such as whiteness, ethnicity, and class significantly influence which victim-survivors are believed, which fathers have opportunities for desistance or are permitted to reintegrate after being labelled "women batterers," and which ones end up in jail. Additionally, these factors determine which children's voices are heard and which are left unheard, speaking into the void.

This thesis discusses the challenges and motivations for change, it provides limited information on the effectiveness of the perpetrator programs and the long-term outcomes for both fathers and their families as this was not the aim of the project. Future research could explore these aspects more thoroughly.

7.4 Concluding remarks

Gottzén et al. (2020) offer a helpful insight into the work ahead. They note that it is insufficient to simply help men stop their abusive behaviours or to teach boys and men to avoid using physical or sexual violence. Men also need to undergo changes in other aspects of their lives, and the concept of masculinity itself must be critically examined. Pease (2019) is among those who have explored masculinity and the possible transition from a violent gender order to a culture of peace and equality, and according to him: "The challenge is to ensure that such pain and emotional discomfort leads to change rather than defensiveness and denial. This will require us to move beyond neoliberal notions of individual responsibility" (p. 176). Facing privileges, gendered and intersecting inequalities, communication patterns, vulnerability, how we treat children, how we prepare parents, how we deal with trauma, how we support those who make mistakes in society, neoliberalism and capitalism are all a part of the problem. Thus, attending to all of these factors can lead us to potential solutions.

Epilogue

This project has impacted me in many ways. I have been working on this research during a period of changes in my life. I have raised, carried and birthed children, moved countries and navigated the boundaries between my private and work life. The global situation has also been intense, with challenges such as COVID-19, wars, genocide, natural disasters, and various forms of injustice.

Being curious about the discomfort my participants expressed and the way they dealt with it has moved me towards change. It has changed my communication with my partner, my children and most importantly, myself. I believe that discomfort can be a compass for what I need to reflect on. To notice where the affective dissonance arises from, whether my knowing and emotions are in line with my behaviour, what I want to understand better, repair or change. For me, as well as my participants and society overall, striving for change is often lengthy, complex, multifaceted, and, above all, filled with discomfort and challenging discussions.

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Paper I



Discourses on fathers who use intimate partner violence: an example from Icelandic mass media

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ABSTRACT

Despite an increased interest in studying masculinity in terms of the merging experiences of fatherhood and violence, the way this subject position appears in the media is often left out of the academic debate on fatherhood and masculinity. This paper offers a contribution to extant research on fatherhood and masculinity by providing a discourse analysis of how fathers and violence are constituted in Icelandic mass media from a feminist poststructuralist perspective. Our findings indicate that ‘good and involved’ versus ‘bad and violent’ fathers are framed in the media as two fundamentally different types of fathers. This paper demonstrates the critical role mass media plays in reproducing individualized discourses about IPV by presenting fathers who have been violent as a certain type of ‘strange’ and ‘dangerous’ men. Through this representation of fathers who have been violent, the media fails to acknowledge gendered social norms and structures that continue to produce IPV against women and children.

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Introduction

Like many other Nordic countries, Icelandic society has invested in involved fatherhood, which is considered essential for working toward gender equality. This investment has been followed by increased media representation of the ‘new’ type of fathers, who are increasingly presented not only as providers but also as being active in household chores and involved in the nurture and upbringing of their children (Wahlström Henriksson, 2020).

While fathers’ involvement has certainly impacted a change in attitude, the ‘meanings of fathers’ involvement and presence are not unambiguous’, as Wahlström Henriksson (2020, p. 322) noted, and do not necessarily lead to gender equality. As Wemrell et al. (2019) suggested regarding the Nordic context, discourses, and assumptions of gender equality can mask the connection of intimate partner violence (IPV) to gendered dynamics of power, ‘making it difficult for men and women to recognize themselves as IPV victims and perpetrators and to seek and receive help’ (p. 16).

Scholars studying media discussion around IPV have increasingly turned their gaze towards perpetrators and shown how the media has stereotyped the abuser instead of

paying attention to the gendered power structures behind IPV (Leung, 2019). Furthermore, since IPV is considered abnormal, men's perpetration of it is explained in the media by citing abnormal personality traits or substance abuse, thus drawing on pathological causes of men's violent behavior (Isaacs & Mthembu, 2018). Isaacs and Mthembu (2018) have criticized the dominant media discourse around IPV, arguing that it 'may encourage perpetrators to subscribe to these distorted representations, without accepting accountability' (p. 479). Academic interest in fathers within studies on IPV has increased (Päivinen, Siltala, & Holma, 2020), and findings of previous interview studies have shown that fathers tend to argue that they are different from 'real' perpetrators and discursively position themselves as involved fathers (Perel & Peled, 2008; Veteläinen, Grönholm, & Holma, 2013). However, this focus on perpetrators role as fathers and how discourses on fatherhood and violence intertwine has been missing from media studies. Against studies showing how fathers avoid the stigmatizing subject position of the violent man, drawing on involvedness instead, we find it important to examine discourses of father's violence and involvedness parallel and in context to each other.

The present paper combines research on studies on fatherhood with feminist research on men and violence, and it contributes to critical feminist literature on masculinity and fatherhood by exploring how fathers who use IPV are constituted within the discourse of fatherhood in Icelandic mass media, and how those discourses contribute to the stigmatization of fathers who are violent. We begin by discussing previous studies on fatherhood and our theoretical perspective. Inspired by a feminist poststructural perspective, we analyzed 250 articles from selected media outlets to identify discursive representations and construction of fathers and violence in Icelandic mass media. We argue that the media bypasses opportunities to connect fathers' violence to societal gender structures by constituting mutually exclusive discourses of 'good and involved' and 'bad and violent' fathers. We arrive at this argument by showing how discourses of fathers and violence are infused by the myth of *stranger danger* (Ahmed, 2013) and how this works to reconstruct a stigmatizing and polarized discourse.

Contextualizing discourses on fatherhood and IPV

Fathers have been extensively studied in relation to (hetero)masculinity and gender equality. In the Nordic context, the prominent focus has been on exploring the role of 'involved' and 'good' fathers as a cornerstone in progress toward equality (e.g. Eydal & Gíslason, 2015; Farstad & Stefansen, 2015). By studying portrayals of Icelandic fathers in books and booklets published in Iceland from 1846 to 2010, Gíslason (2018) traced how the image of the good father has changed, moving from exclusion to optional participation, but still in a way that does not require elite men to relinquish their power. Discursive production of modern-involved fatherhood includes taking parental leave, attending children's leisure activities and school events, expressing love for their children, being active in domesticity, and sharing custody after separation (Farstad & Stefansen, 2015). However, fatherhood is more nuanced and ambivalent than merely being a discursive production. Jóhannsdóttir and Gíslason (2018) showed that the desire to become a good father is prominent among young Icelandic men, indicating the intersection of discourses of masculinity and fathering. The young men interviewed in their study identified strongly with becoming good and caring fathers in the future and

connected that role with performing (hetero)masculinity. Being an involved and caring father is seen as the ‘new’ masculinity, at least within the Icelandic context, and this subject position affects men, whether they become fathers or not. Similarly, Farstad and Stefansen (2015) drew on interviews with parents of young children in Iceland when they stated that ‘[b]eing a caring father seems nothing less than culturally obligatory’ (p. 67), but mainly available to men who are born and raised in Iceland, middle-class, able-bodied, and have a support system (Farstad & Stefansen, 2015; Harðardóttir, Lay, & Magnúsdóttir, *in press*).

The dominant discourse on active and involved fathers does not only construct particular gendered expectations for fathers to live up to but it also ‘others’ those fathers who are positioned differently or do not fit into what Judith Butler (1990) defined as the heterosexual matrix. The representation of fathers in the media during the past decade has been homogenous. If LGBTIQ fathers are mentioned, it is under the pretext of something unusual, thus constituted as an exception from the norm. The same applies to other minority groups, such as disabled fathers, who are either not mentioned in the media at all or depicted as the abject other. They are not fully accepted or considered to fit into the cultural life script, which constructs fatherhood as something expected of ‘authentic’ and able-bodied men (Wahlström Henriksson, 2020).

It is possible for men to embrace involved fatherhood, condemn IPV, and acknowledge gender equality but at the same time use violence (Gottzén & Berggren, 2021). Integrating the role of fatherhood with an identity as a violent man can therefore prove difficult since violent men are often discursively portrayed as different from ‘normal or good’ men (Veteläinen et al., 2013). Consequently, scholars within the comprehensive tradition of research focusing on how men talk about their own violence have shown that men try to discursively distance themselves from the stigmatizing stereotype of the ‘real women batterer’ (Gottzén, 2019; Hearn, 1998). It is difficult to comprehend to what extent stigmatizing discourses about perpetrators hinder men from seeking help because most research on perpetrators of violence draws from the experience of men in therapy, which limits the assumptions that can be made. Even so, Gottzén (2017) showed that the steps through what he refers to as ‘the gate to shame’ and into perpetrator therapy can be leaden, since men are reluctant to be categorized as ‘aggressive criminals’ (p. 535), as one of his participants described it. Although involved fatherhood can be a motivator for behavioral change (Päivinen et al., 2020; Stanley, Graham-Kevan, & Borthwick, 2012), scholars have criticized the access that fathers who have been violent get to children and their mothers because it can enable a continuum of violence (Bruno, 2016).

Theorizing media discourses on fatherhood from a feminist poststructural perspective

Using a feminist poststructuralist approach means that we view discourse, power, and gender as socially constructed, intertwined, and ever-changing. According to this perspective, there is no single or stable universal category of ‘man’, ‘woman’, ‘father’, or ‘mother’ since they are in a constant process infused, changed, and reproduced by past and present discourses (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

Waling (2019) turned to both feminism and poststructuralism when she criticized the widely used categorial analysis that views masculinity as something stable or constant,

which she points out is often the case despite scholars' 'attempts to theorize its fluid multiplicity' (p. 89). Without questioning whether masculinity is oppressive or dismissing men's experiences of trauma or difficulty, she proposes a focus on how men engage with masculinity across time and place and 'their capacity for agentic and emotionally reflective choices' (Waling, 2019, p. 102). Masculinity can thus be understood as a relational process for men, not as a determining cause. According to Waling (2019), a poststructural feminist approach to agency and emotional reflexivity can be useful to gain a better understanding of men's complex experiences and enactment of gendered subjectivity.

Just as we view ideas, practices, and discourses related to fatherhood as intertwined with processes of masculinity, a feminist poststructural perspective also means that we understand violence as sustained and produced by gendered power structures. Therefore, we do not believe that violent behavior is a natural or inevitable part of masculinity but examine it in the context of societal discourses, such as those portrayed in the media. Media attention to and societal critique of IPV and people who use violence is understandable and can be a sign of societal support for victim-survivors and contribute to a sense of just spaces (Antonsdóttir, 2020; Royal, 2019). Because of the power that the media has over framing our understanding of violence against women, Royal (2019) stated that journalists and editors have an obligation to report on it sensitively and accurately. Previous studies on media discourses about perpetrators of violence have focused mainly on sexual violence and harassment, showing that such discourses are both gendered and racialized (Cover, 2019). When the media ties IPV to violent characteristics or individual 'bad apples' (Gill & Orgad, 2018, p. 1320), they risk missing the opportunity to mediate to the public connections to structural power imbalance or intersectional marginalization. Inspired by Waling (2019) critique of an academic focus that theorizes masculinity based on certain types that men are oppressed by, we examine how certain types of fatherhood are constituted in media discourses about fathers who have been violent in intimate partner relationships.

Data and methods

The data were collected and analyzed systematically from articles published by the main media outlets in Iceland between 2008 and 2018. We chose this decade because it involved some years of adaptation following the legal changes to parental leave made in 2000. After the financial crisis in 2008, there were noticeable changes in the cultural climate in Iceland, which involved an increased focus on fatherhood. Articles related to custody disputes and fathers' rights noticeably surged during this period, and there was an overall increase in mass media coverage of fathers and fatherhood during that decade. The majority of the selected articles were from 2018 (59), and the fewest were from 2009 (8) (see Table 1).

In total, nineteen media sources (outlets) were analyzed, three from broadcasting media, five online newspapers, one that was available in print only, and ten that were

Table 1. Distribution of newspaper articles on fatherhood per year.

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Total
Quantity	19	8	13	13	18	27	21	16	31	25	59	250

available online and in print (see Table 2). The data were gathered in the fall of 2019 using the electronic database of Icelandic Media Watch, which stores and gathers almost all media publications in Iceland. We used the following keywords in Icelandic: *Faðir, feður, feðrun, pabbi, faðir*, góður faðir, feður og ofbeldi* (Father, fathers, fathering, dad, father*, good father, fathers, and violence). The search yielded over 40,000 responses for two of the most common versions of the word father (*faðir* and *feður**). The first phase of the analysis involved scanning the articles that the search provided and identifying those that were truly connected to fathers or fatherhood. The second phase involved selecting articles from a larger sample of thousands of news items and interviews, those that had (a) fathers or fathering as their topic, (b) a narrative from a person about their own father or other fathers, (c) narratives from fathers about their experience as fathers, or (d) mentioned fathers who had been violent.¹ After applying these four criteria, 250 articles formed the basis for the data used in this paper.

In the third phase of the analysis, these articles were read and reread using the analysis software Atlas.ti to identify recurring themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A feminist post-structural approach was used to critically analyze the representation of fatherhood and violence in the media. We also used Atlas.ti to organize quotations relevant to key themes, such as violence, custody disputes, involvedness, stigmatization, and connections to a gender-equal society. Then, we examined how these themes demonstrated ideologies surrounding discourses about fathers who had been violent against women and children.

We understand ethics as a deliberate process (in line with Hollway and Jefferson (2013)) and have thus placed respect as our primary ethical responsibility, which means that we do not view violence as something that only occurs in ‘other’ or ‘broken’ families. Violence is rooted in socially constructed gendered power structures and thus occurs irrespective of class and location, which draws attention to the complexity of violence and how it is experienced. Basing our analysis on feminist poststructuralism means that we view people as multi-layered and experiences as nuanced and therefore approach violent fathers in our analysis without stigmatizing them as fundamentally different from ‘normal fathers’. We find it ethically important to theorize the language around fathers and violence ‘in a way that opens them up to political change’ (Weedon, 1987, p. 82). At the same time, we acknowledge the experiences of victim-survivors without questioning them when analyzing the media articles, although we focus on discourses around perpetrators of violence. As the newspaper articles have already been published, we are not obliged to anonymize those involved in the articles. However, taking into consideration how small Icelandic society is, we have chosen to keep them anonymous and to focus on the discourses as they are presented in mass media. In the following chapters, we show how fathers who have been violent are constructed in the media.

Findings

In the following sections, we discuss three themes that cast light on how violent fathers are discursively constituted in contrast to ‘ideal’ involved fathers. In the first theme, *discourse of bad and violent fathers*, we show how IPV is constituted as an individual trait perpetrated by the violent ‘Other’, depicted as strange and devious types of men ‘passing’ as partners and fathers. In the second theme, we draw forth the way *good and involved*

Table 2. Overview of media outlets and number of news items on fatherhood.

Media	Bygging	Bændablaðið	DV	Fókus (DV)	Fréttablaðið	Fréttatíminn	Glamúr	Hringbraut	Kjarninn	Kvinnablaðið	Mannlíf	MBL	Morgun -blaðið	Nútíminn	Ruv	Stundin	Stöð 2	Viðskipta -blaðið	Visir	Total
Quantity	2	1	59	1	36	21	1	1	7	2	7	18	43	1	7	17	5	3	18	250

fathers are presented in Icelandic media and the contrast highlighted between them and fathers who have been violent. The last theme captures how mutually exclusive these discourses construct fathers as *involved or violent – never both?* Thus, being an involved father is assumed to preclude fathers from being violent. Our point is that by focusing on violence as an individual trait of a certain type of men, the media ignores the connection between IPV and gendered power structures.

Discourse of ‘bad and violent’ fathers

Media discourses mediate more than words, which means that encounters with the media can impact the directions in which public sensations, opinions, and embodied responses are steered (e.g. Alcoff, 2018). In media discourses around fathers and violence, the focus is no less on their individual traits than on their behavior. According to Ahmed (2013), the myth of *stranger danger* lays focus on who these strangers are and commonly referring to fathers who had been violent in the media as ‘violent men’, ‘sexual offenders’, ‘pedophiles’, ‘child molesters’, ‘perpetrators’, and ‘these men’, indicates that violence is a part of their core self. From the poststructuralist perspective, which emphasizes that words matter and language can impact thought (Weedon, 1987), language is viewed as an essential part of the social process of stigma that is created and reconstructed in social interactions (Goffman, 1963). In many cases, fathers who had been violent appeared in the media as shady and dangerous types of men, as the following quote indicates: ‘Then he suddenly jumped out of the darkness which stunned me, and I became so frightened’ (Sigurðardóttir, 2018). Here, the image of the violent father who lingers alone in the shadow, waiting for a chance to jump out to harass women and children, is in stark contrast to the ideal loving and involved father Icelandic public policy invests in, as discussed previously. As Ahmed (2013) pointed out, we are directed toward particular readings of the violent husband and father through the media discourse, which she explains as ‘a monster underneath, as a stranger passing as husband, rather than as a husband exercising the power that is already legitimated through hegemonic forms of masculinity’ (p. 36). This ‘monster underneath’ appears, for example, in the following extract: ‘That was when he revealed his true self. [...] When he gets angry, his eyes turn black, and he transforms. In that state, [he] can do anything’ (Guðjónsson, 2018). This media representation depicts this particular father in essentialist terms by referring to his violent behavior as a part of his nature or inner being. The violent father is constructed as a dangerous intruder who deceives his way into the safety of the home. Fathers who have been violent repeatedly appear in the media as the type of men that are ‘dangerous to their environment [...] incapable of controlling their behavior or urges’ (Kjartansdóttir, 2017), and in constant need to ‘find an outlet for their violent urges’ (Kjartansdóttir, 2018). Since fathers who use violence are portrayed in the media as out of control and driven by deviant ‘urges’ that make them a danger to society, the fact that they might look like ‘good’ or ‘normal’ fathers is explained by describing them as deceiving (‘monsters underneath’). The devious nature of violent men is portrayed in the media as something people need to learn how to spot: ‘People only see an emotional and good man who wants to have a relationship with his children. If you do not have the knowledge, it is so hard to see through it’ (Kjartansdóttir, 2018). Here, learning how to spot violent men requires ‘seeing through’ their apparently false appearance as ‘emotional and good’

and noticing that they are in fact violent and, hence, bad. Additionally, this extract reconstructs a polarized discourse that assumes that one can either be a good father and a man who is emotional and wants to be involved, or a bad father who is violent.

The contrast between fathers who have been violent and those who are depicted as 'normal' and 'good' fathers is further marked in extracts around the way 'violent men use the system' (Jóhannsson, 2018). The devious 'nature' of violent fathers is emphasized through depicting them as always 'ready to hit' (Editors of Mannlíf, 2018) and looking for a chance to take advantage of 'loopholes in the system' (Kjartansdóttir, 2017). Historically, the violence of fathers has been normalized, ignored, or dealt with as a private matter (Hearn, 1998). Since men's violence against women and children is portrayed as isolated incidents committed by a particular species of men, it fuels the myth of 'stranger danger'. When the violent father is seen as an intruder in the ideal home, the impact and responsibility of the state or society are seldom the focus of the media reportage of IPV (Ahmed, 2013; Hearn, 2002). These discursive practices reproduce and sustain an ideology of us and them, whereby violent fathers are presented as dangerous strangers, far from us and thus not 'our' problem.

Ahmed (2013) argues that in the media debate around pedophiles '[t]he stranger is here figured as the violent monster whose elimination would mean safety for women and children' (Ahmed, 2013, p. 36). Fathers who were sexually violent against their children are in that way represented as having intruded their way not only into homes but into communities and must therefore be recognized and evicted. Ahmed (2013) further explained that stereotyping violent fathers as dangerous strangers in the media involves 'a refusal to recognize how violence is structured by, and legitimated through, the formation of home and community as such' (p. 36).

In a media interview with a victim-survivor of IPV, the journalist describes the relationship as 'sick', the situation at home as 'insane', and her ex-husband as a 'maniac' with a 'disturbed look in his eyes' (Guðjónsson, 2018). The media repeatedly bypasses opportunities to 'join the dots' between forms of violence and their link to gender inequality (Westmarland, 2015, p. xv) by focusing on gloomy descriptions and individualistic traits. In one such example, the media places the reason for a severe night of violence, described by a victim-survivor, on 'a storm raging in his head' (Guðjónsson, 2018). Rather than paying attention to the danger that women face because of gendered social structures, here the focus is on describing the madness of the violent father as a 'raging storm' that is located 'in his head', which gives the impression that this mentally ill and dangerous individual is the sole problem. This representation of fathers who have been violent feeds into what Almanssori and Stanley (2021) describe as the *deviant perpetrator* discourse, in which violence is constructed as something isolated, avoidable, and infrequent. They point out that a discourse that positions perpetrator behavior as deviant and presents certain individual traits as signs that girls and women should look out for reinscribes victim blaming because it insinuates that victim-survivors are responsible for avoiding contact or relationships with violent men. A discourse of violent men as sick individuals can risk minimizing perpetrators' responsibility since the focus is put on a mental state as the cause of the violence and the systematic power differences within the social structure are left undisturbed (Steinþórsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2019).

Through narratives ‘where the father came into the home like thunder’ violent fathers were described as ‘a kind of danger in the home’ (Jóhannsdóttir, 2017). A discourse of fathers as a danger in the home has roots in traditional views of fathers as disciplining authorities that still seem to prevail despite being deemed outdated and generate a very different emotional response from the dominant discourse of involved fatherhood, which seems intertwined with positive emotions and happiness.

The contrary ‘good and involved’

While fathers’ involvement can certainly be a positive step toward gender equality, it does not preclude fathers from using violence (Gottzén & Berggren, 2021). Contrary to fathers who had been violent, ‘good and involved’ fathers were presented in the media as harmless, friendly, and caring men who were involved in their children’s lives, as seen in the next two extracts:

There is nothing that provides more joy than cooking for hungry mouths, seeing them eat well, then going off and scoring goals, getting good reviews from their teachers, or performing in recitals. (Aðalsteinsdóttir, 2018a)

Fatherhood is, after all, the most important part of my life, and I love my children endlessly. Putting the youngest ones to bed with homemade stories and waking up with them in the morning and driving them to school are the best moments of the day. (Aðalsteinsdóttir, 2018c)

Mentioning domestic labor, such as cooking and care work, which entails attending sports and school events, putting them to sleep, and driving them to school, along with drawing on their love for their children, appears as proof that these are the good and involved type of fathers. Taking parental leave was presented as culturally expected of fathers, for example, through numerous narratives of fathers who described that they did ‘of course take parental leave’ (Aðalsteinsdóttir, 2018b). The discourse around father’s parental leave has been predominantly positive in Iceland and contributed to an image of involved fathers as present, responsible, and caring (Eydal & Gíslason, 2015). Furthermore, involved fatherhood was connected to positive emotions and love, as exemplified in the following: ‘There is nothing more wonderful in life than holding your child, wrapping it with care and the purest form of love’ (Aðalsteinsdóttir, 2018c). Since caring for children is one aspect of involved fatherhood (Cederström, 2019), fathers love for their children was commonly cited as an important manifestation of being an involved father.

Father involvement is expected to continue after separation or divorce, repeatedly mentioned as an important part of building a gender-equal society: ‘It is, without a doubt, positive that both parents are equally responsible for their children’s upbringing, also after divorce or separation. That is one factor in establishing real gender equality in all areas’ (Stephensen, 2013). The role involved fathers play in working toward gender equality is thus not only considered to benefit Icelandic society but also assumed to contribute to a ‘leading’ position transnationally: ‘It has made international attention how high the ratio of parental leave used by fathers is, and it can thus be said that Icelandic fathers are leading among their peers’ (Hlynsdóttir, 2014). However, father’s involvement in Iceland still appears to be viewed as assistance to mothers, the default main parent and

attention has been brought to the difference between being involved and sharing responsibility (Gíslason & Símonardóttir, 2018). While few mothers in heterosexual relationships are praised for being involved, this seems to be the case for involved fathers: '[Sister] says her brother is diligent in the home. He bakes, cleans, and is involved in the care for his children when he is at home' (Hreinsdóttir, 2010). According to Cover (2019), tying masculinity to different types of men where a stereotype of violent men is placed as the worst risks 'exonerating other kinds of masculinities that are deemed to be less violent, less "dangerous"' (p. 305). In that sense, socially approved behavior, like being an involved father, can make men appear less likely, or even incapable of using violence.

Involved or violent – never both?

Mutually exclusive discourses of 'good and involved' versus 'bad and violent' fatherhood were most apparent in media coverage of custody disputes.

Drawing on Collins's (2000, p. 10) concept of 'the negative controlling image' Jørgensen (2019) argues for similarities in the Danish context concerning a negative image of 'the Muslim migrant man'. As Jørgensen (2019) shows, the negative controlling image represents and reproduces a cultural mistrust of migrant masculinity, within a broader hierarchical symbolic framework which impacts experiences of migrant fathers and their families whether they have been violent or not. We see similarities in the representation of immigrant fathers in the Icelandic media where they are mostly portrayed as uninterested and unengaged in their children's lives, as well as potentially violent, as this next extract suggests:

Whenever [the mother] took the children to Iceland, [the father] would not once try to contact them. He was asked about this during court and confirmed that he had never tried to contact them. He does not care about the girls; he just wants to torment their mother for leaving him. (MBL, 2014)

The fact that this father with a foreign background confirms that he 'never tried to contact' his children is presented as proof not only that he is not an involved father, since he 'does not care', but also of his violent will to 'torment' the mother. Similarly, accusations of violence are further supported by this immigrant father's absence: '[the father] moved abroad, back to his hometown in [country], without saying goodbye to his son or making arrangements for further contact. [The child] did therefore not see his father for half a year' (Sigurðardóttir, 2018). In our findings, the violence of immigrant fathers is not portrayed as more severe or common in the media than that of Icelandic fathers. However, there were hardly any counter-discourses that viewed them in a positive light. Specifying that violent fathers are not Icelandic or at least not living in Iceland strengthens the negative controlling image indicating that the foreign other fail to follow 'our' equality standards due to their cultural heritage. The problem of IPV is thus tied to them, not to us, and is related to a commonly outspoken concern around immigration and refugee policies. In line with what Karlsson, Lila, Gracia, and Wemrell (2021) illustrated in their analysis of the othering of non-Swedish IPWAV perpetrators in Swedish media, immigrant fathers are constituted as the 'ultimate violent strangers' (Ahmed, 2013, p. 36) because they are perceived as strangers to an Icelandic

and gender-equal society as well as strangers to involved fatherhood. Even though gendered violence prevails in countries like Iceland and Sweden, they manage to hold on to a reputation of gender equality, partly because representation in public discourse associates violence and traditional social views in terms of gender equality with ‘other’ or ‘foreign’ men (Karlsson et al., 2021; Þorvaldsdóttir, 2011).

Immigrant fathers are aware of the normative expectations of involved fatherhood in Icelandic society; however, their opportunities of living up to them are limited (Harðardóttir et al., *in press*; Ingvarsdóttir, 2014). This immigrant father, accused of violence, is unable to convince the media of his good and thus nonviolent fathering despite arguing for his children’s best interests:

[He] says he is a good father to the girls, but is a difficult custody dispute something that good parents put their children through?

[Father’s name]: “I do not think I have caused my children stress. I think this is wrong. I have for a long time thought it is best for them that I fight for them.” (Vilhjálmssdóttir, 2013)

The involvement or attempts at involvement by immigrant fathers do not suffice for inclusion in the discourse of involved fatherhood (Harðardóttir et al., *in press*).

Icelandic fathers commonly drew on their involvedness to deny accusations of violence in the media. While we found no examples of fathers who acknowledged having been violent during the decade our search yielded, fathers renounced violence they were accused of in numerous articles related to custody disputes, for example, by pointing out what type of men they were not:

I got the news from the district magistrate that I was not allowed to see my daughter because I needed to pull myself together in life (this came from the mother of my child and her mom). I am not a criminal, I don’t beat people up. I am not a bad man but a man that loves his child more than anything, but I can’t do it anymore. (Kjartansdóttir, 2016b)

I would have understood if I had been drinking or using, but there is nothing like that going on. (Kjartansdóttir, 2016a)

Linking violence against women and children to a certain type of men (‘criminal’, ‘bad’, ‘drinking or using’) can lead to the assumption that if men are not ‘that type’ of father, they are less likely to use violence. In the following example, a person defends an acquaintance’s characteristics:

A calm and friendly man that I have known for many years who has shown and proven his love for his children. Now, his child’s mother has placed him in the middle of a nightmare after their divorce. To avenge herself, she sued him for slapping their son, which could not be further from the truth. (Sverrisdóttir, 2018)

Here, the father’s involvedness does not seem limited to practices such as attending activities or staying in contact; he can still ‘prove’ his love through yearning for contact, which seems enough to pass the criteria and preclude him from being the violent type. When only the bluntest forms of violence are recognized and discussed in the media and violence against women is assumed to be perpetrated by a deviant minority, it can raise concerns about false allegations and counteract the movement against gendered-based violence (e.g. Alcott, 2018; Lazard, 2020). Men’s reactions to allegations of violence against women or their complicity in a patriarchal social

structure may include hostility, defense, or disinterest (Flood, 2019) as this next extract suggests:

I grabbed hold of her arm hard and said that now she would listen to my side. I know you can never speak up, because then you get stigmatized from it, but it also hurts to always be the quiet one. (Kjartansdóttir, 2016a)

This father continued by giving examples of his yearning to be involved and of how fond the child was of him. ‘Every time they take the girl away she calls me, she is always like dad, dad, dad’ (Kjartansdóttir, 2016a), adding that she is always unhappy and cries a lot when they are separated. Fathers presented in the media seem to be aware of expectations embedded in the dominant discourse on fatherhood and know that being detected as the violent type could entail exclusion from respectable (hetero)masculinity. Thus, for those under suspicion, it is vital to disclaim the violence to avoid the stigma, as seen in these next two extracts: ‘I have never touched a hair on her head. This is just a comic absurdity’ (Gestsdóttir, 2018), and ‘it shall be stated that I have never been accused, charged nor convicted for sexual abuse! Neither toward a child nor an adult’ (Gunnarsdóttir, 2009). Bjarnason and Pétursdóttir (2019) showed that Icelandic media discourses constitute men as either good or violent. While their findings focus on perpetrators of sexual violence, we see similarities between their results and media discourses about fathers and violence, where fathers appear as either violent or good fathers, never both. According to Veteläinen et al. (2013), that is, however, in contrast to how fathers who *have* been violent experience themselves and can therefore cause them problems. Difficulties accepting the stigmatizing label of being ‘a violent man’ appeared in a statement from this next father, who captured the discrepancy between the way society views him and his own identity: ‘All of a sudden when she comes to Iceland, I am a violent man and do not get to see my son for three weeks and do not know where he is’ (Gestsdóttir, 2018). According to this father, who has been active in a father’s rights movement, the accusations of violence from his former partner and the media coverage of her experience transform him into a violent man in the sense that society views him as violent. He is aware that failing as a father can involve a literal ‘loss’ of access and custody over his child and firmly denies the violence in an interview, accusing the mother of false allegations: ‘She has killed my reputation with these allegations, and I will file a charge with evidence that she is being untruthful’ (Gestsdóttir, 2018). Another father, who firmly denied having been violent against his partner, drew on his love and grief as an indication that he was not the violent type: ‘I experienced grief that I never could have imagined, we had an indescribable spiritual connection’ (Gestsdóttir, 2018). In his words, being accused of IPV and losing custody of his child caused him painful grief. A prominent discussion regarding father’s rights movements in Icelandic media during the decade the study focuses on is whether allegations of violence are a weapon in the hands of angry mothers, routinely used to prevent fathers any contact with their children. False accusations of violence are rare and allegations are substantiated (Bruno, 2016). Even so, Flood (2012) pointed out that the painful experiences of divorce, custody battles, and dissatisfaction with loss of contact with children are among the experiences that bring men to fathers’ rights movements. Ultimately, our study of the stigmatization of violent fathers in the media exemplifies how fathers engage with mutually exclusive discourses when negotiating their fatherhood and masculinity.

Conclusion

Previous research has highlighted the importance of directing academic attention to fathers and violence (e.g. Stanley et al., 2012). The focus has been mainly on the experiences of father's participating in therapy programs (see Perel & Peled, 2008; Veteläinen et al., 2013), illustrating that stigmatization of violent fathers manifests in the tension they experience when trying to make sense of their role as fathers and identity as violent men. The stigmatization might, according to Gottzén (2017, 2019) and Wemrell et al. (2019), even discourage them from acknowledging their violent behavior and seeking help, which makes it worthwhile to explore discourses on fathers and violence more closely and how they are constructed in Icelandic mass media. By approaching media discourses from a poststructural feminist perspective, we attempt to unpack the stigmatizing discourses of fathers and violence.

This research makes several contributions. First, by focusing on how discourses on fathers and violence are constituted in the media, we provide a theoretical discussion of fathers and violence. Second, we give insight into how placing involved and violent fathers as different and opposite types of masculinity produces and sustains stigmatized discourses about perpetrators of violence within the context of Icelandic media. Through producing and framing these subject positions as mutually exclusive the complexity of the phenomenon is ignored. Since public policy in Iceland has invested in 'good and involved' fathers to increase gender equality, 'bad and violent' fathers are dismissed in the media as a lost cause, assuming that fathers cannot be involved and violent at the same time.

Furthermore, discourses of father's violence seem to be infused with the myth of *stranger danger*, even though fathers who use violence are not strangers to their partners and children. Consequently, they are depicted as 'monsters underneath' the familiar disguise of 'normal and good' fathers. Alcoff (2018) pointed out that discourses of violence constantly engage with ideas and myths about violence rather than actual experiences. Thus, in line with Alcoff (2018), we argue that the media representation of perpetrators creates *myths* and certain *ideas* about men and fathers, which then eschews the discussion on IPV as a structural problem. Moreover, this kind of myth-building reduces the responsibility of perpetrators of IPV, and bypasses their emotional reflexivity, which is a necessary part of the desistance process (e.g. Maruna, 2017).

Navigating a discourse in which children and victim-survivors of IPV are believed wholeheartedly without constituting perpetrators as monsters can prove uncomfortable. However, having ambivalent conversations about IPV and fathers who use violence could allow for a more holistic approach toward gender equality.

Note

1. In all articles that included the words father and violence, the violence was perpetrated against an (ex) partner and/or child.

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Paper II

Dealing with discomfort: Affective dissonance in fathers' narratives of violence

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Abstract

Researchers focusing on fathers' violence and perpetrator programmes have expressed growing interest in the question of change. Yet, there has been little dialogue in relation to feminist affect theories on change. Drawing on the narratives of eight fathers in Iceland who had been violent against their female partner and/or children, we suggest that attending to comfort and discomfort is central to understanding violent fathers' process of change. Inspired by feminist theories of affective dissonance, the analysis shows that, on the one hand, fathers avoided dealing with uncomfortable emotions, conversations, and situations in diverse ways, for example, by leaning on women's emotional labour. On the other hand, the fathers also attempted to deal with discomfort, and this was often as part of their decision to seek help, turn to self-reflection, or hold themselves accountable. By foregrounding discomfort in these narratives, this paper provides insights into the possibilities of and hindrances to fathers' change from perpetrating domestic violence.

Keywords

change, desistance, domestic violence, gender, Iceland, masculinity

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Fathers' violence against partners and children is an important feminist topic, and focusing on fathers' violence in research and practice is a key element in working towards safety for women and children. Men who subject their women partners to violence are often fathers and, despite the country's reputation as a pioneer in gender equality, Iceland is no exception (Icelandic Police, 2022; Kjaran & Kristinsdóttir, 2021). Some have pointed out the benefit of an increased focus on fathers who perpetrate intimate partner violence (IPV), as men's identities as fathers make them especially receptive to therapy (Pfitzner et al., 2017; Stanley et al., 2012). A central concern in research on fathers who commit IPV has been to highlight what succeeds in motivating them to change (Pfitzner et al., 2017) and to identify ambivalent experiences related to the tension between diverse discourses on masculinity, fatherhood, and violence (Päivinen et al., 2020). Others have shown that violence as well as desistance from it are emotionally complex problems (Perel & Peled, 2008) and contend that, consequently, it is important to pay attention to those complexities when studying fathers who have been violent and their processes of change.

Recently, calls have been made for a focus on the intersections of violence, affect, and gender under the premise that affect is present in all forms of violence and violation; thus, affect must be considered to understand gendered violence as both a personal experience and a structural phenomenon (Hook & Wolfe, 2018; Husso et al., 2021). Siltala et al. (2021) emphasise that working with diverse emotions related to IPV and considering how they might be assessed in interventions for perpetrators is a "key element of change" (p. 138). This is in line with feminist scholars such as Hemmings (2012) and Chadwick (2020), who have theorised change as an affective and relational process that requires reflexivity.

Hemmings (2012) argues that the desire for transformation is based on *affective dissonance*, that is, a gap or mismatch between experience and identity, which differs somewhat from the perspective in criminology that sees desistance as rooted in identity (e.g., Maruna, 2001; Walker et al., 2018). Chadwick (2020) develops this argument further, foregrounding the importance of how we respond to or deal with affective experiences of *discomfort*. For instance, while moments of discomfort may offer an opportunity for reconsideration and change, they may also be swiftly ignored or dismissed.

This paper explores the centrality of *dealing with discomfort* in fathers' narratives of violence and change. Drawing upon eight interviews in Iceland, we show how the affects of comfort and discomfort emerged in the interview setting and were often invoked in the fathers' accounts of their violence and relations to women partners and children. Drawing upon Chadwick, we suggest that moments of discomfort can offer opportunities for reflexivity, accountability, and change, but may also be glossed over, reproducing gendered power relations.

Violent fathers and processes of change

Research on masculinity and violence against women has taken several forms (Berggren et al., 2021), often focusing on how men account for their violence after the fact (e.g., Lau & Stevens, 2012; LeCouteur & Oxlad, 2011) or on their trajectories to becoming violent men in the first place (e.g., Gadd, 2000; Messerschmidt, 2012). Questions about change

have been more prominent in research on batterer programmes, which has focused on how violent men cease their abuse (Dobash et al., 1999; Stanley et al., 2012). Although affect tends to attract little attention in studies on perpetrator programmes, men's complex emotional experiences are often mentioned (e.g., Hearn, 1998; Seymour et al., 2021). For example, drawing on an analysis of a group model for perpetrators in Finland, Siltala et al. (2021) discuss the ways emotions can be displayed and worked through in therapeutic treatment for IPV. They argue that for "long-term change towards non-violence to happen, it is not enough for perpetrators to work on their own emotions and behaviour; instead, they must also move outside their subjective experiences and reflect on the feelings of others" (Siltala et al., 2021 p. 150). Research specifically on fathers and IPV also closely focuses on therapy models and what motivates fathers to change (Stanley et al., 2012). Analyses of fathers' accounts of IPV have shown that their attempts to emphasise their identities as good men and involved fathers tend to divert attention from explanations that look at heteronormative structures and gendered power relations (Kjaran & Kristinsdóttir, 2021; Päivinen et al., 2020). Others have highlighted the emotional tensions that men experience when negotiating their identities as simultaneously good fathers and perpetrators of violence (Päivinen et al., 2020; Perel & Peled, 2008).

Emerging criminological research on desistance from IPV has addressed questions about changing from violence (Berggren et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2015). In this context, Hall and Harris (2022) emphasise the importance of examining the impact of men's desistance processes on their female partners. While intimate relationships can play an important role in the process of changing violent men's behaviour, emotional work may be unevenly distributed, with female partners doing the work and providing support to men to achieve change, to the women's own detriment.

To date, relatively little is known about fathers and violence in Iceland, but Kjaran and Kristinsdóttir (2021) suggest that violent men's role as fathers is central to their identity and could inspire change. Critical self-reflection, including engaging with children's perspectives, can be vital to fathers' processes of changing violent behaviour (Guðjónsdóttir & Stanley, 2023). Moreover, a study of media representations showed that a polarised discourse prevails that depicts fathers as either good or violent, ignoring the complexity of the phenomenon (Guðjónsdóttir & Kjaran, 2023). Furthermore, the perspectives of children living with domestic violence in Iceland suggest that questions about fathers and violence are more ambivalent and emotionally complex (Kristinsdóttir et al., 2014).

Focusing on violent fathers' change is urgent because, without change, violence continues to harm both the men's children and their (ex)partners (Bruno, 2022). While previous research has pointed out in various ways that emotions are important in the process of change, this paper further advances the discussion by turning to feminist theories of affective dissonance and discomfort.

The affective potential of discomfort

There is a long, rich feminist discussion of emotions and embodied affects within and beyond feminist psychology (e.g., Åhäll, 2018; Parvulescu, 2019). Feminist theorists

have, in diverse ways, emphasised the importance of “staying with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016, p. 1) and being “willing to be proximate to unhappiness” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 87). More recently, feminist affect scholars have noted that exploring comfort and, in particular, discomfort can be crucial to understanding change (Chadwick, 2020; Hemmings, 2012). Drawing attention to discomfort as a potentially transformative affect, Hemmings (2012) argues that experiencing dissonance between our self-perception and how the world sees us can move and inspire us to pause, reflect, and potentially act differently. She further explains this as “feeling the desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort” (Hemmings, 2012, p. 158). Thus, feeling differently can move us towards different kinds of knowing, being, and resisting. Chadwick (2020) builds on Hemmings’s work and adds that discomfort merges and morphs into other feelings and affects; it does not “necessarily manifest as a standalone emotional response” (p. 561). In the case of fathers and violence, for example, discomfort merges with shame, guilt, sorrow, and disappointment.

Drawing upon Hemmings, Chadwick (2020) notes that “affective dissonance and discomfort do not necessarily manifest as moments that result in a seamless shift towards transformative praxis or politicisation” (p. 562). Rather, being moved by discomfort is a complicated process that involves various experiences and engagements that can disrupt our taken-for-granted thinking and existence, and fracture our view of the world. We can thus think of affective dissonance and discomfort as a spark that, given oxygen and the right circumstances, can grow into a flame. However, that spark can also be extinguished. Chadwick (2020) and Hemmings (2012) agree that discomfort does not automatically lead to transformation. For example, Chadwick (2020) argues that privileged persons may be tempted to ignore, avoid, or dismiss feelings of discomfort and return to familiar “epistemic comfort zones” (p. 563).

While Hemmings (2012) and Chadwick (2020) both view dissonance and discomfort from the perspective of women and subordinate groups, we suggest that theorising discomfort as a possible critical moment or process of rupture (as Chadwick proposes) can inform an understanding of fathers’ complex experiences of having perpetrated violence and trying to change, an approach that aligns with recent interest in how discomfort and shame manifest in the context of masculinity and IPV (Gottzén, 2019a; Pease, 2012).

Methods

This study drew on data from in-depth interviews with eight Icelandic fathers, aged 30 to 65, who had been violent against their female partner and/or children. The interviews were characterised by open questions from the interviewer, which enabled the participants to talk about their background and experience of fathering, including their views on the father role, intimate relationships, violence, and masculinity. The interviews were conducted by the first author for her PhD project in 2019–2020, and most lasted for more than 2 hours. With the help of gatekeepers, six participants were recruited from the Icelandic therapy model Peace at Home (Heimilisfriður). Inspired and aligned with the Norwegian ATV (alternative to violence), Heimilisfriður is an individual and group based psychological treatment and Iceland’s only therapeutic programme for

IPV perpetrators. Two more men offered to participate through a general call to fathers who self-identified as having perpetrated violence. Due to the gravity of the topic, finding participants in a country as sparsely populated as Iceland (387,758 in 2023) presented a challenge. In light of that, we provide as little detail about the participants as possible to ensure their anonymity. Importantly, maintaining the anonymity of the participants protects the identity of their (ex)partners and children, who were not asked to participate in this research. The research was positively reviewed by the Ethical Board of the University of Iceland, and minimising emotional harm was a priority throughout the research process. This was done, for example, by informing the fathers where they could seek assistance if they struggled emotionally after the interview.

The fathers were offered no incentive for their participation. All but one interview took place in an office where most of the participants were in treatment, so they were familiar with the environment. One interview was held in an office at the University of Iceland. Only one participant had served time in prison, and few had been charged or convicted for their violence, but all but one of them recognised their behaviour as violence. The violence they had committed varied in type, form, and duration. All the participants had subjected the mother of their child/children to violence, and many noted that they had been violent against other female intimate partners. Two participants were still in a relationship with a woman towards whom they had been violent; four fathers were single when the interview took place, and two were in new relationships. Five fathers described direct violence against their child/children. Most of the fathers shared custody of one or all their children, but two had almost no contact with some or all of their children. The participants were all cisgender and heterosexual. Four fathers may be described as working-class, and the other four as middle-class, as they had finished secondary school and had a university degree or jobs that normally provide an income above the legal minimum wage in Iceland.

All interviews were conducted and transcribed in Icelandic. The parts of the interviews that related to (dis)comfort were then translated into English by the first author, in dialogue with the second author and proofreaders. We analysed the interviews through dialogic narrative analysis (Kohler-Riessman, 2008) with a focus on affect (Chadwick, 2021), which we approached as both discursive and embodied (Åhäll, 2018; Ahmed, 2014). In terms of analysis, this means that we paid attention to what the participants said as well as to how they expressed themselves by analysing hesitations, silences, changes in voice speed and volume, facial expressions, and other forms of body language. Affective atmospheres depend on the baggage we bring with us (Åhäll, 2018; Ahmed, 2014), so we had to be mindful of how our position and experiences impacted the research process. The interviews required the first author, a cis-woman in her early 30s, to navigate her experience as a mother and victim-survivor in the interview setting, to manage a balance between comfort and discomfort. This entailed that she continuously reflected upon what information and when it was shared with participants. To ensure her well-being, the first author made use of debriefing through writing after the interviews, as well as discussing difficult and complex emotions with the second author and a therapist. As the aim in the interview setting was to make the participants feel comfortable enough to express themselves freely, moments of discomfort stood out and sparked interest in the gendered power relations embedded in these encounters.

Findings

In analysing the interviews, we observed that discomfort played a prominent part in the fathers' narratives of violence and change. Discomfort came up as both a topic in the fathers' narratives and as something that occurred in the interview interactions. On the one hand, the fathers spoke directly of comfort and discomfort, for example, when they discussed their heterosexual relationships or fatherhood. On the other hand, discomfort could be present even though they did not mention it directly, such as when they were asked about their violent practices and their impact on their children and women partners. In the following, we first show that the fathers tried to avoid the discomfort that followed acknowledging their violent behaviour. We then suggest that dwelling in discomfort had the potential to move them towards self-reflection and enabled them—for example, by consciously stopping and correcting themselves—to practice holding themselves accountable.

Avoiding discomfort

A prominent theme in research on masculinity and violence is how men talk about, justify, or shy away from responsibility for their violent practices (e.g., Hearn, 1998). Many of our participants did that at some point during the interview by stressing that they mostly perpetrated psychological violence, by limiting their physical violence to “that one time,” or by pointing out their partner's role in the violence. Drawing on feminist affect theories, we argue that talking about violence is also an affective process. In this section, we discuss how the fathers avoided discomfort and grappled with justifications, stigmatising discourses, and emotional investments in gendered power structures. All the fathers showed and described discomfort in facing their responsibility for being violent. Tommy stated that “you naturally always want to be able to blame the core of it [the violence] on somebody else.” Between pauses and silences, Tommy explained his quest for “some reason to hold on to,” trying to express his feeling of not being able to blame anyone else for his violent behaviour:

I did not experience any sexual violence or severe violence as a child, you see, so I cannot hide behind anything like that. And I just come from a normal middle-class home. Did not suffer any shortage, did not have to break in to steal computer games or anything. So, there is no concrete reason I could refer to, a violation to hide behind. Which is rather uncomfortable.

Tommy provides insight into his process of looking for a reason he could cling to that would allow him to avoid the uncomfortable fact that he was responsible for the violence on his ex-partner. Others grappled with trying to understand their own justification, as seen in Jonatan's explanation of avoiding discomfort:

If you don't justify this to yourself [pause] what are you going to do then? This is of course a crazy uncomfortable feeling, just “I'm such an ass.” ... Based on what I've heard in the group, the justification always starts to avoid the discomfort. [Silence] And people often misunderstand this justification, like we then think it's okay to behave this way. But it's really a way of escaping.

According to Jonatan, men justify their violence to escape the discomfort of feeling like “an ass.” This echoes Chadwick’s (2020) assertion that we instinctively respond to “feelings of discomfort by withdrawing from triggering situations or encounters and repressing or avoiding confrontation or engagement with uncomfortable affects” (p. 563). Although both Tommy and Jonatan recognised their behaviour as violence, their accounts of struggling with a desire to explain and justify or escape the discomfort of facing their violence show the emotional complexity of identifying with the category of “violent men.” This aligns with Ólafsdóttir and Rúdólfsdóttir’s (2023) recent study in Iceland suggesting that middle-class men—such as Jonatan and Tommy—face an identity crisis when they recognise their behaviour as violence, as it threatens their status within respectable hetero-masculinity.

All the fathers in our study found it hard to identify with being a perpetrator of violence because they felt that it would stigmatise them as monsters according to the dominant discourse (e.g., Guðjónsdóttir & Kjaran, 2023). Jonatan found the stigmatising “monster” discourse very uncomfortable and felt that “you just need to accept having ‘I am a monster’ tattooed on your forehead. Just by facing it.” He experienced this discomfort as a hindrance; speaking slowly, he said, “That [the monster tattoo] makes the steps towards seeking help very heavy.” He then lapsed into silence. According to Jonatan, wishing to avoid being put in the uncomfortable category of monster can make perpetrators of IPV reluctant to seek help (cf. Gottzén, 2017; Ólafsdóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2023). For three fathers, the desire to differentiate themselves from “real perpetrators” discouraged them from accepting the available help, such as group therapy. Petur explained:

That is what is most difficult for me, and that is still difficult. I still have prejudice towards people that are physically violent. But I am just somehow so close to it. I am just at the edge, or there. But I still don’t want to be judged with that other group, you know. So that is also some kind of a stopper for seeking help. That I don’t want to be stigmatised, in some group with ... [hesitates] I still want the help. But there is a stopper. [Pause] I have not gone to this kind of group. Anxious, I am a bit anxious about it. Or I find it a bit uncomfortable ... to be in that category.

We see that discomfort merges with anxiety and shame and then collides with the will to change and get help, which makes the experience messy and complicated. While Petur seemed aware of what he must do to change, he still avoided the discomfort he felt was inherent in being categorised with “that other group” of more violent men. Similarly, Borki, who had a history of crime, drugs, and violence, seemed to know what he needed to do to change his behaviour, along with getting sober: “You just have to dare. Dare to talk. Dare to have the conversation. Dive into this matter. Start discussing it.” However, he did not follow his own advice. When asked whether he discussed his emotions or situation with his friends or professionals, he answered:

Borki: No, no, no, no, no.

Researcher: Do you discuss it with anyone?

Borki: No, no, no, no. Are you crazy? Mom maybe, at most [coughs uncomfortably and remains silent for a while].

Even though Borki wished to change and claimed that an important part of the process was to “dare to talk,” he seemed to find the thought of the vulnerability inherent in a conversation about his emotions too uncomfortable to handle. Ciurria (2018) argues that, because people in liberal democracies have access to information, education, and treatment, perpetrators are responsible for their choice not to use those resources to control their abusive behaviour; even though knowledge of domestic violence is not as widespread as it should be, it is sufficiently “available,” so perpetrators are responsible for using available knowledge and resources to move away from violence.

Chadwick (2020) argues that, while people may be tempted to smooth over discomfort and quickly return to familiar spaces or “epistemic comfort zones” (p. 563), closing down feelings of discomfort can be dangerous. Avoiding discomfort can, at worst, not only discourage men from seeking help and acknowledging the experience of their ex-partners, but also risk reproducing what Chadwick (2020) describes as “hierarchical and dominant forms of knowing and power relations” (p. 563). Ignoring gendered power differences and victim/survivor experiences allowed Borki to present acts of severe violence as humorous:

Borki: [Smiling, talking cheerfully] I just think it is so amusing, especially when they think they are going to win. And they really think that it is going to happen. And they go on and on and on. I have told them, “no more, no more, no more, no more. I will knock you out” [laughs quietly], and they keep punching. Until I beat them unconscious.

Researcher: [I maintain a neutral facial expression when Borki talks but squirm uncomfortably in my chair, which he clearly notices]

Borki: [Hesitates] It is not pretty to say this. I have never talked about this vio-, vio-. Never. Not once.

In line with Pease (2012), we suggest that Borki’s emotional investment in the reproduction of male power and privilege discouraged him from considering the experience of the women he had subjected to violence. Since he did not have to face them, he could joke, describe the physical violence he subjected several intimate female partners to as a competition (“they think they are going to win”), and dismiss the gendered power differences embedded in the relationship. In fact, he did not seem to find anything wrong with his narrative until he noticed the female interviewer’s affective response. In this example, discomfort was reflected to the father through the interviewer’s affective squirming. While he recognised that he had been violent, he had never discussed his actions as violence before, and struggled to finish the word *violence*.

Discomfort is relational, something that “moves” (Hemmings, 2012, p. 151) and “flows” (Chadwick, 2020, p. 4) between people and their bodies, for example, through words and the meanings and histories behind those words (Ahmed, 2014). Ahmed (2014) points out that the “availability of comfort for some bodies may depend on the labour of others, and the burden of concealment” (p. 149). The female researcher’s inability to conceal her discomfort disrupted Borki’s “availability of comfort” in his cheerful narrative of violence and was, in that sense, contagious. He did not have to face his victim-survivors while joking about his violence, but he had to face the discomfort his violence created in other women (the woman sitting across from him). Our findings echo assertions by Chadwick (2020) and Pease (2012) that, although feelings of discomfort can potentially be used to motivate men to interrogate their privilege and change violent behaviour, this does not happen automatically but rather requires effort and continual practice.

Leaning on women’s emotional labour

As feminist researchers, we consider it important to expand the discussion of emotions from a focus on the individual perpetrator and his feelings to the relational setting. Thus, we highlight how others are affected by fathers’ attempts to change and, in particular, how the feeling of comfort may “move” (see Ahmed, 2014) the fathers to rely on the support of women in their lives. In doing so, we suggest that the gendered division of emotional labour and the support that the men received from mothers, girlfriends, and ex-partners—both in the violent relationship and after it ended—made it possible for the fathers to avoid moments of discomfort. Jonatan described his mother as “always very flexible in helping,” especially when it came to his therapy sessions. He also noted the emotional support from his girlfriend when he worried that he would be viewed as a “monster for life.” Similarly, a major factor in Tommy’s change was the help and support he received from the women in his life, mainly his ex-wife and his mother, who both encouraged and praised him, and took care of his children, which cleared the path for him timewise. Only two participants expressed awareness of the uneven emotional labour in their relationships, whereas others, including Tommy, normalised it: “Yes. [Carelessly] I naturally had so much support. [My ex-partner] was at home, and mum was, of course, a widow and had stopped working.” Tommy’s narrative presumed that, because his ex-wife was on maternity leave and his mother retired, it was “natural” that they supported him by prioritising his schedule. Tommy had been active for years in a therapy model for perpetrators and had changed his lifestyle considerably. He had also gone to rehab, which seemed to be an empowering experience for him rather than shameful or embarrassing as for some of the other participants. This was largely because his ex-wife took care of all the uncomfortable conversations.

[My ex-partner] answered my phone while I was in therapy for those 20 days, and she of course just asked, “What should I tell people?” I just said, “Tell them that I am in rehab.” [Smiles and talks cheerfully] So, it was incredibly comfortable for me to come out. Those who had contacted me just knew that I had been in rehab.

Because Tommy's ex-partner took on his discomfort work by answering his phone, he could avoid uncomfortable conversations about his problems and the nature of the situation. According to Hochschild (2003) and, more recently, Kolehmainen and Juvonen (2018), gendered power is reproduced in how we manage emotions, so that being a woman often entails the emotional labour of making others feel better. Enander (2010) has shown that victim-survivors sometimes do extensive emotional labour in the aftermaths of violence by trying to understand the perpetrators' pain and showing them compassion. Although they had been separated for years, Tommy's ex-wife continued to support him by prioritising his time and needs. While Tommy seemed to notice this, he was reluctant to change this very comfortable arrangement. He continued, "So, overall, the relationship was incredibly comfortable. You know, for me. But it was apparently a complete hell for her at times." Even though he recognised his behaviour as violence, he used words such as "apparently," suggesting that her experience of the relationship as a "complete hell" came as a surprise to him. According to Hemmings (2012), feelings are entangled with our knowing, and moments of affect are thus at the core of change. Therefore, for Tommy to recognise the gendered power dynamics inherent in his and his ex-wife's different experiences of the relationship, his emotional investment in the comfort of his privilege would have to be disrupted (see Pease, 2012). We suggest that, sometimes, the fathers in our study could avoid dealing with the uncomfortable emotional baggage of having committed domestic violence because they leant on women's emotional labour and relied on them to do their discomfort work for them.

This section described how the fathers in this study could avoid feelings of discomfort, but that is not the only way of dealing with discomfort. As Hemmings (2012, p. 157) points out, "Affective dissonance cannot guarantee feminist politicisation or even a resistant mode. And yet, it just might."

Dwelling in discomfort: A space for self-reflection

We have shown how fathers who subjected their partners and/or children to violence could avoid dealing with the discomfort of facing their violent behaviour. However, when the fathers engaged with these uncomfortable moments and encounters by staying with them, they opened space for a sense of dissonance that could provoke questions and reflection on other people's perspectives. According to Chadwick (2020), discomfort is "an affective force" (p. 571) that can move people both towards and away from different ways of knowing. We observed numerous examples in our data of participants stopping, hesitating, and responding with uncomfortable silence or fidgeting (body language) when asked about their violence's effect on their children. For example, Emil was silent for a long time before he answered, "I [hesitating, his voice filling with sorrow] don't know." Anton was in intensive therapy at the time of the interview: with his partner, singly in a therapy programme for perpetrators, and in a rehabilitation centre for burnout. He seemed to be in a place of dissonance and intense discomfort. He had begun to view his behaviour and attitudes critically and wanted to get better. Reflecting on his violence against his children seemed painful.

Anton: Yes, the parenting has been characterised by anger. And there would be some threats: “If you do not obey, you will not get this. If you don’t stop” [chokes up]. I don’t know.

Researcher: But how do you think your children experience you as a father?

Anton: [A long silence fills with palpable sorrow while Anton tears up] Eh. [Long silence] Wow. You are just making me cry over here. [Wipes away tears] It’s, you know—I don’t know if I can answer that.

By noticing Anton’s body language—how he choked up after describing his parenting as characterised by anger—we see that this admission caused him discomfort. In his case, emotional responses to the intensity of discomfort seemed to increase when he was asked to consider how his children experienced him. Instead of contemplating his parenting from his own perspective, he was directed towards thinking of their perspective, which caused considerably more discomfort (perceptible in long silences and crying). Moments in which the fathers’ discomfort and pain seemed to fill the interview’s atmosphere were often followed by more critical self-reflection. After the tangible discomfort and sorrow illustrated in the extract above, Anton continued reflecting on his children’s experience of him and seemed to recognise the power imbalance between them.

But then, when they start to think about it, of course they see the brittleness. But whether they have the confidence to point it out, that is another question. You are on a certain pedestal in the parenting role. The day will come when the children see through you, and then you are no longer on a pedestal. But [he assumes a serious, sad facial expression during a long silence] I mean, I... [quickly and with humour] I just hope I will have moved to an elderly home when that happens [grins].

In his reflection, Anton saw his behaviour from his children’s perspective and recognised, through the reference to a pedestal, the power difference between them. Imagining the day when his children will “see through” him and when, consequently, his power over them would decrease, seemed to cause him discomfort, as he stopped and was sad and silent for a while before switching gears and resorting to humour. Therefore, we suggest that by responding to discomfort by dwelling in it, fathers could allow it to move them towards different ways of knowing. According to Matthias, looking back on how he had felt and thought was “just really uncomfortable. Because I never saw that I had any part in it.” Before he sought help, Matthias felt that he was “at the edge” and had feared how much his violent behaviour would escalate if it continued. This uncomfortable dissonance between his behaviour and his identity made him want to turn to several organisations and models for guidance.

Discomfort could be a part of the fathers’ emotional path towards seeking help, and starting therapy often brought even more discomfort. Feeling defensive when they started seeing a psychologist or couples’ therapist was something that came up in all the interviews. When he began couples’ treatment, Tommy felt that the therapy was

not on “his terms” and that he was being “attacked,” a feeling shared by four other fathers. Tommy reflected, “Nothing was my fault; back then, everything was still her fault. If I woke up too late, it was her fault.” As in the extract from Matthias above, Tommy shared that “back then” he saw no problem in his behaviour and felt that everything wrong in their relationship was his partner’s fault. Recognising that he had been violent required Tommy to learn about various forms of violence and practice reflecting on his ex-wife’s experience.

I had not connected the dots, but, when we went over it, then I just got like [makes a sound as though he lost his breath from shock] just like a punch in the stomach. Just, “Shit, yes, this is a description of me.”

With practice, Tommy became less defensive and more open to listening and staying with the discomfort of recognising that he had been violent. That included allowing uncomfortable sensations “like a punch in the stomach” to move him towards different understandings of violence. In this way, dealing with discomfort by returning to it and staying with it offered the fathers the possibility of critically reflecting on their actions, identity, and privilege.

“Hey, I did this”: Holding oneself accountable

The interviews provided numerous examples of participants forcing themselves into moments of discomfort by stopping, correcting, and holding themselves accountable after their initial response had been to shy away from discomfort. Tommy said:

Tommy: It helps me so much to talk about it. Keeps me on my toes. Because I know very well how to use violence. I am really good at it. [Smiles awkwardly] And I get my way by using violence, and I know that I get ahead by doing it. But you know, by admitting to people how I use violence and what I gain from it, I am of course giving them my weapons. So, they will not work anymore. Which is of course a crazy method.

Researcher: Yes. That sounds very, like, exposing.

Tommy: [In a matter-of-fact tone, lightly and quickly] This behaviour is beneficial for me in a lot of circumstances; I get ahead, I can make money faster by doing this and gain a certain quality of life much faster by just using harshness and meanness. [Slowly and seriously] But I don’t want to. [Silence]

While Tommy described his talent for violence (“I am really good at it”) and some ambiguity regarding letting go of the “quality of life” he could gain, he also had a means of exposing himself to hold himself accountable and to work towards change. Because he had been active in a therapy programme for years, he was presumably aware that holding himself accountable was important to achieving change (Stanley et al., 2012;

Walker et al., 2015). Emil also seemed to realise this when he said, “I have used psychological violence against a partner. And I believe I have done so in all my relationships. Or, I think that is just very clear.” Here, Emil changed his initial “belie[f]” that he had been violent in all his relationships to acknowledging that it was “very clear.”

A prominent aim of the Icelandic therapy model is getting perpetrators to recognise their violent behaviour, hold themselves accountable, and develop ways of handling partner communication constructively (Heimilisfriður [Peace at Home], n.d.). The preceding extracts suggest that Tommy and Emil, who both sought help from Peace at Home, tried to practice accountability for their violence. Similarly, Matthias had been working on himself for almost a decade. He had sought help from a broad range of counsellors and therapy models, and seemed determined to take responsibility for his actions, even though it was uncomfortable. Matthias had developed a method of holding himself accountable by giving nitty-gritty descriptions of how he grabbed, pinched, shook, and threw his children; doing so meant that he could not for a moment justify or attempt to deny the behaviour. He consciously steered himself into uncomfortable accountability when, for example, he firmly stated, “Just, hey, I did this!” Matthias explained that, in attempts to counteract shame and support his children’s healing from the pain he had caused them, he repeatedly discussed with them how he was trying to change, emphasising that they were not responsible for his behaviour. For Matthias, accepting that the process of change would require ongoing practice was uncomfortable.

This anger is still a part of me. And just because there has not been physical violence anymore, if they spilled a glass of milk or knocked over a bowl of cereal, one could snap, you know. And to see [hesitates] the fear. It has happened very seldom over the past years, [firmly] but it has happened. It always just takes me back to [in a hopeless, sad voice] “fuck.” I need to be careful as shit!

We have shown that one element of the fathers’ desistance process could involve dealing with discomfort by reflecting on their partners’ and/or children’s perspectives on their violence. For Matthias, realising that he was still capable of causing his children so much fear was a painful reminder that change required continuous and conscious practice. In sum, fathers who had subjected their partners and/or children to violence could deal with moments of discomfort by consciously steering themselves towards that discomfort. Taking over the discomfort work thus entailed listening, having uncomfortable and vulnerable conversations, and returning to their process after having been defensive.

Conclusions

We have argued in this article that insights from feminist affect theory can benefit research on fathers who have been violent. Feminist theories on affect have noted that staying with discomfort can move us towards interrogating attitudes and privileges and may thus contribute to behavioural change. We examined discomfort as a prominent part of the change process in eight Icelandic fathers who had been violent against female partners and children. Drawing on Chadwick’s (2020) and Hemmings’s (2012) work on the potentially

transformative qualities of discomfort, we have shown that dealing with discomfort could move fathers towards self-reflection. Some fathers found ways to hold themselves accountable by consciously steering themselves into moments of discomfort, as they recognised possibilities of change there. In line with other research (e.g., Gottzén, 2019b; Stanley et al., 2012), the fathers' desistance from domestic violence was a long-term process that seemed to require regular practice, often under professional guidance. As Chadwick (2020) points out, however, change is not an automatic effect of discomfort. Although there is currently only one programme in Iceland that focuses on treating perpetrators, it can be argued that the Icelandic society offers sufficient resources, knowledge, and counter-discourses with which violent fathers can engage in working towards change. Ahmed (2014) connects comfort to privilege and power, contending that experiencing (normative) comfort can make it very hard to notice. The fathers could often lean on the support of women in their lives in the aftermath of violence, which they could use either to avoid or address discomfort. Relying on women's emotional labour sometimes appeared to discourage fathers from taking responsibility for their process of change, which suggests that beyond the injustice and harmful consequences of being subjected to violence, women may continue to endure uneven emotional labour after the relationship ends, to support men's desistance processes (cf. Hall & Harris, 2022). Men who have been violent may therefore depend upon the emotional labour and compliance of women to ensure their own uninterrupted comfort. We suggest that, if fathers who have been violent are to notice their power and the consequences of their violence, their comfort may need to be disrupted, for example, by having to deal with someone else's discomfort, as in the encounter between the female researcher and Borki. As Päivinen et al. (2020) have shown, this can also be done in therapy by persuading fathers to reflect on the emotions and experiences of women and children. Our findings suggest that discomfort is a relational coproduction, and we therefore propose that discomfort could be incorporated more centrally into therapeutic practices with violent men and fathers as a core aspect of reflexive therapy. By applying a feminist affect approach to discomfort in studying fathers' desistance processes, we have captured the ambivalent and contradictory voices of fathers who, at times, seemed to both avoid discomfort and continually practice letting discomfort move them towards change. We view this attention to affective dissonance, comfort, and discomfort as a productive way of approaching questions about violent fathers' change. It is also important that the analysis of affect is not restricted to violent men's emotions but situates them in relation to gendered power relations as well as the experiences, perspectives, and affects of women and children.

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Paper III



Ticking the boxes: fathers' performativity, change and intimate partner violence

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, perpetrator programmes that specialize in working with fathers who have been violent towards their partners aim both to improve parenting skills and to challenge and change men's abusive behaviour. The context of the cultural discourses around fatherhood against which programmes are delivered have however received little recognition. We contribute to this conversation by exploring how eight fathers in Iceland approach fatherhood in their process of changing violent behaviour. Inspired by feminist post structural theories, the analysis shows that fatherhood could be performative at times. Fathers tried to perform fatherhood in line with dominant discourses of gender equal and involved fatherhood to assert their identities as good and respectable men and avoid shame. However, this performance did not necessarily engage with or show understanding of their children's perspectives. When these fathers did engage in uncomfortable conversations with their children it had potential to move them towards change through critical reflections on their violent behaviour and ongoing power differences. This paper provides insights into possibilities of and obstacles to change for violent fathers that may prove useful for perpetrator programmes that intersect work on men's intimate partner violence with addressing their fathering skills and capacity.

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Introduction

There has been a surge in both research and interventions that focus on fathers' violence, with the aim of increasing women's and children's safety (Alderson, Kelly, and Westmarland 2015; Featherstone and Fraser 2012). Perpetrator programmes that specifically address and work with fathering in the context of violence are now trying to combine work on challenging and changing men's abusive behaviour with work on developing parenting skills and understanding the impact of their behaviour on children (Radford et al. 2019). There have been suggestions that these different approaches are not necessarily compatible as they may do more to change fathers' parenting skills and perceptions of themselves, than for their acceptance of responsibility for violence towards women (McCracken and Deave 2012). Scholars have suggested that children are an important motivation for change for fathers who have been violent (Päivinen, Siltala, and Holma 2020; Stanley, Graham-Kevan, and Borthwick 2012). The emotional weight of the child's reflexive gaze can be a more significant incentive for changing fathers' abusive behaviour than the potential loss of the relationship with children or their partner (Stanley et al. 2012). Since it is challenging for the self-image to reconcile the children's conceptions of them as violent men with an identity as a caring

father, it can stimulate change in their process of help seeking (Päivinen, Siltala, and Holma 2020; Stanley, Graham-Kevan, and Borthwick 2012; Veteläinen, Grönholm, and Holma 2013). Scholars have also linked this identity tension to the way violent men on the one hand, and caring fathers on the other are represented in the mass media as two different types of men that do not overlap (Guðjónsdóttir and Ingvar Kjara 2023). The ideology of involved fatherhood can thus divert attention away from holding fathers accountable for their violent behaviour and the necessity of reflecting on and respecting their children's experiences (Holt 2015; Lamb, Humphreys, and Hegarty 2018). So, although fathers who have been violent may understand the impact their behaviour has on their children and genuinely want to improve their relationship (e.Perel and Peled 2008), they still often struggle to achieve behaviour change (Bruno and Eriksson 2023; Holt 2015). One barrier to seeking help, turning to self-reflection, or holding themselves accountable can be that they then need to deal with uncomfortable emotions, conversations, and situations (Guðjónsdóttir and Berggren *in press*).

This study provides insights into how fathers who have been violent reflect on their own violence, its impact on children's lives and relation to their fathering. The findings are relevant for perpetrator programmes that address the twin goals of achieving safety and strengthening abusive men's fathering. We explore whether and how the wider cultural context against which the perpetrator programmes are carried out appears in fathers' narratives. The paper also has potential to contribute to cultural discourses on fatherhood, violence, and change.

Fathers, violence, and parenting

The parenting of violent fathers has been identified as a major gap in knowledge which mirrors a lack of focus on them in practice (Stanley 2011). Those studies that have addressed the parenting of fathers who have perpetrated intimate partner violence (IPV) have described them as over-reactive, rigid, neglectful and frequently rejecting as well as emotionally and psychologically absent (Holt 2015; Scott 2021). Not engaging with fathers who have perpetrated IPV leaves children and victim-survivors in a position of having to deal with the consequences, which can manifest as a continuum of violence after separation and places the responsibility for managing men's violence and co-parenting on mothers (Bruno 2016; Stanley 2011). Alderson et al. (2015); Eriksson and Hester (2001); and Scott (2021) note the incongruity of fathers' claims that their abusive communication with their partner does not impact the quality of their fathering or their relationship with their children. The message in such claims is that being an involved father in terms of spending time with their children, sharing custody or having regular contact outweighs fathers' behaviour and communication towards their child's mother. The atmosphere created by fathers' violence has repeatedly been shown to affect children's well-being, whether they experience or witness direct violence or not (Callaghan et al. 2018; Kertesz, Fogden, and Humphreys 2021; Radford et al. 2019). Scott (2021) argues for a reconceptualizing of fathers' perpetration of violence as parenting, highlighting the importance of paying attention to the atmosphere and communication that the child lives with rather than focusing on whether children witness specific incidents. Approaching fathers' violence as parenting involves exploring how their overall communication affects the atmosphere in the home and the child's experience of their parents, rather than merely examining the child's reaction to violent acts (Scott 2021).

Nordic studies on fathers who have been violent emphasize the cultural discourse of caring and involved fathers as a prominent and positive part of men's aspiration to fatherhood (Kjara and Kristinsdóttir 2021; Veteläinen, Grönholm, and Holma 2013). While co-parenting can be an important area of change for fathers with history of perpetrating violence (Scott 2021), increased expectations and demands for involved fatherhood have also highlighted complications around co-parenting in the aftermath of violence (Katz, Nikupeteri, and Laitinen 2020). Fathers in Iceland are likely to share custody of their children (Arnarsson and Bjarnason 2008; Júlíusdóttir and Sigurðardóttir 2013) and children might thus live with their violent fathers, or experience

substantial amounts of contact, whether those fathers are in a process of change or not. While the research discussed above emphasizes the parenting deficits of fathers who perpetrate IPV, Gottzén and Berggren's (2021) qualitative case study with two violent fathers shows that it is also possible for men to embrace involved fatherhood, take primary responsibility for their children, condemn IPV, support gender equality and still perpetrate violence against their partner. Fathers can thus minimize or deflect attention from their violence by emphasizing their involvement as fathers (Gottzén and Berggren 2021). This is important because simply achieving more father involvement – for instance, spending more time with their children or being more involved in their hobbies or daily routines – does not necessarily guarantee a change of values, attitudes or behaviour (Humphreys et al. 2019; Lamb, Humphreys, and Hegarty 2018). Päivinen et al. (2020) argue for the strategy of positioning which entails encouraging abusive men to put themselves in the position of their child or partner as a means of examining and working with masculinity, fatherhood and violence. Considering the impact of violence on their children is a key component of this approach and something their children call for as well (Lamb, Humphreys, and Hegarty 2018). This could prove effective since some scholars have found that fathers who have been violent rarely listen to or prioritize the child's needs and even tend to assume that the child's needs, for contact for example, are the same as their own (Forssell 2016; Holt 2018). The value of fathers learning to understand and approach IPV from the child's perspective has thus been emphasized (Alderson, Kelly, and Westmarland 2015; Holt 2018). As Eriksson and Hester (2001) have noted, raising a child and raising a child who has lived with violence are not the same thing. Repairing a relationship with a child after exposing them to violence must therefore entail taking responsibility both through addressing and acknowledging the violence and by actively working on change (Lamb, Humphreys, and Hegarty 2018; Perel and Peled 2008).

Perpetrator programmes for fathers who have been violent

Since men's role as fathers can neither be separated from IPV, nor from the impact their violence has on children and victim-survivors, it is important that perpetrator programmes integrate a focus on fathering and parenting skills into their work on ending violence. Perpetrator programme research tends to focus on recidivism in determining whether certain programmes 'work' or not. However, knowledge from qualitative studies has raised questions of whether fathers' efforts to change are genuine and whether their process of change is rooted in an understanding of the impact of their behaviour on their children or motivated by attempts to retain control in their relationships with children and their mothers (Bruno and Eriksson 2023; Humphreys et al. 2019; Katz, Nikupeteri, and Laitinen 2020). Despite promising findings on perpetrator programmes that address both violent behaviour and fathering, such as the Caring Dads programme (McConnell, Barnard, and Taylor 2017; McCracken and Deave 2012), Fathers for Change (Stover 2015) and *REAL Fathers* (Ashburn et al. 2017), they seem to have less impact on fathers' attitudes to gender norms than on their parenting practices (Ashburn et al. 2017). There have also been promising findings from whole family programmes, where the focus is on combining different treatment approaches and providing a coordinated response to IPV that emphasizes working directly and safely with all family members (Radford et al. 2019; Stanley and Humphreys 2017). However, there are still considerable gaps in knowledge regarding fathers' engagement, which interventions show promise in meeting the needs of victim-survivors and children and how fathers' violence is actually addressed by these programmes (Radford et al. 2019).

Featherstone et al. (2018) criticize the focus on fathers' violence as an individual problem or personal deficit that need to be fixed since such a focus tends to ignore structural social injustices in society. They call for a shift of focus from the individual to the role of the state in working against violence and social injustice. However, Heward-Belle (2016) calls into question approaches that are based upon a 'one size fits all' premise (p. 13). Since the criminal justice responses cannot deal adequately with all abusive behaviour and men vary in terms of attitudes and beliefs regarding

masculinity, fathering practices and harm, there is need for diverse policies and practices which both hold men accountable for crimes and encourage them to seek help (Heward-Belle 2016; Rees and Rivett 2005). In Iceland, there is currently only one therapeutic programme for IPV perpetrators although individual psychologists may offer treatment. The programme is based on the Norwegian ATV (Alternative to violence) and although fatherhood and parenting are frequently discussed in programme groups, the theoretical framework of the programme does not specifically focus on fatherhood (Heimilisfriður [Peace at home] n.d.).

The study

This study draws on in-depth interviews with eight Icelandic fathers, aged 30 to 65, who had been violent towards their female partner. The interviews were conducted by the first author in 2019–20 as part of her PhD study. With the help of gatekeepers, six participants were recruited from the Icelandic perpetrators programme, Peace at Home (ISL. Heimilisfriður). Additionally, two fathers offered to participate through a general call via social media. The research was positively reviewed by the Ethical Board of the University of Iceland on the condition that all participants gave informed consent. Due to the seriousness of the topic, finding participants in a country as sparsely populated as Iceland (population = 387,758, 2023) was a challenge. In this paper, we provide as little detail about the participants as possible to ensure their anonymity and use pseudonyms when identifying them. We have further anonymized participants and their families by removing information about their children's sex or age, only referring to [child] in the extracts. The fathers were not offered any incentive for their participation in the research. The interviews were designed as semi-structured, meaning that although each interview was unique, interview guides were prepared and used (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The interview guide was divided into separate themes, starting with a few questions about the participant's background then moving on to other topics such as fathering, including their thoughts on the fathering role and relationships with their children, intimate partner relationships, society, and masculinity. However, the interviews usually took the form of open interviews (Creswell 2009) as most lasted for more than two hours. All but one interview took place at an office where most participants received treatment and were consequently familiar with the place. One interview took place at an office at the University of Iceland.

Few of the participants had been charged or convicted for their violence; only one had served time in prison, and all but one recognized their behaviour as IPV. The violence that the participants had committed varied in type, form, and duration. All participants had subjected the mother of their child/ren to violence, although many noted that they had been violent against other intimate female partners as well. Two of the participants were still in a relationship with a woman they had been violent to; four were single when the interview took place and two were in new relationships. Five fathers described direct violence against their child/ren. Most of the fathers shared custody over one or all their children, but two had almost no contact with some or all their children. The participants were all cis-men and the IPV in question was in all cases committed in heterosexual relationships. Four fathers can be described as working class and the other four we classify as middle-class because they had finished secondary school, had a university degree or jobs that normally provide an income above the legal minimum wage in Iceland.

Limitations

The sample is small and not representative. Drawing generalizations based on the material was never our intention but rather we aimed to explore fathers' own perspectives and meaning making. Further research could focus on a broader group of fathers and take a more intersectional perspective, gaining insights from immigrant, black, disabled and LGBTQ+ fathers.

Men who have participated in perpetrator programmes are likely to reproduce some of the thinking and language that they have absorbed from the intervention (Kjaran and Kristinsdóttir

2021). This was sometimes apparent in the men's narratives. However, fathers' engagement with therapy varied noticeably, which a larger study might be able to explore further. In line with Rees and Rivett (2005), we assume that men are telling their truth when they say that they want to change and that they are working towards it. However, we do not exclude the possibility that children or ex-partners might have different experiences of men's progress or change.

Analysis

We have analysed the interviews through dialogic narrative analysis (Kohler-Riessman 2008) and by drawing on a feminist post-structuralist perspective (Waling 2019). This means that we approach gender as the primary contributor to violence against women while also considering how dominant discourses mediate gender and intersect with class, culture and other subject positions and experiences. In addition to the participants' speech, we paid attention to hesitations, silences as well as changes in voice speed and volume, facial expressions, and other forms of body language. We approached analysis as a process which began with breaking up the text and adding researcher's comments during transcription (Braun and Clarke 2013). Looking more closely at recurring and diverging themes we also considered what was conveyed by tone or affective practices (such as body language), as well as their references to larger societal discourses or concepts. The dominant discourse of involved fatherhood was found to be prominent in fathers' narratives of violence and change. Below, we show that fathers' narratives often emphasized the performative and that their performance revolved around spending time with children, doing something fun with them, providing for them or sharing custody of them. These narratives seldom centred on or considered children's experiences or needs. Whether and how these fathers discussed their violent behaviour with their children provides insight into their views of power, accountability, and justice in their processes of change.

Findings

Performing ideal fatherhood

The image of the 'involved father' in participants' narratives was consistent with dominant discourses in Icelandic society which pursues gender equality in the form of fathers' parental leave, shared care and custody (Gíslason 2008; Guðjónsdóttir and Ingvar Kjaran 2023). Seeing his child every week was an important part of fatherhood for Jonatan: 'I think this is great, to get to be with [child] so much. [The child] is with me six days one week and five days the other week'. One way in which he and his ex-partner manage their co-parenting involves them living in the same neighbourhood:

One manages to be much more involved. I don't know whether I would be as much of a dad as I am or whether our communication would be this good if I only met [child] every other weekend and for a month during the summer. You cannot bond as much. But the downside is that [child] has to live in a suitcase a lot.

Here, Jonatan attempts to put himself in the child's position by noting that even though this arrangement worked well for him, moving between homes might be tough for his child. For some participants, their role as fathers seemed to be central in how they organized their life: it determined where they lived (close to their children and ex-partners), what they did (how they scheduled their work) as well as their identity ('much of a dad'). Whilst all the fathers mentioned some daily activities such as driving their children to school or putting them to bed in their accounts of fatherhood, for some of the fathers, 'being involved' seemed to entail assisting mothers: 'She cooks. Organizes everything, does the laundry. I (hesitates) am in charge of getting the kids in and out of bed. Ugh, and you see. Vacuuming and mopping and cleaning the toilet'. Involvement did not necessarily mean that the fathers had taken up more egalitarian attitudes.

Three fathers felt they took more responsibility for disciplining their children than the mothers did. Most of the participants noted that they aimed to be a better father than their own fathers, who were mostly described as absent, emotionally distant, or violent. For Jonatan, being conscious about how his father's parenting had impacted his ideas about discipline helped him both understand and change his attitudes:

My background was this (silence) you should obey just to obey. There was this fear-based control and 'I am bigger than you' and that was the atmosphere that I received from my dad. He was the master of his house and he needed to rule. And you take that with you, which shapes you and just causes collisions. (Jonatan)

Here, the impact of the perpetrator programme discourse is noticeable in the way Jonatan spoke of his own upbringing. He described his own parenting practices before he started the programme as: 'just discipline and this old, like you see in the 60s movies. Incredibly old fashioned and lame. But then I have of course been in this programme and learned all kinds of stuff'. Now he was always the one who sat down with the kids and discussed matters if they fought and he gave an example of how his family and friends had made fun of him for doing this. His examples conveyed that that he had changed his approach to discipline so radically that he was now mocked for being too egalitarian in his parenting.

When Tommi spoke of how his parenting had changed through the perpetrator programme, he described his current parenting as 'open', meaning that he tried to discuss things with his children, particularly emotions. However, he quickly added that 'you see, there is discipline. I have had extremely firm but fair rules'. Involved fathers are presented through dominant discourses as embodying qualities that have traditionally been associated with femininity such as being soft, attentive, or discussing emotions. Maintaining discipline can therefore be a way for fathers to be perceived as in control and respectable. Most participants seemed to be slightly torn in their attitudes towards discipline. Matthias explained that the reasons for that lay in societal attitudes: 'There is a lot of talk about soft men and all that. That is the norm today. Basically, just being soft, or you are at least not supposed to be hard'. The fathers in this study grappled with different discourses and expectations of fatherhood, trying to live up to both modern ideals by caring for and spending time with their children and more traditional ideals that prioritized the father's role as provider and as disciplining authority. As demonstrated by Veteläinen et al. (2013), this can cause tension in fathers' identities.

In their narratives of change, the participants provided examples of their performances as fathers that reflected dominant discourses of involved fatherhood. Some seemed to approach change as a performance in which they were perceived as a good father, sharing custody, attending therapy, being sober, and 'healthy' in the sense of changing their diet and exercising. These fathers used comparison as a means of navigating their change, comparing their performance with how they used to be as a parent and to the performance of other fathers, including their own, as well as to their children's mother. For Tommi, performing ideal fatherhood meant 'ticking boxes':

It's like there are invisible boxes that you must tick, once a year to take the kids abroad, you need to take them skiing once and then everything must be posted on Instagram and (hesitates) yes, to be a good dad, you would kind of have to have ticked all these boxes. You need to take them fishing, you need to try everything once but as soon as the box has been ticked then I think you get some peace. (Tommi)

Being a good father could be achieved by performing occasional activities where the performance was directed not at the children but at an online audience on social media:

I do it consciously and unconsciously to scroll through Instagram and Facebook to see what other dads around me are doing. And overall, I think I am above average. And I am not posting everything you know. I did at some point. I felt driven to get some recognition that I was doing something right. (Tommi)

Another way in which Tommi could get this recognition or 'ego boost' was to ask his children directly to compare his fathering performance to other fathers:

Of course you want to hear that you are better than all other fathers. And one has asked just ‘how am I compared to the other dads in your class, is there anything I can do better or that I do better than others?’ (Tommi)

Fathers anticipated positive responses from the people around them and online audiences when they performed ideal fatherhood. The sense that their performance as fathers could stand comparison with that of other fathers, past and present, offered a means of distancing themselves from the deviant figure of ‘the violent man’ (see Gottzén 2015; Ólafsdóttir and Rúdólfssdóttir 2023). In all the narratives, it was apparent that the fathers wanted to avoid being categorized as violent which for many meant ‘having to tattoo on your forehead that I am a monster’ (Jonatan). Here, the stigma and shame associated with their violence is explicit.

Jonatan connected his goal of being ‘better today than I was yesterday’ directly to fatherhood since that would provide his child with good parenting and a decent preparation for life. Making sure that his child had good memories of him, and that people would remember him as a good man: ‘That is the ultimate goal. That someone out there will think when I am dead this was a good man’. Being perceived as a ‘good man’ was another way in which the fathers tried to whitewash their reputation and avoid shame. The connection between being a good man and a good father was also apparent in fathers’ hopes of becoming or being grandfathers. Emil was already a grandfather, and he connected that role to his goal of becoming a ‘good man’: ‘I just want to do my best to be a good person. Now I am a grandfather [...] I want to take them [the children] with me and show them and teach them’. Interestingly, being a good grandfather seems to be performative in a very similar way to being a good father.

Performing fathering for a wide audience also had its pressures as is evident in Tommi’s account above. While Petur thought it could be ‘motivating’ to see what other fathers were doing on Facebook, such comparisons could induce anxiety: ‘But it also puts a lot of pressure to see how functional and organized men are and such super dads’. The demands of being a ‘super dad’ meant that fathers needed to be well informed:

You have no excuse to do some nonsense, so you are just researching and finding the best. Must always have the best of everything. And doing something new and having the newest information about how it is best to do things and then research and compare and do that. Instead of just doing things like your dad did. (Petur)

This account is infused by neoliberal discourses which assume that all the information is out there, and it is therefore every individual’s responsibility to achieve and become the best version of themselves (Scharff 2015). Petur felt pressurized to provide his children with trips abroad and skiing gear which he could not afford. In this sense, ideal fatherhood has been informed by consumerism and has become infused by class-specific concepts. Being able to tick those boxes and stand comparison could, as we saw in Tommi’s account, provide fathers who have been violent with ‘some peace’, but it could also be a source of pressure.

Narratives about contact and custody were also performative in the sense that the fathers were trying to stand comparison. In this context, the competition was with the ex-partner rather than other or their own fathers. Tommi was explicit about this:

What happens is that both consciously and unconsciously you compete with your partner for attention and try to top her. So maybe if I know what [my ex] does in her week, then I want to do the same or more next week to surpass her. (Tommi)

All fathers compared their performance as fathers to that of the mothers in some way and, for Tommi, sharing custody with his ex was not any less of a competition than planning what activities to do on the vacation.

The impact of equality discourses around shared parenting was evident both in parental co-operation after separation but also in the fathers’ comparison of their parenting with that of the mothers. In the context of custody disputes or arguments over contact, fathers’ accounts often turned to the question of who was ‘better’ or a more competent parent.

Birkir felt that his contact with his children had been on his ex-partner's terms and that she controlled everything until he started to fight for 'his rights'. He was in a heated custody dispute with his ex-partner and argued that she was an unfit mother who 'tends to the child half-heartedly'. A fathers' rights discourse thus informed mother blaming which deflected attention away from Birkir's own abusive behaviour. A culture of performative and competitive fathering can in this way feed into abusive behaviour and inform the rhetoric of fathers' rights movements (Bruno 2022; Eriksson and Hester 2001; Lapierre, Côté, and Lessard 2022).

Engaging with children 's perspectives

The participants' understanding of their children's perspectives varied considerably. Some narratives included little or nothing that indicated that they engaged with their children's experiences or needs, while other repeatedly demonstrated an understanding of their children's perspectives. Those fathers who had had most input from programmes, showed more awareness of children's perspectives. Even though this variation in fathers' engagement with their children's perspectives can be analysed in terms of different stages of understanding, their narratives provide insight into the non-linear temporality and complex relations between past and present acts and identities. We do therefore not approach their understanding of their children's perspectives as separate and distinct stages but recognize that changing violent behaviour is not a smooth progression (Berggren, Gottzén, and Bornäs 2020).

The main reason for these fathers not to engage with their children's perspectives seemed to be to avoid feelings of shame and discomfort. Some fathers were certain that their violent behaviour had not impacted their child/ren and therefore did not see any point in discussing their violence with them. For Borki (the only participant who had not attended a perpetrator programme) who had been convicted of violence towards his child, concerns about wider social perceptions of his behaviour predominated over any engagement with the child's experience. Borki stated that he did not think that his child (now a young adult) could remember this experience since they were young at the time. When asked whether he had discussed this with his child he said:

We haven't discussed this. I say that I am going to discuss it with [child] when [it] is older and an adult. I just think [the child] is still too much of a child for this. I think [child's] mom puts words in [it's] mouth and that [the child] has just experienced since it was [x years old] that I am a bad man. (Borki)

Even though his child is now a young adult, Borki considers them 'too much of a child' and so justifies not valuing their experience or needs. He is thus able to avoid uncomfortable reflections and conversations about his violent behaviour. In common with Birkir, Borki blamed the child's mother for the child's perception of him as a 'bad man'. Other fathers seemed aware that their behaviour could have impacted their child but, like Jonatan, still wanted to postpone discussions of violence until the child/ren were 'a bit older'. Jonatan was not concerned that the child would not understand it, because he explained that his child was capable of handling complicated discussions. It seemed that his own anticipated discomfort was the main reason for postponing this conversation.

While most participants said that they were going to discuss the violence with their child when they were older or sufficiently mature, regardless of the child's age, Matthias and Petur considered that discussing the violence they perpetrated was a way of holding themselves accountable and practising justice towards their children. Their accounts included emotional reflections on how their children experienced their abusive behaviour but also repeated mentions of their children's experiences and needs. These references to their children's needs were often spontaneous and were not produced only in response to direct questions. Petur noticed how his past violence affected his child's behaviour now and found this difficult to manage:

If [child] spills or does something that [it] thinks is a mistake then [child] has started to say sorry in advance. And I was like (sighs defeatedly) ‘ohh you know, then one has inflicted stress or this, very sad that [it] experiences that’. So, I am trying to prevent it. But it is not easy to stop being like this. (Petur)

Although most perpetrator programmes, including those that participants had attended, emphasize the importance of men acknowledging their violence and taking ‘responsibility for their behaviour’ (Peace, n.d.) there has also been a loud call for perpetrators to take responsibility in recent waves of the Me-too movement in Iceland (Brynjarsdóttir 2021). The wider cultural context therefore reinforces programme messages in this respect. Nordic fathers’ high levels of contact and responsibility for children’s care makes it even more important that they can engage with their children’s perspectives. Narratives where fathers showed understanding of and engagement with their children’s perspectives were usually intertwined with examples of their own experiences of taking responsibility for their children alone over a longer period and therefore experiencing both the cognitive and emotional challenges of managing parenting combined with work and running a household. For the three younger fathers, who were all aged 30 to 45, taking on more responsibility as fathers seemed to be an important part of their engagement with their children’s perspectives and the responsibility they took for their violent behaviour. For Petur, taking responsibility for his behaviour entailed continuous conversations with his children about his own behaviour and emotions: ‘I have had to have it [conversation] regularly (grins awkwardly) to explain that [child] is not doing anything wrong [. . .] then I have also given [child] the permission to call bullshit, or you know not take it in’.

When Matthias’ child was in elementary school, he had started to ‘step into the fear and seek help’ for his violence so, during a bedtime routine at a point when he got angry, he took a moment to count to 10. He notes that he did not discuss the violence with his child at that point but told the child he was seeking help and explained: ‘You know I can often get so angry, and this is one of the things I am trying to do to help me not get as angry as I can become’. Matthias described this as a memorable moment because his child went completely silent which he explained with sadness in his voice:

[The child] was of course expecting the worst. Because dad was angry. But to be able to [discuss] ‘okay, dad is not really cured but there is something happening there’. That is the first time I opened up to [child] about it. (Matthias)

Being able to do things differently and discuss it with his child was an empowering moment and Matthias pointed out that having conversations about his violence was also a part of supporting his children in dealing with the harm he had caused them. He noted that ‘silencing is of course just violence in itself. Something happens, maybe traumatizing, then just we are not going to discuss it so you will just carry it for the rest of your life’. Understanding both the impact of his violence as well as grasping that not addressing the violence could have serious consequences for children’s wellbeing had potential to be transformative. Especially when it led fathers to critically reflect on their power, behaviour and actively work towards change. Some fathers were able to acknowledge the power that came with parenthood. Matthias account below is infused with shame. He felt he might not deserve to be put ‘on a pedestal’:

It is so messed up to think that (chokes up and emphasises despite) despite all the shit I put them through. That I am still on some pedestal (smiles awkwardly). And in a way you do not feel you deserve it. Because you have been a monster. (Matthias)

Even when they were viewed positively by their children, a sense of shame continued to inform their narratives. Just as shame could work as a hindrance for fathers’ engagement with their children’s perspectives, it could also be motivating as Matthias noted: ‘I have acknowledged my past and am working on making amends for my violations’. Carrying on ‘making amends’ was however a continuous work. Despite being among the youngest participants, both Jonatan and Matthias were determined not to have more children. Years into his desistance process, Matthias decided to

get a vasectomy to make sure he did not father more children explaining that: 'I am just not qualified as a father for more children'. For him, not having more children entailed taking responsibility and working towards reparation of his relationship with his children:

I have two lovely children that (hesitates) mean the world to me and (hesitates) for everything they have had to go through. You know, that is a project for life to just be able to, (hesitates) maybe not make up for but (sighs deeply) just be there for them. (Matthias)

Engaging with their experience not only involved hope of repairing his relationship with his children but meant respecting what 'they have had to go through' because of his violence.

All the narratives demonstrated that changing violent behaviour, attitudes and engaging with their children's experiences is an uncomfortable, non-linear process that could be lengthy. Although Anton had been attending a perpetrator programme for some time and had sought help from various counsellors, psychologists, and programmes over the years, he noted that it was 'not until now the last two, three years that I have tried to be a better parent. (silence) Not until now that one has connected it in that way'. The sadness in his voice, disappointed tone, and uncomfortable squirm when he talked about his children's experience and his parenting indicated that he realized that this change was happening unfairly late for his children. Emil captured well how sporadic the process of change could be when he noted that, even though he was starting to think differently, he still felt like he had 'not gotten it yet'. Based on the narratives of the fathers who showed understanding of their children's perspectives, 'getting it' entails listening to, respecting, and actively engaging with their child/ren's experience, and this is consistent with Lamb et al. (2018) findings. We found that the fathers in our study could achieve this by critically reflecting on their behaviour and views as well as having uncomfortable conversations with their children where they took responsibility for their violence. This process needs to be encouraged and supported by perpetrator programmes to support a sustainable and genuine process of change.

Discussion

This study has emphasized the importance of fatherhood in the change process of men who have been violent in intimate partner relationships, showing that their role as fathers and possibility of a better relationship with their children can motivate them to seek help and commit to perpetrator programmes (Päivinen, Siltala, and Holma 2020; Stanley, Graham-Kevan, and Borthwick 2012). However, studies have also pointed out that fathers who have been domestically violent are often slow to change (Bruno and Eriksson 2023) and tend to avoid uncomfortable feelings and conversations (Guðjónsdóttir and Berggren *in press*). In their process of change, fathers fear being stigmatized as violent men. Shame is a major obstacle in this process and it seems difficult for programmes to balance work on reducing its debilitating effects while also ensuring that men take full responsibility for abusive behaviour (Gottzén 2015; Stanley, Graham-Kevan, and Borthwick 2012). Ólafsdóttir and Hearn (2023) have shown that perpetrators may feel obliged to perform shame 'correctly' to be redeemed from the violence and 'come back' without fully facing the structural problem of violence or the discomfort of shame. Similarly, we have argued in this article that, for men who have been violent against their partner, fatherhood is at times performative.

Social media can reproduce the guidelines of good and involved fatherhood which is constructed in the Nordic context through a focus on equal parenting. Being a good father is thus perceived as a performative task achievable by ticking the right boxes. For fathers in a process of change from violence, ticking those boxes and feeling that they could stand comparison with other fathers could, as one father put it, give them 'some peace' from the shame invoked by confronting violent behaviour. The fathers tended to perform good fatherhood for an audience and referred to how other people, such as their child, other fathers, or people on social media perceived them. It was relatively easy to compare their own parenting practices favourably to those of their fathers. However, when fathers engaged emotionally with the discomfort of reflecting on their children's perspectives, it

had potential to move them towards change through critical reflections on their behaviour and power. We agree with Päivinen et al. (2020) on the value of work that specifically targets fathers who have been violent in intimate partner relationships and that such interventions need to capture the interaction in dominant discourses between violence, fatherhood and masculinity. Our findings indicate that while abusive fathers may sometimes dismiss their children's experiences, their engagement with their child/ren's perspective, through critical reflection, can be an important part of their change process. We therefore suggest that perpetrator programmes work towards equipping fathers with recognition of the child as a person in their own right, rather than an appendage or extension of them (Forssell 2016). The needs of mothers and fathers are not the same in the aftermaths of violence nor are the needs of parents and children (Forssell 2016). Previous research has shown that change for abusive fathers is a non-linear process that takes time (Berggren, Gottzén, and Bornäs 2020; Radford et al. 2019). This is also reflected in our findings. Children however may not be able or willing to wait for that change and it is therefore important to elicit their views on living arrangements and the frequency of contact. Prioritizing children's perspectives in planning and delivering coordinated interventions against violence in close relationships is therefore an especially important part of working towards children's safety in the Nordic countries.

Conclusion

Our study has emphasized how abusive men's narratives of fathering and change connect to dominant discourses of involved fatherhood. Perpetrator programmes that aim to combine a focus on developing parenting skills with challenging and changing men's abusive behaviour, should harness the cultural context and be mindful of how dominant discourses shape understandings and experiences of fatherhood, violence, and change. Nordic culture portrays involved fatherhood as interwoven with respectable masculinity and as something that fathers who have been violent need to perform in order to avoid being categorized as monsters or women batterers (Gottzén 2015; Stanley et al. 2012). The risk is that, in doing so, fathers miss or ignore critical and often uncomfortable self-reflections that can provide a path towards taking responsibility for their violent behaviour and even towards justice in their relationship with their children. Finally, in line with Rees and Rivett (2005) and Heward-Belle (2016), our findings indicate that that it is important that professionals working with perpetrators of violence adopt an intersectional perspective and attend to men's lived experiences as multi-dimensional, where factors of gender, class, race and culture intersect, without exculpating them from responsibility for the violence they have used.

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