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

Abstract

Increasingly, perpetrator programmes that specialise 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.

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 et al., 2015; Featherstone & 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 & Deave, 2012). Scholars have suggested that children are an important motivation for change for fathers who have been violent (Päivinen et al., 2020; Author, date). 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 (Author, date). 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 et al., 2020; Author, date; Veteläinen et al., 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 (Author, date). 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 et al., 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.g. Perel & Peled, 2008), they still often struggle to achieve behaviour change (Bruno & 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 (Author, date).

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 (Author, date). 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; Author, date). 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 et al., 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 emphasise the cultural discourse of caring and involved fathers as a prominent and positive part of men's aspiration to fatherhood (Kjaran & Kristinsdóttir, 2021; Veteläinen et al., 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 et al., 2020). 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 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 (Humphreys et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 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 et al., 2018). 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 (Lamb et al., 2018; Perel & 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 to control in their relationships with children and their mothers (Bruno & Eriksson, 2023; Humphreys et al., 2019; Katz et al., 2020). Despite promising findings on perpetrator programmes 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 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; Author, date). 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 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 & 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 X 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 anonymised 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 & 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 X.

Few of the participants had been charged or convicted for their violence; only one had served time in prison, and all but one recognised 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 & 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 hesitancies, 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 & 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 emphasised 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; Author, date). 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 neighborhood:

> 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 prioritised 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 & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2023). In all the narratives, it was apparent that the fathers wanted to avoid being categorised 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 organised 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 pressurised 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 & Hester, 2001; Lapierre et al., 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 recognise that changing violent behaviour is not a smooth progression (Berggren et al., 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, emphasise the importance of men acknowledging their violence and taking "responsibility for their behaviour" (Heimilisfriður [Peace at home], 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 ten. 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 traumatising, 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 realised 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 emphasised 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 et al., 2020; Author, date). However, studies have also pointed out that fathers who have been domestically violent are often slow to change (Bruno & Eriksson, 2023) and tend to avoid uncomfortable feelings and conversations (Author, date). 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; Author, date). 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 et al., 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. Prioritising 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 emphasised 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; Author, date). 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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