



# How Do Men in Treatment for Intimate Partner Violence Experience Parenting their Young Child? A Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis

Henning Mohaupt<sup>1,2,3</sup> · Fanny Duckert<sup>1,2</sup> · Ingunn Rangul Askeland<sup>3</sup>

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## Abstract

Men who use intimate partner violence (IPV) often have challenges as caregivers such as poor understanding of children's needs and emotions. There is little knowledge regarding their everyday-life experiences of being a parent. We interviewed 14 men in therapy for intimate partner violence on how they experienced their relationship to one of their children (mean age 4,5 years). We performed a descriptive phenomenological analysis. Informants seldom explored their children's experience. They found that their fathering was influenced by past relationships and negative expectations for the future. The informants' bodily experience of emotional arousal was described as difficult to control and understand and was a limited source for meaning making in the father-child relationship. The experience of being a good father was connected to presence and control of the child's behavior. Informants felt that what they experienced as good parenting lacked others' recognition. Interventions for partner-abusive men should address their fathering and focus on fathers' life-experience and context as influencing their fathering. Therapeutic interventions should strengthen partner-abusive fathers' awareness of and meaning making from their emotional arousal. Where safety permits, dyadic interventions aiming at re-establishing the child's experience of safety in the father-child relationship should be considered by therapy providers as a complement to established interventions with partner-abusive men.

**Keywords** Father-child relations · Intimate partner violence · Parenting representations · Phenomenology

Many men who seek help for their use of intimate partner violence (IPV) are fathers and have regular contact with their children (Askeland and Heir 2014). This has been a source for concern, for several reasons: fathers may use child contact to keep up dominance and control over the children's mother (Bancroft et al. 2011). Coercive control of family members infringes children's social life, development of a sense of self as social agents, and effectively teaches them that sharing thoughts and feelings of their own may be dangerous (Katz 2016). Living with IPV puts children at risk for physical and emotional abuse and correlates with negative mental health outcomes in children and adolescents (Lanius et al. 2013).

Children are vulnerable for the effects of witnessing partner abuse as they often are exposed to multiple relational trauma (Stover et al. 2017), since male-to-female IPV correlates with fathers' mental health problems (Askeland and Heir 2014), alcohol and substance use problems (Stover and Spink 2012), and trait-hostility (Birkley and Eckhardt 2015). Compared to non-abusive fathers, partner-abusive fathers rate themselves higher on anger, and as more likely to express anger aggressively toward their children (Fox and Benson 2004; Francis and Wolfe 2008). Men who use IPV score poorly on measures of parental reflective functioning (Stover and Kiselica 2014), a construct that denotes a parent's ability to envision intentionality from behavior, and to form representations of the child's and the parent's mental states, such as feelings, beliefs, and wishes with the objective to provide safety and wellbeing for the child (Slade 2005). Partner-abusive fathers often show limited ability to take the child's perspective (Stover and Spink 2012) and may use their awareness of their children's vulnerable emotions to punish or intimidate them (Maliken and Fainsilber Katz 2013). However, partner-abusive fathers also differ in the extent to which they

✉ Henning Mohaupt  
henning.mohaupt@atv-stiftelsen.no

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

<sup>2</sup> Alcohol and Drug Research Western Norway (KORFOR), Stavanger University Hospital, Stavanger, Norway

<sup>3</sup> Alternative to Violence, Lilleorget 1, 0184 Oslo, Norway

envison and take responsibility for the consequences of the violence for their children (Rothman et al. 2007). Qualitative studies are more sensitive to diversity within phenomena and therefore tend to find more variation regarding partner-abusive men's ability to understand the negative impact of their violence on their children, and their efforts to mitigate these negative effects (Bourassa et al. 2016). For example, Perel and Peled (2008) found that partner-abusive men in a non-clinical sample could acknowledge the negative impact of IPV on children but simultaneously relativized this impact in relation to their child. Similarly, a Finnish study found that fathers in IPV treatment often embraced the ideal of the involved and sensitive father but still described their fathering as socially passive, emotionally distant, but domineering and controlling in line with traditional masculinity values (Veteläinen et al. 2013). Heward-Belle (2014) pointed out that partner-abusive fathers differ regarding their adverse parenting behaviors. She found that relative adherence to hegemonic masculinity values, perceived control over the use of violence, health and class combined to form men's identity as more or less entitled to dominance in the family, contributing to diverse patterns of abuse and neglect (Heward-Belle 2014). It has been argued that even if partner-abusive men gain better behavioral control over their aggression and understand that living with partner-abuse negatively affects their children, their parenting still lacks elements of care such as affective awareness (Stover and Spink 2012), parental reflective functioning (Stover and Kiselica 2014), emotion coaching (Katz and Windecker-Nelson 2006), and emotional support (Fox and Benson 2004). To enhance therapeutic interventions with partner-abusive men who are fathers, we need to broaden our understanding of their everyday-life experience of being a parent. Based on our literature review and on our previous findings (Mohaupt and Duckert 2016) we knew that men who use IPV tend to score poorly on measures of parental reflective functioning. These findings indicate that they had simplistic representations of their children's mental process such as intentions, feelings and beliefs. The present qualitative strand of our project elaborated these findings by using a phenomenological approach. Our research question was: How do men in treatment for IPV experience the father-child relationship?

## Method

The goal of the present study was to interview partner-abusive men on their everyday-life experience of the father-child relationship, the violence being the implicit background against which fathering was talked about. Phenomenological research examines how human experience is created and modulated in consciousness (Giorgi 2009). The descriptive phenomenological method (Giorgi 2009) uses phenomenological reduction, or the bracketing of theoretical and scientific understanding in

the data-analysis to ensure that the researcher minimizes interpretation and describes the informants' presentation of their experience in ways that generate a new perspective on the phenomenon under study. It can be argued that such an approach is ethically challenging in our study, as previous research has demonstrated that partner-abusive fathers tend to minimize the extent and detrimental effects of their violence. However, by suspending this knowledge in the analysis, we could access their psychological experience openly. Theoretical, research based and clinical knowledge regarding the parenting of partner-abusive men was not bracketed from the discussion of our findings.

## Procedure

The present article describes the qualitative strand of a mixed-methods study using an emergent embedded quantitative-qualitative design (Creswell and Plano 2011). Qualitative and quantitative data were collected parallelly. For the larger study, we recruited a strategic sample of 36 participants from a Western-Norwegian office of Alternative to Violence (ATV), a national non-governmental organization offering psychotherapy for adults who use IPV. Men were included in the study if they lived with their child or had visitation at least twice a month. As ATV does not provide therapy in cases demanding acute psychiatric care or cases with alcohol or substance dependency according to ICD 10 (WHO 1992), these conditions also became exclusion criteria for this study. During the recruitment phase, 153 men were in treatment for violence against their partner there. While 46 men fulfilled the criteria for enrollment in the study, five did not wish to participate, eight were not asked for participation by their therapists due to acute safety concerns or cases involving newborns, and one client consented but did not come to the interview. To ensure participation of men in treatment for IPV from urban areas, five men were randomly recruited from ATV's Oslo office, one of whom cancelled the interview later. All men were voluntarily in therapy for violence against a female partner between March 2012 and December 2014. They received integrative violence-focused psychotherapy that used a trauma-informed, cognitive-behavioral approach, with an emphasis on how violent behaviors may be linked to difficulties with emotion- regulation, mentalization, attachment, and to dysfunctional schemata on relationships and gender (Askeland and Råkil 2017). The emphasis on trauma-work stems from research that has demonstrated the relatively high presence of early relational trauma (Stover 2013) and PTSD (Maguire et al. 2015) in men in treatment for intimate partner violence. Psychotherapy was provided by clinical psychologists working on a full-time basis with adults who use IPV. We assessed types and scope of violence toward partner and children from the intake interviews and referrals, parental reflective functioning (Parent Development Interview- R2; Slade et al.

2003), alcohol use (AUDIT; Babor et al. 2001), substance use (DUDIT; Berman et al. 2007), and trauma history (TEC; Nijenhuis et al. 2002). The findings and procedures from the quantitative strand of our study have been presented in a separate publication (Mohaupt and Duckert 2016).

### Sample Characteristics

We wanted the present sample to represent the diversity of the findings from the quantitative strand of our study. Therefore, we included 14 cases that covered the full specter of scores on parental reflective functioning, alcohol and substance use profiles, the trauma screening, fathers who lived with their children, and those who had visitation. Participants' mean age was 32.1 years ( $R = 22\text{--}46$  years). They were all Caucasian ethnicity, and Norwegian defined as raised in Norway by at least one Norwegian parent. Mean years of total education was 12.6 years ( $R = 9\text{--}19$  years). Participants came from urban and rural communities. Three men reported being the father to one child, eight to two children, and three to three children. Two men reported having a child from another relationship who they did not have contact with. One participant was in jail and had regular visitation outside jail. Seven of the men were still living together with the mother of their child, the others had visitation at least twice a month. In nine cases child protection services were in contact with the family during the time fathers were in treatment. Participants were encouraged to talk about their youngest child, and about the relationship to one of their biological children. None of the men in this sample were living together with non-biological children. Six of the focus children were girls, eight were boys. The focus-children's mean age was 4.5 years ( $R = 2\text{--}8$  years). Mean length of treatment was 20.6 sessions ( $r = 4\text{--}67$ ;  $SD = 20.8$ ) at the time of the interview. Being in treatment did not guarantee that violence had stopped. The study was approved by the Regional Committees for Medical and Health Research Ethics (REC).

### Interview

We used the Norwegian translation of the Parent Development Interview- Revised (PDI-R2; Slade et al. 2003), a semi-structured interview that combines a focus on perceived strengths and challenges in the parent-child relationship with questions on anger, guilt and needs vis-à-vis the child. It is designed to assess parental reflective functioning using a coding scheme and score (Slade et al. 2003). However, it has also been used for gathering qualitative data for content analysis (Stover and Spink 2012). We find the phrasing of the questions in the PDI-R2 to be sufficiently open to allow for phenomenological analyses of the data deriving from it. None of the interview questions addressed use of violence directly but examined the everyday-life experience of the father-child

relationship. The first author, who is a heterosexual, male clinical psychologist experienced in working with family violence, married and father to three sons, as well as five female and one male trained therapists from ATV conducted the interviews. This is problematic as the interviewer's characteristics such as gender, age and interview style independently influence the process (Shaw 2010). However, the semi-structured format of the PDI-R2 allowed informants to cover the same topics, while leaving room for the individuals' personal experiences. Conducting interviews in a clinical setting may have mirrored the role of the interviewers as therapists, and the role of informants as clients. Thus, interviewees experienced that they were interviewed by someone who knew about family violence, but also acted non-judgmental about it and openly explored the informants' thoughts and reflections. This ensured that informants' use of IPV was implicit while the everyday-life experience of the father-child relationship was in the foreground. Participants were reimbursed with 250 Norwegian kroner. Two research assistants transcribed the audio files verbatim. The first author checked transcripts for accuracy by comparing them back to the audio files.

### Analytic Procedure

The first author divided each interview into meaning units, transcribed each meaning unit from first-person statements into third-person statements (e.g., the piece of data "*I don't understand my son when he gets angry. I try to talk to him, but it doesn't work, so I must push him away.*" was transcribed into "*Person A says that he does not understand his son when his son gets angry. He says that he tries to talk to him, but that talking does not work. He says that he has to push the son away.*"). He then translated them into English, and summarized its essential content using free imaginative variation, a process that denotes the imaginary modification of a statement with the aim of exploring it from different perspectives and arriving at its essential content (Giorgi 2009). Using the example, the researcher can ask themselves: "*Does this piece of data lose its essential meaning if we change the son's emotion from angry to sad, or the father's pushing to holding, or slapping?*". We find the former does, but that the latter does not change the essential content of the piece of data. We can also ask: "*What would most likely have made person A experience that something "worked"?*" This leaves us with a formulation of essential content that contains the son's specific emotion, the father's goal-directedness toward stopping the emotion, and a non-specific physical act: "*Person A says that he finds his attempts to engage with his son's experience of being angry fruitless and feels compelled to stop his son's anger by physically subduing him.*". For each participant, a summary of their idiographic experience was written down and the structures of each individual psychological experiences were formulated and coded. Codes, essential meaning

content and labels were discussed by all authors. Themes that made up the individual psychological structures were then compared across cases (e.g. *Several participants described difficulties understanding their child when the child was upset and failed to engage with them in ways that were helpful for the child. They described how they resorted to use physical force to stop the child's emotion*) and described as a general psychological structure for the fathering-experience of our participants. Each step in this process was written down to ensure that the process from raw data to general psychological structure was retraceable and open for scrutiny.

## Findings

We described the general psychological structure of our sample of partner-abusive fathers' parenting experience using five main themes with several subthemes. First, we described their parenting experience as anchored in time, and influenced by previous experience, current changes and expectations for the future. Second, we described how men in our sample described their bodily experience as a source of closeness and insecurity in the father-child relationship. Third, we described our informants' ideas of what constituted good and poor fathering. Fourth, we described how the fathers in our sample perceived their children. Finally, we described how our informants' experience of themselves as fathers was affected by their perception of others' judgement regarding their fathering.

## Time Structure

All participants described how their aggression impacted negatively on family relationships in the past and present. The fathers who talked about their first-born child described the transition to fatherhood as a chasm in their lives that required a choice to engage with parenting. The father-child relationship in the present was described as increasingly unstable because of perceived conflict. The future was expected to harbor problems for the father-child relationship.

**Before Fatherhood** All the fathers pointed out that the arrival of a child forced them to confront their history of aggression. Johan said that he felt he had been aggressive since he had been little. He described how he hid his aggression in the social sphere, and how he had experienced parental rejection in response to his childhood-anger:

*I felt rejection in relation to my hysterical anger when I kicked and hit and broke stuff, and I felt hurt because I got reactions only for what I did and no questions on how I felt [...] I was always kind at school and unkind at home, very angry at home, and that is the same in adulthood: I have my anger problem at home while I am ok in other arenas. (Johan)*

Johan described his aggression as a liability, as it could harm the child: *"I see that she gets sad and scared, and then I get sad because I feel I transmit my problems onto her."* His example illustrates how informants described their problems with aggression to have existed prior to becoming a parent, how they were aware that their aggression was socially sanctioned, how they consciously presented themselves as non-aggressive in the social sphere, but did not manage to control their aggression in intimate relationships and toward their children. Their experience of being aggressive seemed to be at odds with their understanding of what constituted safe parenting.

**Choosing Fatherhood** All our informants expressed that they experienced their transition to fatherhood as life-changing: from within their experience of being aggressive and unsafe for their intimate others, becoming a father was described as a possibility to change. Informants mentioned how they became more caring for themselves and others after the arrival of the child. Mats described how the prospect of fathering gave him a choice between a destructive lifestyle and a more meaningful existence:

*I had to make a choice when he came, and that was either the kid or the people I was with. That changed me. I cut them out and started to take care of him. God knows where I would be today if I hadn't got a kid [...] I feel I have learned to handle problems. Before, I drank, and the alcohol made me do bad things. (Mats)*

Mats presented choosing the father-role instead of a life with friends and drinking as a fundamental change. He seemed to experience that his efforts to change were a proof of his intentions of being a good father. By presenting a contrast to his choice – the people he stopped being with – he also portrayed himself as mature in comparison. This is an example of how informants' good intentions for their fathering contributed to positive self-evaluation as parents.

**The Changing Father-Child Relationship in the Present** Most fathers in our sample reported a change in the father-child relationship as the child developed and became more autonomous. They described the development as negative and referred to a general experience of the relationship as more conflictual:

*For the first 18 months I felt I had an extremely close relationship, and I was the person she came to when there was anything. But that has changed with time [...] in the sense that we often fight [...] there are few days now that are just fine [...] it already starts at daycare, she doesn't want to go home and acts up [...] She creates more work for me, by making it difficult for me. (Kenneth)*

Kenneth described the father-child relationship as something that went from pure to spoiled by conflict. The child's expressions of will seemed to be connected to more conflict. The quote exemplifies how informants struggled with their children's increasing autonomy: rather than accepting this development as normal and positive, it seemed to create insecurity for them. With growing independence, it appeared that the child was experienced as increasingly and deliberately provocative.

**Fear of the Future** Most of our informants reported that their aggression contributed to an expectation that the father-child relationship would deteriorate in the future. Hans said he anticipated that his problems would damage the close relationship he felt he had with his child: *"I don't believe that I have let her down in any concrete sense yet. That will probably happen. At some point in time this will happen"* (Hans). All informants who acknowledged physical violence toward the child described their fear of having damaged the father-child relationship beyond repair:

*I hope he remembers me for what I do right rather than what I do wrong. That he remembers this as a good period (cries). [...] He has been damaged by the episodes where I like didn't have full control over myself and my feelings [...] I wish I had never become so mad that I hit him. What I wouldn't have changed as a father is everything else, at least 90% of it.* (Preben)

It seemed that for Preben, it was up to the child to give a verdict regarding the quality of the father-child relationship after Preben's violence. Preben did not consider that he could help his son with relating to the violence but hoped that the child could acknowledge Preben's efforts at parenting. This quote illustrates how our informants thought of violence as being primarily physical violence and how violence toward a child was portrayed as separate from non-violent parenting. It seemed that informants who had beaten their children expected the child to hold an equally unintegrated view on their fathers' abuse, with the physical violence being an unintended exception. Preben's example illustrates how informants seemed to believe that ending physical abuse was enough to become an adequate parent and underscores their disregard for the lasting psychological effects of violence on the child.

## The Body

All fathers in our sample described how they episodically conveyed closeness and conflict between them and their children in non-verbal, bodily and seemingly non-reciprocal ways. The body was also described as a liability: aggression was difficult to control, could hurt the child, damage the relationship and cause informants' shame and guilt. Informants

mentioned that they used their body to force compliance and intimacy when they felt insecure.

**Closeness through the Body** All our informants described closeness to their children, often in situations where they were alone with the child, and where they perceived no need to talk. The fathers in the sample seldom referred to verbal interaction as closeness. Rather, they mentioned body-based interaction, such as rough-and-tumble play, sports or holding and cuddling the child, as close and intimate.

*She and I had been to the pool [...] afterwards we got incredibly sleepy. So, she came over to me in the café and leaned into me. She and I sat there half-sleeping for fifteen, thirty minutes. That was such a pleasant state. Then I and her talked a bit. Not much, just sat there [...] She is happy and relaxed, I am happy and relaxed, and all is just nice [...] I hope that she felt it the same way.* (Hans)

Hans described a moment he shared alone with his child. It seemed that he relaxed, and this relaxed state sounded like an exception from how he usually felt. The quote exemplifies how informants often experienced a wordless connection with their children but at the same time expressed uncertainty regarding the child's experience of closeness.

## The Body as Obstacle to Closeness

Ten of the men described episodes where they felt aggression toward the child. The bodily experience of aggression was conveyed as threatening, as informants said that they were unsure if they were able to contain their aggression.

*My immediate reaction is completely fucked up. Spontaneously you want to grab that hand and just do this, because he is just a little shit and I can just do this (makes squashing sound), and I can dominate, but that is something that would give me the creeps, so I don't do it, but it's a spontaneous reaction.* (Ola)

Ola described a need for dominance and simultaneous aversion for having this impulse toward his toddler. He seemed to experience his aggression as misplaced and inexplicable. There appeared to be an awareness of a power-dimension as a recurring experience in Ola's relation to his son. Ola's experience of aggression illustrates how informants were uncomfortable describing themselves as angry in relation to their children. Often, they seemed to fragment their aggression and described it as episodic. They also said that they never got at their angriest with their children, using subjective definitions of aggression, and suggesting that they felt they had control over their feelings. Ola expressed that he

never got angry with his child. When asked to elaborate, he used different words to describe levels of negative emotion toward his son: “*I get cranky, like, irritated, pissed off, hell knows, there are many words for angry, I get... when I get angry, I’d call myself raging, raging hell. That’s when I am angry.*” (Ola).

These informants described how they did not engage with the child’s perceived experience of the father’s anger:

*I try to hide that I am angry [...] but he experiences me as angry because of my deep voice [...] so he believes I am angry and therefore I try to hide that and explain to him that I am not angry [...] I actually am angry inside, but I don’t want him to see it.* (Lars)

Lars explicitly denied his anger despite knowing that the child sensed it. Lars did not consider that acknowledging his anger could contribute to more safety for his son. The quote illustrates the fathers’ need to hide negative emotions from their children. For Lars, his project of being a father who is not experienced as angry appeared to overrule his child’s need for acknowledgment of his experience of Lars’ anger. This seemed to be more of an unconscious attempt at self-presentation than a conscious attempt at manipulation of the child.

**Relating through the Body** Many of our informants said that their insecurities in relation to their children were seldom verbalized but expressed through the body. Some of the fathers reported that they felt hurt when their children did not respond positively to offers of closeness. Preben described how his push for concrete displays of the child’s affection could set off further rejection from the child: “*I don’t know if he notices [my feelings of guilt]. I over-compensate by cuddling him and hugging him, and that’s when he pushes me away, he surely does realize that [...] when I am totally off.*”

Preben seemed to experience a need for reassurance from his child. He did not use words to communicate his need but expressed it bodily by imposing hugs on the child. It appeared that he did not envision how the child was feeling but sensed the inappropriateness of his behavior from the child’s reaction.

Several of our informants also described how they acted on, rather than represented the child’s negative emotions toward the father. They acknowledged the child’s negative emotional reactions but kept from elaborating them into meaningful representations of the child’s experience. Instead, they described the child’s behavior. The child’s feelings were described as irrelevant, and the child as an object that had to be controlled. Thus, it appeared that bodily interaction became non-reciprocal and lost the relational quality presented in descriptions of closeness: “*I put him in his place. Lift him on his bed. Then he is not allowed to leave his bed until he gives in and calms down. And if he tries, I lift him back. And I raise my*

*voice.*” (Arne) Arne seemed to experience his child’s reactions as an inadequate aspect of the child’s personality. He described a need to stop the child’s emotion rather than engaging with it. Arne conveyed that perfect children do not lose control over their feelings, and his child’s emotional outburst was described as a deficiency in the child that he needed to stop rather than understand.

Most of the fathers in our sample described an obligation to make the child understand what was right and wrong. They conveyed that this goal justified the use of force and punishment: “*I must calm him down. Maybe I must make him understand that what he is doing is not right. Then I get reactions from the child. Then things go out of hand.*” (Arne) Arne seemed to feel that if he made his son understand the rules, the child would manage to calm down. All of these fathers mentioned the use of punishment with remorse, and conveyed a sense of having to act despite themselves: “*I tried out all the tricks in the book, ended up with forcing him to sit in a corner, and I had to shout, I, like, had to, I don’t like using that voice [...] I don’t like being mad.*” (Preben).

Preben and Arne described how they forced the child’s body into stillness to make the child understand a rule. It seemed that they felt that the child’s behavior called for a socially sanctified aggressive response. Preben’s description of his use of shouting reflects a shift from the mental and abstract (verbal content) to the physical and concrete (volume). These quotes illustrate how informants described that they initially attempted what they believed to be sensitive parenting but did not find that effective. They expressed how they resorted to using their bodies, often unpremeditated, to restore their sense of control over the child. Punishment was described as more common-sensical parenting, maybe because it appeared to have immediate effect on the unwanted behavior.

## Ideas about Fatherhood

Most of our informants talked about their fathering as the avoidance of appearing weak. They described how they hid their insecurity, and fear of failing permeated the descriptions of their fathering. They said that failure included not having control over the child or a situation involving the child. All the fathers mentioned feeling guilty when they experienced that they were causing their children pain. Guilt was explicitly related to aggression and separation. Fathers expressed that they handled their feelings of guilt solitarily.

**The Strict Father as a Good Father** Our informants described how their being strict was connected to a sense of being respected and in control. Nine participants described themselves as rigid and dominant in relation to their children. They described everyday situations related to mealtimes, preparation for kindergarten, or bedtime where they were

deliberately dominant without trying to take the child's perspective.

*I am a dominating guy also when it comes to parenting. [...] I wonder if that is more present in me than in others, but one is also afraid to fail [...] I don't open for others' input the way I maybe should. Once I have decided on a course it stays that way [...] even when I feel I could give in. (Geir)*

Geir described how admitting mistakes or giving in equaled weakness. It seemed that for him, failure was having to admit mistakes, while being dominant was not considered as failure, but as avoiding that others perceived him as weak. Four fathers in our sample described themselves as generally dominant but inconsequential as they frequently allowed their children to transgress the father's rules. They described how these transgressions in turn gave rise to anger toward their children. They said that they felt they did not manage to be strict enough.

*I try to be strict and then they charm you, like, that you go «ok, whatever, go ahead». I can't bother to stop them, so often it turns out that I go in and am strict afterwards, I knew what they would do, but I still get mad. (Preben)*

It seemed that Preben set unclear limits for his children. When his children became too active for him, he became angry and authoritarian. Preben's experience illustrates challenges fathers had with being predictable and stable adults.

**The Insecure Father as a Weak Father** Where aggression had become a fixed aspect of the father-child relationship, the fathers said that they anticipated new conflict. Kenneth described how he experienced absence of conflict as a break between conflicts with his child. *“All is harmony [...] but then I think: “well, when will it turn?” (Kenneth).*

Most informants mentioned that a focus on not-being-aggressive and never knowing when one became too aggressive contributed to an experience of insecurity:

*All the time there is insecurity related to...is it right to do this, or is it right to do that, and ... to yell now, is that right? And in a way... should I let this pass, is it right to... yeah, anything really, related to insecurity. (Johan)*

Johan expressed doubts about being too permissive, indicating a fear that this would have negative consequences for the child in the long run. The possibility of aggression appeared to define our informants' parenting even when aggression was absent. Safe parenting was not described as exploring the child's mind, but as having control over the child's behavior. It seemed that there was an expectation that the child

would exploit permissiveness and enter a negative developmental path if she was not controlled. When fathers in our sample became angry with their children, nine of them described how they entered power struggles: *“In the middle of it I am so angry that most of all I must not show weakness.” (Karl)* Karl expressed that if he examined his child's experience, he would be weak. It seemed most important that the child understand and respect the father's position, rather than vice versa. This example illustrates how the informants' insecurity was not expressed verbally, but through dominance.

**The Absent Father as a Bad Father** Those fathers in our sample who did not live with their children described being present in the child's life as good parenting. Accepting limited contact with the child was labelled as not-caring for the child.

*If you have a child and don't care if you have the child or not, then you sure shouldn't have a child. Then you should get beaten [...] if someone is in my situation and is okay with not being with the child for a week, they should burn in hell. (Ola)*

For Ola, physical presence in the child's life equaled care, and seemed to be important for his experience of being a good father. He did not openly consider the possibility that little contact could be safer for the child in the context of Ola's substance use and aggression problems. All seven fathers who had visitation with their children described a need for close and untainted contact with the child during visitation. Their talk focused on the child having to adjust to a divorce and ascribed children's problems to the break-up rather than the violence. These fathers described how they did not want to spoil the little time they had with their children by addressing how the violence had affected the child: *“I feel that I am not being there for her enough [...] that I am a bad father [...] I try to be positive and happy when she is around. I don't want her to have any negative feelings.” (Tim).*

Tim's example illustrates these fathers' need to offer their children a positive experience during visitation to feel good themselves. For these fathers, positive seemed to be equivalent to absence of negative feelings, rather than a safe integration of the child's positive and negative experiences.

## Perceiving the Child

Informants expressed that they were having a special bond to the child. Their talk showed how they tried to embrace the child as an intentional agent but rejected the child's subjectivity and intentionality when it was directed against the father: then, the child's experience was described as irrelevant or misconstrued. Their accounts often assimilated the child's experience to match with the fathers' experience of a situation.

**Making Sense of the Child** Six fathers in our sample described general difficulties talking about emotions and acknowledged this as a vulnerability in their relationship to their children: “*I don’t like talking about feelings [...] what you can grasp and hold and feel in your hand - that is ok [...] I know that feelings [...] I am not good at dealing with this in relation to the kids.*” (Karl) Karl described feelings as alien and uncomfortable and seemed to struggle with experiencing feelings as meaningful. He described this as an inability rather than a choice. For other informants, the child’s negative feelings were not talked about as a source of information about the child: these fathers described an experience that the child’s feelings manifest their failure to be a good father. All our informants conveyed that the meaning they generated from the child’s emotions was primarily about the father and secondarily about the child. Our informants described how the child’s negative emotions were perceived as a critique of the father. They said that they often resorted to ending the child’s emotion rather than engaging with it. Some of the fathers described anger toward their children as if they were in a relationship to an adult:

*She probably thinks that I am an idiot and I think she is an idiot. That happens when I start shouting and she starts screaming and we can’t manage to stop [...] I get so mad and angry that [...] I could have beat the kid up [...] And she doesn’t stop [...] and I get more and more angry [...] when it is not about me I can be understanding and try to get her to focus on other thoughts, and I give her alternatives [...] I can do everything the right way because I am not part of it. Interviewer: “And when you are a part of it? Then I can’t do any of this.” (Kenneth)*

Kenneth seemed to experience it intolerable when the child was in opposition toward him. Then, despite Kenneth’s understanding that his child needed his support, he experienced that he did not manage to provide this. Similarly, twelve of the fathers described how they could tolerate the child’s expression of certain feelings, but not of others:

*She is very independent and grown-up [...] there is no whining [...] and I have not experienced any ingratitude [...] she can become, like... yeah, short and snotty. Playing it tough. And then I take her to the side and tell her “you don’t need to play it tough; I get you anything you point at, and we are buddies.” (Thomas)*

Thomas described how he experienced a need to stop his child from expressing a feeling he disliked, rather than engaging with the child’s experience. He presented her compliance to the child as something he rewarded and as a prerequisite for his being her “buddy”. This quote illustrates how fathers in our sample were coercive toward their children seemingly without experiencing that as coercion.

Four of the fathers outlined models of their children’s emotional experience as separate and meaningful even when they were challenging the father: “*And she hunches because she is afraid of daddy turning angry so incredibly quickly for something she doesn’t understand. And then all this shame and guilt appears inside of me, and everything that hurts.*” (Johan) Johan appeared to notice his toddler’s emotion and contextualized it. His perception of the child experiencing him as angry seemed to set off feelings of guilt. While he represented his child’s feelings, he could not help the child in the situation as he seemed to be overwhelmed by guilt.

**Assimilation of the child’s Perceived Experience** Informants mentioned how they experienced the child being different from them as unsettling: “*I like that she is very different from what I was like at her age, because I was a hell of a difficult kid [...] She is so cautious and proper [...] I react to this. I find her not natural.*” (Thomas) Thomas said he wished a different childhood for his daughter than what he had had. At the same time, her being different from him made him react. It seemed that it was difficult for him to acknowledge their differences.

In their talk, eight of our informants assimilated the perceived experience of the child to theirs. “*She has trouble concentrating [...] no problem for me, I experience her as a bit hyper, but then I was like that as a kid and I am a bit like that now, so we two go together pretty good.*” (Peder) Here, the child’s problems were not explored as possible signs of maladjustment due to adverse life experience, but as normal since Peder could relate to them. He seemed to assimilate his child’s experience to his rather than consider the child’s experience as unique and different from his.

All the fathers in our sample pointed out similarities between them and their children: “*I and him are so similar; both are stubborn, both want to be right. I don’t understand him well enough despite us being so similar.*” (Preben) For Preben, his perception of similarity between him and his son seemed to provide a sense of connectedness. Preben did not consider that his son may not have felt the similarity Preben experienced. The inherent contradiction between similarity and lack of understanding underscored that understanding the child seemed to be secondary.

Five men in the study pointed out how they experienced similarity to their children regarding aggression. They expressed concern that they had passed on their problematic aggression: “*When she reminds me of myself, when she gets furious, that is the most difficult for me, when I see myself in her.*” (Johan) Johan said that when his child was extremely angry, she was like him. The quote illustrates how informants who were concerned with transferring their problems unto their children may have experienced the child’s anger as the father’s anger appearing in the child, blurring the borders between father’s and children’s experiences.



**The child's Agency** Seven of our informants described their children's intentionality primarily in the context of conflict: *"Sometimes I feel that he can't do things because he doesn't want to. And I can feel an irritation, because I know he can do it. And he knows he can do it [...] and it becomes a fight"* (Geir). Geir appeared to avoid exploring his pre-school son's intentions. His talk illustrates how the fathers often understood the child's defiance as intended against them and did not understand behavior as an expression of the child's underlying needs.

Those of our informants with children who could not yet speak expressed frustration related to not understanding the child: *"I get frustrated when I see she wants something. I don't understand what she wants [...] I feel I let her down in these situations."* (Tim) Tim described a small child's body language and prosody as unintelligible and this seemed to trigger his frustration. The child appeared to be a subject Tim struggled to understand but also an irritating object giving rise to a sense of inadequacy in him.

Two of our informants described their children's agency as meaningful: *"If I am an angry person, he becomes an angry person. He gets very sad when I get angry. I can see that he gets sad and then he gets angry back at me. He feels rejected, too."* (Ben) Ben acknowledged his child's feelings and made a distinction between what he thought the child felt and how the child responded. He also expressed that he understood how his aggression influenced his son's development negatively. Johan, in contrast, described how his daughter's agency triggered his aggression when it conflicted with his intentions:

*She is supposed to sleep and so this little person is jumping up and down in bed and doesn't want to lie down [...] and I just get so fed up and so angry and then I scare her back into the bed, really angry.* (Johan)

While he adequately understood it, Johan seemed to be unable to accept his daughter's agency. Her refusing to do what he thought she should, appeared to cause him anger he could not regulate.

### Others' Perception of the Father as Parent

Informants described how awareness of others' experience of the informants as fathers made them conscious of their problems with parenting. Children's explicit expression of doubts regarding fathers' parenting abilities seemed to unsettle fathers. If others expressed such doubts, they were often disregarded. Informants said they seldom involved others in their emotional problems.

**The Child as the Critical Other** Informants' talk revealed how their identity as good fathers was related to the child sharing the father's experience. Many fathers described the father-child relationship as purely positive.

*It is me she talks about, she never talks about her mother and when she is with her mother, she always talks about me. And she said «Daddy» long before she learned to say «Mommy» and most words she has learned she has learned from me. We have this contact that is just complete magic.* (Peder)

Peder claimed being more important for the child than the mother, despite very limited visitation. Peder's apparent need to have a special place in his child's life seemed to influence his experience of how the child viewed the relationship to him. It seemed to be unsettling for the fathers when the child made their shortcomings explicit.

*And there was this situation that scared me. My wife was angry with me [...] and she is whining, and I answer back [...] the child turns to her mother: "Don't answer him", the child says. "Then he stops. [...] if you stop it now, he will stop. If you don't answer him, he will stop." And I wonder... does the child think the same? That it is me who is being difficult?* (Hans)

Hans seemed to find it difficult that the child experienced him not as subject that could be understood but as object that needed to be dealt with. He described how he experienced this as unsettling. The child's experience seemed to be more difficult to defend against than the adult-partner's and forced the father to consider it as a possible truth.

**Others as Threat** Hans also described how he found that his wife manipulated the child out of a safe relationship with him: *"The mother has taken a complete grip on the child [...] she is creating an abyss between the child and me."* (Hans) The mother's behavior was not seen in context with his aggression and periodic alcohol abuse. This, it seemed, allowed Hans to experience it as a purely hostile act against the father. This quote illustrates how informants often held the child's mother responsible for problems in the father-child relationship. Also, systems could be talked about as a threat:

*Child protective services said that I was like violent toward the wife, the kid, and, like others were scared of me and blablabla [...] I really had the urge to just beat all and everyone who were in that room, tear off my shirt and stand there in the singlet and show them some real white-trash beating, beat them up. I thought: "Hell, what are you thinking of me?"* (Ola)

Ola appeared to experience others' perception of him as a violent man as provocative. He dismissed the possibility of him being an unsafe father and reacted with seemingly wanting to destroy the negative representation others held of him. The quote illustrates some of our informants' impulse to reject others' experiences of them as unsafe parents.

## Discussion

The men in our sample struggled with envisioning their children's experience and fathoming the impact of their behavior on their children. This is in line with mentalization theory's claim that poor representation of others' feelings, intentions and beliefs associates with insensitive parenting (Slade 2005) and use of violence in intimate relationships (Fonagy 1999). The fathers also described a limited ability to attend to, decode, and sensitively adjust to the child's body language, and their examples of transgressions of the child's bodily integrity indicated poor implicit embodied mentalization (Shai and Belsky 2011). Furthermore, our findings supported empirical studies of partner-abusive men's limited capacity to adequately decode social interaction in general (Fite et al. 2008) and particularly in relation to children (Francis and Wolfe 2008). Our informants may have had a limited ability to grasp and make meaning of ostensive cues as described by Fonagy and Allison (2014) as emotional signals bearing relational content. From this perspective, our informants' problems with understanding ostensive cues may have contributed to their insecurity in relationship to their children, their representation of others as untrustworthy, their tendency to feel rejected, and their inclination to avoid relational content (Fonagy and Allison 2014). Fathers in our sample described how they often treated the child as a concrete body rather than a feeling and thinking subject. It has been suggested that acting and representing may afford different central-nervous processes and meaning making from these processes may differ when the child's emotion and behavior is acted upon rather than mentally represented (Merleau-Ponty 1945). For example, when some of the fathers described "having to hold" or "having to push" their children, the acts of holding and pushing may have reinforced their perceived need to primarily control the child's body and behavior and inhibited an understanding of the child's mind, thoughts and feelings.

Moreover, our findings were in line with empirical studies that demonstrated how rage in partner-abusive adults can be understood as maladaptive regulation of own anxiety (George et al. 2000) and that partner-abusive men often have challenges with understanding and regulating their own fear and anger, thus becoming poor models for their children regarding affect-regulation (Katz and Windecker-Nelson 2006; Maliken and Fainsilber Katz 2013). Our informants often reacted with

anger to the child's emotions or dismissed them as irrelevant. Their expressed need to control the child and their experience of being inflexible parents resonated with an attachment theory perspective on partner-abusive men (Fonagy 1999; Gormley 2005). Men in our sample feared and expected to lose closeness to their children, in accordance with what is found in patterns of anxious attachment (Gormley 2005). Their inability or unwillingness to engage with their children's underlying mental states is typical among adults with avoidant attachment styles (Gormley 2005). Both anxious and avoidant patterns of attachment in adulthood have been conceptualized as relational strategies to deal with the fear of losing a valued relational bond and have been linked to partner abuse (Babcock et al. 2000), and to harsh and insensitive fathering (Madigan et al. 2011). In addition, others who raised concern for the father-child relationship were commonly perceived as critical and threatening, and disregarded. Our informants' consciousness of others' perception of their fathering thus contributed to their understanding of themselves and their relationship to the child, illustrating Sartre's (1943 / 2003, pp. 245–452) concept of being-for-others.

From a gender perspective, our informants' experience of the father-child relationship reflected traditional masculinity-norms that normalize disregard of others' emotions (Freeman 2008). Rather than admitting their insecurities or perceived shortcomings and taking an intersubjective stance, men in our sample invoked their culturally sanctified prerogatives for dominance in the family by disregarding others' subjectivity, as has been described as typical masculine strategies in gender theories (Freeman 2008; Josephs 2007). Additionally, the findings that the fathers acted dominantly in the family and felt increasingly excluded from the emotional domain mother and children shared, further illustrated what has been described in theories of gender and parenting (Freeman 2008; Josephs 2007). Their lack of acknowledging mistakes and experiencing giving-in as losing face also fit with theories of male dominance as an established aspect of patriarchal societies (Freeman 2008). The findings from our study also reflect previous research on how traditional masculinity norms contribute to partner-abusive fathers' coercive tactics toward their children (Heward-Belle 2014; Katz 2016).

## Implications for Practice

There are a range of therapeutic interventions targeting fathering in the context of men's violence against women, but few have been evaluated and there are inconclusive findings on effectiveness of most programs (Labarre et al. 2016). Most interventions are group-based and time-limited and focus on reducing aggression and raising awareness of the consequences of IPV on children (Bourassa et al. 2016). While some interventions have shown promising results when it comes to self-reported change in parenting and co-parenting, our

findings suggest that interventions need to go beyond these goals and address fathering in everyday-life situations. In our sample, poor understanding of the child's intentionality and agency contributed to poor fathering also in non-violent father-child interaction. Our informants' difficulties with mentally representing their children is an argument for expanding therapy formats that are based on representation of the child and self-reported change by adding dyadic sessions with father and child as is incorporated in e.g. Fathers for Change (Stover 2013) or Child Parent Psychotherapy (Lieberman et al. 2006). These approaches are sensitive for how fathers' personal history and context impact on their general fathering-experience and their perception of the child. Dyadic sessions allow therapists to witness fathers' parenting and address challenges in the room. This may be more helpful for men who struggle with talking about and making meaning of the child's emotions and may be safer for the child than letting fathers try out therapeutic input unsupervised at home. Arguments against dyadic therapy include safety concerns, the risk of taxing the emotional well-being of the child and their mother, and the possibility that such therapy be used as an argument for extended visitation. For a detailed account of prerequisites for dyadic therapy between partner-abusive men and their children, see e.g. Stover (2013). Where safety concerns do not permit dyadic sessions, the child's subjectivity and its impact on the father should be a therapeutic focus, as we identified fathers' problems with understanding and accepting children's emotions to contribute to unsafe father-child relationships.

The father's experience of the father-child relationship should be understood as functional for the father's identity. Any attempt to change that relationship from the outside may consequentially be experienced as an existential threat. The importance of the father-child relationship for the identity of men who use IPV, their problems with emotion regulation, their insecurities as fathers, and their claim to be important for their children's development could have harmful consequences for the child and their mother. Therapy should make conscious how fathers need the father-child relationship to regulate their self-esteem, and how the child gradually can be coerced into that function at the expense of the child's subjectivity and development being at the heart of the relationship.

Therapy for men who have been violent toward their partner should help fathers be more aware of their body in relation to the child, and focus on heightened tolerance, awareness and regulation of emotions. Particularly the expression of insecurity and powerlessness through aggression should be worked with. Understanding of how the violence affected the child contributed to shame in these fathers. Their difficulties with tolerating and regulating shame and guilt may interfere with their ability to empathize with their child's experience.

Rigidity and hiding insecurity were part of our informants' experience and tied to continued unsafe and insensitive parenting, also because men could value them as assets. Therefore, therapy should elaborate men's culturally shaped attitudes toward insecurity and weakness in the father-role.

### Strengths and Limitations

Men in this study were voluntarily, not court-mandated or otherwise officially mandated, attending therapy after IPV. While such voluntary participation also may be the result of partner's, or others' pressure, we find that it also implies some insight into the problems the use of violence poses for the family. Lack of such insight may associate with more severe violence and other risk factors and may affect participants' ability to reflect upon the parent-child relationship openly. Further, as data-collection occurred at one single point in time, the conclusions drawn from the data are limited, and may have been influenced by the informants' life situation at that point in time. Also, we did here only briefly examine the role of the informants' experience of co-parenting, which can be argued is an important impact on the parenting experience of partner-abusive men. Finally, men in treatment for IPV may present themselves in a positive light. Given the phenomenological nature of this study, we did not externally verify the presentation of family life given by our informants.

### Conclusions

Our findings suggest an understanding of partner-abusive men's detrimental fathering practices as underdeveloped relational skills. Underlying traditional masculinity values may reinforce these shortages and allow partner-abusive men to formulate them as paternal assets. The fathers' difficulties included poor understanding of children's feelings and intentions. This seemed to contribute to their problems with creating safe relationships to their children, which seemed to worsen as children developed a will of their own. Therapeutic interventions for partner-abusive fathers should therefore go beyond the aims of behavioral control over aggression and acknowledgement of how violence affects their children and the father-child relationship and include the building of basic relational competence. Overall, our findings suggest that the fathers' general mental representation of the child's intentionality and subjectivity was poor and unstable. Therefore, dyadic interventions should be considered by therapy providers as a complement to group or individual therapy for partner-abusive men.

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