Negotiating normality and deviation
– father’s violence against mother
from children’s perspectives
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Abstract


The aim of this study is to contribute to understanding of how children try to understand and interpret their own father and his (possibly) violent actions against their mother in relation to their general conceptualizations concerning fathers and violence. A general social psychological and interactionist approach is related to the children’s selves as the organizing and experiencing structures, the family as the arena for experiences and communicative interaction, and society as a structure of norms and general ideas.

The study is based on interviews with ten children, who were eight to twelve years old at the time of the interview and whose mothers had escaped from their fathers’ violence to a Women’s House. Qualitative interpretation of each child’s complex abstracted and generalized conceptualizations of fathers and violence enabled the understanding of individual themes as crucial parts of each child’s logically unified and conciliated symbolic meaning through the theoretical construct of negotiation.

The study results in the identification of three alternative theoretical approaches to meaning-conciliation. One can be described as ‘conceptual fission’ in the general conception of fathers, one as ‘conceptual fission’ in the conception of the own father and one as negotiating the extension of the opposite of violence, described as ‘goodness’. These negotiations can be understood as parts of distancing violence from either one subgroup of fathers, from the overall, essential or principle understanding of the own father within the child’s relationship with him, or from fathers altogether, including the child’s own. The children’s attempts to combine normalization of their father as an individual with resistance to his violent acts are interpreted as indicating the difficulty that the combination of the social deviancy of violence and the family context constitutes for many children.

Keywords: children, children’s perspectives, family relations, violence, family violence, meaning, fatherhood, childhood

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Åsa
1. Fathers’ violence against mothers as a social and research problem

The aim of this study is to contribute to understanding of how children try to understand and interpret their own father and his (possibly) violent actions against their mother in relation to their general conceptualizations concerning fathers and violence. After developing and discussing some essential aspects, the aim is specified at the end of this chapter.

Although families usually provide safety for their members, for some children family life involves direct or indirect physical, sexual or psychological violence or neglect (cf. Almqvist & Broberg 2004; Arnell & Ekbom 1999). Since violence can start or develop in relation to pregnancy and the arrival of a baby in the family, a child can experience violence in her or his family from the very start of life (cf. Christensen 1990; McGee 2000: 42ff; Stenson 2002). Violence occurring momentarily, outside the home and/or from a stranger can be easier to get over. The assertion that ‘it is over now’ can be comforting, and the home can provide a feeling of safety and a basis for routines to go back to (Garbarino et al. 1991). In addition, the family can unite for reassurance and mutual confirmation of interpretation (Bischofberger et al. 1991: 76). However, although children can develop intellectual and emotional preparedness for handling re-occurring violent events, if continuous violence takes place within the home, opportunities to get over the fear and to lead a normal life decrease (Garbarino et al. 1991). The vulnerability of the nuclear family means that children have relatively few adults in their social network (Almquist & Broberg 2000). Therefore, for most children in western societies who have experienced one parent’s violence against the other, the persons that can protect, explain and comfort, and on whom the child most depends for her or his well-being, are the perpetrator and victim of the violence. Such violence also takes place within a context from which children’s options to escape are limited, constituting a particularly difficult social problem for children.

Due to the cultural taboo that surrounds violence in families, hidden cases and a lack of consensus about the definition of violence (within families and among researchers) and also exposure to it (Fantuzzo & Mohr 1999; Leira 2002), the exact number of children experiencing violence in their families is
not known. However, with very few exceptions, children seem to be aware of their parents’ violence against each other (e.g. Christensen 1990; Hester et al. 2000; Hydén 1994). Although estimates vary according to definition, Arnell and Ekbom (1999) calculate that between 85,000 and 195,000 children experience their mother being subjected to violence by her partner or in her home in Sweden each year. This largely corresponds to a rough estimate of 10% of all children having experienced violence in the home at least some time and about 5% experiencing it often (SOU 2001b: 26). These estimates suggest that a significant number of children experience family violence in Sweden.

During the 20th century, changes in laws and in people’s consciousness enabled the identification of violence within homes as a problem, and research to focus first on the direct victims, such as women and children, and then on the social problems entailed by the ‘second hand victimization’ of children experiencing violence against their primary caregivers (cf. Hydén 1994; Persson 1992). Today, the multitude of theories and perspectives, among researchers as well as in general discourse, means that there is a lack of consensus with regard to understanding the mechanisms of violence in families (see, e.g., Loue 2001 for an overview). The impacts of heredity, environment and social constructions, of individual versus societal processes, of alcohol, drugs and psychological dysfunctions and of reciprocity have given rise to debates about the characteristics, definition and extent of the phenomenon and problem. So has the question of how men’s violence against women in families is related to violence in society, in the streets and against other men (see Emery 1989; Gelles & Loseke 1993; Walby 2002).

In a Danish study, Christensen (1990) concludes that the children of mothers who move into a Women’s House are not spared from the violence against their mother from her husband or cohabitant, who is often also the child’s biological father. Similar conclusions about most children being aware of most of the violence in their family have later been drawn by, among others, Almqvist & Broberg (2004), Holden et al. (1998), Hutchison and Hirschel (2001), McGee (2000) and Peled (1998), although some, such as Edleson (1999) and Peled (1998), stress that some children are unaware. Edleson (1999) further stresses that children can experience violent events in a variety of direct and indirect ways, such as seeing or hearing it occur, and also seeing or hearing its consequences, such as injuries, violence-related feelings and behaviours, police intervention or moving to a Women’s House. They can also be directly involved, or used as tools in the parents’ violence. A parent might use the child to get at, or get control over, the other parent by hitting or threatening the child, by taking the child hostage, by using the child to spy on the other parent, or by using the child as a weapon. In addi-
tion, a child can be forced to watch or participate in using violence, used to drive a wedge between the other parent and the child, or be told that everything would be all right if it were not for the other parent’s behaviour. A child’s awareness of father’s violence against the mother can include any such experiences. The violent acts can be of various types, ‘natures’, frequencies and durations, involving different escalation processes, consequences and ‘resolutions’. Also, the violent acts can have different characteristics, and the ‘roles’ of the perpetrator and victim and their relationships with the child vary (cf. Holden 2003).

Central to this study is an ambition to interpret children’s accounts and report results in ways that do not alienate the informants or the others concerned (cf. Weinehall 1997: 36). Hydén (1994) stresses that some expressions of disagreement, such as physical violence, are illegitimate. However, violence is subjective and perspective-dependent, and intimate relationships are perceived as intrinsically containing possibilities of conflict; most adults can be assumed to sometimes use force, threats or violence to effect their will. Accordingly, in this study, neither individuals fighting with their spouse nor their families are seen as pathologic, ‘violent’ or qualitatively different from ‘ordinary people’ or ‘normal families’ (cf. Hydén 1994). Further, discussing children’s understanding of their father’s violence against their mother in this study does not mean ignoring the violence of women and mothers. Any family member can use violence against any other, and some studies indicate that women and men use violence against each other in intimate relationships to a similar extent (e.g. Stets & Straus 1990; Straus 1993). However, inequality – physical, social and economic – and dependency are risk factors that generally make women and children especially vulnerable to violence in families (Black & Newman 1996; Walby 2002; Wallace 1996). Also, Stets and Straus (1990), Straus and Gelles (1990) and Wallace (1996), among others, argue that men generally have better opportunities to leave abusive relationships than women, and men’s violence against women in close relationships seems to have more severe and long-lasting physical, psychological and relational consequences. Therefore, drawing on Hearn (1998), this text discusses ‘fathers’ violence’ to attribute the violence and the responsibility for it to the men, thereby removing ambiguity about a special ‘male’ form of violence and acknowledging the plurality of men’s violence. In addition, since it implicitly stresses the child’s position and perspective, the term acknowledges power-related issues and children’s suffering from the violence (cf. Arnell & Ekborg 1999; Eriksson 2003). The terms ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’ are used to stress that such categorizations are relational and situational, but they do not acknowledge the mutuality that prevails in individual situations. Further, this study discusses children’s
‘experiences of violence’. This conception acknowledges the risk of direct victimization, but it is more inclusive than ‘witnessing’ and less vague than ‘exposure’, and also entails that over-generalization of ‘victimization’ can be avoided (cf. Holden 2003). However, when discussing the research of others, their definitions are used to refer to more or less specific situations of violence, and to various groups of perpetrators and victims.

Experiencing parents’ violence – risks and resilience

Experiencing violence in the family constitutes a complex risk factor for children. First, although their roles as risk factors for or as consequences of violence are debated, the relative commonness of substance abuse, psychological vulnerability and economic and social poverty in families with violence problems imply some of the circumstances that many children in such families live with (see, e.g., Christensen 1990; Flanzer 1993; Gelles & Loseke (eds.) 1993). Second, children of fathers who subject the mother to violence seem to be at increased risk of being direct victims of violence themselves (Edleson 1999b). In different studies, the overlap ranges between 20% and 70% (Eriksson 2003; cf. Avery et al. 2002; Cox et al. 2003). This may depend on different methodologies and definitions – with higher overlaps possibly referring to less severe incidents or acts, and lower to more severe abuse. In addition, the presence of physical violence in a family seems to increase the risk of other kinds of violence, such as psychological, material, economic and sexual (Avery et al. 2002). Although the relationships between different types of exposure are significant, they are often small (see, e.g., Litrownik et al. 2003). For example, Hughes (1988) and Ross (1996) stress that many, perhaps even most, child witnesses to violence are not direct victims themselves.

Even if violence is not directly aimed at them, children can be injured by accident or intentionally by one parent’s physical violence, threats, or belittling undertaken to control or emotionally disturb the other. Alternatively, during violent incidents both parents may be too pre-occupied with the violence, and on protection from it, to be able to respond to the child’s needs. Fear of violence and its consequences can be acute, as in fearing for the mother’s life, or it may be chronic, involving attempts to avoid new violent attacks. Thereby, experiencing father’s violence against mother can in itself, even if the child is not the victim of any direct physical violence, entail victimization in the form of psychological maltreatment (cf. Almqvist & Broberg 2004; SOU 2001b). However, Edleson (1999a: 866) stresses that defining witnessing as maltreatment ‘ignores the fact that large numbers of children [show] no negative development problems and some [show] evidence of strong coping abilities. [It may also] ignore battered mothers’ efforts to
develop safe environments for their children and themselves’. Adults’ functioning as parents and children’s well-being can depend on many factors apart from violence, and children can be affected, not only by physical violence, but also by fear and other factors (McGee 2000).

When it comes to how experiencing violence in the family affects children, Sternberg (1996: 299) states that, ‘Although there is consensus among clinicians that children who are victims of child abuse or witnesses of spouse abuse are at heightened risk for developmental problems, the pattern of symptomatology evinced by children from violent families is not as consistent as researchers would have predicted’. Edleson’s (1999a) review of 31 studies indicates a consistent finding, across various samples and the applications of differing methodologies, that child witnesses to violence in the family exhibit a host of behavioural and emotional problems, such as more anxiety, depression, trauma symptoms and temperament problems, and aggressive, antisocial, fearful and inhibited behaviours and lower social competence, when compared with other children. While the studies reached different conclusions about sex differences, few found differences that could be traced to ethnicity (op. cit.). Similarly, Wolfe et al.’s (2003) meta-analysis of 41 studies concludes that children exposed to violence in the family experience more difficulties than their peers, but that the overall effects in relation to emotional and behavioural problems seem small. While age, sex and type of outcome are not found to be significant moderators, co-occurrence of child abuse increases the levels of problems. Thereby, ‘exposure to domestic violence [typifies] the process of multifinality of development [and] is part of harm-producing contextual factors […] that interfere with normal development and lead to unpredictable, but generally negative, outcomes’ (op. cit.: 171).

The risks of children’s victimization through family violence can be increased by factors such as young maternal age and low education or income, and reduced by separation between the mother and her partner (Cox et al. 2003). Almqvist and Broberg (2004) suggest that the sooner the mother leaves a violent man, the better for children. Environmental stability, consistency and predictability seem to promote coping and adaptation, but social support – which is generally protective – may be difficult to obtain for children experiencing violence in the family (Osofsky 2003). In addition, while less perceived self-blame and threat seem to be related to less internalizing problems, a positive parent-child relationship can be protecting and self-esteem and locus of control seem to promote coping (Guille 2004). Overall, it is estimated that up to 80% of all children exposed to powerful stressors do not sustain developmental damage (Garbarino et al. 1992); further, Jaffe et al. (1990) state that many children of battered women do
not display elevated symptoms of maladaptive coping and stress. Christensen (1990) found that, even though the 394 children in her study had difficult living conditions and suffered considerable disadvantages, they had not surrendered but were ‘tough’. For some, however, problems may not manifest themselves until later on or, for example, in therapy (see Burman & Allen-Meares 1994). Higgins and McCabe (2000) found highly significant interrelationships between retrospective reports of childhood experiences of physical and sexual abuse, psychological maltreatment, neglect and witnessing family violence and adult psychological adjustment problems.

To complicate the picture further, Jaffe et al. (1990) suggest that fear and anxiety can be the direct effects of violence in the family, while indirect consequences take the form of parental ineffectiveness and sibling distress. In similar vein, English et al. (2003) found that violence in the family does not have direct effects on children’s health, but that it impacts indirectly on family functioning, the primary caregiver’s general health and well-being, and the quality of interaction with the child (see also Hershorn & Rosenbaum 1985; Morrel et al. 2003; Wolfe et al. 1985). Parents’ marital quality and interaction affect parent-child relationships directly, through exposure, and indirectly, through the parents’ psychological functioning as parents (Cummings & O’Reilly 1996). However, Guile (2004) stresses that although batterers often use their children for their own needs and lack empathy, maltreating a child by subjecting the mother to violence does not eliminate the possibility of positive father-child interaction from the child’s perspective, and that research about the relationship between children and the heterogeneous group of paternal perpetrators of violence is needed.

Children experiencing their parents’ violence do not think violence in families is a good thing, but rather frightening and upsetting. However, since they may learn that violence is a way to solve an argument without necessarily ending a relationship, the assumption of a generationally transmitted cycle of violence seems reasonable (Baumeister 1996: 278). Different studies have indicated that exposure to family violence and being abused, independently and in combination, can predict children’s and adolescents’ later violent behaviour and, especially among boys, justify acceptance of violence; and that male adult batterers are more likely than others to have grown up in homes with violence in the family (Edleson 1999a). Based on a meta-analysis of 39 studies, Stith et al. (2000) conclude that there is a weak to moderate relationship between witnessing or experiencing family violence in childhood and receiving or perpetrating violence in an adult heterosexual cohabiting or marital relationship. They caution against accepting intergenerational transmission of family violence as given, since many studies suggest that such relationships are based on anecdotal reports or on data drawn from
distinctive populations: ‘In general, growing up in a violent home tends to have a weaker relationship to being in a violent adult relationship than does having a positive attitude toward violence or a traditional gender attitude, but a stronger relationship than does having a masculine gender orientation’ (op. cit.: 648). Although there is a stronger relationship between growing up in a violent home and becoming a perpetrator of spouse abuse for men than for women, and for becoming a victim of spouse abuse for women than for men, the majority do not (Jaffe et al. 1990). In addition, being abused as a child appears to be more strongly related to becoming a victim of spouse abuse than is witnessing inter-parental abuse (Stith et al. 2000).

Straus and Gelles (1990) found that physical violence in the family is related to male dominance in the family and society, the presence of capital punishment, high rates of violence in the streets, and many living in poverty in a wealthy society. Therefore, social, juridical and economic differences, and also differences in general tolerance of violence, mean that knowledge about violence in families can not easily be generalized between countries (cf. Hydén 1994: 17). To conclude, however, researchers generally agree that experiencing family violence, or father’s violence against mother, is a risk factor and can have negative effects for a child; nevertheless, it is often hard to separate out violence from other influencing factors. On the basis of a holistic approach (Stattin & Magnusson 1996), witnessing family violence can thereby be seen as one risk or vulnerability factor that can be either explanatory in itself, or can have transactional, additional or interactional effects in combination with other risk or protective factors (cf. Lagerberg & Sundelin 2000). To deal with and further understand the complexity and heterogeneity in children’s reactions to violence and its long-term outcomes, Sternberg et al. (1993: 50) suggest that: ‘Perhaps the experience of observing spouse abuse affects children by a less direct route than physical abuse, with cognitive mechanisms playing a greater role in shaping the effects of observing violence’. There is also a general call for research about children’s perceptions and interpretations (see, e.g., Holden 2003). Since the meaning a child gives a situation or event influences the extent to which a situation becomes traumatic for a child, a situation is not intrinsically traumatic or neutral, but depends on the child’s apprehension and interpretation of it (Dyregrov 1997). Many children can cope well both during and after traumatic events (op. cit.), and witnessing parents’ violence appears to affect individual children differently (see, e.g., Christensen 1988; Edleson 1999; Jaffe et al. 1990; Stith et al. 2000). The close relationship between emotional and cognitive processes (see, e.g., Dyregrov 1997), means that closer understanding of children’s interpretations of family violence may help in comprehending differences in emotional and behavioural responses. Further,
obtaining insights into children’s perspectives on family violence is not only motivated because children’s perspectives on their experiences and on their own reactions to them seem to differ from e.g. their mothers’ (cf. Holden 2003; Jouriles & Norwood 1995; Morrel et al. 2003). It is also motivated by Giant and Vartanian’s (2003) finding that the way in which abusive parents’ aggressive behaviour is perceived is a more important predictor of lower self-concept than the frequency of such aggressive behaviour.

**Children’s perspectives and social research**

Children are assumed to be particularly dependent, especially on their parents, and particularly vulnerable to social problems; also, they have limited possibilities to form their own lives and to make themselves heard. ‘Society can be said to have a moral duty in covering the interests of the weaker part’ (SoS-rapport 1996: 12 [author's translation]; cf. also Eliasson-Lappalainen 1995). Therefore, the importance of acknowledging children’s perspectives and trying to understand them is now stressed at international as well as national level (cf. SOU 1997; SFS 1998: 453; United Nations 1989).

Expectations connected with social categories affect people’s lives, and for children today the constructed category of ‘childhood’ includes being seen as a mix of an individual actor, behaving in accordance with personal wishes and choices, and a cultural being, more or less forced to behave according to societal rules (cf. Frönes 1994). Children can and do experience similar situations in different ways. But the term ‘children’, referring to a certain group of people, phase in life, generation or relation (Frönes 1994; Tiller 1990; ), can also hide diversity in maturity of individuals, and in their experiences as girls and boys with different physical and psychological conditions and as members of ethnic, socio-economic, religious and other kinds of groups. In addition, since many frames of reference are available for any one individual (cf. Ahmadi 2000; Allwood 2000a), which of these has more impact on a child’s understanding in a given situation can not be taken for granted.

The variety of children’s experiences and the differences between the lives of those who are children today and the lives of those, e.g. adults and researchers, who were children earlier accentuate the importance of children’s own testimonies (Dahlgren & Hultqvist 1995) – in research and other contexts. Moreover, because the meanings of childhood are implicated in the meanings of adulthood, and because the relation is asymmetric, an understanding of children as active creators of meaning in their own lives and as competent informants is recommended for any research that includes a child perspective (see Tiller 1988). Alanen (1992) suggests that focusing on
children’s similarities with human beings in general might enable avoidance of implied incompetence and dependence, and also permit children to be seen as ‘social actors who act even when positioned unequally in relation to other (more powerful) groups in everyday social life’ (op. cit.: 88). Within current social research, taking children seriously thereby implies not only developing understanding of what it is to be a child, and how this varies across times and societies, and also seeing them as competent, contributing social actors and agents intersecting with the structures surrounding their lives. It further implies seeing children’s own wishes and expressed needs as relevant to the construction and implementation of social policies and practices (cf. Mayall 2000). To do so, children’s perspectives also need to be incorporated into theoretical development within social research. ‘Children’s perspectives within social research’ can thereby refer to a discourse that includes an interest in children’s handling of their experiences, an ambition to include children in research, e.g. as informants, and inclusion of children’s experiences of their general and specific living conditions in theoretical development.

Within this tradition, this study aiming at understanding children’s understandings and interpretations acknowledges the heterogeneity of the group, while dealing less with the characteristics of the children’s experiences in themselves and what such experiences can ‘do to children’ (cf. Hyvönen 1993: 6; Tiller 1991). Focusing on children as a social category and on their perspectives implies trying to understand how their understandings are rational in relation to the position they find themselves in. The starting point is that difficult circumstances may limit children’s forming of their lives, but must not exclude their competence. This focus on the ways children think and create meaning means that the study deals more with what being a child is like than with how children are, even though the two can scarcely be separated in reality (cf. Tiller 1990). A genuine interest in children’s points of view forms the overarching positioning of this study; and central to it is the perception of children as social agents and active and competent creators of meaning in their own lives and in the interviews (cf., e.g., Corsaro 1997; Hyvönen 1993; Tiller 1988; 1991). However, ‘children’s perspectives’ in research such as this must per se be filtered through the researcher’s adult interpretations. How this is dealt with in this study is developed in Chapter 3.
Conceptual contexts for understanding fathers’ violence against mothers in families

Meaning is created in the intersection between individual actions and general norms. Children’s perspectives on experiences of fathers’ violence against mothers within their general living conditions in the family can be assumed to be related to cultural and historical characteristics in society. Accordingly, a study based in Sweden must be related to general assumptions and discourses about fathers and violence in contemporary Swedish society. In this section, general images of fathers and violence, and how men and women create meaning of violence within intimate relationships, form the conditions for the complex mechanisms of children’s understandings of fathers’ violence against mothers in the family.

Today, the discourse about active and engaged fatherhood and equal parenting is largely consensual and relatively well-established at all levels in Swedish society (Plantin et al. 2000), and ‘gender role’ differences appear to be comparatively small in Sweden (Sandqvist 1996). As family and children become more important parts of masculine identity, a caring father today is, according to the official and legislative image of the ideal Swedish father, as well as to most fathers themselves, expected to spend time with his family and to be fair, open, engaged and sensitive to his children’s needs, and also to be a ‘frame-setter’ (Berg & Johansson 1999; Kullberg 1996; Plantin et al. 2000). The general and equal parental-leave insurance gives fathers good opportunities for emotional and communicative everyday closeness, and fathers themselves stress the importance of this (Berg & Johansson 1999). In practice, this discourse and social-political structure host a variety of possibilities for arranging fatherhood; the biological, economic, social, intellectual and emotional functions that children and fathers can fill for each other, directly and indirectly, can be met in different ways and to different extents (Allwood 2000b; Lamb 1997). The complex contemporary perspectives and expectations on fathers as carers, bearers of structure and cultural creators of fatherhood can be related to parallel historical changes in expectations of and the meaning of fatherhood and of being a dad and a man; and they include their absence as well as importance as carers (Johansson 2003a; Johansson 2003b; see also Hobson (ed.) 2002 for a discussion about fathers, fatherhood and fathering). On average, fathers take up less than 15% of a couple’s parental-leave insurance in Sweden; fathers in families with higher incomes or higher education take up more than those in families with lower incomes and education levels (RFV 2002). This highlights the complexity of the issue of equality between fathers and mothers (cf. Berg & Johansson 1999). Hagström (1999) argues that in the media, commercials
and in their own stories, dads come across as fundamentally different to mums, and that a ‘good dad’ needs to understand this to remain ‘a man’ when approaching parenthood. The contemporary discourse about fatherhood is intricate also in its relation to violence. According to Eriksson (2003), the general image of fathers and fatherhood as ‘neutral’ and ‘non-violent’ may have a considerable impact on understanding of the violence of fathers. ‘Fatherhood has often been given special treatment, so the state has not intervened against father’s (men’s) violence to women and children’ (Hearn 2002: 346).

Overall, children’s conceptualizations of their fathers seem to correspond to official views and ideals. Hyvönen (1993) found that most children at the ages 7 and 10, interviewed in a Swedish study, describe a fairly close relationship with their anti-patriarchally characterized father. Father is generally described as caring and understanding, and as ideally participating actively in the daily care of his children. Similarly, in an English study, children aged 14 presented their fathers as emotionally involved and participant in their children’s lives (O’Brien & Jones 1995) – although most children still appear to feel closer to their mothers. The difference between the two countries is constituted by a majority of the English children feeling that ‘earning money was the most important activity for fathers’ (O’Brien & Jones 1995: 137), whereas Hyvönen (1993) found that it was mainly younger children from working class families who viewed their father primarily as the breadwinner. Further, Goldman and Goldman (1983) found that, at least in their teens, children in Sweden appear to identify fathers in authority or leadership roles less than children in Australia, England and North America. Hyvönen (1993) found that the main picture is an anti-authoritarian father, which is not therefore without authority. Nevertheless, younger boys in particular describe their father as rigorous, angry and demanding, sometimes express ambivalence in valuing his good sides and his kinship, but despise his demands. While father is generally described as deciding equally much as mother in family matters, and some point to his masculine sides, such as strength and courage, it is mostly boys who think their father decides more and stress father’s ability to protect his family from threats and dangers, and to be the representative of norms and the judge of right and wrong. Whether such differences in the children’s accounts can also be related to specific behaviours of their fathers is to be further investigated. There are also other, more general, differences between girls’ and boys’ views of their fathers that may affect their perspectives on experiences of father’s violence. As an example, whereas boys appear to tend to view their father as someone to do things together with and connect his love to living up to his demands and expectations, girls view him more as their mother’s partner, a ‘family-father’
and an accessible communicative conversation partner, and conceive the emotional relationship as more ‘natural’ (Hyvönen 1993). In similar vein, O’Brien & Jones (1995) found that girls spend slightly less time with their fathers. Research about children’s understanding of fathers seems mainly to have focused on their perception of their own father. But within children’s perspectives on their own fathers, which generally matches societal ideals of generally caring and non-violent men who differ from women and mothers, the connection with violence seems possible and present to some, but mainly only indirectly and implicitly.

The concept of ‘violence’ generally refers to physical and possibly mental acts with the intention or perceived intention to cause, or that in fact result in, pain or injury to another person (Straus 1990, first proposed by Gelles and Straus 1979). The dimension of power also includes dominance, e.g. by restricting others’ choices to act, think or feel, or by denying them rights or liberties (cf. Baumeister 1996; Jaffe et al. 1990; SOU 1994; Wallace 1996). But, subjectively interpreted, it also refers to ‘a mass of different experiences in people’s lives [and] violence, what is meant by violence, and whether there is a notion of violence at all, are historically, socially and culturally constructed’ (Hearn 1998: 15). Although cultures generally do not have a positive attitude to violence, and general tolerance of violence has decreased in countries such as Sweden during the last century, violence can sometimes be interpreted as ambiguous or even justifiable, a lot of violence take place and violent crime even be on the increase (see Baumeister 1996: 272f; Franzén 2000; Knutsson 1984). No single act of violence can be consistently identified as right or wrong (Cerulo 1998), and violence, such as for self-defence, by the police or in war, is not always unlawful (cf. Hird 2002; Kühlhorn 1984). The juridical system’s view of good (victim) and bad (perpetrator) forms a dualism that is difficult to find in most real situations. The commonalities and differences between socially approved and illegitimate violence in societal norms can be traced to basing negative violence on the victim’s perspective and positive, or justified, violence on the other’s viewpoint (cf. Finkelhor et al. 1983; Franzén 2000; Straus 1990). Such dramatics-associated ideas can be strengthened or weakened (Åkerström 1997; 2000). The acting subject can be disregarded by talking about violence in the passive voice, or about the actor as the victim of a disease or alcohol or as non-violent, or by focusing on understanding the perpetrator’s reasons or on the form of the act, such as in terms of hitting or pushing. By focusing on the reciprocity of the situation or on the situation per se, rather than on its consequences, a violent act can be made understandable, normalized and justified or de-emphasized and re-defined. Thereby, stories, as value-laden instruments of meaning, of virtually identical acts of violence can be
attributed vastly differing meanings, and imply either condemnation or normalization. Further, irrespective of expected asymmetries in or a lack of relationship between perpetrator and victim or intention to harm, acts that logically and legally meets the prerequisites for abuse may be defined otherwise even by the victim (Cerulo 1998; Åkerström 1997; 2000). Sahlin and Åkerström (2000) put forward the view that defining or structuring the meaning of violence is influenced by general cultural praxis as well as the rhetoric exclusion or inclusion of actual or possible actions or event. In relation to gender, the general negotiability of violence is additionally complicated, since it is connected to masculinity, and its opposite to femininity (Hird 2002; Åse 2000). Jalmert (1984: 104) states that ‘Aggression has for a long time been considered – and has been – a typically male expression’, [author’s translation] and Hird (2002: 85) argues that society ‘at most encourages, and at least tolerates, male violence’. As an example, while most violence on TV takes place between unequal and male actors and victims, females’ motives for violence and feelings related to violent acts are presented more clearly than males’ (Cronström & Höijer 1996: 88). Further, Cerulo (1998) argues that men’s generally relatively greater likelihood of being suspected and convicted of deviant violence, and the well-established conventions of the deviant nature of ‘strangers’ and of force directed against male victims, while violence against females is often viewed as normal, defines women as ‘appropriate victims’ of violence’ in the domestic realm.

Although anti-violence is among the earliest lessons of childhood socialization (Cerulo 1998: 16), young people in countries such as Sweden generally face a non-negligible amount of violence in their everyday life (Weinehall 2002). Although research about children’s general understanding of violence seems scarce, Mullender et al. (2002) found that most children in a general population define threats to harm as equally violent as physical acts of aggression; other psychological abuse and controlling behaviour is seen as violence by a third. In Sweden, findings suggest that many 7–8 year-old children construct girls as good, and regard rowdiness as a charmingly inoffensive masculine trait – although conceptions about gender seem to have a stronger impact on abstract and symbolic ideas than on concrete individual experiences (Fagrell 2000). Also, a majority of children in 9th grade (approx. 15 years old) think it is easy for abused women to leave their husbands, and a few believe that violence is the family’s business and that society should not interfere, or are unsure about whether some women deserve violence, or about whether – most boys – forced sex is OK (Hultgren 2002). Such reasoning seems to correspond to the ambiguity, or rather negotiability, of general ideas surrounding violence and their relation to gender. On the other hand, Stigbrand and Stolpe (2000) found that girls aged between 16
and 20 overestimate the rate of fatal violence against women – perhaps related to about half of them having, directly or indirectly, experienced violence or serious threats among their own close friends or relatives. Uddén (1998; 2000) found that teenage boys in Sweden with documented violence and at correctional facilities use violence more than they accept it. They think it is acceptable for self-defence, to keep ‘respect’ and exert power; some see it as an acceptable response to insult or as revenge, but not when hitting first or against children or females, except for a smack if provoked. ‘When the connection to everyday life is not there several of the boys allow themselves to be critical toward violence as a means to gain power’ (Uddén 2000: 92 [author’s translation]). These results highlight the distance between general, principled views and perpetrators’ perspectives. However, Boulton and Underwood (1992) found that victims as well as bullies themselves can think that bullies feel happy and strong after bullying – suggesting that positive associations with violence are not necessarily limited to perpetrators alone.

Accordingly, children’s constructions of violence – similar to general images – seem to include both some variety and some relation to gender. As fathers ‘need to be’ men, but are generally not related to violence, and violence is associated with men and masculinity, but not with fathers, the connection between fathers and violence can be presumed to be problematic for children. But the ideas surrounding fathers as men and violence do have some connections; and the interpretation of violence in families is cultural and historical and surrounded by several contradictory and competing discourses (Walby 2002). Since what is now understood as violence against women and children within families has developed into being seen as a social and criminal problem relatively recently (cf. Hydén 1994: 2; Lennartsson 1999; Persson 1992; Zorza 1992), some acts and situations in homes that might until recently have been seen as in consensus with societal norms are now unaccepted.

The intimate relationship, and the expectations attached to it, seem to form an extraordinary context for the generally different perspectives between victims and perpetrators for interpreting violence between spouses in families. The idea of romantic love as the basis for intimate relationships is embraced not only by men who have repeatedly battered their wives but also by their wives (Hydén 1994). Combined with cultural and legal ambiguities, such as about the possibility of rape within marriages, it can prevent women from defining their experiences within the intimate relationship as violence or rape (see Finkelhor et al. 1983: 121). Although approval of violence has declined over the past decades, the belief that under certain circumstances it is appropriate for a man to hit his wife seems still to
be alive (Gelles 1997: 36ff). Lundgren (1992) argues that it is neither legally nor culturally totally unacceptable even in Sweden, and also suggests that beliefs about masculinity’s relation to virility – closely related to violence – enables interpretation of men’s individual acts of violence as okay. This may possibly be enabled by a lack of consensual general understanding of the meanings of violence and battering (Hydén 1994). Men’s and women’s interpretations of violent actions may be products of their individually, relationally and culturally determined modes of and expectations for their own marital life, and the link between action and context is of fundamental significance for the understanding of violent acts. Hydén (1994; cf. also Hearn 1998) suggests that a husband’s violence against his wife, and the way she reacts to it, both produces a social order and reflects an already existing social order in the surrounding society; related to these processes, marriage can play the role of the social category that conceptually determines the violence. Within the spectrum of possible interpretations of individual acts and situations in families, women generally tend to understand violence as an integral part of social relationships, whereas men generally define violence more narrowly (Hearn 2002). From different perspectives, what a woman victim describes as an intentionally harming ‘assault’, causing fear and depression in conflict with the joint marital project, the man perpetrator may describe as a ‘fight’. For example, by separating the narrative first-person from the subject of the act, or by classifying violent acts according to their seriousness, he can avoid seeing himself as an abuser (Hydén 1994; see also Hearn 1998; Skjørten 1989). Lundgren (1992) suggests that if a man’s reason for violence being, e.g., to help the woman to understand, it may be perceived as an act of love and care. Thereby, violence can signify masculinity both in its direct relation to power and in relation to the strong (man) taking care of the weak (woman). However, Christensen (1988: 101) stresses that repeated subjection to violence can give rise to differentiation, causing difficulty for women in determining when the line to violence is crossed. This possibility is further developed in the following chapter in terms of the theoretical construct of the normalization process.

Thereby, the connections between ideas about violence, about masculinity and femininity and about intimacy and our heritage of (accepting) violence by the stronger, such as authorities, men, adults and teachers, against the weaker, such as criminals, women, children and students (cf. Black & Newman 1996; Persson 1992), seem to form a possibility for principle rejections of violence to turn into complex ambiguities in specific situations. It seems reasonable to assume that children’s interpretations of violence are affected by their parents’ interpretations, and specifically by how the parents talk about it or do not talk about it. However, the differences between father
perpetrators’ and mother victims’ perspectives leave children with ambiguous guidance about how to understand violent incidents in their families. Since children psychologically can scarcely be outside observers of involuntary and unwanted possibly anguish-filling events within their living environment, but are compelled to react in some way to it, they are ‘indirect victims of violence’ – not as outsiders, but rather as ‘participatory witnesses’, whose position is not determined once and for all, but by their methods of dealing with the violence (Hydén 1994: 123). Considering the significance of perspective for understanding violence in general, and particularly within their own family, children’s unique position in relation to their parents’ violence, including participation and victimization as well as ‘witnessing’, forms a unique perspective for handling the general ambiguity about the (un)acceptability of men’s violence against women in families (cf., e.g., Litrownik et al. 2003 about children’s unique perspectives on violence in their families).

Participatory witnesses’ perspectives on their fathers’ violence

For a child, violence against the mother, or the possibility of it, can be a living condition or constant element of everyday life rather than a transient experience or crisis (Christensen 1988). The children in Peled’s (1998) study describe living with a routine of what they call ‘fights between mom and dad’ rather than explicitly focusing on violence or abuse. Similarly, Heinänen and Särkelä (1985: 84) conclude that ‘The children somehow seem to get used to these situations’ [author’s translation]. Although it would be impossible to identify specific symptoms, Christensen (1988) identifies some general conditions for the specific psychic circumstances that child witnesses of violence against their mother have to deal with during childhood. Apart from generally having experienced violence, these conditions include feeling anxiety and ambivalence towards their parents, the violence being silenced, and shame over the violence and over the family.

Although they may feel powerless, children – at different phases – respond to violence against their mother (Peled 1998), and use different active strategies to try to understand and handle their life situation and emotions (McGee 2000; Weinehall 1997). As observers, physical distance, by leaving the arena for violence in their homes, or cognitive distance, by trying to stand or escape it by forgetting or distracting themselves or actively pushing conflict-related stimuli from their consciousness, can mitigate children’s immediate experiences, but not safeguard them from witnessing or having disturbing thoughts and feelings about them (Hydén 1994; Mullender et al.)
2002; Peled 1998; Ungmark 1996). As participants, many children try to actively prevent, interfere with, calm down or stop the violence, or call the police, cry, scream or show psychosomatic symptoms that could have an impact on the violence or actively show support for or opposition to one parent, protect the abused parent, or prevent harm or alleviate feelings of anxiety, distress and helplessness (Christensen 1989; Heinänen & Särkelä 1985; Hydén 1994; Mullender et al. 2002; Peled 1998; Weinehall 1997). As a victim, some try not to think about the violence, others to forgive the perpetrator, pray to God for a better reality or deny reality through using drugs, daydreaming, lying or pretending to be in another world, or try to control emotions and situations (Weinehall 1997). In addition, breaking the secret can be a ‘space to breathe’ and some attempt to endure until coming of age to move out (cf. Ungmark 1996; Weinehall 1997). Christensen (1989) found that boys’ strategies aimed towards directly or symbolically exerting control via their own power, whereas girls’ tended to exert influence via their relationships with other people. Such gendered strategies seem to be in accordance, although possibly exaggeratedly so, with the stereotyped gender roles in society, and could perhaps be related to families with violence generally being described as more gender-role stereotyped than average. Whereas some girls seemed to redefine agitated or aggressive situations into caring situations, one of the boys’ strategies was to define content and rules by redefining aggressive situations as sexual situations (Christensen 1988: 53f). As an example, boys interpreting what their mother interprets as rape as a (normal) sexual act can invalidate or smooth over the anxiety-rising and the dangerousness of the violence.

The subjective experiences and understandings of children who have experienced their father’s violence against their mother have only fairly recently been studied through direct contact with the children themselves, i.e. as informants. In Denmark and Finland, the studies by Christensen (1988) and Heinänen and Särkelä (1985) can be considered pioneering for using child witnesses between the ages of 4 and 12 themselves as interview informants. Today, interviews with children ranging from 4 to 17 years old in Canada (Ericksen & Henderson 1992), Israel (Sternberg et al. 1994), USA (Peled 1998) and Wales and England (Mc Gee 2000; Mullender et al. 2002) contribute to the knowledge about children’s perspectives on family violence. In Sweden, Ungmark (1996) has interviewed adults who witnessed their parents’ violence as children, Weinehall (1997) has interviewed teenagers and Almqvist and Broberg’s study (2004) includes interviews with children about their emotional reactions to family violence. These studies focus on the children’s own realities, perceptions, experiences, interpretations and attempts to make sense ‘within their own categories of meaning’ (Peled 1998).
of the violence against their mother and their parents and living situation, and many include an explicit or implicit aim to develop help for them. Although these studies have mainly been relatively explorative and broad in focus and with relatively limited samples, some features or themes that can be related to processes of the children’s understanding of their specific experiences in relation to general images are presented and discussed here.

On the one hand, children’s perceptions of the father who has subjected their mother to violence seem to include love and care for him, and emphasis on his good qualities and interaction, e.g. as in being attached to him or feeling sorry for him and having warm feelings for him when he is sober (Mullender et al. 2002; Peled 1998; Sternberg et al. 1994; Weinehall 1997). On the other, children can hate their father for not knowing or caring for them, be convinced that father is able to kill the rest of the family, see father as capricious, manipulative, abusive, destructive, criminal and ruthless, awaking feelings of fear, anger and confusion, hurting their mothers, violating social rules and norms since children learn that abusive behaviour is wrong and the fault of the abuser (Peled 1998; Ungmark 1996; Weinehall 1997). Their ambivalence about both parents, often including complex and contradictory images of fathers as good and evil in extreme (Ungmark 1996), can be so difficult to accept and live with that they ‘[cho]ose to either see their fathers as ‘bad’ or [find] ways to contain, excuse, and reframe the fathers’ abusive behaviors’ (Peled 1998: 418). One way to handle complex and problematic ideas about fathers, and the contradiction of knowing something is wrong while the parents’ message is that it is not worth discussing or labelling as violence or abuse, is to perceive the violence as normal and acceptable (Ericksen & Hendersen 1992; Peled 1998; Weinehall 1997). Such strategies may resemble meaning-making mechanisms in accounts or techniques of neutralization employed by battered women (Peled 1998). Sternberg et al. (1994) found that, unlike those abused themselves, child witnesses to father’s violence against mother did not have more negative feelings towards father, but to mother. This may be related to perceiving mother staying with father a treachery and/or ambivalence in who causes the violence (cf. Ungmark 1996). However, even if de-emphasizing their father’s violence and searching explanations for it, Weinehall (1997; see also Mullender et al. 2002) suggests that strong feelings of hatred toward him and thoughts about revenge can be signs of assigning the responsibility of the violence to the father. These complexities and ambiguities may well be investigated further, especially with regard to how children relate these images to fathers in general, e.g. whether they assume fathers in general to be like their own. Also, the importance of girls stressing that they, although his violence impedes their feelings for him, try to accept their father’s bad
qualities, while boys are negative and indifferent to his existence and reject
and separate his cruelty from what they want to like in him (Weinehall 1997),
can be further analysed in relation to overall conceptions of fathers.

Although Heinänen and Särkelä (1985) conclude that children can learn
to predict violence, the overall picture of children’s descriptions of their
father’s violence is as unpredictable. Peled (1998) concludes that children
becoming aware of the risk of serious injury is related to worry and fear, and
once violence becomes part of the father’s fighting repertoire any parental
conflict has the potential to become violent. Not knowing what causes
violence and when violence will start means always being on guard, living
under impending threat, constant stress and readiness, and paying attention
to possible and varying signs of violence (e.g. Ungmark 1996; Weinehall
1997; cf. also Metell et al. 2001). Thereby, interpreting ‘normal’ situations
or actions as possible violent triggers can possibly partly explain why child-
ren think violence within the family is normal (see Ericksen and Henderson
1992). Investigation into the role of unpredictability in relation to their ge-
neral understanding of violence might bring about better understanding of
the processes of the contradiction between children’s understanding of their
parents’ behaviour and their own. As an example, Weinehall (1997) found
that although preferring equal and non-violent intimate relationships, child-
ren may think that violence in relationships, like in their parents’, is
unavoidable (see also Ericksen & Henderson 1992). Despite disapproving
mother’s adjustments to avoid violence, boys may, in contradiction, feel
capable, powerful, strong and in control from getting their girlfriend
frightened, passive and adjusted by violence, while girls can wish for a nuclear
family, without unfaithfulness and violence, but stay with abusing boyfriends.
These contradictions may be more understandable from deepened knowledge
about children’s approaches to conciliating general images with their own
experiences.

One of the features thought to be of greatest importance for children’s
interpretations of their fathers’ violence is that it is often not talked about at
all in their family (e.g., Christensen 1988; Peled 1998). The cultural taboo
(Leira 2002), and the families’ general isolation (Wallace 1996), leave child-
ren rather alone in dealing with the issue, with few possibilities to under-
stand and process it with the help of adults (Christensen 1988). While being
threatened to maintain silence can be described as the hardest, adults’ silence
inside and outside the families, and denial or concealment (Ungmark 1996),
of incidents can confuse and violate the integrity of children, since they may
lose confidence in adults and/or take on the blame themselves (Bischofberger
et al. 1991). However, although children’s emotional difficulties theoretically
might be related to feelings of guilt for causing or not preventing violence,
Peled (1998) found no mentioning of feeling guilty, even when being actively involved in fights; most children rather reported feelings of fear or worry. Christensen (1990), Peled (1998), Ungmark (1996) and Weinehall (1997) all found that the children had experienced little communication and discussion about the violence, and the boundaries of secrets implied by neither the mother nor the father defining the fights as violence or abuse to the children can confine children’s understanding and interpretations of their experiences (Peled 1998). As an example, normalization strategies can allow children to hold onto a normal image of their families only up to the point when they realize what other family relationships might look like or until the secret is broken, meaning a radical change of family rules and shift in the meaning of the secret. Starting to perceive their own family as deviant can, if there has been no-one to trust and talk to, mean that children have to try to figure things out themselves by seeking knowledge about their situation and trying new explanations for more credible ones (cf. Weinehall 1997).

Although children may use their parents as resources in different ways (Alanen 1992), the family discourse is significant to children’s developing emotional understanding (Dunn et al. 1991); and situations difficult to understand may cause anxiety (Christensen 1988). The language children have for their experiences may be that their father was ‘sick’ when he hit, that their mother was ‘tired’ after the violent incident, and even that the child’s anxiety about the violence was denominated as sour. ‘This way of making use of language makes it difficult for the children to arrange their experiences of the abuse in their general world of experiences’ (op.cit.: 25 [author’s translation]). Getting no confirmation of one’s interpretations can mean the start of doubting one’s own perceptions, and a father’s self-imposed right to interpret situations may make a child's reality invisible and her or his interpretations not valid (Weinehall 1997), which would make adjustment to the interpretation that is valid (e.g. the father’s) sensible. Christensen (1988) concludes that every child, from her or his own perspective, acts meaningfully, and with her or his actions, or lack of actions, seeks to create a predictability – needed for feeling safe and for keeping anxiety at a distance, but possibly lacking in their own home. Not talking about the incidents at all, or talking about them in ways that do not correspond to other – similar – incidents would be confusing for the children. And violence that is perpetrated by and against the persons a child is closest to and most dependent on, within a context from which the child can not escape, seems to be the violence they have the least opportunity to talk about and understand, leaving them rather alone trying to reach conciliated meaning.

Since traumatic images may dominate children’s cognitions in intrusive and distressing ways (Terr 1991), knowledge about children’s images and
understandings are important. The calls from Christensen (2002) and others for more detailed research about children’s understanding and handling of experiences of violence in their family, and from Sternberg (1996) for studies about children’s perceptions of their fathers in families with violence, imply that such knowledge can relate to several aspects in children’s experiences. The explorative studies mentioned above have revealed some themes that can form the base for theorizing children’s processes of understanding and meaning-conciliation of their fathers’ violence; e.g. how their general perceptions and understandings of fathers and violence can be related to their own experiences, which is the focus of this study.

**Aim of study**

Although many studies concerning violence against children can be found within a number of disciplines (see, e.g., Graham-Bermann & Edleson 2001 for an overview), how children themselves describe their experiences or their understandings or interpretations of the violence that they are ‘participatory witnesses’ to still needs further exploration in social research. In Sweden, the need for knowledge about children whose fathers abuse their mothers has been stressed by the Swedish Commission of Violence Against Women (SOU 1995) and by the National Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ 1994).

Children who have experienced family violence may be described as ordinary children with normal reactions to extraordinary experiences (cf. Dencik 1995: 95f). Because of the subjectivity of interpretations, more or less experience of a more or less severe nature may have more or less impact on their present and future lives, and it can not be taken for granted that these children, from their own perspectives, have experienced something qualitatively different from other children.

Relating to the field of knowledge described in this chapter, the aim of this study is to contribute to understanding of how children try to understand and interpret their own father and his (possibly) violent actions against their mother in relation to their general conceptualizations concerning fathers and violence. This aim includes the mutual interaction between the general understandings of fathers and violence, i.e. how children can produce and reproduce their understanding of the not always consistent signals about violence and about fathers in Swedish society, and their individual experiences of their own father and his actions. The study is based on interviews with children whose mothers have escaped their father’s violence to a Women’s House.

The study also relates to, but is not primarily aimed at discussing, the relation between what the children perceive as ‘normal’ and ‘extreme’ when it comes to fathers and violence, how they handle it, and how their
experiences and interpretations are similar to or differ from their mothers’ and fathers’ experiences and interpretations. Such aspects can be related not only to their attitudes, but also to the children’s self-image. If the dynamic processes of understanding, of attaching or creating meaning as ‘inner reality’, can deepen understanding about the impact of these ideas on children’s psychological and social life as reactions to their ‘outer reality’, such knowledge can be used for understanding children in general as well as children in Women’s Houses and in child health, social care and psychiatric environments. Further, children’s understanding of ‘extreme’ experiences can indirectly tell us something about some of the ‘normal’ cultural ideas about men, fatherhood and violence (cf. Jeffner 1997: 15). Such knowledge can further be of benefit not only in child support settings, but also in social research in general.

The aim of this study necessitates balancing the complexity and diversity of emotional and behavioural difficulties that experiencing violence in the family can mean to children against their strategies for coping. The following chapter specifies the theoretical framework for understanding how children, as cognitively active subjects, may understand and create meaning in the intersection of general ideas and specific experiences of fathers and violence from a social psychological perspective.

**Layout**

In Chapter 1, discussions about the complexities of experiencing parents’ violence, children’s perspectives and the complexity of social images of fathers and violence constituted the basis for introducing contemporary research about participatory witnesses’ perspectives on their father’s violence to introduce and explicate the focus and aim of the study. Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical concepts of generalization, abstraction and negotiating processes, which form the starting point for designing the collection of the empirical material, and that are related to the specific area of children experiencing fathers’ violence in the family to introduce the theoretical possibilities of normalization and resisting processes. Chapter 3 consists of a presentation and discussion of the methodological approach and research-related practical and ethical decisions during the processes of planning, sampling, interviewing and analyzing the qualitative interview-material.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are structured according to the different approaches to meaning-conciliation of general ideas and specific experiences of fathers and violence that form the result of the interpretation of the empirical material as a whole. These chapters include the interviews with the children, in their complexity and dynamics, and the individual interpretations of them, as well as discussions about the approaches they represent.
In Chapter 7, the analysis returns to the initial theoretical concepts of the study, and from a re-conceptualization of these, a tentative framework for understanding the children’s different approaches to meaning-conciliation is suggested. Chapter 8 discusses the contributions of the study in relation to some general features of the material and as a result of the research process.

The validity of the arguments in any study must be valued in relation to its theoretical and methodological approaches. Regarding the knowledge discussed and developed in this study as positioned means awareness about the possibility of other perspectives, which – from other points of views – might be regarded as more relevant or valid.
2. The concept of understanding
– a theoretical framework

The starting point for this study is children’s exposure, in the context of their family and society, to situations, events and actions to which they – through interactional and internal processes – give meaning, which may then be used as a basis for their own acting (see Dahlberg 1985). This chapter outlines a framework, including the concepts central to interpreting children’s understanding processes, related to general ideas and life circumstances and individual experiences, and their relations. An interactional approach enables an analysis focused on cognitive understanding processes, including interpersonal as well as intrapersonal qualities and emotional aspects. It implies societal as well as familial and individual contexts, and permits understanding of the dimension of time. The aim of this theoretical framework is to provide an opportunity for an understanding of the processes of children’s conceptualizations that is both dynamic and expansive (cf. Hyvönen 1993: 143).

In this study, treating childhood primarily as a modern social phenomenon, in relation to time, context and other social categories means explicitly acknowledging children as a social category of active subjects (see Alanen 1992; Quortrup et al. 1994). And although Mead, like many other classic social theorists, might not seem to have much to say about children (see Ambert 1986; Alanen 1992: 12), the theoretical framework in this study is based on Mead’s interactionist social psychology. It has the advantages of a psychological approach for understanding individual processes, and of a sociological approach for considering external conditions (see Alanen 1992). Children’s possible sensitivity, special needs, strong feelings and complicated thought processes do not mean that they are incompetent and/or dependent. Therefore, the theoretical framework also aims at enabling an analysis in which children are seen as active human beings in special life circumstances that restrain the choices of children positioned in the context of the family.
Interpretation as giving social and individual meaning to symbols

The importance of social constructions for human reality and the existence of society as both an objective and subjective reality – the two corresponding to each other without being coextensive – has been stressed, inter alia, by Berger and Luckmann (1966). Without being subjectively interpreted, reality is meaningless, but objective reality sets a limit on how variable interpretations can be without rendering language useless. Differences in the bases for interpretation between groups and individuals create diversity in perceptions of the world. But also, a child, for example, can absorb a perspective in an individual coloration given by parents as an actor in the process of understanding. Such understanding is based on her or his own experiences as well as on others’ messages about it (op. cit.: 151). Physical closeness, as experienced by the child, to individuals available in her or his milieu can affect the child’s handling of emotional closeness, and how any information gained in interaction with different people is used. In addition, although significance can only be attributed by the interpreter, since children at the start of their lives are more or less presented with an existing arena for their primary socialization (Kovarik 1994), those who live with their parents will experience the influence of them.

The underlying understanding is that all human beings, children and adults alike, engage in similar processes when creating meaning. Berger and Luckmann (1966: 154ff) claim that a child does not internalize the world as one of many possibilities, but as the world. However, since many individuals often interact with the child, the world perceived by any individual is in reality (sic!) often multifaceted, complex, and maybe even ambivalent. With the child’s experiences or emotions as objective reality and another person’s interpretation of it as subjective, the child, already in the first feeling, has access to at least two views, the objective and the subjective. Also, from one point in time to another any person’s world changes. Contemporary individuals live in a world different from preceding ones. And what this means in terms of the reality in which these individuals conduct their everyday lives is far from clear. The interpretations of the parents the child has access to will differ over time. Since there are always preceding experiences, children, like adults, can be assumed to have a more or less dynamic relation to their reality. Accordingly, although ‘the first world of childhood’ may be described as relatively massively and indubitably real, the variety within and variability of it must also be acknowledged.

Cognition is about perceiving information about events and situations, selecting among it, and interpreting it. Through the process of interpret-
tion, including reading or expressing the significance of something in individuals’ different ways of directing their attention and interpreting, knowledge is gathered, and ideas and expectations about the world formed so as to guide future interpretations (Lundh et al. 1992). Since organizing experiences in patterns of knowledge and creating cognitive maps of our environment aid future knowledge, we are – throughout our lives – involved in trying to understand the world we live in by interpreting, structuring and connecting information to build meaningful contexts (Andersson 1979). Meaning is the most important substance in human reflective intelligence. The most important thing about human beings is that they are continuously creating interpretations and meanings, which is done in interaction and communication with other people – the processes through which symbols become significant (Mead 1934/1972). When an individual is confronted with something new, which does not offer a reminder of something known before, and that she or he is not able to understand based on earlier experiences, the unknown and unpredictable can cause anxiety. The risk of anxiety and depression can be reduced by understanding a stressful situation, by connecting the unknown to categories, e.g. to words, so that the new can be valued, interpreted and fitted into the already known, and then experienced as understandable, coherent and predictable (see Antonovsky 1987; Christensen 1988: 25). Without attaching meaning to situations, phenomena and symbols, every situation and phenomena would be new, and symbols, language and communication would be useless.

Meaning is the result of interpretation and understanding, the latter referring to processing acts of reasoning, and not necessarily corresponding to objective ‘truth’. The concept of meaning can include dimensions of thoughts, opinions, ideas or valuations about something or someone, but may also refer more specifically to dimensions of comprehensibility or the rationality of a whole. When understanding, individuals try to interpret signs, which in a broad sense can be words or other symbols, in order to give meaning to them. Generally, the concepts of interpretation and understanding can be used more or less interchangeably. However, in this study, interpretation primarily refers to processes of trying to understand things as they are in themselves, while understanding can also more explicitly include dimensions of reasons for and consequences of phenomena, processes or situations. The meaning of a sign is whatever the sign signifies or expresses, or is intended or understood to refer to, signify or express. Aspects of meaning also include information being perceived as true or false, possible directives for taking action, and expressing or conveying a mood or an attitude. This means that meaning can deal with accuracy or have implications for how a person acts and reacts in a social situation (see Berger & Luckmann 1966).
Accordingly, for example, attempts by children to understand and make the objectives and symbols of fathers and violence meaningful include the possibility of influence on their emotional states.

Meaning is not hidden within the object or word, or in the individual, but is created through and emerges in attitude-taking, i.e. in social, interpersonal interaction and communication (see Mead 1934/1972). And since meaning is related to the circumstances under which and to the individuals by whom it is produced or used, we can expect that words are given different meanings. Signs and symbols are developed through others’ functional categorizing and hypotheses about relations and contexts. When more than one individual understands a gesture in the same way, and they know they do so, the symbol has become significant (see Mead 1934/1972). Everything can be symbolic, but the significance of symbols depends on the individual’s interpretation. Language is important for the ability to understand and interpret symbols, and has to be developed in social interaction with other people. Only when two individuals get together and use language, are words given meaning. One stimulus affects both individuals in similar ways, and the significant symbols alert the same content of meaning for the sender and the receiver. Mead’s significant symbols of language constitute the objective and universal principle that exceeds the individual’s consciousness. Since communication is not possible without a common understanding of the meaning of signs, paradoxically, meaning is both the prerequisite for and the consequence of communication, forming the interpersonal dimension of meaning.

Communication can be physical or verbal, ‘one-way’ or mutual, and signs, as behaviour or language, can be said to be the ‘tools’ of communication. All communication takes place within a context, which means that no sign or symbol is perceived or interpreted by the individual without regard to circumstances. As meaning depends on its social context and the individual ‘carries society’ within her- or himself, personal thoughts – as ‘internalized conversation’ – contains reflexivity similar to that of interpersonal communication. Communication can thereby also include an individual’s communication with her- or himself, when using prior information to understand a new sign; the basis for generalization and abstraction processes is the individual’s own prior understanding. If there are inconsistencies between prior knowledge and the sign, negotiation might be necessary. When the sign has been interpreted, it has been given a meaning, which will form the individual’s future values and assumptions about norms, expectations and behaviour. In reality, the interpersonal and the intrapersonal processes are not sharply distinguished from each other, either in time or as proceedings. Any meaning given is also used in future communication. If it
results in non-functional communication, it must be revised, or communication will continue to fail. Once they are established most meanings are taken for granted, even though everyday language is not based on very strict definitions (Mead 1934/1972).

An individual is never confronted with a completely new situation, experience or phenomenon. Confronted with any new phenomenon, the individual will seek to use prior experiences and the interpretation of it, i.e. prior understanding, both to understand that phenomenon and in order to calculate what to expect next and to guide future behaviour. Throughout an individual’s life, there is an accumulation of kinds of interactive possibilities that form the basis for a more and more nuanced, or at least more firmly based, understanding. This means that the understanding of any sign is always in progress and there is really no start and no end to the process of understanding. Further, children as well as adults are not only influenced by their milieu, but they can and do also influence it by their interpretations and usage of concepts. Individuals are influenced by their milieu in a direct way, e.g. when a concept is used by someone else, and indirectly, e.g. in the feedback they are given on their own usage of the same concept.

**Generalization and abstraction processes**

Giving meaning through conceptual thinking is characterized by the processes of generalization and abstraction (cf. Mead 1934/1972). As the individual identifies certain characteristics in phenomena and generalizes them to other phenomena – thereby classifying things, roles and situations – generalization is about establishing relations between elements or symbols of elements (see also Berg et al 1975/1976).

The process of generalization can be said to be the transference of knowledge from one object to another, so to establish relations between objects on the basis of, most prominently, similarities (Mead 1934/1972). It is a process of identifying what characteristics an object, person or event share with others, what it does not share and what the opposite is. Necessary for such an understanding is that that very characteristic is *not* typical of other phenomena. The individual is involved in this process when faced with any phenomenon, situation, person or event, including the self. The question dealt with is: Which situations, phenomena or the like does this category include?

The individual generalizes when she or he understands that certain characteristics are typical of certain groups of phenomena, e.g. that some behaviours are typical of certain groups of people (see Berg 1995). Mead (1934/1972) suggests that it is its universality that gives a concrete experience meaning. To be able to identify the important characteristics of a certain
phenomenon in a systematic way, the individual needs to identify the criteria for categorizing.

Concepts develop through experiences of concrete examples, situations and instances, some of which are found to be members of the class being derived and others that are not. To abstract is to identify the important aspects of an object and to be able to keep these aspects in mind without having to relate them directly to the concrete object (see Mead 1934/1972), thereby dealing with the creation of a more constant criterion for selection, deciding criteria and sticking to them (Berg et al. 1975/1976: 76f). In abstraction, which is a prominent aspect of human cognitive processes, generalized categories are used to represent a range of particular phenomena, objects or situations. Through concept-formation processes, individuals come to give a common response, such as a word or name, to a general class of objects that have certain central characteristics in common. During early childhood, an individual starts practising abstraction to create a cognitive structure for a particular phenomenon. She or he abstracts similar actions or behaviours that one group of people directs at another group of people (Mead 1934/1972). The process of abstraction aims at identifying the characteristics of a phenomenon. The questions dealt with are: What is significant for this phenomenon? What is this in its essence?

The processes of generalization and abstraction are closely related to each other. They are each other’s presumptions and the child abstracts and generalizes more and more experiences and builds relations between them to gain, gather and create knowledge that can be used in totally new situations; in this way, new experiences can be made familiar (cf. Mead 1934/1972).

**Negotiation processes**

As discussed in Chapter 1, the associations and meanings surrounding violence and fathers can vary within as well as between cultures and social categories of people. They are constantly changing, and at the same time constantly being maintained through the ways they are communicated in private and public – in constant interaction between individuals and the world around them. Children’s ideas are formed in their encounters with the statements and reactions of other people, such as friends, family members and, in most societies today, school staff, the media etc., in addition to their own lived experiences. Contradictory signals are likely to complicate the process of understanding. As an example, ideas or norms in society can be non-concordant between themselves or with the child’s own experiences. In handling such situations, the family is crucial, as much for the experiences it provides as for the process of understanding. As seen in the previous chapter,
the concepts of fathers and violence both in themselves and especially in their relation to each other, include some not-insignificant contradictions.

Although Mead (1934/1972), in the constructs of generalization and abstraction, provides a theoretical framework for understanding the process of understanding in general, it can be argued that – when it comes to situations including more contradictory messages – the framework needs to be supplemented. Since Mead does not really deal with different or contradictory responses, the processes and significance of symbols that are interpreted differently by the individuals involved need further theorization. Assuming that human beings in general are, at least in some respect, rational – as in seeking the interpretation that best tallies with the information available to them at that time – entails that when information is inconsistent, the individual needs to prioritize. Jeffner (1997) suggests a theory about negotiation, which can supplement Mead’s more general theoretical framework, for more complicated interpreting situations.

Jeffner (1997) suggests signs can become significant in different ways in different settings, and that perception can be adjusted depending on cultural norms and ideas. A principle definition of a concept, based on a rather sharp line of demarcation between what is considered ‘normal’, good and desirable and ‘extreme’, as in wrong and unacceptable, can – when confronted by a concrete example – be negotiated and re-interpreted. The differences between understandings are negotiable on the basis of circumstances that move the line between the two, and may make acts and incidents that would in principle be understood as the one interpreted as the other. Thereby the line is more appropriately described as a space of negotiation. On the level of principle, individuals do not consider the circumstances that form the space, but on the concrete level, they are determining. Negotiation allows the interpreting individual to keep the cognitive structure that surrounds one interpreted phenomenon or acting individual at the ‘expense’ of the principle understanding of another. The bottom line is that two cognitive structures can not be unified.

In this study, the theoretical concept of negotiation is primarily used to understand processes of prioritizing between inconsistent information available, or more precisely of prioritizing what cognitive structure to change to be able to keep another. Thereby, it highlights the difficulty and non-taken-for-grantedness of some categorizations. However, such processes are not necessarily conscious to the individual in any one situation. In addition, in this study, the theoretical concept of negotiation aims at primarily internal processes of negotiating ‘with one self’. Although insights appearing to the individual through interpersonal communication can initiate the need for negotiation, and the usefulness of negotiated understandings can be ‘tested’
in interpersonal communication and used in interpersonal rhetoric, such negotiation must be distinguished from the kind of negotiation that individuals engage in with each other. When two or more individuals negotiate argumentatively with each other, the result may be cognitive adjustment on the part of one or both to reach a common understanding; but, equally well, the result might be that both retain the primary understanding that they have argued for, and there has been no qualitative change. In this study, negotiation aims at internal cognitive processes effecting a qualitative change in understanding for the interpreting individual. Also, the negotiation concept can be used for dealing with entities of the same kind, e.g. individuals or acts, as well as with entities of different kinds, e.g. individuals in relation to acts.

Understanding can be based in experiences of and in cultural ideas about phenomena that are assimilated through norms in society. These experiences and norms are always interpreted, and the interpretation is based on earlier experiences and understanding of cultural ideas. Since several types of norms can be present at the same time within any one cultural setting, the understanding is a continuous process and can not be separated from experiences and cultural ideas, or demarcated in time. Jeffner (1997) analyzes the meaning of one ground for typification (gender), per se something that is continuously constituted, and the relations between the categories and the assumptions about these relations’ impact on the understanding. She argues that the perception of a specific phenomenon can be re-interpreted according to cultural codes and norms, assuming that gender and power are and have been intimately related in the Swedish culture, which constitutes her empirical example. Although experience and cultural norms interact mutually, what people, such as informants in research, say represents some form of understanding, based in experiences and their interpretation of cultural norms. Thereby, they are consciously or unconsciously involved in interaction with their social environment in trying to maintain or change the environment and themselves. If, for example, cultural understandings about two phenomena that can be assumed to contain significantly oppositional associations, such as fathers and violence (cf. Chapter 1), encounter one another in a particular situation, such as violence being carried out by a father, negotiation of one or both may be necessary. It is the search for meaning that necessitates negotiation, but as meaning here refers to especially complex processes of conciliating conflicting understandings, the term ‘meaning-conciliation’ is used.

A theoretical framework including negotiation may be a useful tool in understanding how children form their conceptions, including the relations between their personal and subjective experiences and understandings of
their own fathers and their actions, as well as general ideas, related to cultural codes and norms, about fathers and violence. General and perhaps especially gender-specific decomposition of norms may increase the possibilities and demands for negotiation within modern families about family life (cf. Björnberg & Kollind 1997). In any case, the silence that surrounds violence and fathers, in families and generally, might mean that a lack of negotiations between individuals about such matters increases the possibilities and demands for less overt negotiations within the child’s own understanding. Further, children having to deal with conflicting messages about family interaction in private and concealed negotiations may create difficulties in their perception of themselves in their development of self (Berg et al. 1975/1976: 63f).

Although abstraction and generalization can be seen as sufficient theoretical concepts for fairly unambiguous information situations, negotiation may be useful for more specific understanding of contrasting or contradicting signals between the cognitive structures or ideas normally used for interpretation and individual experiences. Thereby, processes of understanding can be seen as the overarching concept of constant handling of information, with the aim of interpreting signs so as to be meaningful. Generalization and abstraction processes can be used as ‘tools’ for achieving such an aim. However, determining which essential aspects to base such generalizations and abstractions on may – in relation to more ambiguous and contradictory signals – require prioritizing some signals, information or ideas to keep at the cost of negotiating the understanding of another.

**Contextualizing understanding**

Understanding the interaction between an interpreting person and her or his perceived environment is central to this study. In the theoretical model for understanding children’s meaning-conciliation processes, this is stressed by giving less prominence to the different arenas in which violence can generally appear, as suggested in SOU (2001c), than to the direct areas that the child can relate her or his understanding about their own father and his possible violence and violence and fathers in general to.

According to the theoretical framework, as described above, the experiencing and understanding individual is treated as a separate ‘context’. Since the family is the arena for the violence that is to be interpreted, it forms another context, which bears some resemblance to the characteristics of micro-systems (cf. Bronfenbrenner 1979) – in that it aims at directly experienced interpersonal activities or relations in a given setting, with particular physical and material characteristics (cf. Mead 1934/1972). The variety of everyday social actions and interactions within the child’s own
family – of which violence is a part – will have an impact on the child’s understanding of her- or himself, of the father and his actions, and also of family life, fathers, and possibly violence in general. Especially considering the relatively limited social networks of families with violence problems (Christensen 1990), the impact of the immediate family can be assumed to be enhanced for these children. In addition, the research focus of this study includes general understandings, aiming at societal and/or cultural ideologies, values and belief-systems – connected, for example, with violence, criminality and masculinity/femininity – that have parallels to a macro-system (cf. Bronfenbrenner 1979). These include linkages, interrelations or interactions between micro-systems – as in meso-systems – and between settings that indirectly can influence the child – as in exo-systems – and aim at consistencies that directly or indirectly influence the child’s understanding through laws, politics, media and other cultural manifestations (op. cit.). If there is little contact between the individuals in the child’s different close milieus, there is a risk that norms and values will develop in different directions and be ‘on a collision course’, which creates perplexity and confusion for the child (see Bronfenbrenner 1979; Garbarino 1992).

The internal context of a violent event within a family is the individual’s self, and the closer external context in which children attach meaning to concepts such as fathers and violence involves to a large degree the family, while society forms the extended external context. Thereby, the society, the family and the individual form three contexts of direct relevance to children’s interpretations and understandings of their fathers’ violence against their mothers. On the one hand, they refer to the contexts that the child has to relate to when interpreting her or his father’s violence. These are contexts through which the child learns. On the other, they refer to three different objects of the child’s understanding. The contexts have implications on related areas of understanding. These are areas the child learns about. Within the complexity, contradictions and nuances of real life, these contexts are inter-related and might not be easily separable, but here – to nuance the intrinsically simplifying theoretical discussion – they are treated as different entities. When seeking a better understanding of children’s worlds with regard to family violence, a broad theoretical framework that allows interpretations based not only on the ’childishness’ of children but on a wider variety of contexts is preferred.

**The young self as creator of meaning**

To concretize the internal context for interpretation, the self – the development of which assumed to be of special concern during childhood – is used as the basic theoretical construction. The self in the Meadian sense,
including not only a generally experiencing and acting I, but also the I as a subject interpreting the Me as an object, enables understanding the self as a ‘context’ for understanding. The focus in this study is less on the quality of self per se than on the subjective awareness of it. Accordingly, a conception of self in the Meadian sense, which refers more to intellectual processes, is here supplemented by the more emotional aspects of Stern’s sense of self. The self, as seen by Mead (1934/1972), develops in social experiences and is, in turn, primarily used for providing a basic organizing perspective on personal experiences. Stern (1973), who more explicitly focuses on the development of self in relation to children as children, rather than as adults-to-be, but whose self-concept has important similarities with Mead’s, suggests that ‘sense of self’ refers to a feeling of being a physical entity, of continuity in time, of having intentions and the ability to act, and of creating order. The sense of self is the subjective organization that our experiences are processed to appear to belong to, most often residing outside awareness, but possible to be brought to and held in consciousness. ‘While no one can agree on exactly what the self is, as adults we still have a very real sense of self that permeates daily social experience. […] Even though the nature of self may forever elude the behavioural sciences, the sense of self stands as an important subjective reality, a reliable, evident phenomenon that science cannot dismiss’ (op. cit: 5f).

The inner structure of self is assumed to be grounded in early childhood. After language has enabled narrative construction of the self, the quality of a subjectively experience of self is formed (Stern 1985). It is then successively growing, changing and revised throughout life via the individual’s relationships to others (Stern 1985). The continuous changeability of a self in process corresponds to the individual always being involved in interpreting processes, and the self can be seen as a process in itself (see Mead 1934/1972). If self, or identity, is a process, any individual’s self can not be discussed without reference to her or his social contexts. Ahmadi (2000: 161) argues that ‘Any identity-building project in this changeable and unpredictable world is only a short term and practical project’. The self can thereby be seen as changeable and temporary; and more as a flexible, multiplex and reflected theoretical construction than as distinct and continuous in time, space and individuality – suggesting that the self in postmodern society can be rational, instrumental and transitory. To some extent, it is something that the individual can choose and change as the result of strategic choices in certain situations or contexts at certain times. Seeing the self as a structure that can work in different ways according to differences in situation or context, there can appear to be different selves, really there are
a variety of aspects of self within one complex structure, which have the ability to bring about different consequences. Any individual has a certain control over what aspects of the self to ‘use’ in a specific situation and what aspects to develop over time.

Since experiences through the process of generalization indirectly come to give information, not only about that which is experienced, but possibly also about the self, interpretations of fathers’ violence and the (possible) violence of their own father can have important consequences for the individual’s understanding of self. And children’s more explicit task of developing a self, but with restricted opportunities to choose their context (as argued earlier in this chapter), makes interpretations that can be related to their understanding of self more crucial and have more significant consequences for them as individuals than in the case of adults. For the analysis in this study, the theoretical construct of self as a flexible and practical project means that the aspects of self that become crucial for children’s processes of meaning can depend on how – on what basis for abstraction – they choose to generalize their knowledge. As an example, whether gendered, cultural or other aspects are more important can not be taken for granted. Thereby, the self is an object in need of understanding as well as an organizing structure for information. In addition, through emotions, as reactions to external or internal events, the self can be alerted to the significance of events (cf. Smith 1993: 40ff). Accordingly, although emotions appear within the individual, since they may surface before the individual has a chance to reflect, it might be said that they can bear information to the individual when emerging in events, phenomena or situations that need to be interpreted.

The relationship between emotions and interpretations is complex in that an emotion demands a certain perception or interpretation of an event, suggesting that the cognitive processes precede the emotional. However, an emotional reaction can be strong enough to direct the cognitive process, implying that emotional processes precede interpretation. Although analysis of children’s self-conceptualizations is not a primary objective of this study, when seeking to comprehend children’s understanding processes related to violence and fathers, and especially to the (possible) violence of their own father, explicit consideration of the intricate relationships between the individual self and understanding processes seems important.

The family as an arena for experiences and communication

As the self forms the organizing principle for interpreting experiences of the individual, the family forms the setting of concrete experience that is to be interpreted in this study, namely the individual’s own father and his (possibly)
violent actions. The family, and what takes place in that arena, is crucial to the child's general learning about the world of experiences and language as well as for the understanding of self. The Meadian term 'significant others' points to the importance of interaction with parents for children, whose early relationships with their parents are assumed to form the basis for the understanding of other people, the self, society, and for future interactions (Mead 1934/1972; cf. also Carlberg 1994: 22; Hwang & Nilsson 2003). As significant others, the parents can often, through their attitudes within the social process, help the child to perceive her-or himself as an object, which is the prerequisite for constructing the I and discovering the self (Mead 1934/1972). Stern (1985) stresses that social relating is a task that a person deals with throughout life, and – starting in interaction with significant others – the comparison with other individuals enables understanding oneself as a separate individual. Children's own interpretations mean they can also in time choose their models or identification 'objects', and actively seek to form themselves through another person as a model (Tiller 1990). This highlights children's active participation in the process of understanding the self as well as the outside world. The child's understanding of the world develops by relative interpreting such, for example, that more pleasurable experiences are interpreted and organized in the light of the less pleasurable. We understand ourselves as children in relation to adults or parents, and as men or women in relation to those of the same and opposite sex on a continuum (Mead 1934/1972). Over time, interpreted representations of the significant others thereby become the child's representations of the self.

Bengtsson (1994) suggests that young people's own individuality today is the norm and ideal, and that identification with parents subordinate (cf. also Hyvönen 1993). On this view, the meaning of this new individuality is a wide and relational one, entailing a more relational perception of the self and a process of remaining identification with parents with partly different meanings than earlier. In similar vein, Lamb (1997) suggests that the father as male seems to be less important for the influence of children, than that father as a parent. Accordingly, the role of identification with the parent of the same sex for an early and stable gender identity is not self-understood. As an example, fathers' crucial importance as representatives of law and order (Hwang 2000), and the sex of children interpreting their mothers' and fathers' victimization or perpetration of violence (Bjerrum Nielsen & Rudberg 1991) can be challenged as the only or even as primary aspects. Gergen (1991) stresses that researchers have to handle the paradox that individuals can perceive themselves as independent, at the same time as they are created and create themselves in a historically, socially, culturally and situationally changeable context. We can be the same and yet at the same time be changed...
depending on external circumstances (cf. Bengtsson 1994). Thereby, children’s relationship to their father and variety of role models imply that fathers now seem to be able to be important for the development of gender identification for boys as well as girls (Allwood 2000b; Hyvönen 1993). In addition, they can be a positive role model, someone to take after in shaping one’s own personality or fatherhood, as well as a negative role model, as in someone the child makes an effort not to be like, or even not really have a model function at all (Hwang 2000). In addition, fathers can, as representatives, role models and significant others, symbolize a variety of categories, roles or generalized others, such as adults, men and parents. How the child interprets and categorizes the characteristics of the father depends partly on how concepts are used in the family. Accordingly, within the family, a father’s violence can, directly or indirectly, influence how the interpreting child forms her or his self. Further, the emotional quality of the interaction between parents and children seems to be related to how the adults feel about each other, so that parents’ hostility and conflicts also seem connected to harm for the social, emotional and behavioural development of the child (Hwang & Nilsson 2003: 219ff). However, to children, the direct father-child relationship seems more important than father’s characteristics or the parents’ spousal roles; in particular, father’s violence does not appear to preclude positive evaluations of a parent (Sternberg et al. 1994).

Thereby, in the arena of the family, primarily in verbal or non-verbal communication with the parents, the child develops her or his sense of self and of the world. However, Mead’s theoretical framework (1934/1972) is based on the individual seeking interaction, but individuals can also be part of interaction they would, if they had a choice, avoid. Mead’s starting point is that the individual acts, and can choose to act or not to act. However, sometimes an individual acts towards another, which can also include an indirect act towards a third party, which – for one reason or another – can not be avoided. Such a situation is more complex than the ones Mead (op. cit.) discusses, and children will generally be more exposed to such involuntary sociality because of their limited possibilities to leave the relationships and arenas they are in. Being a child can restrict individuals from leaving situations and relationships due to their dependency for their physical needs, since they can not provide themselves with food and a home without the support of adults. However, being a child may also mean that psychological needs restrict choices of interaction, since, for example, they cannot choose their parents and primary caregivers (cf. Kovarik 1994) and easily end their relationships with them even though they include acts or action they would rather escape. Because of their limited choices to choose interaction partners, children also have less opportunity to avoid experiences
that demand difficult understanding processes. The meaning of the family as the arena of the event for interpretation is something unique to children, since they have less opportunity to leave than do adults.

**Societal norms and general ideas**

While the family forms the arena for the specific and concrete significant others and the acts that the child is to understand, the general images of society forms the wider context to which to relate the concretely experienced. The line between the parents as significant others and other people as the generalized other can not be drawn too sharply, since the development of the individual’s self depends on a close relation to the generalized other in the form of anonymous individuals and representatives of society or people in general (Mead 1934/1972). Since the generalized other has institutional aspects, such as family, religion, education and economic and political institutions, an I is part of society; and society and human action are dialectically connected as prerequisites of one another (Berg 1995). Seeing the process of thinking as a conversation between the individual and her or his society, i.e. the generalized other, there is no sharp distinction between the Me and the generalized other. The forming and maintaining of the generalized other is, like the forming of the self and the importance of the significant other, always in process. Over time, the child abstracts and generalizes more roles and constructs relations between them so that a whole, the generalized other – referring to both the actual societal structure and the interpretation of it that the individual forms – is formed (see Mead 1934/1972). Through direct and indirect mediation, this structure of norms, or ideas about normality – about, for example, parenthood, gender and inter-individual interaction in society gives the child a wider context for understanding her or his own family, its individuals, its roles and its everyday life. However, the relative seclusion of families with violence problems could mean that the children have limited opportunities to develop the generalized other, and the significance of the parents is the more important.

As the wider setting for general norms and understandings, ‘society’ can refer to some national aspect and can include a variety of cultures. Mead’s references to ‘society’ appear to be to aspects of what is often understood as ‘culture’. A central part of culture has to do with the content of understanding that is used by a certain group of people, which can be based not only on neighbourhood, nationality, religion, social or economic class, ethnicity, friendship, family relationships etc., but also to gender, generation, age, etc. Societies and cultures are variable and changeable, and any one person relates to several groups. Since the content of understanding in these different groups can be more or less alike, more or less integrated, perhaps more today than
ever, it is impossible to say which, if any, of the cultures, or cultural traditions, available to an individual in a given situation, is more prominent for the individual’s understanding (see Allwood & Franzén 2000). Therefore, the context of ‘cultural and historical society’, like ‘family’, is a complex and multifaceted one.

**Normalization and resisting processes**

An intimate heterosexual relationship is not only a union between a man and a woman, but also between representatives of different interests within the organization of society as a whole as well as within the individual relationship (cf. Goldner et al. 1990; Kyle 2000). Therefore, children’s conceptualizations regarding fathers’ violence against mothers must be related to power relations, the description of which demands the broadening of a general interactionist vocabulary (Layder 1993: 153). Two main theoretical approaches to understanding the processes of men’s and women’s understanding of a man’s violence against a woman within a relationship are the constructs of normalization and resistance.

Lundgren (e.g. 1993; 1997) suggests a dynamic model for understanding of the relations between normality and divergence in gender relations, and that the development and maintenance of violence in a relationship can be understood as a process signified by normalization of it – in which the perpetrator and victim are both involved, but in different ways. Normalization means that violence gradually becomes a regular feature of everyday life, and leads to an acceptance and a defence of it (cf. also Walker 1993). Systematic differences in power between the sexes and in expectations connected to masculinity and femininity in society, such as associations between violence and ideas about what it means to be a woman and a man and norms about good relationships, form the base for understanding of the possibility of power imbalance within the family. One of the premises of a gender cultural process perspective on violence is that a violent relationship is seen, not as qualitatively, but quantitatively different from a ‘normal’ one. Lundgren suggests a drifting passage between a peaceful and a violent relationship, between a superior male role and a violent one and between a subordinate female role and one that includes submission and violence. This concerns levels of acting, experience and interpretation. Some men’s violence is symbolic and has an important significance in relation to all men since individual men’s behaviour has implications for the paradigmatic models of what a normal man is, his nature and the expectations on him (Lundgren 1993). Lundgren (1997) stresses the importance of being open to the possibility that the process might develop its own dynamic, in which experiences of violence, as they are interpreted, might be so strong that they
become a force in the maintenance and thereby the development of the violence process. The normalization process suggests that the violence is controlled. Through the male violator’s emotional states, decisions and practices surrounding the violence he gains dominance over the woman, leading to her isolation and decreased life-areas; and shifts between good and bad mean that he sets the limits for what she can do, say or even think and feel. The man’s definitions of norms and of what constitutes positive and negative femininity are gradually internalized by the woman (Lundgren 1993). Although normalization refers primarily to the extent to which acts become possible within the relationship (cf. Holmberg & Enander 2004), it is here understood as intimately connected with – not necessarily entirely conscious – assumptions about what is common in relationships. Thereby, normalization can mean ‘pushing the defining line’ for violence so that more and more actions can be interpreted as something else. It is facilitated by and therefore often combined with minimization or even denial of the acts. The relative commonness of men minimizing their violence (cf. Hearn 1998), means that, for a child, normalization can be associated with the father’s perspective, even though the concept also refers to women allying with their men’s perspectives in order to survive.

Hydén (2000) argues that the resistance many battered women express is an indication that the violence is not normalized (cf. also Bowker 1993), a perspective that implies the woman’s possibility to act and the individual man’s responsibility for the violence. Although men often try to escape responsibility, sometimes with the help of the woman, she can interpret these acts as a choice – in that he can take responsibility for his actions or not. One way to escape responsibility is to redefine violent acts as not violent, to which the woman can react in different ways, e.g. by taking a decision to leave the man. This perspective focuses on the actors, the woman as well as the man, as individuals in a relational, situational and also socio-cultural context, the latter assumed to be over-emphasized in normalization theory. Resistance means (cognitively or intellectually) holding on to a definition of violence so as to be able to repudiate it, and does not necessarily include direct (physical or verbal) confrontation or ‘visible resisting action’. As Hydén (2001) suggests, such a strategy may become salient (only) after a woman has left her man. Therefore, for children, such a strategy may be closely connected to allying with mother, especially for children no longer living with their father. That the mother has shown drive and responsibility by moving away with the child might further promote such a perspective.

Although negotiation in no way means distortion or falsification of ‘the truth’, it implies a starting point, some basic understanding to ‘adjust’ in one way or another. Since meaning is constantly produced, reproduced,
maintained and changed, such a ‘starting point’ can only be assumed theoretically, but scarcely found empirically. This is why processes of violence can only be discussed as theoretical possibilities, although, of course, they are grounded in empirical findings. The theoretical concept of negotiation is a way of acknowledging the possibility of adjusting the understanding of concepts in relation to each other to reach a meaning-conciliation that is rational for intellectual and emotional survival considering the living circumstances. And although the negotiation processes of normalization and resistance are theoretical concepts developed to understand the dynamics of adults’ relationships, they can also sensitize and nuance the discussion about children’s own perspectives on their parents’ violence. Children’s perspectives, conditions and premises for action, and also interpretation and understanding, have similarities as well as dissimilarities with those of their parents.

The theoretical framework as a tool for analysis
A general social psychological and interactionist approach forms the theoretical entrance for understanding the processes of the children in the study when trying to give meaning to fathers and violence in general and their own father and his (possible) violence. The focus is on processes of meaning taking place in interaction between the individual’s self and experiences of, and communication with, her or his milieu. The aim of the theoretical constructs of generalization and abstraction as the basic processes for constructing meaning is to more concretely guide the interpretation of the interviews, especially the children’s general conceptions of fathers and violence, which in their ‘basic forms’ can be comparatively unequivocal. As a potential way of understanding how abstractions are related to each other within the totality of a cognitive structure – especially considering the inconsistencies, complexities and contradictions of fathers and violence as understood in families and societies – the construct of negotiation is employed. When interpreting the material, consideration is taken of the contexts of the self as an organizing and experiencing structure, of the family as the arena for experiences and communicative interaction, and of society as a structure of norms and general ideas. The specific theoretical constructs of normalization and resistance are seen as possible ways of understanding how children make use of negotiations related to these different contexts for meaning-conciliation.

The theoretical framework presented above enables interpretation of children’s processes of understanding experiences that include qualitatively as well as quantitatively different events and processes of violence within their family. These may include one-way or mutual violence, outbreaks of uncontrolled rage, and the use of violence as a goal-directed strategy. Taken
into account also are different interpreting attitudes and strategies among fathers and mothers in traditionally organized families, and families generally organized according to modern expectations. The theoretical framework also allows interpretation of children’s models for explaining father’s violence against mother based on ideas at individual level – as in trying to explain violence by features of the father (such as being ‘sick’) or the mother (such as doing something ‘wrong’), at situational level – as in stress ‘causing’ violence, and at structural level – as in explaining violence by reference to power and norms, such as seeing women as disobedient and men as violent (cf. Svedling 1996). The framework further enables elucidation of some features of children’s possible understanding, or approaches to meaning-conciliation, of fathers’ violence, and their own father and his (possible) violence. As an example, normalization of the violence within the family would imply having to deal with signals from the outer world that impose non-acceptance of violence, and might be related to strategies to limit contacts with the outside world to minimize the risk of such signals. And while adults are less directly imposed by others’ opinions, inter alia about violence, children might be told off by school personnel or other adults and therefore be subject to direct prohibition to accept or use violence. Indeed, this may be discussed in school. Also, children’s different premises as actors in the process means that while the adults have chosen each other for the relationship in which violence has emerged and perhaps will be maintained, the children might not ‘have to’ normalize the violence in order to justify why they stay in the family. And since male perpetrators and female victims seem to hold vastly different positions in relation to interpreting violent acts, it may be difficult for children to choose a position of being loyal to both their parents and their interpretations, but they may have to either share a subordinate role in the family with the victim or ‘gain’ power by allying with the dominant and power-exerting party.

The interrelations of the three themes that constitute the object of meaning-conciliation in this study (fathers and violence as general conceptions, and the child’s experiences of her or his own father) form three basic relations (or possible ‘connections’). For clarity, they are simplified and dichotomized here, albeit in a way that rarely corresponds to reality.

1. The relation between the conception about one’s own father and fathers in general can be characterized by closeness or distance. Closeness between the two would be connected to focusing on the similarities, so that the own, more personally experienced, father would be perceived as normal or ordinary in relation to fathers in general, while distance would imply focusing on the differences. Closeness might be manifested either in assuming fathers
in general to be like the specific and personally experienced father (see generalizing processes) or in interpreting the own father in accordance with general expectations of what fathers are like. Distance would, in its extreme from, be based on the assumption that the own father is unique and/or that fathers in general are not like the own father. Tendencies in children’s conceptions of how their own father is related to fathers in general may focus on the own father being or not being like fathers in general. The tendencies can be related to assumptions about normality, when focusing on father’s similarities with other fathers, or deviation, as in perceiving his actions as so unusual that the main conception of him is vastly different from fathers in general.

2. The relation between the general conceptions of fathers and violence could be characterized by either inclusion or separation. Inclusion would imply an understanding of fathers in general that acknowledges the possibility of violence, whilst separation would exclude such a possibility. The possible relations between fathers in general and violence might thereby include the expectation that fathers in general either do or do not, or could or could not, usually use violence, e.g. against the mother or members of the family.

3. The relation between the own father and violence could be manifested either in excluding the possibility of interpreting acts of his as violent or including such an interpretation into the conception of father. It might also include aspects of including acts of the own father into what is understood as violence or excluding them. Since the two are interrelated, the tendencies in how children’s conceptions of their own father’s actions are related to their conceptions of violence in general could thereby mean assuming that the own father either has or has not used violence, e.g. against the mother or other members of the family. The theoretical framework suggests two possible patterns: normalization and resistance. They are here somewhat simplified or ‘cultivated’ for the purpose of the specific analysis. Normalization would include viewing father’s actions as normal and hence not be labelled as violence, while resistance would have to do with labelling father’s actions as violence and be connected with a non-acceptance of those actions.
The figure symbolizes the possible relationships between the understanding of the own and the generalized understanding of fathers (1), between the generalized understandings of fathers and violence (2), and between the own father and violence (3), that constitute the object for meaning-conciliation in this study. Each of these possible interacting relationships can be combined with any of the other two, with inclusion or close connection as the one alternative and distance or separation as the other.

In this model, no way of understanding or of forming conceptions of fathers or violence is considered pathological. There are just different theoretical possibilities. Nor is the aim to allocate different individuals into categories, but rather to seek theoretical alternatives for solving the task of interpretation. Which choice a person makes is assumed to depend on the contemporary situation, the context, the involved individuals and their relation to the interpreter, and earlier experiences and ideas about the future, rather than on fixed features of the individual.
3. Methodological approach and considerations

From the starting point of the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter, the aim of the study is to contribute to understanding of how children try to understand and interpret their own father and his (possibly) violent actions against their mother in relation to their general conceptualizations concerning fathers and violence on the basis of qualitative interpretations of interviews. This chapter presents and discusses the methodological procedures.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) suggest qualitative approaches to studies of this kind, which aim at generating knowledge about processes in which social experience is created and given meaning, rather than about causal relationships between variables. As well as implying an emphasis on the qualities of entities, and on processes and meanings, qualitative research also entails stressing the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, the situational constraints that shape inquiry, the value-laden nature of inquiry, and the socially constructed nature of reality. In this study, acknowledging the importance of and focusing on social constructions does not exclude the existence of reality as such. Interpretative qualitative research further aims at presenting a set of representations that are related to the specifics of complex situations. Through the researcher’s close descriptions, qualitative research has the potential to show the human sides of the studied individuals as individuals. ‘Sometimes there is an evaluative and political view behind this kind of research; in large to let those speak who can not make their voices heard […]. Other times it is not so, but even then the closeness to the study objects increases the researcher’s respect for the perception of reality of the actors’ (Repstad 1999: 13 [author’s translation]). The flexibility of qualitative research means that the answer or result of a question or interview can, even though dealing with the same theme, influence subsequent questions or interviews in such a way that they will be different. Thereby, ‘in all possible richness of nuance and as authentically as possible, [they can be] catching ‘the actors point of view’, the opinions of reality, motives and ways to think of the actor. […] Rather than answering the question ‘What do I see them do?’ the researcher tries to approach the question of ‘What do they themselves think they are doing?’” (op. cit.: 12 [author’s translation]). How the interviews, with a strong
resemblance to dialogues, were planned, implemented and interpreted within the study is presented and discussed below. The quality and the ethics of a study rely at every phase in the research process (see Kvale 1996). Accordingly, the lines of reasoning behind decisions related to validity, reliability and ethics are included in every theme in this chapter, but especially focused in the specific discussions towards its end.

**The interview guide**

The way the aim of the study was conceptualized as three interrelating themes (fathers and violence in general, and the child’s own father) in a triangular model in Chapter 2 formed the basis for designing the interview guide. Since these three themes are possible objects of abstraction and generalisation in themselves, they were also the primary objects for information, from which processes of negotiation between them could be interpreted in terms of conciliated meaning. Accordingly, they structured the themes of the interview guide. On the one hand, preparing for a study by constructing a theoretical framework helps in developing a methodological technique, and enables enhanced understanding of the studied; on the other, it may limit creativity in interpreting material. To ethically motivate intrusion into people’s lives, especially in a sensitive subject area, the validity of methodological preparation and theoretical awareness, specifically concerning the adequacy of the research design and whether the knowledge gained is in proportion to the risks of the design, is critical to any study. Since awareness of the multitude of levels capable of analysis means that more than one dimension of social reality can be dealt with and enables the analysis of connections between levels (see Layder 1993), a ‘broad’ theoretical framework, with concepts encouraging understanding, while imposing as few limitations as possible, was developed for structuring the interviews.

If the aim is theoretical development, Kjær Jensen (1988) suggests low standardization and low structure – a form that Andersson (1998), among others, suggests provides especially good conditions for child interviews. Since both violence and fathers are seen as subjective constructions, the theoretical approach supports open questions, not taking for granted the child’s experiences or definitions of what might have happened in the family. In similar vein, for ethical reasons, questions about who has been victimized, and in what way, were not asked. Rather than starting from what happened, the aim was to let the children’s general descriptions lead to mandate to ask further – in their own words and giving their own examples – thus giving them a genuine opportunity to decide on what and how much they were willing to tell about their thoughts and reasoning.
Øvreeide (1998: 110) stresses that difficult issues, e.g. those experienced as shameful, may for children be easier to expose to a trustworthy stranger than to a person within an established relationship. To be clear that the purposes of the contact was for research only, to limit the possible similarities with other groups of adults that the children might get in contact with that could be confusing with regard to expectations of loyalty, and to limit the impact on the children’s and mothers’ lives, a single interview encounter was preferred to a lengthy getting-to-know phase. The reasoning behind the decision was also that one well-prepared interview should be able to provide enough material.

Based on the theoretical framework in relation to these premises, an interview guide, aiming at the possibility of flexible conversation (cf. Patton 1990: 280ff), and consisting of an introduction, three main themes and a finish, was developed. There was an introductory ‘Tell me about your family’ session, aimed at getting background on the informant’s family and everyday life from her or his perspective; the interview then proceeded with a descriptive question about something well-known to the informant, which was assumed to be relatively easy to talk about (cf. op. cit.; Andersson 1998; Repstad 1999: 77). This introduction was not stressed, but was not allowed to take too much time either, and there was a preparedness for even such a ‘generally neutral’ request to be problematic for the children. However, most children readily gave a rich account.

The three main themes were each written on one little card, so that the interview could focus on one question at a time; changing cards could visually and concretely signal the informant when a new subject was introduced (cf. Andenaes 1991). Each card formed the first stage in each main theme of the interview, namely ‘Tell me about fathers’, ‘Tell me about violence’ and ‘Tell me about your father’. The words on the small cards were ‘Fathers’, ‘Violence’ and ‘My father’ respectively, and they were turned by and read by the informant, or – on request – by the researcher, at the start of each new theme. Thereby, the informant had a chance to associate more freely with the phenomenon and the term, but the cards also gave a visual stimulus as a variation on the auditive stimuli of which interviews mainly consist. ‘Tell me about fathers’ and ‘Tell me about violence’ formed the base for the ‘essence’ the informants could make of the phenomena and terms, and how they could be related to other phenomena and terms. Depending on the child’s account and ‘mandate’, information about how they related their understanding to certain situations or circumstances could be sought in follow-up questions. ‘Tell me about your father’ aimed at a deeper exploration of the informants’ conception of their own father and formed the basis for formulating questions
about their understanding of his (possibly) violent actions, leading to the mother fleeing to the Women’s House.

The main aim of the final ‘real’ question, namely ‘Tell me about a time that was really good in your family’, was to end the interview with a ‘positive’ and ‘easier’ subject (cf. Greig & Taylor 1999). The interview was ended by offering the informant the possibility of clarifying or supplementing what had been said, and of conveying opinions on the interview and on being interviewed about these issues. While some took the opportunity to clarify their account or comment on their expectations of the interview, no one mentioned any negative opinions or reactions towards being interviewed.

The validity of the interview process could have been hampered by the explicit aim of the study to address ‘fathers and violence’, since it might have prompted the children to describe connections between the two that did not correspond to their beliefs. Accordingly, special attention was paid to the overall intention of inviting the child to describe each theme – first in itself, nuanced and multifaceted as understood by the child – and, thereafter, in conformity with the child’s account, asking further to look into if she or he had made connections between them and, if so, the nature of the connections. During the interviews, the children’s answers and accounts related to the themes, rather than predetermined questions, were used to form structuring elements in developing communication and enriching the material. The aim was to form a communication within the interview that made sense to the informant rather than one that was adjusted to the researcher’s (my) need of advance control. In the communication that followed each child’s first account about a theme, the informant’s terminology was used as much as possible to formulate clarifying and deepening questions (see Øvreide 1998; Greig & Taylor 1999). Follow-up questions may be necessary for children to provide rich information and, if open, they may also promote ‘accuracy’ in testimony (see Waterman et al. 2001). Therefore, all themes within the interview guide were completed with a battery of open-ended follow-up questions to serve as an aid, in the interview situation, to making the material as rich as possible (cf. Patton 1990). The follow-up questions were only to be used if needed (cf. op. cit.: 280ff), and they were individually formulated in communication with each child. They were also open to change during the interview phase, depending on what methodological adjustments and theoretical specialization former interviews and analysis of them had given rise. Thus, the pre-prepared follow-up questions were to be used as a flexible aid for richer communication. The advantage of open questions not directing or limiting informants to pre-determined responses, and also giving informants the possibility of making detailed and nuanced answers, is gained at the expense of difficulties in interpreting and comparing the responses.
obtained (cf. Andersson 1994: 73). The approach of using experiences and interpretations of earlier interviews to enhance subsequent interviews, methodologically as well as theoretically, combined with the open questions, reflected the aim of prioritizing rich and varied information over relatively easy analysis. The variation within the interview material (see below) may be a sign that the aim of the open-ended questions, namely to invite the children to choose whether to describe their own father as violent or to relate violence mainly to men and/or to families, was successful.

Rather early in the process of developing the interview structure, two test interviews were conducted (cf. Kjær Jensen 1988). Although the informants were children with no experience of violence in their family, they confirmed that interviews with low standardization and structure could be used to obtain relatively rich information from children. Before starting the process of contacting children about participation, a senior doctor in the Paediatric Psychiatry Clinic at the Regional Hospital in Örebro was consulted. In addition, the interview guide, the routines for material collection and the general planning of the study were examined and accepted by the Board of Research Ethics at Örebro University.

Criteria for selection of and access to informants

Due to the secrecy that surrounds family violence and the difficulty in defining violence, the total population of child witnesses to fathers’ violence against mothers in Sweden can only be estimated approximately (SOU 2001a: 12). Since the total population, due to characteristics of the subject matter, is not known, a statistically based sample is not possible; and if there is no way of guaranteeing that every unit of the total studied population has a known chance of being selected for study, so-called ‘purposive’ sampling can be used (see Layder 1998). The focus may lie on where the processes about which knowledge is sought are most likely to be found (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). If the purpose is theoretical, characteristics or criteria suggested by initially established concepts, or the developing theoretical framework or approach, can guide sampling (cf. Silverman 2000a; Layder 1998). Sample composition and size must not be predetermined and decisions about them restricted to the beginning of the research process, but materials can be flexibly and continuously selected during the whole process. This would provide for the most fruitful outcome in relation to emerging theoretical development and for benefiting the unfolding nature of the research (cf. Layder 1998: 29). The researcher can collect and analyse the material simultaneously to get immediate feedback from the material collection, which in turn has implications for theory-generation. In line with Layder’s (op.cit.) argumentation, this study made use of a flexible and continuous selection
process, in which neither sample size nor composition, or even selection technique, was predetermined during the early stages of the research process. The present knowledge and theoretical constructs about the processes of meaning that this study aims at, as described in chapters 1 and 2, give some indications of characteristics that can guide sampling for theoretical development. How such aspects and possible advantages were weighted against practical and ethical limitations that the characteristics of the subject entailed in this study are discussed here.

As an example, mother moving to a Women’s House can be critical for a child’s understanding of father’s violence (Peled 1998). The sample in this study was restricted to children who had experienced such a move, and did not include children who had not. This was primarily because family violence is a hidden problem, due to its nature as a ‘family secret’, making families where violence is a problem difficult to gain knowledge about. Individual families may seek to prevent people in their environment from finding out about the violence (see Weinmahl 1997), and the size – as well as possibly some characteristics – of the total population is not known in Sweden or elsewhere (see Arnell & Ekbom 2000; Edleson 1999). Because Women’s Houses are a possibility for women to protect themselves and their children for shorter or longer periods of time (see Peled 1998; see also McGee 2000 for women’s and children’s experiences), and the atmosphere there is characterized by peace and a possibility of recovery, the search for informants was focused on Women’s Houses. Since that meant they were not living with or in current danger of violence (cf. Mullender et al. 2002: 33f), there was an ethical decision involved. In initial explorative contacts with Women’s Houses, the managers explained that the women seeking their help form a group of socio-economic and cultural variability. Out of convenience, Women’s Houses in central Sweden were approached – first one, and after realizing that the collection of sufficient material would take too long (cf. Mullender et al. 2002), five others. Of these, two declined to participate, since they thought they were too small to be able to provide contact with families according to the investigation criteria (see below), resulting in four finally accepting co-operation with the project.

This procedure for access to informants may have affected the results in that certain variation is excluded from the analysis and results. There may be discrepancies between mother victims in general (i.e. a community sample) and women who have sought protection in Women’s Houses (see Straus 1990), e.g. in ideological or social aspects. However, if the man’s disapproval or the woman’s own shame diminishes her social network, the woman’s social situation is altered as a consequence of the violence, rather than being a generalization problem. Although this does not necessarily mean that child-
ren at Women’s Houses are different from child witnesses to parents’ violence in general, one should consider the possibility that being at a Women’s House can be a special circumstance for the children’s processes of meaning. However, since research about children at Women’s Houses in Sweden is scarce, it is hard to know just how staying at a Women’s House affects a child’s ideas about violence and fathers, apart from the general possibility that the mother’s decision to move from her home may be interpreted as a sign that the violence that has taken place was or is not normal (see Peled 1998). For this study, considering existing knowledge about the subject and the character of the Women’s Houses as described above, material gained through contact with Women’s Houses was assessed to include enough variation to meet the aim of theory development. Availability and content relevance were combined.

The primary criteria for approaching an individual woman at a Women’s House was that she was there to escape the violence of her child’s father, as in ‘father-in-practice’ – meaning a social father that the child would think about as her or his father figure, and preferably, but not necessarily, her or his biological father. However, there were also some other factors that required consideration before approaching individual women at the Women’s Houses.

First of all, experiencing violence within the family can be highly stressful, as too can be moving away from home to a Women’s House. There are new and unusual practical arrangements, uncertainty about the future, and perhaps the need to deal emotionally and intellectually with the preceding experiences. Although a sample including variation in ‘severity’ of violence experienced may have provided a better ground for theoretical development, concern for the children’s well-being was prioritized. Since the informants in this study did not form a clinical population, and the interviews – for ethical as well as professional reasons – were not conducted within a clinical setting and did not involve ‘clinical questions’, it was judged reasonable not to include children showing signs of ill-health in the study. Because closer knowledge of an individual child’s normal behaviour and emotional state is needed for understanding signs of ill-health, these aspects were discussed with the mothers in the first encounter – to minimize the risk that an interview or even the question of participation in an interview could cause discomfort to the child. To avoid risking that interviews would interfere with ongoing therapy of any kind, children in treatment were not asked to participate. Even if the amount of ill-health in this group might be small in the light of what might be expected from their living conditions (see, e.g., Christensen 1988), such an exclusion could affect the results; the children that were affected most by violence in the family were excluded from the analysis.
However, a psychiatric disorder or special fragility may have complicated the analysis, and posed special theoretical as well as methodological and ethical demands.

Further, the meaning-creating processes about which this study aims at developing knowledge may be related to varying experience, maturity and dependency on parents that in part can be related to the children’s age. Therefore, a target group broad enough to be able to get in contact with within a reasonable time frame and to include some variety, but narrow enough not to over-complicate interpretation, was preferred. When considering a lower age-limit, a certain cognitive maturity, and a level of logical and verbal communication skills were prioritized. By the age of eight, children have normally entered social life and have experience of interaction and communication with adults in school (cf. Greig & Taylor 1999: 78). In addition, although individual differences can be expected, the children have developed more advanced symbolic representation, can understand logic, intentionality and social relationships and handle several aspects simultaneously, and also differentiate between experiences and wishes. They understand that people’s different perspectives and apprehensions are constructed, and since their own self-understanding is more stable, they can adopt a certain distance to their own thinking (Havnesköld & Risholm Mothander 1995; Hwang & Nilsson 2003; Øvreeide 1998: 73f). Therefore, the age of eight was determined as the youngest for participation (see also Mullender et al. 2002). At the other end of the age scale, since the focus of the study included the family as the arena for experiences of violence, the participating children’s orientation towards the family was important. Accordingly, since entering adolescence was assumed to be related to a greater orientation outside the family and to change in relationship to parents (Havnesköld & Risholm Mothander 1995), informants less than thirteen years were decided upon as an appropriate upper age limit. Weinahall (1997) suggests that children within this age span (eight to twelve) have usually realized that violence in the family is not normal, and may ‘try’ different understandings of their experiences. A sample including children between eight and twelve years of age was therefore judged to include good variation for developing theoretical understanding about meaning related to the family as the primary group of reference for the children, while they were old enough to be able to talk about their own thoughts and experiences of fathers and violence in an interview situation.

Despite similar attitudes towards violence in principle, the situations, forms and grounds for justification of violence can differ both between and within groups (cf. Baumeister 1996; also Hearn 1998). Within the theoretical framework of this study, ‘culture’ is seen as social action, as something to
‘do’, rather than as a homogenous, constant and demarcated system to ‘belong to’ (Allwood 2000a: 40). Seeing interpretation as part of ‘doing culture’ through social action implies dealing with each child’s understanding in relation to various aspects, such as gendered, cultural or ethnic, religious or socio-economic. The theoretical framework also entails treating cultural practice, as well as individual experience, as varied and multidimensional. The children in the study were thought to relate their understandings to the possible variations in social images and their possibly complex relations with their individual experiences. As this view of ‘culture’ does not provide a basis for categorization, and since the same mechanisms are present in families with a violence problem (see, e.g., Metell et al. 2001), a sample including variation within ‘subcultures’ within Swedish society was welcome. For practical reasons, however, a criterion for inclusion in the study was that the children spoke good enough Swedish to be interviewed; then, they were seen as part of Swedish society and included (cf. Hydén 1994).

A basic demand for the interviews was the informed consent of the child her- or himself and, since they were under the age of 15 and the study was of an ethically sensitive nature, also of the child’s caregiver (see HSFR 1996). Talking about violence in the family may be a sensitive matter, and the children might not have talked about what had happened and might feel they should keep the secret from outsiders. Therefore, and because the child’s caregiver was assumed to be able to make the best first judgement about the advisability of participation or further contact on the basis of information about the project, initial contact was taken with the mother alone. When their situation was not chaotic, mothers of eight to twelve year-old Swedish-speaking children who had, according to themselves, experienced some kind of violence serious enough to flee their home and seek help at a Women’s House, were approached. Although talking to the mother before talking to the child meant some ‘bias’ when listening to the child, minimizing the risk of approaching a child whose mother would not consent to participation in an interview was prioritized. And, although this procedure limited the control over how the study and the conditions of the child’s participation, e.g. concerning voluntariness, was presented to the child, the possibility that the mother’s consent could help the child feel at ease in talking about the issues in an interview was prioritized (cf. Øvreeide 1998).

Because of the decision to talk to the mothers before talking to the children about participation in the study, the mothers also made the initial judgement about whether what had taken place in the family could and should be described as violence. Because violence is a subjective phenomenon, mother and child might have different interpretations about what father had done, but for practical and ethical reasons, the operational criteria for talking
to a child about participation was that the mother had defined the father’s actions as some kind of violence. The mothers’ reasons for seeking help and sanctuary in a Women’s House could vary from continuous life-threatening physical violence to a single incident or situations of psychological, material or economic limitations. However, especially since women tend to underestimate the extent to which actions against them are criminal (Walby 2002), their decision to leave their home for sanctuary at a Women’s House was considered a signal of the severity, at least from their perspective, of the situation.

In interpretative research, the ‘information richness’ in each interview is more important than sample size; and, since such richness can scarcely be determined beforehand, a final decision about sample size should not be made before starting data collection (Layder 1998). Information-rich interviews are ones from which the researcher can obtain substantial knowledge about the research topic, and learn much about issues of importance for the purpose of the research. Consequently, recommendations about sample size in qualitative research are often vague: ‘In interpretative studies the size of the sample is no larger than that needed to gather the information of interest. Redundancy is to be avoided’ (Marlow 2000: 145). According to Kvale (1996: 101), ‘To the common question, “How many interview subjects do I need?” the answer is simply, ‘Interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know’. Kvale further stresses that the number of interviews depends on the aim of the study. If the purpose is to explore and describe in detail an attitude, new interviews can be conducted and the sample expanded until a point of satisfaction is reached, each new interview does not give more substantial knowledge, and the researcher judges that no new theoretical ideas appear. This point is normally reached after about 15+/−10 interviews (op. cit.: 102).

In line with those arguments, a final decision about the number of informants for the study was not made before the start of the interviews. However, based on Kvale’s (op. cit.) judgement of what is generally practically possible in relation to the time frame of the study and to the variation needed for nuancing the theoretical approach on the basis of praxis in qualitative research, interviews with 15 informants was the approximate goal at the start of the material collection. As the interviewing proceeded, much practical effort had to be put into making contact with families that fitted the study’s criteria (cf. Mullender et al. 2002), and into organizing secure and ethical circumstances for the interviews. The extension of the material collection that this involved, in combination with the ethical balance in not approaching more families – and especially not more children – than ‘necessary’, and the amount of new insights from each interview as the
interviewing proceeded, resulted in ten interviews finally being considered enough for the purpose of the study.

In order not to contact families in the most stressful situations, at the first phase, managers at one of the Women’s Houses identified mothers of children that fitted the criteria and who had recently, i.e. within one year, left the Women’s House. Individual letters to the mothers informed them about the study and the reason for contacting them. It was stressed that the staff of the Women’s House had posted the letter and that I (as the researcher) had no information except their names and their telephone numbers; also, they were told that, according to the staff at the Women’s House, they fitted the criteria of the study. Further, it was made welcome for them to contact me or the Women’s House for further information. The purpose of the letter was to prepare the mothers for being contacted by telephone about possible participation in the study. I would not know if the telephone number given to me was correct and ‘working’ until I tried it, and by the time I found out, some had been discontinued or were not answered. Since, in such cases, the mother could already have received a letter, which would need some follow-up, a second letter was sent to give them an opportunity to answer me by mail. This initial strategy resulted in only one contact and interview.

Therefore, the strategy was changed, and other Women’s Houses contacted. The managers of the Women’s Houses were well informed about the study, and its aim and design. After they had got to know the mother and child, they made a first assessment about whether the child could participate in the study, depending on his or her psychological health and that of the mother, language skills, and the situation of the family. Thereafter, they made first contact with the mothers of the children that fitted the criteria for participation in the study. The informants had lived at least a week at the Women’s House before they were asked if they would consider being included in the study. This was to let them get over the first phase of ‘turbulence’ and settle in. The gathered experience of and knowledge about mothers’ and children’s victimization at the Women’s Houses, and their knowledge about the study, provided a point of reference and interface for the mothers as well as for me. If the mother was positive to participation, the contact was communicated to me. Thereafter, I met the mother in question to present the study and asked her to think over the conditions and possible consequences of participation. After the first meeting with the mother, the contact with each family was handled individually to deal with emotional and practical changes, such as moving from the Women’s House. If the mother, when contacted again after a few days, gave her consent, a subsequent contact was discussed and a meeting with the child and mother was arranged.
During the joint meeting, the child was informed of the aim of the study, why knowledge was needed about her or his role in the project, and the conditions of participation, including that it was voluntary and that an interview could be discontinued whenever so-desired. The children were further told that the information would be used for research only and their identity would not be passed on, but that they were free to talk about the interview with others, e.g. with their mother. Tiller (1988) stresses that, while it is important to tell child informants about secrecy, it may also give the child the impression that what will be discussed is stigmatizing, shameful or bad. Since the children’s possibility to speak without having to consider what a parent might think about their account was considered important, and secrecy concerned the informants’ parents as well, the mothers were informed that what was said during the interview was between the child informant and the interviewer only. However, since children might want a parent present and might not consider a parent’s presence a limitation, the children were asked about how they felt about being interviewed alone. Thereby, the pre-decided arrangement that the mother should be in an adjacent room during the interview could be altered by the child’s choice to have the mother present, but a mother could not insist on such a right. Because of this, one mother declined participation for her children, who were therefore not contacted. No child asked for her or his mother’s presence during the interview. Thereafter, the informant was told that her or his mother had approved to participation and that it was now up to the child to decide whether she or he wanted to participate (see HSFR 1996). At that stage, no child or mother declined participation. Two mothers and, according to the mother, one child declined participation, all before the joint meeting, and they were not asked to provide a specific reason (cf. Mullender et al 2002: 27). The interviews took place during the time the child and mother lived at the Women’s House or after they had left, depending on the circumstances. Theoretically, interviewing children about family issues could benefit from taking place within the home, but in this case, for practical and ethical reasons, since the home may not have been a safe place, they were conducted where the mother suggested. The interviewer and the informants had no relationship of dependency and the informants were not offered compensation for participation of any kind.

Due to the practical requirements that the sensitivity and complexity of the subject, and the ambition to try to avoid causing worry to the children, implied, the sample became limited to what could be obtained, with reasonable amounts of time and effort spent, rather than a truly theoretical sample.
Considerations and procedures for adult researchers interviewing children

‘If one is interested in children’s thinking, it comes natural to ask them about how they think in different matters’ (Doverborg & Pramling 1985: 7; see also Greig & Taylor 1999). Talking to children can also be a way of bringing children in general into our understanding of social life (see Tiller 1988). However, since knowledge about children in research for a long time has mainly been gathered through the statements or evaluations of adults, parents or professionals or through acts, journals, registers or observation, the knowledge about interviewing children for research purposes is limited (see Andersson 1998), and careful ethical and methodological considerations are necessary.

According to Solberg (1994: 196), identifying knowledge as positioned is of special importance within child research: ‘Besides sharing with other researchers from their own culture the general problem of ethnocentrism, being positioned in their own culture as adults, child researchers may have difficulty in obtaining the necessary distance to be able to reflect on adult ways of conceiving of children and childhood. [...] If we fail to identify our knowledge as positioned, and turn it into research questions, our knowledge about children and our experiences of relating to them may have a false status as “factual” or “neutral” knowledge’. Solberg further acknowledges problems with children as informants, not associated with their child-like qualities, but with adult researchers’ capacities not to let assumptions about such qualities interfere with researcher-informant interaction. To improve methodologically and enlarge our sources of knowledge about the construction of childhood, Solberg (op. cit.: 160f) suggests paying less attention to the qualities of the research persons as children, so as to approach them in ways that ‘fit’ such characteristics, and more to reflection on the social relationships and encounters entered into by researcher and researched during the research process. Thereby, trust can be gained from the research subjects, and an entrance made into analysis of the social system. Similarly, Andenaes (1991) points out that one barrier to conducting an interview where all participants are active lies in cultural ideas about how children; accordingly, interviewers must relate to cultural categories rather than just represent them.

Although interviews with pre-school children may impose special demands (see, e.g., Lindh-Munther 1999), researchers such as Andenaes (1991) conclude that age does not change the procedures in any essential way and that communicative ability as well as theoretical reflections are more connected with qualitative interviewing than the age of the informants.
Similarly, Christensen and James (2000) stress that special techniques or methods are often not necessary for research with children. Rather, as age may matter more in some situational contexts than in others, Solberg (1994: 180) suggests directing attention at the contexts in which research encounters take place; conceptions of the qualities that may differ between children and adults ‘should not influence our ways of approaching children in social science research, but […] should be subject of an empirical investigation to explore what significance age has within different contexts and situations’. However, as informer-researcher encounters are especially asymmetrical and salient in interviews with child informants, mutual understanding by adaptation to the situation is required (cf. Andersson 1998). ‘Of course the use of children in research demands insight in and familiarity with the unique about children’s forms for experiences and expressions at different ages’ (Tiller 1988: 43 [author’s translation]). Thereby, although the age of the informants in this study may not impose any qualitatively unique requirements, the power-related dimension constituted by the age difference between informant and researcher requires special consideration of practical arrangements. But rather than attributing difficulties to child characteristics, they could be attached to most research conducted by adults, whose ideas and expectations with regard to children limit their understanding. In this study, respect of children was sought through recognition of the ‘subtleties’ of child-adult interaction (cf. Christensen & James 2000) and by actively focusing on the similarities between the adult researcher and the child informant, rather than by trying to ignore or erase the differences between adults and children. Further, the youth of the informants in this study meant paying special attention to and reflecting over the general challenges of doing qualitative interviews and applying general methodological requirements and practices that would resonate with children’s own concerns; this prompted special openness during interaction in the interviews and in interpretations (cf. Andenaes 1991; Christensen & James 2000; Tiller 1990). As an example, special attention was paid to clarifying the interview contract, establishing focus in the conversation, and motivating and creating good conditions for the informant. ‘A child needs more help than an adult to be able to tell what an interviewer needs to be able to ask deeper questions relevant for the research problem’ (Andenaes 1991: 277–278 [author’s translation]; cf. Øvreeide 1998).

In practice, in this study this also meant that, immediately before each interview, after describing the aim of the study, the child was told that researchers and adults know very little about how children who have stayed with their mother at a Women’s House think about fathers and violence in general and about their own father. And since children are kind of experts
on this topic and probably have the greatest knowledge about it, the researcher asks for the child’s help (see Andenaes 1991; Solberg 1994; Tiller 2000). Solberg (op. cit.) points out that this can also limit the risk of young informants interpreting sets of questions as ‘tests’ (like in school), and therefore search for what they believe are ‘correct’ answers rather than focus on their actual experiences. To lessen the pressure on the participants to ‘make up’ answers, it was stressed that ‘it is okay not to know the answer’ (see Waterman et al. 2001). It was also stressed that different children tell a stranger, such as a researcher, different things and in different amounts (cf. Andenaes 1991), and that things can change and that one can feel and mean several different things at the same time (cf. Tiller 1988). After letting the child know that her or his points of views are interesting and important, the ambition was to handle the inescapable power-imbalance in the interview so as to allow the child to ‘be the expert’ (cf. Kampmann 1998). Because of the risk that the interviewer gives subtle signals about desirable responses, and that informants might have their own theories about desirable answers or have preferences other than giving the kind of information the researcher aims for, it is the interviewer’s responsibility to behave in a respectful and trustworthy way so that informants trust her or him with the information that gives the researcher the best possible base for understanding. Andenaes (1991) also suggests stressing the importance of answering the questions so that the researcher can understand as well as possible, and also recording the interviews for better recall. One objective of the interviews in this study was to find a balance between showing genuine interest in receiving the information necessary to understand the child’s perspective and being able to handle that information while respecting the child’s limits in what he or she is prepared to tell.

The question of reliability is crucial in the interview process (see Kvale 1996; Denzin & Lincoln 2000). During the interviews, repeating the children’s own terminology in follow-up questions and focusing on responding to their emotions when reacting to their accounts, provided a way of showing the children that I could handle the information they gave me (emotionally as well as thematically); the child’s terminology as well as general ‘emotional level’ should form the conditions under which an interview takes place (see Øvreeide 1998). Andenaes (1991) stresses that offering praise to clarify relational content, by emphasizing that the children help the interviewer to understand, rather than commenting on the content of what they tell, is important as a reminder of any interview contract with children. In this study, this also pointed to the importance of asking questions so that the informant has a chance to understand and reply, e.g. by connecting to something concrete, so that there is something to praise. To provide the
best conditions for valid interview accounts, a balanced combination of respect towards the children's status as social actors and the interviewer's responsibilities as adult researcher was sought (cf. Woodhead & Faulkner 2000).

After each interview, the child and her or his mother met me to talk about the interview. The aim of that contact was to give the informants an opportunity to ask questions or talk about feelings that appeared during or after the interview, as well as for the researcher to judge the possibly negative effects of the interview on the informant and to be able to provide assistance in any such case. The informants were given another opportunity to talk about the process and content of the interview and feelings that may have appeared (cf. Peled 1998). Thereby, the child and I would have no secrets from the mother; the child's emotional state following the interview and the possible need for support interventions could be discussed, and the interview was started and ended together with the mother to provide some continuity (cf. Øvreeide 1998). The mother was informed about the thematic content of the interview, but not about the content of the child's account. Caution had to be taken to maintain a balance between keeping secrecy towards the mother and letting her know what had been talked about. The contact ended with me repeating that I would not contact them again, but that they were welcome to contact me.

**Process of interpretation**

Possibly because of the sensitivity of the subject and the intricate and complex practical circumstances that followed, the material-collecting period of 21 months resulted in a total of ten interviews, three with girls and seven with boys – some more informative and focused than others. The children were eight to twelve years old at the time of the interview, and the average age was 9.6 years. Two children were interviewed in their home, two at the university and six at the Women's House where they had stayed or were staying with their mother. The interviews were 36–57 minutes long, except for the first one, which was only 20 minutes. The average time was 42 minutes.

The children's mothers had all fled their home and sought help at a Women's House for different levels and kinds of violence from the children's 'father in practice'. At the time of the interviews, all the children had lived for a shorter or longer period of time with their mother at the Women's House; some were still there, while others had moved out. As a result of the focus of the study, they all had a relationship with a mother and a father; children who had lived with only one parent for some time or with two parents of the same sex were not asked to participate. Although two were born in non-European countries and had come to Sweden as babies or
toddlers, and parents of another three were born in non-European countries, they were all judged to have been domiciled in Sweden, and they spoke good Swedish and studied and lived in Sweden. The research arrangements did not provide information about the social or economic status of the families.

The interviews were taped on MiniDisc. The tapes were marked with fictitious names and held in secure storage (cf. HSFR 1996). Taping the interviews meant later access to the informants’ terminology and formulations, better conditions for maintaining focus during the interviews due to less demand for keeping notes, and an ability to signal the importance of the interviews to the informants since everything was taken care of (cf. Andenæs 1991). At the analysis phase, Tiller (1988) stresses that children’s answers will vary in nuance, quantity and elaboration; partly because of this, all responses must be interpreted contextually; in the case of children, their enhanced contextual sensitivity makes the location of the interview of great importance. Since the reliability of a qualitative study is closely related to the process of interpretation, there follows an attempt to describe that process here in as much detail as possible (although this is difficult in this kind of study). The following chapters, covering the interviews and interpretations of the parts and wholes of each interview, also makes the process of interpretation more explicit.

Kvale (1996) recommends not only deciding the method for analysis before interviewing, but also integrating analysis into the interview situation itself. In Quarsell’s (1988) view, questions of validity in child interviews are concerned with whether the child answers the question asked or another question, implying that validity has as much to do with how the informant understands the interviewer as with how the interviewer understands the informant. Individual interview situations and the collection of material as a whole provide opportunities for the researcher to acknowledge information that substantiates or contradicts hypotheses within the process of interpretation. In this study, interpretation started in each interview situation as a continuous process of trying to understand how the informants viewed the subject, so as to be able to formulate relevant and helpful follow-up questions and clarifications. Direct contact with the informant in the interview situation can be used to confirm interpretations, but can also convey suggestions to the informant. Because the theoretical concepts were relatively well-defined at the start of information collection, the interviews were focused, and theoretical reflection could start already in interaction with the informants. During the interviews, questions designed to confirm interpretations in relation to the theoretical framework were asked sparingly; they were more to enable further questions relevant to the informant to be posed, but the informants’ clarifications and corrections as responses to questions in the
interviews also included some feedback on emerging theoretical interpretations.

Listening to the interviews in order to transcribe them into text provided a second opportunity for interpretation in a wider sense. In relation to the aim of the study, a valid transcription from tape to text (cf. Kvale 1996) was judged to prioritize the authenticity of the material, e.g. by retaining colloquial expressions, creative grammatical solutions and unusual terminology, so as to stay as close to the children’s spoken language as possible. Every word, including any repetition, was written down, pauses were marked with ‘…’, but without noting their length, and the few parts that could not be heard properly were marked ‘[inaudible]’. As well as the informants being given fictitious names, all names of other individuals or places were replaced by designations of their relation to the child, such as ‘sister’ or ‘big city’. Hums that made a contribution to the dialogue were kept, but those just filled the function of providing general encouragement to keep talking were excluded. Finding a balance between when sentences ended and new ones started and whether a passage was to be seen as one sentence or two posed something of a challenge. The aim of transcribing the taped material into Swedish text was to make the content of the interviews visible and manageable for analysing and interpretive purposes while staying as close to the original spoken conversation as possible. Transcription meant listening through every interview several times, resulting in a general familiarity with the individual interviews as well as with the material as a whole. Repeated listening for the purpose of writing everything down entailed meticulous attention to hearing each word; such attention to detail, somewhat paradoxically, formed a basis for understanding of the whole. Special themes and aspects that appeared and were theoretically interesting were recorded in another document, whereby aspects that became visible, i.e. audible, during listening to and transcription of the tapes could be included and followed up in subsequent interviews. Thereby, the process of interpreting each interview started during interviewing and continued in listening to and transcribing the tape. After gaining general familiarity with and understanding of each interview as a whole, the transcriptions were used to focus in greater depth on parts of the interviews. The main interpretation of the individual interviews included two separate, but closely intertwined, processes.

First, to understand how each child treated each of the themes that the interviews were concentrated on, namely violence and fathers in general and their own father including his (possibly) violent acts, meant structuring the material of each interview around these themes. Although the interviews were planned to deal with each theme individually, the children made many
connections between them, and individual parts of the interviews could be important for understanding a child’s conception of several themes at one and the same time. Thereafter, a more detailed categorization coded each theme into different aspects that could be understood in terms of the theoretical constructs of abstraction and generalization. While the three overarching themes that formed the basis for the first categorization were derived from the theoretical perspective of the research aim and applied to all interviews, the sub-categories were derived more from the empirical material and, at the first stage, therefore differed somewhat between the interviews. Some of the themes in the battery of follow-up questions were more fruitful in some interviews than others. In addition, the children brought up aspects and themes that could be followed up with questions. Yet other themes appeared during transcription as important enough to explore further. Thereby, the more detailed coding of the themes in the interviews can be seen as the outcome of the children’s initiatives as well as of the interviewer’s theoretical suggestions or interpretations. Since the children’s accounts were guided by my questions, the themes can not be described as entirely empirically derived for they were influenced by the theoretical starting points of the study. However, the objective of basing questions in the interviews on children’s initial descriptions when introduced to the theme was a strategy specifically adopted to limit that influence.

Such sub-themes were grouped together into categories that could be used for recognizing similarities and differences between the interviews. When a theme became salient in one interview, its correspondence was sought for in other interviews, in which both similar and dissimilar approaches could be traced. Thereby, the similarities and dissimilarities in these aspects between interviews formed the basis for constructing interpretations of what was ‘essential’ to each child’s understanding of any one theme in relation to generalization and abstraction processes, and the conceptions of the three main themes of each child were also interpreted in relation to the other children. In this process, material that – in relation to the research aim and questions and theoretical assumptions – was considered irrelevant was not included in the analysis. Given the variety of aspects of each theme, the detailed codings provided insight into which, in the light of the child’s account of that theme in total, were more marginal and which were more central to her or his understanding of that theme. Parts that appeared central to their logic as a whole, within each theme as well as between them, were considered crucial to understanding their grounds for abstraction and generalization. Practically, those crucial parts were sought for by attempts to summarize each informant’s account with a focus on what was most important for understanding the whole. That, in turn, was facilitated by comparison with the
other interviews. Thereby, understanding each child’s abstracted and generalized conceptualization of each theme, in a successive but also parallel process, enabled understanding the individual themes as crucial parts of each child’s logically unified and conciliated symbolic meaning through the theoretical construct of negotiation.

An interview can reveal, perhaps at most, ‘what an individual thinks and feels at a certain point in time and in a certain context’ (Repstad 1992: 80 [author’s translation]). Accordingly, the children’s conciliations of symbolic meaning were not seen as stable or fixed, but as a continuous process that – at each point in time – might take different paths of development. Such a process is produced and reproduced, and perhaps slightly modified, continuously in individual, interactional and cultural praxis. The aim of interpreting each interview individually entailed searching for all the parts on which the child built her or his conciliated meaning – trying to see the complexity while focusing on the parts most crucial for their logically conciliated meaning. The aim was less to find interpretations free from contradictions, and more to understand the contradictions (cf. Kvale 1996; Silverman 2000a). In the process of understanding the children’s negotiation processes, the theoretical alternatives of normalization and resistance were used as an initial orientation for classification. Depending on the totality of each individual interview, aspects or processes of logic that were present in several interviews could be central in some but trivial in others. Further insight into how the different parts, interpreted as described earlier, were related to each other for understanding the children’s meaning-conciliation from the perspective of negotiation, and into the validity of the approach to the empirical material and the logic of interpretations, is provided in the presentations of each interview and the interpretations of them in chapters 4, 5 and 6.

Interpretation of the children’s accounts demanded paying special attention to the variety of possible relations between what they said and what they could have meant. That children’s statements seem illogical in the light of adult researchers’ forms of analysis, and therefore implicitly not true, is one of the major difficulties with analysing the kind of information that children give in an interview (cf. Greig & Taylor 1999; Tiller 1988). Children’s living conditions can be so different from adults’ that their interpretations can seem unreasonable, even though they are very reasonable from a child’s perspective. According to Tiller (1988: 57), ‘Complete and at the same time contrasting reality, that not in the same way as for adults is separated into reciprocally excluding categories, demands that research continuously must search for the categories and dimensions that are specially
relevant to children’ [author’s translation]. The paradox lies in that the importance of the concrete requires more abstract, i.e. theoretical, work.

Because of the flexible design for material collection and the variety of mandates gained in the interviews for talking about different subjects, some aspects were well developed in some interviews but less so in others. Interpreting material of such variety demands treating each interview individually or running the risk of forcing the individual children’s accounts into a common frame. The theoretical framework enabled handling of the subjectivity that follows from interpreting and seeking a structure within each interview individually before searching for patterns between interviews. Focusing analysis first on each child’s understanding within each theme, related to individual statements and to the interview in total, had the purpose of staying as true to the material as possible and acknowledging the complexity of each child’s conciliated structure of meaning. Interpreting the relations between the themes as negotiations for meaning-conciliation for each child permitted a more comparative analysis. Similarities and differences in the children’s conciliations of symbolic meaning could be compared with each other to develop a more general theoretical understanding about negotiation and meaning-conciliation approaches. While some comparisons, due to familiarity with the material as a whole, could not be avoided in interpreting the individual interviews, shifting focus to the similarities and differences between the interviews meant actively seeking patterns in the interpretations of the parts and wholes of the individual interviews. In reality, the different stages of analysis were intertwined. Details in individual interviews raised questions about how the other children had dealt with that theme, and focusing on comparing the children enabled a deeper understanding of a specific child’s conceptualizations of specific themes. Therefore, understanding the interviews was a process of moving attention in many directions of the material and an almost hermeneutic switching between focus on parts of individual interviews and the interview material as a whole. Whilst the initial focus was on reaching an understanding of each child’s conceptions, there was also constant attention to the material as a totality. Only in relation to the other interviews could the uniqueness of each individual interview be identified. Similarly, when shifting focus to the material as a whole, individual details had to be taken into consideration for an understanding of general aspects. The theoretical assumptions about connections in details were then compared with the interviews as a whole.

Categorizing the interview information to permit comparison with the other interviews meant looking for differences and similarities in the generalizations and abstractions in the three main concepts (fathers, violence, and the own father), which also enabled understanding the reasons for the
differences. New meanings and perspectives were developed through interpretation, including contextualization (see Kvale 1996), so that one part of an interview was related to other interviews as well as to other parts of the same interview. Relating the differences and similarities in the interviews to the conditions of, opportunities for and possible consequences of interpretations formed part of the focus on understanding the children as interpreting individuals in situations rather than on, say, their personalities. However, as the interpretations of the children’s handling of the individual themes could include much complexity and many contradictions, the broad and varying spectrum of ‘solutions’ for handling the relation between their understanding of the three parts could at first not be grasped by the construct displayed in Figure 1 (as outlined in Chapter 2). While the interpretations of the individual interviews acknowledged ambiguities, logical ‘problems’ and process, Figure 1 implies a categorization focusing on ‘the result’ of the children’s overall meaning-conciliation of the relations between the individual themes, rather than on the contents of them.

The encounter between the theoretical framework, as described in Chapter 2, and the empirical material thereby made clear that the children’s approaches to reaching conciliated meaning about these issues were more complex than the framework allowed. The difficulties involved in ‘matching’ the material to the possible alternatives in the triangular model (Figure 1) primarily had to do with many of the children either treating fathers in general as two groups or not presenting one unified image of their own father. Both of these factors obstructed the classification of the ‘variable’ constituted by the similarity or difference between the own and general fathers. Thereby, although treating the approaches as ideal-typical, the vast majority of the children’s accounts did not let themselves be included or understood in the logic of the model. Thus, a ‘new look’ was essential. Focusing less on the ‘results’ of the children’s conciliated meanings enabled acknowledgment of the separations, understood as negotiating processes, as central to structuring and guiding understanding of the children’s processes of meaning-conciliation. By focusing on the negotiations that obstructed categorization within the simplified and basic model, the complexity of the interviews came into immediate focus. Thereby, the theoretical framework, as described in Chapter 2, formed the basis for the methodological approach and design. The methodology provided an empirical material, which necessitated theoretical adjustment, as here described, before a developed interpretation of the material could be made.

The new focus on the negotiations made features that were not necessarily prominent, or even seemed problematic or logically contradictory at first glance, appear as crucial for the children’s meaning-conciliations. When these
‘problems’ were placed in focus and treated as signs of negotiation processes, another pattern emerged concerning the children’s violence-conception – namely that the conception of violence in itself, as a principle concept, was not negotiated as much as its opposite, i.e. ‘goodness’ or ‘niceness’. This could have implications for the conception of specific incidents or situations of violence. Through this process, the focus switched from the ‘results’ of the children’s understandings to the elaborative processes through which they became possible. When the different approaches to meaning-conciliation were recognized, it also became apparent that they corresponded to other circumstances within the children’s accounts, that were not part of the approach in itself. Aspects that co-occurred were used for suggesting a theoretical relation, as in possible ‘mechanism’, that could point the children’s intellectual attention in one direction or another. At this stage of the analysis, the levels of the self of the child, the family as an arena for (possible) violence, and society as the setting of norms were used as reference. The logic of this process is described more concretely in Chapter 7.

**Ethical considerations**

Since research findings whose general trustworthiness is under threat can scarcely motivate intrusion into people’s lives, methodological preparation and theoretical awareness are critical – especially if research concerns a sensitive subject. Research ethics mainly concerns how a body of material is collected and analysed, and how results are reported and used when central cultural and social values come into conflict with each other (see Alver & Öyen 1998). The primary ethical question includes weighing the value of the possible knowledge gain of a study against its possible harm. Especially when it comes to particularly vulnerable groups, studies can be legitimized by the possibility of developing support for these groups (op. cit.). As an example, long-term positive general outcomes of non-therapeutic research that do not have a direct positive outcome for the informant can, if the child’s safety in combination with the consent of a parent is provided, motivate such research (Bischofberger et al. 1991). This study, including interviews with children with experiences of violence in their own family, was motivated by the need for more nuanced understanding of how children deal with such experiences, their thoughts in their living situation, and what they have to say themselves. Such knowledge might also form a foundation for the development of support practices for children with such experiences. However, the need for knowledge has to be weighed against the informants’ rights to integrity, autonomy and well-being; both short-term and long-term possible negative outcomes have to be considered (Hermerén 1996; see also Alver & Öyen 1998; HSFR 1996). The ethical considerations in this study
concerned relations and possible differences, or even conflicts of interest, between the informants as individuals and as parts of a group of children, their mothers as caregivers of the children and as victims of violence, their fathers as parents and as alleged perpetrators, and the Women’s Houses as trusted by women and as policy agents, and the need for research. While the procedures in this study have already been described, some aspects of how they were specifically designed to attend to the safety and well-being of the participants, and the reasoning behind the decisions in question, are described in more detail here.

Hermerén (1996: 231) stresses that the researcher has a responsibility to discontinue a study if the knowledge gained is not in proportion to the discomfort the study causes the participants. It is the researcher’s duty to protect informants, other family members, and the family as such from harm. When it comes to families in which violence has been part of life, this duty is complex. Situations may appear in which protecting the child means harming the family as an institution. A plan was developed to secure the well-being of the child informants if any child showed signs of discomfort or other negative consequences due to the interviews. If the child showed such signs during the interview, it would be discontinued and the mother, who was in another room during the interview, would be contacted. I would talk to the child and mother about what had happened in the interview situation and what feelings it had awoken; on the basis of the mother’s familiarity with the child’s needs and situation an opinion on the child’s need for intervention could then be formed. It would be my responsibility to initiate discussion about what help the Women’s House, the social services, the Paediatric Psychiatry Clinic, school counsellor, school psychiatrist, etc. could offer. If the mother wished, staff from the Women’s House could be asked to participate in this discussion. The mother would decide what help to seek for the child and initiate those contacts, with my support if needed. As mentioned above, a senior doctor at the Paediatric Psychiatry Clinic at the regional hospital in Örebro was the contact person during the interview phase. The doctor could be contacted for consultation if needed. If the child showed signs of negative impact of the interviews afterwards, the same procedure would be applied after the follow-up meeting. However, no child showed discomfort or other negative consequences that required the use of the strategies described above.

The question of the children’s well-being is also related to the possibility that the researcher receives knowledge about such circumstances for the child that action needs to be taken for their safety. Thereby, the issue of anonymity is related to the question of discretion and self-imposed secrecy. Alver and Öyen (1998) discuss the question of the child’s right to talk in confidence on the one hand and witness responsibility and duty to report on the other,
and conclude that every unique situation demands an individual decision. Before starting the interviewing, a decision was taken that a child who revealed such information should be neither left without action nor treated as an object for action, but that action should first be discussed with the child and thereafter with the mother. However, no such information that was not already ‘in the open’ was revealed.

HSFR (1996) recommends researchers to give participants the opportunity to take part of ethically sensitive parts of text and controversial interpretations before publication. In Hermerén (1996: 233f) view, participants have the right to know how their participation has been used; to make their participation more meaningful, they should also have the opportunity to see the result or report. If participants are offended by the interpretations, the knowledge gain should be weighed against the negative outcomes of publication. In this study, since participation was sensitive and future living arrangements not always determined, the informants and their mothers were told that they were welcome to contact me at any time about any questions that might arise after participation, but that I would not keep their telephone numbers or addresses. Therefore, if they wanted a report they would have to contact me or the Women’s House, which would receive a copy.

**Aspects of quality:**

**reliability and validity in generalization and abstraction**

First, the reliability of this study can be related to the interview material. As an example, a study based on a verbal design is limited in what information the researcher can receive. In interviews, the researcher can get a glimpse of ‘meaning by principle’ (see Jeffner 1997), but the complexity of conceptual and ‘behavioural’ meaning can probably only be reached through the study of a concrete situation. Not all experiences, feelings or even thoughts can be verbalized. However, the aim of this study is to understand the children’s more general understanding of the phenomena and concepts; concrete violent events are used as examples, but are not the starting points of discussion. This means the study focuses on a kind of narrative truth, but is able to say little about how the children would react emotionally or behaviourally to witnessing violence. In addition, ‘abstract’ and ‘verbal’ meanings are just as important as ‘behavioural’ meanings, but of different kinds. And speech as well as actions can be interpreted in different ways and fulfil different functions. Another limitation consists in only the information the informant *wishes* to share ever reaching the researcher, which is possibly related to talking about thoughts in a research interview including the feature of
revealing information about one’s self (cf. Goffman 1959/1990). This could be true also for a study of behavioural meaning. It is possible that, in the interviews, informants adjust concepts or understandings of individual phenomena to make the totality appear more logical.

It is also important to stress that whether the children in the study had actually witnessed their father’s violence against their mother depended on their mother’s interpretation. For approaching mothers of children, the managers at the Women’s Houses were told that I wanted to interview children who had witnessed their father’s violence against their mother, which was also how the project was described to the mothers before asking for their consent. Whether a child was directly asked in the interviews about the violence depended on their openness to such questions. Since violence is a subjective phenomenon, it is possible that the children’s fathers would have said there was no violence (cf., e.g., Hearn 1998; Hydén 1994; Lundgren 1990). Women often considering psychological violence and threats as the worst kind of violence (cf. Lundgren et al. 2001) might mean that mothers’ interpretation of their situation as severe was due to psychological circumstances rather than physical violence. This could be seen as a methodological problem or as simply corresponding to the different subjective possibilities of defining violence, which makes predetermined definitions problematic. Accordingly, the need for study subjects, such as women and children, to let the researcher know and start the research on the basis of their definitions is even more evident. The criteria for participation were based on the mother, from her perspective, having experienced enough violence to escape her home with her child.

Further, since the children in this study, for practical and ethical reasons, were not interviewed in the direct context of violence – in the sense that violence was not directly present during the interviews, retrospection can be seen as a limitation. However, if a violent event is seen as a process that includes a phase of building up as a prehistory, a phase of violent act(s) and a phase of aftermath (Hydén 1994), during the interviews the children could be seen as being within the aftermath phase in the wider context of violence. On the other hand, the children in this study – having been confronted with their mother’s decision to leave and responses from outside the family, such as from Women’s House staff, police or lawyers – may have more explicitly been exposed to socially deviant images of their fathers. This might have initiated a change in their interpretation compared with when living in the family, and ‘may have turned [their] perceptions of parental fights into a clash of values between fathers and society’ (Peled 1998: 425). This could limit the generalizability of the meaning conciliating processes to children with such experiences.
The possibility that informants may, at the time of the interview, just have been exposed to specific incidents, such as violent situations, or individuals’ influence, such as father’s, mother’s, Women’s House staff, etc., may be assumed to have had an impact on their thinking about the issues of the interviews. Similarly, being asked about participation, thinking about being interviewed, being interviewed, and (as happened in one case) being interviewed again due to technical problems, could have influenced their conciliated meaning. Also, the way the study was first presented to the children by their mothers was out of my control and – despite the open-ended questions – the themes could at worst have tempted the children to reveal associations that were not their own. Such influence can be seen as a methodological problem, but also as the core of creating meaning (see Chapter 2). Since meaning is always challenged and always changing, each individual has a choice in how to treat every piece of new information. They have chosen whom to listen to and how to make sense of what they hear and see of other’s interpretations. Therefore, what the children said in the interviews is treated as ‘their own’ interpretation of the influences of others, which are taken for granted. However, to minimize possible interviewer’s ‘bias’, the interview questions were kept open and were formulated from the starting point of each individual child and her or his own words and accounts; the conversation-like and open interviews provided opportunity for elaboration, definition and clarification during the interview process (cf. Marlow 2000: 182). Further, since meaning is seen as a process rather than a state, the empirical material in which it is reflected is transient (cf. also Chapter 8 for a discussion about the flightiness of the results). Therefore, rather than seeing reliability as related to consistency (cf. Marlow 2000), the reliability of the interpretations and results in this study is primarily assumed to be subordinate to its validity.

Qualitative research demands serious considerations about validity, since the results are often based on a unique research design and interpretations that are intrinsically subjective. In Kvale’s (1996) view, there is a mutual dependence between a philosophical understanding of truth, the ideas on validity within social science, and the practical problem of verifying knowledge based on qualitative interviews. The quality of the knowledge developed in this study, as in its relation to the social phenomena to which it refers, depends on the validity of the theoretical approach in relation to how the empirical material was used for logical interpretations (cf. Silverman 2000a). The validity of the relation between the theoretical presuppositions and the research questions is manifested in the discussions in Chapter 2. By presenting the full empirical material that formed the basis for analysis, the variety and deviances in the material are included and visualized. This study
presents the theoretical starting points, the procedure of analysis, the empirical material as a whole, and the reasonings behind the interpretation of each part of the material in detail to provide insight into the validity and relevance of the process of interpretations and results.

Although the informants did not themselves directly have the opportunity to judge the validity of the interpretations of what they said, the communication in the interviews meant that my interpretations in the immediate situation to some extent could be evaluated by the children. The children – having no relationship with me outside the interviews, and being told what they said would stay between us – had few reasons to say anything other than what was in their mind. However, the general limitations of spoken language would, in relation to the complexity of multitudes of meanings (cf. Silverman 2000b), imply that what is described below as the children’s approaches primarily reflect the narratives in the interviews.

The process of interpretation converted the informants’ role from reliable reporters about their meanings in the interviews into representatives of approaches whose perspectives were to be understood also in the light of testimonies that appeared contradictory or incorrect. The validity of the process and outcome of interpretation of the parts and wholes of individual interviews and of the material as a whole was strengthened by explicit and constant attention to contradictions within each child’s account and between different interviews, and also to alternative interpretations as well as to accounts contradicting the suggested interpretations and conclusions found (cf. Silverman 2000a). After actively seeking out and addressing unusual and contradictory material, juxtapositions of the conclusions and possible material that would distort the analysis in progress was embarked upon; since all parts of the material were inspected and analysed, they were treated comprehensively. Interpretations of the material included searching for alternatives, which resulted in a revised organization of the material and a new focus for the analysis (see above), and also in some unexpected findings (discussed in Chapter 8). The process of analysing the individual themes, the individual interviews as wholes, and the interview material in its entirety continued until as much as possible of the material could be understood. For so long as accounts could not be included in the overall interpretation or were contradictory to it, new interpretations were sought. The intention was to reach an interpretation that, within reason, could account for most details and variations. Silverman (2000a: 180) argues that aiming at a generalization applicable to every single gobbet of relevant collected data strengthens the validity of a qualitative analysis. Practically, this process included pursuing the line of argument that can be followed in chapters 4, 5 and 6.
The external validity of this study, as in aiming at the degree to which findings can be generalized to other settings (Silverman 2000a), is discussed here in terms of generalization and abstraction. The interview material in this study was somewhat limited by availability, which is assumed to limit the generalizability to that very group (c.f. Marlow 2000). However, Persson (1999: 17–18) claims that also few interviews can provide the base for generalizations, although ‘not of the same kind that quantitative methods provide, that is generalizations that can be manifested in terms of shares of a population [, but they] can shed light on universal features in social and personal existence. Furthermore, individual existences are not as distinct as some seem to believe: they do have features that are distinct, but several that they share with others’. Seeing qualitative generalization as something radically different from quantitative means linking it intimately to a deeper reflection about what these – for the generalization’s relevant, unique or universal features – actually are. In similar vein, Maxwell (1996), separating internal generalizability (referring to the generalizability of a conclusion within the setting or group studied) from external (which refers to generalizability beyond a particular setting or group), suggests that generalizability in qualitative studies can be based on the development of a theory that can be extended to other cases. Similarly, Silverman (2000a) argues that the use of an analytical model, assuming that generalizability is present in the existence of any case, can make it reachable.

The question when it comes to internal generalization has to do with the description or categorizing of the group studied. That group could in this study be described as either wide, ‘children who have experienced family violence’, or as narrow as ‘children of eight to twelve years of age with recent but not contemporary experiences of their father’s violence against the mother at some specific Women’s Houses in Sweden’. In addition, external generalizability is normally connected to what is referred to as ‘the total population’, which here might be all child witnesses to family violence. However, some aspects of the results may also be applicable to all children in any families, considering the subjective dimension of violence. If results provide an account of a population that illuminates an extreme case (see Maxwell 1996: 97), the question of which characteristics make this group extreme still remains. In this study, it could be the age or maturity of the witness to violence, or the relationship with the perpetrator and victim, or perhaps the fact that the violence takes place in the home. If the children in this study have experienced something qualitatively and distinctly different, the results can only be generalized to a limited group of children. However, if violence is seen as a wider concept and its subjective dimension taken seriously, all children experience incidents within the family that can be perceived as more
or less violent, and this study may have wider claims. Maxwell’s discussion points to the necessity of determining the characteristics that determine the groups of individuals to which the results of this study may be applicable.

Thereby, generalizability is related to the abstraction of variability within the theoretical concepts (Tiller 1990). Determinant of the possibility to generalize from a sample to a total population is the extent to which subjects or informants are representative of the population to which they belong. An entirely different issue is whether the situation, time, phenomenon, the social system etc. to which the informant refers is representative of the different situations, times, systems etc. about which general conclusions can or can not be drawn. Tiller (op. cit.: 61f) further stresses that a representative sample of a population of individuals is not necessarily of much help in generalizing the variation in structures or processes of meaning, or in situations that these individuals may be in and that can affect that which is studied. Thereby, generalization to a population can not be separated from the abstraction of the key issues in the information that the individuals in that population represent. Kvale (1996: 233) defines analytical generalization in terms of well-reflected judgements about whether, according to similarities and differences, the results can guide prediction of other situations or phenomena – thereby building generalization on argumentative logic.

Accordingly, the theoretical knowledge produced in this study in itself bears the possibility of generalizability. But since variety in the empirical material enhances flexibility in understanding and interpretation, the limited information about internal meaning-creating processes a researcher generally is able to get (in interview studies such as this one) can be assumed to form a limitation of the variation of content of the accounts of greater dignity than the limited sample of children. Although the variance in this study is limited, in levels of sampling as well as in methods of material gathering, its variation in theoretical levels can be used for expanded flexibility in analysis. The theoretical framework can enable flexibility in abstraction so that the interpretation of the material, at least to some extent, can include levels outside the scope of data (see Layder 1993). As an example, perceiving childhood as a concept categorizing individuals on the basis of their common life conditions, rather than level of maturity, bears the possibility of opening up broader opportunities for generalization.

The qualitative method applied in this study would, by aiming at theoretical use and development, be able to provide generalizations that can shed light on some universal features of social and personal existence. According to Sayer (1992), knowledge about concrete action can be unique, whereas abstract knowledge about structures and their mechanisms may be generally applicable. Accordingly, since the children’s approaches to meaning-
conciliation include the aspect of (possible) concrete experiences of their own father’s violence, the approaches that form the theoretical result of the study can be assumed to be generalizable to other children with such experiences. The sample that the analysis is based upon includes both girls and boys, and also children with different family backgrounds. However, since children that mothers judged as psychologically vulnerable or having an especially difficult time were not asked to participate in the interviews, those that suffered the most negative effects of their father’s violence might not have been interviewed. Also, children whose mothers, for ideological or other reasons, would not turn to a Women’s House or who did not perceive the violence as overt enough or dangerous enough to seek help for themselves or their children are not included in the study. At worst, this could mean that the most, as well as the least severe, cases of experience of violence within the family were excluded and that the total variation is greater than the results of this study show. However, as the following chapters illustrate, the design allowed for noteworthy variety. Further, as discussed below (see chapters 7 and 8), what the children stressed in the interviews might be related to their living conditions at the time, such as most of them not living with their father anymore, but having moved away from him only fairly recently. In addition, since the aim of the study also included aspects of societal ideas, as assumed to be mediated through media and language, a Swedish setting would form an outer limitation. Therefore, the results of the methodology in this study can, in the first instance, be assumed to be generalizable to girls and boys of different social backgrounds who live in Sweden and have experienced what their mother defined as their father’s violence against her, and also that have lived with their father until recently, but not anymore and without signs of violence-related ill-health as a result of the violence. The generalizability of the results is further discussed in Chapter 8, after the results of the study have been presented.

The validity and ethics of translation and reporting
The interpreting process that started during interviewing and which primarily focused on the Swedish transcriptions, continued in the translation to English. Although the main analysis was already done, the extra attention that needed to be paid to translating certain terms demanded caution about the ‘essence’ of what an individual child might have meant in the interview. Since the information can be ethically sensitive, it should not only be obtained and kept, but also reported in such a way that the participants can not be identified (see HSFR 1996). Balancing the methodological goals and the informants’ rights to let the voices of the informants be heard and the ethically demanded hiding of the informants’ identities (see Alver & Öyen 1998: 110)
was therefore an issue in formulating the English text. The aim was to let the reader get acquainted with the interview in as ‘pure’ a form as possible so as to offer an opportunity to get to know how the informants talked about the subjects. Thus, the translation had to be as close to the original spoken conversation as possible, whilst keeping it short, focused and easy to read.

Accordingly, at the first stage, all unusual word orders and grammatical variants were retained. However, a gentle adjustment of grammar, repetitions and linguistic mistakes was necessary to make the interviews easier to read. Other unusual solutions, such as some vague or even incorrect allusions, were kept so that the material was manipulated as little as possible. Pure clarifications and repetitions were excluded, as were self-corrections. As endings to otherwise informative statements, ‘And-then-there-is-nothing-more’ and the like were excluded, but as replies in themselves, such as ‘I-don’t-know’, were kept, unless the question could be answered subsequent to rewording. Finally, a few mixed-up words were corrected. Only a few passages judged to be completely unrelated to any of the themes (cf. what was not included in the interpretation as described above) were not translated. The translation involved balancing between trying to keep the children’s own language and terminology without making them sound unnecessarily naïve, while at the same time trying to find formulations that made sense to the readers.

In the first round, ‘general’ and ‘neutral’ translations were sought where a Swedish term had more than one English translation. Special attention was paid to searching for translations with associations as close to the Swedish original as possible. Thereby, dictionaries had to be used flexibly and with caution. In a second round, the immediate context in the interview, i.e. what was said before and after each sentence, was used to choose alternative translations when the context implied that other terms than the ‘general or ‘neutral’ ones were more appropriate. Finally, individual statements and terminology that included multiple possible translations could be translated in relation to their position and context in the total interview. This meant that sometimes one Swedish formulation had to be translated into different English terms in different passages, depending on the context. The individuality of each interview also gives rise to some variation in the way they are depicted in the following chapters.

To keep the text short and readable and focus on the informants, and since the interview questions are mainly open, they are as a rule not included in the text. As an example, clarifying questions are excluded. When, however, the questions are necessary to understand the answers as citations, the questions are included, using the original terms, but perhaps, for readability, in a different order. When the questions are specific, the
formulations are depicted. Apart from these examples, the citations in the report correspond to the verbal accounts. Full stops and commas are sometimes used to illustrate pauses in the informants’ speech to enable to stay as close to the spoken language, even when grammatically it is not entirely correct.

Some information is excluded from the dissertational text to obstruct identification of the children. As an example, the ages of the informants are left out. The age span of the informants, ranging between eight and twelve, is considered accurate enough (cf. Solberg 1994: 195; Quortrup (ed.) 1994). For the same reason, siblings and relatives are ‘ungendered’ and ‘unaged’ wherever possible. Further, without forgoing intelligibility and details – such as professions, whether the children and their families lived in a city, town or village, in an apartment or house as well as details in their descriptions of special occasions – are ‘generalized’. Information that is not considered crucial to interpretation was easily excluded, although thorough consideration was taken of passages that included information that may have facilitated detection of the identity of an informant, but is also crucial to understanding her or his meaning-creating approach. The most common solution was to exclude the possible identity-exposing information and keep the rest – sometimes meaning that the grammar of the quote is slightly changed. As leaving details out means less manipulation of the material than distorting the circumstances that the children lived under or their accounts, it is considered a better strategy for concealing the identity of the informants.

In the following chapters, after a presentation with a focus on her or his living situation at the time of the interview, each child’s accounts about their own father, fathers in general and violence are individually presented, and then discussed in relation to the theoretical framework and the approach to meaning-conciliation (of which it is a substantiation). Since for each child, the most prominent aspects are dealt with, attention to individual details differs between the children. Within the themes, what was said is here presented in order of appearance in the interview, but the themes may have been dealt with in other orders. Thereafter follows an attempt to understand each child’s approach to a conciliation of meaning surrounding these concepts, which is related to the triangular model presented above.

As a result of the process described, the following chapters are structured around the outcomes of the analysis, as in the possible alternatives for negotiating approaches to meaning-conciliation that were found. From the starting point of the theoretical framework, the interviews serve as substantiations, as material provided to support the genuineness or precision of the categories of interpretations and the suggestions for understanding the negotiation approaches. The interviews, as substantiations of such
possible alternative negotiation approaches, are related to the ‘objects’ of negotiation, with a focus on the relations between the themes (fathers, violence, and the own father) that emerged from the theoretical framework as described in Figure 1 in Chapter 2. They are used to represent and substantiate the most prominent features of their approaches and the complexity of their accounts. Although the interviews with the children are presented as representations of different approaches, fluctuation and mixing was more common than ‘clear-cut ideal-type’ usage of each approach. The aim of the following chapters is to discuss and develop theoretical sensitivity to the negotiating processes that children develop and use. Since the children’s approaches very well might include features discussed in other parts, the categorizations per se are less important than the negotiating processes that can be identified. First, the interviews that indicated approaches, including negotiation of the general conception of fathers, thereafter those that indicated approaches, including negotiation of the perception of own father and his actions, and finally the negotiations aimed at the reverse of violence are presented and discussed. Linked to the understanding of the children’s negotiating approaches, their possible relations to alternatives in the theoretical framework are discussed.

A more detailed discussion of the contents and processes is presented in direct relation to the empirical material concerning each approach. While the structure is a result mainly of the theoretical framework, the categorization of the children within the structure is a result of the interpretations of the individual interviews. The reasonings behind the interpretation of their approaches to understanding, which forms the basis for categorization, are presented in relation to the presentation of each individual interview.
4. Negotiations related to general father-conceptions

The three following chapters introduce the different approaches to meaning-conciliation that compose the results of the analysis. First, each approach to meaning-conciliation is presented in the way it is substantiated in the interviews that enable identification of the approach. Since the approaches relate to the conciliation of a ‘whole’ of meaning, the presentations and interpretations of the different themes within the interviews constitute the foundation of a child’s meaning-conciliation process. How that can be understood in terms of a central approach is discussed after each interview. For readability, the themes are presented in the same order in all interviews. Thereafter, the individual approach as such is discussed and some aspects of the children’s conciliated meanings and lives are related to their subjectively experienced circumstances, and the possible consequences of their approach. The conditions for the development of each approach, and under what conditions it is used, form the basis for discussing possible interaction between meaning-creation and living context. The conclusions to the discussions show the extent to which, or in what way, the theoretical framework is able to enhance understanding of meaning-creating processes for child witnesses to their father’s violence.

When the conception of father encounters the possibility of violence, the children’s negotiations within their conciliated meanings prompt development of the theoretical framework. One central feature of parts of the interview material is a general understanding of fathers as divided into different kinds. In the following, first, the approaches of the children whose processes of understanding can be related to negotiation of the abstraction of the general conception of fathers are discussed. Annelie, Daniel and Melvin form a group of two boys and one girl that stretches from the youngest to the oldest in the material. While they approach the interview with very different attitudes and talking-styles, their ways of negotiating the general father-conception are rather similar.
Dividing fathers into different kinds

In the interviews with Annelie and Daniel, one first approach to dealing with the intricate relation between their own father's violence and the understanding of fathers as a general conception can be identified. By focusing on different kinds of fathers, an expectation of some fathers’ goodness can be kept while acknowledging the violence of others; accordingly, their own father does not, because of his violence, have to be treated as completely deviant. Presenting the interviews with Annelie and Daniel provides the ground for identifying the approach, which is then discussed in greater detail.

Annelie

Within the interview, Annelie sometimes talks about her biological father, sometimes about another father figure who has lived for a long time in her family, and sometimes of both. The description and discussion of her account reflect her references. She relates violence closely to family life and gender and her experiences of her own father(s). She strongly repudiates violence, but believes it to be common and violence-related features seem central to her understanding of her own father(s). A division of her general understanding of fathers into groups of ‘nice’ and ‘bad’ fathers is understood as enabling a certain normalization of her own father(s) in relation to some other fathers, while resisting and repudiating violence in relation to the broader perspective of fathers and of human beings in general.

Annelie describes her family as consisting of her mother, herself and a sibling, all living together at time of interview, but then adds two further siblings. Among the children, ‘No one has the same father.’ and her biological father does not live with her. She says she has lived mostly together with her ‘real father’, but before the move to the Women’s House, she has lived with her younger sibling’s father, whom she – when asked – says has been a father to her in some respects. She reckons she has lived with her younger sibling’s father for about six years, meaning he has been around most of her life. At time of interview, Annelie lives with her mother and sibling in a Women’s House. About the move there, she says, ‘We moved… First, we went to mum’s flat. And then we went up to another town and a Women’s House that was there and then we went home again and then we went to some relatives and then we went here’. Annelie has difficulties estimating how long it has been since she was at her former home, but guesses that it has been quite a few months, ‘Something like ten’. On ordinary days, she says, ‘I usually play with friends’. Together, she, her sibling and mother usually ‘go for a snack and shop for food and so on’. She explains that when they lived at home they spent more time there. At time of interview, Annelie thinks the Women’s
House is her home more than the former place ‘where we used to live’. Earlier, Annelie used to go swimming with her father, but not at time of interview. She does not see her father any more: ‘Nowadays I never see him’. At time of interview, she has not seen him for a very long time, not since they lived together.

A really good time in her family was when Annelie visited a Fairytale Village with her mother, her siblings and the father of the youngest child.

**The own father as abstracted experiences of violence**

Introduced to the theme of her own father, Annelie says, ‘He is bad … Then I don’t know anything more’. Then she explains that she is talking about both of her fathers and continues, ‘They cause trouble for my mother’. When asked what they usually do with Annelie and she with them, she replies, ‘They don’t do things with me. It’s mostly with my mother’. She explains that earlier, she used to go swimming with them, but that she does not do things together with them. She further explains that ‘They have always been the same. In everything’.

When asked about good and bad things about her fathers, she says, ‘I don’t know’. She also says she does not know in what way she thinks her father is ordinary, but that he is unusual in ‘every way. He’s sometimes like ordinary people. But not inside … Not in his heart’. She thinks so ‘because he’s bad’. However, Annelie does not believe everybody thinks her father is bad, ‘His friends, I believe, that… They think he’s good. Because they don’t know him for real’.

After Annelie’s first statement about her father being bad follows an account that includes almost only negative aspects of her fathers. In the interview, she presents her father(s) as primarily characterized by being bad and causing trouble, even to the extent that she states that he is not like others ‘inside his heart’. Although her negative conceptions of her own father(s) possibly can be related to her expectations about the interview and its purposes, or, for some reason, to wanting to stress or strengthen her mother’s perspective, that she ‘genuinely’ depicts her father(s) as mainly bad seems reasonable considering that her mother has sought sanctuary in a Women’s House. In addition, her focus on the bad may have to do with integrating good and bad qualities in any one person is challenging and difficult. But even so, her choice to focus on the bad implies that, from Annelie’s perspective, the negative aspects are more important or essential than the positive ones.

Annelie does not mention any positive interaction with her fathers. The question about what her fathers usually do with her is intended to find out about everyday interaction and father-daughter activities, but Annelie’s reply
indicates that she understands the question as regarding what harm her fathers have done to her. Going swimming might have been part of a close relationship, including many other joint activities. But even so, at time of interview, Annelie describes no positive interaction. Since current geographical distance from the father does not prevent Annelie from talking about father’s bad aspects in the present tense, her lack of examples of positive interaction is likely to refer to before as well as after the move and separation from him. In the light of such a lack of direct positive experiences, Annelie’s lack of good thoughts about her fathers seems logical. Further, her description of her family starts out by including the members that were living at the Women’s House at the time, but excludes both her fathers. Such exclusion of the fathers from her family is not likely to be based on the fathers not currently living with Annelie, since she included the siblings that also were not. Considering her otherwise negative description, such an exclusion is also less likely to have to do with regarding the father(s)’s position in the family as self-understood, which – considering the theme of the interview – would otherwise have been logical and more likely to indicate a distance between Annelie and her father(s).

Annelie’s description of her own father(s) as essentially unusual in every way and inside their hearts to the extent that she can not even give a single example of ordinariness seems to be founded in the assumption that knowing them ‘for real’ also entails knowing that they are bad. Implying that she knows her father(s) ‘for real’ can be based on her own experiences of him/them. Although Annelie does not incorporate any bad actions directed at herself into her description of her fathers – ‘bad’ referring mainly to being bad towards mother – her focus on inherent trouble-causing makes Annelie’s perspective similar to that of a victim in relation to the fathers.

Such positioning may be related to Annelie’s close relationship with mother, her dependence on her, and/or on her identification with her. If the strong statements about her fathers being bad and not like ordinary people inside their hearts indicates that she relates her fathers’ violent actions to their essential selves, such a victim’s perspective might indicate the significance of the bad of her fathers as related to her own self as a female. If knowing her father ‘for real’ means personal experience of his badness, then such experience can also affect not only the perspective on father but also on Annelie herself – perhaps as a female, or as a potential or actual victim.

This interpretation of Annelie’s conception of her father(s) adds up to a homogeneous abstraction of no ‘good’ aspects. In the light of this interpretation, ending her first short statement about father being bad by stating that she does not know ‘anything more than that’ appears to refer to the most important thing being said. Annelie does not make any direct reference to
violence or violent acts on the behalf of her fathers. But her descriptions of them as bad to the border of humanity and as causing trouble for mother is interpreted – especially considering her views on fathers in general and about violence (see below) – as relating to an area of physical, psychological or generally trouble-causing violence.

Perceiving father as bad can be assumed to develop or encourage psychological distancing from him, and such distancing can facilitate interpretation of his actions as ‘bad’. Perhaps perceiving her father(s) as unusual because of bad qualities allows Annelie to retain a favourable view on people in general. Even though she perceives her own fathers as genuinely and continuously bad, treating them as exceptions means that she can expect good from new acquaintances. Annelie’s statement about her father not being like ordinary people in his heart can be seen as adopting a strong standpoint against general human evil; and claiming that the own father is different might facilitate condemnation of his actions.

**Conceptualizing fathers into ‘the good’ and ‘the bad’**

Annelie’s first comment on general fathers is that ‘they are bad sometimes. Then I don’t know anything more’. Then they ‘fight and cause trouble and… They talk bad’; such as they say ‘that you are stupid or something like that’. She also knows ‘that some are good. They go for a ride with their family. And… work so they earn money and have some fun. Go out for a snack. Such things. I believe that some fathers are good and some are bad’. She does not know why there are fathers, but says ‘that they are good sometimes. Then I don’t know’. About how to know which are bad and which are good, Annelie explains, ‘That you notice’. When asked about how to do that, she says, ‘That I don’t really know’. And she can not think of any specific situation when a father might be bad or good.

What fathers do according to Annelie is that ‘either they are at work or they are outside working or they are inside… or they are indoors eating or they are lying down sleeping’. Working outside means ‘sawing wood and feeding animals and such things’. Annelie suggests that other persons who do approximately the same things as fathers might be ‘babies. But they aren’t outside and working. But they sleep and eat food’. She thinks there are no other persons that do approximately the same things as fathers, but that the opposites of fathers are ‘mothers’. Asked in what way they might be opposites, she says, ‘That I don’t know either’.

Annelie says she does not know when fathers are ‘good to have’, but she suggests they are not good ‘when they are bad. Fight. And shout … And then I don’t know anything more’.
You can know who your father is since ‘you can be similar. The face. And the style’. If there were no fathers, according to Annelie, ‘it wouldn’t be as exciting. To be hunted and such. If one… Then one may see the father and such. Otherwise nothing can happen and also when you grow up maybe you can help other children, since you know what it was like when you were little. Because then you understand better’. Annelie does not think there are any other advantages to fathers.

Overall, Annelie’s account of general fathers includes more references to negative aspects than to positive ones. However, her explicit emphasis is on differentiating the good fathers from the bad. While her examples of fathers being bad or good refers to activities that are intrinsically related to interpersonal interaction – such as fighting, causing trouble and talking condescendingly, and going for a ride with the family, respectively – her suggestion about what fathers most often do, such as working, eating and sleeping, does not have such correspondingly close references to interpersonal interaction. If these references to interpersonal interaction are linked to a more personal relation to the area they exemplify, this may be an indication that the good/bad duality is quite central to Annelie’s general and abstracted father-conception.

Actually, Annelie makes two seemingly contradictory claims about fathers. On the one hand, she mentions twice how they are good or bad sometimes, thereby seemingly relating to situationality and how the nature of fathers can change. However, in between, she explicitly refers fathers’ possible good and bad aspects to different persons rather than to different situations, stating that she believes that some are good while others are bad. Since the latter statement is direct, explicit and clear, while ‘sometimes’ in spoken language can refer to ‘some times’ as well as to ‘some people’, a reasonable interpretation is that, for Annelie, the division is primarily between personalities.

The other prominent feature of Annelie’s general conception of fathers lies in her references to negative aspects. As an example, seeing fathers as similar to babies, can – if related to women comparing their violent men to children (see Hydén 2001) – be interpreted as an attribution of an immature lack of responsibility and ground for distance. Perceiving mothers as fathers’ opposites can also – when related to fighting, causing trouble and “being bad” – be part of attributing responsibility of violence to fathers, while retaining a perception of the mother as a ‘pure victim’ (cf. Åkerström & Sahlin eds. 2001). This would, again, suggest that Annelie’s perspective is closely related to a victim’s, and highlights the connection of general fathers as closer to ‘being bad’ than to any advantages or good features.
Annelie’s division of her general father-conception into the good and the bad seems to be related, on the one hand, to her specific and personal experiences of her own fathers, and on the other to a wider generalized group of human beings. Her general references to fathers being of no use when bad and causing trouble are similar to her description of her own fathers. But more important, her specific conviction that differences between good and bad fathers are obvious and her example of ‘the excitement of being hunted’ are likely to refer to personal experience. Assuming that it is possible to detect who are bad and who are good might indicate that her experiences of her own father have given her an important tool in categorizing other fathers. And many moves to end up in a Women’s House far away from the man and father can be an indication of the persistency of his attempts – from the woman’s and mother’s perspective – to make unwanted contact. Annelie’s conception, on this interpretation, includes a close relationship between her own fathers and her general notion of fathers – a similarity based on ‘badness’, but also with the acceptance that some fathers deviate from that negative image. When suggesting that her own father is not like ordinary people ‘in his heart’ she might thereby mean that the wider generalized group of people (as in human beings) is not generally connected to violence, but fathers in general are – due to a high proportion of them being ‘bad’. Accordingly, Annelie’s experiences of her own fathers and their badness seem to have a significant impact on her general father-conception, but the goodness of people in general seems to be her point of reference.

Her formulation that fathers can say that one is ‘stupid’ might indicate that she is referring to something personally experienced. Speculating that she has experienced something similar to such a wrong from her own father might clarify her victim’s perspective on these issues. It may be a way through which her father’s behaviour, although not ‘doing things with her’ (cf. above), makes her feel victimized, albeit perhaps only vaguely. Within such a perception of victimization, experiences of self may be intimately linked to the conception of the perpetrator of such acts and the generalized groups that that person represents.

A division of the general father-conception as described here may be significant for Annelie in direct relation to her understanding of fathers in general as well as for interpreting her own father(s). On the one hand, the wider point of reference of the goodness of people may obstruct interpreting her own father as good if he, in her perception, does not entirely live up to the standards of good people. On the other, her intricate understanding of the relationship between general fathers and being bad might have to do with her basing her general understanding of fathers heavily on her own
experiences. This may be problematic with regard to her future relationships with men; a general assumption that fathers are bad can entail social difficulties. Taking into consideration, although not necessarily consciously, a general social rule in society not to judge groups of people, and especially the ‘social rule’ of perceiving fathers as non-violent (see Eriksson 2003), may well be rational from such a perspective. Saying twice that she ‘does not know why there are fathers’ can be interpreted as a manifestation of her lack of ideas about positive grounds for abstraction. Her suggestion, at the end of the interview, that fathers can bring excitement to the lives of other family members and that the experiences fathers give children can be used for better understanding children in need of help may be a euphemism used by Annelie as a strategy to look forward. Seeing nothing positive about fathers at all can imply difficulties for her as a social being as well as a child with troublesome experiences. Dividing her general father-conception, just as attempting to find positive aspects in bad individual experiences of her own father, can be understood as a way of avoiding an entirely negative description. Treating her own father as ‘unusual’ in relation to people in general and to those fathers who are more like people in general, but still similar to some other fathers, enables the handling of the centrality of good and bad in interpersonal interaction through an elaborated system of thought.

Generalization of violence from a subjective perspective

Violence, to Annelie, is simply, ‘violence. … It’s sad. And then I know nothing more’. Annelie describes violence as meaning ‘that one fights and causes trouble and … It’s sad. One may get unhappy. … It’s tough as well. It’s tough to … as a child not to know what’s happening … and why your mother is unhappy sometimes or … And in case she has a wound or something, then … one wonders as well. Then I don’t know anything more’.

Annelie assumes people use violence ‘because they are cowardly and don’t dare to talk’. When asked what they could say, she says, ‘I don’t know’. The situations in which violence is most likely to occur are ‘when you are … When the mother and the father don’t want … want to divorce and then perhaps one of them doesn’t want to divorce and then they start fighting. And then I don’t know anything else’. She thinks violence is common ‘all over Sweden’, and although she says she does not know who would use more violence, she thinks that the most victimized are ‘mothers’.

Annelie thinks violence can be good ‘when it’s dangerous. When there are some people coming to hit you. Then it’s good. And try to exchange one’. Annelie herself has used violence, but ‘only when I quarrel with my brother. Then he wants to hit me and then I pinch him. If he doesn’t get his way’.
Annelie thinks there are ‘rather many’ persons that use violence. When asked if she thinks there are certain people that use violence more than others, she responds, ‘Fathers. They work out more. And when they don’t get their way they get grumpy. A bit like that’. When other people get grumpy, ‘they just get grumpy’.

Similar to violence is, according to Annelie, ‘to yell and scream’. And she is not aware of any more examples. When someone ‘screams or fights, then you get sad’. When asked about the opposite of violence, she says she does not know. Annelie thinks violence exists because ‘otherwise you can’t live because you can’t … Because you need to … You have to quarrel sometimes, because you can’t always be happy’.

The most prominent feature of Annelie’s account about violence is her references to it as sad, unpleasant and causing trouble, unhappiness and insecurity – all of which are here interpreted as forming a victim’s emotional perspective. Her account includes emotional effects that violence can have on direct victims as well as on the children of victimized mothers. Also, for example, suggesting ‘dangerous’ situations to be good situations for violence and assuming that perpetrators are cowards who do not dare to talk can be interpreted as originating from a victim’s perspective.

Such a victim’s perspective, especially alongside Annelie’s specific examples, might indicate that her general conception of violence is founded in personal experience. Defining her own pinching as violence, and assuming violence to be ‘very common’, although it is not entirely clear that she includes psychological acts, such as screaming and quarrelling, into the concept, implies that her general conception of violence is neither unusually narrow nor something that she prefers to define as distant. Annelie’s acknowledgement of her own acts of violence and her general assumption about it being common indicates what can be called a generally personal (as in not distanced) relation to the concept of violence. Further, her suggestions that mothers are the most likely victims of violence and that fathers use violence more than others indicates that her abstracted conception of violence is associated with gender, parenthood and family life. Her accounts of her own father(s) and fathers in general as close to ‘bad’ and her concrete example of the divorce situation indicate that her general concept of violence is fairly firmly based in personal experience within her family.

Her last statement, which can be interpreted as Annelie regarding violence as inevitable, may be significant for her generalization of violence and her connecting it closely to gendered family members and family processes. Seeing violence as inevitable seems common among child ‘witnesses’ (cf. Weinehall 1997). Seeing it as inevitable may serve the function of easing the guilt that children may feel for their parents’ violence (e.g. Lyckner & Metell...
2001), since it means that the child has little influence on it anyway. However, on the one hand, connecting violence closely to family life and, on the other, seeing it as inevitable might – although Annelie does not approve of or consider the badness of her fathers as common in general – imply a lessened lack of acceptance of violence in the family.

**Division of general father-conception and resisting father’s deviation I**

Annelie’s division of fathers into the good and the bad is here interpreted as crucial to her approach to an overall understanding of the relations between general images of fathers and violence in relation to her personal experiences of her own fathers. Her view of violence as inevitable and perhaps necessary for self-protection in directly dangerous situations – but from a victim’s perspective mainly with possible negative consequences – can further be interpreted as an attitude aimed at resisting normalization of violence and as central to her approach to dividing the conception of fathers. This section summarizes and discusses Annelie’s approach to meaning-conciliation in these respects.

On her account, Annelie’s conceptions of violence and of her own father(s) appear as intimately connected. Since she views violence as negative and includes the bad of her own father(s) into the conception, a division of the generalized conception of fathers can facilitate meaning-conciliation. Her specific experiences of fathers preclude a homogeneous image of fathers in general as nice or non-violent. In addition, its consequences for future social relations as well as possibly ideas about the ‘social incorrectness’ of overgeneralization in talking about fathers as violent (see Eriksson 2003) entail that the negative of violence can not easily be generalized to an expectation on fathers. However, by dividing general fathers into being either bad or nice, some fathers can be assumed to be similar to her own father(s) and others more similar to ordinary people. Thereby, although the bad of her own father(s) and of fathers in general is seen as deviating from a general human norm of good, it is normalized in the sense that such badness can be expected from some fathers. At the same time, the division of the general father-conception into two opposite kinds enables acknowledging and resisting the bad of her own father(s). Dividing her general father-conception allows for it to be equally well related to an idea about human beings generally being nice and to her own father(s), of which bad is a significant part. Thereby, condemnation of violence requires treating fathers as a generalized group as different from ‘ordinary people’.

By exemplifying violence through, for example, what fathers can do to mothers in families and saying that she does not know when fathers may be ‘good to have’, relating fathers in general to violence does not seem
inconceivable to Annelie. However, since she suggests communal family activities as depictions of what good fathers can do, her image of fathers in general includes the good as well as the bad. But approaching violence in general as well as the bad of her own father(s) from a victim’s perspective and giving no examples of positive interaction with her own father(s) indicate the significance Annelie attributes to her personal experiences of her own father(s), which forms the basis for a more ‘clear-cut’ conception. The choice of focusing on the bad of the own father(s) may imply that, from Annelie’s perspective, her understanding of her own father(s) less than of fathers in general requires negotiation.

Within her framework of understanding fathers in general as two different kinds or groups, her own father can be treated as within the variation of the generalized group of fathers, although not within the variation of ordinary people. On Annelie’s account, her own fathers do not necessarily represent a mere minority of fathers, but simply belong to one of two possible groups that are different. These groups may have more or less desired features, but are not necessarily unequal in size or significance.

Since Annelie’s approach to conciliation of meaning includes conceiving her own father(s) as normal in a sense, thereby connecting an expectation of a ‘subgroup’ of fathers as possible users of violence and an indication that violence is inevitable, also violence can be interpreted as normalized from her perspective. However, Annelie’s perspective also strongly focuses on the bad effects of violence, which is interpreted as resistance towards non-accepted violent acts. Accordingly, tendencies to normalize individuals in relation to generalized groups can be separated from the normalization of acts or behaviours. The tendency to resist father’s violent actions, while assuming that he is normal in relation to some fathers in general, means that resistance is aimed at a broad target – since the actions of the own father as well as of fathers in general bear the possibility of being defined as violent. Resisting one’s own father’s actions as well as the possible violence of fathers in general might be assisted by distance, e.g. as in not having much contact with father or other fathers. In this respect, Annelie’s account can be interpreted as a kind of ‘resisting the actions of normalized individuals’.

Annelie’s main starting point for talking about violence from a victim’s perspective can be related to identifying with her mother. Alternatively, she perceives herself as a victim, since the events in the family have had a rather extensive impact on Annelie’s own life. Also, having lived with her mother in Women’s Houses for numerous months at time of interview may have brought Annelie and her mother closer together, and also increased Annelie’s actual or perceived dependency on and reasons for loyalty to her mother. Alternatively, the relatively single-gendered context in the Women’s Houses
may have played a role in adopting such a perspective. Perhaps Annelie’s living situation at time of interview, including a narrowed social network from moving and closeness to her mother, and also her experience of not only one but two fathers who, she says, have caused trouble for her mother and thereby indirectly for Annelie herself, makes her assumption about her own fathers a reasonable one. I have argued that, from Annelie’s perspective, division of the generalized father-conception may be a reasonable approach. The significance of Annelie’s experiences of her own fathers’ bad makes the connection between violence and her own father(s) relatively clear-cut and ‘intellectually uncomplicated’. But her experiences, combined with not seeing many positive aspects to fathers in general, and also awareness of the problems of a general attribution of violence to fathers, may form the fundament for negotiating the general father-conception rather than the understanding of her own father.

Daniel
Daniel’s account is filled with references to concrete situations in which he has experienced his father’s dissatisfaction and frustration, and references to his father’s anger and bitterness towards the rest of the family are also frequent. Even though Daniel’s experiences of his own father seem to be a central base for his general father-conception, the discrepancy in his general expectations of fathers and concrete experiences of his own father is clear. His strong and unambiguous resistance towards violence is interpreted as a possible strategy for emotionally surviving the concrete experiences of his own father’s violence within the family, and crucial to the ‘duality’ in his ideas concerning general fathers.

Daniel tells me his family consists of ‘my sister, then I have a brother. And we have a mother. And then my father’. At time of interview, Daniel lives with his mother, brother and sister. His father lives at some distance, where the whole family lived before the separation a couple of months earlier. In between, Daniel and his mother, brother and sister lived for about a month at the Women’s House. Daniel explains that on an ordinary day, ‘Well, I go with my mother to school, I and my brother, then we are in school and then we take the bus home. And then I sit down in front of the computer. And then we watch TV or otherwise I am with some friend in father’s neighbourhood. And stay there’. Daniel and his brother go to their old school in the neighbourhood where father still lives and their mother drops them off every morning since her work is on the same route. About meeting his father, Daniel says, ‘I don’t usually meet him very often. I’m there on weekends, often. Yes, and then mother is there as well, and everybody. We usually watch a film there. Or eat dinner. Father nags almost all the time
about us coming there and then mother brings us there. Then we go home in the evening or, like this, at night, about 11 o’clock. It’s on weekends, on Saturdays, normally’.

About who appreciates those meetings the most, Daniel says, ‘Well… I don’t know. Yes, I appreciate them a bit, but not so much. I guess my brother likes it, I guess that’s pretty much because he has quite a lot, he has most of his friends there and has, like, a play house and such, that they play with. And he often… He’s there more. He’s there almost every day. But then he’s mostly with a friend. Otherwise he’s with father until about 6 o’clock’.

Daniel says his sister ‘is only there when I’m also there. But she hardly ever sees him. She comes sometimes. Not every weekend, because then she’s at a party or something’. When asked if Daniel would like to see his father more or less, he says, ‘No, I think it’s just right now’. Daniel thinks it is better to see his father together with the rest of the family than to see him alone: ‘All at once, I think it’s the best’. He further says, ‘My sister, I don’t like her very much, she’s rather nasty. And stingy, I think. Sometimes she’s nice, but often she’s like this, stingy. She doesn’t let anyone borrow her earphones or anything like that. So you can’t have any sound when you play. Brother doesn’t matter, he’s almost never at home. He’s at home in the evenings, but then he goes into his room and plays Super Nintendo. So he isn’t much of a problem. But we have had problems before. We share a room as well. And mother, yes, I like her, because she’s fair. She lets me do almost whatever I like. But before, when I lived with father, then, he was the one who decided, then I was almost not allowed to do anything. If my friend, like, lived far away, I wasn’t allowed to go there. So I didn’t like him a lot then’. Daniel further says his family is ‘rather unusual. Well, I don’t know’ and ‘I spend most time with mother and brother and sister, like that’. When Daniel needs to talk to someone, he turns to his mother.

Asked about a time in his family that was really good, he says, ‘Well, that the rest of us stuck together somewhat. Mother always tried to protect us if we had done something. At least she realized and tried to fix it. So when she started minding and trying, she got the blame for everything, because she defended us and then father got angry with her instead. And then we got, I mean, she got all the shit for everything then’.

About an especially good occasion, he says, ‘Yes, we have been in one place very often and that was great fun, because then he was never like that. He took us out to beaches, then he took us out to those. On the holiday… But everybody… Except for the way there, there was often a row between mother and father, since mother can’t read maps, so father got angry. But it was fun when we got there. Especially when we went to an island, it was fun. But you still have contact with your parents. We recently went abroad with
them. And sister went to a city with them and... They don’t want to lose contact with us, because they are and things are going well for the rest of the family. You know, father has siblings and they lead very good lives. But father had a girl before, that was like this, that’s when he got that way. You know, totally psychic she became, and then he got so as well. Before that, he was really calm. It was something that had some name, I don’t know. He was like that affected by her and she was like that every day, almost, and then he became so as well. Otherwise, if he hadn’t met her, I believe everything would have been all right now. Because since then he has been in psych... like that. So he was psyched by her. He couldn’t... Perhaps he was rather nasty with mother when... No, but he was rather good in the beginning when he met, because he had had a new one then. But then he started thinking about the other, he had kind of found a lot of old things and such. He found a whole bunch, so then he started thinking about all that for a rather long time, after a while. And then he started thinking about how tough everything is, such. Then... But you know he was happy when we came into the world, like I said, I and sister and brother. But then, after a while, like that, he started thinking about it and he had found those old things and... such’.

The own father abstracted as concrete experiences of violence

When I ask Daniel to tell me about his father, he says, ‘But what shall I say about him? Well, he’s mostly, works almost all the time. Home at the weekend, but then he tends to drink. 7.5% beer, that’s quite strong. Then he gets drunk. Then he has a hangover the next day, usually... and then he gets angry at almost everything’. He explains further, ‘Everybody knows how he is and the like. But I guess mother knows him best. She has lived with him for a rather long time’. He thinks his father is an unusual father, because ‘he’s rather unfair. He drinks and such. He often, I have seen him be secretive. He says he has stopped, but he hasn’t. He has hidden it behind things. I think that’s rather tough and then, and then he often adds, when we are there, he often adds comments such as if it’s, like this, a commercial, in some film, about, “Take your family on a journey”, and such, or something, then he says, “What family?” and such. Plays the martyr. Goes on like that. That’s sad’.

The best about his father, Daniel says, is ‘that he has become a little fairer now than before. He’s not as nasty. He doesn’t decide as much over us, since we don’t live there’. When asked to describe his father, Daniel says, ‘That I don’t know. No. I don’t know’. At time of interview, he thinks his father is different from when they lived together: ‘Yes, now he tends to, if you call it... be cocky. He can say whatever he likes ..., but he can’t do that now since you don’t even live there. Now you are, kind of, almost a stranger to him. Kind
of, he doesn’t own us anymore, as if we were his slaves. Not slaves and slaves directly, but he could decide over you and say whatever he wanted’. Daniel says he wishes his father was ‘Fair. Mm... Not drinking. Yes, that’s what I would like...’.

Daniel usually calls his parents by their first names and says he always has: ‘Father’s name mostly. And then mother’s name, I call her by. I don’t say like this “mother”. But, yes, sometimes, mother is a little bit more mother. That is, mother’s name, I mostly say. But father was away for a couple of years, you know when you start... because then I was only for like, a couple of years with mother. So I got used to her. He was away in another city, for some, to become like this, whatever it was... It was something. He was to get like this, a certain job, it was’.

To a direct question, Daniel replies, ‘That he has... If I think that he has used violence against us? Yes, I think so. Since he has hit us. Sometimes when we lie down in pain, because he has hit us, then he has kicked, he did. He says that he doesn’t remember anything. But I don’t believe that. He says so to get an excuse for everything. To forget that everything has happened and the like. He wants to start everything over. ... He goes on like this and nags, “Can you not come over to me?” and “Can you not stay?” and such. Then he starts blaming mother for everything, that it’s she who has made everything a crisis, that it’s she who has, kind of like this, said bad things to him, and that he has been treated like a slave, that it’s, kind of, the opposite, but it’s against him and that he has done nothing against us. That nothing has happened against us. That he has been, kind of like this, bullied and rejected by mother. I think that all of us know that it’s a lie, all of us children. Then he should realize that it’s, we are right since everybody says so. Then when we say that we don’t want to be there, then he thinks that mother, like this, forces it onto us that we shouldn’t be there. Then, like this, “No, come now. You are not allowed to be there” and such. But it’s not so. He thinks she decides over us, just because she doesn’t like him. He thinks that’s why we don’t want to come there, but I don’t like him very much, so I don’t want to go there. I think he has himself to blame, almost, for what he has done’. Daniel thinks his father wants the rest of the family to come back, ‘Well, I guess he regrets things a little. Feels lonely and such’. About how things would be if they moved back, Daniel says, ‘After a while I guess it will be the same. In a year at the most I guess it will be back. I guess it was that since mother had moved away before. But father, he nagged, said that nothing had happened, and he wouldn’t do anything and so and then she moved back. She lived with my grandmother. Then she went back, but it happened again. That was many years ago’.
About what he thinks about what his father did when they lived together, Daniel goes on to say, ‘Well. Since I didn’t dislike him when I lived there, so... but I didn’t care very much... But he wasn’t at home very much, so I felt... I felt free under, like this, before he came home, but sometimes he was at home, like this, when we just finished school, but when he was gone I almost felt free, could go wherever I wanted to. So sometimes I lied as well, that I was going to a friend not so very far from home, like this, but I don’t know what to say, and then we went out, I and another friend, out playing, I didn’t want to... I knew he would say, “no”, because he, we were to play in a certain place. I didn’t want to say it, because I knew I would have got “no”, because I have done a lot, if I had been allowed to go to a party or something like that, but then he says, “no”’. So I used to lie about things so that I can do it since I want to. Now I don’t have to lie, because now mother always lets me do it’.

Daniel’s conception about his own father is interpreted as being based in the core features of father’s anger and ‘unfairness’. His image of his father, as presented in the interview, is almost entirely negative – with his own experiences of father’s drinking, demands, cynicism and violence within the family at the centre.

When explicitly asked about his father’s good qualities or positive family interaction, Daniel’s examples refer primarily to restricted situations that are less bad, as if only slightly less direct or severe negative activities make situations appear exceptionally good. He does not express any positive things about his father, only that he is unjust, cynical, ironic and drunk. He describes his father as ‘rather unusual’ because of being unfair and drinking, both features that Daniel wishes would go away. For there to be any point in seeing father, as in social interaction, more often than during some weekends, Daniel, at this stage, seems to wish for no added features to father, but only the elimination of distrust, belittling and being treated badly.

Daniel is quite clear about his definition of what his father has done as violence. His conception of father’s violence appears to include father’s extensive decision-making and prohibitions when the family was living with father, as well as father hitting the others. Daniel’s account of his father’s behaviour before, in relation to after the family’s separation, is understood as describing how father used to and still does behave cockily, but that the new situation limits his relative power (at least as experienced by Daniel). Only the lack of opportunities preventing his father from further nastiness and violence and father’s hangovers and crucial experience with a former girl friend, which are to blame for ‘causing’ the violence not disappearing, suggest that the connection Daniel makes between his father and violence is durable.
Daniel’s account is filled with emotions. He repeatedly describes situations related to having been hurt by his father’s words, unfair decisions and diminishing of him. Father’s prohibitive decisions, secret drinking, playing the martyr and representing himself as the victim and thereby not accepting responsibility for his violence, while still trying to make the others feel guilty, as well as not trusting the children’s own opinions, are all likely to be part of Daniel’s feelings of belittlement and of being not trusted and disrespected. The centrality of his emotions can also be traced to father’s behaviour compelling Daniel to do something that is generally not desirable, namely being a liar. Thereby, father’s behaviour can directly affect Daniel’s conception of his self. Such a direct relation between father’s behaviour and Daniel’s self can account for Daniel’s strong disapproval of father’s behaviour.

Daniel’s conception of his father can be understood as almost entirely based on experiences of his father’s behaviour toward Daniel himself. Because Daniel has formed his conception about his father on experiences of how his father has treated him, what father has done toward mother may not to Daniel appear so relevant in itself, but rather as part of father’s victimization of the rest of the family as a whole; accordingly, members of the family have to stick together and try to protect each other. Describing himself as a direct victim of father’s many kinds of hostilities highlights the centrality of the concrete, direct and personal experiences underlying his conception. Thereby, Daniel’s conception of his father seems relatively unambiguously based on negative features. Direct experiences of being belittled can make justification of father’s violence harder, and Daniel’s conception of his father has a very concrete, and highly personal and emotional, base. On this interpretation, Daniel’s conception of his own father consists in an abstracted consistency of constant but varied ‘badness’, with negative emotional effects for Daniel.

Conceptualizing fathers as unequally symmetrical and unfair demanders

About fathers, Daniel says, ‘Fathers. Eh… that’s a bit difficult. What’s meant by that? What I think about them? I like mothers the most. I think they are often fair, the fairest. Nicer and such. Because fathers can, they decide more and they can do almost whatever they want. They decide… I don’t know what they do. They decide more’. When asked why it is so, Daniel replies, ‘I don’t know. They can, I don’t know… they can decide most. They decide over most things, over everybody in the family. If you can go away or something like that. Mostly it’s like that. Then they can go to… well, start drinking and such, often’. To a question about if it is common that they do so, Daniel says, ‘I don’t know’. However, he thinks it is more common that fathers do so than that others do it: ‘I think so. But often, in families it’s most, I think’. After being reminded that he has earlier said that mothers are fairer, he adds,
‘Yes, it’s often so. At least I like my mother the most. I always have’.

He thinks fathers and mothers are usually different in the respect that ‘Mothers, I think, have most to do with the children, since it’s they that usually bring them up. Since it becomes almost their children. When they grow up and such, that often happens’.

Daniel suggests fathers are good to have, since, ‘No… Yes, there are many things… An extra person if, what is it called, mother goes away, so that you don’t end up alone or something like that. He can be fair sometimes as well, I think. They can be fair, like this when… No, I don’t know. I can’t… They can be good like this and go out for things with you and be nice and such’. About fathers he then says, ‘I think like I said, roughly, just now’.

Daniel is asked about what the most common fathers are like, ‘No, it’s probably the common… that doesn’t do very much, is just fair, often. No, there are many kinds. I don’t know which is the most common type. Well, there are many, like this. Some that are fair, some that are bad’. About how to know which fathers are fair and which are bad, Daniel suggests, ‘You notice that. If you are together with them. They can be, like this, nasty and tell you off all the time. And you aren’t allowed to touch that, that and that’.

According to Daniel, there are fathers ‘Because there are’. About the possibilities for fathers to stop being fathers, he says, ‘No… Well, sometimes one can’t start… Yes, one can stop being a father, in case they die. If they divorce, they are still fathers’. He further says that ‘The best is that they can be fair and the worst that they can be bad’.

Daniel describes a father as, ‘Well, a son… The one the son was created by, man. They can bring children up and such. They… There are all kinds of things. Upbringing, that’s that they take care of the children and such’. When asked if he thinks it is more common for fathers to take care of children or not, he replies, ‘No, it’s mostly the mothers that do it’. He thinks the things fathers say and do are easy to understand: ‘Yes, I guess they are rather easy to understand’. About becoming a father himself, Daniel says that he has planned to be ‘Fair. Take care of the children. I will be nice to them. I guess we can go out for things and such’.

About whether there is anything that is similar to fathers, Daniel says, ‘Mm. No. They are just ordinary men, although they have children’. He then suggests that the opposite of fathers are mothers, and about the similarities between fathers and other men, he explains, ‘You know, both look… It’s almost, there’s great similarity’. About the similarities and differences between mothers and fathers, Daniel says, ‘You know, it’s mothers that are mostly with the children’.

Daniel’s general father-conception corresponds to his conception of his own father in a complex manner. On the one hand, the ‘components’ or
‘elements’ of significance seem to overlap; on the other, the content of Daniel’s expectations of fathers in general sometimes match his experiences of his own father, but sometimes are the opposite. As an example, Daniel’s general father-conception includes the expectation that fathers usually decide more over others in the family. Perhaps not always agreeing with his own father’s decisions is critical to Daniel regarding decision-making as crucial to his general father-concept. Further, Daniel’s general father-conception includes the ideas that many do not do much and that they often drink, both features that Daniel claims to be central to his conception of his own father. Further, he thinks on the one hand that some fathers are bad, like his own, but on the other expects that fathers in general are fair, as his own is not. The latter is a feature that Daniel gets back to so often that it can be assumed to be central to his conception of fatherhood. Perhaps the most striking example of the complexity of Daniel’s conception of fathers in general in relation to his own father concerns the social aspect of the relationship between fathers and children. While many other children focus on fathers’ material functions (cf. the accounts of Belinda, Rasmus, Tomi, Petri and Örjan below), Daniel seems to attach great importance to the social function of fatherhood. He explains that fathers are expected to take their children out and be nice, and to take care of them. But describing mothers as the primary caregivers and fathers as deciding and drinking can, especially when combined with finding no examples of when fathers can be fair, suggest that this function is more hypothetical than real. This can be understood as Daniel not really expecting general fathers to succeed in living up to this expectation, which would be concordant with experiences of his own father.

The central feature of taking care of, or ‘bringing up’, children in Daniel’s abstraction of fathers in general is also complex in the sense that – although he repeats the importance of this feature in fathers – mothers are expected to have it even more. Daniel describes fathers in terms of an extra person to take care of the child if the mother for some reason can not, which can be understood as a reference to a symmetrical view on male and female parents. However, he also says that children are virtually mothers’ children. So the symmetry can be interpreted as not exactly a symmetry on equal terms, but rather as mothers as caregivers and if they can not, fathers will have to fill the gap as stand-ins. Going as far as saying that children become their mother’s children, rather than their parents’ children, may further point to his notion that fathers are expected to fill a less important role as a parent, but rather act as a second choice if necessary because of any incapacity on part of the mother. His account of fathers, including describing them on the one hand as men, and on the other as parents, may be a reflection on a
general discourse. The result of what is understood as his negotiation turns out as a model of parental symmetry, but on an unequal basis.

His overall account includes good as well as bad expectations. But, in the light of the drinking, unfairness, nastiness and ‘deciding’ – and that the children, according to Daniel, practically almost become their mothers’ – fathers’ care-taking appears somewhat more hypothetical. This ‘duality’ in Daniel’s conception of fathers in general may refer to a conception of one homogeneous image concerning the complexity and variety of traits and behaviours within individual fathers. But although he, unlike Annelie, suggests that there are many kinds of fathers, Daniel – just like Annelie – exemplifies variability between fathers by contrasting the good with the bad. This division is interpreted as the core of his abstraction of fathers in general. Within such a conception of division, the unequal symmetry of parenthood can be related to general fathers by multiple routes. The expectancy that fathers take care of children is compatible with some fathers, while for others mothers’ primary care-taking responsibility can be focused upon. Thus, the ‘duality’ that characterizes Daniel’s account can, if understood as a dichotomy, be interpreted as Daniel trying to combine the primarily negative experiences of his own father with a positive, more socially accepted, image of fatherhood.

**Violence as generalized repudiation**

Daniel’s first response when asked about his concept of violence is, ‘Well, I think it’s damned bad that there’s violence, that violence is used. That people fight. Really, I just think that about all violence. Except for like in sports, of course. Like in boxing and wrestling and such’. Daniel thinks violence is okay in such sports, because ‘you know, they know that… They want to. But, it’s like in a sport. They are prepared for it then’. Different from violence in sports is ‘outside, like that among people that don’t know each other, in pubs and such, then there’s… in the home as well. But that’s of course not exactly the same. It’s mostly the big that hit the little. Like father, when he hit us, when we had done something. And I don’t think that was fun’. Daniel thinks that is violence. About how common it is, Daniel says, ‘I don’t know that too well… It’s rather unusual, it’s not too many that have it that way. Not all, at least. So I guess it’s rather unusual anyway’.

Daniel further describes violence as, ‘Well, that, people that hit each other. Hit each other and such. Well, it’s almost that you fight, kick and everything… You hurt that person. Outwardly. And psychologically and physically’. When encouraged to specify how violence can be used psychologically, Daniel says, ‘That’s inward, isn’t it? Yes, you can make someone afraid. Like think, ‘What
have I done?’ and a lot like that. And physically, that’s on the outside, hurt one, like this. And perhaps have pain. And such. Difficulties in walking, perhaps, or something like that. Yes, there’s nothing good about violence, I think. There’s only bad. You can get hurt’. He does not know why people do it: ‘I don’t know that. It’s the same as if they rob them. Maybe they were, kind of, angry inside and wanted to do it... That is, perhaps they are angry inside themselves and then maybe they knock you down or something like that. To express what they feel inside. Really, they often don’t want to, but... they have to do it. They are so angry, perhaps. Because it must go on like this in circles, someone did something, perhaps not on purpose, perhaps dropped something on someone or so, so that person gets angry with that one, then gets like that. Then that one hits that one, than that one hits him, and then they start hitting each other and so on’.

Daniel’s father used violence ‘because we perhaps dropped something and it broke, it was often that. If we happened to do something so that it broke. Or that we came home too late if we had been very far away. When he wanted to, kind of, well, when we were about to eat, that it was unnecessary to go on preparing food and such. So he got angry and then he hit. He couldn’t control himself. He was often, it was often like this on Saturdays, because then he was free and he had a hangover’.

About violence in general Daniel further says, ‘It’s mostly like this in groups. Rather cocky types and such. And it can also be rather many young people that go on. They get into fights after someone perhaps has done something to someone, that wasn’t really on purpose, then fighting just happens. And then there are older ones as well, who can express violence in other ways, I don’t know whether it’s violence really, when you shoot someone, like this and such’.

About whether there are groups that use less violence than others, Daniel says, ‘Yes, there are those that don’t usually... It’s not that very, well, go in groups, such, that take it easy and, like, haven’t grown up in a lot, such in neighbourhoods and it can also be that you have been brought up and such... If you have grown up in a tough neighbourhood, where, or a village or something... Yes, it can play a role if you, kind of, have grown up in a certain part of town, where there are often easily fights. It can be like that, if they move into town, later, there can be fights there as well. They get angry so easily. And such’. I ask how there could be an end to the violence in the world, and Daniel says he does not know.

Daniel says that fathers are usually more violent than mothers: ‘Yes. It’s them who mostly decide in the house. And such’. To Daniel, that means that men use violence more than women do: ‘Yes, it’s mostly just men, also like this, among young boys, and girls, they can control themselves. They don’t
think like that, most of them’. I ask if that is so for little children as well. 'Yes, little children, like that at... How old? Well, they don't usually use violence, such violence, perhaps if there's a fight, like this, among, not like this big fight, but that's not to be called violence so much, you know'. About young boys and girls he further says, 'The girls never fight. Yes, they do, but not like this on purpose. That is, like this, but not like this serious. They do like this as a joke and such. Not so they get like this really angry and start hitting you and such. They never do that'.

About how to define a certain situation as violence or not, Daniel says, 'That you notice. If it's in the newspaper?' I suggest that perhaps two people have different opinions about whether a situation contains violence or not, and Daniel says, 'That you must be allowed to judge for yourself. It's when it's a joke, like this, between, like this pretend fight just because they think it's fun to wrestle or something like that. It can be as well. If someone happens to get like this so that it hurts, then, “Stop. Stop it”. Then you notice or if it becomes like this real, like this, so that he perhaps stabs somebody, then you know that it's violence. Or something like this so that it's very dangerous. Dangerous is that it can hurt very much. You can get big wounds. Kind of like this, that is that, they can have a good relationship with each other, like this, friends and such and you aren't friends with that one and then you start fighting about something, then you know that it's so'.

I ask if I have understood Daniel right when he says he believes that the victimized person is generally better at judging what is or not violence than the one who does something, and he explains, 'Well, the person that does something, that one often can't, “What?”, that is stop. They are so angry that they just want to, imagine that they want to do it, so that that they get like this, they don't know that it's violence. But the one that's exposed, that one knows that it's violence, because they have just jumped on you and are going on and started hitting you without that one knowing'. I say, 'Yes, but imagine if that person says like this, that “I didn't mean to. I didn't mean for it to hurt” or, “I slipped” or something like that?' Daniel replies, 'Well, you know, you don't usually slip and hit someone'. About that person claiming that it was not on purpose, Daniel says, 'Yes, kind of, scare you or do like this right in front of you. Yes, that can happen as well. Sometimes does, but not if you go on, like this, after, like this if you reach out your hand and are about to do like this, pretend not to hit and you do it once again. You don't do that, because then you know that it's on purpose. But you go up to that one then, and say, “I'm sorry, I didn't mean to touch you”, is what you say then'.

Daniel has a view on the most typical kind of violence, 'It's mostly like this gangs, fights and generally, like this, it can start in schools, it can start in
society, it can start in town. But it’s probably rather common that bigger hit smaller in the home. Like fathers hitting children... There are some that do that as well’.

At the end of the interview, Daniel wants to add something, ‘Mm... Most importantly, I think that it’s bad that they can’t keep it inside if they get angry with something, and just think like that, some solution, what to do, kind of, if a thing breaks, then you try to fix it, mend it and have, in case you are bored some time, save it. The next day you might be bored, then you do it. Wait. And that you don’t need to be frightened to hide, because so that you have to do it in secret, in the bathroom, try to get it together. Then it doesn’t turn out as nice, you know, if you have to stress. It can be solved, most things, like that. Without violence. You don’t need to use violence if something happens. You can talk about it instead, I think. Violence is just some unnecessary thing, like an addition. There are better solutions. Some people don’t use these better solutions because I guess they don’t think... They have no time to think... it just happens like this, kind of, they open the door and someone just drops something and get like this and so they think, “Oh, no, that which I have bought for, like, 200 crowns. And it’s almost new and I was just about to use it and no”, then one of them gets so angry and then he gets so very angry with that one, so he has to do something. Then you know that he, like, isn’t going to pay for the thing, because he will never withdraw 300 for you... So I guess you get rather angry’.

‘But my friends, they like my mother very much, they think she’s fair and... I think that’s rather unusual, this difference between my mother and my father. Because he’s like that, tends to drink and that and mother, she’s like that very nice, everybody’s favourite. She’s the kind that everybody knows, kind of. But father, kind of no one knows, almost none of my friends know his name, even. But mother, she’s like that social, she meets everybody and is very like that open. So everybody thinks she’s cool, because she has, she and her car, and she often drives fast, because she thinks it’s fun. She does what you tell her, like. She’s always willing to help’.

The core of Daniel’s abstracted conception of violence is interpreted as his strong repudiation of its use, and – perhaps connected to his own strong view on it – he genuinely depicts his inability to understand why people use violence to hurt others. When confronted with a question about the reasons for violence, he seems to associate with other phenomena that he has tried to understand, suggesting that the reasons for interpersonal violence is something to which he has given some thought without reaching any plausible conclusion (cf. Weinehall 1997). Acknowledging that, although no one wants violence, some can – due to inner forces – not avoid using it, it
seems incomprehensible to Daniel why they can not instead adopt his solution – that of ‘waiting a bit’ in critical situations.

His conception of violence is interpreted as focused on the aspect of unwillingly expressing internal anger or being unable to control oneself. These features seem to be related to exposure to violence in different circumstances or relations, such as his father’s former girlfriend, and are concretized by his father not being able to control his expressions of anger and violence, when having a hangover or when someone drops or breaks something. Also, the inclusion of violence in what goes on in sports, and the centrality Daniel attributes to the rules for perceiving such violence as acceptable, is interpreted as part of conceiving control as central to judging the unacceptability of violent acts.

Daniel further seems to include immediate reactions, as well as escalating situations, in his conception of violence. Although he expects, for example, breaking anything to be a prelude to violence, he takes the view that the reasons for violence are often not obvious to the victim. Being of the opinion that the victim is the better party to decide what is violence and what is not might mean that Daniel associates violence more with consequences than intent. This is supported by his view of violence as more related to lack of control than as a means to reach a goal. In addition, not including what little children or girls do in what is called violence might have to do with the limited consequences of the actions of physically weaker individuals.

Although the essence of violence, on Daniel’s view, is exemplified by hitting, fighting and kicking, etc., he explicitly includes causing fear into his violence-concept and also relates decision-making to it – thereby including hurting physically as well as psychologically. He even expresses uncertainty about whether the use of guns is to be considered ‘real’ violence. Interpreting this as a sign that he considers the core of violence to be something more ‘personal’ or more ‘face-to-face’ may imply that his own direct experiences of unpredictable violence from his father are connected to the centrality and strength of his repudiation.

An interpretation of Daniel’s conception of violence can be summarized as an abstraction of incomprehensible inability to control anger resulting in negative consequences for unprepared and innocent victims. Since he gives no examples of regulated psychological violence, it can only hit unprepared victims, making psychological violence – unlike physical violence – always unacceptable. Also, while physical violence, e.g. in the form of weapons, can be so impersonal that it is no longer violence, intimacy is an essential precondition for psychological violence. His inclusion of psychological aspects into his general violence-conception is exemplified by extensive experiences of fear and being belittled and restricted in his life by
his father. However, when justifying labelling what his father has done as violence, Daniel primarily refers to his father’s physical acts. Perhaps the relative ‘concreteness’ of physical actions is perceived as easier to legitimize to an outsider, such as a researcher. In addition, Daniel connects violence closely to men and fathers, not as in violence being typical of men and fathers, but as men and fathers being the typical perpetrators of violence. Within the context of his general references to family life, this is interpreted as related to Daniel’s own concrete experiences, in which the intimacy of the relationship between him and his father is significant to his repudiation of violence, and also its incomprehensibility.

**Division of general father-conception and resisting father’s deviation II**

To deal with the contents of his understanding of fathers and violence, Daniel’s account – as that of Annelie – is interpreted unreservedly as acknowledging some actions of his own father as violence, and as describing violence very much in terms of experiences of his own father, while relating fathers in general to violence in a slightly more complex way. The relative homogeneity of the unfairness and violence of his own father and of the genuine badness and incomprehensibility of violence are reflected by a division of general fathers into ‘fair’ caregivers of children and ‘bad’ ones.

Although basing his general conception heavily on parallels to experiences of his own father, the relations between Daniel’s thinking about his own father and fathers in general seem to be constituted by the assumption that his own father is rather unusual because of drinking and violence, and that most other fathers do not generally drink and use violence within the family. However, when relating general fathers to violence, Daniel suggests that – although fathers are not usually violent – they are often ‘deciding’, and that violence is more common among fathers than among mothers. Seeing Daniel’s strong repudiation of violence as the foundation for his approach to meaning makes his arrangement of understanding interpretable as an example of resistance. Wide generalization of resistance to violence also corresponds to Daniel including the actions of his father in what is meant by violence. Generalizing the ‘badness’ of his own father to a set of assumptions about other fathers does not appear to affect Daniel’s repudiation of the concrete experiences of his own father’s behaviour.

Although resisting the violence of one’s own father, in combination with viewing him as deviant because of his violence, can have the advantage of a positive general expectation of fathers, it can also easily become an identification issue – Daniel being his particular father’s child and, perhaps especially, his son. On the other hand, viewing father as ordinary in relation to other fathers would entail either assuming fathers in general to be prone
to violence, or normalizing the actions of the own father. The former is problematic with regard to relating to the generalized group of men, and the latter almost impossible because of the emotional difficulties father’s actions have caused. Acknowledging father’s actions as violent, maintaining the unacceptability of violence from fathers, and conceiving father as deviant because of his violence – while still acknowledging the possibility that those features can be shared with some fathers – might mean that the division of the generalized understanding of fathers facilitates resistance towards the violence of own father and of other fathers.

Dividing fathers in general into different kinds, of which some are fair, by contrast with his own father, and some are bad, like him, can for Daniel be a way of dealing with his own experiences and the generalization of them in slightly different ways than in the case of Annelie. Whereas Annelie’s account is presented from the perspective of a victim, Daniel’s includes more concrete references to situations in which he has experienced belittling and disappointment. Having a certain perspective does not require concrete and direct experiences, but does in itself exclude other perspectives; accordingly, Daniel’s concrete personal and emotional experiences may have given rise to such a negative impression of his own father that other sources of information about fathers in general become redundant. Further, while assuming fathers to be generally violent is argued to be problematic for Annelie’s future relationships with men, to Daniel such a general assumption might more directly affect his sense of self, as part of the generalized group of men. From that perspective, dealing with his limited positive information about fathers in general by assigning to some fathers the negative features he has experienced of his own father, and assuming that others lack those same aspects, can be a functional strategy for resisting his own father’s violence – thus enabling emotional and cognitive survival in a longer perspective.

‘Some are good and some are bad’

An approach to negotiation consisting of creating subcategories to separate bad fathers from good ones means that some, but not all, fathers can be expected to share features with the own father. To Annelie and Daniel, such division might mean that the bad features of their own father are not seen as unique to him, but nor have to be expected from all fathers. Accordingly, experiences of one’s own father do not form the sole base for generalized understanding of fathers, but nor are they excluded from it. The acknowledgement of the violence of one’s own father may highlight or promote the importance of a not entirely negative view of him.

What this approach for meaning-conciliation primarily accentuates is that the violence of one’s own father is not simply normalized into a general
expectation. However, nor is it treated as an entirely deviant example of repudiated evil. Rather, Annelie’s and Daniel’s accounts provide insight into the possibility of more nuanced understanding, including resistance towards the acts, as well as a relation to some, but not all, other fathers. This approach can be illustrated in comparison with the approaches of Belinda and Rasmus (see below), which focus on the intrinsic changeability of their own father. Whereas the focus of the latter is more on variation within people’s personalities and behavioural repertoires, this negotiation approach attributes violence to some but liberates others from such features or actions – an aspect with some similarity to official images (cf. Eriksson 2003). Similar tendencies can be found in Tony’s reasoning, described in Chapter 5.

As mentioned above, Annelie and Daniel not only include violence in their understanding of their own father, but their images of their own fathers appear to be mainly focused around violence-related aspects, such as threats and belittling. Connecting violence to understanding of their own father more clearly or directly than to the general understanding of fathers may be assumed to form some difficulty for a child’s sense of self, since his or her own father is part of their primary group of social reference. But, if the own father offers a problematic image to which to relate one’s own development of self, negotiation by division in the general understanding of fathers may offer an opportunity for relating the own father to a variety of fathers. This can provide a multitude of aspects of fathers to which to relate. And, at the same time, the own father does not have to be seen as entirely deviant, since his features can also be found in other fathers.

A separation, such as the one described here, can at its best form a possibility for acknowledging the violence of the own father as well as for enabling openness in expectations of fathers in general. At worst, it can enhance a good/bad dualism that obstructs integration of the good and bad features of individuals. Annelie’s division seems to imply a straighter dualism of the good and the bad, whereas Daniel suggests that there are many types of fathers. Although most of his concrete examples are related to a similar dualism, he considers many possible aspects around which categorization can be based.

Since this approach strongly resembles another alternative for meaning-conciliation, namely what is described as ‘exceptionalization’ below, both are further discussed at the end of this chapter.

**Separating fathers from their violent exceptions**

Although what first becomes salient in Melvin’s interview are similarities with Annelie’s and Daniel’s, a closer look reveals a difference that highlights the possibility of a slightly different theoretical alternative for meaning-
conciliation. The negotiation of general fathers to Melvin appears to be less a separation of fathers into different, but ‘equal’, kinds than a division specifically aimed at maintaining a singular view of them, which is highlighted by the extreme deviation of some. After providing insight into how the interview with Melvin enables identification of this approach, there follows a summary discussion first of this approach and then of children’s negotiations of their general father-conceptions.

**Melvin**

Similarly to Daniel’s in particular, Melvin’s account includes several direct descriptions of concrete and dramatic violent situations. However, compared with Annelie and Daniel, who reveal something about how their experiences of their fathers’ violence have affected them, Melvin’s talk about his father being ‘a little bad to mother’ and that not being ‘much fun’ come across as understatements. And his resistance and repudiation of the violence with which he closely seems to associate his father is interpreted as a motive for negotiating his general conception of fathers, since such an approach to handling, and in some sense surviving, such overwhelming circumstances allows some close – but not definite or complete – associations between violence and fathers.

Melvin, at time of interview, is living at the Women’s House for the second time. His father has just been released from prison and Melvin’s mother has moved back to the Women’s House with Melvin and his sibling. He has met his father on a recent occasion.

**The own father abstracted as his concrete violent acts**

When the interview is started with Melvin, and I encourage him to tell me a bit about himself and his family, he responds, ‘And, should I also do that which, how do you say it… Should I also say what my father has done to my mother?’ I say, ‘If you want to’. And after Melvin has made sure twice that the interviews are only for children that have seen their mothers being beaten, he explains, ‘In my family, my father is a little bad to my mother. Once, he held a knife against her neck. He was almost about to kill mother. But then my mother pushed herself away from father and locked herself into a room. And then I came in. And then everything was all right. … And then father hit mother with a thing in her head. A toy. That it was. When he did so, I saw it. I thought that wasn’t nice. I thought that you aren’t allowed to do that kind of thing. And my mother called. And then when I was in school, my mother came in a police car and took us to the Women’s House and picked some things up. But then my father was at work. Then, father was at work. And he became a madman. And then, do you know what he did? Once, in town, he
took my mother when he saw her and just ran. Held her like this, really hard, like this, and shook her. And then my mother was really unhappy. And then the police came who recognized him from prison. My father, it was he that was [father’s name]. Yes, it was he that was so bad’.

Melvin suggests his father did these things ‘Because he was upset and took mother’s notebook and then he saw that my mother just wrote this about another man and just liked a guy, but wasn’t together with him. Then the other man thought she was together with many. It said. … That’s all it said. … That was rather... That wasn’t much fun. That my... That my father beat my mother. That wasn’t fun. That wasn’t fun at all. That really wasn’t even fun’. Melvin does not think it common for fathers to beat mothers like that: ‘No. Not all... And the one that was written about in the book, that was the other man’.

‘That wasn’t much fun. It wasn’t fun that he beat her… It wasn’t much fun when he did that’. Melvin suggests his father did it ‘Because he looked in that book. And that. That’s why’. Melvin describes the state his mother was in, ‘She became unhappy and bled a lot’. Melvin thinks his father saw that. ‘Yes, he saw. He has seen the other man. Father, he says a little that he shall, when he sees the other man, that he shall strangle him to death, he says. And that isn’t much fun’. He continues, ‘Father, he says he’s going to buy us everything we want. Do you think that’s true?’ I say, ‘I don’t know.’ and Melvin says, ‘No one knows that’. I ask if Melvin thinks it is true. He says, ‘No… No, I don’t know that’.

Then Melvin says, ‘That wasn’t very good… It doesn’t... One day, do you know that, that he, he hates the other man and he hates the other man’s father and he hates the other man’s mother. When they buy something for me or for mother, then he just says like this, “Oh, I feel like ripping it apart”, he says’. Melvin thinks his father says that ‘Just because he doesn’t like the other man. Just because he doesn’t like... It’s just because of that. I think one should be allowed to like someone’. Melvin does not think wanting to beat another person one does not like is common: ‘No. It’s not common. There are rather many that don’t want to fight. There are so many that are like... There are so many that are like that... That are good’.

‘It’s not much fun, that. To fight... It’s not much fun that people fight. Rather, I think that people should not be allowed to fight’. To make people not fight, Melvin suggests ‘That one shouldn’t write in books and do things. That the women keep it secret and don’t say anything. There’s a woman who has said something. As it is... It’s not very smart to say so to... The police come up to you and say like this, “Do you need help?”. “No, I can handle things myself”, they say. And then they become... And then they become dead, all that say that. Dead by their boyfriends. They become dead when
they say that. They can’t... That, they can’t... It’s no good if they... It’s no good. No. It wasn’t much fun. I think you shouldn’t be allowed to do that. Better if you weren’t. Life would be good then. And not even children. No one should be allowed to fight. Better life, everyone would think. Non-fighting-life’. Melvin suggests that ‘You feel so bad when you fight. You’re sad as well’. Melvin thinks everybody gets sad when they fights: ‘Yes, they do’. He thinks that those that fight, ‘They feel, that it was good. And then, father, he says that one thing, he says that he’s going to kill mother’s mother and father unless we... unless he gives us away, to him. That’s why. It’s really... That’s not allowed, I think. Better... It’s... That’s not much fun. It’s better if it wasn’t allowed... Those that fight feel it’s fun. But the others don’t think so’.

Melvin says his father does not always beat his mother: ‘No. Not always’. So I ask what else he does and Melvin says, ‘Don’t know. I don’t know that. Otherwise... I don’t know that’. Melvin thinks his family is ‘Unusual, I think it is. I think it’s an unusual family... Say it’s an unusual family, I think. I think everyone would think that it’s unusual. Families that fight are unusual’. Melvin talks about that the main similarity between his mother and father, ‘That is... They are as nice to each other. It’s the other man’s father and... They are always nice to each other. They do everything together’. I ask, ‘Your mother and father?’ and Melvin says, ‘Yes. They do everything together, they do. It’s not much fun with the two of them. ... They are so unusual... So they are so unusual and they are bad to each other’. I ask, ‘Are they as bad to each other?’ and Melvin says, ‘No, only one is bad... Yes, it’s so bad to be bad’. About the main difference between his mother and father, he says,‘I don’t know’. When asked, ‘You think they are mostly similar, is that so?’, Melvin says, ‘Yes. I think so. Similar’. Melvin thinks he is most similar ‘To both of them’. Also, he says he would like to be most similar to ‘Both!’ When asked to give an example of something he would like to be similar about, he says, ‘No, I can’t. I think that both, both I think... I think... It’s better if both were nice to each other’. He says he thinks both are as bad to each other now: ‘Yes, I think so... It’s not very nice to be that. I think... It’s no fun for the two of them. They don’t think it’s fun. They both have a bad life. The two of them have a bad life. That’s what I think they have. They don’t have good lives. Both don’t even have good lives. They think their life is sad. They think so’. When asked how it would be to be good, Melvin answers, ‘Don’t know’.

After coming home from school, he explains, ‘I usually do different things. Sometimes I forget what I have done. I forget everything that I do’. About what he usually does with his mother and father, he says, ‘I usually play with them a little. I mostly play with both of them. Both at the same time. But not,
not when they are this bad to each other. Then I take one. One, I take. Then I just take one... I don't think it's nice when they are bad, I don't think'.

Melvin thinks his father is ‘Unusual! On TV he was and then they said that fathers are no fathers, they are murderers’. He thinks that is ‘No good. I don’t agree with them. I think that they are ordinary’.

Melvin’s allusions are sometimes not entirely easy to follow. As an example, when asked about the similarity between his mother and father, he describes his mother’s friend’s parents as always nice to each other. During the conversation, I do not hear the reference to Melvin’s mother’s friend’s parents, but I do hear it when listening to the recording afterwards. In the interview situation I ask if he means his own parents, to which he responds in the affirmative. Since he continues by explaining that they are as bad as each other, a plausible interpretation might be that he considers his mother’s friend’s parents to be an ‘ordinary’ or ‘ideal’ parental couple, in comparison with which his own parents are bad to each other.

On his account, Melvin’s main conception of his own father is closely related to his experiences of father’s concrete acts of violence. When thinking of and talking about father, at least within the setting of the interview, Melvin’s main associations seem to be with a variety of violent situations. Melvin’s initiative in talking about his father’s concrete violent acts against his mother and against those close to her, which Melvin thinks are not very nice, one is not allowed to do and that Melvin does not approve of, seems consistent with his description of father as ‘bad’, ‘a madman’ and ‘almost killing mother’. Such associations with his father can be reasonable considering that Melvin’s mother has sought sanctuary at a Women’s House several times for violence for which his father has served prison sentences. One might say that specific and concrete acts of violence are so significant that they directly form his conception of his father to the extent that, to Melvin, his essential conception of father is more or less constituted by the father’s violent acts. Thus, Melvin’s conception of father resembles that of Annelie’s – although Melvin’s account, like Daniel’s, includes more severe as well as more concrete examples. While Annelie includes violence in her conception of her own father, and Daniel bases his conception of his father virtually solely on violence, to Melvin, father’s violence more or less seems to be the essence of his conception as a whole (in that it is even more central). These experiences and this conception of his father seem to Melvin to form a firm basis for perceiving father as unusual.

But, although Melvin himself repeatedly initiates conversation about concrete situations in which his father has used violence against mother and those close to her, his terminology of it being ‘not nice or much fun’ somewhat neutralizes its impact. In addition, even though Melvin more or less
defines his own father by non-approval of his acts; indeed, he does not exclusively attribute responsibility for the fights to father, sometimes referring to his father and mother as being as bad as each other in the general family context. His tendencies to blame ‘the book’ (see also the end of the interview below), or the woman writing it, i.e. mother, or jealousy as a possible justification for violence (cf. Hearn 1998; Isdal & Råkil 2001 for men’s similar tendencies), might indicate that thoughts about his father’s violence pre-occupy and puzzle Melvin. Trying to find a position that avoids the possible emotional threat of attributing sole responsibility of guilt to his father while not disregarding or ignoring his father’s violence may be a dilemma for Melvin. Perceiving father as entirely responsible for severe violence might be emotionally difficult, and constant awareness when searching for a nuanced position can bring those aspects into his mind and become even more central. Thereby, the significance of violence to Melvin’s conception of father may have to do with the need for cognitive and emotional contemplation, and also the attention that needs to be paid to the violence.

Not surprisingly, despite saying that he used to play with his father, most of Melvin’s account indicates that his relationship with father does not take trust for granted, and he indicates no benefits from his relationship with father (see also the end of the interview, below). Accordingly, what his father has done to mother may be all the more important for Melvin’s conception, and overshadow his own direct relationship with father.

Conceptualizing fathers as nice – but with murderous exceptions
Melvin says he knows about ordinary fathers ‘That they are nice, that they don’t fight and such. That they do nice things. They never fight’. Then he suggests that there are fathers ‘To murder. No! Some don’t murder. Some fathers exist for murdering. Yes, they want to murder. They are murderers! … or the entire life’. He talks about the most common fathers ‘That they are nice. That they aren’t allowed to fight. And that they aren’t allowed to peek at others’ poems. Only my father does that. He peeked at my mother’s, so he knows everything about that. If he hadn’t peeked, then it wouldn’t have happened’.

The best about fathers is, according to Melvin, ‘That they are nice. I’ve already said that! They are nice to each other… When you are nice, you should … Almost like a friend. You are almost. You are so nice. One… One usually… One does nothing bad. And then you sometimes help… things, you help. One helps. In a good way. In a good way they go on and help. Help with anything. Help with writing something that you can’t’.

Melvin’s reply to a question about the opposite of fathers is, ‘Opposite. That they… That they are bad to each other… If it was the opposite and no
one would be bad, then life would be... then everybody would think life is really good... Some think that life is the worst. Some say... Some say that life is the worst'.

Melvin thinks there are some people that think violence is good. They think so ‘Because they have good lives. They don’t get beaten’.

When Melvin talks about fathers in general, his account fluctuates; on the one hand he repeats that fathers in general are nice, so nice in fact that Melvin can hardly give an example, but for sure it means never fighting, and on the other is the possibility that some fathers commit murder. Only a couple of days before the interview a father has killed his daughter, and for almost a week the media are filled with news, articles and reports about it. At time of interview, although Melvin says some fathers do not murder, the thought about fathers as murderers does seem important to him.

Taking direct reference from his idea about fathers in general to his own father’s violence, Melvin concludes that it is uncommon for fathers to beat mothers like his own father did. Rather, he seems to take the view that his own father is an exception, and perhaps even the opposite of ordinary, nice fathers. When talking about his own father, he goes as far as to consider what has been said on TV, namely that murder can challenge fathers’ ‘fatherliness’. Thus, Melvin seems to use his father’s concrete violence as significant for the atypical, but still existing, father.

His account is interpreted as meaning that, while most fathers are generally nice, some fathers are unique in the worrying aspect of being murderous. One can say that Melvin’s abstracted fathers are nice, and their general niceness is stressed, or enhanced, by the border-crossing murdering and otherwise violent fathers. Although Melvin gives the impression of being decisive about his overall position about fathers as nice, his ‘trying’ of the connection between fathers and murderers in the interview might mean that he is not entirely sure about how to handle that aspect.

The violence he has seen from his own father, and its consequences, is likely to make the possible general connection between fathers and violence, and even murderers, more realistic – and therefore even more important to deal with for Melvin than for children with no personal experience to which they can relate a ‘killing father’ in the media. On the one hand, connecting fathers generally to being nice, and perceiving his own father and his violence as unusual, whereas, on the other, maintaining a connection to murdering, gives the possibility of expecting good from people while relating fathers to violence in a brutal, but ambiguous way. To Melvin, stressing general similarities between mother and father, rather than fathers’ unique and irreplaceable advantages for a child, may facilitate the inclusion of the possibility of violence in his general father-conception, since similarity means
that the physical or psychological loss of father can be compensated for by mother.

Even when specifically asked about fathers in general, Melvin talks mainly about concrete experiences of his own father’s different kinds of violent acts against his mother. Perhaps the concrete situations are more important for Melvin to deal with at the time than abstract and general questions, and the interview provided an opportunity for Melvin to think aloud about his general conceptions of fathers and about the possibilities for a general conception of them as nice while acknowledging the violence and murdering of some. Perhaps, precisely in his concrete experiences of his own father, the duality of good and bad is elevated most, thereby demanding division within the generalized conception.

**Violence as generalized concrete experiences**

When asked if he has heard of the word ‘violence’, Melvin replies, ‘Yes, when they fight!’ He says he does not know why there is violence: ‘I don’t know, so I don’t know’. To the question, ‘Who do you think it is mostly that uses violence?’ Melvin replies, ‘When one fights’, and gives no further answer. He thinks it is so common that all people do it: ‘Everybody generally does it. Everybody does it’. To the question, ‘When do you think there is most violence?’ he replies, ‘Sometimes there is generally violence. Sometimes’. He says he does not know when.

Then, Melvin asks when the interview will end, and is told we can finish if he wants to, and he says, ‘I shall only say one thing, then we finish. That... That it’s something bad they are doing. Yes, father, he wants to send us away and father and never come back home. That’s what he wants... Now, we are finished!’ Asked what he thinks about that he replies, ‘I think it’s bad. And then one thing... And then that, that he tries to fool us with something bad. So that I don’t want to live like that with mother and so that when I, when I become 12 years old so will I decide where to live, that I will decide father. That I will decide father. That when I am 12... then, then, then he’s like this sly and then he fools us... then I think that mother. I want it to end now!’

Most of Melvin’s account of violence is included in his speaking about his own father and fathers in general. His detailed accounts of fathers appear to leave little to add about violence in general. His conception of violence, within the entirety of the interview, includes stressing that violence, as in fighting, is not nice. And, as the violence that he has experienced from his father can be interpreted as the most relevant to him – which again hints at a victim’s perspective – violence is indirectly related to general fathers. Although suggesting that his parents are equally bad to each other, fathers are the only perpetrators of direct acts of violence on Melvin’s account, which
is possibly related to fathers being the most significant perpetrators in his life situation at time of interview. Even though fathers generally are seen as nice, when talking about violence in general without direct reference to his own father, Melvin’s exemplifications only include other fathers. Melvin’s understanding of violence in relation to fathers can be further understood in the light of seeing murder as the most extreme kind of violence, making the connection between murder and fathers significant to his conception.

However, suggesting that the way to prevent violence is for women to behave differently might imply a tendency to blame the victim, e.g. in the way he points to his own experiences of father reading mother’s book with violence as a consequence. Had mother kept her secret and father not read the notebook, there would have been no violence, on Melvin’s reasoning. When talking about fighting in general terms, Melvin’s response to how violence can be avoided gives another indication of his thoughts about violence in general being heavily based on experiences in his family and of his father’s violent behaviour against his mother. Since Melvin most of the time talks about his father’s violence against mother as one-way abuse, his first reference to violence, ‘They fight’, might mean that he thinks the violence is one-way but that both parents are involved. Accordingly, Melvin’s conception about violence is closely, but not exclusively, associated with fathers. Melvin repeating that one should not be allowed to practice what he has experienced in terms of violence can reflect an assumption about the possibility of acts of violence requiring acceptance. This may constitute another part of a reasoning that encompasses the spreading of responsibility for violent actions. The richness of Melvin’s examples of fighting and threatening situations when talking about fathers, and especially about his own father – but when talking about violence, only including comparatively vague general references – can also be interpreted as the spreading of responsibility. Whereas the significance of some fathers can be traced to their violence, not all the responsibility for violence can be traced back to fathers.

He further suggests that violence in general is fairly common and generally connects violence to fighting, but when talking about what his own father has done, he does not seem to make a qualitative difference between physical acts and threats. However, even if this implies that Melvin includes physical and psychological violence, such as threats, on similar terms in his conception of violence in the family, it can not be taken for granted that such an inclusion also concerns his general conception of violence. His associations during the interview, however, include a whole range of fighting and threatening situations that come across as common, especially from the perspective of the concrete experiences of victims. In combination with his suggestion that those that fight want violence and feel it is good (cf. above),
but that victims get sad, meaning that those who think violence is good are not victimized by it, his repudiation of violence can be understood as underlining his victim perspective.

This interpretation of Melvin’s conception of violence can be summarized as attributing the perpetration of what physical and threatening forms of violence there are primarily to fathers, but without sparing mothers and attitudes in general from responsibility.

**Division of general father-conception and resisting fathers’ extreme deviation**

Melvin’s approach to reaching an overall understanding of conciliated meaning can be understood from the perspective of the impact of the concrete experiences of his father’s violence on his view of his own father and of general fathers, the former seeming comprehensible and the latter subject to division. In contrast to his general description of violence as primarily fighting, his own experiences within the family relate to a wider sphere of threats, disrespect, distrust and physical violence. Experiences of such a ‘totality of victimization’ can be the ground for his overall conception of his own father as a perpetrator of violence being clearer than his general conception of fathers, which is interpreted as them being divided into the nice ones and the deviant perpetrators of violence and murders.

Melvin, on the one hand, seems to consider his own father unusual in relation to general fathers, because most other ordinary fathers are not expected to be bad like his own. However, he knows that some fathers conduct violence, like his own, and also commit murders. The possibility of shared responsibility for violence does not seem to challenge seeing his father as a perpetrator of violence. Rather, he seems clear about acknowledging his father’s actions, as described in several concrete depictions, as violence; he resists the actions he has experienced, and regards them as deviant and unacceptable. However, while the connections between his experiences of his own father’s concrete violence and general conception of violence are so close that they almost form a single entity, his general father-conception is two-dimensional, including both nice and violent/murdering fathers.

Defining one’s own father’s actions as violence without an expectation of violence in the generalized father-conception can be assumed to be difficult for a child. Melvin talks about his own father more or less as being his violent actions, while also referring to fathers being murderers, rather than individuals who conduct violent acts, which suggests a very close connection between the perpetrators and their violence. Since ‘being’ refers to a constancy that can be associated with a personality trait, making such a connection is critical. Perhaps the distance that his father’s imprisonment
and also staying at a Women’s House impose between Melvin and his father, and limited direct interaction between them especially under those circumstances, facilitate his close and mutual associations between violence and father. His interaction with mother may, at time of interview, be more important for his perception of the reasons for his mother’s flight, and also for his perception of father as a person. However, Melvin’s motives for associating father closely with violence can also be sought in Melvin’s general victim’s perspective when talking about violence in general and the concrete situations in his family.

Assuming that the own father is ‘unique’ in relation to other fathers might embrace the advantage of a positive general expectation of fathers, but viewing one’s own father as violent and deviant can also easily become an identification issue for Melvin – as his father’s child and a family member. However, an assumption about the generalized group of fathers being violators can also imply practical social difficulties as well as difficulties related to sense of self. For Melvin, separating fathers into different kinds can mean that a deterministic categorization is less threatening, especially if a majority are expected not to be violent. The separate groups can ‘highlight’ the niceness of the majority. A division of fathers in general can, to Melvin, be part of facilitating and enabling the gathering of resistance against the acts he has experienced, in that this comparatively firm and unchallenged association between his own father and violence can thereby be related to the actions of some other fathers, without risking being so widely generalized that it loses its meaning.

**Exceptionalization**

The interview with Melvin enables understanding a possible alternative division of the general father-conception. As a theoretical alternative for meaning-conciliation, it is a parallel to dividing fathers into the good and the bad, especially if the good fathers are assumed to be more common, or their features can be more widely expected, than their opposites within the group. On this approach however, the differences are accentuated and, more importantly, the groups of good and bad are treated as especially unequal. Compared with Annelie and Daniel, Melvin’s contrasting the good fathers with the murderous ones can be understood as creating exceptions of unwanted features. Rather than approaching good and bad general fathers as two more or less ‘mainstream’ possibilities within normal variability, the extreme badness of a few can be understood as used as an exception that highlights the norm of goodness. Melvin’s somewhat ambiguous position in relation to how to relate to fathers’ assumed extreme goodness, on the one hand, and the knowledge that others use severe violence and even murder,
on the other, can be understood as an attempt to develop or maintain a view of fathers as good without neglecting or minimizing the violence that some conduct. The knowledge about rather extreme violence of some may require greater difference between the groups. Accordingly, the extreme bad some may create or stress a notion of fathers’ normality that is based on great goodness as its contrast. Thereby, the extreme bad of some fathers can be acknowledged as significant for the group and an exception to normality at the same time.

Such an understanding of ‘exceptionalization’ does thereby less than within general division of fathers into good and bad, include the feature of generalizing the violent actions of the own father. Having a main conception of fathers as good can form a positive image for children to relate to, and conceiving their own father as an example of norm-breaking can be a way of repudiating his violence. However, the approach may also impede interpretation of the acts of the individuals considered to be normal, good fathers as violent. Such prioritizing of the classification of individuals over the characteristics of their actions has been stressed, among others, by Jeffner (1997) and Cerulo (1998).

**Concluding discussion about negotiations in general father-conceptions**

All three children whose interviews are interpreted as indicating that they base their overall meaning-conciliation on negotiation of the general father-conception include violence in their understanding of their own father, but without complicating their understanding of him specifically. Annelie’s conception of her own father is interpreted as embracing his violence, Daniel’s as going a step further in basing his conception of his father on violence, and Melvin’s as even forming the essence of his conception of his father on violence. In addition, their understanding of violence seems comparatively ‘clear-cut’ and unambiguous and not, at least not principally, adjusted in relation to fathers. They all include what their father has done in their definition of violence, and even if some of them say that they can not comprehend the reasons for resorting to violence when there are other, less harmful, ways of acting, none of them excludes their father’s actions from their definition or understanding of violence. To the contrary, Annelie, Daniel and Melvin relate their understanding of violence and of their own father so closely to each other that, within the context of the family, the two almost appear as one entity. Their own fathers are described very much in terms of what violence they have carried out, and violence is primarily exemplified by what they have experienced their own father to do.
Although all three acknowledge some actions of their own father’s as violence, they seem to resist any simple inclusion of violence as a possibility in their general father-conception. If referring to the own father’s actions as violence is interpreted as a sign of resistance towards normalization of violence, they have to prioritize forming or maintaining their principled definition of violence over their possible loyalty to their father as a parent. What is understood as their negotiation of the general understanding of fathers can be seen as related to their individually experienced violence of their own father in combination with possibly socially imposed resistance towards violence, and also towards attributing violence to general fathers. They all talk about general fathers as closely related to their own father, as personally experienced – either in directly answering questions about general fathers by referring to the own father or indirectly by using the same terminology for describing the generalized father-conception as their own father. Basing their general father-conception on a generalization of their individual experiences might entail a ‘clash’ with a social decree about fathers’ principled goodness; the separation of the general father-conception can be seen in light of the general discourse about fathers in Sweden not including ‘violent fathers’ (see Eriksson 2003). But, if one’s own experiences do not correspond to the societal assumption about fathers’ goodness, negotiation may provide a logical strategy for handling the contradiction. Accordingly, what the children as individuals have experienced in the arena of their family, and their lack of ambiguity in relating their own father to violence, can – when combined with the expectations generated by certain societal images – be understood as the basis for the perceived necessity to negotiate the general image.

What is interpreted in terms of negotiation of the general understanding of fathers can be illustrated in a modified version of the triangular figure presented in Chapter 2 (Figure 1, above). As an ‘ideal-type’, the approach to negotiation derived from the interviews with Annelie, Daniel and Melvin can be illustrated as division as in Figure 1a.
Figure 1a. Meaning-conciliation by incongruous groups of fathers

The own father’s actions are described as violence (3), and some fathers are assumed to use violence (2), like the own father (1), and these relationships are symbolized by accentuated connections. Other fathers, however, lie outside the ‘triangle of sense’, since they are assumed not to use violence.

The relations between violence and the own father and some fathers are comparatively unequivocal and solid. However, the division of general fathers into subgroups means that another group of fathers is not associated with violence, and therefore essentially different from the own father. The differences between ‘some fathers’ and ‘others’ can be constructed as a difference of two basically equal kinds of groups, or as differentiating deviant exceptions from the normal.

It might be assumed that differentiation of fathers into different groups of more or less equal status means that the children have difficulties in judging whether their own father is ordinary, as they have a complex, or double, image to ‘compare with’. However, by explicitly, or by more generally, describing the violent fathers as being very much in the minority, they seem to mean that their own father is unusual, even though the violence of the few appears rather significant for their understanding of the group of fathers as a whole. For example, while Annelie’s account includes primarily negative features, which suggests that her division of fathers includes relating violence to comparatively many fathers, Melvin’s division is more explicitly based on the assumption that most fathers are nice, but a few are perpetrators of violence. That difference can be understood by Annelie referring to a broad spectrum of violent acts and generally threatening situations, whereas Melvin
connects the violence of a minority of fathers to very severe violence; the broader ‘definition’ includes more acts and more possible perpetrators, while the narrower includes fewer. Thereby, the own father can be described as unusual in relation to most people or most fathers, as well as be seen as an example of the more significant features of general fathers, whereas general fathers can be described both as similar and the opposite to the own father. Melvin’s, in comparison with Annelie’s, rather extreme polarity in attributing the possibility of murdering to some fathers, but also in attributing almost indescribable niceness to others, may further be related to having less concrete experiences than any notion of the principle importance of ‘the goodness of fathers’.

Within the negotiation approaches that include, or are based on, dividing the general conception of fathers into different kinds, the relation to violence can be understood as central. The children connecting their own father and violence mutually closely, while repudiating and resisting normalization of it suggests that it is the connection to violence that necessitates division of the general understanding of fathers. When understanding of general fathers ‘meets’ the concept of violence, in the experiences of their own father, the children seem to prefer division to a ‘singular’ expectation of fathers as one homogenous group or concept.

**Direct and indirect victim perspectives**

Some aspects of the children’s general conceptions about fathers may, as a result of the interviews and the theoretical framework, be assumed to be important for or be associated with their overall approaches. As examples, Annelie and Melvin both describe little or no concrete good or positive relations with their father, which might make rational a general perception of him based on what he has done to their mother (to whom they do appear to have a closer relationship). However, Daniel bases his understanding on more direct interaction with his father, but for him that interaction includes being a direct victim of father’s violence. Also, whereas Annelie and Melvin seem to have poor contact with their father altogether, Daniel describes seeing his father on weekends, and thinks that amount of contact is just about right. But Daniel also refers to the content of those encounters as mostly on father’s terms, including father’s complaints and self-pity, and seems to see little genuine benefit from the interaction.

From the starting point of the mother’s and father’s symmetrical roles in relation to the child, as in Figure 2a below (see Eriksson 2003 for similar models), father’s violence against mother may not victimize the child directly, and has the possibility of being perceived to be of minor importance within the father-child relationship (cf. the approach described in Chapter 5 below).
As an alternative, from the starting point of seeing fathers primarily as partners to mother, and interacting with their child through and depending on the mother, as in Figure 2b below, the child’s perspective on the father may be dependent on the mother. The closeness to her, in relation to that to the father, may mean that children approach their father from the perspective of their victimized mother – encouraging a victim’s perspective on the fathers’ actions (despite not perceiving themselves as being directly victimized).

Figure 2a  Figure 2b

The symmetrical parent model       The indirect fatherhood model

The perspectives that the children whose accounts are interpreted as dividing their general father-conception adopt in relation to their fathers’ violence can thereby be understood as victims’. For Daniel, his direct interaction with father, as understood in relation to Figure 2a, includes perceiving being a direct victim of father’s violence; and for Annelie and Melvin, their contact with father can be understood as more indirect, as illustrated in Figure 2b, enhancing the significance of father’s violence against mother also for the children’s perspective on him. Thus, all three can be understood as ‘cognitively positioned’ not only as victims in relation to their father’s violence, either indirectly or directly, but also with little positive interaction to balance, or ‘complicate’ or ‘interfere with’, the bad. Accordingly, the perceived perspective of a victim is not restricted to one or the other of these family models; rather, it transcends them, and can be similar despite the circumstances in the child’s family and her or his experiences being quite different. Since the perspective of a victim is prominent in the interviews with Annelie, Daniel and Melvin, that perspective, rather than a focus on the experience of direct or indirect victimization, is suggested to be connected with negotiating the general father-conception.

That the children in this group describe themselves more or less explicitly as victims in relation to their father’s violence against their mother, or against themselves, seems more related to their subjective experience and perceived
position within the family than to differences in family or violence characteristics from the children whose accounts are understood as other approaches to meaning-conciliation (see below). This trait is perhaps most discernible in the differences between Daniel’s and Rasmus’s accounts (below), which seem to include the same, or at least a similar, basic description of their common family, although they present themselves in relation to their circumstances rather differently. Thus, their subjective experience of themselves as a victim appear to disregard from not only the relationships between children and fathers in families, but also from differences in ‘actual violent actions aimed towards them’. Whereas Daniel bases his understanding of fathers and his actions on experiences within his own relationship with his father, Annelie and Melvin – for their conciliation of meaning – focus more on what their fathers have done to their mothers. Thereby, the acts of father as such and whether relating directly to father or indirectly to him via mother seems to be of less importance than the subjective experience of victimization.

That the three children present what they say about violence in general as well as about their father from a victim’s perspective can be understood as central to their approach. While understanding father’s actions as violence is assumed to promote a victim’s perspective, experiencing oneself as a victim may also enable repudiation of his violence as violence. Perceiving themselves as a victim of their own father’s violence can be assumed to have a severe impact on their conception of self – as their father’s offspring, and as a boy or a girl. A victim’s perspective, which also points to the centrality of the experiences of the own father, thereby further suggest that individual and concrete experiences are in some way primary in children’s meaning-conciliation, namely that handling of the relation between the own father and violence precedes the handling of the relation between violence and fathers in general.

**Expected functions of fathers**

Another aspect that seems associated with negotiating the general father-conception is the functions the children attribute to general fathers. The children in the study focus on different kinds of functions of fathers. Describing fathers as givers of money or other things, or providers of physical strength or car-rides, such as Örjan, Belinda, Rasmus and Petri do (see below), may be associated with focusing on their material functions. Fathers’ biological functions, e.g. for children to be born, are stressed primarily by Örjan, Belinda and Tomi (below). Social functions, such as expecting fathers to share the interests of their children, and play with and take care of them, are put forward by Belinda, Rasmus, Tomi, Tyra (below) and Daniel. For Tony (below), the father has a primary social function in relation to his
girlfriend and the children’s mother, and a material one towards children in buying things. While fathers’ biological functions can be assumed to correspond with a complementary view of general fathers, the direct importance of father for the children, at the age of the interviewees, is less clear. Material and social functions can in themselves, at least theoretically, be equally well filled by fathers and mothers unless other aspects are included.

Among the children negotiating their general father-conception, neither Annelie nor Melvin really mentions any positive functions of general fathers. Not seeing much practical importance in fathers may facilitate resistance towards the own father’s violence, since it reduces the psychological loss that such resistance may entail. And also perceiving father as a perpetrator of violence might mean that the generalized father-conception includes comparatively little positive aspects, and that any social or emotional loss can be intellectually diminished by attributing few functions to general fathers. Daniel, on the other hand, in assigning social functions to fathers, may do so. Such attribution can be more difficult to combine with violence than is giving material goods or money – meaning that attributing social functions to general fathers can be related to his experiences and interpretations of his own father. The badness of the violence per se and a failure to live up to the general expectation about what positive things he might have contributed with to the child’s life – the impossible combination of benefiting socially from a father whom one has to fear – thereby forms a double negative image. Accordingly, all three children’s expectations of the functions of fathers in general can, via their understanding of their own fathers, be related to their negotiation approach.

Fathers’ attributed functions can also be described in terms of their complementarity or symmetry in relation to mothers. Ascribing fathers in general more complementary functions in relation to mothers, and implying fathers’ uniqueness in relation to mothers, may involve mainly referring to fathers’ biological function in ‘making children’, as Örjan and Tomi do (see below). Alternatively, it can include activities related to physical strength, such as Rasmus, or generally stressing social differences and different talents between fathers and mothers, as do Belinda, Tyra, Petri and Tony (below). Melvin, on the other hand, stresses similarities between mothers and fathers in general, and Daniel a ‘symmetry on unequal terms’, but Annelie does not see any functionality to fathers at all. Seeing fathers as not filling unique functions in the family generally, or for their children specifically, can facilitate interpreting the own father’s actions as violence. Such social or emotional distance from father can be less threatening, since complementarity means that functions can be taken over by the mother. These complementary or symmetrically related ways of creating meaning about fathers as parents
are – as tendencies in the negotiation approaches among the children – perhaps less clear-cut than the ‘content’, such as biological, material or social, of the functions attributed to fathers. But, alongside the children’s perceived victimization and virtual lack of functions that their own father fulfils, they contribute to form circumstances for negotiating the children’s general father-conception.
5. Negotiations related to conceptions of the own father

While the approaches distinguished in the interviews with Annelie, Daniel and Melvin are aimed primarily at negotiation of the general father-concept, the alternative for negotiations identified within the meaning-conciliations of Belinda, Rasmus, Tyra, Tony, Tomi and Petri mainly concern their own father in relation to his use of violence. This group of children, including two girls and four boys of varying age, reveals an approach to meaning-conciliation of three different kinds – one related to their father’s essential self, one to the principle understanding of him, and one to their own direct relationship with father. These negotiations all resemble ‘exceptionalization’ as described in Chapter 4 (cf. Melvin), in the sense that the violence is acknowledged, but its main significance is to highlight the good, although here the good within the understanding of the own father rather than of any group of general fathers.

Separating father’s essential self from his actions

From the interviews with Belinda and Rasmus one first approach to dealing with challenging relations between the own father and the conception of violence can be found in separating those actions of father that, according to the general understanding of violence, have to be labelled violence, from what is perceived as father’s essential self. The interviews with Belinda and Rasmus are presented and discussed below as an attempt to depict and substantiate this approach, which is further discussed after these two interviews and at the end of the chapter.

Belinda

Belinda seems to hold a position of ‘unspoken’ resistance towards what she calls her father’s angriness. While resisting his state of mind or his actions, she thinks of him as a person as normal. The label ‘angriness’ enables her to preserve a view of him as mainly normal, which would be difficult, for example, had she categorized his angriness as violence instead.

Belinda describes her family as consisting of her father, her siblings, herself and her mother, and explains that the children live with their mother in one
household and with their father in another. The family has lived with this arrangement for a couple of years and the children live one week with their father followed by one with their mother, which is ‘not much fun. We would rather live with mother’. Belinda explains their father takes the children in the car from one place to the other. During the days Belinda, at time of interview, will normally ‘sit and watch TV, and by the computer and do my homework’, which is what the others do as well, except for the younger sibling, who interrupts her most of the time. ‘With father we go to another town almost every weekend, that is, when we are with him. With mother we go to different places’. Belinda thinks she is more similar to her mother, because her mother is ‘good and considerate and doesn’t say bad things’. Belinda thinks her family is ‘a bit unusual, because not many families get divorced. Not as many as are married... There are more that are married than are divorced’. The best about Belinda’s family is that they are ‘fun and help each other’, except for the younger sibling. Not so good about the family is that they ‘quarrel quite often, especially father and my brother. My brother always has to tease me. As soon as you go out to go to school, he has to throw snowballs. He does it to tease. He thinks it’s funny’. She thinks it is common for boys or older brothers to do such things: ‘Yes, we have another one, a friend in my class, we have exactly the same families, so that we are the same number of children of the same ages. And the brothers, they are always together and I and she are always and the younger siblings are always and the parents as well. So that... And the brother is just as annoying. Always has to go on and throw snowballs everywhere’. Most important about her family is, according to Belinda, that ‘They are good... nice and you can talk about things that you can’t talk to anyone else about’. About the similarities and differences between Belinda’s mother and father she says that ‘The difference is that mother is much nicer and lets us do more things and helps us with our homework more often. And she does more things with us, and similarities... What similarities are there? That both help out when we are to go for a trip’. Belinda explains she goes for trips with the school, or alone, or with friends.

About a time that was extra good in her family, Belinda says, ‘With mother or father, or with everybody? Better with mother. Vacation, then we went to an amusement park and had a great time. It was we and mother and then many other people that we know’.

**Conceptualizing the own father as essentially changeable**

About her own father, Belinda says, ‘You know, my father gets very angry rather easily. He doesn’t do very much himself, although he just asks that we should do a lot of things. That we, like, do the dishes, while he’s sitting
watching TV and such. I want to do something and then I’m not allowed to
do it because he doesn’t want it. I’m not allowed to do what I want even
though he’s allowed to do what he wants. And then he’s not at home very
often because he works all the time. That’s not much fun. And then we have
to take care of our little sibling. The best is, I suppose, that he’s nice sometimes
and the worst that he gets angry easily and demands a lot of things, but he
doesn’t do anything himself. There are a lot of fathers that don’t do very
much, but what’s unusual about him is that he gets angry very easily and
doesn’t want to do anything himself almost all the time. It’s much better
being a girl, because girls don’t cause as much trouble as boys and don’t say
as many bad things’.

Belinda thinks that her father thinks violence is ‘okay sometimes and bad
sometimes. I think mother thinks violence is very bad. She really thinks there
should be no violence, but it just keeps coming all the time’. She says her
own opinion is more like her mother’s. ‘Father is nice sometimes and fun
sometimes and sometimes really boring and doesn’t want to do anything,
always watches TV by himself, and you have to take care of your sibling
yourself, and you aren’t allowed to do anything almost. His friends would
describe him differently and his siblings would describe him similarly’. The
ones that would describe him differently would say he is ‘tiresome, boring.
Mean sometimes and sometimes he’s really brisk and wants to do everything’.
Belinda says there are different descriptions of her father because ‘he behaves
differently among other people. Everybody is right, it depends on how he
behaves’.

Belinda’s main characterization of her father, ‘very angry rather easily’, is
a reference more to his temper more than to his actions; she might mean that
either most of the time he is not angry but might easily get so, or that his
anger is so easily triggered that he actually is angry most of the time. Although
the connection between anger and violence is not straightforward, the
significance Belinda attributes to her father’s angriness can be understood in
the light of violent aspects, especially since she pities that for her mother
violence ‘keeps coming all the time’ (see also below). A father’s angriness
may have similar effects as his violence against mother in being scary to
children. It is unclear whether Belinda perceives her father as easily angry
with her, or with her mother, or just generally angry. Although angriness
refers to a temper and violence to action, since both terms are rather
subjective, many situations can just as well be interpreted or labelled as either.
As physical violence is not necessary for perceiving situations as threatening,
limiting or violent (cf. Hearn 1998; Lundgren et al. 2002; Weinehall 1997:
40f), the connection between anger, at least if expressed, and violence is
close. Accordingly, Belinda’s references to her father’s angriness can be interpreted as referring to some aspect of violence.

But Belinda also stresses that her father’s angriness is not constant. To the contrary, she points out that he behaves differently at different times and with different people. Although unclear whether she means depending on situations or other circumstances, such as unexpected mood-swings, her account is interpreted as emphasizing that the ‘true essence’ of her father is these different behaviours; that changeability forms the essence of her abstracted conception of her father. Her account is interpreted as referring to his basic or general characteristics as demanding and ‘on the edge of getting angry’, but that this base-line characteristic is flexible; it changes, either in the direction of getting angry, which can happen easily, or towards being nice. Further, she seems to think that these general characteristics of her father are quite common among fathers, but that angriness is more unusual. By this description, Belinda can separate her father as he is – namely lazy, demanding and ‘on the edge’ – from his actual angriness, which is treated as an exception. And by excluding her father’s angriness from his general self, she can describe him as ordinary, but his angriness as unusual.

With changeability at its core, his violence can be included without being given primary significance within her presentation of him. The significance of this can be traced to Belinda’s opinion mainly being based on her own relationship with her father. Mentioning him first of all among family members may indicate that including him in the family is especially important to her, and focusing on his violence may be threatening for her. Since everyone gets angry once in a while, the term ‘angriness’ can steer associations away from unacceptable behaviour and towards a common variety in temperament, thereby possibly normalizing violence in a sense. From that perspective, talking about ‘angriness’ can be interpreted as part of minimization or normalization of violent acts, which can be part of allying with her father’s perspective (cf. Hearn 1998: 141ff; Lundgren 1997). But also, his importance to her may put high demands on making sense of her experiences of his demanding behaviour towards the children. However, she would rather live with mother alone, makes few references to positive aspects of or interaction with father specifically, and she thinks her father might approve of violence sometimes and also explicitly exemplifies violence with father hitting mother (see below). When conceptualizing father, the essential nature of changeability can invite a focus on the possibility of anger rather than on the violence that is acknowledged, but separated from the main conception rather than made significant for overall understanding.
Fathers generalized as gendered uniqueness

About fathers in general, Belinda says, ‘Fathers are good because sometimes perhaps the mothers can’t help. Then the fathers can help with different things. Sometimes the mothers, like, aren’t able to help with sums in the maths book and then you can go to the fathers. That they aren’t equally good at different things. And that they behave differently. You can see the differences between the fathers and mothers, for example, that the mothers help more. They help even though they can’t sometimes. The fathers say, “No, but I can’t and then I don’t help”. Or like, “No, I’m not up to it. I’m not up to driving the children to school” or something like that. They almost think more about themselves’. She says it is ‘pretty common’ that fathers are like that. ‘Ordinary fathers help more, do the dishes themselves and don’t demand so much from their children, just that they should clean their own rooms. That they should clean up after themselves, in their room’. In describing ordinary fathers she says, ‘What they usually do... I don’t know. Help more perhaps. Fathers are good when you need help with things and, like, driving somewhere. Most women don’t have a driving licence, more the men. Or, like, record a movie or something, and then they can help with computers and the like’.

To Belinda, there are fathers ‘For one to live! We come from the fathers, you know’. Her answer to ‘How do you know a father is a father?’ is, ‘You can almost see it in the appearance and then in the voices. When you get older, you get a deeper voice. Then you don’t have as light a voice as you do when you are younger’. She suggests that the opposite of a father is ‘a woman’ and that similar to a father are ‘guys, boys’, and that the difference between fathers and other men is that ‘fathers know more how to take care of children’.

‘A father is a person that you can talk with and that can help with a lot of things. And if it was a guy, you could say that “It’s a person like you, but older”’. A typical father-figure Belinda describes as ‘Almost always tired. Doesn’t want to do anything. That’s typical’. About the possibility to stop being a father, she explains, ‘If the children have died, otherwise it’s not possible. But if you have a child and it lives then you are still a father. You can’t stop being one’. What one has to do as a father is, according to Belinda, to ‘take care of the children’. If a father does not do that, ‘then he is no good a father’. She would like to say to all fathers ‘that they should cheer up and not be tired all the time. Because then they can help more and then they can get on better with each other’.

Belinda does not, like most children, primarily describe fathers in themselves, but focuses on their differences in relation to mothers. She is thereby the one who perhaps most strongly stresses the unique talents and
qualities of fathers in relation to mothers, and she repeatedly exemplifies such differences. Even though she thinks that one central difference is that mothers generally are more inclined to help while fathers sometimes do not, fathers are expected to be better at helping with maths, recording and computers and to have a driving licence, all of which can be perceived as activities generally associated with men. To these more material or physical and practical qualities Belinda supplements a reference to fathers’ unique biological function, in which she takes fathers’ roles in making babies as far as saying not only that fathers are necessary for babies to be born, but that ‘We come from the fathers’. Her basic assumption seems to be that fathers, because they are men, can fill functions that complement mothers, and that fathers’ functions and advantages therefore are uniquely connected to them as men.

Suggesting that the opposite of a father is not, as for many of the other children, a mother, but a woman, and also that age more or less per se leads toparenthood for men, might therefore be indications of the strength of Belinda’s association between fathers and men. Men and women are not united by the bond and similarity that parenthood provides. To her, the concept of father seems to be not very different from the concept of man. If Belinda believes that fathers, because of their gendered talents and qualities, are unique, their advantages can hardly be substituted for by mothers.

However, Belinda’s description of fathers, seemingly resting comparatively heavily on their qualities as men, has one exceptional feature. To her, being a good father requires taking care of the children. In addition, fathers are expected to know more than other men about that and to be someone, not only to receive help from, but someone one can talk with (cf. Hyvönen 1993). About such social functions Belinda does not stress differences between fathers and mothers, but she did say earlier that mothers talk to the children more and have more confidence in children’s own decisions. So, in Belinda’s view, for a child fathers and mothers can be understood as complementing each other in biological and material functions, but in social functions, such as taking care of children, her expectations are similar.

Belinda also seems to base her general father-conception on the experiences of her own father, but at the same time somewhat on a negation of her experiences of him. She uses the same terminology for defining fathers in general as for describing her own father, but says it is unusual that one must do as they demand, and that they get angry easily. She also says she expects fathers to help more than her own father does. Although she earlier said that girls don’t quarrel and say bad things to the extent that boys generally do, Belinda does not seem to relate general fathers to violence.
Perhaps stressing the gendered differences and fathers’ uniqueness as a principle as well as suggesting that fathers should take care of their children can help Belinda to justify having contact with her own father and accepting a living-arrangement that she has little opportunity to influence. Her descriptions of father not talking to her and trying to ‘fool’ the children with activities without asking them and not letting them decide for themselves (cf. below), as she expects from a father, can be understood as experiences of father not really listening to her and respectfully treating her like a person. If so, her generalized view of fathers focusing on the necessity of fathers may facilitate acceptance of her own father, which is impeded by those experiences.

**Violence abstracted as (moral) evil**

When confronted with the concept of violence, Belinda says, ‘Violence. That earlier, when mother and father were married, father used to beat mother, when he got angry with her or if she did something wrong or something. And then he started shouting at her and saying bad things and... and then he sometimes used to, when you don’t do as he says, but do something wrong, then he gets angry and then earlier, then he would start to hit, or he wouldn’t hit, but he started yelling all the time as soon as someone did something wrong. Like, if he said, “Do the dishes”, although one just said, “No, I don’t want to”. And then, maybe you would do two plates and then leave, then he started yelling’. Belinda thinks he did so because ‘he got angry. When he says something, then you have to do it, even though you don’t want to. That’s not very common. It’s rather unusual’. About what other fathers might do in similar situations, Belinda says, ‘I don’t know too many that are divorced. That is, I know a lot, but it’s... I haven’t met the fathers. Maybe they get angry as well. I don’t know’. When asked if she thought her father is an ordinary or unusual father, she replies, ‘In between’.

Belinda thinks the most common reason for people using violence is ‘when you do something wrong and you do something bad. Kind of, like this, goes and quarrels with you and kicks someone on purpose or pushes you or does a lot of things. Like, when you say bad things to someone and several others... Like bullying. ... Violence is rather common. Because there’s very much violence at night. Such as fights and going on saying bad things and burglary and such. Drinking and a lot of things. There’s a lot in a certain town district. They have moved police there, so there’s not so much anymore. There’s a lot downtown’. She suggests that those that perform violence mostly are ‘Men and boys... guys... and teenagers. It’s like... many older that drink at night and...’.
About the dividing line between what is violence and what is not, she says, ‘That when you only say things to one another, that’s not much fun, but it’s not like hitting one another, go on and kick and threaten with knives and things. That happens very often... Saying bad things can be violence as well. It depends on what you say. If you say like this, “You are so stupid that you can’t think”, and go on and say “whore” or “poof” and everything and “fuck” and such things. And then just say, “I’ll kill you” and the like’. One knows that it is violence because ‘It’s very bad to say so that one, like a boy... and if you are together with a boy or so and if you make threats you may get afraid at night that that person will turn up’.

To describe what violence is, e.g. if there is something written in the newspaper about it, she says, ‘That one has committed a burglary and then threatened each other, these really bad things, that they just find... when they go on with Satan and such’. Belinda says she thinks violence exists because ‘you know, there are so many that... Everybody can’t get on well and everybody doesn’t have the same opinion, everybody doesn’t walk the same way and dress and such. Some perhaps only have one percent and most have three or two percent, that is, what one uses of the brain. Then they get like a bit... angry’. Belinda suggests the alternative of responding to such situations without violence: ‘You go and talk rubbish about the others, behind their backs or also, like to someone in the class and then you go to everyone in the class and gather a gang, all girls, like, against one girl and gather a gang and leave that one out. Don’t care about that one, just talk rubbish’. When I ask which is better or worse, Belinda replies, ‘Better or worse... I don’t know... I don’t know’.

Belinda thinks violence can possibly be good or okay: ‘When someone is shooting a police, like, then violence can be used, or is shooting people, then you can jump on from behind and take the gun and call the police’. She considers the opposite of violence to be ‘goodness. That you don’t bully, and you don’t drink, it’s only like at parties, but don’t drink too much. And say good things and don’t gather gangs and such. Goodness is done by those that don’t use violence to talk to someone or that they don’t understand what you said. Those that don’t say, “You are nuts”, and go on like that, “You just don’t get things”’. She says that those who use violence ‘probably think it’s okay, “It doesn’t matter if I do that or that, that. There’s no one that cares”. Even though there are many that care’. Those that use violence do not, according to Belinda, believe it to be violence: ‘No, they think that “this is good, so I can do it”. Although when they get it back, then they think it’s very much violence’. About how to know who is right in a situation where there is one person that hits another and they have different opinions about whether it is violence or not, Belinda says, ‘The one that says it. One
can’t just go and hit someone. One hasn’t done anything. “He walks wrong, so we can go and hit him now”.

Most important about violence, she explains, ‘It's that you can call someone bad, very bad, things, like “whore” and “such”’. For people working with people who have been subject to violence, the most important thing, according to Belinda, is ‘that they have met a lot of people that have had difficulties. Then they have learnt that they shall become good and not hit others, just because you have done something wrong or so. Like when you have done something wrong, have something wrong or something’.

Belinda says she thinks children can use violence against adults, but about babies’ abilities to use violence against adults she says, ‘They don’t understand very much so then they can’t do it. But they can do some things, such as scratch and bite and such’.

‘I think violence is bad because you subject it to people who haven’t done anything. That it’s they that are beaten. Some can die from just being hit once, so violence is very bad. Violence is bad most of the time’. But violence may not be so bad ‘when someone hits you and pushes you down, then you should just be able to say good things back. Like, if they say like this, “Yes, you are so stupid”. You can say, “Yes, but I still think you are nice. You can become nicer than you are”’. About her own use of violence, Belinda says, ‘I have said bad things, but I haven’t gone hitting people. That felt bad’.

When, at the end of the interview, Belinda is asked if there is something else that needs to be said, she suggests, ‘That you would ask how it was that day, when they got divorced, how father was then. It’s not extremely important. But how they were the first day is a little important’. The important is that ‘as soon as they get divorced they don’t talk at all, then they do more things with the children, to keep them with the fathers. They make the children want to stay. As an example, they take them for rides and do many things’. When asked whether both the mothers and fathers do so, Belinda says, ‘Yes. But the mothers talk to them more. They don’t just do it to make the children live with them. They think more that it’s better the children can decide for themselves. Than making them live there’. Belinda thinks that is common when parents have divorced. ‘They always want the children to live with their mother or father’. When I ask how that feels for a child, Belinda says, ‘Rather tough. You feel… you know that they try to make you live with them’.

Belinda’s abstracted violence-conception includes physical acts, such as hitting, which seems first to come to her mind, as well as psychological acts. Her suggestion that saying bad things in general might hurt emotionally, but not result in obvious consequences, can be interpreted as entailing that verbal acts are at the periphery of what she means by violence. Threats, on the
other hand, can cause fear and are almost at the core of her abstracted violence-conception. In addition, the possibility of diminishing the self-esteem of the victim of verbal actions directed at sexually related personality traits is interpreted as a sign of the centrality of consequences for Belinda’s understanding of violence.

As the perpetrators do not acknowledge those consequences, or their actions as violence, Belinda’s account can be interpreted as suggesting that the definition of violence is closely connected to positions as victim or offender. However, little children not understanding limits their possibilities to use violence, which implies that intent is also central to Belinda’s conception of violence. Her understanding is further interpreted as focusing on violence as appearing ‘out of the blue’. Although she acknowledges its connection to someone doing something wrong or bad from the perpetrator’s perspective, she means that the worst thing about violence is that the victim has done nothing wrong. In the light of the inevitability of people’s physical and social differences, and also differences in brain-capacity usage, her description of the reasons for violence can be understood as seeing them as somewhat under-dimensioned. This can imply that she thinks of violence as – by definition – unprovoked from a wider perspective, and that she attributes violence to one-way situations only; or, at least that non-mutual violence is the ‘typical’ form of violence.

This, in turn, might imply that – to Belinda – actions that with no mutuality can be classified as violence may, with some dimension of mutuality, be justified and termed differently. As an example, defining her own actions in the interaction with her father as a form of mutuality may explain her description of her father as ‘angry’. But that Belinda also includes her father’s actions against mother in her understanding of violence, in her first depiction of it and in her general inclusion of verbal acts, might mean that her father’s yelling and saying bad things, especially if they include explicit or implicit threats, is also violence Belinda. Further, on the one hand, Belinda says she thinks her father’s demanding behaviour is ‘rather unusual’, on the other, that she thinks violence is rather common. Her suggestion that most violence occurs in certain town districts and downtown can indicate that she thinks that fathers’ violence within families, despite the fact that it is her primary association, is unusual, but ‘ordinary violence’, such as street violence, is common in society.

Altogether, Belinda’s depictions of violence can be interpreted as related to one integrated image. The assumption that perpetrators probably think their violent acts are okay and do not acknowledge the consequences of them can be connected to evil intent being the prerequisite of violence. The associations with men drinking downtown with the intent to harm non-
provocative, innocent and non-acting victims physically and psychologically also seem related to her almost synonymous associations between violence, drinking and Satan, altogether forming an inner image of ‘evil’. The content of this image can also be highlighted by its contrasts, including the notion of the innocent victim and the suggestion that ‘goodness’ is the opposite of violence. In addition, her depictions of accepted, justified or less bad violence, namely taking a gun from someone with force and responding by being nice towards the assailant, can be understood, not only as her suggestion about acceptable violent situations, but also as stressing that ‘It is good to stop violence’. Since movies often depict more absolute good-versus-bad dualism than real life (see Cronström & Höijer 1996), Belinda’s example of ‘justified violence’ having similarities with a typical movie situation can be understood as corresponding to such a dualism.

Separation as normalization of father and resistance of his violence I

Within Belinda’s meaning-conciliation with regard to the themes of fathers and violence and their possible connections, the focus on the changeability of her own father is interpreted as central. Its ‘base-line’ can be related to common features of fathers in general (such as laziness), while ‘angriness’ as such is assumed to be more unusual.

According to Belinda’s own conception of violence, the actions of her father are considered very bad. However, her understanding of fathers focuses on their uniquenesses, and does not include the general expectation of violence. As the advantages of fathers can not be replaced by mothers, the importance of Belinda’s own father as a ‘man’ would make treating his violence as essential to the understanding of him a direct disadvantage for her. By, instead, treating his very changeability as the core feature, she can perceive her father as a person primarily sharing characteristics with fathers in general, while his violence can be acknowledged as such, but not as central to his person. Thereby, Belinda’s generalized father-conception is also based on the changeable features she has experienced in her own father, as well as expecting violence within the range of possible behaviours to be unusual. As Belinda regards fathers in general as less demanding and less easily angry than her own father, but that violence is more often done by men than by women, she does not expect violence from fathers in general, but does not in principle exclude violence from fatherhood either. As violence is closely related to what her father has done to mother, but also perceived as very bad, Belinda’s experiences of her own father can form the basis for expecting ‘better’ from fathers in general. Their uniqueness will make them generally important, and the specific expectation of taking care of their children can enhance their value in children’s lives. Although her understanding
of fathers in general might not be entirely unambiguous, it can be understood as more sharply focused on the variety of behaviours in fathers, than a division of fathers in general into different kinds or groups.

Although thinking that general fathers are more demanding than mothers, and that her own father might be even more so in comparison with other fathers, and also suggesting that men use more violence than women, the terminology Belinda uses when describing her own father is only distantly violence-related. Describing him as quarrelsome, angry, lazy and demanding, means focusing on aspects that can be either parts of violence or not, but when talking about violence, she starts out by exemplifying it with her father hitting mother. This can be interpreted as an indication of the difficulty of initiating talking about his violence when talking about father as a person, although when talking about violence, father’s actions may be central and hence more directly described as such. Although father’s actions may be typical and significant examples of violence, violence may not be the most significant or typical feature of him. Focusing on his changeability can for Belinda be a way of including his importance to her as a male caregiver alongside his attempts to influence her and the evil of his violence.

Describing father as unusually angry may include him in the variety of the normal, contrary to describing him as violent. But, to Belinda, since the expressions of anger, as in violence, is separated from father as a person, such ‘neutralizing terminology’ appears to be less part of normalizing violent actions than of normalizing her father as a person. To the contrary, the separation can be interpreted as a sign that father’s violence is not normalized, but needs to be handled to avoid normalization. Since they are not crucial aspects of his personality, the violent acts of father can be resisted, and be treated as an exception from the dominating similarities between him and other fathers.

Rasmus
Similarly to Belinda, Rasmus seems to depict his own father as essentially changeable, which also, in his case, can be interpreted as crucial to his conciliated meaning. Acknowledging father’s violence while focusing on other aspects of his being means that his violence can be conceived as deviant in relation to general fathers and resisted, while father as a person can be depicted mainly with a focus on general similarities to other fathers.

Rasmus is Daniel’s brother. The first thing Rasmus says about his family is that ‘it’s good’ and he explains that it consists of his brother, his sister, his mother and himself, all of whom live together at the time of interview, ‘It, it doesn’t feel good to share a room with my brother, because, kind of, he and I share a room, sister gets one room for herself, and mother has to sleep on
the couch... We have lived like, here for... To count until we moved... Well, you can kind of say... five months’. Before moving, everybody except the father lived at a Women’s House, before which the family had lived ‘at father’s place’. About the moves, Rasmus says, ‘It feels good to get out in town. It’s closer to the shops, where you go and buy, shop’. About when he sees his father, he says, ‘Well, I was with him yesterday. Or today! Fifteen minutes ago, kind of’. Rasmus can see his father whenever he wants to and decides himself. ‘But often... I can, kind of, say... Mm... It’s so different. Sometimes it’s two, three times a week, sometimes it’s none, sometimes it’s two, and sometimes it’s four. Well, like that’. He can walk from school to his father’s home ‘and then, if I want to, from town I can just take the bus’. Rasmus agrees that this means he can see his father as often as he likes. ‘Sometimes I go there when it’s kind of Eurovision Song Contest or something like that, because then, then he brings out, out like this, food and sweets and the like. But then the whole family goes there’. When asked what he and his father do together when Rasmus goes there alone, he says, ‘I just do... and I haven’t been so many times by myself. I have only been there, kind of, once... Today I was with brother... But then I was with brother there. Hibi... We... fished things up from under the terrace, that is, kind of, there were a lot of things under the openings. With one of those things that father had bought. Yes. And we got up like this, pens and bottle tops and rings. And a ring that I got up. And then we found a coin’.

Rasmus explains that he does different things with his mother than with his father: ‘Yes, it’s slightly different. Yes, it’s different. With mother I usually do like this... Then I don’t usually do very much... Mm. It’s difficult to explain. Kind of, with mother, then I usually go out for walks mostly. With father I go swimming at a beach mostly. Both are just as much fun... Yes. It’s difficult to explain. Well, for example... I often help mother with the dishes sometimes. But at father’s, then I often, then I often help with cleaning and such. But that’s not so very... But that’s not so very different’. About whom he thinks he is more similar to, he says, ‘I don’t know... I think it’s mother. Or, I don’t know’.

At end of interview, Rasmus is encouraged to tell me about a time in his family that was really good, and explains, ‘The best with my family, that’s... That... is... that... that they sometimes... That they sometimes are so nice. That is, sometimes they are willing to stand by. Well, kind of, if I’m ill on the couch and then perhaps sister is sitting by the computer and then, “Can you get me a glass of water, please?” and then perhaps she does’.
Conceptualizing the own father as fundamentally changeable

The first thing Rasmus says about his father is, ‘Yes. He, he rings so much and nags and says that we should always go there, but mother doesn't want that, and neither do I. And then... That is, he rings so much and says and then we start... then we get tired of it and then we go there. But then he has to offer us nice food and the like. A lot of nice dishes. Sometimes he's nice, sometimes tired, sometimes sulky, sometimes... odd. That... Yes. Kind of, he's so strange, I don't know, how to explain how he is, but... It's difficult to explain. When he's nice, then, kind of if, like this, if you can have an ice cream, “Yes”, but next, “Can I take an ice cream?”, “Yes”, “Can I take an ice cream?”, “Yes” and then, “Take an ice cream?” then, “No, it's enough ice cream now”. But if he's like this sulky, then like this, “Can I have an ice cream?”, “Yes”, and then you say next time, “Can I have an ice cream?”, “No, it's enough ice cream. It's enough ice cream now”. He says, like that’. 

‘The most important about him is that he can repair things. Toys that break. But that was before. When I was little. He repairs things now as well, but those are his own, of course. That is, the car and such. He, he's, he's... He works at a company and then he can, like that... He's a professional, who repairs things. ... He's good at... barbecuing. And, and then, that is build things, kind of, I mean, build things and not repair. Kind of, a couple of years ago he built a shed. It turned out really nice. Yes, that is was... He's not very good at... He's not very good at... He's not very good at... going for walks! No, but that was probably a bad... No, but he almost never goes... But... He's bad at... doing like this, kind of, cleaning in the house. He mainly lazes about. Most of the time anyway. He lies and sleeps so much. Yes... He’s good at playing on the computer, that...’

Rasmus explains something typical of his father, ‘It's that he doesn't do any sport. He should go to soccer, or handball or something like that’. When asked whether it is common for fathers to play sports, Rasmus says, ‘No, but he, kind of, I want him to go to sports. That is, soccer or something like that. I think soccer is so cruel’, meaning he wants his father to start playing soccer. He further explains that his father ‘Eh... He's important for me to have someone to go to after school, if I miss the bus. Yes’. The best about his father is ‘that you can go there when you want after school. And then, nothing’.

The worst about his father, ‘That's... that... that he gets so grumpy all the time. I mean, sulky. Yes, if something breaks. If you drop a glass or kind of, on the ground... He gets very sulky. Like, kind of, “Aaahh!” He kind of, he screams and, “What are you doing?” kind of like that, he says’. I ask if his father gets unusually sulky, and Rasmus says, ‘Yes. Not extremely sulky if you drop a glass, directly, but he gets angry. Eh... It hasn't happened too
many times. That is, that you have dropped a glass’. He says it has happened many times, however, that his father has got that sulky, and he thinks that ‘It is common’. He believes his father to be an unusual father. ‘It’s difficult to explain. Eh... It’s... that... he... always fights when you drop something on the ground’. Rasmus thinks that is ‘Bad’, and suggests instead that ‘You can just say. Or, “It was just an accident”. That is, if you do that. Yes’. He thinks that is ‘Common’. The reason to the move to the Women’s House, Rasmus describes as, ‘He hit a lot. Yes’. When asked if he thinks that is violence, he says, ‘I don’t really know what violence is. Yes, I think so’.

Rasmus’s main characterization of his father is interpreted as based on changeability or fluctuation, as depicted in examples of contrasts. The different qualities of his father include a spectrum from times of being nice or a handyman, to sulky or fighting as a response to someone making a mistake, as well as strange, perhaps connected to the unpredictability to which the changes may give rise. Rasmus is quite straightforward about violence being part of his conception of his father, and his repeated references to father being sulky – screaming and getting angry and fighting when others make mistakes – is, as recounted below, supplemented by exemplifying violence with his father’s actions towards Rasmus himself. His own relationship with father includes seeing each other rather often, and often on Rasmus’s own initiative, but when father nags at them to come, Rasmus does not want to. This may indicate that Rasmus thinks that the quality of their relationship varies according to his father’s changeable mood.

Rasmus’s focus on the fluctuation of his father’s mood and behaviour, but only giving concrete depictions of what his father might do when sulky or fighting, and not of any positive moods or interactions related to Rasmus, might indicate that his focus on fluctuation is a way to characterize father in a more favourable way than indicated by his experiences. Fluctuation, including sulkiness and fighting, can – as Rasmus describes it – refer to either a broad spectrum with empathy and tender care at the end, or a moderate spectrum with ‘nothing’ at the end, or even to a very narrow spectrum with fighting over trifles at the worst and walking around expressing sulkiness at the best. The assumption that Rasmus would have included positive situations of father-child interaction in his account – had any come to his mind at the time – makes the first broad spectrum less likely. Rasmus taking the initiative to see his father indicates that he perceives father as at least sometimes valuable to spend time with; and, since he also repeatedly points out that he does not like father’s sulkiness, the middle alternative might be what he is most likely referring to. If he thinks of his father as changing between fighting, sulkiness and ‘neutral’ behaviour, the latter may be difficult
to describe since it is really a matter of a lack of negative or positive activities rather than their presence.

At time of interview, father’s major importance to Rasmus is no longer to repair and build things for him, but rather to have someone to go to after school. To Rasmus, the violence of his father is acknowledged, but neither central to his understanding of father nor to his relationship with him. And he may think that had father been interested in sport, they could have something positive in common on which to build a more social relationship. His wish for his father to be interested in sports, since Rasmus himself is so, can be traced to an expectation of similarity between them that is not met. Whereas his brother, Daniel, seems to wish things away in the interaction with father for a more mutual social communication, Rasmus refers more or less to being in the same place at the same time. And although he seems to benefit from such a ‘material’ or physical togetherness, and takes the initiative for it, he wishes that his father would take the initiative to provide a positive ground for their relationship. That can be interpreted as Rasmus recognizing a lack of positive interaction, but also seeing the possibility of it.

Although his experiences of his father, including times of non-sulkiness, gives a possibility for him to appreciate the relationship with his father, Rasmus’s wishing for a positive ground for interaction may indicate that the similarity he expects as the base for his conception of father is not met. The importance father has for Rasmus, which is shown in his own initiative for spending time with his father, can – in combination with his discontent at father’s sulkiness and lack of positive interactional content – form the foundation for his focus on changeability. For Rasmus, focusing on father’s changeability can also be a way of preparing for unpredictable changes in his father’s mood – so that he is able to handle the sulkiness when it appears, and take advantage of the times without it.

**Fathers generalized as ideals**

When Rasmus is encountered with the request to describe a father in general, he says, ‘No. Yes, but I don’t know... No. Yes. It’s a girl, no, I’m just joking. No, but. It’s a man. No, but, it’s kind of, a father. A father is a father. Yes’. One knows it, ‘If he has children, then he’s a father. If you have children, like, three, that are called Alfred, Bertil and Camilla, then he’s a father. And then there’s a mother as well. Yes’. According to Rasmus, typical of fathers is, ‘That’s that they can never join in any game. Water-war or something like that. They don’t have the time. That is, when they come home, they have to sit in front of the TV and watch the News or something like that. It’s so tough. Yes’.
When asked if there is any father that is typical, Rasmus explains, ‘Yes, mine. Eh, he just watches the News. Yes’. He would like his father to do something else instead: ‘Yep. Play badminton’. When asked to describe a really unusual father, Rasmus says, ‘I don’t know. I don’t even know what an unusual father is like’. A really common father, however, is described as ‘One that’s blond, eh… Has three children and, and doesn’t watch the News so much and shall play… a sport, for example. That plays sport, that is that goes to sport’.

To an imaginary person who does not know what a father is, Rasmus would describe a father as, ‘No, but kind of… If he had a father… Hibi. No, but if he had… If he had a family, then he would have a sister or a brother, or a mother or a father. Then I would explain, kind of… If he would walk up to me… “You, Rasmus, what kind of thing is a father?” Then I would say kind of like this, “It’s… It’s the one who… That is, it… I don’t know how to explain”’. He does not know why there are fathers: ‘I don’t know. They are good for… Kind of, it’s almost just they that are strong and that. Yes, it’s they that can do, like this work. And like this, building work. That are like this… And then like this, yes…”.

About whether there is something that is similar to a father, he says, ‘No, not that I know of’. And about something that is the opposite, he says, ‘No. Or?’ The similarities and differences between his own father and other fathers, he describes as, ‘Well, that they don’t do the same things. Some… Or… That is, should I explain, kind of, what, what my father does to what the others do? Well, my father kind of, watches the News, sleeps a lot, and smokes a lot and such, and watches the News a lot. And then, well. And then, other fathers perhaps have sports or they watch, like this, ordinary TV programmes, such as family shows, these ordinary TV-programmes. Yes. But they can watch the News as well sometimes. Yes, and then they don’t usually do anything else’. To compare his own father with other fathers, he further explains, ‘He’s better then them at, and kind of like that? Yes, he’s what’s it called… At watching the News and nothing else. And they are better at a sport and nothing else’. Rasmus would like his father to be better at soccer.

Rasmus thinks it is more common that fathers use violence than mothers: ‘Mm. Yes. Well, kind of. They drink a lot of alcohol and get drunk and then they quarrel so much and that’. He thinks it is more common that fathers do that than mothers. There is a difference, though, when mothers do it, ‘Yes. Because she hasn’t used violence very much. At least not against father’. He thinks it is more common that fathers use violence within the family than outside it, and more common that they use it against women than against men, and also more common that adults use violence against children than children against adults. Important about other fathers is, ‘That’s that they
Rasmus’s account of general fathers is interpreted as focusing on their relatively positive sides in relation to his own father. His account includes exemplifying, as well as contrasting, his image of the generalized father with experiences of his own. As an example, the expectation of fathers’ interest in sports reflects his explicit wish for his own father to take such an interest. Watching TV and drinking are aspects that he appears to think his own father shares with other fathers. In the light of the suggested unusualness of his father’s fighting when someone makes a mistake, as above, Rasmus’s suggestion that father getting sulky being quite usual may refer to a common, as in often occurring, mood of his father rather than common among fathers. However, assuming fathers to be more common perpetrators of violence than mothers does not entail that he regards violence as a common trait among fathers as a group.

Activity is a central feature of Rasmus’ conception of fathers in general. It is, in general, very much related to being strong and able to build things. Such aspects are material by nature, and refer to fathers’ ‘traditionally male tasks’, indicating that others can hardly fill their place. In addition, his expectation of fathers’ general interest in sports implies a positive aspect from Rasmus’s perspective. Perhaps, fathers’ relationships with children, which Rasmus emphasizes, enhances the expectation of interest in sports further; his own interest in sport could then form a common ground for his relationship with his father to develop. On the interpretation that Rasmus’s generalized father-conception is primarily – at least relative to his own father – positive, his suggestion about ‘typical’ features being that they, like his own father, rather watch the News instead of play can be understood as referring to a feature that is ‘typical’ in the sense of being negative rather than representative.

Rasmus’s conception about fathers in general can be interpreted as focusing on essential features that his own father does not have. His own father has used his strength and know-how to build and repair things for Rasmus, but does not do so anymore at time of interview. An interest in sports is very much wanted by Rasmus, but his father does not have it. While these aspects symbolize positive aspects of fathers that his own does not fulfil, his own father’s fighting is an aspect that is not expected among fathers and that he wishes his own did not have. On this interpretation, Rasmus holds a somewhat idealized image of fathers in general when related to experiences of his own father. By contrasting his own father with fathers in general, a wish for his own father to be more like fathers in general can be identified. Since sports are important to Rasmus, and he would like his own father to participate in sports more, he seems to base his idealization of
other fathers on this wish – perhaps connecting what he wishes with what he assumes to be common, but also focusing on an aspect that includes a possibility for similarity between them.

**Violence abstracted as contextualized**

Rasmus starts on the theme of violence by saying, ‘Violence... that’s... that he fights. And... He usually hits one in the back or on the head.’, referring to his father. When asked to explain what violence generally means, he says, ’Violence? It means... I actually don’t know. I know, but I can’t remember’. However, he thinks that ‘It contains rows and fights and... nothing else’.

When asked if he would describe two people fighting with each other differently from how he would describe one person fighting with another, Rasmus says, ‘Yes’, but then he says that violence can be what one person does to another as well as what two do to each other. To exemplify, he explains, ‘That one fights. ... I can’t think of so much more’.

To describe violence to an imaginary person who has never heard of the concept, Rasmus would say ‘That it was, kind of, things or persons that quarrelled about something. Or fight. Or quarrel’. Typical of violence is, according to Rasmus, ‘that you go at it hard. Yes’. About how to know what is violence and what is not, he says, ‘It... things. Kind of, like you... Like, it... That you hit each other with things. Yes. Kind of, it... It’s difficult to explain, but... It’s kind of a word that, no... hihi. It’s kind of, you kind of understand, because it’s like this, things that you, hit each other. That is, kind of, it’s like this violence, kind of, violence that is kind of hitting, that you... You get mad. Or, yes. You get mad and then you get angry. And then you can quarrel, get angry, quarrel with a person. Then there’s a row. And then that’s called violence’.

When asked if there are different kinds of violence, he says, ‘Mm. No. Or? Is there? Yes... No, I don’t know. No, I don’t think so... You know, kind of, this is common, that you kind of hit and that. Or, something that it’s unusual, that’s like, if you take a big piece of iron and then, “Thghhh!” in the head’. About the most common form of violence, he believes ‘that it causes injuries’. When asked if he means severe injuries or bruises and such, he explains, ‘It’s both. Sometimes there’s both’. He believes there is violence ‘Because there’s a sport where you need to use violence. Wresting... And, and this, sumo wrestling, when they wrestle. And then I think it’s in boxing. And then... I don’t know any other’. He thinks there is a difference between violence used in sports and outside sports: ‘Kind of, kind of in sports, then you use violence to be best and win. But in usual cases, if you have violence, then it kind of is that you want to cause injury to the person that you are quarrelling with. Because that you... You get so angry that you boil over and then you
hit’. Rasmus says violence is most common ‘because there are so many who do it’. He gives an indication of when it most often happens, ‘That depends on how people are. Kind of, if, if you would kind of, sit on a chair, and that leg broke and that chair was antique and valuable, and then would I be kind of, like this, irritated and like this really angry, like this. And then perhaps you sat down and then the leg broke. Then perhaps I get like this really angry, and then I want to kind of… It’s so difficult to explain, kind of… that you kind of want to hit that person. But I don’t know why you hit that person. You can say, “No, now you broke it”, can’t you?’ He means one can get so frustrated: ‘Yes. That is, that antique chair might be worth several thousand’.

About the use of violence he explains, ‘It’s mostly in war, is violence… It’s mostly men that use violence. Because it’s they that are the most heavy handed. That is, it’s they that get like this drunk and then they fight and that’. When asked why, he says he does not know. ‘When it’s okay to use violence, then is it kind of… That’s when it’s in sports. Okay to use violence. That’s when you should be like this strong and you should try to get the other one down. Yes’. When I ask if there are certain situations in which it is especially bad to use violence, Rasmus says, ‘Yes. That is, at a place where it’s bad to use violence? Yes. At a golf course. If you are playing golf and then perhaps you miss the hole so you get like this angry. And then you get like this so that you bang the club so that it ends up on someone. Kind of like that’. About if there are certain persons it is worse to use violence against, Rasmus says, ‘Mm… No. But it depends on who it is. Kind of, Bin Laden, you should use violence against. He has destroyed the biggest tower of the whole US. Yes’. According to Rasmus, Bin Laden may deserve something, ‘Yes, since many people died’.

Rasmus starts out by exemplifying violence with his own father’s fighting and hitting, indicating that the core of the concept to him lies in physical acts. His suggestion that rows and quarrels can be violence may refer to other terms for physical acts, or also include verbal ones – the former probably more likely considering the centrality of causing injury to Rasmus’s definition of violence.

Rasmus describes two situations that may lead to violence. One illustrates an escalating situation in which a person gets ‘mad’, which leads to anger, which leads to a quarrel, which is violence. Being angry means frustration and wanting to injure the other, which is thought to lead to violence. Such violence Rasmus considers unjustified, and he does not understand why such frustration has to lead to violence, even though he seems to believe it to be common. The other situation is violence related to sports. While violence is the means of some sports and therefore okay, in other sports or other
situations violence is not good. The centrality of sports to Rasmus’s general violence-conception is recognizable in his suggestion that there is violence because there are sports. From the perspective of violence primarily being exemplified by fighting and hitting, whereas the use of weapons is at the periphery or even a ‘deviance’, relating to sports may also mean that – since neither wrestling nor boxing include weapons – the use of ‘bare hands’ in face-to-face situations is ‘real’ or typical violence to Rasmus. While fathers are earlier described in terms of the abilities of their hands, this focus on the strength of bare hands connects violence to men, which is also suggested in his description of violence as related to war and to drinking. While both the situation of escalating anger and that of sport may include such ‘intimate’ violent interaction, the context constitutes a crucial difference for Rasmus. At the end of that part of the interview, he suggests that violence might be reasonable to use against Bin Laden. If Rasmus means that once you have started, you can not back out, as in, ‘In for a penny, in for a pound’, then using violence against Bin Laden can be seen as justifiable, given that Bin Laden organized the attack on the World Trade Center building on September 11, 2001. Considering the general centrality of sports rules for Rasmus’s violence-conception, such logic may imply that he regards violence as an accepted response in other situations and for other reasons.

Perhaps his love for sports necessitates a differentiation between what goes on within and outside sports. Because he is very aware of the similarities, such as the gender of perpetrators often being male and that injury is a possible and possibly intended consequence, he has found a base for separating the two. Sports, entered into willingly and where one should be informed of the risks, are quite explicitly separated from escalating anger resulting in violence. It is noteworthy that he includes both kinds in his concept of violence, rather than simply defining similar acts in sports as something else, e.g. as part of the game. By including what goes on in sports into his conception of violence, his structure for categorization may provide him with ‘rules of contextualization’ on which to build his logic – possibly in an attempt to understand violence as escalated anger, which he has experienced from his father without understanding.

**Separation as normalization of father and resistance of his violence II**
To reach an overall meaning-conciliation, including the content he has given to the general concepts of fathers and violence, the understanding of his own father as changeable seems vital to Rasmus. While violence is associated with physical fighting, and fathers in general as being strong and capable with their hands, the physical violent actions of his father are acknowledged as violence, but not crucial to his overall description of his own father.
The importance Rasmus attributes to sport during the entire interview is interpreted to be a major point of reference. Being ‘a good sportsman’ would mean knowing the rules, as in being prepared for and accepting violence in some sports or situations, but also realizing that using violence in other sports or situations is rule-breaking. Wanting his father to develop an interest in sport may point to father’s importance as a man. If Rasmus’s ideas of fathers are related to ‘male’ traits, interests and practical advantages, his mother would not be able to fill the gap that losing contact with father would mean, and perceiving father as violent may be threatening. However, living with mother, seeing father as non-violent might be equally difficult. Not acknowledging father’s violence might mean communicative as well as practical difficulties in everyday life with the other family members. From such a perspective, regarding father as essentially changeable and including violence may be a strategy for consistency within both contexts. Further, wanting father to develop an interest in sport can be a reasonable wish for any father, since they, according to Rasmus, most of the time have no time for games or prefer watching the News, but can also, indirectly, have an impact on father’s violence. Since sports are surrounded by rules, Rasmus’s desire for his father to take an interest in sport can possibly also be part of a wish for a common frame of reference, not only in a common interest but also to ‘get into each other’s game’ of shared rules. It might include a hope either that father shall stop breaking the rules and accept ‘sports ethics’, or that Rasmus, with a common frame of reference, will be able to understand his father’s behaviour.

Since sports, which in turn are related to gender, are important to Rasmus, and sports may contain situations or actions with a strong resemblance to violence, his resistance to violence seems carefully considered. By carefully defining the borders of the concept of violence, he can keep on enjoying sports while focusing or targeting his resistance on what he considers ‘real’ violence, such as the actions that he has experienced in his family. Exemplifying violence mainly by ‘hitting’, ‘fighting’ and sporting activities, but considering the use of a weapon more unusual, might mean that the essence of what Rasmus thinks to be violence is largely based on what he has experienced. Abstracting violence from the starting point of his own experience is the opposite of a normalizing strategy, namely to base understanding of violence on distal situations from which events in one’s own family can be separated. Instead, Rasmus’s well-considered and well-targeted resistance of violence seems to be facilitated by differentiating what is normal in some sports from what is deviant in life outside sports. Dealing with the not-so-positive conception of his own father, with whom he shares gender, which – in Rasmus’s conciliation of meaning – seems rather crucial to
people’s general being, the world of sports can provide a frame of reference that allows for a well-adapted tool for precise resistance to the well-defined violent actions of his father.

While general laziness and being boring can constitute general features that his own father shares with other fathers, attributing significance to father’s violence can be threatening to the importance related to his strength and physical abilities that Rasmus attributes to his father. While Rasmus thinks that his father has used violence and exemplifies violence by what his father has done, his general description of father focuses on other features. Thereby, his integrated ‘classification’ of father as ‘changeable’ can include violence, but primarily focus on general similarities. Since changeability provides a framework for perceiving father as someone who it is reasonable to want to stay with, although father’s fighting makes him unusual, treating him as essentially changeable can be a way of focusing on a ‘general normality’. Accordingly, Rasmus’s general portrayal of his own father as essentially changeable can include a variety of positive and negative aspects as well as resistance towards violence in general. But it can also include resistance towards his own father’s violent acts, which can be treated as somewhat separate from, or at least a subject of minor importance for, his overall understanding of father.

‘He isn’t what he does’
The negotiation approach constituted by separation of the own father’s essential self from his actions can be illustrated by a comparison with its opposite. Whereas Melvin explicitly seems to ally with the view that ‘You are your actions’, the approach of Belinda and Rasmus focuses on excluding some actions from their overall perception of the persons that are their fathers, or at least giving them minor importance in the main categorization.

Belinda and Rasmus both include violence in their descriptions of their father, but when “getting to the bottom line” it is given minor importance and their characterizations of him end up as ‘changeable’ or ‘fluctuating’. Thereby, the description of father’s ‘essential self’ can include violence, without treating violence as the ground for an overall conception – but rather stressing his different sides. Whereas Annelie also includes violence in her understanding of her father(s), she does not, like Belinda and Rasmus, give another description of her father(s) that replaces or shifts focus from that image. In addition, while Annelie stresses that she knows that the essence of her father(s) is to be found in his/their violence and that the changes in his/their behaviour is more or less ‘cosmetic’, Belinda and Rasmus focus on changeability as essential to their understanding.
Although theoretically separating father’s actions from his self may well mean minimizing the violence he has undertaken and presenting him as ‘essentially nice’, Belinda and Rasmus include the actions they acknowledge as violence when they both describe their father as ‘essentially changeable’. Describing father as changeable can be understood in the light of Lundgren (1997) suggesting that men’s violence against women within ‘intimate relationships’ is made possible by fluctuation between violence and being nice. Niceness being a prerequisite for violence entails that changeability or fluctuation can be a more accurate description of a father who has perpetrated violence against mother than of most fathers, and also that violence is a crucial part of that ‘fluctuation’. Thereby, this way of separating father’s actions from his ‘overall self’ can form a logical and reasonable core for conciliated meaning. It can specifically include the benefit of not having to present one’s own father as ‘evil’; presenting him as changeable can offer a slight change in focus so that the violence he has conducted can be acknowledged and resisted without being the most significant feature. Nevertheless he can be thought of as primarily more or less normal.

As a possible answer to the hypothetical question about what to base the understanding of a person on, if not on her or his actions, the following approach focuses on the importance of a positive view of father as a matter of principle.

**Separating principled understanding from experience of father**

The negotiating approach of Belinda and Rasmus includes acknowledgement of their father’s violence, but only as a less characteristic part of what he truly is. Another approach, in which separating father’s actions from his self is less significant, focuses on distinguishing father as he appears as a living person to the children in their everyday life from his importance to them as a principle. This approach is identified, and substantiated below, in the interviews with Tyra and Tony. Its intrinsic nature is discussed after the interviews, and then related to other approaches to negotiating the concept of one’s own father at the end of this chapter.

**Tyra**

Tyra does not appear to accept her father being angry and causing stress and emotional pain to the other family members. But, since it seems very important to her as a principle to keep a positive view of her father, her resistance towards his attitude and actions is interpreted as ambiguous.

Tyra describes her family as consisting of ‘mother and father and my siblings’. She lives in two different places, ‘Because my stepfather lives on
one street and father lives in a certain part of town and mother lives in another part of town’. She lives mostly with ‘mother and stepfather, I don’t really know what to say, but we live mostly on stepfather’s street... My oldest sibling lives in another place, and my other sibling lives with us at home in mother’s part of town’. When Tyra is asked about when she sees her father, she says, ‘It’s very rarely that I see him. It was his birthday some day that was a weekday, but I don’t know when, but it was his birthday some weekday... and then I went out there and then, then and had a snack and then I went home. Mother drove me’. When asked how not living with father feels, she says, ‘Good’ and explains it is better than before because ‘it’s much calmer, because he was just stressing when we lived with him’. About what she thinks her father thinks, she says, ‘I don’t know, I think he wants to see me. When I call him, then, then, then he says like this, “No, I’m going away”. And he says so all the time. And when I have the time, then he doesn’t want to and when I want to come to him, then I’m not allowed to. Then he’s going away and so’. She does not know why this is the case.

During the days, Tyra goes to school. Mother works and picks Tyra up after school. When asked if she is most similar to her mother or father, she says, ‘Mmm. One sibling. And grandmother’. She says that in her family, she feels closest to or trusts her mother most, because ‘I don’t know. No comment’, but if getting sad or worried she goes to her teacher. About who decides in her family, she replies, ‘Mmm... Siblings and mother’. When asked if it has always been like that, she says, ‘Mm’, and when asked if they decided also when they lived with father, Tyra adds, ‘And father, of course’. She thinks her father decided most then and he decided about ‘Everything’. When I ask if he decided things that the others thought were good or sometimes things that were not good, she replies, ‘No. Not’. She does not exemplify what kinds of things that might be, ‘I wouldn’t know that!’ I ask if it feels like a long time since she lived with father and she responds, ‘But it was! You know, it was a year ago’. Whether her family is an ordinary or an unusual one, she says, ‘Ordinary... Or I don’t know that’. Important to her family is, she says, ‘Ehh, mother’, but she does not believe everybody thinks so. She says she thinks girls are better than boys, but when asked in what ways she says, ‘I don’t know’.

Apart from herself, she considers her father to be the bravest in her family, ‘He has been with dangerous animals’.

**Conceptualizing the own father as good by principle**

About her father Tyra says, ‘We were always so stressed, when he lived with us. Then it became calm when mother moved. Kind of like this. He was always in a hurry, and everything should go as fast as he wanted and at the
speed that he said’. If things did not go that fast ‘then he just got angry. At me and my sibling and mother... He was stressed because I, how do you say, how do you say, eh, used to wet my bed sometimes. That’s just because, when I lived with him, then I did that. Then, how do you say, it happened, then, when, how do you say, when I had done that, then, how do you say, then there was blood on the floor. And then he got angry with me. And then when my sibling’s friend was coming, he was standing there to blow clean the mattress. And then he was really stressed. That was tough. Embarrassing’. She thinks her father to be an unusual one, because ‘he’s kind of like this strange, he’s always so stressed and usual fathers normally have their children there, but he doesn’t even want to see me. That doesn’t feel so good. Because I want to see him even if he has been bad or so. He kind of shouts and grasps your arm hard and so’.

Tyra, her mother and one sibling have stayed at the Women’s House for a while, ‘because he... that happened, then he was kind of away all the time and worked with things. And then he was away pretty much and then now that, how do you say, then, when we lived here at the Women’s House, then he came here with things, and... that, but we didn’t want things, but then his friend came, then his friend from work came with the things, tried anyway and I was going to open then, but that wasn’t very good, so mother said, and therefore I didn’t, then came, then my father was standing there waiting and then my oldest sibling came, to visit here, yes, and then, then father handed over the things and my sibling brought it up. Yes, it was mother’s things and... our things, but it was like this, food and magazines for us, and candy and such’. About the reason for the move to the Women’s House, Tyra explains, ‘I don’t know, it was mother that wanted to. But I really didn’t want to move here, just because my pet was at a pet pension then. Because it can’t be here’. Tyra would rather have ‘stayed, because I don’t want to hurt my father’.

About the similarities and differences between Tyra’s mother and father, she says, ‘In different ways they are, mother isn’t stressed like father is. And... mother can, how do you say, like this, she can do much more than father. For example she can write much better and such. He writes so carelessly and such’. Tyra can not say whom she is most similar to, ‘I don’t know. Mother can answer that, but I don’t know’. However, she wants to be similar to ‘father. Because he’s so nice’. To describe what nice things he does, she says, ‘Ehh... He kind of... at least tries to be nice. No, but I can’t explain’. And she can not give an example.

Tyra does not think it is common that fathers are as stressed as her own father was at the time of the move to the Women’s House, but that it is more common that they ‘drive around. Talk on the telephone’. When Tyra and her
mother moved to the Women's House, ‘He simply became unhappy. He cried’. When asked if she thinks he or mother was more unhappy, Tyra explains, ‘I think he was both.’ as in both unhappy and ‘angry’. Tyra thinks there are many that go to stay at Women’s Houses: ‘Yes... But it’s only I that have done it in school, I think’. She says she thinks her father has become worse since they moved, ‘In some way. I don’t know. I don’t know if he’s nice or bad. Little children can’t know that’.

Tyra’s first statement about her father refers to the effect he has had on the rest of the family, that they become stressed. When she also says her father is stressed himself and that she conceives her father as unusual because of being stressed, she relates stress to her father, in being it as well as causing it. Although after further describing him as demanding speed and getting angry, on Tyra’s account, father being ‘stressed’ seems almost synonymous to being irritated and angry. She then describes him as ‘so good’, which she changes to at least ‘trying to be good’.

These seemingly ambiguous or illogical statements can be interpreted as a strategy for Tyra to try to maintain a positive view of her father, but this is difficult for her—since from her perspective, she can hardly give any examples of good behaviour or good actions on his part. She acknowledges how his presence has a negative impact on the family, and that he does not even want to see her. Although her father made her stressed when living together, Tyra wants to see him. Wanting to see him might be a manifestation of wanting to give him another chance to show that he is good and nice, and confirm the conception of him that she wants to have, but – based on her experiences – this is difficult to sustain. Alternatively, it may be part of wanting to stay with him so as to not hurt him, although living apart from him is perceived as better since it gives less stress. Emphasizing that he is good may also be part of a way to try to appeal to him to make him want to see her. Getting the impression that he does not allow her to see him and thinking that he does not want to see her would, assuming that feeling unwanted by a parent is difficult for a child, may make it even more important to retain a positive view of him. However, stressing his good sides and that she wants contact have little correspondence to her concrete experiences of his general behaviour and to her understanding of him not prioritizing contact with her. Thereby, her wishes seem to form the base for her depiction of her father at the cost of her concrete experience of his actions. Stressing his importance to her, without being able to exemplify in what way, may indicate that Tyra’s father is important to her as a ‘concept’ or a principle rather than as the individual he has proven to be through his actions.
Fathers generalized as complementary to mothers

Tyra first says about the word-card fathers, ‘What about them?’ and when asked to tell me about fathers and what they are like, she says, ‘But I don’t know that’. However, she suggests that fathers and mothers are not precisely the same, since ‘Mothers don’t use the same tactics. They don’t have the same technique. For example, in doing the dishes. And cleaning as well. I don’t know. They clean differently. They put different things a little bit anywhere’. She thinks the opposite of a father is ‘mother’, and similar to fathers are, she says, ‘I! Because I have no money. But father has money now…’. About whether it is more common that fathers have money or that they do not, she says, ‘That they, in between’.

To the question about what is most important about fathers, she replies, ‘I don’t know. I know nothing about fathers. I haven’t done any research about that. They are too nagging… All in the whole world’. To make fathers understand and be less nagging, Tyra suggests one can say, “Now you listen!” You could use a swear word’. I ask what it is they should listen to, and she says, ‘Music. They should listen to’. There is something Tyra would like to say to fathers, that they need to understand: ‘Yes, “Goodbye”. Because he doesn’t understand what goodbye means. At least not my father. He doesn’t understand, because my oldest sibling, how do you say, father, he was, like this with sibling and then kind of, then sibling didn’t want him to come, because he came there almost every day. Because sibling didn’t answer. Then he did that, then he didn’t understand what goodbye meant. So therefore, how do you say… Then sibling said that he should leave, and then he didn’t leave and then it just became good. But he hadn’t learnt anything’.

About in what ways fathers are better than mothers and in what ways fathers are worse than mothers she says, ‘Mother is worse than father because mother is very mothery and father is better because he is much fatherier. No, but mother is kind of sluggish. And father is kind of a bit quick. I think it’s better to be quick, because then you can run fast’. Tyra does not think she herself is fast, but she would like to be.

According to Tyra, there are fathers ‘because there must be for children. Otherwise they get unhappy’. When I ask if children get happy because of their fathers, Tyra replies, ‘Mm!’ and when I ask if they always do, she says, ‘In between’.

After starting out by stating that she knows nothing about fathers in general Tyra’s account includes many references to her own father – as in responding to questions that explicitly concern fathers in general by giving examples of her own. Perhaps she considers her knowledge about fathers to go a little further than experiences of her own father. However, she later suggests that she does not believe it to be common for fathers to be as stressed
as her own father is, but thinks fathers in general to be too nagging. Assuming fathers to have no money, and especially relating that aspect to herself, can be part of an association with a kind of childish rashness, which can further be indicated by her suggesting that the usual activities of fathers are to drive around and talk on the phone. Perhaps it is less a matter of not knowing much about fathers in general than of general fathers not having much meaning to her without the relation to her own father. The principle importance she seems to attribute to her own father, since it does not appear in the interview to have come from her concrete experiences of him, can be interpreted as – at least in part – having its base in some idea about what a father might be, but that her own father is not. Such ideas might, considering Tyra’s own account, have their base in some other context than within her direct personal experiences.

She further expresses that she expects fathers to be interested in their children and thinks children would be unhappy if there were no fathers. The importance of this possible social function of fathers can be understood in the light of the complementary functions she attaches to fathers in relation to mothers. Tyra seems to think that mothers and fathers are each other’s essential opposites, ‘mothery’ being synonymous to sluggish, which Tyra does not like, and ‘fathery’ synonymous to quick, a quality she appreciates. Such complementarity can mean that if one is missing, the other parent can not fill certain functions for the child and make each of them unique and indispensable. This indispensability may apply especially to fathers, since their quality is valued higher. Stressing the good about ‘fatheryness’ can be part of stressing fathers’ general importance as well as of stressing her own father’s importance to her – the latter possibly supported by her suggestion that children become unhappy without fathers.

Perhaps her uncertainty about fathers in general has to do with their importance as complementary to mothers. Since they or their function can not be replaced, but her experiences of her own father include more concrete examples of causing unhappiness for the family – both with regard to stress and in not understanding the meaning of ‘goodbye’ (which is the starting theme of the interview) – Tyra may feel uncertain about her solution to the complicated cognitive puzzle.

**Violence abstracted as physical force**

When Tyra is first confronted with the term violence, she asks, ‘What’s that?’ She says she has never heard the word, ‘No, not violence. But rape… What’s violence? I don’t know what it means…’. She wants me to define it, so I ask if she has heard the word ‘violent’ and she says, ‘Mm. No… Yes, I have heard it, but I don’t know what it means’. Then she suggests that a violent person
‘ravages! As in angry, I don’t know, and fights!’ She then proposes that when people use violence, they ‘fight. Is it to fight?’.

Then she writes ‘father’, ‘fathers’ and ‘violence’, draws a circle around it and writes ‘talk’ at the top. She thinks violence is ‘No good. If you’re violent it’s no good. Then you hurt yourself. I guess those who fight think violence is good. Because they use violence, you know. But in different ways’.

She thinks people use violence ‘To be bad. Otherwise you wouldn’t do it, would you?’. She knows someone that has used violence: ‘Yes, my classmates. They fight! A few. Against each other’. Tyra thinks that is common. When asked if she thinks it is more common in classes or among children or among adults, she says, ‘I can’t answer that. It’s so difficult’.

According to Tyra, violence can be good ‘if you are holding someone. You are holding someone, or that can’t get free, then it’s good to use violence’. When asked if she herself has ever used violence, she says, ‘No. I don’t know’. However, she thinks I, the researcher, have. I say that one time, when my brother and I were young, I thought I had not used violence, but he probably thought I had, and ask Tyra who she thinks was right. ‘Your brother. Because he thought it’. She thinks the best person to judge whether a situation is violent or not is ‘the one who is victimized by it’.

She suggests that the opposite of violence is ‘Bad’. I say I do not understand and she replies, ‘Nice!’. When I once more say I do not understand, she says, ‘Me neither’. When I stress that there might not be a correct answer, but one can have an opinion, she suggests, ‘Eh… You are the contrary to violence. No, the police. No, but they can stop violence’. Similar to violence is, Tyra suggests, ‘Wrestling’, but then they do not get sad: ‘Oh, no. They fight back’. She says fighting can be violence as well as kicking, but not saying swear words. She says saying mean things can not be violence. I ask, ‘Does one have to…?’ and she interrupts me, ‘Fight’.

Thereby, Tyra’s abstraction of violence is interpreted as putting physical force at the core. By her connection to wrestling, the example of classmates’ fighting and her suggestion that violence can be good to break free from someone, which may not necessarily result in harm, she seems to mean that using physical force is almost synonymous with violence. Tyra’s suggestion that people use violence to be bad can, in the light of including breaking free – which does not, in itself, usually include an intent to harm – indicate some ambiguity about the role of intent in violence, or refer also to also the kind of physical strength used to break free being bad (since it is understood as violence). Defining violence more or less as ‘the use of physical force or strength’ is an unusual position, since it excludes many actions of psychological and threatening character while including or embracing actions that have neither any intent to harm nor are harmful in their consequence.
Perhaps the insecurity about the concept she expresses can be connected to such a definition including only ‘visible’ aspects, namely what can be observed to take place, but not internal processes.

Although Tyra says the one who is victimized is the better judge of what is violence or not, her suggestion that people who fight think violence is ‘good for being bad’ can be understood as meaning that violence implies an intent to be bad and that using violence includes approving of it. Since, on her view, violent acts are rather easily defined, she may assume that perpetrators are aware of what they are doing and that using violence is a more or less conscious choice. Connecting father to violence can be critical in combination with assuming that violence is a conscious choice, since such a connection will have a severe impact on father’s perceived goodness. Relating violence more to school life than to family life, the latter seemingly not at all, gives her a position that she shares almost alone with Örjan (see below). While the other children in the study either relate violence mainly or partly to family life, Tyra’s comparatively narrow definition, which only includes physical acts, can be part of not perceiving her father as a perpetrator of violence.

Separation of resisted deviant experiences from normality on principle 1

Tyra’s sometimes peculiar accounts during the interview might have to do with being tired, since the interview took place directly after school for her. Such circumstances demand special caution in interpretation. In this interpretation, Tyra’s conciliated understanding of the totality that the themes of the own father and fathers and violence in general form, includes her complex description of her own father’s relation to stress and seeing fathers generally as complementing mothers as parents, which do not – to Tyra – seem directly related to violence, which she conceives as more or less identical with physical force.

While she seems to think that her own father is rather unusual because of stress, her description of fathers in general has vast similarities with her conception of her own father. Describing the general conception in terms of, and exemplified by, one’s own experiences can be understood as a perceived shortage of, or uncertainty about, one’s knowledge about fathers in general. This would make the own father the only frame of reference, but can not explain the assumption that the own father is unusual. Perhaps the unusualness of her own father refers to a characterization of him as a person that can be compared with people in general, rather than to him as a father.

Only including physical acts in her conception of violence entails a comparatively narrow generalization, which enables the exclusion of many acts from the conception. As an example, verbal and psychological acts – carried out in the family by her father, and resulting in limited life space,
stress and emotional pain for other family members, and being the rationale for Tyra’s mother escaping to a Women’s House – may not be thought of as ‘violence’ by Tyra. Even though Tyra can despise such actions, and does not – at least not explicitly – normalize them in the sense that she negotiates their deviancy into being expected from fathers in family life generally, her narrow understanding of what violence is can help her maintain the image of her own, by principle, nice father. Indeed, the ‘neutrality’ of Tyra’s references to her father’s actions in terms of ‘stress’ is similar to Belinda’s references to ‘anger’. Tyra also presents a picture of father’s general ‘neutrality’ rather than focusing on the concrete content of the stress-inducing features or ‘actions’ or their consequences, which can be interpreted as part of ‘normalization’ of father. Tyra’s account even includes the possibility of being vague, or inviting a lack of clarity, about whether father is primarily the cause or victim of stress.

Whereas Belinda’s conception focuses more on excluding individual actions of violence on the part of her father from his overall self, Tyra’s seems more focused on not acknowledging individual acts, but on focusing on his general behaviour or intentions. The special goodness of ‘fatherliness’ (despite the nagging) in comparison with ‘motherliness’ as well as her own father’s importance to her (despite a lack of examples), indicate that her concrete experiences of him are subordinate to his importance to her as a principle. Resisting normalization, as in maintaining a broad conception of violence and including her father’s actions in it, seem, for Tyra, to be impeded by the principle importance she attributes to fathers in general and her own father in particular. What seems to be her starting point, her father’s principle goodness, can serve as a strategy to find a position in which she can condemn what she knows she has to condemn, but without having to say that father is not nice.

As her general understanding of fathers is heavily based on the generalization of the experiences of her own father, a definition of father’s actions as violence will have direct implications for Tyra’s general father-conception. By maintaining a principled view of her father as nice and ordinary, the threat of assuming a connection to violence can be avoided.

**Tony**

Tony’s approach is understood as based on resistance towards violence in general, as well as towards the violence his father has undertaken in hitting Tony’s mother. However, even though there are actions of his father that are both severe enough and frequent enough to be quite disturbing for such a general conception, the principle of not basing his overall conception of fat-
her as a person on those experiences is interpreted as crucial to his understanding.

Tony starts the interview by presenting his family as consisting of his cousins, grandfather and grandmother and his mother’s sisters. When asked about who he lives together with, he says, ‘Eh, what? In our country, when we were there? Here we live with father, but we came here, but there we live… But when we go there, to our country, then we live in, we live with my grandfather and grandmother. And then, then we go back to Sweden’. Tony was born in another country, but has lived in Sweden since he was very young. ‘My father moved here and then my father went to my country, and then my mother came here… I have a sibling. Not here, but in my country’. And Tony has lived with his mother and father in Sweden, but – at time of interview – he lives with his mother at a Women’s House while father lives at home. Tony tells me that during the days, ‘I normally play with my friends. When we on Mondays have homework all the time, I do my homework first and then I go out. I have friends, but they don’t know that I am here at the Women’s House’. Tony and his mother moved to the Women’s House because ‘Father hit my mother. My father hit my mother in the teeth, then she bled a little… But he quarrelled more than that. Then my mother said, “Let’s go to the Women’s House, because we can’t stay. If we go back then he will hit us another time”’. That has happened many times. Tony says father has not hit Tony, ‘My mother only. Sometimes he hits me because I don’t do something nice. Sometimes I don’t do something nice. I don’t know. Then he gets angry with me’. Tony does not know why father hit mother, ‘I don’t know… Because sometimes she puts things that he forgets they are there, and then he gets angry with her. Sometimes when she’s unwell, or something, then he says to her, “Wake up and cook for me”. And then mother says, “But I can’t”. Then she wants… Then he cooks for her. And then after a couple of days, then he says, “But get up now and clean the house”, and everything else’. Generally, he says, ‘It’s a good family that I have. I have a good family. My cousins… I think they are nice and everything. And my grandfather and grandmother… It’s just a good family. It’s that they laugh and are nice and everything’. When I ask if there is anything that is not good, Tony just says ‘No’.

A really good time in Tony’s family is, ‘Sometimes when we in the family, when we go to our country or another town or something, well, then we have fun and everything. Then my whole family goes. We have a lot of cars there. Then my family goes and everything. Then we have fun. We go out and buy something, everybody that wants to, and we go to something, where they make movies and watch how they do it and go to the circus and things like that. Watch the movies and everything’.
Conceptualizing the own father as a principled negation

Tony says about his father, ‘He’s nice. I don’t want to say that my father isn’t nice’.

When Tony is asked to tell me about his father, he says, ‘What my father does and everything? He’s nice to me but angry. Sometimes he gets angry with me if I don’t know where something is. Perhaps if I burn my finger, and then he gets angry with me, “Why did you do that? Why don’t you ask?” Sometimes I turn on the micro, yes, and I forget to put the lid on, because it shouldn’t get burned, yes, then my father gets angry with me because there’s smoke and everything. Or when I’m baking something, I want to bake something that I think about, then perhaps there’s a fire, and I forget to close it. Then my father is angry with me. Sometimes he’s nice to me, then we go to a public bath and he buys me something and perhaps he buys me a game, then we go and eat McDonald’s and such things’. When asked about the best about his father, he says, ‘Best? That’s that, that’s that… He’s nice’. Tony says he thinks his father is ‘Most often nice. Not nice… He’s often nice and he’s often angry’.

Tony’s father does not do the same things with Tony as he does with Tony’s mother, ‘No. My father, he doesn’t hit me, but he just yells. I don’t think it’s good. No. I don’t think it’s good’. Tony would rather that his father ‘talked a lot like this, “Tony, don’t do that, that and that”’. When his father yells, Tony gets ‘Not so scared’. In the future, Tony says, ‘Well, I would like it to be nice towards mother and everything. Then perhaps my father was nice. Perhaps he was angry sometimes, then perhaps my mother also was angry sometimes and nice…’. Tony explains that when father gets angry with his mother, ‘She gets sad. Then? Well, then my mother goes and sits in my room and lies in her bed’.

To my question about whether Tony thinks what his father has done is violence, he replies, ‘When he did violence on mother. Yes, he yelled and quarrelled with her… I don’t think it’s common’.

Tony’s conception of his own father includes niceness as well as angriness. Father is described as mainly nice to Tony, which he likes, but also often angry with mother and with Tony, and he refers to some of father’s actions as hitting mother. Whereas some of the other children, such as Belinda, describe their father as easily irritated as a base line, Tony describes the base line as nice, and the anger as an often occurring exception (similar to Tyra). Like Tyra, he also seems to attribute a niceness to his father, although when aiming at a more concrete description or content of his conception, the depictions consist more of the angriness that is considered the exception. Tony’s statement, ‘I don’t want to say that father is not nice.’ can be interpreted as the concentrated essence of his conception of his father. It
indicates an individual requirement, or possible social decree, to love and honour one’s parents as strong or important enough for other possible features, which are major but inconsistent with being worthy of love and honour, to be considered exceptions in a parent’s being. According to such a decree, calling a parent anything but nice is impossible, and therefore the principle of having a nice father can be presupposed. On such an interpretation, Tony’s separation of his father’s frequent anger from the principled view of his father as nice is understandable.

Tony is the only one of the children to define his family from a wider generational perspective – wider than the household. Since his family thereby has many members, what his father has done to mother may come to be less significant in the complete picture of his family. Father is a smaller portion of a large family than a father generally is in relation to a nuclear family. When talking about his family, Tony says there is nothing that is not good. But when talking about father he rejects his violence. Accordingly, Tony – considering that he does not mention father at all when describing his family – is the only one in this study to possibly see father (even though still being father) as not entirely part of the ‘real’ family or, on the contrary, to view father’s inclusion in the family as so self-evident that it is not even worth mentioning. Although Tony liking when father buys him things and when they go swimming may support the idea about the matter-of-course of father’s inclusion in the family, father’s individual actions may be less significant from the perspective of an extended family.

When Tony describes his father as ordinary (see below), his frame of reference seems to lie in the physiology of the human race. He seems to refer to human aspects in basic thinking as the main similarity between his own father and other fathers. If the category of reference is human beings, then the likeliness that his own father is like other fathers is immensely increased compared with what father would be if the category with which to compare had been a narrower one, such as ‘nice male primary caregivers’. Just as with the wide family perspective, this broader and physiologically based category of reference can enable similarities and normality to be focused upon.

A broad context of placing the conception of father in the perspective of the human race and also taking a broad perspective, as in using ‘family’ in a wide sense, can facilitate a conception of father as ordinary, normal and, connected to that, as primarily nice. And although father is not described by Tony as entirely nice, his basic conception of the essence of father can thereby turn out to be what by principle he can not be, namely not nice.
Fathers generalized as problematically differentiated

About fathers, Tony says, ‘Eh… Father is nice, but sometimes he’s not nice. And he’s not that nice. Sometimes he’s nice, then he gets angry. Angry with mother, I mean’. Tony thinks it is common that fathers are like his father, although ‘I don’t really know what other fathers are like. Some are worse than that, angrier than my father, some are nice, perhaps. You know who is angry and who is nice. Some are nice and they don’t want them to go to the Women’s House or something. Some want to get angry with them and they, they want them to have headaches and everything. Such things. I think there are many that are nice and many that… I think many are nice. I think there are many of both, I think. Because they are angry. I think’.

About common things for fathers to do, Tony says, ‘Fathers when they are nice and angry? Nice, they want to be nice, they, if their girl wants to go out, then they go out with her and everything, they want to be nice to their children, they buy them something. Angry, they want, don’t love their children, such things. But father loves me. He said so!’ But Tony does not think his father loves his mother, ‘No, I don’t think so. How can he hit her and tell her to “Get out!”?’. The most important thing to know about fathers is, according to Tony, ‘Why they get angry?’. To explain why he thinks they do, he says, ‘I believe that mother does… No, I don’t think so. How can be hit her and tell her to “Get out!”?’. The most important thing to know about fathers is, according to Tony, ‘Why they get angry?’. To explain why he thinks they do, he says, ‘I believe that mother does… No, I don’t think so. How can be hit her and tell her to “Get out!”?’. The most important thing to know about fathers is, according to Tony, ‘Why they get angry?’. To explain why he thinks they do, he says, ‘I believe that mother does… No, I don’t think so. How can be hit her and tell her to “Get out!”?’.

He further says that there are fathers ‘Because they exist, fathers. And there, there are girls as well. Fathers, they want there to be fathers and mothers. That they should get married and everything’. He can not think of anything similar or opposite to fathers. But he says that if there were no fathers, ‘It wouldn’t exist, the Women’s House. Then there wouldn’t be a lot of jobs and everything, because the jobs are some that boys have to do. And some that girls have to do. Perhaps boys must do some things, but that’s only boy things. And there are some things that girls only must do. Girl things, and perhaps if there were no boys, then everything would be girl things. Well, I don’t know… Some things girls do and boys work with. Perhaps ride motorcycle, boys do sometimes. Ride motorcycles and everything. But making pillows and everything, then girls do that. I don’t know who made jobs like that’.

About the similarities between his father and other fathers, Tony says, ‘Well, I don’t know. I know that you can look at the brain and what it is. I want to take someone’s brain and think how they think’. The difference between Tony’s father and other fathers is ‘perhaps why they are nice and not… my father is nice’.
‘Sometimes they are good to have when they go out and everything. But sometimes it’s when they go out and everything, but fathers, then they get angry sometimes. Then father gets angry and then he says to mother, “Go now. We are going home now”. And everything, that we’re not buying anything or… Such things… When they are happy and everything, then they are good for children and everything. They go out with them, they go to a public bath and such things. Buy them toys. But I don’t want toys, I’m not a child. I don’t want toys. But TV games, that I want’. His father does not usually buy Tony toys, ‘No, he doesn’t usually now, because I told him I don’t want toys. I am no child’.

About the similarities and differences between his own father and other fathers, Tony says, ‘Similarity… Perhaps… I don’t know. With thoughts and everything, “What kind of thing is this?” The thoughts, why are they, sometimes they are nice… the brain and everything’.

I ask if he thinks there are some fathers that are nice all the time, and also other fathers… Then Tony interrupts me, saying, ‘That are nice sometimes. I believe the one that is nice, he is nice all the time, and the one who is angry, he gets nice, and angry and…’. He thinks that is so, ‘Yes, because my friends, they say their fathers are nice and then they go with their fathers and everything. They, they say that with fathers, “We went there and went there and went there”’. Two features of Tony’s general father-conception can be interpreted as prominent. First, Tony’s account of fathers as a general concept does not generally exceed his conception of his own father, but he repeatedly refers to his own father for exemplification and concretization. Second, like Annelie, Melvin and Daniel, Tony makes a distinction between different kinds of fathers in that he suggests that some fathers are nice all the time, and some are sometimes nice and sometimes angry.

His conception of fathers in general is interpreted as being focused on a division into the nice and the angry. According to Tony, being nice requires being so all the time. Being nice sometimes does not qualify for a general categorization as nice, but is understood as something else. The categories are described as qualitatively different, with any occurrence of angerness defeating categorization as nice. Positioning his own father in between the two, in suggesting that some fathers are angrier than his own and others nice, is interpreted as referring less to a continuum of nice and angry than to the impossibility of positioning his own father in either of the groups he has constructed. Since his own father is sometimes angry and has hit mother, placing him in the one category is impossible (on his own definition), and the other is explicitly undesired. In addition, since angry fathers do not love
their children, Tony’s father loving him is incompatible with such a categorization.

Tony’s general father-conception is further interpreted as including a feature of complementarity in relation to mothers, since he means there are boys’ things and girls’ things. He also describes that fathers have a more social function towards their girlfriend or the mother of their children, whereas the function of fathers’ towards their children is mainly described as buying things (a more material function). If it is in the relation to the spouse that social aspects are the most important, one can assume that hitting that spouse is central to defining the relationship. However, it may also mean that, within the relationship with the child, the social aspects are proportionally less important, but can be ‘supported’ by other aspects. Tony’s differentiation between father hitting mother and hitting Tony can be interpreted as giving different meaning to similar actions due to different expectations within different relationships.

Tony’s experiences of his own father can be interpreted as crucial to his generalized father-conception. Several examples indicate that he uses his own father as reference for his generalized conception, and that overall physiological similarities unite his own father with fathers that do not use violence. But, more importantly, since his differentiation is not a matter of separating the perfectly good from the invariably bad – his example of the basis for classification being the alternation between nice and angry – corresponds very well to his portrayal of his own father. But since men and boys are assumed to be able to do things that women or girls can not, and perhaps especially since loving children is seen as incompatible with categorization as angry, his father can not belong to the category he appears to be the model for. As experiences of his own father can thereby be interpreted as the origin of the criteria for classification, the same father also challenges the categories. Perhaps the idea of his own father evading categorization forms the basis for his generalized father-conception being consistently related to the threat to the borders of categorization that his own father represents.

**Violence abstracted as immature internal force**

When Tony is confronted with the word violence, he says, ‘Violence. What is violence?’ I ask what he thinks it means and he asks, ‘Mothers?’. I ask how he thinks and he says, ‘Friends’. I ask again how he thinks. ‘It may be friends, if they’re not nice to you. They say you shouldn’t be with them and everything. Like that. My friends are nice, I think. I am nice to them as well’. He explains further, ‘There’s a quarrel. Then someone gets angry. And fierce and such things. I talked about that in school. We have a book that we write in. If you
get angry and everything. “Life creating”, I think it is called. We got to write how it feels like to get frightened, how it feels... how it feels with mother and father. And then, at the end we should write what's good in life creating and everything. I wrote that it's good. Because they showed on the first, on the first page, then they showed, “What do you love to do?”. I think it's fun to draw one's hand and everything. And then do what you like doing. I wrote football. I love football. I'm starting football and I will be a goalkeeper. I have broken my hand all the time when I play football'.

Tony suggests that the reasons for violence might have to do with, ‘Sometimes when we play football, then there is violence. Then my friends don't want them to take part and everything. But in the paper, we promised not to quarrel with our friends and... such things and quarrel and everything. Not say, “You can't take part”. That's why we wrote the paper. Then, it's... When we wrote everything on the paper, then came... she didn't look, she said, “Do you promise that, everything you wrote, everything?”, “Yes”’. Tony thinks it can happen anyway: ‘Yes, but it didn't happen. Yes, and there's something, if my friends think I'm not nice to them or, sometimes, then they write, “Who's not nice to you?”. They write a question there and then, then. Someone isn't nice to you, or nice or sometimes nice, then we should write that, that he's not nice and then they ask, “Who is it?”. Then they might write, “Tony”, my friends then. Yes, and then when they get the paper, then, the one who got the paper, then says, “Tony should come”. And talk to me, then I leave. And say, “Why aren't you nice with your friends?”. So I have to say why I'm not nice and everything'. It has never happened, though: ‘No, but it could happen if I wasn't nice'.

Tony says he has never used violence. When I ask who does, he says, ‘Yes, some friends, but they are not in my class. They want... If I play football and everything, yes, then they want to quarrel with me and everything. Once they quarrelled with me, then my teacher came and stopped... and pushed him, but I wasn't there then. I was going to stand on the swing. I took his foot, then I let go. And then he just, “Now I will hit you”. I just, “Please, don't hit me. It wasn't even on purpose”. Yes, then he came and quarrelled. And then I wanted to take his hand because he punched me. Yes, he punched me here. Then I had to go and tell the teacher. Then my teacher said that “You mustn't hit him”. Then my friends said, “If you hit Tony, then we will hit you”. Because it wasn't on purpose. I was to hold the swing. I was to stop it. Because we had time. If perhaps, two minutes passed, then we must stop the swing. But, they continued. And I wanted to stop the swing. I and my friends, I wanted to stop, I was to hold it, because it went really fast. I took his foot. Then I let go and then he just, “I die”. I just, “Please forgive me, it wasn't even on purpose. I just wanted to stop the swing”. And then he came,
then he hit me, then it came, our teacher. And says to him, “You mustn’t quarrel. You mustn’t fight”. And then when my teacher said, “Why, why did he hit you, Tony?” I just, “I was just stopping the swing. But it wasn’t on purpose. I took his foot”. And then he said to him, “It wasn’t on purpose”. He said. He was really angry. “It wasn’t on purpose”. He just, “Okay, then”. He hit me. I don’t think that was good. Unfair. That’s not good, I think. I think that… I don’t want to fight, but... Some want to fight’. Tony suggests that some people want to fight and some do not, ‘Well, perhaps men when they take their girls to the Women’s House. Perhaps they fight when they were a child, then when they grow up they can’t find anyone to fight with, they fight with their women’.

He further exemplifies violence by saying, ‘Violence… I don’t know… What... Sometimes when they say bad words, then I want to quarrel, but I don’t want to. Then someone wants to quarrel... Then I want to quarrel, but I mustn’t. I say so. I don’t want to quarrel. But, I mustn’t quarrel, but... I don’t know. I don’t want to quarrel with anyone. I want to quarrel, but I don’t want to. Yes, someone says bad things or something to me. If someone teases me. If I’m not able to do something and I start doing it. Then they tease me that “You can’t do that”, or something. Then I get angry. Then I want to quarrel, but I don’t want to quarrel. I want to... I want to be nice, not bad to people’. When I ask if one can say that he has decided to, even if he gets angry, not to use violence, he says, ‘No…’.

Tony suggests that some people use violence because ‘They want to, I guess. Why do they quarrel?’’. Teasing can also be violence: ‘Yes, then, in school quarrelling isn’t allowed. If we should finish school and leave, if they tease me, our teacher gave us a paper to us when we started school, if there’s a quarrel or something, then we have all the names there, then we call their name, then we write their name, we find their name and everything, and find where they live and everything, and then we find a telephone number, then we call and then we tell their mother and father. We are not allowed to quarrel there. We mustn’t, if it’s in school, then we go there, then they quarrel about something. I have some friends that want to quarrel. But they are perhaps big. They are in fourth grade’.

Tony’s answer to whether it is worse when bigger fight or when smaller fight is, ‘Yes, if someone walks in the way, that boy, he hits... Once, a boy, he’s really big and he’s really strong, a teacher watched him from the balcony, he saw her, when we walked to school... My cousin has told me this, yes, then, then he got angry, then he got angry so he hit the teacher here. Yes. And then the teacher got angry with him and then he was not allowed to go to school only for a week. Then he could come back and then this boy who got angry, the one who hit the teacher, then he came, the other boy, he came and
wanted to hit him, he just, “Come on if you are a coward. Otherwise we will hit you”’. Tony thinks that is ‘Not good’. He thinks violence can never be good, ‘It’s not good, violence’. About times when violence is especially bad or not quite so bad he says, ‘Yes, when father hits mother, then violence is no good. I think. Or, when there’s a real fight with mother, and almost everybody in school, do we need to fight and everything? It’s no good. I was going to play a sport, but they quarrelled and I didn’t want to go there then’.

Tony says he thinks there is violence ‘Because if someone teases or quarrels or says bad things or… If you say something, then there is violence. Violence, that’s quarrelling. Yes, you quarrel, you get angry and everything. Such things. Gets fierce’. So I ask if violence means doing things, saying things, or maybe both. ‘You do things. You quarrel and everything’. He thinks that just saying things is not violence: ‘Well, if you say things all the time, then quarrelling becomes violence’.

When he gets the opportunity to say something more about the things we have talked about, he says, ‘No… Sometimes when we break things, then mother gets angry with me, then I perhaps break a window, or break a lamp, when we play and something, and when we kick the football, and perhaps we have an alarm as in our school, somebody bounces the ball, then, the basketball, then, then there’s an alarm. Sometimes when I break my bike, or lose a game or break my PlayStation… Then my mother gets angry with me’.

At the end, Tony wants to add something, ‘Yes, sometimes, when my friends, we play a game and the other wants to play another game, perhaps we should play PlayStation, someone else wants to play Superman and someone wants to play football, someone wants to play basketball, someone wants to play ice-hockey, or PlayStation or Xbox, I can’t say all of them…’. When I ask what one can do for it not to be violence, he responds, ‘So that not violence? Yes, to say, “Stop fighting”. Not… nice friends and everything’.

Before ending the interview, Tony wants to say that ‘Yes, when we go swimming and we go to a real sea and everything. That’s fun. But sometimes one drowns’.

To Tony, the core of violence is interpreted as related to acting, as in physical acts, while verbal acts are included in his conception because they can lead to physical violence. Violence being associated primarily with fighting, and also with quarrelling, teasing, getting angry and social exclusion and other ‘interpersonal difficulties’, all merge into one another.

On the one hand, Tony suggests that some people have an urge to fight so that they have to ‘find someone to use as a hitting object’, that the ‘need’ to fight is constant in some individuals, and that reasons and victims are fairly irrelevant. On the other, he thinks that, if a person does something, it is because she or he wants to do it. Therefore, it seems like a matter of an inner
force of wanting to fight and, considering his detailed descriptions of possibly violent situations among friends, a force possibly thought to be stronger in or mainly connected with childhood. On Tony’s account, violence in general seems related more to ‘friend life’ than to family life. Although he has earlier been clear about depicting his father’s hitting, violence is not primarily exemplified by his own father’s or general fathers’ actions. But father’s violence seems to be an example of especially bad violence, perhaps related to an assumption that children’s violence is more common, but fathers’ violence more deviant. His vivid illustrations of ‘friend life’ in school, apparently thoroughly discussed in school, may indicate that he considers that violence in adulthood is a deviant residue that some people retain from their childhood, when violence is common.

Much of Tony’s account can be interpreted as dealing with the difficulty of resisting violence in the everyday situations where he comes across it. Perhaps, an inclusive understanding of violence to Tony means that comparatively many situations have the potential to include violence. And since so many situations among friends are assumed potentially to include violence, his own father has not been able to resist the urge several times. Also, since Tony himself has experienced the desire to use violence sometimes, his account can be interpreted as closely related to his conception of himself and his capacities to avoid the unwanted. Perhaps perceiving himself as not a child provides some support for maintaining the maturity that mother shows when not using violence although getting angry, but that his own father has proven to lack (cf. Hydén 2001), and which he perceives as necessary for avoiding violence when exposed to the many situations in which it can develop.

**Separation of resisted deviant experiences from normality on principle II**

Tony’s approach to reaching a comprehensive understanding, including the images of what is to be considered normal for fathers, what violence is, the violence his own father has used against his mother, and his expectations for father to be nice, is interpreted as including negotiation of the contents of these conceptions in several ways. Like Annelie’s, Daniel’s and Melvin’s, Tony’s account can be interpreted as conceptualizing general fathers as of two different kinds, the nice and the angry. And, just like Belinda and Rasmus, he acknowledges his father’s violence, but does not define his father on the basis of it. The interpretation of Tony’s conciliated meaning includes these approaches, but is focused on his handling the categorization of his own father in relation to the two possible groups of fathers he has constructed.
Thinking of fathers in general as of different kinds may call for a categorization of the own father. And his conception of his father, with his anger, seems to be more or less the archetype of the generalized angry father. But since the feature that directs the categorization is thought to be a rather constant feature in individuals, categorizing father as being an angry father will not be easily changed. It also means that Tony detaches himself from the unique advantages that his father as a man symbolizes, and also Tony’s love of him. But, as being nice demands being so all the time, his description of his father does not fit into that category.

Tony’s expression about the undesirability of describing father as not nice is interpreted as central to his understanding, and some circumstances and assumptions can facilitate or be facilitated by such a negotiation approach. While anger and violence are determinant of categorizing fathers as nice or angry, the overarching physiological similarities unite the group; that perspective can enable Tony to see his own father’s normality in relation to fathers in general. And seeing father in the perspective of the many members of Tony’s family can help to minimize the impact of father’s violence on the family situation as a whole. As father’s relative importance is decreased, his ‘need to fight’ – which is assumed to be constant – becomes less threatening. Finally, Tony’s very broad conception of violence, as well as relating it mainly to what takes place in groups of friends rather than in families, can further serve to ‘normalize’ father and his behaviour.

Nevertheless, his account of mother getting angry and he himself wanting to use violence can be interpreted as motivating the expectation that father should also be able to avoid violence. Avoiding categorizing father as not nice through the relative normality of father and his relatively minor importance within the family as a whole, makes salient the impossibility of categorizing him as directly ‘nice’. Tony’s resistance to the normalization of violence is also indicated by not using his father’s changeability between nice and angry as a reason to renegotiate the line of demarcation between, or ground for classification of, fathers. Labelling father as nice on the grounds of being so sometimes might entail having to abandon the important idea that prevent the concept of ‘nice’ from being invaded with nastiness and possibly violent ‘exceptions’. This points to the importance Tony attaches to resisting violence and to preserving the borders of the concept of violence, thereby preventing them from being deflated.

Tony suggesting that father hitting mother is something quite different from hitting Tony may indicate an ambiguity in his resistance towards violence. But such differentiation can refer to differences in severity as well as juridical impact, between what is understood as abuse according to criminal law and smacking (cf. Christensen 1988; 1990), and also correspond
to the general discourse. Since his main approach seems to be to treat family relationships in general as ‘all-inclusive’, the feature of separating the father-mother relationship from the father-Tony relationship (cf. below) is interpreted as subordinate to the feature of treating the principle importance of having a good father when conciliating the meanings of violence and fathers in general into an essential understanding of his father. Although agreeing with mother that they had to move to the Women’s House because father’s violence was getting worse rather than better, the differentiation between father’s violence against mother and Tony can distance father’s violence, and thereby its possible impacts, from Tony. Resisting and condemning violence in general, as well as the violence his father has conducted in hitting Tony’s mother, can thereby be combined with a positive – or, at least, not explicitly negative – view of his father, in which the aspects of his father that counteract such a conclusion can be treated as exceptions.

Thereby, whereas the children described in Chapter 4 (above) use the subgroups of fathers that they have constructed to categorize their own father, Tony’s understanding of his own father is understood as transcending any such subcategories; accordingly, they are not functional – at least not directly – for meaning-conciliating the whole. This is the rationale for using the interview with Tony to develop understanding of a particular approach to negotiating understanding of the own father.

**Father’s importance as a matter of principle**

The approach represented by the interviews with Tyra and Tony includes negotiating a separation between individual experiences and a principled description of the own father. Although this may seem to have major similarities with separating father’s actions from his self, the difference between the two approaches lies in that the former focuses on some actions or behaviour in relation to others, whereas the latter implies a possibility to disregard actions and behaviour altogether when choosing a main characterization of, in this case, the own father. This does not necessarily mean that acts of violence are neglected, only that they are not made the basis for understanding of the acting father.

Just as the other approach, which focuses on negotiating understanding of the own father, this approach provides an opportunity to preserve a positive view of the own father. Apart from the main characterization, it also allows for either including or minimizing what violence father may have perpetrated; but it also enables a meaning-conciliation based on stressing that he is important to his child – if not in concrete actions and behaviour, so at least as a possibility.
While prioritizing one’s father’s principle importance over concrete experiences as a basis for conception may have to do with the father, and also what practical, social or emotional advantages he or the relationship with him can offer, prioritizing the principle of having a good father might also be related to the child’s view of her- or himself. To see oneself as a person with a good or a bad father may be related to self-perception, especially for young people, who relate mainly to the family and its members for conceiving their worlds (including their own).

The prioritizing of principle importance implies that something other than concrete and personal experiences has become crucial to the process of meaning. Since individual experience can hardly in itself, but only in interaction with social or communicated images, form the base for attributing principle importance to fathers, Tyra’s and Tony’s approach might, more than the other approaches in this study, be related to social and societal decrees about ‘the goodness of fathers’ (cf. Eriksson 2003).

While prioritizing concrete experiences when approaching a conception of one’s own father is assumed to facilitate – or more easily be associated with – a resisting approach, prioritizing or focusing on values of principle can possibly support the normalization of father’s violence. However, especially to Tony, such prioritizing seems like a comparatively conscious decision of giving significance, and the outcome is interpreted as an approach to normalizing father while acknowledging and resisting his violence. Generally, since the approach highlights prioritizing between understandings of the father as a person and acts of violence, it would not be necessary for the father’s violence to be normalized. Thus, per se, it can be seen as necessitated by the desire to avoid normalization of father’s violence, and thereby mainly part of an implicit resistance.

**Separating the father-child relationship from the father-mother relationship**

A third possible approach to some kind of negotiation in the conception of the own father focuses not on features of the own father as a person, but on the relationships of which he is part. The interviews with Tomi and Petri reveal how the relationship between father and mother can be separated from the relationship between father and child. Such separation becomes especially salient when it is compared with the pictures drawn in the interviews with Annelie, Daniel and Melvin. To them, the violent actions of their fathers seem to form an all-embracing circumstance and difficulty for the rest of the family, and it constitutes the base for the perception and understanding of father as part of the conciliated meaning of father, fathers and
violence. The feature of differentiating between relationships discussed in this section is not restricted to the interviews with Tomi and Petri, although they are used as substantiations of the approach described below. It is later related to the two other theoretical suggestions for negotiating the own father.

Tomi

To Tomi, resistance towards father’s fighting seems to be related to separating the father-mother relationship, which includes fighting, from the father-child(ren) relationship(s), within which father is described as nice; but, the emotional effects of father’s general attitude on all family members are also acknowledged. The focus on different relationships can be related to Tomi’s understanding of the relationship between his own father and violence changing in relation to the perspective adopted.

Tomi tells me his family consists of his mother, himself, his siblings and his father. His siblings live with the children’s father, and Tomi and the mother live at the Women’s House. ‘First, I lived with father and mother. And then, for two days, I think, I came here... Well, father abused mother. And it happened four times and the third time they (Tomi’s siblings) said, “This is the last time. If you don’t behave yourself we will not let her be with you”, but after two, three months it happened, the same thing’. About what the family does together Tomi explains, ‘Well, I often play for example computer games with my siblings and... Yes, do web sites. We often go to... playing sometimes, then everybody come along or when we, I and my siblings go bathing. Then they usually come along. They watch and sunbathe. And we swim’. He further explains that ‘Well, in one way it’s an unusual family, you know. Well, be abused four times. And that which is ordinary, that’s... It... Another thing I find strange is that they have lived together for many years and it ended up like this. And what’s fun is that we normally have it comfortable together. Then, everybody watches TV or listens to music or something like that’.

About the future he says, ‘Well, without parents it’s sad. That is, it’s... without mother, you know, she’s pretty old and father is even more, and when they die I have no parents in the future. Then I might get... Then it gets really sad. Then I only have my siblings left’. About the more immediate future following mother’s move to the Women’s House, Tomi says, ‘I think she will get an apartment, then my siblings will come to us, and be in the apartment instead of being with father’. And about his future contact with his father, he says, ‘Sometimes we go there. Sometimes we meet in school or something like that’. He does not think his mother will follow, but ‘My sibling
can take care of us and help me’. He describes the best about his family as ‘The best? That’s when we are together’. When asked who he thinks he is most similar to he says, ‘Everybody says that I am similar to, mostly, my sibling. Well, if everybody says so… I guess I think so as well’. Most important to Tomi is his mother: ‘Eh… I was in her tummy for nine months. And, well, father hasn’t taken care of me that much. It has been mostly mother. And my sibling’.

An especially good time, Tomi describes as, ‘When we watched TV, and mother and father sat beside each other. I and my sibling sat beside each other. I… I sat by myself, my siblings sat together. And when we often go bathing with our relatives and that. Outside. Sometimes inside. But then mother and father and their parents don’t usually follow. Their father and ours, my father usually takes us there. And then over there they leave us. Pick us up when we are ready. My sibling has a mobile, so he calls home and says, “Can you pick us up?”’. Then father comes and picks us up. After we have gone out bathing. And like that, we shower…’

**Conceptualizing the own father as a perspective-dependent relationship partner**

About his father Tomi says, ‘He’s usually nice, but toward mother he’s not nice. He laughs with people and just sees mother as invisible. And, yes, he’s nice toward me, but bad towards mother. He sometimes talks about mother’s siblings and her and I sometimes hear it when I sleep. That is, when I should sleep’. He explains what he means by invisible, while showing how father just walks pass mother, ‘Yes, that is, if this is mother, then father goes like that. Doesn’t even look at her. You know, you can’t live like that. He doesn’t eat her food. When she cooks, then father doesn’t want it. And when… And when she doesn’t cook father tells me to tell, to me or the siblings, that she should cook and when she cooks, then he doesn’t want it. And he… And he goes out and eats fast food and that. That feels really sad’. About his mother he says, ‘Yes, she, she loves father, but father doesn’t seem to love her’. Tomi does not think that he and his mother have different opinions about Tomi’s father, ‘No. It’s father who has different opinions. But we… But we like him, both of us. All the family, but… It’s just he that doesn’t like mother. Talks about her sibling and talks about her and goes on like that…’. He does not know why father does that, ‘My sibling always cries. And he… Once he has lied to me. Or that is several times. And I don’t like that’.

Tomi says, ‘I think the most important thing is that he’s well’. He further describes his father as, ‘Well… He does look a bit scary. Yes. Moustache, and then like this a bit scary’. I ask, ‘He looks scary, but is he scary as well?’ and Tomi says, ‘No, but he looks scary’. When asked if he thinks his father is an
ordinary or an unusual one, he replies, ‘Yes, he’s unusual to me. Yes, he fights too much and that. And… And I don’t think many families do that’. Most ordinary about his father is that ‘he often sits with mother, he often eats with us… Because he doesn’t eat with us, he just sits by the computer and eats. And he, well… I have nothing more to say’. Most unusual is that he ‘fights. As not many fathers do. You know, you marry for love, but he married for anger. Well, since my sibling was born I think there have been problems’. I ask, ‘Do you think it has been approximately as much, or do you think it has gotten worse or do you think that…’. Tomi interrupts me: ‘Worse. He seems to hit harder and harder every time. You have to, “It’s enough. You don’t like me. It’s enough. Don’t bother me any more”. But he says, “No, you are wrong and that and that and that”. In the end, we came here’.

About what first comes to his mind when thinking about his father, he says, ‘First I think about how he is. He’s fine’. He does not know what his father thinks about mother’s and Tomi’s move to the Women’s House, but thinks his father knows why they did it. Tomi does not think his father can change: ‘No, not in that way. You know it happened four times. All the time’.

About when Tomi last saw his father, he says, ‘Mm… I think it was about… two months ago’. Since the move to the Women’s House he has seen him ‘Once in school. He just came there and… he gave me some sweets, then he left’. The best about Tomi’s father, ‘That’s when he’s usually nice. Then he usually eats with us, is with us, talks to us, goes on, plays. Like that’. I ask if he misses his father when staying at the Women’s House. ‘Yes, I will go there on Saturday or Sunday, I think. Erhh, I think. I don’t know. But I go there sometimes to meet him. And my siblings. I meet my sibling the most. Because I finish early, you know. And I often… And then, he finishes at half-past four, I mean half-past five, and then, then we go there. I mean, we walk there, I and my mother, and meet him’.

To a question about whether Tomi thinks his father would agree with him that his father has abused mother, he says, ‘No, he just says, “Well, I hold her so she doesn’t break things”’. Tomi says he does not think his father would agree that it is abuse, but he thinks so himself, ‘He hits and that’s abuse. Several times’. He thinks his father would not think so, since ‘he lies to people. That is, he says, “Well, it’s like this that I tried to hold her, but she… She tries to break things, that’s why I hold her”. He abuses… He abuses her and lies’.

Tomi explicitly differentiates between father’s usual niceness, which includes being nice to Tomi, and father’s bad behaviour, which includes ignoring, offending and hitting his mother. Accordingly, Tomi’s conception of his father seems to focus on the sub-relationships of which father is part. Although the bad behaviours of father can affect the entire family, discriminating between individual family members means that father’s
actions toward mother can be acknowledged without being given absolute significance to the conception of him.

Tomi’s account is interpreted as an overall conception of his father, which contains the two differentiated images of niceness and badness. Although Tomi explicitly differentiates between how father is towards himself and towards mother, believing that being nice most of the time is not enough for being an ordinary father indicates that he does not disregard father’s violence against mother. But, since it is only in the relationship with mother that the bad appears or becomes salient, it can be treated as a separate part of him. This badness can thereby be treated as one aspect, among many, from an overall perspective and from Tomi’s own perspective on his relationship with father. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the family as a whole, it is a more significant part. Tomi’s opinion that his father is an unusual one can, from that outlook, be interpreted as having to do precisely with father as a father, since a father, more than the wider group of men in general, are intrinsically related to family life and family relationships and, especially for Tomi, to the relationship with mother (see below). When Tomi’s expectations that father as a rule should eat what mother cooks for him and with the rest of the family are not met, these sides seem to be emphasized. The occasions when father does live up to the expectations also makes his unusualness visible because it makes the two sides of him discernible.

Tomi likes his father and perceives him as nice within their own two-some relationship. He values father’s well-being, has lived with father, and enjoys father’s ‘ordinary’ behaviour. Although saying he has been lied to by father, he – seemingly without hesitation – defines father’s fighting, disrespecting and holding as abuse, and does not accept father’s explanations or justifications for it. Father’s violence is not excluded from the conception of him. Rather, similarly to Belinda, Tomi thinks that his father can scarcely change for the better and that his person genuinely includes both sides.

Seeing his father as unusual in a negative way is related to ‘seeing mother as invisible’ and not eating her food. Including such acts of disrespect as psychological aspects of father’s violence can also be facilitated by the separation of father into two sides, since its effect on the Tomi-father relationship would be less severe than if the essence of father was seen as a unity.

**Fathers generalized as family men**

Tomi says, ‘Well, fathers are usually nice, not like my father. That is, fathers are usually most of the time nice, but my father isn’t usually nice. Well… They take care of their child very much. And don’t just go and eat fast food in stead of eating mother’s food with everybody, the whole family’. He thinks other fathers take care of their children more than his own father does.
describe fathers, he says further, ‘You have a father, who’s married to your mother and they are your parents. That’s how I would describe it. Parents… It’s mother that has taken care of you in her tummy and married your father, and those two are your parents’.

To Tomi, the most ordinary fathers, ‘They are nice. Come with us to bathe, sunbathe, well, such. Come with the children and the mother. And is with them. Extra much’. Fathers exist ‘to marry the mother and have children’. And one can tell a father is a father since ‘it has a child, two, three. And he’s married’. He can not think of similarities or opposites to fathers.

When asked what fathers usually do during the days, Tomi says, ‘My father usually sleeps. One, two o’clock or so. Then he often… Works on the computer. Yes, like that. Helps people with computers’. He does not think that is common, but laughs, ‘I don’t think so’. About ordinary fathers he says, ‘They are usually with their child and the mother. First eat and take care of the child. Go on and, like, play with it. Be with the mother. And be happy. Fathers are usually most of the time happy when they are happy. Play with their child, be with the mother. Then, they are usually happy’. About how one can see that they are happy Tomi says, ‘You notice it. Like I said.’, meaning that they are with them.

Tomi’s description of fathers is closely related to their relation to their family and less to a description of fathers ‘in themselves’. The expectation of playing with and taking care of children points to an assumption about direct social relationships between fathers and children. The aspect of marrying mother implies an indirect relationship between father and child, via mother, as well as fathers’ biological importance for children. Since nothing in Tomi’s account indicates that he prioritizes between these different relationships or functions, one can assume that he includes all of them in his conception of fathers in general. As fathers’ complementary biological role, and roles as mothers’ husbands and caregivers and playmates to their children, mean that children’s relationships with their fathers have different possible routes – direct or via the mother – there are also different possible areas within which to relate to one’s own father.

Using the example of his own father to stress that fathers in general do not fight, but are nice, and expecting fathers in general to take care of their children and respect the mother (more than his own father), makes Tomi’s general father-conception somewhat like an idealized image of what general fathers can or should be like. On his account of fathers in general, his conception of his own father becomes salient and although he has earlier described him as usually nice, in relation to other fathers he comes across as less nice. The divergence between his understanding of his own father and fathers in general can be traced to his central expectations that fathers take
care of their children and are happy with their family, but that his own father does not fulfil his role as spouse. But if taking care of family members for Tomi is an expression simply of being spared negative interaction, the positive image of fathers in general may be more likely to be related to wishing away his own father’s weaknesses by developing an overwhelmingly positive image of fathers as family men. When relating father’s niceness to his anger, his niceness overshadows the anger and violence that can be linked to the father-mother relationship, but when relating father to other fathers, that same anger and violence appear as more significant in Tomi’s conception.

**Violence abstracted as essentially unjustifiable**

About violence, Tomi says, ‘I know that they often fight. That’s violence’. But, there is more to violence than that, ‘Yes, bullying, abusing, kicking. And so… on’. In describing violence, he says, ‘Violence, that’s if you fight, you do things that are no good. It’s something that’s not good’. He suggests that violence occurs because ‘you don’t really agree very much’. But disagreement does not have to be violence: ‘No, you can talk about it as well, but… But my, my parents want violence, father’. After an episode of violence, ‘They usually agree, but not this time’. To a question about how people who have been involved in violence feel, Tomi responds, ‘They feel like this, “No, this is not well done by me”’. He thinks that those that have used violence regret it, ‘Yes, and say, “No, this was not well done. I must put it down. Say I’m sorry, that I have done something bad”’. When I say, ‘But then they sometimes do it…’, he interrupts me: ‘Again, yes. Yes, then it might be because of the alcohol or that’. Most important to know about violence, ‘That’s that… You should put that aside. You should not use violence. If you can’t agree you should talk to each other, not use violence’.

Tomi thinks violence to be no good, and he does not think there are others that think violence is good. Explaining how it can happen despite this, Tomi says, ‘Well… One perhaps says, “Take care of the child. I’m just going out for an hour”. The other says, “No, why are you going out and I have to stay indoors with the child?”’. That one says, “Yes, because I’m going out. You should have said so earlier if you were going out”. That one says, “No, but now you should also take care of the child. I don’t want just to take care of the child”. Then it goes on, continues and continues. And they argue with each other and then the father hits. Like this, “No, now I go out and you take care of the child”. Or it happens that you go on several times and that, because you can’t agree. One might say, “It was one that hit that, the child, my child”. He says, “It was just an accident”. Then he says, “No, that was no accident. He hit her for real”. That one says, “No, he didn’t at all”. Then he
says... then he says like this and they go on like that. Then there’s violence. Or they might say, “You take care of my child and I go out”. That one says, “No, why should I do that? Can’t we talk about it instead of arguing?”. And then, then they talk with each other. After a while, when they have quarrelled’. He does not know why people sometimes use violence instead of talking.

‘Some don’t use violence. Some use. And sometimes they don’t dare to say it’. When I ask, ‘What is the difference between those who use violence and those who do not?’, Tomi says, ‘Those who don’t use violence, they are good fathers and those who use it, you can tell that they are no good’. I ask, ‘Do you think it is more common that fathers use violence than…?’, and Tomi interrupts me by saying, ‘Yes’. Then he says, ‘I think that women don’t use violence, you know. Like that. You know, they are like this... not like boys. You know, boys are like this, faster than girls and that. I think that’s common. That’s why he hits... to be stronger and prove, “Yes, now I am stronger than you. You can’t take me”’. He further explains that ‘It’s often children. Because you know, adults think a bit more. But there are some children that don’t even use violence. Or they resist violence’.

When asked about how to know if something is violence or not, he says, ‘Violence, they... They hit. But not to use violence, they resist. Like when someone says, “I, I’m best. I’m the strongest in my class”. One says, “No, I’m the best!” That one says, “Shall we fight?”. Then the other says, “Yes”. And then, then they fight about who is the strongest. And that’s violence’. I say, ‘Imagine if one just hits a little, then?’, and Tomi says, ‘But that’s violence as well’. He means that it can be violence even if it doesn’t hurt a lot, but that it has to do with wanting to hurt the other: ‘Yes. One doesn’t just stand there and say, and then hit like this and punch and then, “Oops, I didn’t mean to”’.

Tomi thinks there are no occasions when violence can be good, ‘Not one place! If someone hits you, then it’s not right to hit back. Because then it will just get worse’. About less bad occasions, he says, ‘That it’s not so bad... If you, kind of, hit like this, a little light and the other resists. Then you say, “I don’t want to hit you” and then that you go on like this a lot, and then it gets bad, then, then that you go on as well. That you can’t just stand there and get hit all the time. And then he continues and both continue. Then perhaps... and then both bleed and if someone sees it, that one tries to stop it’.

About where Tomi thinks there is most violence, he says, ‘Well... At us it’s violence, you know. Or a dictator. Where we... Where I was born’. He suggests it is as common as ‘Fifty percent? Thirty? Fifty? Yes, roughly... I think there are many that don’t want to hit violence, perhaps when they are
young, but when they become like this big, thirty-nine, thirty like that, they might do it. I don’t know. My father did it. At his age’.

At end of interview, Tomi says, ‘Well... You know violence is not good. Fathers are usually good. Most of the time. And my father is usually not so good. So, about him I want to regret myself. You can’t do that’. I have to ask Tomi what he means by saying he would like to regret about his father. ‘Well, I want to exchange him for a good person’.

Tomi’s conception of violence seems primarily to encompass physical actions. They are never good and approved of by no-one, and he exemplifies good or less bad violence by what can be understood as processes of stopping escalating situations or resisting fighting back. His understanding gives no space for the justification of violence by himself or others. Unlike some other children in the study, he assumes that the immediate response to one’s own use of violence is regret and perhaps also trying to conceal it. Thus, his expectation of everybody’s rejection of violence can be understood by Tomi assuming that carrying out violence is based on wanting to do so – at least to the extent that he appears to define violence more in terms of intention than in its consequences. Such an assumption can be part of explicitly attributing responsibility to the perpetrator. Accordingly, Tomi’s account can be interpreted as indicating that he thinks of responsibility for badness to be difficult to bear for the perpetrator, since the ground for regret appears not to be pity for the victim, but based on self-examination.

In the interview, Tomi, on the one hand, suggests that children often hit to prove their strength and, on the other, that some start to use violence as adults. Children’s use of violence can, on Tomi’s view, be related to not thinking in advance and adopting an active stance to resist it. His suggestion that some start to use violence as adults can be related to their increased strength and access to alcohol, but might also simply be an attempt to generalize his experiences of his own father’s violence. The outcome of his suggestions, however, is a portrayal of some children and some fathers as perpetrators of violence. Since the use of violence is associated with men’s strength and speed – as the ground for a wish to prove the point of being the strongest – women are not thought of as perpetrators, which may be connected to the desire to influence by physical force being less functional for the weaker party. He further connects violence to school life (on one occasion), but mainly to family life. Tomi’s examples refer to family situations where disagreements, e.g. about childcare, can lead to violence, despite the possibility that the situation could have been resolved by talking. That arguments about childcare are not an unusual ground for violence within families (e.g. Christensen 1990: 173), and also the assumption about perpetrators regretting their deeds after violence, might indicate that the close connection
Tomi makes between violence and family life – as expressions of regret after violent incidents are assumed to be part of sustaining intimate relationships that include violence (Lundgren 1997).

As unjustifiable and undesired and part of his experiences within his family, Tomi’s resistance towards violence points to a belief in the need for adopting an active stance against it. Since initiatives for violence are taken, active resistance of the ‘urge’ is needed. ‘Avoiding’ is something he does not discuss. It almost seems like violence is the ‘easy way’ and one has actively to make a choice to be able to ‘resist’ it. Associating violence with intentions to hurt, and assuming that growing older means getting wiser (which would facilitate resisting violence), may explain Tomi’s difficulties in making sense of his father having used violence at his (‘great’) age. His father’s inability to resist the impulse to violence is so grave that Tomi, at end of interview, says he wants to replace his father.

**Separating resisted violence from normal relationship with father I**

Tomi’s focus on his father’s principle niceness is interpreted as his primary approach to a logical solution for including his interpreted fields of meaning. The interview demonstrates the complexity of Tomi’s conception of his father in relation to violence. When describing father as a person, his violence appears to be a minor part in relation to father’s usual niceness. But when relating father to fathers in general, his violence increases in significance – to the extent that he is described as ‘unusual’. When, finally, violence is the topic, it is exemplified by father’s actions; he comes across as a perpetrator of violence, so grave that Tomi says he wants to replace his father with a nice one. Thereby, as his perspectives change, so do Tomi’s account of his father and the significance of his violence.

Since the unjustifiability of violence is difficult to combine with the expectation that fathers are happy with taking care of their spouse and children, the actions of his own father can not be generalized to fathers as a group. That would make his own father appear deviant because of his violence. However, by defining violence primarily in terms of physical actions, father’s violence, as directed at mother, can be separated from Tomi’s own relationship with father – although the generally bad actions of father affect the entire family atmosphere. Defining violence primarily as physical may also make the supposition of its unjustifiablity easier to maintain, as well as it can somewhat protect the own relationship from such associations.

Despite father’s behaviour towards mother affecting the family as a whole, focusing on each binary relationship means that father’s importance and relative success as a normal socially contributing father within his direct relationships with the children can be highlighted. The general description
of fathers as family men with double possibilities for father-child relationships, directly or via the mother, can provide similar benefits. As a child, Tomi can perceive his father as father – a perspective that enables acknowledgement of his benefits more than the less favourable perspective on him as mother’s husband – but also accept the emotional impact that father’s behaviour has had on the family as a whole. Although psychological actions are not a major part of Tomi’s general violence-conception, wanting to replace his father can indicate that the significance of psychological aspects are more tangible in relation to the effects of his own father’s badness.

Although Tomi seems to find it hard to believe that father – being an adult and expected to think before acting – can use violence, he acknowledges it and considers it unusual. And, while his description indicates that father hitting mother has an impact on the entire family, since this impact is constituted more by feeling bad for mother rather than feeling directly victimized, mother seems to be thought of as the main, or even the only, victim.

To Tomi, the approach of separating violence within the mother-father relationship from the bad within his own relationship with father can be interpreted as offering a possibility for resistance towards father’s violence and maintaining the high demands for qualifying as ‘nice’. The double perspectives can mean that father’s importance as family father is not threatened, while the impact of his violence as a husband is not neglected.

**Petri**

Whereas Tomi, to some extent, encompasses the children of his family into victimization within a framework of overall separation of the Tomi-father relationship, Petri’s account includes several possible bases for differentiation. Of these, his description of his father as his close and good friend, and the violence as the parents’ own business – up to them to be part of, interpret and judge – are interpreted as the most central.

Petri explains that, in his family, there are a sibling, his mother, his father and Petri himself. He has lived, for a couple of months, with his mother and sibling, and his father lives where the whole family used to live. The rest of the family visited father for a couple of days and came back home the day before the interview. Petri thinks it was fun to visit, ‘Yes, we... I was going to a skateboard place but they had cancelled everything. Mm. So I was with friends and entered the Internet on the computer. Bought two calendars, but my sibling ate them, my calendars. Yes ... With chocolate in them. And then... Well, nothing more... We slept there. Played war. Tickled each other and were on top of each other. Everybody, everybody against everybody. I took and threw my sibling. Then I jumped on my father and father jumped on me...
and my sibling. And tickled us and such’. First, Petri’s mother and sibling moved to the new home, and Petri came back after a couple of months. Before, his mother and sibling had lived at the Women’s House. ‘Then after I stayed there a while. I was there and visited. For a month, I was there. Then I went back to father again. I wanted to live with father then. I just had some shock that I wanted to live there’.

After school, Petri normally spends time with his girlfriend, with whom he has been together for a couple of weeks. About the incident preceding his mother’s move to the Women’s House, Petri says, ‘I wasn’t there when they, when they, when it happened, when they quarrelled. I was in another neighbourhood. There I was skating and such. So I wasn’t there. And then they became friends after some months. Then I got really happy. Then my father’s friend hit my mother’s friend. They just sat there and talked and he got angry. I’m sure he was intoxicated’. Petri tells me that before, ‘It has been fine. Before. It was good. Then they just divorced. I don’t know what happened’. He describes their relationship at time of interview as ‘Good as well. They say hello to each other. So better now’.

When I ask whom in his family he feels closest to, he interrupts me, ‘Most secure with? I don’t know. Mother. Mother allows me to be together with someone, but father doesn’t. Then father might get angry. Can hit a little perhaps. But mother doesn’t. She may tell me off’. About who he is more similar to, he explains, ‘You know, I do have my mother’s nose and mouth and the like. But I think I have my father’s body’. About who he is more similar to in his ways, he says, ‘Mother. I think. Behaviour. Then I think I’m like mother… Nice. Nice to my girlfriend’.

Most important about his family is, according to Petri, ‘That they feel secure’. He says they all feel that way.

When, at the end of the interview, I ask Petri to tell me about a really good occasion in his family, he says, ‘When they lived together was a good occasion. And they did not quarrel. I think that was good’.

### Conceptualizing the own father as part of a violence-distanced father-child relationship

About his own father, Petri says, ‘Ordinary and unusual. In some ways he’s ordinary and in some ways he’s unusual. He doesn’t give as much money. As ordinary ones. Can be stingy… Have it messy perhaps. He’s lazy. And… No, he’s ordinary. Ordinary and unusual mixed’. When Petri is asked to describe his father to someone who does not know him, he explains, ‘That he’s a boy like you and he can be like a friend’. When thinking about his father, he says, ‘That I am sure that he’s sitting at home watching TV’. He thinks that is what other fathers might do as well, ‘Yes, I guess they do that as well mostly’.
At time of interview, while not living with father, Petri says he sees his father ‘Every second week. Weekends. And school holidays and such’.

He usually spends the night along with his sibling, ‘In case the sibling comes, which doesn’t happen so often… I would like to meet him every week. Every weekend’. He responds positively when asked if he would like to live there, but he does not, ‘Because I’m not allowed to decide. I’m sure mother doesn’t want that. I’m sure she wants me. She doesn’t want to lose me’. Petri does not think she would lose him, ‘I would come and visit, you know’. When he is free and staying with his father, Petri will usually ‘go out with friends. With my friends’. Petri has friends both where he used to live and where he lives at time of interview. ‘And some in another city. Because father’s… My uncle lives there. I went there two weeks ago, I think. With father. We were at his brother’s with my cousins’. When asked if there is something he does together with his father, he explains, ‘I am mostly with my friends, or I go skateboarding. Or I sit at home and play on the computer. Go into MSN. I go into MSN and chat. With my friends’.

The best about Petri’s father is ‘that he has a car’. To Petri, the greatest difference if his father was not here would be that ‘I wouldn’t know who he was. I wouldn’t think about it’. When asked what he would miss the most, he says, ‘Father. I would like to meet him’. When I ask, ‘What would you like to say to him then or what would you like to…’, Petri interrupts, ‘“What happened?” I would like to say’.

About what happened the time his parents quarrelled and his mother moved to the Women’s House, Petri says, ‘I don’t know, but she moved there for some reason. You know, I wasn’t there for very long, but after a couple of months I moved there’. But when it happened he was out, and about coming home, he says, ‘I don’t know. I came home and then the friend talked and said that “Your father, he has quarrelled with your mother”. And then, “Oh, is that so”. Then I don’t know where she went. I’m sure she went to some friend. But then they were already divorced before as well. They were divorced before. They got divorced, then mother came to pick up a jacket and then they started quarrelling. But I was not at home then. Then she moved to the Women’s House’. So first, they divorced, then ‘She stayed at a friend’. Petri’s mother had come for a jacket when he was not home and his mother and father quarrelled. When Petri came home, his father was at home like usual, ‘Yes. He hadn’t said anything, but then my friend said, when he came out, “There was a quarrel. The police were here”. They saw the police car coming’. Petri says his parents had not really quarrelled before.

At the end of the interview, Petri again describes his father in relation to other fathers as, ‘He is mixed unusual and ordinary’.

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Petri’s conception about his father is interpreted as focused on their joint relationship. Although he suggests material aspects such as giving money and having a car to be important, the episode of ‘tickle war’ and the expression of wishing to live with his father indicates that their relationship is close and that his father is important to Petri. He further refers to father as being like a friend, and his description of father’s home and car seems to mean that father fills a function not only in a social relationship with Petri, but also as a base for other social contacts. Wanting to live with father may have to do with concern for him, but Petri’s account seems primarily focused on generally enjoying interaction with father and getting access to social interaction that is difficult to maintain through mother and her household. He repeats that his father is ordinary as well as unusual, and – while the ordinariness can be traced to Petri’s description of their relationship – father’s unusualness consists of being stingy, messy and lazy, none of which followed up to indicate any negative impact on their relationship.

However, since quarrelling is violence to Petri (see below), his conception of his father also includes father’s violence and his understanding of father’s actions is differentiated. Petri’s account includes that father can generally get angry and ‘hit a little’ and does not allow Petri to have a girlfriend. This aspect does not appear to be given significant importance in Petri’s conception of his father. Rather, the formulation that father ‘can hit a little, perhaps’ can be seen as an attempt to minimize violent acts and their significance. Father’s quarrelling with mother, on the other hand, is more readily described as violence, but only on one single occasion. He talks about the time before and after that incident as good, and does not explicitly acknowledge any pre-history to the incident. The consequence of it, however, is obvious in that mother has moved to a Women’s House, but he stresses that they were already divorced by then. His ‘encapsulation’ of his father’s quarrelling with mother as a once-only and incomprehensible incident can be understood as a strategy implied by the quarrelling having had explicit consequences, obstructing minimization or treating it as insignificant.

Petri’s use of terminology can also be interpreted as indications of differentiation between his father’s acts. What father generally can do when getting angry is depicted as ‘hitting’. ‘Hitting’ generally refers to a perpetrator acting against a victim, and can be associated with one strike, i.e. a hit, or many. ‘Quarrelling’, however, is used for describing the father-mother incident. When Petri depicts what his friend told him, he refers to father quarrelling with mother, suggesting a similar perpetrator-to-victim action, but when talking about it himself, he refers to them quarrelling as a mutual situation. This is interpreted as another indication that the relative severity
of father’s actions against mother calls for other approaches for it to be treated as not very significant for the conception of father.

Petri stresses that he himself was not there when it happened, and therefore can not know about father’s quarrel with mother, and – in addition – referring to mother having ‘some reason’ to move to the Women’s House is interpreted as leaving the interpretations and judgements of what happened and of moving to his mother and father. Thereby, the physical distance between Petri and father’s quarrel with mother appears in Petri’s rhetoric as stressing cognitive distance.

The concluding interpretation is that Petri, despite the hitting, treasures his relationship with father so much that the violence against mother is separated from this relationship. In relation to the value of his own relationship with father, father’s hitting and quarrelling is less significant. Perhaps especially wanting to live with father can be difficult to justify if fully acknowledging father’s actions as violent. But, by focusing on his own relationship with father, and making it the primary ground for approaching father and more or less excluding the father-mother relationship from his own conception, he does not have to excuse father’s violence, but can give it low priority.

Fathers generalized as relationship-related carers

When Petri is invited to describe what he knows and thinks about fathers, he says, ‘Yes. It’s mostly they that quarrel. Yes. And they can be nice sometimes, but it’s mostly they that give money as well. And then buy pizzas and such as well. And they take you where you want to go, because they have a car. That mothers mostly don’t… Bad at cooking’.

The most important thing to know about fathers is, ‘You should know if they drink or not’. The most ordinary fathers are described as ‘Nice. They… not yell, let you go out, perhaps. If you aren’t allowed to do that. More money for…’. To describe a father, Petri says, ‘If it was a boy I would say, “He’s like you, a boy. But he’s bigger than you and he takes care of you. He gives you money so that you can buy the things so that you can live. You may get the same body as them. The same colour of hair, eyes”’. If he was to describe a father to a girl, ‘Then I would say that it, “A father is a boy, a big, adult boy that takes care of you and gives you food and money so that you can buy and such”’. The most important about fathers, Petri says, is ‘That they should keep their home nice. They usually don’t. Like here. It shouldn’t be messy, it shouldn’t be dirty. It should smell nice’.

Petri says the best about fathers is ‘that I am a boy. It’s so much fun when they come up with more things than girls. To play. Mm… they have cars you can go in. Can test driving. Like that. A lot of that. Work more’. No good
about fathers is, says Petri, ‘*They often drink. And then... I think most fathers drink. They may get weirder then weird. They act as you are, a friend of theirs*’. Petri thinks that is no good: ‘Say, “Hello, so how are you? What’s your name then?”’. *Can forget some things*. Petri would prefer that they ‘Like you’. He suggests the most common thing that fathers do is to ‘*Watch TV*’.

Petri says that similar to fathers are uncles: ‘*They are similar to each other. Then they have similar voices. Dark voices*’. As having similar functions as fathers Petri suggests ‘*friends to fathers. They can be like parents*’. Petri suggests mothers to be the opposite of fathers. He describes the similarities and differences between mothers and fathers as, ‘*Mothers have breasts, fathers don’t have breasts. Fathers have hair. Mothers don’t. Beards they don’t have. Mothers, that is*’. When I ask about the most common thing about fathers, Petri suggests, ‘*That they mostly sit at home. Or go to friends a lot*’.

Petri first claiming that it is mostly fathers that quarrel, and then suggesting that they can be nice sometimes, is interpreted as an indication of the importance of context for Petri’s understanding of the essence of fathers as a general conception. As the subject of fathers in general appears within the context of family life, and also violence, Petri’s account may indicate that thinking about fathers in relation to other groups of people enables the suggestion that it is fathers that are the cause of quarrelling in families. But when thinking about fathers within the context of fathers as such, looking at the most ordinary father, Petri concludes that he is nice.

From the perspective of the ordinary, nice father, Petri focuses on the expectancies of fathers’ material generosity in giving money and buying pizza, their permitting attitudes and offering drives and care for their children, and providing fun activities (primarily for their sons). Petri’s account of fathers’ material functions can be related to the importance of fathers taking care of children, as in aiming at fathers’ abilities to care emotionally for their child and in giving their child money, but can also include caring for their child *by* giving money, etc. Petri’s suggestions about fathers’ similarity to their brothers and friends and regarding mothers their opposite indicate that he perceives these values of fathers as associated with being men. Stressing the unique benefits of being a boy within the relationship with father can be another part of emphasizing the significance of gender in relationships.

These good aspects of fathers can be understood as related to the specifics of father-child relationships. Petri thinks drinking is common among fathers, and the importance he attributes to knowing if they do can be traced to drinking sometimes causing fathers to behave in a weird manner. As fathers are expected to take care of their children in different ways, for a child, a
father behaving weird – as in approaching the child as a friend – may mean that he fails to offer the care that he is expected to provide to the child. Petri wishing that fathers would like their child, rather than acting weird and approaching their child as an acquaintance, indicates that the judgement of the content of the interaction is closely related to the relationship and the roles or positions of those involved. From such a perspective, drinking in Petri’s conception may constitute a risk not primarily for quarrelling, but for weird interaction, as in crossing the borders of father-son relationships.

Thereby, Petri’s conception of fathers in general is interpreted as focusing on the relationship between fathers and their children, and especially their sons, and the fathers’ care – although the most common activity of fathers is suggested to be watching TV.

**Violence abstracted as consequence-dependent**

Petri explains that violence, ‘It’s like this, dictatorship. Quarrelling. People quarrel. It can happen that it occurs when you divorce. Then they quarrel. I can use violence sometimes as well. But not by hitting. I can use violence by pushing someone down. Harass. I tease them and... such’. The worst violence is, according to Petri, ‘Dictatorship. If you fight. Use hands and such. Because you can get hurt. You can when it’s harassment as well. You can get... odd you can get. You can have brain damage. And such’. When asked ‘How would you describe violence?’, Petri says, ‘To someone that didn’t know what it was? Then I would say, “Violence, that’s fighting with your hands, then when you push someone down and tease and such”. Yes’.

Petri suggests that violence is used, ‘When it’s needed. At... When some robbers rob a bank you might need to shoot them in the leg. To make them stop. Then perhaps... jump on them and hit them so that they faint. On that occasion you might need violence’. Petri thinks it is okay to use violence on such occasions, but not ‘when you start quarrelling with someone and start teasing, then you just get angry. Then you go there and hit that one’. It is okay to use violence ‘when it’s a robbery or something like that, then I think it’s good to use violence. For the moment’. If someone jumps on one and hits, ‘Then I think you should take that one down to the ground and then you should say, “Stop!” and then get away from there’. Petri does not consider that to be violence, ‘Not when you hold that one on the ground and say, “Stop!” and then leave’.

Petri suggests that the opposite of violence is ‘Nice. Not using violence. Instead of quarrelling, you say like this, “Please, can you stop. I don’t want to quarrel”’. He further goes on to say that ‘it’s dangerous to use violence. You can get hurt... There’s a lot of violence. War between countries’. Mostly, ‘In Israel and Palestine’. In Sweden mostly in ‘Stockholm’. Petri suggests that
those who might use violence the most may be ‘racists. And... militaries. Polices as well. Militaries use violence to be able to war, the police use it to catch. Racists just want to kill’. Petri thinks some of these different uses are better and others worse, ‘I would say, dangerous to use if you don’t need to. Then it’s unnecessary to use it’.

At the end of the interview, I ask, ‘And then, what do you think about violence and fathers? Do you think it is common that fathers use violence, or what do you think...’, and Petri interrupts me by saying, ‘Yes, it is, I think. Fathers use violence the most. Than mothers. It’s always they that start the divorce and such. They might fight. And then they divorce because they can’t live together, or they have different opinions and they can quarrel every day’. I ask if he means that it is the fathers that start the quarrels, ‘Mostly fathers. I guess they think it’s fun. Might have seen, discovered the wrong woman... Perhaps have seen that she was with another man. Then they got angry and hit and that’. I ask if he thinks most fathers use violence or only a few, ‘No, most’.

He thinks his own father has used violence: ‘Yes, I think... When he was little, he might have quarrelled. I’m sure he dislikes violence’. He also thinks there was violence when his mother came for her jacket, ‘Yes, I believe so’. I ask, ‘Do you think it was your father that did the violence then or was it both...’, and Petri interrupts me, ‘Yes, I believe so for sure’. He thinks it was mostly father that did, ‘Perhaps mother tried to push him away’.

Petri suggests a really good situation to use violence would be ‘if you try to save your country. Or your family. Save your family. Be able to lock the family in somewhere and then go and quarrel with the one who’s going on’.

Petri’s conception of violence includes a wide range of physical and psychological actions of fighting, quarrelling and teasing by different, but seemingly primarily male, actors in different settings; and, the consequences of individual acts are interpreted as significant in his account.

The possibility of resulting in injury is interpreted as crucial to judging violent acts for Petri. He suggests that preventing crimes by shooting or hitting robbers so they faint is considered violence, while using physical force as self-protection is not. The worst violence is exemplified primarily by dictatorship and physical fighting, but also by harassment with explicit and direct consequences. The significance of consequences can also be distinguished in his description of violence as a means for militaries to be able to wage war and for polices to catch appearing to be justified contrary to the violence of racists – which is described as violence without reason, but resulting in the ultimate consequence, namely death. Similarly, the examples of violence for almost heroically saving country or family have no consequences for the one who is ‘going on’. Finally, if violence as a conscious strategy is assumed
to lead to less consequences than uncontrollable anger, his suggestion that violence as a means to stop robbers can be justifiable and even needed, while violence following anger due to escalated quarrelling and teasing is not, can be interpreted as another part of stressing the significance of consequences. Such differentiation between areas and kinds of violence, so that its consequences determine whether it is considered worse or less bad and central to or more peripheral to Petri, can also be related to his understanding of the violence of fathers. Suggesting that fathers use violence when they get angry will within Petri’s general understanding imply that their violence is to be considered rather bad. But violent acts to which consequences can not be traced, such as possibly his own teasing, can be seen as less bad.

His first depiction – including dictatorship, quarrelling and divorce – can be interpreted either as an enumeration of different, and not necessarily related, forms and situations of violence, or as a suggestion that dictatorship is defined by or can be carried out by quarrelling, and that such quarrelling also exists in families, e.g. in relation to divorce. However, interpreting his account as suggesting that dictatorship can include quarrelling and that dictatorial ruling by quarrelling also exists in families, e.g. in relation to divorce, may be to go too far. Nevertheless, his assumption that most violence is carried out by the police and military implies that he connects perpetration to men, and suggesting that fathers use violence more than mothers indicates that family interaction to Petri may correspond to the power imbalance of dictatorship.

While divorce is assumed to be a possible consequence of his own father’s violence, Petri stressed that his parents were already divorced at the time of their quarrel. From the perspective of the significance of consequences for the judgement of violent acts, that could indicate that he does not consider his father’s quarrelling with mother as severe. Such an interpretation may be supported by Petri’s focusing on what violence his father might have committed as a child, although fathers in general are seen as common perpetrators. An inclusive conception of violence, such as Petri’s, may call for differentiation to separate violence that can not be justified from that which, on basis of its consequences, can. Such differentiation can, in that perspective, be interpreted as a means for dealing with the acts of his own father.

**Separating resisted violence from normal relationship with father II**

When attempting to understand Petri’s logic for combining his conceptions of fathers, violence and his own father, his description of his relationship with his father is seen as fundamental. While Tomi’s approach for meaningconciliation is interpreted as distancing father’s physical violence against
mother from the psychological effects on all the family, Petri’s approach is understood as aimed at differentiating between father’s quarrelling with mother and his hitting Petri.

On this interpretation, Petri’s valued relationships with father urges for not connecting him with violence. But, thinking of violence as such an inclusive concept will make that difficult. Differentiation between more and less severe acts of violence in terms of consequences enables attaching less significance to most of his father’s actions. But as fighting with mother has led to her moving to a Women’s House, that specific incident can less easily be disregarded. The significance of it, however, can be decreased by describing it as an exception within an otherwise good relationship; furthermore, by focusing on the father-mother relationship as separate from the own relationship with father, the special value of the latter can be preserved.

The positive aspects of social caretaking, as well as the negative of drinking and violence, in Petri’s description of fathers seems to correspond rather well to his conception of his own father. But his father is not described as entirely ordinary, rather as both ordinary and unusual. Although he acknowledges those aspects of his father, Petri motivates his father’s unusualness with more ‘neutral’ aspects than his quarrelling, hitting, fighting or violence. His account can be understood as based on the assumption that his own father’s violence is part of a rather common trait among fathers, but that his unusualness is constituted of laziness, messiness and stinginess. Although stinginess may imply an aspect of sociability, being lazy and messy refers to father himself, and can be considered insignificant to the father-child relationship. Thereby, the unusualness of Petri’s father can primarily be related to himself, while their mutual relationship – although it may include some hitting on father’s behalf – can be considered more ordinary.

Despite his assumption that men and fathers are the ones that often initiate violence, the violent actions of his own father appear to have little impact on Petri’s general understanding of violence. Resisting all violence may imply taking distance from his father, but as Petri’s relationship with his father is valued otherwise, his father’s angriness, hitting and quarrelling may motivate a differentiation of violence on the basis of the consequences of different acts. Such a differentiation may also enable acknowledging his own violence, but is insufficient for protecting father from culpability for the fighting that led to mother’s move.

For Petri, stressing that he does not know what happened may imply a position of neither acknowledging nor invalidating his mother’s interpretation of the situation and his father’s actions. Treating the one occurrence of father’s violence that can not be considered insignificant as impossible for Petri himself to judge may – especially when within an otherwise good
relationship between mother and father – minimize the impact of the violence aspect in the conception of his own father. And, as an event that is up to the parents to be part of, interpret and judge, it can be separated from the Petri-father relationship. Such separation and distancing of father’s violence from their mutual relationship may enable Petri to concentrate his resistance on more severe violence while acknowledging also other acts, including those of his fathers. However, for himself and from his own perspective, he treats father’s violence as of minimal importance for the overall conception of father. Regarding his father’s positive aspects as more essential to himself may not necessarily be part of justifying or excusing his father’s actions, but of weighing his father’s violence against his importance. Thereby, Petri’s approach – of separating the father-mother relationship from the own relationship with father – also includes a tendency to separate his father’s actions in relation to his person as well as in relation to ‘father’s real self’ (see earlier in this chapter).

**Perceiving the relationship with father as dual or integrated**

Tomi and Petri, who feature an approach including negotiation of the understanding of their own father by separating the mother-father relationship from the child-father relationship, both show very complex courses of meaning.

Some children think that their father’s violence against their mother scares them or makes him a bad person, both implying that the violence that their father directs at their mother destroys the father’s relationships with all other family members or affects the entire family negatively. Such a perspective can also be forwarded by children, who say their father has also been bad to them physically, and see little reason to spend time with him. It can also be implied by children who say they love their father and want to spend time with him, but have experienced their father breaking promises or behaving in a way that the children think he does not care for them. Tomi and Petri, to the contrary, stress that their fathers are bad to their mothers, but nice to them. The first approach to creating meaning about their own father may have implications for how the children see themselves, since it raises questions about the possibility of their own father not loving them. The other approach may make moving to a Women’s House with mother a strange decision, if the child would rather live ‘at home’ with father.

The approach of Tomi and Petri acknowledges the direct relationship between the father and the child. Compared with assuming that the father’s relationship with the child goes via the mother, this approach is assumed to regard the position or the role of the mother as less important to the father-child relationship. Therefore, it is more likely to be associated with
normalization strategies, while seeing mother as a necessary link between
the father and the child is assumed to be more easily combined with resistance
to father’s violence. Seeing the father-child relationship as unique, rather
than as part of the family as a whole, seems to be a way for children to
regard violence as ‘their parents’ business’. But to Tomi and Petri, this does
not mean that they perceive their father as entirely nice. Rather,
differentiations between the relationships are used as part of resistance
against father’s violence, but in combination with acknowledging father’s
importance as a person for the child.

A separation between the own relationship with father and the mother-
father relationship can, at its worst, impose a sense of ‘false security’ on
children. Either as in not acknowledging possible risks of being directly
subjected to father’s violence, or as feeling secure about the own father ‘being
good’, which – if something happens that forces the child to reconstruct her
or his conception of father – can catch her or him ‘off guard’. The possible
benefits of the approach can include stressing that father may be a better
father than a husband, which may be comforting for a mother as well as for
a child.

Concluding discussion about negotiations
in conceptions of the own father

The children in this chapter, similarly to the children in Chapter 4, present
different but comparatively firm and coherent understandings of violence,
and these understandings are interpreted as a basic prerequisite for their
understanding of their own father. In Chapter 4, the children’s understandings
of violence and their own father are interpreted as closely related. While
their own father is perceived in light of the violence they have experienced
from him, and violence is thought of very much in terms of their father’s
actions, their general understandings of fathers can be understood as divided
into separate groups of nice and bad. By comparison, the conceptions of
their own fathers that the children in this chapter present are more complex.
As an example, Belinda uses a model of her father as having a base-line
behaviour, which can change for the better or for the worse, whereas Rasmus,
similarly, perceives his father as essentially changeable. Thereby, both
can include their fathers’ violence into their conceptions of him without
giving it primary significance. Tyra attributes to her father a desire to ‘be
good’, although her concrete depictions do not substantially back up that
view, whereas Tony describes his father as ‘not not nice’ – both of which are
interpreted as separating the view of their by principle good father from his
less good actions. Tomi and Petri separate the person that is their father as
their father, on the one hand, and as spouse, on the other, whereby their father’s violence against mother appears less critical to their own relationship with him. Such relative complexity within the father image is especially salient when comparing Annelie’s suggestion that her father may demonstrate many different behaviours, but only having seen all his sides gives a possibility to judge who he really is, with Belinda meaning that her father ‘truly is’ all his different behaviours.

To the children in this chapter, the possibility of interpreting acts of violence as part of the conception of their own father is more complex than to the children in the former chapter and, when encountered with the conception of violence, what is understood as their negotiations focuses on their conception of their own father rather than on their general father-conception. Among them, no firmness can be identified in their general understanding of fathers corresponding to the firmness in the relations between violence and the fathers of the children in Chapter 4. Rather, as the importance of their own father being perceived as threatened, when encountered by the firm conception of violence, can be understood as forming a rationale for the negotiation; their general understanding of fathers is interpreted as secondary to the complexity of their conception of their own father. Since they do not normalize his behaviour by not acknowledging his violence as such, they can avoid an entirely negative description of their father through negotiation approaches that are assumed to provide an opportunity to include his violence without assigning it primary significance. Accordingly, while individual experiences are seen as primary for the understanding of their own fathers to the children in Chapter 4, and societal images are related to them for conceptualizing general fathers, for these children societal images of fathers seem to be taken into consideration already when perceiving the own father within the family. Focusing on an overall perception of father as changeable, as well as on an understanding of the own father as by principle nice, can be interpreted as approaches that enable perceiving father as more in line with a general societal discourse about fatherhood (in which actions that do not correspond to that image can be seen as minor). Similarly, separating the father-child relationship from the father-mother relationship may represent an approach to creating a good father within the family, despite the violence of mother’s spouse.

Although none of the children in this group spontaneously express themselves in terms of ‘violence’ in relation to their father, except if specifically asked, many describe actions, features and feelings that appear related to violence in a broader sense, such as being demanding and angriness (see Belinda and Tyra), deciding and hitting (see Rasmus and Tony) and disrespecting (see Tomi). While Annelie, Daniel and Melvin more or less
define their father in terms of bad or violent acts, the children in this chapter treat such associations differently. Belinda, Rasmus, Tyra, Tony, Tomi and Petri handle different aspects of their fathers, including implicit or explicit possibilities of violence or violence-related features, by separations in their overall understanding of their fathers. This approach resembles the finding of Weinehall (1997), who interpreted the accounts of teenagers as describing their fathers in terms of one bad and one nice father. The negotiated image of the own father can, when related to the other two themes focused upon in the model presented in Chapter 2 (Figure 1; cf. also Figure 1a), be illustrated accordingly:

Figure 1b Meaning-conciliation by separated aspects of the own father

The dissolved connections between the three objects for understanding symbolize how fathers are not generally thought of as perpetrators of violence (2) and how the divided conception of the own father means that some aspects of the own father are assumed to correspond to general fathers (1), whereas other aspects are related to violence (3).

This illustration aims at describing how general fathers are not assumed to use violence (2). The division in the understanding of the own father implies that he, ‘in his essence’, ‘by principle’ or within the child’s own direct relationship with him, is largely to be described as similar to ordinary and primarily non-violent fathers (1). Simultaneously, some of his actions, some
of the child’s concrete experiences of him and within father’s relationship with mother are, according to the child’s own definition, acknowledged as violence (3).

The approaches aimed at separating the own father from his violence, in some of the children’s accounts, also seem to be combined with treating general fathers as dependent on context – with separation of fathers into groups, or only opening up an indirect possibility for perceiving general fathers as users of violence. As an example, describing fathers in mainly positive terms, but suggesting that the more common users of violence may be fathers, can be understood as part of the general discourse in Sweden, which avoids direct connections between the two (see Eriksson 2003).

The rationale for the separation can be traced to the importance of the father to the child being perceived as threatened when encountered by a firm conception of violence. The approaches can be interpreted as aimed at trying to hold on to a positive overall view of the own father. But this does not necessarily mean normalization of what he has done. Rather, the approaches are interpreted as aimed at enabling acknowledgement and repudiation of acts of violence, while keeping a personal and subjective view of father, as a person or as by principle, as ‘nice’. The different aspects of the children’s own fathers can be used to shift focus in relation to the contexts of violence or general fathers. As the value and importance of father to a child may be greater than the value and importance of a man to a woman, for a child, such a negotiation can enable separating the normalization of father as a person from acts, that do not need to be normalized.

The subjective importance of father
One aspect that is central to the children, whose understanding of their father is interpreted as negotiated in relation to his violent or otherwise bad actions, is the importance that the children, especially compared with the children in the former chapter, attribute to him. Father’s practical or emotional function for a child, as well as perceiving him as nice, may constitute importance and advantages to the children.

By contrast, Annelie and Melvin express few functions of fathers in general, which seems to be related to their experiences of their own fathers; Daniel’s expectations of fathers’ social value seems rather to represent a failure of his own father; and, all of them describe their fathers in terms of bad experiences. Even when asked about good sides, they give examples more of ‘less bad’ situations than good traits or functions. And, although the children whose accounts are understood as negotiating the content of their understanding of their own father for most parts also include such aspects, they all also explicitly included positive aspects. As an example, the boys’
illustrations of their fathers include spending time together and doing ordinary things together – such as eating, tickling or swimming, repairing and giving things and spending time at their fathers’ place. Spending time at father’s home can provide them with access to social contacts with friends living in father’s neighbourhood or where father can drive them, as well as access to father himself. The boys’ focus on their father’s material functions may have to do with such aspects being more easily described, or with justifying the importance of their father with aspects that the mother is assumed to not be able to fulfil. The girls, on the other hand, seem more focused on matters of general or principled importance – Tyra stressing that her father is important to her and Belinda stressing the niceness about her father’s essential self, both without giving a concrete positive example of in what way their fathers are good to them. Although the values of fathers often seem to lie in biological functions – in relation to ‘making babies’, as for Tomi, or in physical activities, as for Rasmus, or in general assumptions about differences between fathers and mothers, such as for Belinda, Tyra, Petri and Tony – fathers’ complementary functions in relation to mothers imply their uniqueness and irreplaceability.

Thereby, this material indicates an association between seeing either a concrete direct or indirect social, material or ‘by principle’ function with the own father and an approach to conciliated meaning including negotiation of the interpretation of him. This corresponds to the association between a firm perception of the own father as a perpetrator of violence and a lack of perceived importance of him among the children in Chapter 4. From the starting point of the importance that the children attribute to their fathers, the father’s violence is perceived as less significant to the children within their own direct relationship with him. And, if the violence of father scares the rest of the family and the child, and he provides little care, seeing the value of material functions can protect parts of a positive image of father. Within the approaches in Chapter 4, the children seeing little good in fathers can form a base for interpreting father’s acts as violence, and his violence may obstruct seeing values with him. However, within this approach, separating the violent acts from the person in different ways can enable acknowledgement of the goodness as well as the badness in him.
6. Negotiation related to violence-conception

While the approaches presented and discussed above in chapters 4 and 5 can be directly related to relations between the themes as discussed in the theoretical framework in Chapter 2, the approach aimed at negotiated understanding of violence is more indirectly related to the relations between the concepts. Although as an approach, it is less obvious than the ones aimed at understandings of fathers, its role within meaning-conciliation is easily discernible. Although this approach to conciliated meaning, compared with the other children’s, appears rather ’simple’ or uncomplicated in itself, it highlights a negotiation process with the inherent possibility of focusing on the good of father. Although more or less similar, ambiguous and central versions of this feature can be seen in several of the interviews, the interview with Örjan makes it particularly salient.

Örjan
Örjan’s reasoning, based on emphasizing his father’s goodness and ordinariness in relation to other fathers, seems to correspond well to the normalization process described in Chapter 2. But as a negotiation, viewing violence as deviant whereas viewing its opposite, goodness, as a broad enough conception to embrace most actions, and also lack of actions, is interpreted less as a normalization as such than as an approach to meaning-conciliation aimed at maintaining an understanding of violence as deviant.

Örjan says that his family includes his father, mother and a sibling. At time of interview, he is living with his mother and sibling. His father lives close to Örjan, and Örjan and his sibling visit their father when they want to. On ordinary days, Örjan watches TV and plays on the computer. The others watch TV as well, ‘And then they don’t do so much more’.

The own father as abstracted goodness
The first thing Örjan says about his own father is, ‘My father is good. And he… He’s pretty rich. And he’s kind. He buys sweets… He does many things’. He thinks his father is an ordinary father, since ‘he does usual things. He watches TV, he goes around in shops. He does different things’.
The best about Örjan’s father is ‘that he’s kind. He buys things’. However, he thinks that it is not unusual for fathers to do so. The worst with Örjan’s father is ‘nothing’. When asked if there is anything that his father does that is bad, and that he thinks other fathers do not do, he replies, ‘No’. About whether he, when becoming a father, would be like his own father to his children, Örjan says, ‘That I don’t know… No… That I don’t know’.

The core feature about Örjan’s statement about his father is that he is good. Focusing on his father’s positive aspects to the extent that he gives no suggestions about any features that he does not like about his father gives little opportunity to talk about violence-related issues at all. His total detachment from bad aspects may have to do with a lack of trust in the interview situation, wanting to protect father as a person or as an image, or with incapacity for a more nuanced or multifaceted image, e.g. due to general immaturity, traumatic experiences or language. Simply perceiving father as utterly, genuinely and completely good is of course possible, even if mother is of another opinion. But assuming that every human being has, at least some, ‘not so good aspects’ and seeing the children in the study as active searchers for meaning, Örjan’s perception of his father as genuinely and completely good is interpreted in relation to a rational negotiating process.

Stressing that his father is ‘good’ can refer to father’s general being or to father’s relationship with Örjan specifically. If Örjan bases his conception of his father on the relationship Örjan himself is a direct part of – the father-child relation – the relationship between father and mother may be secondary to Örjan’s opinion. Such a focus can facilitate disregarding actions that mother interprets as violence. Also, the relative nature of being good allows Örjan to relate father’s goodness to earlier in time. It is possible that, since the family at time of interview is living apart, and especially mother and father have less contact, intra-familial interaction has improved compared with when living together – allowing for a time-related conception of father. Furthermore, Örjan may be relating father’s goodness to father’s bad sides, so that if the good aspects are perceived as extensive enough, the bad are not worth mentioning. By exemplifying and depicting common and “neutral” activities, Örjan, similar to the ‘goodness’, also stresses his father’s ordinariness. This may have to do with wanting or needing to keep up appearances by assuming that all fathers are like his own father, or with prioritizing overall similarities over what are perceived as minor differences.

Referring mainly material functions to the father can facilitate seeing father as good even if interpersonal relationships are not so by common standards. In the extreme, it can allow father to ‘buy being perceived as good’. Mentioning his father first of all among family members may, but does not necessarily have to, indicate the position and/or importance Örjan
attributes to his father in the family. And even though Örjan, when talking about his father, does not indicate any emotional closeness, stressing that his father is good since he buys things, may be an indication of perceiving their relationship as good. Örjan’s own initiative to see father can indicate that his stressing his father’s essential goodness and normality is part of a ‘genuine’ perception.

**Fathers as generalized goodness**

The first thing Örjan says about the card that says ‘fathers’ is ‘that they should be good... And nice... And then there’s nothing more’. He responds affirmatively to whether they are so most of the time. Good and nice are described as, ‘That’s when you are not bad. And... you are good’. One can do different things when being good, according to Örjan, such as to ‘watch TV. And then there’s nothing more’.

He suggests one can know who is one’s father ‘since you know’, and suggests one way to know is ‘because I have seen him so many times’. If it is an unknown person, ‘Then I don’t know’. He thinks that the opposite of a father is ‘mother’, and suggests that fathers exist ‘for you to be born’. Later, one can benefit from fathers because ‘you get money’ and then Örjan can not think of anything else. When asked when fathers are best to have, he responds, ‘That I don’t know’, but suggests that they are the very worst to have ‘when they are grumpy’.

Örjan has no plans on being a father himself, but if so, he would be like ordinary fathers. He explains that ordinary fathers are ‘like ordinary fathers. For example that they are good... And then they cook. That they buy sweets. And then there’s nothing more’. During the days, fathers ‘watch TV’, something Örjan knows because he has seen it. He does not believe all fathers do that, but he does not know what other fathers might do.

Goodness is a repeated theme in Örjan’s account about fathers in general. But although he does not directly relate his general father-concept to any aspects other than or contrary to good, he suggests that fathers are the very worst to have ‘when they are grumpy’, and also stresses that they ought to be good and nice, rather then just describing them as so. This may imply an expectation about or an opening up of the possibility of fathers not always being good, but can also simply be a matter of speech – the latter perhaps more likely since he answers affirmatively to whether they are so most of the time. Even the best may occasionally be grumpy.

Örjan’s statement that fathers exist for one to be born can be interpreted as focusing on their biological uniquenesses in relation to mothers, that the conception is where the importance of fathers is most significant. Seeing mothers as fathers’ opposites may support such an interpretation. On the
other hand, the main significance of fathers lies, according to Örjan, in more material areas, such as giving things. Focusing on the material functions of fathers corresponds fairly well with Örjan’s view of his own father’s function for him. Also more generally, Örjan’s statements about fathers in general match what he has earlier said about his own father, namely being mainly good. If his earlier description of his own father as rather rich refers to a comparison with his mother, it may correspond to a general assumption about fathers’ complementary advantages in relation to mothers.

Fathers normally being good and Örjan’s description of his own father as an ordinary one – implying that fathers in general have much in common with his own father – can be further understood from Örjan’s suggestion that good means the absence of bad (a theme further discussed below).

**Violence abstracted as what ‘good’ can not cover**

Örjan’s first association to the word violence is ‘that you are bad’. Being bad is described as, ‘Then one fights. And then the others get sad’. When asked about what can be similar to violence, he says, ‘That I don’t know’. The opposite of violence, however, is, ‘Good. Then you don’t say nasty words. You don’t fight. Then there’s nothing more’. He does not know why there is violence.

He first says he thinks there is violence ‘all the time’, but then that he does not know, and he does not know why people use violence. Örjan says he himself has never used violence, but believes that I have, and relates it to ‘that you got angry’. But he does not agree that it is generally when one is angry that one uses violence and does not know when violence is common. He does not think there are any occasions when violence is good, and does not know how common it is. He further thinks that violence is something that many people are involved in, but does not know who. He suggests using violence can be ‘that you fight and are bad, and say nasty words’, such as ‘“fuck you” and “shut up”’ (in Örjan’s own words). When someone says such things Örjan says, ‘They get sad’.

For it to be violence, he suggests one has to hit so hard ‘so that you get a black eye. Or bruises appear’. When asked, he explains that hitting without it resulting in bruises can be violence. When asked how to know if something is violence, he says he does not know. After giving examples that Örjan defines as not violence, and also as violence, he suggests that one way to know that the one is violence as opposed to the other is, ‘That it hurts’. However, if one falls it is not violence, according to Örjan. If someone kicks someone, it may be violence and he suggests that the kick needs to be ‘really hard’.
According to Örjan, ‘People fight almost all the time. Because they get angry’. He does not know why they get angry, but knows that rather many people use violence and that violence is rather common, ‘Because it happens almost all the time. I know it. I have seen it’. About where he has seen it, he says, ‘Different’ and claims he has seen it in reality.

Örjan includes first physical, then also verbal, acts in his conception of violence. His account of violence includes fewer references to emotions or to personal experiences than most of the other children’s in this study. Although defining violence as being bad as well as indicating that the definition of violence has to do with its consequence, such as victims’ bruises or pain, he generally talks about others’ response to violence – through which he seems to take a ‘neutral’ or ‘outside’ perspective when talking about it.

Although, at first, he will not acknowledge that it is generally because of anger that violence happens, he states later that the widespread usage of it is connected with anger. Perhaps his fluctuation has to do with trying to avoid ‘getting close’ to the concept of violence. Since anger is a mood most people experience, he might first not want to make such a general connection, but later connects the two by their similarly negative association. He might mean that anger does not necessarily lead to violence, but that violence can have its origin in anger.

According to Örjan, violence can never be justified, and he does not know why people use it. This can be understood from the perspective of his standpoint that violence and good are each other’s opposites. Örjan’s understanding of ‘good’ is depicted as a lack of bad aspects, such as saying bad words and fighting, rather than something in itself. This can, especially together with his unambiguous statement that he himself has never used violence, be interpreted as an attempt to create distance between himself and the entire concept of violence.

Örjan’s belief that violence means being bad, that it can never be justified, and that he does not know why people use it constitutes a less ambiguous or nuanced position than those of most of the children in the study. His examples not including much details, and his reference to personal experience of violence including no concrete situations, indicates that such lack of ambiguity can be understood as a comparatively abstract principle approach. Örjan’s distanced attitude, accompanied by the outside perspective, is interpreted as part of a principled repudiation of violence that he, for some reason, will or can not engage in elaborating about for himself or possibly for me.
Negotiating ‘goodness’ and normalization of father

Örjan’s overall conciliation of the meanings he has reached concerning the themes of the interview can be understood in relation to taking his starting point in focusing on the good. He seems, almost by principle, to stress the good and ordinary about his own father, as well as about fathers in general, while violence is described as something comparatively distant.

Violence being bad can be understood as the starting point for Örjan’s account about the relation between his own father as a good family member and his assumption that fathers generally are good. As Örjan’s conciliation of meaning includes conceiving his own father as normal in relation to fathers in general, and fathers in general being good like his own, violence has no connection to fathers on Örjan’s account, and his description of fathers in general has considerable resemblance to how he describes his own father. However, since the similarities are mainly exemplified by ‘material’ and non-violence-related characteristics, the base for his understanding of his own father as ordinary does not appear as necessarily directly related only to a lack of violence. In light of most of the other children acknowledging at least some less likeable features about their fathers, the firmness of his declaration that there are no ‘no-good’ features about his father can be understood as not wanting to make a connection between his father and violence rather than a failure to identify one (cf. Hällberg 2003: 28). Seeing violence as unilaterally bad, and not acknowledging own usage, may be facilitated by interpreting father’s actions as not violent. And repudiation of violence can be possible through its distance from father and fathers.

Örjan repeatedly stressing that his father is good and an ordinary father, with whom ‘nothing’ is the worst, may mean that he does not consider the actions of his father, connected to mother seeking help from the Women’s House and the separation between the parents, as violence. Alternatively, it can indicate that he considers those aspects of his father as not anymore relevant, or not relevant related to his overall conception of him. Not relating his own definition of violence, including physical as well as verbal acts, to what has happened in the family or to his father may be related to negotiating processes in which Örjan engages to separate family experiences from violence-related issues. It may also be consistent with ‘general’ understandings of violence, if he is not aware of the reasons for his mother’s escape to the Women’s House, or if mother has felt threatened by situations that are not generally regarded as violence. Nor does he directly relate violence to fathers in general, but the assumption of its prevalence is associated with people in general.

Örjan’s approach can be interpreted from the perspective of ‘being good’ being a relative estimation or classification, which allows for higher, lower
or different claims for such a classification. On Örjan’s account, being ‘good’ is exemplified by not being bad and connected mainly with doing ‘neutral’ things, such as watching TV and making a material contribution, but not necessarily incorporating interpersonal communication or action. A narrower definition of ‘good’ would require Örjan to demand a lot from someone to be labelled as good, and his father may not fit that description. But defining ‘being good’ largely as ‘not being bad’ can enable even only the direct absence of bad, such as violence, to qualify as good. That Örjan’s father has not lived with the rest of the family for quite some time and the possibilities to use violence therefore have been limited, can give further opportunities for labelling father as good, in relation to earlier in time. Thereby, a wider understanding of ‘good’, by generally decreased demands or focused on certain aspects, such as material functions, can more easily allow Örjan to conceptualize his father as good.

Seeing Örjan’s account from an overall perspective, the emphasis on his father’s goodness and ordinariness in relation to other fathers’ goodness can be interpreted as central parts of his normalizing of his own father. Extensive generalization of the concept of good does not have to include or imply minimization of what is understood as violence, but will almost by definition ‘purify’ father’s goodness and normality. The tendency to assume that father is a normal father means that violence is detached from fathers in general as well as from the specific father. While such detachment may be facilitated by a generally minimized or ‘condensed’ violence-conception, meaning that more incidents can be excluded from it and that father can more easily be defined as ordinary, a too narrow violence-conception may in the long term be problematic in interpersonal communication and interaction.

Considering the research indicating that silence generally surrounds violence in families (e.g. Christensen 1990), the relative sketchiness, the general rather than personal depictions and the principle contents of his account can all have to do with Örjan’s general reticence. Also, his references to violence happening ‘all the time’ may be part of creating violence as a vague and general conception, and the ‘flightiness’ of the concept can in turn facilitate creating distance from himself, as well as from his own and other fathers. Although not labelling father’s or fathers’ actions violence can be seen as part of normalization of actions and the general reticence of Örjan’s account impedes interpretation, he seems to normalize violent actions to a lesser extent than his father as a person. While violence is, according to Örjan, not normal, his father is; consequently, his father’s actions can scarcely be labelled as, or fall into the category, ‘violence’. Rather, by negotiating the generalized content of ‘good’, the own father’s normality can be enhanced,
and as a secondary result, his actions be seen as normal. Although such an approach can also result in the normalization of individual acts, its secondary importance entails that the approach as such can be theoretically separable from normalization processes. On the one hand, father can more easily be interpreted as ‘good’ if ‘goodness’ is negotiated, and on the other, the presupposition that father is good may demand negotiation of ‘goodness’.

The wider generalization of the concept of ‘good’ allows more generous normalization of father, and when talking about fathers in general as good, Örjan can gain another possible benefit. Being a boy, a limited definition or limited demands about being good, increases his own opportunities for ‘being good’ as a human being, man and/or future father. Further, the normalization of father in relation to other fathers and possibly his actions, by not referring to them as violence due to a wide conception of good, can be related to Örjan not presenting himself as a victim. It can also be related to not including his father’s actions against his mother into his conception of violence, the latter possibly related to focusing on his own current relationship with father.

Since his mother has moved away from father as a result of her interpretation of his acts against her as violent and limiting, Örjan’s perspective can be understood as being loyal to his father; his interpretation is at the expense of loyalty to the interpretation or judgement of his mother, with whom he lives. Such a choice can be understood as an active and rational one, on the assumption that his father fills a function important enough to prioritize his ‘good’ aspects on behalf of his ‘bad’ ones. From such a perspective, the ‘material’ functions Örjan stresses about his father may be so important to Örjan that he can not ‘afford’ to focus on his father’s limitations.

**Concluding discussion about negotiation in violence-conception**

This approach, similar to the other two presented and discussed in chapters 4 and 5, can be understood as necessitated by the understanding of violence as confronting the perceptions of the own father. Whereas the other two approaches focus on that which is confronted, namely general fathers or the own father, the approach depicted by the interview with Örjan focuses on that which for all children seems to be the starting point of their meaning-conciliations, namely violence. However, the negotiation approach does not appear to be aimed at, or focused upon, the understanding of violence in itself, but rather at what is assumed to be its opposite (to Örjan, understood as goodness).
To illustrate a possible theoretical discussion about the conception of violence in relation to its opposite, by the children described as nice or good, figures 3a-c can be employed. These figures illustrate how one act (symbolized by ‘a’) can be interpreted differently according to differences in the borders of the conceptions of ‘violence’ and ‘good’ respectively (symbolized by ‘/’).

Seeing acts as possible to classify on a continuum from the worst violence to the best of good, the space in the middle symbolizes a possibility to interpret phenomena or actions (a) that do not meet the demands of being ‘neither’ violent or good (Figure 3a).

In the study material, several children, especially Örjan, seem to adopt an inner model that can be illustrated as in Figure 3b, which assumes that actions can be categorized as ‘violence’ or as ‘good’. Since the two categories, violence and good, are exclusive – so that, at least in principle, no action can be categorized as both – the model does not really symbolize a continuum. The same act (a) that, according to Figure 3a is labelled ‘neither’ violent nor good, will in Figure 3b be classified as either violent or good, and here falls into the category of good. It can also facilitate not separating a lack of acts from good acts.

In relation to another possible model of the relation between violent and good acts (Figure 3c), however, Örjan’s conceptualization has the possibility to be used for normalizing, as in labelling as good, actions (Position a) that, in relation to the other two models, would be labelled either as neither bad nor good, but close to bad (Figure 3a) or as violence (Figure 3c). It is similar to Figure 3b in that the categories ‘violence’ and ‘good’ are each other’s opposites, and any act has to be classified as one or the other. However, since Figure 3c treats violence and good as more equally wide conceptions, the advantage of the inner model of Figure 3b, possibly facilitating interpreting the acts of important fathers as good, is visualized.
This feature of treating violence and good as unequally broad categories (see Figure 3b) is not unique to Örjan, but is understood as more central to his meaning-conciliation. Although the interview with Örjan serves as the main example in this context, several of the other children show a similar tendency to define nice or good by the absence of bad – suggesting either that the opposite of violence is nothing in itself or is difficult to verbalize as something in itself (cf. Belinda). However, the interviews with the other children are used to substantiate other features of negotiations that are interpreted as more central to their meaning-conciliation. Among the other children, there are also examples of opposite attitudes to nice, such as Tomi demanding nice in all situations and in all relationships for such a label. To Örjan, as the only ‘typical’ model of this approach, violence – quite simply – does not appear as part of the possible repertoires of his own father or of general fathers, a unique opinion in the material. Similarly, Örjan is the only one to describe his father as ordinary without exceptions, the others either finding their fathers unusual, related to his violence, doing bad things or causing general unhappiness, or differentiating aspects of their father so as to be able to view him as both ordinary and unusual (see Chapter 5). Furthermore, all the other children in the study acknowledge at least some violent acts of their father, even though its connection to him, as well as to general fathers, is often complex. However, also to Örjan, the oblique possibility of fathers not always being entirely good is part of this approach.

The theoretical model developed in Chapter 2 (Figure 1; cf. also figures 1a and 1b) is therefore here modified to illustrate how the wider conception of ‘good’ ‘pushes back’ possibilities to interpret acts of the own father as violence. Although violence in itself is not seen as directly adjusted by negotiation, the width of ‘good’ makes interpreting a situation or phenomenon as violence more ‘far-fetched’. ‘Good’ can be extended to be a possible definition of more or less anything that does not clearly fall under what is understood as ‘violence’, and to include any action that can be described as different from violence, as well as situations simply not including violence even if they do not include any positive interaction. The conception of violence is not changed as such, but has become more distant from the images of fathers and the own father – the latter two possibly being closer by sharing a distance from violence.
The emboldened connection between the own father and general fathers (1) illustrates the assumed ‘match’ between the two in this figure. The relation to violence, however, is weakened (2 and 3) – not in the sense that connections are impossible or that the generalized understanding of violence is decreased, but in the sense that interpretations of fathers’ actions are more closely connected to the significant concept of goodness, here also symbolized by accentuation.

The approach, as understood here, is not seen as directly aimed at decreasing the conception of violence in itself, but – to the contrary – aims at more or less keeping the principle understanding of what is to be included into the conception of violence, so as to be able to repudiate and resist it. Thereby, it is to be understood as something different from a normalization process, in which the target of the operation is violence itself. The similarities between this approach and a normalization process, however, may be an indication of the internal logic within any normalization strategy, which – at least in part – may constitute the attractiveness of such an approach. Although such an approach may be problematic in the long term, its attractiveness is assumed to be constituted by the relative simplicity of its logic, as well as the outcome being that ‘everything is fine’ – both of which are possibly less ‘intellectually demanding’ of the individual than the other approaches for meaning-conciliation described above.
Distanced perception of violence
Within the material, the children seem to present similar pictures in principle (cf. Jeffner 1997) in including physical as well as psychological aspects into the concept of violence as bad, but have rather different personal relations to it. As examples, Annelie, Daniel and Melvin show a comparatively clear victim’s perspective. Örjan is the only child in the material to stress that he himself has not used violence. In addition, he describes no concrete violence-related experiences. This can be compared to those children that give continuous examples of violence within their family, within their school or of their own use. Thereby, Örjan’s relation to violence is interpreted as a distal one.

Whereas most of the other children further use their own personal experiences of violence to develop an assumption or attitude that violence is bad ‘by definition’ (such as Daniel) or that it can be justifiable in certain situations (such as Rasmus and Petri), Örjan’s lack of concrete references makes his conception of violence appear as ‘by principle’ and lack reference to context. Also, to some children (such as Melvin and Belinda), repudiation of violence is closely related to or even intertwined with questions of morality and life-and-death, both of which are assumed to imply very personal positions in relation to violence, and also possibly as permanently topical issues. Further, assuming that violence sometimes can be justified – just because it is normally or by principle seen as bad – would demand careful and personal consideration, which is also apparent in several of the children’s accounts. However, the sketchiness of Örjan’s depiction is connected with distance, principle and a lack of context. Also, seeing violence as part of being human (such as Annelie does) is assumed to be associated with a closer and perhaps more personal relation to the understanding of it, while conceiving it as an abnormality, which might be implied by Örjan’s comparatively detached repudiation, can be assumed to be related to distance and detachment from it.

Relating to violence as something distant from one self and one’s world may imply difficulties in connecting it to general fathers or the own father, especially for a boy with a relationship with his father that he treasures.
7. Understanding children’s meaning-conciliations

The interpretations of each child’s meaning-conciliation and the identification of the different approaches that form the structuring of the previous chapters enable recognition of some tendencies in the material as a whole. I suggest that one central conclusion of this study is that, from an interactionist perspective, a variety of approaches are available to children for creating meaning concerning their father and his violence in relation to their general conceptions of fathers and violence. The identified approaches to meaning-conciliation, although possibly not developed or used consciously by the children, are more complex and multifaceted than the theoretical framework in its basic form suggests. When their experience of father encounter the possibility of violence, negotiations – aimed primarily at the children’s understanding of their own father, of fathers in general or indirectly of violence – are interpreted as central to meaning-conciliation. This chapter argues for an understanding of the interviews that exceeds the primary theoretical concepts suggested in Chapter 2. After suggesting ‘conceptual fission’ as an adequate theoretical construct for describing some of the children’s negotiations, a tentative model for understanding the different ‘objects’ in the children’s approaches to meaning-conciliation in relation to some tendencies that can be derived from the interpretations of the interviews are suggested.

Normalization, resistance and deviation

The initial theoretical suggestions for how children’s conceptions of their fathers and the actions of these fathers can be related to the understanding of violence are, in Chapter 2, described in terms of normalization or resisting processes.

If normalization means ‘pushing the defining line’ for violence so that more and more actions can be interpreted as something else (cf. Lundgren 1997), most children in this study do not, at least not explicitly and within the limitations that the methodology of the study set, manifest such tendencies. Although many do not give significant importance to their father’s violence, nor do they define it as something else. Since normalization can be
assumed to be facilitated by and often combined with minimization or denial of the acts, Örjan’s withholding that his father is entirely good can be interpreted in terms of normalization. His account including no reference to acknowledging any of his father’s actions as improper or unjustifiable in any way, and not giving any example of what he might not like about his father, bears strong resemblance to a normalization process. However, although his approach to meaning-conciliation is interpreted as aimed at expanding the conception of good, the interview does not allow an assumption that it also means a decreased violence-conception. The negotiation of the conception of the opposite of violence is interpreted more as part of advancing the goodness of non-violent acts, than as changing the understanding of those acts in themselves.

The feature of resistance, on the other hand, is manifested in most children’s (all except Örjan’s) explicit acknowledgement of their father’s actions as non-acceptable, unjustifiable and unusual. Without de-emphasizing the possibility that the children might normalize individual situations or actions, the accounts in the interviews are interpreted as signs of most of them having a mainly resisting attitude, indicating that they have not normalized the violence they have experienced (cf. Hydén 2000). While the children whose accounts are interpreted as negotiations of their general conceptions of fathers seem to more straightforwardly resist their father’s violent actions, the children whose accounts are interpreted as negotiations of their understanding of their own father do not, at least not by principle as it comes forward in the interviews, seem to normalize their father’s violence either. Although their accounts include de-emphasizing the significance of violence for the overall understanding of their fathers, the fathers’ acts are defined as violence, and repudiated as such.

That children repudiate the violence of their fathers does not support a mechanism of the superior power of their father relative to their mother being decisive to their meaning-conciliations. Father’s relative power and his interpretations receiving support, e.g. from the mother in attempts to avoid violence, can be assumed to influence children in adopting their father’s perspective (cf. Hester & Radford 1996; Hwang & Nilsson 2003). But inequality related to power and dependency, possibly corresponding to general differences in society and increasing the vulnerability to violence within the family (e.g. Walby 2002), can not, if assumed to support men’s interpretations being perceived as more valid than women’s, explain the resistance expressed in the child interviews in this study. Rather, from a similar ‘power-perspective’, the mother moving from the father with the children, e.g. to a Women’s House, may be a sign that she takes control; and, after the move the mother’s interpretation may be the more ‘valid’ one in the
context the children live in. As the support she gains in new interaction, e.g. with the Women’s House or the police, may validate her interpretation, a child may find her interpretation more meaningful. As an example, Melvin and Annelie, who both live with their mother at a Women’s House at time of interview, can perceive their mother’s interpretations as the more valid in that time and context, and therefore adopt similar understandings.

Thereby, these tendencies in the material can be related to the children’s living situation at time of interview and their position in relation to the violence. Resistance becomes more salient after women have left their men (cf. Hydén 2001). This implies that such an approach can be understood in relation to most children not living with father anymore at time of interview, or to adopting mother’s perspective being rational within their contemporaneous living arrangements. Not living with father might mean that distance from the situations and actions makes them easier to resist or repudiate and also, their mother having shown strength by moving away with the children can give weight and credibility to her interpretations. As distance may facilitate acknowledging the deviancy of their father’s violence and the mother’s initiative to move away from him might form a signal about the unacceptability and severity of it (cf. Peled 1998), the resistance found in the children’s accounts is understandable. The signs of ambiguity in this resistance can possibly be traced to the children keeping contact with their father while not living with him, as this contact means that they are continuously concretely reminded of his negative as well as positive sides. Assuming that normalization processes might be stronger while living with the perpetrator and resistance stronger when not, although the children’s position in the relationship differ and none of the informants indicate that it was they that initiated leaving father, their approaches to meaning-conciliation may have shown more tendencies to normalization had they been interviewed while still living with father. For the children, the resistance perspective, implying the woman’s possibility to act (cf. Hydén 2001), may also offer a possibility to redefine their own position and possibilities to control their own lives (cf. Daniel’s experiences of feeling free without father). Also, not normalizing as in generalizing the violence of the own father into general expectations on fathers may have the benefit of facilitating relationships with other men, who can also be or become fathers eventually, since an expectation of violence can be assumed to complicate social interaction.

Further, normalization has to do with development and maintenance of the violence, and refers to a process in which both perpetrator and victim are involved (cf. Lundgren 1997). As such, the concept of normalization may also highlight the significance of the children’s positions as participatory
witnesses (Hydén 1994). The influence of the man’s interpretations on the woman’s is closely connected to her role as the victim. Before a normalization process has ‘got hold of’ the relationship, her possibility to end it forms a prerequisite that a child witness, even if ‘participatory’ in a wider sense, does not share. Thereby, while normalization for a woman can be a strategy for actively keeping the relationship together, for children, since they have little impact on their own living situation, such an approach offers little possibility of influence. Accordingly, while systematic gendered power differences are assumed to form a condition for normalization processes, the systematic power differences between generations may mean that children are hindered in using such an approach.

Another tendency that becomes salient in the interviews, especially those that include division within the conception of the own father, is that normalization of father’s violent acts needs to be understood as separated from normalization of father as a person. A similar tendency is noted by Weinshall (1997) in boys separating their father’s cruelty from his good side. While the initial theoretical conceptualizations in Chapter 2 include contrasting normalization with resisting processes, referring to the relation between the own father and violence, the relationship between the own father and other fathers can – from the perspective of the ‘triangular model’ (Figure 1) in Chapter 2 – be approached in terms of normalization versus deviation.

The relation between the own father and fathers in general can, according to that model, be focused on either assumed similarity or difference. Mead’s (1934/1972) ‘ideal-type’ theoretical suggestion implies that children’s experiences of their own fathers over time are generalized into expectations about fathers in general. In this study, this would imply that the children, on the basis of their personal experience of the own father’s violence, would assume that fathers in general also use violence. However, in this material, although some children suggest that some or many fathers may use violence like their own, no one makes a general and absolute association between violence, as in the actions of their own father, and fathers in general. Similarly, nothing in the majority of the interviews indicates that presenting their father as ordinary is part of loyalty to him, again possibly having to do with the mothers having sought help from Women’s Houses being an indication that the behaviour of the own father is unacceptable and not normal (cf. Peled 1998). To the contrary, although viewing the own father as normal would theoretically be assumed to support handling or surviving in a social-psychological sense the everyday interaction with a father whose violence is acknowledged and repudiated, assigning ‘nice’ features to fathers in general is a rather prominent tendency. In the material, the own father’s ordinariness and normality appear unambiguously clear only to Örjan; and to him, the
normality of his father’s non-violent actions appears closely related to his father’s normality as a person. Thereby, to Örjan there is no violence acknowledged as such of his own father that can be generalized. All the other children, however, believe that their own father in some respect is unusual.

However, the relationship between their own and other fathers is not unequivocal. As an example, although their repudiation of their fathers’ violence seem to form the basis for Annelie’s, Melvin’s and Daniel’s assumptions about their own fathers’ deviancy, the deviancy’s connection to fathers as a group is more complex. The children’s division of their general understanding of fathers, as well as tendencies to relate the deviancy to people in general – rather than only to fathers – obstruct clear-cut relations between their own father and general fathers. While the perceived deviancy may form a basis or motive for dividing the general father-conception, its possible references to groups beyond fathers can be part of complex and intricate relationships of meaning. However, for most children in the material, the complexity is constituted by separation in their understanding of their own father. Thereby, although his violence can be made comparatively insignificant, the children still mainly consider him as unusual, less directly related to the violence, which they construct as less relevant, than to other negative aspects, such as drinking, separating from mother or being lazy and demanding. Further, the individual experiences of the own father – including his violence as well as other aspects of him – appear intricately combined with social, or official, images (cf. Melvin, as one of the youngest, seemingly taking into consideration information from media), thereby forming a complex understanding of the relationship between the own father and general fathers.

Negotiations in the conceptions of the own and general fathers can allow the children to more collaborated relationships within their meaning-conciliation than the theoretical framework suggests. This may involve perceiving father’s violence as unusual, but his overall being as similar to fathers in general; or perceiving their father as unusual because of demands and laziness, but assuming violence to be rather common among fathers. Assuming that fathers are of different kinds can equally well as separating his violence from father himself be traced to trying to avoid perceiving the own father as deviant but attempting to attribute ‘ordinariness’ to him. Thereby, children’s general images of fathers do not appear as uncomplicated generalizations of their individual experiences of their own father, and nor do most of the children describe their own father simply in terms of a general image. Nor do they simply negate their knowledge about the one to conceptualize the other. Rather, the importance of the violent experiences of
their own father can be seen in some children’s difficulties to ‘fill their positive expectations on fathers in general with concrete content’ other than describing them as lacking the unwanted aspects of their own father. Accordingly, their own father seems to play a central role in their general understanding of fathers, but without being a clear positive or negative role model (cf. Hwang 2000).

Based on the interviews with the children in this study and the interpretations of them, it is too simplistic to assume that children who have witnessed their father’s violence against their mothers know of no other reality, that they simply take over their father’s interpretation or perspective, or that conclusions can be drawn from their mothers’ experiences. Even though their family may be a primary frame of reference for producing their view of the world, they relate – but in different amounts and in different ways – to realities and information outside their family. They have different approaches to dealing with sometimes inconsistent information and contradictory worlds of reality; and, even though sometimes relating closely to their father’s and/or mother’s experiences or interpretations, they try to reach their own conclusion based on their own unique position and the opportunities for and possible consequences of different alternatives for interpretation resulting from any such position.

To conclude, the children in the study seem to base their meaning-conciliations on multifaceted and nuanced reasoning, relating the normalization of, or resistance towards, the own father’s violent acts to wider categories than fathers in general, and perceiving the own father as normal or deviant in relation to fathers in general on the basis of many features in addition to his violence. As an example, although perceiving fathers as constituted by separate subgroups can be assumed to be more easily combined with resisting the violence of a smaller group of fathers, treating fathers as one homogenous concept can be part of normalization of their violent acts only if they are generally seen as non-violent (cf. Örjan). As the tendency to normalize the own father in this study is more salient than the tendency to normalize his violent actions or behaviour, theoretical frameworks for understanding children’s perspectives on their father’s violence must be sensitive to the difference between the act and the acting person within the context of generations.

**Negotiation re-negotiated**

To return to another, and for this study even more central, theoretical construct, Jeffner’s (1997) ‘space of negotiation’ refers to the principle understanding of a concept in a specific situation, or after a specific experience, necessitating withdrawal of the inclusive understanding of another (with
which it is not compatible). In practice, the space refers not only to the possibility to negotiate, but also to more peripheral parts of a conception, as the core that forms the essence of abstraction is less likely to be negotiated. In a specific situation, one can assume that it is understanding that can be traced to the more peripheral parts of a conception that are subjected to negotiation with the aim of keeping the conception that ‘is threatened in its essence’ by the interaction with the other. Which conceptions include cores that are essential are, of course, related to cultural assumptions. Following Jeffner’s theoretical construct means expecting negotiations within the children’s meaning-conciliations to include incompatibility between the conceptions of the own father and his actions and more general or principled conceptions of fathers and violence. But although the interviews with the children are interpreted in terms of negotiations, these negotiations are considerably different from the ones Jeffner describes.

Although conceptions of the own father and fathers are understood as negotiated, the understanding of violence does not in itself appear to be negotiated and re-interpreted by the children when encountered with the own father’s concrete acts (cf. Jeffner 1997). Acts and incidents that would by principle be understood as violence do not appear to be interpreted as something else, but the ‘unnegotiated’ principle understanding of violence affects perception of the individuals concerned. In addition, the children’s negotiated understandings of their own father as well as of general fathers do not appear to influence the ‘content of fatherhood’. Concrete acts of violence seem to call for handling the conceptions, but not as in redefinition or adjustment of core aspects, but rather as highlighting and clarifying those aspects capable of resisting the normalization of violent acts, or keeping some positive expectations of general fathers. Thereby, for most children a ‘line’ of negotiation does not appear to be moved between some principle understanding and concrete experiences, but rather, the concrete acts seem to influence the principle understandings of the persons. Thereby, for all children in this study, with the possible exception of Örjan, there appears to be less a negotiation allowing the interpreting individual to keep the cognitive structure that surrounds an individual involved in the act at the ‘expense’ of the principle understanding of that kind of act (cf. Jeffner 1997). Rather, the negotiation appears to enable them to keep the principle understanding of the act at the cost of a unified conception of individuals or groups of individuals. Örjan’s negotiation, similarly, does not seem to change the principle definition of violence, although his adjustment of the possible proportions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ by limiting or eliminating the possibility of defining actions as ‘in-between’ or ‘neutral’ might possibly be understood as being
within a space for negotiation, thus ‘moving the line’ for what is understood as ‘good’.

This dissimilarity between Jeffner’s theoretical construct of a ‘space of negotiation’ and the interviews in the study initiates a development of the theoretical construct of negotiation. The model of the interacting objects of understanding from Chapter 2 (Figure 1) can illustrate the different possibilities for negotiation. In this study, a space of negotiation, understood as moving the border of a conception to decrease its generalizability, implies some incompatibility between understandings of the generalized violence-conception and the violence of the own father (3), or between the generalized father-conception and the own father (1), as illustrated in Figure 4. Such incompatibilities are assumed to move the borders of the conceptions, so as to decrease the generalization of it within the space in which negotiation is possible.

*Figure 4. Space for negotiation model*

![Space for negotiation model](image)

However, the interviews with the children in this study indicate several approaches that can be understood as negotiations of different kinds. Rather than negotiating their understanding of one of the three parts that constitutes the whole in this model by decreasing its generalizability, the interviews with the children can be interpreted as holding on to rather inclusive conceptions of fathers and violence in general, as well as of the own father. But to handle the incompatibilities that nevertheless appear between the parts, the understandings are split, or ‘fissioned’. Although
violence can be considered bad and the own father primarily nice, his actions appear to be less redefined as something else than separated from his essential being. And, similarly, although fathers can be assumed to be nice and the own father uses violence, which is bad, his ‘fatherness’ is not contested, but fathers can in general be assumed to be of different kinds. Chapters 4 and 5 show how, rather than negotiating the generalizability, it can be kept by sub-categorizations of the different kinds of fathers and different aspects of the own father. Thereby, some of the negotiations that are identified in the children’s meaning-conciliations of cognitive structures that can not straightforwardly be unified for the children in this study can be better described as ‘conceptual fission’ (see Figure 5). Although this study does not identify it as crucial to the children’s meaning-conciliation, many of the children also create similar sub-categories of acceptable and unjustifiable violence, wherefore such a possibility is also included in Figure 5.

*Figure 5. Conceptual fission model*

![Diagram of conceptual fission model](image)

Although meaning-conciliating processes such as these can be assumed to more often be unconscious to the interpreting and meaning-conciliating individual, the term ‘fission’ here refers to the meaning-related goal of the process. The process of dividing the object into several kinds, as in separating the bad from the good, resemblances splitting as a defence mechanism known from psychodynamic developmental psychology (see Freud 1966/1979). But the process of conceptual fission in this study is an elaborated, logic and reasonable one, which can be made conscious by and for the fissioning
individual. This process can be described as containing the possibility to divide the conception while simultaneously keeping an integrated understanding of it and to be able to shift focus between those two levels. As such, the theoretical construct of ‘conceptual fission’ can be understood as referring to a strategic cognitive intervention to deal with meaning-conciliation including emotionally charged objects for conception.

As noted above, however, conceptual fission is hardly a theoretical construct that does justice to the meaning-conciliation in the interview with Örjan. The interpretation of the interview with Örjan rather focuses on the difference between violence and its opposite than on differences within what is understood as violence. It is of course possible to fission the conception of violence as well as those of the own father or fathers in general. However, among most of the children in this study the repudiation of violence altogether is rather apparent. Some, such as Tyra, focus on special features on physical force, so as not to fission the conception, but to define the borders of what is understood as violence or not. Rasmus comparatively straightforwardly differentiates between violence in different settings, within and outside sports, but this rather highlights the deviancy of his own father’s violence than is part of his overall meaning-conciliation. Petri’s differentiation of violent acts on basis of their consequences can be interpreted as part of conciliating his meaning around his father’s violence against his mother, but as he ultimately refer the definition of that only incident of violence to his parents, the differentiation of his own relationship with father from the father-mother relationship can be considered more significant. If the conception of violence would be fissioned in a similar dichotomization as the specific and general conceptions of fathers in this study, the result could be that some kinds of violence are inherently bad, but others justifiable or necessary. Within such a dichotomy, the violence of the own father can either be related to ‘the bad’ or to ‘the understandable’. Seeing the violence of the own father as justifiable and understandable would be compatible with a generally positive view of fathers. But although some interviews can be understood as indicating fissions in the children’s understanding of violence into repudiable and justifiable, they connect the violence of their own fathers more to the former kind of violence than to the latter. And since fathers are described as generally nice, connecting the violence of the own father, or of fathers in general, to the more repudiated kinds of violence would not help meaning-conciliation. Thereby, for no child in the study, including Örjan, fission within the conception of violence can be understood as crucial to meaning-conciliation.

What can be established is that some children’s understanding of their own father or of fathers in general can be understood as processes of
‘conceptual fission’, whereas others’ understanding of their own father’s actions can be better understood in terms of ‘a space for negotiation’. As the latter aims at understanding of ‘good’, both kinds of negotiations can enable resistance towards violent acts as well as normalization of father as a person. In the following, how the different approaches to meaning-conciliation can be understood in relation to some aspects that appear in the material as a whole is discussed.

Understanding children’s interacting conceptions
Understanding the children’s accounts in chapters 4–6 as processes of negotiation, as discussed above, enables further discussion about the material as a whole. Although the children’s life circumstances and individual experiences have similarities, their processes of understanding are interpreted as aimed at different solutions for logic, suggesting that they actively handle their specific life circumstances and their relationships with their parents as individuals (cf. Alanen 1992).

For Annelie, Daniel and Melvin in Chapter 4, the feature of fission is acknowledged as the essential basis for abstraction of their general understanding of fathers. Similarly, the children in Chapter 5 are interpreted as abstracting their understanding of their own father on basis of fission. Although no corresponding fission appears as vital for Örjan, the individual meanings attached to each theme can be converged, presumably supported by certain negotiation of ‘good’. Generalization processes seem dependent on the abstractions. To the children abstracting the concept of fathers on basis of fission, since the fission aims at creating opposites, generalization is interpreted as limited in application to subgroups of fathers. To the children fissioning the conception of their own father, generalization is generally understood as of secondary importance. And for Örjan, generalization of the ‘essence’ of fathers is interpreted as more clear-cut in its content, but whether the specific experiences of his own father or a general image is ‘primary’ is difficult to determine from the interview.

To reach meaning-conciliation, most children’s accounts in this study appear as including bargaining, meaning that they have to mediate and moderate at one end or the other, in order to make their discrepant understandings compatible. Örjan’s normalization-like interpretations of his father’s actions differ from those of the other children’s, since they reject actions they define as unjustifiable. Some in that process define their own father’s actions as deviant in a general perspective, while others define their own father’s actions as normal for some fathers, but not for others, making some fathers a group from which bad can be expected. Contrary to the possible expectation that children tend to be loyal to their parents, almost all the children (not Örjan)
are interpreted as basing their main understanding on defying rather than normalizing acts of violence. Assuming that acts of violence are less likely without some processes in favour of normalization in the family, the strategy to go against or even contravene such normalization of violent acts, is noteworthy among the majority of the children.

Although children generally have the opportunity to identify with both their parents, for most children in this study, relating themselves to what they perceive as their mother’s and their father’s good sides can be assumed to be obstructed by their father’s violence against their mother. Father’s violence against mother signals that the mother and father symbolize different and incompatible qualities. To the children, the violence of the father, and the victimization of the mother that it results in, may form negative aspects that obstruct identification with any of the parents. From such a perspective, the separations in the understandings of the own father as well as of general fathers may serve as means to protect the child’s self-conception from the impact of the own father’s violence, and from the possibility of own deviancy related to violence-use as well as from being ‘overwhelmed by victimization’. Similarly but contrarily, negotiation related to violence as a general understanding can be seen as a means to protect the image of father, which indirectly may be related to protecting the conception of self. As an example, a widened conception of the opposite of violence can serve as a protection of the own choices, such as initiatives to make contact with the own father. Thereby, all the negotiations identified in this study can be functional for the children in developing their self-understanding.

To understand the differences in the children’s targets for negotiation, I suggest turning to certain circumstances and possible consequences of interpretation as subjectively experienced by the children. Since the starting point – that children are competent and acting subjects – implies an analytical perspective on their interpretations as rational, some circumstances that may promote different directions for rational interpretation are related to the children’s ‘narratives’ as representatives of the different approaches described in the former chapters. Some themes and aspects arise and become especially noticeable in the interviews, either appearing in early interviews and followed up in later ones or appearing only after seeing the interview material as a whole. To understand how children interpret acts within the family, about which the meaning is contested and the parents are assumed to hold different views, I suggest that the themes below may guide children’s interpretation. They are related to the child’s relationship with the person conducting the act that is to be interpreted and understood, and are also related to each other, but separated here for clarification. Since the interviews were structured around each individual child’s account, and the overall design for
material collection flexible, the aspects were covered in different depth in the interviews. In addition, since some questions that were posed at the beginning were adjusted and transformed during the process into more ‘refined’ or sensitive questions, the discussion that follows can be considered empirically based, although the wider theoretical framework guided material collection and analysis.

Since the aim is to recognize what can be interpreted as central negotiations within each child’s meaning-conciliation, and most interviews can be understood as implying several different negotiations at the same time, a further analysis of the circumstances that surround the approaches can only be tentative. Further, approaches such as the ones suggested in – chapters 4, 5 and 6 might, with other information about the children’s families and the different family members’ relationships and violence, be possible to relate to the amounts and kinds of violence that ‘have actually’ taken place within the children’s families. This study, which focuses on cognitive meaning-conciliations per se, does not imply neglect of ‘actual facts’, but rather points to the importance of intellectual and meaning-creating processes. The aim here being to try to focus on what negotiation can be understood as most central for meaning-conciliation is part of trying to identify different negotiations for theoretical development, and entails a simplified depiction of the children’s accounts.

**Direct and indirect victimization**

Violence against a mother seems to be associated with a risk for the children to be also ‘direct victims’ of violence in their family (e.g. Edleson 1999b). However, this material includes relatively few spontaneous references to the children as victims of violence or abuse. This may have to do with mothers of physically abused children declining participation in the project because of experiencing a risk of losing their child if knowledge about child abuse in their family came out. Accordingly, the material may include fewer cases of child abuse than in a proportional sample. However, direct questions about whether the children were also ‘direct victims’ of violence in their family were not the aim of the study; nor were they posed during the interviews. Therefore, the few references to such aspects may also have to do with the children in the interviews ‘guarding’ the most severe taboos or family secrets. Similar aspects can explain the few references to sexual violence (only Tyra in a general suggestion) compared with the many references to physical violence, threats, verbal belittling and negligence. For the children similarly, separating violent acts aimed at the mother from those aimed at the child her- or himself can be a means for protecting the own feelings towards fat-
her, or might be a question of separating ‘abuse’ from ‘smack’ in a legal sense.

Leaving child abuse and children being used as ‘tools’ by a parent to hurt the other aside (cf. Chapter 1), having to witness violence in one’s home can in itself be argued to be a kind of psychological maltreatment (see SOU 2001b: 122; Almqvist & Broberg 2004). However, differentiating between direct and indirect victimization can offer the benefit of allowing recognition of the variety of difficulties that children may experience as well as a more detailed analysis and discussion. In the interviews, the children approach the violence-related issues differently, and their descriptions of violence in general as well as within their own families vary in how they themselves relate to it.

The accounts of Annelie, Melvin and Daniel are interpreted in terms of fissioning their general understanding of fathers. They also seem to hold the opinion that the violence of their father is an important part of his ‘essential being’ as well as of their common relationship, and the issue of victimization is apparent in the interviews. They all describe their own father mainly in terms of what violent acts or other violence-related behaviour he has carried out within their families. Although, among those three, only Daniels describe being a ‘direct victim’ of his father’s physical violence, their relating to the whole area of the interview themes is interpreted as from a victim’s perspective. Although some other children describe situations or actions that include features of what can be called violence directed towards themselves, they do not present themselves as victims in the same way. Instead, they present their relationship with their father as mainly consisting of other, more positive, aspects, such as Rasmus, or by differentiating between violent actions aimed at their mother and themselves, such as Petri.

Thereby, the children who substantiate negotiations of general fatherhood and simultaneously acknowledge their own father as a perpetrator of violence also rather explicitly seem to take a victim’s perspective in relation to the issues of violence and fathers. They describe violence from the perspective of themselves as victims, even though not necessarily as a consciously chosen perspective. These differences in their accounts suggest that victimization in this sense is something subjective rather than ‘factual’. As an example, Daniel and Rasmus, being brothers and talking about the same family, both describe how their father’s behaviour affects the entire family, but approach the subjective feature of their own victimization with different focuses – Daniel on how he himself is affected by father’s behaviour and Rasmus on father’s general being. ‘Inherent’ or ‘hidden’ processes of ‘trying to hurt mother through hurting children’ by more ‘sophisticated’ means than direct, overt physical or psychological violence may be part of the children’s
experiences without appearing in the interviews. But without disregarding such experiences, focusing on the subjectivity of victimization can, although all the children in the study in another sense can be said to be victims, stress the aspect of seeing oneself as affected by actions that are not necessarily aimed at one self.

If the inner structure of self, as discussed in Chapter 2, is thought to be grounded in early childhood and at the age of the children in this material largely formed, victimization as a subjectively perceived circumstance during childhood can be assumed central to a child’s understanding of her- or himself. Even if the self is changeable, once it is established in relation to victimization, since victimization per se is associated to objectification and ‘powerlessness’, one would expect that a ‘positive’ input from the ‘outside’ is necessary to remove that experience. The lack of direct victimization is not in itself enough for a change ‘from within’, although the understanding of the self in general can be changed throughout life. From this perspective, seeing the self as something the individual can choose, and change as the result of strategic and logic choices in situations, contexts or times, has its limitations. A chosen self-conception can be assumed to be more easily changed than a self-conception associated with powerlessness that has been forced upon the individual in some way.

An individual’s sense, or conception, of self being closely related to interpersonal interaction has its limitations as well as its possibilities. As it depends on the actions and reactions of others, the individual has limited opportunities to influence how it develops. Nevertheless, many situations include an opportunity to choose whom to interact with, and also to discontinue interaction that influences the understanding of the self negatively. One can, to some extent, choose others, and also choose to act towards them in ways that encourage them to reciprocate in certain ways. Compared with many social situations and social contacts that are possible to seek or avoid, the relative ‘inescapability’ of the social interaction with parents within one’s family and household for a child means that the possibilities to avoid the actions of those others are constrained. Thereby, the limited possibilities to ‘escape’ what these actions do to the own self-conception create a circumstance within which aspects that the individual would in other situations have avoided may affect the sense of self. Through such involuntary interaction or experience, unwanted aspects of the self, such as perceived victimization, can be ‘forced upon’ the individual.

Although the material in this study is small, it suggests a theoretical possibility that subjectively experienced victimization and fission of the general father-conception, rather than fission of the own father, have something to do with each other. Assuming that such negotiation of the general father-
conception is likely to be related to a ‘homogenous’ image of the own father, including acknowledging his violence, perceived victimization can make inclusion of violence in understanding of the own father more logical. Alternatively, acknowledging father’s violence as an important aspect of his ‘being’ could form the basis for perceiving oneself as a victim. In similar vein, Hällberg’s (2004) material appears to indicate a relationship between children’s direct physical victimization of father’s violence and a greater focus on the unacceptability of his violence.

Fathers’ functions and importances
Another feature that appears in the interviews has to do with the functions and importances of fathers from the children’s perspectives. While fathers are generally assumed to be of benefit to their children (cf. Hyvönen 1993; Allwood 2000b; Plantin et al. 2000), the approaches of the children in this study include a variety of views on the functions and value of their own father as well as of general fathers. Overall, the concrete functions that the father fills for the child in everyday interaction can be assumed to constitute the basis for his importance, which is generalized to general expectations of functions of fathers (cf. Mead 1934/1972). And knowledge about fathers in general, including an expectation of them to fill certain functions for children would be assumed to guide the interpretation of the own father in the direction of expecting him to fill those functions, and this would be associated with conceiving him as important. However, the interviews in this material are interpreted as placing different emphases on functions and importance respectively.

The own father’s importance is in this study more concretely exemplified and stressed among the children conciliating their meaning by fissioning their understanding of him than among the other children. But whereas the importance for her that Belinda attributes to her father seems connected to fathers’ and mothers’ gendered and therefore unique functions, to Tyra and Tony the importance is interpreted as more related to abstract principled issues than to functions, especially if such are perceived as of more practical kinds. The functions of fathers appear in the interviews with the children as related to spending time together and doing ordinary, everyday things together, spending time at father’s place (and thereby gaining access to social contacts with friends that live in father’s neighbourhood or that father can drive them to). Similar to Hyvönen’s (1993) finding that boys relate fathers to physical activity and girls to communication, emphasizing fathers’ functions in terms of repairing and giving things appears to be more common among boys in this material, while girls describe fathers more in terms of being of general or principled importance. Thereby, describing the own
father as important is not related to any specific functions, but more to a variety of areas within which fathers can play a role.

In addition, the importance of the father can in this study not be easily connected to the amount and ‘quality’ of the contact or the children’s contemporary living situation in relation to their father. Among the children interpreted in terms of negotiation of general fathers, the contact and satisfaction with the contact vary from Annelie and Melvin seeing their fathers extremely rarely to Daniel seeing his father rather regularly, but not appreciating it very much. Similarly, the contact of the children interpreted in terms of negotiating their understanding of their own father, includes seeing father very rarely to living with him every second week. However, Petri, who sees his father regularly, wants to see his father more, as does Tyra, who sees her father very rarely. Rasmus appears rather content with his contact with father, and Belinda would rather live with only her mother than every second week with father. Altogether, the material includes children happy to see their father often or rarely as well as those wishing to see their father more often or not seeing much point in seeing him so often, which is not always in line with their parents’ wishes or beliefs about what would be best from their perspectives. This indicates that, within the limited material of this study, the importance of father can also be more straightforwardly associated with the children’s meaning-conciliation than to their contact with their father within their living situation.

What the children whose accounts are interpreted as indicating negotiations of the generalized father-conception have in common is not primarily that their father is not important to them. To the contrary, the effort that Melvin, for example, appears to put into making sense of his father and his behaviour can indicate that his father is important to him. And also in this group of children, the contact with father varies. Annelie and Melvin both describe little or no concrete, good or positive relationship with their father, and also seem to have poor contact with their father altogether. However, for Daniel, the regular interaction with father includes being subjected to father’s expressions of frustration, and he sees little genuine benefit from interaction with him. As, in comparison, the children whose accounts are interpreted as negotiations of their understanding of the own father seem to also explicitly include positive aspects, the feature that the children interpreted as negotiating their general father-conception is better described as a lack of functions attributed to fathers than as father not being important to them or as the children having little contact with him.

To conclude, for some children, the own father’s importance is manifested in more or less concrete functions. These can form a basis for generalized expectations of fathers’ functions for children, but general expectations of
fathers can also imply a tendency to interpret the own father’s behaviour in line with the general cognitive schema, and be especially open to signs of such good qualities in the own father. For other children, no concrete positive functions support the importance of their father, which is possibly compatible with associating him more with the negative experience of victimization than with positive interaction. The lack of positive examples of their own father’s functions makes the few concrete suggestions for general functions of fathers understandable. On the basis of these differences, this study suggests that experiencing father as important can be theoretically related to meaning-conciliation processes in which the understanding of him is fissioned, rather than his violence being treated as significant for the conceptualization of him. Another theoretical implication is that shortage of positive associations with the own father is related to fissioning the general father-conception rather than the image of the own father, which is comparatively homogeneous.

Violence – closeness and distance

While the aspects of victimization and the importance and functions of fathers have mainly been discussed in relation to fissions within the understandings of the own and generalized fathers, there is also an aspect related to the children’s direct images of violence that seem to be related to their meaning-conciliation approaches. In the interviews, no strategies for physical or cognitive distance from individual incidents of violence, as in trying to forget or distract themselves from individual incidents as described by, for example, Peled (1998) and Ungmark (1996) are discernable. This is possibly related to the aim of the study and the objectives of the interviews. However, in the children’s attitudes to violence in general, different approaches connected to distance and closeness appear.

The approach that is described earlier in terms of subjective victimization to father’s violence also includes associating violence in general primarily to concrete experiences in the child’s own life. Not only do Annelie, Daniel and Melvin describe violence by rather detailed examples. Their accounts are also interpreted as quite directly relating to the impact of these experiences on their lives. Thereby, their conception of violence as a whole can be interpreted as closely related to their experiences as individuals and possibly to their self-conceptions. Primarily associating violence to or thinking of it as something that goes on in families and referring to and exemplifying it with references to the own family may make violence outside families less relevant, which is an attitude quite different from the general discourse on violence. These associations with violence as almost solely related to personal experiences of the own father’s behaviour are understood as a result of
the experience as a victim due to its possible direct relations to self-understanding. As the subjective experience of victimization is interpreted as primary, it is constructed as an aspect in itself for those children, whereas their association with violence in a broader sense is not.

While Annelie, Daniel and Melvin relate to and exemplify almost exclusively by violence in families perpetrated by fathers also when talking about violence generally, the group of children interpreted in terms of negotiating their understanding of their own father refer to and talk about violence from a broader perspective. When describing violence, Belinda, Rasmus, Tomi and Petri refer to what can go on in wars, terror situations, streets, certain towns or town districts and schools as well as in families. Tyra and Tony, whose interviews are understood as implying that it is important on principle for them to see their father as nice, mostly exemplify with school-situations. Such descriptions of violence as related primarily to many different settings, and only possibly also to families, appear more in concordance with general discourse in Swedish society, and the variety of possible areas of violence can be understood as a comprehensive understanding of violence. It includes the possibility of violence in distal as well as proximate situations and settings.

As a contrast to primarily Annelie, Daniel and Melvin associating violence in general closely with concrete experiences in their own lives and approaching the issues from subjective victims’ perspectives, Örjan’s account implies a mainly principled view of violence, with few references to personally experienced knowledge. His account of violence is discreet, and includes no initiatives to present concrete examples. As his account includes only the view of violence as something distant and Örjan rather firmly does not acknowledge any of his father’s or his own acts as violence, no adjustment of a distanced and principled conception when encountered with a concrete situation in his immediate surroundings, as described by Jeffner (1997), can be identified. Rather, on Örjan’s account, the principle and distanced conception appears as an overall approach.

Thus, his firmly distanced approach to violence can be interpreted as a way of dealing with possibly difficult personal experiences of violence as well as of preventing actions from becoming such personal experiences of violence. Distancing oneself from violence in general can be a way to distance oneself from the acts of the own father that may be interpreted as violence. However, seeing violence as primarily something distant can also be related to the general discourse in society. If perpetration as well as victimization are generally related to ‘others’, the perceived distance can to some degree protect the self from the deviation of violence, and such societal images can enhance the necessity for distance.
Compared with all the other children in the study, who describe violence as something close, real or potentially part of their life by connecting it – at least in part – to concrete and personal experiences, Örjan’s distanced account of violence is as unique in the material as his overall approach to meaning-conciliation. Although the study only includes one child, Örjan, whose interview account is interpreted as conciliating meaning by focusing on the understanding of violence in itself, the intelligibility of a distanced attitude relative to his meaning-conciliation enables constructing this relationship as a theoretical, and thereby more general, possibility. This intelligibility between meaning-conciliation by a widely generalized conception of good so that violence is not part of the understanding of the own or any fathers and a distanced approach to violence does not, however, say anything about causality. The focus on goodness in the overall meaning-conciliation can support a distanced attitude to violence, and such an attitude to violence can make focusing on goodness more likely.

These features of subjective victimization, fathers’ importance and functions and a distanced approach to violence in the children’s accounts are in the following related to the three different approaches to meaning-conciliation described in the previous chapters.

**Understanding the different approaches to meaning-conciliation**

The different approaches to meaning-conciliation suggested in and structuring chapters 4–6 are neither clear-cut nor possibly consciously treated as central by the children, but rather more or less unconscious, more or less accepted and more or less implicit. Within this study, the features discussed above all co-occur with a certain approach to meaning-conciliation that they are intelligible with but not necessarily part of. Such intelligibility says nothing in itself about causality, but is discussed here as a feature that may promote or be more likely to be developed in relation to certain approaches to meaning-conciliation. This is discussed to further develop understanding of what constitutes parts of possible processes of meaning.

Overall, the meaning-conciliations of the children seem aimed at the relations between violence and their own father, and between violence and fathers in general, more than to the relation between their own father and fathers in general, and to be connected more to the own father’s violence than to violence or fathers in general. To further understand the mutual relations between their own father and his actions and their general images of fathers and violence, the following theoretical postulations can be developed:
1. For a child, to experience a sense of victimization in relation to the own father’s violence is related to the possibility of acknowledging father’s actions as violence. Also, seeing no functions to fathers or experiencing that the own father fails to live up to such expectations is related to such acknowledgement. The acknowledgement of father’s actions as violent is further related to the overall understanding of him, and this forms the foundation for thinking about fathers in general. In that process, conceiving fathers as generally nice is obstructed by the individual experiences of violence of the own father. Since conceiving fathers as generally violent is socially problematic, a homogenous image is negotiated into a conceptual fission of fathers in general into subgroups, such as the nice and the violent/bad. The relative firmness of the connection between the own father and violence means that his violence is significant for overall understanding of him and for a general understanding of violence. The understandings of the own father and of violence thereby almost merge and are associated with some fathers, while other fathers are separated from this united sphere of association (see Figure 1a). The fission in the conception of fathers in general can result either in two equal groups, or as an enhancement of the ‘normal’ by the ‘deviant’.

Separating the nice fathers from other fathers, and especially from one’s own father, might mean that the own father is deprived of the possibility to ‘represent’ ordinary nice fathers. Then, references might not be possible to draw from one group to the other, and the own father’s behaviour cannot be used for building general expectations about functions of fathers. In addition, an almost absolute focus on essential differences between the two groups can possibly imply a strategy to deal with perceived victimization. Since victimization in itself implies a dimension of powerlessness, division of fathers can offer double, and qualitatively different, possibilities to which to relate the conception of the own self. Since the ‘normal and nice’ fathers are seen as something completely separate from the own father, the notion of them provides an opportunity to relate to something completely distanced from the inner experience of victimization from the own father. Thereby, fission in the general conception of fathers can be related to the conception of self.

2. As another alternative, primarily perceiving the own father as socially, instrumentally or by principle important within the own personal relationship is associated with interpreting father’s violence as a less vital or essential part of his personality. Although acknowledging his actions as violence, by a fissioned understanding of the own father, the violence can be separated from the core conception of him. Since the understanding of the own father is fissioned into different focuses, some aspects of him can be connected to fathers in general, which are mainly assumed to be non-violent, and others
to violence. Within this approach, since the children mainly do not connect fathers to violence, the ‘trinity’ of the themes that formed the starting point of the study is treated as two separate parts that have little to do with each other (see Figure 1b).

This ‘double perspective’ on the own father can provide an opportunity to acknowledge father’s good and bad aspects without true integration of the two on one level. By switching focus between the different perspectives, the impact of father’s violence can be weighed against his importance. On another level, the totality of the two sides forms an inclusive and varied understanding of father. If such an approach is used in relation to the self, an overall self-understanding can be used for trivializing bad behaviour. As an example, if a child experiences violence within her or his family, and learns that violence is bad, but also a way of dealing with conflict (cf. Baumeister 1996), the possibility of separating actions from an overall conception of individuals can enable, or be a result of, maintaining a positive self-image despite one’s own use of violence.

3. Perceiving violence only as something distant, however, is related to not acknowledging violence as included in the possible action repertoire of the own father or of fathers in general. Thereby, the absence of violence as a possible aspect of fatherhood gives rise to a similarity between the own father and other fathers. As this similarity stresses the normality of the own father, the distance to violence creates an extended opportunity for interpreting individual acts as its opposite, ‘nice’ or ‘good’.

Perceiving violence as something generally distant in relation to one self will not only facilitate distancing it from fathers and the own father. It can also mean that interpreting actions of the own father in terms of violence are threatening, as the concept is reserved for more severe situation and therefore has especially intimidating associations.

All three postulations can be understood from the viewpoint of the primary importance of making sense of the own father and his actions. According to the reasoning above, if the conception of the own father is problematic, e.g. due to actions that can be interpreted as violence, the general conceptions are of less importance and meaning-conciliation focuses on the most immediately important, namely the own father. A fissioned understanding enables acknowledging the bad as well as the good of the own father. However, if some actions of father are acknowledged as violence and the child in an intellectual sense has ‘come to terms with’ perceiving father as a perpetrator of violence, its implications for fatherhood in general may become the focus of meaning-conciliation. Again, fission can enable
acknowledging the violence of some, while good can be expected from others. Finally, if father is perceived as nice and none of his actions in any way interpreted as violence, general fathers can, similarly to the societal view, be conceived as nice with no explicit exceptions. But if there are reasons to assume that others may make other interpretations of some of father’s actions, an inclusive understanding of ‘nice’ may facilitate meaning-conciliation.

These three postulations do not mean that perceiving oneself as a victim in relation to father’s violence is incompatible with experiencing closeness to and functions of him, nor that those aspects are the ends of any single continuum. Nevertheless, each of them theoretically can form a ‘force’ that enhances the likelihood of a certain approach to meaning-conciliation. The material in this study does not exclude the possibility that these features can affect the approach to meaning-conciliation as well as vice versa, and may also be part of circular processes in which both fuel each other. However, I have argued that the logical intelligibility of co-occurrence implies that the features can be understood as stronger or weaker forces, which make certain roads for interpretation more likely than others without steering interpretation in a causal sense.

This understanding of children’s approaches to meaning-conciliation is based in an understanding of the most significant aspect of meaning-conciliation within each interview. It is thereby not an issue of which negotiation can be identified, since often many can be identified within the account of any one individual child. Nor is it an issue of ‘strength’, in the way that stronger signs of one particular negotiation make certain other aspects more likely. This study simply deals with which negotiation is most significant for conciliating meanings into a logical understanding of the whole.
8. Discussion

This study focuses on ten children’s meaning-conciliations for comprehending their own father and those actions of his that their mother has experienced as violence, in relation to the children’s general images of fathers and violence. The qualitative and open interviews, aiming at the three ‘centres of meaning’ – of fathers, violence and the own father – enable recognition of the negotiations at the intersections of their conciliated contents. The interviews highlight the intricate relationships between the different parts of understanding and how, for example, the normalization of violent acts must be seen as separate from the normalization of individuals. While one interview more directly can be related to a space of negotiation, the negotiations of most children are found to be better described as ‘conceptual fission’. Conceptual fission aims at describing how children prefer to divide their understanding of a phenomenon to decreasing generalizability. Rather than renegotiating the meaning of a conception when confronted with two principle and incompatible understandings, it can be kept by division into subcategories. Thereby, the primary overall conception does not need negotiation, but attention can be directed either at the overall all-inclusive or comprehensive conception or at one or other of its elements. From different perspectives, various aspects can be focused on and given significance.

The line of argument developed in the previous chapter constitutes a tentative suggestion for understanding some variations in how children can deal with the general images of fathers and violence, and their own father and his ‘possibly violent’ acts. The different approaches are not to be seen as isolated reflections of children’s ‘real meanings’, but rather as points of departure for curious thinking about and attention to the variety of possibilities of meaning in children’s worlds as they see them. The understanding this study suggests is based on a categorization of the children’s accounts, which is related to the general aim of the study as well as to its specific theoretical starting points. The focus of the aim and the theoretical framework draw attention to certain aspects and discourage developing further aspects that other theoretical starting points may emphasize and focus results upon, such processes of denial (cf. Christensen 1988) or children’s levels of maturity and awareness (cf. Weinehall 1997). Because of the ambition to develop theoretical alternatives for children’s meaning-conciliation
approaches, the categorizations are not necessarily based on the intrinsically most striking features of each interview, but on those features that – according to my interpretation – are critical for each child’s conciliated meaning. This further means that the often-overlapping aspects that the children disclose can be seen as indications of the flux of meaning, i.e. how overall meaning by partial adjustments can be changed in a constant process.

The children’s interview accounts are characterized by the complexity of and sensitivity to what they have to take into account, and of relative solidity of opinion. Their opinions are generally more nuanced and elaborated than stereotyped. As an example, despite their personal experience of their own father and his violence, the children do not simply assume that fathers in general use violence. And they do not, on the basis of their own father being the perpetrator of the acts, assume that the acts are therefore not to be seen or classified as violence; nor do they deprive their own father of his ‘fatherness’ because of his violence. The overall picture includes the children’s nuanced processes of meaning, including less their processes of one-dimensional or denying explanations, rationalizations or simplifications than their complex and dynamic understandings of complex and multifaceted worlds. The meaning-conciliating processes that this study focuses on may not be conscious to the children, but point to the diversity of approaches that children can adopt in relation to the issues in question.

This final chapter discusses some tendencies in the study that highlight its contributions to theoretical nuances in relation to other research in the field. In doing so, some features of the meaning-conciliations, as they appear as inner and intrapersonal practices in the interviews, are related to the starting points of the study. In that respect, the three postulations presented in the previous chapter have two features in common. First, all three approaches include creating cognitive distance to violence – either for one subgroup of fathers, for the overall, essential or principle understanding of the own father within the child’s own relationship with him or for fathers altogether, including the child’s own. Second, within all three postulations, the own father is seen as the primary object for understanding in relation to the generalized conceptions of fathers and violence. But before developing these features, some aspects of the generalizability of the results of the study are discussed.

**Contributions of the study given its limitations**

Generally, as the results of the study are based on only ten qualitative interviews, they must be seen as tentative. The small scope of the study necessitates general awareness of possible alternative aspects that may be determinant of individual children’s meaning-conciliations. And interviews
with children who are, for example, still living with their father or whose mother has not moved with them to a Women’s House might provide insight into other, additional, approaches to meaning-conciliation.

However, given these limitations, the theoretical alternatives for children’s approaches to meaning-conciliation that form the results of the study enable a more nuanced understanding of the intellectual processes that children, as competent actors, develop. As an example, the framework developed here implies suggestions for understanding other research findings regarding how children who have experienced the violence of their father perceive him. Research about children whose fathers have subjected their mother to violence has recognized children’s acknowledgement of their father’s good qualities and positive interaction with and emotions towards him, as well as very negative images, hate and thoughts of revenge (cf., e.g., Mullender et al. 2002; Peled 1998; Sternberg et al. 1994; Ungmark 1996; Weinehall 1997). This study suggests that such expressions can be understood as parts of patterns related to general images of violence and fathers. Although almost all the children in the study assign responsibility for the violence to the father (cf. Weinehall 1997; Mullender et al. 2002), seeing father as mainly ‘bad’ is here understood as related to a certain subjective experience of victimization and to expecting little function of fathers and especially the own. Seeing father as bad is, in this study, interpreted less as connected to feelings of hate and revenge (cf. Weinehall 1997), than of disappointment – possibly related to hate being more difficult to express for younger children, who may still experience greater dependency on the relationship with their father. This study also suggests that such a perspective is related to conceptually fissioning the understanding of fathers in general – so as to be able to somewhat ease the deviancy of the own father, but also expect good from other fathers. Acknowledging father’s positive sides is, in this study, related to a fissioned understanding of the own father, which enables acknowledging his advantages as well as his violence, and also to what can be understood as normalization of the own father. While the latter is suggested to be associated with perceiving father as important despite acknowledging his violent actions, the normalization of father does not include perceiving violence as normal or acceptable (cf. Ericksen & Hendersen 1992; Peled 1998; Weinehall 1997), but rather refers to normalization of the own and other fathers as individuals. The patterns that this study suggests thereby constitute a model for acknowledging the logic of the children’s varied experiences as they perceive them.

Further, the basic elements of these theoretical alternatives for meaning-conciliation may have relevance outside this group of children. The significance of experiencing father’s violence against mother for a child can be
reduced to a few basic aspects. The core features can be presumed to be related to not being able to avoid direct and continuous interaction with a person whom one, on the one hand, is expected to and wishes to respect in a positive relationship, and who, on the other – in one way or another – takes unacceptable actions towards a loved one. From the results of this study, questions can be derived which suggest how the results may be generalizable and some areas of research that can shed light on the validity of the general theoretical construction. Do, for example, children who themselves have been the direct victims of some kind of violence from a close relative, tend to use meaning-conciliation approaches similar to the ones described in Chapter 4, i.e. to conceptually fission the understanding of a generalized group of people that the perpetrator represents? And would the children of parents who have been imprisoned for criminal offence, if they perceive their relationship as important, negotiate their understanding of that parent so that the parent’s main qualities are separated from the criminal act? Could an entirely distanced attitude towards intoxication promote an expansion of the understanding of soberness and exclude ‘true’ intoxication from the understanding of people associated with positive aspects? Further, can the theoretical constructs developed to understand intellectual processes in this study be related to some aspect of immaturity among the children, or can the meaning-conciliations of adults in similar situations be understood in a similar manner?

Chapter 2 suggests an aspect that might require special discussion in a study such as this, namely how children’s sex might possibly affect how they make sense of their fathers’ (possible) violence in relation to general understandings about fathers and violence. As gender is early identified as a generally fundamental marker of difference (cf. Hird 2002) and crucial to labelling others as well as ourselves (cf. Bjerrum Nielsen & Rudberg 1991), its importance as a ground for identification would suggest that children ‘ally’ with interpretations of the adult of the same sex. Boys would be assumed to identify and possibly ‘ally’ with the father perpetrator and his perspective, and girls to feel more similar to their mother, the victim. However, the different approaches to meaning-conciliation do not coincide with the children’s sex. While Örjan is a boy and his account can be interpreted as the most similar to a general perpetrator’s perspective in avoiding interpreting acts as violence – as described, among others, by Hearn (1998), Hydén (1994) and Skjørten (1989) – a conclusion about an association can not be drawn from the material at large. A tendency to describe violence as inescapable can possibly primarily be traced more to the girls. But that aspect is not interpreted as crucial to their overall approaches to meaning-conciliation, and is therefore left for future analyses to investigate.
Rather, the main picture of describing what has happened in the family as fights, but attributing the responsibility (at least mostly) to father, rather describes the tendencies of boys as well as girls. Although the girls’, as well as the boys’, accounts are interpreted as different approaches to meaningconciliation (see chapters 4, 5 and 6), their perspectives on their fathers’ violence remind mostly of what can be considered a women’s perspective. Thereby, the children do not appear to ‘ally’ with their parent of the same sex. While gender can be assumed to be crucial to the general image of men’s violence differing from women’s (e.g. in terms of primary caregivers to children and general association with violence) so that the children would have had quite different interpretations of and attitudes towards violence from their mothers, their own sex does not appear to be of much significance. The issue of being or not being like the own father appears to be a general question rather than one mainly connected to gender. Thereby, either the children perceive the violence of their father as so clearly unjustifiable that that (alone) guides their interpretation and standpoint, or their perspective is more related to which of their parents is in greater control of the situation or on which they depend more, than identification.

Interestingly, Christensen (1990) in her study found no sex differences in how the children had reacted to the violence in their families, and Mullender et al. (2002), similarly, found little variation in coping strategies in terms of the children’s sex. Perhaps changed premises for choosing identification objects, including young people’s own individuality being the norm and ideal, makes identification with parents subordinate in general and suggests a more relational perception of the self (cf. Bengtsson 1994; 2001). Since people today, including children, generally spend more time within their own generation group and the child collective can be a secondary or supplementary primary group of reference (Näsman 1994), children at younger ages in some ways are less dependent on their parents (only). For children in modern society, the opportunities for choosing to use a parent (cf. Alanen 1992) for purposes according to other criteria than her or his sex may imply that the perceived function of a father has to do with the individual relationship and the individual positions the child and father hold in relation to one another, as well as with the child’s general ideas about (gendered) parenthood in society. The positive, negative or lack of model functions of mothers and fathers for girls and boys, e.g. in gender identification (cf. Allwood 2000b; Hwang 2000), may symbolize a variety of categories (or roles), such as those of adults and parents, women or men. And if the bases for experiencing similarity transcend gender more than earlier, the complexity of experiencing similarity makes numerous possible bases for identification available to a child at any time. If children perceive gender (as subjectively understood) as
less crucial to identification than sometimes thought, whether their own conclusions about the situation and experiences in the family is more like their mother’s or their father’s will have less impact on their own sense of self. Then, their interpretations may (generally) be less limited as a result of “threats” to their sense of self.

**Children’s elaborated condemnation of violence**

One theme, in which the contributions of this study become especially salient, relates to the children’s understandings of and attitudes towards violence. As the differences in the children’s understandings about violence have already been highlighted in the discussions about the different approaches to meaning-conciliation in previous chapters, this section discusses some general tendencies across the material.

A lack of consensus about the concept of violence means that many acts, at least theoretically, can be either included in or excluded from its definition, and interpretation may have consequences for individuals’ perpetration and victimization. The theory about a generationally transmittable cycle of violence suggests that children experiencing or witnessing the violence of parents generally will perceive violence as a solution to conflicts (cf. Baumeister 1996: 278; Widom 1989). Moreover, the importance fathers are generally attributed (cf. Plantin et al. 2000) can be thought to impede inclusion of the acts of the own father in what is understood as violence, and facilitate or promote normalization of his ‘possibly violent’ acts. That boy witnesses especially are more likely to approve of acts of violence (Edleson 1999a) can be understood in terms of learning experiences in the family in combination with the assumed importance of fathers and men’s generally narrower conception of violence (cf. Hearn 1998); a narrow conception enables the interpretation of more acts as something else.

Although normalization, as in a tendency to denominate father’s actions as something other than violence, and regarded as normal, is a strategy that would be assumed to be common among the children in this study, as Ericksen and Hendersen (1992; see also Peled 1998) suggest, the accounts of the children rather indicate a strong resistance. As an opposite approach to normalization, resistance implies focusing on the unacceptability and condemnation of violence. Such condemnation is aimed not only at violence in general or as a principle conception, but also at the specific violent acts of the own father. Several children exemplifying justified violence in distant situations, such as in war or political chaos, or in situations recurrent in action movies, such as robberies or the police being attacked, but exemplifying unjustified violence with situations that could easily occur in a family or among friends, can be interpreted as indicating stronger condem-
nation of personally experienced violence than in general. When they initiate talking about their fathers’ violence, most children describe it in terms of ‘fighting’. That may indicate a general familiarity with the term or contain a presumption of mutuality. But even though some also more explicitly acknowledge some kind of ‘contributions’ of both parents in such situations (cf. Melvin), most are not hindered from also being rather clear about the mother being the main victim and the father the main perpetrator (except Örjan and possibly Petri). Thereby, the children in this study do not generally show the kind of ambivalence with regard to who causes the violence that Ungmark’s (1996), Weinehall’s (1997) and Peled’s (1998) studies describe.

For many children, the father’s perpetration of violence is seen as either immutable or escalating to the worse (cf. Tyra, Tony and Tomi) unless obstructed by external circumstances (cf. Daniel), which is similar to Weinehall’s (1997) findings. While some children seem to assume that those who use violence want to, as in the perpetration of violence requiring intention, others think that – for some people – the urge to use violence is so strong that they can not resist it. The former assumption can imply full responsibility of the perpetrator, while the latter can include pitying the perpetrator as a victim of ‘inner forces’. However, to most children, such ‘inner forces’ appear not necessarily to be thought of as making people do things they do not want to, but rather as ‘making them want to use violence’. For others, (cf. Belinda and Annelie) not only the own father’s but violence in general appear inescapable, due to inevitable circumstances such as people’s differences or changing moods. But even inevitability and assuming that perpetrators would rather have avoided violence if they had been able to do not appear as extenuating circumstances for the children, since they can still not understand why violence would have to be the outcome in situations where they saw other solutions (cf. Melvin and Daniel). Overall, the children in this study describe their father’s violence as disproportionate to what they understand is its causes, and thereby it is incomprehensible and unpredictable – which is in line with the findings of Heinänen and Särkelä (1985), Peled (1998), Ungmark (1996) and Weinehall (1997).

The close connections many children seem to make between the most serious and the most common forms of violence (cf. Belinda) might mean that clearer significance is associated with the core of the conception, and/or could partly explain the common assumption that violence requires physical strength. As an example, although the children generally seem to conceive violence as a rather wide term, and can describe extensive experiences of fear and being belittled and limited in their lives by their father, they tend to justify their definition of his acts as violence mainly on the basis of his
physical actions. While psychological aspects may be crucial to their overall perception of their father, justifying naming father’s actions as violence seems mainly based on physical acts. Violence requiring strength could in turn be related to another common prerequisite for defining acts as violent in the material, namely the successful achievement of a goal. Thereby, violence appears to the children to depend on its consequences more than on the dynamics of the violent act in itself.

The incomprehensibility and repudiation of violence in general as well as the violence of their own father can perhaps be related to the physical consequences that men’s, as the stronger party, violence can result in (cf. Wallace 1996; Straus & Gelles 1990; Stets & Straus 1990). Men’s strength and the negative outcomes of violence appear to be crucial to the children’s understanding of violence, and this is what may be perceived as not in proportion to what has triggered it, i.e. the ‘wrongs’ that the mothers and children have done. Experiences of severe violence as a response to comparatively minor mishaps may explain why many of the children discuss violence in terms of not only innocent, but also unprepared victims. Thereby, the children’s descriptions of violence as from their perspectives generally appearing ‘out of the blue’ or without explanatory context can be descriptions of the living condition that violence in the family implies. While such a feature in the children’s descriptions would be in line with research about family violence, seeing their father as ‘changeable’ is more complex. Father’s changeability can be interpreted as including times without violence as his good sides, while some researchers stress that such changes are an essential part of the violent pattern and a prerequisite for a continuous and developing violence process (cf. Lundgren 1997).

The few references to shame and guilt due to assumed responsibility for the violence can, apart from the interviews not focusing on such aspects, have to do with the criteria for participation in the study excluding those children who are affected the most by the violence in their family. For the families in the study ‘the story was out’ and one can assume somewhat different approaches from children living in families where the violence is (yet) not talked about and no action has been taken, and the child thereby possibly receiving more signals from everybody in the family that everything in some way is okay. Thereby, the unexpected strength of resistance within the children’s approaches in this study could have to do with the interviews taking place after the children have moved from their father. And although some variation can also be related to possible differences in the amount and pattern of violence in the families (cf. Saunders 1992), the children’s general condemnation of violence might indicate a contrast to a ‘cycle of generationally transmitted violence’, criticized by many (c.f. Baumeister
However, this will not necessarily mean that one can take for granted that the children have not ‘integrated their fathers interpretation’ into their ‘behavioural repertoire’. The intellectual approaches and presentations in the interviews may not correspond in any simple way to how they may act in future individual situations. However, the repudiation of violence in this study can also be related to children in general being rather definite that children should not have to live with violence in the family and their generally ‘very clear understanding that men who abuse are selfish and unreasonable, that they are responsible for their own behaviour, and that it is unfair when others are made to pay with their health, happiness and quality of life’ (Mullender et al. 2002: 230).

In line with repudiating violence, all the interviews in the study share the feature of creating a cognitive distance between violence on the one hand and some fathers or some aspects of the own father or, for Örjan, fathers altogether, including his own, on the other. In line with the negotiations that can be identified in the material, one can assume that fissioning the understanding of violence would provide a good possibility to interpret the own father’s actions as ‘less bad violence’. But no such reasoning is found in any of the interviews. This can be understood in terms of the children understanding the general discourse of violence as so uniform that such differentiation is not possible. Alternatively, it is not relevant to understanding the actions of their father and other fathers (cf. Rasmus), since they believe that violence, including that of their father, is to be repudiated and not excused or its significance minimized, which is possibly related to generally negative attitudes to violence that children learn early (Baumeister 1996; Cerulo 1998). Such created distance to repudiated violence constitutes a feature that unites the children, despite the different approaches towards the whole area of meaning-conciliation.

Non-negotiable ‘fatherness’

Another interesting tendency in this study can be recognized in none of the children, with the possible exception of Melvin, negotiating ‘fatherness’ in itself, e.g. by decreasing the understanding of fatherness when confronted with violence or by depriving the own father of his fatherness because of his violence. From an outside and adult perspective, generally positive images about fathers and fatherhood (cf. Plantin et al. 2000; Eriksson 2003) might entail a theoretical possibility that children who have experienced their father’s violence will think that fathers that use violence are not ‘real fathers’. Especially considering that the fathers might not acknowledge the children’s needs or reflect on their role as fathers and the children’s own assumption
that their father will not change his violent behaviour (cf. Mullender et al 2002; Weinehall 1997), it is noteworthy that the theoretical alternative for logical meaning-conciliation of taking the own father’s use of violence as a reason for thinking of him as less than a ‘real father’ has very little correspondence in the material.

Melvin’s account can be interpreted as touching upon the possibility that murdering, which can be seen as the worst of all violence, may overshadow the fatherliness of fathers. Apart from this, fathers’ importances as fathers are a rather apparent feature in the interview material. Although some of the children’s accounts of their general conceptions of fathers and/or of their own father are interpreted in terms of fissions, such negotiations can be seen as parts of strategies for retaining the fatherliness of the own father, despite his violence. Although fatherliness in general would be conceptually incompatible with violence (cf. Eriksson 2003), fathers in general do not in this material become any less of a father because of the use of violence, although they are seen as varying. And the own father continues to be seen mainly as a father, either as a primarily good one, or as can be expected from some fathers. No child seems to protect her- or himself by adopting a distance from the own father by stating that he is not a real father. Although acknowledging and repudiating his violence, most children also seem to acknowledge their father’s complexity, here understood less in terms of difficulties in dealing with extreme images of good and evil (cf. Ungmark 1996; Weinehall 1997), but more as part of strategies for inclusive understanding (cf. Peled 1998).

Thereby, the children at large avoid challenging the content of both general concepts that the violence of their own father can be related to. As discussed above, they seem to stick to their definition and repudiation of father’s violence as violence and, as discussed here, they seem to stick to their definition of their father as a father. They do not appear to use their relationship with, or closeness or attachment to, their father as a ground for redefining violence or for challenging their father’s fatherliness. Fatherhood has been argued to be negotiable (Bekkengen 2002; see also Sjöberg 2000), meaning that fathers have possibilities to choose the level and kind of responsibilities for their children, while the parenthood of mothers is relatively ‘unconditional’. In this study, the relative non-negotiability of fatherliness in general and of their own father from the children’s perspectives suggests that the negotiability of fatherhood is a negotiability that refers to parents’ perspectives.

Their reluctance to challenge the fatherliness of their fathers can be understood in relation to one recurrent theme in the children’s testimonies being the relationship between ‘factual’ violence and the allowance of it.
Irrespective of whether they refer to a general acceptance or to a lack of someone stopping their fathers, the assumption that the occurrence of violence indicates that it is allowed may indicate that the children on the whole think that their father’s behaviour, although they themselves do not approve it, is in a way acceptable. Such an assumption may be especially understandable if the children have perceived explicit lack of acceptance in the rhetoric and actions of those from whom the children expect help or intervention as lacking or insufficient. But also, a logic of assuming violence to deprive fathers of their fatherhood would, if combined with acknowledgement of the violence of the own father that all the children except Örjan express, make the child ‘fatherless’ in their understanding. From such a perspective, maintaining the conception of their own father’s fatherhood might simply be an indication that they prefer having a violent father to having no father at all.

Further, the children’s ‘irrefutability’ about their father’s fatherhood can be related to fathers generally ‘needing to be’ men (cf. Hagström 1999). Although fathers in the general discourse can not, as a rule, be related to violence, the association between violence, men and ‘manliness’ can form a basis for the children to handle the contradictory situation, e.g. by stressing the gendered uniqueness of fathers as parents (cf. Belinda, Rasmus and Tyra). Such reasoning can also mean that the gendered asymmetry of bad parenthood being unintelligible in relation to good motherhood but not to good fatherhood (Eriksson 2003) forms a basis for children to develop an understanding of their father’s violence – not as common, ordinary or to be expected from fathers in general, but possibly not as completely unacceptable, deviant and repudiated as one may assume that mothers’ violence would be. A strong connection between the children’s ideas about their own father as a father and about masculinity could be supported by the discourse on active, engaged and equal fatherhood – as presented, for example, by Plantin et al. (2000) – not coming across very clearly in the interviews as a whole. It is neither a prominent feature of the own father from the children’s perspectives, nor does it – in the lack of such ‘social/emotional’ aspects – form a ground for negotiating the ‘fatherhood of father’. Rather, the children seem to handle the ‘new discourse of active and family-oriented fathers’ by attributing more ‘material’ or physical than social, intellectual or emotional functions to fathers in general (cf. Allwood 2000b).

**The positioning of children’s perspectives**

The aspects discussed above can be related to the children’s specific living conditions and positioning at the time of the interviews. As an example, all the children were living with their mother, but had lived with their father...
until recently. Depending on how their relationships with their fathers develop, their views and attitudes towards their father as well as towards violence may change – if, for example, living with father for some becomes a more distant history. And, as they reach adolescence, gender differences may appear that are not salient at time of the interviews, e.g. concerning their general understanding of fatherhood. Further, although all the aspects discussed above are surprisingly conspicuous, all of them also include variation between the children as well as complexity and diversity in the material. In this section, one of the most important aspects that this study deals with, namely children’s own perspectives, is discussed as a more explicit starting point for approaching the material as a whole.

Apart from Örjan’s, the children’s understandings of their fathers’ violent acts have important similarities with what can be assumed to be their mothers’ perspectives. However, their view of their father as a person differing in that respect suggests that they have not simply adopted their mother’s perspective. In addition, although many children’s fissions for meaning-conciliation seem to be required by the importance of their father to them, it would be too simplistic to say that the children see the violence as deviant, possibly similarly to their mothers, but their father as normal. While the children’s attempts to understand can be interpreted as a ‘usage’ of the understandings of others, they can also be related to the children’s positions in relation to their experiences. As participatory witnesses, their position in their families may contain action as well as some responsibility, but not control. The position of participatory witnesses means they are not the primary victims (although some are that as well) and as such, it contains distance, but not detachment. The duality of this unique position provides a starting point for understanding the children’s perspectives as logical.

When initiating a study about children’s perspectives, including interviewing children about their father’s (possible) violence against their mother, an especially central issue is that of loyalty. As an example, loyalty to parents might mean that the children will not confide information about tabooed and silenced violence in their families to an unknown researcher. In this study, most children readily spoke of their experiences in their families, although every aspect of the violence might not have been covered. Thereby, their accounts do not seem to be problematically limited by loyalty to ‘family secrets’. Based on similar experiences of child interviews, Heinänen and Säerkelä (1985) raised the question of whether children’s loyalty to parents and therefore reluctance to tell researchers about their family’s situation and living conditions, and their own feelings and relation to the parents, to some extent is a myth. Perhaps children’s protection of their parents’ weaknesses has decreased as a result of individualization (cf. Quortrup 1994: 10).
Alternatively, perhaps child interviewing has developed so that researchers more easily receive the children’s mandate to talk about such issues. Or perhaps children’s loyalty has been over-estimated as a result of theoretical assumptions.

But primarily, loyalty to parents is assumed to affect the reliability of children’s interview accounts if these are replications of their parents’ views and interpretations rather than their own. But in the case of fathers’ (possible) violence against mothers, the vastly different positions in relation to interpreting the (violent) acts of men perpetrators and women victims entails that children only with some difficulty can be loyal to both their parents’ positioned interpretations, but have to choose. Although the theory of violence normalization implies that interpretations and meaning can be forced upon others, the main theoretical assumptions in this study imply that the very interaction between interpersonal and intrapersonal processes gives the interpreting individual some possibility ultimately to choose between perspectives. Since violence in children’s families in itself implies that ‘loyalty to parents’ may be better be understood as ‘loyalty to mother or father’, and children in such cases can be assumed, at least to some extent, to be familiar with both perspectives, the decision they take can be assumed to be both well-substantiated and their own. Thereby, the participation of children in the processes within their family may, combined with the access to both parents’ views that the relative distance may provide, offer to children unique conditions for elaborated and ‘informed’ understandings.

Also, the uniqueness of the children’s accounts and meaning-conciliation approaches, as interpreted here, in relation to men perpetrators’ and women victims’ general views, suggests that their loyalty (at least) is not absolute and all-inclusive. The children’s unique positions as children within the family in general, as well as their unique position as a ‘participatory witness’ in relation to the violence their father has carried out against their mother, and their living situation including relatively recent physical distance from father combined with more ‘dependency’ on mother at time of interview, may imply that loyalty (on part of the children) is to be seen as a rational and, possibly on some level, conscious and strategic choice – depending on practical social circumstances as well as perhaps on parenthood per se.

As children, their interpretations and understandings must be understood relative to their living conditions. As an example, as under-aged, they must conform to the living arrangements that adults decide and provide, and especially the taboo surrounding violence in families will mean a limiting circumstance for the forming of their lives. As having most of their life in front of them, and as children to their parents, their father’s violence will affect his role as object for identification and as one of their closest relatives.
Further, while modern society offers a variety of choices, it also demands taking a personal stance. If children’s processes of learning how concepts are used and how to interact within social relationships are more explicit than adults’, the necessity of not ‘making a bad deal’ in the negotiation of understanding of concepts may be especially important. While an adult may be confident about the validity of her or his conceptions, and therefore feel free to manipulate them temporarily, or adjust and then readjust them according to circumstances, a child might (perhaps unconsciously) know the significance of ‘getting things right’ – knowing that once a conception is formed it might be very difficult to change it. A vague feeling of the severe consequences of normalizing violence and/or including violent aspects into a general expectation of men or fathers might stimulate the rejection of such approaches.

Thereby, children’s perspectives as their own individual stand in relation to comprehending the area of fathers and violence can be understood, perhaps less as ‘qualitatively new’ aspects or approaches, but as often connecting to – as well as critically examining in relation to their specific circumstances – the information that they can gather from different sources (such as mother, father, friends and media). If children’s interpretations and understandings related to their unique positions and perspectives are different from mothers’ and fathers’, children’s resisting or defying approaches highlight the necessity to approach children as active meaning-creators, with their own conceptual components for bargaining for unified logic.

**Something about living conditions as described from the children’s perspectives**

Although neither the children’s living conditions nor their emotional reactions to them per se is the object of the study, the interviews provide a portrait of their lives – including misery, vulnerability and difficulties, as well as dignity and struggle and strategies for coping with them, and also general strengths and features of the children’s ordinary lives. The interviews also reveal the varied impact of violence on the children’s everyday life as well as its centrality to what they all had to grasp and live with.

The interviews are not directly aimed at emotional reactions to their experiences, but the open-ended questions and the themes include opportunities for such aspects to be brought up. Although the interviews include few expressions of a strong emotional kind, such as living with constant worry and fear of father’s actions or of becoming like him, neither do the children appear to have understood or accepted the violence. Rather, the violence forms a troubling circumstance that they have to relate to. Although
none of them is living with their father any more, for Annelie, Daniel and Melvin the violence seems to represent a comprehensive life condition, as suggested by Christensen (1988), Heinänen and Särkelä (1985) and Peled (1998). Several of the others appear to rationalize the violence as a limited aspect of their life. It has indeed had a significant impact on their lives, e.g. since their parents are now separated and they have moved away from father. But Tomi and Petri, for example, treat their mother’s choice as a matter of fact more than their father’s violence as emotionally important. Also, to many children in this study, treating violence as a life condition appears to mean viewing the violence they have experienced in a broader context. Accordingly, for the children the violence per se may not be perceived as the major problem, but the overall situation of limitations and demands, of which violence is a part. In an overall life situation where father’s demands and blame affect all family relationships and everyday life, actual physical violence may be regarded as secondary. Furthermore, just a few situations of direct violence can be enough for mothers to change their course of life and separate from the men that they do not feel love them, and that they have reason to fear more violence from. Then, the children might not see signs of escalation and their mother may escape before violence has affected all aspects of family life. Thereby, violence in itself may not be perceived as central, either in situations of much or comparatively little violence, due to father’s other demanding sides in direct relation to the child.

Also, even though the children in this study seem to manage well in their everyday life, most of them express aspects that can be expected to restrict their general satisfaction with life. For many, these experiences are, at time of interview, in the past and they are putting the bad experiences behind them as new and positive experiences fill their lives. However, although the children seem to cope – socially as well as emotionally and intellectually in a broader perspective – considering the experiences that at least some of them describe, the meaning-conciliations that are discussed here in a somewhat ‘distanced’ manner could very well be part of and signs of difficult inner emotional as well as intellectual dilemmas that they need to resolve. As an example, several of the children describe situations or life conditions that include how either their perception of situations is not acknowledged or validated (cf. Tomi), or hardly being seen or acknowledged as a person at all by their father (cf. Daniel and Tyra). Even if their mother, despite the practical, economic, social and emotional intricacies they have to deal with at this phase of their lives, can ‘be there’ for the children and respond to their emotional needs, perceiving indifference, neglect or invalidation – especially combined with intoxication, laziness, demands, limitations and irritability
from father – is likely to be difficult for the child. And such experiences easily transfer to resigned expectations about fathers in general.

Certain aspects of their living conditions, which the children describe, may be related to their social positioning as children – not necessarily as absolute limitations, but as part of a possibly taken-for-granted discourse generally prioritizing adult perspectives. Despite children’s limited formal rights to decide over their living situation, some children in the interviews describe themselves as having some choice. More specifically, Petri and Örjan appear to be able to choose to have contact with their fathers, as their initiatives to make contact with their fathers are fruitful. However, Tyra expressing that she is unable to see her father although she wishes to, because of his plans and desires, suggests that the negotiability of fatherhood from her father’s perspective is in practice superordinated to the non-negotiability of her father’s fatherness from her own. Further, Daniel describes visiting father as a result of father’s nagging, and Belinda expresses the wish to live solely with her mother. Thereby, both appear to be subjected to their parents’ arrangements and initiatives, suggesting that the norm in official praxis that children should have contact with their father (cf. Eriksson 2003) corresponds to a similar norm within families. Accordingly, children’s initiatives to have more contact with father appear to be acknowledged and appreciated more than children’s preferences to have less contact.

**Risks, safety and children’s vulnerabilities, strengths and rights**

Although the aim of this study was primarily based in an attempt to explore the processes of meaning as described by the children themselves without requirements other than the theoretical framework, a study such as this is indirectly also motivated by the possibility to develop (adult or) professional aims and ambitions to help children in difficult life situations. Therefore, these final few lines are devoted to discussing more specifically some aspects of meeting children with experiences of violence in their family. While experiencing father’s violence against mother until recently primarily seems to have interested women’s activists and children’s workers in refuges (see Mullender & Morley 1994), interest and knowledge are also starting to be built within the general child protection, welfare and counselling arenas.

Studying and writing about children who have experienced violence in their families is exacting in many ways. Not only are ethical issues repeatedly brought to the fore and one’s emotional preparedness tried, but there is also a constant balance to be considered when it comes to focusing on the vulnerabilities and strengths of the children. No child should ever need to experience any violence in their own family, and such experiences may cause
extensive problems for children and/or affect their lives for long periods of time. However, the strategies many children develop for coping with their experiences and life situation, especially since they may be used for their own emotional, development (cf. Furman 1997; Mullender et al. 2002: 109; cf. also Annelie), must be validated and made visible. The negotiations in this study may be implications of the emotional difficulties attached to the themes, in that fissions, for example, may be strategies to avoid the difficulties that keeping a unified or homogenous image may include. And even though the children might not have expressed ‘psychological difficulties’, such as worry, fear or anxiety, but seem to be able to handle everyday life, they may struggle with internal efforts to deal with and handle their experiences and living situations.

From the interview material as a whole, a cautiousness among the children about drawing conclusions about fathers and violence in general as well as about their own father can be discerned. Their often nuanced accounts, as well as responding that they can not answer questions, can be interpreted as indications that they want a well-founded base before making statements about their perceptions of things. In general, this would probably be a reasonable attitude, and perhaps even more so in families where tolerance might be limited. Since the children’s meaning-conciliations appear to be nuanced and sensitive rather than stereotyped, and they seem to approach the themes from (in some ways slightly, but in others totally) different angles, interventions and approaching the children demand corresponding nuanced sensitivity from adults and professionals. Because of individual differences in interpretation and in consequences of violence, care must be taken when moving from knowledge about the presence of violence in a child’s family (the risk factor or circumstance) to assumptions about the child’s state or victimization (its effects). As an example, since children sometimes seem to find other uses of parents than adults generally expect, to protect children with experiences of violence within their family demands caution in not removing what, from their perspective, might be a resource. Having children witness their parents’ violence can be considered a violation of law, and children thereby victims of crime (see SOU 2001b: 72), but it does not uncomplicatedly correspond to their own perception of themselves as victims.

The importance that many children in this study (after all) attribute to their father highlights the significance of the behaviour of fathers, and the implicit importance of their fathers’ interpretations as validations of the child’s interpretations. For a plan for the physical and psychological safety of the child to form the basis for positive contact in a combination of addressing children’s right to see their father and to safety and protection, father’s explicit acknowledgement and responsibility for his own violence is
crucial. However, not only are the choices of mothers and fathers crucial to children’s’ lives and to what professionals have to consider. Some children’s own choice to keep in contact (cf. Örjan) or even live with (cf. Petri) their father despite his violence against the mother may be difficult to deal with for adults with concerns for the child’s well-being. First, letting children make such decisions demands distance from one’s own adult reasoning. But although some children may make such decisions on the basis of threats or blackmailing, investigations into the reasons for a child’s decision may also reflect benefits for the child from her or his own perspective. Even if the reasons appear to have more to do with the principle importance of the father, they may be real and important enough for the child to make a break in contact distressing. Talking to the child could also make reasons related to trying to take responsibility for protecting themselves, other family members or the violent parent (e.g. from ‘violent emotions’ or suicide) visible. Knowledge of the child’s own reasoning would be a requirement for easing the child’s experience of responsibility. Further, if ‘society’, professionals and other adults can show children that violence in families can be talked about and help provided, and that there are others that take responsibility for stopping the violence and for the safety of the family members, children would be less likely to experience that the responsibility is theirs. Similarly, if children’s reasons for contact with a violent father have to do with perceiving him as the ‘strong and responsible one’ of their parents (cf. Hester & Radford 1996) – which implies a truly difficult circumstance – the way to assure a child that the mother is a strong and capable parent, also in a situation which may be characterized by her being told she is useless and worthless and put down in front of the child, would differ according to the child’s own reasoning.

The routines of the police and social welfare offices must work for children to gain the protection and support that is their legal right. Since the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children (United Nations 1989: Convention of the Rights of the Child, Article 3), but children seem to create vastly different individual meanings of what can be assumed to be similar life circumstances, general assumptions about children as a group need to be supplemented by explicit reflection over the best for individual children. Understanding of children’s concrete life experiences can help challenge adults’ (sometimes consensual) ideas on how to interpret children’s behaviours (see Solberg 2002). Although the relation between the best for the child in a longer perspective might not correspond easily to the child’s own understanding, seeing children as active creators of meaning and competent about their own situation would imply talking to
them about their view and understanding of their own situation (see also United Nations 1989: Convention of the Rights of the Child, Article 12).

By delving into questions such as those alerted to by this study, its inherent ideas can also be used to develop knowledge about how children deal with other complex and contradictory sets of phenomena. Thereby, the generalizability of the theoretical development can be tested in future research about the parts as well as the wholes of children’s conciliations of meaning. As such, it may be useful for developing practices for meeting children, not only with experience of violence in their families, but also facing other situations of difficulty of contradictory meaning. General opportunities for children to talk about, not only violence in general, but violence in families specifically, would provide a better opportunity for children with such experiences not only to handle different messages about the issues in an open setting, but also to let adults know about their experiences at an earlier stage, which the children could benefit from (cf. McGee 2000).
Notes

1 To highlight the subjectivity of the concept of violence and the complexity of judging individual situations and actions, the terms ‘(possibly) violent actions’ and ‘(possible) violence’ are used to emphasize that children’s subjective categorizations are not simply taken for granted.

2 Women’s House (Kvinnohus) is the most common Swedish term for protected living for women and their children; in other countries, such facilities are known as shelters, women’s refuges or crisis centres.

3 These were questions such as ‘What more can you tell me?’, ‘How do you mean?’, ‘Can you give an example?’, ‘What do you think about that?’, ‘What is important to know about that (him)?’, ‘How would you describe it (them/him) to someone who does not know what it (who he) is?’, ‘When is it (they/he) good/not so good?’, ‘How do you know what it is?, ‘Do you know of anything that is roughly the same?’, ‘What is its opposite?’, ‘Why do you think it is like that?’, ‘How can one know that?’.

4 As an example, many children responded to the invitation to talk about their own father by categorizing him as either ‘bad’ or ‘nice’; from this tendency, a sub-theme of ‘basic characterization’ was derived. Such a characterization was enabled by the interview arrangement, e.g. the theme ‘functions of fathers’, which could be more directly traced to the battery of follow-up questions for the interview (cf. ‘When are they good?’) and hence to an initial theoretical assumption.

5 As an example, in some interviews the child appeared to relate very closely to her or his mother’s perspective. This motivated a search through the interview material that resulted in identification of similar approaches in other interviews and what appeared as strategies aimed at a distance from the mother’s perspectives in others. Yet, other interviews did not include indications about this aspect at all, or it appeared of less significance.

6 As an example, one child during the interview commented on a picture she/he was drawing. Another passage that was left out was a child telling me about what she/he had learnt at school.

7 As an example, while ‘hit’ (‘slå’) refers to an action that one person directs at another, ‘fight’ (‘slåss’) is a grammatical alternative that mainly refers to mutual action; however, the latter also refers to some aspect of constancy and thereby to something that a person often or usually does. To say that someone ‘slåss’ can refer almost to a personality trait. But also, children generally appear to prefer talking about ‘slåss’ to ‘slå’. Accordingly, presumptions can not be made on the basis of the exact formulations in such cases, but individual statements have to be related to the overall account.

8 As an example, Tomi said, ‘Talks about his brother… her brother and talk about her’, which is shortened into, ‘Talks about her brother…’. Tomi also said, ‘It is mother is, has taken care of you in her tummy.’, which is corrected to ‘it is mother who has…’.

9 As an example, Daniel said, ‘I have seen that he smuggles (smugglar)’, which was changed into, ‘I have seen that he is secretive (smusslar)’. And Tyra said, ‘He was always in a fast’, which was corrected into, ‘He was always in a hurry’.

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10 As an example, ‘sur’ generally translates to ‘sour’, ‘sore’ or ‘surly’, but was translated as ‘grumpy’, which has similar associations with the original ‘sur’, especially coming from a child.

11 As examples, questions such as ‘Can you give an example?’ or ‘What do you mean?’ were judged as primarily clarifying and not necessary to be included.

12 As an example, a question such as, ‘What is violence?’ answered with, ‘It is bad.’ could be changed into, ‘Violence is bad’.

13 As an example, Daniel’s reply ‘Well, you know, one doesn’t usually slip and hit someone.’ would make little sense without my question about someone talking about their own possibly violent acts in terms of ‘I slipped.’ or something like that’.

14 A fake example is replacing ‘poodle’ by ‘dog’.
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