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## ‘How Did This Happen?’: Making Retrospective, Present and Prospective Sense of Intimate Relationships Where Men Have Been Violent

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### ABSTRACT

In seeking to explain intimate partner violence (IPV), feminist research has shifted its focus from individual explanations to the social contexts of such violence. Adopting such a perspective, we explore the narratives of three men who identify as perpetrators of violence and three women who identify as victims/survivors of IPV. Our analyses focus on how the participants present their relationships, employing the notion of affective – discursive practices as informing, at times constituting, the participants’ experiences. Their stories are characterised by a chronological line – retrospective, present and prospective. Their understandings change in framing their experiences, with the relationships themselves becoming affective–discursive practices, albeit figuring differently in the participants’ stories across time. Our findings also underline the significance of shame as a regulatory mechanism sustaining heteronormative practices.

**Keywords:** affective–discursive practices, intimate partner violence, shame, temporal perspective, violence against women

### INTRODUCTION

Explaining, changing, reducing or stopping intimate partner violence (IPV) means attending to not only the immediate acts of violence but also the intimate relationships and broader societal contexts in which violence is perpetrated. IPV thus raises deep-rooted challenges for both perpetrators and victims/survivors in terms of the violence itself and their understandings of the whole, extended and contextualised relationship: ‘How did this happen?’ Deconstructing such different understandings is part of these necessary societal, political, policy and personal changes addressing IPV.

In this article, we present a feminist exploration of how both perpetrators and victims/survivors make sense of such intimate relationships where men have been violent towards women. Using an affective–discursive framework, we focus on the relationships themselves, the structures framing understandings of violence, and the gendered politics of shame in a ‘gender-equal’ Nordic context.<sup>1</sup> Through the narratives of perpetrators and victims/survivors of IPV, we explore shifts within the trajectories of the relationships – moving from what is gone (in the past) to what is understood (in the present) and to what is awaited (in the future).

IPV is manifested in different ways. Some violent acts, fitting within the legal framework, are easily identifiable; others do not fit such predefined categories, making them harder for many people to accept. To allow for the different manifestations of IPV, we recognise violence as a continuum or spectrum (Alcoff, 2018: 4-6; Kelly, 1988: 76; 1996: 194-197, 202), encompassing different experiences of different forms of violence, and making central their impacts on victims/survivors. The mainstream discussion on IPV has clear gendered aspects regarding how

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<sup>1</sup> Gender equality is a cornerstone of national image across the Nordic region. However, when viewed from the perspective of prevalence statistics, the image is compromised, with high levels of physical or sexual violence against women persisting in the Nordic countries. A European Union survey showed prevalence of IPV to be noticeably higher in the Nordic member states (ranging from 22% in Sweden to 32% in Denmark) than the European average (22%) (FRA, 2014: 28-29). This has led to a considerable debate on what is sometimes called the ‘Nordic paradox’ (see, for example, Garcia and Merlo, 2016; Humbert *et al.*, 2021; Wemrell *et al.*, 2019).

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well the violent act fits given norms on violence (Alcoff, 2018: 3). The more serious (as perceived) and the more damaging the violence, the more believable it is likely to be in the eyes of the public, as in many news media reports. In public debate, first, the violent man tends to be 'othered', pathologised and psychologised, thus removed from ordinary men (Hearn, 1998: 8-10, 81-83; Nilsson, 2019: 1178; Ólafsdóttir and Rúðólfssdóttir, 2022: 4). Second, victims/survivors are blamed for being violated if they cannot prove their stories to be true (Alcoff, 2018: 1-2; Lazard, 2020: 2; Nilsson, 2019: 1178, 1191).

Furthermore, understandings of what violence is (or is not) occur in their societal contexts in turn shaping perpetrators' and victims/survivors' experiences. While much research, especially mainstream research, on IPV has focused on individual factors, research informed by feminist epistemology highlights the importance of the societal context of such violence, as a structural problem taking different forms in different spheres of society (Gavey, 2018: x; Hearn, 1998: 3-4, 11; Wemrell *et al.*, 2019: 4-5). This directs attention to the societal construction of violence and assumptions with regard to gender, masculinity and femininity, as well as the role of shame, which itself can be understood in this context as a surveillance mechanism maintaining gender identities and normative power relations within the heterosexual project (Shefer and Munt, 2019: 146-147). With Western hegemonic masculinity, the subordination of women continues to be legitimized. Referring to enactments of masculinity as *dramas*, Ptacek (2021: 672) spells out men's different behaviours in private and public, as well as how their search for masculine recognition becomes a driving factor in their abuse. Their abuse of women becomes a way of conforming to patriarchal rule when it is perceived as failing (Ptacek, 2021: 674). Relatedly, Hanmer (2000: 13) asserts that only when the victims/survivors stop taking responsibility for their partners' feelings will they be able to end their relationships. Leaving violent men means reinterpreting the feelings of men, in relation to violence, as negative.

In this article, we analyse perpetrators' and victims/survivors' recounting of violent relationships. Our primary research question: how do the study participants present their violent relationships – retrospectively, in and from the present, and prospectively? To address this, we employ the notion of affective–discursive practices as informing, at times constituting, the participants' experiences, with specific reference to shame in a Nordic context.

## HETERONORMATIVE POWER RELATIONS AND VIOLENCE IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

There is a high prevalence of violence against women worldwide (World Health Organization, 2021). Even in a society such as that of Iceland, known for its gender equality and highly rated in global gender equality rankings (World Economic Forum, 2021), IPV still thrives (Reykjavík Police Department and City of Reykjavík, 2021). Nonetheless, the Nordic countries take pride in being among the most gender-equal places in the world, forming a vital part of their national identities (Alsaker *et al.*, 2016: 480; Einarsdóttir, 2020: 140-141; Wemrell *et al.*, 2019: 2). Societal acceptance of IPV is low. It is generally considered a breach of gender norms – a flaw in the equality discourse (Alsaker *et al.*, 2016: 484; Brännvall, 2016: 51-52; Enander, 2010a: 20; Gottzén and Berggren, 2021: 69). However, traditional heterosexual norms infused with notions of romantic love and the accompanying hierarchical gender arrangements (Enander, 2010a: 24-25; Lahti, 2015: 432) still prevail in relation to sex/dating and intimate relationships (Gottzén and Berggren, 2021: 67-68; Holma *et al.*, 2021: 2; Jóhannsdóttir and Gíslason, 2018: 4; Ólafsdóttir and Kjaran, 2019: 51).

A considerable amount of qualitative research on IPV in Nordic societies focuses on gendered power dynamics and heterosexual masculinity norms. In their narratives, perpetrators of IPV tend to use individual reasoning, for example, drug use, a difficult childhood or mutual fights between partners, when explaining the violence, downplaying the severity of the act and making the victim/survivor complicit (Brännvall, 2016: 88-89; Ólafsdóttir and Rúðólfssdóttir, 2022: 13-14; Wemrell *et al.*, 2019: 7). This connects to masculinity norms where, on the surface, men adhere to new modes of being men where they can relate to women as equals. However, beneath the surface, normative heteromale values are still at work (de Boise and Hearn, 2017: 780; Gottzén and Berggren, 2021: 67-69; Jóhannsdóttir and Gíslason, 2018: 4).

Additionally, Icelandic research (Ólafsdóttir and Rúðólfssdóttir, 2022: 13-15) shows that the perpetrator's social positioning, closely connected to the surrounding masculinity norms, is important for his understanding of his committed violence. Victims/survivors rely on both individual and structural explanations in trying to make sense of their experiences. However, as the experience of violence is personal, the tendency is to lean towards explanations based on the pathology and the deviance of the perpetrator (Enander, 2010b: 83). Neoliberal discourses on equality portray Nordic women as empowered and strong; the resistance to identifying as a victim/survivor of IPV has been identified as a by-product of the discourse portraying female victims as different (weak) from 'normal', strong and independent women (Brännvall, 2016: 53; Wemrell *et al.*, 2019: 7-8).

Shame is a significant theme in some previous Nordic research on IPV. Shame is a synonym for a range of feelings, usually produced when we feel ourselves becoming smaller in others' eyes, often not measuring up to

expected societal norms. Gender norms can include the perception that one should not be violent towards a female/weaker partner. When breaching such gendered norms of violence, perpetrators experience shame, and through recognising their behaviour as shameful, they risk condemnation by society. All of these issues figure in *either* their inability to identify their acts *as violence* and accept responsibility for such behaviour *or* in their difficulty with doing so (Gottzén, 2016: 162; 2019: 289; Ólafsdóttir and Rúðólfsdóttir, 2022: 13-14). When subjected to violence, the empowered Nordic women are expected to show their strength and end their relationships with the abusive men. When unable to do so, women feel shame and guilt for not being *strong enough*, which in turn leads to more shame for staying with their partners (Alsaker *et al.*, 2016: 484; Brännvall, 2016: 52-53; Enander, 2010a: 20-21; Wemrell *et al.*, 2019: 7-8). For perpetrators and victims/survivors alike, shame and shaming processes are thus experienced as both (discursive) regulatory practices and embodied experiences. Due to its role in reinforcing the heterosexual project, the understanding of shame and how it relates to violence is of particular interest in this article.

## AFFECTIVE–DISCURSIVE PRACTICES

Discourses are widely understood as forming a collective way of constructing knowledge and social practice. Discourses on relationships and gender (among other social relations) inform the participants' approach to violence. When examining the participants' stories, we focus on practices to allow our analyses of the juncture of the societal, the institutional and the personal, as well as the context where these relations are formalised, through which 'hidden forms of violating practices become visible and observable' (Husso *et al.*, 2021: 9).

Drawing on Wetherell's analysis (2012), we perceive emotion and affect as part of what shapes feelings (Husso *et al.*, 2021: 8), providing us with 'textured research on embodied social action' (Wetherell, 2013: 351). Discursive practices always have an affective element and are therefore affective–discursive (Wetherell, 2012: 21-22; 2013: 351). We understand affective practices as ways of being and doing (Husso *et al.*, 2021: 8), submerged in emotions. From this perspective, discourse and affect are not easily separable. Rather, they are intertwined in the patterning of everyday life, 'along with their social consequences and entailments' (Wetherell, 2012: 52), and should therefore be read together (Wetherell, 2013: 364).

The theoretical lens of affective–discursive practices helps us focus on how people are drawn in, both affectively and discursively, by accepted suppositions. The participants aim to make (cognitive) sense of their experiences, as well as the not fully articulated aspects, such as shame, that linger beyond rational explanations and terms. In other words, we explore the logics of *affective–discursive practices* that frame the retelling of the violent relationships from the participants' different perspectives, in the Nordic societal context.

## METHOD AND DATA

Undertaking research on a sensitive subject is difficult. There are practical difficulties, such as locating participants and obtaining their consent, as well as ethical and psychological concerns. With the help of gatekeepers, prospective participants were recruited from the Icelandic prison system, as well as through a general call to men who self-identify as violent, and to women who identify as victim/survivor. Following established ethical procedures, the research plan stated that informed consent would be obtained from all participants prior to their participation, and their anonymity would be guaranteed.<sup>2</sup> The plan was submitted to and approved by the Ethical Board of the University of Iceland. Due to the gravity of the topic, a formal request to conduct interviews was sent to the National Bioethics Committee and the Prison and Probation Administration, both of which granted us permission to proceed. All participants received information on where and how to seek help in case the interviews proved difficult for them. All participants mentioned that it was important to them, knowing that their experiences could contribute to the discussion on IPV and help others. Their change of pace and relative boredom while incarcerated may have factored in some male participants' decision to take part in the research. Others were generous enough to be interviewed in their free time.

All participants who answered the research call were white and identified as cisgender, sharing their experiences of violence, varying in type and form, in a steady heterosexual relationship. Importantly, the participants were not connected to each other – not least as this could raise ethical issues and safety questions. From the larger study of 10 male perpetrators and 12 female victims/survivors, the analyses presented here draw on 7 interviews with 6 individuals, aged 20–40, comprising 3 men who self-identified their behaviour as violent and 3 women who identified their intimate partners' behaviour as violent. Icelanders have largely adopted ideas of a classless

<sup>2</sup> Even though anonymity is guaranteed, it can be withheld if the participants disclose that they might harm themselves or others. The study participants did not disclose such information.

community (Oddsson, 2018: 18), and social class in the context of Iceland is under-theorised, including in relation to possible urban/rural differences. When determining the participants' socioeconomic status, we therefore focus on describing the interviewees in terms of background, occupation, and educational level.

Two of the male participants, Bjarki and Kristján, came from they themselves reported as unstable homes. They described a difficult upbringing, with one parent/both parents being alcoholic, having difficulties holding on to jobs, and themselves suffering from neglect due to their home situation. They did not pursue further studies after finishing compulsory education, both having traditional working-class careers that did not require formal education. The third man, Baldur, came from a stable home and attended secondary school after finishing compulsory education. His parents held economically middle-class jobs (with incomes above the minimum wage), but in terms of cultural capital, they can best be described as respectable working-class people. All the men who participated in the study described periods of substance abuse.

All the female participants had finished secondary school and described their backgrounds as stable. Lása, coming from a middle-class family in terms of economic resources and cultural capital, held a university degree and a traditional middle-class job. Sigga and Magga had similar backgrounds, with one or both parents holding economically middle-class jobs but lacking status in terms of cultural capital. In their interviews, both shared their aspirations for career advancement in terms of education and work, with Sigga having already started her university studies.

In-depth interviews were conducted by the first author from December 2019 to June 2021. All participants were interviewed once, except Bjarki, who was interviewed twice in six months, providing a more extended account. The interviews lasted 50–150 minutes each. In-depth interviews open the possibility for the interviewer to respond to individual participants and create the trust needed for discussing sensitive subjects (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 88-90). The aim of the interviews was to understand the participants' experiences of IPV from their own perspectives as perpetrators or victims/survivors. Certain topics were highlighted, yet the format was sufficiently open to allow flexibility in the subject matter, according to the participants' wishes. The interviews were emotionally draining for both the interviewees and the interviewer. The participants often put themselves in a vulnerable position, recounting emotionally difficult experiences, leaving the interviewer deeply touched by their trusting her with their stories.

## MAKING SENSE OF A VIOLENT RELATIONSHIP

There is a clear difference between the perceptions of perpetrators and victims/survivors in the participants accounts of the violence experienced. Previous research has shown that while a perpetrator generally views acts of physical violence as induced by *specific* events or circumstances (cf. Hearn, 1998), a victim/survivor describes the violence more in terms of a *process or system* of abuse (cf. Hanmer, 1998). When defining a relationship retrospectively, the interpretation is subject to the process of time, as well as to the influence of dominant discourses informing the participants' approach to violence, all of which are configured in the participants' narratives.

In this article, we focus on each storyteller's point of view and how he/she arranges his/her story into a narrative. We are interested in the dynamics holding a story together, what moves it along, brings it to a halt or dictates how it unfolds. Our analyses focuses on the perception of the participants as expressed by them, the aim to disentangle how they combine narrative elements to make sense of – build a story from – their experiences. More precisely, we seek to identify the affective–discursive practices that the participants have to work with when making sense of their experiences.

The participants' stories of relationships gone wrong unfolded as we read through the interview data. As the participants focused on making sense of their relationships, their stories were characterised by a chronological line – retrospective, in and from the present, and prospective. We identified three narrative elements featured in all of them: 1) recalling love, retrospectively; 2) understanding the relationship in and from the present; and 3) what happens next, prospectively?

The male participants reflected on their attempts to find their way back to good standing (and feelings of relief) after committing acts of violence. They identified limitations in their character, but at the same time, wondered how their relationship turned from good to bad and what the future would hold for them. The female participants longed to understand how their (former) partners could have inflicted such pain on them. Identifying their feelings of being stuck in the relationship and of 'losing their minds', they reflected on how they could recover from their experiences and continue with their lives.

### 1) Recalling Love

In their accounts, the participants often began by looking back to where the relationship started.

## Men

All the male participants drew on traditional heteronormative discourses when recounting how their relationships began. Looking back, they positioned themselves as good boyfriends, describing a fairy tale-like love. Their girlfriends became characters in their stories, whom they adored and who were subsequently made responsible for their (un)happiness.

Kristján and Bjarki described a strong bond between themselves and their girlfriends. Kristján identified his girlfriend as *'the love of his life'*. Bjarki said that he *'worshipped'* his girlfriend. Positioning himself as a good boyfriend, he added that he liked to give her presents as tokens of love. Later, he added that he was a bit obsessed with her and felt good when he was with her. Kristján met a young woman who provided him with the love and warmth that he so desperately longed for; according to him, they quickly became *'addicted'* to each other. His narrative revolved around a love so intense that it was like *'two broken souls merging'*. When they were together, they just wanted to *'cuddle, eat, work, drink, do drugs and fuck'*, which was new to Kristján:

I remember where I sat and how I was dressed and everything when I thought to myself that I was happy. Because it [the feeling] was new.

According to him, a person would want to be in a relationship to have someone to share their life with; it was about wanting – not needing. However, in the beginning of the interview, he stated that when a person was in a bad place oneself (he was using and dealing in drugs), one did not find a good partner, making a point that his girlfriend was not flawless, either.

Baldur mentioned having been in love *'a few times'*. However, he did not describe love as being as intense as the other male participants did. To him, there was more *'spark'* in the beginning of a relationship, in the first six months or so, after which it usually changed and became less exciting. Drawing on a heteromascuine discourse on hypersexuality and entitlement to women's bodies, he said that his attention moved quickly from one woman to the next.

## Women

The female participants tried to understand how they got drawn into the relationship to begin with. While identifying excitement at its initial stages, they described how the relationship quickly turned for the worse. Looking back, they tried to identify the red flags that they might have missed early on in the relationship, drawing on normative discourses on heterosexuality to describe what romantic love is supposed (or not supposed) to be manifested.

Sigga met her boyfriend at a very young age; she was 15 and he was 19. She identified his behaviour as being romantic at first; he was kind and gave her gifts. Because she was young and naïve and had never experienced romantic love before, she thought that this was it, thus adopting a passive position towards him. In retrospect, she now recognised his behaviour as deviant; he was controlling very early on in their relationship, and his jealousy was unreasonable. Now she could not remember if the relationship was ever good:

I can't really remember much of the good times; the rest is more memorable.

Lísa described her relationship in similar terms:

It was all just horrible. Different kinds of horrible.

Describing her boyfriend, Lísa said that he was not a bad man, but he was *'surrounded by darkness'*; looking back, she wondered if she ever really knew him. The night when they first met, they had sex, which she now identified as a sexual violation. Taking on the feminine project of the caregiver, identifying her own behaviour as self-destructive and co-dependent at the time, she continued to date him. She now wondered if it was her need to save him from his substance abuse that made her stay in the relationship. After he became sober, the situation worsened; *'the darkness that surrounded us just got deeper'*. It became clear to her that his substance abuse was not the primary problem; he needed behavioural therapy as well. Looking back, she could only identify a few moments of happiness: *'I wished there had been more.'*

Magga, embracing new modes of femininity, explained the initial phase of her relationship with her ex-boyfriend as originating in intellectual and sexual tensions:

I really liked how he challenged me intellectually; he asked me questions and was interested in what I had to say. I really found that attractive.

She did not identify as monogamous, creating some complications in the heterosexual project. Her boyfriend accepted this at first; however, driven by his need for masculine recognition, he began to make rules for her about

whom she could hook up with. The rules were reasonable at first but became more intrusive with time. He soon became more possessive of her. *'I had a bad feeling in the beginning but ignored it'*, she said. *'He spoke so highly of me, like I was his goddess and was perfect.'* Nonetheless, when she could not live up to the role he assigned her, he became angry with her.

Finally, the male participants drew on heteronormative discourses when sharing their experiences of love in a relationship. They positioned themselves as good boyfriends in an attempt to distance themselves from the violent Other. However, they all drew their girlfriends to the table, and partly blamed their girlfriends, in minimising the violence that took place. Looking back, the female participants wondered what their initial attraction to their partners was. Drawing on heterosexual discourses on romance, they were pathologising their former partners (the violent Other) when identifying signs that something was *'off'* from the start.

## 2) Understanding the relationship in and from the present

The participants' accounts continued with how the relationships were remembered, how these changed for the worse, and the effects on them.

### *Men*

In accounting for what was remembered in their relationships from the present-day perspective, the male participants framed their problems as being out of their control; in this way, they individualised the problem of violence. For them, it was a violent event, a momentary loss of control, a framing that enabled them to distance themselves from the violent act and disregard its gendered context.

At the start of his interview, Bjarki told a story of a violent event that he identified as his turning point, resulting in his redefinition of his behaviour. He was imprisoned after physically assaulting his girlfriend, and for the first time, he felt the need to seek help about his behaviour. He admitted that this was not his first act of violence directed towards her, while stressing that he was a good guy: *'When I drink, there is a whole different person that comes out'*, he said. Later in the interview, he admitted having pushed his girlfriend and screamed at her when arguing, both while sober and intoxicated, although he did not acknowledge them as acts of violence. According to Bjarki, his greatest punishment was *'to have to live with having done [the physical assault]'*, identifying his behaviour at the time as self-destructive and the event as a consequence of his feelings of depression and anger. The event as such had become a discursive resource for him to make sense of the relationship, acknowledging his feelings of shame to condemn his own behaviour. Displaying remorse in that way called attention to himself, understanding that he overstepped gendered norms and positioning himself as a good guy who made a mistake, siding with the part of the community that condemned violence against women (Gottzén, 2016: 162).

After the initial blitz of new love wore off, both Kristján and Baldur described their relationships with their girlfriends as characterised by mutual violence and drug abuse. The drugs created tension between the partners that built up and finally exploded, which sometimes included violence. They both described arguing with their girlfriends, who responded by assaulting them. Consequently, they were forced to push back, which included intimidating their girlfriends, breaking things and holding the women so they would stop. *'I was forced to pin her down'*, Baldur said – not taking into account their difference in physical strength. To Kristján, it was clear that the violence was mutual:

There was no one who started it. The atmosphere was just toxic; then we took turns exploding [being violent].

By ignoring the gendered context of violence, framing their experiences as mutual fighting, they positioned their girlfriends as flawed women. Framing their own violence as them lashing out only served to minimise the negative effects of their behaviour.

After a violent event, Baldur would feel ashamed, and he now recognised that his behaviour must have caused harm to his ex-girlfriend. However, he was quite sure that if it was not for the drugs, none of this would have happened:

[ I ] felt bad afterwards, and she was really scared of me and really hurt because she loved me and I her. It must hurt when someone you love does something like this to you.

Kristján's behaviour towards his girlfriend was coercive.<sup>3</sup> He described his feelings at the time as characterised by insecurity, fear of rejection, feeling manic (due to drugs and depression) and controlled by anger. At one point, he had broken up with his girlfriend, after which he attempted to take his own life to *'win her back'*. Even though he now understood that his behaviour was at times violent and manipulative, he still held on to the belief that she

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<sup>3</sup> Drawing on Stark (2007), we understand coercive control as a pattern of behaviours designed to strip away a victim/survivor's sense of self, in an effort to dominate and take away their freedom.

provoked him to react that way. At the same time, he admitted feeling deeply ashamed of what he did to her. As he was losing control, his violence became a means to regain his position as a masculine subject in control (Ptacek, 2021: 674-675).

### *Women*

Looking back, situating their relationships, the female participants reflected on how their lives changed during the course of the relationships, as well as their attempts to leave. Describing the damaging effects of her boyfriend's coercive and jealous manner, Sigga said that her boyfriend would get angry with her when he could not get in touch with her. Soon, she dropped out of college and became isolated, quitting her hobbies, not seeing her friends or family, a classic strategy of isolation deployed in coercive relationships. He told her proudly that he despised men who were violent against women, seeking recognition as a good man, well versed in the discourse on equality. However, he would put her through various forms of violence in private, including strangling and raping her. When she tried to leave him, he threatened to kill himself. She believed him and therefore felt obliged to stay with him. He even proposed to her, threatening to end his life if she would not accept, causing her deep shame when she accepted his proposal:

Afterwards, I didn't want to tell people [about the engagement], as a way to stand up for myself.

Out of desperation, she later tried cheating on him and telling him about it, as a way to make him leave her, but he refused. She felt completely and utterly stuck.

Both Sigga and Lísá described their sex life as being on their boyfriends' terms. Sigga was very young when the relationship started and did not know how to enjoy sex; she thought that sex was important to make the relationship work. Subsequently, sex was on his terms, disregarding her sexual boundaries. She waited for him to finish at night, so she could go to sleep.

Lísá's ex-boyfriend would tell her of his former sex partners who were more sex-positive than she was. He would pressure her into performing as he wished sexually by slowly breaking down her spirit, body shaming her and making her understand how a good girlfriend should behave. Finally, she gave in. Today, Lísá identified many of her sexual experiences in the relationship as rape. Similar to Sigga, she felt completely stuck in the relationship in which she had invested so much to make it work.

Leaving a violent relationship is a difficult process; women often share the feeling of being trapped, due to the perceived danger associated with leaving (practical reasons), as well as feelings of shame (emotional reasons) (Enander, 2010a: 620-621). Both reasons figured in Sigga's and Lísá's stories. Additionally, both stories are examples of how the normative heterosexual discourse on sex figures in everyday life. Heterosexual masculinity is presented as agentive and entitled to women's bodies, whereas femininity and female sexuality are constructed as passive (Beres, 2007: 96-97; Gavey, 2018: 3; Lazard, 2020: 7-9, 20, 50). Their stories are examples of men enacting their (hyper) masculinity in private as a way of gaining power and masculine recognition. This further connects to the societal understanding of IPV as something private, which only serves to disconnect it from its gendered context.

Magga and her ex-partner were both using drugs during their relationship, which had a strongly negative impact on their relationship. She felt that it was his goal to have her by his side day and night:

He did everything to have me by his side, first by being sweet, and then by threatening me or by using violence.

Her boyfriend accused her of being a coward who always ran away from her problems, belittling her to make sure that she did not leave his side. If that did not work to make her stay or do what he wanted, he would move on to physical and other forms of violence: pushing her to the floor, punching the walls and going through her phone. He would frame it as doing these things out of care for her, positioning himself as a good, strong man and her as weak, while seeking to dominate their private life where he was losing control. Magga further explained this as follows:

He didn't recognise what he did as violence. There was always a good reason for doing what he did – protecting me from myself or others.

The male participants placed the origin of their problems as out of their control, connecting it to substance abuse. They expressed feeling shameful, but at the same time, framed the experience as *mutual* violence, positioning their girlfriends as 'bad', downplaying the severity of the violence and ignoring gendered contexts. The female participants all described their partners as slowly losing control, using violence to gain masculine recognition. They emphasised feeling stuck in relationships that they knew were harmful to them, enduring multiple forms of violence and abuse in private, from men who felt entitled to their bodies.

### 3) What happens next?

Finally, the participants spoke of their expectations for the future, as well as their reflections on what was unfinished or had remained ambiguous.

#### *Men*

Wondering what would await them after the relationship had run its course, the male participants expressed their will to become better men. However, their definition of 'better' and their approach to 'becoming better' varied, as did their future expectations.

Bjarki's narrative was about being in love. He wanted to leave the anger and violence of his past behind him and start over:

[To] work on the things that make me fuck everything up like that (...) leave all the bad behind and run away.

He had undergone psychological therapy and attended AA meetings, which to him, meant that he had done the work required of him to get better. By showing his will to change, he hoped to pass as a masculine subject in control. He loved his girlfriend, and she loved him; to him, that was enough for them to be together. However, due to the severity of the latest violent event, he feared that he had lost her for good. Consequently, it made him happy when she agreed to start seeing him again, even though she did not want to tell her friends and family about it. When they learned about the relationship and became upset, he had a hard time understanding the reason. To him, he had left all his bad habits behind. He said that people usually became better persons after making mistakes (without reflecting on how people became better), so he deserved a second chance at the relationship:

I have been back and forth feeling sorry for myself. Why can't they just forgive me? They know I am not like that.

The people closest to Bjarki and his girlfriend all condemned the violent act. For him, it was important to acknowledge that what he did was violence, and to express feeling ashamed of it. Showing his shame made it possible for him to re-enter society. He had defined his actions as morally wrong; now he wanted to forget about it and did not care for friends and family questioning his good intentions. Swedish research (Gottzén, 2016: 170) shows how men do get initial pushback from their networks for their behaviours that breach gender norms; however, this is soon forgotten.

When asked if he had given any thought to how the violent events had affected his girlfriend, Bjarki answered that he '*hadn't given it that much thought*'. Their relationship had become a bit boring and toxic before it ended, '*but now (...) she knows that she is tough and beautiful, and I feel she is stronger for it*'. By reframing the relationship, positioning her as being empowered after the violent event, he turned the problem of his violent behaviour into a project for them to work on together. He showed a limited understanding of the harm that his violent behaviour had caused her, as well as the gendered power imbalances inherent in the heterosexual project.

Baldur stopped doing drugs and became confident that his problems were thereby solved. He would know if he was a genuinely bad guy:

I would know if I was mean and nasty, that sort of character. I have seen that type of character, and I know I am not like that. I am a good guy, even though I have done some things [violence].

Baldur explained that he tried behavioural therapy but did not feel that it helped him much. The only thing that helped was to avoid taking drugs: '*You just react that way when you have reached this stage [of using]*'. He claimed that all the girls whom he had hurt knew that it only happened because he was abusing drugs at the time. According to him, it was '*better for them to know that*' rather than '*thinking I did it knowingly and meant it*', which only showed the limited extent of his understanding of the damaging effects of violence. To Baldur, masculinity was about control, which he had now regained, hence no more problems.

To Kristján, redemption was not in the cards, as he acknowledged that he would never master his own emotional control:

My future is just being alone (...) to coast through what's left of life, with no expectations (...). That's enough [for me] (...). I can think about things now and not feel anything (...). Some of it might be acceptance, but some of it is also just [me] being numb and not dealing with it.

Nonetheless, to Kristján, the most important thing was to maintain control so that he would not repeat bad habits. He was sober now but would need to work on himself to become a better person, and he could now honestly admit that he was not ready to do that just yet.

## Women

The female participants reflected on their relationship issues that remained unresolved. Sigga and Lísá both felt that they were losing their minds during the course of their relationships with their boyfriends. Shortly after breaking up with her boyfriend, Sigga even consulted a doctor, wondering if she might have a personality disorder, which her ex-partner had suggested to her:

He had convinced me that what I saw and heard was just some nonsense and that I was just imagining [things]. I started to feel like I was crazy.

Lísá said that her boyfriend was very *'good at projecting'*; when she addressed a problem with his behaviour, he would mirror that remark to her, making her behaviour the problem. She explained how she only identified her experience as being a form of psychological violence (gaslighting) after their relationship had ended, designed to wear her down and make her feel bad. Before, she thought she was just being paranoid and anxious.

After her relationship ended, Sigga would have flashbacks regarding the violent relationship, causing her problems in daily life, for example, when communicating and having sex with her current partner:

I didn't realise that it was violence until later, after we had broken up. Then I realised, 'Wow, that was not normal.'

She was later diagnosed with PTSD, which she was now still dealing with. She explained how *'the psychological [violence] was even worse'* than other forms of violence endured during the relationship. She added that it took her a long time after the relationship had ended to realise that she was a person whose needs and opinions mattered.

Psychological violence is often identified as one of the most damaging forms of violence in intimate relationships (Ptacek, 2021: 675-676). It wears down women's identities, ensuring their passivity, as part of the masculine subject's need for recognition and domestic misogyny. Their broken-down self-esteem and PTSD contribute to women's feeling of inability to leave/end a relationship.

Magga and Sigga both described how their boyfriends blamed them for the violence that took place. The men deemed their girlfriends' actions as triggering their violent reactions

He always felt I deserved what happened. It was my own fault for doing something [wrong]. (Magga)

After a violent event, Magga's boyfriend would feel sad but simultaneously angry with her for allowing the event to happen. Once, she told him that she experienced these events as violence, to which he reacted by accusing her of being the violent one in the relationship. According to Magga, all she ever did was fight back when he turned violent; being half his size, she felt very scared. After the relationship ended, her boyfriend told her that he had only been angry with her twice during their relationship, not acknowledging his erratic and controlling behaviour as violence. Wondering about his current situation, Magga said that he was not a bad person, but he never learned to love in a healthy manner. She hoped that he would get better. However, taking a position different from her previous one, now focusing on her own wellbeing, she said, *'But I also know that it's not worth it to try to make his life better by sacrificing mine.'*

Positioning her boyfriend as out of control, Lísá recognised that he felt ashamed and scared when he lost control. At that time, he was abusing drugs and alcohol, and to Lísá, it was obvious that he *'needed to gain control of his life'*. After he became sober, Lísá hoped that he would find some peace, but the violence did not stop, and the apology that she so desperately hoped for never came. She was hurt. Similar to the other participants, she continued to wait for his full recognition of his abusive actions towards her as violence.

The male participants reflected on how to abstain from violent behaviour and become better men. Focusing on their sobriety as key to their lives as masculine subjects in control, they neglected the fact that they had not undergone substantial behavioural therapy to gain insights into the harm caused to their victims. After having ended their relationships, the female participants focused on the long-term toll of the psychological abuse on them. They wondered if their ex-partners would ever understand how the relationships affected them or would accept responsibility for their actions, fully recognising the pain that they caused.

## DISCUSSION

In this article, we have explored how the participants recounted and (re)defined their experiences of violent relationships in relation to time, as well as how their understandings changed in framing their experiences. Each relationship, perceived as an affective–discursive practice, figured differently across its three phases: 'the happy relationship', 'the violent relationship' and 'the post-relationship'. First, recalling love retrospectively, framed in terms of the heterosexual project, became an affective–discursive practice. The male participants were adamant

about positioning themselves as being in love and good (not deviant) boyfriends. They reported how they loved their girlfriends dearly until the women fell short of living up to their expectations, triggering their need for masculine recognition and control. The female participants carefully rethought about their boyfriends' behaviour, asking themselves if love ever existed between them and their partners after recognising the latter's abusive tendencies retrospectively.

Understanding their relationships in and from the present-day vantage point, the male participants placed the origin of their problems as beyond their control. They framed the violence as mutual, resulting in their loss of control and ignoring the gendered context of violence. The female participants positioned themselves as subordinated and relatively weak in enduring multiple forms of violence, designed to increase their boyfriends' control over them, and resulting in their feeling of being completely stuck in the relationships.

Speaking prospectively, the men expressed their desire to pass as masculine subjects in control. Positioning themselves as deviant only when resorting to violence, they tried to escape being othered as violent men, without demonstrating a deeper understanding of the damaging effects of violence. Meanwhile, the female participants wondered if their ex-boyfriends would ever be able to accept full responsibility for the harm that they caused their partners or to understand the women's pain. The women had not yet experienced closure regarding their violent relationships; their violent relationships remained unfinished.

Looking back, the relationships themselves became an affective–discursive practice or practices, informing and constituting the participants' experiences as they re-lived and re-felt the violence committed and suffered, generating different embodied experiences, notably shame. Shame figured strongly in the participants' stories, sometimes expressed explicitly, at other times lingering more implicitly in their narratives, not fully articulated or understood but traceable through its regulatory role in sustaining heteronormative practices.

Representations of IPV in contemporary Nordic society rely heavily on individualising, pathologising and psychologising the discourse on the perpetrator as the violent Other in contrast to ordinary men. In the Nordic region, police investigations of IPV are frequently prematurely suspended (Brännvall, 2016: 31-32; Sæmundsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2018: 72-73), resulting in the assumption of the innocence of the alleged perpetrators. It is common for both perpetrators and victims/survivors to minimise and downplay the severity of the violence, with gendered societal norms deeming violence as shameful (Brännvall, 2016: 54; Wemrell *et al.*, 2019: 7). Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that the research participants turned to individual factors in trying to make sense of their violent relationships. Gendered power relations rarely figure in such everyday understandings of violence (Päivinen and Holma, 2017: 2-3), as reflected in the participants' difficulties in acknowledging the structural factors enabling violence.

The male participants focused on the individual acts of violence that were unlawful (cf. Hearn, 1998), while the female participants described their relationships more broadly as abusive (cf. Hanmer, 1998). Framing the violence as mutual (cf. Ferguson, 2018) or resulting from drug abuse is an example of an individualising discourse – a product of the discourse on the perpetrator as the violent Other. Putting the blame outside the relationship helps the men participants cope with the negative affects attached to violence, such as shame, positioning themselves as good men who did bad things due to circumstances presented as beyond their control. However, this highlighted their lack of understanding of the severity of the violence committed, as well as the gendered structures enabling violence.

The female participants framed their experiences in broader terms, describing various forms of violence, including violent behaviour that was often dismissed as non-violence. Framing abuse such as coercion and gaslighting as violence, as well as using 'criminal justice terms' to do so, 'is a new phenomenon in its visibility and prominence in contemporary culture' (Lazard, 2020: 97). This was witnessed in the stories of the female participants, all of whom discussed the mental strain of their relationships in terms of violence, underlining its immense harm. In their relationships, they occupied positions weaker than those of their partners, with their emotions disregarded. They now awaited validation, a wish for real acceptance of the responsibility for and the recognition of the pain suffered at the hands of their former partners. That wish manifested their desire that violence would be understood as a structural phenomenon because without such knowledge their former partners (and society) would never fully comprehend their pain.

With this article, we seek to contribute to the analysis of cultural meanings of shame and shaming processes (Shefer and Munt, 2019: 145-146), as well as how and when shame should be felt, in making sense of a violent relationship and regulating the heterosexual project. Shame may seem to be simply a feeling, but it is also a complex affective–discursive practice, materialised in different ways, depending on the individual, time and place. Shame is 'a project of everyday ethics' (Probyn, 2004: 336), an affective–discursive practice that connects individuals to societal (in this case, Nordic) contexts, positioning participants positively or negatively.

For men, shame is at times performative. After their violent acts, the perpetrators express shame in breaking gender norms, fearing being othered as violent men. To perform shame correctly enables them to *come back*, to be redeemed, from violence, even if they do not feel or engage in the discomfort of shame that is needed to engage

with the structural problem of violence. Perpetrators are expected to express shame to start a conscious process to regain their previous masculine position; they need to admit (positive) shame for their violence and be rewarded by being excused. However, this is problematic, as it can distance themselves from the shameful act of violence (Gottzén, 2016: 170-172; Shefer and Munt, 2019: 150-151).

Shame, for women victims/survivors, is constructed differently. The regulatory effects of shame operate within the neoliberal discourse on gender equality, portraying Nordic women as empowered and able to protect themselves. Subsequently, victims/survivors of IPV are positioned and position themselves as relatively weak when violated, causing them (negative) shame. They are then expected to leave their violent relationships, adding further shame when they stay (Alsaker *et al.*, 2016: 484-485; Brännvall, 2016: 50). Being stuck in a violent relationship is regarded as a negative aspect of heterosexual femininity that gender-equal women do not identify with (Enander, 2010a: 20-21). All of these are configured in women's 'gendered shame' (Brännvall, 2016: 51; Enander, 2010a: 20-21; Shefer and Munt, 2019: 147) – the feeling that it is women's responsibility to solve the problem of IPV by simply and individually leaving. Shame thus has an individualising function, regulating the power relations that sustain structural inequalities, including the heterosexual project (Shefer and Munt, 2019: 145-147). Additionally, it can be a significant aspect of womanhood and female sexuality, already figuring strongly in their lives. When they find themselves in violent relationships, they may neither want to nor be able to acknowledge violence immediately, due to shame. In retrospect, they can now see the warning signs and recognise the relationships more broadly as violent. The discourses that they have to work with stop here – 'forgiveness' or 'acceptance' is not part of the discourses available after a violent relationship; women may feel stuck in their relationships due to shame. Considering the powerful structural nature of shame, we call for a deeper examination of the socio-political effects of shame in the Nordic context and elsewhere.

The participants' relations to violence and the violent relationship are informed, albeit differently, by gendered discourses, affective–discursive practices and shame. Experiences of violence are deeply personal, so it becomes difficult for the individual to disentangle themselves from the structural backdrop and place their experiences within a seemingly invisible gender system. Prevalence of IPV in Iceland, as in other Nordic countries, is high. Even though gender equality is widely considered achieved, normative, gendered, individualistic discourses on violence figure beneath the surface. The structures enabling such violence must be changed, including increasing exposure to discourses and affective–discursive practices that challenge and resist the self-policing heteronormative structures of society, and go beyond shame.

More broadly, in this article, we have sought to bring together studies on violence against women, societal context, gendered affective–discursive practices, and shame. While these issues have often been dealt with somewhat separately, there is a relatively limited, but growing, research literature on affect, affective–discursive practices, violence, and violence against women (e.g. Dolan, 2022; Gottzén, 2016, 2017; Jones, 2018; Sakki and Martikainen, 2022; Venäläinen, 2020, 2022), including in societal conditions of relative formal gender equality. From this ongoing work, we see here considerable potential for further studies on various affective–discursive aspects of violence, including how violence is enacted, perceived, experienced, reported, represented, responded to, and politicised or not.

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