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Men's Experience of Intimate Partner Violence

In this chapter we will hear about 18 men's experiences with partner violence. These men are between 22 and 66 years of age and have experienced various forms of partner violence. Six of these men come from immigrant backgrounds; the others are ethnic Norwegians. As mentioned earlier, this interview study is, in many ways, a visibility project, since there are few substantial qualitative studies which investigate in depth men's experiences of violence in intimate relationships. Through autobiographical interviews and an interpretive phenomenological analytical approach, we wanted to give room to the men's own voices. The chapter raises the following questions: How do men describe the violence to which they are exposed? In what social contexts does this violence occur? How do men perceive their experiences of violence? And how are their lives affected by such violence and conflict?

Who Are These Men?

Most of the Norwegian men in our sample have more than three years of university or college education. Those from other ethnic backgrounds have a more mixed educational profile: several of them are very young

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and have little formal education. Eight of the men have used the services of various family protection offices around the country. Most of their contact was in relation to mandatory family mediation. Nine men have taken up the offer of accommodation at two crisis centres in Norway. The last group of men were recruited through staff at these centres. The other participants were recruited via social media and with the help of staff members of two other support services.

Three of the eighteen men have experienced violence from gay partners. One of the gay men is Norwegian, the other two are of foreign origin. One of the participants from the crisis centre has not experienced violence from a partner, but grew up in a violent home. The other participants have experienced violence from a female partner. The female perpetrators come from both Norwegian and foreign backgrounds, although there is a predominance of women with foreign backgrounds in our material. This is due in part to the fact that we have consciously recruited male victims of violence from ethnic backgrounds. However, it is not the perpetrators of violence or its causes on which we aim to throw light.

In 2015 a Norwegian report was published entitled *Menn på krisesenter* (*Men at Crisis Centres*; Grøvdal and Jonassen 2015). This formed an important starting point for our study. The majority of the men in Grøvdal and Jonassen's study have a Norwegian ethnic background, which is why it was important for us to recruit men of immigrant background, in particular since this group has made increasing use of Norwegian crisis centres in recent years. In Norwegian and Nordic contexts, research into immigrant men's experiences of violence in intimate relationships is almost non-existent. The immigrant men we have interviewed in this study have all experienced physical violence as children. Some also experienced sexual abuse by neighbours while growing up in their country of origin.

To What Kind of Violence Are They Exposed?

The men have been subjected to milder as well as severe physical violence, psychological violence and threats, material violence and varying degrees of sexual harassment. One suffered life-threatening physical injuries that

required extensive treatment. For the other men, the physical violence consisted of having hard objects thrown at them, being pushed, hit, scratched or kicked. Two of the men have been subjected to more occasional and so-called milder forms of psychological and/or physical partner violence. These incidents of violence have occurred in situations in which the couple were engaged in a heated discussion and are therefore of a more episodic nature.

Three of the men who were subjected to physical violence reported that they used force to hold their violent partner back. These situations are described by the men who were trying to stop the woman from harming herself, or who were acting in self-defence. A recurring theme here is that these men have made a strong decision not to use violence, a matter to which we return later in this book.

At the time of the interviews, one man was still living in a relationship marked by frequent conflict and various forms of violence. The other men had ended their relationships, and seven had experiences of violence that dated back more than five years. The majority of the men interviewed have been in therapy, which no doubt explains their ability to reflect on the effect their experiences of violence have had on their perception of themselves, and the psychological consequences of this violence on their lives.

As further discussed later in this chapter, it is without doubt the psychological violence in the form of systematic degradation, ridicule, sabotage of contact with children and so on which is most manifest, and the combination of anger, aggression, control and psychological terror is a common theme in most of the interviews. The fact that our sample consists of men from such different backgrounds ensures a rich variety in the stories about men's experience of violence in intimate relationships. We try in our analysis to bring visibility to the diversity of these experiences of violence and its consequences. We describe the context in which the violence occurs, the psychological effects it has on men's ability to function in everyday life, and how they perceive themselves as victims. Through these qualitative interviews we wanted to find out more about how the phenomenon of violence functions, and it is therefore important to be attentive to any stories that break with previous stereotypical ideas about violence.

Childhood Experiences of Violence

It is well documented in a number of studies that people who experience violence in childhood and adolescence are more vulnerable to becoming victims of violence later in life (Andersson et al. 2014; Thoresen and Hjemdal 2014; Simmons et al. 2014). In the survey *Vold og voldtekt i Norge* (*Violence and Rape in Norway*), the authors emphasise that they cannot identify the exact mechanisms at work that could explain the link between suffering violence as a child and later as an adult. In other Norwegian studies a connection has been found between partner violence and other violence, and in the first nationwide survey in Norway, *Vold i parforhold* (*Violence in Partner Relationships*), it states that "it has been found that those subjected to violence from someone other than their partner are also at greater risk of being exposed to violence from their partner" (Haaland et al. 2005, p. 50). Pape and Stefansen (2004) find similar trends in the Norwegian survey *Den skjulte volden?* (*The Hidden Violence?)*. It must be emphasised, however, that the precise effects vary in these different studies.

Half the men we interviewed have either been hit by their parents or stepparents or have been bullied at school. There is a significant quantity of research that aims at understanding the relationship between risk factors and the perpetration of physical violence and victimisation. As far as the relationship between childhood violence and adulthood is concerned, we know from previous research that there is a statistical link between being the victim of violence in childhood and the risk of being subjected to violence in adulthood. The Norwegian prevalence study *Vold og voldtekt i* Norge (*Violence and Rape in Norway*; Thoresen and Hjemdal 2014) reveals clear trends towards multi-victimisation; about the link between being exposed to physical abuse as a child and as an adult Thoresen and Hjemdal state: "there was a significant increase in the prevalence of violence in adulthood in respondents who had experienced violence or sexual abuse during childhood" (p. 117). This relationship is stronger for those who, as children/teenagers, have been subjected to sexual assault than those who have been subjected to physical violence.

We therefore wanted to investigate whether any of the men in our sample had previous experiences of violence in childhood. Approximately half of the men were victims of violence in childhood. The other participants report having a secure and normal upbringing with few problems. In what follows we present some of the men's early experiences. Later in this chapter we will see some of these early experiences in relationship to the violence experienced in adulthood and how these men reflect on their own vulnerability.

Fredrik

Fredrik (53) describes serious and extensive sexual abuse from a male babysitter in childhood. His father disappeared from his life when he was a year old and he grew up with his mother. Despite being short of money, his mother was a resourceful woman who supported him in his school work and other activities. Fredrik says that his mother was always very concerned about him, but had to work a great deal to support the family. It was over a period of three years from the age of 7 when his mother was out of the house a lot that a male babysitter was abusing him. This serious abuse went on regularly until he was about 10 years old. It was only when Fredrik suddenly became mute one day that his mother realised that something was wrong and he told her about the abuse. His mother dismissed the babysitter, but did not take any action with any support organisations or with the police, and Fredrik grew up without ever talking to anyone else about the abuse. In his interview, he says that he felt he had a wound and a "deep hole" in him. He did not understand why his mother did not want to talk about what had happened or seek help. He describes himself as being a timorous child at elementary school, and says his teenage years were marked by enormous insecurity and eventually frequent sexual relations with both sexes. Fredrik was caught up in a cycle of ambivalence, fearful of intimate contact while being drawn to sexual experimentation:

> *You can develop a kind of hyper-sexuality even after abuse. Mine was a youth filled with lots of experimentation with both sexes. Some of which I'd rather have been spared. At the same time as being extremely scared, I went and did this.*

Fredrik expresses feelings of shame for this period of sexual experimentation. In childhood and adolescence, he developed ambivalent feelings for his mother because of her failure to help him deal with the abuse and trauma he had suffered. When, as a young man, he plucked up the courage to call a sexual abuse helpline, he was advised that they were unable to offer help to abused men:

> *She was not emphatic and said that they only dealt with sexual abuse against girls and women and that I mustn't contact them about my problems. … I sat at home and wanted to take my own life.*

Fredrik's story is in many ways a story of revictimisation and of traumatic events that were never dealt with. He lost trust in the mother whom he loved. The story of abuse continues into his relationship with the woman he married and with whom he had children. As we will return to later, life with his wife followed a pattern of harassment, emotional abuse and episodes of physical abuse for long stretches at a time. He blamed himself both for allowing this to happen to him and for his inability to get out of the relationship before it had major consequences, for both his children and him.

Tor

Tor (66) grew up in the 1950s with his parents and one sister who was slightly older than him. He describes his childhood as difficult and turbulent, because his mother subjected both the children and their father to serious physical and psychological violence. The children witnessed their father being hit, humiliated and harassed, making Tor afraid and insecure:

> *I particularly remember a time when my mother kicked my father in the crotch so he fell down on the kitchen floor. He lay there writhing in pain, he curled up, with his huge hands clutching his crotch. We stood there terrified and watched, my sister and me. I was only eight years old at the time, but I remember it as though it was today.*

His mother also hit and kicked the children, afterwards comforting them and drying their tears. Tor reports that there were periods when his mother lost control completely and became very aggressive. Once she ran after him and rammed his head between the door and the wall. On another occasion, she pushed him down onto the bed and almost throttled him before his father came to his rescue. Tor thought she actually wanted to kill him.

Tor did badly at school. His parents got divorced when he went to primary school and, despite the fact that the mother's violence was known to child protection and social services, she got custody of Tor and his sister. Tor was terrified of his mother and wanted to live with his father. He found it very traumatic when his mother won the child custody case and he was forced to live with her. Later, when Tor's mother packed her cases one day and left the family home, his father was given responsibility for the care of both children. After this, Tor's everyday life improved, marked by caring and attention from his father. In his interview Tor describes feeling bitter towards a care system that almost broke both the children and their father.

Tor did well at school and went on to complete a prestigious education. But he says that his childhood experiences left deep marks, and he still struggles with uncomfortable memories and pain as a result of his mother's abuse. Witnessing such serious violence between his parents resulted in trauma. On several occasions during his childhood, Tor feared that his mother might actually succeed in killing him. Later in life she said she felt no remorse for the pain she had inflicted on the family. When Tor divorced his wife, and she took his child and moved to another city, his childhood traumas resurfaced.

Harald

Harald (43) grew up with his parents and two siblings. His mother stayed at home until he reached high-school age. His parents did not have the best relationship, although their arguments did not lead to violence. But Harald emphasises that he often felt insecure because he could never fully comprehend his parents' reactions to things:

It was about manipulation or the use of a bad conscience as a way of bringing children up. The demand to behave—linked to you feeling bad if you thought you'd done something wrong.

Harald grew insecure and regularly struggled with a bad conscience without quite knowing why. He felt responsible early on for everything being right at home. He says he was hyper-aware of his parents' moods and of trying to be good and dutiful: "My strategy was not to make too much of myself." Although there were lots of good things, there were so many inconsistent reactions. His mother and father often hid problems. When he was 10 years old, his grandfather came down with cancer, but his parents failed to tell Harald about his grandfather's illness until after the man's death. His grandfather's death came as a shock and Harald says it gave him a sense of insecurity that he has carried with him throughout his life:

I did not get the time or understanding to absorb what had happened. Suddenly, my grandfather was dead. I didn't get to participate in the funeral either. It's fixed in my memory, this clear and difficult childhood experience.

As an adolescent he felt unattractive to girls and found it difficult to approach them. Harald says himself that this was probably because he had always been a bit socially insecure and felt unsafe in relationships. When he met his future wife as a student, he was very surprised that such a pretty young woman could have fallen in love with him: "I was so inexperienced with girls, incredibly insecure about my looks, my body, my achievements and intellect." It soon revealed itself that his young girlfriend was self-harming. After a while she also became bad tempered and violent towards him, both verbally and physically. The violence escalated still further after they had had children. Harald stayed in the relationship for over 15 years, and even after several years of therapy he still struggles with the effects of this violent relationship.

Jon

Jon (51) grew up in a small town with his mother and father and many siblings. His parents were loving and caring towards each other, but they

were always short of money and had a large number of children to take care of. Jon has suffered with psychological difficulties and anxiety for years. At the time of the interview, he was unemployed. He describes the tensions in the family he grew up in:

> *I grew up in a big family who did not have much money. Firstly, there were lots of us—a massive gang of us in a tiny apartment. In addition, my sister had been diagnosed with a serious mental condition, and that meant there was a fair bit of friction and high-level general stress in our family. We couldn't bring other children home. We were basically "the odd family".*

It is clear from Jon's story that he was a loner, generally excluded from any friendships or relationships at school. He was close to his parents, but he also says in the interview that they were unable to cope with the children. From early on he learned to tiptoe around at home. His sister could attack her siblings physically, which caused a lot of fear and upset. He was also picked on at school, and at primary school he became the target for one of the rougher boys, who bullied him both physically and verbally. He describes serious bullying and harassment from his schoolfellows:

> *It was nine years of physical and mental harassment. It included everything, from trying to drown me, hitting me, kicking and bullying me. After a while I closed up.*

Jon says that he shrank in on himself and did not retaliate. He was beaten and kicked and was scared of going to school. His classmates stole his clothes during gym class and held him underwater in the swimming pool. He dropped out of high school, but went back to college later. He explains that the insecurity he experienced in childhood and adolescence made him fearful of growing up and caused social anxiety.

In his 20s he met a young woman and quickly moved in with her: "We were two vulnerable souls who found each other." It turned out that his girlfriend also had difficult past experiences and had serious problems controlling her anger. For over ten years Jon was with a woman who kicked and hit him. He has sought the help of psychologists, general practitioners and other support agencies.

As mentioned earlier, we see some differences in the childhood experiences of ethnic Norwegians and men from ethnic minorities who have gone on to experience partner violence. This may, among other things, be due to cultural differences in childrearing and views on children. Most of the six men from other ethnic backgrounds have extensive experiences of violence from childhood and, as we have seen, two of them also suffered sexual abuse. The participants from immigrant backgrounds all describe a childhood in which it was quite common for children to be hit, especially by fathers, but also teachers and other people in authority. They are reluctant to call it violence; it was so common in their experience that they saw nothing special about it. For Ali, Deo and Bashir, violence was an intrinsic part of their upbringing, both within and outside the home.

Ali

Ali (55), who came to Norway when he was an adult, describes his experiences of being hit as a child:

> Researcher: Can I ask you about your experiences of violence as a child, were you subjected to violence by mother or father?
>
> *Yes. Not in the hard way that you'd understand it, but because in our culture they think differently. Parents think if they use a little violence or are hard on their children, that's best for them. Yes, now and again it is. I remember that I got many slaps from my father.*
>
> *I thought it was normal, because if you look at my situation and others of the same age, then it was fine—I was fine. It's normal to hit kids. I didn't get any violence, but he hit me. It happened. When I'd done something he didn't like.*

Ali's experience is not unique. Several men from minority groups undercommunicate the violence they experienced in childhood, normalising or trivialising it. Being hit by parents or teachers was a part of growing up for many of these men. These are not common experiences among the ethnic Norwegian men we have interviewed, however.

Deo

The story of Deo (34) has many similarities with Ali's, also being hit by his father and his teacher. During the interview, Deo initially answers "no" to the question of whether he was subjected to violence in his childhood. When the question is repeated, he again replies in the negative, but then goes on:

No. They are stricter in my home country, that's usual.
Researcher: What do you think is usual?
Yes. It is usual for teachers to hit [children]. I got several injuries when I was ten years old because the teachers hit me and were very strict. There were lots of rules.
Researcher: How did the teachers hit [you]—with a stick?
Yes. They hit [me] here and they hit there [indicating on his body] and they hit my legs here too.
Researcher: But your mother and father then?
Yes. Dad hit but not Mum. Dad hit the kids, but he did not hit Mum.

We have to ask these questions several times before the story begins to come out, and what he calls "usual" reveals itself to mean quite extensive blows to his body and head. Deo came to Norway to get married. He says that he does not want to go back to his home country despite the huge problems he has had with his wife and in-laws. He has a job and security in Norway, and if he were to return life would be extremely difficult. We will come back to this later in the chapter.

Bashir

Two of the immigrant men tell us that they were victims of sexual abuse as children, both from neighbours. Bashir (20) explains:

When I was about ten years old, there was a man in the neighbourhood who abused me whenever he wanted to. Afterwards everyone realised that I had been abused. They bullied me and called me names.

This abuse had major consequences for Bashir and his family. The neighbour continued his abuse for several years and when it became known among the other neighbours, it was not the perpetrator they turned against, but Bashir himself and his family. They called him gay and when he was 15 years old, they attempted to kill him. They stabbed him in the throat with a knife. The villagers persecuted the family and finally took it out on his father:

> *I was in hospital for three months afterwards, and they rang my father and said they didn't know how things were going with his boy. Then the men who'd cut my throat drove to my father's house and killed him. Because I'm gay. They went to the house and killed him while I was in hospital.*

These childhood experiences continue to affect Bashir in many ways. He suffers from social anxiety and is afraid of even associating with people. He describes extensive harassment from the people from his home country who live in the same town as him in Norway. He has huge problems with anxiety and suicidal ideation. Bashir's case probably bears the clearest hallmarks of multi-victimisation of any in this chapter.

Daniel

Daniel (25) talks about his experience of abuse by a neighbour:

> *When I was in secondary school, I was abused by the boyfriend of a [female] friend of my mother's. This friend lived across the street. It happened in the pool. We were swimming in the pool. Me, him, his son and his daughter. His wife had called their kids in because they were going away. Then he came over to me and held me and pulled down my pants and he was already hard. Then he pushed his penis into me.*

Daniel wanted to stay in the pool because he rarely got to swim in a pool. In his interview, he dismissed the idea that it may not have been a complete coincidence that he was subjected to abuse of this nature when he was 13 years old. He came from an extremely brutal background and was exposed to extensive bullying by his peers at school. He was overweight and was bullied because his family were poor or because he wore the wrong

clothes. Other kids stole or broke his things. His family lived in cramped conditions in a bad neighbourhood. He describes, as a child, having to step over people who had overdosed in the stairwell, and syringes and needles lying everywhere. There were regular shootings in the neighbourhood. Daniel grew up with a vulnerability which arguably made him a potential victim. When we ask if he told anyone about the rape, he answers:

> *No, I didn't say anything because I was afraid and … well. It was a mix of lots of things. I'd been bullied, I thought it was my fault because I—I shouldn't have been in the pool alone with him. I thought what if what if, what should I have done etc. You go over the situation in your head time after time and yes…*

As we can see, Daniel looks for answers as to why he was abused. And, like several other men we interviewed who have experienced sexual abuse, described in Chap. 6, he has lived with feelings of shame and guilt for what happened.

Bashir and Daniel both experienced a great deal of violence in childhood, and both came to Norway when they were approximately 20 years old. Their relationship to violence differs from that of the other participants; both tell their experiences without holding so much back. There is a big difference in how Bashir and Daniel talk about their experiences of violence after coming to Norway, in comparison to Ali and Deo. Both Ali and Deo under-communicate the violence they have been exposed to in adulthood, something we will see later.

Several of the men talk about much of the violence they have experienced as though it were normal. It was an everyday part of life, or something that everyone did, or simply how things were. The violence these men experienced as "normal" when they were children may have contributed to their acceptance of a life of violence as adults—at least until it became too serious to be tolerated.

Peter

Peter (44) talks about this "acceptance" of violence in another way. He was also subjected to violence and witnessed frequent quarrels and physical violence between his mother and his stepfather at home as a

child. He frequently got a cuff round the ear from his stepfather, but his relationship with him could be good in periods. His stepfather took him on trips and skiing. His mother was never violent towards him, but she was hot-tempered and had an argumentative relationship with her husband. Peter says that witnessing the "battles" between them made him avoid any form of confrontation and conflict later in life:

> *I don't like discussions that lead to a tense atmosphere. I don't like it. Then I withdraw, and go in on myself.*

He has learned to be evasive and has developed behaviour patterns which mean he does not confront those who treat him badly. Instead of confronting them about their actions, he tries to understand why they are behaving in the way they are.

Peter grits his teeth and retreats rather than confronting people. In his case, and in the case of several of the other men, we see a huge ability to try to understand and show compassion for the perpetrator; to such an extent that they have managed to explain away the consequences that this violence has had on them. We will return to this later in the chapter.

Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence

We will now describe the men's experiences of intimate partner violence. First we will meet men who have been exposed to systematic violence over a period of time. There is a tendency in several of the men's stories for them to have shown a lot of consideration towards their partners who have told them about difficulties in their upbringing. The partners have, at times, been so aggressive and unstable that the men have developed strategies to please them order to avoid conflict, for example by leaving the house when there are signs of irrational aggression, or being extra friendly or quiet to dampen their partner's level of aggression.

Living with Systematic Violence over Time

Harald is one of the respondents who has lived with a violent partner for the longest. When he was divorced from his wife a few years back, it was after having gone through a 15-year relationship in which violence and conflicts were a regular occurrence. It became clear to Harald early on that his girlfriend had psychological problems: she was very temperamental and tried to harm herself several times. She had told him about experiences of abuse from her adolescence and he wanted to help her. Harald realised she needed treatment, but thought that if he only he loved her enough, she would get better. The episodes of self-harm and dramatic behaviour became more frequent after they moved in together. For periods Harald had to keep watch at night in case his girlfriend tried to harm herself. In these situations, she could attack him physically: "My explanation is that it all began with her losing control of herself. She hit, kicked and bit me. She was completely rabid."

His girlfriend's episodes of rage, self-harm and physical violence towards Harald continued, in particular after disputes or when he had done something she did not like. When Harald wanted to finish the relationship, she fell pregnant.

Harald lived in a relationship where he was bitten, scratched and punched in the face until his nose bled. His wife kicked him in the crotch and threw hard objects at him when she got angry. She threatened him with a knife. He says that he was sometimes very afraid for his life. At the same time as letting loose on him, she also harmed herself. She rowed with Harald if he had been in contact with his family. He experienced an inner chaos and had ambivalent feelings, because he felt sorry for his wife and, for sake of the children and wider family, he wanted to keep the family together. It was only after the breakup that he realised how serious his ex-wife's mental health problems had been. According to Harald, she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder before the divorce, but at the time he had not known how severe it was. He smoothed things over, hid things and tried to normalise the children's day-to-day lives.

Similarly, Tom (63) describes a pattern of harassment, humiliation, bullying and various forms of physical violence in a ten-year relationship.

He had been married to another woman previously with whom he had children. There had been no violence at all in this relationship. The two had remained good friends after the divorce. Tom says it took a long time before he understood the kind of regime he was living under with his new partner because she changed slowly, becoming more controlling over time. He noticed that something was wrong in the relationship when they moved in together. She refused to let his children come to visit and would remove his private possessions without saying anything. Letters from the bank disappeared without explanation. He says he became "slightly paranoid" because things vanished. Not until much later did he realise that his partner had been behind all this. Tom describes how he was subjected to humiliation and harassment:

> *We had a party one afternoon. We had babies in arms and the neighbours had been here with their toddlers. After the visitors have gone, she says: Didn't you notice? Didn't you see that people are rolling their eyes at you? They're talking to me about you. They come to me and say that they feel sorry for me because you've got such a condescending attitude towards me.*

His partner's methods worsened after the birth of their child. Tom was continually told what a bad man and father he was, and that he was incapable of taking care of the child properly. He was frequently told that their mutual friends thought that he behaved weirdly and whined all the time:

> *I remember we went for a walk once. She said that I shouldn't contact two of our male friends anymore because they were totally fed up with all my whining. Their wives had told her that their husbands would rather not be with me. We'd go to a birthday party, and when we got home she'd say people were nodding to each other and exchanging knowing glances because I was behaving so weirdly.*

Over time, Tom began to doubt himself and felt that he was never clever enough verbally or cognitively in conversations. He says he never knew who his friends were or what other people thought about him. Tom became troubled and confused and says he lost his grip on everyday life: "Something in me snapped. There had been many such episodes, of

humiliation and insults. I locked myself in the bathroom and screamed." He regularly went off in the middle of the night to escape the problems and so the kids would not wake up. Occasionally he took his duvet with him and slept in the car.

Serious Harm

Tom has also experienced serious physical violence that led to injuries. When their child was about a year old, his partner threatened him with an object for the first time. They were meant to have friends for dinner and prepare the food in the kitchen. When he contradicted her about something, she stabbed him in the face with a knife and accused him of never contributing to the household. We asked Tom if he could predict when his partner would become aggressive:

> *Yes. I could. When the vacuum cleaner began to go at least once a day and there was lots of unnecessary house cleaning. Then I knew something was in the air. Perhaps the cleaning was a way of channelling her anger, I don't know. But I learned to see the signs. The intense gaze and dark eyes. Then she'd close in on herself. Nothing but commands came out [of her]. Then she'd start slamming the doors.*

When his partner began to slam doors, Tom would go around the house trying not to say or do anything that could irritate her.

Once his partner went into a fury when Tom returned home from a Christmas party. He had had some aquavit to drink and was slightly tipsy. When he came home at one o'clock in the morning, he got a surprise:

> *Just as I get in the door, I hear someone come raging down the stairs. She stands in the hallway and yells at me to get out. I'm saying it's okay and turn to go. Then she catches me from behind so I fall backwards and all I can remember is a bang when my head hits the ground. I'm lying on the floor in foetal position—I was a bit drunk too of course. Bit by bit I get back on my feet and see myself in the mirror. There's blood all over my face and down my shirt. I have a big cut in my head. I stagger into the bathroom and lock the door. Then she left and went to bed.*

During his interview, Tom describes several similar incidents of physical and emotional abuse by his former partner. In one case, her 10-year-old son stands in the dark and kicks him in the face as he is coming up the stairs. Later the child is very upset and cries about the event.

But in Tom's story, there is no parallel narrative about a woman who has had bad childhood experiences or is battling with a psychiatric diagnosis. Tom's former partner was well liked at work and had a good network of friends and neighbours. He thinks she was (and is) very talented socially. This was one of the reasons why he did not tell his friends about her behaviour behind the four walls of their home.

Peter's (second) wife subjected him to various forms of violence, including economic and material violence. It started with her using his credit card and buying "stupid things just to spend money", as well as taking a knife and cutting the sofa and making knife marks on the living room wall. She also began harming herself and breaking his things. Peter explains her entire behaviour thus: "she provokes me something rotten. It's like she wants to drive me to breaking point."

Of the episode that eventually led him to leave and move to the crisis centre, he says:

> *She behaves exactly as she wants, because she knows I won't do anything. After a while she got physical, she was harming herself, so we began to fight, and then she started to hit me. She hit me right in the face with her fist. Once she nearly strangled me. When I was at the doctor's a few days later, I mentioned it to the doctor because it hurt to swallow. She'd squeezed my throat that hard. The doctor asked me what had happened. I said my wife had put her hands round my throat. The doctor said he couldn't feel anything [wrong], but that he was sure it was painful. Then we got to the problem I'd gone there with. Originally she'd threatened me with—instead of threatening to hurt herself, then she started threatening me with a knife. She did this twice. With the knife in her hand. She was standing there boiling baby bottles, and once she went to pick up the saucepan full of boiling water and came over with it and threatened me that if you don't do this or that, I'll throw this over you. Then I thought, God Almighty, this is getting too crazy. I can't go on like this.*

The result was that Peter left home and "wandered around the city and shopping mall until six or seven in the evening". He did not know what

to do or where to go, but on the internet on his phone he found a crisis centre, where he stayed for several weeks.

The men we interviewed who attended a crisis centre because they themselves felt that the violence had gone too far had all been subjected to partner violence except one: Carlos (22), who came to stay at the crisis centre with his entire family when they fled his mother's violent partner. Since Carlos was over 18, he was obliged to stay in the men's section. Carlos's story is different from the others, in that he had not been exposed to violence from a *partner*, but was part of a household where violence and anger were commonplace, right into adulthood. We will return to Carlos's story later. He displays a tendency which we find in many of the men—a huge capacity throughout long periods of his life to take care of others.

Psychological Control

We have previously highlighted Johnson's (2008) distinction between the typologies of situational violence and intimate terrorism, and how Johnson argues that physical superiority and threats of or actual physical violence lead to the (male) partner controlling and dominating the other. In several of the stories of partner violence perpetrated by women, it is not the threat of physical violence that controls men, but that women have psychological dominance and exert control in the form of systematic harassment and humiliation.

Filip (33) is an example of the devastating effects that harassment and humiliation can have when they occur in a love relationship. Filip's story has parallels with Tom's. At the time of the interview, he is divorced from his wife. According to his description she is well liked, has a large network and is a resourceful woman in many ways.

Filip was subjected to emotional violence in the form of frequent humiliation and ridicule. He had no experience of either physical or psychological violence before his early 20s, when he met a woman four years older than him. Early on in the relationship it emerged that she could at times be destructive and aggressive. Filip was very in love with her and wanted the relationship to succeed. The problems worsened after two or

three years of their being together. After their first child was born, she often went out on the town and met other men. She could be gone for whole nights at a time, without Filip knowing where she was. He explains that he loved her and became insecure and nervous when she left without telling him where she was. He describes how he experienced the situation when his wife came home in the morning:

> *What was worst was when she tells me everything. She comes home, for example, at half past seven in the morning. This is after the children are born. Later on in the day she tells me about what she's done. And it's like she's not shy, there's no embarrassment or shame or anything, but it's with a glint in her eye and this eager expression in her face—like, how's he going to react to this? A kind of hungry glow. It got disgusting, really disgusting, and that's how it was every time. So I got the feeling that she got a kick out of seeing me suffer.*

The latent threat that his wife could disappear and meet other men exhausted Filip. He describes how his anxiety began to take over: What was wrong with him? Why was she doing this to him and to the children? His wife often looked right through him, as if he were not there, when they were in the same room. She did not answer his questions or laughed when he declared his love to her. Filip felt that his wife undermined him by ignoring him and criticising him. He says he became unsure of himself and started to suffer from social anxiety. During his interview, he says that he does not dare to meet women now because he feels such anxiety about being judged, and is terrified of being rejected.

Tom became seriously ill just before the family was due to go on a trip abroad. The doctor advised him to cancel the holiday due to his general poor health. When Tom told his wife that it was unlikely he would be able to travel, she was furious and refused to let him stay at home:

> *She jumped on me, not physically, but verbally. She screamed at me saying I was weak and that I'd let the doctor control me. I was completely beaten down and went on the trip anyway. The next day I became acutely ill and had to go back home.*

Tom, Filip and Harald have all experienced psychological control in their marriages. All three of them did what they thought their wives expected of them to avoid trouble. It is not the physical violence or the

threat of violence here that causes these men to feel anxiety or have other psychological reactions. Aggression and control are exerted through harassment, often combined with threats to take the children away from them or to report them for violence.

A recurring feature in the stories of men who have experienced intimate partner violence from women is that they regularly experience feelings of guilt without knowing quite why. As we will return to later in this chapter, eroded self-esteem and fear of doing and/or saying something wrong are common consequences of living with conflict and violence.

Fredrik is an example of a man whose self-esteem has been eroded after many years of experiencing serious emotional abuse and the use of control strategies. He says that he often had the uncomfortable feeling that his wife was never satisfied with him as a partner and the life they lived together. He believes that she took her own worries and stress out on him. He was never good enough, neither as a husband nor as a father. Before he left for a work trip, his wife would threaten him, saying there was no guaranteed that she and the kids would be there when he got back. Walking on tiptoe and trying to curb his wife's aggression by weighing his words carefully and being extra friendly and kind became one of Fredrik's strategies.

Fredrik says he carried a certain amount of insecurity because he was subjected to sexual abuse as a small boy. When they were discussing things, his wife would humiliate him by attacking him where he was at his most vulnerable. He explains how she exposed him to humiliation and harassment:

> *I felt like a shit, and that I was never good enough. I felt like that throughout the relationship. She compared me to my mates, saying that they probably had a stronger sex drive than me. … Because I'd been abused, and I'd had lots of partners before her, she reckoned I should be grateful that anyone wanted me.*

Fredrik's wife often accused him of being unfaithful and looking at other women. She thought there was something wrong with him since he constantly tried to attract other people's attention. She threw wet towels in his face, wrecked things and threw knives, but Fredrik emphasises that it was the humiliation, the ridiculing of him as a partner and father and

the sexual harassment that were the most devastating. He says that his wife had complete psychological dominance over him during certain periods:

> *I was cracking up and I got totally desperate. Once I tried to jump out of the car when it was moving. I couldn't bear anymore. She kept on and on at me with accusations and threats. I wasn't safe in my own home.*

Filip and Harald reported in similar terms how they broke down after enduring "floods" of humiliation and harassment. Sometimes they feel so low that they try to take their own lives.

In the Norwegian report *Menn på krisesenter* (*Men at Crisis Centres*), researchers conclude that men exposed to systematic violence from partners have many of the same needs as women with similar experiences (Grøvdal and Jonassen 2015). The men presented in the report express that they fear more violence and experience shame. They are worried about the future welfare of the children, while also caring about the perpetrator of the violence. Our survey confirms some of these findings. We too find various forms of violence and shame being inflicted, combined with men's enormous concern for the children and also for the violent partner. The men try to protect both themselves and those who perpetrate the violence, until this proves impossible and they turn to the crisis centre for help.

Seen in the context of Johnson's distinction between situational partner violence and intimate terrorism, most of the men in our study are subject to intimate terrorism. These acts of violence are part of a pattern that governs the relationship. It comprises a combination of aggressive and controlling behaviours, threats, put-downs and other forms of psychological terror combined with various forms of physical violence and, in some cases, sexual violence. It is the persistent and repetitive nature of these experiences that characterises this violence. Most of the men we interviewed from the crisis centres focus a great deal on the final violent episode which forced them onto the streets, to move out and finally go to a crisis centre. But this final episode of violence, and their reactions to it, can only be understood when viewed in the context of the violence meted out by the partner over an extended period of time.

Intimate terrorism is characterised by a partner exercising physical and psychological violence which suppresses the freedom of the autonomous subject to live in an equal relationship. Interviews with the men in our study indicate that it is not the fear of physical violence that drives the control regime, but rather psychologically controlling behaviour or fear of trouble, harassment and of losing contact with children.

Using the Child

The fathers in our sample say they have been frightened of losing contact with their children. Albert (33) is one of those we interviewed who has been subject to relatively minor attacks. Albert's ex-wife was never physically violent towards him, but worked systematically to sabotage his relationship with the children. He says that he learned to be hyper-sensitive to his ex-wife's moods after the breakup to avoid her putting a spoke in the wheels when he was going to have the children. She regularly changed her plans just before he was going to pick up the children and refused him permission to take them on holidays that they had planned long in advance. At one time she even contacted the child welfare office and accused him of kidnapping one of the children. Her new husband has also been verbally threatening towards Albert in social situations, in the presence of the children.

One of the men represented here has never lived with the mother of the child he had in mature years. His story illustrates a particularly serious example of a psychological abuse and control strategy used by mothers over fathers who are in a weaker legal position as regards the child than either married or cohabiting fathers. Andreas (55) describes having continual problems with an ex-girlfriend who limits and controls his movements with his son. He met this woman through common friends. Some months after they had got together, she began to behave aggressively without cause:

> *There was this sudden violent need to be in control. Detailed planning, almost to the minute. She could flare up if it didn't go quite as she'd planned. Eventually I felt that our relationship had no future. Just when I'd decided to end the relationship, she calls and tells me she's pregnant.*

Andreas decided to make the best out of the situation. He very much wanted to take part in the responsibility for his son's upbringing despite the relationship being over, but his ex-girlfriend would have nothing to do with him:

After the birth she was totally weird. She became a lioness who was constantly on the look out. I wasn't allowed to change the baby's nappy. I wasn't allowed to put him to bed. I was barely allowed to hold him, but I thought all this would pass when our son got a bit bigger.

This constant watchfulness over the father and son did *not* pass. When Andreas tried tentatively to suggest to her that he might have regular contact with his son, the mother refused. Access based on any usually acceptable structure was out of the question. Andreas describes how his movements with his son were controlled:

A stopwatch was set when I went out with the pram. If I wasn't back after 45 minutes, then all hell let loose, total panic. She yelled at me and raged and went hysterical. She couldn't control herself, got very angry and yelled and screamed at me. I was screamed at a lot, and that affected me very strongly because I wasn't used to that sort of thing.

It was revealed after a while that their son had a psychological developmental disorder and needed special care and educational support. In order to be around more, Andreas moved into a house close to his ex-girlfriend, but not long afterwards she took her son and moved in with her parents many miles away. The courts had awarded him contact every other weekend and once a week, but this never materialised. His ex-girlfriend systematically sabotaged the contact. He would travel to meet his son feeling uneasy and fearful as to whether he would be able to spend time with him or not. One afternoon when Andreas came to pick up his son, he was also threatened by other family members:

She and her family had obviously made a plan, an ambush attack. When I came in the door the father of my ex-girlfriend was sitting there filming me on a video-recorder as I walked in and picked him up. My son is strongly impacted

by his diagnosis and is socially reticent. It wasn't as though he jumped up to meet me like other children do. Inside, his grandmother sat there yelling at me: "Look how he's wrecking the boy!" My son was very frightened. It was a completely absurd situation. I didn't get to take my son with me. Things became too much for me after this episode. I went into a depression and stopped asking for any contact because it was all so mad.

Like many other men, Andreas never uses the word violence when referring to his experiences. "Crazy" and "mad" are the words used more frequently to describe what they have been subjected to. We will return to this later in the chapter.

After a while, Andreas agreed to his ex-partner's proposal of contact under her supervision. He could take his son on holiday or to his house or to visit his family, provided that his ex-partner was present. Andreas has decided to live with this solution to protect his son and himself.

Both Albert and Tor were threatened with being taken to court if they did not agree to the contact agreements that their ex-partners sketched out prior to their meetings with family protection. Tor came under pressure from his ex-wife during negotiations about care and residence, and ended up paying her a huge amount of money to share the care. She said that if he refused, she would go to court. Christian (28) was also threatened in the same way by his ex-wife.

The desire to be a modern father who was present for his children clearly emerges in Andreas's story. The person who carried out his interview felt that the sorrow and pain he had sustained were palpable. He was not allowed to change his son's nappies because the mother expressed a fear that he might abuse the boy. Threats, tirades and the casting of aspersions became an integral part of any meeting. He was caught in a game of control mechanisms. He was willing to adapt to a highly controlling regime in order to spend as much time as possible with his son. Both Andreas's and Tor's narratives are stories of a lost fatherhood and of various forms of second-wave abuse in the institutions they have come into contact with (Corbally 2015, p. 3120). While Andreas suffers in silence, Tom adopted the same methods as the mother. Becoming desperate, he took his child back to his home and refused to return her to her mother because she had moved home without consent. After several years of very serious conflict, he lost all contact with the child.

Excessive Control Exercised over Daily Life

Peter explains that the violence began with his wife's jealousy of his children from a previous relationship: of his spending too much time with them, being too affectionate and sitting next to them, instead of with her on the couch. His wife's jealousy eventually resulted in more controlling behaviour, both control of his relationship with the children, and also of when and how he should communicate with their mother. Any messages to his ex-wife had to go through his new wife's phone, in addition to her dictating what he could write. There should be no niceties like "hello" or "how are things".

Deo's story comprises many of the same elements, although the control exercised over his life is even greater. Deo came to Norway to get married, but it was a couple of years after his arrival that his wife began to quarrel with him, threatening him, blaming him for things and generally taking control of his life. She inflicted injuries on him several times, scratched him, threw things on the floor and at him: "threw lamps and the like in the bedroom". She also controlled his spending, and eventually also brought her family in to decide with her how Deo should use his money and time. Deo found this very humiliating and cried several times during the interview:

> *They want to look at my finances, it's horrible. It's sad. My dad has never looked at them. Friends of hers have also done that. I don't like to live because … my wife knows how much I earn and how [much] I send home. My wife knows everything. I often showed my wife my account and she knows how [much] money I send. I don't have any secrets, none.*

His wife controls his life in almost every detail. She decides when Deo can go out and regularly threatens to send him back to their homeland:

> *She travels back to our home country, but I'm not allowed to go out or visit friends. It's not allowed. She is strict. She can travel. But I cannot go out and she wants me to tell her who I've talked to and who I've called. When get our pay at work we get together and go for a beer, I don't drink. I went once, but my wife wouldn't let me go the next time. I'm just at home, I can't do anything, I clean the house and clear the snow and go to work. No fresh air.*

In the end, the threats from both his wife and her family are so great that Deo seeks help. He is encouraged by people he meets in adult education to contact the crisis centre, and he moves in.

Deo is subjected to enormous social control and violence from both his wife and his in-laws in Norway and her wider family back in their homeland. The money he earns and his car keys are confiscated, his movements are controlled, and his wife's brothers demand insight into his finances. His wife often calls him several times a day when he is at work, which creates difficulties for him with colleagues. If he does not do what his wife and her family say, they threaten to send him home. This is an unbearable idea for him since the shame would be horrendous, nor does he know what his wife's family (and his own family) would do to him if he was returned.

Situational Partner Violence

Three of the men in this sample have experienced violence that has come and gone in periods, and can be characterised as situational couple violence based on Johnson's (2008) definition. Although the men describe repeated episodes of physical, material and psychological violence, it is not certain that their partners have psychological control over them or that they systematically dominate them. Christian's wife was only physically violent when they had arguments. She was from Latin America and they got married quite soon after meeting so that she could get a residence permit. Christian says that he was very in love with her. Their relationship did not go well, however, and Christian eventually got the feeling that she was not really in love with him, but was just using him. She often threatened to move out and she could stay away for several days without his knowing where she was. She lied to him and went with other men behind his back.

There was a great deal of conflict in the relationship between Christian and his wife, and he is one of the men who explains that on some occasions he used his physical superiority to defend himself. He and his wife had no children and he has not sought help from any agencies. On two occasions, the police arrived at the door because of the noise. Once,

Christian called the police himself because his wife had bitten him and drawn blood. The police came and took his wife to the station for questioning. The police thought Christian should file a report on the incident, but he did not want to because he felt sorry for her. He also felt that he had started the argument by trying to take her mobile phone from her. On another occasion, the police came to the house because the neighbours had reported a disturbance. Christian's wife had kicked him and thrown a candlestick at him, and he had kicked her in the thigh in self-defence. When the police arrived, the woman had marks on her thigh and he had a bruise on his forehead. The police drove her immediately to the crisis centre.

In the case of Christian and his wife, the violence is in part mutual, but the psychological pressure and harassment to which she subjected Christian led to him being unable to sleep and losing his grip on reality. He explains that friends and other networks helped him to recover after the breakup with his wife.

Erik (52) is the only man in this study who still lives with a violent wife. She originally comes from somewhere in Africa and told Erik about various physical violence and sexual abuse which took place in the family in which she grew up. His wife is only violent when she drinks alcohol and, according to Erik, she is fast developing an alcohol problem. She has broken a computer and other valuables in fits of rage. She tries to control who he sees and what he spends his time on. In arguments she has said that no one else would want him and shouted out how ugly and hopeless he is. She has also threatened to call the crisis centre and report him for being violent towards her. Afterwards she cries and says she is upset and ashamed at what she has done.

Main Breadwinner and Victim

Low income and poor educational attainments are, in themselves, risk factors for becoming the victim of violence. It is well documented in clinical trials of abused women that as a group they are often outside the world of work. Half the residents of Norwegian crisis centres are on benefits (Bufdir 2016). There are relatively large differences in terms of

employment and income among the respondents in this study, but the majority are middle-class and employed. Most of the participants resemble many other Norwegian men in that they are, or have been, the main providers for their families. This, to some degree, also includes the two heterosexual immigrant men who have lived in Norway long enough to get work permits. We find an interesting ambivalence in this section of the study as regards the attitude of these men towards the traditional notion of a man as active protector and main breadwinner, and their experiences as victims of violence. They offer financial support and want to protect their wives and children, and yet they are simultaneously subjected to partner violence.

Deo had several jobs when he arrived in Norway. It was necessary for him to send money to his family and also to satisfy his wife's demands. Now he has *one* job which he really enjoys. He says his job is what gives him the will to live. He has work colleagues there and the person he calls his only friend. Outside work, he is still completely isolated and is frightened of going out.

Most men point to their work as an important anchor in their lives. Those who have had a job have managed to keep hold of it, even when this has at times been very difficult. Jonas (46) says that he had to sleep in a container for several days because his wife had thrown him out, and he was careful that no one should discover it. At other times he worked continuously to satisfy his wife's needs and demands for money, and describes how he once "ended up sleeping only a few hours a day for 14 days". The burden of providing for the family lay with these men. Their identity as men was largely linked to their being proactively involved as fathers and successful in their working lives.

Harald says that he had several jobs at times to keep the wheels turning, because his wife could not handle the workplace. In periods of increased conflict and violence he went on sick leave. This led to feelings of stress and anxiety at not managing well enough. Tom was providing for his wife who worked part-time. Being in the role of a strong and active protector for the family may have made it difficult for some of these men to see themselves as the victims of violence. Their superior economic position may also have meant that parts of the available support system, and even friends and networks, failed to notice them or

identify them as victims within their relationships. But as mentioned previously, we also have examples of stories from younger men who do not have their own financial resources or any work.

It is not, these men tell us, always for economic reasons that they work longer hours in difficult periods. The majority explain that they went to work despite any physical injuries and/or the psychological pressures, and Harald, Tom and Erik all say that they spent more hours at work to escape the chaos at home.

I Am a Man and I Do Not Hit Women

None of the men interviewed reports having taken the lead in the use of physical violence against their partners. Tor and Albert have both defended themselves verbally against their ex-wives when they threatened to sabotage their contact with the children. Christian held his wife down and kicked her back when she hit him. In some cases they say they have defended themselves verbally and physically, responding with derogatory language and offensive behaviour, holding their partners back when they have attacked them, kicking out to defend themselves from being bitten and kicked, trying to lock their partner's hands, and one man says he brought his wife down to the floor to make her stop.

Arild's (43) answer to the question as to whether he himself has ever hit his partner is typical:

> Researcher: Can I ask you about the situations that became physical—did you hit her back then or were you both sort of kicking and hitting each other?
>
> *No, I have never hit her, but once when she went crazy and flew at me, I managed to hold her hands and knock her legs aside, very carefully and hold her on the ground for a couple of minutes, but then she was totally crazy.*

Men generally regard themselves as physically stronger and some, but far from all, use this strength to defend themselves against violence. In line with Johnson's categories of violence, we can term this form *violence resistance*; that is, a form of violence that occurs in self-defence as a response or counter-action to the systematic abuse and control behaviour of a

partner (Johnson 2008). As previously mentioned, intimate terrorism is where an individual is systematically violent and controlling and the partner is not. The men we interviewed who say they defended themselves have not, so far as we have ascertained, exercised general control over their partners (Johnson 2008, p. 6).

In those cases where there is a female perpetrator of violence, the men clearly state that they regard it as unmanly to hit a woman, and hitting back has therefore not been an option. The men's attitude to violence must be seen in light of the fact that in Norway, as in many other European countries, violence towards women is a gender equality issue (Gottzén 2016). In a Swedish study of male perpetrators, Gottzén describes how violent men often exhibit shame, condemning and criticising their own actions (p. 170). Gottzén sees the shame experienced by these men in the context that abusive husbands represent a deviation that undermines the Nordic ideology of gender equality (p. 163).

The majority of the men we interviewed said that they actively distance themselves from violence in general, and that they have been brought up to believe that men should not hit women. These men regard it as an expression of strength when they do not hit their partners back. For example, Jon says: "I did not experience that it [not responding violently] threatened my identity as a man, because I think it's more manly not to hit." Harald says: "I've never identified myself with 'macho ideals' and I do not hit women."

Ali, who is from Asia, is one of the men who openly says that it is not good for a man to admit he has been hit by a woman. He also has great difficulty in talking about the physical and psychological violence to which he has been subjected. One of the reasons given by Deo for not retaliating is that he is also afraid of his own anger, that he might be triggered into being violent and injuring his wife. For men who live with a female partner, using violence as self-defence is high risk because of the difference in physical strength which often exists between women and men. One of the respondents pointed out that this was a major reason for his going to a crisis centre: he was quite simply fearful that he might retaliate and of the possible consequences of doing so, and that he might even risk killing her. Tom explained that he was terrified of finding himself in a situation where he would react to his partner's repeated provocations and end up on the front page of the local newspaper as a wife beater or killer.

There are others too who say they have been terrified of losing control and hitting back. Non-retaliation, holding out and taking responsibility for the children and family all seem to act as confirmation for them that they are proper men and fathers. Men also know that if they do retaliate, they risk not being believed and fear getting into serious trouble with the police and child welfare.

This gender relationship is not the same for those who have experienced violence from a male partner. The gay men also say they have not used violence, but we do not find the same man/woman narrative in their stories. For them the thought of hitting their partner has simply not occurred to them.

Gender Switching of Perpetrator and Victim

Another important finding is that men fear false accusations that *they* are violent. Fredrik's ex-wife threatened him with telling other people that he had hit her if he ever left her. He had no idea what the other people in the village thought of him, and grew anxious about mixing with people. He tells us that he has experienced various crises and very dangerous situations at work, but it was the war at home that broke him. These men find that women occupy a position that gives them enormous credibility with both the family and child protection services, and that it is easy for them to represent the man as the perpetrator of violence. The threat of *role switching* is expressed in different ways. For example, Filip described how his ex-wife sat in a meeting with child protection after an episode where she had thrown their youngest boy out in the freezing cold, and dismissed his story:

> *Yes. She sat there and said: Yes, but what mother could do something like that to her children? It was a rhetorical question of course. Who was going to believe that she could subject her husband and children to psychological abuse?*

Peter and Deo both describe an additional stress that complicates their relationship with their partners and the outside world still further; that is, that their wives accuse *them* of being violent. They do this by running out onto the street and shouting and screaming that they have been attacked. Deo explains:

I don't hit my wife. She often threatens me, calls the police several times. I don't hit her, but she often shouts and runs out into the street and says I'm hitting her. … I call the police and ask for help. Because my wife is attacking me and causing me injuries and running out into the street shouting, and there are lots of neighbours watching and lots of neighbours don't understand of course, because they think: he's a foreigner and he's violent. I don't like it, because they see we have a crisis. She shouts and runs into the street—I don't like that.

In similar vein, Peter says:

Yes. She's yelled and screamed and then tried to run outside. She knows how I feel about the neighbours—like what they might think or believe. You can see for yourself if she comes running out screaming—who's fault is everybody going to think it is? Mine, of course, so I'm left sitting there and everybody thinks it's me who's … and she knows that because I've told her and that's why she keeps rushing out randomly, again and again.

The men are extra vulnerable because it is easy to believe that a woman is being beaten by her husband if she runs outside screaming. Both men express a level of desperation and a huge sense of helplessness over the gendered social order to which they are subject. They have been rendered powerless and do not know how to tackle the situation. It is extremely likely, in the cases of both Peter and Deo, that the very fact that they are men subjected to violence by female partners, while their female partners protect themselves by saying that it is their husbands who are violent, has actually prolonged the violence to which they have been victim. Both express how hard it is to get anyone to believe them.

Arild experiences another variation of this switching of the violent relationship. He describes an incident when his wife had been out on the town drinking and came home with one side of her face completely smashed. She told him that she had slipped on the ice on her way home. She had big bruises on her face for four weeks. After they broke up, she told all her colleagues that Arild had been knocking her about for years, referring back to the time when she had had big bruises on her face. Arild says: "I think their reaction would be—well, I'd never have thought that of him, and you can't ever know when you're looking at things from the outside, and—she was totally black and blue and beaten up, wasn't she. I think it's dreadful."

This switching around of the violence relationship should be viewed as a significant form of psychological abuse to which men are subjected. This is a strategy available only to women, not to men, and is based on the wider society's accepted narrative about violence in intimate relationships where women are the only legitimate victims. This is a form of violence that it is difficult to imagine women being subjected to.

Minimising the Physical Violence

Men are subjected to systematic psychological, material and economic violence and controlling behaviour from their female partners. The physical violence directed against men is less systematic, but, as we have seen, over half of the men are subjected to physical violence with relatively significant potential to do damage. It has also been found that a proportion of these men are reluctant to talk much about this physical violence. Many of them begin by minimising or trivialising it, before the details gradually start to emerge and we eventually find out that they have in fact feared for their lives—which was their reason for going to a crisis centre.

It is well documented in previous prevalence studies that men living in violent relationships are subjected to less severe physical violence than women in comparable situations. As mentioned earlier, there are methodological challenges inherent in comparing prevalence studies and clinical trials, and we will not embark on any detailed discussion of gender symmetry here. However, based on the results of our interviews, it is reasonable to conclude that physical violence is under-communicated and may be far more extensive than men report. As we have seen, it took a long time before these men realised that they were victims of various forms of violence, some claiming that they did not fear the physical violence.

It is often only through quite detailed questioning, and sometimes a certain amount of persistence from interviewers, that we have revealed the physical violence and its severity. This is particularly true of those men we interviewed who came from minority backgrounds. We also see a tendency for the distance of time to impact on men's understanding of what they have been subjected to. Those men who have had a chance to look back on a violent relationship and have had therapy find it easier to recognise violent episodes.

Here we reproduce an extensive sequence from our interview with Ali, because it serves as a good illustration of the minimisation of physical violence.

Researcher: Can you describe what happened?

For example I never thought this would happen, but life is impossible to describe because we are human. Now and then something happens suddenly, and you don't understand why. Sometimes I hear that age affects and…

Researcher: Yes, but if you were to describe what concretely happened to you without interpreting it?

What happened—the other side, she only thinks about herself—because if you think about yourself, you don't listen to anyone.

Researcher: What has she done to you, in reality?

She has done it?

Researcher: What has she done?

She doesn't listen to me, or the children. Not anyone, not even to her friends.

Researcher: Can I ask you concretely—what has she subjected you to; is it physical violence or psychological violence?

Nothing.

Researcher: Nothing? No physical violence.

No.

Researcher: She hasn't hit you or kicked you?

Yes, she has, but I can't describe it as violence, no.

Researcher: Forget the word violence, just describe what actually happens?

She has thrown the key at me, yes, in my face. She was very angry and she pushed me against the door.

Researcher: Did you fall?

Yes, she's controlled me. I thought if I fell, it would be serious for me because I'm sick and I have problems with my back. Sometimes I lose the balance.

Researcher: She has pushed you?

Yes, two three times, but I…

It becomes clear later in the interview that Ali's wife has repeatedly thrown keys in his face and pushed him so hard that he has fallen. The situations he describes have been so aggressive in nature that Ali has been afraid of what might happen to him. At the time of the interview he had left the marital home and sought help at the crisis centre.

Similarly, Jonas tells us that he did not really understand that he was being subjected to systematic violence. He thought it was just an accident that he suddenly got an arm or elbow "in his face". He could not understand that she might be doing it on purpose. So for years he lived with her bashing him in the face with an arm or elbow, or throwing things at him and constantly losing her temper and screaming at him.

Tom wants to be recognised as a victim of violence while simultaneously being aware that he contributed to concealing it. He says that the shame has been unbearable and reproaches himself for not having dealt with the situation head on. Both Erik and Harald, who have been subjected to physical violence, said they were terrified that their wives might inflict serious injuries on them, but generally insist that they ought to have been able to cope with the attacks, and say they were not afraid even when knives and candlesticks were thrown at them. We see this as an under-communication of serious violence, something that should be seen in the light of ideals that suggest that men should tolerate pain and discomfort (Seidler 1997; Kimmel 2002).

As mentioned in our introduction, it is Michael P. Johnson's understanding of violence as a phenomenon and his theory that have formed the starting point for our analysis. When, in his research, Johnson (2008) decides to replace the concept of *patriarchal terrorism* with *intimate terrorism*, it is precisely because he realises that it is not only men who, out of a patriarchal ideology, commit serious violence against their female partners, but that women also commit serious and systematic violence towards their male partners. Nevertheless, there is very little in his research on how female violence unfolds and how the male victim experiences this violence in a relationship that is characterised by intimate terrorism. The interviews we have described are therefore important in improving our understanding of how intimate terrorism functions when the victim is a man.

What we find, and what is interesting in this context, is that the men discover that parts of the public support network, especially family protection and child welfare, do not recognise or see that men may be victims and/or do not understand the psychological regimes in which they find themselves.

Sexual Violence from a Male Partner

We mentioned previously that three of the men have been exposed to sexual violence. The most serious example is that of Daniel, who was repeatedly subjected to sexual abuse by his husband. He had completed his education and had a good job in his home country when he met his future partner. They became boyfriends and decided to get married and move to Norway. Daniel left his home (and his good job) and went with his partner to Norway to start a new life. His partner had never been violent towards him before coming to Norway. Shortly after their arrival, his partner getting involved in sexual practices including group sex, fisting and the use of hard drugs. Daniel did not want to participate in this, but was forced to do so. His partner became very controlling and this soon developed into physical violence, hitting him, kicking him, spitting, using a knife, locking him in and sexual abuse. Daniel says:

> *He started getting violent, for example, forcing me to have sex, sometimes he hit me, pushing me onto the bed … and said he would rape me and fuck me.*

Daniel does not have a permanent residence permit. His husband often threatened to tell the police stories so that they would send him out of the country. Controlling behaviour combined with manipulation and violence kept Daniel in a difficult situation, until he finally decided to call the crisis centre and moved in.

Daniel and Deo are in a particularly difficult situation due to the fact that neither of them has permanent right of residence in Norway, and their spouses threatened to get them thrown out of the country. Such threats are particularly degrading because they make them feel they have no rights. Both feel especially vulnerable and they are insecure about the framework around their own lives. The help they received from the crisis centre has therefore been particularly important. This help has contributed to the fact that they are now in the process of rebuilding their lives.

Male Vulnerability and Male Pain

Neither in popular perception nor in social research is vulnerability a trait much associated with the male role. On the contrary, research on the subject of men has generally concerned itself with men's strength and courage, or perhaps we should say men's desire to demonstrate these traits. One of the earliest studies of men and masculinities clearly revealed what was to become the main focus of men's studies. In the book *The Male Sex Role*, American sociologists Sarah David and Bob Brannon divide masculinity into four categories: *No sissy stuff* (that is, keep clear of anything that smacks of femininity), *The big wheel* (the battle for success and status), *The sturdy oak* (always strive to be tough and have control, preferably over yourself and others) and, last but not least, *Give 'em hell* (be brave, show aggression and always be ready for a fight). These categories reflect a significant level of stereotyping and some degree of irony (David and Brannon 1976). Nonetheless, many might still say that there is something in this understanding when we look at the way masculinity is presented, both as a fictional entity and in the real world.

In other research into men too, the focus is largely directed towards hegemonic manliness (Kimmel 2002). Where violence is the theme, the focus is generally on men as the perpetrators of violence and rarely on men as the victims of violence (Kimmel 2002; Gottzén 2016). In our material, however, we get an insight into male vulnerability. Men who are subjected to systematic abuse do not wish to respond to this violence with further violence, and in so doing become linked with traditional notions of masculinity. On the contrary, several of the men we interviewed expressed a will to understand their partners and show them care and love. For example, when asked why they have not reported the violence to the police, several respondents answered that they did not want to expose their partners to the consequences of such an action, be that in relation to employers or to the children or other social contexts.

Peter is one of the men who has stood by his wife for several years and helped her with her problems, despite her subjecting him to physical and mental violence for several years. Since she has obvious problems (including with self-harming), he has taken her to doctors and psychologists and tried to get the help she needs from relevant professional organisations.

Asked why he has not reported her after the episodes of serious violence, he replies that "if I report her violence it will cause her problems and have consequences for her later in her work", and that is not something he wants. That fact that she has obvious difficulties means that Peter understands her and tries to help her, with the consequence that the violence against him is in reality under-communicated.

Carlos is staying at the crisis centre because his mother has been a victim of violence for several years. He has experienced extensive violence within his family throughout childhood, yet, despite his youth, Carlos shows incredible understanding towards the perpetrators of this violence. He has intervened between his stepfather and mother several times, calmed situations that could easily have escalated, talked with his stepfather about his problems and got him to open up about his childhood experiences of sexual violence from his own father. Carlos has also postponed his education to stay at home and ensure that his mother is not subjected to further violence. Although the police and other bodies have been involved, Carlos's efforts have been crucial for the whole family. He is also among those who were both relieved and grateful to come to a crisis centre, and who greatly appreciated the support offered.

One of the questions we asked respondents was whether being a victim of violence had any significance for their identity as men. It was important to us that the men be able to reflect on their experience of themselves as men being subjected to violence, in order to challenge stereotypes of masculinity. Jonas described a psychologist whom he had visited who had little understanding of why he continued to live in a violent relationship for so long:

> Researcher: You mentioned that your male psychologist said that men aren't the ones in relationships of this kind being harassed so much. But do you have any thoughts about how your identity as a man was affected by being exposed to partner violence in this way?
>
> *I know I've thought about it. What it's done to me as a man? I don't know.*
>
> Researcher: I think perhaps it's not easy to answer that, but there are certainly some set beliefs that men don't put up with that sort of thing.
>
> *I was like that too once. But it takes strength not to hit out. I've often thought that. I've used more strength both mental and physical in not hitting back. So*

I haven't—what it's done to me as a man, yes, I've got an incredible amount of mental strength and I've used an incredible amount of strength in not hitting. It would have been a lot easier for me to hit her.

Jonas has thought about the relationship between masculinity and violence; more specifically, he reflects on the expectations which go with being a man in our society—he says it would have been much easier for him to hit his partner back. Nonetheless, Jonas chooses another solution; that is, not to use violence, and instead to mobilise a great deal of strength so as not to respond with violence to the extensive harassment and violence he has suffered for years. But this also leaves him extremely vulnerable, and the consequence is that he almost negates his own self in his attempt to understand and live with such violence. He frequently thinks that he would be better off dead and, looking back, Jonas sees that he almost obliterated himself entirely in his way of being.

It is essential that we reflect a little on the question of whether this violence had any impact on the victims' identity as men. For us, however, this was one of the hardest questions to put to respondents, and on listening back through the interviews afterwards we can see that we have almost shrunk back from asking it, and sometimes reformulated the question so as to avoid linking it directly to their masculinity, asking instead if the violence has had an impact on them as a person. This, in itself, says a great deal about our ideas and understanding of the notion of masculinity or manliness. It can seem that just by *asking* if this meant something to them as men, we are signalling that their masculinity has been undermined. Recognising this presumption is essential in understanding the vulnerability of masculinity.

Being the subject of violence rather than the perpetrator, being the recipient rather than the agent, being passive rather than active, can be a difficult thing for men to acknowledge. Fjell also deals with this in his book about male victims: "Men who do not defend themselves but take a passive stance represent a shift in our understanding of masculinity" (Fjell 2013, p. 139). In the case of violence, there are two conditions that make this difficult: first, a centuries-old notion of men as proactive, powerful and in control; and second, 40 years of feminist tradition that assumes that women are the sole victims of violence in intimate relationships.

Both are problematic, and both make it difficult for men to be believed by others, or even to believe it themselves, when they say that they are the victims of their partner's violence. Many of the men have not fully recognised that what they have been subjected to is indeed violence, because they have had neither the language nor the concepts to apply to it.

One of the most important aims of this study is perhaps to help to put words to the experience of these men. Commenting on men's word use in describing the violence to which they have been subjected, Fjell says: "With the exception of a few men, who during the interview reason their way to the idea that they are victims of violence, this is a term that men do not generally use. Instead, words such as 'madness', 'manipulation' and 'short-tempered'" (Fjell 2013, p. 138) come to the fore. Several of the men we interviewed only started to describe it as violence after attending the crisis centre or having therapy and talking about their experiences, thus being able to see them in a wider perspective. According to Seidler (1997), keeping their emotions in check is a widespread way for men to handle difficult life experiences. In his book *Unreasonable Men*, however, Seidler (1997) describes how men are taught to base their evaluation of themselves on external criteria: "So a gap opens up between our inner lives and outward expression that becomes difficult to overcome" (p. 135). Keeping quiet about problems becomes a form of self-protection to avoid revealing weakness (p. 135). An extremely positive finding in this study is that professional organisations and support services have started to recognise men's suffering and are willing to offer them help in reorienting themselves in their everyday lives and within society generally.

Bearing in mind the findings outlined in this chapter, it is not altogether surprising that we have relatively few in-depth answers from respondents to the question of whether violence has influenced their experience of themselves as men. Several of them say that they have not thought about it. Some say that they do not find it embarrassing or feel ashamed, while others experience it as degrading and shameful. Several think that the violence was difficult to talk about, but they have been met with understanding when they have finally opened up about it to family or friends. The most comprehensive dialogue on this theme emerged in the interview with Daniel.

Researcher: May I ask you if you've ever posed yourself questions like: why does this happen to me … and who you are as a person, as a man …

My personality changed, I used to be happy and be out with friends. Sometimes, I feel like a woman with 10 children who's stuck in a relationship because she doesn't want the kids to lose their father, something like that if you get what I mean. That I'm sacrificing something to be in this relationship with him. I realise now that I shouldn't use time on this relationship. That I should be happy and not worrying about a partner who wants to kill himself, or being forced to have sex and spat on. I asked questions like that about myself, and then I realised that this isn't how I used to be, this isn't the person I am.

Researcher: Some men have said that being beaten as a man can take away from their sense of manhood. Because this shouldn't really happen to men, as you said, when you search the internet, you generally find information about women who are subjected to violence. Is this something you've thought about?

There's some help on the internet for men too, but it's mostly offered to women. But I haven't felt less of a man because I'm quite open that this can happen to anyone. It can happen to women and to men. But if someone sees a woman hit a man on the street, people will stop and say: something's going on here, he's probably been cheating on her or something. If they see a man hit a woman—call the police!! It's true, because that's the way society is. If they see a man being hit, he's a man, he can't be hurt, he's got to be a man and just tolerate it. But for me it's the same and it doesn't make me feel less a man or whatever … no, I was open, this can happen to anyone at all. I'm not ashamed either because it happened. Because I'm gay and this kind of thing happens in relationships. Yes, it can happen.

Researcher: Maybe it's different if you're in a heterosexual relationship and you're hit by a woman, I don't know.

Yes, of course, it's another thing if you've been beaten up by your wife. That's what's hard to talk about.

The three men who have experienced violence from their male partners do not feel that this has affected their sense of self as men, even though their lives have been affected very badly by the violence to which they have been exposed. When the relationship is between a woman and a man, men appear to be affected by the heteronormative understanding of

the power relationship between women and men, and in such a relationship men are not the victims of violence.

Bjerkeseth also poses questions about men's experience of themselves as men in her master's dissertation "Den mannlige offerrollen" (The Male Victim Role; 2010). Bjerkeseth does not find that violence threatens their self-esteem as men. The men she interviews define the male role as caring, attentive, characterised by openness, integrity and an ability to talk about emotions (Bjerkeseth 2010, p. 77). Bjerkeseth claims that on the one hand men tend to under-communicate and trivialise the seriousness of the violence they have been subjected to, and on the other hand they do not feel threatened by talking about it. Despite the fact that violence against men has been invisible in research, in the wider social discourse and in the historical narrative about men, it seems that men are generally able to speak openly about their own experiences of violence without defining themselves as victims.

As described earlier in this chapter, the most obvious consequences of violence are withdrawal and loneliness. Even though the men in our study do not associate this directly with their own experience of themselves as men, there seems to us to be a correlation between their desire to maintain a sense of manliness and one or more of the following:

- They do not recognise themselves as victims of systematic violence before the violence becomes life threatening.
- They keep it to themselves for a long time and think that they can handle it.
- They feel lonely and isolated.
- They withdraw from social situations and do not join in activities that they would otherwise have participated in.

In the next chapter, we will investigate the consequences that violence has had on the mental health and everyday functioning of men. In what ways do these experiences of intimate partner violence affect their lives after the violence has ceased, and how do they deal with the varying effects?

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