

The Fathering of Violent Men

Constriction and Yearning

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The study presented in this research note aims to expand our understanding of the experience of fathering for men who are violent toward their partners. The naturalistic qualitative methodology applied was shaped by phenomenological, feminist, and interpretative interactionist influences. In-depth interviews were conducted with 14 abusive men identified through domestic violence intervention centers. The findings describe the drama of fathering for abusive men, centered on an inner dialogue between an experienced constriction and a yearning for a closer, deeper connection with their children. The discussion focuses on the meaning of fathering for abusive men, and possible applications for intervention are proposed.

Keywords: *domestic violence; experience; fathering; parenting; violent men*

The aim of the research presented in this research note is to describe the experience of fathering of men who are violent toward their partners. The attempt to learn about the experience of fathering is part of a relatively recent research trend that emphasizes understanding fathering and the fathers, as opposed to assessing their role as fathers and their level of involvement in their children's lives (Lamb, 2000; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Marsiglio & Chohan, 2000).

The attempts to understand fathering through the eyes of the fathers can be distinguished by their theoretical grounding. Research based on "identity theory" regards "father" as one of many functional identities that comprise a sense of self. Identity is perceived as fixed, stable, and continuing (Marsiglio et al., 2000; Minton & Paseley, 1996). The naturalistic approaches emphasize the emotional and subjective aspects of fathering. Fathering is perceived as a structure that is continuously crystallizing in a reciprocal relationship with the environment, in which the social, cultural, and academic discourses not only describe fathering but also shape it (Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Marsiglio & Chohan, 2000; Marsiglio et al., 2000; Trowell, 2002).

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In the absence of stable and enduring social definitions, the social structure of “fathering” is seen as particularly sensitive to the context in which it exists (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998). The multiplicity of definitions and images of the father role, some of them contradictory, allows contemporary fathers greater room in constructing their fathering but also leads them to experience confusion, distress, and inner conflicts. Furthermore, fathers today confront a complex and rapidly changing social reality, which greatly affects their experience. Changes in family structure and gender relationships, a rise in the number of single-parent fathers, an increase in fathers’ child care responsibilities and in women’s workforce participation, along with an increase in the number of noncustodial and detached fathers, have all brought about a diffusion of norms regarding fathering. These changes have intensified interest in fathers and fathering among professionals and researchers and have reinforced the assumption that fathering can be understood in depth only in the context in which it takes place (Lamb, 2000; Marsiglio & Chohan, 2000; Marsiglio et al., 2000).

A distant and pathological perspective seems to characterize the construction of “fathering” in the academic discourse (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). Research on fathers identifies them as “variables” affecting their children, and the emotional and pleasurable aspects of fathering are mostly absent. When emotions are discussed, it is in relation to the difficulty of adapting to the parental role, or of expressing emotion. Doherty (1991, in Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997) named this approach “the deficit paradigm.” From this perspective, fathering is associated with a multitude of structural flaws. These may correctly describe many fathers but are inappropriate for others. Set off against the deficit paradigm are new efforts to understand fathering within the social context in which it takes place and based on a recognition of the uniqueness of the father role. Examples of this trend are the growing number of studies directed at the fathers’ experience of fathering, the growing recognition among developmental psychologists of the complexity and the importance of the father-child relationship, and the expansion of the concept of “paternal involvement” to include the father’s responsibility to his children even if he does not take care of them directly or does not live near them (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1985; Marsiglio et al., 2000). These changes in the concept of fathering can best be observed in the “generative fathering” approach, which adopts a positive viewpoint toward fathers and fathering and claims that viewing fathering from a deficit perspective fails to provide an understanding of fathers and cannot propel them toward change and growth (Gerson, 1997; Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Snary, 1993).

The Fathering of Men Who Are Violent Toward Their Partners

Very little research has focused directly on the characteristics of violent men as fathers; the available findings present a dismal and problematic picture. These

fathers were found to be rigid and authoritative (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002), uninvolved in their children's lives, negligent of their basic needs (including those thwarted by the violence; Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Sterenberg et al., 1994), self-absorbed and possessive of the child (Ayoub, Grace, Paradise, & Newberger, 1991), manipulative (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Vock, Elliot, & Spironello, 1997), and physically punitive but not physically affectionate (Holden & Ritchie, 1991). Various negative characteristics of the fathering of violent men are described in the context of divorce proceedings, the most salient of which is the father's view of his children as a means for continuing his attempts to exert control over his wife's life and abuse her (e.g., Eriksson & Hester 2001; Geffner & Pagelow, 1990; Harne & Radford, 1994; Hooper, 1994; Saunders, 1994; Vock et al., 1997).

A more complex picture of violent men as fathers was portrayed by Fox and her colleagues (Fox & Benson, 2004; Fox, Sayers, & Bruce, 2001). A qualitative study on the fathering of eight men who participated in batterers groups (Fox et al., 2001) found that the men expressed feelings of guilt, shame, remorse, and responsibility regarding the damage they caused as fathers and wished to fix it. The authors point at the potential contribution of the men's fathering role to their sense of self, which in turn may lead to a less defensive inspection of their abusive behaviors. In a second study, based on a U.S. national households' survey, the researchers found partial support for both competing hypotheses (Fox & Benson, 2004). Violent men's fathering was found to differ from that of nonviolent men. For example, they were found to engage more in punitive behaviors and less often in positive parenting behaviors than nonviolent men. However, they also were indistinguishable from nonviolent men in other aspects of their fathering, such as in the amount of time they spent with their children or in their monitoring standards and actions. The researchers concluded their report with a call for policy makers not to rely solely on one of the hypotheses.

Violent men's abuse of their children is another central aspect of their fathering. The exposure of children to violence against their mother is a form of child abuse (Peled, 1998, 2000). The exposure to violence terrifies and terrorizes children; creates an unstable atmosphere in the home; exposes them to narrow, rigid, destructive, violent, and antisocial role models; and leads them to experience both externalized and internalized behavior problems (Graham-Bermann, 1996; Margolin, 1998; Peled, 1998). The violence also harms the mothering of the abused woman by hampering her daily functioning, undermining her self-esteem and parental authority, and inciting the children against her (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Holden, Stein, Ritchie, Harris, & Jouriles, 1998; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 1998). In addition, there appears to be a considerable overlap (30%-60%) between woman abuse and child physical and sexual abuse (Edleson, 1999).

The bulk of the literature on fathers who abuse their partners focuses on their negative traits and their deficient functioning. Although this is understandable in light of their abusive behavior, it seems lacking by being one-dimensional, alienated from lived experience, and using sweeping generalizations. Even if inescapable at times,

the attempt to learn about the fathering of violent men by relying on their partner's reports (e.g., Holden et al., 1998; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 1998) or on research findings regarding the general characteristics of violent men (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002) is methodologically problematic. For example, Bancroft and Silverman (2002), in the first book published on the fathering of violent men, sketched a "profile" of violent men (self-absorbed, possessive, confuse love and violence, manipulative) as a profile of their parenting. They then validate this parental profile on the basis of their clinical experience with violent fathers and, to a lesser extent, on the limited literature in this domain. At a minimum, the significant variance found among "types" of violent men (Dixon & Browne, 2003; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000) calls for a more comprehensive and systematic approach to the qualities of their fathering.

In summary, our ability to learn about the fathering experiences of violent men based on the literature in this domain is limited. Although current approaches to fathering relate to the complex nature of the father role, and try to understand the context in which fathers function and to listen to what the fathers have to say, the discourse on the fathering of violent men is by and large judgmental and focused on their deficiencies. But for the study by Fox et al. (2001), no attempt has been made so far to describe the experience of fathering for violent men as they perceive it.

Caution and even suspicion are imperative in dealing with fathers who are violent—their parenting is deficient and abusive by virtue of their violence toward the mother of their children. This notwithstanding, an exclusive reliance on the deficit paradigm for learning about these fathers is restrictive. Our current knowledge about violent men as fathers enhances our ability to protect their victims but does not help us to understand them as fathers. We believe that an understanding of their experience of fathering is crucial for helping those of them who are interested in embarking on the long and demanding process of rehabilitating their damaged fatherhood and their relationship with their children and their children's mothers (Mathews, 1995; Peled & Edleson, 1999). These objectives have led us to the present research in which we attempted to understand the experience of fathering for men who are violent toward their partners, together with the internal forces and processes contributing to the shaping of this experience.

Method

We used a naturalistic qualitative research method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). The experience of fathering for violent men is a broad, multidimensional research topic that has not been studied until now. We thus aimed to arrive at as wide and comprehensive a preliminary description as possible of the different dimensions of this experience. We also wanted our findings to be useful to practitioners working with this population. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate

for achieving these aims by producing an in-depth, complex, and dynamic picture of the reality being studied.

Formative Influences

The research was shaped by the theories and methodologies of phenomenology, feminism, and interpretative interactionism. Phenomenological research assumes that the meaning of experience precedes interpretation or theory and that all objective understandings are based on subjective perception. Experience is perceived as a significant and valid source of knowledge (Mustakas, 1984). Phenomenology attempts to enter the consciousness of the people studied to learn how they live and understand a certain experience, thus learning about the meaning of that experience for them (Creswell, 1998). *Feminist research* is a general term for a range of approaches and methodologies sharing an ideological commitment to promote women's interests and rights, to improve their lives, and to produce knowledge useful to these ends (Reinhartz, 1992). Any research that aims to understand the oppression of women can be regarded as feminist research, including research focused on men (Kelly, Burton, & Regan, 1994). From this perspective, men's violence against women is one aspect of wide-ranging social processes aimed at maintaining male domination over women and children. It is thus flawed to view men's violence toward their partners outside the social context in which it takes place and without consideration of their victims. A purely phenomenological approach to the (fathering) experience of violent men will blur the problematic social context of this experience and may make the victims invisible. With this in mind, we adopted the interpretive interactionism approach (Denzin, 1989), which facilitates the integration of phenomenological tenets with the social-interpretive viewpoint posited by feminism. This approach focuses on the meanings attributed by people to formative life experiences, as lived in the context of reciprocal relationships between the person and the social environment. The aim of the interpretation is to expose the processes, history, and interactions that shape and locate the phenomenon being studied.

The first author, a social worker in training and a father of two, conducted the interviews and took a leading role in their analysis. Hence, his influence on the study should be noted as well. The study was influenced by his extensive experience in intervening with violent men. His intervention approach merges dynamic and feminist components: an empathic study of the men's complex inner world at the same time as maintaining constant awareness of, and vigilance toward, their abused partners and the harm inflicted on them. Intervention of this kind with violent men requires grasping both ends of a long rope. At the one extreme—acceptance, holding, sometimes love, whereas at the other extreme—repudiation of the violent behavior, emotions of anger and even rage, and the provision of support for the victim. The attempt to grasp both ends of this rope is evident as well in the design of this study. Both researchers conducted self and mutual examination of ways in which issues

related to personal experiences and attitudes around fathering could affect the study to monitor unwanted influences on data collection and analysis.

Population and Sample

A convenience sample of 14 men was recruited from three Domestic Violence Intervention and Prevention Centers in central Israel. The centers' male client population is diverse in terms of personal characteristics, the circumstances of their referral, and the type and severity of their violence. The research population was defined as men (a) currently in contact with one of the centers, (b) who admitted to being violent (physically, emotionally, or sexually) toward their partner during the previous year, (c) whose caseworkers in the center defined them as violent, (d) who are fathers, and (e) who are able to express themselves in Hebrew reasonably well. After we obtained the necessary administrative authorization, we approached several of the centers' workers and requested them to provide us with the names of men who had agreed to consider participation in the research. Workers provided us with contact information for 24 men, of which we interviewed 14 (about 60%). We gave the men a preliminary explanation by telephone and, if they were willing to participate, set up a meeting to obtain their informed consent. Major reasons for nonparticipation were (a) a reluctance of some men to speak about their fathering experiences and (b) scheduling problems.

The age of the participants ranged from 35 to 48 years. Ten were married, 3 divorced or separated and not living with their children, and 1 unmarried. The number of children ranged from one to three and the ages of the children from 3 to 23 years. These characteristics, although not necessarily representative of Israeli violent men in general, are typical of the overall male (fathers) client population of Israeli domestic violence intervention centers. All of the participants completed approximately 5 months of basic batterers group intervention, and their reported level of violence at the time of the interviews was low.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected by means of a semistructured in-depth interview (Patton, 1990). The interview topics included the man's activities as a father; his experiences as a father; how he, his partner, and his children perceive his fathering; and his views of the connection between his parenting and the violence. The interviews were conducted between the fall of 1999 and the summer of 2001, and each lasted 1.5 to 2 hours. Most of the interviews took place in the fathers' homes, and some in an office, whichever the interviewee preferred. The atmosphere in the majority of the interviews could be characterized as a gradual progression from caution and emotional restraint to increased openness.

The transcribed interviews were content analyzed following the procedure proposed by Denzin (1989) for interpretive interactionism analysis—from deconstruction of the texts into themes to reconstruction of the fathering experience, and from an emphasis on the description of the experience to an attempt to interpret its essence.

Standards for Evaluating the Quality of the Research

Following Denzin (1989), we strove to maximize the quality of the interpretive processes and findings by (a) providing a rich and detailed description of the participants' life experiences (meaning, thoughts, feelings, and actions); (b) considering the developmental dimension of the experience; (c) attending to the reciprocal relationship between the fathers and their environment; (d) including prior knowledge about the fathering of violent men; and (e) giving a coherent and contextualized portrayal of the findings.

Following Lincoln and Guba (1985), we attempted to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings: (a) An effort was made to establish a respectful, continuing, in-depth, and authentic dialogue with the participants to avoid the pitfalls of superficiality and social desirability; (b) we refrained from interviewing men previously known to the interviewer to avoid the influence of preconceptions and prior relationship patterns; (c) collegial debriefing and consultation between the authors was used throughout the analysis to examine issues such as the impact of personal and professional experiences on the analysis; and (d) the reliance on *two* formative theories (phenomenology and feminism) helped avoid theoretical bias. To increase the transferability of the findings, an effort was made to describe the research process and its context in detail.

Finally, the research seems to meet the major criterion of feminist research (Kelly et al., 1994): It has the potential to motivate social change processes for improving the situation of women—in this case, those abused by their partners. Understanding the fathering experience of violent men could improve parenting intervention with this population, which in turn may help these men to become better fathers and coparents, thus improving the parenting situation of their abused partners. We are currently disseminating the research findings to various professional groups and organizations working with violent men with the aim of increasing the impact of the research in this direction.

Ethical Aspects

Studying the experience of the fathering of violent men is ethically complex. Although we needed empathy to understand them and illuminate their experience, their violence toward their partners and their children aroused our anger and criticism. Research that cannot balance these emotional polarities could be harmful. We believe that establishing intimate conversation on a sensitive topic with interviewees for the purpose of a critical and dispassionate analysis of their experience is wrong

(Peled & Leichtentritt, 2002). From another perspective, it is ethically flawed to provide violent men with an opportunity to voice their experiences, while the harm they have inflicted on their partners and children remains unspoken. We chose to relate to the violent men as simultaneously vulnerable and harmful. We openly defined the research participants as violent men, and we only interviewed men who acknowledged being abusive toward their partners. Furthermore, we used our feminist viewpoint throughout the analysis, the writing up and the discussion of the findings, to shed light on the violence and its harmful effects. Concurrently, we made an effort to minimize potential negative effects of the research on the participants. First, we avoided a one-dimensional focus on problems and weaknesses by identifying existing strengths. Second, we attempted to ease the emotional burden that accompanies such interviews by adopting a warm, empathic, respectful, and appreciative attitude toward the interviewees, and by avoiding criticism as much as possible. Finally, consent to participation in the research was voluntary and fully informed.

Findings

At the heart of our findings are the complex and dramatic dynamics of fathering for violent men. Fathering-sustaining forces compete with obstructing ones, both internal and external. These encounters bring about processes of withdrawal and constriction that leave the fathers with a strong and, at times, unfulfilled yearning for connection with their children. For most of the fathers we interviewed, these processes are spiral rather than linear. The processes involved in this drama are presented below under the following themes: the good father, limitations and shadows, the constricted father, the father who yearns to connect, and loss versus growth.

The Good Father

An utterly positive attitude lies at the core of the men's perceptions of fathering in general and of their own fathering in particular. They view fathering as one of the most important domains of life, if not the most important, and themselves as good fathers.

The meaning of fathering: "You live for your children." Fathering appears to have given meaning and purpose to the lives of many of the interviewees. The totality and intensity of their feelings is revealed through their descriptions of the significance of fatherhood and explains their commitment to their children and to their role as fathers:

My children are my life. The bottom line is the children. I live for the children. Everything is for the children, everything net is for the children. Everything is the children. (Gidon)

[The children are] your seed, blood of your blood, the soul of your soul. It's something, it's something that is given to you from above as a gift. A gift from on high. And you have to give her everything and take care of her and raise her and protect her in the best way possible. (Zev)

For Chaim, the potential for happiness lies in connecting with the children:

The moment I open the front door and my daughter looks at me and starts to smile and laugh, a big smile, and she suddenly stands up or crawls toward me, quickly, and she wants me to suddenly pick her high up, it's the greatest joy in the world. It gives you happiness, happiness. (Chaim)

Happiness of this kind may also be derived from the existential meaning the men found in fathering and in their children. A "good father," looking at his happy children as his accomplishment, may feel at that moment that his life has meaning.

Constructing fatherhood: "To give him everything and be the best possible." Throughout the interviews, we noticed various means the men used to construct their image as good fathers. These included providing material needs, protection, education, and creating a warm connection with the children. In the spirit of traditional conceptions of fathering, the breadwinner or provider roles took precedence over the other attributes of good fathering. For example, Chaim describes his love for his daughter as stemming from his efforts to provide her with everything that she lacks, rather than the other way around:

The responsibility is enormous, enormous. You have to take care of everything the child lacks. You can't say "Listen, I'm not going to buy diapers." There's no such thing. You have to take care that nothing is lacking, whether it's yogurt for the baby, whether it's supplements, whether it's diapers, whether it's creams, a big responsibility, love. I always was a loving person, but I learned to love most in the world through the girl. (Chaim)

The fathers also emphasized their role of protecting their children, against the background of their perception of the world outside the home as filled with dangers and threats. Furthermore, they saw themselves in an educational and a molding capacity—influencing their children's emotional world, shaping their characters and their values, and being concerned about their education. The major educational issue to which most of the fathers related was the need to set limits on the children's behavior and demands. All the men perceived a good father as one who succeeds in setting these limits, despite the fact that most of them shared with us how difficult it is to do so. Finally, "the good father" was perceived by all the interviewees as one who has warm and frequent contact with his children.

Overall, the violent men we interviewed presented themselves as good fathers. The images of "the good father" they constructed seemed to combine their ideal

perception of fathering and of themselves, and the reality of their lives. Some of their descriptions, even when true to reality, had the quality of a “business card” behind which lurks a far more complex reality. Most of the fathers, as will be detailed below, also described many deficiencies and difficulties, but these were viewed as a deviation from the reference point of their good fathering.

Limitations and Shadows

Our interviewees’ desire to be “good fathers” was overshadowed by internal and external limitations and difficulties. These included the influence of their childhood on their fathering, the limitations the fathers attributed to themselves, the child’s exposure to violence, and coparenting.

Childhood: The absent and present father. The men spoke extensively about their childhood during the interviews, presenting a complex and multifaceted picture, and stressing their relationships with their fathers. In most cases, their childhoods seemed to have left them with residues and deficiencies they had to deal with in the process of becoming fathers. Few interviewees perceived their childhood, and especially the image they had of their fathers, as a source of inspiration and strength for them as parents.

Most of the interviewees portrayed an almost identical image of their fathers as essentially absent from the home and from their lives, usually because of long working days. The men refrained from expressing anger or criticism about this issue, but their yearning for a closer, more accessible father was evident. This yearning seemed to have been compounded by two other characteristics of their fathers: first, their being distant, rigid, and emotionally inhibited, or, in Gal’s words, “as hard as steel,” and, second, their minimal involvement in child care and in the child’s life:

What was lacking was the . . . the sitting and talking . . . ask me how school was, how was it, what, he couldn’t do it? He worked very hard, he also would come home wrecked, and would shower and stuff and go to sleep, he was wrecked, so that we wouldn’t lack anything. (Gal)

Despite their absence, the fathers’ presence at home was perceived as aggressive and controlling and, for a couple of interviewees, also as abusive. As Gidon described, “He didn’t spend too much time with me, but on Sabbath he slapped me, finally on Sabbath he was at home.” Only two men described their fathers as being warm toward them, but also as absent, imparting the warmth and the closeness in those few moments in which it was possible.

Although the men dwelt at length on the image of their fathers, the lack of similar consideration of their mothers is conspicuous. The mothers were relegated to the sidelines and were described, almost incidentally, as those who raised them and, in the father’s absence, dealt with all aspects of their care.

The image the men have of their fathers seems to have affected critically their fathering. Most of them seemed to have engaged in an inner dialogue with their fathers in an attempt to improve their own fathering. This complex inner dialogue displayed two opposing desires: to resemble the father and follow in his footsteps and to be different or “the opposite.” At times the men tried both to retain certain aspects of their fathers and to reject many others. For example, men who emphasized how different their fathering is from that of their fathers still wished to emulate their fathers’ total commitment to providing for the children’s material needs, even at the cost of almost complete absence from the home and from the children’s lives.

Baruch’s comments, reflecting the general tenor of most of the men, point to the confusion and discomfort of someone who feels that his childhood and his parents did not prepare him for fatherhood. He knows what he doesn’t want to be, but not what should be done and how to do it:

I don’t know what I’m doing wrong and what I’m not doing wrong because I operate according to feeling, imitation, and logic. I see how my parents were, and I know that many things were not right for me the way I felt inside, I know that it wasn’t good for me, then I don’t want to pass it on to my children, and I don’t want to teach them, and I try not to resemble my [parents] in all sorts of things that they were examples of. On the other hand, I also don’t know what’s good. . . . I don’t know, I don’t have any tools, there is no one to lead me, to instruct me. (Baruch)

Personal limitations. Although the men perceived themselves as good fathers, they did relate to flaws in their fathering. These flaws, however, were felt to be few and were presented in a toned-down and balanced manner, lacking the decisiveness that characterized their self-presentation as good fathers. They regarded their persistent absence from the home because of work, which led to physical and emotional distance from their children, as the most problematic aspect of their fathering. Still, in most cases, the men felt that their absence was legitimate in light of the need to provide for the family’s livelihood: “Maybe they feel that something is lacking when I don’t spend much time with them. But look, I prefer that they feel a bit short now rather than afterwards they don’t have anywhere to live” (Ehud).

Some of the fathers also described themselves as tense, troubled, and emotionally unavailable for their children:

[There are] periods of remoteness. When you can be sitting with them in the same room, in the same home, and there is a kind of gulf between you, a type of barrier. Really, you feel that they . . . are trying to make it easier for you and they move away, but there is, there is distance, there is distance. . . . I certainly am not one of those who comes closer after a situation like this, like, after a blow-up, or when there is tension, not necessarily a blow-up . . . your remoteness automatically becomes their remoteness. (Dudu)

Such remoteness, however, was not seen by the fathers as a personal characteristic but rather was attributed to the situation at home, namely, that of violence toward their partner.

Exposing the child to violence. In our view, the exposure of the children to violence casts a heavy shadow over the fathering of men who abuse their partners. The fathers we interviewed expressed diverse attitudes toward this issue. Some, who have completed an intensive domestic violence intervention, perceived the exposure and its harmful impact as severe and disturbing:

I was less than a good father, I would call it a bad father, because it passes on a kind of trauma to the child. (Beny)

All the blows, he saw all these things, all the shouting, all the quarrels, all these not nice things. He absorbed it. Listen, this child is already soaked to the skin, excuse me, in this shit, and it's not appropriate. (Zev)

Other fathers showed less concern and at times a complete disregard for the issue of the exposure and its implications. This was true even among men who were prepared to discuss their violence toward their partners or their children. For example,

Look, I have two children, one is very, very, very independent, and the other follows the bigger one around, but we have a very big problem with him, and I'm aware of it. He hears a shout, doesn't matter what, and he immediately withdraws into himself, and I can't understand why. So I'm always being accused because I shouted once or twice when he was there. (Baruch)

Although many of the fathers admitted that the child had been exposed to some violence, a large proportion of them were not prepared to consider the consequences of the exposure for the child. Thus, acknowledging exposure did not automatically lead to recognizing its harmful impact. The men most aware of the impact of their children's exposure were also the ones who attempted to repair the damage that it caused. All attempts at repair seemed to emphasize didactic and educational, sometimes forceful, measures:

They, they are influenced by . . . what are they influenced by? By what happens between me and my wife . . . ah, they're kinds of, kinds of long quarrels, kinds of long situations, and then they react . . . I spoke with them a few times. . . . Often I spoke with them about the fact that ahh it's forbidden to hit, it's forbidden to raise your hand in any way. (Dudu)

None of the fathers reported any attempt to relate to the child's emotional distress. In our view, some of these "educational" measures for dealing with the exposure have probably added to the children's distress, rather than lessening it.

The coparenting. The men found the couple relationship and the coparenting to be the most troublesome aspects of their fathering. They saw coparenting as obstructing their fathering, especially in situations where the marital conflict spilled over to the coparenting. Many fathers described coparenting as a struggle leading to a rift between the parents. Descriptions of cooperation and dialogue were rare. Two issues were particularly highlighted: (a) an ongoing disagreement about the children's education and (b) the father's efforts to position himself as a parent:

These two weeks, when my wife wasn't at home. And I really got home earlier, and I was with the children and stuff, we had two happy weeks. Really, really, really happy. But on a daily basis even if I get home at the same time, I don't have, at that moment I don't have the place that my wife has at home. (Dani)

The Constricted Father

The most salient process that we identified in the fathering of our interviewees was constriction. In reaction to the limitations and difficulties that affected the men's fathering, many of them constricted both the quality and the quantity of connection they had with their children, as well as their responsibility for them. Three major forms of constriction emerged from the interviews: "the controller," "the breadwinner," and "the residual parent."

"The controller." The presence of many fathers in their children's lives has become one-dimensional as a result of the frequent exercise of power and control. By becoming "the controller"—the ruler, educator, or punisher—some fathers have greatly impaired their ability to maintain a close and intimate relationship with their children. The control over the children can be seen in daily life in the home or as part of an attempt to educate, shape, and influence the child's character, as Zev described it:

"Don't do this! Don't do that! Do this! Do that! Take off your sandals, put them where they belong, don't open the fridge, wash your hands, flush the toilet after you pee . . . don't answer back, listen to what you are told." Something along those lines. Like the house policeman. (Zev)

Control-based fathering is likely to resort to violence. The fathers' views regarding the use of violence were diverse. All the fathers, without exception, felt that talking was the best way to educate children. Whereas some rejected the use of any violence whatsoever, others justified it in cases where attempts to talk did not succeed. Some even admitted that they used "light" violence from time to time, using the terms *flick* and *a slap on the behind*, but none described the use of severe and uncontrolled violence. A number of fathers told us about their resolve not to use violence against their children, and one stated explicitly that he had been violent in the

past. Although taking a step along the right path, these fathers seemed to still lack an alternative to the violent behavior. This has led them to feel awkward and confused and even to completely refrain from educating the children:

There were times when I would shake them, I would shout, “Now, get up and put your legs down now!” Orders. And if that didn’t help, I’d hit them on the behind. . . . We reached an agreement—I’m out of the picture, you do what you want. . . . That’s what we agreed, and really, as far as I’m concerned, the children can break everything . . . they can take everything apart, I don’t react. (Gal)

“*The breadwinner.*” The “breadwinning fathers” spent most of their time at work, absent from the home, resulting in the gradual diminution of other spheres of connection and commitment to their children. The men’s commitment to “provide” at all costs was fostered by the objective need to sustain the family, but also by the significance they attributed to the breadwinner role as a central aspect of the “good father”:

It’s frustrating, because you . . . you feel that it’s something you’ve done. Is this why you’ve brought a child into the world so that things will be worse for him than for another child? . . . I feel that, that . . . if I would have thought about it beforehand, either I wouldn’t have had children, or I would have created a situation in which I could give them more things. More time, and more of me, and also more material things. (Dudu)

In a parallel process to constriction to the breadwinner role, many fathers emphasized the material aspect of their relationship with their children. Many interviews were filled with detailed descriptions of things bought for the children, from clothes and books to pizzas and tickets for performances. Devoting oneself to material giving, similar to focusing on the role of breadwinner, could hamper the development of other dimensions of the relationship:

Sometimes I have pangs of conscience that I can’t provide them with everything material that I want to give them. Because from an emotional point of view, I can always compensate them with another hug and another kiss and stuff, but when it comes to the real [things]. . . . (Ehud)

“*The residual father.*” The fathers saw their partner as significantly constricting their parenting by leaving them little functioning space free of her dominating parental presence. Some of them accepted this as the natural order:

I speak to them, and beyond that, my wife is more involved with the children than I am. My wife is the house-mother, I feel that she is like my mother, I feel that I am also like a child, what they feel I also feel. . . . We aren’t together, she’s at my side and I’m at hers, but there is no joint parenting with regard to the children, regarding the children’s education. I intervene only when they ask me. (Eyal)

The most significant role that their partner left to them, in their view, was the exercise of authority and power. Some fathers felt, however, that she forced this role on them and that she turned them into “the commander” or “the devil,” thereby constricting them and harming the quality of their relationship with the children.

In summary, we found that the fathers experienced processes of constriction of their presence and involvement in their children’s lives. These involved limiting themselves to the breadwinner role, basing their paternal presence on authority and power, and functioning in the shadow of the mother’s dominance. These processes left the fathers with a strong yearning for connection with their children.

The Father Who Yearns to Connect

The yearning for a close and warm relationship with the children was displayed in many of the interviews. This yearning, often unattainable, played a central role in the drama of our interviewees’ fathering. The drama was intensified by the clash between the men’s image of “the good father” who maintains a warm relationship with his children and the processes of constriction described above. The inevitable result of this encounter was the yearning for a different, ideal kind of connection:

I used to take him when he was small, like this, and I would wash them, and do their laundry, and feed them, and change their diapers. It wasn’t a problem. I also liked doing it, because I wanted it to get closer to them emotionally, and that kind of connection was created. Besides that, when it’s your son, you also want to be close to him . . . and because of that closeness, when you look today, and say, wait a minute, where have I sinned? (Yakov)

For Baruch, a mother-child relation is an ideal through which he expresses his yearning:

But there are things which you feel as a father you are missing. For me, for example, it’s the times I return home late. It’s true that I’m with my children, but you don’t see them growing up. It’s an intense feeling of missing out . . . when your son or daughter is born, as a father I don’t know many fathers that jumped on the child and hugged him and kissed him. I’m telling you this, sincerely. A mother, yes, the minute he [is born] it doesn’t matter how he looks—immediately a kiss. Me, it took six months to get used to the fact that I have a child . . . no matter what I do, it can never be like a mother’s love. It’s harboring inside me. (Baruch)

Fathers at various phases of their fathering seemed to have concealed a yearning for a deeper and more significant relationship with their children than the existing one. This was true for married fathers raising their children and noncustodial divorced fathers, fathers who experienced constriction, and those who reported a close relationship with their children.

Loss Versus Growth

The processes described so far have led the interviewed men along an emotional path extending from a sense of failure and loss to one of growth. Although most of the interviewees could be found struggling with their fathering somewhere in the middle ground, the experiences of those fathers who most represent the extremities better demonstrate the complexities involved.

Failing fathering: “Where did I go wrong?” The drama of fathering for violent men could develop into a tragedy. Yakov was one of two interviewees who had to come to terms with the shadows of failure that crept into their lives:

Where did I go wrong? . . . What, what didn’t work? And you can’t, you can’t get an answer, what didn’t work. You don’t know . . . so what’s it all worth? You feel that you invested a lot, and you say, okay, what’s missing? If it’s clothes, if it’s education, it, that is, I tried. In everything material, each one has his own room. I made sure that they have a sound system, made sure that each one has a television . . . and despite this, something in the air is lacking, something that . . . maybe a key, maybe a magic word that will create a connection between me and them, because actually that was the aim, the intention. And it’s not working. (Yakov)

The interview with Yakov was painful. At the time of the interview, he was in the process of getting divorced and leaving home, was living in a separate unit in his house, and had almost no contact with his three adolescent children and his wife. Yakov was filled with a fervent desire to be a good and loving father. In his fathering he tried, and succeeded, in resembling his father. He based his fathering on a narrow basis of authority, power, and control over his partner and his children, while at the same time making enormous efforts to provide for the family’s livelihood and to take care of its material needs. Now with the dismantling of the family, the cessation of the violence, the intervention of the criminal justice system, and his children’s adolescence, he feels pain, frustration, disappointment, and helplessness:

If I knew what I want to change, maybe I would succeed in making the change tomorrow, and the whole system would, would be all right . . . I haven’t succeeded. If we would have known, put a finger on the issue, do this here, change here, maybe I would know that . . . on that issue I would do something, and things would change, and then I’d be happy! But I myself don’t know what to do. What can I do today, tomorrow to turn things around and that things will be beautiful? (Yakov)

Fathering in the process of growth: “You reap what you sow.” Many of our interviewees perceived their fathering as improving, part of the extensive process of change that had recently taken place in their lives following the exposure of the violence. Their frequent references to change in general and to their changed fathering

in particular, and their insights and analysis of past events are, in our view, outcomes of the intervention they had undergone. These change and growth processes are probably far less common in the general population of men who are violent toward their partners. Gidon, for example, came to an understanding that his presence at home is essential and that he should devote less time to work:

[Once] it was all work. I live for work and that's it. Nothing else interests me. That's how it was. I don't care about the house, I don't care about shopping. Take the money and do what you want. I don't care. . . . Say, for example, if my daughter needed a vaccination, and if I'm working then I'm working, I can't come. And today if she needs something, even if I'm in the middle of work, I'll leave . . . you understand, I discovered that life is not just work . . . what opened my eyes was that we were about to get divorced, that I had been arrested, and that I understood that if you are a father, you have to do other things. Not just to be a father that brings the money and that's all. (Gidon)

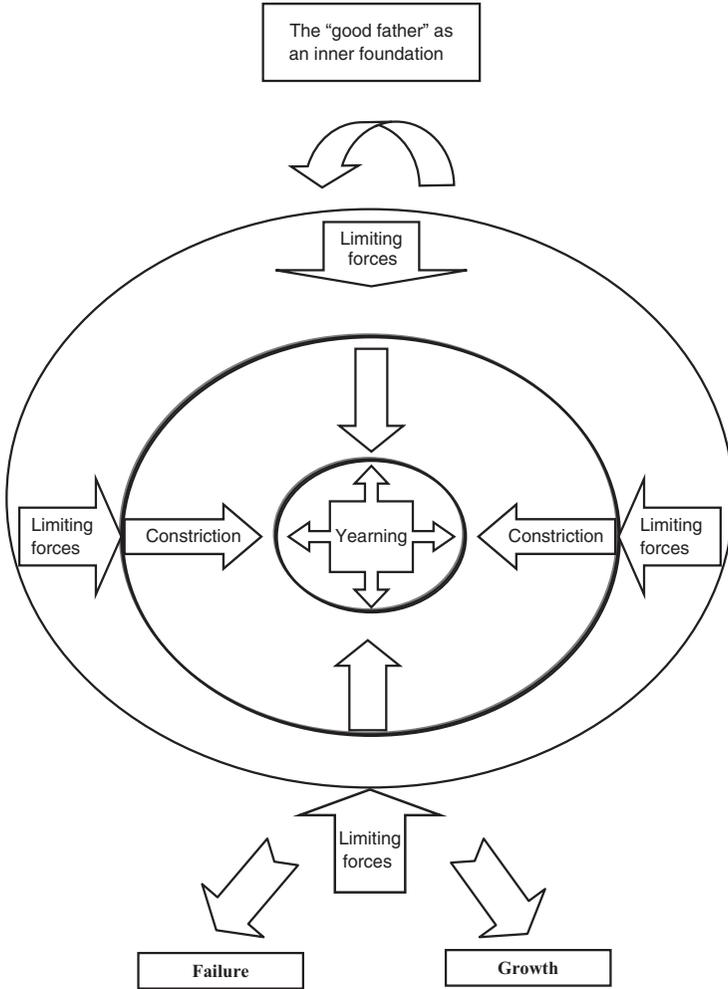
Gidon also saw the changes he had undergone as a father as connected to the cessation of the violence:

When you change the thing about the violence, then automatically you build good things about being a father. You understand? Let's say that in that way you're not good, so that at home there is an atmosphere of tension, an atmosphere of fear, an atmosphere of irritability, then fathering is not fathering, and mothering is not mothering, a family is not a family. The moment that everything is okay, then you . . . you reap what you sow. (Gidon)

Summary of the Findings

Our findings tell the story of fathering of men who were violent toward their partners. The men's basic attitude toward fathering was positive: Fathering was perceived as being of the utmost importance, the men devoted considerable efforts to being a "good father" as they perceived it, and they felt that they were indeed good fathers. Their aspirations, however, were undermined by internal and external forces, which included their own childhoods, their personal limitations, the children's exposure to violence, and the coparenting. The men perceived these forces, independently and jointly, as constricting their fatherhood. They diminished their involvement and presence in their children's lives and focused their fathering on providing for their children and controlling them. Despite the constriction and possibly as a reaction to it, many fathers were left with a strong yearning for a closer and warmer relationship with their children. In an overall review of their fathering experience, the men could be located on a continuum extending from feelings of failure and missed opportunities to a sense of growth and improvement as part of a wider change process bound up with the cessation of the violence. These processes are graphically portrayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Model of the Fathering Experience of Violent
Men Participating in the Research



Discussion

The findings shed light on the centrality of fathering in personal identity. The interviewees' perceptions of their fathering was grounded in (a) a view of fathering as one

of the most important, if not the most important, aspect of life; (b) an ongoing dialogue with the concept of the "good father" to which they aspire; and (c) a belief that their fathering is good and significant. We see the three as interrelated: The centrality of fathering motivates the desire for good fathering, which in turn helps to maintain a positive self-perception as a parent. This observation is supported by "identity theory," which postulates that the desire to view one's fathering as positive increases when fathering is central to personal identity (Marsiglio & Chohan, 2000; Marsiglio et al., 2000).

This ostensibly simple process becomes complicated for men who are violent toward their partners. The centrality and meaning of fathering in their lives are threatened by the negative impact of the violence on their exposed children and on their fathering. Thus, to maintain a balanced equation, they need to alter one of its components. This may explain the efforts taken by most of the fathers at the onset of the interview to convince us that they are good fathers, to the point of "proving their innocence." The air of criticism and suspicion regarding their fathering and the defensiveness it generates were present in the interview situation, even before the first word was uttered. The source of these feelings seems to be both internal and external. The incongruity between the ideal images of a good father and that of an abusive man may threaten violent men. Violent men also possibly react to the negative institutional and public attitudes toward their fathering. The attempt to maintain an integrated identity against the threats to one of its central components, that is, fathering, seems to consume much of the fathers' emotional energy and to impair their ability to identify and confront problems in their family relationships.

Our findings support the view that fathers find it difficult to realize their image of ideal fathering. This frustrating struggle is compounded by the confused social expectations from fathers and by the critical approach toward them in the public and professional discourse (Lewis & O'Brien, 1987; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Snary, 1993). In particular, the findings demonstrate the role of the violence in further hindering and disrupting the fathering experience. The violence sets off a process of constriction, accompanied by feelings of frustration and yearning, through the father's controlling and violent presence in the home; by accelerating separation, divorce, or disconnection from the home; and by damaging the marital relationship. The quality of the marital relationship is a major factor affecting the quality of fathering. Fathers tend to withdraw from their children when in conflict with the mother. In the absence of a stable universal model, the ongoing dialogue between the parents on the father's role is of major significance in shaping fathering. Thus, the breakdown in communication between the parents ultimately harms the fathering experience and functioning (Doherty et al., 1998). The constriction of the fathering experience under these circumstances may be amplified by a tendency of violent men to display emotional constriction, often as a result of childhood experiences of abuse (Buss, 1991; Lisak, Hooper, & Song, 1996).

As described extensively in the literature on fathering, our interviewees vacillated between different, sometimes contradictory definitions of their role as fathers

(Lamb, 2000; Marsiglio et al., 2000). On the one hand, the fathers yearned for a close and warm connection with their children, as is expected from “the new father,” whereas on the other hand, they were clearly influenced by the more traditional conceptions of the father role: the provider, the moral teacher, and the disciplinarian. This confusion seems to be particularly acute among violent fathers. Research suggests that men who are violent toward their partners lack differentiation in the feeling of gender identity, in that they feel distant both from their “masculinity” and from their “femininity” (La Violette, Barnett, & Miller, 1994; Tolman & Bennet, 1990). The narrow fathering model to which many of the men were exposed in their childhood seems to have intensified their struggle to fit their fathering to the changing social reality (Daly, 1993). In our view, constriction was the way these fathers stabilized their identity and attained a certain amount of security and certainty in the eye of the surrounding storm.

The Yearning of Violent Fathers for Connection With Their Children

The literature on the fathering of violent men questions their parenting capacities as well as their rights. The desire of violent men to continue to maintain contact with their children in the context of divorce is mentioned but is seen as manipulation aimed to maintain control over the woman and the children’s lives (e.g., Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Harné & Radford, 1994). We believe this claim deserves a reexamination in light of our findings.

The men we interviewed experienced unfulfilled yearning for warm and involved relationships with their children, unrelated to divorce proceedings. Such yearning for connection could be an expression of the need to control the woman and the children, but it could also arise from the gap between a desired close and warm connection with one’s children and the reality of a remote and constricted relationship. Support for the latter view can be found in descriptions of violent men as characterized by a yearning for intimacy (e.g., Dutton & Browning, 1988; Vaselle-Augenstein & Ehrlich, 1992; Yassour-Borochowitz, 2000). Denzin (1984) described the vicious cycle violent men create when they try to achieve intimacy and closeness with their partner by using violence, only to find themselves further rejected by their victims. Furthermore, the experience of yearning for a closer, warmer relationship with one’s children seems to be shared by many fathers, regardless of violent history (e.g., Daly, 1993; Gerson, 1997; Lewis & O’Brien, 1987; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Snary, 1993).

The negative attitudes about violent men’s motivations for contact with their children deepen the already existing conflict between “the domestic violence movement” and “fathering movements” and thwart potential collaboration for advancing a safer family environment for all its members (Williams, Boggess, & Carter, 2001). Although some feminist writers are suspicious of the motivations and intentions of many of the “new fathering” organizations (Harné & Radford, 1994; Hooper, 1994;

Lewis & O'Brien, 1987), others regard these trends as compatible with feminist interests (Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Silverstein, 1996). In their opinion, emphasizing caring and concern together with breadwinning in the redefinition of fathering is an essential stage in the feminist revolution against the patriarchal culture, for the benefit of men and women alike.

Are Violent Men Different From Other Fathers?

Our findings lend support to those of Fox and Benson (2004): They are, and they are not. As discussed above, many similarities exist between aspects of the fathering experiences of our interviewees and those reported for contemporary fathers in the general population—for example, in aspiring to fulfill an ideal image of fatherhood, in feeling confused by contradicting social expectations regarding the father role, or in yearning for a closer, warmer relationship with their children. Hence, we join Tolman and Bennet (1990), who suggested not looking at violent men as a distinct population but rather learning from them about the experiences of men in our society. Yet, the men we studied also taught us about particular and problematic violence-related aspects of their fathering, such as the impact of violence on further constricting their fathering role and relationship with their children and negatively affecting their ability to coparent with their partner. The unique aspects of the fathering experiences of violent men suggest the need for further research and intervention development designed to deepen our understanding of, and response to, the needs of this particular population of fathers.

Applications for Intervention With Violent Men

Very few structured interventions with violent men as fathers have been documented (Fall, Howard, & Ford, 1999; Mathews, 1995; Pence, Hardesty, Steil, Soderberg, & Ottman, 1991), and conspicuous by their absence are any considerations of fathering in many other intervention programs with violent men (e.g., Adams, 1988; Hague, 1993; Hansen & Harway, 1993; Stordeur & Stille, 1989). We assume that this is not coincidental but rather that it represents alienation from, and suspicion toward, the fathering of violent men. We believe that under certain conditions, and if it is their wish, these abusive fathers deserve a chance to repair their damaged parenting. A possible tentative conclusion from our findings is that allowing abusive men an in-depth exploration of this meaningful and sensitive aspect of their lives may also facilitate change in other domains of intervention with them by providing access into inner worlds otherwise cordoned off from practitioners. Such an assumption echoes a growing inclination among fatherhood scholars to view it as an important dimension of adult emotional development, particularly in relation to one's capacity for engaging in intimate relationships (Hawkins, Christiansen, & Sargent, 1993; Palkovitz, 2002; Roy, 2006). This while keeping in mind the potential dangers involved for the women and children in offering

fathering intervention to violent men and to the possibility of the men misusing the intervention to strengthen their control over their family (Peled, 2000).

On the basis of our findings, we carefully propose several guidelines for intervention with violent men as fathers (see also Peled & Perel, 2007). Because qualitative research supports transference of findings rather than their generalization, we ask practitioners to examine the appropriateness of our findings and suggestions for the particular context in which they operate. The findings suggest that contradictory forces and processes are inseparably bound up with the experience of fathering among men who are violent toward their partners. The centrality of fathering in their world and their desire to be good fathers, as they see it, are intertwined with a fundamental, mostly denied, parental deficit, namely, the violence. The yearning for a close and warm connection exists side by side with constriction, remoteness, and absence. The men struggle with a multiplicity of roles, the expectations and contradictions these roles create, and resulting stress and confusion. Familiarity with these issues and a sensitive and comprehensive handling of them could further the effectiveness of intervention with violent men as fathers.

The flawed and abusive parenting of men who are violent toward their partners poses a challenge to anyone wishing to intervene with them. At the same time, we believe that intervention will be effective only if it is based on respect and empathy to their experiences and views, in line with the “generative fathering” approach (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). We suggest regarding these men as simultaneously harmful and vulnerable. This implies condemnation of the harm they cause to the children and striving to put a stop to it, while being attentive to their distress and providing them with support.

Finally, men need to acknowledge and take responsibility for their abusive behavior, as well as make significant progress in stopping it, before entering fathering intervention. Offering parenting intervention to violent men prior to a successful completion of intervention directed at the violent behavior could strengthen denial of the violence by seeming to reframe their problem as that of deficient parenting.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Current research on the fathering of violent men focuses on these men’s flawed and abusive parenting. This study expanded our view to include also their vulnerability, distress, and yearning. The research was conducted according to the assumptions of the naturalistic approach and does not purport to generalize the findings for the population of violent men. Our findings should thus be viewed as tentative in terms of thinking and intervening in this area. Interviews with men who are not part of an intervention program, for example, will enrich our research and improve its generalizability.

Further research could deepen our understanding of the fathering of violent men by examining such issues as parental satisfaction and confidence; personal and relational changes following the onset of parenting; intimacy, communication, and stress in the relationship with their children; comparative study of fathering by types of

violence displayed toward their partners; and more. Another challenge could be to operationalize and measure some of the processes described in our research. It would be interesting, for example, to examine the intensity of constriction or yearning and their influence on parental functioning. Finally, the fathering of violent men could be studied also from their children's and their partner's viewpoints, comparing among the three perspectives.

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