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## "I Don't Even Deserve a Chance": An Ethnographic Study of Adverse Childhood Experiences Among Male Perpetrators of Intimate Partner Violence

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## "I Don't Even Deserve a Chance": An Ethnographic Study of Adverse Childhood Experiences Among Male Perpetrators of Intimate Partner Violence

### Abstract

Perpetrators of intimate partner violence (IPV) are more likely to have been exposed to adverse childhood experiences (ACES) than the general population (e.g., Whitfield, Anda, Dube, & Felitti, 2003). Despite this association, occurrence of ACES does not necessarily lead to the development of patterned abusive behavior (Godbout et al., 2017). To understand the link between ACES and IPV perpetration, Godbout et al. (2017) suggest that research must consider a complex array of intra- and interpersonal experiences. For this project, we used ethnographic methods, including participant observation at a local batterer intervention program (BIP) and semi-structured interviews with 15 male IPV perpetrators to explore the individual experiences in greater detail. The data were analyzed using a combination of concept-driven, open, and axial coding, creating an inductive and iterative process for interpretation (e.g., Manning & Kunkel, 2014). Participants' reports revealed high frequency of often co-occurring ACES, with patterns of negative messages about self-worth, beliefs about personal responsibility for experiences of abuse, and both feelings of powerlessness in the face of abusers and the need to feel powerful. Results are discussed regarding the theoretical understanding of individual differences among IPV perpetrators. Specifically, we address the practical need to expand our investigation of ACES, as experienced by IPV perpetrators, to include more varied types of abuse and household dysfunction.

### Keywords

Adverse Childhood Experiences, Intimate Partner Violence, IPV Perpetrator, Batterer Intervention Program, Ethnography, Participant Observation, Semi-Structured Interviews

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# **“I Don’t Even Deserve a Chance”: An Ethnographic Study of Adverse Childhood Experiences Among Male Perpetrators of Intimate Partner Violence**

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*Perpetrators of intimate partner violence (IPV) are more likely to have been exposed to adverse childhood experiences (ACES) than the general population (e.g., Whitfield, Anda, Dube, & Felitti, 2003). Despite this association, occurrence of ACES does not necessarily lead to the development of patterned abusive behavior (Godbout et al., 2017). To understand the link between ACES and IPV perpetration, Godbout et al. (2017) suggest that research must consider a complex array of intra- and interpersonal experiences. For this project, we used ethnographic methods, including participant observation at a local batterer intervention program (BIP) and semi-structured interviews with 15 male IPV perpetrators to explore the individual experiences in greater detail. The data were analyzed using a combination of concept-driven, open, and axial coding, creating an inductive and iterative process for interpretation (e.g., Manning & Kunkel, 2014). Participants’ reports revealed high frequency of often co-occurring ACES, with patterns of negative messages about self-worth, beliefs about personal responsibility for experiences of abuse, and both feelings of powerlessness in the face of abusers and the need to feel powerful. Results are discussed regarding the theoretical understanding of individual differences among IPV perpetrators. Specifically, we address the practical need to expand our investigation of ACES, as experienced by IPV perpetrators, to include more varied types of abuse and household dysfunction. Keywords: Adverse Childhood Experiences, Intimate Partner Violence, IPV Perpetrator, Batterer Intervention Program, Ethnography, Participant Observation, Semi-Structured Interviews*

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Researchers (e.g., Delsol & Margolin, 2004; Dugal, Godbout, Bélanger, Hébert, & Goulet, 2018; Else, Wonderlich, Beatty, Christie, & Stanton, 1993; Godbout et al., 2017; Lisak, Hopper, & Song, 1996; Rosenbaum & Leisring, 2003; Smith-Marek et al., 2015) have now widely documented the link between adverse childhood experiences (ACES) and intimate partner violence (IPV). Several recent meta-analyses (e.g., Delsol & Margolin, 2004; Godbout et al., 2017; Smith-Marek et al., 2015) allow us to see just how well-studied, yet not fully understood, the complex relationship between ACES and IPV is. Godbout et al. (2017) reviewed 66 studies examining the ACES-IPV link and found that the association between child maltreatment (CM) and IPV among male perpetrators is somewhat small, suggesting CM survivors typically do not become IPV perpetrators. Despite showing weak direct predictive power, ACES are nonetheless significantly more prevalent among samples of male perpetrators of IPV than comparison groups of non-abusive men (e.g., Else et al., 1993; Lisak et al., 1996; Rosenbaum & Leisring, 2003). According to Godbout et al. (2017), this reality suggests “a combination of individual, relational, and societal factors likely contributes to the risk of being

... a perpetrator of IPV in male CM survivors” (p. 8). Thus, the exploration of issues that may link ACES to IPV perpetration is a worthwhile pursuit.

In recent years, researchers have empirically demonstrated several explanations to support an indirect relationship between ACES and IPV, such as the development of anxious or avoidant attachment styles (e.g., Godbout, Dutton, Lussier, & Sabourin, 2009), the inability to regulate emotions (e.g., Dugal et al., 2018), and other psychological trauma symptoms that inhibit healthy interpersonal communication and conflict resolution (e.g., impaired self-reference, tension reduction behavior; Milner et al., 2010). However, most investigations of the ACES-IPV link employ cross-sectional methods and non-clinical samples (c.f., interviews with death row inmates; Lisak & Beszterczey, 2007). In contrast to methods of research that limit data collection to fixed responses on questionnaires, the current study examines the detailed accounts, through ethnographic methods, of men who have been court-mandated to attend so-called “batterer intervention programs” (BIP). With these methods, we can better grasp the complex tapestry of childhood adversity and household dysfunction among IPV perpetrators. The more we understand the array of early childhood experiences that influence the cycle of violence and *how* individuals experience ACES, the better able we will be to design effective prevention, intervention, and general population education programs and services.

## Literature Review

### The ACES-IPV Link

With decades of multidisciplinary research, there is no reason to doubt the connection between enacting violence against others and experiencing violence and adversity in childhood. For example, in a meta-analysis of studies examining intergenerational transmission of violence, Delsol and Margolin (2004) found family-of-origin violence to be more prevalent in samples of men who were violent with spouses (60%) than nonviolent married men (20%). In a much larger meta-analysis, Smith-Marek et al. (2015) reviewed 124 studies measuring the association between witnessing interparental violence and/or physical violence victimization and adult IPV. They found effect sizes for perpetration were stronger than for victimization. This finding suggests that witnessing and/or experiencing abuse in childhood is more likely to predict IPV perpetration than further IPV victimization. Additionally, Smith-Marek et al. (2015) also found that the effect sizes for perpetration were stronger for male participants than for females (who are more likely to experience further victimization) in the studies analyzed. This apparent gender difference illustrates that there must be individual, relational, and social factors that are unique, or at least more prevalent, in the lives of boys as they develop.

Though it is clear that adult male IPV perpetrators generally experience more adversity in childhood than non-violent men, it is still unclear as to how much, as well as how varied, the experiences of ACES might be among those in this particular population. According to one of the most recent reviews of ACES-IPV research (Godbout et al., 2017), most studies exploring this link tend to focus narrowly on witnessing or experiencing physical abuse in childhood and the perpetration of physical abuse in adulthood. The narrow focus of previous ACES-IPV inquiries may be attributable to some earlier research (e.g., Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986) that found witnessing abuse of a mother figure to be the most consistent predictor of adult male IPV perpetration. In addition, social learning theories have shaped how we understand IPV, such that we have long believed watching others benefit from the use of abusive tactics as a function of power and control in intimate relationships leads to the acceptance of intergenerational violence (e.g., see Ali & Naylor, 2013; Woszidlo & Kunkel, 2018).

However, the study of ACES (e.g., Felitti et al., 1998) draws attention to the life-altering influence of abuse and household dysfunction. For example, Godbout et al.'s (2017) analysis revealed, "sexual, physical, and psychological abuses, neglect, and witnessing IPV in childhood are significantly associated with both perpetration and victimization involving physical, sexual, and psychological IPV" (p. 8). Thus, we believe additional forms of adversity may contribute to the development of abusive behaviors in adult relationships. In the current study, we explore a somewhat broader range of traumatogenic experiences using the 10 ACES categories: (a) psychological, (b) physical, or (c) sexual abuse; (d) emotional and (e) physical neglect; (f) parental separation or divorce; (g) witnessing violence against a mother or stepmother; or (h) living with household members who were substance abusers, (i) mentally ill or suicidal, or ever (j) incarcerated.

ACES research (e.g., Edwards, Anda, Felitti, & Dube, 2004; Felitti et al., 1998) has consistently shown the categories of childhood adversity to be commonly co-occurring phenomena and predictive of many negative physical and psychological outcomes. Therefore, we propose that a narrow focus on physical abuse victimization and witnessing physical abuse eliminates much of the complexity that is necessary to understand the development of abusive behaviors in adulthood. Thus, the following research question was addressed in this study:

RQ: How do male perpetrators of intimate partner violence experience adverse childhood experiences?

### **Our Role as Researchers**

This project is a portion of Natalie's doctoral dissertation, a larger project, which Adrienne directed as her dissertation chair. Thus, in consultation with Adrienne, Natalie was the primary investigator who selected the research topic, designed the research project, and was actively involved in all stages of the research process. At the time of the study, Natalie was a white, female graduate student who studied gender socialization and social support, utilizing qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. During the course of this project, Natalie was keenly aware of her identity as a woman, which presented a potential for bias and participant reactivity. However, she was more likely to empathize with participants than to demonize them due to her belief that *all* people have the capacity for cruel behavior, and cruelty exists on a continuum. While empathizing with participants can be a threat to validity in some studies, empathy (i.e., a prosocial skill that allows us to attune to others and/or put oneself in another person's shoes) made it easier to listen actively and carry genuine dialogue with study participants.

Participant reactivity refers to participants reacting to the researcher in a way that may alter their behaviors in certain situations (Maxwell, 2012). For example, as a woman, Natalie's presence posed a potential threat to validity through reactivity, because she represented the gender of participants' relationship partners (i.e., victims of abuse). One participant reported that this was true for him when he first entered into the program. However, as he advanced through the program and abandoned some of his rigid gender role beliefs (e.g., "*you're a woman, you should be cooking*"), he admitted that he preferred to talk to the female facilitators about deeper issues. This is also reflected in social support research because, in general, "women are expected to be the primary source of nurturance and emotional support" (Burleson, 2003, p. 575). Thus, we have confidence that reactivity did not impede the Natalie's ability to engage participants in genuine conversation.

As dissertation chair, Adrienne acted as an advisor throughout the entire duration of the project and supported Natalie in designing the research, coding the data, and writing the manuscript. Adrienne is a white, female professor who studies social support and survivors of domestic violence, utilizing predominantly qualitative research methods. As a doctoral student,

Natalie studied masculinities, in addition to gendered communication, positioning her interests in alignment with Adrienne. In working together, we hope to better understand the complexity of adverse experiences in the lives of male IPV perpetrators to increase our knowledge of these interrelated phenomena and, ultimately, contribute to the conversation that surrounds violence prevention and intervention practices. We chose to use ethnographic methods for the current project, because the nature of the field setting allowed for us to directly observe and interact with men's accounts of their experiences, beliefs, and emotions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017; Manning & Kunkel, 2014).

## **Method**

To answer the research question, it was necessary to be immersed in an environment that allowed for direct interrogation of men's own accounts of their lived experiences. We collected data through the use of the two complementary methods: participant observation and in-depth interviews. From December 2013 to May 2017 (approximately 40 months), Natalie attended weekly meetings of a men's group at a local batterer intervention program (BIP), Family Safety Enterprises (FSE; a pseudonym), which offers intervention groups, in addition to IPV victim support and resources. FSE's BIP group curriculum is designed to be completed in 27 weeks. Although some men entered FSE's program voluntarily, most were either court-mandated to attend classes, or they were given the class as an option to achieve desired ends through the court system (i.e., regaining custody of their children or to have court charges reduced). Research participants selected their own pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. We acted independently and did not receive any funding or compensation from FSE or its affiliates. Moreover, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Kansas approved all methods and procedures for this study.

### **Participant Observation**

From April 2014 to February 2015 (approximately 10 months), Natalie completed approximately 257.5 hours of participant observation as a member of one BIP group. Her role as researcher was frequently disclosed, as new members would join the group on a regular basis (Tracy, 2013). In accordance with our IRB protocol, FSE staff members collected informed consent from participants when they attended the FSE program orientation, which occurred before their first BIP group meeting. When new participants would arrive in the group for the first time, Natalie introduced herself as the researcher before the group began. If any individual group member refused to consent to study participation, Natalie introduced herself as a courtesy yet made it clear that the non-consenting group members' words and actions would be excluded in notes of conversations and interactions. Only one group member refused to consent and remained in the group.

As a participant and observer, Natalie received 32 hours of BIP facilitator training, built rapport with 101 male perpetrators of IPV from the weekly BIP group, engaged in group discussions and activities, and observed participants' behavior, talk, and interactions with each other and facilitators, including herself (Maxwell, 2012). After each group meeting, she joined the FSE facilitators in a discussion about the night's meeting, which helped to reaffirm observations, check assumptions, and participate in planning the group for the subsequent week.

Approximately 5 to 20 men attended each BIP group meeting. The men's average age was 35.18 years (range = 21-59 years). The men's ethnic composition was 80% Caucasian, 9% African American, 4% Native American, 2% Hispanic, 2% Asian American, and 2% Mixed Ethnicity. Forty-four percent were currently in a relationship (50% with the victim of abuse),

27% were married (75% to the victim of abuse), 20% were single, 4% were divorced, and 4% were separated. Socioeconomic status was varied. Typical income appeared to range from \$20,000 to \$65,000 annually, with one participant reporting a \$200,000 annual income, but many men did not report income, making it impossible to calculate a representative average. Several men were unemployed (18%) and reliant on government assistance (11%). Twenty-two percent reported working in the construction industry, making it the most commonly held occupation. However, there were a wide variety of other occupations held, including (but not limited to) elevator operator, car dealer, and nurse.

For 33 consecutive weeks, Natalie took copious notes through two types of methods: field notes and voice notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Tracy, 2013). First, she would only record field notes during a meeting to capture participants' words if they were salient to the study's purpose and research question. She would do this while the facilitator was speaking and/or presenting a lesson, so that she could appear to be taking notes about the lesson. She did not wish to be perceived as taking notes when participants were speaking, because she wanted them to see her as other-focused (i.e., interested in them and their stories). As a full participant observer, Natalie aimed to engage fully in group participation without distraction. Thus, much of her notetaking depended on her ability to recall what occurred during the meetings. After the end of each meeting, Natalie made detailed voice recordings about participants' behaviors and interactions. While recording, she typically recounted the events of the evening in chronological order. Field notes were later cross-referenced to piece together the order and the veracity of the voice notes to minimize recall error. Twelve hours of recorded voice notes were then transcribed into 61 pages of single-spaced, typed pages of field notes. In addition to voice recordings, Natalie filled two 80-page notebooks with handwritten field notes. Voice notes and handwritten field notes, combined, totaled 141 single-spaced pages of participant observation data. These transcripts included content such as the following portion of one night's group lesson:

At first, it's very much like a lecture: using the board, writing stuff up on the board. The river of cruelty starts when somebody's cruel to you and makes you feel bad, but what [the facilitator] does is he doesn't talk about the feelings right away. He asks the men "what did you do to survive the cruelty?" and the men throw up all these words on the board like, "I went into the woods," "I ignored it," "I accepted it," "became numb," and "started being violent."

In another example, one night, the facilitator passed around ACES questionnaires, and we were able to hear how their experiences of adversity shaped their perception of others:

Everybody filled out the questionnaire. On the board, [the facilitator] listed the numbers associated with the men's ACE scores. The only man with a zero was Bucky. However, [the facilitator] said Bucky's mother was very abusive and that's why he went to live with his grandparents. When [the facilitator] said her ACE score was a one, one man said he didn't believe that anyone could have less than a three. This particular man had a nine. We talked about how growing up with trauma normalizes it. If someone experiences no trauma, then it's weird to those who have.

### **In-Depth Interviews**

In addition to participant observation procedures, Natalie also conducted 19.5 hours of semi-structured in-depth interviews. Starting in May 2014, and over the course of 6 months

(May 2014 to December 2015; one full cycle of the 27-week program curriculum), she invited as many BIP group members as possible to complete an interview. At any given time, there were no more than 20 men per group. Most men declined to participate in interviews due to work schedules and a general lack of free time or flexibility. Ultimately, patterns of adverse experiences emerged in the men's stories, and data reached saturation after 15 in-depth interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017).

Natalie's efforts to build rapport with members of the weekly BIP group were advantageous to rich and thoughtful conversations during interviews. Most importantly, her role as a participant observer in the weekly groups allowed her to triangulate interview findings with previous observations and interactions (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). These two methods of data collection complemented each other nicely. What a participant said in an interview could often be confirmed or disconfirmed by comparing it to the ongoing weekly observations.

The interview protocol included questions designed to elicit types and prevalence of adverse childhood experiences (ACES; e.g., "When is the first time you can remember being treated cruelly?", "Did you experience violence/abuse growing up?"), affective responses to ACES (e.g., "How did you feel at the time?", "How does it feel to talk about it?"), and general demographic information (i.e., age, race, ethnicity, level of education, and employment). Again, coupled with observations from the weekly BIP group meetings, interviews were conducted with a foundational knowledge about interview participants that informed the use of the interview protocol and allowed for individualized and nuanced follow-up questions. For example, when a participant mentioned in the weekly group meeting that they had their first experience of childhood adversity when they were only 5-years-old, Natalie was able to use that information to make questions more focused and precise in the interview process. Instead of asking, "When was the first time you remember experiencing abuse?" Natalie was able to ask, "In group, you mentioned that your first memory of abuse was when you were 5-years-old? Would you mind telling me more about that experience?" This strategy allowed for greater fluidity and depth in the conversation and resulted in more efficient use of time and arguably a greater degree of disclosure from participants.

The average interview length was 1 hour and 18 minutes, and interviews ranged from 43 minutes to 2 hours and 52 minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. All transcription for this project was completed by Natalie and a trained undergraduate research assistant. Single-spaced transcriptions resulted in 366 pages.

Of the 15 interview participants, the average age was 33.87 years (age range = 23-57). The men's ethnic composition was 10 (67%) Caucasian, 1 (7%) African American, 2 (13%) Hispanic, and 2 (13%) Native American. All men identified as heterosexual. At the time of the interviews, 5 men (33%) were cohabiting with intimate partners, 4 (27%) were separated from their spouses, 3 (20%) were single, 2 (13%) were married, and 1 (6%) was divorced. The average number of total weekly groups attended was 20 weeks (range = 4-27 weeks) at the time of the interviews. Thirteen (87%) men successfully completed the program, and 2 (13%) dropped out. The men had varying education levels, from an 8th-grade education to some college or vocational training, and they held various occupations (e.g., mechanic, culinary school student, construction workers (53%), florist, barista, union carpenter, paper factory machine operator, and volunteer firefighter).

### **Data Analysis**

We combined all participant observation and interview transcripts to create one data set. Natalie read through the data three separate times to see how they fit (or failed to fit) with the research question addressed in this study. For example, participants spoke about their adult relationships, including the events that led to their participation in the FSE program. Typically,



these narratives were not directly related to our current research question, so we did not include them in our analysis. Instead, men's stories about childhood experiences fit more closely to the aims of our project. Adrianne also read through the data to corroborate Natalie's analysis.

As a graduate student, Natalie felt it was important to gain an understanding of qualitative data analysis through the experience of a manual analytical process, instead of using a qualitative analysis software (e.g., NVivo). Thus, we printed the entire data set, which was created using Microsoft Word, and used the hard copy to conduct our analysis. Through our coding process, detailed below, we identified words, sentences, and paragraphs that related to our research question. Once we identified relevant content, we used scissors to cut the content from the hard copy and physically sorted the cuttings into piles. Cuttings were first organized by initial codes and, through progressive stages of analysis, they were reorganized into final themes.

While reading through the data set, we used a combination of concept-driven, open, and axial coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). First, concept-driven coding involved "categories or concepts [. . .that] come from the research literature, previous studies, topics in the interview schedule" (Gibbs, 2007, p. 44). We used concept-driven coding to help categorize responses that were related to the specific predetermined themes (e.g., ACES; deductive). For example, responses that fit the predetermined theme of physical abuse (one of the ACES categories) were identified through the men's accounts when they described their experiences of physical violence perpetrated by a primary caregiver. In Bello's interview, he described his father's physical abuse in detail:

He beat me with a belt so bad they kept me home for two days, because I had whip marks around where . . . it looked like purple snakes all over me, from where the belt had gone around and he . . . I remember trying to run from him and he hit me would hit me so hard I would lift up and fall to one side and then he'd hit me so hard, he'd knock me back to the other side. I remember hiding underneath the table, and I remember him flipping the whole table over and stomping on me.

The detail of the account above clearly indicates the presence of physical abuse in Bello's household. Thus, we were able to identify the account as physical abuse, cut the paragraph from the data set, and place the paragraph of data into the physical abuse category.

To explore the data further, open and axial coding allowed us to discover patterns in the data set that may not have been anticipated based on the literature (inductive; Manning & Kunkel, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, a passage from one participant's interview may not have included themes from the original ACES categories, yet we interpreted an experience that was not previously anticipated as adverse, based on the participant's description. Several participants mentioned the death of a parent as being a pivotal moment in their lives, yet the death of a parent is not included in the original ACES categories. In one case, Kennedy described the events that followed his father's death as emotionally, socially, and developmentally devastating. When reading the data set, we were able to see how Kennedy associated his father's death with the negative events that followed, "*I just got really hardened after [my father's death]. Once I started getting older in teenage years and started doing a little bit of that time. Time really hardened my ass.*" Thus, through open coding, we added *parental death* to our list of initial codes.

Additionally, Natalie asked Kennedy if his father's death was the first time he had ever experienced adversity, which prompted Kennedy to talk about his earlier experiences with bullying in elementary school:

I got picked on a lot. I went to a Catholic school – rich, Catholic school. I wore Pro-Wings, so I got made fun of all the time . . . and people were wearing like \$100 pair of Jordans. I got made fun of all the time, and finally I was like ‘Fuck you. Fuck you.’ That led to fights, and then there were a couple of kids I had to fight every single day.

Though bullying is not included in the original list of ACES categories, we determined bullying to be one of our initial codes through the identification of the category as a repeated theme in the men’s stories, the effects they perceived bullying had on their lives, and its conceptual similarity to other types of childhood adversity.

After creating initial codes, we continued to reassess the data with multiple passes and constant comparison between interview data, participant observation notes, and initial codes (i.e., axial coding; Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, multiple participants reported being physically bullied by both siblings and peers, which are not categories included in the original 10 ACES categories. However, according to the men’s stories, the physical bullying they experienced was brutal, ongoing and, in many ways, transformative in their early childhood. For example, Rick recalled a bully whose psychological taunts turned into a fight in the boys’ bathroom at school. Rick described the event, “*He ripped my shirt, he tore my shirt. . . he hit me, I mean he busted me up pretty good, knocked out a tooth, fucked up my jaw.*” His description is similar to many participants’ experience of bullying in school. Additionally, participants spoke of siblings who created an environment of terror in their household. For example, Sam spoke about his two brothers throughout his interview. To summarize their bullying, Sam said:

They’d attack me. I guess that’s just how the nature of the beast worked. They just wanted to get me—it just felt like that. But yeah, I got attacked a lot. If it wasn’t from one, then it’d be from the other one.

Thus, we combined the physical bullying from peers with the physical harassment and assaults of siblings into one of our final themes (i.e., physical abuse from siblings and peers) and created a separate theme that encompassed the psychological abuse men experienced outside of the household environment (i.e., psychological abuse from peers).

The stories of peers and siblings fit conceptually with the definition of physical and psychological abuse in the ACES literature, but because the perpetrators of the abuse were children, the accounts did not fit into the original ACES categories. Finally, in our analytical discussions, we decided the effects of the peer and sibling abuse were traumatic in a way that should not be overlooked. In this way, our approach to the coding process was iterative (Fairhurst, 2014; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009; Tracy, 2013). As a result of these coding processes, we organized the data into the 10 original ACES categories, in addition to six important themes we uncovered related to childhood adversity that are not included in the original 10 ACES categories (i.e., psychological abuse from siblings, psychological abuse from peers, physical abuse from siblings and peers, physical abuse from school faculty and administrators, and loss of parent(s) through abandonment or death). Thus, the next section organizes participant narratives into both pre-existing and emergent categories in the following order: (a) psychological abuse from parent(s), (b) siblings, and (c) peers; (d) physical abuse from siblings and peers, (e) parent(s), (f) school faculty, and administrators; (g) sexual abuse; (h) emotional and (i) physical neglect; (j) loss of parent(s) through separation, divorce, (k) abandonment, or (l) death; (m) witnessing violence against mother or stepmother; (n) substance abuse; (o) mental illness; and (p) incarceration.

## Results and Interpretation

Given our research question, we sought to learn more about how men who have perpetrated intimate partner violence (IPV) have experienced childhood adversity. Thus, we collected stories about participants' experiences of adversity through group observation and by asking interview participants to recall their earliest memories of being treated cruelly (language specific to FSE's program) in and outside of the home environment. The following paragraphs illustrate their varied responses and illuminate the prevalence and variety of adversity and household dysfunction among the study participants, as well as how the experiences made them feel.

### Psychological Abuse

The ACES studies characterize psychological abuse as involving swearing, insults, put downs, and humiliation (e.g., Felitti et al., 1998). Additionally, psychological abuse can include threats of physical harm, controlling, withholding information, and many other forms of verbal abuse and coercive tactics (NCADV, 2015). The current study's sample reflects a high degree of prevalence of psychological abuse. Out of the 15 interview participants, 11 (73.3%) reported experiencing repeated psychological abuse. Though frequency among the group members during participant observation was not measured, the theme of psychological abuse was also quite common in group discussion. The following cases illustrate the wide range of sources and variety of experiences that constitute psychological abuse.

**Psychological abuse from parents.** Many participants experienced psychological abuse in the household, both from parents and guardians. For example, Harley's parents used threats and fear as a method to control their out-of-control home environment. In his own words, Harley explained, "*my parents threatened to put us in foster care . . . Nothing ever became of it, but I really thought that was gonna happen.*" These threats, though never realized, gave Harley the sense that he was not important and felt like a put down and a threat of abandonment. He explained, "*I was afraid they were really gonna do it, I was sad that they would think of doing it, mad that they would even consider it.*" When asked how their threats made him feel, Harley said, "*That I'm not worth their time . . . that they—I don't even deserve a chance.*"

In a similar vein, Ray described his childhood with his adoptive father as unstable and surrounded by drugs and criminal activity. Ray reported that his adoptive father responded to every misstep with yelling and insults. In his own words, Ray explained:

Since I was growing up, my dad that raised me was always yelling at me. . . I hardly ever got punished by whipping so much as extreme, loud yell—scare the hell out of me, think I'm gonna get killed type of yelling: "WHAT? ARE YOU FREAKING STUPID?? I DONE TOLD YOU."

Ray's experience mirrors many of the other participants' experiences. For example, Lee's stepfather often told Lee and his brother that, "*he didn't give a shit if we were there or not.*" Furthermore, each time they got in trouble or even just failed to meet their stepfather's standards, they were yelled and cussed at, in addition to physical beatings.

**Psychological abuse from siblings.** Many participants reported that the source of psychological abuse stemmed from the behaviors of siblings. For example, Harley described his childhood as being in the shadow of his older brother's abuse:

He put our family through emotional stress for years of his life by being destructive and violent. . .breaking my stuff just 'cause he's in a rage over something he's already in with the parents about. He'd take it out on anything that was around him. He broke windows all the time, holes in the walls all the time. He'd break family pictures just walking by punching things in the house.

Similarly, Pete experienced household psychological abuse nearly daily. Pete lived with his mother and his two half-brothers, who were seven and nine years older than he. Both brothers were members of a street gang. As early as 3-years-old, Pete remembers growing up watching his older brothers turn from petty criminals to hardened felons. One night in the BIP group, Pete told a story of abuse that he had never shared with anyone before. In his interview, he was asked to retell his experience:

[My brothers] were going to go leave to go ride their bikes with their friends—and I said, “I wanna go,” and they said “No, no, no.” And my mom said, “Yep, you gotta take him.” And they fought with her for a while and finally they said, “Alright, we’ll take him,” smile on their face and everything, and I’m thinking “Alright, maybe they’re gonna be cool,” ‘cause they were acting cool. And then we went over, and we were riding behind the houses and he told me—he stopped the bike and he told me—to get off and he said, “Alright, I’m gonna talk to you about. . .let me tell you about where we’re going so you don’t do nothing that’s gonna get you in trouble.” So, we both got off the bike and he was talking to me, he pulled out the handcuff and put it around my arm. . .And then he took the other handcuff and he clicked it to the fence. And he said, “Now you better not give me any shit—you better not get me in trouble. I’m not gonna leave you here forever. You shouldn’t have said that you wanted to come—we told you we didn’t want you to come.” And I’m begging him to let me go. . .And he was just, “You shut up. If you get any louder, it’s gonna get worse.”

**Psychological abuse from peers.** Several of the participants experienced psychological abuse from peers. The ACES questionnaire measures household dysfunction and does not capture bullying outside of the home. The results from the current study suggest there are a high number of incidents of psychological abuse outside of the home to be considered, as well as inside the home.

For instance, Rick was bullied by his peers in elementary school. When asked why, he recalled, *“I was new in school. So that was pretty much: you’re new, you’re retarded. I was in special ed for pretty much everything but fuckin’ like PE and science and computer.”* His experiences with bullying led to fighting. He said, *“It did happen a lot, but I checked their asses pretty quick. . .I fought back. I got kicked out of school for 2 years ‘cause I fought back.”* Similarly, Kennedy was bullied for not wearing name-brand clothes in an affluent Catholic school. In his recollection, Kennedy explained that it was usually about his shoes, which were

Generic, very generic, like seven-dollar pair of shoes. And people were wearing like hundred-dollar pairs of Jordans. So, I got made fun of all the time and finally I was like “Fuck you. Fuck you.” And that led to fights, and then there were a couple of kids I had to fight every single day.

For these men, their experiences of psychological abuse were outside of the home, but they were persistent and clearly shaped their beliefs about defending oneself. Kennedy pointed to

his experiences of being bullied as the main reason why he has always been so quick to defend himself from criticism and attack. He explained in his own words:

Even we're talking, man, "If you wanna fight, I'm gonna fight you." Now you gotta punch me in the face or put your hands on me to get me to fight you. And it's been like that for a while.

Though Kennedy claims he was much more reactive in his younger days, he continues to insist that if someone attacks him, retaliation is his only option. As was observed in a group meeting one night, Kennedy was concerned about having to appear in court the next day because he knew that if his ex's new boyfriend was there, Kennedy would probably get arrested for "*punching him out*." Though he knew this behavior might risk taking him away from his son, he admitted that it was just the way things were. In his words, "*I wasn't gonna get punched on*."

Clearly, psychological abuse was prevalent and varied among participants in the current study. Additionally, and mirroring what we already know about the nature of abusive behaviors, psychological abuse was frequently a precursor to, or co-occurring with, physical and sexual abuse for many men during their childhood (NCADV, 2015).

## Physical Abuse

The ACES studies characterize physical abuse as pushing, grabbing, slapping, or having objects thrown at you (e.g., Felitti et al., 1998). The ACES questionnaire also emphasizes parents or other adults as being the perpetrators of physical abuse. However, participants in the current study report repeated patterns of physical abuse at the hands of their siblings and peers. Out of the 15 interview participants, 13 (86.7%) reported physical abuse, whether from siblings, peers, or parents, as well as other authority figures.

**Physical abuse from siblings and peers.** In observations, many men in the BIP group told stories about being physically abused by siblings. One man, Jerry, said his brother used to hurt him a lot. He would run to his mother for help, but she would only say, "*Don't push his buttons*." Cal, who lived on a farm with his nine brothers and sisters, told a story once about a time when his older brothers pushed him into an electric fence. Similarly, Mack would talk in group about his older sister, who "*tortured him since he was born*." Mack said she did "*evil fucking shit*" to him, but he would not elaborate. Sam remembers growing up with his two older brothers and spending a great deal of time in their backyard, where their mother ran a daycare. Sam recalls that his mother was often too busy to take care of him, and his brothers were left in charge in her absence. Sam explained, "*My brothers always attacked me and hit on me. . . [they'd] be like, 'Oh wait till mom leaves' . . . And they'd attack me. . . I got attacked a lot. If it wasn't from one, then it'd be from the other one*." Sam often felt that his brothers were setting him up. He explained that he thought they were, "*trying to lead me on, to trap me for the next time*."

Others were physically tormented by peers in school. For example, as mentioned earlier, Rick was bullied by classmates because he was new to school. Recalling one incident, Rick described being provoked by a particularly popular boy. He recounted: "*The next day, we went to the bathroom. . . me and him got in this fuckin fight, but he ripped my shirt. . . he hit me, I mean he busted me up pretty good, knocked out a tooth. . . fucked up my jaw*." According to Rick, and other participants, this sort of peer violence happened frequently. For instance, Noten's experience at boarding school was overshadowed by nearly constant physical abuse. Noten was sent to boarding school for about 2 years, where most of the students were Sioux.

Noten was not Sioux. He explained that “*if you weren’t Sioux, you weren’t shit,*” and the other kids would beat him up for it.

Similarly, school fights crept into their lives at home. For example, Lee said his stepfather taught him a lesson the first time Lee came home from losing a fight at school. In his own words, Lee remembered, “*The first time I got in a fight at school and I didn’t win the fight and my stepdad kicked my ass at home and made me go back and fight the kid again.*” When asked what message he received from his stepfather’s beating, he added, “*You don’t lose like that. You don’t let people walk on you. You don’t lose fights.*”

**Physical abuse from parent(s), school faculty, and administrators.** Some participants shared stories of the physical abuse coming from school faculty or administrators. For example, as mentioned earlier, Noten’s classmates would beat him up, but they were motivated to fight in ways that would not get them caught by the teachers. Noten explained: “*[The other kids] might jump you and stuff but they wouldn’t hit you in the face. They’d just kick the shit out of your body, though. ‘Put the boots to you,’ they called it.*” The reason for this was that fighting was not allowed, and those who were caught fighting would be severely punished. Noten added:

They’d spank your ass or a lot of the nuns took their pointers and tell you to put your hands out and they’d beat on the palms of your hands. It all depended on what the offense was, too. If you got caught stealing or cheating, that’s what kind of retaliation you would get. But if you were a repeat offender, [they’d] basically beat your ass.

Similarly, Bert told this story of when he was in high school: “*I remember my principal picked me up . . . picked me up by the shirt, smacked me up against the wall . . . feet off the ground.*”

While some participants experienced physical abuse from teachers and administrators, many endured physical abuse from parents or guardians at home. For example, Bello shared the following account:

My dad beat the shit out of me. He beat me with a belt so bad they kept me home for two days . . . I remember trying to run from him and he hit me so hard I would lift up and fall to one side and then he’d hit me so hard, he’d knock me back to the other side you know trying to get away from him. I remember hiding underneath the table . . . and I remember him flipping the whole table over and stomping on me.

Additionally, Rick mentioned that he had been in the care of approximately 27 foster homes. When asked in his interview to share his experiences, Rick said:

Yeah, they beat us, they let us starve. Pretty much what I’m trying to say—the people that they took us from, my actual parents, my birth parents, the people they took us from, all of the people till [my adoptive parents]—they were the only decent parents—the rest of them were just as fucked up as my [birth] parents were. If not, probably worse. There were some that would tie us up, but they would chain us up with barbed wire, or they would whip us with barbed wire. And this one dude had tack nails on a board, and he would whip us with that. I didn’t get adopted until I was 5 ½.

However, Rick's experience of physical abuse did not end once he was adopted. In his words about his adoptive parents, *"they were the best I'd ever had,"* though his adoptive father used physical punishment as a form of discipline. Rick explained his adoptive father's favorite method: *"My dad used to pinch my ears. He just grew his fingernails out and pinched my ears until they bled."* In addition to pinching his ears, Rick shared at least one experience where his adoptive father knocked him out to stop him from hurting their younger foster child. He remembers vividly, *"when I turned around, Dad hits me really hard in the fuckin' head and like knocks me straight the fuck out."*

Most men interviewed, or observed in the BIP group, shared some experiences of corporal punishment, whether from parents or school faculty. Though most of the interview participants had spent a lot of time in the BIP groups ( $M = 21.5$  weeks), observations in the group revealed that most men entered the FSE program believing that physical punishment was an essential component of learning respect and learning right from wrong. Therefore, it was common for men to say that they got a beating, but that they deserved it. Bert, who had only attended his orientation class and a single group meeting before our interview, recalled, *"I saw my mom—she'd lost her temper a few times, and she'd smack my sisters. Open handed, across the face, you know. But it was usually after they got . . . a condescending attitude toward her."* Again, the violence Bert witnessed was deserved—always attributable to the victim's bad behavior.

### **Sexual Abuse**

Though sexual abuse is the focus of many studies (e.g., Dube et al., 2005; Dutton, Starzomski, & Ryan, 1996; Lisak et al., 1996; Lisak & Beszterczey, 2007) and is often considered one of "The Big Three" traumas (i.e., sexual and physical abuse and witnessing abuse), which may lead to later abuse perpetration (e.g., Whitfield et al., 2003), sexual abuse was reported infrequently among the current study's sample. In talking with Hank, FSE's director, and other facilitators, sexual abuse is one of the most stigmatized abuses to occur. Therefore, it is possible that some men experienced sexual abuse, but were too ashamed to report it openly.

However infrequent the reports, for those who did disclose experiencing sexual abuse (i.e., 2 of the 15 interview participants), the accounts were extreme and reflected ongoing sexual abuse. For example, Rick's biological parents sexually abused him, his brother, and their baby sister. Rick's response to the initial interview question about the cruelty he experienced as a child is indicative of the difficulty men have with sharing such experiences. Rick prefaced his disclosure with these words: *"I don't know, shit, fuck, I don't even want to say this."* He then explained, *"They used to tie us down and have sex with us or have us watch them have sex."* You could see his discomfort as he shifted in his seat and cast his eyes downward. He also later recalled that his parents trafficked them to buy drugs. Rick's memory of the events was not intact, because he was so young when it happened. However, he said social services took them away from their biological parents and later explained why. Again, Rick's reluctance to share was made clear with his opening statement during his interview, *"I don't even want to say this."* It is entirely possible that there were others who experienced sexual abuse, but who were simply too ashamed to share or who did not wish to revisit such agonizing or triggering memories.

### **Emotional Neglect**

The ACES studies define emotional neglect as a deficit of closeness, emphasizing a sense of feeling unloved and unimportant (e.g., Felitti et al., 1998). Emotional neglect is also

characterized by a lack of familial support. Most participants (73.3%) expressed feelings of feeling unloved or unimportant at some point during interview conversations. In the BIP groups, experiencing emotional neglect was also a common theme. For example, it was often discussed how it feels for BIP participants when they were treated cruelly by their parents at a young age. Frequently, men reported feeling worthless, inadequate, unwanted, and unloved. For instance, when Kennedy's father died at age 12, his mother was no longer emotionally available for him. He characterized her as "*grieving—my mom was in her own world.*" When asked whether she took care of him at that point, Kennedy said, "*she fed me and stuff like that,*" but she was so emotionally distraught that they no longer got along. As a result of her emotional distance, Kennedy moved out to live with his older sister.

Similarly, Kirk spent most of his childhood moving back and forth between parents. He described his tumultuous living situation as follows:

Ever since fifth grade, I had moved back and forth between Kansas and Virginia. So, fifth and sixth grade I lived in Virginia, seventh and eighth grade I lived in Kansas, ninth and tenth grade I lived in Virginia, eleventh and twelfth grade I lived down here [in Kansas].

Kirk had previously talked about this instability growing up during BIP group meetings, so in his interview, he was asked if he would talk more about what prompted his constant relocation. Kirk explained that as soon as the friction between him and one parent became too much to handle, they would send him to the other parent. This back and forth between parents made Kirk feel "*unwanted.*" Each time he would "*butt heads*" with one of his parents, they would send him away to live with the other.

Another example of emotional neglect comes from Emilio who remembered how he came home from playing outside to find nobody there, which made him feel unloved. He recalled the experience in his own words:

I think I was 6 or 5, and we went to go play. When we came home, my mom, my brother—nobody—was home. That was the first time I was sad 'cause of my parents. 'Cause they left us. They said they went to the store or something. We were there for about an hour, and they came home an hour later. And it was late—about five—so they came home around six.

When asked if they apologized, Emilio said, "*No, that's the thing. 'Oh you guys weren't here; you guys were playing, so we left.'*" When asked if his parents knew he was sad at the time, he said, "*They knew, 'cause I was in the closet crying.*" Despite knowing how sad and afraid Emilio had been about coming home to an empty house at 6 or 7 years old, his parents were unapologetic, leaving Emilio feeling like they did not care about him.

## Physical Neglect

The ACES studies (e.g., Felitti et al., 1998) define physical neglect as the feeling that physical needs are not being met. Specifically, physical neglect includes not having enough food to eat, having to wear dirty clothes, or that one's parents are too drunk or high to provide care. Though many interview participants reported that their parents took good care of them, a few (20%) disclosed that they were, at times, without basic physical needs met or even prevented from meeting those needs. For example, Sam's mother ran a daycare out of her home. Sam described the scene at their house as overcrowded and "*pretty wild.*" In his words, he painted a vivid picture:



There'd be 13 kids out there plus us three. That's 16 kids running wild, hitting each other. And mostly it was all boys; it was weird. She'd tell us, "If you ain't gotta take a shit, just go outside and piss," so then we were all pissing behind the trees, acting crazy all day.

Clearly, Sam was left to fend for himself among 13 other kids, plus his two abusive older brothers, while his mother insisted that no one was allowed to use the bathroom in the house.

Likewise, Rick's father was physically neglectful. In addition to the beatings, Rick's parents would leave them home alone for hours. He recalled that his father got tired of finding Rick and Jimmy running around the house, while they were gone, so they began tying Rick and his little brother to the bed:

It got to the point where dad kept catching us doing that shit, so he would tie us down and they would be gone for 8, 9, 10 hours while we were tied hands, arms, legs cornered to the fuckin' bed—and we'd be tied there until they got home.

Though Rick's situation is vastly different from Sam's backyard experience, both illustrate ways in which one's physical needs have been neglected and/or compromised. In addition to patterns of psychological, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as emotional and physical neglect, several categories of household dysfunction emerged in the analysis.

The ACES questionnaire measures five categories of household dysfunction (Felitti et al., 1998). The five categories of household dysfunction are: (a) parental separation or divorce; (b) witnessing violence against mother or stepmother; or (c) living with household members who were substance abusers, (d) mentally ill or suicidal, or ever (e) incarcerated. Patterns in our participants' stories suggest these five categories were prevalent. Additionally, we found parental abandonment and the death of a parent to be significant adverse experiences in our sample. In the following sections, we discuss each of the five ACES categories of household dysfunction, as well as the additional categories that emerged in our data: (a) loss of parent(s): separation, divorce, abandonment, or death; (b) witnessing violence against mother or stepmother; (c) substance abuse; (d) mental illness; and (e) incarceration.

### **Loss of Parent(s) through Separation, Divorce, Abandonment, or Death**

Though the ACES questionnaire only asks whether parents were either separated or divorced (Felitti et al., 1998), caregiver instability (e.g., loss of a parent) in general can significantly affect a child's development (e.g., Briere, Runtz, Eadie, Bigras, & Godbout, 2017; Lisak & Beszterczey, 2007). In the current sample, 13 out of the 15 (or 86.7%) participants experienced some form of parental loss, whether by separation, divorce, abandonment, or death.

**Parental separation or divorce.** Separation is characterized by a division of two partners. Sometimes, separation becomes permanent, leading to divorce or dissolution of the relationship. However, separation in this study is taken to be a temporary condition in one's parents' relationship. For example, Harley shared that his parents are still married to this day, and that they have a very "*tight family*." However, Harley's family experienced great stress from his younger brother, as he explained, "*He put our family through emotional stress for years of his life by being destructive and violent.*" Harley's mother and father disagreed about how to cope with his brother's destructive behavior. As a result of ongoing struggles, Harley admitted that his father became so tired of the situation that they moved out of the house

temporarily when Harley was 12. Harley described that *“me and my dad actually ended up going and moving in with his mom and dad, with my grandparents for. . .a month or so.”*

Bert's parents separated for several months when he was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. He remembered not understanding why it happened, but he has vivid memories of his dad in a separate residence. In his own words, Bert remembered what happened:

She kicked dad out that time and filed for divorce when I was a kid. It was kind of a surprise, because they never fought in front of us. There was never any screaming or yelling at each other or throwing stuff. There was no . . . what I right now consider abusive language or anything. It all seemed pretty normal to me . . . I don't remember details.

Despite not being able to conjure up details from this time in his life, Bert admitted that it was strange visiting his father in the rental house. He also recognized that the event did not make sense, because it did not arise out of recognizable differences or conflict.

Unlike separation, divorce is typically permanent. Children of divorced parents seem to struggle more than children whose parents' relationship stays intact. Amato and Keith (1991) conducted a meta-analysis based on data from over 13,000 children. Their analysis confirms that children of divorce “experience a lower level of well-being than do children living in continuously intact families” (p. 30). The view that children of divorce adapt readily and reveal no lasting negative consequences is simply not supported by the cumulative data in this area. For some, divorce may lead to losing one parent, yet divorced partners often stay connected and share custody. Among the current study's participants, divorce that resulted in the loss of one parent is discussed below, under abandonment. The current section provides examples of divorce in which the separation is permanent, yet both parents share in child custody and care.

For example, Outkast's parents divorced when he was 5-years-old. In his opinion, their decision to divorce with children at that age was selfish. He explained, *“It just happened at probably the worst point; they could've been better about it. They could've waited; they could've argued for 2 more years.”* When asked why it was the worst time, Outkast explained, *“‘Cause you don't understand. And when you're 8, you understand boys and girls and this and that. . .but when you're 5—if they had done it when I was 4, I probably would hardly remember.”* Outkast explained that, at 5 years old, he was old enough to remember, but not old enough to understand. His parents' divorce stands out in his memory as disrupting what he knew for the first 5 years of his life: one moment they are together, and the next, they are not. Outkast said it was hard, because *“when they came in and told me they got divorced, I didn't understand, 'cause I never heard them argue.”* For the first 5 years of Outkast's life, they lived in a trailer court surrounded by extended family members. When his parents divorced, his mother took him and his sister away to live in a house nearby. Despite this small distance, however, Outkast insisted that they always lived near each other, and that sharing custody only made his family community tighter.

In another example, Ray's biological father abandoned him when he was 2-years-old, and his mother married another man who she ultimately divorced. Ray describes the events that led their divorce and the subsequent instability that occurred:

My mom and my dad that raised me—he got too big into the drugs for her, so she was gonna divorce him. So, when they got divorced, he pretty much was moved out. I was living with my mom, and I'd go stay with my dad. And at the time, he's doing his drug dealing and his drug use, so he went from like staying in a trailer to staying with a friend to staying with my aunt, so staying all over—

so we would go, and he'd take care of us. But he would go around and be everywhere.

It was, in part, due to the divorce and shared custody that Ray was later subjected to this unstable environment, exposing him to drug use, drug dealing, and other dangerous situations.

**Abandonment.** Out of the 15 interview participants, eight (or 53.3%) reported being abandoned by at least one biological parent. Abandonment, in our study, simply means that the parent is alive, but not involved in the child's life. For some participants, their parents separated and only one remained to provide care. For example, Christopher's parents divorced when he was 3-years-old, and he distinctly remembers the disappointment associated with his father's broken promises. When Christopher was asked to share his earliest memory of this, he explained, "*My father would . . . I'd talk to him all week about what we'd do that weekend . . . he'd never show up. That's what I trace it back to . . . that feeling of sitting there waiting on him and realizing he's not going to come.*" Christopher explained that the repeated broken promises communicated to him that he was not important to his father, that he was "*less than*" and "*unworthy.*"

Lee's father left him before he could remember any details. He does not have a full understanding about why his father was absent in the first place, leaving a host of unanswered questions. Lee offered the following as an explanation for how little he knows:

There's conflicting stories. My mom says he took off, but they say on that side of my family that he did leave but he tried to stay in contact and my grandma stepped in and told him that we moved somewhere and didn't want anything to do with him.

When asked why she would do that, Lee explained, "*I don't know. My dad was in and out of prison a lot; he was always in a lot of trouble.*" Some years later, Lee's father committed suicide which, in Lee's opinion, did not change anything, because he never knew his father anyway. When he was asked how it felt to know that his biological father stopped trying to visit with him when he was about 5-years-old, Lee said it made him feel "*not important.*" He explained, "*If you're not trying to stay in contact with your kids, you obviously don't still care about them.*"

For other participants, one or both parents gave up their legal rights to care for the child. Noten's mother was either incapable or unwilling to care for him as a child. When Noten was asked what his mother was doing at the time, he described her as "*drinking, running around.*" He explained:

My mother adopted me out to her sister when I was 3. My aunt, Carrie, ended up taking me when she was in a relationship or married to what I wanna call my dad now but at the time, he was my uncle.

Noten remembers this period in his life as his earliest memory of being helpless, because his aunt and uncle took him away from his three older sisters, who he considered his "real" family.

When Bello was asked about abandonment, he described his mother as "*blowing in the wind.*" Bello's mother's issues with substance abuse took her away from him at a very young age, leaving him to grow up with a physically abusive father. He explained, "*My dad took me from her. She was such a bad drug addict.*" Memories of Bello's brief interactions with his mother paint a picture of how disconnected they were. When he was asked about the last time

he saw her, Bello recalled, *“I seen her when I was like 18. She thought I stole her meth, but I didn’t do meth at the time—I only smoked pot. So, like we were having this huge fight.”*

**Death.** Though death is a natural part of life, the loss of a parent to death can disrupt one’s worldview and sense of self. Research indicates that children who lose a parent to death are more susceptible to depressive symptoms and substance abuse shortly after experiencing the loss, especially if grief processing is not achieved (Brent, Melhem, Donohoe, & Walker, 2009). For example, at age 12, and after years of feeling disappointed by his father’s broken promises, Christopher’s father died. Christopher described where he was socially and psychologically when his father died. He said, *“I was already in the middle of my rebellion phase. You know flannels and long hair, just the grunge kid I guess. And I started experimenting with pot at this point and beer, and then he died.”* Christopher went on to explain the broader impact of his father’s death on his own development into manhood, *“I had to do it all myself. You got a 13-year-old kid working on a lawn mower by himself, he’s gonna fuck it up more than he’s gonna do anything, but he’s gonna learn.”* While Christopher’s father was more often absent than present, Christopher still felt the loss of the potential male role model that occurred when his father died.

In a similar example, Kennedy’s father had a brain tumor that prevented him from being involved in Kennedy’s formative years. Kennedy explained, *“He was always sick. He had a brain tumor. . . I never had a dad after [he died] or any kind of male influence.”* Though his father’s cancer progressed slowly over many years, Kennedy remembers his father’s death as sudden and terrifying. Kennedy was only 12 when his father died, and the event tore his family apart. The emotional impact on Kennedy’s mother left Kennedy feeling abandoned by her as well. Eventually, Kennedy moved in with his sister, who was nine years older, and went on to engage in petty crimes with other adolescent boys in his neighborhood. Kennedy believes that if his father had not died, he would have provided a certain kind of motivation to stay out of trouble. Kennedy explains his belief in his own words:

Basically, I don’t know that father role model, I guess. I didn’t play sports after that, which then led me into probably hanging around the bad crowd, getting in trouble, starting to steal. That shit probably would’ve never happened if my dad was alive ‘cause I would’ve fuckin’ gotten in trouble for it. . . Ultimately, I think that’s what changed my life, was my dad dying. ‘Cause I would have been more on the straight and narrow path ‘cause it was stricter.

Like many others, losing his father caused Kennedy to feel lost and directionless. Though the *death* of a parent has not, to our knowledge, been the focus of any studies aimed at examining antecedents to adult IPV perpetration, it is no wonder that so many of the current study’s participants reported losing fathers. Psychodynamic theories of gender development would support the notion that the relationship a boy has with his father or stepfather is crucial to his development into manhood (see Wood & Eagly, 2015, for a review). Similarly, the relationship a man has with his mother or stepmother can be very influential regarding his sense of self and his attitudes and beliefs toward women (e.g., Whitfield et al., 2003).

### **Witnessing Violence Against Mother or Stepmother**

The second category of household dysfunction in the ACES studies is witnessing abuse against a mother or stepmother (e.g., Felitti et al., 1998). Witnessing abuse against a mother or stepmother is well-known as a predictor of IPV perpetration (e.g., Lisak & Beszterczey, 2007; Whitfield et al., 2003). Many interview participants (40%) watched their fathers and stepfathers

abuse their mothers and stepmothers. This was also commonly reported in the BIP group. For example, Brett described watching his father, and later his uncle, abuse his mother. He said he would watch them, “*smack the fire out of her.*” He recalled at least once when his mom told him to call the police, actively assuring him that his dad would be taken away and they would all be safe. However, after he and his brother called the police, 2 hours later, his dad came back. Brett remembered that his dad sent his mom on an errand and then “*beat the shit*” out of him and his brother.

Similarly, Blake was punished for wanting to protect his mother from beatings. He said that his mom spanked him and his brother for attacking her boyfriend with rolling pins when they witnessed him beating her. At 5 and 6 years old, Blake recalled, they were attempting to protect their mother, yet they were punished for trying. Several other men described similar beliefs about feeling personally responsible for protecting their mothers from abuse, and they often blamed themselves when the violence got worse as a result. For example, Outkast describes how, at 11 years old, he would stand up to his stepfather, and believed the argument might not have escalated as much if he had stayed out of it:

There may be no blow up or nothing if it was left between you. But as soon as . . . you say something smart and he says back to you “You know what? Fuck that.” Oh, here comes the 11-year-old across the room. “You know what? Fuck that? Fuck what?” And it’s either you can shut up, grown man, or you can fight me.

For most participants, the abuse that was witnessed was typically men’s violence against women, but occasionally, men described their parents as being violent toward each other. For example, Harley’s parents would fight often, exchanging insults and accusations. He remembered the fights as being explosive:

It was just really, really verbal. Like, high intensity verbal yelling. Just . . . absolutely getting nowhere with anything, just bashing each other. . . He’d call her a bitch and a cunt and a whore and accuse her of sleeping around, and she’d accuse him and it’d just—it was always—just bashing verbally.

During group observations, many men described hating their fathers for the way they treated their mothers. However, several men blamed their mothers for the abuse. During his interview, Sam wondered why his father, who was physically abusive to his mother, left them in the first place. Sam recalled:

I don’t know if he was just trying to get away from my mom, and that’s what happened to me—I felt like I got the blunt end of the stick ‘cause he wasn’t nowhere around, I felt like I got short-changed.

Similarly, Outkast described his mother and stepfather as arguing mutually, but he alludes to his stepfather, at times, having stepped out of the bounds of what Outkast considered appropriate behavior toward his mother.

## Substance Abuse

The third category of household dysfunction in the ACES studies is living with a member of the household who abuses drugs or alcohol (e.g., Felitti et al., 1998). Most men in the BIP group talked about living with family members who abused substances. Several

interview participants (46.6%) also reported high incidence of substance abuse in the home. For example, Rick's parents were alcoholics and would often leave the children alone in the house while they went out to drink. Rick remembered being alone for hours with his little brother and baby sister.

Likewise, Ray's adoptive father was a drug dealer, so he was exposed to great deal of illicit activity (e.g., crystal meth and cocaine) at a young age. And like many others, his early exposure led to his own drug use and criminal activity. Ray explained how it progressed in his own words:

I had people now looking for it, and I'm like, "Well my dad's friends, they've been making this shit and doing this shit for years," so I was like, "I'll go talk to them." I'll go straight to the source instead of hitting up people that I barely know. I can talk to people I've known since I was a little kid. So, then I was getting the better deals, better than anybody else around, and then I got really into it, and it just kind of led from there.

Pete had a similar experience. His older brothers' involvement with the local gangs had them using and selling drugs out of the house. Pete described how he got involved early on:

I started selling weed when I was 14. . .because they had it all the time and it was easy. I could find it in my house and go sell it to somebody to get candy or whatever. . .Somebody robbed me at gunpoint for a pound and a half of weed, and I was all upset 'cause it was everything I had put together.

For Pete and Ray, drugs were in the house, so they were exposed to drugs and the lifestyle that came with them very early in their lives.

Outkast had several family members who had issues with substance abuse. His uncle was an alcoholic, and his grandmother was addicted to the medications that all the doctors were giving her. Later, when Outkast's mother remarried, his stepfather brought his alcoholism into the home. Outkast remembered how this affected their relationship and said, "*My stepdad was a dick, and he was too drunk all the time. . .drunk enough to not matter what you're saying, whether it's intelligent and right or not, I'm just—don't wanna listen to it.*" Similarly, Noten's adoptive father (i.e., his uncle) was an alcoholic. Noten remembered how his adoptive father's drinking led to some of the daily abuse:

I wanna say he drank every night, 'cause he'd always come home drunk. . .and then I'd get in trouble. . .or he'd take it out on me, whatever he was mad about. I don't care, we're fighting that I didn't cook dinner right or whatever, it didn't matter, he'd still end up taking it out on me. I knew that was gonna happen.

Ray and Pete had very different experiences from Outkast and Noten. For Ray and Pete, their early exposure to substance abuse led to their involvement in dealing and using drugs themselves. Though they each ended up with multiple incarcerations as a result, they did not express any adverse feelings associated with their exposure. However, Outkast and Noten describe contrasting experiences. For both Outkast and Noten, their fathers' alcohol use directly and negatively affected their lives. They claimed their fathers were more abusive when they were drunk, and they made efforts to escape the house as a result.

## Mental Illness

The fourth category of household dysfunction in the ACES studies is living with a member of the household who suffers from a mental illness (e.g., Felitti et al., 1998). It is difficult to know just how much mental illness men in the study sample encountered, as it is highly likely that mental illness was often present yet undiagnosed. A few interview participants (26.6%) mentioned living with siblings who were institutionalized at some point. Despite never naming their challenges with mental illness labels, each story suggests that the parents at least believed they needed mental health care and were unable to care for them in their own home.

For example, Christopher had a half-brother 5 years older who fought with his mother when Christopher was little. Christopher shared that his brother held a lot of resentment, because their mother admitted him to the local Menninger Clinic for psychiatric care. Christopher said he did not have many memories of his older brother's experience, but he knew he was "*a very problem child and his dad was in prison.*"

Harley's experience, as described above, was similar to Christopher's. Harley's parents struggled to manage his violent brother's outbursts, but they eventually admitted him to the local Menninger clinic. Harley recalled, however, that his parents were unable to afford long-term care, noting, "*That only lasted for a couple months maybe, and then they couldn't deal with that financially anymore.*" As a result, Harley's brother continued to wreak chaos in their home. When asked how he coped with the feeling of frustration, Harley shared his reaction:

Probably really just acting out, looking back. That's when I started smoking cigarettes, about 12 years old. I smoked marijuana for the first time at 12 or 13 years old, and that's all around the same time when our family was feeling broken up 'cause of the violence of my brother.

Like Christopher and Harley's older brothers, Lee's younger brother struggled with violent tendencies. Lee shared in his interview how his brother was between 8 and 11 years old when he was put into a group home. Lee recalled what prompted his removal from the household:

He got in a lot of trouble. He was pretty violent too. He got taken out of the house because he was attacking my mom and fightin' with cops at that age. I think it has to do a lot with what was going on in our house [referring to their stepfather's abuse].

Lee said that he and his little brother ran away from home once. He said he could not remember exactly what triggered it, but he knew it had something to do with their stepfather. Lee described their plight in his own words:

If both of us were there, and [our stepfather] was fucking with one of us, then both of us would get it. It was just. . . after he got onto one of us, he'd start telling the other one how much a little fucker he was. We just didn't feel very wanted when we were kids.

When asked how it felt being the big brother and watching his little brother get in to so much trouble, Lee lamented:

It was hard. I remember when they took him out of the house, my mom and my grandma came and got me out of school to tell me what was going on. 'Cause

he had gotten in trouble at school that day, ‘cause he attacked a teacher or something. So, it sucked.

These three cases clearly illustrate some of the violence and instability many men were exposed to during their early childhood years.

### **Incarceration**

The fifth ACES category of household dysfunction is living with a member of the household who is incarcerated (e.g., Felitti et al., 1998). Many men in our study reported having family members in and out of prison. In the BIP group discussions, this was often the case. For example, Brett’s biological parents were both in prison when he was very young. He said they were “*in for life*.” William’s mother went to prison when he was very young. Additionally, a couple interview participants (13.3%) experienced living with or being related to individuals who were incarcerated during their childhood.

For example, Pete’s biological father was in prison since he was born, and Pete never really knew him. As mentioned above, Pete’s brothers were also in and out of jail when Pete was very young. He shared what it was like to begin learning about their criminal behavior:

I would just hear it over and over. I would hear my mom talking on the phone to somebody or . . . the other brother’s in jail, and he’s talking to somebody while he’s in jail, “We need to go over here and pick this up and get rid of this.” And I was like, “Man, I just thought you guys played basketball.” I mean, I knew they were bad, but as I got older and could understand what they were really doing, it was kinda . . . mind-blowing.

Pete’s oldest brother was still incarcerated at the time of his interview. Pete said he was in for a felony with a gun, but he had “*caught another charge*” while he was in prison “*for assault with a deadly weapon with intent to do bodily harm, something like that. So, they gave him another—more time on top of that.*” Pete’s other brother had just been released from serving 12 years for manslaughter.

Lee experienced both abandonment and death of his father. He only met his father a couple of times, during which his father was incarcerated. When Lee visited his father in prison, he was only 5 years old, and remembers very little about the man. Here he describes the distant memory: “*One memory that sticks out is seeing him in prison. I don’t know why that sticks in my head. I guess he used to grind his teeth all the time. That’s what I remember is him gritting his teeth.*”

### **Discussion**

In response to our research question, regarding male IPV perpetrators’ experiences of ACES, participants reported a high frequency and variety of adverse experiences. Though there were several BIP group members who initially claimed they experienced no adversity in childhood, they each eventually changed their accounts over the course of several weeks in FSE’s program. According to the definitions of cruelty provided by the FSE curriculum (i.e., “the blatant disregard for another person”; “the intentional infliction of harm”) and considering the 10 ACES categories, which extend beyond trauma, men who participated in the current study generally acknowledged that they experienced some form of childhood adversity, though it may not have been labeled as such until they progressed through the BIP program at FSE.



Individually, each participant experienced at least three unique categories of ACES. In fact, most participants experienced multiple, co-occurring ACES. This mirrors previous ACES research that suggests the presence of one ACES category significantly increases the likelihood of experiencing a second ACES category (e.g., Felitti et al., 1998). Based on participants' accounts, the following is a summary of the frequency of the 10 ACES categories experienced by the 15 interview participants: (1) psychological (73.3%), (2) physical (86.7%), and (3) sexual (13.3%) abuse; (4) emotional (73.3%) and (5) physical (20%) neglect; (6) parental separation or divorce (i.e., parental loss, including abandonment and death; 86.7%); (7) witnessing violence against mother or stepmother (40%); or living with household members who were (8) substance abusers (46.6%), (9) mentally ill (26.6%), or ever (10) incarcerated (13.3%). Ostensibly, parental loss, physical and psychological abuse, and emotional neglect were experienced most frequently out of the 10 ACES categories. However, our results suggest that there are many more types of adversity and dysfunction (e.g., peer and sibling abuse, death of a parent) to consider than the 10 original ACES categories. These are categories of adversity that may be overlooked due to the tendency for our beliefs to normalize such events (e.g., "boys will be boys"; "death is a natural part of life").

Furthermore, in answering our research question, the stories revealed that men in the current study were not only subject to significant adversity and dysfunction in childhood, but that ACES were associated with intense adverse emotions (e.g., sadness, fear, powerlessness) and the development of several beliefs and attitudes regarding self and other. Patterns throughout men's stories suggest four common themes: (a) low self-worth; (b) self-blame; (c) feelings of powerlessness; and (d) beliefs that justified the use of physical violence (e.g., "*don't let people walk on you*").

### Messages about Self-Worth

There were consistent messages about self and self-worth that participants received when experiencing adversity in childhood. Men repeatedly reported that their experiences of psychological and physical abuse, emotional and physical neglect, and their experience of losing a parent made them feel "*worthless*," "*unloved*," and "*unworthy*." For example, Kirk's account of household instability, moving back and forth between permanently separated parents, communicated to him that he was "*unwanted*." Similarly, Lee's stepfather actively and explicitly communicated how Lee and his younger brother were unwanted, but even his mother's failure to protect Lee and his brother, Lee perceived, communicated that they were unloved. Lee noted that his mother would say she loved them, but he never believed her. Thus, again and again, participants' accounts of experiencing adversity and dysfunction during childhood were coupled with messages about low self-worth. This finding helps to substantiate cross-sectional research about attachment style as a mediator between the ACES-IPV relationship, in which men may experience anxiety about rejection or abandonment combined with feelings of low self-worth (e.g., Godbout et al., 2009).

### Taking the Blame for ACES

In addition to messages about self-worth, many men felt they were personally responsible for the abuse they experienced. In some cases, men were explicitly blamed for what happened. For example, Pete remembered how his brother made him feel after handcuffing him to the fence. Pete interpreted his brother's message as blame, saying, "*it was my fault for wanting to go with them*" in the first place. Others believed they deserved their abuse. For instance, Bert explained that his mother, "*lost her temper a few times, and she'd smack my*

sisters,” but according to Bert, “it was usually after they got. . .a condescending attitude toward her.”

Miller’s (2002) treatise on “poisonous pedagogy” suggests parents will justify their use of physical punishment as a means to an end, making it clear that they would not need to punish in this way if children would only behave properly. Bert’s story, in which he blames his sisters’ “condescending attitude” for their mother’s choice of physical punishment, is just one example of how many study participants believe bad behavior deserves physical punishment or correction (i.e., “discipline”). If men learned that only those who deserve it get punished, then it is possible they developed beliefs about relationships that motivated them to punish those whom they believe to be deserving. For example, when Rick learned that his younger brother, Jimmy, was thinking about moving in with their biological father after years of abuse and foster care, Rick described how he punched Jimmy in the mouth, causing him to fall off a balcony, to teach him a lesson. In his own words, Rick explained, “I didn’t even feel bad that I beat Jimmy’s fuckin’ ass, because he deserved that fuckin’ shit—stupid cock—yeah. . .because he was ignorant.” This is an example of how men may hurt others because they believe them to be deserving of punishment or correction.

### Overcoming Powerlessness

Despite often being made to feel deserving of abuse, men also learned they were powerless in the face of their abusers. For example, many who were abused, or witnessed the abuse of their mothers or stepmothers, tried to intervene and stop the abuse. However, each time they attempted to interrupt the abusive behavior they were unsuccessful due, in part, to their size and strength at the time. It was only after boys grew into adolescent young men that they began to stand up to the abuse in a way that was effective, somewhat regaining (or reclaiming) a sense of power. However, by the time these young men became old enough (i.e., strong enough) to stop the abuse, they were also motivated to escape and leave their home life. Thus, whatever power they regained was no longer functional within the context of protecting themselves or others from household abuse or dysfunction, yet the need to feel powerful lingered to compensate for a deflated sense of self.

### “Don’t Let People Walk on You”

To illustrate the need to overcome powerlessness, men ascribed to beliefs that justified their use of violence. Participants described the need to retaliate against physical abuse and psychological bullying during childhood. Conversely, stories from their adult lives suggest many men left their home of origin in search of ways in which they could prove their strengths. For example, when Harley was about 23-years-old, he engaged in a fight with another man to prove to his older brother, who had terrorized his family for years, that he could no longer hurt him. When Harley described what happened, he explained, “Even though I was defending my brother. . .I wanted to show him, ‘I could whip your ass too.’ That’s what I really felt.” Similarly, Bello, who ran away from his abusive father at 16, described how he became a “world champion martial artist” and that doing so, “fueled this ego of like, ‘I’m bad, test it. If not, don’t test me.’”

Similar to the risks involved with believing one cannot back down from a fight, the need to prove powerfulness (i.e., disprove weakness) holds the potential for justifying the use of violence against others in an effort to preserve one’s ego. In multiple experiments, Baumeister and his colleagues (e.g., Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Bushman et al., 2009) demonstrated that a threat to one’s ego can provoke aggression. However, these studies also suggest it is *high* self-esteem and not *low* self-esteem that, when combined with narcissistic

personality traits, that produces aggressive behaviors. Clearly, there is still much we can learn about the connection between individual experiences (e.g., ACES), individual differences (e.g., beliefs and attitudes), and IPV perpetration.

### **Limitations**

There are several potential limitations in the current study, which are reported here for consideration. First, the study design was dependent on two types of qualitative data collection: (a) participant observation and (b) participant self-reflection via in-depth interviews. Participant observation may limit the ability for the study to be a valid representation of “reality” insofar that the researcher must select from the environment what observations to make and whether or not the researcher attunes to the most salient information. Additionally, as an observer, the researcher must rely on fallible senses and processes (e.g., listening, sight, memory) in order to collect data. One potential limitation of collecting data from interviews with participants is that participants might have misperceived or misremembered events in their lives, and they may even misdirect researchers purposefully in order to avoid sharing difficult or private information. However, validity is not what qualitative research aims to capture (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). Instead, we used multiple methods to help understand the complexity of men’s experiences through long-term involvement and rich data. Thus, combined with efforts to build rapport with study participants through ongoing BIP group participation and practicing openness and honesty in group conversations, the qualitative research methods utilized in the current study may have provided more accurate reflections of participants’ lived experiences than any other data collection tools could (e.g., surveys, questionnaires).

In addition to data collection methods, the current study may have been limited by the heavy reliance on only 15 in-depth interviews. However, the 15 interviews were also supplemented by observations of over 100 men over the course of 10 months through participant observation in the BIP group at FSE. Thus, the participant observation helped to triangulate the stories and experiences of the men who were interviewed (Manning & Kunkel, 2014), confirming the patterns observed, as well as helping to prompt and probe participants during the interview process. Thus, the sample size was not as small as it would be without the support of additional participant observation data. Taken together with additional need for inquiry, these reflections of potential limitations lead to the discussion for future avenues of research.

### **Future Directions**

The themes in the current study (i.e., low self-worth, self-blame, feelings of powerlessness, and beliefs that justify the use of physical violence) may be compounded or amplified by the absence of strong primary attachments, low or lacking social support, possible effects of marginalization and discrimination, as well as traditional masculinity. Future research should examine these co-occurring social and relational issues that appear to complicate childhood development around experiences of abuse and dysfunction.

Additionally, though there are reasons for focusing research on men’s violence against women (e.g., higher injury rates; see LaViolette & Barnett, 2014, for a review), future research should explore ACES experiences among female perpetrators in a variety of relationships and among male perpetrators in LGBTQIA relationships. It stands to reason that IPV perpetrators, regardless of gender identity and sexual orientation, would share similar stories of maltreatment in childhood. Yet, perhaps IPV perpetrators who are members of marginalized communities

experience a greater severity of intra- and interpersonal consequences, stemming from increased social isolation and discrimination.

Finally, future investigations about IPV perpetrators' experiences of ACES should be considered to better understand the value of processing trauma (i.e., experiences of abuse and household dysfunction) for individuals who participate in intervention programming (e.g., court-ordered BIP groups). During participant observation and in-depth interviews, men often shared stories of ACES for the first time in their lives. These same men reported feeling great relief from the opportunity to purge long-held secrets and perceptions of shame from their childhood (e.g., see Manning, 2010; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016). However, to our knowledge, most BIP in the United States do not include trauma-focused content in their curricula because they believe perpetrators use childhood abuse as an excuse for their own behavior (e.g., Pence & Paymar, 2011) or they believe trauma processing can only be achieved through individual therapy (e.g., Sonkin & Dutton, 2003). In a recent review of BIP research, Aaron and Beaulaurier (2017) contend that current models of BIP produce inconsistent results because they do not successfully account for individual differences among IPV perpetrators. Thus, further understanding of the usefulness of ACES in BIP programming is warranted.

## Conclusion

Previous research (e.g., Else et al., 1993; Lisak & Beszterczey, 2007; Lisak et al., 1996; Whitfield et al., 2003) provides rich and varied data to support the claim that IPV perpetrators experience ACES to a higher degree than the general public. The current study was not designed to measure prevalence and type of ACES in order to test this theory. Instead, our aim was two-fold. First, we wanted to see *how* men who have perpetrated IPV *experienced* ACES (i.e., how they see it now, years after the events), such that we could understand more about the variety and the severity of childhood adversity and household dysfunction. Second, in our observations and conversations with study participants, we wished to explore their adverse experiences (as well as the meanings they attach to those experiences) in greater depth, going beyond simply what they experienced and to what degree. Thus, our goal was to gather emotional reactions, beliefs, and attitudes from participants and to better understand the perceived effects of ACES.

The current study complements other studies (e.g., Dugal et al., 2018; Godbout et al., 2009; Milner et al., 2010) that explore the individual, social, and environmental factors that mediate the relationship between ACES and IPV perpetration. With the help of open and vulnerable community members, projects such as this, will allow us to probe further into the lived experiences of IPV perpetrators to better understand the complexity of ACES and IPV. The more we learn about these processes, the more we will be able to provide families and individuals with the information and resources needed for improved primary, secondary, and tertiary abuse prevention.

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