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To cite this article: Sarah Wendt, Josephine Clarke & Wendy Mayer (12 Jul 2024): Exploring Christian Lutheran theological framings that shape men's perpetration of domestic violence through pastor perspectives, Journal of Gender Studies, DOI: [10.1080/09589236.2024.2377635](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2377635)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2377635>



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Published online: 12 Jul 2024.



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Exploring Christian Lutheran theological framings that shape men's perpetration of domestic violence through pastor perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The inclusion of theological beliefs and practices in the analysis of domestic violence is needed, hence this paper explores how Christian theological framings shape men's perpetration of domestic violence. Through engagement with the Lutheran Church of Australia, interviews and a survey with Pastors found that gender was dominant in the themes and provided a framework for how Pastors understood domestic violence and how they articulated their explanations for why they perceived a denial of domestic violence in their religious contexts. The interviews in this study brought out the capacity of gendered theological discourse and the truth valency of scripture to both inform domestic violence and potentially be part of the solution, while at the same time the narratives express the inherent tensions and the resistance to change in the religious culture. The paper argues for the coming together of sociological, feminist, theological and spiritual understandings of gender identity to shape responses to domestic violence in Christian contexts.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 8 June 2023
Accepted 2 July 2024

KEYWORDS

Domestic violence;
Christianity; gender; clergy

Introduction

Domestic violence continues to be a major issue facing faith-based communities today (Clarke, 2015). Men within a religious group who behave violently towards women may be especially resistant to change if they use their religion to justify their violent behaviour (Nason-Clarke et al., 2018). Writers such as Clarke (2015) and Rayburn (2015) name this justification of men's violent behaviour as expressions of misogyny and argue this is one of the major forces driving domestic violence, simultaneously denying other expressions of masculinity that do not hinge on oppression of women. The inclusion of theological beliefs and practices in the analysis of domestic violence is therefore needed. Theological beliefs and practices shape local socio-cultural gendered relationships, hence exploration of the interface between faith, family, institutions, and domestic violence is needed to advance understandings and solutions within religious contexts. Faith-based leaders have significant influence through their role as spiritual advisers, which can potentially challenge and shift oppressive and misogynist attitudes that contribute to and sustain domestic violence (Istratii, 2018). This paper therefore addresses the research question – what theological framings shape men's perpetration of domestic violence?

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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The term domestic violence will be used throughout the paper to refer to abuse perpetrated by a man against a woman in a heterosexual marital or intimate cohabiting relationship, with or without children. It includes physical, sexual, psychological, economic, social, and spiritual abuse. The central element of domestic violence is recognized as an ongoing pattern of behaviour aimed at controlling a partner through fear, by using behaviour which is violent and threatening (Stark, 2007). This is recognized as coercive control and has been adopted in definitions in the Australian context in which this study took place (National Domestic and Family Violence Bench Book, 2023). Religion refers to a systematic body of beliefs and practices that are related to spiritual search. Christianity was the focus in this study, being the most well-known religion in Australia and this study explored the denomination of Lutheranism. Theological beliefs and practices refer to those relating or based on theology, that is religious doctrine based on God's design and will to humankind.

Literature review

Research on domestic violence within Christian contexts has provided understandings of women victims/survivors experiences (Wendt, 2008; Wendt & Zannettino, 2015) insight into faith leaders support and responses (Zust et al., 2021) and identification of spiritual abuse (Oakley & Humphreys, 2019). Such research also provides valuable insight on men's perpetration of such violence.

Yet, little research exists in the Australian context and internationally that specifically explores men's perpetration of domestic violence within religious contexts (Pepper & Powell, 2022). Instead, research has provided some insight into how church leaders understand and respond to domestic violence. For example, Pepper and Powell (2022) undertook the first Australia-wide cross-denominational survey study on actions church leaders have taken when responding to domestic violence. They found that overwhelmingly, leaders who had dealt with domestic violence had dealt directly with a victim, typically by referring the victim to a service agency and/or by counselling the victim. In comparison, far fewer leaders – although still a large minority – had dealt directly with a perpetrator, by means of counselling and to a lesser degree through referral to support services (Pepper & Powell, 2022).

The research by Nason-Clarke et al. (2018) show specific insight into men's perpetration of domestic violence within Christian contexts. First, they found that religious men do not see themselves as violent and often they believe they are the real victims. They view themselves as victims of their female partner's behaviour, victims of the system, and victims of their childhood. Second, they found that spiritual tradition or religious practices can increase 'buy in' for men who attend a behaviour change program on a regular basis. Thirdly, change is more likely when words of contemporary culture and words of the spirit are harnessed together – particularly when submission and expectations of forgiveness feature in men's stories. Finally, Nason-Clarke et al. (2018) point out that the narrative of conversion, that is, repentance, remorse, altered behaviour and forgiveness can be an important spiritual strategy for change; however, it is common for men to want their circumstances to change, but they do not want to alter their own religious thinking or behaviour. Little research has explored how theological beliefs and practices shape men's use of violence in their intimate partner relationships. As Nason-Clarke et al. (2018) argue aspects of men's lived religion need to be explored when calling him to religious accountability and change.

Exploring theological beliefs and practices has occurred in two studies. First, Jakobsen's (2014) research in Tanzania, through 27 focus group discussions, argued for the importance of understanding multiple aspects of gender as an organizing principle for both structure and interaction in society when explaining 'wifebeating'. This qualitative study showed how wife beating was supported by dominant social norms and cyclically intertwined with 'doing gender'; hence, hegemonic performances of masculinity and femininity and power relations of inequality exist because they are culturally valued and expected. Jakobsen (2014) concluded that gender norms support wifebeating and violence enforces the performance of gender and maintains hierarchies.

Second, Istratii's PhD thesis (2018) sought to explore the influence of the folklore Christian tradition in Aksum in Tigray, and the relationship with conjugal abuse realities and attitudes in the local society. The study was particularly focused on people's own concepts, their aetiologies of domestic violence and the relationships with wider belief systems that might guide their thinking. Istratii (2018) explained as divinely created, bio-social and spiritual entities, all women and men were located in the strife between good and evil, both were called to choose, and both were held responsible for their choices. Istratii (2018) concludes by recognizing this finding shows the need for more nuanced, multidimensional analytical understanding of agency if we are going to understand how religious beliefs and practices shape gender identity and conjugal abuse realities.

The research by Jakobsen (2014) and Istratii (2018) show that it is possible to explore gendering practices, and local nuances to explain domestic violence in religious contexts, and it is possible to delve into theological beliefs and practices to ascertain how men use violence. This paper reports on an Australian study that aimed to generate knowledge about how Christian Lutheran beliefs and practices are used by men to perpetrate domestic violence. As Hearn (2012) argues, focusing on men's talk allows exploration of how violence is reproduced through dominant discourses of gendered identity (Hearn, 2012); hence, men who perpetrate domestic violence and male Pastors were sought for this study.

Methodology

The Lutheran Church of Australia requested the research because they wanted to better understand domestic violence to provide support to victims-survivors and challenge the values and behaviours of those who perpetrated it. Australian Research Council Linkage Funding (LP190100269) was secured by the authors to conduct the study.

The study used a layered qualitative design to build in-depth insights into men's use of domestic violence (Robinson, 2014). We focused on one denomination of Christianity, Lutheranism, which enabled deep exploration, explanation, and illustration of men's use of violence in a specific religious context (Yin, 2012). This allowed us to engage with the complexities, nuances, and idiosyncrasies of domestic violence and Lutheranism, yet themes can inform other contexts. The research was approved by the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee at Flinders University (Project no: 2232).

Context

The Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) is the local expression of a global Christian, Protestant denomination which was developed from the Reformation during the 1500s and is based on the confessional writings of Martin Luther (Worthing, 2017). In 2017, the LCA launched its Campaign for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence under the tagline *Hidden Hurts Healing Hearts*. Members of this Campaign formed the Advisory Group, which supported the study reported in this paper. Recruitment, sampling and methods were determined in consultation with the Advisory Group to ensure appropriate language and approaches to reach potential participants.

Recruitment and sample

To recruit Pastors and men who perpetrate domestic violence to the study, several steps were undertaken. First, the Bishop of the LCA endorsed his support of the study in writing. Second, the Advisory Group then emailed District Bishops representing the State/Territories of Australia, Assistant Bishops and three Mission Directors. This leadership team was introduced to the study and asked to forward the email containing information sheets onto Pastors who were considered 'champions', – that is – those that were known for having an interest in the topic of domestic

Table 1. Interview participants.

	Age	Married	Length of Service	Christian
Pastor Pete	55–60 years	30–35 years, adult children	Ordained for 10–15 years	Entire life
Pastor Tom	55–60 years	30–35 years, adult children	Ordained for 25–30 years	Entire life
Pastor Stephen	60–65 years	30–35 years, adult children	Ordained 30–35 years	Teenager
Pastor James	60–65 years	30–35 years, adult children	Ordained 35–40 years	Entire life
David He/Him	55–60 years	25–30 years, adult children	N/A	Entire life

Table 2. Survey participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Married	Length of Service	Christian
Pastor Andrew	32–41 years	Not indicated	Ordained for 6–10 years	Entire life
Pastor Jeff	32–41 years	Not indicated	Ordained 0–5 years	Entire life
Pastor Shane	52–61 years	Not indicated	Ordained 30–35 years	Teenager
Pastor Bill	52–61 years	Not indicated	Ordained 31–30	Entire life
Pastor Greg	62–71 years	Not indicated	Ordained for 21–30 years	Entire life
Pastor Les	52–61 years	Not Indicated	Ordained 11–20 years	Entire life
Pastor Daniel	52–61 years	Not indicated	Ordained 11–20 years	Entire life

violence and wanting to be part of the solution and could potentially identify men who use violence in their relationship.

Second, Pastors who showed an interest in participation were asked to recruit men who had perpetrated violence and were not high risk or in a state of crisis and showed signs of readiness to talk about their use of domestic violence. This recruitment of men within the context of a known church and with familiar Pastors was selected to ensure participant privacy, confidentiality, and safety. Pastors and men who perpetrated domestic violence who indicated an interest were then supported by a member of the research team to discuss information sheets, consent, and formats of interviews as well as the setting up of time and venue. If Pastors did not feel they could recruit men who had used violence, they were welcomed to be interviewed regarding their experiences of helping men.

This method of recruitment resulted in two interviews with Pastors and one interview with a man who identified as a perpetrator of domestic violence.

To increase participation, in consultation with the Advisory Group, it was decided to advertise the scope of the research and the opportunity to participate in two LCA publications. First, a short article was submitted to the Lutheran magazine, and second, an article was published in the LCA's eNews. Both these recruitment strategies targeted Pastors, with the aim of talking to them about supporting men's safe participation.

During this recruitment opportunity, it was also decided with the Advisory Group that a qualitative survey option be introduced as another method to support data collection, considering the difficulties experienced in recruiting via emails and having face-to-face interviews as the only option. This method would offer anonymity online. The link to the survey was included as part of the story in the LCA media outlets described above. The surveys also provided opportunity for Pastors to provide contact details to the researchers if interested in being interviewed face-to-face and/or to support a man who had used violence to participate.

This method of recruitment resulted in seven Pastors completing the survey, and two interviews face to face. No men who perpetrated domestic violence were recruited.

In total, four male pastors and one man were interviewed as shown in [Table 1](#) and seven male Pastors completed the survey anonymously online as shown in [Table 2](#).

Methods

Interviews were sought with Pastors to explore specific theological beliefs that have enabled or hindered Pastors' ability to counsel men who use violence in their intimate partner relationships. The interview

Table 3. Themes.

Theme	Subtheme
Gender Expectations	Contestations Fear
Understanding domestic violence	Shame
Understanding the Bible	Gender order Pastoral care

schedule included questions exploring Pastors' understandings of domestic violence, their experiences in counselling men who use violence against women and/or supporting women victims. They were also asked to talk about how they use theological framings and texts to understand and engage with people experiencing domestic violence and if that had changed over time in their practice. Finally, they were asked to talk about the training and support they have received to understand and respond to domestic violence. The study also aimed to interview men to gain firsthand accounts into how they understand and use theological beliefs and practices in their intimate partner relationships, and particularly how such theological texts shaped the perpetration of domestic violence. Interviews with Pastors went for approximately 1–2 h. The interview with the man went for approximately 3 h over two sessions.

A qualitative survey was also distributed via LCA media outlets. The survey adapted the existing interview questions as outlined above and was administered through Qualtrics. This method provided the choice of anonymity as no identifying material was asked for or recorded. Answers were short written paragraphs, approximately 100–200 words across questions from respondents.

Analysis

First, the four interviews with Pastors were analysed through thematic analysis using the process of reading each transcript in full and recording early impressions of themes. The transcripts were read a second time, and data was assigned to themes and subtheme headings. The transcript data placed under each theme and subtheme, as a result of this task, were then read a third time, to check the interpretations of the authors and quotations were confirmed as evidence of the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process allowed for dominant themes to emerge, that is, the similarity of content discussed in each interview. At the same time, the emergence of themes were also the construction of the authors active role in knowledge production. Themes were therefore organized not in a predefined order but were produced through a relative core commonality and a reflexive process that focused on theological beliefs and practices (Bryne, 2022).

This produced the following themes and subthemes as shown in Table 3.

Second, the qualitative responses written by Pastors in the survey were also analysed through thematic analysis to build saturation, where opportunities were sought to allocate content to the themes/subthemes identified through the interviews.

Third, the interview with David was analysed as one case study to inform, sophisticate, and increase theological understandings of domestic violence by engaging with the complexities, nuances, and idiosyncrasies of his story (Stake, 1995). David's story was invited into the presentation of findings from analysis of Pastors interviews to provide an elegant intricacy of understanding of how theological beliefs and practices are used by men to perpetrate domestic violence.

Limitations

The sample size was very small, despite efforts to recruit through various avenues with the support of the LCA. The difficulty of reaching men, who were willing to talk about their religious beliefs and perpetration of domestic violence was therefore quite surprising. Notwithstanding these limitations, the Pastors offered important insights into theological teachings that shaped men's use of violence

but also the broader gender politics and scripts within Lutheranism and therefore perhaps why recruitment was so difficult.

Findings

Gender was the dominant theme and interacted with other themes and sub-themes; hence, gender provided a framework for how Pastors understood domestic violence and how they articulated their explanations for why they perceived a denial of domestic violence in religious contexts. Pastors were able to share particular Bible teachings that shaped such gendered ideas and therefore contributed to domestic violence. Pastors also performed self-reflection during the interviews and surveys, which gave another layer of insight into gender scripts that are constructed in religion.

Gender expectations

All pastors reflected on theological narratives that shaped gender expectations and described these expectations as having a long history; hence, they shaped and described constructions of identity for men, women and family life. Pastors used phrases such as gender expectations being 'deep', 'strong', and 'powerful' and associated men and masculinity with 'privilege', 'not emotional' and women and femininity with 'service' and 'relational' and 'emotional'. For example, Pastor Pete said:

Living up to expectations ... men have been brought up in the church with the teachings of gender not being equal, and unfortunately the church is still teaching ... and they aren't encouraged to show any emotion and if they are being taught that they are the head of the house that all fits in with it. Nothing is the male's fault whatever happens.

David reflected on his own childhood and identified that he was taught that strength equated to be male:

My dad was a big and hard working. Very loud, very strong, and I witnessed violence in the house ... I just remember getting belted all the time, – I was in fear of my father ... I almost lost sight of what's right and wrong because I didn't know whether I was going to be laughed at, smiled or belted for my actions. So, being a created male by God has a physical strength, I was a strong – I was working with dad, so I was a physically strong lad.

Pastors Stephen spent some time in his interview talking about the teachings of gender that Pastor Pete describes. He expanded to talk about how ideas of gender inequality have a history in the church and therefore shape men's and women's identities over time and their relationship with each other and the church:

Theological narratives are deep because they describe identity, the role and service of women in church and society and relationships in the home. Women keep silent is a strong text that has been used for millennia to say that women, therefore, are to submit and be silent. And if I'm using that as a cultural thing; so, women were only allowed to vote in the Lutheran church, in the 1980s, they could not vote before that. You could not have a woman as a delegate until the end of the 1980s going to Synod. Women did not have a voice for themselves ... So, that is the culture of the church, and that was justified by biblical texts. In congregations, the same thing was happening in congregations, and therefore, also in families. So, there is a long conversation we could have about that.

Pastor James talked about the expectations placed on women and family life. During his interview, he shared a story about a family he knew well over a significant amount of time. He described intimate partner violence and violence towards children by the husband, and he also talked about the strength of the wife enduring the violence.

I notice that it was the women, the wife who would keep things up, keep the lid on things, protect their husband ... And preserving the family unit was her safety blanket ... women live with a strong sense of shame ... so you had to keep the social fabric intact, and everyone had their place within that social fabric. And a woman's job was to support her husband.

Gender contestations

When the Pastors were describing gender expectations, they also offered reflections that these gender expectations were being challenged by men, women, families and some clergy. However, in their descriptions of this challenge, they painted a picture of contestation and a culture of persistence with gender expectations, as alternatives to gender inequality were positioned as threatening to theological teachings. Pastors spoke about how men with a Lutheran upbringing are struggling to understand alternative narratives because they potentially disrupt their own sense of self. Pastor Stephen reinforced this point by suggesting that questioning male power and privilege is difficult because the theological and identity investment is constructed as 'truth' that cannot be changed or cannot be wrong.

People are so heavily invested in male power and privilege it's just so much to give up ... So it's asking a lot for people to consider another way of being ... so when you are talking about mutuality and equality of women, some men get really anxious about the language of equality, why is he positioned differently now, he believes theologically his needs come first, but he loves her and provides for her but she has to be submissive to him because the scriptures tell him to do that. Now if we introduce some narrative that says that how he understands his wife is not adequate, he has now hurt her by not letting her be equal ... he can't bring himself to admit that he did that ... Therefore, you'll find people motivated by things that you'll never understand ... he is being taken to a place he doesn't want to go, cannot comprehend.

Pastors talked about how theological teachings, including about relationships between men and women, shaped people's identity and sense of self, that is, who they are and their relationship with God. When investment of such teachings shapes and influences life and is connected to ideas of the afterlife, perceived challenge of such teachings is felt personally, and builds fear – fear that somehow a relationship with God will be compromised.

Gender and fear

Fear was also a theme that Pastors spoke about. For example, Pastor James spoke about how the claim of divinity is used to justify beliefs and practices, yet he argued that men often do this out of fear. He spoke about trying to question men's understandings of who they think God is and why they think God wants them to act violently as that is not the God of Jesus Christ. He explained that men justify violence because they are afraid of their relationship with God and afraid of losing their identity in society, of 'surrendering authority and power'.

But is fear something that governs your behaviour patterns and that controls your whole life is, is the antithesis of the gospel. Because fear is the precursor of death not of life. A perfect love drives out fear ... I think if the idea of the man is to govern people by them being afraid I know there is a cycle of abuse.

Pastor Stephen and Pastor Pete both talked about their noticing of men's reactions to arguments of gender equality. Defensiveness, confusion, and anger were some phrases they used to describe reactions. They oscillated between empathy for older men, particularly those that had grown up in the Lutheran Church, as they were experiencing challenges to their masculinity and personal turmoil as a result, and frustration as they themselves described their commitment to personally embracing gender equality and trying to embrace that challenge. For example, Pastor Pete shows this oscillation when he reflects:

I can see that blokes are doing it tough in some ways, and not understanding their role in the relationship and then how they handle that ... blokes sometimes are not very good at communicating ... I am starting to connect with men and looking at men's groups and relationships to talk about this stuff. I do not think some men are doing this well ... So, there is a selfishness there. Anger will come out sometimes.

David reflected on his role in his marriage, but also his partners throughout the interview. He talked about trying to understand marriage, and the confusion he felt in terms of understanding why it was not working, despite seeking counselling, reading the Bible, and praying to God. In the quote below,

he was expressing his confusion and frustration about gender roles and why there were not 'working'.

I think it was just love her more, but I didn't understand what that meant. Was that giving in more? Giving her, allowing her to do, but I – I think through my Christian values, I was committed to the relationship, I had no affairs, but I also then understood a deeper understanding of my own makeup, my own sexual desire, my own physical attributes.

Pastor Tom offered a personal reflection about his own journey of confronting his male power and privilege. He spoke about his childhood, teenage years and then his marriage and how he noticed the favour or benefit awarded to his father and himself at the expense and humiliation of women in his life. He talked about questioning the teachings that awarded him privilege.

Realising that the way I'd heard my father speak to my mother was not right . . . it wasn't funny. It was treated as humour at the time, very old type humour about gender, but it was humiliating, it was degrading and that is the way I was speaking to my wife as a way of controlling her.

Pastor Stephen also spoke about men in the church who were seeking alternative narratives that challenged the gender expectations they grew up knowing. He described how men resist the 'not emotional', 'strong' male image, instead seeking masculinities that embrace caring and love, which Pastors described as the image of Jesus Christ. Pastor Andrew wrote in the survey that the '*doctrine of male headship is a terrible burden for us all*'. The construction of masculinity being a burden and therefore something to be relieved of, reflects that gender expectations and contestations are felt and lived in the everyday lives of Lutheran families.

Understanding domestic violence

The theme of gender expectations and contestations provided an important backdrop to how Pastors constructed their understandings of domestic violence. Pastors described domestic violence as physical abuse and then would expand to other forms, particularly emotional or spiritual. Sexual abuse was not mentioned. For example:

Using violence or the threat of violence to establish and maintain control over a spouse/household. (Pastor Andrew)

Domestic violence is not exclusive to physical violence, and much DV is psychological, spiritual, or mental. (Pastor Jeff)

The Pastors who were interviewed had the opportunity to expand on their understandings of domestic violence, hence provided insight into their explanations and interpretations of what domestic violence was, and why it occurred. To unpack and reach for the nuances of theological interpretations of domestic violence, Pastor Tom, through his own experience and reflections in the interview, talked about the consequences of gender expectations and inequality and how gender constructions shaped the possibilities of domestic violence because power is exercised in family relationships.

I really appreciate that this is a male problem, distinctly male problem. I know that people push back against . . . After that workshop on domestic violence . . . for me that was hugely confronting . . . So there was a professional realisation but there was also a deep personal realisation that the culture that I'd grown up in and in what I'd taken for granted as a way of the husband relating to his wife as acceptable I realised wasn't. I had to think long and deep about myself and the way I was acting as well as my professional self and the help that I was offering people.

Shame

Pastor Pete explained that he believed many families informed by Lutheranism and Pastors, may not recognize or understand domestic violence, because they associate it with physical abuse and do not see or interpret emotional, psychological or verbal abuse as part of domestic violence because they are entwined with constructions of gender expectations that allow inequality. Pastor Stephen similarly reflected that he thought Pastors and families did not recognize domestic violence as a form of control, beyond physical violence, because gender power relations construct the possibilities that men can speak harshly to their wife, they can tell her what to do, and they are given permission to not be good at communicating or good at relationships, as this is the domain of women – to service relationships and the family.

However, Pastor Stephen also expanded his explanation for why domestic violence is largely only seen as physical violence. He introduced the concept of shame. He talked about men experiencing shame. First, he connected the concept of shame with sin. Sin brings shame in front of God and in front of congregational peers; therefore, if interpersonal gendered exchanges within the family, that subscribe to gendered expectations of relationships, are labelled abusive, Pastor Stephen explained, it is overwhelming for couples because sin then emerges and compromises a perceived relationship with God.

The raw thing is always shame before family, shame before others, shame before God ... I could start talking about fear, fear of judgement because shame is a church thing, because church and my faith is a congregational activity ... lets go deeper below the shame ... God comes to us and takes upon our sin on the cross and freely gives his righteousness ... I'm put right with God, in my baptism I am called Christian, I didn't earn it ... but often with domestic violence, people are caught up and feel ashamed that I have sinned, and God will strike me dead. If I was more righteous, I wouldn't have done it. If I was more righteous, I wouldn't have accepted my husband doing it. So, it becomes an expression of my failure to be adequately righteous ... I need to be holy and righteous before God, and I am failing, therefore God will send me to hell.

Second, he explained that men will resist shame and resist being positioned with sin because they believe they are living the gendered expectations according to God's will. Therefore, the language and meanings of domestic violence, particularly exercising male power and privilege is not viewed as abusive.

Then often people in shame, will retreat from the church and they'll get further and further away from the preaching and teaching of what God does for you, and you end up in this mire that God hates me, God hates them, which is very hard to deal with ... and there is that conflict in the sexes and the desire of the man to be found without shame.

Shame was present in David's story. He grappled with the possibility of divorce and talked about many ways in which he sought help to keep his marriage, such as reading the Bible, counselling, and reaching out to Pastors for guidance. It was only when he perceived permission, through God's grace to divorce, did he divorce. God's grace, that is God being favourably inclined towards him, wanting what was best for him, did his feelings of shame perhaps subside. However, his quote shows, he was still grappling with what he perceived to be his shame and his wife's sin.

I said, I can't do this anymore. So I moved out of home and rented a place but I only moved out to get some air and rebuild the relationship, but she didn't, yeah, didn't happen. So, I guess, the thing that made it final, I was talking to a pastor about it and saying, I'm doing the wrong thing by divorcing – thou shalt not divorce, and this guy said, now you're putting God's law, thou shalt not divorce, above God's grace, right? – that was the clincher. So then ... I will go through with this and get divorced, but even still, that was like, the whole process, the pastors, they just – they don't know how to deal with it. You go there thinking my life isn't what it is in scripture as it should be, and I know I'm a sinner, I know I've failed, I know repentance, I know forgiveness.

Understanding the Bible

Asking Pastors to reflect on their understandings of domestic violence, as shown above, allowed them to offer interpretations beyond broad definitions that have formed in mainstream policy and practice contexts. Their explanations enabled insight into how Lutheran families understand and identify (or not) domestic violence within broader theological framings of gender, shame and sin. At the same time, Pastors also identified and explained theological references and teachings that men who perpetrate domestic violence use and engage with to understand and justify their behaviour.

The book of Ephesians, Chapters 4–5 in the New Testament of the Bible was a reference most Pastors mentioned in terms of how men can use these teachings to justify their male privilege and status above women, therefore their use of violence. Pastor Stephen spoke about Ephesians for some time during his interview and provided insight into the contestation of interpretations regarding gender roles.

Ephesians Chapter 4 and 5 ... I want to show you the New International Version ... Paul is going on, through Ephesians, and following God's example, therefore walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us ... Now this is a commonly understood text, and see, this is instructions for the Christian household ... so can you see it says submit to one another out of reverence for Christ- Submit yourselves to your husbands as you do to the lord, ... and then it says husbands love your wives. Now, in the first publication of the international version, verse 21 was included here. So, it says, yep, sing and make music from your heart to the lord, always giving thanks to God the father for everything in the name of the lord, our lord Jesus Christ, submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, was the way they published it ... In their first edition of the New international version – that line was in a previous paragraph, and then it had instructions for Christians household, as a heading for a new paragraph. So, they divided a sentence to make a new section ... why am I telling you that?

I'm telling you that because this whole section is about submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ ... But to put it in the preceding paragraph and to start mid-sentence, as a new section, is what we call eisegesis, it's reading into the text – your agenda ... It means that it is easy to say the language of submission is biblical, the NIV translation imported their agenda on gender and ignored that dominant phrase. The church always has that struggle when we are talking cultural expressions.

In his discussion of the presentation of Ephesians, Pastor Stephen is trying to tell a history of translation, language use, and interpretations influenced by cultures of the day, which is performed through gender power relations. He argues that the interpretation of celestial inequality, that is God-given inequality, between men and women meets multiple male hegemonic agendas including for the church constructing the Christian household in a particular way, and for men who use violence, a way to explain and justify their behaviour. Other Pastors in the survey also wrote about Ephesians and supported the argument made by Pastor Stephen that interpretations can be corrupted to suit men who use violence. At the same time, they also showed insight into how they use texts to respond to domestic violence and challenge gendered ideas, as demonstrated by Pastor Bill and Pastor Greg.

I have drawn attention to Ephesians 5:21 and explained submission is mutual and voluntary and this passage is not a good Christian wife as an obedient follower of her husband. I gently tried to show that Christian marriage (and relationships generally) involve mutual respect, trust, service and honouring. Submission as described in the bible is mutual and voluntary and cannot be mandated. (Pastor Bill)

Sinful nature vs the new nature in Christ. Ten commandments, the image of God in each person but also in relationship, the expression of love per 1 Cor 13, the love of Christ for his bride the church, the two become one and harming one's partner is self-harm. Freeing loving, serving the partner benefits self (Pastor Greg)

Pastor James also reflected on Ephesians and talked about how male leaders of the clergy claim status of the divine scripture, such as Ephesians, and use culture to create a system that encourages inertia, so that it is impossible to challenge or change. When it is divine, that's the final word on everything, Pastor James explained, therefore closing conversations.

It's contextual, it's not written in a vacuum from some sealed envelope. I'm sorry it was a patriarchal world ... the bible's contextually and I think always has to be read contextually it's not prescribing a divine order of society.

I don't believe there's any such thing. . . the church doesn't prescribe a divine order of how the church should be run either. Lutherans are free to have any form of structure they want We have liberated from having to have a Pope and all that sort of stuff. So we have multiple wives for example in the Old Testament, how many did Abraham have? There is no perfect form of society or government and the worse kind of family is when a man says God put me charge do as I say. (Pastor James)

David reflected on his perceptions of men and women's roles in relationships, and he positioned masculinity with strength, and women with emotion. In trying to understand domestic violence, he also constructed women as perpetrators of domestic violence because he argued women use their emotional strength to manipulate men. He positions women as the possible cause of violence, and hence men naturally act out their physical strength in response – hence there is a justification present in his quotation as he draws on his biblical ideas of male and female.

I don't think we're educated on who we are as a male and as a female. I don't like society trying to make us the same. We are equal in God's eyes but we are completely different people and boys are just full of energy and are strong and physical, and I think we should be made aware of that, of our own physicality and what problems that can bring about, and we need then to be really educated on the beauty, the gorgeousness, of female, the frailness, in a sense, of – and learn to understand that . . . blokes deal with things, they just punch each other and . . . move on, whereas women get all emotional and moody, so in some environments it's expected that men will be physical. By no means am I saying that in a marriage situation, that physical stuff is not accepted, not at all, but then there needs to be an education process that women can be very vicious and emotionally manipulative as well.

Through the interview, Pastor Stephen also named other biblical texts that he identified have been used to justify gender inequality and hierarchy, particularly the debates regarding the order of creation and the ordination of women. With such vehement debate regarding these issues, Pastor Stephen stated these constructions of gender influence Christian households, and therefore can keep domestic violence unspoken or unrecognized, or justified.

Gender order

Similarly, Pastor Bill in his responses explained that domestic violence is not recognized or understood by some men in the Lutheran church because they equate it with the gender order, but he also explained that men will use scripture to reassert this power and position in the church and family. What Pastor Stephen and Bill's accounts show is that there is tension between constructing men as 'knowing no different' because they are acculturated by gender beliefs, they have been taught their entire lives, and constructing men as strategically using theological teachings to maintain power and privilege. The tension between what is divine versus what is cultural is present in the debates.

Men deny that they have done such a thing (domestic violence) because of their view of male and female roles in marriage I see this as the worst in some men, acting in the assumption that they are behaving in a God pleasing way. My view of the depth of sin in all of us has also increased, noting our willingness to twist God's word for our own fearful, selfish ends. (Pastor Bill)

Pastoral care

All Pastors expressed their worry or concern about responding to domestic violence, describing how they felt they did not have the expertise or knowledge to do so. To provide a response, Pastors explained they would draw on theological teachings to assist victims and perpetrators, hoping that their shared faith in God would bring some comfort to families. They called this pastoral care – meaning emotional, social, and spiritual support. For example, some Pastors talked about the significance of one's relationship with God, and the act of forgiveness to heal from the turmoil of domestic violence.

I am more prone to lift up references to grace and forgiveness, as well as the fact that we are all sinners in need of God's grace (Pastor Bill)

In Pastor Bill's description of using theological teachings, he like some other Pastors, is drawing on neutrality, that is, no one is to blame for domestic violence because it happens because all people are sinful. They do not judge the woman or her partner, instead talk about healing through a relationship with God. They are drawing on Lutheran teachings that we are all born in sin, and it is only through the Grace of God that we are forgiven. On the other hand, other Pastors also talked about the concept of sin, to understand and respond to domestic violence, and inferred that domestic violence was a man's sin, and therefore they were careful not to urge women victims to forgive domestic violence. For example:

I draw heavily on the sinful nature into which we are born, and therefore we need Jesus. God did not allow this to happen, but rather the sinful free will of man did this. God is a God of second chances, forgiveness, and love. And through the Holy Spirit we must be willing to engage in that process with each other. But NOT if it then places the woman in harm's way, I am wanting to help them to understand that it was not anything they did, there is no blame to be put on them for being abused. (Pastor Jeff)

Discussion and conclusion

The study presented in this paper aimed to generate knowledge about how theological beliefs and practices are used by men to perpetrate domestic violence. The interviews with male Pastors and the one man who identified as a perpetrator of domestic violence provided rich accounts of how men understand and talk about domestic violence with gender performances and gendered hierarchies featuring heavily (Jakobsen, 2014). A limitation, however, was not being able to report on men's own accounts of engaging with theological beliefs and practices to talk about their use of domestic violence.

The findings showed that gendered expectations that constructed service to men by women were supported through teachings of the order of creation, gendered compatibility, and submission. Through biological or essentialist ideas of man and woman together with historical and cultural privileges to constructions of Lutheran masculinity, domestic violence was viewed as inevitable, or a representation of the nature order – a man being a man. These arguments are not new in feminist theorizing; however, this study shows the way gender constructions are maintained through male interests in family life, and how gender permeates and is reinforced by religion – a significant institution with multi-level systems of social practices – endorsed through ideas of divinity. Domestic violence in religious contexts is intricately intertwined with gender – that is – performances of gender norms that maintain gender hierarchies and vice versa. Religion is a key site for reproducing gendered and gender normative discourses and the performance of dominant masculinities.

The prominence of gendered ideas endorsed through theological beliefs and practices needs attention if the discourses surrounding domestic violence are going to change. As this study showed, for some people practicing religion there is no problem of domestic violence because this is their cultural frame that has been rewarded through beliefs and practices. This finding goes some way to explain the difficulty in identifying and facilitating men to participate in the study despite numerous methodological attempts. Men, especially those who use violence, will often not be aware of the extent of their violence or justify it, using dominant discourses of gender available to them, which this study showed has theological bases (Hearn, 2012). In addition, as the Pastors pointed out, many men are feeling challenged in church community's where gender and domestic violence are being discussed, hence may not have participated in the research because they are struggling with their own spiritual and religious identity. The findings express the inherent tensions and the resistance to change in the religious culture influencing men, families and congregations in their understandings of domestic violence, and by extension perhaps recruitment to this study.

Despite only having one man participate who identified as a perpetrator of domestic violence, the interviews with male Pastors in this study brought out the capacity of gendered theological discourse and the truth valency of scripture to both inform domestic violence and potentially be part of the solution. As Hearn (1998) has argued for some time, accounts of violence are shaped by men's relationship to violence and by their more structured relation to power – maleness is not inherently violent (Hearn, 1998). To open possibilities of difference, other truths, and enable men's navigation of other discourses of everyday gender in religious contexts requires understanding and intervention against this gender-violence nexus (Jakobsen, 2014) that is reinforced culturally and structurally in religious practices. This is of course difficult, and many people have endured resistance and backlash by and within religious institutions. The challenge, as this paper has highlighted, is that such a backlash will always be present in a religious context when dominant masculinities are perceived to be divine and endorsed institutionally. The investment of the LCA into this research shows there is an appetite and strong commitment to understanding and challenging domestic violence and engaging in conversations about gender. Like the arguments made by Istratii (2018) and Jakobsen (2014), the prominence of theological teachings and influence in people's lives and subjectivities cannot be underestimated; hence, it is important to consider the feasibility of theology-informed and clergy centred interventions to address domestic violence and associated gendered ideas.

At the same time, it is recognized that extensive research has shown that many clergy are not equipped to harness the beliefs and practices of their religious traditions to help an abuser, and clergy often feel caught between the demands of their religious traditions to discourage divorce and face homes in which safety and peace do not exist (Nason-Clarke et al., 2018). Religion is used to naturalize gender difference and this in turn, allows the reproduction of domestic violence. Gendered discourses enable men individually and collectively in religion to determine what does and does not count as violence. Theological determinations and arguments for truths based on scriptural interpretation that restrain gender equality need further recognition to increase support for safe and peaceful intimate partner relations. There needs to be space for another truth valency of scripture, and it is theologian that can lead and enable this. This will require the coming together of sociological and feminist understandings of gender identity and theological and spiritual understandings of gender identity (Rayburn, 2015). Gender sensitivity, without denying the gendered underpinnings of domestic violence, needs to be guided by religious leaders, as it those voices that become embodied by local congregations (Istratii, 2018).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the Australian Research Council [LP0989533].

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