

## Research question 1 = *why did you join your men's group?*

→ Analysis ↓

→ *What caused/ causes participants to join/ attend their men's group?*

### Second Cause: Family

The families that participants were born into – their family of origin – emerged easily and clearly in terms of relevance to joining men's groups. As illustrated by the photo above, families are conceptualised as originating - or evolving - from previous generations and from broader and previous Irish culture. Similar to concept 1, families were revealed to be complex and dynamic entities, and it was often difficult to isolate specific elements of the concept with regard to participants and their decision to attend men's groups. Therefore a degree of forced isolation in necessary and is conducted below. Further chapters will discuss the concept in more dept.

Sub concept 1, *Grandparents*. As was common in previous generations in Ireland– less so now – children often shared their home with a grandparent (usually a parent of the mother). For this reason grandparents sometimes had a direct and significant impact on the development of children.

Noel, whose mother experienced significant levels of poverty - and shame – by virtue of living in the Dublin tenements, grew up with his maternal grandmother. She came to live with him and his family due to an illness she suffered:

*my mother ended up lookin after her mother in our house an she was doubly incontinent, she couldn't talk..I was fuckin terrified of the woman..[she was there] until I was about six or seven..then she had te go because my mother had a third baby, right, so..but I was fuckin terrified of her because all she did was grunt and*

*shout..she couldn't communicate..she shuffled, right..she dribbled..fuckin terrified of her*

Andrew was also reared with his maternal grandmother. This was due to the fact that she could no longer maintain her farm and required her son-in law and daughter to support her, a move that was accompanied by a degree of resentment on the part of Andrew's father, at least.

One of the reasons that Andrew joined a men's group was because of a difficulty he had with relationships. He found it hard to relax, be spontaneous and enjoy the simple things in life. He traces the origin of this difficulties to aspects of his upbringing, including his relationship with - and the actions of - his grandmother:

*one of the first things I remember was I said something about my mother and father..they were working down the yard and I said something..me granny had a dish cloth in her hand and she gave me the (laughs) full force..she laced me across the face with..absolutely laced me across (laughs) the face..cut the face off (laughs) me with the dishcloth..an I just..I can remember being and..lookin at her..an..an I just froze an I just remember, I can remember it clear as day, the thoughts that went through me head, what she looked like an everything else..and I knew I was wrong to say what I said, but I knew that she was wrong..she was wronger..she shouldn't have done what she did..an I (clears throat) when I was gonin back through things I..I found that was kindef a key point, that, from then on I realised..I needed te kinda..I stopped..developing naturally and I started developing..tippy-toeing around.. I..I don't know, like..I was very small because (inhales) em..I..I was two or three*

The philosophy of 'survival of the fittest' that John was born into – and possesses to this day – did not begin with John's father, although he certainly possessed it. Instead it can be traced back to a further generation, at least.

*my father was a twin and his brother [the bigger and preferred twin] died..at six months..like, his father was an alcoholic..bet them up..my grandfather never gave any paren..yeknow..fathering..to his son and my father never gave any fathering to me*

Further support for the relevance of the 'grandparents' sub concept is – for brevity – bullet pointed below:

- *both my parents came from very dysfunctional backgrounds themselves like, yeknow..the background that..well, like, me mother's father..basically like, used te batter them and sexually abuse them..yeknow..and so that was hor..an he never spoke te any of us..he never spoke to his grandchildren, so he was fairly fucked up in the head..now, me granny..his wife..was a lovely woman..on me Da's side, his mother had major psychiatric problems..had a good few breakdowns, an his Da was an alcoholic..that worked in Jameson's (Jimmy, p.3)*
- *my father's mother died when my father was two or three years of age..there was always a lack of connection there..I don't think..from my father's upbringing..he does not know how to connect, 'cause he was not given..it's my belief that he was not nurtured as a child..so for him ca..does not know how to nurture..doesn't know how to love and cannot connect but is a very good natured man (Dessie)*
- *me Da's mother died early..when she was young..and his Da married again and married a woman who had a couple of kids and..and she had more kids then (Freddie)*
- *my Dad came from a..a much harder background..his family would've been comfortably off and fell on very hard times..my..his parents..em..there were four in his family..eh, my Dad was the second youngest and when my grandmother was pregnant with the youngest, the grandfather went off to America to make his fortune for the family to follow..only the family never followed..and he never came back..this was..he was born in 1922, so we're talkin a long time back, so basically, right throughout the nineteen..the hungry thirties..were very hungry for them because..he had..the father..the grandfather had disappeared to America and there was no communication and they were left..effectively destitute...his older brother died of some illness when he was aged about twelve (Séan)*

Sub concept 2, *Fathers*: The father-son relationship emerges clearly as the most significant and relevant concept in terms of the analysis of data pertaining to question one of this research. It is also equally relevant with respect to the second research question and other facets of the study and for that reason this particular relationship – and concept - will be substantially revisited in the proceeding chapters of this thesis.

It is important to stress that many participants had - and do have - good relationships with their father – just as they do with grandparents and other family members that make up the concept of family as discussed in this research. However, as participants perceive their need for men’s groups to be one driven largely by lack or loss the focus here is on loss or lack within the father son relationship.

According to Michael, his father

*had no..has no..concept of what it means te be a father..communication from me father consisted of “cut that out” or “shut the fuck up”..like he’s passin on wha..wha..how he was..raised..by his Dad yeknow and again his Dad died kinda young..the relationship wit me Da would been, yeknow, non-existent..I was afraid of him..yeknow..for..for mosta growin up yeknow an didn’t have any means of..like any connection with him, other than football..football was the only thing yeknow..and I..yeknow I’d..I’d wait for him to kinda come in te ask if we had a match on the weekend..that was the only..only point of reference I had with him, yeknow..other than that..he wouldn’t talk te ye about anything..he’d wouldn’t..he’d barely notice ye, yeknow..*

Michael’s father, a member of An Garda Síochána, has had long term alcohol and psychological issues. Following the death of his father at 15, his mother emigrated when he was 21. He is currently being encouraged by a psychologist to look at early loss as a possible source of his problems, something that is invoking a degree of resistance in him, as the following quote illustrates:

*this bitch started talkin about me Ma again, as if that’s the issue, an it’s like, I keep tellin them it’s not*

When Dessie was fifteen, his father had what was termed a 'nervous breakdown', and was diagnosed with manic depression. At this point Dessie states that

*I became the father of the house..as the eldest son*

The intergenerational transmission of lack of connection and nurture resulted in a variety of issues for Dessie, including low confidence and self-esteem. For many years he used drink, drugs and sex to cope with – or mask – this lack. Eventually he decided to deal with these issues and their underlying cause through a journey of self-development. A journey that includes men's groups.

Freddie's father similarly experienced the death of his mother at a young age. He also experienced absorption into a 'new' family. Outside the home, Freddie's father was a 'hard man' – a fighter and grafter - but he was also hard at home, demanding and hard to get along with. When Freddie was two or three, his father suffered the first of a series of strokes and heart attacks that eventually culminated in him leaving the family home. Freddie was 11 years of age when his father entered full time care. His memories of his father include

*me Da was an alcoholic, ravin lunatic, yeknow..gentleman on the street an devil in the house, yeknow..yeknowhaimean..an warped values, yeknow..he wouldn't let anybody curse in his company..but yet he could come home and be fuckin so violent..not that he was at home much either..[he] tried te discipline me older brothers..em..he didn't like anybody idle..everybody had te work..he always worked..he very rarely didn't work..I can't..I..from what I know, he'd always..find work..as his kinda..escape, I suppose..me Da got taken inte hospital [when] me Ma couldn't look after him anymore...a couple a heart attacks after that..another stroke after that and she said, 'look, I can't look after him,..I've had enough of his drinkin' dyeknowhaimean..em..he was goin in a bucket beside him.. 'cause he was too drunk te go out to the toilet..[he] couldn't walk..so she kinda had enough of that..inte hospital..eh, so he went inte a care home then*

Liam's father

*was a drunk, and a dangerous one..so [it was] a chaotic household, where there was knives, there was..breakin glass*

He paints a picture – a bleak one - of the family environment created by this behaviour and how, as a young schoolboy he adapted himself to it:

*my class would finish at half four an I'd walk home..and I'd walk in the door at about quarter te six..and they're be eight people sittin around the table and there'd be an empty chair and my dinner would be there and I would slide into the chair and start eatin an nobody would even..there wouldn't be a thing said..I would just..yeknow..an my task was te just get in without creatin..anything*

For Liam to survive in this environment he decided “*not to create any hassle..an..te act that out I just became invisible*”. This manifested initially by Liam ‘putting the head down’ and working intensely in school and later in business. In time he would acknowledge an obsessive and compulsive relationship with work but only after major health concerns, serious marital problems and the suicidal ideation of his ten year old son.

Padraig's father was a violent and controlling man. Underlying this behaviour – Padraig believes – is a fear born (or at least nurtured) in the tenements and passed on down the generations. Padraig's father was extremely domineering to all family members but was especially so with his sons. He beat Padraig (and his brother) frequently and with much force, including whipping them with a leather belt on their exposed buttocks, sometimes for rather trivial reasons. Like Liam – and others -Padraig coped by repressing himself and throwing himself obsessively into achievement and work

*I was riddled by fear...I always had antenna out listening for sounds, voices...people that might be threatening to me and obsessively planning escape routes on one sort or another..I was always trying to read minds..guessing what people were thinking*

*and I would always tailor what I said and did to what others wanted or expected. It got to the stage that I didn't know who I was..what I wanted and didn't want...the worst question anyone could ask me when I was younger was something like, 'do you like that'..or 'what do you want'...I hadn't a clue and would get embarrassed or flustered. But underneath all that..going along with things..I had a huge rage..at times I wanted to kill people and how I never actually snapped I'll never know*

At twenty seven years of age Pdraig decided to seek help. This led to years of psychotherapy and for the last seven years, participation in a men's group.

For brevity further evidence of the relevance of the father/ son relationship are bullet pointed below:

- Eddie's father, married quite late in life and when Eddie was born his father was 62 (Eddie was 7 when his father died). Sixty years old today, Eddie still has *"enormous anger about that"*
- At 55, Andrew's father was also of an advanced age when he was born. Andrew's father also had anger issues:

*dad was a very angry person..he was very angry..but..or he had the potential to be angry, it wasn't always angry but he had the potential to be angry..and he wasn't a kind of a (inhales then exhales) he wasn't a soft kind of a..approach..yeknow..te things*

- When Willie was seven years old, his father left his marriage and family of four children for a 17 year old woman. At that stage Willie was "enchanted" with his father, where:

*a smile from him (his father) is..is a huge..yeknow..light..brightens up your whole day..so, his approval is everything..so when he pissed off and everybody was saying nasty things about him, I really couldn't handle that*

This loss and the mess that was left behind created long term 'self-esteem, and other issues for Willie.

- According to Richard, *“I had difficulty with my mine [father]..my relationship with my father, yeknow..I could see it was competitive..my father would never..in any sense show that he was vulnerable..none*
- *When I was born my father started drinkin an he hasn’t fuckin stopped* (Noel, p.12)
- *in terms of the relationship with my dad..like, my dad was non-communicative..and still is, yeknow..a nice guy, yeknow..no, well..ya..nice pleasant guy but I had no..an still have..no communication with him* (Larry, p.3)
- Franny’s father died when he was four years old

Relevant sub concept 3, *Mothers*: Like the father-son relationship, participant’s relationships with their mothers - in the context of lack and loss - emerged as relevant to their attendance at men’s groups. In many cases, similar themes (or sub concepts) emerged but so also did themes conceptualised as unique to the mother son relationship.

In terms of similarity, the physical loss of a mother was a significant element in some participant’s path to men’s group. Sometimes this loss was through death (n=1) and other times through prolonged or frequent periods of absence from the home (n=2).

Consequently having lost his father when he was four, the experience of losing his mother when he was 13 exasperated Franny’s difficulties. These difficulties were primarily an emotional sense of loss and grief coupled with an inability – for various reasons – for these emotions and experiences to be acknowledged by others and expressed by him.

Both Martin and Liam experienced the absence of their mothers during their formative years: Martin because his mother was frequently hospitalised for depression and Liam because his mother frequently fled from her violent and chaotic husband and home. She left for good when Liam was 18.

*my mother was suffering from depression for years and years and years..he [his father] was told one day during the kind of disaster that our lives was growing up, in so far as that, my mum wasn’t there to look after us, so we had grannies, aunties, minders, au-pairs an everything else..but at one stage he was advised by somebody who said, “look, I think you’re goin te need to put those ku..kids into a foster..into foster care or into a home”..and his words to that guy, “I will fuckin drive around with*

*those kids in the back of my car before I'll put them in foster home"..and he did..we used te sit in the back of his car doin our homework, while he was in work (Martin)*

*at that stage me mother was comin an goin..yeknow..em..she she went..went an stay wit me aunts..em..and..eh..she'd go for a week or so an then she'd be back..eh and then.. eh..she went an she didn't come back..I've a younger sister and she..she was..she was twelve and she..me..an aunt was a reverent mother in a convent and got her a place in a secondary school..posh secondary school over near Howth..boarding school..that let..tha allowed me mother to go an stay away 'cause we were all, quotes,..working age..I suppose (Liam)*

Physical violence from mothers also emerged as relevant in the course of data analysis, although not to the extent as it did from the data pertaining to fathers. Consequently four participants reported that such violence left a life-long negative impression on their psyche.

Although Tony's father was violent towards his sons, so also was Tony's mother, at least to him. Tony gives an example of this violence and also an indication of the complex family dynamics underlying and surrounding it

*she's been violent aswell..well, I wouldn't call it..'over-violent'..we got in..the door was open..James shot in..my mother was behind the door with a belt..and I got the belt..never forget it..I fuckin got it..she didn't go in after James..who fuckin, was the oldest....so I was sure I was gettin picked on all the time..an it seemed..then later on when I think about it..it was kindef..me Da sorted James out..and me Ma sorted me out, te even it up...ye know*

Jimmy's experience mirrors Tony's - to some extent at least - in terms of parental violence and family dynamics.

*what I got brought up in, was me Da batterin me Ma..me Ma batterin us and a lot of alcoholism and me Ma's fuckin fridge full of Valium*

Jimmy also outlines the intergenerational nature of these behaviours:

*both my parents came from very dysfunctional backgrounds themselves like..the background that..well, like, me mother's father..basically like, used te batter them and sexually abuse them..yeknow..and so that was hor..an he never spoke te any of us..he never spoke to his grandchildren, so he was fairly fucked up in the head..now, me granny..his wife..was a lovely woman..she used te come to hospital and do everything eh..yeknow that she could for us..on me Da's side, his mother had major psychiatric problems..had a good few breakdowns, an his Da was an alcoholic..that worked in Jameson's*

In contrast, Eoin's mother was the sole physically violent parent in his home.

*one was very gentle growing up and the other was kinda violent and aggressive and that was my mum*

Interestingly, Eoin currently has less problems associated with his relationship with his mother and so he currently attends a men's group primarily to deal with issues connected to his father. These problems are primarily related to feeling let down by a passive father who was unable to model and teach manhood to his son. This issue emerged as a central pillar of this study and will be identified more fully and discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter and further chapters.

Padraig's mother was a reserved, shy person outside the home. She was also the victim of a domineering husband. Padraig believes that in order to cope with these circumstances, his mother took her frustration out on her children. He remembers her beating him and his siblings with her hands, a wooden spoon and a rolling-pin. The extent to which this violence impacted on Padraig is difficult for him to gauge, due to the much higher levels of violence inflicted on him by his father, which he is sure did impact him. However, other more subtle emotional violence from his mother did have a large impact.

*My mother was great at turning her children against one another to get her own way..she would butter up the sibling that she though would most likely agree with*

*her and at the same time talk bad about those that were not agreeing with her..behind their back..she was highly manipulative and would sit back when we'd be at each other's throats...she poisoned our relationships and didn't stop when we became adults with the result that..today there aren't any [relationships]*

This type of psychological manipulation emerged in the data as relevant, significant in its impact and highly gendered. It was enacted primarily by mothers and had a substantial impact on many participants, particularly in the way that they learned to view and conceptualise their fathers and later, how they began to conceptualise masculinity, femininity and gender as a whole.

Accordingly, when Michael was young he had little regard for his father, who was an angry, non-engaging father. But a lack of regard for his father was also formed due to the assertions of Michael's mother.

*my mother would talk to me but it would always be with a, yeknow, like..yer Da's a useless cunt, yeknow...he's great man, great man but he's a useless cunt yeknow (coughs) so he was the role model yeknow, for those formative years anyway..growin up and..like..I hated the thought of growin into that man, yeknow that weak, fuckin..useless man yeknow or so the story I was given of him yeknow..I see him very differently now like..I see him **very** differently*

Noel also grew up with an intense dislike of the man his father was. His determination to avoid being like his father would eventually result in self-esteem and relationship problems which were the immediate catalyst for him joining a men's group. Noel identifies remarks from his mother – and silence from his father - as being responsible for some of these problems

*my Da would be out drinkin..this is my..the story my mother gave me..was drinkin all the money..my Da'd get paid on Fridays..we usen'te have no dinner until he came home..deye know that kindaway..or ye'd be goin around lookin in pockets for fifty pence to buy two eggs an yeknow, two loose rashers..so I remember being acutely*

*aware that my Da was off pissing all the money away..that was my mother's story..right, so I was caught in the middle of that..right, so I remember thinkin..my Da's out fuckin drinkin all our money..we can't afford to buy new shoes..right..so I completely bought into me mother's side.. 'cause me Da wouldn't say anything..he'd come home then..he'd had his few pints..he was all right..he was kinda quiet and stuff an he could be cranky but he wasn't giving me a counter story..like, your mother's a pain in the fuckin hole..I just can't wait to go to the pub to get away from her, right*

Eddie's father died when he was seven. This experience, the advanced age of this father and not having his father's death explained to him, all interacted to leave a deep scar.

*everybody is..is cryin..peop..isn't it terrible..eh..ye know..it's so sad he's gone..but nobody..te..sat down to me and said, 'your dad has died'. It..it..it..it was in..it was in the air..or atmosphere..or the (laughs), yeknow..it..it was in the room..but nobody actually spoke to me about it..I worked out that he was dead but nobody actually set me down and said, 'your dad is dead'*

It seems that Eddie's mother drew the majority of concern and attention at this time, and in the proceeding years. Most destructively, from Eddie's point of view:

*my mother was..was depressed .....so....I remember....deciding I wasn't goin to burden her with..with my..with my needs..so..I..I had to..not burden her with..with my stress...so I had to keep that within me and not talk about it. That's where I believe all..all my ideas..it..the same happens..my wife..I don't want to burden her with..with my stress..and I think that's where it all started from..with me..not wanting to burden the females with the stress because they're not able to deal with it*