



**Kamilla Fodor**  
Diaconia University of Applied Sciences  
Bachelor  
Social Services  
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# REFLECTIVE FATHERS

**How intercultural participants evaluate their personal experience about a 7-week long peer support group program?**



## ABSTRACT

Kamilla Fodor

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The current paper evaluates 6 intercultural fathers' experience after a 7 week long peer support group program. The activities built on a strong structural base which gave opportunity for the participant to reflect on their male-parenting from an emotional and need-focused perspectives. As the intersecting field of intercultural fatherhood, peer support group and emotional awareness programs are rarely researched in the Finnish context. Therefore, this study could shed a light on the importance of peer support group activities targeting intercultural fathers, and serve an analysis on how self-awareness, non-violent communication and need recognition could promote the individual's self-improvement and wellbeing.

The emerging themes discussed in the paper were based on a 50 minutes long focus group discussion and its thematic analysis. The results suggest that all the 6 participants recognized positive changes in their personal life that could be linked to the peer support group activities. As the number of intercultural fathers are growing in Finland, it is necessary to assess their needs and tailor services and support programs that serves them the best.

Keywords: peer support group, focus group, intercultural fathers, subjective well-being, thematic data analysis, social learning



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# 1 INTRODUCTION

The theme of the theses revolves around the context of fatherhood, peer support group activities and experience of service users. The research takes its subject from implemented peer support group activities targeting intercultural fathers living in Finland. The research-based approach includes qualitative data collection methodology such as a focus group discussion. The collected answers are processed by a thematic data analysis method. The “ peer support group project was planned and facilitated by Rafael Borges, a fellow Social Services student from Diakonia UAS. The peer group activities included 3 main components such as emotional awareness, non-violent communication and coping skills related to partnership and fatherhood. The evaluation of participant’s experience was organized at the end of the peer support group season by myself, Kamilla Fodor. The project’s host organization was Familia ry, a Helsinki based NGO focusing on intercultural family matters.

The research aims to involve the peer support group participants who are according to the predefined criteriums are fathers who are part of an intercultural family. The key objectives of the project evaluation research is to; a) contribute to the short-listed literature on peer support groups focusing on emotional awareness and empathetic communication within the social service context and the themes around fatherhood, which are related to the needs and interests of the wider intercultural community; b) to gather information directly from the service users participating in the peer support group activities, in order to understand their experience throughout the 7-week long project; c) to provide an overview on the practices that worked well or could be improve during the peer support group activities and therefore could be utilized in a future projects or onetime events targeting the same services users.

## 2 CHANGING FATHERHOOD

While motherhood and infant relationship with the primary caregiver has been a long-discussed theme over the past decades, the volume of literature about fatherhood and positive father involvement has started to engross only in the past 30 years (Marcia C. Inhorn, Wendy Chavkin, José-Alberto Navarro , 2014; American Psychological Association 2009). The raising general interest towards male-parenting has societal, demographical, and cultural implications, which are worth to be examined to understand the current norms and tendencies connecting to male-parenting in the post- modern, globalized world.

### 2.1 Societal aspect of fatherhood

The traditional duties of a father within the family had undergone a drastic transformation in the past hundreds of years. While two centuries ago, fathers had been responsible for the financial stability, moral and religious guidance of the children, the wave of urbanization and industrialization redefined the gender roles within the family system (American Psychological Association, 2009). The “new fatherhood” in the United States, as Robert L. Griswold (1993) stated, evolved during the Industrial Revolution and generated economic and societal changes ( Marcia C., Inhorn, Wendy Chavkin, José-Alberto Navarro 2014, 3) . Fathers who worked in factories, spent significant time apart from their families, or left their wives and offspring’s completely behind (American Psychological Association, 2009). Therefore programs targeting unmarried women with children and widows were tailored in order to support the non-nuclear families (American Psychological Association, 2009). The emancipation of women resulted in the growth of non-traditional family structures, wherein the roles of fathers needed to be reinvented. While fathers’ time allocated to child-rearing and their emotional investment into their offspring started to increase, the role of fathering expended beyond indirect care of the child. As Chodorow (1999) suggested, the role of the feminist movements in the 1970’s had a significant impact on bringing fathers’ involvement into the public discourse ( Marcia C. Inhorn, Wendy Chavkin, José-Alberto Navarro, 2014, 1).

## 2.2 Fathers' involvement into child rearing

Fatherhood is a stage in life when an individual takes up new roles and adapts to them according to learnt strategies. The role of father's involvement to a child's life is significant in many ways as "growth, development, maturation, health status, psychological well-being—... are some of the life-course outcomes that are likely to be influenced by parental investment (Gray, Kermyt & Anderson 2010, 124). Therefore, children's emotional landscape could be significantly altered by fathers in a positive or negative way. By practicing skills that can support fathers in effective and empathetic communication, self-reflection and emotional awareness could have a positive impact on the whole family structure, not just to one person's life (Ninivaggi 2013, 348). According to Ninivaggi (2013) fathers often report that they lack caregiving socialization, which also includes active listening and patience (Ninivaggi 2013, 348). Positive male parenting could involve direct care toward the child (such as feeding, holding the baby) or passive care (for instance providing resources, being in close proximity to the infant) (Peter B. Gray, Kermyt G. Anderson 2010, 32). Furthermore, as Peter B. Gray, Kermyt G. Anderson (2010) suggest, gender factor in fathers' involvement also plays a significant role; male parents tend to dedicate more resources to their son(s) than daughter(s). From the care-takers perspective, the gender differentiation in caring style expressed by the notion of father frequent involvement into physical play, which is less true for mothers (Peter B. Gray, Kermyt G. Anderson 2010, 41-43). Correlation between time investment and positive involvement into the child's life was observed in previous studies. Research involving a cross cultural sample of 186 cultures and different linguistic groups found that fathers with solid parental confidence more likely provide direct care to their child (Peter B. Gray, Kermyt G. Anderson 2010, 34;36). Therefore, advocating for fathers' positive involvement by tailoring target specific intervention programs could have a positive impact on the psycho-social development of children and parental confidence of fathers.

Facilitating parents with the opportunity to spend time with their children could be achieved through the implementation of legal incentives and societal transfers, including monetary benefits. In the Finnish context similarly to other Nordic countries, encouragement of new fathers for taking up the role of a responsible care-giver has been on the legislative agenda for a longer time, as Eerola et al. (2019) referred to (Eydal



et al., 2015; Haas & Rostgaard, 2011; Lammi-Taskula, 2017). Parental leave was first introduced by Norway and Finland in the 1970's, and a decade later Finland adopted a shareable parental leave system (Eerola et al. 2019, 1).

The new Finnish Family leave reform came into effect on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, 2022. The renewed parental leave allows caretakers to spend equal amount of time with their child. In the Finnish context, work-life balance could be established if both caretakers can flexibly negotiate about the time they want to spend with child-rearing and career building. Therefore, the reform also aims to promote shared responsibility regardless of the parents' gender or unique family situation (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, 2022.).

### 2.3 Intercultural fathers in Finland

In the current context, the term of intercultural fathers is defined as male individuals who live in a family system that consists members of more than one nationality. For example, a Finnish-born male together with a foreign-born spouse is considered as intercultural couples. Intercultural fathers could have a multilingual household, wherein the members speak one, two or multiple languages. There is not a single definition for intercultural fathers, however Familia ry (2020) suggest a description for intercultural "families in which family members have different cultural backgrounds". It is not a simple task to find an inclusive and general definition that would involve all the spectrum of gender diversity related to intercultural fatherhood or families, but the scope of the actual research was narrow down to fathers who self-identified as intercultural. Another non-profit organization based in Helsinki, known as Monimuotoiset Perheet ry (Diverse Families Association), has estimated that the number of bicultural couples residing in Finland exceeds 65.000, with approximately half of them also having children (Monimuotoiset Perheet, 2023).

### 2.4 Services targeting international fathers

The research is connecting to the themes of intercultural fatherhood, emotional awareness, and a peer support group structure. To explore the possibility for self-

development within predefined circumstances and time frame, the change that happens within the peer support group participants can be monitored and evaluated systematically. Previous projects such as MenTalk Initiative launched by Familia ry and its partners provided an example for male-targeted peer support group activities and structure. MenTalk covered the themes such as emotions, sharing, trust, non-violent communication, mindfulness, and personal values (Familia ry, 2022). As the peer facilitators concluded, the project seemed to have empowering effect on its participants and helped the advancement of self-awareness and communicational skills (Familia ry, 2022). Similarly to MenTalk, the first Father peer support group is connected to Familia ry, and it provided the structural base for the new group that is going to be launched on 11.04.2022 by the thesis collaborator and colleague, Rafael Borges. The special point of the Fathers' group activity plan that it covers similar themes as MenTalk, but focused on the life-circle and every days of intercultural fathers. The accommodated fathers with various cultural background, but the language of the sessions were English, which offered space for people with a diverse socioeconomic or linguistic background. In the research paper, the term of father's group, peer support group or intercultural fathers group all refer to the same participants, who attended the program, therefore these terms are used interchangeable.

### 3 MASCULINITY AND FATHERS' MENTAL HEALTH

The following chapter is going to explore the negative impact of traditional masculine upbringing to males who might struggle to express emotions and demonstrate vulnerability later in life due to the norms they grown up with. In the second part, the mental health aspects of immigrant male population is going to be discussed, focusing on the Finnish context and intercultural males.

#### 3.1 Masculine socialization and emotions

Masculinity, according to the definition of the Cambridge dictionary (2023), refers to "the characteristics that are traditionally thought to be typical of or suitable for men". The execution of gender-specific roles significantly shapes an individual's connection with both their internal psychological landscape and the broader external societal

context. As Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell (2005, 22) explain, every society is structured by gender-based work division and in addition, links gender to certain behavioral structures and rules. The fulfilled role of a “man” within a relationship or family structure not always allowed the individual to confine certain emotions such as sadness or fear. The label of “unmanly” behavior can still negatively influence the current social performance of vulnerability and inner struggle. The explanation of modern masculinity was also observed from a sociological point of view by Adams and Frauenheim, (2020) who introduced the term of “confined masculinity” to further explain “toxic masculinity traits”. Confined masculinity is elucidated as comprising three primary roles for men: the protector, the provider, and the conqueror. These roles serve as central archetypes or conventional models that men are expected to adhere to within traditional constructs of what constitutes a "genuine" man (Adams and Frauenheim 2020, 26-27). In addition, Adams and Frauenheim (2020, 28) emphasizes that confined masculinity leaves scant space for the recognition and acceptance of alternative roles, such as those of the compassionate partner, the wise man, the spirituality seeker, and the caretaker. Therefore, strengthening the capacity of man who would like to experience connection and vulnerability could help individuals to connect better with their inner self and with loved ones.

### 3.2 The loneliness of intercultural men and mental health initiatives

Experiencing loneliness and discrimination as a person with foreign background in Finland is not a rare phenomenon, especially among the male population of immigrants. According to the report of Yle (2020) on rising loneliness, 4 out of 10 men born outside of Finland experienced discrimination in the same year. The study also showed that those people who moved to Finland from North Africa or the Middle East encounters issues with well-being, health, depression, and isolation (Yle 2020). Having no strong social circle, professional network, friendship group, meaningful hobbies could limit the individual’s capacity to form new relationships in the new country.

The national Institute for health and welfare (THL) concluded that the mental load on people with migrant background is generally higher than in the overall population. Furthermore, experiencing depressions or anxiety is more common among people with

foreign background if we consider the data gathered at the national level (THL, 2023). There are several barriers that a person with foreign background faces when it comes to service provision, which can be language skills, financial issues, lack of knowledge about the service providers (Kieseppä 2022, 62-63).

Low threshold services such as peer support group activities are often organized by the actors from the non-profit field, as a part of a particular initiative. A new peer support group structure called Toivo (in another world “hope”) emerged in 2018 within the project called “mental health and wellbeing in Multicultural Finland, in short MIOS (Mieli, 2023). The project was launched by Mieli Mental Health Finland which is the world’s oldest nongovernmental organization working on the field of well-being and mental health promotion (Mieli, 2022). The MIOS projects had three objectives, one of them concentrated on developing a new group structure targeting immigrants. During the 2-year long project about 50 groups were organized and 500 people were involved. As the report suggests, the facilitators and group participants agreed that the activities helped them to improve their sense of belonging (Mieli, 2023).

### 3.3 Social learning theory

Human behavior in a group context could be positively influence by providing models, patterns, and guidance for people, serving as examples for future actions (Barton & Henderson 2016, 4). Social learning theory originates from Albert Bandura's academic work, who argued that learning could occur when people observe others' actions, which was a new idea compared to the dominant reinforcement and conditioning based learning concepts dominating the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Cherry 2021). The main statements of social learning theory is that people can learn via observation; the mental construct of individuals are important in learning; and behavioral change might not occur as a result of learning (Cherry 2021). There are 3 models connecting to observational learning; the live model suggests that a person demonstrates the behavior or mimics it; at the symbolic level the individual receives stimuli via mediums such as books, media products, movies etc.; while the verbal instructional model utilizes guidelines and descriptions of the desired behavior (Cherry 2021). The key steps towards learning require motivation (personal drive) , attention focus on the subject) , retention (being able to decode the information), and replication (reproduction of the knowledge) (Cherry 2021).

The main objective of the fathers' group project was to increase the participants knowledge on emotional recognition, self-awareness, and positive actions related to father involvement. To achieve these goals, educational activities combined with group discussions were applied during the 7-week long project. The participants were continuously repeated and applied the tools that were introduced by the peer support group facilitator.

Social learning theory therefore could serve as a base for analyzing the fathers peer support group participants feedback regarded to their experienced. Furthermore, it can help to understand the ways in which future father group sessions can be structured to meet the criteriums of learning (mentioned above).

### 3.4 Peer support groups

A peer support group means that “people, who are peers amongst themselves, giving each other support”, knowingly that their personal experience is connected due to a shared life situation (Finnish Refugee Council 2021, 7). This form of community engagement and empowerment is also used by Familia ry, the current project’s partner organization, therefore, the setting and methodology is known and utilized by the mentioned NGO. Since the foundation of peer support group as a concept is strong at Familia ry, the project evaluation results could contribute to the development of future peer support group activities organized in the future.

According to Mental Health Foundation (2022), the provision of peer support has been shown to have a positive impact on individuals' overall well-being, resulting in reduced hospitalization rates, expanded social support structures, and enhanced self-esteem, self-confidence, and interpersonal skills. In Finland numerous non-profit organizations offer low-threshold and volunteer-based peer support group options, therefore if the individual has knowledge about the existence of such initiatives, it is relatively easy to get accepted to a peer support group.

## 4 RESEARCH BACKGROUND: PURPOSE, AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Intercultural fatherhood is still a relatively new theme that requires more attention as the population of Finland is rapidly changing and becoming more diverse. The selected theme relates to a broader societal need, which is explained in the following sections. The purpose of the research refers to the wider and more abstract idea yet desirable to work towards to reach a positive and meaningful change. The aim of the research refers to more concrete steps toward reaching the purpose.

#### 4.1 The purpose of the research

The main purpose of the research is to promote the wellbeing of intercultural fathers living in Finland. The research contributes to the short-listed literature on peer support groups focusing on emotional awareness and empathetic communication within the social service context and the themes around fatherhood, which are related to the needs and interests of the wider intercultural community. It is essential to gather information directly from the service users participating in the designed peer support group activities, to understand their experience and development throughout the 7-week long project. In addition, the research could provide an overview on the practices that could be improved or worked well during the peer support group activities and therefore could be utilized in a future projects or one-time events targeting the same services users.

#### 4.2 The aim of the research and research questions

The aim of the thesis is to identify which aspects of the the 7-week long program was significant for the participants from the point of view of personal well-being. Therefore, to understand how emotional self-awareness skills, empathetic communication and emotional vocabulary could be developed and practiced in a peer support group environment, it was important to leave space for a longer discussion, in which the participants have an opportunity to elaborate on their answers. The participants' narrative and feedback provided the main source of data that was collected and later analysed. From a professional and personal point of view, the proposed theme and objectives could create an opportunity to enhance a research oriented methodological knowledge and analytical perspective on an end-user driven and experience focused research. The secondary aim is to identify, categorize and describe the positive aspects of the peer support group on the participants, and involve them to the evaluation process. Knowing the perspective of the potential service users could help Familia ry or other non-profit NGO's, peer support group leaders to tailor activities which can fit for the target group of intercultural fathers.

Due to scholastic endeavours, the author finds it essential to combine theoretical knowledge to uncover the fathers' peer support group projects' strength and developmental aspects. Furthermore, preparing for future academical studies and working life

on the NGO filed, it seemed an obvious choice to focus on a concrete activity and its analysis. The target group is also relevant both from personal and professional reasons, since the author has an immigrant background herself, she is part of an intercultural family and deeply interested in the themes of inclusion, integration, and well-being of the minority groups living in Finland.

Since the focus is on the peer support group participants own experience regarded to the program and its content, the main questions the researcher wanted to get an answer for are the followings; 1.) What were the primary benefits of the program as perceived by the participants? 2.) What kind of improvement can be made regarded to the program structure and activities?

## 5 WORKING LIFE PARTNER

### 5.1 Familia ry

The working life partner of the current thesis and the fathers' group project was a Helsinki based non-governmental organization, called Familia ry. The NGO mainly focuses on the well-being promotion of intercultural families residing in Finland (Familia ry, 2021). They offer peer support group activities, children's and baby clubs, Finnish language courses, counselling services and networking events for their target group. (Familia ry, 2021). Since Familia ry is one the main expertise on intercultural family matters, their support and contribution to the current research and Rafael Borges' project work was essential (Familia ry 2021). Familia ry provided its platform for advertising the fathers peer support group activities, and suggested a partner organization's platform, Parisuhdekeskus Kataja ry, in order to find the suitable amount and well-matching participants to the project.

The collaboration between Familia ry, the fathers group facilitator and the researcher was strengthen over the time, as both students were completing their practical placement at the organization, therefore daily connection, short meetings and negotiations around research permit was a dynamic and fast process.



## 5.2 Father's group

The peer support group participant total number were 8. They got evaluated and selected before the first peer support group session started according to the criterium of the facilitator, Rafael Borges. The participants shared a common background; they were fathers or fathers to be; a part of an intercultural family; they all lived permanently in Finland; and they spoke English (Rafael B., personal communication, 12.09.2022 ). The participants were open to share their opinion in a form of feedback at the end of each group sessions, which principally would had been used as a part of the thematic analysis. Later, due to the reach quantitative data provided during the focus group discussion, the data collected in a project diary was discarded from the current research. The number of voluntary participants in the focus group discussion was 6, and their conversations and answers to open ended questions were analysed. All participants received 2 preparatory sessions. One in a form of a short power point presentation which was created by Kamilla Fodor and interpreted by the group facilitator (see it among the appendixes). The goal was to prepare the participants for the focus group discussion by explaining them its purpose, goals, and duration. Another short breathing was organized right before the focus group discussion has started, to remind everyone to their rights, and options to overview the research results before the thesis writing process ends; or optionally after the thesis has been published. All the 6 participants actively got involved into the forming discussion and provided valuable information on their personal experience regarded to the program.

## 6 DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

It was predictable that during the research project a large amount of data would be gathered. Therefore, the researcher had to follow some data gathering steps to not miss important information due to poor planning, equipment failure or other issues. Firstly, the of the focus group discussion needed to enable on-site and online participation, therefore the researcher needed a quite space with a display, speakers, internet connection and recording device. The meeting room was set up an hour prior to the discussion with the help of the peer support group facilitator, who had experience in holding

hybrid sessions. The list of open-ended guiding questions were prepared and printed out, so the structure of the conversation can be followed without confusion. Ideally the researcher could have also taken some observational notes during the discussion, however it became clear that it is more important to connect with the participants and listen to what they have to say. The focus group discussion was recorded by a smart phone and the zoom recorder, to have a back up copy in case something happens with one of the two devices. The discussion took 50 minutes. During the conversation the researcher tried to engage everyone equally and gave space for people to react to each other, as it would happen in a natural conversation.

As a second step, the recorded conversation needed to be saved in the project's folder. The sound quality of the records was satisfactory, however some sentences turned to be slightly unclear due to some participants' low volume of speech. The records were also saved to Kamilla Fodor's computer in a back up folder, to avoid any technical issues.

### 6.1 Focus group discussion

A focus group, which is a well-known and widely used qualitative research method ensures an interactive and stimulative environment for the research participants and aims to gather diverse opinions in a more natural social setting (Hennink 2014, 1). The strength of a focus group discussion is that each participant can have a reaction and contra reaction to what they were asked about and what the other participants said. Since a focus group mimics a thematized discussion that often happens in a peer support group setting, it can create an opportunity both for the facilitator and the participants to self-disclose and discover underlying concepts together. Focus group discussions according to Hennink (2014, 1-2) designed for 6-8 or max up to 10 participants of common background who focuses on a particular issue or aspect within a limited timeframe. Successful facilitation of a focus group requires preparation and specific skillset from the researcher. At a pragmatic level, the facilitator needs to design questions which can be stimulative for the discussion participants, and aim for uncovering an issue instead of reaching a consensus within the group (Hennink 2014, 2). In addition, leading a focus group requires sensitivity towards the participants while keeping an objective distance, which can create a tension between the roles embodied by the facilitator; one of an empathetic listener and another of an observer. Creating a safe

atmosphere is also a key to build rapport with the participants, and it could be challenging for novice practitioners. Therefore, undergoing a training is usually suggested for focus group facilitation. Opposing to other methods, such as individual interviewing, the participants remain in a familiar group structure, which mimics the setup of the peer support group sessions. Therefore, a more natural and less exposed environment can be provided for individuals who have already built a certain level of intimacy with each other.

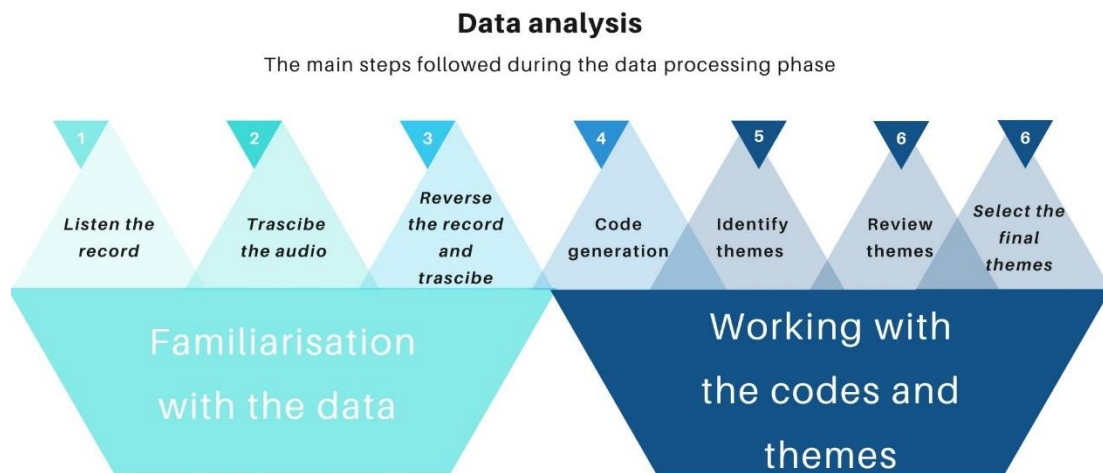
## 6.2 Thematic content analysis

The research project involved a time-intensive data-analysis process which was divided into several phases. The main methodology that provided a guidance for screening and re-organising the answers of the peer support group participants was thematic content analysis. In the following section the reader is going to be provided with a summary on how the data analysis was conducted step by step.

Thematic analysis refers to a description method of qualitative data which source can be a transcribed interview or other material which is textual in nature (Anderson 2007, 1). The advantage of thematic analysis within the proposed research context is manifold. First, the gained data from the focus group discussion could be thematize further and can be utilized together with other observational and transcribed materials collected by the leader of the peer support group. With this mixed method, the researcher would be able to gain enough data for further and in depth analysis, even if the number of participants is limited.

The data analysis required the following steps: 1. listening to the record; 2. transcribing the conversation; 3. reading the transcribed document multiple times and listening the record again (to get familiar and comfortable with the data); 4. collecting codes from the texts; identifying main and subthemes; 5. collecting direct quotations from the participants; rearranging the overlapping themes by merging them into larger categories; 6. Selection of final themes. The research questions were predefined before the focus group session, the approach used within the thematic analysis was top-down, as Maguire and Delahunt (2017) referred to Braun & Clarke (2006), which means that the gained data linked to the main interest of the current research, the experience of the end-users.

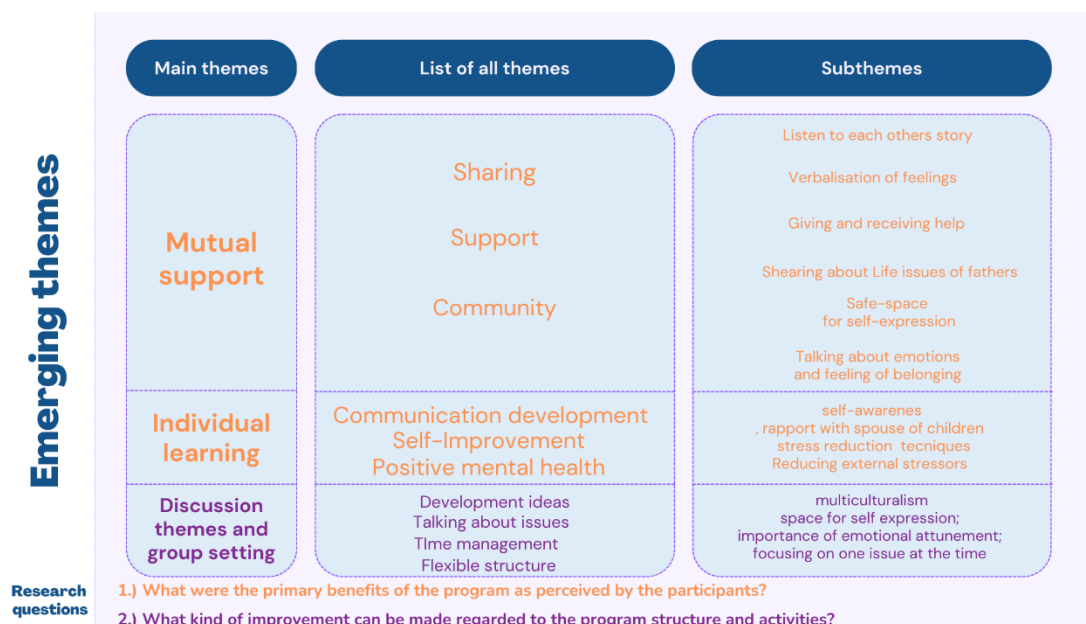
## 1) Figure: The main steps of data analysis



Based on: Moira Maguire & Brid Delahunt (2017)

Background information about the participants marital status, number and age of children and their country of origin was not collected, however in some cases the group discussion revealed that 5 of them had at least one child and 1 of them was about to become a father. All the participants spoke English, and resided in different parts of Finland (mainly in Helsinki). One of the participants attended the focus group discussion online, as it was also a possibility during the 8-week program. All 6 of the fathers lived in an intercultural family and the majority of them was not originally from Finland (one exception).

## 2). Figure: Emerging themes combined with the research questions



After the voice record of the focus group discussion was transcribed, the researcher read repeatedly the prepared written word document. Each section of the document was marked with a line number, from 1 to 725. The code generation process was divided into 2 phases. First, the researcher highlighted sentences in the text that could relate to the initial research questions. In the following, an excel document was created to generate the list of subthemes, list of all themes, main themes, quotations, and notes. To create a clear structure, each section got an individual cell in the created table. All the gathered information was placed to the excel file. To make it easier to navigate in the document, colour codes were applied to link the themes with direct quotations. The list of the main themes was mutual support, individual learning, and finally discussion themes and group setting (see above).

## 7 RESULTS

The next chapter will tackle the research questions by organizing the participants inputs into common themes and subthemes. The focus group discussion was conducted on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May, 2022. A list of the guiding questions were used during the session (see appendix 2). Alternation to the main questions occasionally occurred as participants elaborated naturally on their thoughts and got into a new conversational territory.

To ensure participant anonymity, a system of numeric codes ranging from 1 to 5 was assigned to everyone. Consequently, throughout the subsequent sections, direct quotations and thoughts will be denoted by the respective participant codes (p.1, p.2, etc.), facilitating the traceability of contributions to their respective sources.

### 7.1 Mutual support as a key benefit

The focus group participants (P.1-6) mentioned several times during the discussion that their main motivation for joining to the peer support activities was to give and receive support regarding to their personal life and intercultural fatherhood. At the beginning of the group discussion everyone talked about how they decided to register to the group season. The reoccurring reasons were; “finding help for myself”, “offer support for advise (P.6); after living through a crisis just “feeling to be somewhere” (P.5). In addition, P.1 highlighted the importance of knowing how other multicultural families “go about their lives” and get support from other fathers in similar life-situation as he was in:

I do find a lot of value and my motivation is both to find help for myself even if it is kind of like getting something off my chest, but it is also good to hear what other people are going through and be there, offer support, advise, what not and it is good to meet other guys and make connections  
– Participant 6

#### 7.1.1 Sharing, and community

Additional subthemes that occurred during the analysis were in connection with belonging and talking about emotions. In a peer support group context establishing a safe space is essential to create suitable atmosphere for each participant to reflect on themselves and uncover their feelings. It can be challenging to build a trustful relationship with one another if the participants feel judged, misunderstood, or misinterpreted. Based on the focus group discussion it is apparent that the fathers valued the space and time which was given to them to express themselves and react to their peers. As P.3 explained, talking about

issues is important because it helps everyone to understand what the other person went through without unnecessary assumptions and harm. Furthermore, he highlighted the fact that talking about emotion could take time for him, especially when he arrives to the session after work. The participant described the same notion with his own words in the following manner:

It takes me a while to warm up and It's I very rarely go as a first person to start sharing something because somehow.. I am still somehow in my work context and not here yet, I just walked and suddenly I have to open up about some emotions.

P.1 realized his need for regular connection with others, and the program seemed to help him to contextualize his inner thoughts and encourage him to attend similar peer support group activities:

I am a foreigner in Finland, so my social life is quite... Terrible. So now I understand.. I mean I kind of knew it but now I want to fight a better way , okay so this is kind of occasions I need so I need to go somewhere else, find another group maybe or try to find something else similar to this. So this was probably the most important thing I found out during the sessions.

## 7.2 Individual learning and positive outcomes

The participants recalled how the program encouraged them to self-reflect and identify their emotions. As p.1 explained, he started focusing more on possible needs behind emotions especially in relation with his child, thanks for the sessions. He further elaborated on how the “need behind emotion” works as an effective motto that he can recall in relevant moments. When the group was asked to express with one word what the program offered for them, different answers emerged. For instance, p.3 mentioned that he gained self-awareness. The concept of “perspective” was also highlighted by p.6, who further elaborated on how his clearer understanding about his feelings, needs translate to better communication with his spouse. The same participant added that he can break down certain problems better and this very improvement helped to bring him closer to his wife-Sense of belonging was the most personally relevant positive aspect that p.2 outlined, as the meetings allow him to take a break from the monotonous

and fast-paced routine. He was allowed to slow down and concentrate on his thoughts and connection with others. In addition, diversity within the group appeared to be a positive aspect that p. 5 particularly appreciated. He mentioned that Finland is getting to be intercultural, therefore there is growing need to spread information that can help everyone to communicate better and see things from a wider perspective.

Based on the feedback of the participants, it can be concluded that all of them learnt something new thanks for the program's topics, methods, and group interactions.



### 7.3 Discussion themes and group setting

The participants collectively proposed specific areas for enhancement. For instance, with regards to the program, there is room for greater flexibility concerning the themes under discussion. Some of the participants also found the program intense and emotionally loaded. To create a pleasant and lighter atmosphere, the main theme of the peer support group could be more pragmatic less didactic and facilitator driven, as another participant suggested. For instance, light topics could be also discussed, focusing on positive aspects rather than conflictual situations and emotional hardship.

In addition, it was noted that the selection of topics could benefit from a more consensual approach, rather than being predefined solely by the facilitator. Another participant wished to give more emphasis to multiculturalism in the future, as all the fathers had diverse cultural background. There was apparently not enough space for in depth discussion about how the fathers' everyday life was influenced by multilingual home environment, cultural adaptation process, and integration in Finland. The commonality that linked the participants that they shared experience of not living within an ethnically homogeneous family and not having a big social circle around them.

Regarding to the duration of the sessions, the participants explained that 45 minutes could be dedicated for a topical discussion and another 45 minutes to learning something new. There was a consensus about that it is essential to emotionally attune with the group members at the beginning of the sessions, therefore the facilitator needs to dedicate space for checking in with the participants. The structure and overall time-management of the sessions were evaluated by the participants differently. According to p.1, the facilitator could have talked less and avoid hurrying the attendees. In contrast, p.3 commented that there was no problem with time management, but he found the duration of the sessions short, which was in total two hours.

#### 7.4 Structural changes

In the second half of the focus group discussion the researcher had a discussion with the participants about what would be their wish for the future, how could the program improve. One of the ideas was raised by p. 6 who suggested to create a mixture of fixed and flexible group structural. As p.6 explained, sometimes it could be beneficial to let the participants think about the official topic and continue the discussion in the upcoming week, in a less thematized manner. This structure could support the participants to think more after each session, digest the topics and bring personally relevant issues for the upcoming meeting.

Other activities could be also integrated to the program, to make it more calming, therapeutical, or interactive as the participants pointed out. Meditation or relaxation techniques could be used as a reoccurring group ritual, as it was suggested by p.5. Sharing laughter and happy moments were also elements that the same participant wished to experience more. As he put it, “laugh relaxes the body, your system and mind it is important to have some kind of nice thing also to bring up not just the problem”.

A future collaboration with a psychotherapist was also among the participants inputs, which could be a logical next step if the facilitator does not have similar professional background.

#### 7.5 Conclusion

Based on the peer support facilitator Rafael Borges (2023, 15) the group project’s main goal was to “To strengthen the emotional relationship between fathers and their children”. The available data and limited scope of the current research is not suitable to prove if the desired impact was reached by the program. Borges followed two objectives during the implementation of the group season. The first was to improve the emotional support of fathers in intercultural families. Taking into account the feedback of the focus group participants, each father mentioned that they gained new knowledge, interpersonal skills and insights due to the group activities and discussions. Overall, the participants were showing a desire to continue the group meetings in the

future and some of them were sad that the group ended. The given feedback of the participants highlighted the fact how much a 7-week long program can achieve, especially if its structure is focused on self-reflection, non-violent communication, and interpersonal relationships. The mentioned aspect is aligned with the project's second objective, that aimed "to increase participants' emotional self-awareness meanwhile introducing the basics of nonviolent communication framework within the session's theme, with the use of two working tools (Borges 2023, 16). All participants mentioned that the program made them think about what they do in their everyday life, how they interact with loved ones and what kind of needs are behind certain emotions. From the participants feedback it can be concluded that the program had strong structural points, but certain aspects could be also developed to provide more time, safe space and routine for the attendees.

## 7.6 Recommendations

In the future, the peer support group targeting multicultural fathers could have more focus on the empowerment of individuals. All the development point that was highlighted by the participants could be considered and tested in a future pilot program. Since the engagement of the attendees were high during the peer support group season, the duration of the program could be prolonged from 7 to 10-12 weeks. If the aim of the future program is supporting the fathers to learn new skills and develop their relationship with their children, possibly more time would be necessary to reach long-lasting positive effect. Gathering data on the long-term impact of specialized peer support programs could also help to create high quality programs that could be replicated and used as a new framework.

## 7.7 Limitations

The collected data was necessary to evaluate the peer support group strength and weaknesses from the target groups' perspective. However, the result cannot be conclusive or generalizable. One of the reasons is that the group was diverse, and it might restrict the project successful replication with another target group and within a different setting. During a focus group discussion participants could influence each other's point

of view or demonstrate “group-thinking” which makes it more difficult to decide if an idea was just momentarily echoed by others or considered self-generated. The sample size allowed the researcher to conclude the session within the recommended max. 1 h time limit. During the moderation repeatedly asked questions about positive impact might create suggestive answers, however the participants felt open to share rather developmental points regarded to the program’s structure and content. Therefore, the first research question could be answered but based on more limited amount of data than the second question. Furthermore, the timescale of the research posed a challenge to prove if the participants developed emotional self-awareness and empathetic communication skills, because it might require a qualitative data collection method and its analysis, which was not aligned with the current research design and the researcher’s capacity.

## 8 Professional development

The subject of the thesis created a challenging and inspiring working process, which was full of unexpected changes, new discoveries, and interpersonal connections. The selection of the research methodology, practices and data analysis methods took longer time than it was previously calculated. Due to the positive work pressure and collaborative atmosphere, the research project come to its end and left space for reflection. In accordance with the competence requirement of the bachelor’s in social services (DIAK, 2022), the following professional skills got improved as a result of the thesis process: the researcher 1.) supported the development of individuals, groups in a goal centered manner, 2.) applied research, and innovation methods and analyzed data to promote well-being, 3.) acted professionally in interaction situations and was able to critically reflect on his/her own actions. In addition, the collaborative work with Rafael Borges offered a unique and innovative opportunity to combine a project based and research-oriented thesis work. Shortcomings in research-oriented work were identified and reflected upon. There is a lot of methodological skills that can be developed further and trained in the future. Overall, the subject of the thesis and the conducted background research deepened the wider knowledge of the researcher.

## 9 RESEARCH ETHICS

To ensure the research participants' safety, the overall result's reliability and the protection of sensitive data, the main principles of research ethics need to be considered. In the next sections, the ethical background, transparency, data handling and distribution of results are going to be discussed.

### 9.1 Ethical principles

In research, ethical conduct involves addressing questions of right and wrong. To do this, researchers refer to the ethical principles established within their research community, as discussed by Wiles (2013, p. 12). The ethical implications of qualitative research could be shortly summarized by four main principles such as informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, risk and safety assessment, and lastly, moral dilemmas (Wiles, 2013 ). Informed consent needs to be required from the research participants by providing all necessary information related to what is going to happen during the research process, how the gathered data is going to be handled and what is the participants rights, such as withdrawing from the research completely within the given timeframe.

During the planning phase of the focus group discussion, participants were informed about the research project in two stages. Firstly, the peer support group leader, Rafael Borges, received a brief presentation from Kamilla Fodor. This presentation aimed to summarize the key information pertaining to the focus group discussion. The participants received information about the study's purpose, the date and duration of the focus group discussion, the assurance of participant anonymity, and their rights to provide voluntary consent and withdraw from the project. The presentation was shown to the participants by the group leader and sent to everyone via the main communication channel that the group established earlier. The participants had time to consider whether they wanted to attend the final focus group discussion. The researcher's contact information was also provided in case they wished to obtain more information from the focus group discussion, data handling or thesis process. On the day of the focus group discussion, all participants were once again provided with the same

information they had previously received. Special emphasis was placed on their rights regarding consent and withdrawal from the research.

## 9.2 Collaboration and transparency

Each steps of the research design was explained and forwarded in a written format to the director of Familia ry before the data collection process has started. The peer group leader and the researcher were working closely from the beginning of data collection to make sure all the participants understand the purpose of data collection, their rights for withdrawal, and restricted use of data. The participants were also assured that their names will be numerically anonymized, and their identity will be protected. Furthermore, they received information about the restricted use of the collected data, the process of data collection method and that their participation is fully voluntary. Informed consent, sharing the thesis and the main results with the stakeholders (Familia ry the group leader, the peer support group participants).

### 9.3 Data handling

All the collected materials which concerned Rafael Borges and Kamilla Fodor thesis process was stored in a shared and protected cloud folder, which had restricted access. The project diary which included recorded weekly feedbacks of the participants and the group facilitator were all added to the project folder, in a form mp3 voice records and their transcribed version. The qualitative data gained after the focus group discussion was recorded with a phone application and with the zoom video recorder, to ensure the quality of the final material. The focus group discussion was transcribed between 3rd and 8th of August, 2022, and right after it was uploaded to the cloud folder. Private use of all data and its' restricted usage was clearly outlined before the research has started. The participants were continuously informed about the purpose of data-collection and their rights of withdraw from the research. Printed materials, and sensitive data, as it was also preliminary determined in the research permit document, are going to be securely erased by using a paper shredder.

Online documents are going to be destroyed after all data processing phases connecting to the current research paper is finalized. Possible data fragments are going to be permanently delated from Kamilla Fodor's personal computer.

### 9.4 Distribution of results

The completed thesis is going to be shared with the participants by email if requested. In the research planning phase Kamilla Fodor agreed with the executive director of Familia ry, Elina Helmanen, to share the key results with the organizations and possibly with its' strategic partners and stakeholders, however this point is a question of further negotiation. In addition, the final thesis is going to be published on Theseus in December 2023.

## 10 DISCUSSION

Intercultural fathers could face manyfold issues while living in Finland. Feeling of belonging is an essential human need that many does not experience due to social isolation, lack of information or personal issues. As masculinity and traditional man roles in the family are rather accommodated based on personal agreements, as religion and collectivism play a less influential role in the Finnish context.

As it was explained in chapter 2, there are certain societal support systems such as family leave reform that allows men to equally participate in child rearing without compromising financial stability. Gender equality allows more flexible practice of roles that males can take in the family, therefore the boundaries between strictly assigned tasks are blurred. Therefore, showing alternative paths could assist fathers who want to be equally involved to the family life, establish an emotionally present and responsive relationship with their loved ones. Low threshold peer support groups could give an opportunity for intercultural men to have a space where they can open-up, socialize, concentrate on their mental landscape, needs, communication skills and conflict resolution methods. Programs however which target is man or intercultural fathers are still not widely common in Finland. Moreover, it should be considered that individuals in intercultural families might have different needs based on their cultural background, education level, age, language skills. It is also not common to establish groups in other languages than Finnish, Swedish or English. The discussed Toivo group model aims to expand the outreach of different communities to improve immigrants' mental health and activate facilitators who lead the group in various languages. The analysed peer support group targeting intercultural fathers in Finland fulfilled a specific niche area that provides a unique model for the future. Based on the result of the 7-week long group activity evaluation, it can be concluded that there is a motivation, need and benefits for organizing future projects related to interculturalism, fatherhood, non-violent communication, and parenting.

The two research questions that give a framework for the thematic data analysis were focusing on the primary benefits of the program based on the participants subjective feedback and their suggestions on how to improve the program further (see chapter 4, section 4.3). The participants highlighted several benefits of the program that promoted their mental health and improved their skillset on communication and self-reflection. Their comments on possible development points were also collected and



reorganized into thematic groups. The participants suggested to integrate topics to the group session that can lighten the atmosphere. In addition, they noted that opening ceremonies or meditation practices could help to self-regulate and arrive to the session. In general terms, the international fathers expressed satisfaction regarded to the time management of the program and its structural content. The sentiment of learning by repeating and observing each other was aligned with the principles of social learning theory. The participants gained knowledge on how to be more self-aware in their everyday interactions with their family members. The group structure enabled learning by repetitive exercises and use of a motto, that the participants remembered to.

Even though there are various pilot programs that have emerged in the past years, the important aspect is how to make these programs sustainable, consistently available, and well-executed. Based on the subjective evaluation of the participants, it can not be concluded if the perceived positive changes would improve the intercultural fathers' well-being in long term. Therefore, further research on the long-term impact of peer support groups could be an intriguing area of inquire.

## APPENDIX 1) Group Plan based on the structure of Rafael Borges (2023).

## 8.2 Group plan

PEER SUPPORT GROUP PLAN
<p><b>1. Name of the group:</b> Duo fathers' group: supporting a wise fatherhood</p> <p><b>2. Beneficiaries:</b> English speaker fathers in intercultural families in Finland</p> <p><b>3. Form of the group:</b> a) Peer support group b) Peer group c) Activity peer group</p> <p>What do the participants need the most: a) open discussions, b) a group to belong to or information or c) activities?</p> <p><b>4. Entering the group:</b> this is a closing group, which means that participants are chosen before the starting and new ones are welcomed just during the first 2 meetings</p> <p><b>5. Participants are interviewed beforehand:</b> Yes. The idea is that the peer supporters and participants get to know each other and the starting of group becomes easier.</p> <p><b>6. Objectives for the group season:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. The participant will be able to reflect with peers on important themes related to fatherhood while developing emotional self-awareness and empathetic communication skills.</li> <li>b. The participant will be able to improve their own well-beingness while adding emotional awareness to past situations related to fatherhood and while discussing in group constructive ways to use emotions.</li> <li>c. The participant will be able to build social network and engage in activities with the peers.</li> </ul> <p><b>7. Desired number of participants:</b> 3-10</p> <p><b>8. Language:</b> English</p> <p><b>9. Name(s) of the peer supporter(s):</b> Rafael Vieites Borges</p> <p><b>10. Meeting place:</b> Familia's premises at Lintulahdenkatu 10, 7th Floor, 00500 Helsinki</p>

**5th meeting - themes:** fathers' wellbeing, mental health, and healthy masculinity

**Objective:** To identify main emotions regarding fathers' wellbeing; To discuss the stereotype of strong masculinity and suppression of emotions.

**Exercises:** Mielj's coping skills list and hand of mental health; movie "The mask you live in".

**6th meeting - theme:** relationship roles after children

**Objective:** To reflect on the main emotions regarding new roles and new relationship models after the birth.

**Exercises:** list of emotions and list of human needs; booklet "Welcoming Emotions".

**7th meeting - theme:** parenting and empathetic communication

**Objective:** To identify main emotions relating to parenting styles.

**Exercises:** list of emotions and list of human needs;

<http://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/category/parenting/parenting-guides/>

**8th meeting - theme:** dining and sauna day – celebration and closing of the group

**Objective:** Closing and celebration of the learning process.

**Expert guest:** Former peer leader Fabrizio Turci.

**Exercises:** Cooking activity and focus group.

## APPENDIX 2.) Focus group; questions for the participants.

Questions**1. (Informal, ice-breaking questions)**

So, it is your last meeting, you are going to have a nice meal, you spent 7 weeks together which is a long period, so

**-how are you feeling coming to the last session of the fathers' peer support group this afternoon?**

**2. You have spent 7 weeks together with other fathers.** Has the experience of being a part of a group had any impact on your wellbeing or your connection with your child? Could you elaborate on your answer?

**3. 5 out of 7 sessions were dedicated to structured reflections around the themes of fatherhood and development of emotional intelligence.** What do you think, have the discussed topics had an impact on you as a person and as a father? Why? (Could you elaborate on it) ...Have you gone through any positive change during the program?

in case there was not any significant impact, could you justify your comprehension so that we can understand what could be developed in a group that significantly would impact in your fatherhood experience...

**4. Is there any way in which the fathers' peer support group could be improved? Please share your thoughts on it** (more unstructured discussion, the overall length of the peer support group could be extended, the order of the activities could be different, some other topics need to be included).

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