



## Beyond Honour and Achieved Hegemony: Violence and the Everyday Masculinities of Young Men

**Stephen Tomsen**

Western Sydney University, Australia

**David Gadd**

University of Manchester, United Kingdom

### Abstract

Mainstream criminology has stressed the importance of flawed notions of personal honour among disadvantaged and minority group men in interactive social disputes that escalate into serious violence. Recent gender studies and critical criminology have been concerned with wider structures of power and the links between hegemonic masculinity and violence directed against women or occurring between men. Our focus group study of views about violence among a mixed cohort of young men suggests the relevance of both these approaches as causal explanations. Nevertheless, violence was also narrated and understood through the sharp moral distinctions between illegitimate and wrongful enactments, and idealised accounts of violent events as measured, fair and just. Anti-violence initiatives need to anticipate the shifting ways by which young men distance themselves and their own violence from negative meanings, along with a continuing belief in a category of male violence that they deem legitimate, admirable, or even heroic.

### Keywords

Gender; hegemonic masculinity; male honour; masculinities; violence.

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## Introduction

### *Male honour*

Globally, male-perpetrated violence against women and other men comprises the great bulk of reported and recorded assaults and homicides. Even in the most serious or fatal cases, many of these incidents appear to arise out of what appears to others as unjustified or trivial reasons for involvement in intense conflicts. To explain this paradox of apparent triviality but critical outcomes in much male-perpetrated violence, researchers have emphasised the significance of retaining 'face', respect and social honour. Their focus is not a historical male code drawn from traditional notions of chivalry, but a commonplace view among men of appropriate social relations grounded in everyday understandings of respect and disrespect, as these are reflected in their interaction with others. Many violent disputes between men arise from petty differences and slights regarding aspects of apparently disrespectful interaction in everyday socialising around licensed venues, open streets and spaces, or while driving in traffic or using public transport (Campbell 1986; Felson and Steadman 1983; Luckenbill 1977).

In a substantial corpus of studies that have closely focused on the details of social interactions that trigger violent encounters, researchers have amassed evidence about an apparent heightened sensitivity to personal affronts and insults, and an overwhelming need to react quickly and aggressively to these with verbal abuse and physical violence (Felson et al. 2017). These actions arise from social disputes that are seemingly so minor, or so intertwined with some illegal act or practice, that reporting and arbitration from police or other legitimate state authority becomes impossible. Whether the central framework for these studies has been concerned with the aggressive behaviour of 'disputatious' individuals (Felson et al. 2017), or the vexed symbolic interaction that occurs in everyday social relations, research in this area reveals that the particular danger of these incidents is a sharp male sense of grievance and the appropriateness of a violent response to real or imagined actions, slights, and the perceived hostile intentions of other people (Luckenbill and Doyle 1989).

Findings from this literature suggest that such an inclination to quick conflict and interpersonal violence is characteristic of younger lower-status males who are overwhelmingly from poor communities and the most materially disadvantaged racial or ethnic minorities (Oliver 1994; Stewart and Simons 2010). Such men, it is hypothesised, engage in arguments that easily escalate and evolve into heated character contests (Deibert and Miethe 2003) with likely bloodshed as a result. This may be worse among those immersed in particular urban subcultures or a street-based code of violence (Stewart and Simons 2010; Wolfgang and Ferracutti 1967). Within such theorising, maintaining face and honour become the explanation as to why poor and socially marginal men decide to engage in dangerous violence. By implication, other men, more embedded in mainstream cultures or the code of the office suite, are perceived as much less prone to responding in kind to a broad range of perceived slights.

In scenarios of both intimate partner violence and male-on-male confrontational violence, male perpetrators often conceive of themselves as the dishonoured party in a shared social dispute. The most successful analyses of this phenomenon have complemented it with a structural dimension and sensitivity to matters of deep social inequality. Feminist research has long revealed how violence against women as intimate partners can reflect a high level of sensitivity to perceived challenges to men's authority, control and sexual possessiveness. It has tended to conceive of this violence as ultimately instrumental in securing patriarchal authority (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Stanko 1990). Masculinities researchers have become concerned with the subjective, multilayered and frequently less rational aspects of this engagement in violence. Bourgois (1995) studied crack dealers from a deprived Puerto Rican neighbourhood in New York as men who struggled for masculine honour and respect through their crime and wrongdoing. Drug dealing, violence and sexual assaults were a distorted mirror of the limited empowerment won by male forebears in a traditional rural patriarchy, in which protection and provision for

women and families were vital aspects of gender dominance. Polk (1999) focused on the sense of grievance, and the moves and countermoves that render a violent response ultimately necessary among working-class men faced with real or imagined slights and hostile intentions. This typically occurs in the context of social drinking, where violence has become normalised and police or criminal justice intervention is virtually non-existent.

Indeed, there is an emerging consensus that in addition to conscious matters of honour and respect, a complex phenomenology is often involved in encounters in which the perpetrator feels shunned or persecuted by the victim, while almost entirely unable to view the world from their perspective. Hence, Ray and colleagues documented evidence of the unacknowledged shame among hate-crime perpetrators who felt menaced by Asian victims, whom they regarded as acting superior and 'laughing at them' (Ray, Smith and Wastell 2004). Likewise, Gadd and Dixon (2011) detected unconscious paranoia among racial harassment perpetrators who suspect their victims to be muttering incomprehensibly about them in their own languages, taunting them by dating white women, or otherwise exposing their own failings to secure better lives for themselves. From their psychosocial perspective, Gadd and Jefferson (2007) drew attention to the degree to which domestic abuse perpetrators attempted to silence partners who were not merely 'nagging', but also articulating truths too painful to endure regarding the men's failings as husbands and fathers. In his ongoing work on male sexuality and violence, Tomsen (2009, 36) exposed the 'unconscious and bodily grounded fears' of invasion, contamination and disease behind some of the most brutal attacks on gay/homosexual men, as well as the law's tendency to collude with this by viewing same-sex approaches as a major threat to male self-respect, which legitimises the defence of 'homosexual advance'.

Such matters of hate crime and homicide may appear unrelated to the everyday acts and thinking of most boys and men. However, this broader approach—which incorporates social structure, wider culture, collective beliefs and even the influence of legal discourse—reflects a relation to key aspects of masculinity across contemporary society and the wider engagement with levels of violence as social action, language and uneven judgements about the legitimacy of different perpetrators and victims. Further, this signals the need to conceptualise a more nuanced sets of relationships between masculinities, specific forms of violence and the ways that they are discussed by perpetrators and victims. These ubiquitous defensive responses to slights, and the ensuing escalation of quick engagement in social conflict that follows, have not usually been perceived as typical of men in general. Yet, attacks on the media, immigrants, political rivals and even whole nations deemed disrespectful of his authority by the current President of the United States, Donald Trump, remind us of the defensive qualities of contemporary masculinities, even at the very top of the class spectrum.

### *Hegemony*

An equally influential explanation for men's violence in contemporary society derives from research concerned with how everyday male social practices and identities play out within the wider structural relations of power and conflict between men and women, and also importantly, between different groups of men. In Raewyn Connell's (1995) highly influential model that merged elements of Gramscian Marxism with a feminist view of gendered social power, there is an overarching interest among men in attaining the power and status accorded to hegemonic masculinity. This exists at the apex of a hierarchy of different and evolving masculinities that are in various ways complicit, subordinate or ostensibly opposed to the dominant pattern. Any approximation of this hegemonic form is highly contingent on the levels of real social power reached in different men's lives and it 'is the successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, that is the mark of hegemony (though violence often underpins or supports authority)' (1995, 77). Most importantly, for criminologists and researchers of violence, a key oppositional form is described as 'protest' masculinity—a form characteristic of men in a marginal location of social class, with a masculine claim on power that is undermined by economic and social weakness (1995, 116).

In reply to early critiques seeking more stress on unconscious forces and class difference in masculinity (Hall 2002; Jefferson 1997), both Connell (2000, 2002, 2016) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have suggested considerable theoretical refinements to this model. They believe it does not describe either a fixed character type or a monolithic practice that is shared by all men. Further contributions from or led by criminologist James Messerschmidt (2004, 2018; Messerschmidt and Messner 2018; Messerschmidt and Tomsen 2016) have explored variation in subjectivity, identity and embodiment among men who perpetrate crime, and the mixed and often failing relation this has to social patterns of male power and dominance.

Connell's model has been a truly persuasive development in contemporary social research. It deals readily with evidence of variation and change in destructive and benign masculinities in a way that is not available to essentialist and evolutionary explanations of gendered social phenomena. Further, the core notion of hegemony as 'rule by consent' implies the very opposite of domination by crude violence or threats of violence. As interpreted by some researchers (e.g., Hall 2002), this can be taken as referring to what Connell notes is a problematic category of 'achieved hegemony' (2016), and a conscious, knowing and effective process of seeking male power via violent engagement. In particular, this view becomes ambiguous as to whether violence is the means used by some men to accomplish the hegemonic position, or whether it is better conceived as the articulation of an oppositional form of protest masculinity. The personal or shared goal of seeking hegemony can be read back into the myriad characteristics, attitudes and actions that exist among most delinquent boys and criminalised groups of men (Hood-Williams 2001).

In line with the intention of the key scholars who generated and have refined this theoretical model, studies reject such reductionism and acknowledge major variations in violent and other masculinities and contradictory official responses to them (see Connell 2016; Messerschmidt 2018). For example, these discovered that the criminal justice system itself has been complicit with the production of violent masculinities among the general population when downplaying male violence directed against women and other men perceived as illegitimate victims—including assaults treated as an institutional means of fostering hardened masculine identities among the general male population (Tomsen and Wadds 2016). Critical criminologists illuminate how corporate capital still relies heavily upon the maintenance of a workforce embodying a sexist and violent masculinity that was most prized in the industrial age (Carrington, McIntosh and Scott 2012; Hobbs et al. 2003).

Most importantly, any conflation of violence and masculinity in general is not merely an issue for research and analysis in criminology. Law enforcement strategies that sharply reflect the insecurity and fears of urban elites and the middle class in the global metropole, can rely on clichéd images of violent masculinity. In this framework, it is the ostensibly rough appearance and manner of youths and men from poor and minority backgrounds that serve as the early public warning signs of criminal risk and danger. In fact, the monitoring, policing and control of this sort of unsettling masculine deportment can feature as a major crime-fighting task in institutional law enforcement and middle-class demands for security and protection from public disorder and incivility (Gau and Pratt 2008).

Given this frequent confusion between the likelihood and occurrence of serious violence and the corporeal presence and indecorum of working, underclass and minority group males in urban space, fostering this sort of negative imagery is a particular hazard of conducting research in this field. In what follows, we attempt to avoid this pitfall by exploring how young men's narratives of fairness, protection and moral guardianship often conceal the fear, vulnerability, confusion and disarray that permeate the enactment of violence. A circular reading that implies an achieved hegemony in the meanings of violent acts is not necessary if one is prepared to accept that motives for violence and the recounting of rationalisations for it are frequently two different factors.

## Research and analysis

In 2014–2017, a series of 14 focus groups was organised and conducted in and around Sydney with exploration and analysis of the experience and attitudes towards engagements with violence in young men's daily lives. The first phase of this study comprised eight groups with 47 participants who were all aged between 16 and 25 years. These groups were conducted in the western suburbs of the city. Participants included those with Anglo-Australian, Indigenous, Mediterranean, Middle-Eastern, South Asian, South-East Asian and Pacific Islander family backgrounds. Some of these groups have been publicly stereotyped as more inclined to fighting and petty delinquency (see Noble, Tabar and Poynting 1998). However, this was not viewed as a reason to exclude such groups from the study and our recruitment reflected the broader racial and ethnic composition of western Sydney.

In a post-industrial city economy characterised by high levels of young adult jobs in service sectors, and mass enrolment in tertiary education, the identification of many participants as 'working class' was even more problematic than in studies of male violence drawing on a regional and rural cohort (see Tomsen 2005). It is also difficult to equate this descriptor exclusively with unskilled and skilled forms of manual work. Nevertheless, the recruited mix of those with student, manual trade, sales and hospitality, information technology, junior professional and administrative roles, could mostly be referred to as young men from the employed and respectable working class or lower-middle class in this large post-industrial city.

Participants in this phase were openly recruited on the basis of their willingness to discuss any recent (i.e., within the previous year) experience or witnessing of a violent incident or threat of violence. This was done to provide discussion material about real-life experience of violence and conflict, but with caution about how it might skew research results by deterring involvement from those with no experience to report. Participation and discussion were encouraged, no matter the apparent level of seriousness of any experience of violence or direct involvement in it. With guarantees regarding privacy and anonymity, each focus group was conducted and recorded in private rooms at accessible city and suburban commercial premises in mid-week early evenings. Participants were asked about, and in detail discussed aspects of, involvements with violence in everyday circumstances in their personal relationships with partners, family and friends, at home, in work and education, public recreation, sport and nightlife settings. Questions and discussions also drew out the distinction between direct participation in violence (as a perpetrator, victim or both) and the more indirect role of talking about and viewing violence from other people and via watching a range of visual media including television, film, electronic games and internet clips.

Focus groups mostly ran for one to one-and-a-half hours each. This variation reflected the pattern of participant willingness to talk freely and their level of effective group engagement with the topic and questions. All participants were asked for their views on key issues, with care taken to prevent any one or a few voices from dominating discussion. Sessions were recorded, transcribed and closely read for the prominence of key themes and regular use of discourse about different occasions and understandings of violence. These included the distinctions between the private and public and the individual and group contexts of violence, key notions of understanding including respect, blame, risk and fairness, and the gendered elements of participation or withdrawal from violence.

## Results and discussion

### *Intimate partner violence*

While all participants openly identified as heterosexual, only about half had a regular girlfriend and few were married or lived with women partners. Most implied that, for them, the critical site of relevance for any questions about violence against women was in relation to intimate partner



conflict. Questions posed about intimate partners and family violence proved troubling for these young men. These were often first met with quick repetition of official government-led campaign messages that regarded such violence as taboo. Some also elaborated on this with their own view that there was an imperative to disengage from any heated dispute:

Deal with it without hitting each other. (Jamie, Group 3)

Defuse the situation and if you can't defuse it, then what's the point in being in the situation. (Tom, Group 4)

Leave, or they'll leave the house and then you break up—there's no point in getting into that violence. (Ashan, Group 4)

However, a substantial minority of participants drawn from across racial and ethnic lines held to more traditional views about gender. These participants subverted any pacifist or equality talk with their insistence that true men should be able to properly manage their relations with women through firm authority. Hence, there would be no need to resort to direct physical violence:

It's [domestic violence] different in the sense that you know them better and you should know how to handle them. (Jamie, Group 3)

Further, these participants clung to traditional notions about the physical assertion of male power over women. Corporal discipline in families and the parental correction of disobedient children were viewed as unfortunate but sometimes quite reasonable. Female compliance was a rudimentary expectation in building a harmonious couple, and control could be used to secure a relationship that outwardly complied with male dominance. Elements of protecting male honour and a shoring up of the relationship authority of men as sexual partners and husbands became interwoven here:

In extreme circumstances, if you're there having some fight and she goes on, then you will have to ... not beat the shit out of her of course, but if it escalates to that extreme point, well its 'this is full on, I've got to do something to stop it'. (Anton, Group 5)

Very few participant remarks about domestic violence were as candid as this. The overwhelming majority of participants appeared more ambivalent about such violence, even though their views generated an excuse for physical force and coercion. This ambivalence was typically reflected in how personal memories or anecdotes regarding ostensibly excusable violence placed a narrative stress on overt female provocation of events. In this way, the accounts concerned punishing and limiting shameful behaviour by women 'troublemakers' who had embarrassed or harmed others (e.g., by spreading a false rumour or flirting with other men), rather than any routine case of discipline for disobedience of husbands and male partners.

In the idealised descriptions of settled personal relations and good families given by most of these young men, there would never be a need to exercise such violence. In particular, they spoke of 'out-of-control' arguments and physical fights between young men and girlfriends as an especially hazardous aspect of finding satisfying long-term relationships. Girls and women who provoked emotional trouble and even themselves resorted to violence—whether directed against other women or committed to manipulate their boyfriends—were simply figures of shame and ultimately not worthy of romantic commitment. In specific circumstances, the coercive so-called 'restraining' of some women could be appropriate or unavoidable because it was necessary for their own protection. In these contexts, reasonable men might seek either to calm overly 'emotional' girlfriends by only using whatever force was necessary to protect themselves or shield their partners from self-harm.

### *Recreational violence between men*

Despite this collective disapproval of intimate partner and domestic or family violence in general, a minority of the men recruited for this study were far more vocal about their involvements with public recreational violence, and proudly aggressive in their accounts of encounters in which they felt they had protected personal masculine status in their own peer group. Conversations mostly focused on violent clashes between men. Young men from Middle-Eastern families and the few Indigenous participants, for example, were all adamant that they would react quickly and physically to any overt or perceived racism in their daily lives.

An adherence to this injustice-rectifying aggression seemed most pronounced of all among young men from Pacific Islander backgrounds. These men regularly fought with males from other ethnic groups and they referred to the indignities of casual racism—from both Anglo-Australians and rival ethnic groups—as an explanation for much violence. They also frequently clashed with each other over rival access to street territory. In parts of western Sydney dominated by rival Maori and Tongan gangs, clashes over access to drug dealing territory were a regular related motive.

The significance of this became directly apparent when one participant arrived late and still donning a hooded top that covered his face. By way of apology, he showed a sharp knife he had brought with him. He explained that the focus group was being held in territory he perceived as a serious risk to enter on his own, despite his large body size and fighting experience. His tone seemed to reflect a genuine concern about personal safety rather than a cheap attempt to impress the group. A neophyte participation in the criminal economy in an urban area with high unemployment of unskilled youth, and the pressure to be noticed by bosses in gangs led by older, street-smart men, were the backdrop to these accounts of social disputes that sometimes escalated into serious violence with stabbings, medical emergencies and hospital admissions.

A minority of these young men also held to essentialist views about the links between masculinity, aggression and violence. Their group conversation often insisted that there was an inherent or even instinctive relation between male hormones and an urge to resort to quick physical measures if men were challenged in disputes and conflicts in their personal and broader social interactions. Among those more inclined to violence, this seemed like a final excuse for their disposition, although ironically, it also undermined their own sense of agency. However, these sorts of essentialist views were not unique among those more committed to very aggressive responses to perceived insults and disrespect. Essentialist and other accounts of socially determined, or chosen and reasoned violence, were often mixed up in the narratives about male violence and how it unfolded.

The pressures of individual self-respect, group and community belonging, and a wider need to defend masculine honour in social interaction, were all described as commonplace. Many of the accounts related these factors assumed the form of narratives about participation in episodes of violence that seemed to fit the criminological blueprint of escalating conflicts over seemingly petty slights, that are nonetheless, felt as very real matters by many young men. Recreational violence arose from occasions of playing or watching contact sports, night-time leisure at pubs and clubs, or house parties with frequent drug use and collective heavy drinking. These were all scenarios that our participants suggested derived from a sharpened sensitivity to disrespect and insults to honour.

### *Principled violence*

The danger of these escalating disputes that appeared to be character contests over honour and reputation were obvious enough. However, these scenarios were often viewed and mutually understood as compelling situations that, at the time, were believed to be difficult to resist and avoid. For example, one Lebanese–Australian youth related how he attempted to protect a girl from harassing telephone calls and sexual innuendo by another young man in their extended

social circle. He did this by delivering his own telephone warning to the caller. The harassing caller and his own friends then drove to the participant's family house. He and his father confronted them in a knife fight in their front driveway. This resulted in an almost fatal blow to this youth's lower back and a deep scar that he lowered his trousers to show us and with which to corroborate his account. Other focus group participants expressed their relief about his lucky escape in this incident. They also commented on the cowardly nature of a knife attack from behind. This was a distinct contrast from accepting the need for the dangerous but upfront and symbolically manly 'face off'. There was no questioning or criticism of his pathway to involvement in this violent incident or a mention of any alternative ways of resolving this sort of dispute.

This was regarded as a particularly perilous occasion of hard-to-avoid violence, although it was uncertain if the stabbed participant in this group really had a solidly established link to the 'girlfriend' he claimed to protect. Yet, in relation to this and similar matters, most young men in our groups believed that there was a 'moral line' of respect that is often crossed in social interaction in which the unacceptable behaviour of others will finally necessitate an aggressive warning or probable violence. To a critical outsider, these sorts of occasions seemed to be matters that involve a real measure of personal choice, and that also might be managed through other means. However, even in cases that clearly involved their own obvious victimisation, reporting to authorities was regarded as a very unlikely course of action. Participants expected no real understanding of cause and blame in such incidents from police, security and other authorities who might witness or hear about such conflicts. Further, there was little doubt that police would have a limited interest in prior intervention in the myriad number of such disputes that permeate an urban community, before they each escalate into a far more serious or lethal matter (see Tomsen and Wadds 2016).

The distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence uncovered in other focus group research on young men's violence (Ravn 2018) was ever present, but also extended as a moral binary by a view of legitimate violence as heroic in form. A masculine 'heroic' image of self-sufficiency when in personal trouble or even as someone who regularly rescues others, is a common way that young men and boys conceive of their own autonomous way of managing social conflict and harm (Gadd et al. 2014). This heroic self-understanding gave a further dimension to the exclusion of seeking out any possible police or official help. The scenarios of conflict and the narrative unfolding of action in incidents given as real-life examples did sometimes seem conveniently brave and admirable. However, from the perspective of these young men, there was nothing wrong, and a lot that was right, with any aggressive response to strangers fondling girlfriends, or to those making degradingly sexist or racist remarks to friends or family:

For me any stupid little thing like someone bumping into me or spilling my drink—I don't give a shit move on, but if someone abuses a friend or a sister or a girlfriend, or abuses my own values, like I hate racism and I see a lot of it when I go out, if someone is racist towards me, I treat everyone for face value if you treat me good, I'll treat you good. (Chris, Group 5)

Even if someone calls you the worst name possible, if you're with a girl you just ignore it because you want to be good with them ... But if you're with your girlfriend and someone calls her an ugly slut or something you don't. (Jarrod, Group 6)  
I think I have a lot of bad luck in my life. I tend to get disrespected in a cross-the-line kind of way a lot of times. I'm not a violent person. I don't necessarily like to hurt people you know. But if someone crosses that boundary I will. (Andre, Group 6)

In these accounts, the excusable compulsive violence was that of a superhero with no choice but to act, rather than of a troublemaker or sadistic thug with no control over their temper and a general desire to inflict pain. Such violence was perceived as measured, proportionate and



precise, and necessary to defend someone else's honour, rather than their own fragile ego—used to instil a moral lesson rather than maim, mutilate or murder. The superhero uses violence to incapacitate and redirect those who bully weak opponents, are racist, target women, and are just plain crazy. He does so in a self-sacrificing way, not because he enjoys it (Sparks 1996).

### *Uncontrolled violence and the risk of injury*

Participants who offered these views were asked if these sorts of heroic narratives were simply after-event rationalisations of violence arising from immediate concerns with masculine honour. In reply, they would only concede that there are occasions in which violence *by others, rather than their own selves*, served as a measure to protect male reputation. This might also bolster personal power in social relations, though often in a contrived way that attracted would-be 'big men' and 'wankers'. Even this ambiguous outcome could appear to confirm a male honour or masculinity enactment thesis. However, such factors were rarely proclaimed as the positive and conscious goals in most of the violence discussed. In general, these young men expressed highly mixed views about violence and its relation to masculinity.

Against the simple notion that a masculine reputation can always be built on ubiquitous violence, they were scathing of those who provoked conflicts and physical fights in an uncontrollable or 'mad' manner. In fact, those who engaged in this practice with frequency were no longer invited to social occasions. Friends and companions who readily provoked such incidents were viewed as little more than a nuisance within their own groups. This was especially the case given how such young men would set off trouble with powerful rivals, police and other authorities, trigger bans from sports teams and sporting events, or end an enjoyable night for others if it finished with collective barring from a pub, club or party, or worst of all, sitting late at night in a hospital ward or a police station:

The main reason I avoid fights, I'm not scared of getting punched but I'm shit scared of getting stabbed or fucking shot which happens too often these days so I tend to avoid a fight nine times out of ten ... I don't know who I'm fucking fighting ... this bloke could be a fucking lunatic. (Michael, Group 5)

We know that getting into a fight is just going to ruin the night for everyone. If you get banned from playing sport, you have a passion for basketball why ruin it, why ruin something you love just for a few moments of anger? (Caleb, Group 8)

I think you realise the consequences ... that's the difference between people who fight and don't fight is the moment of realisation. Some people have it right from the beginning, some people have it as it's about to kick off or as a couple of punches are being thrown 'oh this is going to be bad'. (Jack, Group 8)

You get kicked out at soccer you get sent off, your team loses so everyone hates you for that. (Lucas, Group 6)

For these young men, engagement with violence can be positively masculine if deployed to regulate social respect and protect and defend others. They claimed that this contrasts with the violence of those who attack weak opponents and readily target women. However, it was also the case that truly masculine men might be secure enough to walk away from some matters rather than react to all provocation. Disengagement from violence could also be masculine when enacted by men with the confidence to withdraw from petty conflicts with seemingly unworthy opponents:

My mentality is you know if you're going to fire up to every Tom, Dick and Harry that fires up at you—you're going to be in a fight every single week. If you walk

away it's not your pride, it's you being a bigger man by saying you're a fuckwit, I'm not going to get into trouble because of your shit. (John, Group 7)

The thing that goes in my head is if I end up in a fight now I'm going to end up going home pretty much, shirt will be ripped, face will be bloody and I think it's not worth it. I'd rather say fuck off, walk away bend my pride a bit and go out and have a good time with my mates because about 10 minutes later I'll forget about it. (Jett, Group 7)

If I've just looked at the person and gone they're drunk as what's the point, I'm not going to wreck my night just because some guys said something to me and he's drunk. [You must be] man enough—'you're a joke, you're pathetic'. (Lucas, Group 7)

I'm not going to waste my time—[if] you're just a piece of trash ... I don't want to waste my time. (Gamal, Group 7)

The use of violence had to match with shifting, but seriously felt, views about respect, justice and fairness in the treatment of other people—women or men. Those men who were physically abusive to conventionally feminine and compliant women, or did so without what was regarded as a serious cause, were usually held in poor regard. So too were bullies who provoked unfair fights and appeared to target much smaller opponents, or those who attacked from the rear or fought with hidden weapons. Most of all, any occasion of condoned violence had to conform in some way with their general but subjective understanding of substantive cause. A cause of this sort was any open signal of unwarranted disrespect, and the tone and intent of such a social snub (e.g., verbal abuse, a rude gesture or deliberate sneer) was often just as important than any actual level of physical harm.

### *Staying vigilant*

In general, these young men were both stoic and fatalistic about their own experiences of aggression and violence in their everyday lives. The above notions of fairness and respect guided their understanding of legitimate decisions about engagement in physical conflicts. This meant a low interest or revulsion about participating in or viewing uneven contests. These included attacks on much weaker or even unconscious opponents, with the latter behaviour even being akin to necrophilia:

Trading blows is sometimes interesting to watch but I don't want to see a guy get his head split open when it's clearly over ... If you knock someone out clean, or even if they're not knocked out but they drop down, you've won it, walk away! What more do you need to prove? (Tom, Group 4)

It's just not on, [striking an unconscious body] ... would you have sex with a dead person? It's the same thing. (Lorenzo, Group 2)

In popular cultural depictions of crime, a true hero is drawn from either side of the law enforcement/criminal divide, but knows how to apply just the right amount of violence to incapacitate the bad opponent without being gratuitous or complicating any final notions of justice (Tomsen and Hobbs 2017). The paradox in this was that while many of the men appeared to assume they had the skill to know how to strike a blow that would be proportionate, and to refrain from violence that led to lasting damage, none viewed themselves as safe from violence that was wholly unpredictable. In this worldview, violence was generated by the attitudes and aggression of morally unattractive true perpetrators—dangerous, unprincipled and out-of-control men—and frequently unavoidable for others who were drawn into social conflicts that

they often could not understand. Conflicts of this sort were clashes arising in sudden circumstances and often difficult-to-read collective interactions. They regularly included disputes in sports (soccer, basketball etc.), eateries, pubs and nightclubs, loud house parties, crowded public transport, quick episodes of road rage, or even one ridiculous case of mistaken identity in which a street gang cornered and bashed a participant they wrongly believed was someone who had crossed them in a recent dispute.

In these scenarios, young men who insisted that they had non-violent temperaments, described themselves as literally 'walking into' fights that unfolded in unpredictable ways, and which they were unable to exit without some threat-making or use of physical force of their own. Most were adamant that on occasions such as these, police, security and bystanders would in all likelihood prove useless. Some display of aggression or a hard front was crucial to avoid serious victimisation. For these participants, coping with such engagements was spoken of as merely enduring and progressing through daily life. These occasions could be minimised by avoiding certain places (e.g., specific violent pubs and nightclubs, high crime areas late at night) or foreseeing some danger by always closely watching the acts, appearance and demeanour of other men. The latter watchfulness was a process uncannily like that assumed by middle-class citizens demanding greater policing and security to alleviate their own abovementioned fears (Gau and Pratt 2008) of young men in urban public space. For the young men in this study, their own vigilance was the expected price of maintaining a respected public masculinity and the risk of such conflict in everyday social interaction could never be wholly eliminated.

## **Conclusion**

Major sociocultural explanations of violence suggest displays of physical aggression and violence are a crucial means of shoring up and attaining masculine status and power. These concerns have major significance for young and socially marginal men responding to perceived affronts to moral worth in their social relations and everyday interactions, or those engaged in hyper-masculine protest in a faltering attempt to emulate the privileges secured by other men. Our analysis of how groups of young men understand their own violence and that perpetrated by other men often resonated with these models regarding the protection of social reputation and a seeking of masculine power and hegemony. In fact, many of these findings might be framed within more recent theoretical expansion of local, shifting and temporarily 'dominant' or 'hegemonic' masculinities (Messerschmidt 2018). However, our findings also signal caution with the presumption that young men widely consider that enacted violence necessarily accomplishes masculinity or secures male honour and power.

The young men in our study did not conflate an inclination to violence straightforwardly with an esteemed form of masculinity. In their worldview, what they perceived as unjust and unheroic violence erodes social respect. There was no honour in being a stereotypical 'wife-beater' or 'bully'. Further, uncontrolled violence is defined as irrational, unmanly and indicative of the kind of individual madness likely to lead to the exclusion from male friendship groups. They claimed that violence was often something to be defused or avoided and many opponents and situations were deemed too risky or simply not worth the trouble. Moreover, much of the violence in their daily lives was spoken about as occurring in sudden and unplanned ways, rendering fights a sudden force of necessity beyond agency and choice. In such narratives, they emphasised that a compelling need to retaliate to affronts and threats could prove hard to resist. This may prompt the rationalising logic that a man has to do what a man has to do, and after which, violence is recounted as an act of rational self-protection, heroic self-sacrifice or moral guardianship. Of course, the question then becomes whether others are convinced of such a necessity and whether they also perceive such interventions as unavoidable, just or heroic, either at the time or merely in the retelling. Necessity, justice and heroism are relative concepts and claims about inevitable violence can be self-serving. Quite probably, the ubiquity of casual male violence in society

indicates how rival participants in many conflicts all commonly hold to an idealistic understanding of their motives and the meanings of their own violence.

Nevertheless, young men who insisted that they do not admire, seek out or enjoy violence, and who are also acutely aware of the social drawbacks of violence, were convinced that they experience their own engagement in these encounters in a fatalistic way. In particular, they claimed they were well removed from conscious choice and calculations about defending honour or opportunities to claim and enhance masculine power, especially when there was a very real chance of being hurt, and/or appearing to be the loser, even if one's physical strength prevails. In narratives such as these, the 'bigger man' was secure enough in himself to walk away. However, the uncomfortable reality for some of these young men is that violence can be a seemingly inevitable feature of these incidents that they had to manage, given their lack of faith in the protections afforded by police and the criminal justice system. This study uncovered understandings and experiences of violence that were often too quick to contemplate consciously at the time and had to be reconfigured in the aftermath, when injuries had been inflicted and/or reprisals threatened. Our participants often felt they shared a view of their own violence as exceptional. For them, it was a measured social resource that should be used sparingly and precisely if it was to increase honour, command respect or enhance masculinity.

Around the globe, community violence education and prevention measures frequently target young men as likely perpetrators of violence (Jewkes, Flood and Lang 2015). This is not inappropriate given their higher levels of involvement in assaults and disruptive social conflicts. However, we suggest caution about any potential alienation of young men by trivialising their own concerns and understandings as both perpetrators and victims, as merely a false claim on male respect or a mistaken struggle to win or display a level of masculine power that exceeds their youth, social class or low level of racial and ethnic status. The apparent meanings of violence matter, both at the scene and its narrative retelling, when it is typically recounted as necessary, proportionate and imperative, even if somewhat regrettable. A danger for educational interventions with didactic messages that violence is in every way unacceptable is the failure to engage convincingly with what can make it seem imperative or heroic, and the deeply embedded masculine commitment to these views. After all, very few men ever see themselves as unfair, mean or mad enough to use violence in a wrongful way.

#### *Correspondence:*

Stephen Tomsen, Professor of Criminology, Western Sydney University, Translational Health Research Institute, David Pilgrim Avenue, Campbelltown NSW 2560, Australia. Email: [s.tomsen@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:s.tomsen@westernsydney.edu.au).

David Gadd, Professor of Criminology, University of Manchester, Centre for Criminology and Criminal Justice, School of Law, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, United Kingdom. Email: [david.gadd@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:david.gadd@manchester.ac.uk).

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