How Do Men Construct and Explain Men’s Violence?

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Abstract
In this study, we examine men’s constructions of violence and their explanations of their own violent behavior. Interviews were conducted with 12 adult men, employed in industrial and manual labor, regarding their associations with violence, their reasons for engaging in violent behavior, and their reasons for not engaging in violent behavior. Utilizing consensual qualitative research methodology, our findings indicated that men’s constructions of violence and their justifications for engaging in violence were linked to their constructions of masculinity and what it meant to them to be a man. Results are discussed through the lenses of multiple gender-based theories and ultimately, deemed to demonstrate the most support for the notion of precarious manhood. Specifically, violence was viewed as necessary in particular situations to assert or maintain one’s social status and sense of self as masculine when faced with threats to manhood status. Implications for psychological intervention and practice with men are discussed, including identifying positive alternatives to violence that preserve one’s sense of self as masculine.

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Interpersonal violence has been classified as a global public health problem, with more than 1.3 million annual deaths due to violent crime and other significant economic and societal costs even when lives are not lost (World Health Organization, 2014). Men are more likely than women to be violent, with reported crime indicating that 75% of violent crimes in the United States (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2007), including 99% of sexual assaults (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010), 90% of murders (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2015), and about 75% of aggravated assaults (FBI, 2012), are committed by men. Research exploring the causes of men’s violence, though, is almost exclusively focused on men’s violence toward women, particularly men’s domestic violence and sexual aggression. As these forms of violence against women cause extreme physical and emotional harm and take lives, in addition to broader social and economic impact (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2003), it is clear that men’s violence against women is a critical issue to study. However, 75% of murder victims in the United States are male (FBI, 2015), and males are the victims of twice the level of simple assault and three times the level of aggravated assault, compared to females (Vaillancourt, 2010). As such, research also needs to be done to identify factors that predict men’s violence toward other men and to do that outside the context of domestic violence.

Popular explanations for men’s higher rates of violence often reference biology and evolution. The biological explanation typically argues that men have higher levels of aggression because they have more testosterone (e.g., Mehta & Beer, 2010), though cortisol and serotonin are also thought to be at play (Montoya, Terburg, Bos, & van Honk, 2012). The evolutionary explanation suggests that male violence toward other males is part of competition for mating potential (e.g., Ainsworth & Maner, 2012). Although these two variables have some face validity in explaining the sex differences in violence, both are insufficient as direct explanations for men’s higher rates of violence. For example, testosterone levels typically rise after violence, suggesting that the connection between testosterone and violence is correlational but not causative (see Carré, McCormick, & Hariri, 2011, for review). In addition, evolutionary perspectives typically de-contextualize their explanation of men’s violence by failing to incorporate the cultural presses for or against violence (Lewontin, Rose, & Kamin, 1984).

A contextual explanation for violence is offered from social learning theory, which posits that people learn to be violent because they are exposed to violent
models and they observe that violent behavior is rewarded (Bandura, 1977). However, this model addresses violence from a non-gendered perspective, explaining, for example, that children were more likely to punch the Bobo doll after watching an adult model act aggressively toward the doll (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). Although the model itself does not incorporate gender directly into its conceptual framework, as it posits the influence of generic models, the results of the classic Bobo doll study strongly indicate the influence of same-sex models on aggression. Specifically, the boys in the study exhibited significantly more aggression when exposed to aggressive males than when females modeled aggressive behavior and vice versa for girls (Bandura et al., 1961).

Given this type of data, in our opinion, the more promising explanation of men’s higher levels of violence incorporates a gendered explanation (e.g., Cohn, Jakupcak, Seibert, Hildebran, & Zeichner, 2010; Mahalik, Burns, & Syzdek, 2007; Vandello & Bosson, 2013). This perspective on men’s violence tends to make the following assertions. First, men’s violence is viewed as normative in many societies (Mahalik et al., 2003) such that males are reinforced for adherence to male violence norms (e.g., get respect from peers) and punished for non-conformity (e.g., shamed or called a coward if running away from a fight). This is particularly true in communities that embrace a “code of honor” (Lee & Ousey, 2011; Spierenburg, 1998). When men are part of a “culture of honor” in these communities (e.g., Southern states in the United States), they tend to perceive more encouragement for aggression in ambiguous situations, whether or not they themselves believe the aggression to be justified (Vandello, Cohen, & Ransom, 2008). Research supports this contention with evidence that men who endorse traditional masculine norms are more interpersonally hostile (Amato, 2012; Jakupcak, Tull, & Roemer, 2005), perpetrate more intimate partner violence (Moore & Stuart, 2005), and report getting into more physical fights (Amato, 2012; Mahalik et al., 2007; Mahalik, Lagan, & Morrison, 2006).

The second assertion incorporating a gendered perspective on violence is the feminist view that normative male violence functions to establish and maintain male power. This perspective contends that men enact violence against women because of the cultural expectations of a patriarchal society that values male power and allows men to be aggressive, controlling, and dominant as legitimate ways to maintain their power over women (Lawson, 2012; Taft, Bryant-Davis, Woodward, Tillman, & Torres, 2009). Extended to men’s violence toward other men, feminist theory would posit that violence is a means whereby men who have power maintain this power and dominance over other men who have less power.

The third assertion is that male violence can be used as a means to regain masculine status after the experience of losing it. This perspective is best
represented by the research program on *precarious manhood* (Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver, & Wasti, 2009; Cohn, Seibert, & Zeichner, 2009; Vandello & Bosson, 2013). In this model, achieving manhood, or being perceived by others as masculine, is something that has to be earned and can be easily lost. This perspective suggests that “the tenuousness of manhood lies in the fact that, once earned, this status can be lost relatively easily via social transgressions and shortcomings” (Bosson & Vandello, 2011, p. 28). Furthermore, as a result of losing masculine status, action which overconforms to masculine norms can be used to ameliorate the anxiety created in experience of losing manhood status (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Although there are many ways that males may overconform to masculine norms to regain masculine status (e.g., heavy drinking, over-involvement in work, sexual promiscuity), violence is often portrayed as a masculine norm demonstrated by strong, traditionally masculine men in the media as a way to respond to problems. As such, it is viewed as one way in which to regain masculine status if lost through some type of social failing or misdeed (Bosson & Vandello, 2011). Applied to the “culture of honor” research, the authors maintain that men’s manhood status is more precarious in these communities, which necessitates greater action to protect one’s reputation, even with violence (Bosson & Vandello, 2011).

The studies reviewed above, among others, have examined factors that predict and influence men’s violent behavior. Although promising, their survey and experimental lab methodologies fail to address a critical dimension to understand men’s use of violence. Namely, they do not incorporate men’s constructions of their own, and other men’s, violent behavior. The purpose of this study is to utilize qualitative data to give voice to men’s personal understanding of factors that contribute to men’s violence. Examining these subjective narratives gives us the opportunity to analyze “blue-collar” men’s constructions of their own and other men’s violence, which provides information about the extent to which current theories of male violence reflect their lived experiences.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participant men were recruited through newspaper advertisement in a large metropolitan area in the northeast United States. The advertisement described our interest in interviewing men working in manual or industrial labor (e.g., factory workers, construction) between ages of 21 to 70 years for a research study about men’s health. Selected participants were compensated $150 for
their time and travel. Men in “blue-collar” occupations were the focus of the study because they are often overlooked in research and because the evidence indicates that men in manual or industrial labor engage in more health risk behaviors (Choi, Redman, Terrell, Pohl, & Duffy, 2012). Twelve men participated in the study. They ranged in age from 23 to 59 years ($M = 40.42$ years, $SD = 9.70$). Most identified as Caucasian ($n = 7$, African American $= 3$, Asian American $= 1$, Biracial $= 1$), Single ($n = 6$, Married $= 3$, Separated $= 2$, Divorced $= 1$), and had a high school education ($n = 5$, not finished high school $= 1$, some college $= 4$, college graduate $= 1$). Half reported not having children ($n = 6$, one child $= 2$, two children $= 2$, three children $= 2$) and all described themselves as heterosexual. They reported having worked on average 10.25 ($SD = 2.34$) out of the last 12 months, earning on average $41,417$ ($SD = 15.22$), in jobs including construction worker, contractor, deleader, forklift operator, laborer, landscaper, mail-handler, mason, paint contractor, screen printer, truck driver, and warehouse worker. All but one of the men reported having medical insurance.

**Interview Protocol**

A semi-structured interview was developed by the second author and two graduate students in psychology to explore men’s constructions of eight health behaviors (i.e., physical violence, alcohol use, seatbelt use, tobacco use, exercise, diet, exam from physician, and help-seeking for feeling sad or depressed). For this study, we examined the physical violence data. The semi-structured interview format for exploring men’s constructions of aggressive and violent behavior included questions such as “Research shows that men tend to get into more physical fights than women. Why do you think that is?” and “What comes to mind when you think of people getting into physical fights?”

**Procedure**

**Telephone screening.** Approximately 50 interested men responded to the advertisement within a 3-day period. The second author conducted initial phone interviews, screening interested persons for inclusion and exclusion criteria until 12 participant men, a typical sample size for reaching saturation, were scheduled for data collection. Inclusion criteria included being male, between the ages of 21 to 70 years, working primarily in manual or industrial labor positions, having worked for at least 6 months during the previous year, and being English-speaking. Exclusion criteria included a psychiatric diagnosis for a psychotic disorder or having received a medical diagnosis that
requires lifestyle changes (e.g., diabetes, cancer, heart disease, high blood pressure, Crohn’s disease, emphysema).

*Interview procedures.* The second author then met individually with participant men in his office on campus to complete measures and conduct the interview. Participants completed a short survey assessing demographic information, information about gender and health behaviors, and selected a code name to be used when referring to their interview. After the interview, participants were debriefed about the study and provided with information about men’s health. At the completion of the 12 interviews, all material was transcribed verbatim with code names substituted for participant’s names and generic labels substituted for all identifying material in the interview (e.g., “Name of Brother”).

*Sectioning transcripts and coding into domains.* Interview data were analyzed using consensual qualitative research methods (Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). In the first step, five graduate students in psychology (four women, one man) divided the transcripts into sections. Raters were aware only that the second author was studying a number of men’s health behaviors and thus focused their time solely on categorizing, rather than interpreting, the raw data. Teams of three raters read the transcript and reached consensus on each point in the transcript at which a new topic had begun. This was marked in the transcript as a section. After all transcripts were divided into sections, they were returned to the same raters to identify domains. To code domains (i.e., what topic was addressed in the section), the rotating teams of three raters independently read each section and identified a domain label (e.g., “Reasons to Engage in Aggressive or Violent Behavior”). The team of raters then met to review the domain labels each had identified and discussed the domain until consensus on the topic and label was reached. Finally, the team met to collapse similar domains into more inclusive domain labels.

*Identifying core ideas.* Transcripts were then organized by domains, and a new set of graduate students (one woman, four men) read the transcripts to audit (i.e., check for agreement) each domain and to abstract core ideas from the transcript. Core ideas are succinct summary statements of the content within each domain, across all cases, attempting to capture “the participant’s perspective and explicit meaning” (Hill et al., 2005, p. 200). The five raters first independently read through the transcripts organized by domain and constructed core ideas for each passage of participant material. The team then met weekly to discuss the core ideas they each had constructed until
consensus was reached on the most accurate and concise phrases for each of the participants’ ideas. In this way, the team generated a consensual classification of core ideas for each domain across all cases.

Cross-analysis. After meeting and reaching consensus on core ideas for each of the 12 cases on each of the domains, the raters developed categories from the core ideas that best represented specific themes. Each rater first independently organized all of the core ideas for each domain into categories (themes). The group then met weekly and argued to consensus on the wording and meaning of the categories, as well as the placement of each core idea into a category. This stage of the process was iterative, in that as categories were created and modified to best represent the core ideas, the core ideas that had been placed within them were reevaluated and placed accordingly, sometimes into a newly constructed category. This process yielded a categorization for each core idea and the corresponding participant remarks. For example, under the domain “Reasons Men Engage in Violence” is the category “Stand Up for Yourself/Self-Defense,” which describes a theme across the data.

Audit. To check the domains and cross-analysis, the second author examined all data organized by domains and themes, reviewing the wording of domains, themes, and the accuracy of rater categorization. The auditor discussed suggestions with the leader of the research raters (the first author) concerning reclassification of some content and revisions to some categories.

Results

In presenting the study’s findings below, we follow the procedure used in consensual qualitative research studies (Hill et al., 1997) of providing examples for each category within the primary domains. Five broad coding domains were identified from analysis of the content of the interviews. Three domains (“Participant’s and Friends’ Violent Behavior,” “Perceptions of Violence,” and “Others’ Views on Participant’s Violent Behavior”) were omitted from further analyses due to lack of substantive content that was not better placed in other domains. Categories were then labeled, based on how frequently they occurred, using Hill et al.’s (2005) labels of general, typical, variant, and rare. General describes a category that was identified by all or all but one participants (in this study, 11 or 12 participants). Typical describes a category that was identified by more than half of the participants (7-10). Variant describes a category identified by more than one through half of the participants (2-6), and rare describes a category that was identified by one
participant. As rare categories included only one case, they were not included in the presentation of findings. Domains, categories, and frequencies are presented in Table 1.

**Domain 1: Reasons Men Engage in Violence**

The first domain examines the men’s views on why they, or other men they know, might engage in violent behavior. The categories in this domain reflect a variety of factors and situations that are understood to increase the likelihood of violence, including threats to one’s self, risk of disrespect from others, alcohol/drug use, threats to one’s social status, threats to others of whom the individual feels protective, men being innately violent, and believing there is no option other than violence to resolve conflict. Seven categories were identified within this domain.

**Stand up for yourself/self-defense.** Responses in this category, the most frequently cited in this domain (see Table 1), described circumstances in which men believed it was necessary to engage in aggressive or violent behavior to protect themselves from physical harm. Some participants noted that they would only respond physically when someone else had initiated physical contact. For example, CJ shared, “Yeah, [I fight] sometimes. When it’s necessary. I mean, if somebody hits me, if somebody comes up and punches me in the face, of course I’m going to fight him.” Similarly, BE said, “I’ll try to get away from it or walk away from it but sometimes you just, you can’t, you just gotta put your foot down and don’t let people push you around.” After sharing a story about his involvement in a physical altercation, he elaborated, “I didn’t initiate it, but you ain’t going to bully me, you had your chance, but then you cross that line, and I wasn’t going to let him get away with it.”

In addition, although SH reported that his last fight occurred when he was in high school, he clearly recounted his need to defend himself physically:

Oh this guy just kept bothering me . . . Followed me home from high school and I just couldn’t take, deal with his bullshit no longer. He was coming towards me, you know . . . [And you knew him from school?] Yeah, and he wanted to fight me, he was coming up to me ready to swing at me so, that’s when I started . . . Finally I said that I had to do this.

These examples highlight the ways in which men in this study described feeling compelled to participate in violent exchanges when their own well-being was threatened, particularly after physical contact was initiated by another man. A number of men noted that they first took steps to avoid physical conflict but then felt as though they had no other choice but to defend themselves
Table 1. Domains, Categories, Frequencies, and Sample Text of Participant Responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Sample Text</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reasons men engage in violence</td>
<td>Stand up for yourself/self-defense</td>
<td>Typical (10)</td>
<td>Participant (P): You stand up for yourself. And I said . . . it’s one of those things, you’re going to let him get away with that? (laughs)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Avoid disrespect</td>
<td>Typical (9)</td>
<td>P: You feel kind of like that, you know. If you, you know I don’t think most peoples is going to sit up there and think about it, they’d much rather just react to it, you know? Like go with the flow, I mean the guys disrespecting you, he’s right in your face, and told you to fuck off, what are you going to do, you know? Maybe some people sit up there and tell him to fuck off back, but I mean, I think a lot of people, especially like into construction, where I mean you’re a guy, you know, you’re a guy’s guy, and, you sit up there and you, I mean, you’ve got to react. You can’t have somebody stepping on ya.</td>
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<td>Alcohol or drug use</td>
<td></td>
<td>Typical (9)</td>
<td>P: I had a couple of friends, one in particular, whose gotten, I was going to say his share but probably more than his share of physical altercations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gain or maintain dominance/status</td>
<td></td>
<td>Typical (8)</td>
<td>Interviewer (): Why is that? Or why was that? P: His lifestyle, he was a drinker, druggie, a great guy, I grew up with him, deep down inside a good guy, but, just, went the wrong way, and kind of went to the dark side. But, just a big partier.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>I: So fighting is one way to kind of show that you’re dominant, and to kind of get status, or to, or what’s the purpose of being dominant?</td>
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<td>P: I would say status and enjoyment out of it and praise, from your peers.</td>
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<td>I: What sort of enjoyment would someone be able to get out of being dominant?</td>
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<td>P: Just giving someone a beat-down and winning, I would think.</td>
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<td>I: And that’s kind of an enjoyable thing to do, for the person doing the beat-down.</td>
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<td>P: I would think so, I mean it seems like if someone’s just physically dom-, is more physically stronger than someone and they know that they can’t lose to just go in and just physically push the person around and give them a beat-down.</td>
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(continued)
with physical force once another man had made contact or gestured toward them.

**Avoid disrespect.** In this category, participants described a variety of situations in which they believed aggressive or violent behavior was necessary in response to disrespectful behavior initiated by another man. Men in this study talked about aggressive retaliation being viewed as especially necessary when the interaction is witnessed by others. CJ offered the following example:

Disrespecting you by looking at something that you have, you know, your girlfriend . . . basically disrespecting . . . Then I mean, you gotta do something. If I was to be in a situation like that I would think that other people are watching
me and thinking I’m some type of punk and I’m going to let some other guy sit there and stare at my girlfriend and talk to my girlfriend or whatever, you know what I mean? And other people are looking at you like, well, you think other people are looking at you like, “You’re going to let this other guy disrespect you by coming up on your girlfriend or whatever like that?”

Interestingly, in this passage, the participant notes that despite his perception, observers may actually not be questioning his ability to stand up to the man talking to his girlfriend. Regardless, he experiences the social expectation that he should act in a way that will preserve his status and pride in the face of another man’s threat.

**Alcohol or drug use.** Men in this study frequently noted their belief that the use of alcohol and/or other drugs increases one’s likelihood of becoming involved in a physical altercation. Regarding this relationship, they commented on both their own behavior and their observations of friends’ and family members’ behavior. For example, when asked what type of person he believed got into fights frequently, SH responded, “Usually it’s a person that gets angry anyway very quickly, and if they’re drinking, you know that sort of happens.” Similarly, many participants referenced friends whose violent behavior was closely linked to their drinking or drug use. TK described the behavior of one of his friends as follows:

As he got a little bit older and started drinking and drugging more, he just seemed to lose his good sense, the little that he had, and would do crazy things. And, sometimes the crazy things turned out okay, sometimes you had fun, sometimes you didn’t have fun, sometimes he would win the fight, sometimes he would lose the fight.

This passage highlights the perception that using drugs and alcohol can lead to loss of judgment and subsequent involvement in violence.

**Gain or maintain dominance/status/respect.** This category includes comments about the ways in which men may use aggression and violence to gain or preserve their current levels of dominance, status, and/or respect. In contrast to the above category, “Fight to Avoid Disrespect,” responses in this category focused on engaging in violence explicitly to gain respect rather than feeling as though fighting was a necessary response to another person’s disrespectful behavior. These responses often included references to weakness and the need to assert oneself with physical aggression and violence to avoid being perceived as weak. TA discussed this need to assert one’s physical competence to be accepted and respected by coworkers in his trade:
Physical strength, stand up for yourself, competence, physical competence, those are huge in the trades, and weakness in any of those areas is a big, big negative, and some of them you can’t get past, some guys won’t look past [it].

TK elaborated,

A lot of men feel the need to prove their masculinity by different means, you know, by the car they drive, by the house they live in, by the women that they date, marry, sleep with, by, you know, the amount of people that they can beat up. I think that’s a huge part of it, the ego, the male ego is a powerful thing.

Similarly, BE talked about how, when he was growing up, he used violence to impress and fit in with an older crowd.

I was a tough kid. Growing up, I hung around with older kids like I told ya. I mean, I’m not tooting my own horn, but we got into tons of fights and I didn’t care. I just couldn’t, I didn’t care about other people, and I was always out to impress the older kids, and I always was good at it . . . Just, you, know, looking to move up that social ladder of being that tough kid and getting that reputation.

Each of these passages outlines the ways in which violence was viewed as a means to gain status and acceptance from peer groups, in both youth and adulthood.

Protect others. A number of men in this study described feeling compelled to engage in aggressive or violent behavior to protect others, often girlfriends/wives or other family members. At times, the responses in this category reflected the belief that it is a man’s responsibility to protect others, particularly women and children. For example, PW commented,

Say if you’re in a mall or something and someone bumps into your wife and, you know, they just say, “Well get the hell out of here,” you being the man, the man of the family, it’s like your job, to defend your family.

Men in this study also discussed the perception that a man’s ability to protect others seems to be attractive to female partners. For example, CJ said, “To show off, to . . . prove to themselves that they’re better than somebody else or, if their girlfriend’s around, to prove to them that, ‘I’m tough, I can protect you.’ Just because they’re a guy.” More generally, responses also addressed men’s responsibilities to protect others who are viewed as weaker or disadvantaged in some way. For example, MU discussed his responsibility as the eldest sibling to protect his brothers and BE talked about becoming physically aggressive with students he had seen bullying others.
Men are naturally/innately violent. In this category, participants described beliefs that a tendency for violent behavior is an innate component of being male. When asked why he thought men engaged in more physical violence than women, MH responded, “I think it might be in genes.” In response to the same question, MA and PW answered similarly with “Just think it’s natural, that’s the nature of males” and “Being a man!” respectively. SH cited both biological and social causes: “Testosterone, biochemical basis. But also with society, thinking that’s what men ought to be like.” MO compared men’s ways of managing conflict to those of women, saying, “I think a woman in general terms is more agreeable, and a man is more, I don’t want to say disagreeable but, tends to not be as agreeable . . . that could lead to more confrontation.” Although he did not speculate about why this may be the case, this observation also evidences the perception that there is something innate about being a man is violent.

Last resort. This category captures in more detail the efforts participants described to avoid physical altercations. Responses in this category framed aggressive or violent behavior as a “last resort,” to be used when verbal or other attempts to alleviate conflict had failed. For example, BE explained, “There’s been times when I just . . . I won’t raise my hand toward somebody until it’s totally necessary, you know I’ll warn you first.” As participants also described in their stories of engaging in violence as necessary self-defense, the responses in this category highlight the ways in which men first attempted to avoid physical confrontation, viewing it as only to be used when no other option is perceived to be available.

Domain 2: Reasons Men Avoid Engaging in Violence

The second domain examines the reasons participants identified for avoiding violent behavior. The categories in this domain reflect the men’s observations that fighting and violence decrease as men get older. They also described how it is important at times to avoid fighting to prevent legal consequences. In contrast to the seven categories identified as reasons to engage in violence, only two categories were identified as reasons not to engage in violence.

Age. In this category, men discussed their thoughts about their own and others’ decreased fighting with age, due to a range of factors including increased maturity, ability to manage conflict verbally, and the physical limitations that come with age. TA noticed this change in his observations of his friends’ and coworkers’ behavior: “There’s quite a few I work with, they still get into fights, especially the younger guys. A lot of that seems to go away as you get older, too.” Similarly, TK noted that all of his friends...
and siblings have stopped fighting as they have gotten older. He says, “I don’t know anybody who actually resorts to physical violence anymore. My friends are all older, hopefully a little bit more mature, the vast majority of them have kids.” TK also shared additional thoughts on why these behavioral changes may occur, citing both physical limitations and increased capacity to avoid conflict.

I think when you’re younger you’re more virile, that if you do resort to violence you’re more well-equipped to handle yourself in that situation, I mean as you get older and your reflexes start to slow down, your health starts to gradually deteriorate, I just think when you’re younger you’re better equipped to handle it. You’re, for the most part you’re less mature, so you’re not as well mentally equipped to handle it, so you don’t always think it out. You often go with your gut instinct, which is to, you know, “He just said that,” bang. Instead of just saying, “He just said that? Oh, he’s an idiot. I’m going to go sit over here, as far away as I can get, I’m going to go talk to somebody else, I’m going to get out of here, I’m going to do anything that’ll get me away from him, instead of just trying to fight him.”

Similarly, MO framed decreased violent behavior as secondary to increased maturity with age.

Maturity, patience. If they take the same situation, and I was 25 years old and someone said something or did something to me, that would cause me to fight, may not cause me to fight at 60. I’d be a little more patient and say, “Let’s look for another way.” But even a better example is road rage. You know, when you’re younger and you see some stuff and you just yell out the window, “You jerk!” and they yell “You jerk!” back and the next you know, “Pull over!” Now you just kind of say, “It’s just not worth it.”

These passages indicate that, as they grow older, men report viewing violence as both a less appropriate and a less effective means of resolving conflict.

Legal consequences. Participants also discussed the threat of legal consequences as a reason not to engage in physically aggressive or violent behavior. SH described police involvement both as a threat to keeping others out of fights and also as a resource for those who are looking for professional assistance in managing others’ violence:

But a lot of people I know, they won’t fight because they know they’ll get arrested, there’re law enforcements [sic], and that sort of thing, you know. If you’re not going to be physically harmed, then you can walk away, you know, or call the police.
This quote notes that the potential gains of engaging in violent behavior are at times not considered to be worth the possibility of legal consequences.

Discussion

These in-depth interviews with a sample of men working in “blue-collar” occupations provide important information about the ways in which they construct masculinity and violence. Overall, the narratives shared by men in this study support several of the theoretical models discussed above. For example, one of the typical responses from participant men was that men are innately more violent than women. This essentialist understanding of men’s violence was attributed by some participants as genetically caused. However, the gendered models seem to be better explanations for the majority of men’s constructions of male violence overall. Participants’ responses are rich with references to social learning in that they often spoke about others witnessing violent or potentially violent encounters with other men, with the allusion that violent behavior was expected by observers and would be socially rewarded in these contexts.

There was also support for several ideas connected to the gender role conformity model (Mahalik et al., 2003). Participant men endorsed the idea that violence is considered to be a central component of masculinity (Mahalik et al., 2003), and their perceptions of other men’s normative behavior were seen as influential on them. Furthermore, many of the men in this study reference their peers at work as a particularly salient and influential social group. For example, one of the participants (excerpted in Table 1) references the “guy’s guy” culture of construction work. It is difficult from our data to discern whether these men may be misreading others’ cues in their perception that violence is expected, but the data suggest that this group of tradesmen function within a “culture of honor” community (Vandello et al., 2008). That is, there are perceived to be particularly high expectations for defending one’s status and significant consequences for not meeting these expectations. Previous research has identified men working in “blue-collar” occupations as a subgroup that demonstrates some elevated health-related risk behaviors, including limited fruit and vegetable intake and insufficient exercise (Choi et al., 2012). Our results suggest an extension of this research, with evidence that the strict adherence to traditional masculine norms seen in “culture of honor” communities warrants further exploration as a possible contributor to health risk behaviors.

Our findings also support feminist perspectives on the important link between violence and men’s power, status, and dominance. Although there is less evidence in these data for the assertion that these men use violence to
maintain a dominant status over those with less power, men talked about violence as a means of responding to other men who try to exert power and dominance over them, as well as necessary to protect others who are perceived to have less power, including men with less social status (e.g., someone being bullied). In other words, while asserting power and dominance does appear to play a role in men’s reasons for engaging in violent behavior, the narratives frame the participants’ intentions as more to defend their own image than to one-up another man, though the latter can certainly function as the means to the former. Future research should examine the relationship between violence and social status more closely, as the current study did not directly inquire about this connection.

The findings of the study are also supportive of the concept of precarious manhood, given that three of the six “Typical” responses under “Reasons Men Engage in Violence” illustrated this concept (i.e., that one’s status as masculine needs to be actively achieved, and then just as actively maintained, Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Men explained repeatedly in their responses that violence is most often necessary in response to a threat to one’s masculinity. In the participants’ eyes, the importance of demonstrating one’s masculinity most often came into play when discussing options for responding to verbal or physical threats from another man. Even if the initial trigger did not seem to relate directly to one’s sense of self as masculine (e.g., another driver’s road rage), these participants were clear that their response to that trigger was a measure of their manhood. They also frequently referenced situations in which witnesses were present to assess the extent to which the participant’s behavior confirms or discredits his masculinity. The responses in the typical categories of “Stand Up for Yourself,” “Avoid Disrespect,” and “Gain or Maintain Status/Dominance” suggest that participant men understand violence as a means to obtain respect and status, and avoid disrespect and losing status. The implication of the participants’ statements is that if they were not to use violence in these situations, they would not be acting as men should and therefore, would risk being viewed as less masculine. Furthermore, while participant men reported preferring some form of conflict resolution to avoid violence (e.g., see “Last Resort”), they often felt that they were placed in the difficult position of feeling as though engaging in violence was critical to preserve their masculine identities, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others.

Results in the category labeled “Protect Others” also support the notion of precarious manhood. Participants discuss their sense of responsibility as the man in a relationship or family, to protect and defend their girlfriends/wives and children. They believe that if they were not to do so, they would not be fulfilling their role as the “man of the family.” In these situations, the choice
is again described as either to fight or to lose manhood. In addition, this expectation implies that their female partners require and/or appreciate this physical protection and that it confirms the men’s masculinity in these women’s eyes.

Men in our study also identified substance abuse as a trigger for violence. Participant men spoke about this in reference to one-time events as well as to friends whose substance abuse patterns lead them to repeatedly become involved in violent encounters with other men. Their constructions of men’s violence and substance abuse are consistent with empirical research indicating that men who use substances are more likely to engage in violence than men who do not use substances (Maldonado-Molina, Reingle, & Jennings, 2011; Testa, 2004). Of note, the majority of the participants spoke quite straightforwardly about the relationship between substance abuse and violence, but the questions in the current study design did not elicit thoughts about the connection between masculinity and substance abuse. Further qualitative exploration of this relationship would add depth to the existing research.

We think it is important to note that men’s constructions of their own and other men’s violence most often describe responses to events outside of oneself. The implications of such attributions are outlined in Jones and Nisbett’s (1971) work on “actor-observer” asymmetry, in which they describe observers of someone’s action as tending to attribute that behavior to stable dispositions of the act, whereas the actor is most likely to attribute the cause of his or her behavior to the presses in the situation. We see this “masculine violence actor-observer asymmetry in attribution” phenomenon demonstrated primarily in two ways. First, portrayals of male violence are usually de-contextualized by observers such that attributions are made that men are dangerous or bad, even though most men are not violent. This can lead to oversimplified “men are bad, women are good” constructions that have limited utility in understanding factors that promote male violence and limit the options for remedial and preventive interventions.

Second, personal responsibility for violence can get overlooked by the actor focusing on the contextual forces that “made” him “have to” resort to violence. For example, many of the participant men’s attributions about violence, whether they were biological (i.e., men are genetically disposed to violence but become less violent as they age), chemical (i.e., men’s greater use of drugs and alcohol causes them to be more violent), or the social learning and gendered constructions (i.e., others’ reactions as reinforcing or shaming, social norms, being forced to defend self and/or others), situate the locus of control outside of the individual. These social learning and gender constructions include the “culture of honor” communities described above, in
which members perceive particularly strong messages that violence is an expected behavioral norm. Violence attribution is an important issue, as others have discussed the idea of violence attribution error that occurs “when an offender does not blame the perpetrator of a violent act (e.g., rape) but instead blames either the victim or the circumstance” (Daley & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 551). Furthermore, it is extremely difficult to encourage behavioral change (i.e., decreasing violent behavior) if one does not view these responses as within his control.

One of the strengths of the study was utilizing a sample of men from an understudied group, with unique health risks, and who work in the very masculine work culture of manual and industrialized labor. Although our participants offered a unique and important perspective on the experience of being male and how that intersects with violence, generalization of these findings to other groups of men should be made with caution as the intersections among gender, race, sexual orientation, class, and other social, political, and personal variables are likely to impact the ways in which one defines and describes masculinity. For example, studies on gendered motivations for violence among men of high socioeconomic status, and among women, would further inform this line of work. Also, although appropriate for these qualitative analyses, the sample size was small, further suggesting caution when generalizing these findings to a larger group of men.

Additional limitations to the study include examining violence in a limited context of intra-gender violence outside of the home. Future research should examine how constructions of violence toward men outside the home, as examined in this study, would likely be different than domestic violence against other men or women. We also note that we asked participants about how they understood men’s violence, generally, but did not directly focus on how they constructed their own violence (although this was frequently raised by participant men). Although we view our focus as explicating their constructions of men’s violence toward other men, future research should more directly examine men’s constructions of their own violence.

Future research should also continue to explore the relationship between gender norms and health behaviors in various “culture of honor” communities. For example, we do not know from this study if membership in these social groups predicts reliance on other traditional masculine norms, such as more general risk-taking or self-reliance. With this information, intervention could be designed to target ways in which to decrease physical and psychological health risks while respecting and, where appropriate, challenging existing cultural norms regarding masculinity. Given the complexity and personal nature of topics such as masculinity and involvement in violence, research should continue to integrate quantitative and qualitative designs to develop an in-depth understanding of these issues.
Alternatively, future research should also identify protective social factors or situations in which men experience less pressure to conform to traditional norms that are associated with risk. For example, in this study, men identified a number of reasons they do not engage in violence, including it not being worth potential consequences and increased problem-solving abilities (i.e., “looking for another way” to resolve conflict) associated with age. However, these responses in the present study are somewhat vague. Future research could identify a taxonomy of alternative behaviors to men’s violence, then identify factors that would increase men’s comfort with applying these in conflict management.

In conclusion, we see two primary implications from the study’s findings. First, men’s violence must be contextualized within our current understanding of masculine gender role norms and the powerful social processes that perpetuate these behavioral expectations. Our findings shed light on the fact that men are able to identify a large number of contextual influences very often intimately connected to their socialization into masculine roles. The participants’ responses draw attention to the pressure some men experience to use violence to assert or defend their masculine identities. It is important to contextualize these ideas to maintain focus on the many reasons men might engage in violence and not to perpetuate misunderstandings and notions that such men are simply “bad.” Of course, it is also important to note again that any single explanation of why men are likely to engage in violence is bound to fall short and that models of men’s violence need to be multi-dimensional.

Second, although our “blue-collar” participant men were thoughtful about the relationship between masculinity/manhood and violence, they tended to construct the causes of violence as outside of the man engaging in violence and to not focus on personal responsibility for violent behavior. This has important implications for efforts to decrease rates of violence in the United States and across the globe. For example, psycho-educational efforts could focus on helping men develop an increasingly internal locus of control regarding violence instead of seeing it as something mandated by the environment, with no other behavioral options. For men who have been violent, work might focus on addressing their cognitions about the necessity of violence. Implications for clinical practice also include helping men to identify alternative strategies for conflict management that are not perceived as compromising one’s sense of self as masculine.

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The first and second authors contributed equally to this work. The third through seventh authors are listed alphabetically, as they contributed equally to the project.

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