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Major: Economics
Minor: Gender Studies
"**Construction and Destruction: Masculinity and Violence in America**"
Written for Capstone Essay, Fall 2014, with Kevin Burke

"Construction and Destruction: Masculinity and Violence in America"

Assignment parameters:

In collaboration with the Director of Undergraduate Studies in Gender Studies, students choose a Gender Studies faculty member who will guide them through the semester-long composition of a capstone essay. The capstone essay is an original and professional piece of scholarly writing based on the student's interdisciplinary research in their primary and supplementary majors. The capstone essay may build upon, but cannot replicate, the work done for a senior thesis or paper in another major or course. This course fulfills the senior capstone project requirement for Gender Studies supplementary majors. It can only be taken in the fall semester of the senior year. In the spring semester of the junior year, interested students should speak to the Gender Studies Director of Undergraduate Studies about planning their thesis topic and research and securing a faculty advisor. For the essay to be accepted by Gender Studies, the minimum page requirement is 20 pages.

Introduction

      "We don't often talk about men being imprisoned by gender stereotypes, but I can see that they are — and that when they are free, things will change for women as a natural consequence," Emma Watson stated in her address to the UN in September of 2014 (McDonald). Watson has gained increased media attention[1] in recent months for the launch of her HeForShe campaign, which seeks to gain worldwide male support for gender equality initiatives, and her speech was effective in kick-starting a global re-examination of the implications of gender constructions in the lives of both men and women. One of these implications that she addressed at various points is that gendered constructs have systematically cast all men as aggressive and violent, which has ultimately been harmful to the lives and well being of both women and men.

      Statistics suggest that aggression in the form of violence may actually reflect of the very types of gendered issues that Watson discusses in her speech. A report compiled by the FBI showing crime statistics in 2012 reveals that there were 12,765 murder victims in America that year (*Table 2*). However, even though America's population is currently almost equally divided with 49.1% male and 50.9% female citizens, violent crime statistics come nowhere close to reflecting these numbers (*2010 Census Briefs* 2). According to the same FBI report, 9,917 murder victims in 2012 were men, compared to only 2,834 women (*Table 2*). What's more, there exists a similar discrepancy in data reporting the gender of murder perpetrators, with 14,581 total murder offenders in 2012, of which 9,425 were identified as male and 1,098 were identified as female, and the genders of the remaining 4,058 offenders were unknown (*Table 3*).

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[1] Watson's speech received polarizing reviews both in the global community and even within my own focus groups. Most notably, she was publicly threatened by hackers, many of them men, who claimed they would release naked photos of her over social media out of "retaliation" for her speech (Perry). Though many women also publicly disagreed with Watson's speech, they did not issue public threats against her the way some of the men on internet forums did.

Is it merely a coincidence that an overwhelming majority of the victims and perpetrators of violent crimes such as murder are men, or are there social structures in place that cause more men than women to commit violent crimes? Specifically, does something about what it means to be a man in America indirectly foster or contribute to violence? In order to explore these and other similar questions, I both analyzed contemporary incidents of male-perpetrated violence in America and interviewed young adult males living in America about what it means to be a man, how masculine identities are constructed, and how masculinity may or may not relate to violence. Through my interviews, I discovered the ways in which some men perceive there to be a strong link between masculinity and violence in America and the ways in which this link is both created and perpetuated. These insights may be valuable in explaining both high-profile incidents of male-perpetrated crime and gendered disparities in violent crime incidence rates.

Framework

When developing a theoretical framework through which masculinity and its relationship to violence can be understood, it is necessary to first observe theories relating to gender, more generally, and the ways in which gender operates in American society.

Donald West and Candace Zimmerman laid the foundations for modern scholarly approaches to conceptualizing gender in their writings about what it means to "do gender." West and Zimmerman argue that gender is not only an action or a set of actions that are performed by only one group of bodies, but rather that gender is a "routine, methodological, and recurring accomplishment" that involves a complex set of socially determined interactional, perceptual, and micropolitical activities that divide and label all social expressions as having either masculine or feminine "natures" (West and Zimmerman 126). Moreover, West and Zimmerman make the case that in Western societies, the conceptions of gender that are most accepted in

society are those that view men and women as separate categories of being whose differences in psychology and behavior can be attributed to reproductive functions. Though these differences appear to be natural, they are not; nevertheless, structures in society develop in response to and ultimately reflect these perceived differences (West and Zimmerman 128). Of particular importance, too, is the notion that although members of society have options as to how they choose to display their gender, they often do not have a say in how their gender is perceived by others. West and Zimmerman theorize that this is a crucial element of "doing gender[2]" because it reflects the institutionalized nature of gender and the ways in which society has been partitioned according to perceived "essential" differences between women and men (West and Zimmerman 136-137). Though West and Zimmerman theorize about gender and gender display as it relates to the entire masculine/feminine and male/female spectrum, Raewyn Connell and Michael Kimmel's theories about masculinity, specifically, offer insight into the relationship that may exist between masculinity and violence.

First, Connell defines masculinity as

simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture (Connell 71).

Of particular note in her definition of masculinity is the inclusion of women, which Connell argues is imperative because masculinity cannot exist except in contrast with femininity (Connell 68). Furthermore, the relationship between masculinity and femininity can be explained by the existence of patriarchy, which Connell argues is not only the main axis of power in the gendered order of the west that subordinates women to maintain the dominance of men, but also that it persists despite resistance to it; nevertheless, this resistance points to the problems of legitimacy

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[2] According to Butler,

that masculinity as a structure struggles to uphold, indicating that an inherent need to validate

patriarchy exists within the structure itself (Connell 74). Connell defines hegemony as the

"cultural dynamic by which one group claims and sustains a leading position in life," explaining

that at any given time, one given form of masculinity dominates others, and all forms of

masculinity dominate femininity (Connell 77). Combining the ideals of patriarchy and

hegemony, Connell proposes the idea of *hegemonic masculinity*, or the socially dominant ideal

of masculinity, defining hegemonic masculinity as

> the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the
> problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees…the dominant position of men
> and the subordination of women. (Connell 77)

Because hegemonic masculinity operates according to the premise that one group achieves

dominance by subordinating other groups, Connell argues that it necessarily follows that

members of the privileged group may use violence to sustain that dominance, many times feeling

that they are justified to that violence or are simply exercising a natural or earned right (Connell

83).

Michael Kimmel expands upon Connell's theories in his elaboration of the specificities

surrounding the current gendered order and the ideals of hegemonic masculinity as it exists

today. According to Kimmel, hegemonic masculinity has evolved from what he calls the

"marketplace manhood" of the 1830s. The marketplace man derives his identity from success in

capitalist markets, which means that he requires proof in the form of money and tangible goods,

and also means that he must exclude others in his quest to dominate the competition to attain

these goods ("Homophobia" 29). Moreover, the marketplace man is characterized by aggression,

competition and anxiety, and the markets act as the arena through which these characteristics are

displayed for the judgment of other men ("Homophobia" 29). Kimmel also cites psychologists

Robert Brannon and Deborah David, who have proposed four basic principles that currently set the ideal standard of masculinity: men must do nothing that suggests femininity in any way, or there must be "no sissy stuff;" men must have power, success, wealth and status; men must remain calm and reliable in the midst of a crisis and must not show emotions; and men must be daring and aggressive ("Homophobia" 30-31). Many of the young men with whom I talked expressed sentiments embodying variations of these defining principles of masculinity, suggesting that Brannon and David's theories still carry some weight within American society, or at least for some of its citizens.

The relationship between masculinity and violence ultimately stems from the institutionalized nature of gender and the way in which gender has come to organize and be organized by a larger social structure. James Messerschmidt claims that social structures can only be realized through social action, and social action is based upon structures; therefore, gender, as a structure, is constantly being produced and reproduced by and through both individuals and the aggregate, which links both masculinity and femininity[3] because of the way in which they are jointly performed in a shared structural space (Messerschmidt 197). Thus, masculinity is institutionalized, and as such, men draw upon previously existing ideals of masculinity when trying to replicate these ideals in various public or private settings. Moreover, Messerschmidt notes the importance of the male body in constructing masculinity. He theorizes that social structures set the standard for both the appearance of the male body and the activities the male body is able to engage in as a result of its appearance, so males whose bodies do not meet these requirements experience distress (Messerschmidt 206). As a result of both the

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[3] This is an especially important point that underlies many of the insights gained from this study. Although the study focuses on the construction of masculinity itself and the ways in which it operates, it is important to bear in mind that femininity and masculinity are intimately linked, and as such, constructions of femininity and the heteronormative assumptions about the ways in which the two interact also play an important role in understanding the relationship between masculinity and violence.

expectation of maintaining the ideal male body—which Messerschmidt describes as tall and strong—and the distress of being unable to do so, some men may turn to violence as a means of proving the competency of their masculine bodies even though their bodies have otherwise failed to live up to the hegemonic ideal (Messerschmidt 208).

Masculinity and the structuralized nature of masculinity do not, in and of themselves, promote or perpetuate violence. Rather, Michael Kimmel explains that entitlement is both a *byproduct* of the institutionalization of masculinity and a *catalyst* for violence. Kimmel explains that if demonstrating masculinity ultimately requires one to be in control, and moments of vulnerability threaten a man's sense of control or perceived sense of control, then men may feel that their masculinity has been compromised and that, in these cases, violence may in fact be restorative (*Angry White Men* 177). However, in order for one to resort to violence, one must first feel *entitled* to use violence as a means of restoring one's sense of being threatened (*Angry White Men* 177). This sense of entitlement is intricately entwined in a system of masculinity that fosters both the power of men over women, and the power of some men over other men[4] (*Angry White Men* 185).

It is important to note, however, that the number of men who actually embody and pursue the currently accepted standard of masculinity, or hegemonic masculinity, as it has come to be defined in American society may be quite small. Many men gain from hegemonic masculinity because they gain from the divide that has been created and sustained by patriarchy, a divide which favors men and their success while subsequently subordinating women in various capacities (Connell 79). In reality, though, there may be very few men who actively and

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[4] It is important to note that this paper deals predominantly with 'white' masculinities and does not focus on the intersectionality of masculinity and race. There is, however, literature that explores the intersection of masculinity and race, as well as the dynamics of power that exist amongst the two, such as Michael Kimmel's *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free, 1996).

consciously subordinate women or other men for their own gain. What these theories and others like them may point to are the ways in which social structures have come to divide members of society into more privileged and less privileged groups, and the ways in which members of the more privileged group may use violence to maintain their privilege, sometimes feeling that they are justified in doing so (Connell 83). This study is in no way meant to imply that *all* men and *only* men are perpetrators of violence or embody strong feelings of entitlement. Rather, it is meant to explore some of the ways in which violence committed by men may be related to or even perpetuated by gendered structures that compose many taken-for-granted aspects of American society as a whole.

Methods

The framework outlined above will be used to analyze highly-publicized current events related to violence committed by men in the United States. However, in order to begin to truly understand the many complex social and situational factors that may contribute to or accompany acts of violence in both the public and private sphere, it is necessary to get perspectives of men whose minds, bodies and lives are continually being constructed in relation to the institution of masculinity and who have traditionally been portrayed by mass media as the predominant perpetrators of violence.

In order to do this, I interviewed ten 19-22-year old males and one 26-year old male from three different American universities. Six of the students currently attend Boston College, one attends UMass Boston, and four attend the University of Notre Dame. I tried to recruit men in the Boston area because of its high concentration of college students, and I believed that recruiting participants from three different schools in the Boston area would allow me to obtain a diverse sample in regards to socioeconomic status, racial or ethnic status, religious affiliation,

academic pursuits, and the like. In addition, I sought to gather participants from three different types of schools in order to test for trends that may or may not vary across institution type. These institutions included Harvard University, Suffolk University, and UMass Boston. Initially, I contacted approximately 130 different student organizations across the three different schools, asking the club leaders or primary club contacts to distribute my call for male participants to the club listservs. The participants would not be paid, and the only criteria for them to participate was that (a) they had to be male, and (b) they had to be at least 18 years old for legal purposes. I attempted to contact a diverse array of student organizations ranging from religious groups, to performing arts groups, to cultural groups, in order to try to create a "random" sample, since I would be unable to distribute my call for participants to every undergraduate male currently enrolled at each university.

However, this method of recruiting proved to be unsuccessful. I received zero responses from the clubs and organizations I contacted, so I then contacted the department chairs of the Gender/Women's Studies and/or Sociology departments at each university. Through this method, I was able to recruit one participant from UMass Boston, but zero participants from Harvard. Suffolk University informed me that I would have to go through an additional IRB approval process in order to recruit participants from the University; since time was limited, I decided to try to recruit from different schools in the Boston area, namely Boston College, where I had been a student for one year prior to enrolling at Notre Dame. I believed that Boston College would be an acceptable alternative because it still attracts students from a variety of geographic backgrounds just as Notre Dame does, I have connections at the University and felt I would be able to recruit a sufficient number of participants, and Boston College and Notre Dame are similar in their Catholic traditions, academic rigor, course offerings, and national rankings.

Therefore, although I would likely no longer be able to detect trends across universities, I would still be able to increase my sample size while maintaining a relatively homogenous sample in terms of institutional setting, with the exception of the participant from UMass Boston. Finally, I decided to include comments from the participant from UMass Boston despite his older age and his attendance at a public university because the participant's responses did not appear to differ substantially from the responses of the younger participants, suggesting that the age and institutional discrepancies did not directly correlate with a significant difference in responses.

In order to recruit participants from Boston College, I contacted personal friends from the university and they referred their friends to me, and one friend of mine convinced the professor of her Women and the Body class to distribute my call for participants to the members of the class. Through these methods, I gathered six participants from Boston College. However, I did not know any of the students I interviewed; this eliminated any chance of obtaining answers that were biased as a result of a prior personal relationship. In order to recruit students from the University of Notre Dame, I contacted the Gender Relations Center and Men Against Violence, a student group on campus, which distributed my call for participants, as well as the director of undergraduate studies in the Gender Studies department, who distributed my call to all students currently affiliated with the department. Through this method, I was able to obtain four participants. One of the participants is in another class with me, but I had never before spoken to him and therefore considered the threat of receiving biased answers as a result of a prior relationship to be low. Another participant, Henry[5], and I knew each other as acquaintances through a mutual friend and had had minimal interactions with each other prior to me interviewing him. However, I did not feel that the nature of these interactions constituted the

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[5] All participant names have been changed to protect the identities of the individuals who were interviewed.

formulation of a personal relationship that may threaten to create a significant bias in his responses and decided to include him in my sample.

As these recruiting methods suggest, the participants I interviewed do not represent a random sample, which is important to note when trying to draw conclusions based upon their comments. First of all, my sample size is small and only reflects attitudes of college-educated males[6], ten of whom are age 19-22 and attend private, Catholic universities. Not only do Boston College and the University of Notre Dame both contain mostly white students from middle to upper-class families, but it is also reasonable to suspect that attitudes toward masculinity may vary across larger age groups, education levels, institution types, race, socioeconomic status, and the like, as each of these factors relate to structural conditions that may cause men to experience and express masculinity in very different ways. Thus, although the insights gained by my participants are valuable in shedding light on the ways in which *some* men may experience masculinity living in America, the perspectives of the males I interviewed cannot be assumed to be indicative of dominant attitudes surrounding masculinity as they exist within the institutions from which I recruited the participants, or within broader American society as a whole, because they represent such a specific demographic. Likewise, all of the men I interviewed are well-educated, as evidenced by their attendance at nationally-ranked universities. Education has allowed them to develop the skills to think critically about masculinity and the ways it affects them in their everyday lives and to articulate these feelings, but it may also cause them to experience masculinity in a way that differs from those who are less educated. Kimmel describes the institutionalized nature of masculinity, and the men I interviewed are now part of an institution that many men in America do not, have not, and will not participate in; thus, it may be

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[6] One participant does not identify as strictly male, but rather as gender-fluid; for convenience, I will still refer to the groups of participants as males or men.

that education, especially college education and a very specific *type* of college education, fosters

a specific form of masculinity that may not be representative of a dominant form of masculinity

that exists in American society. Similarly, many of the men I interviewed were recruited from

academic departments or student clubs that relate specifically to gender and gender issues.

Therefore, these men have likely had exposure to many of the academic discussions surrounding

the construction of gendered identities in addition to issues that arise from gendered social

structures, and may have come to alter their own personal opinions or understandings of gender

as a result. In other words, their perceptions of gender may more closely conform to popular

theories of gender and masculinity than a significant number of other males in America who

have not had exposure to these theories and discussions in an academic setting. Finally, I did not

collect specific demographic or personal information from these men and am thus ignorant,

except for what conclusions I am able to draw directly from their comments, about the variety of

factors that may have come to shape their perception of masculinity, violence and entitlement in

America. Socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, race, religion, and many other demographic

and personal factors all have likely come to shape my participants' understanding of masculinity

in significant ways just as they likely do for most men living in America, and because these

factors are unobserved in my data except for in cases where the men explicitly discuss them, my

conclusions fail to account for a broad spectrum of dynamics and relationships that may underlie

some experiences of masculinity and which may ultimately contribute to the relationship

between masculinity and violence.

     For each sample group, I conducted approximately one-hour long focus group sessions at

a mutually agreed upon location at each university. Each male was asked to sign a consent form

prior to the beginning of the discussion. I conducted three separate focus group sessions: one

face-to-face interview with the individual male from UMass Boston, a group interview with the

six participants from Boston College, and one group interview with the four participants from

Notre Dame. The interviews were semi-structured; I began by telling all participants that I was

conducting a study about masculinity, violence and entitlement, and asked for their thoughts.

From there, the conversation centered on whatever the men thought it was important that I know

about these issues. I would occasionally interrupt to ask a question if I needed clarification about

something they were saying, or I would ask about their thoughts specifically regarding the

current events that I will discuss below, or about how their comments on these events or other

points of discussion might relate to violence or entitlement. In this way, each interview session

was unique; however, the Ray Rice and Elliot Rodger incidents, in addition to questions about

the relationship between masculinity and violence, possible causes of this relationship,

masculinity as a social construct, and entitlement were addressed during all three sessions.

Though I will discuss individual comments in the context of the topic of discussion at the time

the comments were made, it may be important to note that the focus group sessions did not

revolve around structured questions and each one addressed different topics, even though there

was some level of consistency in the themes of the topics discussed.

Data

It was Friday, May 23rd, a typical day in Santa Barbara, California—typical, that is, until

22-year-old Elliot Rodger set into a motion a plan that had ultimately been years in the making.

On that day, Rodger fatally stabbed three of his college roommates before approaching a UC

Santa Barbara sorority house and shooting two females standing outside; the horror ended when

Rodger shot a man in a local deli before turning the gun on himself (Yan, Brumfield, and Carter).

As news reports continued to surface shedding light on Rodger and his life in an effort to try to

explain a possible motive for his heinous rampage, some stories presented Rodger as a deeply disturbed young man whose parents frequently worried about his mental health (Nagourney et al.). Rodger's parents tried switching schools, setting their son up on play dates, taking him to counselors and therapists, and even medication, to alleviate his suffering from what was believed to be solely a mental illness that had been afflicting the boy for years (Nagourney et al.).

However, Elliot Rodger left behind a manifesto over 140 pages long describing an entire lifetime's worth of frustrations, loneliness and angst, especially of a sexual nature. Though it is likely that Rodger did suffer from some kind of mental illness—and it is important to note that most people who suffer from mental illnesses do not act out in a violent way even if some may at times contemplate doing so, according to psychologist J. Reid Meloy—some people, such as Dr. Michael Stone, a New York based forensic psychiatrist who studied Rodger's manifesto, have indicated that what makes the manifesto unique is that the writing is clear and precise and "has none of the raving quality that you see in the writing of people with psychosis" (Nagourney et al.). Thus, in addition to simply detailing the troubled life of a lonely, withdrawn young man, Rodger's manifesto also may serve as an important case study from which the ways in which the broader dynamics of masculinity and entitlement may intertwine to lead to violence may be examined.

Throughout the manifesto, Rodger frequently returns to themes of loneliness and sexual frustration, often relating experiences of feeling rejected by females or inadequate in the presence of other males. For example, Rodger recounts a story of two "hot blonde girls" who were once waiting at a bus stop. He smiled at them, but they ignored him; in response, Rodger turned toward the girls and splashed his Starbucks latte all over them, later writing, "I felt a feeling of spiteful satisfaction as I saw it stain their jeans" (Nagourney et al.). He recalls another

instance when he saw "a flock of beautiful blonde girls" playing kickball with "fraternity jocks" in a public park; he was so outraged by this scene that he drove to Kmart, bought a water gun and filled it with orange juice before he "screamed at them with rage as [he] sprayed them with [his] super soaker" (Nagourney et al.). Furthermore, Rodger describes his distress in the wake of his parents' divorce, but also the respect he gained for his father when he was able to begin dating so quickly after the separation. Of this, Rodger says:

> Males who can easily find female mates garner more respect from their fellow men, even children. How ironic is it that my father, one of those men who could easily find a girlfriend, has a son who would struggle all his life to find a girlfriend. (Yan, Brumfield, and Carter)

Shortly before the end of his life, Rodger began posting on various website forums, such as PUAhate, that attract sexually frustrated males, oftentimes expressing his disgust at women and his confusion about how they could resist him. He said in one post, which has since been removed, "One day incels [a term he used for involuntary celibates] will realize their true strength and numbers, and will overthrow this oppressive feminist system. Start envisioning a world where WOMEN FEAR YOU" (Nagourney et al.). The following excerpt from his manifesto sums up the prevailing attitude that Rodger demonstrates throughout:

> Females truly have something mentally wrong with them. Their minds are flawed, and at this point in my life I was beginning to see it. The more I explored my college town of Isla Vista, the more ridiculousness I witnessed. All of the hot, beautiful girls walked around with obnoxious, tough jock-type men who partied all the time and acted crazy. They should be going for intelligent gentlemen such as myself. Women are sexually attracted to the wrong type of man. This is a major flaw in the very foundation of humanity. It is completely and utterly wrong, in every sense of the word. As these truths fully dawned on me, I became deeply disturbed by them. Deeply disturbed, offended, and traumatized. (Rodger)

As I discussed Elliot Rodger and his motivations with Edward, a 26-year old undergraduate from UMass Boston, I mentioned how Rodger's case is a unique case of mass violence because of the air of entitlement that is so prominent throughout his manifesto—Rodger

expresses overt entitlement to women and their bodies, becomes frustrated and even angry when

he is not given permission to act on his physical desires, and he also, in accordance with

Kimmel's theory, expresses a tacit form of entitlement that he feels justifies his use of violence

in aggression in alleviating his frustrations. Upon reflecting on these ideas, Edward theorized

about Rodger's motives, saying:

> But it is an example of something that, if not tackled, this is what it turns into. And, um,
> going back to your entitlement…but you think about the fact that women are taught to
> aspire to marriage, well men are taught that, from an early age, their value in society as
> well is also connected to how many women they're sleeping with. Whether or not they
> can attract a mate, whether or not they can find a girlfriend, whether or not they can make
> a girl laugh…

In other words, Edward perceives that men are judged and evaluated according to their ability to

obtain the things that Rodger was unable to obtain. I acknowledged that the case of Rodger is an

extreme case of violence that seems to stem, at least to some extent, from an underlying attitude

of entitlement, but I asked Edward how real these feelings of entitlement may be, either in the

case of Rodger or as a facet of masculinity more generally. He replied:

> I think it's a real issue. I don't think every guy would end up doing this, I don't think a
> majority of guys would do this, but I think what we're not looking at is the fact that
> women who feel this way, women who cannot be the 'beautiful women'—the women
> who don't fit society's standards of beauty and the ones who aren't surrounded by guys
> all the time—their form of violence is towards themselves…But the entitlement here is
> the fact that men hurt other people. And that's the problem.

Dan, a 21-year old from Boston College, expressed a slightly different idea about the case of

Rodger. He said of the relationship between violence and entitlement as it relates to masculinity:

> I don't think that's true for Columbine, and I'm not sure about [another widely
> publicized violent attack at a high school in Pittsburgh earlier this year] but yeah I think
> that's literally, like, yeah. You're pushed and pushed and pushed and it's just you do
> something and you break and you act violently thing. I think the entitlement thing comes
> from the fact that [Rodger] was involved in these groups, these men's rights groups …I
> think that's where the entitlement thing comes from, which absolutely plays a piece in his
> violence, but I don't think it plays a piece in the violence more generally speaking. I think
> violence, more generally speaking, comes from being taught that you have to do

something, and I think that what you are taught to do, that's the move you're taught to make.

Something detrimental that also comes out of the men's rights thing, which I think was a big part of Eliot Roger's felt, was like the friend zoning thing, like 'I was nice to a girl and she didn't immediately, like, start having sex with me. What the fuck is this bullshit?' It's like, no. Just because you're a decent human being doesn't mean you're owed sex, which like is a scary thing that many people believe. The fact that the 'friend zone' is such a pervasive term in our culture is very scary.

To this, Steven added:

And going back to the societal implication of the social construct of being a man, is to not want deep, emotional connections because you're trying to shy away from the emotions to something more physical, something strength-based, something power-based.

Dan and Steven's insights closely resemble Brannon and David's four tenets of masculinity, one of which states that men are expected to be daring and aggressive. This is a theme that was frequently acknowledged by the men I interviewed as well. Brandon, a 19-year old student from Boston College, offered some insight into how men are socialized to adopt daring and aggressive tendencies while discussing the relationship between masculinity and violence. He said:

I would say that men and violence begins at a really young age. Men are taught to be, in a sense, very physical. I was in third grade playing sports where they tackle each other, where they throw each other on the ground, and it's, I think, what you see as a man who is bigger and better than another man is bigger in stature, bigger in strength… I think that when people feel threatened especially, their first reaction is not kind of to solve the situation using non-violent tactics, but to kind of fight back, because that seems to be, it's just kind of the fight or flight sense that's almost kind of triggered and ingrained in us as we mature.

Steven, a 20-year old student from Boston College, elaborated on these sentiments:

I agree with the starting young thing, even young boys as old as three or four are told 'Oh you have to do this to grow up big and strong.' Like those are the things that are kind of highlighted as ideals to strive for. The toys that they play with—if you walk through a toy store, you'll see boys sections and girls sections separated, and in the boys section there's action figures of soldiers and police officers and there's toy guns and knives and those knives and it's very aggression-directed from a very, very young age.

Michael, a 21-year old Boston College student agreed with both Brandon and Steven, suggesting that perhaps the mechanisms with which society teaches young boys and, later, adult men to use

violence and aggression as a means of restoring their dominant positions within a situation in which they have been wronged may help explain the actions of men such as Elliot Rodger. Michael said:

> I feel like boys are also taught to take action in situations, and that might lead to the violence thing. Because if you get someone who's really, really passionate about something…he experiences this issue where it's like he's taught to do this to get girls, and he does this and it doesn't work, and he's like 'there's something wrong here,' and his reaction is to take action, and that's violent action. And I just—that would be different if we weren't taught that the answer is always that you're right and be confident and just do it.

Kimmel points out that prior to the 1990s, most school shootings took place in urban schools, and the typical narrative seemed to be that a young man would bring a gun to school in search of a specific target due to some previous conflict (*Angry White Men* 72). However, the profile of school shooters began to change in the late 1980s and early 1990s to one of the boy, typically white, from a suburban or rural school opening fire at seemingly random targets and usually killing himself afterward (*Angry White Men* 72). Rodger joins the infamous ranks of notorious rampage school shooters such as Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who murdered 13 students and teacher at Columbine High School before turning the guns on themselves in April of 1999, as well as others such as Seung-Hui Cho, a student at Virginia Tech who murdered 32 of his classmates and professors before committing suicide in April of 2007 (*Angry White Men* 84). All of these shooters, along with several other widely publicized high school and college-aged mass shooters, reported being bullied and picked on—sometimes being called "gay" or "sissies," sometimes receiving insults implying that their physical bodies were not masculine enough, sometimes being physically harassed, —as did Elliott Rodger in his manifesto (*Angry White Men* 77). Interestingly, many of the participants in my focus groups also readily recalled times when they were bullied as they were growing up, sometimes because they had too many

female friends, which was seen as less-masculine than having male friends, or sometimes simply because of their shorter stature—both things that they claimed prevent them from fully achieving the hegemonic ideal of masculinity; yet, none of them turned to or even considered turning to violence, despite the loneliness and frustration that inevitably arose from being picked on.

However, although many men may experience bullying, especially in a manner that insults or de-legitimizes their masculinity through verbal or physical assaults, Kimmel explains that "what transforms the aggrieved into mass murders is also a sense of entitlement, a sense that using violence against others, making others hurt as you hurt, is fully justified" (*Angry White Men* 75). This aggrieved entitlement, Kimmel argues, is also a *gendered* sense of entitlement that is a byproduct of a patriarchal system that continually guarantees the dominant position of men at the expense of other men and women, and is also a byproduct of a hegemonic ideal of masculinity that condones violence as a form of justice (*Angry White Men* 82).

Brandon, Steven and Michael's ideas seem to support this idea. In the case of Elliot Rodger, it may be that Rodger felt entitled to use violence as a means of restoring what he felt he had lost, which was both the social capital Brandon posits takes the form of sexual prowess in the lives of men, and more generally, Rodger's ability to control the situations or the females that would allow him to have access to that capital. Matthew, a 21-year old from Notre Dame, explained to me that, regarding what it means to be a man in America, "there might be an expectation of control over aspects of your life, control over your emotion…as well as having the ability to control what's going on around you." This idea complements Brannon and David's claim that it is expected that men remain calm and reliable in situations—in essence, retaining some sense of control over the situation, and by extension, the female body—and again reinforces the notion that the inability for Rodger to control situations involving females

threatened his masculinity as well as his pride. As West and Zimmerman note in their theories of gender display, a crucial element of gender display is the way in which others perceive one's display. So although Rodger expresses his belief that he is the type of "intelligent gentleman" that females should be attracted to and that, by extension, he lives up to the standards of masculinity that men are socialized to aspire to, his beliefs are irrelevant if he is not perceived that way by either the males or females for whom he presents his masculine identity on a daily basis. Without the affirmation of others, Rodger cannot succeed in achieving the masculine ideal. Likewise, Messerschmidt notes both the ways in which men draw upon previously existing ideals when constructing their own ideas about masculinity, and also the importance of the male body in constructing masculinity. Rodger drew upon both his father—as did Edward, at least earlier in his life, when I discussed where his conceptions of what it means to be a man came from— and the "jock-type men" when developing his understanding of masculinity, noting that the primary means through which these men expressed their masculinity was through their sexual and emotional relationships with women. Invariably, the male body itself gains significance in constructing masculinity because it engages in the sexual relationships that signify one's achievement of masculinity, as Rodger says in his manifesto. Therefore, as Messerschmidt theorizes, males may commit violence in part as a means of proving the competency of their bodies if their competency has been perceived as lacking in other areas, as Rodger's was in his involuntary abstinence from sexual activities.

Mass shootings such as that committed by Elliott Rodger and other young men are, fortunately, extreme and rare occurrences, but another insidious form of violence nevertheless lurks in the shadows of the public eye. Every day in America, at least five women die as a result of intimate partner violence; in fact, the United States has the highest rate of spousal homicide in

the developed world (*Angry White Men* 173). The United States Surgeon General has even declared that male partner attacks on women are the number one cause of injury to women between 15 and 44 in the United States, with one in three female murder victims killed at the hands of their own intimate male partners every year (*Angry White Men* 174). Although domestic violence may not be as publicly visible or may not draw as much media attention as massacres such as the tragic one committed by Elliot Rodger in Santa Barbara, one case of domestic violence that was caught on camera quickly gained notoriety throughout the United States in mid-2014. Ray Rice, a popular NFL running back from the Baltimore Ravens, was caught on video punching his fiancé in the face after an apparent dispute in an elevator. It has been reported that the dispute began when Janay Rice tried to grab her husband's phone; he then spit at her, she hit him in the face, and he then punched her in the face, knocking her unconscious and causing her to hit her head on an elevator railing before he dragged her unconscious body out of the elevator (Mandell).

Once video footage surfaced, it quickly circulated throughout popular social media and news reporting outlets. One popular blogging website, Reddit, attracted many males who expressed both frustration at the criticism surrounding Ray Rice's behavior and even support for his "defensive" tactics in the elevator. Some of the comments that bloggers posted in the wake of the release of the video included things such as, "She hit him first. He backed away and she came at him again. Glad he didn't get more in trouble," "He defended himself from her first attack and moved away, then she came for a second attack and he defended himself…As the research says, the strongest predictor of a woman being injured by [domestic violence], is her own initiation of violence," and "Sure, she may have felt emboldened by the fact that she felt she could count on

millions of apologists for female violence to take the wrong side on this issue if it ever became

public, but fundamentally, she assaulted him, and he defended himself" (Saccaro).

In addition to expressing outright support for Ray Rice in the wake of the incident in the

elevator, many bloggers also expressed frustration at the notion of domestic violence in general,

saying that only men can be convicted of it, even though, as the video suggests, women are also

guilty of physically assaulting their intimate male partners. When I asked Edward what he

thought about this, he responded:

> I feel like only men are held accountable for domestic violence when there are a lot of women who are committing domestic violence… but I think, and it's something I have a hard time explaining, but this is something that like, especially when it comes to any domestic violence, especially in heterosexual couples, men are expected to behave like that—men are expected to hurt. So in this case, she hurt him, so he hurt her back because that's what men are taught. You hit me, I hit you back. But women are never expected to hit. So, when a woman hits a man, not only is a man being hit, not only is somebody hurting him, but a *woman* is hurting him. Someone who, in their eyes, is supposed to say 'yes, you're right,' and then they back down.

On the notion that men are expected to hit back when they are hit, Steven offered insight into

how other areas of society, namely the economic sector, may also foster aggression as a

component of masculinity. Steven said:

> I mean, like, men have traditionally been cast as the breadwinners and women as the homemakers, and the whole idea of the family dynamic. So that kind of goes along with that, sort of like, the man is the one who's supposed to go out and be the cut-throat business man or something like that, like, they kind of have to be aggressive in multiple ways. So I think that that 's kind of like an indoctrination into that mindset and having it kind of permeate throughout their life.

Although it is true that women also commit acts of domestic violence toward their

intimate partners or husbands, some sociologists such as R. Emerson and Russell Dobash have

explained that men and women tend to commit intimate partner violence for different reasons,

specifically citing reasons that spouses may murder each other. They explain that men often kill

their wives after long periods of physically assaulting them, whereas women oftentimes kill their

husbands as a defense, either in a moment of violence being committed against them or in anticipation of more violence (*Angry White Men* 175). Some say that social pressures may prevent men from reporting domestic violence to authorities, as it may be viewed as "unmasculine" to admit physical impairment at the hands of another—especially at the hands of a woman, who is commonly viewed as weak. However, FBI crime statistics collected in 2012 reveal that there still exists a gross disparity between the number of husbands who kill their wives and the number of wives who kill their husbands[7]. In 2012, there were 96 reported cases of husbands who had been murdered by their wives; that same year, 498 wives were reported to have been killed by their husbands (*Table 10*). Interestingly, the rates of murders amongst mothers and fathers showed significantly smaller disparities, with 130 mothers and 126 fathers murdered by their child(ren) in 2012, as were the rates of sons and daughters, with 215 sons and 168 daughters murdered by their parent(s) (*Table 10*). However, incidence rates again demonstrate a gross gendered disparity when another romantic relationship is observed in the data, with 168 boyfriends murdered by their girlfriends and 494 girlfriends murdered by their boyfriends in 2012 (*Table 10*).

Perhaps one interpretation of the romantic component and its relationship to a larger disparity in murder incidence rates is that romance involves some element of vulnerability. According to Michael Kimmel, vulnerability is a threat to masculinity. He explains that if masculinity is based on "impermeable defenses and the feeling of being in control," then violence may be restorative in that it returns a man to his dominant position in the relationship before the moment he made himself vulnerable (*Angry White Men* 177). In short, Kimmel says, "One must feel entitled to use violence as a means of restoring what was experienced as

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[7] The report noted that spousal relationships only reflect heterosexual couples; homosexual relationships were accounted for by being labeled as murders committed against "acquaintances."

threatened, that part of the self that is suddenly made vulnerable" (*Angry White Men* 177).

Thomas, a 21-year old from Notre Dame, seems to agree. As we were discussing vulnerability in

conversation and the ways in which the participants from Notre Dame perceive there to be

differences in the intimacy levels of their conversations with males and their conversations with

females, Thomas said:

> The running theme is vulnerability, like it's so difficult. The idea of manhood is
> impregnability. Like, you cannot be punctured, or penetrated, or overreached, like your
> walls are what define you. And depending on how tall, how strong, how thick they are—
> like you can even see it manifest on a person, depending on body mass or weight or size
> or the way they carry themselves, the way they walk. It's all about building both
> emotional and physical isolation.

Brandon expressed similar views, stating:

> Men, in general, are almost taught to suppress—like the whole man up thing, which is
> ironic because in a sense that it's to suppress your emotions. So, like, in, you're not
> supposed to cry, you're not supposed to show that you're sad, you're not supposed to
> show that you're overly-infatuated with someone, um, but the emotion men are allowed
> to show, in a sense, is anger.

Other participants in my focus groups expressed similar feelings that in general, it is less

acceptable for men to verbally express their emotions than it is to physically express emotions

such as anger or frustration, especially around other men. Mason, a 19-year old freshman from

Notre Dame, elaborated on Thomas' sentiments by telling the group about a talk he had heard

from a formerly incarcerated man. The man had been trying to call his wife from prison, but a

younger inmate repeatedly refused to give him the phone. All of this transpired in the presence of

other inmates. As Mason explained:

> …the next day, [he] confronted the young man and basically beat him up, and he told us
> that this was basically the first time he had every physically assaulted anyone in his life,
> but he said that if he didn't, he would have been perceived as a much weaker guy and he
> would have been taken advantage of physically and sexually for the rest of his time in
> prison. That risk was far worse to him was far worse than beating this guy
> up…Obviously, as I said, that's exaggerated because it's prison, but I think it definitely
> holds a lot of truth outside of prison walls. Like, if you are embarrassed, or if you get told

to screw off, at least my—an instinct of mine is to immediately verbally let the guy know, or to physically—and I don't act on these things—but to physically reassert my dominance and be, like, listen…

Dominance, as Connell theorizes, is a driving force of both hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy. In order to achieve dominance, violence is sometimes necessary. Furthermore, as Kimmel claims, violence is also a means of preserving impregnability or restoring a state of control as something, and it ultimately stems from entitlement. While reflecting upon this idea later on in my interview with the males from Notre Dame, Matthew, a 22-year old student, shared a deeply personal account of a time when he says he recognized a sense of entitlement in himself. He explained:

> I had recently, I went somewhere and drunkenly made out with someone and then I had this reflection when I looked back at it, I don't remember saying anything and establishing consent or anything, and it's weird to think about yourself as entitled, but it's like you're ok with it in the moment. Like, there's this sense of this is right, like this is how I'm supposed to have it manifested, this is healthy, this is the context of the space. But like if you deconstruct and analyze it, there's this sense that—not that you raped someone—but like an unhealthy sense of access and entitlement that like if you don't check, it can lead to worse things. Like there's this sense that it's like ok, this is perfectly ok, me and this person have not talked or established consent but I'm having access to their body, and it's frightening. It's sort of like, it's sort of troubling. I'm kind of nervous talking about this, but guys don't deconstruct it like that most times. Most times they're like 'oh I did this,' and it's a source of pride, it's a confirmation of your manhood, but you can't let those kind of things by and be surprised when those things escalate into a negative because you have this mindset and sense of entitlement to women's bodies that's permeated throughout culture through music, media and all of that, and it's like— it's weird to be like coming face to face with like I might be subconsciously complicit in that rather than something different.

The "worse things" that Matthew referred to have, unfortunately, become one of the most frequently experienced forms of violence in America. Though there is some variation and ambiguity surrounding sexual violence statistics, according to a report released in 2010 by the Center for Disease Control, nearly one in five women had reported being raped as of 2010, with almost 80% of female rape victims reporting having been raped for the first time before the age

of 25 (*Sexual Violence Survey* 1-2). From 2004-2006[8], approximately 105,187 females and 6,525

males ages 10-24 received medical care for injuries incurred from a sexual assault (*Facts at a*

Glance). Rape and sexual assault is a serious crime that can lead to significant physical and

psychological traumas in victims, and it has gained increasing media attention as the United

States government begins to recognize the scope of the problem and its role in decreasing

incidence rates and properly responding to both victims and perpetrators, especially on college

campuses where 19% of undergraduate women report experiencing attempted or completed

sexual assault since beginning college (*Facts at a Glance*). Sexual assault has also gained

extensive media attention because of high-profile cases involving pop culture icons and

American celebrities, such as the recent surge in reports from various women that Bill Cosby,

star of the popular American sitcom *The Cosby Show*, drugged and sexually assaulted them at

various points throughout his career (Mallenbaum).

Though the data and many high-profile cases of sexual assault suggest that perpetrators

most commonly assault females, it is important to recognize that sexual assault affects victims of

both genders. Earlier this year, national news outlets reported that police in Kentucky charged

five men for sexual assault after the men took turns violently sexually assaulting a 15-year-old

boy and video-recording the attack, leaving the victim with life-threatening injuries (Smith). In

the same report issued by the CDC in 2012, 1 in 20 men report experiencing sexual violence

other than rape at some point in their life, with 1 in 20 women reporting the same (*Facts at a*

Glance). Though much debate surrounds the effectiveness of statistics in accurately reporting

victims, one common concern is that men may be less willing to report assaults committed

against them because of the common stereotype that men always want sex and are always willing

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[8] This, according to a similar summary report released by the CDC in 2012; not only does ambiguity surround both the incidence reporting procedures, but it is also difficult to find up-to-date statistics reporting on sexual violence.

to participate, or out of fear that their masculinity or even sexuality might be questioned (Rawley). Brannon and David's tenets of masculinity support this view, as expressing that they themselves have been the victims of a crime may make men "sissies," may threaten their appearance of dominant and aggressive if they were able to be physically overtaken by somebody else, or may even be perceived as a display of emotions that men are otherwise not supposed to express.

However, similar to the murder statistics discussed earlier, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence survey issued by the Center for Disease Control states that a majority of female *and* a majority of male victims of sexual violence report being assaulted by a male (*Sexual Violence Survey* 3). Peter, a 22-year old student at Boston College, works with rape prevention and says that he sees entitlement most prominently in sexual violence. As he sees it, "There's entitlement in sexual violence…a lot of the cases [he sees] are men who not only belittle women and like, objectify them, but then say 'ok they're an object and I'm going to use that object…'" Michael later added, "And a little more cynically, I think men are taught to view women as a source of sex, and that's about it." Many of the participants noted that part of constructing or displaying one's masculinity involves being aggressive and taking action when they desire a different result, as Dan and Brandon discussed when reflecting on Elliot Rodger's rampage. As Peter said, it may be that men feel entitled to women's or men's bodies and will use force to access those bodies because they have been socialized to be aggressive in order to achieve results. This would also adhere to both Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, which is upheld only insofar as men are able to maintain their dominant status in society by subordinating women, and also Kimmel's theory that entitlement is a necessary component of violence that guarantees some men's power over both women *and* other men.

Henry, a 20-year old student at Notre Dame, offered one final insight, addressing the ultimate reason why aggression has sustained such an important position in the hegemonic masculine ideal as it currently operates in American society. He said:

> It seems like, in general, aggression is rewarded if you're a male…And a lot of it is in subtle ways. But, like, you have to make physical space and be dominant in that space, or when it comes to getting a job or getting what you want, it's 'be aggressive, be aggressive,' but with women you become pushy, or bossy, or too controlling, or clingy if you're talking about a significant other. So like the base impulse is aggression, and I think it's definitely rewarded in different ways. I think it's just an ingrained thing where the reaction [of men and women] is different. It's kind of a leap to say that that leads to violence, but it also might not be.

Conclusion

In total, I conducted three focus group sessions and collected over three hours of qualitative interview data in order to test whether or not theories of masculinity and gender construction are accurate in describing the ways in which some men actually experience masculinity living in America, and to learn about the ways in which some men believe there to be a link between masculinity and violence. Interview responses clearly indicate that men are socialized in various capacities to adopt aggressive tendencies in multiple facets of their lives, and many men in my focus groups believe that there does exist a clear link between the way masculinity is constructed in America and violence committed by men, as gender and masculinity theorists also posit. Though women also commit violent crimes, sexual assaults, and physical abuse, statistics suggest that they do not do so nearly at the same rate as men, indicating that there may be a strong gendered component to violent crime in America.

Though my data only reflects the perceptions of a very small portion and a very specific demographic of the American population, it still offers insights into the ways in which some men living in America experience and understand masculinity, and more importantly, about the ways that they believe masculinity and violence to be intimately connected. Not a single participant

denied this connection and the pervasiveness of the seemingly "natural" link between masculinity and aggression at any point during my interviews. There seemed to be a general consensus that men are socialized to adopt aggression starting at a young age through such mechanisms as the toys they play with; movies, music, and other media they are exposed to; and other male role models in their lives, such as fathers, brothers, and friends.

"I think…that men are almost always seen as aggressive or as threats to women. They're also seen as aggressive and as threats to children," said Brandon, as we were discussing the ways in which hegemonic masculinity most negatively impacts those who are unwilling to or incapable of achieving it, which includes both women and other men. I asked him if it makes him angry that men are always perceived as threats, to which he replied:

> I mean, it bothers me that men are almost always assumed—I mean the assumption is that a man can't be walking through a park without those intentions, or a man can't be around children with those intentions, a man can't just like children… because men are viewed as aggressive, and historically are aggressive in the sense that all men are assumed to be that. We're assumed to be that patriarchy, we're assumed that we want to dominate things, which is, you know, an unfair assumption to many men. But, it doesn't, in many ways it comes with historical precedents, which also is noted.

As statistics and media reports reflect, men are commonly the reported perpetrators of aggression and violent crimes, which has inevitably, as Brandon believes, contributed to the perpetuation of the gendered stereotype that all men are aggressive or expected to be so. But, as both Brandon and Emma Watson note, it is important to remember that not only are all men *not* overly-aggressive as some may believe, but men have also become threats to both themselves and to other men as a result of these stereotypes.

Beyond the numbers, which hint at the ways in which a hegemonic masculinity that emphasizes aggression as a key component has become detrimental and even fatal for men, the men I interviewed cited the perhaps more subtle ways in which hegemonic masculinity

negatively impacts them in their everyday lives: Edward relayed his strenuous relationship with his parents as a result of both his homosexuality and his alleged subordination to his ex-wife, which he claimed that both parents perceived to be a marker of his failure to live up to an aggressive masculine archetype; Charlie, a 20-year old from Boston College, described his feelings of frustration at constantly being compared to his twin brother and his "male, aggressive-type" friends while growing up, feeling that his multiple friendships with women did not give him social status his twin brother and his friends had; Thomas recounted the ways in which hegemonic masculinity has made it difficult for them[9] to find intimate partners when they do not perform sexual interest the way hegemonic masculinity mandates and when their gender display or performance do not indicate a sexual preference the way, according to Thomas, a true man's should.

Watson is absolutely correct in saying that gendered stereotypes are oppressive to men—just as they are to women and anybody who falls somewhere in between the masculine and feminine ends of the gender spectrum. However, what *all* individuals in America need to start paying attention to is the ways in which these stereotypes have acted as catalysts for violence. Government policy and the criminal justice system are only part of the solution to a complex problem, one which may be closely related to gendered constructs that have been so ingrained in everyday life that they have come to take on the appearance of simply being the natural way when they are, in fact, not. Gender is not, by any means, the only structural mechanism related to incidents of violence; however, male-perpetrated violence must be a crucial point of discussion in contemporary feminist dialogue because of the ways that gender constructions have contributed to systematic patterns of violence in America.

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[9] Thomas identifies as gender-fluid and prefers to be referred to by the pronoun(s) they/them/their

As Watson suggested in her speech to the UN, working to change gendered stereotypes into ones that do not foster aggression and violence as a means of upholding dominance is essential in creating a world that is more equitable, accessible, and safe for women, especially because these stereotypes reflect socialized behaviors rather than essential differences between men and women. But, what tends to take a backseat in dialogues about gender construction is the way in which changing stereotypes is critical for creating a world that is also safer and less restricting for men. Though oppression stemming from patriarchy affects both genders in different ways, it is clear from the men that I interviewed that men are not completely free to show vulnerability or to show emotions other than anger, and this may in fact be the crux of male-perpetrated violence against other men and against women, especially because this is one of the ways in which the system of patriarchy upholds its legitimacy. Therefore, only when narrow gender roles that restrict both men and women are altered to allow true freedom in all non-violent forms of self-expression can Watson's vision of true gender equality and the beginning of the dismantling of patriarchy be realized.

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