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An Explorative Study of Men's Masculinity Constructions and Proximity to Violence Against Women

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Abstract

This explorative study aimed to develop an understanding of how a sample of two groups of men, considered to be situated at different ends of Connell's masculinity continuum, construct their masculinity, and how these constructions relate to their proximity to violence against women (VAW). One group consisted of five men incarcerated for violent crimes (MIVC) that had previously used VAW. The other included five participants in the pro-feminist group Men Against Violence (MAV), without prior VAW. An *abductive* approach, using qualitative interviews, was employed. Results show that the MIVC participants appeared ambivalent, unreflective, and inconsistent in their masculinity constructions, and used VAW as part of their problem-solving repertoire. The MAV participants appeared to have a reflexive stance towards gender equality and consistently adopted inclusive ways of enacting masculinity and preventing VAW. The study can only provide some support to the postulated relationship between men's masculinity positions and their attitudes toward VAW.

Keywords: Violence against women; proximity to violence; masculinity construction.



Un Estudio Exploratorio de las Construcciones de Masculinidad de los Hombres y la Proximidad a la Violencia Contra las Mujeres

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Resumen

Este estudio exploratorio tiene como objetivo comprender cómo una muestra de dos grupos de hombres, situados en diferentes extremos del continuo de masculinidad de Connell, construyen su masculinidad y cómo estas construcciones se relacionan con su proximidad a la violencia contra las mujeres (VCM). Un grupo estaba formado por cinco hombres encarcelados por delitos violentos que habían utilizado anteriormente la VCM. El otro incluyó a cinco participantes del grupo pro-feminista, sin VCM previa. Se empleó un enfoque abductivo, utilizando entrevistas cualitativas. Los resultados muestran que los participantes del grupo de hombres encarcelados parecían ambivalentes, irreflexivos e inconsistentes en sus construcciones de masculinidad, y usaban la VCM como parte de su repertorio de resolución de problemas. Los participantes del movimiento pro-feminista parecían tener una postura reflexiva hacia la igualdad de género y adoptaron consistentemente formas inclusivas de representar la masculinidad y prevenir la VCM. El estudio solo puede brindar cierto apoyo a la relación postulada entre las posiciones de masculinidad de los hombres y sus actitudes hacia la VCM.

Palabras clave: Violencia contra las mujeres; proximidad a la violencia; construcción de la masculinidad.

Relatively few studies have assessed how different forms of masculinity relate to violence. Kaufman (1987) uses the concept “the triad of violence” to show that men’s VAW is an inseparable part of the “doing of masculinity,” and of men’s violence against other men and against themselves. Scholars such as Kaufman (1987), Connell (1995, 2000), Scheff (2006) and Hutching (2008) have all broadened our understanding of how men, in stark contrast to women, are socialized into an insensitive gender role. Katz (2006) and Hearn (1998a, 1998b) stress men’s collective responsibility for individual men’s violence, by being passive bystanders or colluding with perpetrators (Connell, 1995; the notion of “complicit masculinity”). But as Flood (2015) argues, a key assumption behind efforts to involve men in stopping VAW is that all men have something to gain from it. Unfortunately, however, the ending of men’s VAW is not in the interest of all men. Even so, not all male gender norms can be said to reinforce such violence. To understand the roots and driving forces behind men’s VAW, Fleming et al. (2015) suggest that it might be more useful to investigate which gender norms trigger violence.

This approach is more useful than treating violence as a universal problem involving all men and/or limiting the interest to just men’s VAW.

A growing number of researchers have concluded that interactions between structural and socioeconomic factors such as childhood experiences, attitudes, social networks and lifestyles, and bio-psychological factors, must be taken into account to gain a full understanding of the causes of violence (Jordan, 2009; Heise, 2012; World Health Organization, 2013). Attitudes that support controlling and using violence against women have been highlighted as important when trying to understand and come to terms with VAW (Hearn, 1998a; Flood & Pease, 2009). One way to better understand if and how such attitudes are associated with violent behaviours is to investigate whether they are distributed differently between men situated at different ends of Connell’s masculinity continuum (1995), with men known to be violent at one end, and men known to take a stand against VAW at the other end (Kelly, 1987).

Gaining a better understanding of how differences in masculinity constructions are related to men’s proximity to VAW (i.e. attitudes that justify

control of or violence against a female partner) could be of great importance when designing interventions against men's VAW on both a societal and an individual level (Jewkes, et al., 2015).

Consequently, the *aim* of the study is to develop an understanding of how men's masculinity constructions are related to their proximity to VAW.

Theoretical Framework and Previous Research on Masculinities and Violence

Male violence is considered an important resource in the production of masculinity and the maintenance of power in relation to women and other men, as well as of men's self-understanding (Connell, 1995; Messerschmidt, 2018a). In many respects, men benefit from the use of violence or threats of violence, as it can function as a defense of their patriarchal dividend (Connell, 1987, 1995; Walby, 1990; Knuttila, 2016). However, different forms of masculinity entail different degrees of proximity to violence (PTV). Some men embody and enact a form of masculinity, live by norms and ideals, and have access to accepted masculinity-validating resources that enable superiority over women without the use of violence (Connell, 1995; Messerschmidt, 2000, 2018a). Men in a marginalized position lack the economic, cultural and social resources needed to meet conventional hegemonic ideals because of unemployment, low-paid work, poor physical or mental health, and/or drug problems (Connell, 1995; Messerschmidt, 2018b). Lacking conventional resources, they are more inclined to use aggressive means to validate their masculinity. They may retreat to contexts where they are in control of their identities and adopt a patriarchal role within the family or participate in violent subcultures and/or criminality (Messerschmidt, 2018a; Connell, 1995). Marginalized men may also perceive dominance, toughness, aggression, crime, violence/VAW and rape as resources for defending their masculine self-understanding (Connell, 1995; Messerschmidt 2000, 2018a; Moore & Stuart, 2004).

In contrast, violence is less present in stories from young men involved in the environmental movement, as well as in the lives of men with a “pro-feminist” attitude (Flood, 2001). The latter tend to reflect on how they should change their lives in response to demands from the feminist movement. This can be compared with the idea of men employing an “inclusive masculinity”. Anderson (2009) showed that men in American and British university environments are moving towards a masculinity less constrained by “orthodox” male values. These men embrace codes and symbols that traditionally have been associated with femininity, which has led to a normalization of both men’s use of traditional feminine behaviours and non-heterosexual gender identities.

Recent research confirms that there is a relationship between men’s lack of access to conventional resources (e.g. having an education, a job and a family) and their use of alternative masculinity-validating strategies, such as patriarchal attitudes, aggression, and VAW (Ellis, 2017; Messerschmidt, 2000, 2018a). Carr and VanDeusen (2004) show that men’s PTV and level of abuse of women is related to their degree of conformity to certain hegemonic masculinity ideals, such as lacking empathy, being emotionally restrained and displaying aggression and hostility towards women. In a study of incarcerated men, Krienert (2003) shows that those who reported taking part in interpersonal violence to a high degree also had a low level of socially accepted, non-violent outlets for “doing gender, and scored high on stereotypically masculine personality traits, such as displaying and valuing physical strength, being aggressive and competitive, and striving for power and control.

Methodology

Using an exploratory, qualitative approach, group and individual interviews were conducted to get knowledge about the two participating groups of men.

The Context

Sweden, the context of the study, has been spared from war in modern times and is internationally recognized for its equality and masculinity policies (Mellström, Hearn & Pringle, 2014). Sweden's public welfare system extensively incorporates elements of de-commodification that benefit women and men as well as gender and equity policies. This is manifested in policy statements and strategies aiming for women to have the same opportunities as men in the workforce, for men to be equally responsible for housework and child care, and for men's VAW to cease (Official Reports of the Swedish Government; SOU 2005:66).

Despite such efforts, the Swedish labor market does not appear to be less gender segregated than other countries in Europe and North America. Nor does Sweden appear to be a model nation when it comes to eliminating VAW. Different studies show that the prevalence of VAW is as high or higher than in the rest of Europe (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014; WHO, 2013). Given the existing gender-equality ideals, these high figures have been viewed by some as a "paradox," as VAW would be expected to be less common in a cultural environment in which women are not perceived as inferior to men (Gracia & Merlo, 2016).

Participants

A theoretical, purposive sampling was made of two groups of men with different expected attitudes and PTV. The two groups chosen were: members of the pro-feminist group *Men Against Violence* (MAV), expected to show characteristics more closely related to what in previous research has been termed complicit masculinity; and *men incarcerated for violent crimes* (MIVC), expected to show attributes and characteristics corresponding to a marginalized masculinity position (Connell 1995). In line with the study's qualitative approach, five male participants from each position were included. To make it possible to follow the individual informants 'reasoning in the results section, the men in the MAV group were named MAV1, MAV2,

MAV3, MAV4 and MAV5, and those in the MIVC group were MIVC1, MIVC2, MIVC3, MIVC4 and MIVC5.

The five MAV participants were characterized by generally high access to accepted and conventional masculinity resources through a postsecondary education, academic training, and stable socioeconomic status from employment or a pension, and a stable family situation. They were married or had a steady heterosexual relationship according to their own account, had no criminal records, and were all actively involved in running the leading Swedish pro-feminist organization MAV which works against VAW. MAV is a non-profit, feminist-oriented, national Swedish organization founded in 1993 which serves as a platform for men to oppose men's VAW, mainly by changing masculinity norms. MAV operates locally through individual activists and local chapters, and nationally by offering and helping to implement violence-prevention methods and programs in schools and other environments. The MAV participants were 37–69 years old (MAV1: 59, MAV2: 37, MAV3: 69, MAV4: 52 and MAV5: 57; average age 55) and had all been active in the MAV organization for more than five years as board members from southern, central and northern Sweden. Two were active in men's support centers, and three others gave lectures on gender issues and/or were politically active.

The MIVC participants were clients at a compulsory Swedish treatment center to which they had been sent for treatment against violence, drug problems and antisocial behaviour, as an alternative to prison. There are about 15 such units in Sweden. The treatment was carried out under the supervision of a correctional unit and had duration of 6–8 months with the possibility of prolongation. The men had not attended secondary school, lacked permanent employment, lived in metropolitan areas, and had drug problems and unstable family situations. Three of them had no stable partner relationship and earned a living through temporary jobs and criminal activities such as debt-collecting, drug-trafficking, and theft. All five had, as mentioned below, adverse childhood experiences and a related shame-proneness that probably influenced their masculinity construction and PTV. They were between 21 and 28 years old (MIVC1: 28, MIVC 2: 21, MIVC3: 26, MIVC4: 27 and

MIVC5: 25; average age 25) and had all been convicted of violent crimes and sentenced to compulsory treatment, and during treatment men that revealed that they had committed VAW.

Childhood experiences: To investigate if there was a relationship between the men's childhood experiences and their masculinity constructions and aggressive behaviours, an initial question section was dedicated to role-model learning in childhood/youth (Clayton & Hendrix, 2007; Craig & Sprang 2007) and emotional consequences of witnessing violence and experiencing abuse in childhood (Schoenleber & Berenbaum, 2012; Young & Widom, 2014; Jansson, 2019). All MIVC stated that they experienced serious adverse childhood experiences and as adults relatively often had reacted in a shame-prone way to partners or others. The MAV stated that they had few adverse childhood experiences and seldom reacted in a shame-prone way to partners.

In summary, there were considerable differences between the two groups with regard to average age, social background, childhood experiences, and current access to socioeconomic resources such as education and jobs, with the MIVC participants being considerably younger, having adverse childhood experiences and having a worse socioeconomic situation.

Interviews, Analytical themes, Areas of Questions, Processing of Data, Accuracy and Credibility

Thematic group interviews complemented by individual interviews were used as ways of collecting data. The first author conducted and transcribed the interviews. To elicit the men's positions, two overarching analytical themes, *Masculinity constructions* and *PTV*, had been created at an early stage. These were operationalized into themes and questions for discussion by elaborating a structured query-template with areas of discussion.

The analytical theme *masculinity construction* was covered by the following five question areas: 1. Power relations within the family and degree of adherence to traditional roles and breadwinner norms; 2. Opinions on being part of subordinated masculinities (e.g. feminine men and/or gay men); 3. Use of a patriarchal or egalitarian masculinity to fulfil expectations from different

contexts; 4. Feelings of pride *or* shame in relation to hegemonic expectations about their occupation/career, material possessions, family (e.g. partner and children), and physical and sexual ability; 5. Possible use of a muscular, well-trained body as an alternative resource in order to establish a masculine identity.

The analytical theme *PTV* was covered by four areas of questions:

1. Attitudes towards power, control, and gender-equality, which included *a.* questions on men's "final say" in domestic decision making, and *b.* control over a female partner's relation to other men and her sexuality; 2. Attitudes toward legal and normalized violence; 3. Attitudes toward excuses and justifications for men's VAW; 4. The men's attitudes towards VAW, including their attitudes toward intervening against other men's VAW. All themes were presented indirectly in order not to reveal any underlying notion that the interviewer had. During the dialogue, the questions became more and more specific to saturate the knowledge.

Because of their geographical dispersion and the impracticality of gathering of all five MAV in one place, the data from the pro-feminist MAV had to be collected through a group interview with two representatives, MAV1 (59 years) and MAV2 (37 years), living in northern Sweden, and individual interviews with each of the other three representatives, MAV3 (69 years), MAV4 (52 years) and MAV5 (57 years), living in central and southern Sweden. All five MIVCs were interviewed in a single group interview at a treatment center in northern Sweden.

The three individual MAV interviews lasted 2–3 hours each, as did the group interviews. As a basis for analysis, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. After the analysis, the material was translated into English. During the group discussions and interviews, when a point was reached where the discussions no longer yielded any new information about a theme the next theme was introduced. To strengthen the accuracy of the method, measures were taken to equalize the interviewer's impact on the informants. The main themes were accordingly stated as identically as possible to both the MAV and MIVC participants, without using leading questions and with a minimum of verbal- and non-verbal responses from the

interviewer. Furthermore, a member check was performed, focusing on the participants' initial interpretations of interviews, to strengthen accuracy and credibility (Creswell, 2007). The member check did not prompt any major changes to the collected material. The coding of the MIVCs' and MAVs' statements was also verified by use of an inter-coder reliability test, where the second author, without knowledge of the original coding, coded the transcribed data in accordance with the two overarching analytical themes: masculinity constructions and PTV. About four-fifths of the data corresponded initially. After discussions between the authors, an inter-coder agreement about the interpretation of the entire body of material was reached.

Analysis

In the current project, an *abductive* approach was employed, which involved going back and forth between theory and data to allow inferences from the empirical data have an impact on the initial and original theoretical understanding and vice versa, possibly leading to reformulations along the way (Graneheim, Lindgren & Lundman, 2017). The initial stage of the analysis process was theory-informed, using previous research to develop the two basic overarching analytical themes and the question areas that covered them.

The subsequent analysis of the men's answers was based on an inductive approach, conducted in three steps. First, the recordings were listened to and the transcripts read through several times. Secondly, once we were familiar with the contents of the conversations, it was possible to identify the participants' overarching talk about how they understood and constructed their male identities and how they talked about men's power and attitudes toward legal/justified violence and VAW. The terms used in this stage of the analysis bore more resemblance to the actual wording in the raw data, but would later be developed while refining the analysis. In the third step, the analytical categories were further developed. This took place in a dialogue with theory and previous research and led to the formation of several sub-categories that structured the content of the men's discussions under the analytical themes. The relation between the analytical themes and the sub-

themes that emerged in the analysis is presented in Table 1 in the results section.

Ethical Considerations

The participants were informed orally and in writing that the aim of the study was to expand the knowledge about how different groups of men reason about VAW. The men had an opportunity to ask questions and before giving their written consent were made aware of their right to terminate participation in the study at any time. Since one of the groups represented a vulnerable population and some of the questions were categorized as sensitive, the study was submitted to and approved by the Swedish Regional Research Ethics Committee.

Results

The presentation in the results section is organized around the subthemes, with the analytical themes serving as an overarching structure. Table 1 presents the two analytical themes, *masculinity constructions* and *proximity to violence*, which are derived from prior research. The table also accounts for the subthemes that emerged, which capture the contents of how the participants talked about and reflected on the two overarching themes.

Table 1.

Illustration of the studies analytical dimension, overarching analytical themes and subthemes.

Research question	Themes	Subthemes
How are the men’s masculinity constructions related to their attitudes towards VAW	Masculinity constructions	General expectations of you as a man Having a job, earning money and being a breadwinner We decide together but concerning money I let my female partner decide Changing masculinities It’s ok being equal
	Proximity to Violence	To what extent do you refrain from controlling your women? Can a man’s violence against a female partner be justifiably? What should be considered as partner violence? The boundary between persuasion and abuse Intervening in men’s VAW

Masculinity Constructions

General expectations of you as a man. Both groups discussed the question of what general social expectations they felt. The discussion with the MIVC participants centred on criteria such as: “keeping one’s honour” (MIVC1) and “You must not be a failure” (MIVC5). In contrast, the discussions with the MAV participants centred on the role-conflict of being expected to embody two different identities at the same time: “I have to live with the tension between being successful and being egalitarian” (MAV5) and “There is a fear

of being a failure...”(MAV 3). This means that the MAVs, unlike the MIVCs, identified the contradictory expectations of living up to hegemonic traits such as power and success, and being an egalitarian man. The MAVs, in contrast to the MIVCs, had access to higher education, training in equality, and a stable income from a job or a pension, which probably laid the foundation for their more reflective answers.

Having a job, earning money and being a breadwinner. The MIVC participants unanimously agreed with statements such as: “Being a breadwinner is not negotiable” (MIVC2) and “You are the one who pays the rent” (MAV5). Not being able to live up to male expectations was expressed as: “No one wants to be ‘a nobody’ without an impact” (MIVC1). One of the five MAV participants, MAV4, reported experiences of being unable to live up to traditional male expectations: “I was ashamed of my lack of ability to be a provider.” In the small group MAV1 claimed that: “If only the family can be supported it doesn’t matter who does it, “with which MAV2 agreed.

When the male breadwinner role was brought up, the MIVC participants described the breadwinner role as “...a non-negotiable part of their male identity...” (MIVC2), with which the rest agreed. No MAV considered it preferable to be the bread winner, since such relationships make women dependent. As MAV1 put it, the male breadwinner role is: “...the opposite of being an equal man.”

The discussions on this sub-theme differed between the groups. The dilemma that a female partner without an income of her own often also lacks influence over financial decisions was not reflected on among the MIVC participants. In contrast, the discussion among the MAVs touched on a more “inclusive” way of exhibiting masculinity (Anderson, 2009), and the possibility to build one’s self-confidence on personal interests and not to rely solely on a professional career and a high salary. However, it is evident that the men’s relation to a job and an income was an omnipresent consideration also for these men.

We decide together, but concerning money, I let my female partner decide. In the discussions about attitudes toward power, control, gender equality, and having the final say in family decision-making, MIVC3 described domestic

decision-making in a way that summed up the discussions among the MIVC participants: “I don’t spend any large sum of money before discussing the matter with my partner.” However MIVC4 remarked that: “It depends on what is being decided on,” suggesting that some decisions are excluded from joint decisions. Also, the MAVs agreed that important domestic decisions should be made jointly. However, when they reflected on how their own decisions on shared financial resources are made, quite a few said that their partners had great influence. MAV1: “If we talk about me then, the most important decisions are of an economic nature: house, car, etc. These are basically taken by my partner.” The individual interviews with MAV3, MAV4 and MAV5 revealed that they also had partners who seemed to oversee their financial decisions.

Changing masculinities? When asked if and how different situations and contexts have affected their doing of masculinity/gender, all the MAV and MIVC participants described situations where they switched from patriarchal to egalitarian masculinity expressions. Concerning this subtheme, the discussion among the MIVCs depicted a rather strict division between how they acted in public and in private. MIVC2 for instance revealed that within the family he enacts a masculinity in line with a “...gentle family man...,” but in his criminal context is hard and tough: “You cannot let other men see you playing with your kid, although I secretly want to be a humble person all the time.” However, at the same time two of the participants expressed the common experience of having only one or two friends who really understand them. MIVC1 expressed this as follows: “You have your closest friends out there who you can show that you feel bad, have tough days and talk to.” The MAV participants expressed a similar tension between the private and the public, MAV2: “When women participate in discussions, I try to remain silent to allow them to speak.” MAV3 summarized: “I act like all other men on the football stands, but like an equal partner at our kitchen-sink.”

The discussions under this sub-theme revealed examples of differences between the two groups. The MIVC participants showed ambivalent attitudes, and gave a more divided picture, endorsing a tough and violent masculine image in public, and a less traditional role at home. The MAVs showed more

awareness of how you should enact masculinity and were more consistent in how they acted in public and in private.

It is ok to be equal. The participants in both groups spoke positively about gender equality. MIVC1 summarized the MIVCs' discussions about equality: "There is nothing wrong with that. You have to do your part." A tentative interpretation of this point to a positive attitude toward enacting an equal masculinity. Both MAV1 and MAV2 agree that the expectations on men have changed, but add that they are somewhat unclear: "There's an expectation that you should be equal. Whatever that means"(MAV1). MAV3 sums up the essence of the discussion, saying: "I'm aware of the kind of masculinity I enact, and it brings forth a lot of thoughts...What makes me wipe off the kitchen sink today, which I didn't do 30 years ago?"

Our interpretation of the talk on this sub-theme is that the discussion seemed to be slightly more reflective among the MAV participants than among the MIVCs. This is evident from the MAVs' thoughts and discussions on how societal changes influenced them as men. Such reflections did not come up among the MIVCs.

Proximity to Violence

To what extent do you refrain from controlling your women? The MIVC participants showed a clearly adverse attitude toward women's social relations with other men. As MIVC2 concluded: "...boys cannot be 'friends' with girls." MIVC4 expressed it more brutally: "If I noticed that she was attracted to another man, I'd give him a beating." When men's control over their female partners' relationships with other men was addressed, the MAVs generally expressed a positive attitude toward their partners having male friends. MAV1 for instance said: "We had a slight disagreement about this at home a few years ago. She thought it was strange that I hadn't objected to her going out and having a beer with a male friend." However, when possible sexual relations between their female partners and other men were brought up, all the MAVs objected, implying that some forms of control are normal and needed.

The question of controlling a female partner was dealt with slightly differently in the two groups. While the MAV participants displayed acceptance of their partner socializing with other men and did not express any scepticism about such a relationship remaining at the level of just friends, the MIVCs denied that men and women could socialize without it leading to a sexual relationship. Regarding what they would do if they suspected another man of flirting with their partner, there was a difference between the two groups, with the MIVCs clearly stating they would beat the other man up if he showed interest in their partner. Our interpretation of these differences in the degree of freedom they are willing to give their partners and the measures that they would take if she exceeded it, indicate an important difference in the two groups 'TV.

Can a man's violence against a female partner be justifiable? In discussions about attitudes toward, and excuses and justifications for, men's VAW, both MAVs and MIVCs rejected the idea that VAW could be justified if a woman threatens to leave them. MIVC5 pointed out that: "There are ten thousand things you can try before hitting her." The discussion among the MIVC participants was more inconsistent. MIVC1 claimed, for instance: "If a girl is having an affair, then it is ok to use violence, at least in my world," a statement with which the other MIVCs seemed to agree. However, MIVC3 objected that: "...there is a difference between a slap and a beating." On the question of whether there are legitimate excuses and justifications for VAW, such as having financial problems, being mentally ill or having drug problems, all MIVC participants disagreed, as did the MAVs. In contrast to the general similarity between the groups, MAV4 argued that the assessment of whether or not VAW is justifiable always includes an assessment of whether the woman has "provoked" the man to use VAW, thus implying that not all VAW can be assessed equally, and that provoked violence can be at least understandable, if not justifiable.

The discussions concerning possible justifications of violence against a female partner reveal striking similarities, as well as important differences, between the two groups. The most obvious difference is that the MIVCs'

justification of violence indicated that they did not have the same zero-tolerance attitude to VAW as the MAVs had.

What should be considered as partner violence? The interviews included questions about what can be considered examples of psychological, physical, and sexual VAW. The interviews started with questions about physical acts, such as whether touching and grabbing a woman should be categorized as VAW. The discussions among the MIVC participants were centred around whether different forms of psychological aggression can be defined as “real violence.” The MIVCs shared the opinion that “psychological violence” is not “real violence.” MIVC1 exemplifies this by saying: “You can make someone feel bad mentally, but as far as I understand it, you can’t beat someone by looking in a different direction.”

The subject of sexual violence was also touched upon. Questions were asked focusing on whether commenting on a woman’s appearance should be considered a violation. The MIVC participants responded by discussing physical assaults, and claimed that the boundary is touching a woman against her will. However, quite paradoxically, MIVC5 added that: “Girls can play hard to get, and then you have to fight harder for it,” implying that physical force might be tolerated, when wanting to have sex with a partner. MIVC4 gave examples of occasions when this might be so: “If she says no, but you can see that she wants to.” On the issue of commenting on women’s appearance the MAVs were more critical. MAV1 claimed that: “It is a form of symbolic violence...Especially if...the man is in a position of superior power, there’s reason to call it violence. But commenting on someone’s appearance,[if] I say ‘what a nice shirt you have today’, no I can’t see that this is violence”. All three interviewed MAV participants considered commenting on a woman’s appearance to be a form of VAW, and said that it becomes sexual abuse when it occurs in an unbalanced power relationship. MAV2, however, pointed out that: “Not all women dislike men making sexual references,” implying that such comments might not always be offensive to all women. MAV4 also added that: “...it is all about reciprocity...there are different boundaries at the workplace and in a partner relationship,” implying

that he and his partner communicate in a sexually more explicit way when alone.

Concerning touching a woman against her will, all MAV participants considered such acts as VAW. According to the two participants in the small MAV group, such things as: “acting aggressively,” “throwing something,” and “banging your fist on the table” should be understood as VAW. MAV2 claimed that: “the harder you slam your fist on the table, the stronger the perceived threat.” To questions about psychological violence, MAV3 added that: “...a single hit can be used as a psychological threat in perpetuity.”

The boundary between persuasion and abuse. When the topic of physical forms of sexual violence was raised, rather ambivalent attitudes were expressed in both groups. All men clearly distanced themselves from rape, but claimed that, in relation to their partner, it is acceptable to use some forms of persuasion to get sex. In the MIVC group, the discussions circled around the subject of rape as a more serious offence than other types of violence. MIVC1 stated: “It is still rape if someone continues to abuse a woman when she says no or if she is high on drugs.” However, in discussions about persuasion (e.g. cajoling, pestering) for sex, MIVC4 said that: “You know how to trigger them. She may say ‘no’, but you can see if she actually means yes.” All MAV participants seemed to believe consensual sex is reciprocal and that one should respect a no from a woman. However, the MAVs also claimed that one must distinguish between behaviours that are acceptable in a public environment, such as a workplace, and that are acceptable in private. MAV3’s opinion summarizes the essence of what the other participants claimed: “One can go a little bit further with a partner at home but must...await consensus at the workplace. At home, if I am a bit aroused and there is no response, I make every effort to make it [sex] happen.” This can be interpreted as indicating that even though the men in both groups regarded all forms of physical and psychological violence as unacceptable and illegitimate, to some extent they stretched the limit for when an act should be understood as abusive. The participants’ understandings varied depending on the context, their relation to the woman and their own desires. Both the MAV and MIVC participants namely argued that it could be justifiable to use some persuasive force to get

sex, from their partner and in private, when they themselves are sexually aroused. Intervening in men's VAW. Discussions with the men also touched upon whether, when and how they considered it appropriate to intervene in other men's exercise of VAW. The MIVC participants initially agreed that VAW is unacceptable and that they would intervene. MIVC2 said: "I step in." However, MIVC4 underlined that rumours are not enough evidence to intervene. On the question of what would be an appropriate thing to do if they witnessed VAW, MIVC1 said: "I would beat him up," though adding: "[However] there are bossy women, who deserve a slap sometimes." In the small MAV group, MAV1 and MAV2 first answered that they would intervene by calling the police, but MAV2 also added that: "When it happens at the neighbours', if the woman first spits in the man's face, then knees him in the crotch, and then is just waiting for him to hit her...then maybe you should make an assessment of whether you should intervene...to not make the situation worse...". The interviews showed that the other three MAVs reasoned similarly. The MAVs indicated that they should first observe and then try to verbally interrupt and protest the violence.

The discussions in this subtheme show that although there was a consensus among all men that they would intervene in the case of VAW, they had reservations about when it is legitimate to intervene. The MIVC participants said that they would intervene in an ongoing situation of VAW in a very hands-on way, trying to fight the abuser down. The MAV participants were less in favour of violent interventions such as calling the police, etc. The men in both groups also showed great ambivalence about whether all VAW is unjustifiable.

Discussion

This study has concerned how masculinity constructions among two groups of male participants (MAV and MIVC) are related to their proximity to VAW.

The results show that men in both groups, in somewhat different ways, associated a positive masculinity with living by standards related to hegemonic masculinity. Both groups of men reported feeling ashamed if they

were unable to live up to such expectation. The MIVC participants highlighted the importance of protecting one's "honor" and being a "bread-winner" while the MAVs underlined their own expectations of being a "high-performance leader" but at the same time also emphasized their "egalitarian" traits. These differences may well be explained by the two groups' different access to conventional opportunities for success according to a hegemonic gender order (Messerschmidt, 2018a). In relation to their partners, both groups endorsed an egalitarian relationship with their partners, sharing decisions about money or letting their partners have the final say in important matters, such as money. The men thereby present a picture diametrically opposed to what is known from previous research on money management in heterosexual relationships, where the distribution of money in families usually is to the disadvantage of women (Callegari, Liedgren & Kullberg, 2019).

The discussions under the sub-theme of masculinity constructions showed both differences and similarities between the groups. The MAV participants touched to a greater extent on an "inclusive" way of exhibiting masculinity (Anderson, 2009). MAVs were also reflective concerning questions of gender equality and their responsibilities regarding it, which might well indicate that they endorsed more "pro-feminist" values (Flood, 2001). They showed more awareness of expectations concerning how they should change to enact an equal masculinity, and were more consistent in how they acted in public and in private. In contrast, such reflection was not present in the MIVC participants' discussions. The MIVCs showed an ambivalent adaptation, displayed a more divided picture, and endorsed a rather tough and violent masculine image in public while at the same time claiming to enact a less traditional role at home, for instance as a caring father.

The two groups' attitudes toward violence exhibited both commonalities and differences. The men in both groups stated they had zero tolerance for VAW. At the same time, both voiced some support for having control over a female partner, even though such attitudes were less pronounced among the MAVs and did not include violent solutions to a partner's interest in other men, as suggested among the MIVCs. The latter expressed an ambivalent attitude, suggesting that not all forms of violence are illicit. The men in both

groups gave examples of vague boundaries between consensual sex and sex achieved through persuasion with their partner. Concerning other men's VAW, both groups claimed it is unacceptable. However, the MIVC participants argued that it might be excused under certain circumstances.

All in all, the differences identified between the two groups may suggest they are located at different ends of a violence continuum (Kelly 1987, 1988). It is also quite likely that the MIVCs' less favourable childhood experiences (see the methods section), influenced their inconsistent reflections concerning VAW. The results indicate that the MIVC participants who had less access to conventional means of exerting masculinity held attitudes that contribute to reproducing the existing gender order, were more ambivalent toward gender equality, and in some instances promoted acts of violence as a means of conflict resolution. This means that they can be assumed to contribute to the maintenance of men's superiority over women to a higher extent than the MAVs (Connell, 1987, 1995; Messerschmidt, 2018a).

At the same time, in light of Anderson's (2009) findings that younger men enact a less "orthodox" and more "inclusive" masculinity, embracing codes and symbols that traditionally have been associated with femininity, it is interesting to note that participants in both groups, despite their other divergent attitudes, were positive to men's equal responsibility for housework and childcare. This could mean that the attitude changes that Anderson (2009) found among male university students might also have influenced other groups.

However, in light of findings from, for instance, Bridges and Pascoe (2014) showing that some men can create a "discursive distancing" from certain representations of masculinity by selectively incorporating features associated with a feminist stance, for instance by rejecting men's hierarchical superiority over women and condemning VAW, and thereby avoiding feminist criticism, one can ask whether the results really depict a change in the men's enactment of masculinity. It is hard to determine, however, whether the participants are enacting a form of masculinity that rejects men's hegemony *or* that contributes to its preservation. Our tentative interpretation is that MAVs are less ambivalent in their descriptions of themselves as egalitarian and non-

violent. Some questions can nevertheless be raised concerning their ways of reasoning about taking measures to persuade their partner to have sex with them, and whether or not it is advisable to intervene in situations of VAW.

The method used in the study has some limitations. The first and most important is that differences in results between the groups may have been affected by the different methods used. In the group interviews with the MIVCs, for example, a conformity bias might have affected some of the men's answers. However, this assumption is to some extent contradicted by the fact that the answers provided by the MIVCs were not entirely homogeneous and allowed for dissimilar opinions, and that they had undergone at least three months of group therapy addressing both related topics and other sensitive areas, making them less sensitive to group pressure. Another limitation is the possibility of an interviewer effect related to the gender of the interviewer and the topics discussed. Due to social desirability, or to explicit or implicit gender expectations, it cannot be ruled out that informants responded in line with the main characteristics of the interviewer and their expectations about desirable answers to the kind of "gender-sensitive" topics being discussed (Huddy et al., 1997). Finally, the participants in the two groups were in different stages of life and had experienced different conditions during childhood. The MAV participants had greater access to socioeconomic resources, which was probably related to their higher average age, since they have had more time to establish themselves. They had also experienced a considerably better childhood.

Conclusions

We conclude that the study can only partially support the postulation that there is a relationship between men's masculinity position and their attitudes to VAW. Further research is therefore needed.

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