

# **Gender as One's Eligibility to Engage In Social Practices: Unpacking the Relationship between Masculinity and Intimate Partner Violence**

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## **Abstract**

Among men's studies scholars, violence is a major focus of attention. Research findings of the past two decades indicate that violence is gendered, and can only be understood in the context of gender inequality. And though contemporary theories on men and violence have rejected the notion that violence is a necessary result of being male, the field continues to struggle with the need for a more contextual understanding of men's relationship to violence. Drawing from Descriptive Psychology and existing paradigms for studying gender and violence, I argue that conceptualizing gender as a status that confers eligibility to engage in some social practices rather than others holds promising potential for explicating masculinity's relationship to intimate partner violence. Acknowledgment

**Keywords:** masculinities, Descriptive Psychology, intimate partner violence

Current research has begun to examine how aggression arises from an interaction of individual characteristics and pressure to conform to social standards (Cohn & Zeichner, 2006). Specifically, social psychological literature and clinical research have demonstrated that characteristics associated with masculinity, such as authoritarianism and need for social power, may activate a desire to appear dominant and, therefore, increase a man's propensity to enact harmful and violent behavior (Kilianski, 2003). Stress resulting from failing to adhere to the "male role," commonly referred to as gender role stress, has also been linked to increased levels

of direct aggression, emotional lability, misogynistic attitudes, and sexual prejudice (e.g., homophobia) (Blazina, Pisecco, & O'Neil, 2005; Good, Robertson, & O'Neil, 1995; Hayes & Mahalik, 2000; Moore & Stuart, 2004). Other literature indicates that some aspects of masculinity are strongly linked to reports of psychological distress, aggression, violent behavior, and conduct problems in men (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Hill & Fischer, 2001; Jakupcak, Lisak, & Roemer, 2002; Monk & Ricciardelli, 2003). For example, perpetrators of violent behavior endorse potent "masculine" attitudes, such as the need to be powerful, dominant, and likewise, support of the use of aggression to gain status. Moreover, men who endorse traits that indicate "hypermasculinity" (i.e., overt and strict endorsement of masculine identity) have been linked to significantly higher levels of aggression, sexual prejudice and use of force against women compared with men who do not endorse such traits (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984; Parrot, Adams, & Zeichner, 2002; Parrot & Zeichner, 2003).

However, one of the most important research findings of the past two decades is that violence is gendered and can only be understood in the context of gender inequality (Schwartz, 2005). Like other scholars (e.g., Martin, 2003; Seymour, 2009), the word gendered is used to connote that gender is a social institution that both defines and constrains interactions. While gender commonly structures interactions in ways that are unremarkable (Seymour, 2009), violence is a striking exception (Eardley, 1995; Hearn, 1996). The link between gender and violence, however, is complex. For example, gender may be defined through "the performance of violence, the potential for violence, the emulation of other's violence, the rejection of violence, or even opposition to violence" (Hearn, 1996, p. 51). The research literature on intimate partner violence (IPV) provides a case in point. Extant research has consistently found that approximately equal numbers of women and men use physical violence against their intimate partners in the U.S. (Archer, 2000). Research indicates, however, these similar prevalence rates should not be interpreted to mean that men's and women's violence against intimate partners are the same phenomena (DeKeseredy, 2006; Renzetti, 1999; Swan & Snow, 2003, 2006). While frequencies of men's and women's physical aggression against partners are similar, men are more likely to commit sexual abuse (Archer, 2000; O'Sullivan, Byers, & Finkelman, 1998; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996; Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, & Anderson, 2003). Men are also more likely to control, isolate, and dominate their partners (Johnson, 2006a; Stark, 2007; Swan & Snow, 2003). Consequences of violence differ by gender as well. Men are more likely than women to cause injury (Archer, 2000; Zlotnick, Kohn, Peterson, & Pearlstein, 1998) and to engender fear in their partners (Hamberger & Guse, 2002; Jacobson et al., 1994). Studies have also found that men report less distress and fewer depressive symptoms related to IPV victimization than do women (Anderson, 2002; Dansky, Byrne, & Brady, 1999; Frieze, 2005; Williams & Frieze, 2005).

Such findings indicate that the relationship between gender and IPV is far from straightforward. A possible explanation for the complexity of findings on gender and IPV is that the theoretical construct of gender goes well beyond sex

differences. As a socially constructed characteristic (Totten, 2003), gender is a dynamic construct that emerges at the intersection of multiple social structures (e.g., economic, historical, political, linguistic, psychological, etc.) (Falmagne, 2000). As such, gender—and hence, masculinity—must be considered as a socially situated occurrence. Thus, any attempt to understand masculinity’s relationship to IPV must seek to understand masculinity as a context-dependent process. However, many dominant research paradigms used to examine the relationship between masculinity and IPV have not utilized such an approach.

Consequently, a goal of this paper is to also critique the research findings of the major theoretical paradigms that have been used to study the relationship between masculinity and IPV. This critique will take the form of a paradigm case formulation (PCF) (Ossorio, 1981, 2006b), which, in this case, will be a prototypical IPV case that embodies all of the features researchers studying masculinity and IPV have been seeking to understand.

### **Johnson’s Typology of IPV and Intimate Terrorism**

In seminal works on types of IPV, Johnson identified three major types of IPV: intimate terrorism, violent resistance, and situational couple violence (Johnson, 1995, 2008a). For the purposes of the PCF, we will be using intimate terrorism as our paradigm case. As described by Johnson, (2011, p. 290) a case of intimate terrorism is, “the pattern of violent coercive control that comes to mind for most people when they hear the term ‘domestic violence’...it involves the combination of physical and/or sexual violence with a variety of non-violent control tactics, such as economic abuse, emotional abuse, the use of children, threats and intimidation, invocation of male privilege, constant monitoring, blaming the victim...” While this form of IPV is not exclusively perpetrated by males against female partners (Cook, 1997; Hines & Douglas, 2010; Renzetti, 1992), research to date shows clearly that the primary perpetrators of intimate terrorism are men in relationships with female partners (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003a; Johnson, 2006b, 2008a). Additionally, several other researchers have found that misogyny and gender traditionalism are crucial components of heterosexual intimate terrorism (for a review, see Sugarman & Frankel, 1996). From this description above, we see that intimate terrorism meets Ossorio’s (2006b, pp. 29-30) recommendations for selection of a paradigm case; it is archetypal, complex, and agreed upon as an indisputable case of IPV. The following discussion delineates the components of the paradigm case to illustrate how violence is gendered.

### **Understanding Behavior**

Ossorio (2006a) describes individual behaviors as being embedded in larger systems of behaviors. Specifically, he writes, “Individual behaviors are embedded in a system of behaviors and occur (are produced) *as* realizations of that system” (p. 169). Put simply, while we may speak of an individual behavior, a behavior only has that particular meaning in a specific context—a person yelling at a sporting event does not mean the same thing as it does in a classroom. Such systems of behaviors are referred to as *social practices*. As defined by Ossorio (2006a, p. 169), “A social

practice is a social pattern of behavior. In general, the pattern includes more than one behavior, and most social practices involve behavior on the part of more than one person.” In addition, he notes, “As social patterns of behavior, social practices are learnable, teachable, do-able, and paradigmatically, done” (Ossorio, 2006a, p. 170).

From Johnson’s (2011) definition, we see that intimate terrorism *is* a pattern of behavior. In fact, Johnson names several individual behaviors (e.g., physical violence, sexual violence, economic abuse, etc.) which, *in combination*, constitute intimate terrorism. Here, Johnson is particular in pointing out that none of these behaviors should be considered in isolation. Rather, he asserts that the behaviors (e.g., physical violence, sexual violence, economic abuse, etc.) are related (an assertion empirical research supports), creating a *social practice* that he calls “intimate terrorism.” Furthermore, he suggests that intimate terrorism is a *gendered* social practice (and most often engaged in by men) by including the invocation of male privilege as part of its definition.

We can also note that Johnson’s (2011) definition relies on other concepts that are fundamental to Ossorio’s (2006a) notion of social practice such as: status(es), constraints, and versions. For example, a description of the intimate terrorism requires that someone be assigned the status of perpetrator, and another that of victim. As will be discussed below, one’s status has important implications for the way in which the social practice of intimate terrorism is played out. In fact, as we will see, it is precisely one’s status(es) that dictate the behavioral constraints one has within a given social practice and how behaviors interact to create different versions/forms of the social practice referred to as “intimate terrorism.” (Johnson’s definition alludes to the idea that intimate terrorism may take many forms by identifying types of behaviors often seen in cases of intimate terrorism, rather than offer strict diagnostic criteria.) To more clearly illustrate that intimate terrorism, when perpetuated by men, involves acting from gendered (specifically masculine) positions we must first consider the concept of gender.

Gender is not merely the doing of a discrete behavior; the term “gender roles” refer to a pattern of behaviors that are ascribed a particular meaning in a particular social context. This notion is self-evident; as discussed earlier, masculinity is neither static nor anachronistic. West and Zimmerman’s (1987) notion of “doing gender” provides an illustration of this point. They noted that masculinity (and gender in general) is not merely an individual attribute or a set of simply normative gender-based practices. Rather, it is something that is accomplished through interactions with others. *Gender*, according to West and Zimmerman (1987), is a *condition* of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors appropriate for one’s sex category (i.e., male or female). Gender activities emerge from and bolster claims to membership in a sex category. According to West & Zimmerman (1987, p. 127) “the analytical independence of sex, sex category, and gender is essential for understanding the relationships among these elements and the interactional work involved in being a gendered person in

society.” Returning to Johnson’s (2011) definition of intimate terrorism, we can see that his reference to male privilege (which is itself – as a package of eligibilities – identifiable as a part of a status) is an acknowledgement that the *social practice* of intimate terrorism is predicated on pattern of behaviors *within* the larger system of gender. In other words, because intimate terrorism occurs within a system (gender) where men, masculinity and associated behaviors are privileged over women, femininity, and corresponding behaviors, intimate terrorism is inherently a *gendered* social practice (regardless of the perpetrator’s gender). It is because the practice is embedded in the gender institution that control/domination of a victim is a defining characteristic of intimate terrorism.

There are two important implications for conceptualizing intimate terrorism as a gendered social practice. First, by recognizing that the social practice of intimate terrorism is embedded within the gender system, one gains a clearer understanding of masculinity’s relationship to IPV. As just one of infinite social practices that could be used to communicate membership in a gender category, intimate terrorism (for those who engage in it) is part of “being a gendered person in society” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 127). Thus, as masculinity (or gender more generally) emerges from interaction, we must study it *as it emerges in particular social situations where partner violence occurs in order to understand their relationship to one another*. Solely identifying and describing masculine traits and/or norms in the study of intimate partner violence fails to tell us how the social practice of intimate terrorism is related to masculinity *in a particular situation*. Though it could be argued that intimate terrorism violence (or IPV more generally) is typically seen as a “masculine” behavior, this does not explain why other non-violent behavior was not used, nor how such behavior creates gender or gender privilege within the established gender system.

A second and related implication of this perspective is that we cannot determine the relevance of masculinity to violence (or any behavior, thought, or feeling) apart from other social roles which may be concurrently produced (Fenstermaker, West, & Zimmerman, 1991). People have many different social identities that may be relevant or muted, depending on the situation. Masculinity (or gender in general) may not be relevant in all situations. In other words, it is not the case that all violence signifies gender. This point highlights the fact that gender explanations cannot explain all intimate violence. Rather, masculinity provides only part of the explanation for men’s use of violence against intimate partners (O’Neil & Nadeau, 1999). Nonetheless, any relationship between masculinity and IPV can only be understood within a particular context. In order to relate the social practice of masculinity to behavior, we must have some conceptual scheme for understanding how difference is produced through the social practice of gender, and how such differences are related to the assignment of status. For this, we first turn to Ossorio’s (2006a) Actor-Observer-Critic model for understanding behavior.

## Actor-Observer-Critic: Fundamental Roles of People Engaging in Social Practice

In order to understand behavior within social practices and the ways in which gender will enter, Ossorio (2006a, pp. 242-243) identifies three roles which are “fundamental to being persons”: actor, observer, and critic. As *actors*, we “act on [our] impulses, desires, and inclinations... We [are] the author[s] of [our] behavior.” As *observers*, we participate in the social world and note, “(1) what is the case now, (2) what is happening now, (3) what has happened in the past and what works generally, (4) what is the case generally, and (5) how things work” (p. 243). As *critics*, we evaluate whether what is happening in a particular context is acceptable. If things are deemed to be “good enough” then, so be it. However, if things are not “good enough,” as critics we formulate an account of what is wrong, and a *prescription* – a specification of what to do differently. In some cases, as critics we may even deem something extraordinarily successful and declare a celebration. Collectively, these roles form a negative-feedback loop representative of people’s relationship to negotiating social contexts (see Figure 1). This provides the logic for self-regulation and self-control, and identifies one of three classic ways in which self-regulation can fail: (a) by failure of impulse control, (b) by failure to observe how things work, and (c) by a failure to diagnose problematic actions.

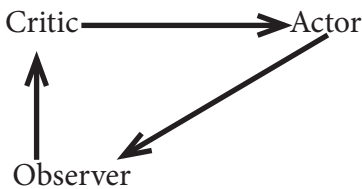


Figure 1 – The Actor-Observer-Critic Loop

The relationship between these three roles can be described as follows: As Actors, we initiate a behavior (or most often, a series of behaviors); once begun, as Observers we monitor its course and expected results; when the series has progressed far enough, as Critics we evaluate it, the result of which informs us as Actors. Ossorio’s (2006a) description maps neatly onto West & Zimmerman’s (1987) account of gender as a socially-situated accomplishment; variation in gender roles are produced as a result of the contextual management of behavior through observation and evaluation.

### The Dramaturgical Model: Contextualizing the Relationships between Actor-Observer-Critic

If we are to critically examine how masculinity relates to intimate terrorism, a description of how masculinity is produced by the roles of Actor, Observer, and Critic is insufficient. Delineation of these roles offers a basis for how others might understand our behavior, but says little about how our behavior makes sense *to us* in real life. Put simply, we need a model which articulates how our own behavior

relates to our own understanding of the world. In other words, we must have some way of linking our own behavior (violent or otherwise) to our own understanding of masculinity. For this, Ossorio (2006a) posits the Dramaturgical Model of behavior. This model links behavior to our understanding of the world by using three concepts: *appraisal*, *unthinkability*, and *status assignment*.

**Appraisal.** Ossorio (2006a, pp. 259-260) defines an appraisal as “discrimination which tautologically carries motivational significance.” Two characteristics of appraisals should be noted here. First, appraisals are first person judgments. Though it is certainly the case that judgments made can be made by others, with regard to our own behavior, we are most concerned with judgments made by us. This is simply because our judgments specify our relationship with some part of the world around us. Second, as appraisals are said to “tautologically carry motivational significance,” they necessarily are made from the perspective of the Actor. In other words, appraisals have such significance, because they constitute a reason to act. As Actors, our job is to “act authentically” (Ossorio, 2006a, p. 262). In any given situation, the only means for acting “like ourselves” is through responding to judgments about the world around us (i.e., our circumstances). Consider this example. While out with some mutual friends, my girlfriend ridicules me for taking an “excessive” amount of time to get dressed and ready to go out. At this point, I make an appraisal: I am being emasculated! Note, this judgment specifies a judgment about myself and my relationship to the surrounding world (more specifically, my friends and girlfriend) and motivates me to act (after all, I don’t want anyone to think I’m unmanly). At this point, I act; I respond with a colorful sexist slur and note that I’d be willing to take my girlfriend out more often if she spent more time taking care of her appearance. This brings us to an important caveat about our chosen actions - the notion of unthinkability.

**Unthinkability.** Within the Dramaturgical Model, the “unthinkable” is a behavioral concept. It does not refer to the cognitive act of calling something to mind or even speaking about some imagined possibility. Rather, it refers to the idea that as Actors, some things are “unthinkable” for us to do, in the sense that they are not a possibility for us to do. Ossorio’s (2006a) example is appropriate here: it is unthinkable for us to walk through walls. Thus, the notion of the unthinkable reminds us that we can only act on possibilities which are *real for us*. In colloquial terms, it is a “Given” (Ossorio, 2006a, uses this term as well) that there are just some things which we (as Actors) cannot do. I will illustrate by returning to the example above. Instead of psychologically abusing my partner, I may wish to perform a Jedi mind trick (such that my friends and girlfriend will for all time consider me the ultimate “alpha male”). Note, I can easily call to mind the possibility of performing a Jedi mind trick—but I am not a Jedi. Thus, it is *unthinkable* for me to do so. Instead, I respond in the manner described above.

It is important to point out that people can be mistaken when it comes to unthinkability. That is, we may think that something is not possible for us (as Actors) to do when, in fact it is. In their study examining perpetrators’ attributions of

responsibility for violence, Whiting, Oka, and Fife (2012) recount how some abusers feel as though it is unthinkable for them to refrain from violence if provoked. One participant explained it thusly: "...the arguments would be, 'Don't say another word. If you say another word, I'm gonna throw something,'...and she'd say another word and, I'd pick up an object and throw it..." (Whiting, et al., 2012, p. 140). In cases where one is mistaken about unthinkability, it becomes the responsibility of the therapist to make the unthinkable "thinkable," so to speak. Research has found that such reactive impulses can be overridden by deliberate, conscious reflection on the problem behavior (Honeycutt & Cantrill, 2001). A therapist working with such perpetrators would facilitate this process by using language that requires the abuser to take responsibility for their actions (Whiting, et al., 2012).

**Status Assignment.** Status assignment refers to "giving something a place in a scheme of things" (Ossorio, 2006a, p. 268). In other words, we assign everything (people, places, things, feelings, etc.) a place (or status) relative to others in our world. It is important to note that the "place that a thing has in the scheme of things is something that is decided, not merely discovered. This holds for both My [our own] scheme of things and for Our [others'] scheme of things" (Ossorio, 2006a, p. 268). Two forms of status assignment which are particularly relevant for understanding behavior are *degradation* and *accreditation* (see Garfinkel, 1967, for the classic statement of conditions). *Degradation* and *Accreditation* refer to changing the place a person has in My [our own] scheme of things or in Our [others'] scheme of things. In the former case, it is reducing a person's place in that scheme; in the latter case, enhancing/improving a person's place in that scheme. Thus, with regards to persons, status assignment necessarily implies implications for degradation or accreditation (Ossorio, 2006a). Returning to behavior, the point of assigning status to something (such as people) is simple: "(a) I am going to treat it accordingly—it sets the terms of my behavior concerning that something. And (b) I am going to demand from it accordingly and evaluate it accordingly" (Ossorio, 2006a, pp. 273-274). For example, if I assign myself the gendered status of "masculine," I will treat myself (i.e., behave) accordingly. I will not, generally speaking, behave in a manner that is inconsistent with that status, because I expect myself to be "masculine" (i.e., demand [masculinity] from it [myself] accordingly) and evaluate my behavior in regards to my "masculine" status (i.e., evaluate it [myself] accordingly). In this way, one's status is characterized by a set of eligibilities to play various roles in social practices. Within the field of gender studies, recognition of this has led to movement away from the traditional, unitary conceptualizations of masculinity to discussions of masculinities as "configurations of practice within gender relations" (Connell, 2000, p. 29).

Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity (1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) is useful for illustrating how status and eligibilities are intimately related with regard to behavior. Connell distinguishes what he called "hegemonic masculinity" from other masculinities by describing it as the "currently most honored way of being man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and



it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). In this definition we see that men who embody qualities of hegemonic masculinity are deemed eligible to: (a) receive privilege(s) above others, (b) serve as models for other men, and (c) exert power and control over women. Being “accredited,” so to speak, as a hegemonically masculine male confers eligibility for behaviors that one would not otherwise have. Consequently (as pointed out by the second clause of Connell’s description), men who fail to embody such qualities are subject to degradation—they lose those eligibilities reserved for the hegemonically masculine.

### **Actor-Observer-Critic as Status Assigning**

Given the above descriptions of the roles of Actor, Observer, and Critic, it should be noted that “treating things accordingly” based on status amounts to very different things in each role. Only as Actors does treating things accordingly involve actual behavior. As Observers and Critics, treating things accordingly means continuing to place things in a scheme of things, and in the latter case, evaluating things based on that scheme. I will discuss these distinctions a bit further below by using the roles of Actor, Observer, and Critic to illustrate how a social practice might unfold in real-time.

**Actor.** In the role of Actor, we respond to things in our own behavioral scheme, treating them accordingly. That is, things which are assigned the status of “masculine” (ourselves included) are treated in “masculine” ways. This notion is crucial to understanding masculinity as it relates to behavior. This is because, as noted by Ossorio (2006a, p. 276), “Contingent on the social practice I am enacting or preparing to enact, certain states of affairs will constitute reasons that I would not have had otherwise. Usually, there will be reasons for engaging in behaviors that I would not otherwise have significant reason to engage in. And I will treat certain things and certain persons in ways that I would not otherwise have reason to do.” In other words, to the degree to which one is enacting a particular social practice in a “masculine” way, one has reasons to engage in behavior (e.g., violence) that one would not have otherwise. For example, as a response to derogatory name-calling (if responding in a hyper masculine manner), one has a reason to punch a man in response to his derogatory name-calling; he was challenging/questioning one’s masculinity. The defensibility of violence in response to name-calling is irrelevant here. The point is that defending one’s “masculinity” provided a reason to engage in behavior that one would not have otherwise.

**Observer.** As observers, we seek to “recognize the thing observed, and to assign it the appropriate placeholder” (Ossorio, 2006a, p. 274). With regard to gender, we seek to recognize things which are indicative of gender (i.e., “gendered” part of a particular social practice), and assign them the status of “masculine” and “feminine.” Over time, such statuses become part of conceptual schemas (i.e., norms/roles/scripts) for making sense of the world. Simply put, masculinity becomes associated with thoughts, feelings, behaviors (i.e., traits) which allow us to assign the status of “masculine” appropriately to things within that gender scheme.

For example, violence is typically associated with masculinity. Is this because all men are violent? No. Rather, the abundance of admired males who use violence (e.g., athletes and military personnel) provide models of masculinity which include violent social practices.

**Critic.** As critics, our primary function is to evaluate things within the scheme of our culture. In essence, it is judging things based on cultural standards and making a determination of how to properly treat such a thing based on those standards (Ossorio, 2006a). Thus, to say that being masculine is good/desirable, we not only reference some cultural standard for masculinity (e.g., traditional masculinity), but also the proper behavior towards things based on that status. Both men and women are expected to treat men who conform to traditional notions of masculinity with admiration and defer to their privileged position in the gender system. For example, consider the gender hierarchy displayed in the overwhelming majority of high school/college “coming of age” movies. The men at the top of the hierarchy are, without fail, those who possess the most traditionally masculine characteristics: White, wealthy, and able-bodied. Men who possess slightly fewer of these characteristics are seen as allying themselves with the “alpha male,” while those with markedly fewer “masculine” traits are outcasts. On the other hand, women, regardless of their position in the hierarchy, are expected to be most romantically interested in the men at the top of hierarchy. However, only women at the top of the female hierarchy are “allowed” to actually pursue these “alpha males.” Social order is maintained in these movies (at least in the beginning), because individuals are evaluating their position in the gender hierarchy and acting in ways consistent with the culture. Conflict in these movies arises from people choosing to act in a manner inconsistent with their social position (e.g., a “jock” trying out for the glee club, or the president of the ornithological society asking the captain of the cheerleading squad on a date).

The above example simultaneously illustrates why some men feel justified in their use of violence against women and why women’s calls for justice often go unanswered; violent men feel like they are maintaining the status quo and women should expect such retribution for not “knowing their place.” In this way, gender can be thought of as social position that confers eligibilities to engage in particular social practices (such as IPV). In other words, masculinity and IPV are related via a relationship in the gender system. By framing masculinity and IPV as related through the social position of gender, we can begin to develop contextual understandings of how violence is produced. The process through which this occurs can be better understood by reviewing how the social practice roles of Actor and Critic provide feedback from the world regarding our behavior.

### Behavior and Critic-Actor Feedback

It is necessary to remember that each one of us acts dynamically as Actor, Observer, and Critic. The knowledge and skills acquired in any one of these roles is available to us, because we as individual persons are the medium for their enactment. However, the relationship between the role of Critic and Actor are

particularly important for thinking about masculinity as it relates to behavior. Recall, as Critics it is our job to determine whether our behavior (as Actors) is proceeding acceptably in a given context (i.e., based on the assignment of status). If the behavior is proceeding acceptably, then so be it. If it isn't, as Critics we generate a "diagnosis" of what is wrong and a "prescription" for what to do about it. For example, some men may determine that being violent toward their partner is appropriate when their masculinity is challenged. In these cases, feedback (as Critics) matches our behavior (as Actors); thus, no change is needed and violence will likely continue on future occasions.

From the description above, it is important to note that our judgments as critics and actors do not always agree. Because we are always engaging in one or more of the social practices of the community, Actor judgments (in general) fit well within Critic judgments. Put simply, what I think is appropriate behavior is often considered by others to, in fact, be so. For example, in the case of the social practice of greeting another person, giving a firm handshake would rarely be considered inappropriate and it would usually be considered a "masculine" thing to do. When in distress, however, crying may be seen as either a sign of weakness (as when one should be keeping a stiff upper lip) or as an appropriate response to true grief, which any man would show as well.

There are two ways in which our judgments in the role of Critic may differ from those in the role of Actor. First, it may be the case that the two judgments are incompatible. For example, a particular man may think it generally appropriate *for him* to cry, but is well aware that it is not appropriate for men, as a group, to do so. Here, the judgment of my behavior is simply dissonant with that of our [men's] behavior. Second, it may be the case that, in a given situation, Critic judgments do not constitute a reason for me (as an Actor) to do something (i.e., to act). Recall the concept of appraisals from earlier. Though all appraisals are judgments, not all judgments are appraisals. Consider the following example. While attending my brother's funeral, I suddenly begin to cry. At this point, I make a judgment; namely, that I am sad about my brother's passing. In this case, the judgment about why I am crying (i.e., sadness) does not constitute a reason to act (i.e., to inhibit crying). However, I could have easily made an appraisal that did constitute a reason to act. An example of an *appraisal* in this situation might be: I shouldn't be crying, none of the other men are. Note that this statement specifies a judgment about myself and my relationship to the surrounding world, thereby motivating me to act. This could account for why some men cry at a funeral, while others do not.

This potential for discrepancy means that each kind of judgment can serve as a reality check on the other. In other words, either judgment can serve to correct the other. Often, we think of the judgment of others as being a "check" on our own views; this is commonly referred to as social comparison. However, it can work both ways; that is, our individual judgments can serve as a "check" on the judgments of others. Ossorio (2006a, p. 284) highlights this point: "We are all familiar with the ways the social can serve as a corrective to the individual view. We are less

familiar with the fact that it can *and should* work the other way as well. ‘Us’ does not refer to an all-knowing, impeccable group soul, but rather to a group of individual ‘Me’s.’”

### **Comparing Framework to Understand the Relationship Between Masculinity and IPV**

The discussion above has summarized how it is that, being in the social position of a man, one is sensitive and responsive to feedback from self and others about how well one’s behavior fits one’s role. How does this approach compare to the major theoretical paradigms used to investigate masculinity and intimate partner violence?

#### **The Essentialist Framework**

An essentialist position on masculinity posits that “masculinity is rooted in actual differences between men and women and primarily analyzes the personality and behavioral attributes more often associated with men than women” (Thompson & Pleck, 1995, pp. 130-131) In this way, masculinity is conceptualized as an individual property; those who possess particular personality attributes and behavioral tendencies are referred to as “masculine.” Essentialist paradigms explain the relationship between masculinity and IPV by attributing perpetration of violence against a partner to characteristics of masculinity endorsed by the individual. Such a conceptualization has several limitations.

First, as illustrated by the discussion above, essentialist formulation of the masculinity/IPV relationship *misstates* the relationship between masculinity and behavior (IPV). In this framework, masculinity is a “critic’s” term; in other words, it is a term used to judge things based on cultural standards. As such, it is a term of evaluation used by any or all of us in our role as critics/judges, and hence it is not something that produces “more” or “less” masculine behavior. Behavior is a function of personal characteristics and circumstances, and one’s position is a central personal characteristic. Second, as the paradigm assumes differences between sexes and similarity within, it cannot sufficiently account for variation among men or women. For example, an essentialist paradigm can only account for men who endorse “masculine” traits, but do not engage in IPV by classifying such behavior as deviant. The astoundingly high prevalence rates of IPV summarily refute such an explanation. Third, this paradigm cannot specify the mechanisms that link traits to violence; having a particular trait does not sufficiently explain how violence results. Fourth, conceptualizing gender as solely an individual attribute methodologically justifies the study of masculinity outside the context in which it occurs. Such a trend is seen in extant literature applying an essentialist paradigm to the study of masculinity and IPV. Operationally, this paradigm uses quantitative assessment measures to identify “masculine” traits associated with violence. Trait measures that have been used to study the relationship between masculinity and violence include: the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) (Bem, 1984), Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) (Spence, Helmreich, & Holahan, 1979), and the Hypermasculinity Inventory (HMI) (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984).

A recent review by Moore & Stuart (2005) noted that studies measuring masculinity using trait-based assessment measures found inconsistent relationships between masculinity and partner violence. For example, several studies examining the relationship between masculinity and IPV using the BSRI found no statistically significant relationship between masculinity and IPV. In fact, the most consistent finding across such studies is that nonviolent men endorsed more “feminine” traits than violent men (Bernard, Bernard, & Bernanrd, 1985; Coleman, Weinman, & Hsi, 1980; Worth, Matthews, & Coleman, 1990). In contrast, using the PAQ, Rosenbaum (1986) found that physically abusive husbands scored lower on “positive” masculinity characteristics (e.g., caring/providing for family members) than non-abusive husbands. No relationship was found between “negative” masculinity characteristics (e.g., willingness to use violence) and abuse. More recently, Jenkins and Aube (2002) found that “negative” masculinity characteristics predicted frequency of college men’s physical and psychological aggression against female partners using the PAQ. Using the HMI, Ray and Gold (1996) found no significant relationship between hypermasculinity and use of physical or verbal aggression, while Parrott and Zeichner (2003) found that men scoring high in hypermasculinity displayed greater aggression in a lab setting. Given the theoretical limitations of this paradigm and conflicting research findings, it would seem that sole use of essentialist gender paradigms are insufficient for understanding the relationship between masculinity and IPV.

### **Social Learning Frameworks**

Approaches grounded in social learning paradigms of gender assume that gendered behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes are learned from social environments through basic processes of reinforcement, punishment, modeling, and the acquisition of gendered schemas or belief systems (Eckes & Trautner, 2000; Fagot, Rodgers, & Leinbach, 2000). Rather than viewing masculinity as a fixed set of traits, masculinities are seen as historically changing roles supported by gendered norms, stereotypes, and ideologies (Pleck, 1981). For example, O’Neil, Good, & Holmes (1995) developed the concept of gender-role conflict to describe the psychological consequences of socialization according to restrictive traditional masculine ideologies and norms. This paradigm postulates that gender roles are inconsistent, ever changing, and often violated by men, resulting in negative psychological consequences (i.e., stress) and overcompensation through the use of dysfunctional behaviors (e.g., violence, drug abuse) to meet gender role expectations (Brooks & Silverstein, 1995; Levant, 1996) Thus, when faced with perceived or actual challenges to their masculine gender role ideology, some men may experience significant conflict and engage in traditionally masculine behaviors (e.g., violence) to maintain their sense of masculinity (Eisler, 1995; Marshall, 1993). These ideologies and norms have been variously described as emphasizing physical toughness, emotional stoicism, anti-femininity, a potentiate preoccupation with success, power, and competition, as well as rigid self-reliance, and homophobia (Brannon, 1976; Mahalik et al., 2003; O’Neil, et al., 1995; Thompson & Pleck, 1986). How would

social learning paradigms explain relationships between masculinity and IPV? This perspective would attribute a person's commission of violence against a partner to the endorsement of cultural gender scripts/roles/norms which support such behavior. In fact, Levant – a strong proponent of the social learning framework – noted in his discussion of the origins of male violence against female partners that, “[it is] certain facets of the male socialization process that potentiate battering” (Levant, 1995, p. 92) However, the application of this paradigm to the study of masculinity and IPV also has limitations.

Methodologically, studies have tended to focus on quantitative measurement of associations between various masculine scripts/roles/norms and various types of violence. Measures representative of a social learning approach include: the Male Role Norms Scale (MRNS) (Thompson & Pleck, 1986), the Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale (GRCS) (O’Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 1986), and the Male Role Norms Inventory Scale (MRNI) (Levant et al., 1992). For example, according to a recent review by Moore & Stuart (2005), studies using the MRNS to assess masculinity found no relationship with physical violence and moderate support for a positive association with psychological abuse. Studies using the MGRS found support for a positive relationship between masculinity and physical and psychological abuse. Taken together, research conducted to date shows moderate support for an association between social learning of gender and IPV. The fairly consistent and positive relationship between gender roles/norms/scripts, and the use of verbal and physical aggression in relationships suggests that social learning may be a critical component in understanding why some men behave violently. Interestingly, Jakupcak and colleagues (2002) noted that gender roles/norms/scripts may be particularly predictive of being violent in a relationship when men also espouse traditionally masculine traits.

Social learning frameworks do have some benefits over those previously discussed. First, the notion that one's ideas about masculinity and gender roles are socially learned, change over time, and differ across cultures at the same time are all consistent with a Descriptive psychological approach. After all, to function effectively as actor, observer, or critic one must be “culturally competent” in order to engage in a social practice in the desired gendered manner. Additionally, researchers have been able to develop models to explain how and when masculinity will lead to violence. Slotter and Finkel (2011) recently proposed I<sup>3</sup> theory, which posits that all risk factors promote IPV perpetration by men through one or more of three types of processes: instigation, impellance, and inhibition. *Instigation* refers to the exposure to discrete partner behaviors that normatively trigger an urge to aggress (e.g., provocation). *Impellance* refers to dispositional or situational factors that psychologically prepare the individual to experience a strong urge to aggress when encountering this instigator in this context (e.g., dispositional aggressiveness). These two factors are theorized to determine the potential perpetrator's “urge-readiness”—the readiness to experience an urge to aggress in response to this particular instigator in this particular context. Due to variability in impellance, people may

sometimes be unaffected by an instigator, experiencing virtually no urge to aggress, or they may be strongly affected, experiencing a powerful urge to aggress. In other words, instigation and impellance interact, such that the urge to aggress is most powerful when both are strong. Finally, *inhibition* refers to dispositional or situational factors that increase the likelihood that people will override this urge to aggress (e.g., executive control). When the strength of inhibition exceeds the strength of the urge to aggress, people behave nonviolently; when the reverse is true, they behave violently. For instance, a man with sexist, negative views of women may not get violent unless his self-regulatory resources have been lowered, say by alcohol (see Graham, Bernardis, Wilsnack, & Gmel, 2011 for a review).

Despite having some empirical support, there are theoretical limitations of social learning paradigms that call for even greater *contextual* understanding of the relationship between masculinity and IPV. The social learning perspective privileges behavioral explanations over contextual ones. As mentioned above, social learning perspectives contend that violence is a result of overcompensation through the use of dysfunctional behaviors (e.g., violence) to meet masculine gender role expectations (Levant, 1996). While preventing violent behavior is important, the paradigm does not directly challenge the social conditions and inequalities that produce IPV, only the problem behaviors. Using the I<sup>3</sup> theory for the purposes of illustration, we see that two of its three constructs, instigation and inhibition, are markedly behavioral in nature. Slotter and Finkel's (2011) description of instigation as *exposure to behavior*, suggests a target's behavior is at least partially to blame for IPV. More importantly, use of the term "urge" in the description of both instigation and impellance is misleading in that it implies a lack of volitional control or thought. A brief return to the dramaturgical model shows how this is incorrect.

Consider the following example. My girlfriend refuses my sexual advances after we return from a date. Starting from the role of observer, I categorize her refusal as an insult. Then, in the role of critic, I judge this insult as degrading. (If, for some reason, you think all insults are necessarily degrading, consider the silly taunts you probably heard/used as a child. As an adult, it is unlikely you would consider the vast majority of them degrading.) Finally, in the role of actor, I respond to this degradation with more forceful and coercive sexual advances. From this example, we can see that an "urge" to act is entirely dependent on the either the categorization or judgment made about the target behavior.

The concept of inhibition is equally problematic. The conflation of dispositional and situational factors in the definition make it functionally impossible to understand if gender's relationship to IPV is due to either or both causes. Consider this example. I notice my girlfriend engaging in many flirtatious interactions with others while out drinking at a bar. Do I refrain from calling her one of many promiscuity-related slurs because she's an amateur mixed martial arts fighter (dispositional; "I'm not as strong as her") or because I'm generally having a good time and don't wanna kill my "buzz" (situational; "I'm drunk")? Or is it both?

Despite its moderate empirical support, the conceptual limitations of the social learning paradigm make it insufficient for understanding the relationship between masculinity and IPV.

### **Social Constructionist Frameworks**

Social constructionist frameworks are currently the most common approaches to studying gender in a variety of social sciences other than psychology (e.g., Gergen, 1999; Harré, 1993; Shotter, 1993). Although social constructionist paradigms can be confused with social learning frameworks, there are some critical differences. Both frameworks begin with the assumption that gender is socially formed, rather than existing naturally as qualities inherent to men or women. However, social learning approaches focus on the way social environments shape gendered behavior, whereas social constructionist perspectives highlight the different ways gender itself is actively constructed by persons in their communities. Thus, the emphasis shifts from a view of individuals as respondents to processes of reinforcement and punishment (i.e., social learning), to a view of individuals as active agents who construct particular meanings of masculinity in particular social contexts.

From a social constructionist perspective, masculinities are flexible; they are constantly being constructed and challenged as men “do gender” in ways that mark themselves as masculine (Connell, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The expression “doing gender” is jarring because strictly speaking, one does not “do” a social position; rather, one engages in the social practices available in one’s community by exercising the options in those practices for one with a certain position. In this sense, gender is interactive and social. Gender does not exist as a set of fixed roles set forth by culture or society, nor as a group of stable personality traits, but rather as a dynamic repertoire put into action by persons interacting with their social environments. Thus, a wide variety of “manly” expressions of the gender role “man” can be performed without any question being raised about the degree of masculinity of the actor. Only when one (either oneself or others) acts as critic does the issue of “masculinity” come up, but when it does, perceived deficiencies in “masculinity” can be powerful motivators for corrective actions—some of which can be coercive and violent. The social construction of gender also occurs at more macro levels of social organization. For example, professional sports can be seen as a set of cultural practices in which particular meanings of masculinity are constructed through advertising, media coverage, and a wide array of symbols associated with competitiveness, physical prowess, and insensitivity to pain (Messner, 1990; White, Young, & McTeer, 1995).

A central assumption in social constructionist frameworks is that there is not a singular masculinity or man’s role, but rather multiple competing masculinities that are continuously being constructed and contested (Connell, 1995). For example, White lower-class suburban masculinities may take different forms than Latino urban masculinities, although they may also share some features. Thus, some social constructionist theorists have emphasized the different ways



race, ethnicity, and social class are simultaneously constructed alongside different masculinities. In effect, there is nothing universal called *masculinity*, but rather urban African-American masculinities, White middle-class masculinities, and so on. Finally, social constructionist frameworks allow, and in fact expect, considerable contextual variability in the construction of masculinities. How would social constructionist paradigms explain relationships between masculinity and IPV? As it assumes masculinity is constantly being created and re-created through interactions, this paradigm would posit that partner violence is one possible way in which men would express their desires to be “masculine” when they felt their status challenged. However, there often seems to be conflation of the mechanisms used to understand the construction of masculinities. While an individual’s masculinity is created through the social practices in which one engages, the social practices of masculinity (and therefore, masculine statuses) themselves are created, revised, abandoned, etc. at higher levels of analysis over the course of time. In other words, it is not an individual who is responsible for such changes to the social practice of gender, but rather the repeated actions of many. Thus, the individual choice of enacting a violent masculinity is predicated on the existence of such a status within the social practice. To my knowledge, no research has applied this paradigm to the study of masculinity and IPV.

### **Feminist**

Similar to social constructionist perspectives, feminist paradigms view gender as a social formation that can occur at a variety of levels of social organization (Falmagne, 2000). Both paradigms also cross traditional disciplinary boundaries in the social sciences to incorporate sociological, anthropological, historical, and psychological perspectives. Where feminist perspectives on masculinity depart is in the degree to which power differences between men and women are seen as central to any analysis of gender. Gender is understood as a multilevel system that organizes relationships between men and women in such a way that men are economically, politically, and often interpersonally dominant. Thus, masculinity cannot be understood apart from men’s place as a group in a social order that privileges them. In addition, power is not distributed evenly among all men, and a person’s social position affects his subjective sense of power. In the United States, men facing discrimination by other men on the basis of socioeconomic class, ethnicity, skin color, or sexual orientation do not have equal access to the variety or degree of social resources available to white, upper class, heterosexual men.

How would feminist paradigms explain relationships between masculinity and IPV? As it assumes gender processes define and justify difference between men and women (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999), it would posit that violence can be used to simultaneously create gender and privilege. One study by Totten (2003) used qualitative interviews to investigate how girlfriend abuse was part of young, marginalized males’ construction of masculinity. Results from the study suggest that use of violence against female partners served as a way to access traditional benefits of patriarchy, such as dominance and authority. Thus, while

this paradigm offers intriguing insight about masculinity and IPV, this approach is not without shortcomings. Specifically, how is it that men are able to successfully construct masculinity unless there is knowledge of “what counts” as masculine in a particular context? From our discussion above, we can see that the function of status(es) in the social practice of masculinity could be used to address this issue. As the medium through which privilege, prestige, and power is conferred, explicit discussion of status could be used to incorporate the strengths of the feminist perspective into any of the paradigms reviewed above.

### **Summary and Directions for Future Research**

This paper has briefly summarized four paradigms which have been used to explain the relationship between masculinity and IPV: essentialist, social learning, social construction, and feminist. Each contributes to understanding the relationship between masculinity and IPV by offering a theoretical explanation for the apparent link between the two. From an essentialist perspective, men’s violence against women is a result of inherent physiological and psychological characteristics that produce violence. Social learning frameworks posit that IPV results from learning (traditionally) masculine norms and stereotypes. Social constructionists argue that IPV is one of many ways in which masculinity can be actively constructed. Feminist paradigms maintain that men’s perpetration of IPV against women is a result of a system of oppression (e.g., gender) which creates and bestows privilege (to men). While the range of empirical support for each of these paradigms varies, all fall short of specifying how masculinity leads to violence in a given situation. The crux of this issue is how to relate theoretical causes (e.g., gender traits, norms, constructions, privilege) to violent behavior in context. I have argued that applying Ossorio’s (2006a) notions of social practice and of gender as a status (position) within social practices allow us to explicate the psychological mechanisms linking theoretical causes to men’s actual perpetration of IPV. Specifically, by dynamically functioning as Actor, Observer, and Critic, men can: (a) assign themselves traits that condone IPV, (b) learn norms and stereotypes that encourage IPV, (c) actively negotiate masculinity in ways that lead to IPV, and (d) utilize and access gender privilege through IPV. In short, the social practice analysis of how gender acquires the eligibilities to engage in IPV allows us to see how the various research tradition each make worthwhile but partial contributions to the understanding of IPV.

Ultimately, the goal of social practice analysis is to understand particular behaviors (such as IPV) within larger systems of behaviors (such as gender). To realize this, it is simply not enough to examine extant research in new ways; we must also employ a broader range of methodology. As can be seen from the literature discussed in the current paper, exploration of the relationship between masculinity and IPV in psychology has been dominated by quantitative methods. Though qualitative studies on masculinity and partner violence have been conducted, such as Totten’s (2003) study of girlfriend abuse, it is not always clear how such studies complement existing bodies of quantitative research. Thus, future research in this area will be best served by employing mixed methodologies (see Johnson &

Onwuegbuzie, 2004 for a comprehensive review). In this way, researchers can explicitly examine how masculinity is related to IPV within the context of (gendered) relationships.

For example, application of a social practice framework could potentially lead to more rigorous empirical validation and differentiation between coercive controlling violence and situational couple violence in heterosexual couples. The term *coercive controlling violence* is used by researchers to refer to physical violence that occurs in an intimate relationship within a larger pattern of intimidation, coercion, and control (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003b; Johnson, 2008b). *Situational couple violence* refers to violence that is not part of a general pattern of controlling behaviors, but rather occurs when specific conflict situations escalate to violence (Johnson & Leone, 2005). In an effort to validate these types of relationships empirically, Graham-Kevan and Archer (2003b) conducted analyses of data where the presence of controlling behavior was used as the sole criterion for distinguishing between coercive controlling and situationally violent couples. While this decision was empirically supported by their results, their analysis fails to capture if and how situational factors may contribute to violence. In fact, Graham-Kevan and Archer (2003b, p. 1262) explicitly state that studies employing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies are necessary to understand situational couple violence. Results of such mixed methods studies are imperative to the development of gender-based prevention and intervention strategies.

## Conclusion

I have argued that gender is a status that mediates the participation of individuals in social practices, including the social practices of IPV. It is important to note that the details of gender as a status evolve in response to the experience of individuals and communities in the social practices in which it is involved. The evolution of gender as a status within the social practice of IPV can be seen by the constant development of more nuanced understandings of IPV; we no longer speak of men as “batterers” (which focuses on the physical aspects of IPV) but rather, use terms that are more inclusive of the range of behaviors comprising IPV, such as “abusers” or “perpetrators.” If we are committed to ending the wide range of men’s violence against women, we must seek to understand how violence does and does not fit into men’s experience of gender. Such experiences are integral to identifying and challenging the statuses that perpetuate violence against women.

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