Jessica Eckstein[a]

# Masculinity of Men Communicating Abuse Victimization

**Abstract** This study explored, through in-depth interviews, the experiences of men sexually, psychologically, and/or physically victimized by female romantic partners. Men's narratives were analyzed to determine how masculinity and construction of victim-identities were related. Results show that abused men construed victimization as precipitated internally through self-blame and externally via societal-blame. Gendered masculinity was demonstrated for most men in the form of hegemonic-striving via complicit rationalizations; however, a minority of men constructed victimization in terms of protest masculinity.

**KEYWORDS** MASCULINITY, MEN, HEGEMONY, INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE, VICTIMIZATION
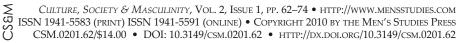
Each year, 3.2 million men in the United States are victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Male IPV victimization, while not as common as female victimization, is a serious problem with its own set of identity issues for male victims. Unfortunately, men's victimization from female partners receives comparatively limited scholarly attention (George, 2003).

The goal of this study was to explore, through in-depth interviews, male IPV victims' communication of gender identities. I first present existing IPV literature to frame my approach to gendered victimization. I employ a theoretical lens of varying masculinities to discuss my findings in terms of heterosocial expectations for men.

## Victimization

IPV may involve sexual (e.g., rape), physical (e.g., using objects or one's body to hit, kick, push, bite, shoot, stab, or strangle another person), and/or psychological (e.g., name calling; degradation; silent treatment; contingent affection; threats of destruction and/or death; social isolation; induced debility; relational obsessiveness or possessiveness) communication perpetrated by a romantic partner (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). The most extreme type of IPV relationship is known as *intimate terrorism* (Johnson, 2008). Believed to involve

[a] Department of Communication, Western Connecticut State University.

primarily female victims, intimate terrorism is also experienced by men (Eckstein, 2009; Sarantakos, 1999). Victims of intimate terrorism are subjected to *coercive control*: support systems are weakened, distrust is cultivated, and humiliation is enforced through identity attacks (Romero, 1985). Often likened to being a prisoner of war, these IPV victims live through (a) *debilitation*, physical and psychological abuse to weaken mind and body; (b) *dread*, degradation and threats; and (c) *dependency*, controlled resources supplemented by kindness (Farber, Harlow, & West, 1957; Walker, 2000).

Strong societal perceptions exist that men rarely or never experience intimate terrorism from women (George, 2002, 2003; Migliaccio, 2001). As a result, men who do experience this type of victimization from female partners are viewed and treated differently from "normal" victims (Coney & Mackey, 1999). Without societal acknowledgement, male IPV victims may embrace dominant views of themselves as failures at masculinity. Social stigmatization of men as inappropriate victims not only affects males; viewing women as more suitable victims also may allow hegemonic norms to operate and keep women powerless (Dobash & Dobash, 1978). For men, who are discounted from expressing victimized identities, it may be difficult to articulate expected, dominant forms of masculinity.

All victims receive pressure to maintain silence about their experiences (Harris & Cook, 1994). However, in male-dominated societies like the U.S., men may receive further messages to suppress weakness or feelings associated with victimization (Kimmel, 2006). This denigration may cause men to strategize about communicating their victimization and enactment of their identities vis-à-vis others. The manner in which male IPV victims communicate gendered identities is unknown; men with similar experiences may embrace and/or react to victimization differently.

## Masculine Enactment

Masculine typologies are not static explanations; embodiment of particular masculinities changes over time and situations for different individuals. Three types of masculinity can be connected to IPV victimization of men: hegemonic masculinity, complicit masculinity, and protest masculinity.

Stereotypes of ideal men (e.g., strong, stoic, dominant) are conveyed by a *hegemonic* construct. Heterosexuality is intrinsic to hegemonic expectations. Men are expected to pursue sexual encounters only with women. Social encounters involving other men are valued to the extent that they uphold this hetero- or anti-homosexual orientation. To function heterosexually, men must appropriately behave homosocially. Men are supposed to be emotionally detached, to compete with one another for pride and resources (e.g., women, feats of strength, capitalistic success), and to sexually objectify women (Bird, 1996). Hegemonic masculinity is not the most common type of gender enactment; most men do not embody this type of masculinity. However, hegemony is still considered to be a preferred standard for men to acquire and is constantly reinforced by men and women (Connell, 1987, 1995).

One way continual hegemonic re-institution is carried out is through subordination and stigmatization of non-compliant forms of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is supported by compliant men and women, who need only to support, and not necessarily enact, dominant behaviors or belief systems in order to accrue the benefits themselves. *Complicit* or *accommodating* men benefit from patriarchy to the extent that all men receive advantages of masculine dominance. Women also may contribute to hegemony by complying in their own traditionally feminine roles (hooks, 1984). Thus, complicit masculinity is the controlling force societally sanctioning heterosexuality/homosociality. Consent of dominant norms may occur explicitly, but it also transpires through silence. Failure to challenge constrictive norms results in the dominant structure's success; consent is achieved implicitly (Hearn, 2004; hooks, 1984). As a result, people not actually in power strengthen hegemonic ideals more than those who fulfill dominant roles. Complicit masculinity allows for governance without explicit defiance.

Sometimes referred to as *compulsive* (Majors & Billson, 1992) or *compensatory* (Pyke, 1996) masculinity, protest forms are exhibited by individuals who challenge dominant interpretations of their gendered identity roles and/or the oppression of other societal members. *Protest*, or *opposition*, masculinity is rarely culturally supported. Men who embody opposition or protest forms do so in spite of dominant norms (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Enactment of opposition masculinity may occur through protest speech or alternative enactment of gender roles (e.g., claiming to possess a masculine identity despite cultural expectations; Messerschmidt, 1994). Individuals who enact opposition masculinity may be stigmatized by hegemonic or complicit others. Any man who deviates from hegemonic norms risks reproach (Bem, 1993; Courtenay, 2000). Therefore, male IPV victims experience not only abuse, but they also encounter stigma associated with deviant victimization and alternative masculinity (Migliaccio, 2001). The subordinated positions of women and children in a patriarchal culture also may be experienced by men who depart from popular expectations of masculinity (Hearn, 2004).

If men victimized in IPV relationships submitted to expectations of failed masculinity, they would be expected to communicate victimization submissively in their narratives. However, one identity role (e.g., victim) may conflict with competing roles (e.g., privileged, powerful) for each man. If this is the case, men victimized by women may enact complicit identities to re-assert hegemonic norms and to avoid stigmatization. As a third option, men who are subordinated or marginalized in a given society may enact protest masculinity, and "claim" masculine identities in spite of what is societally expected of them (Messerschmidt, 1994). Any abused man may shape his experiences to fit within dominant frameworks. To explore that formative process, I asked the following research question: How do men abused in heterosexual, romantic relationships communicate gender in their victimization narratives?

## Methods

*Participants*

The interviews reported here were derived from a larger study of male victimization (Eckstein, 2009). Men's specific victimization experiences, self-disclosure practices, and perceptions of social support were reported in that study and are not replicated here. In this report, I focus on constructions of victimization in terms of gendered masculinities. Twenty-eight heterosexual men, 28 to 58 years old ($M = 45.8$ years; $SD = 8.72$), participated in semi-structured interviews (*duration* = 29 minutes to 1.5 hours, $M = 57.82$ minutes, $SD = 16.24$). The majority of men were Caucasian ($n = 26$). However, racial differences, in terms of victimization construction and masculine enactment, were not apparent between these men and the two men who did not identify as White (i.e., one African American and one Asian American). Saturation was achieved by the third and fourth interviews. Responses were verified by a random subsample of the men who re-checked their completed transcriptions; all subsample data were confirmed as accurately documented.

All 28 men experienced intimate terrorism, as conceptualized by Johnson (2008), and encountered severe emotional/psychological abuse and threats. All men experienced tactics of domination/control from partners. Additionally, narratives often included severe physical injury ($n = 23$) and some cases of sexual abuse and rape ($n = 4$). The sample included men both currently in ($n = 24$) and out ($n = 4$) of abusive relationships. The majority of men ($n = 26$) stayed for years after victimization initially occurred. Among relationships ended at interview time, half ($n = 12$) were ended by the female perpetrators. Those still in relationships with their abusers mentioned desires to separate ($n = 2$), keep the relationship going and "work it out" ($n = 1$), or stay until children were grown ($n = 1$). There were no apparent differences in victimization or masculinity narratives between men currently out of or still in abusive relationships.

*Procedure*

After obtaining institutional approval for participants' protection, men were solicited for telephone interviews via Internet postings. The online call for research targeted heterosexual men self-identified as victims of an abusive relationship. The call was posted in chat groups and forums devoted to abused men and victims of family violence. Parameters were set to include English-speaking men residing in the United States. The final sample was comprised of men from 25 different states. To maximize participant safety, men had to, in an email, (a) initiate contact; (b) provide a safe, un-monitored telephone number; (c) set up a future appointment for the interview; and (d) agree to have their interview recorded.

*PROCESS OF ANALYSIS*

Using a phenomenological approach similar to a constant comparative method, I employed a process of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Viewing communication as a symbolic process whereby individuals form and present identities, a phenomenological approach to studying that communication is particularly useful (Moustakas, 1994). To begin, I examined interview transcripts for emergent themes and noted *indicators* (e.g., words/phrases representing larger concepts). I coded these concept-indicators against one another within the same interview and with other interviews, constantly noting discrepant and convergent data (Strauss, 1987). For example, in one interview, I would look at the number (e.g., frequency representing prevalence) and types (e.g., as verb, noun, with different adjectives/adverbs, as received from different sources) of ways a term such as "victim" was used. Across interviews, I would pay particular attention to the ways these identified characteristics of "victim" were similar among diverse men's narratives and how the construct differed according to the individual experiences, demographics, and constructions of each man.

In the second step, I applied axial coding by evaluating indicators against existing theoretical conceptualizations of masculinity and IPV; I observed contexts and relationships where indicators existed. Again using the "victim" construct as an example, I would look for pairs or groupings of multiple constructs (e.g., "victim" emerging synchronously with discussions of "society" or "excuses for perpetrators"). I searched for themes/constructs that tended to hang together, within each interview and across all interviews, in such a way as to suggest rationale, cause/effect, or associative relationships. The *process* variables uncovered at this stage were examined to see how they fit with existing theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Finally, I conducted selective coding to demonstrate congruent stories of masculinity narratives (LaRossa, 2005). By noting categories and relationships between constructs in the first two steps, I could now see a "storyline" begin to emerge. For example, victimization was often discussed along with societal roles but in different ways, depending on the man's perspective of his own role as "man," "protector," or "victim." Rather than viewing divergent themes/relationships in and among interviews as limiting, I viewed discrepancies as an opportunity to explore not only why each man differed, but how (i.e., the communication tools used) the contradictions (both within interviews and amongst all) served to reinforce particular or multiple masculine identities. Based on these methods, I report findings in terms of a critical understanding of gender and victimization.

## FINDINGS

All men demonstrated awareness of negative outcomes resulting from victimization and consistently emphasized a masculine interpretation of that

abuse. Never blaming the female perpetrator, men instead blamed themselves and/or society for permitting and perpetuating their victimization.

*MASCULINE INTERNALIZATION OF BLAME*

All of the men mentioned feeling loss, or a diminishing sense of identity, from the abuse. One man exemplified responses along this line:

> During the time I'm going through this, often I saw myself as a victim. I see myself as a victim of something totally different now as opposed to then in describing it. I *realize* now I was a victim of more or less, *my own* ignorance, and *my* low expectations for myself. You know, it was my fault 'cause I had to own up to *my own selfishness* and my own guilt, selling myself short. So you know, yes, I saw myself as a victim then, but now I feel like I was a victim of *my own shortcomings*. (emphases added) (*"Ron," 39-year-old single electrician, 2½-year abusive dating relationship, out of IPV for 2 years*)

Embodying self-blame, Ron viewed his continued, albeit changed, victimization as internally precipitated. Other men also redirected victimization positions by making excuses for or noting a desire to protect their partners. They made blame intrapersonal instead of *extrapunitive*, as discussed by Miller and Porter (1983). The psychological shifts of this tactic were communicated by men concerned that others could see their identity failures. Representatively, Todd noted:

> I just didn't feel I was worthy. Of anything. I mean, it was, it made me really doubt. That my paradigm set was wrong. You know, everything I'd believed in was all of a sudden wrong. So yeah, it did affect me. My mother and family friends, who knew me prior to the marriage, said that I'd really changed. (*"Todd," 48-year-old single chemist, 5-year abusive marriage, out of IPV for 2 years*)

By acknowledging that members of their social network observed manifestations of their victimization, some men (*n* = 10) explicitly noted feeling stigma, an affect often exacerbated when seen by others (Flynn, 1990; Goffman, 1963). Knowing others' awareness of their abuse, these men may have internalized stigma with public perceptions of failed masculinity or relinquished relational control (Migliaccio, 2001). Possibly in an effort to re-assert control, some of the men discussed their relationships as progressing from self-imposed-victim to self-imposed-agent. These men could then discuss secondary consequences of having been formerly abused and no longer struggling with a victimized identity. Pete, still illustrating self-blame, discussed his relationship from a position away from his abuser, "Yeah, there was one day that I just sat down and said, 'Oh my God. She's nuts and I married her. What does that say about me?' It was a very disconcerting feeling" (*"Pete," 57-year-old single retired engineering supervisor, 4-month abusive marriage, out of IPV for 7 years*).

Some men could move to agentic positions. These men credited being able to convey the abuse in their own words with gaining control over how their identities were portrayed. These few men, representing exceptional cases (*n* = 4), tended to voice the perspective, "If it don't kill you, it can only make you stronger" (*"Dave," 28-year-old single mortgage broker/carpenter, 4-year abusive co-habiting relationship, out of IPV for 1 year*). In essence, as has been found in research on abused women (Peterson & Seligman, 1983), very few men emerged as agentic advocate survivors; more of them still internalized their blame.

## MASCULINE EXTERNALIZATION OF BLAME

An internalization of blame did not preclude men from also turning culpability outward; many men blamed both themselves and others. However, it was through blame externalization that embodiment of masculine types clearly emerged. While most men embodied a hegemonically supportive complicit form, some men instead enacted protest masculinity. The communication of the men in this sample did not suggest overlapping (i.e., identifying in both categories) forms of masculinity for individual men.

*HEGEMONIC/COMPLICIT MASCULINITY.* Most commonly, men in this sample felt both hurt and anger. However, these men's (*n* = 21) emotions were not directed at their abusers. Resentment was aimed at "systems" and a society allowing and perpetuating their victimization.

> In a politically correct way, yeah. But I mean, I don't know. Is it a victim? Of the circumstances? Isn't it the system? I would say I'm more a person that was exposed to an unfortunate situation, and the bias or the unfairness in the system perpetuated it to create a problem that really wasn't, or shouldn't have been there. (*"John," 57-year-old re-married financial planner, 1½-year abusive marriage, out of IPV for 16 years*)

> (laughs). I'm absolutely a victim. I mean, what she did was wrong and the abuse was wrong. But the problem is I feel I'm more a victim of the state, you know, than the victim of her. Because if it weren't for the state giving her the permission to be abusive, then there's no way she could have been. So yeah, I feel victimized by this country, allowing this to happen. (*"Kyle," 52-year-old engaged aerospace engineer, 16-year abusive marriage, out of IPV for 3 years*)

One man in particular, demonstrating internalization of hegemonic norms, discussed his victimization in terms of his own failure to uphold a masculine identity of power and control:

> Yes. Victim. I don't like to say that, because I hate that term. I don't like people saying they're victims, 'cause everyone can fight for themselves. But I've gone to the courts with the truth, and all the studies, all the proof in the world,

and it was just turned against me, and made me look like I was the perpe-trator. In that case, yeah, I feel like a human rights victim, definitely. And my kids are suffering because of it. That really pisses me off. (*"Bob," 38-year-old single manager, 4-year abusive marriage, out of IPV for 6 years*)

Many of the men I interviewed felt they were victimized but refused to identify as victims solely of female perpetrators. In cases where abuse affected family members, such as children, these men also emphatically communicated hegemonic roles of provider and protector. Perhaps these roles entitled the men to "righteous" anger for injustice. As noted by Kimmel (2006), "fighting back" is the most endorsed form of aggression for American men. For the men in this sample who highlighted masculinity in their narratives, it may be that the so-cietal system was a worthy (i.e., masculine, dominant, powerful) opponent to fight and against which to fail, but females and relationships were not. In-grained notions of permitted societal roles for perpetrator/victim emerged in these narratives. Communicating masculinity against victimization, men il-lustrated understanding and internalization of hegemonic norms concerning power relations. Theoretically speaking, as IPV victims, these men could no longer claim a hegemonic identity status. As a result, in an effort to re-claim so-cially acceptable masculine identities through messages of strength, fighting against injustice, protection of the weak, and others, the identity that actually emerged in their narratives was one of complicit masculinity.

Individuals with subordinated identities may appeal to the same sources that dominate them to reinforce their self-worth. This form of identity-main-tenance involves oppressed individuals playing up to dominant expectations. For example, Black men humiliated in early America (or similarly in colonial societies) could (a) act in stereotypically Euro-centric, hyper masculine ways and (b) re-direct their exploitation to Black women in an effort to maintain dominance over someone (Brownmiller, 1975). However, rather than raising the value of masculinity for Black men, appropriating (or merely mimicking, as do complicit forms) White hegemonic styles of masculinity through hyper-gen-dered enactment and dominance of others serves only to reinforce the subor-dination of the same men seeking to emulate it. This reproduction has been seen throughout history—in colonial societies where European values are per-petuated by native populations, particularly in gendered forms (Stoler, 1997); with poor and/or Black men in the post-Reconstructionist South who redirected their devaluation onto Black women (Hall, 1983); and with the men in this study who chose to embrace masculine, retaliatory attitudes toward anyone threatening their masculinity—but is an identity strategy that often backfires (e.g., further colonization, continued lynching, and further stigma of IPV vic-tims, respectively). Basically, men who use a hierarchical structure to attempt increasing their own power, by upholding the system's masculine ideals, may be merely perpetuating their own oppression.

*PROTEST MASCULINITY*. Some of the men in this sample ($n = 6$) appeared to exhibit a form of protest masculinity in which they re-claimed masculine identities in spite of hegemonic norms. These men consistently asserted identities as "true men" resulting from better, softer fathering; improved interpersonal, emotional communication; and social activism on behalf of others (Connell, 1995). These men acknowledged that their victimization allowed them to re-perceive themselves as masculine, but in a different way than before their abuse. Now, they felt possessed of better humor, wisdom, and emotional responsiveness.

> How has it affected me? I've developed a much better sense of humor. I don't take everything with a grain of salt nowadays. I take it with a five pound bag. With a nice pretzel on the side with cheese. But see, that's what helps when you've got those heartbreaking instances. I've changed quite a bit over the years. I've gotten a little softer, I guess, you know, it's that old age setting in, huh? But it's taken a while. It's taken quite a while. (*"Ken," 54-year-old single unemployed laboratory assistant, 3-year abusive marriage, out of IPV for 9 years*)

Thus, these men constructed their victimization in terms of a "softening" of masculinity by protesting the idea that their identities were still fundamentally masculine: "Strangely enough, it [the abuse] had good side effects. I mean, I can cry watching movies. I can feel things emotionally that probably I never would've had I not been through this" (*Kyle*). These men, although not representing the majority, separated from hegemonic expectations to more gender-flexible forms of protest masculinity.

## IMPLICATIONS

### CONSEQUENCES FOR INDIVIDUAL MEN

Findings from this study are valuable in that they demonstrate gender and power operating for male IPV victims through their identity constructions. Awareness of these processes, sources of struggle for many victims, can aid practitioners working with male victims. For example, the institutional culpability discussed by men in this sample is not unfounded. Unique cultural repercussions for male IPV victims include denial of social services, blame for victimization, and verbal and physical abuse from members of their social networks (Muller, Desmarais, & Hamel, 2009; Sarantakos, 1999). Compared to female victims, male victims have difficulty obtaining governmental protection, legal aid, and social support for their abuse (Migliaccio, 2001; Taub, 1983). Alienation, denigration, and limitation of resources are culturally sanctioned for men who fail to uphold traditionally masculine identities (Carney et al., 2007; Courtenay, 2000). However, the findings from this study reveal that it is not only institutional, but also personal perceptions that influence men's likelihood of seeking help for their victimization. Further, many of the men demon-

strated their own support of dominant norms. The men's awareness *and* continued reinforcement of prevailing gender standards suggest that programs tailored to male victims not only need to provide typical victim-aid resources (e.g., tangible, informational, and emotional support), but programs also should address personal masculinity concepts for individual men.

*THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS*

Debate exists surrounding the prevalence of violence perpetration by and victimization of individual men. Gender theories of violence and hegemonic masculinity associate the construct with men's dominance—violence is purported to be necessary for maintaining patriarchal culture (Anderson, 1997; Braithwaite & Daly, 1994). However, most men do not perpetrate violence (Katz, 1995; White & Kowalski, 1994). And whereas this fact has been attributed by some scholars to a lack of violent necessity on the part of individual men, who may rely on popular conceptions of violence to intimidate (e.g., women's vulnerability to sexual violence) (Brownmiller, 1975; MacKinnon, 1983), the lived experiences of individual, diverse men are less certain. More likely, as demonstrated in this study, the theoretical concepts of societal norms influencing victim identification also operate for subordinated men.

Theories of hegemonic dominance suggest that order may be maintained by framing women as appropriate, and thus powerless, victims of IPV (Dobash & Dobash, 1978). This understanding of hegemony may apply equally to men, particularly abused men who differ from dominant gender norms. Concepts of hegemonic dominance and violent enforcement operate for everyone in a society, including otherwise "dominant" (e.g., White, heterosexual, educated) men (Hearn, 2004). Results from this study indicate a need for theories/models of gender, masculinity, and violence to include diverse understandings of power operating for *all* people involved.

*LIMITATIONS*

The primary limitations of this study included a limited sample size and the recruitment and participation procedures. With fewer men than women victimized by IPV, it is possible that the men in this study represented unique cases. Internet recruitment and telephone participation limited the sample to men with those resources. Additionally, soliciting from primarily violence-focused resources may have resulted in recruitment of participants with particularly severe or impressionable experiences, representing extreme cases. Another result of soliciting from groups identified with IPV is that the sample may be self-selected by participants who have a predisposition to victimization tendencies. While the narratives in this sample suggest the men were more averse than receptive to viewing themselves as IPV "victims" in the purest sense (i.e., of female perpetrators), it is nonetheless a possibility that this sampling bias occurred. Each of these factors may affect the generalizability of findings.

*DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH*

Future research should continue to examine how currently existing understandings of violence, gender, and power can account for male victims. If anything, this line of research will augment and improve our understanding of dominant societal structures. It would be helpful to know more about male IPV victims' coping strategies and their constructions of the actual IPV experience. Specifically, micro-ethnographic data should be collected that would explicate harm, severity of injury, violence motives, perpetration attempts, help-seeking efforts, and social attributions for the violence. Knowing more about these factors can inform policy decisions which influence medical and psychological assistance available for victims (Goodyear-Smith & Laidlaw, 1999). This research also would shed light on the subjective and varying experiences of IPV victims.

CONCLUSION

Viewing men as perpetrators and women as victims discounts men subjected to abuse. These men are subjugated not only as abuse victims, but also as un-masculine men by society. Individual resistance to this stigma was shown here through hegemonic re-construction of who/what was to blame and by men enacting protest forms of masculinity. All men (and women) must position themselves in relation to hegemonic norms, whether through silence/acceptance/complicity or protest of all forms of victimization.

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