Article

Personhood, Masculinity, and Male-Perpetrated Intimate Partner Violence

Understanding the Centrality of Culture and Context in Violence Research

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Abstract

Most international violence research that are firmly rooted in the ontology and cultural background of individualism make rash generalisations about violence and human nature by taking the examples of self and gender concepts in Western settings as the only reference point for their claims. Based on the understanding of self in Western cultures, many social psychological studies have over the years blamed interpersonal violence, including intimate partner violence (IPV), on perpetrators' self-image. For example, while some studies indicate that people with low self-esteem are more likely to turn violent in order to gain esteem, others have theorised that individuals with inflated (high) self-esteem are more susceptible to use violence, particularly when the inflated self is threatened in interpersonal relationships. A growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship also traces the aetiology of IPV and the propensity for men to commit violence against women to the internalisation, endorsement and enactment of culturally defined male gender role. Despite the valuable contributions of these studies, there are significant challenges inherent in research that make broad universal claims about self and violence at the expense of culture and context. One of the most important phenomena that seems underexplored, overlooked or neglected in the context of violence research is how culture-specific notions of personhood and masculinity shapes male-perpetrated IPV. In this article, I explore the centrality of context and culture-specificities of personhood and masculinity in understanding male-perpetrated IPV. I discuss how the dialogical relationship between men's psychological sense of who they are (personhood) and cultural notions of masculinity provides new insights for understanding violence research in context. I argue that, rather than a threat to a person's dispositional self, the *social pain* of unfavourable third-party communal evaluations of masculine inadequacy threatens a man's relational sense of personhood, and consequently provoke the use of violence towards the source of the threat in intimate relationships in Ghana.

Keywords

personhood, masculinity, self-esteem, intimate partner violence, culture, Ghana

Introduction

There is a burgeoning body of research that consistently predicts that most violence, from interpersonal to collective, are perpetrated by men in the world. The burden of violence has justifiably sparked research efforts aimed at understanding its aetiology and intervention strategies. However, most research on violence tend to ignore the influence of culture and contexts, and rather focus on discovering universal truths of violence and perpetrators of violence by taking the examples of self and gender concepts in Western

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settings as the only reference point for its claims. The broad universal claims in most of these studies are based on data drawn from people who are mainly white middle-class males located in the so called Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) cultural context. Despite the reality that WEIRD worlds constitute only a narrow slice of humanity (Arnett, 2008; Henrich et al., 2010), the universal claims on violence persistently influence the ontological and epistemological frameworks used by most behavioural scientists and violence researchers to understand humans and violent behaviour in different economic, social, and environmental contexts. For example, there is an accumulated body of scholarship over the past few decades in the social sciences that have tended to blame most interpersonal violence, including intimate partner violence (IPV), on perpetrators' self-image (Baumeister, 1997; Papadakaki et al., 2009; Renzetti, 1992). These studies that make broad and generalised claims about the relationship between individual's self-perception and violence do not provide enough nuancing between different persons (for example, men) in different spatio-temporal contexts and thus fail to attend to the cultural specificities of self and the indigenous aspects of human socialisation as significant for understanding male-perpetrated violence. In the context of violence research, one of the most important phenomena that seems underexplored, overlooked, or neglected is how a culture-specific understanding of personhood and masculinity shapes male-perpetrated IPV. In this paper, I discuss the dialogical relationship between culture-specific notions of personhood and masculinity and show how this relationship shapes male-perpetrated IPV, using Ghana as example.

Previous social psychological studies, albeit inconclusive, have located the aetiology of most violence in interpersonal relationships, such as IPV, in perpetrators' self-image. For example, there is a long-held notion in social science scholarship that low self-regard is the root cause of most violence in interpersonal relationships (Renzetti, 1992; Anderson, 1994). Papadkaki and colleagues (2009) have reported a statistically significant relationship between low self-esteem and IPV perpetration among a Greek sample. The overgeneralised idea that individuals with low self-regard engage in interpersonal violence is not new. A neo-Freudian, Alfred Adler, has long theorised that aggression in interpersonal relationship is motivated by aggressors' feelings of inferiority rooted in their early developmental experiences of rejection and humiliation (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Adler's (1927) aggression theory espouses the belief that most violence begins with the feeling of anxiety or inferiority; that when the feeling of anxiety or inferiority increases, people may use anger as a safeguard to their self-esteem, and as a compensatory mechanism to overcome the feeling of inferiority, which may result in aggression in interpersonal relationships (Adler, 1927; Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Thus, rather than seen as an innate tendency, Adler viewed aggression as the striving to overcome inferiority or low self-regard (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Generally, the literature portrays people with low self-esteem as uncertain, confused, emotionally labile, modest, shy, lacking confidence in themselves, and oriented toward avoiding risk and potential loss (Baumeister, 1993), and therefore, the belief is that people with low self-esteem turn violent in order to gain esteem — that there is a compensatory relationship between low self-esteem and violence (Toch, 1992).

However, the relationship between low self-esteem and violence has been challenged by some social psychologists who claim that the idea that interpersonal violence results from low self-regard is inconsistent with the characteristics of low self-esteem (for example, Baumeister et al., 1996). These scholars argue that people with low self-esteem, given their characteristics, do not have much to lose if their self-image is attacked by unfavourable external stimuli. The theory of egotism has been proposed as an alternative explanation for the relationship between self-esteem and interpersonal violence (Baumeister et al., 1996; Baumeister et al., 2000). The theory of egotism suggests that violence is likely to result when a person's favourable and unstable or inflated sense of self is threatened (ego threat) by a less favourable external feedback. The proposition is that if aggression results from a threat to a person's self-image at all, it is reasonable to think that, in the face of a perceived threat to self-image, people with high self-regard (not low self-esteem) are more likely to lash out against the source of the threat in an attempt to restore their self-view (Baumeister et al., 1993). For example, Bushman and Baumeister (1998) reported that individuals with inflated self-esteem (i.e., unstable and vulnerable, such as narcissists) have a high susceptibility to use violence, particularly when the inflated self-ego is threatened in interpersonal relationships. As Baumeister and his colleagues (2000, p. 26) have argued, "violent men seem to have a strong sense of personal superiority, and their violence often seems to stem from a sense of wounded pride." In this view, when a cherished self-image is threatened or perceived to be injured, a man may resort to the use of violence as a means to restore his superior sense of self.

While these studies on interpersonal violence have been invaluable, they suffer from two important limitations. One, these studies appear to make broad claims about self-understanding and violence that do not provide enough nuancing between different persons (for example, men) in different spatio-temporal contexts. For example, the compensatory view of low self-esteem and the restorative explanations of high self-esteem, relative to interpersonal violence, are both based on the cultural background of individualism and WEIRD conception of the self as private, self-contained, discrete, and separated from structures of society (i.e., dispositional aspect of the self). Thus, within the social psychological accounts, there is an emphasis on the *inner self* and thus appears to make *self-restraint* the central tool in regulating interpersonal violence (Elias, 1982). As Baumeister and Boden (1998) concludes, the most promising psychological antidote to violence is self-control. The second limitation is that these studies do not appear to take into account how differences in individual's self-understanding, specificities of cultural notions of gender and personhood, as well as the indigenous aspects of human socialisation processes are inextricably implicated in interpersonal violence such as IPV. For example, with few notable exceptions (such as Beesley, 2009; Coleman et al., 2009; Toch, 1992), the studies do not seem to sufficiently answer the question: how do gender and cultural differences in self-perceptions (for example, independent vs. interdependent self-construal) moderate self-esteem-motivated interpersonal violence?

A more socio-cultural and structural analysis of violence in intimate relationships based on gender identity has also been put forward. For instance, there is a large body of interdisciplinary research that links the internalisation, endorsement, and enactment of culturally defined male gender role to the propensity for men to commit violence against women in intimate relationships (for example, Adjei, 2016; Adomako Ampofo & Boateng, 2007; Connell, 2005; Ellsberg & Heise, 2005; Gelles, 1974; Jewkes et al., 2014; Pleck, 1995). This view blames IPV on the existence and acceptance of rigidly defined and enforced gender roles — where masculinity is conceptualised as toughness, dominance, and male honour (Connell, 2005; Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). Rather than blame violence on the dispositional aspect of the self, the gender-based view indicates that IPV occurs when men are unable to measure up to socially constructed ideas of what it means to be a *successful* man (for example, Connell, 2005; Gelles, 1974; Jewkes et al., 2014). As has been observed by Gelles (1974), when a man's identity is challenged in an intimate relationship, he is more likely to lash out to his intimate partner in order to maintain some semblance of male power. The masculine-identity-based analysis of violence in intimate relationships, like low and high self-image explanations, draws on a person's sense of self and the psychological urge to avoid shame when people perceive negative social feedback, contrary to the ideal of who they thought they should be (Adjei, in press, for a detailed analysis of masculinity and male shame in Ghana). However, the gender identity-based explanation of violence is more social, structural, and fluid. As indicated earlier, one of the most important phenomena that appears overlooked or neglected in international violence research is how a culture-specific understanding of personhood and masculinity shapes male-perpetrated IPV. The psychological experience of men when their male identity is threatened remains largely unexplored in violence research (Gebhard et al., 2019). The goal of this article is to demonstrate the centrality of culture and context in violence research by discussing the dialogical relationship between men's psychological sense of who they are (personhood) and cultural notions of masculinity and how this relationship shapes male-perpetrated IPV in Ghana. This article is part of a larger project that seeks to explore and develop a conceptual framework for understanding the dialogical interaction between masculinity and communal sense of personhood, and its relationship with IPV in Ghana.

Contextualising Personhood, Masculinity, and Male-Perpetrated IPV

Much of the research on gender-based violence increasingly makes very rash universal statements about violence without addressing cultural specificities of personhood, masculinities, and indigenous aspects of human socialisation. Many of these studies take the notions of self and gender, and the regularity of its functioning and development in Western contexts as something absolute, and as the only reference systems for making broad claims about violence and perpetrators of violence. In this section, I show how context-specific notions of self and masculinity are central in enhancing our cross-cultural understanding of violence. I discuss how the relationship between men's psychological sense of who they are (personhood) and culture-specific notions of masculinity shapes IPV, using the cultural context of Ghana as an example. Personhood is the essence of one's existence, the fact of being a person and possessing qualities that bestow distinct individuality or personality (Adjei, 2016). In the communal context of Ghana,

personhood describes the experience of one's self as relationally connected to others "in a network of embedded interdependence" (Adjei, 2019, p. 490). In the Ghanaian (African) communal ecosystem, relationality and embedded interdependence are considered intrinsic to a person and may serve as the primary unit of consciousness (Adjei, 2019) because a sense of personhood is ontologically, cosmologically, spiritually, and normatively connected to others and the community (Ikuenobe, 2006). This means that the constant interdependence of people in their daily routines, the discursive practices, other people's opinions, and social representations become part of the inner speech of one another, and guide people's ways of knowing, thinking, feeling, and acting as social beings. In the world view of the Akan[1] people of Ghana, personhood is a *being* (becoming) (Adjei, 2019), and it is earned in the ethical and social arena based on an individual's moral and social achievement in his or her community (Gyekye, 1997). Thus, one can be a human being without *being* (becoming) a person or attaining personhood.

Masculinity on the other hand refers to culture-specific notions, assumptions, attributes, and roles associated with men and male behaviour. Though there are multiple notions of being a man, research generally associate men and masculinity in Ghana with attributes such as sexual virility, physical strength, heroism, dominance, procreation, family headship, conjugal authority, among others (Adinkrah, 2012; Adjei, 2016; Adomako Ampofo & Boateng, 2007; Miescher, 2005). Being a man in Ghana, like personhood, is a becoming and requires acting and behaving in a culture-specific ways and may be attained through the learning of gendered or social rules. For example, the Akan statements *"ɔnnyɛ ɔbarima"* (he is not a man) or "*ɔbarima hunu*" (a useless man) emphasise the ethnolinguistic peculiarities and cultural *becomingness* of masculinity and men. These statements, though descriptive, are used to evaluatively demonstrate the contradiction and ambiguity between an adult male as a biological entity or being and a normative male or man as a cultural or social being. The implication is that, within the cultural ecology of Ghana, a person can be an adult male without *being* (becoming) a man or attaining maleness, or an adult male can be incompetent at maleness (Adjei, 2016), as there exists certain fundamental notions and ideals to which the behavioural prescriptions and social conduct of an adult male, "*sɛ ɔyɛ ɔbarima a*" (if he is a real man), ought to conform. Masculinity also involves men's psychological sense of self because identity, personal or collective, may be conceived of as a person's or group's aggregated sum of psychological experience (such as sensation, thoughts, feelings, motives) that forms an individual's understanding of his or her place, role and meaning in society (Chakkarath, 2013). Similarly, men's understanding of their masculine identities reflect their psychological experiences such as thoughts, feelings, motives, and actions, and these experiences also define men's understanding of their place, role and meaning in a given society.

It can thus be deduced from the foregoing accounts that personhood and masculinity are relational and inseparably connected in terms of defining who a man or a person really is in the Ghanaian cultural and social ecosystem. They are both becoming and require the necessary social and cultural mores for attaining them. For example, masculinity, like personhood, may be said to have eluded an adult male when his social behaviours do not appear to be consistent with the cultural definitions of maleness or standard male gender norms (Adjei, 2016). The relationality of personhood and masculinity produces in men a heightened sense of public self-consciousness or objective self-awareness — the tendency for a man to feel that he is being judged or evaluated by others in their social environment (see Adams, 2005; Adjei, 2019). Thus, attaining personhood and masculinity require public demonstrations to provide a signal to social others about one's relational resolve to belong. This is important because a person's collective (relational) identity is the most significant and a psychologically primary component of self-concept in the sense that personal identity involves individuals comparing themselves with members of their own group in order to determine what characteristics make them unique (Taylor et al., 2003). It is thus impossible to form personal identity without a collective identity to serve as a reference point (Taylor et al., 2003), and therefore, when a person's relational identity is compromised in any way, the entire self-concept will also be jeopardised, particularly in interdependent cultural settings.

The relational sense of personhood and masculinity has significant cultural and psychological implications for male-perpetrated IPV in Ghana. For example, research suggests that one of the defining norms of maleness in Ghana is a man's ability to provide financial and material resources and shelter for his family, to the extent that men who are dependent on their wives are

[1] Ethnographically, the Akans are the largest polity of Ghana, constituting over 47% of Ghana's population (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012).

assumed to have lost their title as heads of both the conjugal and the extended family and, consequently, they may be regarded as *mmarima hunu* (useless men) (Adjei, 2012; for a detailed analysis of Akan proverbs on masculinity and gender inequality, see Mariwah et al., 2022). Such men have been found to resort to violence against their wives as a public demonstration of masculine authority and as a way to evade the unpleasant psychological and emotional experience of fear — the fear of being shamed by social others, of being labelled as *mmarima hunu* (Adjei, 2015). In such public demonstrations of manliness, the private-self (the independent self) of the man (or person) becomes silenced in the (relational) male gender identity (men) due to the awareness that others are evaluating the communal-self (interdependent self) according to culturally agreed masculine standards. The importance of *ethnolinguistic peculiarities*, such as men's fear of being socially taunted as *mmarima hunu,* for understanding how the relationship between personhood and masculinity influences violence in the domestic sphere has so far received too little attention in international research on violence. These ethnolinguistic particularities of maleness and relational notions of self-concept contribute important insights for enhancing cross-cultural understanding of violence in diverse sociolinguistic spaces.

Apparently, the relationship between a man's endorsement and internalisation of culture-specific notions of masculinity and communal sense of personhood is both dialogical and stressful (Adjei, in press). The socio-cultural stress that results from the dialogical interaction between a man's communal understanding of himself (personhood) and culturally upheld and desirable appraisals and notions of maleness (cultural notions of masculinity) may engender masculine-anxiety in men, especially when threatened by unfavourable external stimuli such as wifely provocation or dissent. For example, empirical studies in Ghana suggest that an open expression of dissent by a wife to a husband's commands is both personally and socially hurtful and threatens a culturally given male identity and sovereignty in conjugal relationships (Adjei, 2016). The threat of perceived or actual wifely disrespect to a man's wished-for masculine identity unsettles him and evokes a sense of fear — "the fear of masculine failure — the fear of being ridiculed and/or emasculated" by gazing (relational) others in society (Adjei, 2016, p. 417). Given a man's heightened sense of maleness due to his objective sense of personhood, and given that such provocations provide a public challenge to a man's wished-for-self-image, and the attendant social pain that such challenge may engender, a man may resort to the use of violence to ward off negative social appraisals and to restore a masculine sense of adequacy, at least in the eyes of cultural bystanders (see Adjei, 2016). When a man experiences a sense of threat to his masculine identity, he is likely to also experience psychosocial reactions such as anger, fear towards the source of the threat, and may thus feel the psychosocial pressure to use violence as an instrumental means to restore his relational image (i.e., personhood and masculinity) and to avoid the *social pain* of negative communal evaluations. Thus, rather than a universal theorisation of violence as resulting from perpetrators' (atomistic) private self or a problem of one's self-esteem, the relational nature and context-specific examples of IPV in Ghana suggest that violence may be highly specific and depend on the details of the evoking situation or cultural context.

Another example of interpersonal violence that could be explained by the relationality of personhood and masculinity is jealousy-induced male-perpetrated violence against women in Ghana. Wifely infidelity is a forbidden behaviour in Ghana and many societies, as it subjects the husband of an adulterous wife to a considerable shame and dishonour. An imagined or actual wifely infidelity may be detrimental to a husband's public or masculine image because, generally, such acts in Ghana may be considered as a husband's inability to sexually and materially satisfy his wife, subjecting the man to persistent public gossip, innuendos, and social derision, including attribution of sexual impotence (Adinkrah, 2012). For this reason, "jealous husbands may use violence against their unfaithful wives as a public signal of possession and/or to fend off threatening social evaluations such as attributions of male sexual impotence" (Adjei, 2015, p. 425). Thus, jealousy-motivated male perpetrated IPV in Ghana may be occasioned by men's anxieties over social image and a perceived *social injury* that real or imagined physical closeness of a partner to others may cause to a man's identity and sense of personhood. Rather than being concerned about one's private self-esteem, the fear of being culturally evaluated as worthless by third parties may explain male-perpetrated violence in intimate relationships in Ghana. As Adjei (2016) notes, one of the key cultural and psychological reasons for which some Ghanaian men maintain their male authority and perpetrate violence in marriage, even in light of their own reluctance to do so, is the beliefs and expectations of third-party social evaluations and enforcement of appropriate masculine behaviour. The anxiety of IPV perpetrators in Ghana about

third-party beliefs and evaluations "resonates with the cultural affordances of embedded interdependence in Ghana, and an interdependent sense of personhood as an object of other people's attention" (Adjei, 2016, p. 416). The rash generalisations of previous and most current research on violence are often dissociated from culture and the social background of those involved in and affected by violence. It is important to insist that every culturally-minded violence researcher of a reflective disposition would recognise and acknowledge that it is the specificity of the mode of thinking and being, its particularity, that makes it profitable to attend to the indigenous aspects of human socialisation as a significant ingredient and context for understanding male-perpetrated violence in diverse societies.

Conclusion

Most international violence research are firmly rooted in the ontology and cultural background of individualism and make rash generalisations about violence and men without conscious recourse to culture and context. This body of research has generally ignored the influence of contexts on violence because its main goal has been to discover universal truths about human behaviour and to cement universal statements about human nature, self, and gender. Its claims are based on data drawn from cultural background of individualism, and often tend to paint male perpetrators of violence with relatively broad *masculinity brushes* that do not reflect the peculiarities and complexities of the notions of self and the locatedness of men and masculinity, and thus do not provide enough nuancing among different men in similar and diverse spatio-temporal contexts.

Generally, people are social beings and creatures of culture who constantly attempt to make sense of their world by communicating with others and themselves (Adjei, 2019). The burgeoning number of Eurocentric research that focus attention on the individual and his or her personal identity and esteem as the cause of interpersonal violence ignore the fact that without a collective identity, the individual will have no clearly established template against which to articulate a personal identity or personal self-esteem (Taylor et al., 2003). The group to which a person belongs is the ground for his or her perceptions, feelings, and actions, and thus it is the ground of the social group that gives to the individual his or her figured character (Allport, 1948). In this article, I have shown how masculine identities in specific context become emphasised and heightened via men's relational sense of personhood, and how this relationship shape violence in intimate relationships in Ghana. Based on the cultural background of interdependence and relational self-construal, I have argued that male-perpetrated violence in intimate relationship has a public and collective reality, and it is shaped by contextual and relational conditions of meanings embedded in indigenous aspect of human socialisations. Violence researchers might study individual men (perpetrators) one at a time to assess how they develop and use violence in intimate relationships. However, in order to understand why the same perpetrator uses and justifies violence against an intimate partner, it would be necessary to investigate the mutually upheld perceptions and norms among groups of perpetrators who view violence as masculine. I have further highlighted the importance of ethnolinguistic peculiarities and the dialogical relationship between culture-specific notions of personhood and masculinity for understanding male-perpetrated intimate violence.

This article departs from most previous psychological and social science research that fundamentally explains male violence from perpetrators' personal dispositions, based on an independent atomistic and private self that are prevalent in Western individualistic cultural contexts. I have explored and used a Ghanaian case to point out both the deficits and overlooked aspects of international violence research generally and interpersonal violence research specifically. The analysis in this article serves to illuminate an important space between individual's subjectivity and gendered social practice and how this interaction may shape interpersonal violence. It has been highlighted that men may experience shame and anxiety when they have a conviction that they are really not who they thought they were or when they perceive that they have failed to live up to a wished-for-self-image, or they are unable to live up to culturally defined ideals of what it means to be a man, or when they notice that they embody the negative ideal of what society expects them to be. Apparently, the notions of maleness may be conveyed and made operational in men's psyche through their *relationality* and public self-consciousness, and consequently function to influence IPV in Ghana (Adjei, 2016).

Men may act violently towards their intimate partners not because they are inherently violent or want to be, as most Western research on self and violence suggest, but because they may be motivated by their shared cultural norms and identities to act violently in order to belong.

To fully understand the nuances of how masculinities influence interpersonal violence in order to develop an intervention, it may be critically important for researchers and practitioners to also understand culture specific interpretations that differentiate systems of meanings associated with personhood and male gender. An understanding of the culture-specific dynamics of masculinities and how they interact with men's psychological sense of personhood can help provide better insights not only into interpersonal violence such as IPV, but also, it can provide a better understanding of the ideological underpinnings and enablers of genocidal violence and mass atrocities.

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