GENDERING VIOLENCE
Masculinity and Power in Men's Accounts of Domestic Violence

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This article examines the construction of gender within men's accounts of domestic violence. Analyses of in-depth interviews conducted with 33 domestically violent heterosexual men indicate that these batterers used diverse strategies to present themselves as nonviolent, capable, and rational men. Respondents performed gender by contrasting effectual male violence with ineffectual female violence, by claiming that female partners were responsible for the violence in their relationships and by constructing men as victims of a biased criminal justice system. This study suggests that violence against female partners is a means by which batterers reproduce a binary framework of gender.

In the 1970s, feminist activists and scholars brought wife abuse to the forefront of public consciousness. Published in the academic and popular press, the words and images of survivors made one aspect of patriarchy visible: Male dominance was displayed on women's bruised and battered bodies (Dobash and Dobash 1979; Martin 1976). Early research contributed to feminist analyses of battery as part of a larger pattern of male domination and control of women (Pence and Paymar 1993; Yllo 1993). Research in the 1980s and 1990s has expanded theoretical understandings of men's violence against women through emphases on women's agency and resistance to male control (Bowker 1983; Kirkwood 1993); the intersection of physical, structural, and emotional forces that sustain men's control over female partners (Kirkwood 1993; Pence and Paymar 1993); and the different constraints

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faced by women and men of diverse nations, racial ethnic identities, and sexualities who experience violence at the hands of intimate partners (Eaton 1994; Island and Letellier 1991; Jang, Lee, and Morello-Frosch 1998; Renzetti 1992). This work demonstrates ways in which the gender order facilitates victimization of disenfranchised groups.

Comparatively less work has examined the ways in which gender influences male perpetrators' experiences of domestic violence (Yllo 1993). However, a growing body of qualitative research critically examines batterers' descriptions of violence within their relationships. Dobash and Dobash (1998), Hearn (1998), and Ptacek (1990) focus on the excuses, justifications, and rationalizations that batterers use to account for their violence. These authors suggest that batterers' accounts of violence are texts through which they attempt to deny responsibility for violence and to present nonviolent self-identities.

Dobash and Dobash (1998) identify ways in which gender, as a system that structures the authority and responsibilities assigned to women and men within intimate relationships, supports battery. They find that men use violence to punish female partners who fail to meet their unspoken physical, sexual, or emotional needs. Lundgren (1998) examines batterers' use of gendered religious ideologies to justify their violence against female partners. Hearn (1998, 37) proposes that violence is a "resource for demonstrating and showing a person is a man." These studies find that masculine identities are constructed through acts of violence and through batterers' ability to control partners as a result of their violence.

This article examines the construction of gender within men's accounts of domestic violence. Guided by theoretical work that characterizes gender as performance (Butler 1990, 1993; West and Fenstermaker 1995), we contend that batterers attempt to construct masculine identities through the practice of violence and the discourse about violence that they provide. We examine these performances of gender as "routine, methodical, and ongoing accomplishment[s]" that create and sustain notions of natural differences between women and men (West and Fenstermaker 1995, 9). Butler's concept of performativity extends this idea by suggesting that it is through performance that gendered subjectivities are constructed: "Gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who may be said to preexist the deed" (1990, 25). For Butler, gender performances demonstrate the instability of masculine subjectivity; a "masculine identity" exists only as the actions of individuals who stylize their bodies and their actions in accordance with a normative binary framework of gender.

In addition, the performance of gender makes male power and privilege appear natural and normal rather than socially produced and structured. Butler (1990) argues that gender is part of a system of relations that sustains heterosexual male privilege through the denigration or erasure of alternative (feminine/gay/lesbian/bisexual) identities. West and Fenstermaker (1995) contend that cultural beliefs about underlying and essential differences between women and men, and social structures that constitute and are constituted by these beliefs, are reproduced by the

accomplishment of gender. In examining the accounts offered by domestically violent men, we focus on identifying ways in which the practice of domestic violence helps men to accomplish gender. We also focus on the contradictions within these accounts to explore the instability of masculine subjectivities and challenges to the performance of gender.

DATA AND METHOD

In-depth interviews conducted in 1995-96 with 33 men recruited through the Family Violence Diversion Network (FVDN), a nonprofit agency located in a midsize southwestern city, serve as data for our analysis. FVDN provides educational domestic violence programs and serves approximately 500 to 700 men per year in this capacity. Eighty-five percent to 90 percent of the program participants are court mandated to participate in a battering program. The remaining participants are self-referred or referred by other sources such as their attorneys or therapists. FVDN's program for batterers entails 21 weekly meetings run by male group leaders. The first three weeks of the program consist of orientation sessions. We recruited respondents primarily through these orientation sessions to reduce the possibility that responses would be influenced by the information provided during group sessions. Potential participants were informed that the study was not connected to FVDN and that their participation was voluntary. The number of participants recruited from 10 FVDN orientation meetings ranged from 5 percent to 40 percent of the men present. Participants were paid 30 to 40 dollars for their participation.

We collected information about the characteristics of the FVDN participant population that allows us to compare our sample to the population. Table 1 presents descriptive data for the study sample and the population of all men who participated in the FVDN program from July through December 1994. A middle-class group of the population served by FVDN volunteered to participate in the present study. On average, the men who volunteered to participate were of higher socioeconomic status and were more likely to be at FVDN at their own initiative than men in the FVDN population. Our sample contained more European American men and fewer Latino men compared with the FVDN population. Six of the respondents reported an African American ethnic identity, 7 men identified as Latino, 19 men reported a European American ancestry, and 1 respondent reported a Native American ancestry. Five men had earned college degrees, 18 had attended college or vocational/technical schools, 6 had completed high school, and 4 had not completed high school. Their annual household incomes ranged from $5,000 to $80,000, with a mean of $30,463.

Interviews were conducted by three white female graduate students in FVDN agency offices and lasted between one and two hours (the average length was 95 minutes). We asked open-ended questions about positive and negative aspects of their relationships with female partners and their children (see Appendix A for a list

TABLE 1: Comparison of Sample to FVDN[a] Population

	FVDN Population 7-94 to 12-94		*Sample of FVDN Participants*	
Variable	M	SD	M	SD
Sociodemographic				
Household Income	14,123	15,936	30,463	16,642
Education (years)	11	3.10	13	1.8
Age	31.51	9.00	32.07	7.88
Race/ethnicity (%)				
African American	16.0		18.2	
European American	32.4		57.5	
Hispanic/Latino	39.7		21.2	
Other	12.1		3.0	
Marital status (%)				
Married	40.2		42.4	
Cohabiting	23.8		27.3	
Divorced/separated	3.7		30.3	
Never married	11.4		0	
FVDN participation (%)				
Court mandated	90.3		81.5	
Voluntary	9.7		18.5	
n	219		33	

a. FVDN = Family Violence Diversion Network.

of the guiding questions). Following the methods used by Dobash and Dobash (1984) in their study of women's accounts of domestic violence, we asked participants to recount the worst and most recent incidents of violence in their relationships. Interviews were semistructured; interviewers were instructed to cover the topics suggested by the guiding questions and to pursue topics raised by the participants. Interviews were transcribed and thematically coded for analysis. After identifying the prevalent themes in the interviews, we reread the transcripts separately for each theme to identify the presence or absence of the theme within the individual transcripts.

The diversity in our sample enables us to examine some ways in which social class and racial ethnic locations influence accounts of violence. Moreover, we are attentive to ways in which gender and racial ethnic differences may have influenced our rapport with respondents and the content of the interviews. Appendix B presents specific demographic information about the individual participants and pseudonyms through which they are referenced.

FINDINGS

How do batterers talk about the violence in their relationships? They excuse, rationalize, justify, and minimize their violence against female partners. Like the

batterers studied by previous researchers, the men in this study constructed their violence as a rational response to extreme provocation, a loss of control, or a minor incident that was blown out of proportion. Through such accounts, batterers deny responsibility for their violence and save face when recounting behavior that has elicited social sanctions (Dobash and Dobash 1998; Ptacek 1990).

However, these accounts are also about the performance of gender. That is, through their speech acts, respondents presented themselves as rational, competent, masculine actors. We examine several ways in which domestic violence is gendered in these accounts. First, according to respondents' reports, violence is gendered in its practice. Although it was in their interests to minimize and deny their violence, participants reported engaging in more serious, frequent, and injurious violence than that committed by their female partners. Second, respondents gendered violence through their depictions and interpretations of violence. They talked about women's violence in a qualitatively different fashion than they talked about their own violence, and their language reflected hegemonic notions of femininity and masculinity. Third, the research participants constructed gender by interpreting the violent conflicts in ways that suggested that their female partners were responsible for the participants' behavior. Finally, respondents gendered violence by claiming that they are victimized by a criminal justice system that constructs all men as villains and all women as victims.

Gendered Practice

Men perpetrate the majority of violence against women and against other men in the United States (Bachman and Saltzman 1995). Although some scholars argue that women perpetrate domestic violence at rates similar to men (Straus 1993), feminist scholars have pointed out that research findings of "sexual symmetry" in domestic violence are based on survey questions that fail to account for sex differences in physical strength and size and in motivations for violence (Dobash et al. 1992; Straton 1994). Moreover, recent evidence from a large national survey suggests that women experience higher rates of victimization at the hands of partners than men and that African American and Latina women experience higher rates of victimization than European American women (Bachman and Saltzman 1995).

Although the majority of respondents described scenarios in which both they and their partners perpetrated violent acts, they reported that their violence was more frequent and severe than the violence perpetrated by their female partners. Eleven respondents (33 percent) described attacking a partner who did not physically resist, and only two respondents (6 percent) reported that they were victimized by their partners but did not themselves perpetrate violence. The twenty cases (61 percent) in which the participants reported "mutual" violence support feminist critiques of "sexual symmetry":

> We started pushing each other. And the thing is that I threw her on the floor. I told her that I'm going to leave. She took my car keys, and I wanted my car keys so I went and

> grabbed her arm, pulled it, and took the car keys away from her. She—she comes back and tries to kick me in the back. So I just pushed her back and threw her on the floor again. (Juan)

Moreover, the respondents did not describe scenarios in which they perceived themselves to be at risk from their partners' violence. The worst injury reportedly sustained was a split lip, and only five men (15 percent) reported sustaining any injury. Female partners reportedly sustained injuries in 14 cases (42 percent). Although the majority of the injuries reportedly inflicted on female partners consisted of bruises and scratches, a few women were hospitalized, and two women sustained broken ribs. These findings corroborate previous studies showing that women suffer more injuries from domestic violence than men (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Neidig, and Thorn 1995). Moreover, because past studies suggest that male batterers underreport their perpetration of violence (Dobash and Dobash 1998), it is likely that respondents engaged in more violence than they described in these in-depth interviews.

Domestic violence is gendered through social and cultural practices that advantage men in violent conflicts with women. Young men often learn to view themselves as capable perpetrators of violence through rough play and contact sports, to exhibit fearlessness in the face of physical confrontations, and to accept the harm and injury associated with violence as "natural" (Dobash and Dobash 1998; Messner 1992). Men are further advantaged by cultural norms suggesting that women should pair with men who are larger and stronger than themselves (Goffman 1977). Women's less pervasive and less effective use of violence reflects fewer social opportunities to learn violent techniques, a lack of encouragement for female violence within society, and women's size disadvantage in relation to male partners (Fagot et al. 1985; McCaughey 1998). In a culture that defines aggression as unfeminine, few women learn to use violence effectively.

Gendered Depictions and Interpretations

Participants reported that they engaged in more frequent and serious violence than their partners, but they also reported that their violence was different from that of their partners. They depicted their violence as rational, effective, and explosive, whereas women's violence was represented as hysterical, trivial, and ineffectual. Of the 22 participants who described violence perpetrated by their partners, twelve (55 percent) suggested that their partner's violence was ridiculous or ineffectual. These respondents minimized their partners' violence by explaining that it was of little concern to them:

> I came out of the kitchen, and then I got in her face, and I shoved her. She shoved, she tried to push me a little bit, but it didn't matter much. (Adam)

> I was seeing this girl, and then a friend of mine saw me with this girl and he went back and told my wife, and when I got home that night, that's when she tried to hit me, to fight me. I just pushed her out of the way and left. (Shad)

This minimizing discourse also characterizes descriptions of cases in which female partners successfully made contact and injured the respondent, as in the following account:

> I was on my way to go to the restroom. And she was just cussing and swearing and she wouldn't let me pass. So, I nudged her. I didn't push her or shove her, I just kind of, you know, just made my way to the restroom. And, when I done that she hit me, and she drew blood. She hit me in the lip, and she drew blood. . . . I go in the bathroom and I started laughing, you know. And I was still half lit that morning, you know. And I was laughing because I think it maybe shocked me more than anything that she had done this, you know. (Ed)

Although his partner "drew blood," Ed minimized her violence by describing it as amusing, uncharacteristic, and shocking.

Even in the case of extreme danger, such as when threatened with a weapon, respondents denied the possibility that their partners' violence was a threat. During a fight described by Steve, his partner locked herself in the bathroom with his gun:

> We were battering each other at that point, and that's when she was in the bathroom. This is—it's like 45 minutes into this whole argument now. She's in the bathroom, messing with my [gun]. And I had no idea. So I kicked the door in—in the bathroom, and she's sitting there trying to load this thing, trying to get this clip in, and luckily she couldn't figure it out. Why, I don't—you know, well, because she was drunk. So, luckily she didn't. The situation could have been a whole lot worse, you know, it could have been a whole lot worse than it was. I thank God that she didn't figure it out. When I think about it, you know, she was lucky to come out of it with just a cut in her head. You know, she could have blown her brains out or done something really stupid.

This account contains interesting contradictions. Steve stated that he had "no idea" that his partner had a gun, but he responded by kicking down the door to reach her. He then suggested that he was concerned about his partner's safety and that he kicked in the door to save her from doing "something really stupid" to herself. Similarly, Alejandro minimized the threat in his account of an incident in which his partner picked up a weapon:

> So, she got angry and got a knife, came up at me, and I kick her. *And then what happened?* Well, I kick her about four times because she—I kick her, and I say "Just stop, stay there!" and she stand up and come again and I had to kick her again. Somebody called the police, somebody called the police. I guess we were making a lot of noise. And I couldn't go out, I couldn't leave home, because I was not dressed properly to go out. And so I couldn't go, so the only alternative I had at this moment was to defend myself from the knife. So I had to kick her.

Alejandro suggested that his partner's attack with a knife was not enough of a threat to warrant his leaving the house when he was "not dressed properly to go out."

In addition to emphasizing their partners' incompetence in the practice of violence, some respondents depicted the violence perpetrated by their partners as irrational:

> She has got no control. She sees something and she don't like it, she'll go and pull my hair, scratch me, and [act] paranoid, crazy, screaming loud, make everybody look at her, and call the police, you know. Just nuts. (Andrew)

> She came back and started hitting me with her purse again so I knocked the purse out of her hand, and then, she started screaming at me to get out. I went back to the room, and she came running down the hall saying she was going to throw all my stuff out and I'd just had enough so I went and grabbed her, pulled her back. And grabbed her back to the bed and threw her on the bed and sat on her—told her I wasn't going to let her up until she came to her senses . . . she came back up again and I just grabbed her and threw her down. After that, she promised—she finally said that she had come to her senses and everything. I went into the other room, and she went out to clean up the mess she had made in the living room, and then she just started just crying all night long, or for a while. (Phil)

Phil and Andrew described their partners' acts as irrational and hysterical. Such depictions helped respondents to justify their own violence and to present themselves as calm, cool, rational men. Phil described his own behavior of throwing his partner down as a nonviolent, controlled response to his partner's outrageous behavior. Moreover, he suggests that he used this incident to demonstrate his sense of superior rationality to his partner. Phil later reported that a doctor became "very upset" about the marks on his wife's neck two days after this incident, suggesting that he was not the rational actor represented in his account.

In eight other cases (36 percent), respondents did not depict their partner's violence as trivial or ineffectual. Rather, they described their partners' behavior in matter-of-fact terms:

> Then she starts jumping at me or hitting me, or tell me "leave the house, I don't want you, I don't love you" and stuff like that. And I say, "don't touch me, don't touch me." And I just push her back. She keeps coming and hit me, hit me. I keep pushing back, she starts scratch me, so I push hard to stop her from hurting me. (Mario)

Other respondents depicted their partner's violence in factual terms but emphasized that they perceived their own violence as the greater danger. Ray took his partner seriously when he stated that "she was willing to fight, to defend herself," yet he also mentioned his fears that his own violence would be lethal: "The worst time is when she threw an iron at me. And I'm gonna tell you, I think that was the worst time because, in defense, in retaliation, I pulled her hair, and I thought maybe I broke her neck." Only two respondents—Alan and Jim—consistently identified as victims:

> One of the worst times was realizing that she was drunk and belligerent. I realized that I needed to take her home in her car and she was not capable of driving. And she was

> physically abusive the whole way home. And before I could get out of the door or get out of the way, she came at me with a knife. And stupidly, I defended myself—kicked her hand to get the knife out. And I bruised her hand enough to where she felt justified enough to call the police with stories that I was horribly abusing. (Jim)

Jim reported that his partner has hit him, stabbed him, and thrown things at him. However, he also noted that he was arrested following several of these incidents, suggesting that his accounts tell us only part of the story. Moreover, like Steve and Alejandro, he did not describe feelings of fear or apprehension about his partner's use of a knife.

Although female partners were represented as dangerous only to themselves, the participants depicted their own violence as primal, explosive, and damaging to others:

> I explode for everything. This time it was trying to help my daughter with her homework, it was a Sunday, and she was not paying any attention, and I get angry with my daughter, and so I kick the TV . . . I guess broke the TV, and then I kick a bookshelf. My daughter tried to get into the middle so I pushed her away from me and I kicked another thing. So, she [his partner] called the police. I am glad she called the police because something really awful could have happened. (Alejandro)

> She said something, and then I just lost control. I choked her, picked her up off her feet, and lifted her up like this, and she was kind of kicking back and forth, and I really felt like I really wanted to kill her this time. (Adam)

> I feel that if there had been a gun in the house, I would have used it. That's one reason also why I refuse to have a gun. Because I know I have a terrible temper and I'm afraid that I will do something stupid like that. (Fred)

In contrast to their reported fearlessness when confronted by women wielding weapons, respondents constructed their own capacity for violence as something that should engender fear. These interpretations are consistent with cultural constructions of male violence as volcanic—natural, lethal, and impossible to stop until it has run its course.

Respondents' interpretations of ineffectual female violence and lethal male violence reflect actual violent practices in a culture that grants men more access to violence, but they also gender violence. By denying a threat from women's violence, participants performed masculinity and reinforced notions of gender difference. Women were constructed as incompetent in the practice of violence, and their successes were trivialized. For example, it is unlikely that Ed would have responded with laughter had his lip been split by the punch of another man (Dobash and Dobash 1998). Moreover, respondents ignored their partners' motivations for violence and their active efforts to exert change within their relationships.

In her examination of Irigaray's writings on the representation of women within the masculine economy, Butler (1993, 36) writes that "the economy that claims to include the feminine as the subordinate term in a binary opposition of masculine/feminine excludes the feminine—produces the feminine as that which must be

excluded for that economy to operate." The binary representation of ineffectual, hysterical female behavior and rational, lethal male violence within these accounts erases the feminine; violence perpetrated by women and female subjectivity are effaced in order that the respondents can construct masculinities.[1] These representations mask the power relations that determine what acts will qualify as "violence" and thus naturalize the notion that violence is the exclusive province of men.

Gendering Blame

The research participants also gendered violence by suggesting that their female partners were responsible for the violence within their relationships. Some respondents did this by claiming that they did not hit women with whom they were involved in the past:

> I've never hit another woman in my life besides the one that I'm with. She just has a knack for bringing out the worst in me. (Tom)
>
> You know, I never hit my first wife. I'm married for five years—I never hit her. I never struck her, not once. (Mitchell)

Respondents also shifted blame onto female partners by detailing faults in their partners' behaviors and personalities. They criticized their partners' parenting styles, interaction styles, and choices. However, the most typically reported criticism was that female partners were controlling. Ten of the 33 respondents (30 percent) characterized their partners as controlling, demanding, or dominating:

> She's real organized and critiquing about things. She wanna—she has to get it like—she like to have her way all the time, you know. In control of things, even when she's at work in the evenings, she has to have control of everything that's going on in the house. And—but—you know, try to get, to control everything there. You know, what's going on, and me and myself. (Adam)
>
> You know, you're here with this person, you're here for five years, and yet they turn out to be aggressive, what is aggressive, too educated, you know. It's the reason they feel like they want to control you. (Mitchell)

In a few cases, respondents claimed that they felt emasculated by what they interpreted as their partners' efforts to control them:

> She's kind of—I don't want to say dominating. She's a good mother, she's a great housekeeper, she's an excellent cook. But as far as our relationship goes, the old traditional "man wears the pants in the family," it's a shared responsibility. There's no way that you could say that I wear the pants in the family. She's dominating in that sense. (Ted)
>
> You ask the guy sitting next door to me, the guy that's down the hall. For years they all say, "Bill, man, reach down and grab your eggs. She wears the pants." Or maybe like, "Hey man, we're going to go—Oh, Bill can't go. He's got to ask his boss first." And they were right. (Bill)

These representations of female partners as dominating enabled men to position themselves as victims of masculinized female partners. The relational construction of masculinity is visible in these accounts; women who "wear the pants" disrupt the binary opposition of masculinity/femininity. Bill's account reveals that "one is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other gender" (Butler 1990, 22); he is unable to perform masculinity to the satisfaction of his friends when mirrored by a partner who is perceived as dominating.

Moreover, respondents appeared to feel emasculated by unspecified forces. Unlike female survivors who describe concrete practices that male partners utilize to exert control (Kirkwood 1993; Walker 1984), participants were vague about what they meant by control and the ways in which their partners exerted control:

> I don't think she's satisfied unless she has absolute control, and she's not in a position to control anyway, um, mentally. . . . *When you said that, um, that she wasn't really in a position to control, what did you mean by that?* Well, she's not in a position to control, in the fact that she's not, the control that she wants, is pretty much control over me. I'm pretty much the only person that she sees every day. She wants to control every aspect of what I do, and while in the same turn, she really can't. (George)

Respondents who claimed that their partners are controlling offered nebulous explanations for these feelings, suggesting that these claims may be indicative of these men's fears about being controlled by a woman rather than the actual practices of their partners.

Finally, respondents gendered violence through their efforts to convince female partners to shoulder at least part of the blame for their violence. The following comments reflect respondents' interpretations of their partners' feelings after the argument was over:

> Finally, for once in her life, I got her to accept 50/50 blame for the reason why she actually got hit. You know, used to be a time where she could say there was never a time. But, she accepts 50/50 blame for this. (Tom)

> She has a sense that she is probably 80-90 percent guilty of my anger. (Alejandro)

Contemporary constructions of gender hold women responsible for men's aggression (Gray, Palileo, and Johnson 1993). Sexual violence is often blamed on women, who are perceived as tempting men who are powerless in the face of their primal sexual desires (Scully 1990). Although interviewees expressed remorse for their violent behavior, they also implied that it was justified in light of their partners' controlling behavior. Moreover, their violence was rewarded by their partners' feelings of guilt, suggesting that violence is simultaneously a performance of masculinity and a means by which respondents encouraged the performance of femininity by female partners.

"The Law Is for Women": Claiming Gender Bias

Participants sometimes rationalized their violence by claiming that the legal system overreacted to a minor incident. Eight of the 33 interviewees (24 percent) depicted themselves as victims of gender politics or the media attention surrounding the trial of O. J. Simpson:

> I think my punishment was wrong. And it was like my attorney told me—I'm suffering because of O. J. Simpson. Mine was the crime of the year. That is, you know, it's the hot issue of the year because of O. J. Two years ago they would have gone "Don't do that again." (Bill)
>
> I'm going to jail for something I haven't even done because the woman is always the victim and the guy is always the bad guy. And O. J., I think, has made it even worse—that mentality. I know that there's a lot of bad, ignorant, violent guys out there that probably think that it's wonderful to batter their wife on a regular basis, but I think there's a lot of reverse mentality going on right now. (Jim)
>
> I don't necessarily agree with the jail system, which I know has nothing to do with you guys, but you have to sign a form saying that you'll come to counseling before you've ever been convicted of a crime. And, like I said, here I am now with this [inaudible] that I have to come to for 21 weeks in a row—for what could amount to some girl calling—hurting herself and saying her boyfriend or husband did it. (Tom)

These claims of gender bias were sometimes directly contradicted by respondents' descriptions of events following the arrival of the police. Four participants (12 percent) reported that the police wanted to arrest their female partner along with or instead of themselves—stories that challenged their claims of bias in the system. A few of these respondents reported that they lied to the police about the source of their injuries to prevent the arrest of their partners. Ed, the respondent who sustained a split lip from his partner's punch, claimed that he "took the fall" for his partner:

> They wanted to arrest her, because I was the one who had the little split lip. And I told them that—I said, "No, man, she's seven months pregnant." I told the officer, you know, "How can you take her to jail? She's seven months pregnant!" And I said, "Look, I came in here—I started it, I pushed her. And she hit me." You know, I told them that I had shoved her. And after that they said, "Okay, well, we have to remove, move you out of this—out of this situation here." Something about the law. So, I said, "Well, you know, I started it." I told them I had started it, you know. And, they said, "Okay, well, we'll take you then." So I went to jail. (Ed)

When the police arrived, these respondents were in a double bind. They wanted to deny their own violence to avoid arrest, but they also wanted to deny victimization at the hands of a woman. "Protecting" their female partners from arrest allowed them a way out of this bind. By volunteering to be arrested despite their alleged innocence, they became chivalrous defenders of their partners. They were also, paradoxically, able to claim that "gender bias" led to their arrest and participation in the

FVDN program. When Ed argued that the criminal justice system is biased toward women, we confronted him about this contradiction:

> *Ed:* I am totally against, you know,—ever since I stepped foot in this program and I've only been to the orientation—[that] it speaks of gender, okay, and everything that—it seems like every statement that is made is directed toward men, toward the male party. . . . as I stated earlier, the law is for women. In my opinion, it—
> *Interviewer:* Although, they would have arrested her if you hadn't intervened.
> *Ed:* They would, that's right. That's another thing. That's right, that's right. They would have arrested her. But, you know even, even with her statement saying, look this is what, this is what happened, I'm not pressing charges. The state picked up those charges, and, they just took it upon themselves, you know, to inconvenience my life, is what they did.
> *Interviewer:* Okay. And the other alternative would have been that she would have been going through this process instead of you.
> *Ed:* Well, no, the other alternative, that was, that was, that would come out of this, is [that] I would have spent 30 days in jail.

Ed repeatedly dismissed the notion that the legal system would hold his partner accountable for her actions despite his own words to the contrary. His construction of men as victimized by an interfering justice system allowed him to avoid the seemingly unacceptable conclusion that either he or his partner was a victim of violence.

Another respondent, Jim, reportedly prevented his partner's arrest because he felt it to be in his best interests:

> She was drunk and behind the wheel and driving erratically while backhanding me. And a cop pulled us over because he saw her hit me. And I realized that she was gonna get a DWI [Driving While Intoxicated], which would have been her second and a major expense to me, besides, you know, I think that there's a thin line between protecting somebody and possessing somebody. But I protect her, I do. I find myself sacrificing myself for her and lying for her constantly. And I told the cops that I hit her just because they saw her hit me and I figured that if I told them that I hit her, rather than her get a DWI, that we would both go to jail over an assault thing. Which is what happened. (Jim)

When batterers "protect" their partners from arrest, their oppressor becomes a powerful criminal justice system rather than a woman. Although even the loser gains status through participation in a fight with another man, a man does not gain prestige from being beaten by a woman (Dobash and Dobash 1998). In addition, respondents who stepped in to prevent their partners from being arrested ensured that their partners remained under their control, as Jim suggested when he described "the thin line between being protected by somebody and possessing somebody." By volunteering to be arrested along with his partner, Jim ensured that she was not "taken into possession" (e.g., taken into custody) by the police.[2]

By focusing the interviews on "gender bias" in the system, respondents deflected attention from their own perpetration and victimization. Constructions of

a bias gave them an explanation for their arrest that was consistent with their self-presentation as rational, strong, and nonviolent actors. Claims of "reverse mentality" also enabled participants to position themselves as victims of gender politics. Several interviewees made use of men's rights rhetoric or alluded to changes wrought by feminism to suggest that they are increasingly oppressed by a society in which women have achieved greater rights:

> I really get upset when I watch TV shows as far as, like they got shows or TV station called Lifetime and there are many phrases "TV for women." And that kind of made me upset. Why is it TV for women? You know, it should be TV for everyone, not just women. You don't hear someone else at a different TV station saying, "TV for men." . . . As far as the law goes, changing some of the laws goes too, some of the laws that guys are pulled away from their children. I kind of felt sorry for the guys. (Kenny)

A number of recent studies have examined the increasingly angry and antifeminist discourse offered by some men who are struggling to construct masculine identities within patriarchies disrupted by feminism and movements for gay/lesbian and civil rights (Fine et al. 1997; Messner 1998; Savran 1998). Some branches of the contemporary "men's movement" have articulated a defensive and antifeminist rhetoric of "men's rights" that suggests that men have become the victims of feminism (Messner 1998; Savran 1998). Although none of our interviewees reported participation in any of the organized men's movements, their allusions to the discourse of victimized manhood suggest that the rhetoric of these movements has become an influential resource for the performance of gender among some men. Like the angry men's rights activists studied by Messner (1998), some respondents positioned themselves as the victims of feminism, which they believe has co-opted the criminal justice system and the media by creating "myths" of male domination. The interviews suggest that respondents feel disempowered and that they identify women—both the women whom they batter and women who lead movements to criminalize domestic violence—as the "Other" who has "stolen their presumed privilege" (Fine et al. 1997, 54): "Now girls are starting to act like men, or try and be like men. Like if you hit me, I'll call the cops, or if you don't do it, I'll do this, or stuff like that" (Juan). Juan contends that by challenging men's "privilege" to hit their female partners without fear of repercussions, women have become "like men." This suggests that the construction of masculine subjectivities is tied to a position of dominance and that women have threatened the binary and hierarchical gender framework through their resistance to male violence.

DISCUSSION: SOCIAL LOCATIONS AND DISCOURSES OF VIOLENCE

Respondents' descriptions of conflicts with female partners were similar across racial ethnic and class locations. Participants of diverse socioeconomic standings

and racial ethnic backgrounds minimized the violence perpetrated by their partners, claimed that the criminal justice system is biased against men, and attempted to place responsibility for their violence on female partners. However, we identified some ways in which social class influenced respondents' self-presentations.[3]

Respondents of higher socioeconomic status emphasized their careers and the material items that they provided for their families throughout the interviews:

> We built two houses together and they are nice. You know, we like to see a nice environment for our family to live in. We want to see our children receive a good education. (Ted)

> That woman now sits in a 2,700 square foot house. She drives a Volvo. She has everything. A brand-new refrigerator, a brand-new washer and dryer. (Bill)

Conversely, economically disenfranchised men volunteered stories about their prowess in fights with other men. These interviewees reported that they engaged in violent conflicts with other men as a means of gaining respect:

> Everybody in my neighborhood respected me a lot, you know. I used to be kind of violent. I used to like to fight and stuff like that, but I'm not like that anymore. She—I don't think she liked me because I liked to fight a lot but she liked me because people respected me because they knew that they would have to fight if they disrespected me. You know I think that's one thing that turned her on about me; I don't let people mess around. (Tony)

> My stepson's friend was there, and he start to push me too. So I started to say, "Hey, you know, this is my house, and you don't tell me nothing in my house." So I start fighting, you know, I was gonna fight him. (Mario)

The use of violence to achieve respect is a central theme in research on the construction of masculinities among disenfranchised men (Messerschmidt 1993; Messner 1992). Although men of diverse socioeconomic standings valorize fistfights between men (Campbell 1993; Dobash and Dobash 1998), the extent to which they participate in these confrontations varies by social context. Privileged young men are more often able to avoid participation in social situations that require physical violence against other men than are men who reside in poor neighborhoods (Messner 1992).

We find some evidence that cultural differences influence accounts of domestic violence. Two respondents who identified themselves as immigrants from Latin America (Alejandro and Juan) reported that they experienced conflicts with female partners about the shifting meanings of gender in the United States:

> She has a different attitude than mine. She has an attitude that comes from Mexico—be a man like, you have to do it. And it's like me here, it's fifty-fifty, it's another thing, you know, it's like "I don't have to do it." . . . I told her the wrong things she was doing and I told her, "It's not going to be that way because we're not in Mexico, we're in the United States." (Juan)

Juan's story suggests that unstable meanings about what it means to be a woman or a man are a source of conflict within his relationship and that he and his partner draw on divergent gender ideologies to buttress their positions. Although many of the respondents expressed uncertainty about appropriate gender performances in the 1990s, those who migrated to the United States may find these "crisis tendencies of the gender order" (Connell 1992, 736) to be particularly unsettling. Interestingly, Juan depicts his partner as clinging to traditional gender norms, while he embraces the notion of gender egalitarianism. However, we are hesitant to draw conclusions about this finding due to the small number of interviews that we conducted with immigrants.

Race or ethnicity, class, and gender matter in the context of the interview setting. As white, middle-class, female researchers, we were often questioning men who resided in different social worlds. Like other female researchers who have interviewed men with histories of sexual violence, we found that the interviewees were usually friendly, polite, and appeared relatively comfortable in the interview setting (Scully 1990). Unlike Ptacek, a male researcher who interviewed batterers, we did not experience a "subtext of resistance and jockeying for power beneath the otherwise friendly manner these individuals displayed in our initial phone conversations" (1990, 140). However, respondents may have offered more deterministic accounts of gender and assumed more shared experiences with the interviewer had they been interviewed by men rather than women (Williams and Heikes 1993). For example, whereas Ptacek (1990) found that 78 percent of the batterers that he interviewed justified their violence by complaining that their wives did not fulfill the obligations of a good wife, participants in this study rarely used language that explicitly emphasized "wifely duties."

Previous studies also suggest that when white, middle-class researchers interview working-class people or people of color, they may encounter problems with establishing rapport and interpreting the accounts of respondents (Edwards 1990). Riessman (1987) found that white researchers feel more comfortable with the narrative styles of white and middle-class respondents and may misinterpret the central themes raised by respondents of color. These findings suggest that shared meanings may have been less easily achieved in our interviews conducted with Latino, Native American, and African American men. For example, there is some evidence that we attempted to impose a linear narrative structure on our interviews with some respondents who may have preferred an episodic style (see Riessman 1987):

> We just started arguing more in the house. And she scratched me, and I push her away. Because I got bleeding on my neck and everything, and I push her away. And she called the police and I run away so they don't catch me there. There's a lot of worse times we argued. She tried to get me with the knife one time, trying to blame me that I did it. And the next time I told her I was going to leave her, and she tried to commit suicide by drinking like a whole bunch of bottles of Tylenol pill. And I had to rush her to the hospital, you know. That's about it. *So, in this worst fight, she scratched you and*

> *you pushed her. She called the police?* A few times she kicked me and scratched me on my neck and everything, and my arms. (Andrew)

Andrew, who identifies as Latino, recounts several episodes that are salient to his understanding of the problems within his relationship. The interviewer, however, steers him toward a sequential recounting of one particular incident rather than probing for elaboration of Andrew's perceptions of these multiple events.

In contrast, racial ethnic locations can shape what interviewers and interviewees reveal. One way in which this dynamic may have influenced the interviews was suggested by Tom, who identified as African American:

> I've never dated a Black woman before. Not me. That was my choice—that's a choice I made a long time ago. . . . I tend to find that Black women, in general, don't have any get-up-and-go, don't work. I can't say—it's just down players. But I just don't see the desire to succeed in life.

Tom introduced the issue of interracial dating without prompting and went on to invoke a variety of controlling images to represent Black women (Collins 1991). It is difficult to imagine that Tom would have shared these details if he had been interviewed by an African American woman or perhaps even a white man. Given the middle-class bias of our sample and our own social locations, future research ought to compare accounts received by differently located interviewers and a wider class and racial ethnic range of respondents.

CONCLUSIONS

Many scholars have suggested that domestic violence is a means by which men construct masculinities (Dobash and Dobash 1998; Gondolf and Hannekin 1987; Hearn 1998). However, few studies have explored the specific practices that domestically violent men use to present themselves as masculine actors. The respondents in this study used diverse and contradictory strategies to gender violence and they shifted their positions as they talked about violence. Respondents sometimes positioned themselves as masculine actors by highlighting their strength, power, and rationality compared with the "irrationality" and vulnerability of female partners. At other times, when describing the criminal justice system or "controlling" female partners, they positioned themselves as vulnerable and powerless. These shifting representations evidence the relational construction of gender and the instability of masculine subjectivities (Butler 1990).

Recently, performativity theories have been criticized for privileging agency, undertheorizing structural and cultural constraints, and facilitating essentialist read-

ings of gender behavior: "Lacking an analysis of structural and cultural context, performances of gender can all too easily be interpreted as free agents' acting out the inevitable surface manifestations of a natural inner sex difference" (Messner 2000, 770). Findings from our study show that each of these criticisms is not necessarily valid.

First, although the batterers described here demonstrate agency by shifting positions, they do so by calling on cultural discourses (of unstoppable masculine aggression, of feminine weakness, and of men's rights). Their performance is shaped by cultural options.

Second, batterers' performances are also shaped by structural changes in the gender order. Some of the batterers interviewed for this study expressed anger and confusion about a world with "TV for women" and female partners who are "too educated." Their arrest signaled a world askew—a place where "the law is for women" and where men have become the victims of discrimination. Although these accounts are ironic in light of the research documenting the continuing reluctance of the legal system to treat domestic violence as a criminal act (Dobash and Dobash 1979), they demonstrate the ways in which legal and structural reforms in the area of domestic violence influence gender performances. By focusing attention on the "bias" in the system, respondents deflected attention from their own perpetration and victimization and sustained their constructions of rational masculinity. Therefore, theories of gender performativity push us toward analyses of the cultural and structural contexts that form the settings for the acts.

Finally, when viewed through the lens of performativity, our findings challenge the notion that violence is an essential or natural expression of masculinity. Rather, they suggest that violence represents an effort to reconstruct a contested and unstable masculinity. Respondents' references to men's rights movement discourse, their claims of "reverse discrimination," and their complaints that female partners are controlling indicate a disruption in masculine subjectivities. Viewing domestic violence as a gender performance counters the essentialist readings of men's violence against women that dominate U.S. popular culture. What one performs is not necessarily what one "is."

Disturbingly, however, this study suggests that violence is (at least temporarily) an effective means by which batterers reconstruct men as masculine and women as feminine. Participants reported that they were able to control their partners through exertions of physical dominance and through their interpretive efforts to hold partners responsible for the violence in their relationships. By gendering violence, these batterers not only performed masculinity but reproduced gender as dominance. Thus, they naturalized a binary and hierarchical gender system.

APPENDIX A
Guiding Questions for In-Depth Interviews

1. First, how did you meet your wife/partner? What attracted you to her in the first place? What do you think attracted her to you?
2. What would you change about her if you could? Anything else? What do you think she would change about you? Anything else?
3. Please tell me about the *worst* time an argument with your partner became physical.
4. Please tell me about the *last* time an argument with your partner became physical.
5. What does it mean to you to be a good father? A good mother? A good child?
6. (Does/do) your own (partner/wife) (and children) fit your view of a good mother (and children)? Why or why not?
7. How do you think children should be disciplined?

APPENDIX B
Pseudonyms and Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Sample

Pseudonym	*Age*	*Education*	*Race/Ethnicity*	*Household Income*	*Marital Status*
Jeff	25	Some college	African American	$40,000-59,999	Married
Alejandro	37	College	Latino	$25,000-29,999	Married
Steve	35	Some college	European American	$15,000-19,999	Married
Mitchell	32	Vocational	African American	$40,000-59,999	Cohabiting
Jake	37	General equivalency diploma (GED)	Native American	$5,000-9,999	Married
Adam	31	High school	European American	$40,000-59,999	Married
Alan	37	High school	European American	$25,000-29,999	Separated
Tom	26	High school	African American	$25,000-29,999	Separated
Ray	42	Some college	African American	$5,000-9,999	Married
Tony	22	Some college	Latino	$20,000-24,999	Cohabiting
Max	29	College	European American	$30,000-39,999	Cohabiting
Robert	40	Vocational	European American	$40,000-59,999	Cohabiting
Jim	38	Some college	European American	$40,000-59,999	Married
Juan	26	High school	Latino	$15,000-19,999	Married
Fred	44	Some college	European American	$40,000-59,999	Separated
Chad	40	Some college	European Amercian/Asian	$40,000-59,999	Cohabiting
Tim	31	Vocational	European American	$25,000-29,999	Separated
Andrew	27	< High school	Latino	$10,000-14,999	Cohabiting
Mario	33	Vocational	Latino	$20,000-24,999	Cohabiting
Kenny	23	GED	European American	$25,000-29,999	Married
Phil	45	College	European American	$60,000-79,999	Separated
Ed	30	Some college	Latino	$10,000-14,999	Cohabiting
George	21	Some college	African American	$10,000-14,999	Cohabiting
Frank	23	Vocational	European American	$30,000-39,999	Married
Eric	24	< High school	Latino	$25,000-29,999	Married

(continued)

APPENDIX B Continued

Pseudonym	*Age*	*Education*	*Race/Ethnicity*	*Household Income*	*Marital Status*
Shad	21	< High school	African American	$20,000-24,999	Divorced
Rich	47	Some college	European American	$10,000-14,999	Married
Leonard	38	Some college	European American	$25,000-29,999	Separated
Matt	31	College	European American	$10,000-14,999	Separated
Ted	41	College	European American	$40,000-59,999	Married
Ryan	22	Some college	European American	$15,000-19,999	Separated
Brandon	28	< High school	European American	$20,000-24,999	Married
Bill	34	Some college	European American	$30,000-39,999	Divorced

NOTES

1. We thank an anonymous *Gender & Society* reviewer for suggesting the relevance of Butler's theory to this analysis.

2. We are grateful to an anonymous *Gender & Society* reviewer for the suggestion that respondents "protect" female partners from arrest to maintain control of their partners.

3. We define high socioeconomic status respondents as those who earn at least $25,000 per year in personal income and who have completed an associate's degree. Seven respondents fit these criteria. We define disenfranchised respondents as those who report personal earnings of less than $15,000 per year and who have not completed a two-year college program. Nine respondents fit these criteria.

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