Hegemonic masculinity and aggression

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When you durst do it, then you were a man/And, to be more than what you were, you would/Be so much more than a man

William Shakespeare, Macbeth (I.7.49–51)

These are the words of Lady Macbeth, who viewed her husband as masculine when he dared to murder the king and assume the throne, yet emasculates him when he expresses his unwillingness to commit the murder. Masculinity and violence have long been connected in both literary and scientific writing. Extant scientific literature suggests that men are more aggressive than women (Bettencourt & Miller, 1996; Eagly & Steffen, 1986; Knight, Guthrie, Page & Fabes, 2002). However, it is important to note that these differences are complex. For example, when considering aggression that is used without the intention of physical harm such as indirect or relational aggression, women’s rates of aggressive behaviour have been shown to exceed men’s (for a review, see Archer & Coyne, 2005). In particular, while a considerable amount of research has examined the effects of biological sex on aggression (for a review, see Archer, 2004), scholars have more recently begun to consider how gender and social roles contribute to aggression. Contemporary scholars have consistently argued that hegemonic masculinity, which refers to a pattern of social practices perpetuating men’s dominance over women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), may be more predictive of aggression than one’s biological sex (Richardson & Hammock, 2007). For instance, a meta-analysis of 39 studies found robust support for the relation between masculine ideology and men’s perpetration of sexual aggression toward women (Murnen, Wright & Kaluzny, 2002). As such, a growing emphasis has been placed on how masculine cultural and socialisation pressures are related to aggressive behaviour. The aim of this chapter is to critically review theoretical and empirical evidence that seeks to explain how hegemonic masculinity contributes to, and is a result of, men’s perpetration of aggression. Conclusions from this review will be used to suggest directions for future research and strategies for intervention.
Definitions and theoretical overview

Defining masculinity

Masculinity refers to the social and cultural roles, personality traits, and behaviours that are deemed socially acceptable for men (Mosher & Tomkins, 1988). Masculinity has numerous conceptualisations that encompass a variety of qualities, including attitudes, values, cognitions, emotions, and behaviours (e.g., Thompson & Pleck, 1995; Thompson & Bennett, 2015). Various terms are utilised in the literature to refer to masculinity including, but not limited to: manhood, masculine ideology, hypermasculinity, hegemonic masculinity, traditional masculinity, gender roles, gender role identity, gender role strain, gender role stress, gender role orientation, and sex role. While many of these terms are used interchangeably, scholars have called for the use of definitions with greater conceptual clarity to promote conceptual distinctions between constructs (e.g., Thompson & Bennett, 2015; Cuthbert, 2015).

Despite myriad conceptualisations and definitions of masculinity, research has consistently demonstrated that measures of masculinity based on sexist masculine role norms are robustly associated with aggression. As such, the present chapter will focus on hegemonic masculinity, which refers to:

the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.

Connell, 2005, p. 77

Hegemonic masculinity essentialises male-female differences as well as the division among men by marginalising men of colour, lower social class, and a non-heterosexual identity (Carrigan, Connell & Lee, 1985; Connell, 2005). Further, hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed, transhistorical model, but rather masculinities are configurations of practice that are fluid and may unfold and change across time (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Men can adopt hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable or necessary in certain contexts and distance themselves strategically in other contexts. Importantly, hegemonic masculinity is not monolithic, but rather multiple “masculinities” and facets of those masculinities exist (for a review, see Connell, 2005).

Theoretical conceptualisations of masculinity

Prior to reviewing research that links hegemonic masculinity and aggression, it is first important to discuss pertinent masculinity theory. Scholars have utilised multiple approaches to examine hegemonic masculinity; however, three approaches have been the most widely used: (1) gender orientation, (2) gender normative, and (3) masculine gender stress.

Gender orientation perspective

The gender orientation approach is one of the earliest conceptualisations of masculinity and posits that masculinity is comprised of socially desirable, ingrained personality traits or attributes that differentiate males and females (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Thompson & Pleck, 1995). In other words, masculinity exists as a “configuration of fixed individual attributes” (Luyt, 2005, p. 6) that exemplifies the idealised man. Although this approach has historically dominated the field, there has been a paradigm shift in the last 20 years toward a conceptualisation that emphasises societally based hegemonic norms (Thompson & Bennett, 2015). Given this shift,
the present chapter will not review literature that links trait masculinity and aggression. We note, however, that the evidence supporting this link is equivocal (for a review, see Moore & Stuart, 2005). Instead, we review two contemporary approaches that examine (1) the gender normative perspective and (2) the masculine gender stress perspective.

**Gender normative perspective**

The **gender normative perspective** purports that masculinity is “a culturally based ideology scripting gender relations, attitudes, and beliefs” (Thompson & Pleck, 1995, p. 30). From this approach, masculinity is considered a set of external cultural or social standards that is a function of a particular time or place. In contrast to the gender orientation approach, which examines the extent to which hegemonic masculinity is incorporated into one’s self-description (e.g., I am dominant), the gender normative conceptualisation examines men’s beliefs about how they should behave, feel, or act in gender-salient situations (e.g., Men should be dominant). In other words, the gender orientation approach examines men’s internalisation of hegemonic masculinity whereas the gender normative approach examines men’s endorsement of hegemonic masculinity.

The most influential conceptualisation of masculinity utilising this approach was put forward by Brannon (1976), who explored the American cultural “blueprint” of what a man should be, desire, and accomplish. He theorised that there were four core themes, or standards, of the masculine gender role: *No Sissy Stuff* (i.e., avoiding femininity, concealing emotions), the *Big Wheel* (i.e., being the breadwinner, being admired and respected), the *Sturdy Oak* (i.e., being tough, confident, and self-reliant); and *Give ‘em Hell* (i.e., willingness to engage in violence and adventure). Thompson and Pleck (1986) advanced this conceptualisation by analysing the empirical structure of male role norms via a factor analysis of Brannon’s scale of masculine ideology. They found that men varied in their adherence to three distinct male role norms: (a) status (i.e., the *Big Wheel*), which reflects the belief that men must gain the respect of others, (b) toughness (i.e., the *Sturdy Oak* and *Give ‘em Hell*), which reflects the expectation that men are physically tough and willing to be aggressive, and (c) antifemininity (i.e., *No Sissy Stuff*), which reflects the belief that men should not engage in stereotypical feminine activities. More recently, Mahalik and colleagues (2003) argued that this three-factor conceptualisation of masculinity is too narrow and posited the inclusion of affective (e.g., feeling proud or happy when conforming to masculine role norms), behavioural (i.e., acting in ways to meet societal expectations for men), and cognitive dimensions (i.e., holding beliefs expected of men) of the male gender role. A factor analysis evidenced 11 theoretically driven masculine norms assessing affective, behavioural, and cognitive domains to which men can conform: emotional control, risk-taking, violence, dominance, playboy, winning, primacy of work, power over women, self-reliance, disdain for homosexuals, and pursuit of status (Mahalik et al., 2003).

**Masculine gender stress perspective**

The gender normative approach predominately focuses on men’s endorsement of hegemonic masculinity; however, research has also focused on men who are unable to conform or live up to standards of hegemonic masculinity. Given the rigid standards of hegemonic masculinity, the proportion of men who violate gender norms is undoubtedly high due to the inconsistent and frequent changes in what is considered “masculine” behaviour (Pleck, 1995). As such, men may experience psychological and physiological stress (i.e., masculine gender stress) when failing to live up to the hegemonic manhood ideal (Eisler & Skidmore, 1987; Eisler, Skidmore & Ward, 1988). Although gender stress is related to beliefs about masculinity, masculine gender stress is a
unique construct that focuses on men’s *gendered or masculine experience* and the degree to which men cognitively appraise gender-relevant situations (e.g., being subordinate to a woman, failing at work or sex) as stressful or threatening (Walker, Tokar & Fischer, 2000).

**Theoretical explanations of the link between hegemonic masculinity and aggression**

**Hegemonic masculinity as a cause**

Aggressive behaviour may result from gender role socialisation that teaches hegemonic norms promoting aggression. In line with the gender normative perspective, how men *should* behave, feel, or act in gender-salient situations influences their behaviour in those situations. In accordance with social learning theory (Bandura, 1973), from an early age boys observe socially acceptable behaviour from parents, teachers, peers, and the media about “masculine” behaviour. These behaviours are learned through reinforcement (e.g., praise for winning) and punishment (e.g., criticism for showing emotion) by others (Pleck, 1981, 1995). Moreover, males are socialised to conform to a narrow definition of masculinity often summarised by dimensions such as breadwinning, stoicism, independence, dominance, avoiding intimacy, and approval of violence (Levant et al., 2007; Mahalik et al., 2003; Smiler, 2004). Men may vary within and across these aforementioned dimensions of masculinity; however, men are defined, and learn to define themselves, by what they are (e.g., dominant, heterosexual), as well as what they are not (e.g., submissive, homosexual; Brannon, 1976; Pleck, 1981).

Masculine socialisation and endorsement of cultural masculine standards may produce a restriction of vulnerable emotions (e.g., Levant, 1996; Levant et al., 2007). To this end, anger is one of the few emotions viewed as acceptable for men to express, especially during periods of distress (Lisak, Hopper & Song, 1996; Moore & Stuart, 2004). It is well established that hostile affect contributes to the expression of aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2002), and thus the social acceptance and expectation of men’s anger likely contributes to aggressive behaviour. Further, theorists postulate a major characterisation of masculinity as a willingness to engage in aggressive behaviour if necessary (e.g., Brannon, 1976; Levant et al., 2007). Male aggression is viewed as normative in many cultures (Mahalik et al., 2003), and male-perpetrated aggression is often a by-product of socialisation and cultural pressures to adhere to a hegemonic masculinity (O’Neil et al., 1986; Pleck, 1995).

**Hegemonic masculinity as a consequence**

Aggression may also be a tactic used to demonstrate hegemonic masculinity (Messerschmidt, 1997). Indeed, aggression may serve various functions, including harming a victim and re-establishing one’s self-image (see Anderson & Bushman, 2002). In line with this view, aggression is a way for men to achieve and bolster masculinity, particularly when experiencing masculine gender stress. Traditional gender roles uphold power differences between men and women by conceptualising men as dominant, aggressive, and at the top of the social hierarchy, and women as submissive, nurturing, and at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Levant, 1996). As such, men may perpetrate aggression to maintain or re-establish this dominant position and achieve hegemonic masculine status. Consistent with this view, impression management theory (Felson, 1978) postulates that aggression is most likely expressed when the perpetrator’s concerns about his identity are salient and onlookers are supportive of aggressive behaviour. Men who feel their masculinity is in question may behave aggressively around others who will provide
reinforcement with social and “manly” approval. More broadly, men may engage in aggressive behaviour in private settings (e.g., against a partner) and later be reinforced when bragging to their friends.

**Empirical evidence linking hegemonic masculinity and aggression**

**Gender normative perspective**

Research has consistently demonstrated that endorsement of hegemonic norms is positively associated with self-reported intimate partner psychological aggression (Good, Heppner, Hillenbrand-Gunn & Wang, 1995), severity of men’s symbolic aggression (e.g., insults, smashing things), and frequency and severity of psychological aggression in intimate relationships (Jenkins & Aubé, 2002). A similar pattern of effects exists using a related conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity that assesses affective, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions of masculine norms (Mahalik et al., 2003). Specifically, research has demonstrated that hegemonic norms are strongly and positively correlated with self-reported general aggression (Mahalik et al., 2003), intimate partner aggression (Tager, Good & Brammer, 2010), and laboratory-based physical aggression (Berke, Sloan, Parrott & Zeichner, 2012; Reidy, Sloan & Zeichner, 2009) among college men.

The majority of research examining hegemonic norms and aggression has used a multidimensional approach to consider how facets of masculinity may uniquely predict different forms of aggression. For instance, studies indicate that only adherence to the toughness norm, but not status or antifemininity norms, predicts self-reported intimate partner physical aggression (Lisco, Leone, Gallagher & Parrott, 2015) and self-reported aggression towards a gay male (Vincent, Parrott & Peterson, 2011). Additionally, using both self-report and laboratory-based measures of aggression, research indicates that adherence to the status and antifemininity norms indirectly facilitates aggression toward gay, but not heterosexual, men via sexual prejudice (Parrott, 2009; Parrott, Peterson & Bakeman, 2011; Vincent et al., 2011) and right-wing authoritarianism (Goodnight, Cook, Parrott & Peterson, 2014). Further, hegemonic norms about power over women, playboy, dominance, and disdain for gay men are strong predictors of college men’s self-reported sexual aggression, whereas norms reflecting risk-taking and violence were only modest predictors (Locke & Mahalik, 2005).

The aforementioned research is consistent with the view that men’s demonstration of different hegemonic masculine norms is context dependent (Connell, 2005). In other words, it may be that men’s beliefs regarding “masculine” behaviour are especially salient in some contexts (e.g., around gay men) and dormant in others (e.g., around children). Although research directly examining context-dependent masculinity is limited, sociological research suggests that expectations of masculine behaviour vary across contexts. Indeed, men are expected to adhere to non-hegemonic “nice guy” masculinities in romantic and family situations, but should adhere to more traditional norms in work and social environments (Talbot & Quayle, 2010). Moreover, there is evidence that certain contextual factors such as men’s acute alcohol intoxication (Leone & Parrott, 2015) and perception of women’s female gender norm conformity (Berke et al., 2012) alter the hegemonic norm-aggression link.

**Masculine gender stress perspective**

Empirical evidence has consistently demonstrated an association between masculine gender stress and self-reported and laboratory-based aggression against women in college and community
samples (for review, see Moore & Stuart, 2005). For example, masculine gender stress independently predicts sexual aggression (e.g., Malamuth et al., 1995; Zurbriggen, 2010) and intimate partner aggression (e.g., Eisler et al., 2000; Franchina, Eisler & Moore, 2001) and interacts with men’s adherence to masculine ideologies (Jakupcak, Lisak & Roemer, 2002; Jakupcak, 2003) and adult attachment style (Mahalik et al., 2005; McDermott & Lopez, 2013) to predict intimate partner aggression.

More recent research has built upon these findings by disentangling specific factors of masculine gender stress that uniquely predict aggression. Moore and colleagues (2010) demonstrated that specific forms of stress impact couple’s conflict in unique ways in a clinical sample of violent men. For example, stress related to failure to perform at work (e.g., being unemployed) or to perform sexually may place a strain on the relationship and cause tension that leads to an increase in psychological and verbal aggression. More recently research indicates that male social drinkers who appraise situations where they are subordinate to their female partners as stressful may be compelled to maintain dominance via sexual aggression (Smith, Parrott, Swartout & Tharp, 2015).

Research has also considered how men’s predisposition to appraise gender-relevant situations as stressful may interact with environmental cues to elicit stress. While all men may experience some stress when attempting to meet gender-relevant standards, men high in masculine gender stress may be especially prone to stress following threats to their masculinity, which in turn may facilitate aggression. Research has demonstrated that gender threatening feedback from a female intimate partner was related to significantly more negative attributions, negative affect, and endorsement of verbal aggression in men high, relative to those low, in masculine gender stress (Franchina, Eisler & Moore, 2001). Similarly, experimental research has revealed that men experience anxiety following gender-relevant threats (Vandello et al., 2008), which in turn leads them to take measures to re-establish or demonstrate their masculinity via aggression (Bosson et al., 2009; Cohn, Seibert & Zeichner, 2009). Perhaps this is because manhood is a precarious social status that is difficult to earn and easy to lose (Vandello & Bosson, 2012). Thus, aggression may serve as a way for men to restore their masculinity when threatened.

**Limitations of the review and how it can inform research**

The preceding review suggests that the gender normative and masculine gender stress approaches demonstrate consistent, albeit nuanced, relationships with aggressive behaviour. First, the reviewed research suggests that men may engage in aggression as a way to conform to hegemonic masculine standards. Importantly, this research suggests that specific facets of hegemonic masculinity may directly or indirectly predict forms of aggression depending on the situational context or environmental cues. In other words, what is considered masculine behaviour may vary across contexts (e.g., with peers versus with a partner). Although various theorists argue aggression is a central component of masculinity (e.g., Brannon, 1976; Levant et al., 2007), the empirical literature reviewed in this chapter suggests that other facets of masculinity (e.g., antifemininity) can be stronger predictors of aggression (Parrott, 2009; Parrott, Peterson & Bakeman, 2011; Vincent et al., 2011).

The reviewed research also demonstrates how aggression may serve as a psychological salve to the stress some men experience in attempting to conform to hegemonic masculinity. For example, aggression may be used to restore one’s masculinity following anxiety related to being outperformed by a woman. In this regard, aggression serves a function: to bolster one’s masculinity. Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that specific domains of masculine gender stress perpetuate aggression to the extent that they activate a man’s need to demonstrate
his manhood in a way most likely to restore his masculine status (Bosson et al., 2009; Cohn, Seibert & Zeichner, 2009). Although some research has examined how situational masculine-relevant threats predict physical aggression, more experimental or event-based research is needed to consider how failure to live up to idealised masculine standards may cause stress and facilitate aggression. Further, it is important to understand whether men experience acute gender stress or concerns about their masculine identity when perpetrating aggression. Elucidating the contexts in which men are most likely to demonstrate or restore their masculinity through aggression will help to identify triggers for these men and more accurately inform prevention efforts. Despite the need for additional research on the masculine gender stress approach to explicitly test state-based and contextual facilitators of aggression, this approach has been highly generative in advancing theory and presenting testable hypotheses regarding the impact of social expectations of masculinity on aggression via internalised gender stress.

Literature that links hegemonic masculinity to aggression against women is well developed (e.g., Moore & Stuart, 2005); in contrast, the role of masculinity in men’s aggression toward other targets is less well understood and would benefit from greater empirical scrutiny. For example, there have been recent calls for research to examine school- and community-based firearm violence (Davies et al., 2014). Despite the fact that 154 out of 160 active shooters from 2000 to 2013 were male (FBI, 2013), there remains no evidence on the link between hegemonic masculinity and firearm violence. Similarly, the prevalence of child sexual and physical abuse, bullying, male-to-male intimate relationships, workplace or sports aggression, and male-to-male physical aggression has been well documented (e.g., Barling, Dupré & Kelloway, 2009; Finkelhor et al., 2014; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Sønderlund et al., 2014; Stanley et al., 2006); yet, there is a dearth of empirical evidence examining how hegemonic masculinity may contribute to, or result from, such aggression.

Another limitation of the extant literature is the need for more research that examines masculinity as a multidimensional, rather than unitary, construct. This is important for several reasons. First, there are a host of cultural beliefs about the male gender role that are both positive and negative in nature (e.g., Brannon, 1976; Thompson & Pleck, 1995); however, research has overwhelmingly focused on how negative masculinity (e.g., men should be tough and aggressive) predicts behaviour. Although it is well documented that men are more likely to perpetrate aggression than women, it is also true that most men are not aggressive (Kilmartin, 2010). It may be that positive masculinity (e.g., men should be respectful of others) may serve as a protective factor for maladaptive behaviours, including aggression. Second, a multidimensional approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the relation between hegemonic masculinity and aggression that can more accurately inform intervention and prevention efforts by allowing programs to target the most relevant dimensions of masculinity.

The literature is also limited because most studies recruit samples that lack racial, ethnic, age, and gender diversity. Despite the advancement of measures that take into account masculinities specific to a particular racial or ethnic group (Thompson & Bennett, 2015), there exists little empirical evidence that examines how diverse masculinities are associated with aggression. Additionally, most measures of masculinity were empirically validated in college-aged samples (e.g., Mahalik et al., 2003) and the extant literature predominately focuses on college men. This is certainly an important population given the high rates of aggression (Archer, 2004); however, future research should strive to understand how these findings may generalise or deviate in other age groups. Finally, it is unclear how women’s endorsement of hegemonic masculine norms may predict aggression perpetration. Scholars have recently validated measures of masculinity among women (Parent & Smiler, 2013), and future research should consider the masculinity–aggression link in women who endorse hegemonic norms.
Intervention and prevention implications

Limitations notwithstanding, this body of work has important implications for violence prevention. Despite the strong link between hegemonic masculinity and aggression, there are few empirically validated prevention or intervention efforts which directly target masculinity. At the individual level, clinicians working with aggressive men may benefit from targeting their belief systems regarding masculinity. Exploring and reconstructing the messages men receive about their gender may help mitigate socialisation pressures to adhere to hegemonic masculinity. Similarly, clinicians can collaborate with men to identify other non-aggressive behaviours to bolster or express their masculinity in gender-relevant situations. Among previously violent men, ‘batterer’ intervention programs would benefit from incorporating masculinity into their curriculum to reduce intimate partner violence. For example, the intervention program Men Stopping Violence trains facilitators to openly challenge messages men receive about dominance over women (Douglas, Bathrick & Perry, 2008), though we note this program has yet to be subjected to empirical scrutiny.

Given the pervasiveness of expectations about masculine behaviour at the societal level, the most promising interventions are likely those directed at the community or group level. Social norms theory postulates that individuals are negatively influenced by their inaccurate perceptions of how other members of their social group think or act (Berkowitz, 2003; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). These misperceptions increase the likelihood that individuals will engage in behaviours that they may otherwise resist if their perceptions were accurate. Research indicates men tend to overestimate the aggressiveness of their male peers and the attractiveness of aggression to women (Vandello, Cohen & Ransom, 2008; Vandello et al., 2009). Thus, social norm interventions that seek to reconstruct the way men view hegemonic masculinity and target misperceptions of peer attitudes about aggression may lead to a decrease in aggression (e.g., Katz, 1995). For example, the web-based sexual violence bystander intervention program, Real Consent (Salazar, Vivolo-Kantor, Hardin & Berkowitz, 2014), targets a range of predictors of sexual violence (e.g., knowledge of informed consent) including adherence to extreme gender-role beliefs. Real Consent participants reported less adherence to extreme gender-role beliefs, less sexual violence perpetration, and more bystander intervention behaviour, compared to controls. However, it remains unclear if these reductions in extreme gender-role beliefs accounted for changes in violence perpetration.

While targeting social norms may be effective at the individual level, group formats in which men can collectively discuss the implications of rigid standards of masculinity may be more transformative. These are especially promising because they engage all men, rather than just perpetrators, in violence prevention. Indeed, bystander intervention programs to prevent gender-based violence utilise techniques including social marketing campaigns and structured psychoeducational programs to reconstruct masculine norms that promote violence (e.g., Katz, 1995; Salazar, et al., 2014). For example, the school-based teen dating violence prevention program, Safe Dates (Foshee et al., 2004), includes a component that aims to challenge and decrease adherence to traditional gender norms. Research indicates that this intervention resulted in reduced rates of adolescent dating violence perpetration, and the effect was mediated by changes in gender role norms (Foshee et al., 2005). This study provides important preliminary evidence that interventions targeting hegemonic masculinity can decrease men’s adherence to and endorsement of hegemonic masculine norms and ultimately help reduce aggressive behaviour.
Conclusion

Masculinity and violence have been connected long before Lady Macbeth questioned her husband’s masculinity; however, scholars have only begun to empirically examine how masculine cultural and socialisation pressures are related to aggressive behaviour within the past two decades. The present chapter reviewed theoretical and empirical evidence linking hegemonic masculinity and aggression, utilising the gender normative and the masculine gender stress perspectives to examining masculinity.

In sum, theoretical and empirical evidence consistently indicates that hegemonic masculinity contributes to, and is a consequence of, aggressive behaviour. However, the link between hegemonic masculinity and aggression is complex and many fundamental questions remain unanswered. In many ways, this chapter raises more questions than answers and highlights the critical need for more research to examine this link. For example, does the masculinity–aggression link vary across situational contexts? How are different domains of masculinity associated with various forms of aggression? Do extant findings generalise to diverse populations? As the answers to these, and other, questions become more clear, researchers and practitioners will be better able to reduce male-perpetrated aggression.

Note

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