

Using Connell's masculinity theory to understand the way in which ex-gang-involved men coped with childhood domestic violence

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This article seeks to foreground enacted masculinity in the narratives of men who experienced both childhood domestic violence and abuse, and gang involvement. This is demonstrated through findings from a small yet in-depth research project, where life-history-inspired narrative interviews were taken from men who had experienced both childhood domestic violence and abuse, and gang involvement. The narratives were analysed using Connell's theory and analytic frame for masculinities to explore the differing masculine identities that emerged in the narratives. By placing a focus on the masculine performances in the men's lives, this study identified three distinct masculinity performances that were enacted during domestic violence and abuse, and in response to their experience, namely, subordinate masculinity, vulnerable masculinity and protest masculinity. Drawing from Connell's work, I demonstrate the way in which these identities were interlinked with experience of domestic violence and abuse in childhood. The coping mechanisms that some participants engaged in appeared to relate to the enactment of violence in order to feel an achieved successful masculinity of their own. Ultimately, this article proposes the need for a greater understanding and consideration of masculinities when working with male child survivors of domestic violence and abuse.

Key words domestic violence and abuse • child survivors • masculinities • gangs • narrative research

Key messages • This paper focuses on the narratives of men who experienced domestic violence and abuse in childhood and who were also gang-involved. • Connell's masculinity theory is used to understand the different masculine identities which were discussed by the participants. • This paper draws on the concept of there being multiple masculinities that individuals can experience throughout the life-course.

To cite this article: Levell, J. (2020) Using Connell's masculinity theory to understand the way in which ex-gang-involved men coped with childhood domestic violence, *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, vol xx, no xx, 1–15, DOI: 10.1332/239868020X15857301876812

## Introduction

'When I used to hear my mum scream and I couldn't do nothing for her ... I'd escape to the streets.'

This poignant quotation is from one of the participants in the study. Dylan's story was in many ways typical of the men that I met with during the research. He grew up with domestic violence and abuse (DVA) being perpetrated by his father towards his mother for the majority of his childhood. This was in a context of DVA being a common occurrence in his community and among his wider family network. Indeed, his own grandmother had also experienced DVA and had been disabled in the process. Dylan disclosed this as part of a narrative study that was carried out with men who previously experienced both DVA at home and overlapping and emerging on-road and gang involvement. In this article, I am homing in on the findings about the way in which the men experienced DVA, as well as talked about responding to and coping with DVA. I apply Connell's masculinity theory to understand more about the distinct pressures on young boys and men as they grow up in the context of experiencing DVA while living in gang-affected areas. I use these findings

to suggest that a genderspecific approach to children who have experienced DVA, with a particular focus on masculinities with boy child survivors, could be beneficial.

## Literature review

### The historic marginalisation of boys in DVA intervention

The mainstream response to DVA originated from the second-wave feminist movement in the UK. It was not until the 1970s that DVA began to be considered as a major social problem (Schechter, 1982; Pleck, 1987). The second-wave feminist movement was explicitly political and sought to raise consciousness on a range of issues, including DVA (Leisenring, 2006). In the 1970s, feminists started to respond to DVA in a new way, through providing emotional support and refuges (Taylor and Rupp, 1993). For the first time, DVA was framed as a serious societal concern and, importantly, victims of DVA were depicted as not responsible for their victimisation (Leisenring, 2006). In the first- and second-wave feminist movements, sex was the basis for organising and provided the sense of a 'shared "essentialized" victimisation among women' (Pratt and Sokoloff, 2005: 19). Feminist theory of the second-wave movement focused on the oppressive links between power, violence and sexuality (Ray, 2018). When refuges and women-only support services opened in the 1970s, they provided a physical manifestation of the second-wave feminist ethos and 'registered the demand for female only spaces' (Haaken and Yragui, 2003: 53). The majority of refuges (then and now) operated a lower age limit for male children, ranging from 12 years old (most commonly) up to 16 years old (Haaken and Yragui, 2003: 64). Refuge age limitation policies often operate alongside the general 'no men' policy in many refuges (Baker, 2009). The exclusion of women's sons has a long history within the feminist movement. Some early feminist communes included male children but barred them from decision-making and social events on the grounds that 'male energy violates women's space' (Taylor and Rupp, 1993: 43). There are a variety of reasons that refuges state to support the exclusion of boys. One reason is that older boys 'look (too much) like a man and scare other refuge residents' (Baker, 2009: 438). Using this as a reason is problematic as it is based upon an essentialist association between masculinity and violence, and between femininity and non-violence. A further reason for the exclusion of boys has been based upon a belief in theories of a 'cycle of violence'. This theory states that violence is passed from one generation to the next through the family and that children who have witnessed DVA will engage in violent relationships, either as victims or perpetrators (Jaffe et al, 1990; Peled et al,

1995; Cummings, 1998). The discursive message results in boys feeling labelled as 'potentially violent men' (Baker, 2009). In current DVA provision, children are supported in a gender-neutral and ungendered way. However, the primary gaze is still on female children as victims, which is highlighted in DVA strategies under the umbrella of 'violence against women and girls' (Home Office, 2016). This is due to the conglomeration of a wide range of issues rightly acknowledging that females are disproportionately victims of gender-based violence and exploitation. However, in the specific case of childhood experiences of DVA, there is unlikely to be a gender disparity in children who live with DVA and this language can thus discursively marginalise boys' experiences.

**Theorising masculinity** This study drew on Connell's (1987; 2005) work on the notion of multiple masculinities, which revolve around the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Connell focused on the underlying power structures that support particular gender performances. Hegemonic masculinity is not assumed to be performed by the majority of men; however, it is the normative and 'most honoured' way of being a man, which 'ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832). Even if most men do not enact it, it is the masculine ideal that men position themselves in relation to, grounding patriarchy. In this article, I

focus, in particular, on three distinct performances of masculinity that emerged in the narratives (see Figure 1 ). Throughout the article, I draw on Connell's (2005) concept of protest masculinity. This draws on the particular experiences of men who assume a type of masculinity that arises from childhood experiences of powerlessness. Young men who have had that experience develop a gendered assertion of power that relates to their childhood

Figure 1: Visual representation of different masculinities in the narratives

Protest Masculinity

Vulnerable Masculinity

Subordinate Masculinity

powerlessness, which emerges as a 'pressured exaggeration of masculine conventions' (Connell, 2005: 111). Looking, in particular, at the practices of street gangs in America, Connell notes that this form of masculine identity appears to emerge from the specific tensions arising from both poverty and an ambience of violence. Through the 'interaction in this milieu, the growing boy puts together a tense, freaky façade, making a claim to power where there are no real resources for power' (Connell, 2005: 111). The protest masculinity is therefore a marginalised masculinity performance, which draws on themes of hegemonic masculinity yet 'reworks them in the a context of poverty' (Connell, 2005: 114). The lack of cultural and economic resources to draw on to perform a classic hegemonic masculinity position is central to protest masculinity. Men in this situation do not receive the same patriarchal dividend that is experienced in wider society; in light of this, they therefore create alternative masculinities to address the issue. Connell noted that youth-gang violence is an example of the assertion of masculinities that are already marginalised. It is in this context that men build on a working-class masculine ethic of solidarity and sociality; however, it is the collective solidarity in the form of gang involvement that then divides the group from the wider working class. Connell's (2005) consideration of subordinate masculinities generally references the different masculinities that are positioned in relation to hegemonic masculinity. Connell emphasised the continuum of masculinity, with feminised versions being further down the hierarchy, and uses the example of homosexual masculinities, which are situated at the bottom of the gender hierarchy among men. This concept has been further explored by gang theorists in particular, such as Glynn (2014), who focused on the way in which men moved through gang involvement and criminality to desistance. He focused on subordinated masculinity as symptomatic of historical and current racial inequality among men. When exploring in the lives of gang-involved men in his study, he then further focused on the creation of subordinated masculinity during the period of primary socialisation. He attributed this to 'poor schooling, family disconnect, limited community connections, urban inequality' (Glynn, 2014: 107). In emphasising the racial dynamics of subordinated masculinity, Glynn noted that black men face the additional barriers of racism that seek to place them as subordinated to white men. Discourse on black boyhood has centred on the perceived 'crisis' of young masculinity, which has rendered the boys as considered only in terms of narrow constructions of masculinity that focus on the way that others fear what they may become in adulthood (Alexander, 2000; Frosh et al, 2002; Dumas and Nelson, 2016). Collier (1998) critiqued Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity, asserting that it is important to recognise that there are more complexities to masculinities than just aspects of masculine toughness, and that this nuance can get lost in dominant discourse. To illustrate this, Collier referenced men who had experienced abuse and violence themselves prior to adopting a tough masculine persona. This close relationship between vulnerability and toughness is a key theme in the article. As a concept, vulnerability has been fully explored by Gilson (2014). She noted that vulnerability is one of the fundamentals of human experience and something that can

never be truly avoided. Vulnerability confronts us 'with the reality of fallibility, mutability, unpredictability and uncontrollability.... Thus, experiences of vulnerability can also prompt fear, defensiveness, avoidance, and disavowal' (Gilson, 2014: 3). This definition of vulnerability shows the way in which it is of integral importance to the human condition. Throughout the article, I posit that vulnerable masculinity inherently coexists when there is protest masculinity. There has been much less theoretical work done on the types of masculinities that men perform that are centred on expressions of insecurity or vulnerability. In the narratives, where the participants were performing protest masculinity, there was always a shadow identity that was vulnerable and emotional, which the men discussed in retrospect. In a way, Connell's conceptualisation of protest masculinity itself implies a fragile dominance, which is characterised by its marginalisation; thus, insecurity is implied in the theorisation of protest masculinity itself. As a concept, vulnerable masculinity has also been worked on by Maguire (2019), who researched the way in which men in prison deal with subordinated masculinities in the wider gender order. Thus, there is traction in exploring vulnerable masculinity as an emerging area of focus, and in taking the focus away from only the hegemonic form, which perpetuates the invisibility of masculine vulnerability.

**Method** In-depth qualitative research was conducted in the form of life-history-inspired narrative interviews (Plummer, 2001), aided by music elicitation (Levell, 2019). This was a small-scale study that included eight participants in lengthy interviews. The men were aged between 21 and 50 years old and had self-identified as meeting the criteria of experiencing DVA and on-road/gang involvement. The interviews were unstructured interviews that were centred upon the following task: 'Pick three music tracks that help you tell parts of your life story'. The music was accessed via YouTube on an Internet-connected laptop in the interview and so nearly always included a music video accompanying the track, which we then watched together. For analysis, I engaged with Connell's (2005) method of analysing the structure of gender relations: power relations; production relations; and relations of cathexis. I started with an exploratory thematic analysis of the narratives to identify themes and key issues within each and recurring across all of them, which I used to make a coding frame using NVIVO software. To ask adults to share narratives of past negative experiences has ethical implications; however, these were addressed by offering follow-up meetings to debrief if required and signposting to support services if needed.

## Findings

### Subordinate masculinity

Using Connell's analytic framework to explore the narratives of DVA in childhood, it became clear that the masculinity that the men assumed at the point when residing with the DVA perpetrator was that of subordinate masculinity. This was born from both the inherent power inequality of adult-child and the dominance of the perpetrator as the domestic patriarch. The way in which the men expressed this feeling of subordinate masculinity was implied through both the way they conveyed the sense of powerlessness that they felt while living at home when the abuse was occurring, and the way they contrasted their experience of expressing protest masculinity elsewhere to make up for it. This idea of the violence that the men (as boys) engaged in outside of the home serving as a type of reparation for the violence they experienced at home was mentioned in several narratives.

When describing DVA, the participants emphasised that DVA was hidden, incomprehensible and unpredictable. All of these dimensions of DVA point to a wider experience of powerlessness. An often-shared sentiment by the participants was the lack of knowledge and control around DVA. They described hearing the various forms of violence and abuse but finding the lack of both knowledge

and how to make it stop to be the things that pushed them to stay away from the home when they could. Sam noted that:

'All you'd hear was big crashing and smashing and stuff and, like, sat listening to it and I'm so young and I can't do anything about it ... at a young age, you don't know how to decipher what's going on around you ... you feel the way they are treating you and that's the way you explain it. It felt like terrorising or bullying or control.'

The lack of being able to explain the circumstances was also spoken about by Dylan, who described hearing his mother being beaten in the bath and hearing the water splashing. What these quotes show is the close relationship between witnessing DVA, experiencing powerlessness and a lack of knowledge about the whole picture. For many of the men in this study, then, DVA was associated with a core sense of powerlessness. This was linked by Eric to the way in which he then engaged with his peers at school as he sought to regain a sense of power. These comments illustrate how a lack of awareness, alongside a lack of power to act, lay the foundations for the home to be an undesirable place to be. Sam framed the powerlessness that he felt in childhood as due to being "not heard". Two of the men (Sam and Dave) used the imagery of 'terrorism' as a way to describe their experiences of childhood violence. This image is a powerful one; coupled with the images of bullying and control, it is clear that the violence was perceived as more further-reaching than isolated incidents of violence. In itself, these aspects of DVA experience in childhood are less gender specific; however, it is in the response to these feelings of subordination and powerlessness that the emerging vulnerable masculinities and protest masculinities emerged in the narratives.

**Vulnerable masculinity: feeling scared but pressured to protect** The experiences that the participants had as children of watching their mothers being victimised through DVA and not being in a position to stop it presented them with gendered tensions that they struggled to resolve. The conflict came from wider societal messages that take a paternal view of gender relations and suggest that men should protect women and, in turn, sons should protect their mothers. The participants understood this pressure in different ways. Some participants noted that it was not just the powerlessness of residing with a DVA perpetrator, but also the inability to protect one's own mother, that was so difficult. As noted in the quotation at the outset of the paper, Dylan discussed the way in which it was the visceral sense of hearing his mother's screaming and the associated powerlessness to intervene which led him to maximize his time outside the home. A similar sense was conveyed by Sam, who emphasized the way he felt he couldn't 'do anything about' the DVA and so felt ineptitude to stop it. Whereas Eric noted that he felt that he should have wanted to do something, he actually developed a safety strategy for himself that was to feel safer when the DVA was going on as it meant that he was not the primary target of abuse at those times. However, when he shared this, he noted that his sister had been unhappy about his decision (though had not felt the same pressure herself to defend her mother):

'Sounds wrong, but when they're not fighting each other, I didn't like it because, instead, they inflicted the pain on us now.... Most guys ... they'd be like "Yea, if I see my mum getting hit, I would get involved", I swear to god I never got involved, I just always left it ... it didn't bother me in the sense that they were fighting ... because once they stopped, it would definitely change now it was me.'

Here, Eric notes that he thinks how he dealt with the DVA at home was different to "most guys", who would have "got involved", which signifies the pressure that he felt to intervene. However, Eric instead focused his role of protector of women onto his sister as he talked a lot about the lengths that he would go to stop her being victimised through DVA, noting that he would even kill, or "go to

prison”, for someone who abused his sister. Through this, he is navigating the lost opportunities to protect his mother, which was an act that, as mentioned by the other participants, was likely something that was unachievable as a boy living with the DVA, but that he now firmly feels would be in his role as a patriarch in their family. Dave described the feeling that he had in childhood that he “couldn’t do anything” about the DVA, which left him with an enduring sense of anger that he still carries around with him now. However, Dave recalled one occasion when he was a teenager and did decide to act against the DVA perpetrator in an attempt to protect his mother from further abuse. This passage demonstrates the inherent vulnerability that Dave felt, outlined through the fear of the perpetrator, as well as the pressure and desire to act:

‘I got sick of being a victim ... I got to probably about 13 [years old] and I confronted him the one time ... he had put a knife at my mum’s throat and I was pissed off and I couldn’t, I didn’t know what to do, I remember one time picking up a Heinz ketchup bottle like a glass bottle and I remember walking out to him and saying “Fuck off, leave my mum alone” and if he would have physically attacked me, he probably would have battered me, but he walked past and other people got involved, neighbours like, and he got in the car and went off.’

This passage expresses the tension that Dave felt between being afraid and feeling victimised, while trying to assert his power in young adolescence. There is an underlying thread in the passage of naivety and powerlessness. The poignant image of Dave clutching a glass ketchup bottle as a weapon to defend himself from a man who he was clearly afraid of presents the tension between a childhood naivety and a desire to enact as the tough protector. Dave acted at the point at which the DVA ceased to be purely a hidden and private phenomenon solely within the domestic sphere and instead became a public form of violence. Through Dave being told by peers that his mother had been threatened by the perpetrator in the park, he then had an assumed responsibility to be seen to act. This links in with the discussion later in the article around emerging protest masculinity, which focuses on the way in which the participants alluded to an emerging sense of powerful masculinity through enacting violence themselves outside of the home environment. Indeed, in the situation Dave described, it was the public nature of the confrontation that was also protective as the perpetrator decided not to react violently to Dave’s provocation due to the presence of neighbours and passers-by. The shift of DVA in private to the public realm of the park completely altered the dynamic.

The inversion of subordination: emerging protest masculinity As the participants described their development into on-road life, it was common in all their stories to describe a point at which they sought to engage in violence themselves in order to assert a distinct type of masculinity unachievable at home. This was an emerging protest masculinity: an attempted enactment of power, toughness, independence and dominance yet with the limited resources of both youth and marginalisation. This manifested in different ways in the narratives, with some participants more explicitly contrasting their emerging violence to the powerlessness at home. Using Connell’s frame, these narratives can be seen as a way to both redress the power relations with other men, and redefine themselves away from the position of their victimised mothers. The sense of comparison between being subordinated by the DVA perpetrator was contrasted with the conscious domination of others outside the home. In the following passage, Eric discussed how regaining some respect that had been lost at home was part of the motivation for fighting:

‘A lot of my friends, we would grow up because parents would beat you to put you in your place, he’s the man of the house, he can get away with that, so now when you go outside, there is no way I think, there is no way you allow anyone to disrespect you, it’s like you can’t do that because ... it’s been done to you at home, you can’t let another person.’

This passage starts to show how the development of a sense of self-respect was beginning to be founded on gaining 'respect' from others outside the home through fighting. The notion of being 'the man of the house', as modelled by his father, evokes concepts both of a patriarchal family structure and of a male privilege within the house, which was reinforced by the unequal gender relations in the house enacted and reinforced through DVA. Eric firmly centred his use of violence as a tool to "be a man". He defines masculinity in relation to his experience of his father's dominance and violence at home. This left Eric wanting to search for his own sense of being 'a man' when outside of his home:

'For me, it was like I wanna be a man, I wasn't man enough, because he [father] was here having fights with woman, making woman get scared of him, for me no way, for me this was a big problem so it became a thing it was like, I would go up there trying to pick a fight with men because it was a way to feel like a man.'

Eric juxtaposed feeling disrespected at home due to the violence he experienced with his sense of an evolving masculinity. Fight afforded a way to rebalance a sense of power. He rationalised that as long as he was not fighting women, then he was not emulating his father. This passage emphasises the physicality of attempted gains in masculinity.

Managing anger, coping with DVA The connection between DVA, internal trauma and committing violence was a common theme in the data. The emotion of anger is one that is relatively safe for men to express without damaging their masculine personas as it is widely considered more 'masculine' (Gough, 2018). Eric described not knowing how to deal with his feelings that the DVA brought up: "You keep seeing it [DVA] at home, and you don't know how to deal with those emotions" (emphasis added). Eric then described his response to these emotions, which included engaging in violence in school as a coping strategy to manage difficult feelings. Engagement in public violence was a way to react against the way in which he had experienced 'invisible' violence in private at home. Engaging in public violence made him feel visible and provided an audience to the violence, which is the role that he had been placed in at home. In the following extended extract, Dylan describes his predicament:

'One day in primary school and I picked up a chair and whacked [fellow student] around the head about five times with it, coz it was learnt behaviour, I thought it was alright to do that ... it was all because of what I seen from a young age that, I thought it was acceptable, you know, even though it wasn't ... from then on, I knew that I could do anything ... I knew from the age 11, 12, that I could go out and kill somebody and not feel no way about it, just so as long as it wasn't a woman, and that's how my life carried on.'

There are several points to note within this passage. First, he directly relates carrying out the act of violence to the violence he had been experiencing at home. He notes that it was "learnt behaviour" and he normalises the violent response as a way to deal with someone he disagrees. Looking back in retrospect, he reflected that this behaviour was not consistent with his peer group at that age. He stated that he had crossed a boundary, or learned something that he could use, both by gaining a sense of power from realising that he could be violent and by the realisation that he did not feel an emotional response to it – that he was desensitised to it. What is clear from Eric's and Dylan's stories of emerging school violence is that engaging in violence was perceived as an outlet for their anger and a way to seek markers of a type of masculinity that was denied to them at home, in particular, respect and power. Eric mentioned a similar experience of perpetrating violence in school at a young age. He noted both that he was desensitised to violence due to experiencing it at home, and that he had an increased tolerance for violence when with peers. In this way, Eric sought

out people to fight at school as a way to reclaim a sense of power and dignity that he had lost when he was being abused at home by his parents. Eric found himself searching for a place to let out the anger that he was carrying. For him, the place he found was the gang context, what he calls in the initial stages a “set”:

‘So then now you go to school and you, your good at school and, yea, everything was good for me, everything except somehow, you want more. It’s like you want a place to let out the anger and you don’t know how. And once you find an avenue, you don’t know it, but you start going back, you know it’s dangerous.’

Here, Eric situates the motivation for joining a gang as initially being as an outlet for the underlying anger. The concept of carrying around residual anger was a common theme that emerged from the narratives. The way in which it was spoken about was as if the participants carried around vengeful anger that needed an outlet elsewhere through experiencing violence at home but not being able to act, and due to the protest masculinity position and dominance of the perpetrator. In turn, this anger then transferred a sense of gaining the power and respect among peers that was not available at home. Through a type of protest masculinity transference, where the power relations that were vastly unequal at home are rebalanced among peers, the angry child finds that they are feared by others. Noticing that even the bigger boys are afraid of them gives them a sense of power:

‘I can relate to, like, obviously how he said [referring to DMX in the music track ‘Slippin’] he started to get angry and was an angry child and he was growing up and he just, he became feared by others, even the bigger boys, like, they was actually scared of me and I was always angry and then I remember like getting a dog and the dog was like my best friend but my dog was vicious as well at the same time.’

This conveys the sense of being an angry child who then finds that they are feared by others. The rap artist provides the words for feelings or rationalisations for feelings that Sam could not find for himself. The sense of power gained through noticing that even the bigger boys were afraid of him was reflected in the way in which he spoke about his dog as being vicious as a mirroring of his own developing violent behaviour. The way in which he positioned his dog as being his best friend at the time could be seen as another type of metaphor. Sam shared the way in which his dog was rejected by his mother, which mirrored the way in which he also felt rejected by her; therefore, together, they went to live on the streets as homeless companions. Using Connell’s analytic lens to focus on the way in which masculinity performance is implicated by power relations and the way in which the participants sought to enact violence in public highlights that they were seeking a sense of power that was unavailable to them at home.

## Discussion

Considering masculinity in order to understand boys’ experiences of DVA in childhood The varied responses to DVA in childhood by some of the participants outline the tension between a sense of powerlessness, pressure to protect and fear that they had to navigate in childhood. The way in which participants experienced DVA, as well as their lack of resources to make it cease, was defined by their lack of power, both as children and as victims themselves. The dynamics between the boys and the male perpetrator, as well as the expectations on them to protect, react and show pain through violence, were all gendered aspects of their experience, and evidence of the imposing masculinity ideals and pressures that they had to navigate as boys and young men. They were subordinated by the intimate partner relationship within which the DVA was centred. This left them trying to make sense of their experiences, which were often hidden, unpredictable and overall

incomprehensible when the participants were boys. As shown in the varied ways in which they referred to experiencing and responding to DVA in the findings, it is clear that the presence of the DVA in their lives was far greater than acting as witnesses or being exposed to it. Instead, they internalised it, manifesting DVA emotionally and relationally to the extent that it reshaped their relationship with family, school and friends. If we accept that children experience it viscerally, then we have to acknowledge that it has the potential to be as damaging for them as for the intimate partner of the perpetrator. Experiencing the DVA was characterised by a sense of powerlessness, both to understand and to stop the abuse. Children who live with DVA are 'experiencing it' (Callaghan et al, 2015) but not always privy to the rules of the game. They experience different aspects of the DVA, which may vary from visibly seeing, hearing and sensing it, to living with the aftermath of it. As the nature of their experience varied, the boys were not likely to be privy to the underlying justifications, rules or dynamics at play within the abusive adult relationship (McGee, 2000). This is not to say that there is not a pattern to the abuse for the victim, but that the children will, most likely, not be privy to it. It therefore follows that for many children, the DVA that they experience is a somewhat unknown quantity and that they will be unaware of its justifications (however flawed). This means that they lack an awareness about the nature of and underlying basis for the violence. McGee (2000: 107) noted that children often developed a 'fear of the unknown' surrounding the DVA. For many children, the DVA that they experience is a somewhat unknown quantity, which means that although children can clearly see and hear the material reality of DVA, what is unknown is the relationship rules. However, ultimately, the children found the DVA to be both unpredictable and incomprehensible. Children have an emerging sense of the world and how interpersonal relationships work, and DVA disrupts any sense of regularity or fairness as anyone can get victimised at any time. In the narratives, it became clear that there were anxieties around intervening, and the general fear and unease that living with the DVA provoked. The only clear choice for survival in that context was to surrender to the random violence, leading to a sense of both resignation and rebellion. However, and particularly as the majority of the men that participated in the study were black or of mixed race and living in gang-affected areas, the risk with the boys reacting to their pain and anger through violence is that they then fitted into a stereotype of black youth criminality and invulnerability. This pushed them farther from the vulnerable victim classification and resulted in them not being offered help or support, but rather being further marginalised. At the root of the tension between protest masculinity and vulnerable masculinity is the way in which the participants in this study always occupied an invisible space between victim/child-in-need and perpetrator/young offender discourse. The concept of the ideal victim is often feminised and infantilised in a way that excludes young marginalised men, especially those such as the participants in this study, who were enacting violence and becoming increasingly involved on-road and in gangs from a young age. Moreover, this is without mentioning the other intersectional aspects whereby the participants were structurally disadvantaged, such as race, ethnicity and class. This created a context where they were not able to find a space to be recognised as victims, or even to recognise themselves as such.

Potential for masculinity to be considered in DVA intervention This research suggests that there is utility in focusing on masculinity and masculine identities among young men who have experienced DVA. This needs to be in a way that does not convey an essentialist reproduction of the social learning theories that equate male children with future perpetration, but does recognise that being a male watching a male role model enact protest masculinity may affect the way in which they instrumentalise violence themselves. In addition, there are specific pressures on young men related to masculinity performance which mean that they seek opportunities to hide or deny their marginalisation and vulnerability that result in enacted protest masculinity. There are a range of

interventions that are currently commonly used with children who have experienced DVA; however, there are limited gender-specific interventions and none existing specifically for those who have experienced the intersection of DVA and gang involvement (Molina and Levell, 2020). The findings from this study suggest that there would be scope to look at the way in which masculine identities affect the way in which boys and young men cope with DVA. There is existing research that promotes gender-specific work with adult men who have experienced trauma. One notable study by Mejía (2005) focused on the importance of developing gender-specific interventions for men in the counselling context. Mejía noted that society is blind to the male experience of trauma as it is conflicts with the wider ideals of achieved masculinity. Thus, the trappings of masculinity affect how men cope with traumatic events in their lives. Mejía's (2005: 37) recommendations are that the treatment and support of male survivors of trauma should focus specifically on: (1) redefining masculinity and its legacies; and (2) confronting the trauma and its legacies. The task for front-line provision is to navigate the complexity of the apparent contradiction between protest and vulnerable masculinity, and to provide space for both. There are existing interventions, mostly for gang-involved men, which seek to work with residual anger. Deuchar et al (2015) looked at the use of traditionally masculine-oriented sports such as boxing, which have been used and promoted by organisations as a way to channel aggression in a safe and off-street environment. They noted that this is often one of the ways in which organisations attract ganginvolved men to the programmes in the first place as they involve a 'strategic use of masculinity' (Deuchar et al, 2015: 733). In Deuchar et al's (2015: 739) study, they recommended that organisations need to provide discussions offered in a safe context that 'enable some aspects of local versions of reformed hegemonic masculinity to be promoted and upheld and will encourage young men to keep engaging and keep talking'. There are arguably conflicts with the promotion of a physical activity so closely associated with violence within a DVA support context; however, there is something that may be taken from approaches that work with an understanding of the masculinity pressures that hide vulnerability and foreground protest masculinity. There need to be affordances for alternative vulnerable masculinities in recognition that they are likely to exist as a shadow-self.

**Conclusion** This article has shared the ways in which the participants talked about their childhood experiences of DVA, and indicated how the abuse had an impact on the development of their masculine identities when analysed using Connell's work on masculinities. I have demonstrated that while the men experiencing the DVA assumed a subordinate masculinity at home, they then talked about leaving the home context and finding opportunities outside, in school and on the streets to use violence as instrumental in gaining power, respect and status. Some of the men talked about their initial forays into peer violence as being due to the residual anger that they felt with what was going on in their private domestic lives; however, for some, this then inverted and they gained status for being violent. These aspects led to a construction of protest masculinity. Alongside this was a shadow-self of vulnerable masculinity that was revealed in the ways in which the participants articulated the pressure to be tough, the pressure to protect and the fear that they felt. Ultimately, using Connell's work has provided a useful framework through which to understand the pressures around masculinity performance through the childhood and adolescence of the men in this study. I would suggest that drawing on this work to conceptualise the identity construction of young people in similar situations could be fortuitous. In this article, I have suggested that support services who work with children who have experienced DVA should consider the impact on gender performance, in particular, masculinities, in their interventions with young men. Certain masculinities entrap men and can have an impact on the way in which they view themselves as victims (or not), and may impact the effectiveness of interventions that seek to support them. Although this study has not

conceptualised the specifics of such interventions, this would be a beneficial exploration for future research.

**Funding** This research was part of a PhD fully funded by The Open University.

**Acknowledgement** The author would like to thank the reviewers for their supportive and constructive feedback.

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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