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## Bad Ass or Punk Ass?: The Contours of Street Masculinity

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The Contours of Street Masculinity**

Christopher W. Mullins and Robin M. Cardwell-Mullins

**Abstract**

In this article, we examine the utility of R.W. Connell's conceptualization of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities through the examination of qualitative interviews with active criminal offenders in Saint Louis, Missouri. The article describes contours of "bad ass" masculinity, the hegemonic form, and "punk" masculinity, the primary subordinate form. After an examination of the nature of these masculinities, we discuss how these elements of the cognitive map of the streets are refractions of mainstream masculinities, exploring the convergences and divergences that emerged in the data. Finally, we point out how the work on masculinities is important to gender studies and feminist criminology.

## **Bad Ass or Punk Ass?: The Contours of Street Masculinity**

Christopher W. Mullins and Robin M. Cardwell-Mullins

Gender is one of the strongest and most persistent correlates with crime and criminality. Particularly within western societies, the overwhelming majority of offenders are male, especially for serious offenses.<sup>1</sup> As an outgrowth of academic feminisms in general, and the development of a feminist criminology specifically, a productive line of scholarship has developed examining the relationships between gender issues and crime participation for both men and women. Much of this work, especially that done with qualitative data, has built upon West and Zimmerman (1987) and West and Fenstermaker's (1995) interactionist examinations of "doing gender" and "doing difference." Seizing upon the notion that gender is partly structural and partly performatory, scholars have sought out the ways in which male offenders "do masculinity" through doing crime (see especially Messerschmidt 1993). Being violent, engaging in risk taking and even just presenting the demeanor of a "tough guy" can build masculine capital in social interactions.

In his analysis of armed robbery enactment, Katz (1988) frames the violent presentation of self that offenders use to accomplish the crime (see also Wright and Decker 1997) as the enactment of a specific form of masculinity, what he terms "bad ass." By acting "crazy" or prone to random violence, not only do men build up a street reputation but also generate masculine capital that facilitates their offending behaviors. Other work has linked masculinity construction to assaultive violence (both lethal and non—see Adler and Polk, 1996, Mullins, Wright and Jacobs, 2004, Polk 1994, —the BJC on pub fighting) as well as property crime enactment (Hochstetler and Copes 2003).

While this line of work has proven problematic in explaining some forms of female offending (see Miller, 2002), it has shown itself highly useful in the explanation of male offending. Through conceptualizing crime as a way to do masculinity and to build masculine capital, the relationships between the two are much clearer. However, much of the best work in this vein has yet to fully specify the theoretical significance of the negative case. To wit: if violent and acquisitive crime is a way to enact the tenets of masculinity, why do most adolescent and adult men refrain from offending? In some ways we are back to a key theoretical question poised by Sutherland (1939): can a single set of social forces and conditions explain both offending and conformity? Simply thinking about masculinity as a singular, monolithic social construction does little to resolve the question. By turning to the work of R.W. Connell, we can sort out this conundrum.

### **Connell's Work**

Some early work on gender and offending fell into the myopic position of assuming that gender was both static and dichotomous. Tautologically, offending was labeled "masculine" as men were the ones who tended to do it. The way out of this interpretive conundrum is the realization that gender and gender demands are neither static nor dichotomous. In a series of works, Connell

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<sup>1</sup> Only one crime exhibits anything near a gender balance in offending ratio: larceny-theft. Only two crimes show a predominance of female arrestees: prostitution and the status offense of running away from home.

(1987, 1995, 2002) provides a multi-level model of the contingent and historically situated nature of masculinities in a society which allows for a more thorough understanding of the complex and shifting natures of gender, gender inequality and the nexus of agency and structure. Following his most recent statement (2002), gender operates at the macro-level (gender order), the meso level (gender régime) and the micro level (gender relations, or what we have called “doing gender” above). Gender cuts across social institutions; it structures life chances and cognitive maps of appropriate desires and behaviors. Within all of these levels of analysis, gender takes a plurality of forms, which may or may not be congruent across these levels.

Gender structures social life through the creation of a distinct pecking order, with hegemonic masculinity situated at the top, subordinate masculinities in between and emphasized femininity and other femininities at the bottom. These masculinities and femininities do not operate within a vacuum or separately, but within social institutions (such as work, the home, and school), and in relation to one another. Masculinities and femininities are not static; they are malleable by socio-historical forces (i.e., the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of feminism, which worked to make it more acceptable for women to be in positions of power, and the gay liberation movement which has worked to stop discrimination against gays and lesbians).

Hegemony is “a social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural processes” (Connell 1987: 184). This ascendancy primarily comes about through the circumstances of daily living; for example one’s ability to go to college, to have a job or a career, how well one is paid for their skills, whether they have a position over another. Hegemony does not eliminate others, but places them into subordinate groups. Hegemonic masculinity and subordinate masculinity are played out relationally and within specific social contexts. Within mainstream society, hegemonic masculinity is heterosexual, independent, and gets much of its identity from workplace success. Subordinate masculinities become socially defined as weak or failed men. To be ascendant, hegemonic masculinity needs subordinate masculinities, and emphasized femininities, to be ascendant. Again, it is the way one acts within a gendered relation. Contextually these gender roles are taken or based upon the situation one happens to be in. For example, hegemonic masculinity relies upon subordinate masculinity and emphasized femininity so that it can be in a position of power; i.e., so that it may be “ascendant.” Hegemonic masculinity needs subordinate masculinity to buy its products, to work for it, to act as a negative social example; just as it needs emphasized femininity to be paid less, so it can be paid more, interested in the superficial to look attractive and please its sexual desires and primary child care provider so it can devote itself to a successful career.

Recently, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) assessed the state of the concept of hegemonic masculinities in gender studies as it has developed in the almost two decades since its introduction. While they do not deny some uses of the notion have been problematic, they reinforce that the conceptualization of masculinities as a pluralistic hierarchy has proven central to understanding men and men’s lives as these dynamics have been explored in numerous social settings and venues. The bulk of such research has shown that variations in the nature of hegemonic masculinities and its linked subordinate masculinities vary at three core levels of analysis: local (within “organizations, families and immediate communities” (p. 849)), regional (“the level of culture or the nation-state” (p. 849)), and global (those “constructed in transnational arenas such as world politics and transnational business and media” (p. 849)). Such emphasis on situationalization and contextualization has also been seen in work on femininities (again, see West and Fenstermaker 1995, West and Zimmerman 1987) and on the interrelationship of gender and crime (see Miller and Mullins, 2006).

Yet, the precise nature, and specific demands, of hegemonic masculinity can vary based upon a given social context. For the data we draw upon here, the general aspirations and enactment of hegemonic masculinity, while well known, are often out of reach for African American men living in communities plagued by concentrated disadvantage. In the eyes of white, upper-middle class society, the bulk of poor, black men would be conceptualized as subordinate due to their socio-economic position. Yet, within urban neighborhoods, different constructions of and power relations between masculinities exist. Anderson (1990, 1999) generally and Oliver (1994) specifically highlight that poor, urban black men do masculinity differently from upper-middle class whites. For our purposes here, “bad ass” masculinity is a distinctly local form, enacted by men in US urban spaces. It is also specifically contextualized within the norms and structures of a streetlife subculture that has evolved through the daily practices of embedded offenders. Street masculinity, and its primary oppositional form, punk masculinity, are cut not from whole cloth in the nation’s poor, urban spaces. Rather the core tenets are produced by concentrated disadvantages refracting more mainstream aspirations and demands. Core institutions of socialization into (and reification of) cultural masculine tropes cut across class lines; regardless of social position, mass media and education particularly carry gendered messages throughout social strata. Yet, as these messages are internalized and interpreted within the context of various racial and class locations, they will be modified or (re)interpreted in a fashion more cognitively consistent with the immediate (what Connell terms local) environment. Thus, what constitutes independence, autonomy, and success will vary, potentially slightly or significantly, in differing contexts and situations. Such is the case with hegemonic and subordinate masculinities in street life subcultures.

In this paper, we survey the contours of street masculinity as it is formed in the accounts of active, male offenders. Through analysis of their discussions of crime and their own criminality, the nature and dynamics of both the hegemonic form of masculinity on the streets (i.e., bad ass masculinity) and the key subordinate masculinity (i.e., punk masculinity) are described and explored. As with any gender hierarchy, these social positions define them selves in relation to each other, and in certain circumstances, the hegemonic or subordinate nature of a given behavior is often definitionally contested and made problematic in the offender’s discourse. In our discussion, we highlight how Connell’s conceptualizations of masculinities are essential to understand masculinities in general, and how masculinities frame life on the streets more specifically.

### **Methodology**

This study utilizes secondary analysis of previously collected interviews with active offenders to explore the nature of masculinities within streetlife social networks and contexts. The original studies were designed to elicit information about the accomplishment of specific offenses (e.g., drug robbery, carjacking, snitching, and criminal retaliation) and were phenomenological in nature (i.e., they focused on issues such as motivation, target selection, and enactment). The interviews used here were collected in Saint Louis, Missouri, a moderately sized Mid Western city. This city provides an excellent site for investigation as it is highly racially segregated (Massey and Denton 1993), hit hard by deindustrialization, and has experienced substantial levels of white flight since the 1960s (Suarez 1999). These forces generate neighborhoods burdened with conditions of concentrated poverty and disadvantage (Wilson 1987), known to produce strong

streetlife social networks (Anderson 1990, 1999).<sup>2</sup> Such communities are home to streetlife social networks, often dominated by an intrinsically criminogenic culture of desperate partying (Shover and Henderson 1995; Shover and Honaker 1992; Wright and Decker 1994, 1997) but also characterized by competition between the streetlife focused values and more mainstream aspirations and behaviors (e.g., see Anderson, 1999).

The sample in the present study was drawn from four separately collected interview projects completed over a five year period; the drug robbers were interviewed in 1998 and 1999, the carjackers in 2000, the snitches in 2001, and the retaliators in 2002 and 2003. The total sample is composed of 86 African American men involved in criminal activity. The drug robbery sample contributed 22 cases; the carjacking sample contributed 11 cases; the snitching sample contributed 12 cases; the retaliation sample contributed 35 cases; six cases were combined from multiple interviews of the same respondent in different samples. The mean age for the sample was 28 years, with a median of 25.

While obtained at different times, all of the samples drew on the same social and geographic region: African American neighborhoods in north Saint Louis that have experienced significant concentration of disadvantage. The same field worker was used in all of the projects and some of the interviewees were sampled in multiple projects. While they represent different informants at different times, they are all essentially drawn from the same population (e.g., predominantly working and lower class criminally involved African Americans in Saint Louis). A potential drawback is that the data were collected over the course of a decade. Yet, there is no indication within the data (or in other research) to suggest that the nature of streetlife in general, or the issues related to gender and streetlife specifically, have changed substantially within the time the interviews were collected.<sup>3</sup>

For all of these data sets a modified version of snowball sampling was used to build a sample (see Jacobs 2000; Wright, Decker, Redfern and Smith 1992). Initial contact with the interviewees was made through a fieldworker, who brought the respondent to the interview location. The field worker was present during all of the interviews. After the interview was completed, the researchers asked the interviewee if they knew anyone else who was appropriate for the study. Some of the individuals were interviewed in more than one study. Only in the criminal retaliation study was a single person interviewed more than once in the project (e.g., Red was interviewed three times so researchers could document an on-going retaliatory tit-for-tat). In those cases, the multiple interviews were merged into one case as well. Thus, our unit of analysis is interviewees, not interviews.

The interviews in all the data sets followed an open-ended interview protocol focused on issues surrounding motivation and accomplishment of the crime that the project emphasized. The questions were designed to elicit thick descriptions of criminal incidents. Demographic questions were asked at the end of the interview (e.g., age, educational attainment, marital status, parental status, work status). The interviews lasted from one to two hours; they were tape recorded with the permission of the interviewee, then transcribed verbatim.

<sup>2</sup> In the year 2000, the city itself had a population of 338,000; 46% of households were white, 53% were African American, with a median age of 33.8 years. Over half the population had a high school diploma or less, with 20% of the city's population living below the federal poverty line. The unemployment rate, 11.8%, is more than three times higher than the national average. Nationally, the median age for all people in the U.S. in 2000 was 35.3, with 80.4% possessing a high school diploma. The aggregate unemployment rate of the U.S. that year was 3.7% with 12.4% of all households in the U.S. earning incomes below the federal poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Additionally, other major qualitative projects in the field have been carried out over similar time frames (see Anderson, 1999).



In these data sets, gender was *not* an express variable of interest. While the retaliation data set contained questions in twenty-four interviews specifically designed to elicit incidents of inter-gender violence, broader gender-worldview issues were neither elicited nor probed. Nonetheless, even in those interviews without an explicit focus on gender, the gender composition of criminal social networks, notions of gendered self-image and gendered motivations came to the surface of the narratives during descriptions of incidents. The men frequently used highly gendered language and, without being prompted, clearly tied issues of offending to gender identity, status and role performance.

Data analysis here relied heavily upon inductive models of reasoning common to qualitative analysis. One of the strong values of rich, descriptive interview data is the ability to not only explore major trends within the data, but to also find sub-trends and thoroughly explore deviant cases. Inductive analysis begins with specific observations and then attempts to build more generalized understandings from those observations. Themes, commonalities and divergences are noted within the data and broader theoretical understandings are then built from those (see Babbie 1998; Spradley 1979).

## Findings

### *“BAD ASS” MASCULINITY*

Much prior work has explored the interconnected nature of masculinity and criminal activity. The data confirmed many existing findings about the nature of masculinities. The men in this sample were highly concerned with projecting images of toughness, independence, self-sufficiency, and potential violence. Such street masculinity was framed by the social realities of sub-living wage employment, the perceived ubiquitous nature of violence and deep criminal involvement. Status hierarchies in mainstream U.S. masculinities involve the utilization and display of key capitals (social, cultural, financial, and gender) to establish one’s relation to others; the streets of Saint Louis are no different. However, the most common paths to capital acquisition (e.g., education and work) were either not available or were scorned by many of the men interviewed. Unlike much of the existing work on masculinities and criminal violence that focuses on adolescents and young men, the sample here is composed of *adult* men. While Anderson (1990, 1999) looks at an entire community, most of his examples of violence concern younger individuals; similarly Messerschmidt’s (2000; 2004) recent work is exclusively focused on teenagers’ use of violence.

### *Street Names*

During data collection, the interviewees were asked to provide a name that would be used to identify them in analysis of the data while protecting their identities. While some were mundane (e.g., Curly, Lewis, Slim), about half of the men gave clearly masculinized street names that highlighted attributes valued in street corner life. Such names provide insight into self-perception and the form of identity they chose to present in the interview and on the streets. Some names emphasized a “crazy,” violent, or otherwise tough persona (e.g., Crazy Jay, Looney Ass Nigger, Mad Dog, K-Ill, Icy Mike, and Loco). Others emphasized the excesses valued in a culture of desperate partying (e.g., Lil’ Player, Binge, Playboy, Kilo). Others offered up a picture of untrustworthiness and underhandedness, at least from the perspective of mainstream values: Do Dirty, Low Down, Sleezee-E, C-Low, and DL (Down Low<sup>4</sup>). The names chosen for self-

<sup>4</sup> In street lingo, Down Low refers to operating “below the radar” of the police by keeping your crimes secret and your public profile non-existent.

representation highlight the extent to which elements of street masculinity were integrated into the identity of those deeply embedded in criminal streetlife.

### *Autonomy*

To be in control of one's own actions, to act independently of others, and to be self-sufficient were essential pillars of street masculinity. Men activating street masculinities emphasized the value of these qualities. Such values are part of broader American masculinities, but here they were manifested in an intensified form as a core set of gendered expectations. Unique conditions faced on the streets (e.g., frequent violent challenges, lack of other available gender capital, and the potential to be snitched on to the police) produced an acute focus on these traits. Establishing the importance of self-control, Tall said, "I'm accountable for my actions, I know exactly what I'm doing... when I'm doing it...I look at it as a strength." Spanky, responding to a question about where he lived, framed his homelessness as a form of masculine independence, "I don't want to stay in one place too long...I don't want to get tired of being in somebody house, nagging and bitching and me there."

As with many elements of street masculinity, serious practical considerations lay behind the emphasis on independence. Interviewees emphasized that other people would double-cross them, snitch on them, or do anything if they could profit from another's downfall. Independence from others became a response to the general lack of trust held among men on the street corner (see below). This was fused with the strength of being able to stand on their own. When asked about having friends on the streets, Black explained, "My mama is my only motherfucking friend. Dude, that is it, you hear me, ain't no friends. Ain't no nothing. You got people that's acquaintances—people will play you out...your motherfucking family will play you out. OK. I don't put nothing past nobody, man, because all I know I can only control myself."

Some men rejected the assistance of peers and family members in carrying out violent retaliations against those who had wronged them. The importance of independence and being in control of their own actions was clearly shown in the following exchange between an interviewer and Goldie. While discussing the results of being shot during a street altercation, he explained why he did not accept help from his family with the retaliation:

*Goldie:* When I got shot my nephew was out there going crazy, calling up, saying "What do you want me to do?" "I want you to do nothing, just calm down, just go on about your life. [The] Doctor told me I'd be walking again, gonna still be happy, I'm gonna get them."

*Interviewer:* But why is that, why did you have to do it yourself?

*Goldie:* 'Cause it was done to me, you know, like it might be somebody do something to my nephew. Most likely he not gonna want me to jump in, he gonna want to do everything on his own.

An important masculinity issue was at stake—the desire to respond to the injury personally as evidence of self-reliance. Goldie's brother was also interviewed in this data. He claimed that the family enacted revenge for the shooting while Goldie was still in the hospital. Regardless of whose account is literally true, both highlight the interviewee's need to construct an appropriately masculine face in the interview context.

When asked if he had ever called upon or hired someone else to carry out a violent retaliation, Black indicated that not only had he never done such a thing, but would never do it, telling the interviewer, "I take care of myself...why spend the money for it?...I got a few little homies out there who would do something. You know, I got some that would do something for free for me but then I'd have to owe them, and I don't want to do that." Here, calling on others



for assistance required the spending of either financial or social capital. It created debts and obligations that reduced the independence Black would be able to exercise. Such social ties ran counter to expectations of independence and self-sufficiency. Further, note that Black indicates he possesses social power over others, yet claims not to need to exercise it.

Exhibiting power over others is a core feature of any form of hegemonic masculinity. When discussing their engagements in crime, many of the men in the sample highlighted how carrying out a criminal action, be it an assault or an acquisitive crime (i.e., robbery) provided a social location for the display of control and self-empowerment. Many reported getting a “high” or “kick” from such actions (see also Katz, 1988; Wright and Decker, 1994, 1997). Robberies can be seen as extensions and activations of the masculine demands of self-sufficiency and independence—for adherents of street masculinity, the ultimate form of independence is the ability to enforce one’s will on someone else. This is clear when the offenders were describing the joy they received in this imposition of power on others. Do Dirty said, “It’s fun. I love to see people run. I love to see them shake in they pants. I seen a dude shit and piss on hisself.” Junebug, when asked what his favorite part of a robbery was, replied, “Just taking they money, seeing them scream, crying, begging, don’t kill me...it’s fun to me. I like to see the motherfuckers scream.” Smokedog described the kick he received when seeing his victims on the streets after the robberies, “I be right in they face laughing and they don’t even know I’m the one who robbed them last night...That’s cold ain’t it?” Such “cold” bravado was a key aspect of street masculinity. Later in the interview, when discussing seeing someone on the streets he had shot, Smokedog said, “No, he ain’t dead. He didn’t die. I shot him in the ass. He wearing a shit bag<sup>5</sup> though. Right now today he still wearing one, a shit bag. Every time he see me I start laughing and ride right on past him.” These responses emphasized the feeling of power street offenders gain from violent activities; this was the ultimate expression of independence and self-control. A key aspect of masculinity was establishing your self as dominant over others. The above quoted offenders not only used violent crime to fulfill this gendered demand, but obtained visceral pleasure from doing so.

### ***Trust Nobody***

A cardinal rule on the streets is: trust nobody. Snitching, double-crossing, and setting people up for victimization are common occurrences. Not surprisingly, the interviewees’ visions of street masculinity reflected not just the focus on independence, but a high pathological distrust of others. C-Ball, when asked if he trusted his friends or co-offenders, emphatically said, “No, you don’t trust nobody in the ghetto anyway. Don’t never trust no nigger that live in the ghetto.” Don Love also strongly emphasized the problematic nature of trust on the streets and why street masculinity emphasized independence from others: “It be the nigger you know who gets you. It don’t be the nigger you don’t know. It don’t be the enemy dude that kill you—it be somebody else that kill you.” Bacca discussed a relationship with a co-offender in the following way: “We’re friends but we’re already at the point where we don’t trust anybody...right now I’m on my own, I don’t have any friends, I don’t trust nobody.”

While the older, more experienced members of the sample emphasized that “you can’t trust anyone,” younger members of the sample berated snitches and claimed strong levels of trustworthiness. As discussed above, the older men were less tied to street associates, while the younger interviewees were more tightly bonded to their criminal peers:

<sup>5</sup> Interviewees in the sample commonly referred to a colostomy bag as a “shit bag.”

*Little Rag:* You can't ever snitch on your partners. If you snitch on them you can't ever be trusted no more.

*Interviewer:* What about an enemy, you know, a rival?

*Little Rag:* No, I would never do that...No, no. Anyway, I ain't got no enemies. I'm...one of those people. They know you so everyone say you're cool. I just kinda like people.

Cal expressed similar sentiments, "Shit, I'm not snitching on some of my friends when I'm out there doing the same thing. You crazy? So [the police] asked me, but man that's some bullshit, I ain't telling on nobody and I'm saying I ain't taking the witness stand. I don't give a fuck man, I ain't snitching on nobody, man." Presenting yourself as trustworthy, especially among younger interviewees, emphasized the valued masculine qualities of strength and reliability. This was most likely due to the stronger tendency for younger men to operate in groups; they saw those groups as essential to their criminal success.

Yet, the issue of snitching highlighted one of the key tensions and contradictions of hegemonic masculinity on the streets. Despite the emic denials of the interviewees, snitching is common on the streets (see Rosenfeld, et al. 2003). Smokedog described when he found it acceptable to snitch:

They're [the police] like, "We want that gun. If we can't get that gun then we gonna have to give your girl three years" and shit like that right. So I'm like, man. And the dude, the dude, man, who I was fucking with man, he ain't one of the homies, you know what I'm saying. We didn't grow up together, we didn't throw rocks together, we didn't climb trees together, we didn't play catch a girl, get a girl together. We didn't do none of that shit. So fuck him...(mentions man's name) got that gun. Yeah. (the man's name) got the gun."

Smokedog highlighted some key lessons learned from spending time on the streets: snitching would happen and you had to protect yourself and your very close network associates. No one else deserved protection, in part because they were likely to give you up as well.

### ***Fatalism***

A profound sense of fatalism permeated the interviews in this sample. Asked whether he worried about being fatally victimized for his street endeavors, Jhustle said, "When it's my time to go, it my time to go. It going down one day. It's just going down one day." In such a violent, uncertain world this was not very surprising; in fact, Miller (1958) identified fatalism as a focal concern among the street offenders he worked with in Boston decades ago (see also Shover, 1996). These views reinforced violent actions and reactions to others, supporting the broader tendencies toward violence on the streets. A sense of the inevitability of being victimized was overpowering, leading many of the men to metaphorically, and literally, shrug their shoulders and say they simply were not concerned about it. Player succinctly said, "Well, you really ain't gonna have no fucking choice if it happens. It's outta your hands." Play Too Much explained, "No, I'm not worried about that...I just let that be...I mean, no, I don't care. It comes down to that, it comes down to that." The men here knew they were going to be violently victimized, even killed, because of their involvement in criminal activities, accepting this inevitability as a key part of their cognitive map of the streets. The stoicism with which they discussed this formed a core pillar of street masculinity.

In discussing the ever-present threats and actualities of violence, many of the men referred not just to a cycle of violence, but to their own broader embeddedness in crime. Goldie, who had been severely injured in several violent encounters over the years, explained why he

was not concerned about people coming back at him. When asked if he was worried about an impending counter-retaliation, Goldie said, “Not at all...because you know, I just do so much dirt to a point that one day my time is gonna come...[it is] just not in my mind [to] worry at all. I just got to be myself and just do what I got to do.” Responding to a similar question, Big C made similarly broad, fatalistic claims, “Life is too short these days. You know, you never know. I could walk out this door here and fall over. Might not even wake up. I could go to sleep tonight and may not even wake up, so I don’t even trip on it.” C-Ball bluntly said, “You gonna die anyway.” Later in the interview he elaborated, “I live in the ghetto and I’m gonna go out and do bad ’cause I was raised up around that. So I ain’t scared of death, I know we all gonna die one day. I don’t care about this world.” K-Red made a similar connection to the inevitability of death, “I don’t need to worry about it. I know we all gonna die soon, why worry about it...we all gonna die pretty soon, we all gonna die. We don’t stay on Earth forever. We all gonna die.” Such attitudes formed a core part of the cognitive map men on the streets used to guide their lives and actions. Embracing fate and inevitability reinforced norms of autonomy. A man who worried too much about the consequences of his actions and the inevitability of counter-retaliation appeared weak. Conversely, allowing fate to determine the outcome of his life established a rough, stoic worldview that easily fit in with other elements of street masculinity.

### *Misogyny*

Most of the men in this sample were profoundly misogynistic. They perceived the women they interacted with on a daily basis to be little more than objects for the satisfaction of their desires.<sup>6</sup> Most qualitative work on women in street corner social contexts has emphasized the marginal positions women hold and the intense sexism they face on a daily basis (see Bourgois, 1995, 1996; Maher, 1997; Miller, 2001; Steffensmeier, 1983; Steffensmeier and Terry, 1986). When asked about a potentially violent encounter with a man over a woman, Play Too Much expressed disdain for women in general: “[It] shouldn’t have went that far [to get violent]...over something temporary.” In his mind, the tenuous and fragile nature of inter-gender relationships made them not worthy of the risks associated with interpersonal violence on the streets. For Play Too Much, and many of the men here, any sort of social tie to a woman was brief and focused on desire satisfaction. When asked about using sex to get back at a woman who had wronged him, he said, “I’ll go get another one [woman]. Don’t chase them, just replace them.”

T Dog summed up his view of women’s worth by saying, “it just a woman.” This dominant attitude was clear and common among interviewees: women were replaceable, disposable objects to be given no respect of consequence. Speezy’s attitude toward women was clear in his statement, “I don’t even mess with women, my friend had her, he had her, I had her, I just drop her and do what I gotta do.” Snap jokingly responded to a question about whether he would target a woman in a drug robbery: “I wouldn’t rob a woman...I be too busy trying to get in they pants, you see what I’m saying.” These excerpts illustrated the categorization of women as objects valuable immediately prior to and during a sexual conquest, only valuable later in so far as the man’s brief possession of her added to his overall sexual and masculine reputation.

<sup>6</sup> There is a distinct difference between the way the men interacted with female street associates and their female relatives (i.e., mothers, sisters, cousins, etc.). A complete examination of intergender relations is beyond the scope of this paper, see Mullins 2006, especially chapters 5 and 6 for a full discussion of these dynamics in this sample.

**PUNKS**

Connell (1987, 1995) points out that any hegemonic set of gender demands is defined in opposition to various subordinate statuses. In the case of hegemonic street masculinity several subordinate masculinities existed. The most clearly recognized and most frequently discussed subordinate masculinity among men on the streets was that of the “punk”—someone who demonstrably failed to live up to the demands of street masculinity. The term punk entered the language of the streets from prison environments. In prison, a punk is someone who receives anal sex, often by force (Kupers, 2001). They represent a key subordinate masculinity in prison culture. As in prison, on the streets punks were men unable to stand up for and protect themselves. It was not surprising to see a crossing of terms from the prison to the street because of the large number of men on the streets who have done time.

Linguistically and cognitively, the category of punk is linked to both femininity and male homosexuality. Men associated with the descriptive punk were seen as being weak, soft, womanly, a “bitch,” or a “fag.” Hops expressed this clearly by saying, “[If] you let one motherfucker get over on you and [people on the street] find out, you know what I’m saying, another motherfucker will get over on you. So it’s gonna be like [people on the street will] label you as a punk.” Smokedog presented a similar description, “I ain’t got time to be playing there, man... This shit out here dog, if you let one motherfucker punk you, man, every motherfucker gonna try to punk you...no nigger’s fucking with me.”

Punks were not a threat to a man’s safety and masculinity. As Paris clearly stated when asked if he was afraid that someone he had victimized would retaliate against him, “He’s a punk. Ain’t nothing to be scared of. They’re scared of me.” In describing the target of a carjacking, C-Ball described him as, “a scary little punk. Do you know what a punk is? He don’t know how to fight, he don’t know how to do nothing.” All of these excerpts frame punks as failed men, as men unable to actualize the rigorous demands of street masculinity especially as it is framed within potential and actual violence. Yet just as there is more to street masculinity than successful fighting, there was more to punkness than being soft or weak.

There was some substantial disagreement among interviewees as to what constituted punk behavior. Several men indicated, for example, that they thought that the use of guns was a “punk move”: if you were really a *man*, you would use your fists, not a firearm. This stood in stark contrast to the ubiquity of guns on the streets and the large numbers of men who described using firearms in their criminal activities. One interview exchange highlighted this tension, making it clear that this was a contested hegemonic belief on the streets. In the following section several interviewers were present, the interviewee (Sleezee-E) and the field worker (Smokedog):

*Interviewer:* So you guys did not have a gun?

*Sleezee-E:* No, we [n]ever carry a weapon. That’s only for wimps.

*Interviewer:* So you only need a gun to take some shit from somebody?

*Smokedog* [interrupting]: So I guess I’m a motherfucking wimp.

*Interviewer* [to Smokedog]: Because you are always strapped, right?

*Smokedog:* Great. I guess I’m a wimp then.

*Sleezee-E:* I can’t use no gun, man. A gun is more federal time, more jail time if you get caught.

Smokedog challenged Sleezee-E’s notion of hegemonic masculinity; he took umbrage with being labeled a punk. As a form of face-saving behavior, Sleezee-E quickly qualified his expressed attitude as a function of self-protection and imprisonment avoidance.

A core contradiction emerges here. Real men are expected to be tough and the penultimate toughness is in not needing a weapon to resolve disputes. A true “bad ass” dominates others

through reputation, force of will, and his fists (see Mullins 2006). Yet, guns are ubiquitous within streetlife and every member of the sample used guns at some time or another to accomplish crime. When presenting the actions of others, reliance on a firearm can be positioned as a sign of weakness (as the exchange above shows), yet, the interviewee's own use of handguns is glossed over as simply another part of their criminal activities.

### *Punks as Targets*

In discussing target selection for violent acquisitive crimes (e.g., carjacking, drug robbery, etc.), many interviewees described looking for punks as targets, as they were soft and easy to victimize, with, at least in the offender's mind, little to no chance that the victim would retaliate. In picking a carjacking target, C-Ball explained that not only did he like the car, but that the driver, "looked like a punk...you know how like a fag, you [know] like [a] homosexual." Rayray explained, "I rob bitches, bitch ass fools that ain't gonna do nothing. I rob dudes that's weak, that's soft, they got a lot of money...he ain't gonna do nothing." Even maintaining the appearances of street masculinity by having money and underworld success wasn't enough to avoid the punk label. Describing his target selection for a drug robbery, Darnell explained why he selected the individual in this way: "He was a motherfucker that had all of this dope and money but he was a bitch, real soft...he was more like a little girl. He was the kind that did his feet and his hands, got his nails done...personally, I thought he was gay." Darnell strongly linked the notion of punk with femininity and sexuality here. Not only was the dealer's street toughness questioned and denigrated, his sexuality—an essential component of masculinity—was also made problematic.

Similarly, how someone acted in the course of a robbery or assault could elicit the punk label. Looney Ass Nigger described, with clear condescension, the response of a carjacking victim: "They crying, 'please man, please, man,' they kind of get on your nerves. You might want to smack them and tell them to shut up or something because that can mess with you head while you doing it. Crying, 'oh, my momma' and all this, 'gonna miss me' and all that. Shut up, shut up and just get on the ground, let's get this over with." It is widely known on the streets that the violence inherent within an armed robbery event is a threat, not an actuality. While the core of a robbery is the robber's violent presentation of self, creating what Wright and Decker (1997) called "the illusion of impending death," a streetwise man (or woman) should realize that it is just that: an illusion. If one's property is turned over it is understood that they will not be killed. The victim in the above incident displayed a lack of bravery and toughness in his collapse in the face of the carjacking.

### *Punks as "weak" men*

Men who did not uphold the rules of violence on the street, especially those centered on retaliation, were also labeled punks. By not striking back at those who had wronged them, they failed to live up to the strict standards of hegemonic street masculinity about how and when violence should be used. It was not just that a man had to be violent and "hold his square," there were also norms of honor and respect; a man had to retaliate in a certain fashion or face being labeled a punk. Chewy explained an incident in which he was attacked, but the offender kept his identity secret:

*Interviewer:* That's kind of sneaky, isn't it?

*Chewy:* Yeah...I think it's a punk move...that thing gay...it [is] something a bitch would do or something...two-faced or something like that.

Thus, a true test of manhood was to provide your opponent with a fighting chance to stand up to your violence. Again, note the use of strongly femininizing language to describe the



assailant. Black also described a similar situation. “He knew [it was not right], hitting me from behind. Look, I’ll take a ass whipping. You want to whip my ass, that’s cool...[But hitting me] from behind and I ain’t even expecting...you don’t pull no shit like that.”

While some members in the samples described similar violent offenses, especially taking the element of surprise from their victim, many regarded this as unmanly by not giving the victim a “fighting chance.” As both the violence and the language of gender used were ways of constructing street hierarchies, the labeling of men who got the drop on them as “punks” or “cowards” was a way to maintain masculine face during the interview event. When enacting violent revenge, it was practical (and street smart) to surprise the victim. However, when *you* are surprised, your own masculinity has been challenged—you were not being observant or alert enough. Thus, discussing the event during an interview, these men re-defined it in an attempt to preserve and/or restore their own masculinity by denying hegemonic masculinity to their victimizer. It was not a failing of personal vigilance that produced the victimization, but a lack of the assailant’s honor.

### *Punks as failed men*

“Punk” was also a cognitive category applied to specific types of individuals on the streets, particularly homeless men and drug addicts. When he discussed robbing drug addicts, Spanky bluntly explained why he wasn’t worried about retaliation. “Who cares? It’s like taking candy from a kid you know, don’t worry about a dope fiend.” In describing an encounter with a homeless man, E expressed the clear disgust he held for such an individual. After being robbed by a homeless man, and acquiescing to the robbery, E described how he and his peers responded to the incident, “I know how it feels to be broke, to be homeless. And my boys said, ‘do you want us to go find and kill him?’ and I said ‘no,’ ‘cause he gonna kill himself...people like that gonna kill themselves ...Homeless guys don’t mean it [robbery as an insult], there ain’t no point in hurting him. People owe us money, living high, gotta make an example of them.” E was clear that he viewed the man with disdain and not as a real *man*, but that the injury was not worth responding to, since it was perpetrated by someone without street credibility. Thus, ironically, since the homeless man’s status was well below E’s, he did not need to reassert his own position, as his street credibility was not truly challenged. Junebug, a crack user, described how he saw himself frequently treated by dealers:

They think they better than the next motherfucker, man, you know because they think, dudes sell heroin, man, you know, like they gonna get a dude high off heroin but them little cats discriminate, the motherfuckers that smoke crack. “Oh he just an old crack head motherfucker”...what the motherfucker fails to realize is man, you know, we make you, you don’t make us. Without us, your crack ain’t shit ‘cause you will still be stuck with that shit, you know...They don’t have no respect for the older dudes...I’m not beggin’ you for anything, I’m buying what I want from you, but I still got to be a crackhead motherfucker to you.

Clearly, Junebug saw this form of treatment as a challenge to his masculinity and used the interview to invert the dominant/subordinate relationship of dealer-addict by saying “we make you, you don’t make us.”

Overall, the label “punk” was used to denigrate and degrade other men, primarily for the purpose of raising their own status. Men could become “punks” for a number of reasons, all of which related to failures to uphold and enact the more hegemonic masculinity demands in streetlife social contexts.



## Discussion

The men's attitudes and lives examined in this piece represent the broad worldview of men heavily embedded in streetlife social networks, a U.S. subculture where the culture of desperate partying and frequent involvement with criminal activity intersect and overlap. By no stretch could we consider these men actively pursuing mainstream hegemonic masculinity structures. They are only engaged in legal work sporadically, if at all; they acknowledge the existence of their children, but little else. Most of them only have transient relationships with women and other men. The acquisition of masculine reputation, status enhancing items and illicit drugs occupy most of their time and efforts. Connell's conceptualizations of gender are nigh essential to understanding these men and the choices they make.

Here, we were able to identify the contours and base principles of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities, as well as how they are played out situationally. Mainstream culture (white, middle class America) clearly identifies these men as a failed, subordinate masculinity. Acquisitive crime, assaultive violence and excessive drug use are all seen as personal and social failures to attain masculine capital in a "socially appropriate" fashion. While risk taking and lower levels of assaultive violence are accepted (if not lionized) by mainstream masculinities, the extremes to which the men in this sample take these elements would only be tolerated among younger men and then only at less intense levels and with the assumption that with age such behaviors will disappear. Further, one could posit that due to age grading in U.S. society, such adolescent masculinities would define such behavior as subordinate anyway—these are ways in which adolescents attain masculinity due to a lack of other options and such a "sowing of wild oats" is expected to decline and become extinct as a man ages.

We can also connect the homophobia inherent in these men's discourse to mainstream masculinities. Due to the reification of heterosexism as a key pillar of masculinity, our culture still places all homosexual experiences in a subordinate position. As noted previously, the use of the term "soft" is identified as a description of women as is "bitch", while "punk" is the term used in prisons to denote men who need protection from other men, thus being a failed man who cannot protect himself. All exhibit homophobia and hatred towards homosexuals and connect this hatred to the assumption that they are like women; they are not men. Mainstream masculinity views and holds homosexuality in a subordinate position, even if blatant slurs and derogatory remarks are less tolerated in contemporary public space.

We also see a refraction of mainstream masculinity in the emphasis on independence. For street masculinities, independence is played out through the ability to take care of and be in control of oneself. An example of this emerges when Tall said, "I'm accountable for my actions, I know exactly what I'm doing when I'm doing it...*I look at it as a strength*" (emphasis added). This statement clearly reflects broader tenets of Western masculinity, but in this context, Tall is referring to his criminality and violence. Further, this independence gets expressed not only in the ability to stand on one's own (to "hold your square") but also drives these men to a profound alienation from others. Many of the men quoted earlier discussed the lack of friendships with male street associates, as well as a profound lack of connection (or even the interest in connection) to women in streetlife context. While mainstream masculinities emphasize independence and individual competences, they do not drive one toward the atomistic singular life that many of these men described living.

Similarly, mainstream hegemonic masculinity does not hold such an extreme view of fatalism. While a certain amount of stoicism does flavor Western hegemonic masculinity, the intensity of these men's fatalistic outlook is divergent from, and a radical intensification of, this broader stoicism. In part, we attribute this focus to the deep embeddedness of these men's lives

in the structural violences of the underground economy. While masculinity is writ into these attitudes, they are a reflection of reality on the streets. Drug deals go back, robberies are a part of everyday life, and bad ass masculinity demands violent responses to personal slights. Simply, the men interviewed here were quite aware of the very real possibility of meeting a violent end on any given day.

Many scholars of masculinities have pointed out that patriarchy is destructive to men, just as it is to women. We find no stronger confirmation of this than the lives these men led. In response to concentrated disadvantage that denies access to more broadly enacted masculinity, these men have constructed a series of gendered positions based upon the mainstream forms of capital they have available to them: independence, toughness and violence, status enhancing items and the domination of women. None of these social arrangements are unique to the streets, yet in the absence of socially defined legitimate forms of capital, streetlife subculture, and its participants, sort men into dominant and subordinate categories based upon their ability to construct, convey and enact the image of the “bad ass.” Drug and alcohol binging, interpersonal assault and a profound alienation from all around are core pillars of this experience.

In this piece, we have examined the utility of R.W. Connell’s formulations of masculinities as contextual, situational, and plural. As we have shown, his delineation and differentiation of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities proves a highly useful frame of analysis for understanding the ways in which masculinities interlink with crime on the streets of a rust belt Mid Western city. The specific situationalization of “bad ass” masculinity within the context of both concentrated disadvantage and criminally-orientated streetlife provide a lens to not only help understand the behavior of the criminally-embedded men interviewed here, but also understand the broader contours of Western masculinities as they currently operate.

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Biographical Statements