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Article

Journal of Men's Studies
1–19
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DOI: 10.1177/1060826519846932
journals.sagepub.com/home/men
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"Who Knows, You May Overpower Him": Narratives and Experiences of Masculinities Among the Dagaaba Youth of Northwestern Ghana

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Abstract

This article focuses broadly on how young men construct, negotiate, and express masculine identities in northwestern Ghana. Situated within discourses of ruling masculinity, and drawing on qualitative interviews, this article provides locally grounded insights about how young men articulate and make themselves visible by negotiating and renegotiating the interplay of complex struggles and realities to maintain dominance over peers. Findings suggest that dominant norms on the meanings of being a young Dagaaba man entail ambivalences, status insecurity, contradictory desires, and an investment to always act in satisfaction of the observer's gaze. The danger of being looked down on emerges as an important organizing framework that shapes participants' engagement in discursive and exaggerated behaviors and violence. Consequently, young men engage in dramatic performances and public displays to further authenticate their manhood, which provokes and authorizes young men to mask their feelings of vulnerability. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords

masculinities, interpersonal violence, Ghana, Dagaaba youth, hegemony within marginality, gendered socialization

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The question of how to progressively approach and study men and their masculinities in low-income contexts has received considerable scholarly attention. In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), for example, Silberschmidt (1999) has examined how societal expectations of men as "masters" of their households lead to gender-based conflict and socioeconomic changes. Morrell (2001) also examined masculinity norms and how these norms have been changing among men in Southern Africa, while Luyt and Foster (2001) have examined how hegemonic masculine conceptualization is inherent in gang culture. Furthermore, Barker (2005) addresses how young men engage in dangerous ventures to both meet masculine ideals and avoid social exclusion, while Adomako Ampofo and Boateng (2007) address the multiple meanings of manhood among boys in Ghana. More recently, Ratele (2017) explores the situated psychologies of boys and men in relation to masculinities in Africa, while Mfecane (2018) focuses on understanding and theorizing masculinities in ways that are African-centered. In Asia and the Pacific regions, too, scholars have addressed issues such as masculinities and feminized migration (Elmhirst, 2007) and factors influencing male perpetration of intimate partner violence (Fulu, Jewkes, Roselli, & Garcia-Moreno, 2013). Similarly, scholars in Latin America have considered such questions as the tensions inherent in masculinities, work, and family (Chant, 2000), the the mainstreaming of men into gender and development (Chant, 2003), what it means to be a man in Mexico City (Gutmann, 2006), as well as how young men navigate normative masculinities in a marginalized urban community in Paraguay (Fleming, Andes, & DiClemente, 2013).

As research continues to expand on gaining deeper understanding of young men and their constructions and negotiations of masculinities, two strands of arguments have become evident. The first stream of argument has pushed for a more careful understanding of how young men are likely to enact violent masculinities in response to their material, economic, and structural circumstances (Barker & Ricardo, 2005; Jewkes, Sikweyiya, Morrell, & Dunkle, 2011; Ratele, 2017). This argument strongly emphasizes critical analysis of the broader micro- and macro structures, processes, and systems within which young men always need to position themselves, both individually and collectively, in relation to dominant notions of manhood (Chant, 2000; Silberschmidt, 1999). Although violence may not be constitutive of dominant masculinity, it may be used by young men as a "shortcut" to reaffirm masculine power, control, and dominance in a context where the main routes to credible masculinity is unattainable (Barker, 2005; Barker & Ricardo, 2005; Ratele, 2008; Ratele, Smith, van Niekerk, & Seedat, 2011). Violence thus functions as an important communicative mechanism to validate and valorize specific models of masculinity within a specific space and time.

The second strand of argument is concerned that violence may just be an aspect of a larger repertoire of internalized norms embedded in the psyche of male-bodied people (Ratele, 2013; Shefer, Kruger, & Schepers, 2015). This argument calls into question the complex processes through which men are socialized to invest in certain emotions, feelings, values, and behaviors (Adomako Ampofo & Boateng, 2007; Mathews, Jewkes, & Abrahams, 2011; Ratele, 2013; Shefer et al., 2015).

These values, norms, and behaviors are further enabled by a variety of countervailing patriarchal forces through which particular types of gender expression are considered appropriate and welcomed, and other types are repudiated (Dery, Fiaveh, & Apusigah, 2019; Ratele, 2013). Through masculine gender socialization, most men tend to believe that to be a "man" is to have access to greater cultural, social, economic, political, and symbolic power (Chant, 2000; Mathews et al., 2011; Ratele, 2013; Shefer et al., 2015). This body of research has suggested that the poor investment of men, especially toward subordination and vulnerability, underpins problematic behaviors of men, including violence. While foregrounding the violence of men as a product of inappropriate childhood psychological development processes, Mathews and associates (2011) have suggested that patriarchal stereotypes are central forces, which both enable and condone male violence in different spaces. In this sense, men can be both victims and perpetrators of male violence, depending on how they perceive particular gender expressions.

From the two streams of arguments outlined above, it is important to highlight the necessity of taking seriously the multiple masculinities that are likely to exist between individual males and groups of males and how the individual male may contest for patriarchal hegemonies within their multiple *locatedness* (Mfecane, 2018; Ratele, 2014; Shefer et al., 2015). In the present article, we attempt to critically engage with the salient subjectivities, violence, resistance, and emotions of different categories of young men across different social arenas in Ghana. We are concerned about how young men may seek to construct, position, evaluate, and imagine themselves as men of significant social essence in relation to their fellow young men, as well as positioning themselves within the larger gender hierarchies. We emphasize a critical understanding of how different social categories, especially gender, age hierarchies, the politics of space, and social rewards, shape and mediate young men's sense of respect, worth, and masculine identity. We theorize how the combination of intersectional structures and geographies of masculinities contribute to exacerbate the reproduction of hierarchical social relationships among men themselves.

The following section discusses the theoretical framework for the article. A brief commentary about the study context is given next. Methods are then discussed. Results from qualitative narrative accounts of young Dagaaba men are then presented and discussed. The implications of the findings and their limitations are considered next, while the final section concludes.

Theoretical Framework: "Marginality Within Hegemony"

One key conceptual framework which has underpinned much masculinity research in SSA has been Raewyn Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity (Mfecane, 2018). While Connell's seminal work on hegemonic masculinity has powerfully penetrated theorizations and understandings of masculinities globally, conceptions of hegemonic masculinity have nevertheless been confronted with significant definitional challenges. Space constraints will not allow us to comprehensively

articulate the pros and cons of the competing arguments on hegemonic masculinity in the literature. As we are concerned about a postcolonial context which is very different from the context within which the theory of hegemonic masculinity emerged from, our analysis is theoretically framed in terms of Kopano Ratele's (2014) theory of *marginality within hegemony*. Building on his earlier theorization of "ruling masculinity" (Ratele, 2008), and moving toward a critical discursive psychological understanding of how social identities interact with and are mediated by a constellation of intersectional categories, Ratele has advocated for "marginality within hegemony" as a prism for critical understanding of the meanings of manhood in Africa. Ratele (2014, 2017) argues that any intervention that seeks to progressively approach and study African boys and men ought to be alert to the complex interplay between dominant notions of masculinity, colonial legacies, and political, economic, and social realities that circumscribe the daily life of men and boys in often deeply patriarchal, classed, and capitalism-driven societies. While young men and men in general may aspire for patriarchal hegemony through heterosexual marriage, economic breadwinner roles, fatherhood, maintaining physical and emotional fortitude, and independence (Chant, 2000; Mfecane, 2018; Ratele, 2008), they may be marginalized by their social, cultural, and political circumstances, as well as age hierarchies, which may compel a complex reconfiguration and renegotiation of masculinities. These modes of manhood do not exist independently of one another, neither are they hierarchically arranged. Rather, they interact, resist, contest, and struggle for dominance and cultural legitimacy at different times and spaces. As far as the complexities of African masculinities[1] are concerned, it is difficult to talk of a single, consistent, and stable hegemonic masculinity as advocated by Connell. For many critical men's studies' theorists in Africa (e.g., Mfecane, 2018; Miescher, 2005; Morrell, Jewkes, & Lindegger, 2012; Ratele, 2014), the notion of *gender hegemony* is a very slippery and unsustainable construct: multiple hegemonies coexist and none may claim absolute cultural legitimacy over others. We believe that situating the present article within the theoretical understanding of "marginality within hegemony" is necessary as it allows for a more careful consideration of how multiple currents, including age, gender, location, poverty, and abled-bodiness are likely to shape masculine identities and how young men may contest for hegemony among themselves.

Locating the Dagaaba of Northwestern Ghana

Northwestern Ghana represents one of the 10 administrative regions of Ghana. Geographically, northwestern Ghana differs from southern Ghana in terms of cultural dynamics, social organization, and ecology. The region has long been, and remains, the poorest and most underdeveloped region in Ghana. Representing one of the four ethnic groups in the region, a greater proportion of the Dagaaba sustain their livelihood on rain-fed subsistence farming. Although patriarchy is a common feature of the larger Ghanaian society, gender roles differentiation, expectations,

and boundaries are enforced among the Dagaaba (Dery & Diedong, 2014). Among the Dagaaba, many intersectory factors, including age, social class, religion, gender, sexuality, and marital status play significant roles in shaping social relationships and interactions between adult men and young men, between men and women, and among young men themselves. Due to gendered and hierarchal social systems, adult men hold positions of greater privilege, authority, and power over both women and children. Most women remain subordinated to male authority and control. The borders and contours of what it may mean to be "a man" or "woman" in the Dagaaba social organization are also "communal properties" strictly enforced and regulated by different stakeholders with various stakes (Dery et al., 2019). For example, culturally, boys are always taught by their parents, peers, and wider society to exhibit traits of hard work, machismo, and imbibe physical strength and bravery to become successful masculine figures in the future. In the same vein, girls are often encouraged to learn qualities and behaviors that make for a "good" wife, such as docility, submissiveness, and acquiescing to patriarchal authority. Masculinities and femininities are sustained and reinforced by cultural metaphors, proverbs, and folk tales in everyday conversations (Dery & Diedong, 2014). For example, it is common to hear Dagaaba make such statement as *doo manŋ taa la kanyiri* (interpreted variously as "a man/boy should endure pain," "a man should be emotionally strong," or "a man should be brave"). Such statements shape particular types of gender expressions that are considered welcome and appropriate in specific timeframes and spaces. It is against this backdrop that our present analysis is co-produced through culturally grounded perspectives of our study participants as well as our own lived experiences as members of this cultural group.

Method

Setting

Six rural Dagaare-speaking communities in northwestern Ghana were purposively selected for this study. The choice of these communities was informed by critical observations which the first author made during fieldwork for a larger research conducted. For example, while interacting with an adult male, a young man of about 18 years came home complaining to his father about some bruises on his left forehead as a result of a confrontation between him and a male school mate. The father furiously reprimanded the young man: "If you allow yourself to be bullied by your peer and you're complaining to me, are you a woman?" The "harsh" and "unsupportive" reaction from this adult man to his son struck me (first author) deeply. How might we imagine and promote notion of "being a man" beyond violence in the social communities and networks in which men interact? We were concerned about learning more about possible opportunities for alternative constructions of masculinity beside the violence which this elder man strongly encouraged his son to pursue. We were particularly concerned about the age range within which these participants fall (18-25 years) and what this may mean for alternative imaginations of masculinity in

participants' interpersonal relationships. The set age range represents a critical point of transitioning, negotiating, externalizing, and imagining the meanings of respectable masculinities.

Participants

Through a community-wide announcement, all young men aged between 18 and 25 years were invited to take part in the study, after explaining in clear language the purpose of the study to them. We also explained to them that participation was completely voluntary. At the time of the interviews, none of the participants was married. However, most of them reported that they were in active heterosexual relationships. Only a few had tertiary education experience. The majority described themselves as unemployed because they were mostly working on family farms. All of them reported that they relied on their family for financial support.

Data Collection

Using a combination of purposive and snowballing techniques, five focus group discussions (FGDs) and 16 individual interviews (IDIs) were successfully conducted between October 2015 and March 2016. Despite the potentially transformative and reflexive nature of group contexts and the fact that we did not wish to introduce bias into our analysis, we allowed participants to reflect for some days on the debates that emerged in the group contexts. This formed the basis for our IDIs with 16 participants who were purposefully selected after they had successfully completed the FGDs. We noticed that the exchanges and discussions among participants in the various groups were very complex and sometimes ambiguous. However, the fact that male only group could function as a potential space for the representation and reproduction of dominant notions of masculinity meant that the interview contexts created opportunities for dialogue with the nuances, ambiguities, complexities, and ambivalences found lacking in group conversations. IDI sessions lasted between 30 and 45 min; group discussions tended to last longer (90 min on average). Using a flexibly designed interview guide, participants were asked to share their opinion on issues such as "what it means to be a young man" and "how does being a young man affect the way society expects them to be like and behave in relation to their peers as well as young women?"

Data Analysis

All interviews were translated and transcribed by the first author. To maintain the integrity of the data, the second author cross-checked and audited the transcripts. Both authors read the transcripts several times to make preliminary sense of the data. We manually coded the data independently by employing a line-by-line coding style. We then categorized codes into broad and meaningful themes for closer analysis.

The final coded data were analyzed and presented thematically. All names are pseudonyms.

Results and Discussion

"Manning Up" as a Masculine Language

Most young men in this study subscribed to *traditional masculinity*. "Traditional masculinity" as embodied was embedded in discourses of toughness, aggressiveness, power, dominance, and violence. Most participants thought that "to be a man" is an art of mastering courage, building confidence, and willingness to sacrifice one's own emotion in the interest of both known and unknown observers. Understandably, the most immediate and tangible benefit associated with subscribing to these traits is one's ability to maintain the image of a "winner." Based on the overwhelming psychological investment demonstrated among participants in terms of embodying traits of traditional masculinity, it is reasonable to suspect that the position of the "winner" represents the epitome of hegemony among young men. Articulating his own interest in cultivating the archetypal image of manliness, Musa shared his experiences:

> I had to master courage and tactics and stand up to other boys when they confront me. My senior brother was always happy to see me beat other boys. But you know, this thing of boys is complex . . . it is complete rubbish, see . . . but I was required to. . .. You know, one does not test the depth of a river with both feet. I had to start with my little sisters at home . . . bully them one or few times. That was not my desire. (18 years, IDI)

George agrees with Musa, arguing,

> George: As boys, we're required to stand out. that is what we've been taught to do. You must take charge of your environment. You're the game changer. . .. You wall yourself to avoid disappointment. You know . . . those boys will try you one time or another. People are always watching you. I mean they are watching you each time and you need to tell them what you are worth. When you're not wicked . . . you're finished. (19 years, FGD)
> Interviewer: So, who taught you that to be "a game changer" you need to be wicked to others? What exactly do you mean by being wicked?
> George: It is kind of, erm, normal here. It is a normal way of putting things in order. As a man, you don't need to look like being soft.

In the dialogue above, Musa and George constructed boyhood practices as complex and confusing. Young masculinity is expressed by Musa as "complete rubbish"; a practice which; a practice which both interlocutors thought that being a "man" is a difficult task because people are always watching young men and such people expect some good demonstration of desirable masculine practices. Once a young man's behavior is perceived to fall outside the acceptable local standards of manhood (of

"being wicked," "a game changer," "a winner"), a young man is easily judged as "failed" ("you're finished"). Both Musa and George demonstrate the limiting nature of being a young man in a rather confusing and restrictive lexicon: "I was required to . . ." and "we're required to stand out . . .." By this expression and Musa's own initial lamentation and confusion expressed in his lack of words ("see . . ."), both participants expressed their position as powerless individuals who have no control over what they might want to do with themselves. This is complicated by the danger of being judged down as less of a man. At the same time, these participants are portraying themselves as subjects of their own social structure in which their subjectivities and feelings are strictly governed. Musa expresses some degree of internal ambivalence in which his own personal feelings and desires are ignored. Bravery, self-fortification, endurance, and the machismo attributes of dominant notions of traditional masculinity assume prominence as weak men are vilified. This finding resonates with Oscar Lewis's (1959) theory of culture of poverty, whereby poor young men may feel somewhat helpless, constrained, and powerless, but nevertheless know the range of recuperative strategies to deploy to reaffirm their identities within specific contexts.

However, Musa's position is not unproblematic. His expression of powerlessness allows him to distance himself from a range of actions, rationalizing his own problematic behaviors. To communicate masculine competence and demonstrate physical prowess, he had to practice as illustrated in the adage, "one does not test the depth of a river with both feet." This is a metaphorical representation in which incipient masculinity is likened to a river whose depth is "unknown." To ensure that he ably and effectively negotiates the complexities of the "unknown," Musa had to master courage and agency. Although courage, and knowing the sorts of agency to deploy is problematic, the interlocutor knows that there is benefit after all. Musa frames the discourse of mastering in a theatrical language in which he had to start with his little sisters at home. Bullying his little sisters is part of what George frames as self-fortification ("walling oneself to avoid disappointment"). The implication of such framing is that young men always need to engage in calculative targeting in which less strong people are likely to fall prey for testing masculine prowess and emotional fortitude.

Reading through the narratives of participants, there are powerful links between demonstrative effect embedded in homosocial spaces and violent masculinity. Violent masculinities are enacted in satisfaction of the public audience, mostly males. Young men's displays of violent masculinities are primarily directed at gaining the approval and support of other men. It is significant to highlight that it is not in Musa's best interests to bully his sisters, neither was he happy enacting violence ("That was not my desire"). The interlocutor delivers a strong message of disclaimer to rationalize his behavior. While articulating his narratives within a deeply constraining context, his narratives potentially expose his own masculinity in a very precarious position vis-à-vis the prevailing codes of manhood. Musa is caught in what appeared to be an ideological dilemma. At the core of this ideological dilemma are the fears of being judged down as less of the acceptable standard—stressing the public image of masculinity. Musa frames the position of his senior brother as a

"coach" who expects the former to be a "winner" and not a "loser." We see this clearly explained by Musa in the following statement: "My senior brother was always happy to see me beat other boys" and George, "People are always watching you. . . ." Although Musa did not explicitly comment on the number of times he had been violent and bully toward other boys in preparation toward facing the "unknown world," we can reasonably speculate that his behavior has deeply been implicated in such masculine bravado umpteenth times. And by being happy and not ready to confront Musa's violent behavior, Musa's senior brother and those who are always watching and perhaps expecting specific displays among young men are complicit in reproducing a particular model of ruling masculinity.

Masculinity as a Contest for Status Legitimacy and Fortification

In all group and IDIs, there were several instances in which constructions of masculinity as a contest for status were inherent. Naah, a 20-year-old young man, narrated such contest for status legitimacy in the following comments:

> So, one day . . . I was sitting down thinking of my world . . . this idiot came to me and told me; "hey, you small boy, come here." I refused. He came closer and said, "didn't you hear me?" I didn't give him attention. The boy insulted me. I felt bad and disrespected and we fought. He was like my younger brother. . . . a small boy. He was not even a good fighter. I dealt with him and I was the boss . . . the man. (IDI)

In a different interview, Angbeyir agrees with Naah:

> You can never tell . . . your own friends are always looking for that opportunity to look down on you. You have to be sort of violent. Who knows, you may overpower him? You become the boss when you win and you're a man. Real men are winners. (25 years, FGD)

Jacob's narrative corroborates his colleagues' as expressed above. He narrated,

> My friends and I were going somewhere.. and here comes this "big for nothing" boy. I didn't do anything, and he confronted me. So, he first spoke something shit and I didn't mind him. He came closer and whispered into my ear saying, "your mother." This is unacceptable, you know. I can't allow this go like that. I was mad, and I dealt with him. (23 years, FGD)

From the narratives above, Naah presented the behavior of his colleague as "problematic," "disruptive," and "unwarranted." This uninvited friend first positioned Naah on a lower scale in relation to himself by calling Naah a *small boy*. By physical stature, Naah looked much older and tough, and to call him a *small boy* in itself is an unacceptable insult. This is what Naah makes references to when he points out that "He was like my younger brother." In a typical Dagaaba community, traditional wisdom places significant value on age, and maximum respect is expected of younger people, be they men or women. Therefore, the behavior of Naah's uninvited guest is

the direct opposite of local social etiquette. The consequence of this generated troubling feelings, which eventually led to an easy battle for Naah to communicate and prove his fighting prowess. The excerpt from Angbeyir communicates a certain degree of uncertainty and masculine ambiguity. The desire to assume the position of a winner generates masculine anxiety and ambivalences among young men, even if one does not want to be violent.

What is intriguing, however, is the display of misdemeanor and disrespect from relatively younger boy to a supposedly senior brother, and this is part of what Angbeyir articulates as "looking down on you" as the boss by way of age. The behavior of Naah's uninvited friend is totally commanding, instructive, and authoritarian. By this, he is seeking to express some form of masculinity by instructing Naah to stop thinking, minding his own business, and honor his call. Although this may look mundane, critically analyzing it reveals what some participants earlier describe as "testing the depth of the river." Naah interpreted this as gross disrespect and an unacceptable behavior. By its very disrespectful nature, Naah refused to give him due attention, "I didn't give him attention." The consequences of some sort of unmet expectations between the two resulted in a battle for status legitimacy and situated hegemony (a demonstration of who is the boss and winner). Beyond its hierarchical relationship, it is simultaneously a contest for power, legitimacy, position, and authority to determine who is qualified to be called a *big boy* and who fits the position of a *small boy* and the attendant privileges. This status contest is also a contest for hegemony. While Naah's mate presented him as a *small boy*, the former had a real interest in proving to his mate that his alleged position as a small boy was nothing than disrespect. The shame of being disrespected has been foregrounded as an important ground for the expression of a range of violent and aggressive behaviors among young men; an evidence which resonates with findings of Lewis (1959) and Ratele (2008). Naah proved his worth and knowledge of idealized codes of masculinity by displaying his fighting prowess and bravery, which facilitated maintenance of dominance and powerful position illustrated by, "he was not even a good fighter. I dealt with him."

Like Naah, Jacob thought that he did not deserve the provocation from his peer who he described as "big for nothing." It seems reasonable to suspect that Jacob's description of a "big for nothing" image is one of lower social substance. Unlike the scenario Naah presented above, Jacob acknowledged that his mate was "big" and by this description, we interpret *bigness* in terms of age and physical stature. Out of the blue, this young man emerged and launched a war of insults and threats; not respect as expected, on Jacob by speaking "shit" to him. This is, arguably, part of the discourse of "testing the depth of the river" as framed by Musa earlier. Like Naah, Jacob had the patience and courage to ignore his mate in the first place to probably signal that he was testing bad waters. This did not signal anything concrete and satisfying to the "big for nothing" young man who failed to understand that Jacob was uninterested to put up any form of confrontation with him. Uninterested as Jacob may appear, he is aware that dominant notions of masculinity are linked to social respectability, and the lack of it generates a situation in which the interlocutor felt deeply troubled ("I was mad"). Jacob's view, as well as the views of many other participants, link manhood and masculinity to social respectability. Through our interaction with participants, we learnt

that these young men actually had learnt such thinking about manhood from their parents, peers, and even teachers. Therefore, the results are really what you would expect given the patriarchal nature of the study setting.

To further claim and fortify status authenticity, legitimacy, and superiority, the young man pushed Jacob beyond the imagined boundary of masculinity by adopting a rather sexist and misogynistic phrase—"your mother." In the Dagaaba tradition, the phrase *your mother* is a deeply political and unsettling message, which amounts to negative and insulting expression about one's mother. The phrase is widely interpreted to mean one of the following: (a) your useless mother, (b) your mother is a fool, (c) you are as incapable as your mother, and (d) your mother is inferior. Knowing these complexities, Jacob felt deeply troubled to allow this "big for nothing" young man walk away freely. He bemoans this as unacceptable; a situation which made him go mad. To prove to the young man and Jacob's own peers that he was not worth the description, Jacob dealt with him. And by this, the respondent is communicating knowledge and command of ideals on what it means to be a "winner."

Sam recounted similar experiences in the following statement:

> We were a group of boys playing one evening at the community centre. So, this boy accused me of stealing his money, which I didn't have knowledge of. He threatened to deal with me if I do not accept that I took his money. I did not. This generated a fight between us. I wanted to run away because this guy was bigger than me. He was tough and physical. But my senior brother told me that if I didn't stand up to this guy. . . beat that guy, I will not follow him to the house. . .. I had to "man up" and adopt a different tactic. That makes the difference. I held his penis and he cried and ran away. I was the winner. (21 years, IDI)

Analyzing the above excerpt, one theme emerges: the desire to defend a masculine status, which comes with the deployment of a range of actions. Implied in Sam's narration is the crucial influence of bystanders, especially the brother's figure. The presence of Sam's brother and the other group members proved to be a real source of encouragement for his involvement in confrontational exchanges with his fellow boy as part of the discourse of ruling masculinity. Although Sam knew that he was innocent of the accusation, he initially thought of absconding the scene immediately. His opponent insisted and threatened to deal rudely with him if he does not agree that he indeed stole the money. With a second thought, this option was rather dangerous because running away would have significant implications on Sam's identity as a man who is supposed to be a winner. The notion of masculinity as linked to a winning position played a role in Sam's decision to either fight or not. Considering this as a less profitable option, Sam looked up to his senior brother for a bail out. But this second option also proved unhelpful much like the first as Sam's brother was not ready in any perceptible way to shield him—Sam must defend his innocence and be prepared to face his mates. It is reasonable to estimate that Sam was left with very limited options other than facing his opponent squarely.

Faced with a delicate situation which could potentially ruin his masculine fortunes and reputation, Sam had to "man up" and face his opponent to prove that he belongs to claim some situated hegemony. To do this successfully, Sam deployed a strategy by

holding his opponent's penis. The art of knowing what strategy to deploy in a specific situation that can potentially redeem one otherwise vulnerable status is an important form of agency available to Sam at this crucial moment. This compelled Sam's opponent to accept defeat by running away. To run away from a battlefield as a man is to take on the image of a "loser." Knowing the kind of strategy to deploy in a specific situation which can facilitate a winning style is imperatively masculine as Sam enthusiastically and proudly declared himself "I was the winner." One can see how Sam has progressed from a near "coward" who almost gave in confronting his peer to a self-acclaimed winner. This demonstrates how slippery hegemony can be gained and easily lost. Our finding supports Shefer and associates' (2015) study on masculine vulnerability and how young men thought that to be vulnerable is to become a loser.

The imperative of Sam's narrative is his willingness and commitment to sacrificing his own vulnerability to abide by behavioral expression deemed situationally appropriate. Sam resisted subordination by the threats of violence from his peers. The immediate benefit of such resistance seems to be social respectability and power. By standing up to his competitor, Sam takes on a new identity which positions him as the more powerful of the two. Sam deviated from his authentic self by succumbing to the social pressure embedded in a homosocial space such as playing ground. Even within his constrained circumstance of being less physically tough compared to his competitor, Sam's ability to retaliate with a subtle form of violence is a demonstration of his real commitment to obey instructions from his elderly brother. By this, he assumes the position of a "good learner" who follows brotherly instructions. By being a good listener, Sam simultaneously advertises his own masculine credentials in the presence of other peers. The currency of the presence of Sam's senior brother and playing mates is powerful and instructive. Sam's brother was not a mere brother per se, but a powerful figure of patriarchal surveillance, whose interest re-entrenches normative ideals on what it means to be a "man" in a specific situation. In order for Sam to present himself as a masculine, worthy, and competent male, he had to subvert his own feelings of vulnerability and the consequences that he is likely to suffer from this confrontational exchange. But there is value in this, arguably. By ignoring the repercussions of violence and his own safety, as well as the potential health implications, he simultaneously expresses belonging, social networking, and connectivity as he could follow his senior brother to the house. This finding did not find resonance with prevailing debates suggesting that fathers serve as strict gender role models for their sons' conformity and adherence to traditional masculine norms (Clowes, Ratele, & Shefer, 2013; Epstein & Ward, 2011; Levant, Zachary, Gerdes, Jadaszewski, & Kathleen, 2017; Ratele, Shefer, & Clowes, 2012). Rather, our analysis contributes to a broader debate on the psychology of men and masculinities, arguing that brothers and peers also play influential roles in "making men" out of these men. To contemporary critical men's studies scholarship, our findings point to the importance of taking into consideration taken-for-granted messages (implicit and explicit) from senior brothers and those who young men closely relate to as regard what is appropriate or inappropriate masculine gendered behavior for younger boys across different spaces.

Putting participants' narratives together thus far, our findings are consistent with the growing body of literature suggesting that patriarchal socialization of boys into rigid notions of masculinities leads to problematic consequences such as poorer psychological development and well-being, poorer health outcomes, and perpetration of violence and aggression against men. Against this backdrop, psychologists may be interested in decoding the range of psychological investment that different men pursue to be seen as "real men," as well as the consequences of the lack thereof, and what this means for negotiating alternative identities in a context in which violence is a celebrated virtue in the formation of gendered identities. We are of the view that feminists and pro-feminists should certainly be worried over this frame of thinking, especially in an era characterized by growing calls for gender-equitable discourses and relationships (Levant et al., 2017). The importance of supportive and gender-conscious parenting becomes a useful gateway in fostering less problematic masculinities among young men (hooks, 2000). Finally, there is widespread evidence in the literature across Africa indicating the many ways that problematic constructions of masculinity linked to patriarchal authority relates to men's deep tolerance for violence both within and outside the home (Adomako Ampofo & Boateng, 2007; Clowes et al., 2013; Dery & Diedong, 2014). Our present findings largely support this literature, and we think that critical masculinity scholars should be deeply concerned about this.

Ambivalences, Confusions, and Contestations on Ruling Masculinity

While some participants appeared to be disinterested in engaging in tough and violent masculine confrontations during subsequent IDIs, they simultaneously endorsed the same acts during the group sessions. During one group discussion, Andy was one of the few discussants who were very loud-voiced and enthused on defending his position as masculine irrespective of whatever approach he needed to adopt. Andy argues that:

> As boys, we were taught to value this thing of manhood. That is the only thing we have . . . So, you've got to maintain it well. And to do this, you sometimes need to be tough looking . . . daring of violence. You have to fight, fight and fight. You need to prove your ability to hurt others in the process of upholding that manhood. If you physically dare me, I got you rolling on the ground. You hit me once; I hit you back twice and even harder. That makes the difference. (22 years, FGD)

In an IDI with Andy, he shared his thought within a context of systemic insecurity:

> My brother you see, we are all young. . . . But sometimes, it is not worth it. Certain things are just not right. You turn left and right and nowhere is safe. People are ready to prove a point. You feel unsafe all the time even among your own "paddies" [friends]. I certainly think this is not right. If things continue this way, what future can we talk of? It does not look a bright future. As youth, we are the tomorrow and we need to start talking about this bro. Violence is bad bro. We need peace in place of violence. (22 years, IDI)

Andy's comments are confusing and contradictory when compared to the context of FGD. Andy's opinion is making a strong case to disrupt constructions of young masculinity linked to physical violence and the imperative of fortifying oneself to avoid social embarrassment. Andy calls for investing and supporting nonviolent masculinities in the IDI while his response in the group was in support of violence and dominance. His narratives are contradictory in that in a private space such as IDI, he portrayed himself to be disinterested in always needing to prove a point. He lamented that the situation is not just right because he assumes that "we" all have a role to play in determining our tomorrow as "youth." He seeks to speak with the single voice of the youth by arguing that we have a tomorrow to face as "youth." And with the growing levels of insecurity in society ("left and right" as Andy articulated), including one's own "paddies," he frames the future to be bleak and fragile. Deploying the voice of the "youth," he asked the question, "what future can we talk of tomorrow?" He reasons that attempting to answer this question is to kick-start earnest and frank discussions on the imperative of deconstructing the meaning of being male. By this, he imagines a central role to be played by the youth in fostering quality behavior and embodying nonviolent masculinities.

In reading Andy's comments, one argument is apparent: that young men may buy into normative ideas masculinity in the presence of other males to validate and affirm their masculinity, whereas such men may be inherently disturbed by the same notions of masculinity. Arguably, no discussant wanted to be judged down in the presence of other discussants to be constructing weak or feminine masculinity by endorsing physical fragility. One cannot be guaranteed that his masculine position will not be threatened by making pronouncements publicly, which reveal or suggest masculine weaknesses in the group context as "people are always looking for the opportunity to look down on others." This suggests that young men have largely internalized the belief that they are being watched from both near and far and in order to validate and reaffirm one's masculinity, one needs to be alert to the demands of ruling norms on masculinity. This suggests that to gain nuanced perspectives on masculinity, young men need to be engaged at the individual level rather than only reifying normative notions of masculinity reproduced in a group context. This culturally-grounded insight is perhaps one of the theoretical and methodological strengths of our study.

Conclusion and Implications for Gender Relations and Policy

This study gives a gendered reading of agency versus structure debates in producing masculine identities. Although young men in this study largely subscribe to dominant ideas about masculinity, there are instances of masculine ambivalences, confusion, contestations, and self-disappointment. In cases of masculine ambiguity, young men always need to renegotiate access to patriarchal hegemonies by deploying a range of tactics within very specific contexts. The gendering of space, and how space is deeply infused with meanings, power, and hegemony, become important considerations for critical understanding of the violence of men against other men. Another important

thread that connects the narratives of these young men and their discursive constructions of masculinity is demonstration of substantive command of courage, violence, and self-resilience. Viewing young men's conceptions of these discourses as part and parcel of the broader politics of manhood means a lot to peace-building processes and reshaping gender relations in private and public spaces.

Despite the high prevalence of violence as part of demonstrating masculinity, some participants contested these same ideas, expressing some masculine ambiguity. To galvanize positive behavioral change among young men, it is imperative to develop a habit that embraces courage and self-resilience as positive aspects of life. That is, the ability to contain oneself even when one's masculinity is likely to be undermined should be interpreted as a masculine virtue. Making young men understand, internalize, and develop habits that dispel the masculine myth that equates courage, masculine ambition, and self-resilience to masculinity should be a responsibility for all: parents, peers, community, school, media, and development practitioners. This also means reshaping and broadening the narrow narratives that underpin conversations on gender. At the family level, it is imperative to deconstruct a fixated notion of gender and to embrace the reality that multiple masculinities coexist within the same social milieu. Different people, men and women, embody different interests and the complexity of these interests and needs must be recognized in the process of opening up space for new possibilities of masculinity.

Within global debates on gender transformative interventions, there is growing awareness on the necessity to discuss men as gendered subjects within mainstream gender and development analysis (e.g., Chant & Gutmann, 2000; Ratele, 2014). Our findings confirm that poor young men are increasingly subjected to multiple vulnerabilities and forms of marginalizations. To overcome feeling of masculine vulnerability and marginalization, constructions of masculinity among poor young men tended to be exaggerated in violent bravados and displays (see also Lewis, 1959). These findings have many implications for development interventions on gender issues, especially with regard to violence. Development practitioners have a major role to play in helping men deconstruct and reconstruct problematic notions of manhood. Consistent with the literature (e.g., Chant & Gutmann, 2000), our findings further suggest that there is urgent need for a more dedicated discussion on men and masculinities among development practitioners, especially in low-income countries where poverty is high. Such an engagement is needed because of the persistent polarization of gender issues in the gender-and-development field. Gender has often been associated with women, and such narrow perception of gender has become part and parcel of gender mainstreaming practices in Ghana.

At the macro level, recognizing multiple masculinities should be taken as an important subject of conscious national debate and policy deliberation. Although Ghana has since 2015 developed and implemented a national gender policy, the focus has been on bridging gender inequalities, especially between men and women. There is currently no comprehensive gender framework or policy that incorporates consideration of masculinities, femininities, and other gender identities as core topics. But since patriarchy affects both men and women and other gender identities,

albeit to varying degrees, both men and women ought to be targeted and involved in any national effort seeking to remake and redefine gender practices, especially patriarchal stereotypes policing masculinities and femininities. Ghana's Gender Ministry should roll out more inclusive and pragmatic interventions that respect cultural diversities, which dictate the meaning of gender. In an economically marginalized context, such as northwestern Ghana, the realities that different categories of men need to contend with in their negotiation of masculinities are likely to be significantly different from those of a middle-class urban context. This needs serious consideration in any policy intervention.

Despite the rich insights produced by our sample of young men in northwestern Ghana, it is important to underscore some limitations. Our findings are not generalizable as only a small, geographically limited sample was used. Although there has been some empirical work in the literature on masculinity and HIV/AIDS, a broader inter-regional comparative synergy could be achieved in finding out whether young men and their female partners from different ethnicities in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa share the same or similar understandings on violence as a rite of passage to meaningful masculinity. Finally, as all interviews were conducted in participants' home language (Dagaare) and considering how translation, transcription, and analysis can be politically influenced, certain meanings and interpretations might be overridden and taken for granted in the process even by a native researcher. These potential limitations notwithstanding, we believe our findings make important contributions to our understanding of how young men construct and enact masculinity in their everyday lives in northwestern Ghana.

Acknowledgments

An earlier version of this article benefited from useful comments from both mentors and mentees at the recent PEASS workshop organized by African Studies Reviews at the ASAA biannual conference held at the University of Ghana, Accra. We are grateful for their constructive comments.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article: Funding for this study was part of a doctoral fellowship supported by the Social Science Research Council's Next Generation Social Sciences in Africa Fellowship, with funds provided by Carnegie Corporation of New York. However, the funder did not contribute to the design, data collection, analysis, and writing of this manuscript.

Note

1. We are conscious of our own deployment of the term *African masculinities* in a manner that does not invoke simplistic essentialization of a diverse continent. Despite the contestations

around African masculinities due to the influences of race/ethnicity, religion, economics, class, politics, and colonial history, we believe certain commonalities in practices of manhood could be identified.

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