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'Cowards' and 'Scumbags': Tough Talk and Men's Violence

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which particular forms of violence, namely violence against women and one-punch assaults, are framed in discourses of violence prevention in Australia. In denouncing certain acts, individuals and groups, I show that condemnatory responses—what I refer to here as 'tough talk'—serve to reinforce, rather than challenge, hierarchical (gendered, raced, classed) difference as normative. Based on assumptions that link violence to particular 'types' of men, such approaches overlook the nuance, complexity and contextual meanings of violence. Preventing violence, I argue, requires that we engage with *cultures* of violence by focusing less on *some* men's violence, instead recognising the interconnectedness of gender and other hierarchies of identity as the critical context for violence.

Keywords

Gender; masculinity; identity; men's violence; violence prevention; violence against women; 'one-punch' violence.

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Introduction

This paper explores the ways in which discourses of gender and violence shape contemporary 'violence-talk' in relation to both men's violence against women and men's violence against men, namely one-punch assaults, in Australia. Violence-talk is, I argue, an important means of identity work, simultaneously accomplishing masculinity and marking the boundaries between 'types' of men and masculinity. In this context, condemnatory responses to certain acts/forms of violence ('tough talk') as shown here, along with the demonisation of certain perpetrators, serve to reinforce rather than challenge dominant constructions of men and masculinity. Instead, recognising the interconnectedness of gender and other hierarchies of identity as the critical context for violence implies a fundamental shift in how we think about, talk about, and respond to violence. A more nuanced approach, as advocated here, necessitates a shift in focus away from the violence of *some* men and towards the social and cultural relationships that enable violence.

The meanings of violence are unstable; violence, as Hearn (1999: 8) observes, does not 'pre-exist in some pure form prior to reference to it'. This is not to say that violence is not 'real' or material in its impacts but, rather, recognises its contested status: that is, that '[n]ot all violence is condemned; not all forms of violence are punished; [and] not all forms of violence receive widespread disapproval' (Stanko 2003: 12). Fiske and Rai (2015), for example, note the distinction commonly drawn between violence that is 'good' and 'bad'—or 'right' and 'wrong'. The 'right kind' of violence, they explain, is that which is 'perpetrated in the "right" way in the "right" situations against the "right" people' and directed towards the legitimate regulation of 'properly specified social relationships' (Fiske and Rai 2015: 146). Violence of the 'wrong kind', then, 'not only fails to constitute those same relationships, but also transgresses them' (Fiske and Rai, 2015: 146). Fiske and Rai's specific focus on 'virtuous violence'—or violence as morally motivated—is not the argument presented in this paper. Rather, their broader emphasis on the 'normative cultural practices' that render violence 'natural and necessary' (Fiske and Rai 2015: 2) in particular situations, is central to the analysis pursued here. Whereas Fiske and Rai largely overlook gender, 'race'/ethnicity and social class, I treat these as integral to the normativity of violence, focusing specifically on the ways in which violence is talked about and written about.

Violence-talk

A focus on 'violence-talk', as I conceptualise it, emphasises the *relations* of violence: of social positionings, the complex interplay between structure and agency, and the ways in which we are both constrained and enabled by our social relationships (Seymour 2018). Statistically, men are the primary perpetrators of criminal violence and we are surrounded by the socially sanctioned, largely male, violences of sport, corporate competition, war and combat. Nonetheless, violence is not inherently masculine, nor does masculinity 'belong' to men. Instead, violence is closely intertwined with relations of power including those of gender, 'race', ethnicity, social class, sexuality, and so on. Violence-talk concerns the accomplishment of identity, this recognising that the ways in which we talk about violence work to fix 'particular meanings and practices' (Nayak and Suchland 2006: 470), and troubles the conceptualisation of violence as, merely, individual acts and incidences. That identities are unstable and contingent—'shifting performance/s' (Gilchrist, Bowles and Wetherell 2010: 4) achieved 'episodically' rather than once and for all (Whitehead 2005: 414)—is crucial. Appreciating the contingency and contestability of masculinities (Connell 2000), of identity work as always in question and never complete, highlights the potential for change: that the 'natural(ised)' association of men, masculinities and violence is not inevitable and can be disrupted.

My understanding of 'violence-talk' draws upon Jeff Hearn's (1998, 1999) earlier work on violence as a 'social process' (Hearn 1999: 2) that encompasses the complex interrelationships between doing, talking about, and responding to violence. Hearn observed that when men talk about violence 'they are doing several different things at the same time' (Hearn 1999: 5); for instance, they are:

providing (re)constructions of violence; they are also producing and reproducing silences and absences; they are operating within discourses of “woman”, gender differentiation, “man”, sexuality and so on; they are providing accounts—repudiations, excuses, justifications and occasionally confessions—of their violence; and they might be recentring men. (Hearn 1999: 5)

In short, because ways of talking about and responding to violence (re)produce violence, paying attention to violence-talk is crucial for understanding and preventing violence. While Hearn's predominant focus was on men talking about their *own* violence (against women), my concern here is with ways of talking about and representing violence more broadly and in the public arena. Like Hearn, though, I am interested in the 'things' that this talk 'does': the ways in which violence-talk (re)produces dominant discourses of (gendered, raced, classed) identity that are, in themselves, productive of violence (see Shepherd 2009).

Method

As an exploration of violence-talk—of ways of talking about and representing violence—this study focuses on written texts produced for, and available in, the public arena. Source materials, all published online, included news media and public awareness campaigns. The Factiva database was used to find media articles, comprising news reports, editorial and other articles, appearing in any Australian news/media publication. The media search was initially broad, using search terms including violence against women, domestic violence, violent offenders, one-punch attack, and coward's punch, and generated in excess of 4,200 articles. A five-year timeframe was subsequently imposed in order to manage the large volume of material available. After filtering for duplicates and re-prints, the results, consisting of the headline and the first two lines of text for each article, were further refined to obtain a manageable sub-set of 30 articles, published between 1 April 2012¹ and 1 April 2017, for closer analysis. In this, my focus was on articles containing commentary and quotations rather than a mere reporting of events. Awareness campaigns and materials were located using the Google search engine (keywords: violence prevention; ending violence; and stop violence against women) and were not restricted to Australian sites/programs.

Once assembled, the documentary materials were analysed for dominant themes, focusing, in particular, on commonalities in the dominant framing of violence against women and one-punch assaults. In this, my goal was to achieve a 'rich thematic description' (Braun and Clarke 2006: 83) *across* the data set. An inductive approach to thematic analysis was taken, consistent with a broadly constructionist method, involving an iterative and interpretative process of pattern identification and code generation, working towards the development, through revision and refinement, of themes at the latent level (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Talking tough about violence

When it comes to violence against women, it seems that 'talking tough' is increasingly the Australian way. Violence prevention campaigns not only in Australia but also internationally are characterised by condemnatory messages based on 'declarations of manliness' (Salter 2016): that 'real men don't hit women' (see, for example, Dallas DV Resources 2017; Kenny 2015; Mesa County DV Task Force 2011; Noyes 2015) as well as exhortations to 'man up' (SAFE Ireland n.d.), 'be the hero' (Nirodah Australia n.d.), 'show your strength' (MCSR's Strength Campaign 2011), '#PickYourFight' (Campaign Brief Asia 2017), and so on. Such messages have broader currency, though, and, as Salter (2016) observes, the reasoning behind them is 'simple', that 'women are, allegedly, too weak to make it a fair fight'. Violence against women (VAW) and children is, thus, 'unmanly' and deeply shameful—not something that many men would willingly admit.

The vehement public condemnation of—or 'talking tough' about—violence against women makes sense; it provides a definitive, strong message and reflects the salience of gendered cultural ideals

regarding protection and vulnerability. Tough talk is not, however, restricted to violence against women and children. It is also characteristic of commentary regarding particular instances of men's violence against men that are seen as breaching unspoken norms about what constitutes a 'fair fight'. One-punch assaults—the so-called 'coward's punch'—for example, are seen as especially contemptible and, given their high potential for causing 'catastrophic injuries' or death (Schreiber, Williams and Ranson 2016: 333), this is not without reason. What I am interested in, though, is the implicitly gendered logic of violence-talk, its evocation of the schoolyard refrain to 'pick on someone your own size'. In this sense, the 'wrongfulness' of violence is relative to the victim, reflecting the potency of ideas regarding what constitutes an appropriate victim and a 'fair fight'. The denunciation of violence perpetrated against those smaller and weaker fixes violence to the body, as inherently physical acts with tangible bodily effects. Closely aligned is the emphasis on bodily capacity—the potential to cause harm—interpreted in terms of the 'match' between perpetrator and victim: body size, muscularity, bodily skills and training, preparedness, and so on. Thus it follows that anything that distorts the perceived 'equality' of this match profoundly alters the *meanings* attributed to violence (see Jackson-Jacobs 2014).

The following discussion of discourses surrounding, firstly, VAW and, secondly, one-punch assaults in Australia, further explores these ideas, paying particular attention to the ways in which certain forms of violence—or certain *perpetrators* of violence—are framed and judged.

***Violence against women: 'Blokes that do this are gutless and cowards'*²**

Together, the association of 'physical mastery and fearlessness' (Mehta and Bondi 1999: 76) with 'being a man' and the idea of women as innately vulnerable (see Day 2001) are cultural ideals that remain central to masculine identity/ies and, as such, violence-talk. The emphasis on VAW as inherently cowardly is especially significant. Cowardice, in general use, refers to a lack of courage, a person who is weak or eager to avoid danger and difficulty. The idea that men who perpetrate violence against women are cowards implies that women are, for lack of a better term, 'easy targets'. The salience of ideas about fairness and the equation of fairness with sameness—as in a 'fair fight' being one in which the combatants are physically matched—is critical. Following this logic, of women and men as opposites and women the 'weaker sex', it is hardly surprising that men who are violent to women are considered 'cowardly and unmanly' (Anderson 2005: 857).

Physical toughness for men is, paradoxically, both normative ('manly') and deviant ('unmanly'). In this respect, the figure of the VAW perpetrator as coward 'casts a shadow that throws heroes into relief, giving them substance and credibility' (Walsh 2016: 11). For programs such as 'Be the hero' (Nirodah Australia n.d.), for example, heroism means 'stand[ing] up and be[ing] counted in rejecting violence'. 'Real' men thus accept the vulnerability of women, recognise their own power, and take seriously their responsibility to protect women from other—violent—men (see Gadd et al. 2014: 11). Calls for men to take action based on the construction of women as fearful, physically weak and passive—particularly within the context of the nuclear family—can, therefore, be seen as playing a critical role in the performance and representation of gender. The performance of 'chivalrous masculinity' allows 'men to amplify their image as fearless' (Day 2001: 122), shifting the focus towards women's vulnerability and enabling the performance of femininity via the reinforcement of 'traditional feminine identities that emphasise fragility and dependence' (Day 2001: 122). Statements such as 'Blokes that do this—like you—are gutless and cowards. You lay a hand on a woman, you're going to do bloody time' (cited in Glassey 2017), for example, in this case voiced by a Magistrate in court proceedings, strongly evoke the gendered tropes of deviance and vulnerability along with the need for punitive protection. Elsewhere, references to VAW as the 'threatening war going on in suburbia' (*Gold Coast Bulletin* 2017), further exemplify the imagery of good men battling bad men to protect the weak.

The idea of cowardice is central to two global social marketing VAW campaigns widely reported in the Australian and international media. Produced by 'artist and activist' Alessandro Palombo,

each campaign consists of a series of eye-catching images in poster form. In the most recent of these, titled 'A brief message to fight violence against women' and released in April 2015, men were asked to respond to the question 'what kind of man are you?' by writing their feelings about VAW on their underwear, taking a photograph and sharing it online. In the resulting series of black and white photographs (at <http://bit.ly/2Bqj4zD>), featured messages include: 'only cowards abuse woman'; 'real men don't beat women'; and 'violent men are pure shit' (Goldberg 2015; Stower 2015). The other campaign, from November 2014, depicts (at <http://bit.ly/2ANbXAf>) female 'iconic cartoon characters' and Disney princesses with visible facial injuries (black eyes, bleeding nose, etcetra), each holding a picture of their 'male match' (Homer Simpson, Fred Flinstone, Cinderella's Prince, and so on) with the word 'Coward' stamped across it (Moss 2013; WYSK 2014). A quotation from Palombo accompanies the images:

As a man, I feel ashamed of the behaviors of those who use violence against women. These beings are not men but cowards. It's up to real men to persecute and fight these cowards. (In Moss 2013)

Clearly these campaigns are designed for maximum impact; they are neither subtle nor nuanced. The strong imagery of cowardice along with the vehement disavowal of 'violent men' is nonetheless striking in its resonance with other instances of more mundane, everyday, violence-talk, as shown here.

Men who hurt women are fundamentally suspect: they are publically marked as the 'deviant minority' (Salter 2016). Focusing on violent men as 'social outsiders' though, as Easteal, Holland and Judd (2015: 106) observe, perpetuates the view of VAW as a 'rare action by a deviant individual rather than [a] widespread social problem'. Outsider status may be invoked in relation to culture, mental illness, and/or deviant masculinity, discussed later. The idea that certain cultures are inherently more violent than others, for example, is reflected in statements reported in the Australian media, such as:

The fact that domestic violence continues to be a major issue in countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Egypt illustrates that there is a clear link between Muslim-dominated countries and violence against women. ... In this country [such views] are widely thought to be abhorrent. (O'Brien 2017; see also Balogh and Buckingham-Jones 2017)

Linking 'harmful cultural and social norms' to 'particular communities' (Francis 2016) along with the representation of perpetrators as mentally unstable—'not sane and rational' (Gorman 2017)—contributes to the framing of VAW as a problem of 'atypical men' (Hearn and McKie 2010: 149). Moreover, it is not violence *per se* that is condemned but, rather, 'particular misuses of violence and aggression' (Murray and Powell 2011: 134). In this way, some men are stigmatised as the 'problem' while other men are invited to identify with those 'right-thinking' men 'who see themselves as unlike the targeted group' (Bacchi 2009: 115). Thus the denouncement of violence against women along with silence regarding other forms and uses of violence can, by itself, be seen as a key means by which hierarchies of (masculine) dominance and difference are enabled and reproduced.

Relatedly, albeit in a different context, Ray, Smith and Wastell's (2003) study of responses to racist offending demonstrates the ways in which the targeting of particular acts and actors contributes to stigmatisation. Targeted approaches, they observed, produce a disproportionate focus on 'extremely violent political extremists' while allowing the 'ordinary' racism of others to 'remain unchallenged' (Ray, Smith and Wastell 2003: 217). Thus, the creation of a category—in this case, the 'racist violent offender'—enables the establishment of a 'moral pariah', distinct and distinguishable from the 'ideal subject of anti-racist discourses' (Ray, Smith and Wastell 2003: 225). Applied here, it can be seen that conceptualising VAW as atypical—the product of deviant

masculinity—has a similar effect, enabling a 'moral pariah' (the 'violent man') that diverts attention from the ordinary, unmarked violences that constitute everyday relations. Focusing on the 'unmanly' violence of other men thus represents a critical point of connection and community for men, a means of performing identity through the (re)assertion of 'normal' masculinity.

Violence against women and children should, and must, be denounced; this is not at issue here. The ways in which violence is constructed and VAW is talked about are, nonetheless, critical and, I argue, have profound implications for social change. In assuming the existence of a category of men who are violent ('violent men'), we risk overlooking the 'complexity of the discursive subject positions men occupy around violence, how they are chained together, and what they conceal' (Gadd et al. 2014: 19). Moreover, framing VAW as 'morally reprehensible' (Gottzén 2013: 198) directs attention towards only certain men, thus contributing to the shaming and stigmatisation of both women³ and men, victims and perpetrators. This is evident in the emotive language used by politicians, the media and in everyday talk. VAW is talked of as 'one of the great shames of Australia' (Turnbull cited in Kenny 2015), a 'scourge' and 'national disgrace' (Kean cited in McCallum 2016), 'abhorrent' (Healy 2016), 'shameful' (Moody 2017), the 'poison in our community' (Kershaw cited in Damjanovic 2016), 'a contagion' (Cavanagh cited in Maddocks 2016), and 'the behaviour of a vile minority of men' (Barry 2017). It is also framed as self-evidently wrong, as both 'utterly unacceptable' (Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins cited in Moody 2017), something that everybody knows is 'wrong' (Social Services Minister Christian Porter cited in Moody 2017), and indicative of weak-will: 'It's not hard ... If the rest of us can control ourselves, so can violent men' (Moody 2017).

Along with the impression of wilful and antisocial defiance, the invocation of shame in this context, both of VAW as shameful and the implicit shaming of its perpetrators, is especially striking. The ways in which VAW is talked about 'create[s] boundaries between us and the Other' by differentiating between 'honourable and shameful subjects' (Gottzén 2016: 163). In other words, violence talk is both embedded in and expresses gendered norms of violence: that is, while men can use violence against other men,⁴ VAW—or against 'physically weaker individuals'—is 'not a legitimate part of doing masculinity' (Gottzén 2016: 167-8). The shame associated with breaching these norms is, according to Gottzén (2016: 168), tied up with the 'fear of being condemned and rejected' as a man. Thus the public *display* of shame can be seen as a crucial means by which men distance themselves 'from the shameful women batterer figure' (Gottzén 2016: 171-172). In expressing shame, the perpetrator of VAW draws a line in the sand; he did a bad thing—and he is 'brave enough to admit what he has done' (Gottzén 2016: 172)—but he is not bad. In condemning his own actions he 'pre-empt[s] censure'; the violence is a 'remnant of the past' that stands in the 'way of [his] true, future non-violent' self' (Gottzén 2016: 173). In this context, the routine misnaming (as, for example, self-defence or passion) and misattribution (mental illness, intoxication, and so on) of VAW likely reflects the ability of some men to position themselves as 'not women batterers but ordinary men who happened to be violent' (Gottzén 2016: 173) as well as the profound ambivalence of the social institutions—including the law and justice systems—that enable this.

One-punch assaults: 'Unspeakable acts of cowardice'⁵

Referred to colloquially as 'king-hits', 'sucker punches', 'knock-outs' or 'coward punches', one-punch assaults occur when a 'single blow to the head causes a victim to fall to the ground unconscious, either from the punch itself or as a result of the impact between the head and the ground' (Schreiber, Williams and Ranson 2016: 332). Because the consequences are generally dire, often involving 'permanent neurological impairment' (Schreiber, Williams and Ranson 2016: 332) or death, one-punch assaults have been associated with considerable community outrage, media coverage and, subsequently, the introduction of new laws and harsher penalties (see Quilter 2017). Commonly, the victims are young men; most assaults occur at night, within the close vicinity of licensed premises, and are perpetrated by 'intoxicated young males'

(Schreiber, Williams and Ranson 2016: 337). According to Flynn, Halsey and Lee (2016: 181), it is the element of randomness that distinguishes one-punch assaults from other instances of man-to-man violence; that they appear to be 'triggerless' and, hence, 'imminent[ly] unpredictab[le]'. The term 'coward punch' captures the sense in which these apparently random and unprovoked acts of violence 'transgress the limits of what we might think of as "honourable" or "respectful" male violence' (Flynn, Halsey and Lee 2016: 181). Thus one-punch assaults, like VAW, are 'dishonourable forms of violence' (emphasis in original).

On the face of it, VAW and one-punch violence are very different phenomena. Whereas VAW occurs in the context of intimacy and relationships, one-punch violence is, on the whole, a public and impersonal act involving men who do not know one another. There are, however, clear parallels in the ways that each is talked about. This is particularly evident in the designation of certain violences—or, rather, certain men—as deviant, perpetrators who are 'not like us' (see Flynn, Halsey and Lee 2016: 184). In the talk about one-punch assaults, the symbolism of 'real men' is exemplified in the partially government funded 'Stop the Coward's Punch' (2016) campaign (at <http://cowardspunchcampaign.com/>). Led by professional boxer Danny Green, the campaign centres on the claim that the '[boxing] ring, the cage or any combat arena ... is the only place a REAL MAN throws a punch' (Stop the Coward's Punch 2016). In this context, the language of 'real men' and cowards/cowardice is used to evoke shame ('being branded a coward is the worst thing for a bloke') and clearly designates these particular incidents of violence as both deviant and thoroughly contemptible. References to the perpetrators of one-punch assaults are especially damning: they are 'scumbag[s] without respect for people or decency' and 'gutless thug[s]' whose actions are 'cowardly [and] disgusting' (Stop the Coward's Punch 2016). Here the denouncement of some violence (the 'coward's punch') hinges on, and thus reinforces, the normativity of other violence (in the sporting arena, for example). Importantly though, it is not men's violence *per se* that is rejected but rather its particular form or circumstances; thus, as Green explains, while 'tempers flare' and fights happen—the business as usual of a night out—there are 'few acts lower than punching someone who can't see it coming' (Stop the Coward's Punch 2016).

The tough-talk surrounding one-punch assaults is certainly not confined to the 'Stop the Coward's Punch' campaign. Media reports, for example, commonly refer to these as a 'scourge on our society' (Hall and Kyriacou 2014) perpetrated by 'drunken thugs' (*The Courier Mail* 2014). Moreover, as is the case for VAW, the discourse of one-punch violence is characterised by its conceptualisation of men and masculinity as both cause and solution. Firstly, the focus of attention is not on masculinity or even masculine violence but, rather, on the ways of being a man that certain (types of) men have adopted. In other words, whether it is attributed to pathology (unwilled) or moral character (willful), the violence is understood in terms of the failure of some men to respect unspoken 'rules' and 'play fair'; the 'first recourse of the personally and socially inadequate, the unintelligent, the cruel and the uncaring' (*The Sunday Mail* 2012). Characteristic also, and mirroring VAW coverage, is the contrasting of the inherent violence and malevolence of the aggressor with the innocence of the victim who is invariably 'very respectable', 'minding his own business' (Davies 2014), from a good family, and so on. Secondly, the reassertion of dominant heteronormative masculinity is central to the denouncement of both one-punch assaults and VAW. The message of News Limited's 'Real Heroes Walk Away' campaign, for instance, that 'heroes' have the 'strength and the self-discipline to walk away' (Dalton et al. 2012), powerfully evokes the imagery of bravery and masculine valour. The weak will of the perpetrator—the 'weak mongrel'⁶ (Collier and Cogdon 2008)—is thus juxtaposed with masculine ideals of strength, rationality and self-control. Similarly, the emphasis on 'man to man conversation', as in the 'Stop the Coward's Punch' campaign, positions violence—or the 'rules' of violence—as essentially *men's business*.

One-punch assaults are commonly framed in one of two ways: as either the outcome of bad *decisions*, as in 'good kids ... getting themselves in trouble by making stupid choices' (Henry 2016)

with tragic, but unforeseen, consequences; or the bad behaviour of a particular 'type' of person—thugs, those 'people who think it's okay to behave in this manner' (Henry 2016). Community awareness campaigns such as 'One Punch Can Kill' (Queensland Homicide Victims Support Group 2013) and 'Step Back Think' (2017) exemplify the former, both focusing on young people, education, social skills, peer influence and violence avoidance strategies. The 'type of person' focus, however, emphasises the bad behaviours associated with 'lack of self control' (Francis 2016), intoxication, aggression, steroid use, trouble-making and general malintent; the 'group of blokes drinking too much [who] have engaged in mindless, stupid breast-beating and ego-inflating violence' (NSW Magistrate Antrum cited in Francis 2016). The randomness of one-punch assaults is especially critical to their designation as 'cowardly acts' which are 'despicable' and 'absolutely shameful' (Stillitano 2016). Thus, it is this combination of the innocence of the victim and their inability to defend themselves that makes this *cowardly* violence: violence that, like VAW, 'transgress[es] the limits of what we might think of as "honourable" or "respectful" male violence'⁷ (Flynn, Halsey and Lee 2016: 181).

One of Australia's previous Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, proclaimed that 'being a man' means 'walking away when provoked' (cited in Piotrowski 2012); more recently, Malcolm Turnbull—the Prime Minister at time of writing—asserted that 'real men don't hit women' (cited in Kenny 2015). Broadly representing the 'tough talk' of violence prevention, both messages invoke the 'negative associations (of weakness and inferiority) of being out of control' (Mehta and Bondi 1999: 79). In this sense, self-control—men's capacity to curb their (natural) capacity for violence—signifies good citizenry and acts as a key reference point for the violent 'other'. Appeals to 'real' men (as in 'real men don't hit women') can thus be seen as a means of 'discursive distancing', enabling the differentiation of violent men—the weak and 'unmanly'—from those men who are 'real' and 'strong' (Bridges and Pascoe 2014: 251). In this way, certain men, already marginalised on the basis of culture, class, and so on, are positioned as the 'bearers of uneducated, backwards, toxic, patriarchal masculinities' (Bridges and Pascoe 2014: 253). By reaffirming the very 'qualities that typify hegemonic masculine forms and dominance' (Bridges and Pascoe 2014: 251), violence-talk contributes to the fortification of 'symbolic and social boundaries' (Bridges and Pascoe 2014: 247); the social hierarchies associated with the collective advantaging of men over women and some men over other men.

Constructing masculinity, negotiating violence

There is growing recognition of the complex relationship between men's use of violence and the construct of masculinity (see, for example, Hearn 2012, Gottzén 2013, Salter 2016, Sundaram 2013). The *capacity* to enact or resist violence, for example, is increasingly understood as significant, highlighting the need to look beyond the activity (or acts) of violence to the ways in which men actively negotiate their involvements in/with violence. Critically, this highlights the contingency of the masculinity-violence association; that the accomplishment of masculinity is not simply a matter of either engaging in or abstaining from violence but, rather, of 'mastering the *balancing* between these two opposites' (Ravn 2017: 14, emphasis in original). As shown by Ravn (2017: 14), the boundaries between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' violence are both 'highly context dependent' and reliant on 'normative judgements'. The decision to engage in violence thus hinges upon perceptions regarding both the 'fairness' of the fight and the 'worthiness' of the opponent/s and victim/s, within the context of normative masculinities (Ravn 2017: 12). Depending on the situation, then, 'acceptable and legitimate (masculine) identities' could be achieved by demonstrating either the 'capacity to act violently' or the 'ability to *resist* from a violent response' (Ravn 2017: 7, emphasis in original). In this context, 'distancing oneself from violence' can be seen as an important means for (re)asserting dominant masculinity; a way of presenting oneself as 'the bigger person' who is 'able to take a step back' and 'act in a controlled and rational manner' (Ravn 2017: 11).

While the constant presence of violence in men's, particularly young men's, lives has been discussed widely, relatively less attention has been given to the complexities of men's engagements with violence. Moving away from 'tough talk' approaches to violence prevention requires a better understanding of not only the nuanced ways in which men actively identify and negotiate their alignment with dominant masculinities but also the implications for awareness campaigns. Research such as that undertaken by Honkatukia, Nyqvist and Pösö (2007: 65), for example, highlights the cognitive work associated with 'rational weighing between one's own safety and keeping up a good reputation'. Sundaram's (2013) finding that behaviour perceived as 'deserved' or understandable is less likely to be named as 'violence' further emphasises the importance of context. Thus behaviours that might otherwise be acknowledged as 'unacceptable or wrong' are normalised—justified as the 'natural response to a given situation (*for a man*)' (Sundaram 2013: 902, emphasis added). The juxtaposition of 'controlled violent masculinity' and 'emotionally weak masculinity' (Honkatukia, Nyqvist and Pösö 2007: 65) is especially significant. While the association of violence and power—that is, the use of violence to control people and situations—is widely understood, references to 'gutless cowards' (VAW) and 'mindless, stupid, breast-beating' (one-punch assaults) highlight, as shown here, the extent to which constructing violence as *controlled* legitimatises its use.⁸ Paying attention to the contextual meanings attributed to violence enables us to see the ambiguities, contradictions and silences inherent in the distinction drawn between legitimate(ised) violence such as that associated with sport, army training, self-defence and professional fights, and other violences—including VAW and 'one-punch' assaults—that are seen as irrational and/or 'uncontrolled' (see Mehta and Bondi 1999).

Masculinity and/in violence prevention

Violence prevention (VP) policies and programs are not created in a vacuum but, rather, within the context of broader understandings of gender and violence (Castelino 2014). In this respect, it should not be surprising that the complexities of gender, masculinities and violence are so poorly reflected in VP across Australia. A binary—either/or—view of violence and non-violence and alignment of 'good' men and non-violence (see Salter 2016) underpins much of the public discourse concerning VP. A focus on male beliefs and attitudes and the targeting of 'male gender norms to change men's behaviours' (Fleming, Lee and Dworkin 2014: 1029) is also common across prevention programs in contexts including VAW and men's health (but see also Castelino 2014). While this is a global trend, as seen in the examples considered in this article, and not unique to Australia, it nonetheless resonates strongly here: as Salter (2015a) observes, 'every man and boy in Australia has been told, at some point and probably more than once, that "real men don't hit women"'. VP in Australia is invariably expressed through appeals to 'good' men—to 'man up, 'stand up' and 'speak out'. The premise of the *Be the Hero!* VP program, for example, is that '[m]ost men are good, decent, honourable human beings' (Victoria Women's Trust 2008; Nirodah n.d.). Good men, it claims, 'have got it worked out': they 'choose the non-violent way, value care and respect' and 'know that bravery and courage are inconsistent with being violent'. Good men, then, are not just non-violent but actively *against* violence. Distinguishable from other 'other' men, good men protect and 'stand up' for women by 'speaking out' about other men's violence (White Ribbon Australia 2018).

VP programs that present 'strength and power as natural resources for men' (Bridges and Pascoe 2014: 251) risk perpetuating gender inequality by reinforcing an essentialist, binary view of gender. Campaigns that draw upon masculine ideals, wittingly or not, exploit the 'higher social status and power afforded to "real" men' (Fleming, Lee and Dworkin 2014: 1029) while also bolstering this by 'lending [it their] institutional weight' (Fleming, Lee and Dworkin 2014: 1032). Importantly, because they tap into broader cultural encouragement for 'a particular kind of "subject"—the "strong", physically dominant male' (Flynn, Halsey and Lee 2016: 191), these campaigns risk endorsing the 'very attitudes they seek to change' (Salter 2015a: 19) while underplaying the necessity for structural and cultural change. Crucially, such approaches overlook the investments that (all) men—and women—have in the gendered status quo (see, for

example, Cornwall 2016: 6) as well as the very different stakes across diverse groups and social locations. Explaining violence through reference to masculinity or, rather, a certain 'type' of masculinity—'traditional' (Commonwealth of Australia 2010: 26), hegemonic, and so on—is also problematic in other ways, not least the failure to consider 'systems of differentiation of and between men's practices' (Hearn 2012: 601; see also Hearn 2010). Condemnatory approaches to VP, therefore, risk 'revaloris[ing] other dominant forms of men/masculinity, such as the "superiority" of non-violent or less obviously violent men/masculinity' (Hearn 2012: 602). It is in this sense that claims to the 'subject position of masculine protector and moral guardian' (Gadd et al. 2014: 17) can be seen as important identity work, ensuring that the spotlight remains on those "[m]ad" men, "scumbags", ethnic minorities and Islamic zealots [who are] the *real* abusers, the real problem' (Gadd et al. 2014: 18, emphasis added). It is equally problematic to assume a straightforward distinction between those who do and do not support violence. As evidenced in this article, the denouncement of VAW and one-punch assaults is, by far, the dominant theme of public discourse. Given that men's violence continues largely unabated, it seems clear that something more than condemnation is needed; men's identifications with violence are, to put it mildly, enormously complex.

Violence: Ordinary and everyday

Violence is not universally condemned, nor is there broad agreement regarding its meaning, characteristics and features. Flynn, Halsey and Lee (2016: 192), for example, refer to the "truth games" concerning what does and does not count as violence in everyday life'. Focusing on the nuances of violence, however, and what it 'says' about the man using it, acknowledges both the embeddedness of everyday violence and the very ordinariness of violence. Thus, despite its association with a deviant minority of men, violence—or more accurately the *capacity* for violence—is normal(ised) and can be seen as, in many respects, *prosocial*. Recognising that violence is integral to men's lives and relations, however, is not to say that all men are violent but, rather, highlights the complex interplay of violence and masculinity. The relationship between violence and power, as highlighted by Hearn (2012), is also complex in that violence may be understood as an expression of both power (as power over people and events) *and* loss of power. This is especially evident in the framing of VAW and one-punch violence as shameful and cowardly, illustrating the limitations of focussing on violence as aberration.

Certain masculinities—in Australia, most notably Indigenous masculinities and migrant/ethnic masculinities—are 'highly visible and pathologised' (Bilge 2009: 17). Focusing critically on discourses of violence—violence-talk—represents a profound shift, away from the violence of certain 'types' of men and the assumption of 'violent masculinity'. Paying attention, instead, to the dominant themes and messages of prevention makes it possible, as shown here, to see the gaps, the silences and the taken-for-granted; the 'right here' rather than the 'over there'. This is to turn the spotlight around, recognising that the association of violence with an 'aggressive, less self-controlled, subordinate masculinity' (Coleman 2007: 210) embodied by certain kinds of men, provides access to a solidarity of sorts with associated 'material and social benefits' (Mehta and Bondi 1999: 79). This is not an easy or comfortable position to take; it brings into focus both the structural relations of society and the fundamental inequities of (unearned) advantage and (undeserved) disadvantage. In short, paying attention to certain violence (in the identification, naming, judgement, differential evaluation of, and so on) risks perpetuating the stigmatisation that is so central to societal inequality and, in turn, to violence itself.

Conclusion

In this paper I have explored the ways in which particular forms of violence, namely violence against women and one-punch violence, are framed in everyday discourses, including those of violence prevention in Australia. I have argued that these framings, conceptualised as 'violence-talk' and in the form of diverse media texts, provide a critical context for identity work. Positioning oneself as 'against violence' thus enables the (re)production and performance of

(dominant) masculinity. The alignment of violence with particular 'types' of men and masculinity *matters*, then; it not only obscures the complex relationship between gender identity (masculinity/ies) and violence but also provides a smokescreen for the ubiquitous ordinariness of 'state and socially sanctioned' violences (Hearn and McKie 2008: 82). This is to recognise that, while violence is central to 'patriarchal relations', men and violence 'are not equivalents' (Hearn 2012: 603). Thus, rather than asking what it is about *men* that accounts for 'their' violence, we might turn our attention to the very construct of gender by, for example, questioning what is *asked* of not only men and women but also of *different* men and women within the context of structural injustice.

The growing focus on men's roles and responsibility in VP is evidence of the substantial progress, most notably in the advancement of gender equality and politicisation of VAW, achieved through the collective and sustained efforts of feminist activists over many years. Men have a critical role to play in debating, responding to and preventing societal violence more broadly. Violence-talk—what men and women say about violence, in public and in private—matters, though; in this respect, good intentions are not enough. Violence evokes strong emotions—of fear, distress, anger, outrage, shock, betrayal, and so on. Fixing violence to particular people—to 'violent men' as a category—is a familiar narrative, a form of collective 'sensemaking' (see Weick 1995). What I am proposing here is very different: that violence is, above all else, a social justice issue; that it is the very arrangements of society that enable—indeed ensure—the entrenched symbiosis of violence and social division. This unsettles those deep-seated assumptions that link violence to people of particular 'types' and dispositions; that violence is something you *are*, that it is possible to categorise men as 'violent' or 'non-violent', and so on. Engaging, instead, with the 'cultural significance of violence' (Ravn 2017: 15)—the depth, nuance and complexity of its contextual meaning/s—fundamentally challenges this dominant logic, instead drawing attention to 'hierarchical and oppositional social relations' (Greig 2001: 7)—societal structures and cultural values—that are fundamental to violence in all its forms.

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¹ The start date of 1/4/2012 was chosen to include coverage related to the 'Real Heroes Walk Away' campaign, News Limited's response to the 'epidemic' of 'king-hit' violence (Dalton 2012: 15 September; Dalton et al. 2012: 14 September).

² Glassey (2017:13 January) "'You mongrel" ...', *Warwick Daily News*

³ See, for example, Salter's (2015b) discussion of the problems associated with the promotion of gender stereotypes in this space; both the 'stereotypical view of women as too weak to defend themselves' and the stigmatisation of women 'who exercise their right to defend themselves against male violence'.

⁴ Most obviously within the sporting arena but this is also as an enduring theme of popular culture in its various forms. See, for example, Parsons (2017): 'At some point you will not be able to walk away. ... You might bump into someone in a bar who will simply not accept your apology. You might wake in the night with a burglar standing at the foot of the bed. You might hear some random goon insult someone you love. What are you going to do about it? You are not going to walk away. You are going to take the initiative while always remembering that you should never hit anyone who you are not prepared to keep hitting'.

⁵ The then Premier of Victoria, Denis Napthine, cited in AAP (2014).

⁶ While outside of the designated five-year period, this article has been included here because of the media attention devoted to the event that it describes, with extensive press coverage and related commentary (of which this article is indicative).

⁷ Here Flynn, Halsey and Lee (2016: 191) are referring to the 'prevalence and social sanctioning' of violence in the context of other "acceptable", but arguably violent, cultural milieus in Australia'.

⁸ A key message of Danny Green's 'Stop The Coward's Punch' (2016) campaign, for example, is the distinction between the controlled violence of the sporting realm and what he refers to as 'going out and cracking someone'. Green (cited in Henry 2016) argues that 'there is no correlation between what I do as a sport and what happens on the streets'.

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