

The measure of a man: masculinity and violence in fight club research paper examp...

[Sociology](#), [Violence](#)



Was violence a necessary and effective vehicle in characterising man's masculinity in Fight Club?

In a research conducted by Johan Galtung, 95% of all violence committed in the world today is attributed to men (1). However, this does not signify that all men are violent or that violence is exclusive to men. Rather, the study shows that violence seems to be exercised by men to a greater degree. This attitude of men towards violence is best explained through the differences among individuals prescribed by the society in terms of gender. According to Raewyn Connell, a notable researcher in the field of gender and masculinity, gender is “ the structure of social relations that centers on the reproductive arena, and the set of practices that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes” (11). These practices are not internal to the individual but involve social relations that formed individual lives and social world. History shows that men have been perceived as the dominant gender, and with this dominance comes their need to control. Although Galtung's study does not indicate the correlation of control and violence in crimes committed by men, the link between masculinity and violence serves as the central theme in the movie Fight Club.

Fight Club revolves around a man's struggle to reclaim masculinity and control through violence. Jack, the narrator, is an insomniac who realizes that he is trapped in a corporate oppression that rendered him powerless. In an attempt to release some of his frustrations which are partly caused by insomnia and depression, he attends support groups for the chronically and terminally ill. In these occasions, he is able to experience human contact that he does not get in his

life, giving him the freedom to let go and feel more alive. “ Every evening, I died, and every evening, I was born.” (12). However, this feeling was altered by even greater frustrations when he met Marla Singer, a woman whom he sees as another faker like himself attending the same support groups that he goes to. He feels uncomfortable seeing Marla, so he chooses to stop going to the support groups to avoid her, which brings him back to his previous struggles. As he continues to live with less sleep and surmounting frustrations over his predicament, he meets Tyler Durden. Durden brings up the idea of co-founding Fight Club, an underground club that offers men the opportunity to reclaim their lost manhood by pounding on each other. This is when Jack realizes “ that when I came home angry and knowing that my life wasn't toeing my five-year plan, I could clean my condominium or detail my car” (Palahniuk 33) is not enough. He realizes that perhaps it is self-destruction that will give him what he is looking for in life, “ that they have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves (Palahniuk 33). Jack finds satisfaction in being able to fight and bearing bruises from these fights. Tyler explains to him that being a man is not “ looking the way a sculptor or an art director says” (Palahniuk 34), rather it is the ability and the courage of a man to fight that describes a man. During the 50's and 60's, parents were allowed by the law to smack their children, while corporal punishment in school has already been banned as early as 1963. However, people back then accepted the idea that fights between boys are common and are not considered to be an act of violence. A study conducted by Foldin Protective School for boys with behaviour problems in 1950-1960 showed that boys who show hesitation in exercising violence and

chose not to fight when asked to fight were labeled as soft, pathetic and cowardly by the school staff themselves. These days, schoolyard fights are no longer expected behaviour from boys as it is already considered an act of violence. However, society still considers boys “ unmanly” when they exhibit weakness, cowardice and lack of self-control. Gatul states that the definition of violence in relation to masculinity differ between cultures, society and time. However, it would seem that the characterisation of being “ unmanly” by showing weakness and cowardice during a fight has not changed even after the passing of time. Men who are able to defend themselves in any given situation is are considered masculine (Krienert). This illustrates the idea that more than looking like a man, or having the bodily structures and processes of human reproduction as discussed by Connell, being able to fight is a more important definition of man prescribed by society itself.

In a scene from the story, Jack and Tyler were looking down at the big O of Jack’s mouth surrounded with blood on the floor after a fight. Tyler considers this as something “ cool” and Jack goes on to shake his opponent’s hand and say “ Good fight” (Palahniuk 35). Fight club is able to form a sense of brotherhood among men, that even two men recovering from drugs would be seen hanging out together all throughout the night both wasted and smiling from fighting so hard (Palahniuk 102). This sense of brotherhood is similar with that which exists between gang members, described by Salo in his study in a South African community as an “ expression of social cohesion in peripheral communities that exist within, and are an integral aspect of, both the cultural and economic reproduction of personhood in a township community” (Salo 149). Salo points out that gang members are also sons,

brothers, husbands, fathers and lovers, making the rites of passage that involve violent beatings and painful tattooing acts of transition of men into adulthood. This explains why despite the violent, deviant and unsocial behaviour characteristics attached on gangs, which are also the same characteristics that define the Fight Club, a strong sense of camaraderie exists among its members, and are supported by certain societies such as that in South Africa. These examples highlight how masculinity exhibited through acts of violence can forge a strong bond between men regardless of their background, as that shown in the story.

In one of Tyler's many beliefs expressed in the story, he talked about getting God's attention for the club to achieve damnation or redemption. "Unless we get God's attention, we have no hope of damnation or Redemption. Which is worse, hell or nothing?" (Palahniuk 103). Tyler emphasises the importance of making themselves known to the public, which they can achieve through Project Splinter, a group that aims to bring urban terrorism. This shows how Tyler wants to empower men whom he considers to be "the strongest and the smartest who have ever lived," but are reduced to lowly jobs that had them "pumping gas and waiting tables" (109). Through the different committees – Arson, Assault, Mischief and Misinformation, Tyler and Jack unleashes fear and chaos through use of violence in an attempt to get the attention of the wealthy and the powerful. This situation was also shown in a study by (Streicher 71) which looked at how gangs in Dili in East Timor creatively constructed masculinities and violence through reinventing themselves as "youth gangs" in their struggle to have their voice heard in the society (Streicher 71). Participants in the said study talked about how

they feel that the government refuses to listen to their demands, making them resort to violence clashes in order to get attention. The gang, particularly the Gang Kulau, became notorious for being violent but was also able to get the support of government representatives, NGOs and international researchers.

Known as a nation that has suffered from a long period of violent regime that was able to show a remarkable potential of being “civilised” in just a short period of time, the clashes created by the gang proved to be a huge disappointment to the government. This had the government and all other international observers listening to the demands of the gang, thereby giving light to how violence instigated by masculinity can at times translate to positive results such as opening communication channels between authority and gangs, as well as giving to the emergence of better job opportunities in order to “civilise” the youth that have “gone wild” (Streicher 71).

As Tyler continues to talk about Project Mayhem, he enforces its purpose of helping men to find the masculinity that they have lost on American consumerism by targeting the symbols of consumer culture like corporate art, the buildings where records of major credit card companies are kept and franchise coffee shops. “What we have to do, people, is remind these guys what kind of power they still have” (Palahniuk 85). This desire to achieve masculinity through the use of violence is what Gatul considers an expression for a “masculinity project” which aims to create a masculine identity (4). In order to identify a man’s masculine identity, distinguishing violence considered taboo from other types is important. Taboo violence, as stated in the study, is violence perceived by society as objectionable, such

as violence towards women or children or towards a person inferior in strength compared to the one instigating violence. On the other hand, violence which is not considered to be taboo is that which the perpetrator perceives to be not problematic by thinking that he has not done any wrongdoing to someone. It is this kind of violence which is not taboo, that Tyler is referring to behind the formation of Project Mayhem.

Violence against men enforces the image of male identity as aggressive and unafraid, which at times help them gain respect.

Similarly, this masculine identity is also at play in *Fight Club*, as even though fighting against men may be considered violent, it is aimed to help men fight things that they are too scared to fight. Men come to fight, regardless if they win or lose. As Tyler puts it, "You aren't alive anywhere like you're alive at fight club" (35). For people like Jack, who recognizes the loss of his masculinity, and those members of the support groups that he went to, *Fight Club* gives them renewed energy in their rediscovery of their masculinity. It is interesting to take note of how people in recovery from something such as Bob, find new purpose and strength that they were not able to get from their support groups. They fight "as if the only choice they have left is how they're going to die and they want to die in a fight" (Palahniuk 102).

People have mixed ideas about the story, some criticising it for being irresponsible as it promotes male revolt against a constraining culture brought about by private corporations. There are some who appreciate the story for bringing into the people's awareness the problem of emasculative capitalism and its link with violent solutions. According to Suzanne Clark, the

“ brilliant artistic representation of violent acts” in the story may instigate a discourse centred on gender identity and violence, thereby providing “ space for some public discussion” (419). Although people may consider the violence in the story disruptive, the primary purpose of Fight Club was to help men battle their frustrations. For this reason, the inclusion of violence in the story as a method to characterise men’s masculinity was necessary and effective. As indicated in the studies, fighting gives men a sense of masculinity. In order for people to accept this, it is important to understand that not all forms of violence are negative in nature, as that of a consensus fight between two men, or when a man does not back down from a fight either when provoked or when a need to protect himself arises. Perhaps some will question this method that men used in the story, but it must be allowed that men, like women, “ are faced with a society in which neither are the masters of their fate” (Faludi 1). As Faludi puts it, “ As men struggle to free themselves from their crisis, their task is not, in the end, to figure out how to be masculine – rather, their masculinity lies in figuring out how to be human” (1).

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