

# An ethnographic study of sources of conflict between young men in the context of the night out

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## Abstract

This paper describes an ethnographic study of male values and interpersonal conflict in the context of evening social events in the North of England. The study involved participant observations, assisted by discussions with 'guides', and interviews with participants. It became apparent that the understanding of conflict required appreciation of the social context, 'the night out'. Important themes that are described include the following: the perceived aim of the night out ('to have a laff') and different ways this was achieved; the appraisal of other men; provoking situations; the sequence leading up to aggressive verbal exchanges and to fights; the role of alcohol; the importance of physical aggression in gaining status; the importance attached to responding to a challenge or insult by men and women; age differences; and 'banter' and story-telling among all-male groups. The findings are discussed in relation to previous ethnographic observations of physical aggression between men in bars, and are interpreted within the framework of evolutionary psychology.

**Keywords:** masculinity, conflict, violence, status, alcohol, sex differences, ethnography

## Introduction

The characteristics that are associated with men and valued by them have been studied from a number of perspectives. Quantitative social psychology has yielded rating scales specifically concerned with masculine attributes (e.g., Mosher and Sirkin 1984; Thompson and Pleck 1986; Thompson, Pleck and Ferrera 1992). They have been used in studies linking individual differences in these attributes to a range of anti-social activities, such as drinking and driving (Mosher and Sirkin 1984), alcohol and drug use (Pleck, Sonenstein and Kw 1993), rape proclivity, and unsympathetic attitudes to women who are victims of sexual aggression (Beaver, Gold and Prisco 1992; Mosher and Anderson 1986; Smeaton and Byrne 1987). Another perspective, lying outside the positivist framework, involves a critical discursive approach to gender, and is usually associated with qualitative research (Connell 1995; Edley and Wetherell 1999; Willott and Griffin 1999). This perspective involves analysing the meanings and assumptions behind conceptions of masculinity, and has its theoretical roots in analyses of the human condition such as psychoanalysis, existentialism, Marxism and feminism (Connell 1987; Jefferson 1994).

Both of these different perspectives view masculine values from the standpoint of the standard social science model (SSSM), a term used by evolutionary psychologists to characterize the assumption that all human behaviour can be explained in terms of cultural influences, and the learning processes through which these are transmitted. This contrasts with the view of masculine values taken by evolutionary psychologists, who have emphasized the link with characteristics that would, in pre-state societies, aid a man's biological fitness (Archer 1994; Daly and Wilson 1988, 1994), especially where there is inequality of ownership (Nisbett 1990).

The present paper describes a qualitative study of masculinity and physical aggression, which is regarded as complementing (rather than replacing) more traditional quantitative methods, and is informed by an evolutionary rather than a critical discursive perspective. Ethnography provides a way of investigating areas of social life that are not open to the majority of the population. It is therefore particularly appropriate for providing accounts of 'closed' social worlds, such as those of schools (Beynon 1989), young working-class men (Parker 1974) and other subcultures. Some existing ethnographic research provides accounts of male interpersonal aggression, such as gang violence (Patrick 1973) and football hooliganism (Williams, Dunning and Murphy 1989). Nevertheless, there are few studies on the relatively common acts of male interpersonal aggression such as arguments, fights and brawls. Exceptions are those by Dyck (1980), Graham, La Rocque, Yetman, Ross and Guistra (1980), Leary (1976) and Tomsen (1997), all of whom focused on bars as environments where fights are likely to start, or accounts of fights are likely to be recalled.

Dyck (1980) studied masculinity and violence in a Canadian logging town. He likened fighting or 'scrapping' to a sport, and pointed out that to the people concerned being an accomplished scrapper brought repute and esteem. The social context of this reputation – the barroom – was all-important. Although relatively common, these violent incidents did not cause concern to the local police because they rarely resulted in serious injury. Scrapping was, however, governed by an unspoken set of rules recognized by barroom patrons and local magistrates alike, who distinguish it from unwarranted assaults and fights: scrapping involved participants who more or less agreed to settle their differences with their fists.

Dyck found that most fights occurred between men aged between 18 and 25 years, and that curtailment of fighting was usually voluntary. Fights were short, usually lasting between thirty seconds and three minutes, although the build-up may be considerably longer. The instigation was usually a perceived insult to a man's dignity or 'barroom identity', which could involve apparently trivial matters, such as 'hard looks' exchanged between men or the accidental spilling of a glass of beer.

Although scrapping was a male activity, this did not mean that men who did not scrap lacked masculinity. The barroom enabled men to adopt various identities and to inhabit various zones. Non-scrappers refrained from discussing fighting, and could assume the identity of 'joker'. The identity of a 'scrapper' appeared to convey esteem and an element of social power within the barroom. Age also played an important role in fighting, with younger men being very sensitive to perceived slights, and quick to respond to challenges, although not necessarily adept at gauging the ability of their opponents. Younger men also engaged in fights to decide whether or not to assume the identity of scrapper. Central to the identity of both the 'scrapper', and to men who were not scrappers but who were rarely challenged, was the ability to 'look after oneself', to be able to defend oneself effectively if challenged.

Although an important source of descriptive detail, Dyck's study is limited in scope. There is no adequate account of the method: a footnote says that 'more than a few of his evenings were spent in barrooms' but there is no indication of the range of bars visited, how representative they were, or the sources of the descriptions. These drawbacks were not shared by the earlier study of barrooms in American rural towns by Leary (1976), which also involved drawing more detailed accounts from interviews (of eighteen 'informants') and observations, and included an analysis of the sequences of events that comprise a fight.

Most fights were between working-class men aged between 18 and 30 years. They were usually preceded by verbal conflict, although this did not always lead to a fight. Fights would either be broken up by 'audience intervention' or continue, eventually producing a victor. After intervention

or victory, a phase of reconciliation may occur, for instance marked by shaking hands. If reconciliation did not occur, this may lead to a future fight. Leary also pointed out the rules governing the social situation of the fight, including the minor physical costs and the social benefit. Fighters recognized that an audience would praise them after the fight and intervene when it became dangerous. Leary was also particularly interested in the fight story and analysed its role, not as a narrative, but as conversation that depended a great deal on the presence of an active audience.

Tomsen (1997) set out to observe fights in Australian bars that he termed 'highly violent venues', based on conversations with patrons and local police. The patrons of the bars were again young working-class men. Tomsen (1997) based his account on direct observation of some thirty-seven assaults and semi-structured interviews with a small sample of regular drinkers. He identified the importance of establishing and maintaining a tough male identity by surviving insults, challenges and actual physical assault. He noted that many violent incidents could be understood in terms of protecting male honour: challenges, and therefore fights, could arise from allegations of cheating at a game of pool, approaches made to girlfriends, and arguments over bumping and spilt drinks. When inflamed by insults, threats and other retorts, such challenges escalated. Tomsen identified refusal of entry and ejection by bar or security staff as the most common cause of physical aggression. This appeared to provoke aggression because drinkers saw the act as unfair and took it as a personal insult. Indeed, doormen initiated a third of the fights that Tomsen observed. He also identified cases where victims of assault were chosen because they were judged to be unable to retaliate effectively. He argued that the heavy drinking and aggressive behaviour that occurred in these bars helped to establish a tough male image, which simultaneously involved a rejection of middle-class values. He also made a clear and causal link between violence and high levels of intoxication during public drinking. He pointed out that rowdy behaviour, such as arguing and swearing, acts to establish drinking as 'time out' – separate from work and from the restrictions of middle-class codes of conduct.

It is evident from these three studies that particular male values play a central role in determining involvement in interpersonal aggression, and indeed such values appear to mediate escalation of disputes. Gilmore (1990) analysed cross-cultural themes in male value systems, and argued that there is a common pattern underlying surface variations in masculine behaviour. Gilmore was concerned with the consensual ideals a society holds about masculinity. His is part of a body of research indicating that many different cultures share a significant number of similarities in terms of their conceptions of masculinity (Brandes 1980; Gregor 1985; Lonner 1980; Raphael 1988). Central to notions of masculinity is that 'manhood' must be earned. It is significant that behaviour that affirms masculinity

often involves risk-taking. It is apparent in a wide range of cultures that young men must also affirm their masculinity by challenging insults and protecting honour with physical violence if necessary (e.g., Archer, Holloway and McLoughlin 1995; Lewis 1961; Cohen and Nisbett 1994; Gilmore 1990).

The consistent link between masculinity and willingness to engage in violent behaviour accords with evolutionary analyses that identify more intense male than female reproductive competition, arising from sexual selection, as the ultimate reason for escalation in response to a challenge (Archer 1994; Daly and Wilson 1988). Much of this male competition is indirect, taking the form of fighting over resources necessary for reproduction, or over reputation, which under circumstances where there is no effective rule of law, is necessary for defending women and children from other men (Daly and Wilson 1988). This analysis identifies the importance of features such as reputation and honour within the masculine social world, in that they ultimately provide evolutionary benefits.

The present study was initially designed to provide a discursive account of acts of physical aggression occurring during the course of Friday and Saturday social nights out in town centres in the North of England, to supplement the previous accounts reviewed above. It also provided the first of a series of multi-method investigations of masculinity and violence (Benson, 2001). The original aim was to document acts of physical aggression between young men in a 'natural environment'. As the observations progressed, it was evident that such acts were less common than was first thought, and formed part of the generation and resolution of conflicts within a particular social context. Therefore other elements of inter-male interactions, including inter-male conversations, conceptions of masculinity and how young men respond in various social situations, became the focus of the research.

## **Method**

The ethnographic method involves the researcher participating in the experiences being studied. The demographic and social characteristics of the first author (the researcher) were not too far removed from those of the people being studied: he was 30 years of age at the beginning of the study. In addition, he attended a gym, shared styles of dress that were fashionable at the time, and engaged in sporting activities and social events that further assisted in the data collection. Since it was clear that participating in a 'night out' would normally require drinking a considerable amount of alcohol, and since doing so would adversely effect the research process, the researcher drank non-alcoholic 'beer' and/or claimed to be driving, so as not to be too conspicuous.

The observations were carried out in two phases, the first more general and the second more focused. Ten evening observations were undertaken for the first phase, three in Wigan, four in Huddersfield (winter 1994/95), and three more in Huddersfield (winter 1995/96). For the second, more focused, phase, five observations were conducted in Huddersfield in spring and summer of 1996 and two in the spring of 1997. Overall 110 hours of observations were undertaken (from 14 pubs and 4 nightclubs in Wigan, and 10 pubs and 3 nightclubs in Huddersfield). Wigan and Huddersfield are both large towns in the North of England that have a large working-class population. Both were based around heavy industry, coal-mining in the case of Wigan, and cotton mills in the case of Huddersfield. The population of Wigan is 312,000 and that of Huddersfield is 130,000.

The observations focused on 'nights out', social events that could last up to eight or more hours each. The observations would begin at approximately 7.30 p.m. and could continue until nightclubs closed at 2 a.m. or even later. They involved visiting various public houses and nightclubs and observing interactions in the streets where these places were situated. Immediate note-taking was avoided as it would have attracted attention. A tape recorder was likewise avoided as this might be mistaken for a police radio. Instead, the researcher had to rely on memory, but also involved other people in the research. These involved three main 'guides', who were aware of the research aims, had a good knowledge of the area and knew some local people, and were involved in discussing various points after the observation had been completed. The discussions with guides usually took place in the morning afterwards, but on two occasions directly followed the observation. Notes on the observations were also written up during the following mornings on forms which were refined as the study progressed.

The methods of data collection were thus direct observation, unstructured interviews with the guides, and also casual interviews undertaken during the course of the observations (varying from 5 to 20 or more minutes). The guides usually introduced the people who were interviewed (who were largely unaware of the research aims). Their ages ranged from late teens to early 40s, but the most were between 18 and 24 years. Regular interviews were undertaken with 10 young men (18–24 years), and 7 young women (18–25 years). The questions varied according to who was involved. People would usually be asked about which pubs and nightclubs were 'rough' ones, how many fights there were there, and what the fights were about. This typically drew the person on to their general experience of violence, so that questions could be asked about why people fought. They were then asked what it meant to be 'hard' and how one could tell that someone was 'hard'. Topics arising out of general conversation led to further questioning, for example concerning appraising other men, appraising women, attitudes towards and experiences of violence, and general male attitudes.

In addition, the observations were discussed with groups of 17–19-year-olds (from Psychology GCSE and A-level groups), who regularly went out to pubs and clubs in Huddersfield and Halifax. The groups varied in size from 14 to 25, of both sexes, and there were 15 such discussions. They acted as a source of validation for the observations. These people's remarks were generally supportive of the observations and of the conclusions drawn.

## Results

### **Stage 1: General observations**

#### *The context of the night out*

It was apparent that the 'night out' was the high point of the week for a large number of young people, in terms of the money spent on it, the time devoted to preparation, and the remarks of people who were interviewed. This was particularly true of employed people, who may visit a 'local' pub mid-week or even go to a nightclub, but for whom the Friday or Saturday 'night out' was the most important social event of the week. For students or unemployed people, it may be the only social event in their week.

The 'night out' generally involved visiting a number of 'lively' (i.e., noisy and crowded) pubs and ending with a nightclub or at an Asian restaurant. The majority of people were dressed neatly – enabling them to enter the pubs and clubs – in a fashion that was frequently described as 'smart but casual'. The neatness of their dress also separated them from the world of work: many men who had manual jobs, or were unemployed, dressed smartly, in some cases wearing ties, only at the weekend. An exception to this type of dress was the minority of young people who belonged to a particular subculture (e.g., heavy metal fans, 'crusties'<sup>1</sup> or punks), although their aims and objectives for a night out appeared no different from others. They also visited specific pubs and clubs, and their friendship groups tended to comprise both sexes, contrasting with the majority of those on a 'night out' who were initially in same-sex groups, including a significant number of men who were in groups of four or five.

#### *The aim of the night out: 'having a laff'<sup>2</sup>*

It was apparent that the aim of the evening was to 'have a laff', a term that conveyed a host of meanings, but was so widely understood that it was seen as requiring no further elaboration. Indeed, to most interviewees, its meaning was so clearly manifest ('you know, have a laff'), that enquiring about what it meant was met with incredulity ('course you know what I mean') or suspicion. Further questioning revealed that it encompassed

several activities, ranging from practical jokes to meeting members of the opposite sex. It could also encompass assault. Although there was a common core meaning, the phrase meant different things to different people. For example, to a group of young women, being 'chatted up' or flirting was 'a laff', but to one small group of men, a brawl in a city centre pub had been 'a laff'. There was also recognition that what was 'a laff' depended on the state of the person and the context: for example:

'It was a laff at the time, you know, we were pissed.'

It would appear that a key element of 'having a laff' was to do something out of the ordinary, different from mundane everyday life. This theme of an escape from ordinary existence was a common feature of the remarks made by people when they are 'out', as these comments indicate:

'work is boring, you just want to let it all out at the weekend' (22-year-old male).

'you want to have a laff, you know do something different' (19-year-old male).

Drinking alcohol was central to 'having a laff' for most of the young people interviewed. Many went out with the stated intention of 'getting pissed', although 'getting off with' (meeting), a member of the opposite sex<sup>3</sup> was often the preferred aim, particularly for men (including 'attached' ones). In some cases, getting drunk was the primary purpose of the 'night out'. Drunkenness was common among younger women, those between 16 and 21 years of age.

### *Sources of conflict*

The large number of groups of young men, the crowded nature of most pubs and clubs, and the effects of alcohol consumption provided much scope for conflicts and disagreements. One common precipitating act was spilling another's drink, and another was being thought to have looked at someone's girlfriend in an inappropriate manner. Spilling drinks was inevitable in many of the more crowded pubs and apologies were usually given and accepted in a boisterous, friendly, fashion. However, there was a tendency for younger men in particular to be more hostile, and to use events such as spilling a drink as an excuse to begin a confrontation. Conflict often occurred when one man perceived another to be making advances to his girlfriend or to a woman to whom he was attracted. When asked about the reason for such conflict, many young men stated that it was to protect their

own reputation, since such behaviour was obviously 'taking the piss', i.e. it amounted to a challenge to them.

It soon became apparent that there was a much lower frequency of actual fights than expected. This contrasted with comments by some guides, such as:

'It is quiet tonight, you should have seen it last week.'

'Oh, you just missed a good one.'

Some interviewees commented on the lower level of fighting than at times in the past:

'Oh, you should have seen it here two years ago, fighting all the time.

It's really quietened down' (22-year-old man).

When asked why this was the case, this person replied:

'People have got less money to spend on going out and getting pissed.'

Conflict in its wider sense was commonly found, so that early in the study the emphasis shifted from fights themselves to the events surrounding conflicts. Conflict was more likely to occur in the streets connecting pubs and clubs than in these places. There were a variety of reasons for this. One was that many pubs popular with young people, and all nightclubs, employed doormen – 'bouncers' – who tended either to deter, or to contain fairly quickly, any inter-male conflict. An important difference between 'punters' and 'bouncers' was the latter's size and potential ability to harm people. One of the main prerequisites for a doorman was that he looked 'hard'. The observer got to know a number of doormen early on, and they provided another source of information on how people behaved when they are 'out', from the perspective of someone whose job it was to remain sober and contain any conflict that occurred. However, other interviewees said that a small number of doormen enjoyed pushing their customers about, and tales of people getting beaten up by doormen were recounted.

As the night progressed, and more alcohol was consumed, groups of people, primarily men, came into contact with other groups as they moved from pub to pub, or pub to club. The groups that were observed generally consisted of four or more young men, usually looking under 21 years. It was evident that some groups enjoyed making remarks to others they passed. The individuals who made the remarks were apparently doing so to make their companions laugh, and to impress them. According to the guides, this was a fairly common cause of a fight or an assault. Many such remarks were clearly aimed at insulting or abusing others, and were aimed at precipitating

conflict. They were presumably made in the knowledge that there was security in numbers, and were acts of 'macho bravado'. Casual interviews revealed that this was also seen as part of 'having a laff', in this case at someone else's expense. A small number of people who were interviewed admitted to engaging in such behaviour:

'It was only a laugh . . . you do that kind of thing when you're out with your mates' (19-year-old male).

'It's only a bit of fun . . . I haven't done it for years' (27-year-old man).

Some remarks were intended to see if they would provoke a response, and if so could be extended to making a direct challenge. Generally the person who made the challenge knew that his mates would support him if conflict resulted, according to men who went out in large groups. The victim was sometimes deemed to be breaking a perceived social rule, for example by displaying feminine qualities. This was evident by homophobic remarks such as 'bloody puff' and 'fucking queer', often based solely on a distinctive dress style or sometimes merely because the person was a student. This perceived rule-breaking formed a pretext for the victim being viewed as a legitimate target: 'he was asking for it' was a fairly common justification.

Most guides were clear that some of these conflicts occurred because the young men concerned enjoyed picking fights. The opponent was seen as a 'soft target', someone thought to be unsuccessful in the use of violence or unlikely to retaliate. Thus for some young men, the aim of the challenge seemed to be to start a fight which they, and often their friends, could win. Responses to these challenges ranged from arguments to retreat. One interesting response was when a challenged individual stopped and stared at the challenger, and either by this behaviour alone, or by a remark, determined whether the challenger would make any further comment. This placed the decision whether to escalate or not in the hands of the challenger, who risked backing down and being embarrassed in front of his friends. However, if his friends came to his assistance, it was generally the challenged party who backed down, typically with a comment or insult, such as 'hard with your mates', that presumably acted as a face-saving measure.

It was apparent from observations and from talking to doormen that the justification for assaults offered by some young men became increasingly tenuous as they consumed more alcohol. When men who had assaulted others on a number of occasions were asked why they had done so, their responses varied and included doing it 'for a laff' and 'I reckoned I didn't like him' (27-year-old man). To other observers they were seen as trying to 'act hard'.

The consumption of large amounts of alcohol and being in large all-male groups often resulted in doormen refusing entry to a nightclub. In one observation, the group who were refused entry (who were in their mid-20s) remained at the club door and tried to provoke the doormen, and then other people in the queue, including the researcher, to enter the nightclub. Unjustified taunts were made, such as 'you've pushed in, you have'. In many instances, the reason given at the time for an assault was appraised differently when the instigator was sober. The day after an assault, the protagonists would often put the incident down solely to alcohol consumption, with comments such as 'I was quite pissed' or 'I was a bit out of order' or 'I didn't really mean it'.

### *Appraising men and women*

Within a pub or nightclub, men appeared to be making an appraisal of both men and women, but obviously for different reasons. When appraising women, the aim was to determine their attractiveness and whether they were 'available'. Physical appearance was the most important information, although reputation was also used. As one man put it, 'You don't want a slag<sup>4</sup> as a girlfriend'.

For inter-male appraisal, the aim was to determine whether other men were a threat. The objective was to 'size up' potential opponents, even for a purely notional conflict. Physical size was not the only cue that was used. Information was derived from dress, ornamentation (tattoos were particularly significant), and 'look': being 'hard' had a certain look that was difficult for people to clearly define. 'You know, he just looks hard' was representative of responses. This was clearly distinguished from 'acting hard', a generally derogatory remark inferring an assumed demeanour that was not borne out in reality. The number and appearance of companions also appeared to be appraised.

Men would often perceive other men 'sizing them up' as a challenge, particularly when it involved 'giving someone the eye', that is staring at another man in an aggressive manner. The common phrase 'What you looking at?' describes this initial exchange that can quickly escalate into a fight. When undertaken overtly, the process of appraisal becomes a challenge: 'I was just seeing what he would do', said one 17-year-old man.

A key part of the appraisal process seemed to be to work out how 'hard' another man was. The reasons interviewees offered for men undertaking this process typically involved physically-based dominance:

'You want to know who you can't mess with' (22-year-old man).

'You know, you want to find out who is top dog' (man in late 20s).

The sizing up of other males was influenced by the situation in which it occurred, and particularly by the nature of the immediate environment. From observations in a range of pubs, it was evident that sizing up of other men was fairly blatant in some pubs but lacking in others. The difference seemed to lie in the reputation of the place. 'Sizing up' was particularly evident in 'rough' pubs. It was also part of a process for working out the appropriate behaviour in a particular situation. If everyone in a particular pub was well built and 'mean looking', young men would adjust their behaviour accordingly, 'just in case one of 'em gives you a slap', as one 22-year-old man put it. Inappropriate behaviour sometimes evoked comments such as 'If he don't behave, he'll get twatted' (i.e., assaulted).

In some 'rough' pubs, sizing up the other men was as obvious and as common as men appraising women. It was most apparent early in the evening. The louder, the busier, the more brightly lit the place, and the younger the clientele, the more sizing up that went on, and the more likely it was to escalate into fights. However, in such places (which usually have doormen) fights were brief incisive attacks, and were usually broken up quickly by doormen and other customers. Indeed, some older women (i.e., over 21) were observed to break up fights by physically intervening and placing themselves between the antagonists.

### *Alcohol*

By 11 p.m. and 2 a.m., the respective closing times of pubs and clubs, many people had consumed large quantities of alcohol. As indicated above, more conflict was observed at these later times. This ranged from arguments between friends, or between girlfriends and boyfriends, to 'face-offs'<sup>5</sup> between men, and actual fights. Although such events could occur as early as 7 p.m., their frequency increased as the night wore on, as people became more intoxicated. The link between alcohol and fighting is likely to be complex. Situations become simplified, impulsive behaviour more likely, and judgement is impaired. This, coupled with an exaggerated sense of self-importance and abilities, and reduced sensitivity to pain, easily led to conflict. One example was when two men ran from a restaurant without paying ('it seemed like a laugh at the time') and ended up in a brawl with four waiters who pursued them. In this example, the males seriously overestimated their chance of escape, presumably due to their intoxication. After the fight they dismissed the incident 'as a laff', some excitement at the end of an evening.

Another effect of alcohol is to simplify the appraisal process, to make the individual more sensitive to perceived threats. One 19-year-old man who was interviewed on a number of occasions had clearly misread situations several times, resulting in him getting into fights. He would perceive threats

when none were intended and on one occasion challenged another man who was with a large group of friends ('I started on one lad and then his mates laid into me'). Another fight led to his girlfriend breaking off with him. He said: 'I thought this lad was trying it on with her so I hit him'. Unfortunately she was unimpressed by his behaviour. On most of these occasions, he blamed being drunk for starting the fight. However, even when sober he defended the general principle that 'you've got to stand up for yourself'.

### *Age differences*

One observation in a nightclub that had a predominantly younger age range revealed that challenges were common and overt, and were likely to result in violence. Indeed, there were two large fights inside the club on the one occasion. Generally it was difficult for the observer to blend into such places, but observing fights associated with younger-aged nightclubs was facilitated because they often occurred in the street outside. Conversations with the guides confirmed the impression that fights were more frequent than in nightclubs that had an older clientele.

Although men who looked over the age of 21 still appraised other men in some situations, and appraised women, particularly when in the company of other men, they were generally far less willing to challenge other men. Therefore, men who seemed younger were far more likely to be involved in fights than were those apparently over 21, although this did not apply to fights over economic issues such as drug dealing, which were distinguished as business rather than 'entertainment' or 'proving yourself'. On a number of occasions, older men explained challenges to their own identity from younger men as being a result of immaturity. This acted as a way of negating the challenge. For instance, when there was a minor collision in a nightclub, an 18-year-old called an older male a 'fat cunt'. The older man laughed, said 'you cheeky little bastard', and walked off.

It was also apparent that younger men (age 17–21 years) were more sensitive to threats than older ones (22–27 years and older). This was evident from the number of minor conflicts that escalated into more serious ones that needed to be broken up. Younger men were more likely to proceed to further insults than were older men, and, based on observations and brief conversations, were more likely to take offence at trivial incidents:

'young lads are always kicking off, they think they've got something to prove' (22-year-old man).

*Male conversations and banter*

During the course of the earlier observations, the researcher tried to steer conversations around to acts of aggression. However, it soon became evident that the content and form of 'normal' conversations during the night out were also of considerable significance. They would generally only feature violence when recounting a recent event or a dramatic story from the past (such as notable fights at school, large brawls and tales of famed 'nutcases'). Although conversation during a 'night out' between friends could cover a range of events, an interesting feature of many male conversations was 'banter'. This comprised conversations about women they are attracted to, jokes and (generally) good-natured insults about each other. Again the apparent intention of the conversations was to 'have a laff'. The subject matter varied, popular topics including sex (including sexual preference), competence in a range of activities and temperament. It appeared that there were commonly accepted rules governing subject-matter and how the butt of a joke should respond. For instance, if a man obviously felt strongly about a girlfriend, she was rarely the subject of a joke or remark, although when he was not present the other men may make remarks about her appearance and her past. It was rare to refer to someone's close family, other than to his brothers, except to praise them. The butt of the joke is expected to reply in kind and to take the joke in good humour. One 19-year-old, who had presumably become upset at a joke about his appearance, was ridiculed for 'acting like a kid about it', as a 23-year-old put it. It was evident that 'a lad should be able to take it and dish it out a bit', as one 24-year-old explained. Joking about each other was an expected part of being 'a mate' and sensitivity to remarks tended to get someone labelled as unstable, 'a bit of a nutter'. Some joking sessions almost took the form of competitions and it was clear that a man who could laugh and joke with the lads was well thought of, and that banter was a form of ritualized inter-male competition. A similar form of verbal interplay could also be used to 'chat up' members of the opposite sex.

**Stage 2: Focused observations**

In the second phase of the observation, particular attention was paid to certain features identified in the first phase of the observation. These were how behaviour differed in different pubs, provoking situations, sex differences in the perception of conflict, what occurred after a fight and accounts of fights.

*Distinction between pubs*

Most people who engaged in the 'nights out' were aware of distinctions between pubs and 'rough' pubs. 'Rough' pubs had a reputation based on the frequency of the fights that occurred in them, the characters who drank in them, and the poorer quality of the decor. They attract fewer women, particularly higher status women. 'Rough' pubs tend to be on the fringes of the areas where most pubs and clubs were situated. Some pubs were viewed as 'rough' because of the people who frequented them, for example particular gangs of football fans. Some 'rough' pubs were associated with drug dealing. Some of these pubs employed doormen who seemed more obviously threatening but there was little difference in terms of numbers of doormen employed at different types of pubs.

*Provoking situations*

It was evident from stage one that inter-male confrontations were fairly common, but did not often lead to physical aggression. In stage two, attention was focused on what happened in situations of possible conflict. It appeared that men could negotiate certain potential causes of conflict, such as a spilt drink, or nudging somebody, by a simple apology or witty remark. These responses were expected and were virtually always forthcoming. Most people would then laugh it off and think nothing of the incident. When the expected response was not forthcoming or was seen as inadequate ('taking the piss', as it was described), a perceivable 'squaring up' often occurred. Particular eye contact and body language was used to signal that this was a situation of conflict and appropriate responses should be made. This often did lead to an apology or remark indicating that the transgressor was in the wrong. On a few occasions two people would square up to each other, usually with support from friends, for example by also staring at the transgressor and standing their ground. There appeared to be clear expectations about what should happen in these situations. Squaring up seemed to be used as a signal to encourage somebody to separate the two parties, to act as peacemaker. A sign of 'backing down' or accepting the transgression, was all that was needed and often the two parties would appear to part on good terms. If someone broke these conventions, escalation could occur very quickly, in the form of an instant attack. Alternatively, there could be a dismissal of the person as a 'nutter' or an 'ignorant bastard', in which case violence would be unlikely, most men not wanting to square up to someone 'obviously' looking for a fight. Sometimes there would be mutual backing off by both parties, as in the following account by a student from Halifax:

'On a Saturday night out in Halifax I stumbled around a nightclub after consuming a large amount of alcohol and bumped into a stool which was occupied by another male of similar age and build to me. Upon bumping into his stool I noticed that he stood up straight with his shoulders thrust forward and his eyes wide open and fixed on mine. In an immediate response I copied the opponent's actions. He responded by asking, "Watch the fuck where you're going?" I quickly said "Fuck off!" We both then backed off not taking our eyes off each other. The situation had been ended verbally and both parties seemed reasonably satisfied' (18-year-old man).

### *Sex differences in perceived reasons for conflict*

It became increasingly apparent that men and women perceived the main reasons for male conflict differently. Although most women knew of others who fought (and there was some evidence of this from the observations), most inter-female conflict was verbal. Instances of physical aggression between women that were reported to the researcher seemed to indicate that fights occurred between younger women (generally under 18 years) and between low-status women (those from 'rough' council estates).

Typical reasons offered by women for the lower instances of physical conflict among their sex were that 'girls are more mature' (an 18-year-old), and that 'women are far cleverer than lads' (a 20-year-old). Such remarks reflect a very different perception of physical conflict than that shown by young men. From a female perspective, inter-male violence was generally seen as a sign of 'immaturity'. Often 'excuses' for fights were seen to be examples of a boyfriend being 'over-possessive' which appeared to be unappreciated, or was rejected as simply 'stupid' behaviour. Very few women appeared to support the behaviour of a boyfriend who claimed he was fighting to 'defend her honour'. One 19-year-old said 'women don't like men who fight for them, as they can stand up for themselves'. Other women said that they would rather seek support from female friends first.

Most of the young women who were interviewed believed that young men fought 'to gain a reputation', 'to feel good about themselves, to be better than the other', and 'to look hard', which was usually meant in a derogatory fashion. Although women viewed 'proving masculinity' as a common reason for male violence, very few saw this as necessary and none claimed that they were attracted to men who fought. As one woman said:

'most women think men who fight are pathetic brainless louts . . . lads fighting can scare women, because one day they may receive a fist themselves'.

Other women made similar fairly hostile comments about men who fought, for example that they were 'pathetic and sad', 'why lower themselves?' and 'why can't they ignore each other, why not just walk away?' Some of these remarks brought indignant comments from men who were present:

'you just don't understand do you, you can't back down' (boyfriend of an 18-year-old).

Although most of the women interviewed were negative about men who fought, some said that they knew women who 'love a good fight':

'Male violence is an ego thing, but some women enjoy watching men fight, you know, watching boxing matches and even street fights' (17-year-old female).

Nevertheless, it appeared from other comments that many younger women considered it to be important for a man to 'be able to stand up for himself' by the use of physical aggression if necessary, although this should not entail being frequently violent. Men were obviously aware of this, but their definition of an appropriate situation was generally far broader than women's. As one 17-year-old woman put it:

'older women think fighting is bad, but boys will be boys. Younger women think it is stupid, but are also attracted to a man who can stick up for himself because that means he can also protect her'.

### *After a fight*

Initially it appeared that very little occurred as a consequence of an argument or fight: 'it all blows over, everyone forgets about it' was one comment. It became evident that this was not the case for all men. Some explained their actions as 'a bit of a laff', but also admitted to some frustration; for example, one 23-year-old said 'I wish I'd given 'em a bit more' after a particular fight. Some expressed regret but used intoxication as an excuse, comments such as 'I was out of order . . . I was pissed' being common. Others claimed that they had lost all memory of their actions: 'I was totally out of it'. Many claimed they would have acted differently had they been sober. A small number fantasized or planned physical revenge on opponents. This ranged from short-term obsessional thoughts ('I just thought about beating hell out of him') to actually 'slagging' the person off<sup>6</sup> with the intention of lowering their reputation. One 19-year-old woman talked about men who had purposely stolen or vandalized the property of opponents as acts of revenge. However, physical revenge was fairly rare and mainly associated with men

under 21 years of age. Older men were more likely to experience revenge fantasies, actual upset ('I was quite shocked at how aggressive I got . . . I really lost it'), and to talk the incident over with friends.

### *Accounts of fights*

Stories about fights tended to be retold again and again, which may serve to make them seem more frequent. This was particularly the case with large-scale brawls. They were described to the researcher by a variety of people, and they ranged from pitched battles between rival rugby league teams, to a violent brawl in a public house on Christmas Day. However, these occurrences were presumably fairly rare and nothing approximating a brawl was observed. It was difficult to gauge the level of exaggeration in descriptions of fights but the impression was that it was on the whole negligible. Descriptions of fights tended to be agreed upon by others present and most men found support for their past conflict experiences in terms of sympathy for feelings of revenge, upset, shame, regret or disgust. In general, there was a view that 'it's happened to us all'.

## **Discussion**

### ***Consistency with previous studies of barroom fights***

Although the present study was broader in scope than the three studies of barroom fighting described in the Introduction, there were a number of themes identified in these studies that recurred in the present observations. Both North American studies (Dyck 1980; Leary 1976) identified the status and esteem with other men that could be gained by fighting. Fights were generally brief and did not involve the police. Both Dyck and Leary noted that the build-up to a fight can take considerably longer, and involved an escalated series of exchanges. The present study also supported previous findings (e.g., Felson 1997; Graham et al. 1980; Tomsen 1997) that intoxication plays a role in inter-male violence. Specifically, we found that it facilitated fight escalation, and that young men in particular would assault opponents whom they considered unlikely to respond violently or who were judged to be unsuccessful in fighting. In the present study, doormen initiated fewer assaults than reported in previous studies (Graham et al. 1980; Tomsen 1997). In contrast to previous studies, we included a wider range of topics, such as inter-male conversations and the role of women, and examined a range of drinking venues. We also emphasized the wider context within which fights occurred, i.e., the 'night out'.

The physical and social environment of a drinking establishment was particularly important in providing an atmosphere in which fights were

more or less likely to occur. We have already noted that Tomsen selected bars with more violent reputations for his observations. Graham et al. (1980) found that aggressive incidents in Vancouver bars were particularly associated with locations equivalent to the 'rough pubs' identified in the present study. These involved unpleasant, unclean and inexpensive décor, unkempt patrons, many of whom were without regular work or were engaged in criminal activities. Felson (1997) found that men with an active night life were more likely to be involved in violent incidents than those who went out less often, and that several lines of indirect evidence indicated that this was attributable to their frequenting violence-prone situations rather than their personal characteristics.

### ***The overall significance of the 'night out'***

From a traditional social science viewpoint, the 'night out' represents a leisure activity at the end of the working week, during which young people – predominantly those with no family responsibilities – seek company, excitement and enjoyment. From an evolutionary perspective, it represents a meeting-ground for sexually active young people of both sexes. There is appraisal of the opposite sex as potential mates, and competition between members of the same sex, which is more overt and likely to be escalated into violence among men (Archer 1994; Daly and Wilson 1988, 1994). In non-human animals, areas away from the feeding or nesting areas that are consistently used for communal displays by members of both sexes are referred to as leks (Wilson 1975: 331–4). The spatial location of the night out, the pubs, clubs and streets, become, during the hours of Friday and Saturday nights, analogous to leks. Males compete with one another in ritualized and escalated displays, and females compete in more subtle ways for male attention. Both sexes appraise possible mates.

### ***Acts that precipitated fights***

Fights within bars or clubs appeared to escalate quickly, and it was often difficult to ascertain the immediate precipitating acts beyond a disagreement or perceived insult. However, where it was possible to tell, a common circumstance leading to a fight seemed to be arguments relating to women. The present study also found further support for the apparently trivial nature of some acts that precipitate fights between men (Dyck 1980; Daly and Wilson 1988). These included hostile looks or stares from other men. Conflicts in the streets near to pubs and clubs were more often the result of one group of men making comments about other groups or individuals that they passed. These went beyond the individual challenges described in previous studies of barroom fights. They seemed to represent ways in which

a group enhanced its identity, and the self-esteem of its members, at relatively little risk, since the targets of the provocations were often unlikely to pose any great threat. In this sense, these findings were consistent with the observation by Tomsen (1997) that men in bars would often challenge opponents perceived to be weaker than they were.

### ***The process of escalation***

Escalation of conflicts appeared to follow clear stages. Initial remarks or insults were often followed by one protagonist confronting his opponent, 'squaring up', often with discernible inflation of the chest and shoulders, and staring into the opponent's eyes. This staring, coupled with verbal insults, may be sufficient for both parties to prove their point and the confrontation would end there. Sometimes opponents would push each other and then 'take a swing', that is, attempt to strike the other. This is similar to the initial use of threat displays followed by escalation to physical aggression found in animal fights (Archer and Huntingford 1994). There were four ways in which an opponent would respond to a challenge: immediate physical retaliation (i.e., a fight breaks out); a verbal counter-challenge or a hostile non-verbal reaction such as staring at the opponent; immobility ('standing your ground'), which does not escalate the confrontation but puts the onus on to the challenger; and retreat.

Leary (1976) reported the typical sequence in the escalation of an aggressive exchange as follows: an initial precipitating situation; an exchange of words, such as insults; an exchange of blows; audience intervention; the emergence of a victor; and possible reconciliation. A similar sequence was reported by Felson (1984) based on self-reports of protagonists. The present observations indicated that further qualifications are necessary to Leary's stages, resulting in the following sequence. There is the initial, often apparently trivial, occurrence, such as a drink or shoulder being knocked or a remark, or a look. This is followed by appraisal that the action was either a challenge or an accident, and an appraisal of the antagonist's fighting ability and social support (in terms of potential allies). An exchange of words follows, with an apology being expected by the antagonist, and possibly encouraged by a verbal counter-challenge or physical display, such as the protagonist 'standing his ground'. If this is not forthcoming, the protagonist may overtly indicate that the response was not appropriate, and depending upon the antagonist's perceived fighting ability and social support, this may lead to escalation in the form of an exchange of blows. Audience intervention may then occur, for example friends or security staff trying to stop the fight. Finally, a range of post-conflict outcomes is possible, including pleasure, shame, regret, revenge fantasies, insults and seeking support.

A crucial aspect of deciding whether to take up a challenge is the appraisal of the potential opponent or opponents in terms of their fighting ability and potential allies. This is consistent with evolutionary analyses of animal conflicts that have highlighted the importance of an assessment phase prior to physical engagement, during which the opponent's likely fighting ability, or resource-holding power (RHP), is assessed. Game theory analyses of animal fighting (Archer 1988; Archer and Huntingford 1994) have shown that the ability to make this assessment, and to act upon it, is a stable evolved strategy under a wide range of conditions, and influences decisions whether to escalate or withdraw from a conflict.

The apparent enjoyment for some men in trying to 'pick a fight' can also be interpreted as an attempt to assess the RHP of their victim, as well as a way of boosting what the social interactionist perspective (Felson 1984; Felson and Tedeschi 1993) terms their situational identity. This involved seeking to impress their 'mates' by such acts, and over the longer term acquiring status or a reputation. Significantly, this process was only recognized by other men, as few women were impressed by such behaviour. This sequence of a challenge followed in some cases by attack can be interpreted as a process whereby the attacker proves his identity as a man both to himself and to his peers. He has also punished an assumed 'wrongdoer' and the incident provides some entertainment and excitement or flow experience.

Although many of those interviewed attributed the causes of fights to alcohol consumption, it is more likely that arguments over girlfriends or other women, perceived threats or challenges, and 'picking fights' were the proximal causes, and that alcohol affected the appraisal process in various ways (Gibbs 1986). The consumption of large amounts of alcohol appeared to reduce the importance placed on the appraisal of RHP, so that physical attack may follow directly from the appraisal of the precipitating act. Teenage men seemed particularly prone to enter into arguments with larger, older men when they were clearly intoxicated. The cognitive effects of alcohol may therefore remove constraints found in other animals whereby low-status individuals avoid fights with higher status, more proficient, individuals (Archer 1994).

### ***Status and reputation***

The present observations confirm a variety of previous accounts indicating that the acquisition, display and defence of status by physically challenging behaviour are particularly important to young men. It was evident that status displays were primarily directed to other men and any notion of 'honour' appeared to concern primarily a male audience. There are a number of parallels with the findings regarding the culture of honour in the

Southern United States studied by Cohen and Nisbett (1994). They found that men from this culture endorsed violence when it was used for self-protection and to defend one's honour. They also identified that the consequences of cowardice would be to lose the respect of peers, and also self-respect. In the present observations, a notion of personal honour based on being able to 'stand up for yourself' physically was most pronounced among younger males, and possibly among other low-status men (i.e., those lacking significant economic power). Thus the men who were most likely to use physical violence to acquire a form of status were those who lacked conventional status, although such men did not seem to feel that they had low status. People who possessed conventional status (i.e., had a well-paid job, qualifications and social standing) were likely to be a target of abuse in so far as they were viewed as claiming to be 'better than' the lower status male. For example, students were referred to as 'thinking they were clever', and derogatory remarks were made about people's accents. The use or threat of violence to acquire or defend status by lower status men was, to them, a fact of male life. It was what men did. Higher status men could, in some situations, also recognize this. A lower status man would use aggression to acquire status so as to be a 'real man', and not be seen as of inferior value.

### ***Women's perceptions of men's behaviour***

Women were not, in general, aware of the importance to men of responding to a perceived threat or challenge. They would often regard such behaviour as immature or unnecessary. In the present study, younger women in particular were attracted to a man who was perceived as being able to 'stand up for himself' but who was not frequently violent, i.e., one who could maintain a credible threat of violence (Daly and Wilson 1988). Men in turn recognized that women were attracted to men who could 'stand up for themselves'. This would entail an initial show or use of violence, as part of establishing a reputation of 'being one of the lads' (which also involved engaging in 'banter', as discussed below). Subsequently such overt aggressive behaviour becomes less necessary, and is much less evident. If a young man habitually continues to use violence to enhance his status after he has formed a sexual relationship, this was generally viewed negatively by the woman concerned.

### ***Competition between women***

Inter-female competition was typically more subtle, and overt physical aggression rare, a finding consistent with a study of bars in London, Ontario (Graham, Wells and West 1997). Women were, however, sensitive to threats to their reputations, or when another woman was 'making moves on their

boyfriend'. The current observations indicated that this was only likely to lead to violence by women of younger ages, and of lower status. These observations support Campbell's (1995, 1999) evolutionary analysis of women's conflicts. She argued that although female conflicts typically did not lead to the escalated exchanges that readily result from inter-male conflicts, women would engage in violent exchanges under certain circumstances. She identified younger ages, lower status and competition for higher status men as increasing the likelihood of physical aggression between women.

### ***Age differences***

Several aspects of the present findings indicated that younger men – those under 21 years of age – were more ready to escalate disputes into physical conflicts. These observations are in accord with findings from studies that have measured the propensity to physical aggression by standard rating scales: in these studies, correlations between age and physical aggression ranged between  $-0.12$  and  $-0.39$  (Archer and Haigh 1997a, 1997b; Broadbent 1999; Harris 1996; O'Connor, Archer and Wu 2001). They are also consistent with analyses of crime figures dating back to the first part of the nineteenth century. These show that crimes by men, including crimes of violence, peak in young adulthood and decline with age (Quetelet 1833/1984; Courtwright 1996), a finding that is consistent whatever the level of violence (Daly and Wilson 1990).

The present findings also fit accounts of young men – particularly those with little to lose – as being prone not to put events into a long-term perspective, and as a consequence to take risks (e.g., Courtwright 1996; Daly and Wilson 1990; Gilmore 1990). Daly and Wilson (1988, 1990) have identified sexual selection as the ultimate reason why younger men underestimate the risks involved in conflict with other men. This analysis is derived from two considerations. The first is that, for mammals generally, reproductive competition is accentuated in males compared to females. The second is that simulations (by Daly and Wilson 1988) show that where not to compete at all would result in zero fitness, individuals will compete even if the risks are high.

### **Inter-male communication and 'banter'**

The subject-matter of men's verbal exchanges, and their use of jokes and insults, had ritual elements. There appeared to be people with whom 'you can have a laff' and those who were 'hard', but the two were not combined in the same individual, an observation that is consistent with findings from sociological studies of delinquent subcultures (e.g., Parker 1974; Patrick

1973; Willis 1979). Thus, being able to tell funny stories or make others laugh provided status, and was appreciated by the others in the group (as in 'oh, you'll like Spoony, he's a right laff'). The ability to make a male audience laugh seemed to involve verbal skills that could be transferred to 'chatting up' and impressing females. Young women often stated that the most important characteristic they would look for in a man was his ability to make them laugh. This is consistent with findings that the use of humour is more associated with long-term than short-term mating tactics (Simpson, Gangestad, Christensen and Leck 1999). Also, the frequency of laughing with a spouse is one of the characteristics people associate with marital satisfaction (Botwin, Buss and Shackelford 1997).

The observations are also consistent with the view that men use language to defend status, and particularly their masculine identity (Dunbar 1996; Seidler 1989). Sociolinguists (e.g., Coates 1993) have noted that loud and aggressive argument is a common feature of speech in all-male groups. Exchanges involving name-calling, threats and insults are well documented and seem to have ritual elements (Labov 1972). Dunbar (1996) analysed language use from an evolutionary perspective, noting an important sex difference in the relative time devoted to talking about other people's social experience and activities compared with a person's own experiences. Younger women tended to devote about two-thirds of their conversations to others, whereas men of the same ages spent two-thirds of their conversations talking about themselves. Dunbar (1996) concluded that women engaged in more networking whereas men engaged in more 'advertising'. He argued that since there is more pronounced male competition, for status and for mates, male conversations are used more frequently to advertise status. For women, testing a male's ability to make them laugh may be a good covert way to assess his qualities as a mate. The present findings are broadly consistent with this analysis.

In all-male conversations, tales of fights and other incidents that involved risk-taking (such as driving a motorbike with eyes closed, and petty crimes) were often told and retold on many occasions. This story-telling relied upon the active participation of an audience, who elaborated key details and reinforced the importance of aspects of the story, sometimes pointing out their role in the incident, or implicitly praising the person relating the incident. This is consistent with Leary's (1976) report of the re-telling of fight stories.

Homosexuality was a rare topic of conversation in all-male groups, and mainly featured in the conversations of younger men who typically expressed aggressive attitudes towards gays or used them as the source of jokes. Cameron (1997) found that men who did not measure up to the group's standards of masculinity were defined as homosexual. In the present study, men who did not display traditional male values or characteristics

were often referred to as 'queers', and on occasion this was used to justify assault.

### **Implications of the present study**

The present paper describes a discursive investigation of the values and beliefs surrounding physical aggression between young men in the context of the 'night out'. It is recognized that the method used has drawbacks in terms of possible observer bias and selectivity, and the reliability and consistency of the procedures used. Nevertheless, many of the present findings show a consistency with the results of other studies of men in barrooms, and with observations and analyses of male conflicts from an evolutionary perspective. These findings form the basis of further studies (Benson 2001) investigating in a more systematic and controlled way how variables such as the provoking circumstances and perceived fighting ability affect the likely responses of socially-active young men.

### **Acknowledgements**

We thank Barry McCarthy for helpful discussion of this study.

### **Notes**

- 1 Crusties are fans of 'grunge', heavy metal and related music.
- 2 For readers with no contact with the North of England, 'laugh' is pronounced 'laff' rather than the southern 'larf'.
- 3 No overt homosexuals were encountered in the observations.
- 4 Slag is generally used as an insult indicating that a woman is sexually promiscuous.
- 5 A face-off is a face-to-face confrontation between two or more opponents.
- 6 Slagging someone off means criticizing them or insulting them, usually behind their back. It represent an attack on their reputation.

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