

For more than a century, criminology has produced an extensive body of theories seeking to explain criminal and violent behavior. While many contemporary theories attempt to explain violent behavior as a form of psychopathology, more sociological theories tend to emphasize social context, peer influences and/or strain. Yet despite years of theorizing, public debate and policy intervention, cases of extreme violence persist. Indeed, after peaking during the 1970s and 80s, levels of extreme violence have remained fairly steady. Moreover, data consistently demonstrate that the overwhelming majority of severe violent offenses are committed by one group: men.

This raises a fundamental question: why are men so consistently the offenders in cases where sheer violence and brutality appear to be the primary objective? And why do existing theories struggle to explain these extreme acts where violence is not merely instrumental—a means to material gain, revenge or self-preservation—but rather the central motivation and desired outcome?

Traditional criminological frameworks often interpret violence as reactive or utilitarian. For example, classical and contemporary versions of strain theory see criminal behavior as a means to an end: economic benefit, alleviations of emotional strain, or attempts to resolve conflict. Even expressive crimes are frequently framed as emotional outbursts rather than deliberate pursuits of domination (e.g. Merton 1938; Agnew 1992). These perspectives treat violence as a means to an end, implicitly assuming the victim's death or subdual is the primary focus of the offender. However, such explanations are insufficient when confronted with cases characterized by calculated and ritualized cruelty, prolonged humiliation, control and domination. In these instances, the *process* of harming another person appears to carry its own internal logic. The act itself, rather than its outcome, becomes central.

We argue that violence, especially extreme violence, is better understood as a performative act through which the offender may experience transformation, moral justification, and intensified feelings of power rooted in male gender socialization. Its meaning lies in what it produces internally: a temporary restoration of a perceived loss of authority, identity, and/or control. Rather than viewing violence solely as reaction to stimuli or a pathology to be diagnosed and treated, this study conceptualizes it as a socially meaningful performance embedded in gendered expectations and cultural scripts. In this sense, unnecessary or extreme violence is not random: it is socially learned, culturally reinforced, and symbolically charged.

The theoretical framework of this study is informed by the work of Jack Katz, particularly his exploration of the experiential dimensions of crime. In *Seductions of Crime*, Katz (1988) emphasizes that certain violent acts are driven by the immediate emotional and moral transformations experienced during the act itself. He highlights that the significance of the violent act for the offender often lies in the performance, where the commission of violence itself is significant because of what it allows the offender to feel and the meaning they attribute to it in the moment. Thus, the offender's experience (of, say, domination of the victim), rather than the external outcome (their death or incapacitation), is central to many cases of extreme violence.

Katz highlights an important experiential aspect of violence in his analysis, however he does not trace the social roots of these expressive and performative acts of violence. For this, feminist theory can be instructive. Brownmiller (1975), for example, emphasizes that violent acts such as rape are indeed a mechanism of patriarchal control. Further, recent research on contemporary forms of male supremacism posits that male supremacy is a system that legitimizes male dominance and entitlement, situating the offender's pursuit of power within broader structures conditioned by gender socialization and patriarchal control (Carian et al.

2022). Through this lens, it becomes clear that much of the extreme violence described by Katz is likely performative, rooted in a gendered order that teaches men to equate identity, status, and self-worth with dominance and control. By shifting attention from what offenders gain *after* violence to what they experience *during* it, this paper challenges traditional criminological accounts that insufficiently incorporate gender.

Acts of extreme violence committed by men enact deeply embedded cultural scripts of power learned through families, peers, institutions, media, and national narratives. These scripts themselves do not necessitate violence, but they create the cultural conditions in which violence can function as a recognizable and meaningful performance of masculine identity. For a contemporary illustration of such gender scripts we look to the emergence of online male supremacist communities, particularly so-called ‘*incels*’ (“involuntary celibates”). Existing scholarship demonstrates that incel ideology is structured around entitlement to women’s bodies, resentment toward female autonomy, and the glorification of retaliatory violence against women. Within these communities, masculinity is framed around dominance, sexual access, and control. Violence is frequently discussed as a justified response to perceived status deprivation (Carian et al. 2022; Bates 2020). Thus, the incel phenomenon exemplifies how socially conditioned expectations of male authority and entitlement can transform frustration into performative aggression.

Building on these insights, our theoretical synthesis posits that extreme violence is driven by a socially conditioned desire to perform dominance which is rooted in male gender socialization. Patriarchal societies construct masculinity through norms that equate manhood with authority, emotional restraint, strength, and the capacity to control others. From early childhood, boys are often socialized into frameworks that reward aggression, discourage vulnerability, and normalize hierarchical relationships. Personal worth becomes linked to demonstrations of power. Within such systems, extreme violence can emerge not simply as deviance but as an exaggerated enactment of culturally sanctioned masculine ideals.

Following West and Zimmerman (1987), we take gender to be a *performance* shaped and reinforced by social norms and institutions. Masculinity as a constructed and performed identity must be continually enacted and validated internally and externally. When masculinity is defined through dominance and control, men experience challenges to status or authority as existential threats. Violence in such contexts becomes a means of restoring symbolic order; the act of domination over another body can temporarily reaffirm an otherwise fragile sense of identity.

Additionally, we explore how gendered social norms develop and become embedded within broader cultural narratives. Specifically, we focus on so-called “cultures of honor” described by Vandello et al (2009) and Cohen (1998), where aggression and retaliatory violence are socially legitimized responses to perceived disrespect. In such cultural contexts, the defense of reputation becomes inseparable from the performance of masculinity. They frame acts of violence as morally justified assertions of honor rather than criminal transgressions. This normalization of aggressive response illustrates how socialization can condition individuals to perceive domination as both necessary and legitimate.

Through an examination of primary sources in both the United States and the Soviet Union, we trace many of these gendered expectations back to the social transformations during and after the Second World War. Periods of war often intensify rigid constructions of masculinity, elevating aggression, stoicism, and physical dominance as patriotic virtues. Wartime conditions disrupt demographic structures, alter family systems, and redefine male identity around combat and sacrifice. Following large-scale conflicts such as the Second World War,

there were dramatic shifts in gender dynamics, labor participation, and the social value of men. In both the United States and the Soviet Union, the post-war decades were marked by heightened emphasis on male authority within the family and the state. Although politically and ideologically distinct, both societies were structured upon deeply patriarchal foundations.

The historical-comparative component of this study examines violent crime trends during the 1970s and 1980s in the United States and the Soviet Union, a period that was frequently described as a peak era for serial homicide and extreme interpersonal violence in the U.S. (Mello-Klein 2023). In the Soviet context, this period has been marked by a notable sudden rise in violent serial killings across multiple regions of the country (Kass & Kapitanova 2023). This comparison is not intended to provide a comprehensive geopolitical analysis but rather to illustrate how differing political systems can nonetheless produce similar patterns of male-perpetrated violence when grounded in comparable patriarchal structures. The wartime experiences and subsequent cultural shifts in both nations contributed to forms of male socialization that emphasized dominance, endurance, and emotional suppression. Despite ideological opposition between capitalism and socialism, both societies maintained rigid gender hierarchies and valorized masculine strength. The persistence of extreme violence within these distinct contexts suggests that structural patriarchy, rather than political ideology alone, plays a significant role in shaping violent behavior.

Methodologically, we employ a multidisciplinary, comparative-historical approach that synthesizes criminological theory, feminist scholarship and symbolic interaction. Integrating these disparate literatures highlights overlooked and undertheorized convergences of masculinity, authority and violence. The historical comparison between the United States and the Soviet Union serves as an illustrative example of how patriarchal socialization operates across divergent political systems. While not relying on original empirical research, its conclusions are conceptual rather than predictive and attempt to reframe analyses of violent crime and gender. Additionally, historical crime data, particularly from the Soviet Union, may present reliability challenges due to state reporting practices. While we acknowledge these limitations, we believe they do not undermine the broader theoretical contribution we strive to make.