Authority Perspective:
Javanese Men’s Talk on Domestic Violence

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ABSTRACT
This paper discusses Javanese men’s perceptions, opinions and attitudes towards domestic violence. Sixteen Javanese men were invited to talk about domestic violence in group discussions, as part of a qualitative research conducted in the southern part of Central Java. The responses collected had different emphasis as given by the male speakers but all engaged in a perspective that reflects their dominant position in the family. While admitting that some men behave badly, the Javanese participants had greater concern about women’s behaviour, seeing this as provocation to violence. Women’s attitudes that were perceived to be a challenge to men’s authority was seen to be the most common form of provocation. The analysis examines the men’s perspective in relation to the dominant discourse of masculinity that preserves men’s identity and identification with power in marital relationships.

Keywords: domestic violence, masculinity, men’s identity, Java.

Introduction
Why do married men commit violence at home? While most married men do not commit violence, what do they think about other men’s violence against their wives? What can we learn from men’s view of other men’s violence? In Indonesian cases of domestic violence, women victims have become the main concern, whereas very little analysis has focused on men’s perspective and attitudes to domestic violence. We know very little about what Indonesian men think of violence at home against women and how they respond to the issue. Of these, we know from a report published by The National Commission on Violence Against Women in Indonesia that male perpetrators typically showed a range of behaviours toward their
wives and to themselves (Poerwandari et al., 2002). These include: a) denying, 
minimising, underreporting his violence; b) justifying, normalising, and rationalising 
their violence; and c) insisting on loyalty, obedience, and submission of their wives 
(Poerwandari et al., 2002). They also seemed very sensitive to perceived disloyalty, 
as such that abusive actions may be triggered by trivial matters (Rowe et al., 2006). 
This can be that the wife is not doing the household work ‘properly’, when the wife 
disobeys the husband; when the wife questions the husband about girlfriends; the 
wife refuses to have sex or the wife expresses suspicion of infidelity (Hakimi et al., 
2001). What can we learn from this information to understand the links between 
men’s will to violence and their practices of marriage in an Indonesian context?

To understand violence against women within men’s position is to assess the 
interrelation of violence with masculinity and men’s identity (Whitehead, 2002). This 
means we look at violence as a practice that produces and re-produces certain 
social discourses that establish men’s place in the society (Hatty, 2000). The main 
question is then, what does violence mean to men as subjects of social discourse? 
This paper aims to outline men’s perspectives, perceptions and attitudes towards 
domestic violence in the Indonesian context. It is part of a larger study I conducted to 
understand the link between masculinity, Islam and the issue of domestic violence in 
a Javanese context. The study brings forward a specific case of Javanese men, 
aiming at proposing masculinity as a framework to understand the issue of domestic 
violence in Indonesia.

Literature on masculinity in Indonesia and Java especially is very limited. The 
attribution to the field is slowly growing with few studies being underway. Hasyim et al 
(2007) is the first book on the subject; it is written in Indonesian. Another study by 
Nilan et al (2007) interviewed Indonesian students in Australia in an attempt to 
approach Indonesian masculinity among Muslims. A broader study was undertaken 
by Clark (2010) who suggested that Indonesian masculinity has persistently been 
adopted from a Javacentric model and has been centred in Soeharto over thirty 
years during the New Order period. The Aristocrat Javanese culture provides the 
prototype of idealised men as being refined, self-restrained, mystical, spiritual potent, 
controlled and sexualised in a repressed way (Clark 2010). Over eight years of his 
presidency, Susilo Bambang Yudoyono (SBY) displays a similar version of aspects 
of Javanese masculinity of being self-restrained, controlled, refined, mystical and
charismatic. Clark’s (2010) book is a literary critique and offers limited sociological grounding. It has a short section on violence, but it is not intended to address the issue of domestic violence.

**Violence and masculinity**

While most men are not involved in and disagree with it, violence is deeply related to masculinity as a social discourse that provides the understanding about violence as a way of expressing men’s identity (Anderson & Umberson, 2001; Barker, 2005; Hatty, 2000). The individual capacity and the social possibility to act and react violently and aggressively are intimately linked to the meaning of becoming a man in a larger social arena (Whitehead, 2002). A component that crucially contributes to the dominant discourse of men’s identity is power over women (Connell, 1995; Hearn, 1998). We can analyse violence as a practice intended to sustain or obtain power (Hautzinger, 2003). Power may be associated with interpersonal control (Katz, 1988), social control (Black, 1983), self image (Felson, 1993), peer approval (Bandura, 1973), social status (Besag, 1980; Felson, 2002), or to coerce compliance in sexual satisfaction (Felson, 1993). In the case of marriage, analysis of violence against women needs to address power as its main motive (Dobash & Dobash’s, 1994, 1998). Men’s ‘will to violence’ is enforced by a social narrative that attributes violence as a sign of power, authority, and control, which are crucial components of masculinity itself (Dobash & Dobash, 1998). When men exercise violence to claim, sustain or regain power at home, they subscribe to a particular discourse of power in the marital relationship (Dobash & Dobash, 1994). In the dominant discourse of masculinity, men’s identity is pervasively perceived in hierarchal relation to women. This hierarchy comprises a sense of control, ownership and authority over wives (Dobash & Dobash, 1994).

Control as a way of domination has been of considerable issue in the analysis of men’s violence against female partners (Browne, 1987; Dutton, 1998). The motive to control is particularly relevant for the setting of violence against women (Felson, 2002). This implies men’s privileges and authority of material resources and services, including domestic and sexual services. Male perpetrators and those who justify their acts do not consider that women deserve the same rights to speak, argue, or negotiate in family affairs and violence is frequently used to weaken women’s voices
(Dobash & Dobash, 1998). The idea of power is also expanded in men’s sense of the right to punish the perceived wrongdoing by wives, to express their possessiveness and jealousy, and to insist on expectations concerning household work and resources (Dobash & Dobash, 1994). Violence is often exercised under the sense of self-righteousness where the male actors believe that they are upholding justice (Felson, 2002).

The authority perspective

The data for this paper resulted from talks on domestic violence in two group discussions attended by sixteen Javanese men for a research project conducted in 2008. The male participants were mostly married with an average 10 years marital life experience, aged between 20 and 60, and mainly farmers; a few were businessmen and village governmental officers. They lived in the southern part of Central Java. They were selected considering different marital life experiences, not acting as religious leaders in the communities and having no criminal record of committing violence. The discussions asked their opinion about the issue of domestic violence, as parts of the research activities that explored discourse of masculinity amongst Muslims men in Java. The term ‘domestic violence’ in this study refers to physical assault against wives. Following group discussions, unstructured interviews were conducted with ten of the participants to develop themes that occurred in the discussions. All of their names quoted here are pseudonyms.

Javanese men in the talks were aware that men have committed most violent actions. But they believed that violence is a temporary outburst and does not necessarily characterise men’s attitudes towards women. Violence may correspond to a heated tension and anger during conflicts but only occurs in a short specific moment. The male speakers also admitted that men do, or may, behave badly. But this is largely due to women’s behaviour that provokes them. Their observation indicated excuses for the violence, by which they placed the blame on the actors but not the responsibility (Hearn, 1989). As violence becomes unaccountable, their views directed the responsibilities towards other objects outside the male actor. They implied that the man was not active, but rather a victim of forces beyond his individual control, this may be financial difficulties, social pressures, drugs and even the evil spirit, that drives him to commit violence.
The larger part of the talks demonstrated much greater concern about women’s behaviour, accounting it to be a more significant factor for the violence. The Javanese men’s perceptions of this issue reflect a perspective from their traditional position as the head and leader of the family. I would call this perspective the ‘authority perspective’. This perspective operates by mainly focusing on women and their manners as the object of men’s authority. Most of the male speakers were concerned about the state of women’s devotion, attitudes, behaviour and responses to men that may pose as a provocation to men’s violence. They judged women acting within this category of behaviour as being arrogant, rude, improper, disobedient, recalcitrant, disrespectful, insulting or contesting. Male violence is then a response to this provocative behaviour.

How did the Javanese men define an act by women as being provocative? The participants of the talk mentioned a wide range of examples of provocative women’s attitudes that can be classified into two major categories: a) those that challenge men’s authority and b) those that put pressure on men by demanding increased wealth in families. The first category, which covered a wider range of behaviours, was reported more frequently and seemed to be the most common provocation for male violence. For these reasons, I will pay more attention to this category. Responding to my question – ‘why men commit the most violence’ – the following opinion best illustrates how the authority perspective works in perceiving this challenging female behaviour:

> [Why do] Husbands commit most of the violence? [That is because] Husbands have a long vision for the future, [and they] make decisions [with] careful. Like Mr. Romsi (one of the participants) has said about [a husband should] be thorough in making decisions. The decision is thoughtful and rightly gives direction [for the family] which is for good purposes for the communities and for the families. That will bring happiness and wealth. But the wives [commonly do not know and] reject that. So [in that situation], the men feel [that they are] in the right [position and have the valid reason to defend that]. [Like me] I am a man with a low blood pressure (the participant ended his comment with laughing). (Mulyadi, 58)

The quote above displays the basic scenario of domestic violence according to the authority perspective: men play a dominant role in marital relationship (which, in their opinion, is correct and valid), making decisions and directing the family, while women challenge this role. Women’s challenging behaviour appeared in two main forms:
female disrespect towards men and women disagreeing with men about particular household issues. Participants placed strong emphasis on the first form.

Disrespectful behaviours

A very common challenge for men is when women behave disrespectfully towards them. I would suggest that the sense of being disrespected by wives is the main tension that may lead men to commit violence. In the men’s experience women may behave disrespectfully in many situations and the meaning can be personally different among men. The most serious one is unfaithfulness by women. From the perspective of men’s authority, unfaithfulness is not merely a betrayal to the marital commitment but a further attack on the men’s authority. Unfaithfulness and adultery demonstrates a women’s breach of devotion towards her husband and exhibits her noncompliant attitude to the marital bond.

If a woman engages in a relationship with another partner and [that means behaving] disobediently to her husband, that is the situation where [domestic violence] will likely break out (Handoko, 54).

For some men, the issue of their wife having another lover is not simply a matter of money and wealth. Deeper than that, it is a serious slight on their affections and emotions.

In fact, unfaithfulness is not merely a matter of money and prosperity, but also the feeling [of being hurt] that is caused (Handoko, 54).

The Javanese men described women who are unfaithful or commit adultery as being ‘disrespectful to the man’ and ‘damaging for families’. They were condemned as causing a serious issue, since they endangered family unity, which may drive men to act cruelly.

Sometimes men become cruel and come to think cruelly, and arrive at the point where they dare to beat their wives, lose their mercy and heartlessly torture the wife. In my opinion, indeed this is because [the wife who is unfaithful] is damaging the family (Anggoro, 56).

Adultery is a direct insult to a man’s core identity and principles. It causes men to suffer severe emotional break downs.

That’s what I call against the core of men [values]. Here, people would see that as an insult to a man’s honour (Handoko, 54).
From my own experience, in fact I have been married twice. What happened in the past with my former wife [was that] she had another lover. That hurt me deep down in my heart. She was resistant to my command. Well, what else can I do? Then I divorced her (Handoko, 54).

However, an accusation made against a man by his wife of being unfaithful also means a serious challenge against his authority. In the final week of the interview period, just before the last interview, a case of violence against a wife occurred in the Pasiran village. A villager living close to some of the participants’ houses struck his wife following her accusation that he had an affair with their widowed neighbour. One of the men in the talks summarised the case to me, saying that the victim confronted her husband and the widow on the spot, ‘shouting loudly’ and ‘astonishing their surrounding neighbours’. I was very interested in knowing how the last participant, Arief (50), who was a highly respected figure in the village, would respond to this case. He understood the case to have occurred because of the wife’s allegation and decision to confront her husband. This case indicated his automatic intention to examine the manner through which the woman’s action had influenced this situation.

Yeah, the wife accused the husband [of being unfaithful] and gave no supporting evidence. Indeed she could not judge and execute the problem in her own immediate way like that. It required supporting evidences. She probably needed witnesses and procedures before she made a judgment. But if [she] did all of this irrationally in her own way [without thinking], it produced a bad image of the family. You see, it didn’t turn out well. And that was actually improper for a wife to accuse [the husband] in a sudden manner without having very convincing evidences. Surely she could not do that (Arief, 50).

The wife was deemed to have judged and confronted the problem in an impetuous way. Arief (50) considered this manner of conduct unacceptable. In acting in such a manner she did not anticipate the results and the impacts, but she instead breached the family’s honour. This participant suggested that the wife did not solve the problem, and instead made the situation worse.

From the authority perspective disrespectful attitudes come about in different ways, many of which seemed to be part of women’s habitual conduct in daily life. The way women talk to their husbands, not necessarily during fights, was a common indicator of disrespectful behaviour. Some participants observed violent incidents that flared because the woman talked to the man in an ‘improper’ manner. Here,
disrespectful women were accused of being grumpy, rude, coarse, disruptive and impulsive.

Those women who talk in a fiery temper do not realise that they themselves are grumpy (Waluyo, 55).

But since they do not have a better knowledge in etiquette, both men and women speak irrationally without thinking [when they are in a dispute]. [The woman would shout] 'I don’t care whether I am doing wrong or not' to the husband. [This is the kind of women who like to] yell at the man very rudely (Arief, 50).

Wives were also seen as causing feelings of disrespect amongst Javanese men if they acted in a self-centred manner, thought only about their own needs and interests, were rude, or accused the husband of doing bad things.

[Often in a conflict] Women behave like an egoist and self-centred, talk rashly without thinking. [Such attitudes make] the husband loses his temper easily, because the wife is unable to make him happy, often says something rude to him, [or] accuses him of adopting others’ [men] wrongdoing (Jasman, 50).

Feelings of disrespect were also likely to arise when wives challenged their husbands in arguments or always wanted to win debates or show up their husband. Several participants associated disrespectful attitudes with the character of women who lack knowledge, a shallow understanding of moral teachings and, therefore, act without thinking.

There are those wives who never stop insisting on winning arguments when they talk, [or those] wives who crave a standing position at the front [of their husbands]. They are making the men disrespected. These [attitudes] are actually forbidden by religion (Islam) (Jasman, 50).

But because the woman has never been told about the correct moral teachings, she acts rashly. She gets into a habit of swearing at the man even for some silly problems (Arief, 50).

A common form of disrespectful conduct is disobedience. Participants perceived disobedience to be an action mostly practiced by women, and temporarily occurring during spousal clashes. Disobedient conduct included women challenging the men to debates or fights. When a man was involved in a spousal conflict, he would likely see her as being disobedient.

Yeah, it (violence) breaks out in that situation (in quarrels). [The man would think] ‘No matter what, if my wife is not obeying me’ [he will attack her]. [That is the situation where] Both sides argue persistently (Sujono, 41).
Men appeared to give orders, admonitions, and commands. Women’s attitudes, in these situations, were seen as neglectful, obstinate and recalcitrant towards those orders. Handoko (54) suggested, ‘if the wife is obstinate and rebellious, violence may take place.’ By this perception, participants described women as being ‘noncompliant’, ‘arguing back’, ‘challenging back’, ‘talking rudely’ or ‘replying with a harsh voice’.

According to my experience, for example, when I am directing my wife, if after the first order and second order I gave to her she remains noncompliant, I may raise my voice. For example, when I am speaking harshly to my wife, she replies harshly as well. That is the situation when violence may happen (Handoko, 54).

In my position as a man, if a wife is ignoring [the husband’s] commands and arguing back against the man, and talking rudely, or, as our ancestors said, speak in very harsh voice that is the moment when violence may happen (Anggoro, 56).

Male violence occurred as a way to counter this challenge and to regain men’s authority.

If a conflict happens between couples it should be the wife who stops arguing and gives in. If she does that [violence] then certainly will not happen (Handoko, 54).

Participants believed that male violence may occur against wives when these behaviours persist. If that happens, women were blamed for conduct which may initiate the family conflict.

The narratives of disrespectful women seem to cover a wide range of women’s attitudes towards their husbands: loyalty and devotion, trust, ethics in communication, understanding and submission to men’s authority. This involves women’s conduct within a broader context of marital relationship and also implies how men expect such conduct should suit their position in the home. To this extent, women might be blamed for challenging men’s authority and in doing so not complying with the behaviour that men have come to expect from their wives.

“Women’s disagreement with men”

Another behaviour which according to the authority perspective is challenging was when wives disagree with their husbands about particularly big issues within the household. While still involving fights between couples, this scenario is rather different to the issue of disrespectful conduct. In these cases, men are not dealing with women’s attitudes toward their husbands generally, but the wives’ contrasting
Children's education, either at home or at school, was a big issue for participants. This participant, Mulyadi (58), imagined a case where a woman insists on contradicting the man, which probably indicates different interests as well. He saw the wife's action in this case as an opposition to the husband's decision. While calling the husband's decision 'rightful', he considered the wife's opposition to be unwise and incorrect. The participant suggested the woman should keep silent, stay away and support what the man has done.

It's better when the husband educates the children, which is rightful. The wife keeps silent and after the man has gone the wife can give the kids additional advice. The wife adds, 'that was surely correct what your Dad told you,' say it that way. That will be better (Mulyadi, 58).

In such situations, the woman's involvement may possibly lead in the wrong direction and would therefore interfere with the man's job and result in more problems.

But with [the wife] adding extra affairs into the conflict, like defending the wrongdoing by children, this will inflict violence (Mulyadi, 58).

Certainly, other settings of spousal conflict that lead to male violence also involve a situation where women disagree with men. Previously, in the cases of disrespectful women, participants used more hostile expressions in reporting different attitudes of women that, in their view, lead to violence.

Women demand more money

The second category of female provocative behaviour does not challenge men’s authority; rather, it places men under pressure by demanding increased wealth in families. The issue of income is important here, but more importantly, how a wife responds to the issue in relation to a man’s effort. Concerns regarding economic issues are fairly common amongst Indonesians. Yet, many participants mentioned
the effects the lack of economic resources and wealth had on spousal conflicts. Women were perceived as typically demanding men for higher incomes and more prosperity for the family. They were seen as ignorant or not sensitive to men’s efforts and difficulties in the work place. In a scenario like this, violence is a response to annoying demands made by a wife for more money or material goods.

If perhaps the husband earns a small amount of money, and the wife is not sensitive about her husband’s problems and asks for more money, this may breed domestic violence (Wahyudi, 35).

Some participants stressed the importance of acceptance and understanding of family conditions more so than money and wealth. This is particularly the case for women, which then results in family conflicts.

[...] if the cause of domestic violence is economic, should this have been happened to me (because my family is poor) (Pambudi, 46).

Although the husband earns only a little bit of money for the family, and the wife is still willing to understand her husband’s situation, be aware of her husband’s difficulties, we (the men) still have the chance to undertake other efforts (Wahyudi, 35).

The issue of income and family wealth seemed sensitive for Javanese men. This is intimately connected to their responsibility and identity within the family. If a wife fails to understand and appreciate a man’s efforts in this matter, she will likely be blamed for creating conflict in the family.

The men that participated in the talks did not have a record of being illegally involved in a domestic violence incident. However, they demonstrated similar views to those found amongst male perpetrators of domestic violence. The National Commission on Violence Against Women in Indonesia reports that Indonesian male perpetrators showed tendencies to demand services, total submission and the loyalty of their wives. They also tended to lay claim to their rights to educate, teach, rule, and discipline their wives (Poerwandari et al., 2002). The men’s talks on domestic violence signified a tendency of blaming the victim, and thereby justifying violence. In contrast to excuses, justification places the responsibility on the man, but the blame belongs to women (Hearn, 1998). Justifications for male violence also lead to the discourse about the man’s right to possess the woman (Hearn, 1998). In such a discourse, violence might be seen as a way of asserting or reinforcing this possession. This is particularly relevant to the discourse of disrespectful wives. For a
Conclusion

The wide adoption of the authority perspective in men’s talk on domestic violence presumes that men hold the superior role in holding the authority to observe, evaluate, judge and control undesirable situations within marital relationships. The perspective itself did not examine the authority, thereby assuming this is something necessarily underlying men’s powerful position. This was a sign of how intensely male participants considered domestic violence in relation to their authority by focusing more on women. This concern denotes a multilayered understanding of women’s attitudes in a marital relationship through which a Javanese husband may perceive his wife for being challenging his authority, identity and masculinity. These findings signify a discourse of masculinity in Java as a naturally given, acceptable, and perhaps expected structure within the family unit, upon which men’s identity is deeply linked to men’s authority and power at home. The men’s tolerance to violence indicates masculine values that uphold a hierarchical model of gender relationship in marital bounds. The ideology that a man’s best value is to rule the family involves demands on specific forms of women attitudes towards their husband. The men’s identity and masculinity themselves are hidden, unexamined, allowing men to set the standard of morality, what is acceptable and not, and use it to manage family affairs and control the dynamic of marital relationship.

This assessment on men’s perspective suggests that men’s violence at home is enabled by an imagined broader discourse of manhood that produces power imbalance between the sexes that men are entitled leadership authority, and that women are to submit in one form or the others to men’s position. Efforts in dealing with domestic violence in Indonesia would not adequately approach the issue without any attempt to address the dominant masculine discourse underlying it. The question
on gender in domestic violence should begin to be more addressed towards the questions of men and masculinity.

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References


