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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Temporality, violence, and masculinity challenges: tracing generational shifts in interpersonal violence narratives in Latin America

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**ABSTRACT**

Sociological research on masculinities has long examined how men respond to shifting gender norms, often through violence, when their masculinity is challenged. Drawing on 58 life history interviews with men imprisoned for assault or homicide across six Latin American countries, this paper explores generational shifts in how men narrate interpersonal violence. Participants were grouped by generation—1950s–60s, 1970s–80s, and 1990s–2000s—reflecting socio-political transformations in the region. Thematic analysis identified two central domains: narratives of violence and reflections on masculinity. Across all groups, violence was framed as a response to perceived threats. However, older men often viewed violence as inevitable or routinized; those born in the 1970s–80s connected it to unresolved emotional grievances; younger men expressed ambivalence, sometimes questioning violence and traditional masculinity norms. Reflective accounts of masculinity were largely absent in older generations but became more integrated into the life stories of younger men. These findings suggest that narratives of masculinity challenges have changed generationally in response to historical transformations. As younger generations demonstrate increasing reflexivity, their need to justify violence signals the emergence of a hybrid vocabulary. This study underscores the importance of context and temporality in understanding the shifting gender frameworks surrounding male violence.

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Masculinities; generations; interpersonal violence; homicide; Latin America

## Introduction

Critical masculinities scholarship has long focused on social change at both personal and societal levels, as well as aiming to contribute to more equal and just gender relations (e.g., Gottzén et al., 2020; Segal, 1990/2006; Seidler, 1989). One practice that masculinity scholars have both studied and sought to change is men's interpersonal violence, since

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violence against women and other men both upholds patriarchal relations and exemplifies the problems men create for themselves and others (Messerschmidt, 1993). Men commit the vast majority of criminal acts, including violent ones, making them, as Hearn (2012, p. 601) notes, 'experts in violence.'

In recent decades, masculinity scholars have observed changes in men's gendered practices toward more progressive values and debated whether more progressive and less oppressive masculinities are emerging and becoming dominant. Some scholars point to the rise of 'inclusive' masculinity practices—where young heterosexual men in Western settings show less homophobia and greater sexual intimacy with other men—as evidence of a changing gender order (Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2013). Others remain skeptical, arguing that while masculinities are evolving, the incorporation of feminine-coded practices, gay aesthetic elements—and even anti-violence stances—may make masculinities appear progressive while reproducing gender inequality (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Demetriou, 2001; Pascoe & Hollander, 2016). Others argue that hegemonic masculinity theory itself has the conceptual resources to account for genuine, not merely cosmetic, change (Duncanson, 2015).

This paper zeroes in on changes in men's relationships with interpersonal, man-to-man violence through a narrative lens. We distinguish 'conflict' (disagreements or tensions) from 'violence' (acts involving physical force or harm) to clarify the ways participants perceive and narrate masculinity challenges. Our large-scale qualitative study of life histories from prison inmates across six Latin American countries suggests shifting patterns in how men *narrate* violence and assault across generations, particularly in how they relate and respond to what Messerschmidt (2000/2019) calls masculinity challenges, that is, interactional threats and insults from others. Although the region continues to have some of the highest rates of interpersonal violence and homicide globally, the changes we identify may point to evolving ways masculinity challenges are framed, and, more broadly, to transformations in men's identities.

In the following, we present our conceptual framework, drawing on the notion of masculinity challenges and introducing a social generational lens to theorize transformations in masculinities, violent practices, and narratives. We then describe our data and methodology, based on repeated life history interviews conducted in Latin America, before analyzing generational shifts (between groups of men born in the 1950s and the 2000s) in how men narrate interpersonal violence. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for broader debates on masculinity, violence, and social change.

## Violent crime and masculinity challenges

Critical masculinity scholars have long demonstrated that criminality, particularly violent crime, is connected to men's attempts to conform to norms of masculinity (e.g., Messerschmidt, 1993; Newburn & Stanko, 1994/2013). In his seminal work, *Masculinities and Crime*, Messerschmidt (1993, p. 85) argued that crime and violence serve as resources for 'accomplishing' masculinity 'when men lack other resources.' This combines two key points: people use whatever resources are available to construct gender, and crime may become a viable option when men lack alternatives. Men's crime is thus understood through the lens of different opportunities available based on race, class, and gender. As Whitehead (2005, p. 418) notes in a UK setting, 'impoverished men, particularly

impoverished Black men, may experience disproportionate pressure to enact masculinity' and 'limited opportunities to do so legitimately.' Boys and young men in marginalized communities and with weak connections to the labor market often have limited resources for achieving middle-class masculinity. For these young men, the street becomes central to accomplishing masculinity, where crime and violent offenses tied to street life and gang activity offer opportunities to manage their class-based and racially marginalized masculinity (Messerschmidt, 1993). In this context, interpersonal violence may serve as a way to prove oneself as a 'real man,' a means to gain masculine respect, and a response to feelings of emasculation or threats to manhood.

Messerschmidt (2000/2019) has later theorized that men's interpersonal violence is linked not only to such a *general* inability to meet masculinity standards—like being a family provider or having sexual prowess—but also to *interactional* threats and insults from partners, peers, and others. What he terms *masculinity challenges* are 'contextual interactions that result in masculine degradation' when 'masculinity is explicitly put on the line' (Messerschmidt, 2000/2019, p. 303). To deal with such challenges, men may resort to interpersonal violence, such as bullying or fighting, which become resources to 'correct the subordinating social situation' and as a consequence, 'various forms of crime can be the result' (p. 13).

The masculinity challenge framework could be said to be based on understanding masculinity as a 'homosocial enactment' where men face 'the constant scrutiny of other men […] who evaluate the performance' (Kimmel, 1994, p. 130). This suggests that qualities perceived as 'masculine' in a local context are highly valued and provide men a sense of honor, superiority, and sovereignty. Yet the concept of masculinity challenges suggests that this gender identity is also extremely fragile and requires constant proof through displays of culturally coded masculine practices (Peretz & Vidmar, 2021). These practices vary across cultural and historical contexts, just as gender configurations in general do, though in many local settings—particularly in poor and marginalized neighborhoods—'physical aggression often is expected and admired among some men' (Connell, 2002, p. 93). For instance, while not using the concept of masculinity challenges, Anderson (2000), has demonstrated how men in a black inner-city community in the US constantly test each other on the street; men who fail these challenges become potential future targets of violence, while success prevents future challenges. But handling masculinity challenges correctly is not only a matter of safety but also provides honor. As Anderson notes, 'For many inner-city youths, manhood and respect are two sides of the same coin; physical and psychological well-being are inseparable, and both require a sense of control, of being in charge' (p. 91).

Masculinities scholarship has fruitfully explored the role of masculinity challenges in violent crime in Western settings. In an early Australian study, Polk (1994/2013) analyzed how public challenges between men produced lethal violent events, arguing that confrontational homicide could be seen as a contest of honor related to insults or other challenges to the perpetrator's manhood. For economically marginalized men in particular, 'physical toughness and violence become a major vehicle for the assertion of their masculinity and a way of defending themselves against what they see as challenges from other males' (Polk, 1994/2013, p. 187). In Mullins' (2006/2013, p. 77) study of US street subcultures, interpersonal violence 'occurred primarily through the perceived need to respond to masculinity challenges.' He argues that street masculinity

is performed by either challenging others or defending against others' challenges. While private insults could challenge a man's internalized sense of self, challenges that occurred in public spaces with many witnesses were especially provocative. The men in Mullins' study viewed 'the actions of others as potentially jeopardizing their masculine capital or saw their own actions as potentially increasing said capital' (p. 154). These actions often arose from seemingly trivial confrontations over money, women, and street credibility. Similarly, in a UK study of men involved in serious violence and crime, Ellis (2016) demonstrates how reputation and masculine embodiment serve as symbolic weaponry during confrontations. When challenged, the men tried to 'manoeuvre themselves into positions of dominance that ensure the maintenance of their own self-dignity, and crucially, the avoidance of terrifying humiliation' (p. 88), which often (but not always) caused confrontations to escalate to actual violence.

Ellis (2016, p. 89) argues that one factor linking masculinity challenges to assault is an individual man's propensity for violence, as the men in his study had learned to see violence as an interactional resource and been socialized in 'climates that equate dignity with one's ability to react appropriately to those who attempt to dominate and denigrate.' While not downplaying the role of gendered socialization, Messerschmidt (2000/2019) instead emphasizes that not all men who face masculinity challenges use violence, as choosing violence as an appropriate masculine response depends on having an *opportunity* for violence to occur.

> Not all predisposed individuals are motivated toward violence, especially if they do not experience masculinity challenges. Similarly, those predisposed individuals who do experience masculinity challenges may nevertheless not engage in violence; that is, the situational opportunities may disallow the possibility of violence as a resource for responding to the masculinity challenge. (p. 14)

While the masculinity challenges framework effectively explains men's interpersonal violence by connecting threats to gendered identities with opportunity structures, it does not address how these challenges might shift across time and place. This reflects a broader gap in criminology regarding masculinities and social change. When masculinities and crime scholars consider temporal change, they mainly focus on how individual men desist from crime and cease to offend (e.g., Berggren et al., 2020; Carlsson, 2013; Gottzén, 2019) or how to end men's violence through gender-transformative interventions (e.g., Flood, 2018; Kato-Wallace et al., 2019; Katz, 1995). In the next section we will therefore present a social generational lens to theorize masculinities, crime and social change in Latin America.

## Generation and masculinity

There are two main sociological approaches to generation (Turner, 2002): as a natural, biological phenomenon (such as age-groups and cohorts) or as a social phenomenon. The latter tradition understands generation as a social reality where 'the biological rhythm of life, such as birth, ageing and death, is understood as taking place within a set of historical processes that are specific to different cohorts' (Roberts & France, 2021, p. 777). In contrast to cohorts, generations cannot be reduced to simple groupings of people born in certain periods, like Generation X, Baby Boomers, or Millennials, an approach critics call 'generationism' (White, 2013). Rather, a sociology of generations

examines 'the study of generational cultures and consciousness where the specific date of a cohort may be less important than the general historical setting of generations' (Turner, 2002, p. 15). Through this, it aims to connect social, cultural and historical changes and conjunctures to individual subjectivity (Woodman & Wyn, 2015).

Mannheim's work (1952) has been foundational to this form of sociology of generations. Developing his theory as an alternative to what he saw as deterministic Marxist approaches, he aimed to demonstrate how generations could be drivers of social change. Rather than seeing individuals from the same generation as mechanically embracing similar ideas and sensibilities, he portrayed generations as potential carriers of new ideas and organizational alternatives that could potentially challenge existing social structures. A generation, according to Mannheim, is defined by its specific temporal location and shared experiences of historical events from similar perspectives—what he termed the 'stratification of experience' (p. 297). Central to his theory is how generations develop collective identity through shared experiences and worldviews, emerging as agents of social change when they become aware of their unique historical position. Though distancing himself from Marx in many ways, his emphasis on generational consciousness in fact parallels Marx's distinction between a class as a structural phenomenon (class in itself) versus becoming conscious of itself (class for itself) as the foundation of class struggle and social change.

According to Turner (2002), Mannheim's understanding of generation has three key components. First is generational *location*—the shared circumstances and opportunities available to people born in a particular time. Mannheim (1952) sees generations as both sharing a location in a historical process and responding to it similarly, thereby developing a shared culture and consciousness. Second is how people in the same cohort collectively respond to their historical situation, what Mannheim (1952) calls the generation as *entelechy*. Through this concept, Mannheim emphasized that not all generations 'realise the potentialities inherent in their generational location. Not all generations share a common awareness and aspirations or achieve generational self-realisation' (Pina-Cabral & Theodossopoulos, 2022, p. 462). Finally, there are generation *units,* that is, subgroups within a generation that develop distinct ways of understanding their place in history. The concept highlights how generations are diverse and sometimes characterized by intragenerational conflict. An individual can belong to a generational unit that differs from, and occasionally is in conflict with, other units within the same generation. Each unit may develop its own worldview and ideology as a unique response to their shared historical setting. In other words, generational consciousness is not uniform, as distinct generational units can represent varying and sometimes opposing interpretations of their historical moment (Mannheim, 1952). According to Mannheim, social change occurs when one or more generational units integrate and can represent the Zeitgeist. Given the right conditions, cohorts or clusters of cohorts may start to recognize themselves as different from previous and future generations. When this happens, the generation may become 'a powerful source of social, political and cultural change' (Roberts & France, 2021, p. 777).

While Mannheim has been immensely useful for exploring social change and generational differences, critics have identified key limitations in his theory. Pina-Cabral and Theodossopoulos (2022), for instance, note that Mannheim's work is unclear about generational awareness and intergenerational coexistence, instead suggesting that while

individuals from different generations may perceive themselves as distant from each other (lacking 'coevalness'), they can simultaneously share elements of consciousness across generations. To address this contradiction, they draw on Marxist cultural analysis and propose a 'conjunctural analysis' that examines both the specific historical conditions enabling generation formation and how individuals from different generations experiencing the same conjuncture may share similar 'structures of feeling', that is, 'affective elements of consciousness and relationships' such as 'impulse, restraint, and tone' (Williams, 1977, p. 132). For example, youth cultural scholars have observed that while working-class youth subcultures may resist mainstream bourgeois society and older generations, they simultaneously retain some ideas from their parent generation, such as 'conceptions of masculinity and of male dominance' (Clarke et al., 1976, p. 53). From this perspective, generation becomes a complex temporal coexistence 'always in the process of becoming: they are continually transformed and replaced by subsequent generations that may be less (or more) aware of themselves and share overlapping structures of feeling' (Pina-Cabral & Theodossopoulos, 2022, p. 457). This means that two individuals might belong to the same cohort without belonging to the same generation; they may coexist yet lack coevalness while sharing values and practices with people in other cohorts.

While Pina-Cabral and Theodossopoulos (2022) aim to solve the issue of generational coevalness, Aboim and Vasconcelos (2014) critique Mannheim's emphasis on generations and generational units as political actors that must become self-conscious to achieve their potential, and instead aim to broaden the concept of generation beyond consciousness. Similarly, we argue that the concept of generations helps explore how different cohorts of men may enact masculinity differently. Whereas some proponents of social generations theory often emphasize that generational subjectivities override distinctions based on gender, location, or socioeconomic circumstances (e.g., Woodman & Wyn, 2015), others have shown how a social generations perspective helps understand men's changing ideals and practices, such as approaches to domestic work (Roberts, 2018), sexuality (Kong, 2021) and relationships with their children (Day, 2025). As time and space shape how gender is accomplished, generational location affects masculinity, both in terms of ideals and practices.

Moreover, as Roberts and France (2021) have noted, including the Global South in generational analyses challenges the idea of 'global generations' (Edmunds & Turner, 2005) while highlighting how masculinity is accomplished differently across cultures. However, it is also crucial to recognize differences between countries within the Global South, as well as within countries and generations. For instance, in a study of men in Bangladesh, Hasan et al. (2018) show that while all men shared the view that 'real' men should be family providers, they differed by social generation as younger men identified a more diverse set of qualities as characteristic of masculinity and oriented more towards a globalized knowledge-based social world where professional skills, style, and education were deemed necessary for success in life. More importantly, they found differences within the youngest generation, suggesting that 'inter-generational and intra-generational variations in masculinities […] show that there is no single Bangladeshi or South Asian masculinity' (Hasan et al., 2018, p. 357).

From this perspective, we understand men's changing relationships to interpersonal violence and masculinity challenges as an evolving generational structure of feeling—a

shift in societal attitudes and ideals that affects how individuals practice masculinity and affectively respond to perceived threats to their masculinity. This change is not causal or uniform – and not everyone in a generation shares the same structure of feeling regarding masculinity, honor, and violence, but in this paper we identify how men in different social generations relate differently to these issues. This does not necessarily mean that men's interpersonal violence is decreasing in Latin America, but rather suggests that their understanding of masculinity and violence is changing.

## Masculinities in Latin America

Latin America offers a distinct context for examining men and masculinities, shaped by enduring social inequalities, political transformations, and diverse cultural norms. Men's practices are influenced by intersecting factors such as class, ethnicity, and engagement with social institutions, with violence being a key aspect explored in regional scholarship (Viveros-Vigoya, 2001; 2016). Since the 1980s, research has moved beyond early debates on machismo to examine diverse experiences, their historical roots, and connections to broader social, political, and economic processes (Gutmann, 2005; Madrid et al., 2023). High rates of homicide, gang activity, crime, and intimate partner violence have been central areas of study, with cross-country comparisons highlighting variations in how men enact masculinity and respond to social and moral pressures.

A critical insight from masculinities and gender studies is that the region's history—from authoritarian regimes and periods of political instability to democratization and the growing institutionalization of feminist perspectives (Barrancos, 2023; Espino, 2024)—intersects with persistent structural inequalities, shaping the opportunities and pressures men face in accomplishing masculinity (e.g., Baird et al., 2022). This provides an essential backdrop for examining shifts in men's narratives of interpersonal violence. Trust in and engagement with institutions has also emerged as a key dimension of masculinity, influencing how men perceive conflict, violence, and help-seeking (Di Marco et al., 2025). Yet, cross-national differences in these dynamics remain underexplored, and the ways in which such shifts unfold across generations are still largely unknown, particularly in relation to changing historical, discursive, and institutional conditions. Addressing this gap is a central aim of the present paper.

## Methods

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured life history interviews with men incarcerated across Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Honduras, and Mexico. We specifically focused on men charged with assault (typically in connection with other crimes) and those convicted of homicide, usually involving acquaintances. This focus served as a strategic entry point for engaging with men who have a history of interpersonal violence with other men, allowing us to explore their perspectives on conflict. The interviews stem from two projects that share a common methodological approach. The first, Crime in Latin America (CRIMLA, funded by the Research Council of Norway, 324299), seeks to develop a culturally and contextually grounded life-course criminology for Latin America.[1] The second, Narratives of Life and Death (funded by the Faculty of Social Sciences, Buenos Aires University, PRI R20-24), focuses on narratives of violence

and homicide in Argentina. A more detailed account of the interview design, analytical strategy, and reflexive considerations is provided in Di Marco and Sandberg (2023)

## Context

Latin America's prison systems are characterized by high incarceration rates (estimated at around 1.6 million people) alongside chronic overcrowding, weak institutional capacity, and limited access to rehabilitative and reintegration programs (Bergman & Fondevila, 2021). These conditions reflect a predominantly punitive penal orientation that does little to address the structural drivers of crime or social exclusion. Survey data indicate that more than 40% of incarcerated individuals report no participation in educational, vocational, or reintegration activities, reinforcing deep social and spatial inequalities rather than mitigating them (IADB, 2025). Prison populations across the region are overwhelmingly drawn from socially marginalized backgrounds marked by poverty, educational exclusion, and precarious labor trajectories—patterns that shape both pathways into crime and the ways masculinities are constructed, enacted, and narrated (Davis, 2015; Gómez-Lobo & Oviedo, 2023). Prisons thus constitute critical social sites where gender, marginality, and violence intersect, offering a privileged vantage point from which to examine how men justify, normalize, or at times contest violent practices within masculine frameworks.

## Sample

All interviewees were cisgender men incarcerated in Latin American prisons. The sample (n = 58) is drawn from six countries, with the highest proportion of interviewees from Argentina (27.59%), followed by Honduras (17.24%), Bolivia (15.52%), Brazil (15.52%), Mexico (12.07%), and Chile (12.07%).

Regarding age distribution, 41.38% of participants were between 20 and 39 years old, 44.83% were between 40 and 59 years old, and 13.79% were aged 60 or older. In terms of education, 18.97% of participants reported having no formal education, 24.14% had incomplete primary education, 10.34% had completed primary education, 31.03% had incomplete secondary education, and 15.52% had completed secondary education.

Regarding criminal convictions, 51.72% of participants were convicted of homicide, while 48.28% had been convicted of assault, with or without additional offenses occurring during the assault. Additionally, 41.38% of participants had prior convictions, while 37.93% had no recorded prior convictions. The remaining 20.69% had unknown prior convictions. This demographic and crime-related data provide an essential framework for understanding the participants' backgrounds and criminal trajectories within the broader sociological scope of the study (Table 1).

Although neighborhood of origin and gang involvement were not part of the analytical focus of this study, most participants came from working-class and socially marginalized urban contexts, including informal settlements and low-income neighborhoods. Educational attainment is used here as a proxy for broader class-based inequalities, situating participants' narratives within structurally constrained life trajectories without treating social class as an independent analytical dimension.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic and crime-related description of interviewees.

| | Country | |
|---|---|---|
| Argentina | 16 (27.59%) | |
| Honduras | 10 (17.24%) | |
| Brazil | 9 (15.52%) | |
| Bolivia | 9 (15.52%) | |
| Chile | 7 (12.07%) | |
| Mexico | 7 (12.07%) | |
| Age Group | | |
| 20–39 | 24 (41.38%) | 1990s–2000s |
| 40–59 | 26 (44.83%) | 1970s–1980s |
| 60+ | 8 (13.79%) | 1950s–1960s |
| Educational Level | | |
| No Education | 11 (18.97%) | |
| Incomplete Primary | 14 (24.14%) | |
| Complete Primary | 6 (10.34%) | |
| Incomplete Secondary | 18 (31.03%) | |
| Complete Secondary | 9 (15.52%) | |
| Conviction | | |
| Homicide | 30 (51.72%) | |
| Assault* | 28 (48.28%) | |
| Time spent in prison | | |
| Less than 4 years | 6 (10.34%) | |
| 4–6 years | 22 (37.93%) | |
| 7 years or more | 30 (51.72%) | |
| Prior convictions | | |
| Yes | 24 (41.38%) | |
| No | 22 (37.93%) | |
| Unknown | 12 (20.69%) | |

*With or without other crimes during the assault.

## *Procedure*

The interviews for the CRIMLA study were conducted between January 2022 and September 2023 in prison facilities across Buenos Aires, La Paz, Cochabamba, Tegucigalpa, Recife, São Paulo, Mexico City, Bogotá, and Santiago de Chile. Additional interviews for a related Narratives of Life and Death study were carried out between March 2020 and November 2022 in Buenos Aires. All interviews were conducted one-on-one (i.e. not in group settings). Most interviews were conducted in Spanish, with some in Portuguese, and all were audio-recorded.

A semi-structured format was employed, designed as life history interviews. These interviews traced participants' lives from childhood to the present, providing an in-depth exploration of their personal experiences. Life history interviews offer particular advantages, notably in capturing participants' perceptions of past events across different life stages. This approach also allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to introduce topics beyond those predefined by the research team or interview guide.

In line with the principles of narrative criminology (Presser & Sandberg, 2015), the interviews focused on how participants narrated their conflicts and disputes related to the crimes they committed, emphasizing the ways they constructed meaning around their experiences over time rather than the factual accuracy of specific events. The use of repeated life history interviews and a flexible research design enabled participants to highlight personally significant themes, reflect between sessions, and engage more openly with sensitive topics—such as emotions surrounding conflicts with other men. This

approach also allowed interviewers to develop follow-up questions and foster a stronger rapport throughout the process (Di Marco & Sandberg, 2023).

Sampling was organized in stages. First, authorization was obtained from higher authorities, typically within the judicial system or prison administration. In some countries, researchers were granted direct access to common prison spaces (e.g., educational or recreational facilities), where an initial convenience sample was established. In other contexts, access was mediated through staff or key informants with knowledge of inmates' offenses, who provided lists of potential participants. To reduce selection bias associated with institutional filtering, snowball sampling was subsequently used to reach additional participants beyond the initial lists.

Interviews were conducted by trained research assistants (men and women, usually in their twenties) with backgrounds in criminology, psychology, and related social sciences. In each country, interviews were conducted by local research assistants. As generational proximity or difference may have shaped rapport and disclosure, interviews were carried out in private and comfortable prison settings and involved repeated, extended encounters as a strategy to foster trust and depth. A more detailed discussion of interviewer—interviewee relationships in this project is provided in Di Marco and Sandberg (2023).

The interviews were conducted in various prison settings, including visiting rooms, common areas, and educational facilities. Importantly, prison officials were not present, and participants were not monitored by criminal justice authorities. On average, each participant was interviewed three times over a four-week period, with each session lasting approximately 1.25 h—totaling nearly four hours of interview time per participant.

In most cases, we did not identify any treatment or rehabilitation programs led by prison staff themselves. This aligns with a broader regional pattern: prison surveys show that 43.6% of incarcerated individuals in Latin America report not participating in any educational, therapeutic, or reintegration activity while serving their sentence (IADB, 2025). With an estimated prison population of 1.6 million (World Prison Index, 2025), this means that over 700,000 people are excluded from such programming. Among those who do participate, activities are typically limited to sports (65.1%), work (58.3%), cleaning (56.6%), and education (52%). While the 'ideal of cure and rehabilitation' has re-emerged in prison reform debates (Phelps, 2011), it has not translated into effective or sustained policies in the region (Bergman & Fondevila, 2021).

Ethical approval for this study was granted by Institutional Review Board of Gino Germani Research Institute (number 160921/2021); Institutional Review Board of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Chile (Number 30-33/2021); Science, Technology and Innovation Institute, Francisco Gavidia University, Honduras (Number 008/2021); Center for Research and Teaching in Economics, Mexico (Number CEI/0002/21). The larger project and data storage was also approved by NSD Norway (Number 56769). All procedures adhered to established protocols for conducting interviews with incarcerated individuals, ensuring that personally identifiable information was removed. Only the quotations included in this paper were translated into English, with all identifying details omitted. To reinforce de-identification, identifying details were removed or altered—for example, the relationship between the interviewee and the victim of aggression.

### Analysis

The transcriptions were analyzed by an interdisciplinary team, including a sociologist, criminologist, and masculinities scholar. Drawing on narrative scholarship, the analysis was guided by three key questions: (a) How is man–man conflict described? (b) How do interviewees position themselves in relation to conflict and violence? and (c) How do they speak about masculinity, directly or indirectly?

We began with an exploratory phase involving close reading of the corpus, memo-writing, and generating initial hypotheses based on participants' stories—a process that Corbin and Strauss (2014) describe as 'waving the red flag.' This was followed by a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where themes were first inductively identified from the data and later refined through peer discussion. The final overarching themes—narratives of violence and conflict, and reflections on masculinity—emerged through two iterative coding cycles and included categories such as 'violence as inevitable' and 'violence linked with frustration' (see Table 2).

Given that historical time was central to our research question, we divided the sample into three cohorts based on birth decades: the 1950s–1960s, the 1970s–1980s, and the 1990s–2000s. These groupings reflect key differences in Latin American historical and political processes, including periods of dictatorship, the expansion of women's rights, and the modernization of state institutions. Testimony selection and the final analytical content were determined through a process that integrated data-driven themes with theoretical concerns, ensuring that both participant narratives and existing frameworks shaped the analysis.

## Results

The men interviewed across the various generations and countries all discussed interpersonal man-to-man conflict, consistently framing violence as a means to achieve a goal. Despite individual variations, a common thread was the perception of aggression as a feasible response to masculinity challenges (Messerschmidt, 2000/2019). However,

**Table 2.** Generational narratives of man-to-man violence and masculinity.

| Generations | Narratives of violence and conflict | Reflections on masculinity |
|---|---|---|
| *1950s–1960s* | a) Perceived as inevitable; b) Framed as logical and orderly; c) Emotionally neutral or detached; d) No perceived need for justification; e) Conflict imagined as total opposition between sides. | a) Masculinity remains unquestioned; b) Masculinity challenges and expectations expressed as duty-bound and self-evident. |
| *1970s–1980s* | a) Linked to personal frustration and perceived injustice; b) Tension between agency and circumstance, with violence often framed as provoked; c) Narratives oscillate between emotional detachment and distress; d) Violence portrayed as reactive rather than inherent; e) Moments of reflection. | a) Growing ambivalence toward masculinity challenges, though still influential; b) Masculinity experienced as strained or in transition. |
| *1990s–2000s* | a) Rooted in inner conflict and hesitation, often triggered by unmet social expectations; b) Narratives emphasize emotional vulnerability, and affective complexity; c) Justifications are more aligned with political correctness, focusing on negotiation and loss of control rather than dominance. | a) Masculinity challenges viewed with increased critical distance; b) Gender practices approached as contingent and open to contestation; c) Heightened reflexivity and self-interrogation regarding masculinity. |

generational differences shaped how these stories were told (see Table 2). For men born in the 1950s–1960s, conflict was often presented as a logical unexamined action, reinforcing a sense of inevitability in violent encounters. Men born in the 1970s and 1980s, in contrast, described violence in relation to emotional distress, or long-standing grievances, revealing a more conflicted perspective on aggression. Meanwhile, younger men born in the 1990s–2000s were more likely to reflect on shifts in the use of violence as a response to masculinity challenges, sometimes questioning its necessity while acknowledging lingering pressures to assert dominance.

### *Inevitability of honor: oldest cohort (1950s–1960s)*

Ramiro, a 61-year-old Bolivian who migrated to Argentina at the age of seven, offers a compelling example of the mindset prevalent among men from his generation. At the time of our interview, he had been incarcerated for two years in a medium-security prison for the attempted homicide of a man he referred to as a 'colleague', someone with whom he had participated in a gang robbery. This was his third conviction, following earlier convictions for petty theft and a serious assault.—

Throughout our conversation, Ramiro framed his use of violence as a practical necessity and a 'logical' resource rather than a moral failing. He saw conflict as an expected part of his social life, requiring little justification beyond survival and the maintenance of masculine status (Mullins, 2006/2013). His story—like those of others born in the mid-twentieth century—shows a less questioned, instrumental view of aggression: violence functioned not only as a means to an end but also as a way to assert dominance and secure one's position within an all-male peer group:

> Violence is just part of life where I come from. You can't survive without it. (…) It's not about being a bad person; it's just how things are. When you're in a situation where you have to fight to keep your place, it's not something you think about too much. (…) You just do it. (…) It's just how things work. If you don't stand your ground, you're nobody.

Like Ramiro, other men from his generation described violence in similar terms. Across their narratives, several key themes were recurrent: violence and conflict were (a) perceived as inevitable; (b) framed as logical and orderly; (c) presented with emotional detachment; (d) treated as actions requiring no justification; and (e) imagined as total opposition between sides. Why violence was chosen over alternative strategies was rarely examined. Instead, it was portrayed as a practical—mostly necessary—response to masculinity challenges, not something that demanded deep reflection. Words like 'reacting,' 'fury,' and 'indignation' were frequently used, underscoring the emotional intensity behind these encounters, even as the men maintained a detached, instrumental view of their actions.

Carlos (62, Chile) exemplifies this way of narrating violence when recalling a betrayal by a former friend with whom he committed small robberies:

> We always had an understanding, what we took, we split. That's how it worked. But this time, he kept more for himself, like I was some idiot who wouldn't notice. When I confronted him, he laughed in my face. That was the real betrayal. It wasn't just about the money; it was about him looking down on me, treating me like I was beneath him. In our world, if you let a man talk to you like that, you're nothing. So, I waited, and when the time was right, I shot him. He knew why. Everyone knew why.

Carlos' story illustrates how conflict and self-worth were deeply intertwined. While a few men in this cohort elaborated on the emotional toll of disputes, most left all emotional talk unspoken, reducing their narratives to almost instinctual reactions to perceived slights. For many, the story reflected a binary logic: respect must be maintained, and violence was the only way to restore it (Ellis, 2016).

Similarly, Domenico (59, Bolivia) described a conflict with a former neighbor—who had become a drug dealer—as an inevitable confrontation that required little, if any, justification. The issue began when the neighbor trespassed to borrow money. Domenico framed the resolution as self-evident: 'When you're dealing with that kind of vermin, what do you expect? I mean, no one said, 'Oh! How could you shoot him?'' he added mockingly. 'I just did it. End of story.'

In these men's stories, conflict was often imagined as total opposition between sides, frequently triggered by perceived disrespect or a clash of interests. The person with whom they had a dispute was quickly turned into an 'adversary' in their stories. Masculinity challenges dissolved prior relationships, replacing a 'we-group' (friends, colleagues, neighbors) with an 'other' (the enemy). When no previous camaraderie existed, the conflict reinforced enmity, even if temporarily. As Diego (Mexico, 61) put it: 'How could I trust a guy who betrayed me like that? It was no longer trust.' Similarly, Emiliano (Honduras, 58) reflected: 'It was like spitting into the wind—he only harmed himself. We are no longer brothers.'

For those who mentioned insults, these played a critical role, typically signaling a disruption of the status quo. Denigration was not merely verbal but deeply embodied, sparking immediate and often violent reactions. The sting of an insult was not just in the words but in the physical sensations the men described—heat rising to the face, clenched fists, and the tightening of the jaw. Similarly to the men in Mullins' (2006/2013) study, insults for these men were not just words but embodied challenges that demanded a response. As Ramiro (Argentina, 61) put it: 'When a man spits in your face with words, it's like he's daring you to prove you're still a man.'

Overall, their ways of accomplishing masculinity remained largely unquestioned for most of these interviewees. They were neither directly mentioned nor critically examined. For men like Ramiro ('it's not something you think about too much') and Domenico ('I just did it. End of story'), the reasoning behind their approach to masculinity challenges —why violence was seen as inevitable, logical, and unexamined—was self-evident. Their stories reflected a worldview where conflict, and the violence it often entailed, was a taken-for-granted part of masculinity. When facing a masculinity challenge, the other man was quickly cast as an adversary, and the response to the perceived slight or insult was reflexive and unquestionable.

This generational narrative on violence and man-to-man conflict reveals a logic in which conflict serves not as a personal dispute but as a reaffirmation of gendered identity and status. For these men, aggression was not an exceptional response but an expected one, shaped by social environments that prioritized dominance and immediate retaliation over reconciliation (Anderson, 2000). Their narratives reflect a worldview where respect must be defended at all costs, and any perceived slight becomes a synecdoche for profound injury to the self. The essence of these violent responses to masculinity challenges lies not in justifications but in their self-explanatory nature. While the men expended considerable energy narrating their experiences, their stories seldom

considered alternative courses of action. This sense of inevitability is central to understanding their self-righteous approach to violence.

### *Fractured certainty: middle cohort (1970s–1980s)*

While Ramiro's portrayal of conflict was rooted in a stark defense of the self, where violence was an unavoidable, logical, and almost unreflective response to masculinity challenges, men from the 1970s and 1980s, born during the final years of regional dictatorships and amid the strengthening of feminism in state institutions, introduced a more conflicted perspective on masculinity challenges. Born in the mid-1970s, 49-year-old Marcelo grew up amid democratic transition and shifting gender expectations. He was serving time in Argentina for stabbing his brother-in-law, and described the act as a breaking point after years of 'provocation'.

> I didn't go looking for trouble, but I'm not made of stone either. He'd been provoking me for years, always in front of people, always making me look small. That day, when he said that in front of my kids, (…) I just lost it. I didn't plan to do anything, but something flipped. I wasn't going to swallow it again.

The men in this middle group often described violence not only as a means of asserting control—in line with previous masculinity challenges literature (Ellis, 2016; Mullins, 2006/2013; Polk, 1994/2013)—but also (a) as a response to personal frustration. While some offered emotionally detached stories similar to those of the older generation in this study, others (b) linked their aggression to emotional distress or a sense of injustice. Their narratives revealed (c) a tension between agency and circumstance, with several positioning themselves as reluctant participants—provoked rather than initiating violence—something largely absent in the narratives of older men. Unlike the older generation, (d) reflections about masculinity and violence were more frequent, pointing to a shift toward greater emotional complexity in how they understood and narrated their violent actions.

Emotional tension played a significant role in how these men spoke about conflict. Fights, often with close acquaintances, were not merely described as responses to masculinity challenges, but instead laid bare an internal struggle. Some expressed contradiction, acknowledging their grievances while recognizing that their emotional reactions were, at least in part, their responsibility. Others externalized blame, framing themselves as victims of humiliation or injustice, unable to contain their response.

For example, Lalo (Chile, 45) captured this tension in the story of his attempted murder of his father-in-law. Lalo reflects the more ambivalent stance many men from his generation express toward violence. His story emerged in fragments—stammered, backtracked, often laced with discomfort. What began as a 'fight over family matters' soon turned into an explosive episode that he continues to replay in his mind:

> He kept saying I wasn't man enough to provide, to take care of his daughter. Always in front of her, always making me feel like I was a nobody. At first, I tried to brush it off. You know, 'Don't start, viejo.' But that day, I had lost my job. I hadn't told anyone yet. He said something like, 'So, what are you good for, then?' And I … I don't know. I just snapped. I grabbed the chair and swung it at him. I wasn't thinking, only that I needed him to stop, to shut up. It was like all the years of swallowing his crap came out at once.

Lalo's story underscores the layered emotional tension present in many middle-generation narratives. Unlike men from the older generation, who often rationalized aggression as a practical, inevitable response to masculinity challenges, he describes a longer build-up of humiliation and suppressed emotion. Lalo describes his act not as justified, but as eruptive and later hints at guilt and confusion. Rather than erasing the emotional weight of the moment, he still struggles to make sense of it. This narrative reflects the tension between agency and circumstance, where violence emerges not as a clear-cut act of interactional dominance but as a set of complex, internal struggles over self-worth and social positioning. While violence continues to be linked with honor and framed as a result of masculinity challenges, as seen in the older men's narratives, Lalo's reflection on his actions reveals a more ambivalent stance toward conflict, signaling a shift towards greater emotional complexity in the middle cohort's understanding of violence and masculinity.

With increasing emotional tension in these conflicts, men provided more elaborate justifications for their violent responses to masculinity challenges. For instance, Ariel (43, Argentina) framed his response not merely as a reaction to *direct* provocation, but as the culmination of accumulated emotional strain and unresolved tensions:

> It wasn't like I wanted to hurt him, but when he said what he did, it was like he was testing me. I had to prove that I wasn't someone to be talked down to. It wasn't just the insult; it was everything that came before it. That's what pushed me to do what I did.

Similarly, Hugo (48, Chile) and Juan (53, Bolivia) both described their violent acts as responses to long-standing insults and ongoing disrespect. Hugo explained that his anger was a result of months of hidden disrespect, which, when confronted, erupted all at once: 'When I finally confronted him, it wasn't just anger, it was everything that had built up. I was tired of being overlooked.' Juan viewed his violent outburst as a defensive reflex triggered by continuous provocation: 'He had been pushing me for days, testing my limits. When he said that, it was like a switch flipped. I had to show him I wasn't someone to be disrespected.'

While still being responses to masculinity challenges, both men framed their actions not as reactions to isolated insults but as responses to ongoing emotional and social tensions. These stories reflect how men from this generation grappled with emotional complexity, oscillating between justifying their actions as responses to perceived masculinity challenges and acknowledging their internal struggles. This made their violence less about simple inevitability and more about emotional intricacies and personal histories.

As with the older generation, men in their 40s and 50s at the time of the interviews continued to view masculinity challenges as significant triggers in their narratives of conflict. Martín (49, Chile) explained that his violent reaction stemmed from a buildup of ongoing insults and public humiliation: 'It had been building for months (…). He kept making jokes at my expense in front of everyone. When he crossed the line, I couldn't hold back anymore.' Similarly, Alejandro (54, Bolivia) described his violent act as the breaking point after enduring constant verbal attacks.

> I had tried to keep my cool, but it was constant. Every time I turned around, he had something to say. That day, I just snapped. I had to make him understand that he couldn't keep doing that to me.

Both Martín and Alejandro described their actions as reactions to prolonged humiliation, with the final insult acting as a breaking point. Their narratives reveal a buildup of tension, portraying violence not as an outburst but as the endpoint of sustained emotional and social strain. These narratives of interpersonal violence suggest a reconfiguration of the men's understandings of masculinity challenges, moving beyond notions of inevitability toward a more intricate reckoning with emotional struggle and personal history.

### *Shifting boundaries: youngest cohort (1990s–2000s)*

The youngest group of interviewed men (1990s–2000s) represents a significant narrative departure from older generations in how they relate to violence. Nicolás, a 31-year-old man from Argentina, provides a telling example of this shift. Growing up in a low-income neighborhood, he described how he had been socialized to see violence as a way to resolve conflict. However, in contrast to most of the older men in our study, his description of violence is marked by visible frustration and ambiguity. At the time of our interview, he had been incarcerated for two years for aggravated assault after a nightclub altercation, which left another man injured. Nicolás did not view the violence as inevitable or strategic, but rather as the regrettable consequence of social expectations. He expressed his reluctance toward violence, emphasizing the rapid escalation of events:

> Look, I wasn't looking for a fight that night. But when he shoved me and got in my face, what was I supposed to do? If I had walked away, people would have talked. You don't want to be the guy who gets stepped on. (…). Honestly, I knew fighting was stupid. I even thought, 'This is not worth ruining my life over.' But when everyone was watching, when he kept pushing, it felt like there was no clean way out.

While Nicolás' narrative largely resembles men's responses to masculinity challenges identified in the older generations as well as in Western settings (e.g., Mullins, 2006/2013; Polk, 1994/2013), his story also illustrates the shifting relationship the younger men in our study have with violence. Unlike Ramiro, who viewed conflict as a self-evident necessity, or Lalo, who expressed emerging inner turmoil over his violent actions, younger men often positioned themselves at a crossroads. Many in this cohort described violence as (a) emerging from inner conflict and hesitation, often framed as a social expectation they felt compelled to meet, rather than as a direct assertion of self-worth or an uncontested way to resolve disputes. Their narratives conveyed (b) emotional vulnerability and affective complexity, and (c) a heightened need to offer politically correct or morally acceptable justifications—something largely absent in older generations.

This shift is echoed in the narratives of other men from this generation. Diego, a 28-year-old from Chile, explained how he felt caught between what he perceived as outdated masculine expectations and his evolving sense of self. He acknowledged that he knew violence was unnecessary, but the pressure to conform to a particular form of masculinity led him to act:

> Sometimes, you know you don't need to fight. But when you're out with friends, and someone disrespects you, there's this unspoken rule. If you let it slide, people see you differently. You don't want that reputation, so you act, even if deep down you don't want to. (…) What bothers me most is that it wasn't even about him. It was about the role I was supposed to play. (…) But that option [leaving] doesn't really exist when everyone expects you to react.

Diego's words reflect a broader trend in this generation: while violence as a necessary response to masculinity challenges still holds influence, younger men increasingly question its automatic application to conflict situations. Unlike older men, who saw violence as a taken-for-granted, instinctual response to insults or challenges, younger men demonstrated more ambivalence, sometimes refraining from violence despite the pressure to act.

For instance, Matías, a 25-year-old from Bolivia, described a situation where he initially resisted the urge to fight, but social pressure from his male friends led him to act. His narrative illustrates how masculinity as a homosocial enactment (Kimmel, 1994), rather than an internalized aggression, shapes many of these men's violent actions:

> He called me weak in front of everyone. I thought about ignoring him, but my friends started laughing like it was true. So, I hit him. It wasn't even about him at that point. It was about them seeing me do something. If they hadn't been there, maybe I wouldn't have done anything.

Matías' story highlights how the social context and the need to conform to group expectations increasingly mediate violent actions. This stands in contrast to older generations, who tended to frame violence as a necessary, self-evident response to challenges or insults.

This introspection and self-awareness also emerge in the descriptions of men like Alejandro (30, Honduras), who expressed regret and confusion about his violence. Reflecting on the pressures to defend his honor, Alejandro summarized the internal conflict many in his generation face:

> You're raised hearing that a man has to defend himself. But then you get older and wonder: defend from what? From words? From looking weak? Sometimes it's just pride, not real danger. But in the moment, you don't think like that. It's later, when you're sitting in a cell, that you start to ask yourself those things.

Alejandro's reflection reveals a growing awareness of the complexity of masculinity and violence. For the younger men, interpersonal violence is not a taken-for-granted or inevitable response to masculinity challenges, but rather influenced by homosocial expectations. While this increased self-awareness is not extended, it does mark a generational shift from the older men, who were more likely to frame their violent actions as straightforward or inevitable.

The narratives of men born in the 1990s and 2000s suggest a generational shift marked by heightened internal conflict and moral ambivalence regarding the use of violence. While the enduring pressure to respond to masculinity challenges through violence—evident in the continued prevalence of man-to-man homicides—remains significant, younger men more frequently express hesitation, doubt, and remorse about their actions, and distance themselves from cultural norms of violent masculinity. Their narratives suggest that violence is no longer viewed as a self-evident response to masculinity challenges, but rather as a more or less deliberate situational choice—one increasingly subject to personal scrutiny that makes nonviolent responses more possible (Messerschmidt, 2000/2019). This transition suggests a broader transformation in the gendered structures of feeling (Pina-Cabral & Theodossopoulos, 2022; Williams, 1977), where aggression is no longer an unquestioned marker of masculine strength or honor, but a contested and emotionally fraught option within a more fluid and reflexive landscape of gender and conflict.

## Concluding discussion

Our aim in this study was to analyze the life histories of incarcerated men as an entry point to understanding shifting narratives of man-to-man violence and, more broadly, transformations in masculinity challenges in Latin America (Messerschmidt, 2000/2019). Within the context of the region's criminological transition (Pridemore, 2007)—marked by a long-term decline in interpersonal violence rates, though still high by global standards—we anticipated changes in how men interpret, justify, or question violent behavior in relation to masculine identity.

The most salient finding is that the narratives of violence varied significantly across generations, revealing changes in how violence, conflict, and masculinity are storied. While individual differences remained, the older generation (men born in the 1950s and 1960s) often described violent encounters as inevitable, unreflective, and deeply normalized—mirroring a normative script of routine masculine aggression. In contrast, men born in the 1970s and 1980s more frequently framed violence as a response to emotional distress or unresolved interpersonal grievances, indicating a more ambivalent and morally fraught stance toward aggression. The youngest men in this study (those born in the 1990s and 2000s) tended to reflect more critically on prevailing gendered norms surrounding violence. Some even questioned its necessity, though they also acknowledged ongoing social pressures to assert dominance when facing interactional masculinity challenges.

This narrative transformation can be understood, in part, through the lens of generational change (Mannheim, 1952), which posits that broader social transformations occur when specific generational units begin to articulate new collective experiences and worldviews. Men born and raised in different historical moments did not simply describe masculinity challenges differently—they also distanced themselves, at least narratively, from the masculinity of previous generational units. In doing so, they positioned themselves as different kinds of men, and their stories—complex and sometimes contradictory—signaled potential openings for social, cultural, and political change (France & Roberts, 2015; Roberts & France, 2021).

These generational differences appear linked to a shifting sense of impunity: the growing need to justify violent behavior suggests the emergence of a more hybrid vocabulary of motives (Mills, 1940)—which exists in increasing tension with a masculinity that takes violence as a viable resource to accomplish gender when facing insults and other interactional challenges. Among younger men, these forms of responses carry less confidence and legitimacy than in older generations. This suggests that discourses of masculinity in Latin America face some degree of contestation—though not necessarily becoming 'more humane' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 833), given that all men in this study have committed assault or murder. We should not overestimate the scope of this change, as distancing oneself from violence may simply be a way to adopt anti-violence stances without truly challenging the current gender order (Pascoe & Hollander, 2016). Nevertheless, the generational differences indicate that the *legitimacy* of men's violent responses to masculinity challenges is being questioned, weakening its taken-for-granted status.

While this paper does not explicitly theorize hybrid masculinity, our findings contribute to debates about masculinity change. Proponents of the hybrid masculinity thesis often argue that shifts in men's identities and practices tend to reproduce patriarchal relations,

even when men incorporate ostensibly progressive elements (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Our findings suggest the possibility of 'progressive' change in masculinity, though we remain cautious about drawing broad conclusions. We have only identified *discursive* shifts among highly violent men in the global South—a demographic greatly underrepresented in hybrid masculinity scholarship. Yet these changes are genuinely hybrid: they are contradictory in that the men express more negative views of their violence, even as they have committed murder. Nor are these changes necessarily teleological, ultimately leading to reduced violence or dismantled patriarchal structures. Our most significant contribution, however, lies in demonstrating the importance of social generations theorizing for understanding masculinity change. Change appears to arrive partly through the formations of new generational units rather than through individual transformation over the life course. Notably, all men in our study were interviewed during the same time period, yet younger and older men expressed markedly different relationships to masculinity threats.

We suggest that both historical and discursive contexts play a pivotal role in shaping these shifts. On the one hand, the historical context (Elder, 1994) offers insight into the broader societal changes that have influenced conceptions of masculinity. The five decades covered in this study span major transformations—from postwar conservatism and the dominance of authoritarian regimes in the region to the growing institutionalization of feminist perspectives within state structures (Barrancos, 2023; Espino, 2024). On the other hand, discursive context—the frameworks of meaning and language available to individuals—profoundly shapes how experiences are interpreted and narrated. As Rosenthal (2018) reminds us, discourses shape how people embody, articulate, and act upon events such as man-to-man conflict. In this sense, the growing public attention to violence and the proliferation of narratives about it, as Binik (2020) suggests, help explain the increasing need for individuals to justify their actions within a socially intelligible framework.

Still, we caution against interpreting these narrative shifts solely through the lens of generational awareness or intergenerational dynamics. While Mannheim's (1952) idea of generational units and the concept of global generations (Edmunds & Turner, 2005) provide helpful tools to identify broader patterns, they risk flattening the social complexity behind these stories. As Pina-Cabral and Theodossopoulos (2022) argue, such frameworks can over-rely on a rationalist view of agency, thereby missing the ambiguity, contradictions, and situational embeddedness that shape how individuals make sense of their actions. Rather than reading these stories as straightforward signs of linear progress, we argue that what is shifting is the available vocabulary of motives itself (Mills, 1940). The ways in which men explain, justify, and legitimize their actions are changing —mirroring evolving social expectations, cultural scripts, and discursive conditions under which masculinities are constructed and negotiated.

Although the exact causes of these generational differences remain unclear, this study demonstrates that masculinity—along with its associated struggles and threats—is neither universal nor static. Recognizing time and change as central dimensions of the relationship between masculinity and violence helps challenge deterministic, fatalistic views of gender (or of social facts more broadly), which often ignore the real but uneven processes of transformation. Without a temporal lens, such analyses risk becoming rigid and overly abstract, missing the shifting, negotiated, and historically grounded nature of gendered experience.

One of the strengths of this study lies in the use of a large, multi-country dataset, which enabled us to identify recurring patterns across national and generational lines, and to move beyond the constraints of methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2003). That said, the study has limitations. Our focus on broad trends meant that we could not fully explore local, national, and everyday expressions of masculinity, or the specific relational contexts of the violent events discussed. Although all participants had been convicted of man-to-man violence, they had varied relationships with their victims—ranging from relatives to strangers—which may have shaped how they narrated those encounters. Methodologically, the use of a *synthetic cohort*—comparing people from different generations who were interviewed at the same historical moment (Campbell & Hudson, 1985)—limits our ability to trace actual generational change over time. The institutional setting and the characteristics of the incarcerated sample also introduce important contextual nuances. Finally, this analysis did not fully account for the influence of therapeutic and mainstream discourses—such as religion, self-improvement, or psychoanalysis—which may have mediated or filtered how these men constructed their narratives.

Despite these limitations, we believe the findings remain compelling. They speak to the urgent need to better understand generational shifts in masculinity, a topic that remains understudied in Latin America—especially through large-scale, comparative approaches. Exploring how masculinity is narrated, challenged, and redefined over time offers a powerful lens into broader social transformations.

## Note

1. For more information: https://www.crimeinlatinamerica.com/.

## Author contributions

CRediT: **Martín Hernán Di Marco:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft; **Lucas Gottzén:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft; **Gustavo Fondevila:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Writing – original draft.

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