

Masculinity development, gender stereotypes, and gender equality

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Abstract: This literature review focuses on how masculinity affects males' health conditions, gender stereotypes, gender equality and whether alternative masculinity can replace current masculinity. Previous literature found negative outcomes of masculinity compared to positive ones. By discussing masculinity's negative effect, I propose that masculinity should be challenged for males' good and to build the groundwork for development towards gender equality. I examine whether alternative masculinity is mature enough to replace current masculinity and suggest it could be seen as a progress of masculinity development. In the future, researchers could focus on challenging masculinity definition and identifying valuable traits for the development of masculinity to benefit both genders and gender equality.

Introduction

Over the last century, the gender equality movement has emerged into public view along with the rising of women's rights movements (Precopio & Ramsey, 2017). However, the development of masculinity has been covered by the light of the gender equality movement. In a recent published book, *The Palgrave Handbook of Male Psychology and Mental Health* (Seager & Barry, 2019), the authors suggested that the global acceptance of minority and women's rights is on the rise, but the perceptions of masculinity remain stagnant and restricted. Despite the attempts from a few papers highlighting positive and functional views

towards masculinity's value in society (Addis et al., 2010; Hammer & Good, 2010), most publications in this field revealed a negative image of masculinity—it is toxic to male physical (Chris Blazina & Watkins, 1996; Kaya et al., 2019, Iwamoto, Cheng, Lee, Takamatsu, & Gordon, 2011; Levant & Wimer, 2014; Mahalik et al., 2006) and mental health (Berger et al., 2005; Christopher Blazina & Watkins, 2000; Kaya et al., 2019). In addition, studies have found high drivers of masculinity correlated with negative attitudes towards feminism, the gender equal rights' movement (Precopio & Ramsey, 2017), and difficulties understanding gender roles, which are the

traits women or men should possess (Valved et al., 2021).

Therefore, I propose that masculinity needs to be redefined for improvement of men's health condition, reduction of confusion over gender roles for future young males and preparation for the groundwork for further development towards gender equality. In this paper, I will review identified problems of masculinity, and masculinity's effect on all genders and our society. In the end, I will discuss whether the introduction of alternative masculinity could potentially resolve the current issues.

Literature Review

Identified problems with masculinity

Seager and Barry argue that masculinity cannot be programmed without biological determinations, such as men are born to be stronger, which suggests that masculinity is inherently embedded and not chosen (Seager & Barry, 2019). However, psychologists discuss masculinity more as a social construct. Hegemonic masculinity, which refers to traditional masculinity, can be defined by several dimensions: repressed emotionality, winning at all costs, taking risks, prioritizing work and social status, having multiple sexual partners, and being aggressive and dominant especially over women (Mahalik et al., 2003). Literature has provided evidence that men who achieve these goals experience loss of physical health and mental well-being (Kaya et al., 2019).

Aggression, risk-taking and dominance over women are more likely to lead to violent and risky sexual behaviors (Levant & Wimer,

2014; Mahalik et al., 2006). The precarious ('hard won, easily lost') status of manhood leads to detrimental health problems, including problematic chemical substance use (Chris Blazina & Watkins, 1996; Vandello & Bosson, 2013). More than often, men are expected to drink and smoke, which are male stereotyped behaviors to express themselves and solve problems. (Lemle & Mishkind, 1989; Kaya et al., 2019). Men who drink socially were found to be more communicative to each other, but they are expected to use social drinking to cover affection for each other because being masculine requires them to not show emotions (Burda & Vaux, 1987). Not only affection, but pain, anxiety, and depression were all expected to be taken care of by chemical substance use. As a sign of transition to manhood, these expectations have been put on males when they were young. The more masculine a man is, the better he should control 'his business.'

Masculinity has also been associated with mental health problems. Based on the ideology that men need to be more dominant, powerful, and competitive, they tend to undergo more stress from family and society. At the same time, men are expected to be emotionally controlled and restricted (Kaya et al., 2019). Therefore, they reported poor mental health conditions with greater anger and anxiety (Blazina & Watkins, 1996). Due to these masculine expectations, young men are less likely to engage in help-seeking behaviors, while experiencing higher rates of depression (Jackson & Finney, 2002; Mahalik, Lagan, & Morrison, 2006).

However, in a study conducted by Kaya and her colleagues, eudaimonic well-being was tested for potential positive correlations with masculinity (Kaya et al., 2019). Eudaimonic well-being refers to the psychological well-being of pursuing happiness and a meaningful spiritual life. More specifically, according to Ryff, it includes multiple dimensions: self-acceptance, life purpose, positive relationships, personal growth and autonomy (Ryff, 1995 & 2014). By using secondary data examining three waves of college students' alcohol use, researchers found that most of their findings mirrored previous studies' negative masculinity outcomes. The only exception being winning at all costs, a signature masculine norm, positively associated with men's well-being. Winning not only directly contributes to one's personal success, but a sense of control and mastery, which can boost one's eudaimonic well-being in return.

Unfortunately, this finding is limited by some sampling problems that need further discussion. First, the participants recruited were all college students, so most of the participants might have not questioned their life's purpose due to a lack of life experience. Older adults may have different considerations with familial attachments. College students, on the other hand, would mostly experience the benefits of winning without cost, and winning and losing might not affect their interpretation of life's purpose as much as older adults. Furthermore, a sample pool purely pulled from college students can restrict the sample to certain socioeconomic groups, which

reflects their personal success and life purpose pursuing eudaimonic well-being. Future studies should explore whether winning will still have a significant effect on eudaimonic well-being on men when considering all the limitations. Even though in this study researchers tried to find positive associations of masculinity to support Seager and Barry's arguments, their findings only affirm a small effect size of a positive masculinity outcome. Kaya and colleagues discussed that constantly facing the negative outcomes of hegemonic masculinity may cause young adult males to question their gender roles, echoing previous studies' implications (McDermott & Schwartz, 2013; O'Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 1986).

Gender role conflict

In their early work, O'Neil and colleagues defined the questioning and unmatching feelings of gender roles as Gender Role Conflict (GRC) (O'Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 1986). More specifically, GRC refers to the discomfort caused by the differences between what a male wants to be and what society defines him to be. Measurements of masculine stress in GRC echo the definition of hegemonic masculinity, including power, competition, repressed emotion and affectionate behavior and conflict between family and work. The correlation between the score of power and competition and alcohol usage was found to be significant (Blazina & Watkins, 1996). Adding to the aforementioned theory of socially drinking being a masculine rite of passage, Blazina and Watkins suggested

increased alcohol consumption is correlated with being more masculine because of societal pressure and therefore causes gender role conflict. Researchers also found that masculine stress (predicted by GRC scores) correlated with higher levels of psychological distress in clinical settings, including anxiety, depression, and poor health habits (Sharpe & Heppner, 1991; Good et al., 1995).

A more recent study (Christopher Blazina & Watkins, 2000) corroborates other negative outcomes caused by masculinity. Men who score higher on the GRC and masculinity are less prone to seeking psychological help and also show more problems with separation from parents. (Cheatham, Shelton, & Ray, 1987). The maternal attachment problem was first raised in 1975, when research showed that failures to separate from the female caregiver will often result in the development of a fragile masculine self (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975). Unfortunately, even today, the only place where school-aged children spend more time (8 minutes more) with their father than their mother is Finland (Seager & Barry, 2019). In other parts of the world, mothers still play larger roles in their children's education and socialization, which leaves young boys with little space to develop their masculine identity. Researchers also found significant negative associations between GRC and Attitudes Towards Feminism (ATF) scores, as well as negative associations between restrictive emotionality and paternal attachments. The relationship will be further explained in the next section.

Attitudes towards feminism and females

Blazina and Watkins found that men who hold less stereotypical views of women experience less differentiation and relationship problems, which is brought forth by their rigid understanding of both gender roles. This skewed understanding of gender norms can ultimately lead to gender stereotypes, the ascription of traits to individual based on one's sex, and objectification, the oppression and reduction of a gender to mere instruments for pleasure or others (Bartky, 1990; Valved et al., 2021).

Other studies further illustrate this point. Men who contain more sexist attitudes and greater tendency to objectify women tend to report more drive of masculinity (Swami & Voracek, 2013). The endorsement of objectification towards women indicates men's tendency to objectify males with masculinity and power (Swami & Voracek, 2013). Men who want to outshine others might maximize their masculinity by emphasizing a masculine appearance. Those who fail to achieve the same might be considered as lower status and therefore less masculine. This can be a dangerous assertion as this rigid beauty standard can lead to lack of self esteem, and body dissatisfaction. This finding shows how masculinity is weakening both men and women's power.

Study conducted by Lemaster and colleagues further explored how masculinity is associated with attitudes towards feminism and gender equality (Lemaster et al., 2015). Feminism refers to the movement to pursue political, economical and social equality for both genders (Jackson, Fleury, &

Lewandowski, 1996). However, the wording only includes females in the picture, which may discourage men from supporting the movement. Previous findings support the idea by showing men who endorse feminism attend less to traditionally masculine activities more (Lemaster et al., 2015).

Even for men who wish to endorse feminism attitudes, there are a plethora of hurdles they have to face. They need to settle their grudge against feminism because the core of masculinity are based on the rejection of feminine behaviors (O'Neil, 1982; Precopio & Ramsey, 2017). Men who are affiliated with women may be seen as of a lower status and experience humiliation or vilification (Wiley, Srinivasan, Finke, Firnhaber, & Shilinsky, 2013). All these prejudices and biases make it harder for male to embrace feminism, even if the movement benefits them as well. Despite the difficulties of embracing feminism, males being active protesters against sexism is important to eliminate the predominant thought of feminism as self-serving for women (Drury & Kaiser, 2014). Appealing to a different group of audiences, as in-group members, males can help the gender equality movement by being taken more seriously by male audiences.

Researchers found that men value social support and binding more for moral concerns tend to endorse feminism beliefs less, identify as feminist less, and be less interested in feminist action (Precopio & Ramsey, 2017). Those who value individual traits for moral concerns (like harm and fairness to persons), on the other hand, would commit to the opposite. Binding

aspects in moral concerns refer to values of being in-group, purity, and authority. Masculinity is a fragile status that needs to be obtained and protected constantly by expressing it because one can easily lose it once gained (Valved et al., 2021). Moreover, masculinity is also a dominant status for men as a whole to achieve and to maintain control over women. Therefore, in-group support defends their masculinity; standing on the 'masculine side', the seemingly opposite to the feminine, confirms males' authority and will not diminish their status quo, which is important to maintaining masculinity.

In addition, repressing emotions might harm the connection between men's feeling for empathy and fairness for both themselves and others. That could be why men who want to display higher masculinity do not value moral concerns for individuals. Moreover, men who value individual traits of moral concern but hold benevolent sexist views may not see current gender norms as harmful (Valved et al., 2021). Benevolent sexism is one of the two forms of modern sexism that perceive females as purer and more caring than males, while hostile sexism rages against females for wanting to gain control over male (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1997). Both perspectives of sexism lead people to react negatively towards females who do not play traditional roles, like housewife. For men who do not consider benevolent sexism as harmful to females may not support feminism, even if they value the moral concerns of the individual.

Gender equality, gender belief system and gender stereotypes

Constructed masculinity's relationship with feminism above, gender stereotypes and gender belief systems reveal themselves increasingly. In this section, masculinity will be explained from a more macro view in society instead of splitting it into parts. The beliefs and opinions of both genders, including views about gender stereotypes, gender norms, masculinity, and femininity, is the gender belief system (Kite & Deaux, 1987). Shared within society, the gender belief system is important because everyone is impacted by certain gender bias throughout their lives (Good & Sherrod, 2001). Gender stereotypes, as the script of individuals based on one's gender and sex, is how people judge everyone accordingly. To diminish the gap and bias between sexes, scientists proposed social role theory, which suggests sexes should be more similar in a gender egalitarian society where men and women access equal rights. More specifically, if women and men occupy similar roles, gender stereotypes should be weaker and less widespread than what we are experiencing (Wood & Eagly, 2012). Therefore, the similarity of social roles between genders should be able to predict the level of gender stereotyping of a society.

A recent finding supports social role theory by comparing the gender egalitarian level between Poland and Norway. Researchers found that Polish men and women reported greater endorsement for traditional roles, hostile sexism, and hegemonic masculinity compared to Norwegian people (Valved et al., 2021). Correspondingly, Norwegian people tend to obtain fewer rigid stereotypes towards

gender roles, particularly masculinity, than Polish people. As previous findings indicated, men that face threat to masculinity tend to show negative emotions and attitudes towards feminism and females (Dahl et al., 2015). This study found that men in lower gender equality countries, like Poland, are more susceptible to threats and negative reactions compared to men in higher gender equality countries, like Norway. A possible explanation is that humans tend to strive for positive social identities for collective self-esteem and facing threats to the positive identities will lead to negative reactions (Tajfel, 1979, 1981). For men specifically, masculinity has been defined as a social status that needs to be maintained and earned while femininity is defined as a biological state that cannot be chosen (Valved et al., 2021; Seager & Barry, 2019). Therefore, in a country with higher gender equality, which indicates similar gender roles and less gender stereotypes, men need to fight for hegemonic masculinity less. Another interesting finding is that men are threatened more by increasing femininity than loss of masculinity, which aligns with previous argument of why it is hard for men to be feminist and engage in feminism activities.

World-widely speaking, gender equality and similar gender roles are still what we try to pursue as a society. According to Seager and Barry, in the UK, 96% of dangerous, dirty, and heavy manual jobs are taken by working-class males. A higher rate of imprisonment and punitive sentences have been put upon males for the same crime compared to females (Starr, 2015). Some of the disparities can be partially explained by

previous findings mentioned above. Masculinity's core value of aggressive and dominant behavior might positively influence the higher rate of drop out of schools for males. A recent finding suggested that 52% of males who committed serious offences against women had been sexually abused by females when they were children (Seager & Barry, 2019). This aligns with the previous study conducted by Blazina and Watkins; the rejection and distain towards the feminine and feminism is highly related to attachment to female caregivers. However, Seager and Berry also suggested females and males share more similar pattern of intimate partner violence, abuse of children, and participation in terrorism than people supposed. Future research could see whether these females who sexually abused the criminals had similar experience before concluding the difference as disparity.

Alternative Masculinity

With the existing problems and negative outcomes constructed with hegemonic masculinity stated above, masculinity development needs to be raised alongside the feminism (gender equality) movement and draw more people's attention. Whether hegemonic masculinity could learn from or be replaced by an alternative masculinity, is a question that needs to be discussed.

Soft Masculinity

Recent years, a new masculinity that encourages males to occupy effeminate features, called soft masculinity, has attracted public and researchers' attention in Asia

(Song, 2021). It originated from popular culture where a transactional trend of male pop stars who wear make-up or effeminate ornaments was formed. This trend encourages young adult males to explore beauty that traditionally only belongs to females. Soft masculinity has been seen as the new way of describing gender relations (Goncalo & Harrell, 2017). However, with increasingly more young people adopting the idea that men can be beautiful, soft and emotional, soft masculinity was strongly rejected by sissy-phobia, the fear or hatred of effeminate males, endorsed by hegemonic masculinity believers (Song, 2021). Only allowing masculinity to be associated with certain physical appearances, sissy-phobia is objectifying males, enhancing gender stereotypes, and dividing gender's relation. More specifically, soft masculinity and race plays an interconnected role in order to marginalize people more in comparison to people who are in lower status in a racial hierarchy.

In a communications study, researchers found soft masculinity has affected US society as well. By interviewing Korean male pop stars fans, they found that soft masculinity is challenging the rigid notion of hegemonic masculinity (Lee et al., 2020). In this study and another study also from Song, researchers indicate that public rejection from sissy-phobia and hegemonic masculinity believers reinforces gender and racial hierarchy because they perceive soft masculinity as lower status or inappropriate (Song & Velding, 2020).

Discussion

Masculinity has been ignored and needs to be challenged for the sake of males' physical/mental health and for the movement of gender equality. Based on previous studies' findings, masculinity can cause multiple levels of problems. First of all, physically, masculinity can lead to problems, including chemical substance use (drug, alcohol, tobacco), risky sexual behavior and violent issues. Second, masculinity causes many identity issues. Men may confuse gender roles, establish a fragile masculine self, and have trouble dealing with intimate relationships (including romantic relationships, relationships/attachment with parents, and relationships between family and work). They may also feel compelled to not seek help, are more likely to objectify both men and women, and maintain gender stereotypes or even sexism. Lastly, masculinity leads to greater chances of mental health concerns because men are more likely to repress emotion but have more anger issues, as well as experience psychological distress (anxiety, depression). Even though 'winning at all cost' facilitates Eudaimonic well-being, the author has discussed the limitation of this finding.

Therefore, challenging masculinity could help improve males' health conditions, reduce confusion with gender roles, allow more males to support the gender equality movement, and build groundwork for development towards a gender-egalitarian society where all genders experience less biases and stereotypes and obtain more harmonious relations.

It is also discussed whether alternative masculinity could be a replacement for the current notion. Encouraging young adults to embrace traits from all genders, and narrowing the gap between sexes, soft masculinity should be considered as a progress of the development of masculinity adapted from social evolution. Unfortunately, soft masculinity has not been examined in a psychological context and the previous studies are from related fields, such as gender studies and communication studies. In addition, soft masculinity may also objectify males with beautiful appearances if gender equality is not discussed in the picture. Many teenagers were not aware of the context and only adopted the beautiful appearance, which is why soft masculinity gathered attention from parents, experts, and policymakers in the first place (Song, 2021). Therefore, masculinity cannot be simply defined into any form, but the public need an overall awareness of the toxicity of masculinity. In this way, people may prevent themselves from adopting toxic masculinity traits. Moreover, researchers could discuss valuable traits that need to be adopted by masculinity. More alternative masculinity could be examined to gather good qualities of masculinity to pass on for the good of human beings. In conclusion, soft masculinity is not a solution to the current issue of masculinity, but it could be considered as a progress of masculinity development.

There are some limitations that need to be addressed for further research. This paper does not cover all previous studies, so meta-analysis or systematic review might need to be done in the field. By doing so,

further research could look for more good traits of masculinity that could be obtained or adopted. In addition, only one type of alternative masculinity is discussed, not in the psychological field. Future studies could be done to fill the gap of examining soft masculinity in a psychological context. Moreover, other alternative masculinity could be discussed to catch the trend of masculinity development.

Conclusion

This literature review focuses on how masculinity affects gender stereotypes and gender equality and whether an alternative masculinity could solve current masculinity's problems. Previous literature focused on the negative outcomes of hegemonic masculinity. However, in a recently published book, two researchers, Seager and Barry, talked about why masculinity should be redefined as a

positive human nature to educate young adults and teenagers. By comparing standing points from both sides, I conclude hegemonic masculinity has significant negative outcomes to both males, females and gender equality. A new masculinity raised in Asia has been discussed for the sake of masculinity redefinition. However, with the limited studies and low influence of this alternative masculinity, it is not the solution for the current issue. Furthermore, I propose that the new definition cannot change the situation but the awareness of the toxicity of hegemonic masculinity could. In the future, researchers could focus on challenging masculinity, and examining other alternative masculinity and find good qualities that could be adopted for masculinity development.

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