

Toxic Masculinity

“...do not let them make you feel guilty, man or woman, boy or girl, for being who you are.”

You might be reading that phrase and wondering how strange it sounds, wondering what it is all about, not sure if you can get an accurate description from the phrase itself. Well, no need to worry, because neither can anyone else, even those who use the term in today's society, which I will begin to get into more detail on soon. I bring this topic up because it is often asserted as the main cause of mental health of men and some women, so it is imperative that I address this.

But as you will see, from its origins through to today, it is far from being a solid concept. Schools, colleges, companies, charities and governments are basing courses, policy and legislation on this notion, treatments based upon it are being drawn up that will ultimately do more harm than good. It is imperative for the field of mental health that this topic be examined, which is why it is here. If you do not wish to read it all, there is a “Too Long; Didn't Read” version at the end, and remember, correlation does not necessarily equal causation.

So what is “Toxic Masculinity”? Well, apart from it being an incredibly poor choice for a title, especially coming from apparent academics and intellectuals, it is an attempt to examine what is considered traditional masculine traits and whether or not they are good for men, women and society as a whole. Now admittedly it sounds innocuous enough, but now that it has been co-opted by today's 3rd Wave of Feminism and the Social Justice Warriors of the world, the term has taken a much more sinister purpose.

So let us start out by trying to find out what kinds of traits are considered ‘masculine’. After looking through journals, online news outlets, charity pages and article databases, I can conclude that no one has a solid answer. There are some common themes and I have tried to draw the most common for examination.

Originally this topic came to light in the 1980s to 1990s, and originated from a men's movement called the “Mythopoetic Men's Movement (MMM)”. Now I cannot find any direct mention of the term toxic masculinity but the concept originated here. It is essentially a movement based on spiritual nonsense, a group of middle class men with far too much time going out into the wilderness, reading fairy tails and singing ^[1], and I am not being sarcastic, they actually did this.

Now originally such concepts as growing up without a father and the lack of influence of what they called ‘mature masculinity’ were brought up i.e. lack of mature role models ^[2]. They also made assertions such as men no longer being comrades and becoming more competitive and are discouraged from showing emotion ^[2]. All of which seem reasonable and worth investigating, but this is where the reasonableness ends and the ideologues get a hold of it.

It is at this point that the concept of men becoming more like defective women and being shamed for being different enters the playing field ^[3]. Instead of being encouraged and celebrating the differences of men and women and how they cohesively work together, men are shamed for not being women ^[3].

So how does this compare with the modern attitude of toxic masculinity? Well, for example, some say traits such as being physically strong, unsentimental and assertive are toxic traits ^[4]. Whereas I thought biologically men are physically stronger than women on average, we are not unsentimental we just do not show emotion as often and being assertive is a personality trait, as you can get men and women who are unassertive. Yet such things are strung up and hung around the neck of men, called toxic and we are blamed for being them, almost as if being biologically stronger than women and not being passive is harmful to a certain demographic and causes unwanted strong competition, food for thought.

There are also a few other alleged traits such as devaluation of women, homophobia and wanton violence ^[5]. Which I do find strange as men and women who devalue each other are called horrible people. Homophobia is not strictly linked to men, women can also be homophobic especially dependant upon the culture and in terms of wanton violence, women are often just as involved as men. So again, it is very strange how despite these being non-exclusive traits, they are labelled bad and placed at the feet of men.

Further the traits of dominance, self-reliance and competition are thrown into the mix ^[6]. Dominance is again not exclusively male and can depend on the situation i.e. physically dominant or socially dominant, traits that can belong once again to men and women. Self reliance can be an issue no doubt about it, but self reliance as a general trait is not toxic, it is how we get through school, college and our working lives, we cannot be expected to be carried through our careers. Lastly, competition is how we as biological creatures, as cultures and economies thrive. Whether it is sport, business or college and school work, trying to be better than ourselves and others is how we improve ourselves, and become examples for others to do the same.

This is in contrast to a study that has shown that traits such as competition i.e. winning at sports, succeeding in work or providing for ones family are not to be considered toxic traits ^[7]. Which is odd considering we live in a world of affirmative action and participation trophies, where everyone gets a reward just for turning up, based on the notion that competition is bad for women and society as a whole ^[6].

So where would we go from here and how would we reconcile these apparent conflicts? Well as it happens I stumbled across a Washington Post article that cited a study that allegedly shows conclusively that conformity to certain masculine norms might be linked to psychological distress and there are some that might not ^[8]. They were citing a study released this year, and as any normal functioning person in search of truth would do, I accessed the paper and read it for myself for 2, long, hours.

The paper by Wong et al 2017^[9] is admittedly quite a comprehensive study. It is a meta-analysis of studies ranging from the years 2003-2013. When reading the abstract you do get the impression that the author of the Washington Post article was correct, but when you read the actual study and limitations thereof, the argument is far from over.

Firstly while there is data showing a correlation between certain traits considered masculine and mental health, Wong et al admit that such data is only correlational and cannot be used to draw general conclusions from it ^[9]. They also state that due to the sample size being overwhelmingly focused on males in the United States; such data cannot therefore be reliably extrapolated to women or non-US populations ^[9]. They also state that the data does not allow for the ability to compare or differentiate between adolescents and adults and also cannot be applied to varying sexual orientations ^[9].

So at this moment in time, a study that shows correlational data for one specific demographic does not allow for general conclusions, cannot be applied to women, anyone non-US, differences in age and differences in sexual orientation. Those last four are four variables that one could reasonably hypothesize would have an impact on the influence of each of these traits upon individual people. So I agree with Wong et al that so far, you cannot draw general conclusions from their data.

Next they say that moderate effects that involve demographic variables should be interpreted cautiously as they do not explain any underlying psychological mechanisms that might account for the varying impact of conformity and mental health^[9]. So here we not only have agreement with my above hypothesis but also confirmation of an earlier digression that personality traits for example or other psychological issues could be reasons for certain traits being demonstrated more in some people in comparison to others.

They also state that using this data is not meaningful to use to address individual conformity; rather it lends itself to examining a single dimension of these traits at a time^[9]. So at this point we cannot use the study data to draw general conclusions and cannot use it to examine individuals, but use to examine a single dimensions effect on conformity, which you can only do tentatively due to the admittance that the above variables and their impact cannot be accounted for.

The meta-analysis itself is limited due to the fact that it was able to only use 1 construct. And that the bi-factor model of CMNI-46 explained only 22% of the common variance in the items used and 9 of the 46 CMNI-46 item factor loadings to the general factor had no significance^[9]. The short version is that there are items of this model that explain only ¼ of the actual variance, and 9 of those items had no significance anyway. So the veracity of such a model should be called into question here. It seems to be somewhat inadequate for its purpose in my humble non-academic opinion.

This is further compounded by the fact that Wong et al call into question using the total scores of the CMNI model, based on low intercorrelations among the subscales of this measure^[9]. They therefore question whether it would ever be useful to use the total score of the CMNI in research on individuals and conformity to masculine norms. So here we have speculation that using the total scores may in fact never be appropriate to use for individual conformity. So we cannot use it for general conclusions, cannot use it for individuals, cannot account for certain variables and may not even be able to use it accurately to measure individual conformity.

They do state that there are strong correlations between certain traits such as self-reliance and being emotionally controlled that negatively impact mental health, while also stating that traits such as succeeding at work does not^[9]. But I would posit that as these are in both men and women, I would hypothesize that an approach examining the underlying psychological mechanisms and personalities of individuals, combined with the unaccounted for variables, will have a much greater insight than looking at this through the biased lens of ‘masculine traits’.

So what does this all mean in the end? Essentially that based on the largest meta-analyses on the literature to date, there is no conclusive evidence that traits spouted as ‘toxic masculinity’ or ‘masculine norms’ are set in a solid foundation of evidence. There needs to be far more research done, less biased research with more variables included and data that allows for actual conclusions to be drawn.

So when companies, schools, colleges and charities spout this nonsense, challenge them on it, because to teach you these things as fact are either incredibly stupid, mind-bendingly ignorant or most likely a combination of the two. The fact that

this is taught to young people and adults as fact without evidence is enraging to me, especially considering that at this moment in time schools, colleges, companies, charities and governments are basing courses, policy and legislation on this notion.

There is no evidence that supports the notion of toxic masculinity as a verifiable fact of mental health. So when you are in school, college, at work or seeking help, if they bring this up, cut them off at the knees. Challenge everything; women are twice as likely to suffer from anxiety, would anyone describe that as toxic femininity? No, because there is no verified established link. The same applies to men; do not let them make you feel guilty, man or woman, boy or girl, for being who you are.

TL; DR Version

- Toxic masculinity spouted as fact.
- Schools, colleges, companies, charities and governments basing courses, policy and legislation on this notion.
- Comprehensive Meta-Analysis on literature on the topic of 'masculine norms' conducted.
- Cannot be used to draw general conclusions, applied to individuals, applied to women or non-US citizens.
- Possible that it cannot be applied to individual conformity, has variables unaccounted for.
- Cannot account for any underlying psychological traits.
- Possibility that the model is inadequate.
- Correlational data presented but as correlation does not necessarily equal causation and the admittance of unaccounted for variables and limitations of the models themselves means any interpretation must be done tentatively and with caution.
- Toxic masculinity is not supported by any evidence and yet is taught as fact.
- This will do more harm than good in the future if we keep looking at these topics biased against one biological sex and basing treatments, policy and legislation on a notion unsupported by any strong evidence.

References

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