

Is “Masculinity” a Problem?:

Framing the Effects of Gendered Social Learning in Men

Michael E. Addis

Clark University

Abigail K. Mansfield

Brown University

Matthew R. Syzdek

Clark University

MANUSCRIPT SUBMITTED FOR PUBLICATION: DO NOT QUOTE

WITHOUT AUTHORS' PERMISSION

Abstract

Despite its ambiguous status in both scientific and lay discussions of gender, the construct of masculinity has achieved a place of virtual hegemony within research and practice in the psychology of men. We argue that “masculinity” as it is currently conceptualized obscures the contingent and contextual effects of gendered social learning in men. The result is a substantive limit on prediction and influence in the scientific domain, and the risk of perpetuating essentialist discourse about gender in the public domain. Beginning with a pragmatic and functional view of theory development and research in the social sciences, we identify the eradication of gender inequality and the promotion of human well-being as core values in the psychology of men. We then show how a return to basic principles of learning can open up new ways of understanding the special case of gendered social learning in men, and also promote a social discourse in the public domain that is consistent with the core values of the field.

Is “Masculinity” a Problem?:

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To accept the contingency of starting-points is to accept our inheritance from, and our conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance. To attempt to evade this contingency is to hope to become a properly-programmed machine.

Richard Rorty

Uttering a word is like striking a note on the keyboard of the imagination.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

The title of this article poses a provocative triple entendre. At first glance, it is possible to answer the question, “Is masculinity a problem?”, without calling into question the nature of the construct itself. Whether masculinity is conceptualized as a social role, a set of personality traits, or a conglomerate of evolved genetic mechanisms, this version of the question asks about its social consequences, good, bad, or otherwise. On second glance, it is also possible to ask what is wrong with the *construct* of masculinity from a more theoretical point of view. Here the question is less about tangible social consequences of a thing called masculinity, and more about the utility of different ways of conceptualizing gender for the progress of psychology and the social sciences more broadly. Finally, it is possible to ask what are the consequences *for society* of developing and disseminating constructs such as “masculinity” to account for gendered processes in the social world.¹ Here the focus is less on the theoretical or

empirical utility of the construct, and more on the pragmatic social consequences of different social scientific discourses (Haslanger, 2000; Rose, 1996).

In this article we argue that the ability both to disentangle and to understand the linkages between these three questions is critical for successful progress through the crossroads at which the psychology of men currently finds itself. We begin by providing a brief survey of the history of the psychology of men. We then argue that “masculinity” as it is currently conceptualized is both limiting scientific progress, and is inconsistent with a social-ethical agenda dedicated to eradicating gender inequality and promoting human well-being. We suggest that rather than continuing with its current conception of masculinity, the psychology of men should focus research on the contingent and contextual nature of gendered social learning, while promoting a social discourse that is consistent with a priori values and goals and grounded in empirical research. We then offer an account of gender social learning grounded in basic learning theory as one example of how this can be achieved.

Our argument in outline form is as follows:

1. The construct of “masculinity” has been central to the history of the psychology of men, and in particular to scholarship in Division 51 of the American Psychological Association (APA). It has achieved a position of virtual hegemony in theory and research.

2. Various more specific constructs (e.g., “roles,” “norms,” “gender role stress,” “gender role conflict”) have been operationalized and measured in ways that are largely inconsistent both with basic principles of social learning theory, and with the way gender is understood by social scientists in virtually all disciplines except psychology.

3. This state of affairs arose because of inevitable tensions between (a) the agenda of studying gendered social learning in boys and men with traditional psychological methods, (b) the agenda of understanding gender (and by extension masculinity) as a socially constructed process, and (c) the agenda of promoting gender equality and human well-being.

4. One pressing implication of recognizing these tensions is the need to consider the consequences of how we talk about the major concepts in our field, not only as scientists and professionals, but as people in positions of power disseminating discourses about gender to the world outside of academia and mental health practice.

5. The psychology of men thus finds itself in a position of needing both to sharpen its scientific constructs, and to develop ways of talking about theory and research that contribute to an adaptive construction/reconstruction of what it means to be a man in the new millennium. Put more colloquially, the two critical questions for a psychology of men are, what do we really think is going on with gendered social learning (a scientific question) and how should we talk about it (a social-ethical question)?

6. Researchers and practitioners can make a substantial contribution to our understanding of the psychology of men by (a) foregrounding the contingent and contextual nature of gendered social learning, and (b) distinguishing between short-term and long-term consequences of such learning. An example of how to do this is to return to basic principles of learning that emphasize cued relationships between repertoires of activity and their consequences rather than acquired decontextualized roles or personality traits. Framing the psychology of men through the lens of basic learning principles has the potential to allow for greater scientific precision. It also carries with it a well-

established and empirically supported set of principles that can be used to achieve valued social change (e.g., promoting gender equality by raising awareness of the presence and function of maladaptive gendered repertoires of behavior in day to day life). Finally, this frame allows for a comparatively straightforward discourse about the varied social effects of behaviors that are rewarded and punished. As such, it avoids an implicit essentialist construction of gender and instead supports a pragmatic construction of the psychology of men that emphasizes activities in particular contexts and their social consequences.

A Brief History of the Psychology of Men

Although masculinity and femininity have been recurring areas of interest in the psychology of gender, the evolution of the psychology of men as a formal discipline gained considerable momentum from two historical developments. The first consisted of a series of influential publications related to the social construction and social learning of gender and their roles in men's psychological development. Joseph Pleck's publication of "The Myth of Masculinity," in 1981 identified several negative social and psychological consequences of boys' and men's socialization according to historically situated and contradictory meanings of manhood (Pleck, 1981). O'Neil further developed Pleck's ideas into a formal model of "gender role conflict," defined as "a psychological state in which gender roles have negative consequences or impact on the person or other" (O'Neil, 1981, pp. 203; O'Neil, Good, & Holmes, 1995). Levant and Pollack (1995) eventually published an edited volume of scholarship entitled, "The New Psychology of Men" that summarized roughly two decades of theory and research in these areas.

The second major formalizing force was the development of a division of the APA in 1995 dedicated to the psychology of men. Division 51, *Society for the*

Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity, was formed by researchers and practitioners interested in theory, empirical work, and clinical practice informed by an understanding of gendered social learning in men. In the broadest sense, Division 51's development was grounded in the notions that boys and men learn from the social environment what it means to be a man, and that such learning produces a wide range of effects on social, emotional, and physical well-being. Within this broad set of assumptions more specific theories and constructs were developed including gender role conflict (O'Neil, 1981), masculine gender role stress (Eisler & Skidmore, 1987), adherence to masculine norms (Mahalik et al., 2003) and masculine identity development (Wade, 1998).

Aided greatly by the development of a divisional journal, *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, empirical research within these related theoretical frameworks increased significantly and was summarized and reviewed three different times within the first 10 years of the division (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1993; Good, Borst, & Wallace, 1994; Smiler, 2004). Early reviews noted that the field had made significant progress in acknowledging the ways in which gender restricts men's experiences (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1993), and in developing theories and models of masculinity (Good et al., 1994). These reviews noted that much research had focused on measuring masculinity and correlating it with negative outcomes. Still, the field faced several challenges. In particular, Good et al. (1994) noted that empirical research on masculinity tended to be less progressive than theorizing on masculinity. More recently, Smiler (2004) summarized several trends, and noted that much research on masculinity has been dominated by essentialist assumptions that are antithetical to the sort of scientific and social progress to which the field aspires. In the

most recent review Whorley and Addis (2006) quantitatively assessed methodological trends in research on the psychology of men and described several characteristics of existing studies. First, the overwhelming majority of research utilized convenience samples of undergraduate students. Second, the predominant methodology was correlational with relatively little experimental or observational work in the field. Third, the majority of studies that measured constructs related to masculinity (e.g., gender role conflict, masculine norms, gender role stress), proceeded from an individual differences framework whereby scores on various self-report measures of masculinity-related constructs were correlated with scores on other measures assessing criteria of interest (e.g., depression, violence, attitudes toward help-seeking, health, etc.). Whorley and Addis noted the limitations of conceptualizing masculinity as a stable individual difference variable in accounting for the possible mechanisms linking gendered social learning to psychosocial outcomes (see also Smiler, 2004).

Current Status of the Field

Our Critical Perspective

In taking a critical perspective on how “masculinity” has been conceptualized in the psychology of men we begin with four assumptions. First, understanding the effects of gendered social learning has been, and will continue to be, a major focus for theory and research in the psychology of men. Second, the motivation for scholarship in this field is not only scientific but also social. In other words, our goals are not only to understand the psychology of men in an abstract sense, but also to influence society toward some valued social states (e.g., greater gender equality, enhanced freedom for optimal psychological development of individuals, and so on). Third, we assume that the

means for social influence are not only through the accumulation of scientific research, but also through the dissemination of psychological theories and constructs into the public domain (Rose, 1996). Finally, we assume that making substantial progress in each of these domains requires a coherent philosophy of science that integrates compatible perspectives on ontology (e.g., what *is* gendered social learning), epistemology (e.g., how can we *understand* its effects), and practical ethics (e.g., towards what social ends *should* we be working).

Below we develop support for the argument that, historically, the dominant approach in the field has drawn on relatively incompatible assumptions in these domains. We then suggest that a pragmatic and functional perspective on theory and research in the social sciences provides a more useful framework (Aune, 1970; Gifford & Hayes, 1999; Hildebrand, 2003; Rorty, 1982). Table 1 summarizes some of the key differences between the dominant paradigm and a pragmatic functionalist approach to understanding gendered social learning in men. These differences include criteria for scientific progress, linkages between scientific progress and social action, sensitivity to the effects of scientific discourse in the public domain, and the implicit metaphors for gendered social learning. A functional and pragmatic perspective on theory and research begins with the assumption that terms such as masculinity do not refer to actual “things” in the world waiting to be discovered. Rather, like all psychological and social constructs, their utility can be evaluated by the degree to which they allow for successful working in the world. “Working” in this sense can have a number of different meanings depending on the particular goals one has in mind (Hayes, 1993; Rorty, 1982). Such goals can be scientific, political, ethical, practical, and so on.

The emphasis on effective working as a criterion for scientific progress has three further implications that influence much of our critique of existing work in the psychology of men. First, there is no avoiding the a priori statement of valued goals in either scientific or social domains; if the utility of different constructs and theories is a function of their “working” then we must know what we’re working toward in order to evaluate progress. Second, if progress is measured by the achievement of desired goals, then the ability to predict and influence events of interest becomes the most meaningful marker of progress (Baum, 1994; Hayes, Hayes, Reese, & Sarbin, 1993; Rorty, 1982). To understand phenomena is to be able to predict their occurrence in advance, and also to be able to influence them in a desired direction. Third, because goals must be stated up front, this perspective also places a strong emphasis on links between scientific progress and social action. From a pragmatic and functional standpoint, when we begin to explore phenomena such as gendered social learning the first question we must always ask is, “why do we want to know about these phenomena?” The answer is typically because we want to be able to do something about them (e.g., change them, increase or decrease their frequency, teach people about them, and so on). In the most generic sense, to “know” about X from this perspective is nothing more and nothing less than the ability to respond effectively to some aspect of X (Baum, 1994). There is no knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but only knowledge that facilitates action in the world. This in turn requires that scholars be sensitive not only to the consequences of their discourse in the professional domain but also in the public domain. Such consequences are unavoidable, particularly in the social sciences, and especially when issues such as race, class, and gender are under consideration. Thus, a major implication of the pragmatic and

functionalist perspective is that it is impossible to separate scientific progress from social progress. Nonetheless, for the sake of exposition we critique existing theory and research in each domain separately, noting the linkages where appropriate. We begin by considering the role “masculinity” has played in predicting and influencing aspects of gendered social learning in men.

Masculinity and Scientific Progress

In terms of prediction, there are literally hundreds of studies that have demonstrated significant correlations between individual differences in measures of masculinity and a range of other criteria (for reviews see O’Neil, 2008; Levant & Pollack, 1995; Whorley & Addis, 2006). In a typical study, masculinity is operationalized as responses to self-report questionnaires measuring gender roles, conformity to gender norms, gender ideologies, or related constructs (e.g., “I try to keep my feelings to myself”; “Men should be strong”, etc.). Scores on these measures are then found to predict other variables such as depression, help-seeking attitudes, sexism, aggression, and so on. Although no formal meta-analyses have been published, our informal survey of the literature suggests that the average effect size for correlational studies is about .30. Thus, on average about 9% of the variance in any criterion of interest can be accounted for by responses to items designed to measure masculinity in one form or another. This degree of association between individual difference measures is fairly common in psychology. As a psychological construct, masculinity thus fairs about as well as many others in predicting criteria of interest.

Assessing influence is in some ways more difficult, and in some ways easier, because influence can be formal and directly observable, or informal and difficult to

observe directly. Studies have shown that it is possible to influence sexist attitudes through manipulation of perceived social norms (Kilmartin et al., 2008). Experimental studies have also demonstrated that manipulating gender-relevant instructions (i.e., telling men that a cold pressor task is a test of endurance and ability to withstand pain) produces differences in cardiovascular reactivity as a function of masculinity (Lash, Eisler, & Schulman, 1990). Although there are currently ample publications about therapy with men, and many of them utilize masculinity and related constructs to conceptualize the therapeutic process, none of the treatments described have been empirically evaluated. In addition, there is precious little evidence that masculinity and related constructs have been used to successfully influence men's behavior in one way or another (e.g., to lead men to adopt less traditional attitudes, etc.). In fact, Whorley and Addis (2006) quantitatively assessed methodological trends in research on the psychology of men from 1996-2006 and found that only a minority of studies included manipulation of any independent variable.

Empirical research can also have indirect influences on desired outcomes. For example, when research on the efficacy of mental health treatments is disseminated, mental health professionals may become more likely to use these treatments. Arguably, research on masculinity and related constructs has enhanced awareness among practitioners, clients, and the general public of the gendered effects of social learning in men. Some informal pieces of evidence consistent with this possibility include the founding of Division 51 of APA, increased membership within the division, the increased number of books published on treating men, and the presence of a continuing education workshop on teaching the psychology of men for five consecutive years at the American

Psychological Association convention. Nonetheless, it is hard to gauge the effects of theory and research on masculinity per se versus an increased cultural awareness of men's issues in general or other factors.

Critique

It seems clear that the dominant approach to conceptualizing and measuring masculinity has produced a degree of predictive ability with regard to a wide range of social outcomes. It also seems clear that the evidence regarding influence of these outcomes is limited at best. Individual difference measures of masculinity are clearly tapping into something of scientific interest. Yet with regard to several critical questions regarding the effects of gendered social learning in men (e.g., *how* men learn about gender, *why* men learn about gender, how to *influence* what men learn about gender, how to use what men learn about gender to develop health enhancing interventions, etc.) our current approach has not been particularly fruitful. Metaphorically speaking, we seem to be in a position of all smoke and no fire.

As one example, there is precious little direct evidence that current measures of masculinity are actually tapping the consequences of gendered social learning in men. Convergent validity with other measures of similar constructs does not demonstrate that a measure is getting at the effects of social learning unless there is evidence that such learning influences scores on one of the measures. To date, there is not a single longitudinal study linking exposure to traditionally masculine roles or norms with scores on existing measures of masculinity. Relatedly, in an exhaustive summary and review of research on gender role conflict (arguably the most widely studied construct in the field), O'Neil cited one unpublished dissertation finding correlations between retrospective

reports of parental socialization practices and individuals' scores on the Gender Role Conflict Scale (O'Neil, 2008).

As one more example, consider the common observation that apparently "traditional" men can behave in very non-traditional ways as a function of social context. Basketball players cry when they win or lose a championship, men who score high on measures of homophobia may eventually befriend or otherwise support gay men, self-reliant men may ask for help under the right conditions, and so on. These observations call into question the notion that scores on masculinity measures are tapping stable traits that have a strong influence on behavior. This is not only an academic issue. Constructions of masculinity as a stable trait work against efforts to identify contexts where men who adhere to traditional gender norms might transgress these norms in adaptive ways. For example, in light of self reported rates of psychopathology as high as 19% for Iraq veterans, and 11% for Afghanistan veterans (Hoge, Auchterlonie, & Milliken, 2006), we must understand the environmental conditions under which otherwise self-reliant men will accept treatment (Addis & Mahalik, 2003).

A major obstacle to enhanced prediction and influence is the substantial gulf between what we know about the processes and outcomes of social learning on the one hand, and the way masculinity has been operationalized on the other. Social learning is situated learning; particular actions are followed by particular consequences in specific contexts. Young boys, for example, often learn that expressing soft vulnerable emotions like sadness will be followed by punishment and other forms of ridicule when this behavior occurs in the context of other dominant males. These same consequences may be less likely to occur among close confidants, or around one's mother versus one's

father. Over time, what emerge are relatively differentiated or discriminated repertoires of activity that are highly sensitive to context.

In short, gendered social learning is more flexible and context dependent than one would assume based on the way it has been operationalized in the psychology of men. All existing measures of masculine related constructs such as masculine norms, gender roles, gender role conflict, masculine role stress, and masculinity ideology are essentially trait measures that are not designed to be sensitive to contextual influences on social learning. This is true not because the developers of these measures proceeded from a trait-based theoretical framework for understanding masculinity. It is a consequence of the fact that every measure (a) asks respondents to describe themselves in general terms, and (b) generates a single score for each individual to describe the level at which they adhere to, endorse, or otherwise “possess” the construct of interest. The availability of multiple subscale scores for a measure does not solve this problem. Whether a measure yields scores for one attribute or ten, if each individual is assumed to possess a score for an attribute, as opposed to possessing multiple potentialities for enacting that attribute depending on the context, we are operating within an implicitly trait-based methodological framework.

The reliance on a trait-based framework also poses a significant conceptual dilemma. A major interest in the field includes the mechanisms and effects of gendered social learning in men. And yet, we are neither studying those mechanisms, nor are we operationalizing their effects in ways that are congruent with our conceptual understanding of them. Gendered social learning does not teach men “to be dominant” or “to be homophobic,” except in the most general and abstract sense. Rather, men (and

women) learn to enact gendered repertoires of behavior in order to achieve particular social means and ends. The ability to conceptualize and operationalize such variability is critical for effective prediction and influence. Without it, the claims we can make about the nature of gendered social learning will remain of the form, “men who are generally like this, are also generally like that.” Again, plenty of smoke but no fire.

Finally, it is worth noting that the pervasive reliance on a trait-based individual differences paradigm places the psychology of men significantly out of step with current approaches to understanding gender, race, and class in sociology, anthropology, and other social sciences (Morawski, 1994, 2001). These disciplines have adopted substantially more constructive and critical perspectives on masculinities in which gender is understood not as a property of individuals, but as nested layers of highly situated and contested social practices (Falmagne, 2000; McVicker Clinchy & Norem, 1998). Over the last several decades this movement has been driven partly by theoretical and empirical concerns, and partly by the recognition that studying gender and disseminating the resulting knowledge can never be a politically neutral act (Harding, 2004). This recognition compels us to be mindful of the potential consequences of developing different forms of knowledge about gender. Accordingly, it is to the question of masculinity and social influence that we now turn.

Masculinity and Social Influence

In order to develop criteria for evaluating the societal effects of theorizing and studying masculinity, it is first necessary to posit desired social goals. For example, if researchers in the psychology of men had the goal of increasing paternal involvement in child-rearing, then particular approaches to scholarship, practice, and advocacy could be

evaluated according to whether they enhance or deter this social outcome. Of course, positing the desirability of different social outcomes requires justification of the underlying values. For this reason we will simply state what we assume to be reasonable basic values and goals for a psychology of men, and then consider critically the different ways “masculinity” as a construct facilitates or hinders social progress in these directions.

Eradicating gender inequality has long been a goal of feminist scholars and activists. In addition, the psychology of men as practiced by members of Division 51 has formally acknowledged its debt to feminism in the Division mission statement:

The Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity (SPSMM) promotes the critical study of how gender shapes and constricts men’s lives, and is committed to an enhancement of men’s capacity to experience their full human potential. SPSMM endeavors to erode constraining definitions of masculinity which historically have inhibited men’s development, their capacity to form meaningful relationships, and have contributed to the oppression of other people. SPSMM acknowledges its historical debt to feminist-inspired scholarship on gender, and commits itself to the support of groups such as women, gays, lesbians, and peoples of color that have been uniquely oppressed by the gender/class/race system. SPSMM vigorously contends that the empowerment of all persons beyond narrow and restrictive gender role definitions leads to the highest level of functioning in individual women and men, to the most healthy interactions between the genders, and to the richest relationships between them.

Thus, for the purposes of developing the current argument we take the eradication of gender inequality as the first major criterion for evaluating social progress resulting from the psychology of men, and from the use of masculinity as an organizing concept in particular. The second goal can be broadly conceived as promoting human well-being, including individual mental and physical health, and also social health (e.g., reduction of violence in society and the promotion of peace and tolerance). Traditionally, this goal has been pursued through developing and disseminating an enhanced understanding of the psychology of men and its effects on human well-being. To the degree that the construct of masculinity has aided us in achieving this goal it can be seen as consistent with social progress.

Critique

It is useful to begin by recognizing that how we talk about complex social processes such as gender, race, and class produces social, material, political, and psychological consequences that extend beyond professional discourse. The history of psychology in particular is replete with examples of the discriminatory effects of particular theories of personality or intelligence that were viewed initially as “objective” or scientific without regard to their consequences in the public domain (Danziger, 1990; Danziger, Hill, & Kral, 2003; Rose, 1996). But the issues here are more subtle and insidious than the existence of transparently racist or sexist theories of human behavior. As Rose has noted, “Psychological theories are...significant not simply because they have provided an abstract ‘science of behavior,’ but rather because they have represented the self and social interaction in such a way that their properties can not only be grasped in thought but correlatively transformed in practice” (1996, p. 120). Consistent with

Rose's notion of the role of theories in transforming practice, we are interested in how a construct such as masculinity comes to shape men's and women's understanding of their own gendered behavior, particularly in relation to the goals of eradicating gender inequality and promoting human well-being.

Many professionals in the psychology of men use the construct of masculinity to raise awareness of the socially constructed and socially learned nature of men's experience, and to contrast such perspectives with biological or otherwise essentialist theories of gender. Masculinity has stood as short-hand for the myriad gender norms, roles, ideologies, and belief systems that constrain men's lives and promote sexism. Thus, raising awareness about the nature of masculinity by disseminating psychological knowledge into the public domain is thought to promote human well-being and gender equality. In short, enhancing individual awareness of masculinity is assumed to be akin to the role of consciousness rising in the feminist movement (Messner, 1997).

What evidence is there that supporting public discourse about "masculinity" has raised consciousness about gender inequality and about the effects of gender socialization on men's well-being? The increasing presence of popular media and books on depression in men, boys' emotional development, fewer men attending college, men's physical health, and related issues may suggest an enhanced public awareness that men's lives are in many ways gendered (e.g., Real, 1997; Pollack, 1999; Kimmel, 2008). To the degree that the concept of masculinity has helped raise this awareness, and that such awareness enhances efforts to promote men's well-being, masculinity could be considered to have had positive social effects. While such a linear chain of cause and effect is hard to

establish, it does seem plausible that awareness of masculinity has produced positive effects on men's well-being.

It also seems plausible that the dissemination of theory and research on "masculinity" into the public domain has helped to promote gender equality. Theoretically, much of the force behind hegemonic masculinity comes from the push toward anti-femininity, which in turn serves to maintain men in a relative position of structural power over women (as distinguished from a psychological or subjective sense of power – see Kaufman, 1994). Thus, freeing men from the restrictive effects of anti-femininity should promote gender equality by reducing social pressures to oppress women that are mediated through individual male gender socialization.

On the other hand, there are also several reasons to believe that dissemination of "masculinity" to the public domain can actually enhance gender inequality and produce harmful effects on men's and women's well-being. It is critical to remember that constructing masculinity as a set of restrictive roles or norms rooted in anti-femininity is only one way the term can be co-opted and used in service of various social agendas. The term can also be used to invoke ideals of male supremacy (see, for example, Mansfield, 2006). Messner (1997) describes four different political movements all of which have used the construct of masculinity (or masculinities) in service of such disparate social agendas as promoting men's rights, enhancing gender equality, promoting women's rights, and eradicating the construct of gender. Messner also points out that the conceptual boundaries between these various political interests are somewhat fluid; discourse that originated in one group can be co-opted by another and used in support of potentially incongruent social agendas. As researchers, clinicians, and

activists, we hold no ownership over the meanings and social functions of the constructs we develop and disseminate. This is particularly true when we attempt to give technical meaning to a term that is already in widespread use in the public domain.

In everyday language, “masculinity” is less often used to promote equality and enhance human well-being, and more often used to reinforce the categorical belief that all men have an inherent nature which renders them fundamentally different from women. Several authors have done comprehensive analyses of the construction and enactment of masculinity in different historical and cultural contexts (e.g., Gilmore, 1990; Kimmel, 1997; Rotundo, 1993). Although it is clear that the social construction of the content of masculinity is always historically situated, it is also clear that masculinity’s assumed *ontology* remains remarkably consistent across time and place (Smiler, 2004); beyond the halls of the academy, masculinity is perennially understood as either something that men possess or something that men do. In both cases, its function is to mark individuals as appropriately male. Thus, in the public domain, masculinity has become short-hand for all those things which define men both as male, and as *different* from women. This categorical and entitative discourse about gender typically serves to reinforce unequal distribution of power between the sexes and is thus inconsistent with promotion of gender equality (de Beauvoir, 1974; Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1988). In addition, the pressure on men to develop and defend a subjective sense of masculinity based on anti-femininity is associated with a wide range of individual and social ills. Thus, by our second criteria for social progress, widespread dissemination of “masculinity” appears potentially problematic as well.

It is probably safe to assume that most professionals in the psychology of men are not intending to promote essentialist beliefs about gender by talking about “masculinity.” Yet the consequences may be unavoidable. All available evidence suggests that non-professionals (e.g., “laypeople”) hold largely essentialist beliefs about the nature of gender (e.g., Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; Martin & Parker, 1995; Smiler & Gelman, 2008). Developmental and social cognitive research has shown that humans are prone to essentialist thinking, particularly in the domains of race and gender, and that such thinking is typically evaluative and associated with stereotyping and prejudices (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000, 2002; Martin & Parker, 1995; Smiler & Gelman, 2008). This may be especially true for concepts related to masculinity. Smiler and Gelman (2008) recently found evidence of greater degrees of essentialist thinking for masculine versus feminine concepts, and greater essentialist thinking among men who conformed to masculine norms. In short, our efforts to better the world by reclaiming “masculinity” from the public domain and metaphorically recasting it as a process that is socially learned, socially constructed, and socially situated, may be a task verging on the sisyphysian.

Summary

Up to this point we have argued that the construct of masculinity has achieved a position of virtual hegemony in research on the psychology of men. We have also suggested that the construct poses several substantial obstacles for progress on both scientific and social fronts. On the scientific front, the dominant approach to conceptualizing and operationalizing masculinity has produced limited predictive utility and there is precious little evidence of its utility for social influence. On the social front,

masculinity has a well entrenched history of promoting essentialist thinking about gender. From a pragmatic point of view, its widespread dissemination may well be inconsistent with eradicating gender inequality and promoting human well-being through an enhanced understanding of the psychology of men.

As it turns out, the major challenge on both the scientific and social fronts is to more fully embrace the contextual nature of gendered social learning while avoiding metaphors that locate gender as an internal property of individuals (Smiler, 2004). This turn towards a focus on historical (both personal and societal), and situational influences on the “doing” of gender is consistent with the majority of work in the social sciences outside of psychology over the last three decades. Within psychology, approaches to learning that are sensitive to contextual influences are much less likely to reinforce essentialist models of gender because the knowledge derived is not about “how men are,” or “what masculinity is,” but rather, *what men are taught to do, under what circumstances, and why.*

Below we show how focusing on contingencies and context is actually highly consistent with basic principles of social learning. We show how, by virtue of foregrounding the role of contingent and contextual social learning, it is possible to distinguish short from long-term consequences of such learning, as well as so-called positive and negative effects. In the long run, this should allow for a greater degree of scientific precision because it allows not only for between-person but also within-person variation across time and situation. At a societal level, the model also renders unnecessary debates about whether gendered social learning is “good” or “bad” (e.g., “positive masculinity”). Instead, it has the potential to promote discourse in the public

domain that raises individual and societal awareness of when gendered activity occurs and the consequences it produces.

Revisiting Gendered Social Learning

What does it mean to say that a particular type of social learning is “gendered?” Regardless of whether the historical emphasis has been on cognitive processes (e.g., gender beliefs, schemas, or ideologies), gender roles, or gender norms, the conventional wisdom is that gendered social learning occurs when individuals are taught about what it means to be girls and boys, and men and women. Although researchers have recognized that individuals also actively construe meanings of gender based on experience, broadly speaking, theories of gendered social learning have always been grounded in basic principles of reinforcement, punishment, and modeling (Smiler, 2004). These concepts come in turn from the study of operant learning which relies heavily on the construct of reinforcement contingencies. A reinforcement contingency is a probabilistic relationship between an organism’s behavior and the consequences that follow, such that the consequences have an effect on the future probability of the behavior occurring. For example, it is widely assumed in the psychology of men that young boys’ early experiences with the aversive consequences of displaying vulnerable emotions make them less likely to do so in the future. In contrast, behavior that is assertive, outgoing, competitive, and so on, is assumed to be met with more positive responses from the environment. As a result, it becomes more prominent in boys’ and men’s’ repertoires of behavior.

It is curious to note that the overwhelming majority of examples of gendered social learning in men found in the research and clinical literature present these sorts of

two-term contingent relationships between behavior and consequences. A two-term contingency is one in which the only dependent or probabilistic relationship that exists is between behavior and its consequences. In contrast, learning theorists and researchers have long recognized that actual social learning is considerably more complex; the same consequences do not invariably follow the same behavior, and the probability of different consequences is often itself dependent on the presence of different environmental cues. Put more colloquially, the dominant approach to understanding gendered social learning in men has implicitly assumed that men are taught to “do this” and “don’t do that.” In actuality, men and women are taught to “do this under these circumstances, but not under these other circumstances.” This is a crucial distinction that has been all but invisible in research on the psychology of men.

If we foreground the importance of complex contingent relationships between activity, the setting in which it occurs, and the consequences that follow, gendered social learning can be understood a special case of social learning more generally. Gendered behavior is behavior that emerges in contexts where gender plays a discriminative role either materially, symbolically, or verbally. “Discriminative” is used here in a technical sense; a discriminative stimulus is a signal or cue that indicates the presence of a contingent relationship between behavior and consequences. For example, over time the presence of other young boys may indicate that the behavior of crying is likely to be followed by the consequence of being ostracized. The presence of other boys/men comes to be associated with a lower probability of crying. In this example, gender is present materially (the boys) and signals the presence of a contingent relationship between crying and the aversive consequence of being ostracized. In another context (e.g., sitting in the

locker room with teammates following the loss of an important game) the material presence of other males may cue a different relationship between crying and the response of the social environment; here crying may be followed by social acceptance and even a greater sense of intimacy amongst teammates.

As another example, consider a group of male teenagers watching a football game on television. One remarks on “how much balls” a particular quarterback has because the player is willing to risk being tackled by a massive linebacker in order to complete a play. Gender is present materially (the other men in the room), verbally (“how much balls...”), and symbolically because the game of football itself has traditionally been considered a highly masculine sport. Gender signals the presence of a positive reinforcement contingency whereby risk-taking by the football players is likely to be followed by social praise from other men.

Finally, consider the example of a father who repeatedly tells his young son that, “being a man means providing for your family.” Here gender serves a discriminative function materially (the presence of the father) and linguistically (“being a man means...”). Depending on the context in which the father’s statements are uttered, and the social consequences that follow, gender may indicate the presence of a positive reinforcement contingency; the young boy’s behavior of listening to his father or agreeing with what was said might be reinforced by increased intimacy and connection between the two. Alternatively, depending on such variables as the father’s tone of voice, gender may cue the presence of a negative reinforcement or escape contingency; the boy learns that the function of providing for one’s family is to *avoid* failing as a man.

There are several things worth noting about this view of gender social learning in contrast to the dominant model now operating in the psychology of men. First, the function of behavior becomes much more important than its form; whether behavior should be considered gendered depends on whether gender served a discriminative function materially, symbolically, or verbally, in the relevant learning history. We can't say, for example, that an individual's tendency to restrict expression of vulnerable emotions is necessarily due to gendered learning without examining the relevant learning history. This recognition of individual differences in the function of topographically similar behaviors avoids the sorts of overgeneralizations that have plagued previous attempts to generalize about the nature of masculinity as a uniform construct.

Second, variations in the emotional sequelae that accompany gendered social learning can be understood as a function of the specific form of learning that has taken place. For example, aversive control of behavior (escape and avoidance learning) reliably produces associated emotions of fear and anxiety, and behavioral efforts of counter-control (Sidman, 1989). Positive reinforcement tends to produce more positive emotions. In general, environmental cues that signal the probability of different types of contingencies can themselves come to elicit emotional responses because they have been paired in time with positive or aversive consequences. More technically, the discriminative stimulus (gender in the current context) also becomes classically conditioned as an aversive stimulus because it not only signals the presence of a negative reinforcement contingency; it is also paired in time with an aversive outcome. This may well account for the observation that homophobia is best understood not as the fear of gay men, but as the fear of intimacy amongst men in general; for many men, the presence

of other men in the past has signaled the possibility that one may be outcast, shamed, or otherwise punished (Kimmel, 1997).

It is also important to note that a contingent and contextual view of gendered social learning distinguishes between short and long-term consequences of such learning. Table 2 shows hypothetical examples of the short and long-term consequences of experiences in which a young boy is encouraged by others to engage in physically risky behavior. Imagine a ten year old boy who is afraid to jump into the deep end of a pool, although he is capable of swimming. He is surrounded by other young boys who are carelessly jumping in and they ridicule the boy when he is reluctant to join them. As a result, he learns that expressing fear of an activity that other males are engaged in will be followed by ridicule, and that the appropriate response is to keep a stiff upper lip and engage in the behavior despite the fear. The short-term effects might include acceptance from peers and success in accomplishing a feared activity. Emotional reactions of shame, stress, and pride may also be present depending on the ultimate outcome. Again, depending on the outcome, long-term consequences might include a sense of confidence in the face of danger, ability to contain the expression of fear (when appropriate), or excessive risk taking as a way of warding off a deeper rooted fear of truly being a “sissy.”

The Potentially Special Case of “Positive” Gendered Social Learning

Most complex social behavior that remains in a person’s repertoire of activity is maintained by a combination of both positive and negative reinforcement, and also has adaptive and maladaptive consequences depending on the context and the particular goals or values the individual is pursuing at the time. Table 2 therefore distinguishes between positive and negative effects of gendered social learning, both in the short and the long-

term. In keeping with our functionalist scientific and social criteria, “positive” and “negative” in this context do not refer to consequences with inherent value one way or the other. Rather, they can be understood as adaptive or maladaptive depending on the consequences they produce in different contexts. Nonetheless, we use the terms positive and negative to show how this perspective on gendered social learning sheds light on current debates about whether masculinity is “all negative” or also has “positive” aspects as well (e.g., Kiselica, Englar-Carlson, Horn, & Fisher, 2008).

The major motivations for the “positive masculinity” movement are first to point out that not everything men are taught about being men produces harmful consequences. Examples abound, from a firefighter restricting his emotions in service of putting out a fire, to a poor man drawing on his drive for competitiveness and success in order to achieve financial security and provide for his family. The second, and perhaps more fundamental motivation, is to raise awareness of the good qualities of many men and to create examples of “positive masculinity” for other men and young boys to model.

Returning to our criteria for social progress, the question becomes how best to talk about contextually adaptive effects of gendered social learning in men. What can and should we say, for example, about a boy who has a close relationship with his father and grows up with low levels of homophobia and a desire to create and maintain emotionally intimate relationships with other men? The first thing we can say is that if gender was materially, symbolically, or verbally present in the learning process (as it likely was) then this is an example of gendered social learning. We can also say that the behavioral repertoires that emerge from such learning are likely to be helpful in the pursuit of gender equality and promoting human well-being. It is thus tempting to call this an example of

“positive masculinity.” But doing so suggests that there is something essentially “masculine” about the desire to create and maintain intimate relationships. Aside from the fact that this is simply not true (i.e., many men and women desire such relationships), constructing it this way also plays right into the hands of the pervasive essentialist thinking about gender in the public domain. In effect, we would be promoting the ideas that, (a) there is something fundamentally “masculine” about this type of desire for intimacy, (b) this type of “masculine” desire is different than the “feminine” desire, and (c) it is an important and useful thing to talk about these differences. It is hard to see how such a discourse will promote gender equality in the long run. There are few if any value-free differences in the social world; sooner or later “different” becomes “better” or “worse” regardless of our best intentions.

So where does this leave us? Should we say nothing about gendered social learning that produces positive consequences? In a recent editorial in the *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, Levant (2008) quoted Addis (2006) on these questions:

Braveness, protectiveness, self-reliance, and other constructs typically associated with hegemonic masculinity can be great things *under the right conditions*. This means not being restrictively bound to enacting them without regard to their personal and social consequences. But more importantly, why do they have to be affirmed as positive aspects of masculinity? Why not affirm them as positive *human* qualities when they function well under the right circumstances?...I think we sometimes forget that as social scientists, and practitioners, we are not only in the business of “understanding” masculinity but also of constructing it in the very process of “understanding” it. I’m generally leery of constructing “positive” aspects of masculinity because I think it confuses two different agendas: One is deconstructing gender as a social process that restricts human potential, and the other is being supportive of men.

When gendered social learning produces consequences that restrict human potential or promote gender inequality, it needs to be pointed out for what it is and deconstructed.

When such learning produces valued or adaptive outcomes, those outcomes need to be de-fused from their association with men or “masculinity.” In short, it is important to raise our awareness of when men do good things; not because they are done *by men* or learned *from men*, but rather because they model positive qualities for all human beings.

Possible Objections:

In the space that remains we anticipate some objections to the arguments we have made so far and offer a brief response to each. Our hope is that doing so will set the stage for ongoing dialogue about gendered social learning in men, and in particular the questions we have wrestled with throughout this paper: what do we really think is going on with gendered social learning, and what’s the best way to talk about it?

Objection 1. Your new model of gendered social learning has not been empirically tested and is therefore no more valid than current models.

Response: Our purpose in developing this model is not to offer a definitive account of gendered social learning, but rather to highlight some of the short-comings of current accounts in the hope of ultimately developing a more accurate and pragmatically useful approach. It is our belief that the model can generate testable research questions that will lead to greater prediction and influence. Its utility should also be evaluated by the degree to which it promotes discourse in the public domain that is non-essentialist and promotes the agendas of eradicating gender inequality and enhancing human well-being.

Objection 2. Aren’t you simply returning to behaviorism, and isn’t behaviorism “dead?”

Response: The answer to the first question is yes, and the answer to the second question is no. We are taking a functional and contextualist approach, and it is true such an approach did evolve out of the philosophy of science originally developed by B. F.

Skinner. However, it has continued to evolve into a contemporary set of ideas that take prediction and influence as the most important scientific goals, while remaining committed to an epistemology that recognizes all scientific claims as nothing more (and nothing less) than human activity, the “truth” of which can be evaluated by its consequences for effective working in the world. This particular combination of empiricism with pragmatism makes the approach well-suited to working productively within the tensions between scientific and social progress values and goals.

Objection 3. Foregrounding context in scientific research will ultimately lead us to devolve into endless particularizing and unproductive relativism. In other words, how will we be able to generalize across individuals and how will we ever know if we are correct in our interpretation of the consequences of different learning experiences?

Response: Taking a pragmatic and functional approach to research itself requires us to specify in advance what our goals are. The degree to which we focus on variability between or within individuals, and the amount of historical context we take into account, both should be a function of what our scientific or social goals are at any point in time. There is no imperative that we continue to refine an analysis into higher and higher degrees of particularity, only that we go far enough to achieve satisfactory answers to the questions that we are asking.

Conclusion

We have raised serious questions about the utility of “masculinity” as a construct when scientific goals emphasize prediction and influence, and social goals include eradicating gender inequality and promoting human well-being. Should the field then abandon the term altogether? Our answer to this question is an unequivocal, “it depends.”

From a scientific perspective, precision of constructs enhances our ability to predict and influence events of interest. If the field is going to continue to organize research around masculinity the construct must be defined and measured with much greater precision. “Masculinity” must cease being a short-hand term for the collective assumedly stable effects of internalized gender norms. Instead, it might be understood as socially cued repertoires of activity; repertoires that are learned, to be sure, but learned and enacted in ways that are highly sensitive to situational cues, and varied in their consequences. This “new” masculinity might open up productive programs of research focused on such questions as: What are the most effective ways to mitigate the effects of situational cues that elicit maladaptive repertoires of gendered activity?; What are the range of emotional sequelae that accompany different forms of gendered social learning in young boys?; How can we teach boys and men to recognize situations that foster adaptive and maladaptive ways of “doing gender?”; How can we measure immediate effects of repertoires of gendered social learning that arise in different social contexts (e.g., recognizing and coping with problems in life, interpersonal loss, role transition, etc.)?

An alternative is to retain masculinity in scientific discourse, but to delineate its meaning in a more limited and precise way. For example, masculinity might refer to the collection of repertoires of activity that are learned in a gendered context and function to mark individuals as appropriately male. Attention could turn to the functions of different types of repertoires that emerge in different contexts. For example, marking oneself as appropriately male in some contexts might require managing shame effectively (e.g., a boy hiding his feelings of devastation when his friends tell him he’s a “pussy” for backing down from a fight). In a different context, marking oneself as appropriately male

might require behavior that functions to assure others of one's competence and ability to handle difficult situations (e.g., a man "taking charge" during a crisis by reassuring others that things will be OK and encouraging them to take action). Both are repertoires of activity that are likely learned in a gendered context and cued by gender-relevant situations.

There is also a need to better understand the process of gender socialization itself. What motivates young boys, for example, to reinforce or punish gendered repertoires of behavior in their peers? There are likely to be a range of coordinated social processes that emerge depending on a variety of macro (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, social class) and micro factors (homogeneity of group composition, presence of gendered cues, etc.). The general point is that when we subsume all such activities under the rubric of "masculinity," and stop inquiring further, we may experience a sense of understanding but we have failed to shed light on their actual psychological and interpersonal functions in a particular context.

As we have argued throughout this paper, when the process of scientific understanding requires effective ability to work toward valued goals, then our ability to predict and influence events of interest is inexorably linked to that understanding. Prediction and influence in turn depend on our ability to accurately comprehend the functions of human activity; in this case, the function of marking oneself as appropriately male. It is our position that the field needs to broaden and refine its thinking about the nature of gendered social learning in men. In contrast, focusing solely on "masculinity" as a metaphor for the effects of social learning has confined the field. The problem is not with the term itself but with its function in our current professional discourse about the

psychology of men; rather than opening up new questions and ways of understanding the functions of men's behavior, it seems to be prematurely cutting off inquiry by offering familiar but incomplete explanations for men's behavior.

Finally, researchers and practitioners are no longer in a position to theorize and study the psychology of men without concern for how our ideas and empirical findings are used for different agendas of social change. Rather, we must actively work toward an understanding of gendered social learning that is consistent with an a priori set of values and goals. It is here that we are less optimistic about the ultimate utility of promoting "masculinity" as the central construct in our field. As we argued above, the term has a long history of functionally contributing to discourses about gender that promote ontological essentialism in the service of normalizing and reinforcing inequality between the sexes. It is time to develop a new set of assumptions, a new vocabulary, and new metaphors for talking about gendered social learning in the public domain.

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Footnotes

1. Throughout the article we put the term masculinity in quotation marks when we want to remind the reader that the ontological and epistemological status of the term is ambiguous and should not be taken for granted.

Table 1. Comparison between the current paradigm for the psychology of men and a functional / pragmatic paradigm.

| | Current Paradigm | Functional / Pragmatic Paradigm |
|--|--|--|
| Criteria for Scientific Progress | <i>Correspondence Between Theory and Observation</i> | <i>Prediction, Influence, Successful Working</i> |
| Linkages Between Scientific Progress and Social Action | <i>Weak, Implicit, Consequential</i> | <i>Strong, Explicit, Intentional</i> |
| Sensitivity to Effects of Scientific Discourse in the Public Domain | <i>Weak</i> | <i>Strong</i> |
| Implicit Metaphor for Gendered Social Learning | <i>Internalized Societal Pressures/Roles</i> | <i>Situationally Cued Repertoires of Action</i> |

Table 2. Examples of Short-term, Long-term, Positive, and Negative Effects of Gendered Social Learning.

| | Positive | Negative |
|------------|--|---|
| Short-term | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptance from peers • Success in accomplishing a feared activity • Pride | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shame • Stress |
| Long-term | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of confidence in ability to act despite fear • Ability to contain expression of fear when appropriate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued fear of peer rejection • Excessive risk-taking |