

Whitepaper: Rethinking Masculinity - The Role and Impact of Men's Groups

Introduction

In contemporary society, traditional views of masculinity have increasingly come under scrutiny for their association with negative psychosocial outcomes. Men, adhering to stoic, tough, and self-reliant ideals, often face challenges in emotional expression and mental health, leading to higher suicide rates and lower life expectancy compared to women (Courtenay, 2000; Arias et al., 2021). Men's groups, such as MELD's, have emerged as pivotal interventions, providing supportive environments where men can explore and express their vulnerabilities.

This whitepaper delves into the transformative impact of these groups, supported by the study findings of Choi and Sabey (2024), and outlines the significant role they play in reshaping modern masculinity.

Theoretical Frameworks

Masculinity and Gender Role Conflict

The concept of hegemonic masculinity posits a standard of male behavior that prioritizes toughness, stoicism, and dominance, often at the cost of emotional well-being and interpersonal connections (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Gender role conflict arises when individuals feel pressured to conform to these norms, leading to psychological stress and negative mental health outcomes (O'Neil, 1981). Choi and Sabey's research underscores this conflict, highlighting how traditional masculinity can impede men's psychological health and social functioning.

Men's Groups as Supportive Interventions

Men's groups challenge the restrictive norms of traditional masculinity, fostering environments where emotional openness is encouraged and supported. These groups serve as a counter-narrative to the often-toxic masculine norms, providing a space for men to explore their identities, express vulnerabilities, and develop new, healthier understandings of masculinity (Provence et al., 2014; Garfield, 2010). The social learning context within these groups enables men to reflect on and modify their attitudes towards masculinity and emotional expression.

Comprehensive Study of Men's Groups Effectiveness

Choi and Sabey's qualitative study involved in-depth interviews with participants of MELD groups, focusing on their experiences and the impact on their perceptions of masculinity. Their methodology, rooted in grounded theory, allowed for the emergence of themes related to discontent with traditional masculinity, processes of reconstruction, and the enactment of new masculine behaviors.

Findings

Discontent and the Drive for Change

Many men experience discontent with traditional masculinity's limitations, prompting them to seek alternatives. This discontent, often rooted in personal struggles or a desire for deeper connections, leads them to men's groups where they can explore and redefine their masculinity (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Hoy, 2012).

Reconstruction of Masculinity

Choi and Sabey identified a process of reconstructing masculinity within these groups, where men engage vulnerably and receive empathetic responses, challenging their preconceived notions of masculinity. This reconstruction allows men to develop a more nuanced and healthier understanding of their masculine identity, moving beyond the constraints of traditional norms.

Enacting New Masculine Behaviors

Post participation in men's groups, men report significant changes in their emotional regulation, self-perception, and interpersonal relationships. They become less reactive, more emotionally aware, and capable of forming deeper, more meaningful connections with others. This enactment of new behaviors signifies a broader transformation in their lives, extending beyond the confines of the group settings.

Implications

Impact of Men's Groups on Masculinity

Men's groups have a profound impact on participants, facilitating a shift from traditional -- often harmful -- masculine norms to more inclusive and emotionally intelligent masculinity. This shift not only benefits individual men but also has broader social implications, promoting healthier relationships and communities.

Clinical and Social Implications

The findings from Choi and Sabey's study have important implications for mental health practitioners and policymakers. They highlight the need for gender-sensitive interventions that acknowledge and address the

unique challenges men face. Incorporating men's groups into broader mental health and social support systems could enhance the effectiveness of these interventions, promoting better outcomes for men's health and well-being.

Conclusion

Men's groups such as those at MELD play a crucial role in addressing the challenges of traditional masculinity, offering spaces where men can safely explore and express their vulnerabilities. The research of Choi and Sabey provides empirical support for the effectiveness of these groups in transforming men's attitudes toward masculinity and improving their mental and emotional health. By fostering environments that challenge the restrictive norms of traditional masculinity, men's groups contribute to the development of a healthier, more inclusive society.

1. Choi, E., & Sabey, A. (2024). "'I Could Just Exist ... Not in a Box': Experiential Examinations of Masculinity Within a Contemporary Men's Group." *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*. Advance online publication. This study provides a qualitative analysis of men's experiences in modern men's groups, exploring how these groups challenge traditional masculinity and support emotional expression and personal growth. [URL: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/men0000462>]
2. Courtenay, W. H. (2000). "Constructions of masculinity and their influence on men's well-being: A theory of gender and health." *Social Science & Medicine*, 50(10), 1385-1401. Discusses how traditional constructions of masculinity impact men's health and well-being.
3. Addis, M. E., & Mahalik, J. R. (2003). "Men, masculinity, and the contexts of help seeking." *American Psychologist*, 58(1), 5-14. Explores the societal and psychological barriers men face in seeking help, linking traditional masculine norms to reduced likelihood of seeking psychological assistance. [URL: <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-66X.58.1.5>]
4. Albarracin, D., & Shavitt, S. (2018). "Attitudes and attitude change." *Annual Review of Psychology*, 69, 299-327. Examines the mechanisms and processes of how attitudes form and change, offering insights into the dynamic nature of belief systems and perceptions. [URL: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-122216-011911>]
5. Arias, E., Tejada-Vera, B., & Ahmad, F. (2021). "Provisional life expectancy estimates for January through June 2020." *Vital Statistics Rapid Release*; no 10. National Center for Health Statistics. Provides statistics on life expectancy and highlights the higher mortality rates among men, underscoring the health disparities linked to traditional masculine norms.

6. Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). "Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept." *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829-859. Rethinks the concept of hegemonic masculinity and its effects on men's social and psychological lives. [URL: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>]
7. O'Neil, J. M. (1981). "Patterns of gender role conflict and strain: Sexism and fear of femininity in men's lives." *Personnel & Guidance Journal*, 60, 203-210. Introduces the concept of gender role conflict and its psychological strain for men adhering to traditional masculine roles. [URL: <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2164-4918.1981.tb00338.x>]
8. Provence, M., Naylor, B., & Finch, A. J. (2014). "Men's groups: The impact of a men's mental health group and its role in breaking down stigma." *Journal of Men's Health*, 11(2), 76-84. Examines the impact of men's groups on mental health and their role in reducing stigma around men's emotional vulnerability.
9. Garfield, C. (2010). "Understanding men's health and illness: A gender-relations approach to policy, research, and practice." *Journal of American College Health*, 58(5), 433-437. Emphasizes the importance of understanding men's health through a gender-relations perspective, highlighting the need for targeted support like men's groups.
10. Hoy, J. (2012). "Men's covert depression: Prevalence, distress, and help-seeking." *Social Work*, 57(3), 279-284. Highlights the issues of underdiagnosis and the reluctance of men to seek help for mental health issues.ⁱ

ⁱ The Choi and Sabey research was done with the old EVERYMAN company; as mentioned in a letter from Choi, the course study was created by Owen Marcus of EVERYMAN and for MELD who currently offers the course.