AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

In the Public Interest (/pi/about/newsletter/) | **September 2018 (/pi/about/newsletter/2018/09/)**

Harmful masculinity and violence

Understanding the connection and approaches to prevention.

Early socialization of negative masculine ideals

Western culture defines specific characteristics to fit the patriarchal ideal masculine construct. The socialization of masculine ideals starts at a young age and defines ideal masculinity as related to toughness, stoicism, heterosexism, self-sufficient attitudes and lack of emotional sensitivity (Wall & Kristjanson, 2005), and of connectedness. Boys learn to be men from the men in their lives, from their own experiences navigating our social norms, and from the large social and cultural context. Boys live under intensified pressure to display gender-appropriate behaviors according to the ideal male code.

Looking at the development of aggression throughout childhood, we know that not only do aggressive behaviors can emerge at an early age, they also tend to persist over time, without early prevention intervention (Broidy et al., 2003; Moffitt, 1993; Zigler, Taussig, & Black, 1992). The socialization of the male characteristics mentioned above also onsets at an early age making it a prime time-period for prevention intervention.

The possibility of negative effects of harmful masculinity occurs when negative masculine ideals are upheld. Primary gender role socialization aims to uphold patriarchal codes by requiring men to achieve dominant and aggressive behaviors (Levant et al., 2003). The concept of gender roles is not cast as a biological phenomenon, but rather a psychological and socially constructed set of ideas that are malleable to change (Levant & Wilmer, 2011).

The connection between masculine culture and violence perpetration

In early childhood, violence and aggression are used to express emotions and distress. Over time, aggression in males shifts to asserting power over another, particularly when masculinity is threatened (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2001). Masculine ideals, such as the restriction of emotional expression and the pressure to conform to expectations of dominance and aggression, may heighten the potential for boys to engage in general acts of violence including, but not limited to, bullying, assault, and/or physical and verbal aggression (Feder, Levant, & Dean, 2010).

Joseph Pleck (1995) devised the Masculine Gender Role Strain Paradigm, which identifies three strains resulting from current culture, discrepancy, dysfunction and trauma (Richmond & Levant, 2003). Aggression can result when a man experiences stress deriving from self-perceived failure to live up to masculine expectations (discrepancy) or when he maintains normative masculine expectations (dysfunction) (Berke et al., 2016). Both may result in a man's expression of negative idealized characteristics of masculinity, such as violence towards others (Pleck, 1995; Richmond & Levant, 2003).

Intimate partner violence (IPV), a prime example of dysfunction, reflects the feelings of distress males experience in situations that threaten their idealized masculine identity (Baugher & Gazmararian, 2015). An annual report by the Violence Policy Center (2017), "When Men Murder Women (http://www.vpc.org/studies/wmmw2017.pdf) " (PDF, 264KB), uses recent data to show the effect IPV perpetrated by men has on women in the U.S.: 1,686 murders included female victims and male perpetrators and 93 percent of the victims were murdered by a male they knew. In addition, according to the World Health Organization (2017), worldwide, 38 percent of murders of women are perpetrated by a male intimate partner. Also, in the U.S., men represent more than 90 percent of perpetrators of criminal violence and 78 percent of the victims (FBI, 2007). Those from minority populations are at increased risk due to greater exposure to high-risk environments and less support when violence occurs (APA, 2018).

Understanding the connection between negative male socialization and violence calls us to support preventative strategies that:

- Counter the problematic normative pressures boys face.

- Recognize gender-related social norms and seek to change the way men view and express themselves resulting in a shift of gendered practices, including the use of violence (Barker, Ricardo & Nascimento, 2007; Dworkin, Treves-Kagan & Lippman, 2013).

Prevention in response to multiple risk factors

Shifting away from negative masculine constructs to promoting a healthy masculine identity in childhood can influence a ripple effect that prevents the expression of violence in adolescence and adulthood (Krug et al., 2002).

For that, one must first address, starting in childhood, perpetrators' known risk factors, which may include:

- Exposure to violence at home, in relationships, media and in the community.

- Poor family functioning.

- Lack of services addressing exposure to trauma and stress.

- Social rejection among peers.

- Poor behavioral control, e.g., overly sexualized attitudes and behavior (Cleveland, Herrera & Stuewig, 2003).

- Social norms condoning male dominance and violence (Abramsky et al., 2011; Kiss, Schraiber, Hossain, Watts, & Zimmerman, 2015; Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy & Zwi, 2002).

Examples of prevention strategies may include:

- Educate parents on the negative consequences of physical punishment and humiliation techniques on children (e.g., Violence-Free Childhood (https://promundoglobal.org/programs/violence-free-childhood/)).

- Educate parents to create safe, nurturing, healthy environments and relationships that prevent modeling violence to children, and teach them to express and regulate their emotions (e.g., ACT Raising Safe Kids (http://www.actraisingsafekids.org/)).

- Identify and treat psychological distress precipitated by gender role socialization (Reidy et al., 2016).

- Promote healthy relationship skills that decrease adolescent's acceptance of traditional gender role norms and dating violence (Berke & Zeichner, 2016).

- Create marketing campaigns designed to modify social and cultural norms that endorse the unhealthy male code and consequent violence (Abramsky et al., 2011; Hossain et al. 2014).

- Have multi-level programs that positively integrate boys/men into society in healthy, positive ways.

References

Abramsky, T., Watts, C.H., Garcia-Moreno, C., Devries, K., Kiss, L., Ellsberg, M., . . . Heise, L. (2011). What factors are associated with recent intimate partner violence? findings from the WHO multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence. *BMC Public Health, 11*(1), 109-109.

American Psychological Association. (2018). Health disparities in racial/ethnic and sexual minority boys and men. Source: Author. Retrieved from: http://www.apa.org/pi/health-disparities/resources/race-sexuality-men.aspx (/pi/health-disparities/resources/race-sexuality-men) .

Barker, G., Ricardo, C., & Nascimento, M. (2007). Engaging men and boys to transform gender-based health inequities: Evidence from programme interventions, World Health Organization, Geneva. Retrieved from: http://www.who.int/gender/documents/Engaging_men_boys.pdf (http://www.who.int/gender/documents/Engaging_men_boys.pdf) (PDF, 1.20MB).

Baugher, A. & Gazmararian, J. (2015). Masculine gender role stress and violence: A literature review of future directions. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 24*, 107-112. doi: 10.1016/j.avb.2015.04.002.

Berke, D.S., & Zeichner, A. (2016). Man's heaviest burden: A review of contemporary paradigms and new directions for understanding and preventing masculine aggression. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 10*(2), 83-91.

Broidy, L.M., Nagin, D.S., Tremblay, R.E., Bates, J.E., Brame, B., Dodge, K.A., . . . Laird, R. (2003). Developmental trajectories of childhood disruptive behaviors and adolescent delinquency: a six-site, cross-national study. *Developmental Psychology, 39*(2), 222.

Cleveland, H.H., Herrera, V.M., & Stuewig, J. (2003). Abusive males and abused females in adolescent relationships: Risk factor similarity and dissimilarity and the role of relationship seriousness. *Journal of Family Violence, 18*(6), 325–339.

Dworkin, S.L., Treves-Kagan, S., & Lippman, S.A. (2013). Gender-transformative interventions to reduce HIV risks and violence with heterosexually-active men: A review of the global evidence. *AIDS and Behavior, 17*(9), 2845-2863.

Feder, J., Levant, R.F., & Dean, J. (2010). *Boys and violence: A gender-informed analysis. Psychology of Violence, 1*(S), 3-12. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/2152-0828.1.S.3 (http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/2152-0828.1.S.3) .

Hossain, M., Zimmerman, C., Kiss, L., Abramsky, T., Kone, D., Bakayoko-Topolska, M., Watts, C. (2014). Working with men to prevent intimate partner violence in a conflict-affected setting: A pilot cluster randomized controlled trial in rural Côte d'Ivoire. *BMC Public Health, 14*(1), 339-339.

Kiss, L., Schraiber, L.B., Hossain, M., Watts, C., & Zimmerman, C. (2015). The link between community-based violence and intimate partner violence: The effect of crime and male aggression on intimate partner violence against women. *Prevention Science, 16*(6), 881-889.

Krug, E., Dahlberg, L., Mercy, J., & Zwi, A. (2002). World report on violence and health. In: World Health Organization (Ed.). Geneva.

Levant, R., Richmond, K., Majors, R., Inclan, J., Rossello, J., et al. (2003). A multicultural investigation of masculinity ideology and alexithymia. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity, 4*, 91-99. doi:dx.doi.org.ezproxy.rit.edu/10.1037/1524-9220.4.2.91.

Levant, R. & Wilmer, D. (2011). Masculinity constructs as protective buffers and risk factors for men's health. *American Journal of men's Health, 8*, 110-120. doi:dx.doi.org.exproxy.rit.edu/10.1177/1557988313494408.

Moffitt, T.E. (1993). Adolescence-limited and life-course-persistent antisocial behavior: a developmental taxonomy. *Psychological review, 100*(4), 674.

Pellegrini, A.D., & Bartini, M. (2001). Dominance in early adolescent boys: Affiliative and aggressive dimensions and possible functions. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 47*(1), Article 7. Available at: https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/mpq/vol47/iss1/7 (https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/mpq/vol47/iss1/7) .

Pleck, J.H. (1995). "The gender role strain paradigm: An update." A New Psychology of Men. Eds. Ronald F. Levant and William S. Pollack. Basic Books, New York,. 11-32, Chapter xiv, 402 Pages.

Reidy, D.E., Berke, D.S., Gentile, B., & Zeichner, A. (2016). Masculine discrepancy stress, substance use, assault and injury in a survey of U.S. men. *Injury Prevention: Journal of the International Society for Child and Adolescent Injury Prevention, 22*(5), 370-374.

Silva, J. (2007). Parents Raising Safe Kids: ACT 8-Week Program for Parents. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Violence Policy Center. (2015). When men murder women: An analysis of 2015 homicide data. Retrieved from http://www.vpc.org/studies/wmmw2017.pdf (http://www.vpc.org/studies/wmmw2017.pdf) (PDF, 264KB).

Wall, D., & Kristjanson. L. (2005). Men, culture, and hegemonic masculinity: understanding the experience of prostate cancer. *Nursing Inquiry, 12*, 97-97. doi: doi-org.ezproxy.rit.edu/10.1111.j.1440-1800.2005.00258.x.

World Health Organization (2017). Violence against women. Retrieved from http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women (http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women) .

World Health Organization, & Liverpool JMU Centre for Public Health. (2010). *Violence prevention: The evidence*. In: World Health Organization (Ed.). Geneva.

World Health Organization, & London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. (2010). *Preventing intimate partner and sexual violence against women: Taking action and generating evidence*. In: World Health Organization (Ed.). Geneva.

Zigler, E., Taussig, C., & Black, K. (1992). Early childhood intervention: a promising preventative for juvenile delinquency. *American Psychologist, 47*: 997-1006.

Find this article at:

https://www.apa.org/pi/about/newsletter/2018/09/harmful-masculinity