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## How Gender Formation Can Inform Best Practices for Combating Toxic Masculinity

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**Abstract:** This paper combines literature on toxic masculinity, gender formation theory, and hegemonic masculinity to analyze best practices for interventions against toxic masculinity. After reading through theoretical understandings of gender, this paper develops recommendations for those wishing to develop their own gendered interventions through an analysis of existing interventions.

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## The Growing Tide of Masculinity

*Toxic masculinity* is harmful. I see it harming the men in my life when they are unable to express how they are truly feeling. I see it causing harm to the women who are trying to emotionally support these men. I see it harming those who live outside of the gender binary but are forced to conform to binary understandings of gender, or else be punished. I see it in TV, magazines, video games, and practically all media I consume that are not explicitly aimed at curbing toxic masculinity. It seems the natural arc of people's lives promotes unhealthy versions of masculinity.

Throughout the beginnings of quarantine, I found myself in my household halfway through my 6th semester of college. I reflected deeply on who I had become and who I wanted to be. Perhaps what I found myself reflecting on most was my time as a teacher of middle school students in a summer program after my sophomore year of college. These students inspired me to be a teacher and had a more profound impact on myself than I could have hoped to have on them. While my experience was nothing short of life-changing, one of the troubles I left with was the gender politics of my school. As hard as I tried to imbue positive images of masculinity to the young boys in my program, there were forces more powerful than me influencing the way they viewed themselves and the world around them. Before I enter education, I want to understand how this masculinity affects people, and how we can best address it.

## Framing the Problem

While men are the main perpetrators of masculinity, women often play a role in fostering and perpetuating toxic masculinity (Daddow and Hertner 2019). Toxic masculinity is dangerous

for the safety and future of all but the “toxic masculinist” (Grey and Shepherd, 2012: 122; Stepien, 2017). In other words, a failure to stop the growing tide of toxic masculinity in young people is harmful for the future of our nation. Research has linked the growth of toxic masculinity to depression and increased suicidal thoughts in young men (Hess 2016; Parent et al 2019), increased misogyny, including dismissal of women’s struggles (Gilbert 2017), alarming rates of rape against female friends (Hansen et al. 2010), overall increases in violence against women (Flood and Pease, 2009), as well as mass shootings (Haider 2016). Toxic masculinity serves the rise of power of “wealthy, able-bodied, heterosexual, ethnic-majority men”, with all people who do not fall within this category being harmed in the process of their dominance (Bjarnegard and Murray, 2018b: 262). However, it is still true that even the men that fall within this category stand to be harmed by toxic masculinity in their deteriorating mental health, for example.

This alarming rise in both inward and outward violence and harm clearly imply that toxic masculinity is killing all of us. Toxic masculinity is a specific form of hegemonic masculinity that is corrosive, violent, and socially destructive. Men and women both can be harmed by toxic masculinity, as well as perpetuate it. The harms toxic masculinity can cause are damaging and do not bode well for a successful future of our nation.

Toxic masculinity can be stopped, however. In order to hone in on a more specific area of study, I will be focusing my efforts on younger children. As such, I will be focusing on gender socialization specifically in young children. After identifying the specific mechanisms of gender socialization and best understanding how toxic masculinity is fostered in the education of young children, I look at current interventions to curb toxic masculinity.

### Methodology and Scope

In this paper, I start by briefly defining what toxic masculinity is and how it is often a root of inequality and hatred. After establishing a working definition of toxic masculinity, I trace the ways toxic masculinity is fostered in young children, and how current social norms are related to the rise of toxic masculinity. I hope to combine a theoretical understanding of toxic masculinity in young people with how people currently intervene with regards to toxic masculinity. In this essay, I look at an array of gender theory and extract important definitions necessary for understanding toxic masculinity. From there, I look at gender socialization theory as a means of developing criteria for successful interventions. In developing these criteria, I recommend parameters that should be considered in a successful intervention. Given my lack of original research, my scope is limited to existing data. Despite this, I still draw on ample theory and studies that give way to suggestions for one developing their own interventions.

### Exploring Toxic Masculinity

In this section, I discuss gender, sexuality, and masculinity. Using toxic masculinity as an anchor point, I open a broader discussion of how there are subcategories, or performances, of masculinity. After defining and describing the performances of toxic masculinity I have seen, I situate toxic masculinity in the larger conversation of gender performance. Analyzing toxic masculinity through a larger conversation of masculinity and gender expression, I attribute many of the dangerous behaviors and thoughts to the corrosive forms of masculinity primarily. In making this case, I emphasize the importance of making specific interventions focused on curbing problematic and toxic forms of masculinity.

Joseph Pleck and Elizabeth Pleck have developed a rich history of masculinity and how it has generally taken shape in their 1980 work, *The American Man*. While much of this history lays the framework for the masculinity we have today, I focus my discussion on the period noted simply as “after 1965” (Pleck and Pleck 1980: 8). A lot of these characteristics pointed out by Pleck and Pleck are ones reminiscent of the gender roles many feel confined to today. These “male-valued traits” as Pleck and Pleck describe them include “aggressive, independent, unemotional, objective, dominant, likes math and science, active, competitive, worldly, logical, skilled in business, direct, acts as a leader, self-confident, thinks men are superior to women, etc.” (Pleck and Pleck 1980: 12). While the list is almost double what I have included, the traits identified give a reasonable idea about how we define masculinity in the modern-day. For the remainder of this section, “masculinity” should be read as this very specific example provided by Pleck and Pleck.

*Hegemonic masculinity*’s goal is often understood to be something that dominates gender relations. In other words, hegemonic masculinity means that femininity must be secondary to it. This idea of femininity being a secondary, weaker part of gender relations is what is known as *emphasized femininity*. Connell (1995) explains that emphasized femininity is “defined around compliance with this subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men” (Connell 1995: 184). Having an understanding of gender that emphasizes femininity and hegemonic masculinity, however, limits one’s understanding of the full scope of masculinity. To fully understand masculinity and how toxic masculinity fits within the larger conversation of gender, it is necessary to study *gender formation*. To understand gender formation, I will move into a brief discussion of what exactly makes one's gender.

## Gender Performance

It is important to understand that masculinity is not boiled down to the features or characteristics of an individual. Approaching gender as if it were related to one's sex is a biological approach which fails to capture the full nuances and complexities of gender expression. Rather, gender is a performance, dictated by one's actions and interactions with people around you (Butler 1988). In other words, gender is not merely what you look like, but rather what you embody and what you do (Connell 1995). These approaches to gender inform how people create their own gendered identity. There are subcategories of masculinity and femininity, and there are gender identities that go beyond a simple binary of masculinity and femininity (ibid). In the next section, I discuss gender roles and how gender roles play a role in creating expectations for people's gender identity.

Expectations for gendered behavior can best be understood in terms of gender roles. Erving Goffman likens gender roles to a game of modern life. In this game, these social expectations dictate what one must do and how one must act (Goffman 1959). Judith Butler extends this understanding of gender roles as a game and identifies how there are serious repercussions for existing outside of these roles: "Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all" (Butler 1988: 528). In essence, gender selection for arts over more traditionally masculine things like hunting and sports (Yates-Sexton 2019; Franklin 1984), or even women trying to enter spaces traditionally occupied by men

(Massanari 2015; Salter 2018). While persecuted by those who subscribe to hegemonic gender roles, these deviant expressions of gender compose the full range of gender expression.

Analyzing gender as a composition of the things people do and how people interact with the world makes toxic masculinity's relationship with overall expressions of gender much clearer. When we apply this definition of gender expression to toxic masculinity, we can see how toxic masculinity is a subcategory of masculinity that aims to vehemently oppose the deviant gender roles. When thinking of the framework of gender expression being a game with rewards and punishments, toxic masculinity can be thought of as the punisher.

### Zooming in on Toxic Masculinity

One theorist succinctly describes masculinity as “an identifiable set of practices that occur across space and over time and are taken up and enacted collectively by groups, communities, and societies” (Schippers 2007: 86). This example of producing masculinity through one's actions and the way they move through the world emphasizes how masculinity, rather than being a characteristic of a person, is a performance of gender expression. One of the most important pieces from that given definition by Schippers is the idea of masculinity being produced and reinforced by communities. Taking the example of the gaming community, we can see that once people are a part of that space, they are much more prone to carrying out that kind of masculinity.

While Pleck and Pleck started this discussion of masculinity through a critical lens, the study of toxic masculinity is much newer. While hard to trace exactly where it began, many point

to a 1996 article discussing the narratives and stories of Vietnam War veterans. When the author interviewed these veterans, one of the most common threads she found was the desire among soldiers to become idealized versions of men. Many of these men based their image of masculinity on their fathers who had served in WWII. While many of these fathers were abusive, the men studied still held a reverence for them. The soldiers were well respected and given some amount of social capital because of their military service. In this way, violence became inextricably linked to what these men saw as an ideal man. With the heroism of serving in a war being placed on them, they saw military service as a “natural rite of passage from boyhood to manhood” (Karner 1996).

Extracting a working definition of toxic masculinity from this example, we can identify toxic masculinity as conceptions of masculinity that place unrealistic or oppressive norms on young boys. Sayings like “boys don’t cry”, “don’t be a sissy”, and other expectations placed on young boys stand as examples of how toxic masculinity restricts is restricting the behavior of young boys (Lindsay 2005). These harmful norms do damage to all people, boys or otherwise. A more precise definition of toxic masculinity that encapsulates this harm done to everyone is masculine norms that are “harmful to women, men, and society overall” (Hess 2016). I will now move into looking at examples of where toxic masculinity occurs and who its actors are.

### Toxic Masculinity vs. Traditional Masculinity

Toxic masculinity is embedded within traditional masculinity, but some researchers in the field make nuanced distinctions between the two (Kesvani 2018; Kupers 2005). To better identify what toxic masculinity is, I define toxic masculinity within the umbrella of traditional

masculinity. In defining toxic masculinity within traditional masculinity, I hope to emphasize the idea that toxic masculinity is often an extreme iteration of traditional masculinity, bent on preserving it. To begin, I draw on literature that defines hegemonic masculinity, and then move into more specifically defining what toxic masculinity looks like within that. Hegemonic masculinity is broadly defined as “the dominant notion of masculinity in a particular historical context” (Connell 1987). While there are multiple representations of masculinity throughout the world, my paper focuses on a more western and North American conception of masculinity.

When looking at a more traditional form of masculinity in this country, some examples of behaviors are an unwillingness to admit weakness (Jennings & Murphy 2000), devaluation of women and all feminine attributes in men (Kupers 2005), or viewing women in a different, often subservient position to men in the workforce (Richardson 1981; Salter 2018; Taylor 2012). Working from these traits, we can define toxic masculinity as “one particular performance” of masculinity (Jenny and Exner-Cortens 2018: 411) but pushed to an extreme and violent end (Schippers 2007). While there are countless examples of behaviors associated with and derived from toxic masculinity, some key examples are having rage and pent-up emotions (Hayder 2016; Romero 2017), underdeveloped or inappropriate communication and interaction styles (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016), and resistance to mental health care (Pollack, 1998). On top of these personal struggles, toxic masculinity often encapsulates a hatred toward subcategories of masculinity and non-men in general. Commonly wrapped into toxic masculinity is a hatred for gay and transgender men (Connell 1998), an unwillingness to express femininity by a male-identifying person (Bird 1996), and to view women as subjects of domination and violence (Kimmel 1987; Brod & Kaufman 1994). It is important to note that there are ways in which masculinity can be positive and caring of people. A man’s desire to “win at sports, provide for

his family, succeed at work, and maintain solidarity with a friend” are a part of hegemonic masculinity, but are not “especially toxic” (Kupers 2006: 716). Rather, when I refer to toxic masculinity, I will be focusing on the examples that are socially damaging to all people involved; be it misogyny, violence, racism, repression of emotions, homophobia, transphobia, or any other iteration of toxic masculinity that would bring harm to a man and the person around them.

## Part 2: Gender Socialization

Now having established what prevailing definitions of toxic masculinity are, the next section defines gender socialization. Gender socialization refers to the idea of children becoming aware of the norms and expectations surrounding their own gender identity (Henslin 1999). The next section will focus on understanding how children learn their gender identity, what mechanisms are in place to teach gender identity, and how early children reinforce certain toxic ideas about gender. Laying this groundwork for how children specifically learn gender is necessary, as these will also be the places they learn about masculinity. Building the foundations of this understanding of masculinity is crucial, as later in the essay I will evaluate the efficacy of specific interventions currently being practiced. By researching the specifics of gender socialization and gender formation, I will make the argument that interventions of toxic masculinity must begin early for them to be effective and preventive, rather than reactive.

### Gender Roles at Different Ages

To begin, I will speak to what gender roles occur at certain ages. By outlining meanings of genders at each age, I will pinpoint the age where it seems toxic masculinity could be most

expected to arise. We must start before infancy. Before a child is born, it is common to see people placing expectations of a child's gender based on their sex assignment (Lindsey 2015). From the conception of one's life and throughout, one of if not the most impactful factors in forming gender identity is placing gender roles and sex roles in the same category (Mussenn 1969). The primary factors in developing an infant's gender knowledge are the actions, appearances, and behaviors of the adults around them (Fagot & Leinbach 1989; Witt 1997). The development of gender in infancy is interesting, as the sex of the baby influences the actions of adults in relationship with the child, and in turn these actions influence the baby's preliminary understandings of gender (Healthy Gender Development and Children).

At 18-24 months, toddlers begin to respond to the world around them and internalize a lot of what they see around them. Leading research shows that this is the age that many toddlers begin to define gender for themselves (Kuhn, Nash & Brucken 1978; Antill, Cunningham, & Cotton, 2003; Zoslus et al., 2009). One of the easiest ways we can understand that someone is developing their gender is through a yearning for group belonging (Baldwin & Moses, 1996). One can find group belonging in the household with families or at daycare facilities. One study specifically looked at sex-typed play as a means of understanding how children understood gender. Very young children in this age range have succeeded at answering questions calling on them to organize certain things in a gendered fashion by pointing to a picture of a male or female in response to experimenter's questions (Etaugh, Grinnell, & Etaugh 1989) or sorting pictures of themselves, their peers, and other people they had not seen into boxes designated for male and female (Weinrub et al., 1984). At this age, there is a clear understanding of the two categories most often used to categorize people: male and female.

This trajectory of a gender binary continues when children are ages 3-4. They are continuing to build this understanding of what gender is in their own minds. Additionally, they are deepening their understanding of “boys and girls” is. One notable development that people have seen in these ages through interviewing children is a connection of actions and attributes to “boys and girls” (Halim & Ruble, 2010). Within this understanding of what ‘boys do’ and what ‘girls do’, children are prone to making rules for what gender is (Kuhn, Nash, & Brucken 1978; Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2004). This is a slightly more nuanced understanding of gender than seen above. Rather than identifying just toys, clothes, or people as male or female, children are starting to understand the kinds of actions that people often associate with male and female identity. Developing rulesets for gender are the beginnings of people policing others forms of gender expression.

The next age frame of development is perhaps the most interesting, as this is the age where gender development becomes much more interactive amongst other children. I will be spending the most time discussing this age frame as I feel it is the most important place interventions should begin and continue. To begin, I will highlight the prevailing research on what this stage means developmentally for gender. What is interesting to note is that this age is the age where children display the most rigid expressions of gender. At this point, children have built a solid understanding of what the rules for gender expression are, as pointed out in the earlier stages of development (Kuhn, Nash, & Brucken 1978; Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2004). Alongside an understanding of these rules, children are extremely aware of the societal pressure that exists to conform to these rules (Egan, Perry, & Dannemiller, 2001; Miller, Lurye, Zosuls, & Ruble, 2009). Despite their knowledge of social standards with regards to gender, this is the age where people are the most unforgiving in their expressions of gender. The unflinching

expression of gender is known as gender rigidity (Weinraub et al., 1984). When a child is rigid in their gender expression at this age, it represents a deep attachment to that gender identity. At this age, based on the knowledge of norms built prior, expressions of gender that are against the norm represent a very deep desire for that child to express gender. As children get older, gender rigidity grows weaker and many fall in line with gender norms (Trautner et al., 2005; Halim, Ruble, Tamis-LeMonda, & Shrout, 2013).

Understanding that gender develops this early is important. In understanding that children can very deeply understand gender roles and how they fit into these roles would logically lead us to understand how toxic masculinity can develop in these early ages. In the next section, I will be speaking about the specific mechanisms that form gender in young children. By ascertaining early children as an age where toxic masculinity [first?] arises, I will make the argument that interventions should occur at this age. On top of this, understanding how and where these interventions occur will allow us to cater our interventions to reverse and address the specific actions that build toxic masculinity in children.

### Defining Gender Socialization

One of the specific mechanisms that encourages unhealthy gender roles in children is the idea of gender socialization. As stated earlier, gender socialization is the idea that people become aware of gendered expectations placed upon them at a very early age. However, the way that people internalize and learn these norms is through gender stereotyping. Gender stereotyping is

the idea that there are given beliefs about certain gendered groups that influence how people see those groups (Judd & Park, 1993). I will briefly discuss how gender stereotyping occurs and why it reinforces the toxic gender roles in our society.

Gender stereotyping is effective because it occurs all around us, through movies, mass media, toys, and other mechanisms/domains (Ruble & Martin, 1998; Powlishta, Sen, Serbin, Poulin-Dubois, & Eichstedt, 2001). The media we feed to children daily are large culprits in the perpetuation of gender stereotypes. By giving children toys based on their gender, we are reinforcing what things they should demonstrate interest in. In media like movies and television, we characterize idyllic men and women. These idyllic characters become a model for what people should be like, and in turn attribute certain traits to men and women separately. In a study of young children, researchers asked children to describe people coded as certain genders. When describing the people coded as male, the descriptions were much more action based, focusing on how tough someone is, what their capabilities are, and what their physical prowess is. On the other hand, people coded as female were more often described in terms of appearance, noting things like someone's clothing, accessories, hairstyle, and type of perfume even (Miller, Lurye, Zosuls, & Ruble, 2009).

Up until now, I have discussed how gender comes up developmentally. More specifically, I have spoken to an individual's experience with gender and how they develop gender for themselves. However, my goal is to understand how we can best intervene in toxic expressions of masculinity. Most commonly, these toxic expressions are relational. As such, to find what the best age for intervention is, it is important to look at how people interact with others in specific gendered interactions.

### How Gender Develops in an Interactive Sense

Focusing on school—a main/formative venue in which gender stereotyping occurs—allows us to hone in on the social interactions between children. In the next section, I will briefly cover the specifics of gendered interactions in young children. One specific instance of toxic gender norms in young children is the idea of group favoritism and same-sex congregation. One extremely common trend in young children specifically is that they often stay in same-sex friend groups (Kuhn, Nash, and Brucken 1978). One harmful consequence of these gender norms is that these students developed more positive attributes to people of a similar gender, whereas they thought negatively of the other group (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2001; Zalk & Katz, 1978). In their friend groups, children enforce a division between other gendered groups. This natural separation often causes there to be an increase of certain stereotypical behaviors related to gender. By studying existing literature on the dynamics of same-sex groups in schools, we can identify schools as sites requiring interventions. To best understand these dynamics, we will talk briefly about the dynamics of play in young children.

### On Play

Understanding play is necessary to understanding the general dynamics of children-children interaction, as play marks one of the only uncontrolled, less supervised venues where children interact. Knowing that children often stick to groups of their own, we can analyze how

the gendered groups influence the experiences of children. Maccoby (2002) pulls on research to summarize generally what play looks like in these ages:

“Playtime interactions among boys, more often than among girls, involve rough-and-tumble play, competition, conflict, ego displays, risk taking, and striving to achieve or maintain dominance, with occasional (but actually quite rare) displays of direct aggression. Girls, by contrast, are more often engaged in what is called collaborative discourse, in which they talk and act reciprocally, each responding to what the other has just said or done, while at the same time trying to get her own initiatives across.”

What Maccoby captures is that boys perpetuate toxic behavior when they only play with each other, whereas girls demonstrate much healthier and collaborative behavior when they play. This is not to say that girls do not have conflict when they play. However, the solutions for conflict are often much more collaborative and focused on a greater goal of the group, rather than individual interest.

Alongside the problem of boys' play being more violent, boys communicate less about their feelings when they are playing (Maccoby 1999; Markovitz, Benenson, & Dolenszky, 2001). Overall, girls are able to voice when they are upset and ask for help, while boys feel increasing pressure to be independent and not seek out help. The failure to communicate even simply how a young boy is feeling on the playground has profound ramifications for the rest of his life. Not being able to express their feelings in these smaller situations can be transferred to how men often struggle to use the resources available to them in schools. For example, fewer men seek out advising and counseling in schools (Sweet 2020). The social dynamics that compel men to refrain from voicing their feelings of struggle also compel men to not ask for help when they

need assistance. Being unable to ask for help is just a larger symptom of the issues that men go through and can be linked to increased anxiety in college-aged men (citation), lower educational attainment in college for men when compared to women, and in extreme cases, higher suicide rates in men than women (Citation). In this way, these dynamics of play are just a symptom of the larger issue of gendered norms. That norm is that men should be independent and solve problems on their own (Mansfield AK).

The idea that men should all act a certain way--specifically as independent, fearless, strong, and avoiding emotional expression-- is referred to as the “male gender socialization paradigm” (Addis Me, Cohane GH). This paradigm reinforces certain behaviors through pressure from both adults around these young boys, as well as their peer relationships and themselves (21, 23, 24). These masculine ideals, like being tough and emotionless, are taught to young boys through “modeling, reinforcement, and punishment that occur throughout a person’s life (citation). The stakes of getting men to speak to these feelings are extremely high. Researchers point out that the disparities between men’s health and women’s health can largely be attributed to the differences in male and female socialization (ibid). In studying the socialization of men and boys, we can see that very negative outcomes are possible, where men rarely express their pain, weaknesses, or emotions at large. By zooming in on socialization, we can trace this early age as a time where these attitudes and behaviors associated with toxic masculinity often develop and flourish.

### **Part 3: Evaluation of Current Interventions**

Thus far, we have looked at the ways gender socialization influences the growth and development of young people. Specifically, we have looked at some of the toxic ways in which

young people are influenced from a very early age. This evidence revealed one clear point about interventions: starting early is best. In this section, I will speak to why starting early is best and speak to other criteria that should be considered when developing gendered interventions. By developing criteria through reading of theory, we can have parameters through which these interventions can be evaluated.

#### Criteria for Successful Intervention: Early Implementation

So far, we have identified one of the primary problems with toxic masculinity as gender socialization. Specifically, we have talked about how the socialization of young boys can cause them to have less of a practice of expressing their feelings or generally asking for help when they need it. Considering the background identified on gender socialization, one of the key parts of an intervention should have the audience be young boys. While successful interventions could still occur at later ages, they will be fighting against these early mechanisms of gender socialization. Therefore, interventions that happen in young boys have the benefit of building positive attitudes towards masculinity before the negative ideals become so deeply ingrained in children.

#### Criteria for Successful Intervention: Structural Lens

Given that a problem is male socialization, an intervention should hope to deal with the norms surrounding boys that enforce these norms in the first place (Taylor 2019). By that, I mean these solutions must be focused on looking at men as a group, not just a series of

individuals. When we are looking at the strength of interventions later in the piece, whether the solutions look structurally at the issue of masculinity in a certain community will be important. Changing something structurally does require the work of an individual (Pir 2019). However, when we are acting as an individual, it is important to recognize that we fit into structures much larger than ourselves that can only change through an overhaul of our current system (NAP 2002; O'Malley 2018; Jewler 2016).

### Criteria for Successful Intervention: Positive Masculinity

Another point that will be important to emphasize is having a positive vision of masculinity or gender relations that could replace the current systems set up. If programs have a goal of redefining masculinity, a necessary component of realizing that change is to have solid meanings and images of masculinity that can contrast with the more negative stereotypes enforced through gender roles (Taylor 2019). Exploring this research further leads us to interesting findings about how young boys form their images of masculinity. In a groundbreaking work on the links between gender and violence titled *Boys will be Boys: Breaking the Link Between Masculinity and Violence*, author Myriam Miedzian expands on the idea of gender socialization and the specific mechanisms that reinforce it. Miedzian details how traditionally, as boys get older and pass 18 months, they will distance themselves from their mother (Miedzian 1991). What this distancing entails is simply recognizing that they will function differently in social spaces. They will dress differently from their mothers, they will not give birth to children, they will not develop breasts, etc. As a result, when boys are looking to

have a model for how they will function socially, they often look more toward the male figures in their life than the female figures (ibid.)

This distancing from their mother causes boys to look to their fathers, teachers, media, and other male figures in their life for guidance on their place in society (Turner 2020). Despite something seemingly harmless, the admiration of athletes can be dangerous to the development of young boys if not carefully considered. In his book *Violence and Sport*, Professor Michael D. Smith details how when one is deeply entrenched in sports as a spectator event, they are early-on introduced to the relationship violence has with sports. To win, the athletes must routinely employ “Tackles, blocks, body checks, collisions, legal blows of all kinds” (Smith). However, it is rare if the violence is condemned in sports, and in fact it is often looked down upon to be passive.

One salient example we can see is in a somewhat recent altercation between Lars Eller and Brad Marchand in a heated game on January 30, 2019. Eller and Marchand, players for the Washington Capitals and Boston Bruins respectively, collided hard while going for the puck. Eller removed his gloves, a universal symbol demonstrating he wanted to fight. Despite this, Marchand tried to proceed forward and simply skated away as Eller grabbed his collar. Despite Marchand’s passivity preventing possible injury and giving his team a competitive advantage in the game, he was frowned upon: “Marchand did what most parents tell their children to do when presented with a fight. He walked away. In doing so, he drew a minor penalty from Eller and gave his team a power play. According to the fighting etiquette, however, Marchand was in the

wrong” (Giorgio 2019). Marchand violated “fighting etiquette”, and therefore was looked down upon by fellow competitors and onlookers who are often searching for red ice. This altercation and its response are just some examples of how violence is glorified in sports. We can also look to other forms of media for examples of how values of violence and domination are perpetuated. In video games and movies, content analyses show very common trends in the kinds of behaviors that media portray, like men being smart, witty, and powerful (Gibson 1994), and men often are depicted as the leaders who are awarded female affection because of their strength and dominance within a story (Lien 2013; Turkle 1984).

When we are aiming to build interventions that will curb the toxic masculinity we see in boys, there need to be models of men displaying positive relationships to their gender and sexuality. Right now, it is clear that the depictions of men portray certain values as predominant. These values fall in line with the traditional and toxic forms of masculinity we have outlined earlier. Research has shown that men who develop positive forms of masculinity are more likely to have had positive male role models in their life from a young age (Roberts-Douglass and Curtis-Boyles 2013). Representing masculinity in a positive way looks different for lots of people, but some key characteristics identified by researchers thus far include being authentic to those around you, showing vulnerability and emotions, and being a responsible member of society with regards to holding men accountable for their actions against women (Cole 2019; University of Richmond). Having positive ways to understand being a man at a young age is a way we can encourage boys to act in a way that does not fall in line with the more toxic masculinity I have discussed earlier in this paper.

### Criteria for Successful Intervention: Mixed Gender Interventions

Another criterion I wish to define before analyzing some popular interventions against toxic masculinity is the gender of the person delivering the intervention. In *The Wonder of Boys: What Parents, Mentors, and Educators can do to Shape Boys into Exceptional Men* by Michael Gurian, he speaks about his time as a man working on the education of boys with regards to their understanding of masculinity. However, many of the interventions were optional and thus self-selecting. Gurian writes about how this imbalance of gender limits restricts the efficacy of a lot of these programs:

“The boys and young men don’t take the elective classes that would teach responsibility because these classes are taught mainly by women about concerns that seem to grow from female culture. It is a given, of course, that many of these concerns are important to male culture, but boys do not see it this way. Schools know this, but give up. They hope the boys will learn about human growth and development somewhere” (Gurian 1997: 76).

This hope that boys will learn elsewhere is misguided given what we have discussed regarding gender socialization. Allowing boys to simply learn these things elsewhere will result in them internalizing the more traditional and often toxic forms of masculinity.

Realizing this deficiency in male-led efforts to teach more positive attitudes toward masculinity, many men have taken initiative in their respective communities to educate young boys. The logic of many of these programs is a “man-to-man approach”, where interventions capitalize on the relationship masculine relationship as an entry point for education (Baker,

Ricaro, and Nascimiento 2007; Yogachandra 2014; Crosson-Giplin and Proulx 2018). While we will get more into specific iterations of these male-only interventions, research shows they are ineffective and are prone to unintentionally reifying the exact stereotypes they wish to dispel (Fleming, Lee, and Dworkin 2014). Through these two examples, it is clear that mixed gender workshops should be heavily considered in intervening with young boys and masculinity. This mixing of gender should ideally be reflected both in those leading interventions, as well as those participating in interventions.

#### Criteria for Successful Interventions: Longstanding Intervention

The last criteria I will briefly speak to evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions is the pathways they provide for people after engaging with the material provided. Similar to interventions needing to provide a positive image of masculinity, a gendered intervention should be longstanding and allow pathways for people to continue to grow and effect change past the intervention. In a study on workshops and their efficacy, Jorge Arango points out how temporary interventions that fail to follow up and continue education are often ineffective at bringing about the long-lasting change they aim to achieve (Arango 2018). It is important that participants in an intervention are either kept up with long-term, or have salient actions they can take to continue their education past the time of the intervention (Community Tool Box). More specifically, those leaving a workshop all participants should have a clear picture of what they should be doing, how they should be doing it, and ways they can support those actions (Edwards & Day 2006).

Now, having established what the criteria are for a successful intervention, I analyze a series of interventions. I look at who is developing the intervention, what the content of the

intervention is, and any other general information necessary to understand the intervention. After developing this baseline info, I use the criteria listed above to analyze how effective these interventions are. I ask these questions of each intervention:

1. Does this intervention focus on toxic masculinity as an issue that is structural? In other words, does the intervention address masculinity as a culture and set of beliefs that many ascribe to, rather than just an issue of individuals?
2. Does the intervention have a positive image of masculinity that can replace/correct the already socialized toxic masculinity?
3. Is the intervention longstanding? Does it provide a clear pathway for participants to continue their education past participation in whatever the intervention may be?
4. If an interactive experience, does the intervention have a mix of genders, both in its participants and those delivering the workshop?

With a basis for how these interventions could work best, I will hope to demonstrate how a close reading of gender socialization and theoretical understandings of where and how masculinity occurs can inform best practices for interventions aimed at curbing/stopping the rise of toxic masculinity in young children. While the best practices outlined here are certainly not the only parameters that can be used to define the success of an intervention, I aim for this theoretical approach to be able to guide interventions.

### The If-Men Project

The If-Men Project is an intervention aiming to implement healthy masculinity in young boys and is developed by a student named Scott Kaltenbaugh as his capstone project for his Master of Arts in Intercultural Service, Leadership and Management. Kaltenbaugh describes the implementation of this program as something aiming to give high school, male-identifying students an opportunity to “understand their own identities, gain an awareness of privilege and power in our society, shift attitudes around masculinity to being healthier and pro-social, and increase personal skills and knowledge that would help the participants be more successful in the world” (Kaltenbaugh 2019: 18). In its implementation, the If-Men Project was a series of 33 weekly sessions that were 45 minutes each. These sessions saw the attendance of anywhere from 6-15 young men, depending on the week.

### Strengths of the If-Men Project

The If-Men Project is very promising in its setup. For starters, it has participants engage weekly for an entire school year. When participants come to this session, they discuss readings, movies, or other materials the leaders of the intervention give out. One clear benefit this has is it allows the participants to stay engaged past the workshop. In this way, it clearly addresses the need for participants to continue their education long past the intervention. With the intervention to last over such a long period of time, we see a strength in how it can remain in these young men’s lives as a routine, as opposed to a one-off instance.

Another strength of the If-Men Project is that it simultaneously tears down the traditional image of masculinity and aims to provide the young boys models for them to create more positive images of masculinity. For starters, certain questions are clearly getting students to think about the more structural examples latent in masculinity. Some examples of these questions include: “What does privilege look like in society? How do identities relate to privilege? When does masculinity become toxic? Why are there men’s roles and women’s roles?” (Kaltenbaugh 2019: Appendix 2) These questions that make participants go beyond themselves to understand toxic masculinity show an effort to have participants understand masculinity as something more structural. Additionally, this intervention uses examples of fictional characters and real men to highlight positive depictions of masculinity. We can see these in the curriculums, “What Can We Do?”, “Healthy Manhood, Healthy Relationships”, “Interrupt the Cycle”, and “Society’s Gender Rules” (Kaltenbaugh 2019: 17). In this way, the If-Men Project addresses both the issue of masculinity being a structural issue that can only be taken down as a team, and the issue of interventions needing to provide an alternative for boys to base their understanding of masculinity through.

#### Areas of Improvement for the If-Men Project

One of the ways this project can be improved based on my research is through implementing mixed-gender education. As it stands, the program is male-only, as well as the teacher of the program being male. While this does not completely nullify the strengths of the program, research has shown risks in having male-only interventions, as these can often reify certain stereotypes about gender roles (Fleming, Lee, and Dworkin 2014). For example, by only

having men present at these interventions, one can unintentionally reinforce men as knowledge producers in a patriarchal society (Salter 2019; Flood & Pease 2009; Roberto and Li 2016). On top of there being more non-male identifying participants, there may be strength in tackling these topics with students who are even younger than high school, which is something that Kaltenbraugh concedes in his conclusion: “It [the If-Men Project] also has room to grow. It should definitely be adapted for even younger boys (Kaltenbaugh 2019: 57).

### University Safe Spaces to Combat Toxic Masculinity

In 2017, many universities began workshops that had the goal of constructing new futures of masculinities. Due to the overlap between these workshops and the If-Men Project, my discussion of their strengths and weaknesses will be much briefer.

### University Workshop Strengths

At the college level, analysis of masculinity is often complex and deeply engages with masculinity as a structural issue. In this section, I highlight a few examples of workshops that detail these complex workings toward masculinity and talk about common themes across these college workshops.

One weekly workshop at Oregon State University focuses on healthy masculinities, wherein students, “engage in collective imagining to construct new futures for masculinities, unrestricted by power, privilege, and oppression” (Gockowski 2017). The “Men’s Project” at

Duke University holds a semester-long program that discusses “the ways we present—or don’t present—our masculinities, so we can better understand how masculinity exists on our campus—often in toxic ways—and begin the work of unlearning violence” (Duke University). Ithaca College routinely holds workshops that “examine hegemonic masculinity and its role as the wheel that rotates a cycle of violence” while empowering “willing individuals to begin to recognize, acknowledge, own, and disrupt the toxicity of manhood to end violence” (Ithaca College). There are common themes throughout all these university workshops. They mention toxic masculinity as a concept that is learned and unlearned, they talk about power and privilege, and they all have a goal of looking beyond the current constructions of masculinity. In these common themes, we can again see the strengths in fighting for structural change of masculinity by dismantling power, and the need to imagine new forms of masculinity if we hope to replace those that are currently setup. Additionally, these programs all throughout the length of the semester, showing a strength in how these interventions are not one-shot solutions.

#### University Workshop Areas of Improvement

One clear area of improvement again is the age of the participants. Again, starting earlier is often better. However, I think the complexity of conversation would be a hurdle in this intervention. Ideally, these topics could be adjusted to be discussed at younger ages.

I think one bigger area for improvement in this case is again the lack of gender diversity for some programs. Many of these programs are male-oriented and are only focused on students who are male-identifying. Recently the Duke’s Women Center has partnered with the Duke’s Men Project. Despite this, the membership is all-male. On top of it being all-male, the only way

for the program to exist in its current form is to have it be an opt-in (Duke University). This is not ideal, as there are many men, often the ones who need it the most, who would not buy into such a program (Burns 2017). For the last intervention, I look at a program I see as a bright spot in this discussion of toxic masculinity, as it embeds these discussions more naturally into the conversation of toxic masculinity.

### Early Childhood Interventions: PATHS

The last intervention I discuss in this piece is an example of what interventions could look like in young people. The case study I use is that of the PATHS program, which stands for Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies Curriculum (Domitrovich, Cortes, and Greenberg 2007). This intervention serves as an example of the kind of success one can see in their interventions when the audience is young children, when interventions are mixed gender, and when interventions are embedded within a school's curriculum. The PATHS program was developed by a group of researchers aiming to improve the social and emotional intelligence of preschoolers. Throughout a full school year (9 months), teachers delivered weekly curriculum, lessons, and extension activities focused on helping these young children build deeper competence in social and emotional learning.

### Strengths of PATHS

Importantly, this PATHS intervention serves as a prime example of what could happen when young children are exposed to discourse surrounding how they interact with their peers at

their young age. In surveys from both the parents and teachers of students, the students who participated in the program were rated as having higher social competence than their peers (Domitrovich, Cortes, and Greenberg 2007). While the intervention is not explicitly looking at masculinity, the ability to engage young children in this sort of curriculum at such a young age is promising as researchers like Kaltenbraugh try to adapt their complex curriculums to young children. The positive effect this intervention had on children reinforces the idea that starting discussions with children of how they interact with peers early is best. Additionally, the success of this intervention provides more evidence for the case that this kind of work should be done at early ages.

#### Limitations of PATHS

In PATHS, one can see how they do not speak explicitly to masculinity. In this way, the exact image of masculinity that children are being socialized to is not directly addressed. However, I think PATHS demonstrates that in young children, you can still have success in your intervention if the intervention looks at explicit toxic behaviors. For example, the communication of one's feelings in young boys is one thing that toxic masculinity gets in the way of, as seen in our readings of how young boys are socialized. While there are limited interventions right now that speak specifically to masculinity for young boys, the ability to encourage positive behavior in young children through these interventions is promising.

### Common Themes and Lessons

There are a few common themes in these interventions that demonstrate some considerations that should be made when developing interventions aimed at curbing the growing tide of toxic masculinity. For starters, having consistent interventions seems to affect how long standing the effects of the intervention are. In these examples, all the interventions happened over the course of multiple weeks, with time also being dedicated outside of the curriculum to have further growth. Based on the implementation of these interventions and their successes, having a consistent curriculum through a long period of time seems effective in small intervention groups.

One salient difference within these programs was the age group. In the interventions focused on high school and college students, there was a much clearer effort to unlearn and dismantle how those participating in the interventions saw masculinity. Only from there could those participating build a better, more positive understanding of masculinity. On the other hand, we saw the program that the preschoolers were a part of was much more focused on teaching a new set of skills for interacting with people. By entering the education of young children early, educators will see much less resistance in terms of deeply socialized beliefs. Another strength of the intervention in the preschool level is that they were embedded in the curriculum. Therefore, the interventions were mixed gender. Boys and girls alike were able to work on their behaviors together and build a positive culture together. Additionally, having an intervention at the school-level reframes the intervention as something that all participate in naturally, rather than an opt-in style program that can be self-selective and attract only those who are already willing to make changes (Kendorski 2019; Anderson and Whiston 2005; Flood 2011).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I took issue with what I see as a growing tide of toxic masculinity. Through a theoretical approach, I both diagnosed the issues I saw in masculinity and traced the specific mechanisms by which toxic masculinity developed in young people. After building this knowledge of gender socialization, I developed criteria I thought important in building an intervention aimed at curbing toxic masculinity. While by no means an exhaustive list, or the only list of qualities that can be used to determine quality, the criteria I developed were grounded in both theoretical understandings of masculinity and current studies on interventions people have developed. Based on my research, interventions should be mixed gendered, as male-only interventions have been prone to reinforcing the idea that men are knowledge-producers, start in young children as a way of building positive images of masculinity early, dismantle current understandings of masculinity, and happen over a long period of time to ensure the effects of the intervention are longer standing. Using three recent interventions, I showed how the criteria I developed can be applied to the development and critique of interventions.

The scope of this project is rather limited, as tackling the umbrella topic of toxic masculinity is difficult within 30 pages. As such, my understanding of toxic masculinity is surface level at times, and I can only look at very specific interventions. There are many promising interventions that are more subtle, like using more music in classrooms, funding arts, aiding in job security, etc. (Gazi & Aksal, 2011; van Lier, Vitaro, & Eisner, 2007; Brekelmans et al., 2011; Holmes, Gibson, and Morrison-Danner 2014). However, the criteria I have developed through close reading could help inform better interventions. As our country is continually ravaged by toxic masculinity, successful interventions have the potential to profoundly change people's lives.

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