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The Need for Research on Child and Adolescent Group Practices for Male Gender Role Strain

Michael Gutzwiller

Abstract: Male adolescents and children experience psychological conflict surrounding the understanding and integration of male gender norms into their self-identities as men and boys. This trouble may lead to an interruption of maturation and an indefinite prolonging of adolescence resulting in a gender identity deficit or sense of incompleteness and inadequacy as a male. Though there is little research in this area, group counseling can be an efficient and cost effective means of addressing the issue, increasing male self-esteem, and decreasing incidents of aggressive behavior. Ultimately, more research is needed to support the continued work in and exploration of group work pertaining to male youth gender role strain.

Research suggests that men and boys are suffering from unrecognized and unattended psychological and emotional distress (Chu, Porche, & Tolman, 2005). One area this can be especially seen is in the psychological conflict surrounding the understanding and integration of male gender norms into the self-identities of men and boys. Chu, Porche, and Tolman (2005) suggest that this integration is rarely successful and the masculine ideals that extend from the cultural gender norms are nearly impossible to achieve, resulting in a gender norm discrepancy. Nowhere is this process of assimilation and letdown more prominently felt than in childhood and adolescence (Richmond & Levant, 2003).

For many counseling professionals who deal with issues pertaining to the child and adolescent male gender norm paradigm and self-esteem, group counseling may be the most viable, cost effective, and preferred method of treatment. Research shows group therapy in general to be more effective than no treatment or placebo and as effective as individual or other counseling methods (Hoag & Burlingame, 1997; Kivlighan, Coleman, & Anderson, 2000). In terms of child and adolescent groups, research is slim. Hoag and Burlingame (1997) found the existing literature lacking in sophisticated methodology and specific variables, though it suggests that group treatment for children and adolescents is popular and seemingly effective despite the lack of empirical support. Further, Hoag and Burlingame (1997) note that compared to efficacy research for adult group therapy, efficacy research for child and adolescent group therapy is lagging far behind.

Based on the psychological and emotional needs of boys and the body of literature, or lack thereof, addressing the male gender norm paradigm and its treatment in group work, more research is needed both on group techniques aimed at the young male population and the efficacy of such treatment. In order to support this claim, this review will first examine the

current literature pertaining to the male gender norm paradigm and why it is important. Second, this review will explore the literature about group practices in this area including multicultural issues. Last, this review will offer an analysis of the current literature and offer suggestions for continued research and application of findings. As a note, this review will focus on the male gender norm paradigm for heterosexual males.

THE GENDER NORM PARADIGM

A broad stereotype exists in our current culture that suggests male emotional deficiencies are merely a quality of being a man. In this view men and boys simply do not have the capabilities to express difficult emotions nor do they have the ability to establish close meaningful relationships on the same level as girls and women (Chu et al., 2005). Emotional distress is not something that is acceptable for men and boys to struggle with and any external displays of internal emotional struggles are simply chalked up to 'boys being boys.' This perspective has become entrenched in our current societal view of masculinity and has become a part of the male gender norm (Chu, et al., 2005). The male gender norm, or hegemonic masculinity as institutionalized in the European American, middle class culture in the United States, places the greatest importance on stereotypical masculine qualities such as physical and athletic prowess, aggression, emotional isolation and interpersonal distance, self-sufficiency, and heterosexual dominance over women (Chu et al., 2005; Enns, 1992; Phillips, 2005; Weber, 2006).

A survey of the counseling literature seems to support this view. A search using the PsychInfo search engine turned up 8,581 listings under the term 'human males' and 25,213 listings under the term 'human females' and a search using the ERIC search engine turned up 13,738 listings under the search term 'males' and 30,327 listings under the search term 'females'. Further refinements of search terms to include 'self-esteem', 'group counseling', and 'group therapy' continue the more than 2:1 ratio of articles pertaining to women and girls compared to men and boys. One implication is that more attention is paid to the psychological and emotional issues of women than men.

The research conducted by Thompson and Pleck suggests two models of masculinity (Chu et al., 2005). The first takes a trait perspective whereby individuals inherently possess psychological traits of masculinity to varying degrees. Male identity is thus evident through the display of masculine qualities or social behaviors. The second model of masculinity is a normative approach that focuses on a social-cultural construction of gender roles (Chu et al., 2005; Richmond & Levant, 2003). Male identity is



constructed through a person's attitudes toward and assimilation of culturally defined gender roles that are often changing and contradictory (Chu et al., 2005; Richmond & Levant, 2003). The gender role strain paradigm rests heavily on the second model. The conflict lies in the fact that while the male gender norm is widely recognized by boys few, if any, ever fully attain it (Chu et al., 2005; Johnson & Hayes, 1997; Richmond & Levant, 2003).

There are three forms of gender role strain in males as described by Pleck: *discrepancy strain*, *dysfunctional strain*, and *trauma strain* (Chu et al., 2005). *Discrepancy strain* is when an individual does not meet a specific internalized quality of masculinity. An example of discrepancy strain would be when a boy is poor at athletics, especially compared to his peers. *Dysfunctional strain* is when a male individual succeeds in conforming to the masculine gender norm role. This can be problematic and psychologically distressing for boys due to the fact that many of the behaviors considered typically masculine, such as aggression or physical dominance, when embodied completely, are potentially harmful and unhealthy behaviors. Further, these behaviors often cause conflict with others and alienate an individual causing confusion as to why the masculine ideology is so desired and at the same time shunned. *Trauma strain* pertains to specific groups of males who have experienced critical and intense gender role strain in which sex differences are heightened and pressure to conform to gender norms are acute (Chu et al., 2005). Examples of these groups would be soldiers and veterans, professional athletes, gay and bisexual men, men of color, and survivors of abuse (Chu et al., 2005). Richmond and Levant place adolescent boys in the trauma strain group.

GENDER NORMS

Richmond and Levant suggest (2003) boys face greater pressure than girls to adhere to rigid gender norms. The manner in which boys confront this issue and reconcile the inherent discrepancies within it is one of the greatest developmental hurdles for boys (Richmond & Levant, 2003). Boys who display more hegemonic masculine traits are more likely to present problematic externalizing behaviors such as school suspension, substance abuse, trouble with the police, and sexual activity (Richmond & Levant, 2003). These troubles may lead to an interruption of maturation and an indefinite prolonging of adolescence resulting in a gender identity deficit or sense of incompleteness and inadequacy as a male (Johnson & Hayes, 1997). Boys who fail to live up to the masculine gender norms often experience psychologically traumatic exclusion from parents, peers, and

teachers, as well as members of the opposite sex (Richmond & Levant, 2003). This rejection often results in a cyclic, redoubled effort to conform, which inevitably leads again to failure.

These descriptions of successful assimilation of and failure to achieve masculine gender norms correlate with the normalized concept of the popular individual and the outcast. In a study conducted with adolescents from a large city public school, Phillips (2005) found that adolescent boys from both groups could easily recognize and articulate what qualities were popular and cool and what qualities were not and further, identify their own status along the continuum. In nearly every instance, the qualities the boys identified as popular and cool were qualities of the masculine gender norm, while the qualities that were not considered popular and cool were not qualities of the masculine gender norm (Phillips, 2005).

In a school setting where much of this process is played out, experiences enforcing and reinforcing gender norms can have a profound effect on self-esteem. Boys may experience “negative social feedback, and/or internalized negative self judgments that can result, for example, in low self-esteem” (Chu et al., 2005, p. 96). While little to no research has been conducted on the connection between male gender role attitudes and masculine ideology and self-esteem, research with women has indicated a strong relationship between female gender role attitudes and self-esteem (Chu et al., 2005). Hendel (2006) lists a number of common signs of low self-esteem in males, including “exaggerated bragging, engaging in attention-seeking behaviors, verbal and physical aggression, displays of arrogance, conceit, narcissism and egotism, and displaying a sense of superiority over others” (p. 175). These signs of low self-esteem could easily be confused with qualities of hegemonic masculinity and, in that context, instead be mistaken as signs of high self-esteem. It would be fair to predict that a correlation exists between masculine gender norms and self-esteem.

GROUP PRACTICES

There is little research pertaining specifically to this topic or even group work with men apart from groups for men who physically or sexually abuse their partners and groups for male survivors of sexual abuse. While an argument could be made that these populations could be considered part of the gender role strain issue, specifically trauma strain, these articles do not address the issue in this way nor is the group work discussed therein necessarily applicable. Further, the vast majority of these articles do not focus on child and adolescent males. A search of the recent literature only revealed a small number of articles that could be



considered applicable to the discussion of group work pertaining to male gender role strain and issues of male self-esteem. The articles that could be located consist of one article discussing the clinical application of the gender role strain paradigm in group treatment for adolescent boys and one article describing a masculine identity focused group for men that could potentially have application to work with children and adolescents. Somewhat off topic but still relatively applicable to this discussion are one article addressing the relationship of client behavior and therapist helping skills in group work with aggressive adolescent boys, and two articles addressing group counseling for African-American adolescent males.

Adolescent Groups

Richmond and Levant (2003) offer an example of group treatment for adolescent boys focusing on the gender role strain paradigm. They believe that group treatment presents an effective means of addressing the issue and facilitating new ways of thinking apart from stereotypical social norms of masculinity. Their group consisted of seven white, middle class, heterosexual boys between the ages of 15 and 17, six of whom were court mandated to group counseling due to aggressive behavior and one who was referred by his mother due to recent depressive behaviors connected to the recent death of his father. The group leaders were a white, Catholic, heterosexual, female graduate student in her mid-twenties and her supervisor, a white, Jewish, heterosexual, middle-aged male. Within the context of the gender role strain paradigm, their goal was to create cohesiveness among the group members and increase the development of interpersonal relationships. The group met for a predetermined 16 sessions.

In order to lend structure to the meetings, the group was built around a “game” consisting of discussion topic cards (Richmond & Levant, 2003). Each group member turned over a card, read the topic word, and the entire group was encouraged to discuss the topic revealed. Topics ranged from non-threatening topics such as “video games” and “movies” to more controversial topics such as “sex” and “fear”. By the end of the third session fewer cards were needed to engage conversation and form cohesion. The researchers noted that initially the boys were reluctant to discuss topics that involved more emotionality, choosing instead to adhere to gender norms. Most of the boys, however, expressed a desire to alleviate the emotional difficulties they were attempting to cope with, specifically anger, substance abuse, and school and gang violence. During these discussions, the leaders implicitly focused on the dimensions of traditional masculinity described in the Male Role Norms Inventory (Fear and Hatred

of Homosexuals, Restrictive Emotionality, Nonrelational Attitudes Toward Sex, Achievement/Status, Avoidance of Femininity, Aggression, and Extreme Self-Reliance), calling attention to specific instances when the boys expressed adherence to traditional norms of masculinity and questioning their utility (Richmond & Levant, 2003).

The effectiveness of the group was questionable at best. At the end of the 16 weeks, the boys had reflected on these difficult topics and how they manifest in their own beliefs about masculinity but as the authors note, were unable or unwilling to effectively change their behaviors outside of the safety of the group (Richmond & Levant, 2003). The authors suggest this was due to limited social support. Despite this fact, the authors offer as evidence of the success of the treatment that, despite being mandated to participate in only 12 sessions, several of the boys continued to attend group for the entire duration. They also suggest that the boys' willingness to discuss the topics openly demonstrated that group cohesiveness was effectively built and the boys in the very least began to challenge their internalized concepts of traditional masculinity. As further evidence of success, three of the boys were excused from the parole system and no longer had to meet with a social worker at the conclusion of group. No formal pre- or posttests were administered and there was no mention of multicultural considerations apart from identifying the composition of the group.

Adult Groups

Johnson and Hayes (1997) presented an identity-focused group for adult males that addressed many of the same issues in a shorter, more structured manner. This group model could potentially have applications with child and adolescent males. Their group model differentiates between male gender role and male gender identity whereby gender role is comprised of the hegemonic masculinity prevalent in a culture and gender identity is comprised of an individual's internal perception of maleness or male self-image (Johnson & Hayes, 1997). They cite studies that show anecdotal evidence that masculine gender identity is correlated positively with self-efficacy and assertiveness and correlated negatively with maladjustment. Thus, in their group work the researchers focus on the consolidation of male gender identity as a means of reducing internalized self-shame due to a sense of incompleteness and inadequacy and as a means of restructuring maladaptive self-perceptions and schemas (Johnson & Hayes, 1997).

Johnson and Hayes (1997) developed an 8-session group that included 8 men between the ages of 24 and 45 selected from the researchers'



individual casework. The participants sought out individual counseling for a variety of issues ranging from anxiety to relationship problems and each had previously expressed interest in exploring further issues of male identity. All of the men were active duty soldiers; 6 were Caucasian and 2 were African-American. The two male leaders hoped to be able to model attitudes and behaviors for the men as well as offer permission for change. Highly structured, each session began with the participants pairing up and leaving the room to discuss the topic of the day for 20 minutes in order to build a rapport with another member as well as provide and inroad into larger group cohesion (Johnson & Hayes, 1997).

The first session focused on explaining the group rules and expectations and developing trust and group cohesion (Johnson & Hayes, 1997). The leaders then led the group members in a discussion about the various identities the members experienced as men (American men, husbands, fathers, military men, etc.) and the relationships and difficulties that extended from them. The culmination of the first session involved the members introducing themselves as men to the rest of the group as a sort of initiation ritual. The second and third sessions focused on the members' relationships with other men, specifically their fathers, and other significant men or mentors in their lives. The discussion that followed, both in dyads and large group, were emotionally laden and led to a shared experience of grieving, acceptance, and value as the members recognized pieces of their own experiences in the others' stories. The third and fourth sessions focused on the members' relationships with women and children in regards to how these relationships impacted their identities as men. Activities included finger painting emotions about an important woman in their lives and bringing in pictures or symbols of children who were particularly meaningful to the men. The fifth through seventh sessions were built around the concept of each member's personal myth. Members were asked to draw their life maps that plotted in time-line manner the important people, experiences, and events in their past and present as well as potential future development that shaped each man's identity. Each member was given ample time to share his story with the group as a narrative or a personal myth and led to experiences of strong emotions, feedback, and often confrontation. The final session was devoted to ending the group, summarizing the progress each member had made in the short time of group. The session ended with each member saying good-bye to the others in a meaningful way that encompassed their masculine identities. The researchers mention no use of a pre- or posttest and no multicultural considerations were mentioned apart from the composition of the group. While this group was not designed for male youth, adaptations could be easily made. The discussions of the members'

relationships with their fathers and other mentors, important women in their lives, and peers are especially adaptable as well as the personal myth sessions.

Other Group Research

No other articles could be located which pertained directly to group work focused on child and adolescent male gender role strain. There is a small collection of literature that addresses other issues that may impact this discussion. Shechtman (2004) examines the relationship of client behaviors and therapist helping skills in individual and group treatment of aggressive boys. Schechtman (2004) investigated 25 group treatments and 26 individual treatments of boys from 32 Israeli elementary schools selected for their aggressive behavior based on teacher rankings. The Child Behavior Checklist and the Teacher Report Form were used to measure levels of aggression and were administered pre and post group and Hill's Helping Skills System was used as a measure of therapist helping skills (Schechtman, 2004). Group work focused mainly on bibliotherapy techniques designed to reduce aggression, manage anger, and increase impulse control. Despite the fact that no discussion of male gender role or gender identity was conducted during group, the results of this study show that group treatment resulted in a larger decrease in aggression than in individual treatment, as well as a larger decrease in aggression by way of teacher reports than student self-reports. The larger decrease in teacher reports lends strength to the efficacy of this group work as teacher reports are more objective than student self-reports. Therapist helping skills were found in this study to have no specific effect on the outcome of the groups (Schechtman, 2004). As to group work in general with boys, the findings of this study agree with the research of Hoag and Burlingame (1997) in that group treatment can be used effectively and is superior to individual therapy regarding cost-effectiveness (Schechtman, 2004).

Enns (1992) briefly notes in a study of consciousness-raising and assertiveness training groups for women that men would benefit from an increase in self-esteem stemming from the exploration of forces that shape self-definition. Men's groups focused on exploring the connection between gender roles and self-esteem may provide a means for men to learn to relate to each other differently, share common experiences, and build support for change not supported elsewhere in the culture (Enns, 1992). Enns (1992) notes, however, that at the time of her writing research in this area did not exist and that adaptations of women's groups could be made to accommodate men. No follow-up articles or data could be located.



MULTICULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

None of the articles available for this review contained specific considerations for racial/ethnic populations. Two studies were located addressing group counseling for African-American males that, while not directly connected to the subject of this review, report findings that could be integrated into male gender role strain work with multicultural youth. Utsey, Howard, and Williams (2003) posit that an African worldview must be incorporated into counseling groups of African-American youth. This view holds that the individual must identify with the community in order to find meaning in life, uphold obligations to other members of the community, and to think and act in a manner that promotes the survival of the community as a whole (Constantine, Alleyne, Wallace, and Franklin-Jackson, 2006; Utsey et al., 2003). One's individual value is intrinsically connected to his or her contribution to the community, family, or nation (Constantine et al., 2006; Utsey et al., 2003). The researchers developed a model for a mentoring group with African-American adolescent males based on five principles: group above self, respect for self and others, responsibility for self and community, reciprocity, and authenticity (Utsey et al., 2003). Anecdotal evidence from a case study of one individual involved in a group using this model suggests effective change in attitudes and behaviors in participants and the development of healthy relationships with African-American role models (Utsey et al., 2003). Even though this model was not focused on gender role strain, the principles it sets forth offer certain considerations when dealing with issues of gender role strain.

Bradley (2001) focused on the disparity of images the current culture cultivates of European-American adolescent males and African-American adolescent males. The stereotype is that behaviors of African-American adolescent males who display maladaptive behaviors are perceived as dangerous, or a menace or threat to society while the same behavior of European-American adolescent males is virtually excused (Bradley, 2001). The internalization of this negative stereotype by African-American boys leads to higher levels of anxiety, lower academic performance, and lower levels of self-esteem. Bradley (2001) found through a case study of one boy from a group focused on the needs of African-American males that group work of this nature could markedly increase the academic success of African-American male students. Further, Bradley (2001) suggests that counselors must be more proactive in delivering interventions to diverse populations in order to meet their unique needs.

ANALYSIS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The gender role strain experienced by males across cultures is evident. Research suggests that child and adolescent males are particularly at risk for negative consequences related to the struggle to internalize self-concepts of masculinity. Forbes (2003) notes the difficulty male youths experience can be seen in high incidents of depression, violence, substance abuse, and feelings of alienation. Further, male youths often are not equipped with the emotional and conceptual means to effectively change (Forbes, 2003).

Group work literature on this subject is slim to none. The articles located for this review summarize the role strain issue and present potential group work models for male youth or models that could be adapted to male youth, but offer no evidence of effectiveness other than anecdotal observations. Variables were not operationalized, outcomes were not scientifically measured, and results were not clinically generalizable. In short, there is no clinical research supporting the efficacy of group work with male youth addressing the gender role strain paradigm. Further research is needed on the efficacy of group work, specifically on process and outcome variables related to male gender role strain such as the etiology and prevalence of the issue among different populations, and the effects of gender role strain on both short term and long term masculine identity development. Clinical studies are also needed to assess the generalizability of results.

Multicultural issues fare no better with regards to the gender role strain. The emphasis on developing a multicultural approach to counseling is so prevalent in the counseling profession today but is almost completely non-existent in literature on male gender role strain and related issues. Enns (1992) notes that issues related to gender roles vary greatly across cultures and ethnicities. Latinos, for example, have conceptualizations of gender (*marianismo*, *machismo*, and *hembrismo*) that do not have equivalents in the dominant European-American culture (Enns, 1992). African-American males experience acute racism that can contribute to issues of psychological distress, such as rage, anger, resentment, grief, and despair (Mahalik, Pierre, and Wan, 2006). Research suggests that African-Americans who identify strongly with a positive Black identity have better mental health than those who identify with White culture in the US (Mahalik et al., 2006). These factors, among many others greatly complicate the gender role strain for racial/ethnic populations. In this context, factors such as aggression and substance abuse become double-edged swords, laden with emotional impact and difficulty on two fronts: masculine ideology as well as racial identity. It is



clear that further research is needed to develop a deeper understanding of the impact of racial and ethnic identity on the gender role strain paradigm in ethnically and racially diverse male populations.

The gender role strain paradigm stands as an intriguing piece of the emotional life of boys. Group work addressing gender role strain could provide a viable, cost-effective means to reduce incidents of aggression among male youth, increase academic performance, and increase levels of positive self-concept and self-esteem. Schools and community clinics could incorporate into group work issues pertaining to masculine identity development, specifically reinforcing thoughts and behaviors that positively challenge social norms, and teaching life skills to better cope with gender role strain. Ultimately, more research is needed to support the continued work in and exploration of group work pertaining to male youth gender role strain.

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