
Masculinity and School Violence: Addressing the Role of Male Gender Socialization

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ABSTRACT

The author argues for school-based violence prevention programming that addresses the unique predicament faced by male youth when they are asked to adopt attitudes and behaviours that may contradict traditional socialized notions of masculinity. Studies based on the Gender Role Conflict Scale (GRCS) and the Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale (MGRSS) are reviewed. The article also reviews recent research findings suggesting that boys and girls respond differently to violence prevention programming in schools. Tentative suggestions are made for violence prevention programming components that address the specific identity needs of male youth.

RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur plaide pour un programme de prévention de la violence à l'école qui touche la situation particulièrement difficile rencontrée par la jeunesse masculine lorsqu'on lui demande d'adopter des attitudes et comportements pouvant entrer en contradiction avec les notions traditionnelles de socialisation de la masculinité. Des études se basant sur l'Échelle de conflit de rôle de genre (ECRG) et sur l'Échelle de stress de rôle du genre masculin (ESRGM) sont étudiées. L'article passe aussi en revue les résultats des récentes recherches, suggérant que les garçons répondent différemment des filles au programme de prévention de la violence dans les écoles. On suggère des composantes de programme de prévention de la violence qui répondent aux besoins identitaires spécifiques de la jeunesse masculine.

There has been good news across Canada in the last few years: the rate of violent adult crime is falling. Canadian statistics show that the rate of violent criminal incidents per capita decreased throughout most of the 1990s, although it remained 6% higher in 2001 than in 1989. In 2002, the rate decreased again in most major categories of violent crime, including attempted murder, assault, robbery, and abduction (Statistics Canada, 2004a). The good news is tempered, however, by a less positive trend among young people. The years 1988 to 1995 saw a sharp rise in violent youth crime. The rate then dropped for four consecutive years before again peaking in 2001 at an even higher rate. Violent youth crime rates dropped again in 2002, but remained "significantly higher" than the rate reported in 1991 (Statistics Canada, 2004b). Increasingly, schools have become sites for youth violence, with homicides on school grounds taking place in both the United States (Columbine High School, among others) and Canada (Taber, Alberta).

One response to the problem of school violence has been the proliferation of school-based violence prevention programs in both Canada and the U.S.

According to Artz, Riecken, MacIntyre, Lam, and Maczewski (2000), however, very few outcome evaluation studies have been done, increasing the risk of ineffectiveness of these programs. In fact, Artz et al. report that only two evaluation studies located in their review of the literature indicate an increase rather than decrease in violence after the implementation of violence prevention programs, a finding partially supported by the evaluation carried out by Artz et al. themselves (see below). Further, Acker and Talbott (1999) claim that “most professionals acknowledge the limited ability of these programs to produce any long-term change...” and that “even when these programs demonstrate improved outcomes for participating students, often these students display a relapse shortly after the termination of the intervention program” (p. 1).

Literature on both school and youth violence reveals one incontrovertible fact: despite the noted increase in violence among female youth in recent years (Artz et al., 2000), male youth are responsible for far more violent acts than females (Brozo, Walter, & Placker, 2002; Davis, Byrd, Arnold, Auinger, & Bocchini, 1999; Hill & Drolet, 1999; Huesmann et al., 1996; Kenway & Fitzclarence, 1997). Of course, this comes as no surprise, reflecting as it does the distribution between males and females of violent crime, abuse, and incarceration in the larger culture. The following quote from a Correctional Service Canada (2004) report sums up the difference:

Sex differences in rates of violence by men and women are consistent, with men outnumbering women by a very large margin. This is so across countries, over time, at all ages, and in relation to different types of violence. This relates to all types of violent or aggressive behaviour, including bullying in schools, in sports, on the street, in the home, among hospital patients or prison populations. The *only* exceptions are the recent recognition of greater parity (but not equality) between rates of domestic homicide among black men and women in the USA, and in child abuse in the home. (p. 1; emphasis in original)

So strong is the historical and cultural association of violence and masculinity, in fact, that the taken-for-granted relationship becomes virtually invisible.

In their study, Artz et al. (2000) followed 13 violence prevention programs in 16 Vancouver Island schools, involving over 5,400 youth. This study is unique in that it includes a gendered analysis of the data, and as of 2000, data for 9 of the 16 schools had been collected and analyzed. In addition to finding that rates of violence actually increased at some schools with programs, the authors also found that boys respond less positively to anti-violence messages than girls, and that, despite drops at some schools in incidences of violence, boys still endorse and participate in violence “to a far greater degree than girls” (p. 25). Among the recommendations by Artz et al. is that violence prevention programs include “some separate instruction of boys and girls in order to maximize effects for both genders” (p. 33).

The purpose of this article is to explore the problem of the propensity toward violence among male youth through the lens of the masculine gender role socialization process. I will discuss how masculine gender role socialization contributes to the problem of school violence, and will offer ideas about reaching

male youth with intervention programs. The discussion draws from a feminist perspective to establish a valid argument for looking at the youth violence problem through a gendered lens. It then moves to a discussion of gender role development and theory, and the findings linking male gender role socialization to anger, stress, and aggression. The last section argues for the inclusion of gender in the design of school violence prevention programs, and offers some ideas for programming directed specifically toward male youth.

THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Two important ideas from feminist theory can be used to inform our discussion of male gender role socialization and school violence. First, feminists have long argued that there is a distinction between *gender* as a social construct and *sex differences* as biologically inherent aspects of maleness and femaleness (Berg, 1994; Petersen & Davies, 1997). This distinction is central to the present discussion in terms of grappling with gender differences without falling into the trap of enforcing stereotypes. In other words, the intention is not to focus on biological reasons for the difference in aggression (for example, testosterone), but to focus on social explanations. The advantages to making this distinction are, as previously stated, that we avoid perpetuating traditional stereotypes (for example, males are inherently more aggressive, therefore females are inherently morally superior), and that we can make recommendations for changes within the social sphere that cannot be accomplished within the biological sphere.

The second important contribution from feminist theory is gender consciousness. The place of gender in the problem of school violence has largely been ignored until recently (Artz et al., 2000), so adopting a feminist perspective illuminates the issues not only for females, but for males as well. In this respect, there is no contradiction involved in looking at issues of masculinity through the lens of feminist theory; in fact, the work done by feminist scholars and researchers can be used to highlight issues of power, oppression, and objectification for males just as it can for females. Further, a gendered perspective allows a shift from the personal to the political, which in terms of our discussion means that the context for looking at youth violence shifts from the intrapsychic (captured in its most extreme form in the media's depiction of youth murderers as deviant monsters, but also in medical model diagnoses) to the social realm (cultural expectations for "real men" to be aggressive).

It appears there are compelling reasons for looking at the issue of school violence from a gendered perspective. It is important to note that focusing on the role of male youth is in no way intended to detract from or minimize the work of feminist researchers in addressing the problems of adolescent females. In fact, one only has to look at the high rate of victimization of male adolescents (De Vos, Stone, Goetz, & Dahlberg, 1996; Pollack, 1998) to appreciate that this subgroup, which is included among the "privileged" in our society, may be as oppressed as females, albeit in different ways and for different reasons. Yet only

one school violence prevention program evaluation article was found that addresses male gender and school violence (Artz et al., 2000); more studies were found showing empirically that more males than females participate in school violence (Funk & Elliott, 1999; Hill & Drolet, 1999; Huesmann et al., 1996), but none of these address the issue of gender. The following sections discuss gender role development, and the empirical evidence linking male gender role conflict and male gender role stress with anger and hostility.

GENDER DEVELOPMENT

Parke and Locke (1999) review a number of different theories that have contributed to our understanding of gender and how it is acquired in individuals. Freud proposed that children acquire either masculine or feminine traits and behaviours by a process of identification with the same-sex parent after the resolution of the Oedipal or Electra complex, usually around age five or six. According to cognitive social learning theory, children acquire gender both through direct guidance from parents and by imitating parents and others, and gender is understood at a very early age. Gender-schema theory is based on the idea that children of about two-and-one-half years of age form theories about gender differences and appropriate behaviours. Apparently, children need only basic labels in order to begin forming rules and behaving in gender-specific ways. Finally, Kohlberg's cognitive developmental theory holds that children learn to categorize themselves as a particular gender based on clues like physical differences and behaviour, and then behave accordingly. Kohlberg believed that children are not capable of making "true gender-typed choices" until age six or seven (Parke & Locke, p. 586).

Currently, there is support for gender-schema theory (Berk, 2003; Martin, 1993; Parke & Locke, 1999) and its acknowledgment of the role of social pressures and expectations in the acquisition of gender-role identity. For example, Martin, Eisenbud, and Rose (1995) demonstrated that four- and five-year-olds who were presented with toys that had previously been gender-labelled by an adult (that is, an adult stated that trucks were for boys and dolls were for girls) avoided even highly attractive toys intended for the other gender. So while it is acknowledged that physical sex characteristics play a part in the gender role identification process, it is important to understand that gender identity is largely a social process, and that gender itself is a social construct based on accepted norms for behaviour, dress, roles, and so on. In fact, research in discourse analysis shows that not only do we create categories for people based on gender, but that gender "provides a way to decode meaning and to understand the complex connections among various forms of human interactions" (Scott, 1986, p. 1053, in Kushner, 1992). This comment is in accordance with a cognitive-developmental perspective (a branch of constructivist theory; Pieretti, 1996), which holds that individuals are actively engaged in the process of organizing experience and making meaning (Mahoney, 1991). As will be seen in the next section, however, research looking

at masculinity only gradually incorporated the notion of socialized gender roles and expectations; originally, traits associated with masculinity were viewed as inherent and innate.

MASCULINE GENDER ROLE CONFLICT AND MASCULINE GENDER ROLE STRESS

Until the 1980s, the social sciences were dominated by a view of gender role identification that linked masculine gender role identity with mental health in men (Eisler, 1995). Traditional masculine traits such as dominance were seen as not only innate, but necessary for healthy male development. According to this view, some mental health problems were the result of the failure of men to identify with the traditional gender role. This view was challenged by Pleck (1981), who identified a number of problems for men that result from the gender role identification process.

Pleck's (1981) Gender Role Stress (GRS) theory formed the basis for other works on masculinity throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Most notably, O'Neil (1981) used GRS theory to develop his idea of gender role conflict, and in 1986 he and his colleagues began development of the Gender Role Conflict Scale (GRCS; O'Neil, Helms, & Gable, 1986). According to their analysis,

Gender role conflict is a psychological state in which socialized gender roles have negative consequences on the person or others. Gender role conflict occurs when rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles result in personal restriction, devaluation, or violation of others or self. (O'Neil, Good, & Holmes, 1995, pp. 166–167)

A number of studies were carried out during the 1980s and early 1990s using the GRCS to assess the associations between these psychological consequences and gender role conflict. High scores on the GRCS have been positively correlated with paranoia, psychoticism, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Good, Robertson, Fitzgerald, Stevens, & Bartels, 1996), depression (Good & Mintz, 1990), anxiety and low self-esteem (Davis, 1987), resistance to help-seeking (Good & Wood, 1995), emotional inexpressiveness, and negative or hostile attitudes toward homosexuals and women (O'Neil et al., 1995).

It is important to note that rather than measuring global characteristics of masculinity, the GRCS measures a particular experience (that is, conflict) within the larger experience of being male. The question that arises is to what extent the GRCS is successful in isolating socially constructed experiences of conflict in men from more global and positive masculine traits. Another scale developed after the GRCS by Eisler and Skidmore (1987) addresses that issue more specifically. The Masculine Gender Role Stress Scale (MGRSS) was developed with the idea that it is important to distinguish purely stressful experiences due to masculine gender role socialization from more positive experiences of masculinity. The authors argue that not all masculine traits produce stressful consequences for males, and that the existing literature did not sufficiently discriminate between positive and negative masculine traits (Eisler, 1995). The authors based their work theoretically on Bem's (1981) gender schema theory

and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model of stress appraisal and coping. The following are the assumptions of the masculine gender role stress paradigm, based on Eisler:

1. Masculine gender role schemas are developed in the majority of individuals born with XY chromosome patterns, and those schema are developed by rewarding socially accepted patterns of masculine behaviours and attitudes and punishing non-masculine (that is, feminine) behaviours and attitudes. Eventually, the masculine schema is internalized by boys until it operates as a self-evaluation process that guides both behaviours and appraisals of events in the world.
2. The appraisal of events through the lens of the masculine schema leads to choices of coping behaviours in response to threats and challenges from the environment. The traditional masculine gender ideology provides only a restricted range of coping strategies, resulting in the likelihood that men will choose aggressive rather than cooperative responses when challenged.
3. There are variations (for example, temperamental, psychological, and cultural reasons) among men as to their level of commitment to the culturally given, traditional masculine gender role schema.
4. Men who are highly committed to the traditional masculine gender role schema are more likely to experience gender role stress due to the limited range of coping strategies in their repertoire. For example, men who are highly committed to the masculine schema may experience more stress at losing a competition than men who are less committed.
5. Masculine gender role stress also arises if men feel they have acted in an unmanly or feminine way; that is, that they are not living up to culturally prescribed standards of masculinity. Men who experience fear in situations requiring masculine displays of strength may be stressed by feeling they did not perform according to the culturally prescribed standard.

Compared to O'Neil et al.'s (1986) GRCS, Masculine Gender Role Stress theory appears to more specifically define the stressful experiences of men due to masculine gender role socialization. According to Eisler and Skidmore (1987), MGRSS scores "represent the degree to which certain gender-role-related situations would be stressful for men" by looking at "a variety of cognitive, behavioural, and environmental events related to the male gender role" (p. 134). Specifically, significant correlations with anger and anxiety support the theory that the negative consequences of masculine gender role socialization consist mainly of stress and reduced coping strategies. Associations have also been found between high MGRSS scores and high-risk health habits such as smoking and alcohol abuse (Eisler, Skidmore, & Ward, 1988), social fears (Arrindell, Kolk, Pickersgill, & Hageman, 1993), and cardiovascular reactivity to situations that threaten the traditional masculine gender role (Lash, Eisler, & Schulman, 1990; Lash, Eisler, & Southard, 1995; Lash, Gillespie, Eisler, & Southard, 1991).

This body of research suggests support for Masculine Gender Role Stress theory. Specifically, the research shows that an overly rigid and stereotypical male gender

role socialization process is linked to stress-related psychological problems for males. It is reasonable to assume that, because gender role identification begins early in life, these problems may arise as early as preadolescence for some boys. Although the research has focused on adult males, it may be that the pressures of identifying with the traditional male role affect male youth, and account to some degree for aggression, anger, and reduced coping strategies. These associations may make sense for those familiar with male youth culture. A common challenge for male youth is balancing pro-social behaviour choices (e.g., reporting bullying, refusing to participate in delinquent activities) with maintaining a place in the social order. For example, after four years of classroom observation, Czoop, Lasane, Sweigard, Bradshaw, & Hammer (1998) concluded that "boys achieved popularity among their peers by exhibiting many stereo-typically masculine behaviours such as athletic ability, being tough, and standing up to their teachers" (p. 281). Their study confirmed the identification by previous masculine theorists of a strategy used by male youth called "cool pose" (Majors & Billson, 1992, cited in Czoop et al.). Cool pose is the adoption of hyper-masculine traits, including "being emotionless, extremely self-confident, always calm under pressure, and in control of oneself and one's surroundings" (p. 281). Czoop et al. also cited studies showing that students' endorsements of masculine characteristics were negatively correlated with grade point average.

The argument here is that male youth encounter huge barriers when faced with choices about how to respond to conflict. Barriers are created through the gender role socialization process, and are both internal (conflict between how one may want to behave and how one is expected to behave) and social (ridicule and loss of standing for choosing pro-social behaviours, which are often seen as feminine). Evidence for this idea is found in two studies: Artz et al. (2000), who found that boys are less likely than girls to participate in violence prevention programs, and Miller (1994), who found that boys are less likely than girls to participate in pro-social volunteer programs. If the problem of violence in schools is to be adequately addressed, the barriers created through the gender role socialization process that prevent boys from participating in such programs needs to be addressed. The next section of the article provides some ideas and suggestions for integrating a gendered approach into school-based violence prevention programs. It should be noted that these suggestions are not based on research, so are speculative and somewhat lacking in specificity. The suggestions would need to be systematically implemented and evaluated to support their feasibility.

INTERVENTIONS

The main idea behind a gendered approach to violence prevention would be to raise students' awareness of how societal expectations drive behaviours, and to help students develop a broader range of responses to conflict than what is offered by the traditional male stereotype. It must be remembered, however, that boys face barriers to behaving differently from the traditional stereotype, and may

need to be assured on some level that deviating from that stereotype is acceptable and possible. Many violence prevention programs may be perceived (especially by those boys who identify strongly with hyper-masculinity) as demanding that they give up their masculine stance, thereby threatening their sense of self and prompting avoidance of such programs. It would be important for such boys to see men they perceive as sharing their masculine identity modelling alternate behaviours. Male role models who exhibit a broader range of coping skills than what is allowed by the traditional male stereotype could be found and promoted, using a variety of media (movies, television programs, books, and music). In today's media culture, there is a shortage of positive, healthy, male role models, and it may be that boys would be more open to a broader range of conflict resolution and coping strategies if they were modelled for them.

It would also be important to facilitate age-appropriate explorations of male stereotypes in a safe, non-threatening manner. Whitney and Hoffman (1999) offer ideas for developing what they term "gender self-confidence" in middle school students. Gender self-confidence refers to "one's genuine assuredness about being female or male; how much one accepts, respects, and values oneself as a female or male person" (p. 236). Their intention is to offer students a safe place to explore issues related to gender, including pressures and alternative ways of being. Some of their ideas could be expanded to include discussions of aggression and alternative coping strategies in conflict. For example, they suggest discussing how much being a boy or girl contributes to the way students define themselves. For boys, the discussion could be expanded to include to what extent they define themselves as tough, strong, aggressive, and so on, and how their self concepts would change or not change if they chose to behave differently than the stereotype.

The exploration of the male gender role and its connections with aggression could be facilitated in a variety of ways. Discussions could be held about stereotypical role models and the perpetuation of violent behaviour. Boys could be challenged to stand up to these role models, to rebel against them, and to find role models of their own who are not supported by the entertainment industry. An exploration of masculine gender traits could also be facilitated. Traditional notions of male traits such as strength, loyalty, independence, and so on could be analyzed, expanded, or redefined.

As previously mentioned, data from the study by Artz et al. (2000) indicate a consistent difference between females and males "in their levels of involvement in violence, their attitudes towards violence as a social issue, and their responsiveness to the messages contained in the violence prevention programs" (p. 28). The authors suggest that to be successful in working with boys, the following should occur:

We must help them first, to contemplate violence as an issue for which they have personal responsibility, second, help them to achieve decisional balance regarding the pro's and con's for changing their behaviour, and third, engage them in actions that change and maintain their behaviour over time. (Artz et al., p. 28)

The first recommendation—taking personal responsibility—provides a balance to the aforementioned approach of exploring the way societal expectations promote aggressive behaviour in men. It would be important to facilitate self-awareness of aggressive behaviours and how these behaviours contribute to and perpetuate the problem. Discussions could explore the differences between prosocial and antisocial behaviours, which could then be dramatized using skits and role-plays.

Artz et al.'s (2000) second recommendation involves helping boys achieve decisional balance regarding the pros and cons of changing their behaviour. Most individuals will choose to change their behaviour when the pros outweigh the cons in a given situation. Again, it would be important to explore the pros and cons from the point of view of boys *as male youth* in this culture, realizing that what is applicable to an adult (especially a female) may not be relevant to them. The barriers to changing behaviour that they face (the cons) need to be validated and taken seriously, and alternative ways found to satisfy underlying needs (for example, social approval). Positive rewards for changing behaviour (the pros) need to be explored, and again placed within the context of male youth culture. Questions such as "Under what conditions would you feel good about choosing a non-aggressive response to conflict?" may offer insight.

Artz et al.'s (2000) third recommendation is to engage boys in actions that change and maintain their behaviours over time. It would seem important to involve the school administration in the implementation of this suggestion; consistency of expectations, commitment to ongoing programs and evaluation, and role modelling by faculty would play an important part in maintaining behaviour changes. Programs could be devised using suggestions from boys themselves about how to make positive changes in their schools and communities. Administration should be open to non-traditional ideas (see also Rodriguez, Hett, & France, 2000), such as using Internet technology, rap music, and so on as part of programs to keep boys interested and committed. Role modelling by faculty and staff would also be important, and male faculty should be encouraged to examine their own behaviours and the messages they send to boys. For example, some physical education teachers use humiliation and bullying tactics to "encourage" students, especially boys; alternative teaching methods need to be explored that do not promote aggressive, stereotypical male behaviour. Pollack (1998) also talks about the damaging effects on boys of shame and humiliation tactics, and how these experiences cause boys to erect masks to hide the feelings that are associated with femininity (sadness, fear), and to respond with anger instead. It is important for teachers to understand that these strategies are harmful to all students, and that they actively perpetuate hostile and aggressive behaviours in boys.

In his book on violent boys, Garbarino (1999) reviews successful strategies used in working with young violent offenders. Garbarino describes a cognitive-behavioural approach in which male youth are taught social skills aimed at preventing the re-occurrence of violent behaviour. These skills include:

Nonaggressive tactics for expressing a complaint, responding to the feelings of others, recovering from a stressful conversation, responding to anger, keeping out of fights, helping others, dealing with an accusation, dealing with group pressure, expressing affection, and responding to failure. (p. 214)

A gendered approach might teach some of these components to boys separately from girls, so that the unique barriers and problems faced by boys in adopting these skills could be addressed and worked through in an environment that is less threatening because everyone is “in the same boat.”

Garbarino (1999) also recommends helping boys examine their concepts of justice and morality, and using moral dilemmas to think about the differences between pro-social and antisocial behaviour. In his work with violent offenders, Garbarino concludes that many acts of violence are based on moral reasoning that is perfectly logical to the offender, often taking the form of retribution or punishment. Garbarino agrees with previous work by authors such as Carol Gilligan, who argue that male and female gender role socialization produces different types of moral reasoning.

CONCLUSION

Given the high levels of aggression and victimization accounted for by male youth, it seems appropriate to address the issue from a gendered perspective. Research has demonstrated an association between the male gender role socialization process and high levels of anger and hostility in adult males. It is time for educators and those who work to prevent youth violence to take seriously the negative implications of male stereotyping, and to work to help male youth redefine who they want to be as men in our society. The process of progressing from the traditional male stereotype to a broader, more androgynous definition of masculinity is outlined by Pieretti (1996), and the purpose of adopting gendered interventions to school violence would be to facilitate that progression. By raising the awareness in male youth of how societal expectations of masculinity confine and oppress them, by modelling a broader range of masculine coping behaviours, and by supporting male students by taking seriously the barriers they face, we may be able to curb not only the problems of violence in schools, but in our communities and the larger society as well.

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