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Problematising 'Toxic' and 'Healthy' Masculinity for Addressing Gender Inequalities

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the emergence of 'toxic' and 'healthy masculinity' in public discourse in addressing gender inequalities. 'Toxic' has emerged through greater awareness of men's violence against women, and men's high rates of health distress and lack of help-seeking. 'Healthy' is thus a response to 'toxic masculinity', attempting to encourage men to engage in expressions of masculinity that are not harmful to others, or themselves as a way to address gender inequalities. This article argues that in using a term such as 'toxic masculinity', we continue to position men as victims of a broader vague entity rather than highlighting their agency in the reproduction of masculinity. Equally, in using a term such as 'healthy masculinity', we continue to set masculinity up as the only expression of gender that men can legitimately engage in, thus reinforcing the notion that femininity (and by extension, androgyny) remains a less valued, and less legitimate, expression of gender. In doing so, 'toxic' and 'healthy masculinity' continue to reproduce, rather than address gender inequalities, and do not support the breaking down of gender binaries.

KEYWORDS

Masculinity; hegemonic; toxic; healthy; gender inequality

Introduction

Recently, we have seen an increase in the usage and visibility of the terms 'toxic masculinity' and 'healthy masculinity'. I recall coming across the term 'toxic masculinity' in late 2015, though I am mindful that it has been around for much longer. I found it frustrating and unhelpful, and seemed to only be a reiteration of other types of masculinity, including Connell's (1987) often misinterpreted hegemonic masculinity, Anderson's (2005) orthodox masculinity, and the unclaimed but well-known traditional masculinity. More recently, I have come across the term 'healthy masculinity', a development that has emerged mainly in public discourse but that is also taking hold in academic literature and government policy.

My frustration was first around this need in men and masculinity studies as an established research field to typologise masculinity (Beasley 2012, 2015; Berggren 2014; Waling 2019a). 'Toxic' and 'healthy' just seemed to be yet another of a number of reiterations of masculinity tropes (Waling 2019a). In wake of increasing recognition that the field of men and masculinities is not as engaged with feminist thought, methodology

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and pedagogy as it often claims to be (Ramazanoglu 1992; McCarry 2007; Waling 2019a, 2019b; Beasley 2012, 2015; O'Neill 2015), I have begun to wonder about how the use of masculinity categories, and general understandings of masculinity more broadly, may continue to uphold and reproduce gender inequalities, rather than work to dismantle them.

This article looks closely at the terms 'toxic' and 'healthy masculinity' and their use in engaging boys and men to address gender inequalities. I use 'masculinity' rather than 'masculinities' as a way to highlight the already embedded categorical notion of the use of these terms (see Waling 2019a, 2019b). By this, I mean that men and masculinity studies (MMS) has a tendency to name masculinity as a series of typologies and types (Waling 2019a, 2019b; Berggren 2014; Beasley 2015). I have found the use of the plural problematic, because it automatically denotes a series of 'types' rather than a more post-structural notion of fluidity as I discuss below (Berggren 2014; Waling 2019a, 2019b). I argue that in using a term such as 'toxic masculinity', we continue to position men as victims of a broader vague entity, rather than highlighting their agency in the reproduction of masculinity (Beasley 2015; Waling 2019a, 2019b). Equally, in using a term such as 'healthy masculinity', we continue to set masculinity up as the only expression of gender that men and boys can legitimately engage in, thus reinforcing the notion that femininity (and by extension, androgyny) remains a less valued, and less legitimate, expression of gender. Not only does it set up a particular kind of masculinity as the only expression of gender that men and boys can engage, but also, deflects attention from forms of female and non-binary masculinity.

I begin with an overview of theorising of masculinity by briefly exploring both long-standing and emerging theoretical takes on men and masculinity, and the emerging criticisms of the field regarding its lacklustre engagement with feminist thought and pedagogy. I then explore the development of the terms 'toxic masculinity' and 'healthy masculinity' from academic and public discourses. I outline how such terms are used to reproduce gender inequalities rather than address them, through a series of short critiques through a post-structuralist perspective where masculinity shapes, and is shaped by, the social world to which it exists (Waling 2019a, 2019b; Harris and Dobson 2015; Rose 1996; Gill 2007). To do this, I adopt Beasley's (2015) appropriation of *strategic essentialism*¹ in attempting to bridge queer and post-structuralist readings of masculinity through deconstructing 'man' from 'masculinity' (see Sedgwick 1996; Halberstam 1998), and feminist perspectives that note that the collapsing of the two into the category of 'men' may still be strategic in certain contexts, particularly that of violence against women (see Pease 2008). I conclude with arguing that in order to better engage men and boys on issues of gender inequality, we need to move away from terms such as 'toxic' and 'healthy masculinity', and instead focus on deconstructing gender binaries regarding who can engage with or enact particular expressions of gender.

Masculinity Studies: Trends and Debates

It is prudent to briefly outline what I mean by masculinity, and the debates emerging within the field of men and masculinity studies (MMS). I do this to highlight the context in which notions of 'toxic' and 'healthy' have emerged. Masculinity is understood as a set of practices, norms and behaviours associated with the idea of being male, believed to stand in opposition to femininity and women. When we talk about a notion of a

‘traditional masculinity’, we mean a series of traits perceived to be essential in being a true or authentic man, such as being a provider, being aggressive, being strong, being stoic, and being a leader among others.

While considerations of masculinity can be traced much further back than Connell’s (1987) work on hegemonic masculinity, I start here as this is where we have a more formalised theoretical framework used to explore gendered power relations between men, and between men and women. *Hegemonic masculinity* originally coined in the work of Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1985) and more formally established in Raewyn Connell’s (1987) work. Drawing from Marxist feminism and theories of cultural hegemony, hegemonic masculinity theory argues that men may adhere, reject, or attempt to resist masculinity in their own engagement with a masculine identity. These actions then enable men to access levels of power and status in society. Those who engage successfully thus have more power than those who cannot, and hegemonic masculinity is maintained through the subordination of that to which is deemed ‘non-masculine’ or feminine. The devaluation of femininity or anything perceived as non-masculine is part of the process of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1992). As such, femininity is thus structured as ‘lesser’ as is anything associated with femininity, such as cisgender women. While Connell envisions hegemonic masculinity to be a configuration of practice, many have misinterpreted hegemonic masculinity to be the major or sole force compelling men to act in problematic and alarming ways in order to gain, or maintain, their access to power (see Beasley 2012 for a critique).

There have been numerous responses to Connell’s work, including a series of critiques (see Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Despite these, Messerschmidt (2019) has noted that Connell’s notion of hegemonic masculinity still remains a valuable, and important, understanding of gendered power relations between men and women. There have been numerous attempts at reformulating hegemonic masculinity. This has led to the development of a number of theories including inclusive masculinity (Anderson 2009), hybrid masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe 2014), mosaic masculinities (Coles 2008) and sticky masculinity (Berggren 2014) among others. Some of these theories, such as Berggren’s work, continue engagement with feminist thought and pedagogy by exploring the possibilities of a poststructural understanding of masculinity as informed by the work of Sara Ahmed (2004).

Others, such as inclusive masculinity theory by Anderson (2009), have been criticised for its lack of engagements with women, its blatant rejection of feminism, and its inability to account for the specific contexts or conditions where transformations of masculinity can occur (de Boise 2015; O’Neill 2015; Waling 2019a). De Boise notes that inclusive masculinity theory is ahistorical and essentialist, ‘often seeing “homosexual” as a nominal descriptor for pre-social desire rather than a historical construction in itself’ (2015, 328). In this way, the theory forgets the longstanding contributions of sexuality and gender theorists such as Foucault, Butler, Sedgwick and Halberstam among others that have worked to deconstruct these notions of gender and sexuality as pre-existing identities. O’Neill (2015) argues that there is an underlying misogyny inherent in the theorising of inclusive masculinity, because it cannot be used to explain relations and sexual politics between men and women, and does not address the fear of feminisation inherent in attempting to maintain a hegemonic masculine identity. This, as O’Neill claims, is in part due to the significant erasure of women and women’s contributions in the theory (108).

Alongside this, there are a whole plethora of ‘types’ of masculinities that are used to typologise men, including ‘toxic’ and ‘healthy’ among many others. The field of MMS has become reliant on categorising types of masculinity that men may adhere to or use as a way to theorise masculinity, rather than consider more readily questions of subjectivity and agency (Waling 2019a; Berggren 2014; Beasley 2015). In this case, there are a multitude of studies that seek to assess the kinds of masculinities that men may engage, or come up with new ‘types’ should old ones be considered inadequate (Waling 2019a).

MMS, while having roots in feminist pedagogy and methodology through the work of Connell (1987) and others as I have noted above, has also been argued to diverge from this path (Beasley 2015). Scholars have noted the lack of engagement of MMS with feminist and queer thought (O’Neill 2015; McCarry 2007; Beasley 2012, 2015; Waling 2019a). Such criticisms include the marginalisation of feminist knowledge² (Ramazanoglu 1992; Robinson 2003), the use of an ambiguous social construct rather than holding men accountable for their actions (McCarry 2007; Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016), the lack of consideration of the active consent of some men and women in the maintenance of patriarchal power (Hearn 2004), the exclusion of considerations of masculinity, such as for gay and bisexual men (Dowsett 1993), and the lack of consideration of men’s relations with women in favour of exploring men’s relations with other men (Haywood et al. 2017). Beasley (2015) notes that MMS has a tendency to use feminist concepts, ideas and vocabularies, particularly poststructural ones, but do not recognise these as such nor attribute them to key scholars who have developed such work. Instead, MMS seems focused on maintaining fixed gender and sexual identity categories within a structuralist and modernist approach, rather than troubling them as feminist and queer work have done (Beasley 2015). As such, it is not surprising that terms such as ‘toxic’ and ‘healthy masculinity’ have emerged in wake of these developments in the field.

‘Toxic Masculinity’

Toxic is a negative term, and describes biological accounts of toxicity relating to the impacts certain types of toxicants can have on living organisms. Something that is toxic is understood as being hazardous to health, and it is something that must be controlled, not by the toxic object itself, but by a second object. In contemporary culture, toxic has emerged as a way to describe social interactions and social environments, such as ‘toxic relationships’, ‘toxic workplaces’, and ‘toxic friendships’ among others. In these framings, ‘toxic’ is used to describe a set of characteristics that can negatively impact a person or group of people. For example, a ‘toxic’ relationship is described as one in which one or more partners engage in a set of psychological, sexual, financial, and/or physical practices of abuse that can lead to a number of negative and harmful outcomes to someone experiencing the toxicity (Brown 2017). Addressing a ‘toxic’ relationship thus may require personal interventions such as couples or family counselling, to government and not-for-profit programs such as women’s shelters and domestic family violence services. As such, there are multiple formal and informal calls for addressing toxicity in these spaces.

In academic scholarship, ‘toxic masculinity’ (also sometimes referred to as hegemonic, unhealthy, orthodox, or traditional among other terms) refers to what some scholars pertain are ‘toxic practices’ of masculinity that have resulted in the oppressions men, women, and trans and gender diverse people experience (Connell and Messerschmidt

2005; de Boise, 2019). 'Toxic masculinity' is believed to be responsible for aggressive and predatory heterosexual behaviour resulting in sexual and domestic violence committed by men (Bhana 2012); the suppression of men's emotions leading to emotional and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Addis and Cohane 2005), the deterioration of men's physical health (Kupers 2005), men's engagement with physical and political violence (Kenway, Fitzclarence, and Hasluck 2000; Burns 2017), men's engagement with homophobic practices (Anderson 2009), and men's engagement with masculinity and men's rights activism (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016). It is important to note that 'toxic masculinity' is not a term used by scholars in the field of critical men and masculinity studies. Rather, it has emerged through misinterpretations of Connell's (1987) work on toxic practices of masculinity in peripheral fields, such as in health and criminology among others.

Michael Salter's (2019) 'The Problem with a Fight against Toxic Masculinity' provides a brief overview of the development of the term. Noting its roots in mythopoetic men's movements (see Schwalbe 2007), Salter highlights that the term 'toxic masculinity' has arisen as a result of a claim for a singular mode of masculinity, and the mythopoetic movement insistence that men and boys are angry due to increased feminisation that denies them access to their authentic, deep masculine nature. Salter (2019) notes that such a claim has been rejected, and building on the ground-breaking work of Raewyn Connell (1987) on hegemonic masculinity (discussed above), that masculinity has been theorised as a product of gender relations and behaviours, rather than fixed identities and attributes. However, as Salter (2019) and others have noted, this work has been misinterpreted by scholars around the world (see Beasley 2012, 2015). This, as Salter (2019) contends, has also led to the increased use of the term 'toxic masculinity' in academic literature and public discourse as described above.

A quick internet search of 'toxic masculinity' will bring forth a multitude of blog posts and news articles lamenting the issues men face today, and is particularly common in 'pop feminism' and 'pop masculinity'. From beliefs that it is responsible for the horrific 2016 Orlando massacre (Haider 2016), to arguments that masculinity causes extreme male trauma (Kupers 2005; Parent, Gobble, and Rochlen 2018) and is responsible for the epidemic of sexual violence against women (Hess and Flores 2018), 'toxic' masculinity has become a catch-all statement when horrific acts are committed or experienced by men. Numerous websites and articles are devoted to the term 'toxic masculinity', highlighting what it is, and calling for men to disengage as a result (for example, Monaghan 2017). Programs and research studies targeting the reduction of gender inequality and engaging with boys and men use concepts such as 'toxic masculinity' as a way to explain its harms for men and boys (see, Arata 2018). The American Psychological Association (APA) (2018) has developed guidelines for working with men and boys in individual therapy on supporting them to disengage with a 'toxic masculinity'. Notions of a 'toxic masculinity' thus are taking hold in Anglophone societies, as well as places such as India (Clugston 2018) among others.

'Healthy Masculinity'

'Healthy masculinity', sometimes known as positive (Roberts-Douglass and Curtis-Boles 2013) or progressive has arisen recently as a way to teach men and boys the

responsibilities they hold in being men, and masculine. Berggren (2014) notes that this notion of a 'healthy masculinity' can be said to have roots feminist consciousness raising, a form of activism that seeks to make people more aware of social, personal, or political issues (see, Bartky 1975). In this framing, men must rationally and consciously reject oppressive regimes of manhood and masculinity in order to support the dismantling of unequal gendered power relations (Berggren 2014). Men must 'take responsibility for their own masculinity' (Seidler 1991, 26). This notion of responsibility in popular discourse has been framed in such a way that boys and men are seen to be 'gifted' with a masculinity for which they are responsible. Such a gift is something they may not want, or even quite know what to do with. Masculinity then, is already set up as having power outside of social influence, that boys and men must bear in mind the responsibilities of having access to such a powerful 'gift'. Here, men can avoid the toxic nature of masculinity if they engage in the right precautions, but can only do so if they take responsibility for such a toxic engagement of masculinity.

'Healthy masculinity' is focused on men engaging their emotions, rather than remaining stoic during times of emotional vulnerability (Nagayama Hall 2017). It requires men to be more engaged with their emotional and sexual relationships with women, as well as maintain spiritual and emotionally fulfilling relationships with other men (Nagayama Hall 2017). It is also the rejection of 'toxic masculinity', such as feeling compelled to behave in a particular way that will cause harm to others (Nagayama Hall 2017). As with 'toxic masculinity', 'healthy masculinity' has been taken up in public discourses concerning how to encourage boys and men to shed their problematic engagements (Ruiz 2018). Men and boys are encouraged to engage in a 'healthy masculinity' to better themselves, and that such engagement will support the dismantling of gender inequality. There are programs in development to do so, such as the APA (2018) guidelines that suggest that therapists should encourage men to engage in a 'healthy masculinity' as part of treatment.

There is value in terms such as 'toxic' and 'healthy masculinity'. Such terms have brought about important visibility and awareness regarding why men and boys may not engage in help-seeking, particularly for issues relating to their mental health and social wellbeing. Further, using language such as 'healthy' and 'toxic' can be an important and significant first step in supporting boys and men to embrace and engage with emotion and vulnerability. Not only has the use of terms such as 'toxic masculinity' brought forth awareness of issues regarding men and boys' mental and physical health and wellbeing, but it has also emphasised the pressing need to support men and boys and to work to create safe spaces for them to engage in that vulnerability. Men's Sheds programs in Australia for older men have been vital in doing this important work to improve older health and wellbeing of disenfranchised and marginalised men (Waling and Fildes 2017). Further, notions of a 'toxic masculinity' have been pivotal in terms of addressing ways in which certain traits of masculinity and masculine cultures can be quite harmful and problematic, such the production and maintenance of rape culture, violence against women, and finding ways to engage men to address this to support gender and sexually diverse people.

'Toxic' and 'Healthy': Reinforcing Gender and Sexual Inequalities

Notions of a 'toxic' and 'healthy masculinity', however, do a number of problematic things that do not address gender inequalities, but rather, reproduce them. The first, is the

reliance on the notion of a 'diseased' and 'well' body. In this case, 'toxic' masculinity is a toxicant that impacts not only the men it contaminates, but the surrounding environment as well. For example, Molloy's (2019) news report on masculinity in Australia highlights this framing, where experts note that 'toxic masculinity' has dire impacts on community and will continue to devastate if left unchecked. In such a framing, masculinity as a concept is positioned as being a disease infecting the male population in any given society. Men are thus victims of such a disease, unable to break away from the contamination masculinity brings, unavoidable due to the circumstance of their assigned sex and gender. The second, is that 'toxic' denotes a high-risk consequence (one is at risk of being infectious nature if they come into contact with it) and yet, is also perceived as avoidable if the right precautions have taken place. For example, one can 'cure' themselves of the toxicant of masculinity if they adapt feminist leanings and doctrine, or, in other words, engage with a 'healthy masculinity'. By using terms such as 'toxic masculinity', it frames this as a disease that men have caught, rather than something to which they may choose to actively engage (discussed further below). In this case, masculinity is reified as the cause rather than as the product of social relations. It is positioned as pre-existing rather than something that is relational (Waling 2019a, 2019b; Harris and Dobson 2015; Rose 1996; Gill 2007), echoing the problematic ways in which masculinity is set up in theories such as inclusive masculinity.

The second, that there is *no consensus as to what a 'healthy masculinity' is or how multiple facets of identity can complicate this concept.* It is quite clear what we mean by a 'toxic masculinity' as I've discussed earlier in this article. However, there is less consensus as to what we might mean by a 'healthy masculinity' despite more pressing needs to encourage it amongst men and boys. Ruiz (2018) writing about the healthy masculinity movement, argues that proponents believe that 'men are ready to embrace a vision of masculinity that isn't interlaced with dominance and harm, to others or one's self' and yet like many other articles, cannot pinpoint exactly what a healthy masculinity looks like. What exactly do we mean when we talk about a 'healthy' masculinity? What actually makes up a 'healthy masculinity' in terms of traits, qualities, and behaviours? How might experiences of marginalisation, such as class, sexuality, gender identity (women, trans and gender diverse), cultural identity, race, or disability shape a 'toxic' and a 'healthy masculinity'? Indeed, this is a rather vague and abstract concept.

Third, it *dismisses the value of some conventional traits of masculinity in appropriate contexts.* If we rethink masculinity and femininity for a moment as not in a hierarchal position of power and oppression but in an idealised equal opposition (or parallel), then we can conceive of some conventional traits of masculinity as positive that can be engaged across all genders. For example, stoicism is often cited as a problematic trait in writings about toxic and healthy masculinity (see APA 2018), despite that it can be valuable and relevant in some contexts, and damaging in others. Stoicism would be necessary for dealing with emergency situations to make important life-saving decisions. However, in regards to expressions of emotional vulnerability in the context of mental health, stoicism is a harmful barrier. Other examples include the eroticism of performances and embodiments of traditional masculinity (Allan 2019), such as in the BDSM,³ Leather,⁴ and fetish/kink context. Conventional traits of masculinity, such as being powerful and in control are idealised, queered, and eroticised in these communities in positive, productive, and

pleasurable ways (Bauer 2016). Indeed, the notion (currently) of a 'toxic' and 'healthy masculinity' cannot account for nuance in these contexts.

Fourth, it *blames masculinity as the sole driver for men's issues*. The use of 'toxic masculinity' as the only explainer for men's problematic engagements with social life has been criticised. As Salter (2019) notes in his critique of the term,

the concept of toxic masculinity encourages an assumption that the causes of male violence and other social problems are the same everywhere, and therefore, that the solutions are the same as well. But as Connell and her cohort have spent years demonstrating, material realities matter.

'Toxic masculinity' follows in the ahistorical and essentialist steps of inclusive masculinity theory (de Boise 2015), where material realities and considerations of time, space, and place are absent. Feminists such as McCarry (2007) have also noted that it takes away responsibility of men for their engagements in violence against women, in which a vague entity (the man, hegemonic, toxic) is to blame. This is echoed in the work of Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016), who argue that it serves a way to render 'invisible' the acts of misogyny by men through an ambiguous blaming on a social construct. Scholars in masculinity studies such as Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2012) have noted in work on boy's health that explanations about boy's health, suicide and help-seeking behaviours speak broadly to a notion of 'too much' or 'not enough' masculinity. For them, 'masculinity has become a "catch all" phrase to explain all male behaviour' (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2012, 483). Here we can see the dilemmas that Beasley (2015) speaks of in bridging queer theory and poststructural concepts of 'masculinity' to radical feminist considerations of the actions of 'men'. Masculinity 'is thus still positioned as something that is done to men, or something to which men are victims' (Waling 2019a, 98) rather than something that men may actively engage.

The last, that it *reproduces a hierarchy in which masculinity is privileged over femininity*. Many of the articles about healthy masculinity, when attempting to provide some kind of model, highlight that men need to be more emotional like women, 'healthy masculinity may involve a dose of femininity' (Nagayama Hall 2017) but name this as 'healthy masculinity' instead. By encouraging men to engage in a 'healthy masculinity' we dismiss the ability for men and boys to engage in femininity or androgyny, or to even recognise that those are an option. Indeed, if we argue that a 'healthy' masculinity is the adoption of conventional traits of femininity, such as vulnerability and expressing emotion, why must this be repackaged as a new form of masculinity? I am reminded of consumer products that repackage everyday items as 'masculine' in an attempt to appeal to men, and the renaming of things to instigate that they are appropriate for men's consumption.⁵ This continues to appropriate conventionally understood forms of femininity. This of course does engage in an assumption of gender specific traits which is problematic in and of itself, as it continues to suggest a gender binary. However, I highlight this to demonstrate how a term such as 'healthy masculinity' not only appropriates traits to become legitimate for men but also does not then allow for a breakdown of gender binaries which is part of the problem in the first place (see Chodorow 1995). I am also reminded of the invisibility of women in inclusive masculinity theory, whereby 'inclusive masculinity' is only premised on heterosexual men's relationships with gay and bisexual men, and not their relationships with women (O'Neill 2015).

In using terms such as 'healthy masculinity', we continue to privilege and set up masculinity as the only expression of gender that men and boys can engage with and in doing so, perpetuate the continued devaluation of femininity. This practice can be attributed to the erasure of women and women's contributions in masculinity research and practice more broadly, such as is the case for inclusive masculinity theory (O'Neill 2015). Instead of breaking down gender binaries that enable the cross-engagement of a variety of practices of masculinity and femininity, regardless of gender identity, (or the de-gendering of such traits) we are in actuality, building up new ones to continue to fixate expressions of masculinity with a male assigned-sexed body. In doing so, we continue to position anything considered 'not-masculine' or feminine, as lesser. As such, we are in fact continuing to teach boys and men that women and girls, or anyone who is not a cisgender heterosexual male, that they are lesser, and deserving of the ill-treatment they may receive both on systemic and everyday levels when we encourage men to seek a 'healthy masculinity'.

Conclusion

As I have highlighted, using terms such as 'toxic' and 'healthy masculinity' do not work to dismantle gender and sexual binaries, but rather, continue to reproduce them. If we are to push forward in addressing the harms of gender inequality, we must be more radical in our approach. We need to first move away from categorisations such as 'toxic masculinity' as the only explanation for a set of social, political, cultural, and economic issues experienced in social life. Masculinity plays a role in the perpetuation of sexual violence against women and men's reluctance to engage in help-seeking, but it is not the sole reason. Violence against women is heavily premised on the numerous ways in which they are set up as lesser in society. To say that this is just an effect of 'toxic masculinity' disembodies men from their actions, denies the long-standing history in which women have consciously been systematically and institutionally marginalised and oppressed by men (McCarry 2007; Beasley 2015), as well as ignores the recognition that 'masculinity' and its meanings have changed over time, space and place (Reeser 2010). Similarly, men's reluctance in help-seeking is compounded by a range of factors, including demographic characteristics that may lend to potential experiences of discrimination in the health care system and historical trauma, such as is the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men (Hunter and Milroy 2006). 'Toxic masculinity' implies that this is not conscious or out of awareness, and that men and larger systemic and social structures, are not responsible.

The second, that we need to encourage femininity as a valued expression of gender, regardless of gender identity and assigned sexed body. We need to recognise that our current methods of engaging men and boys may be in some ways, ineffective, because they do not push forward the recognition of femininity, and those we might associate with femininity, as valid. Rather, they continue to fixate men and boys with 'masculinity', creating new types to suit these needs rather than addressing the core issue at hand, which is the devaluation of femininity or anything perceived as 'non-masculine'. Instead of encouraging men to seek a 'healthy masculinity', we need to instead encourage them to embrace aspects of what conventionally go under the rubric of femininity, and continue to advocate for the recognised personhood for anyone who is not a cisgender, heterosexual male. Alongside this, we need to continue to advocate for the breaking down

of gender binaries, rather than continuing to associate specific traits and qualities with a gender.

Third, we need to recognise that masculinity is a vague concept and the manner in which we position men as victims of a category of gender (Waling 2019a). As Chodorow (1995) suggests, gender may be culturally constructed, but it is a cultural category which is constantly negotiated and integrated at an individual's psychic and practical level. Working to interrogate this complexity and recognition that masculinity can be both culturally imposed and individually negotiated (see Waling 2019a) will enable us to better address issues regarding men's agency and subjectivity. Only then may we actually start to see shifts and changes in gender inequalities, because then we are actively breaking down the gender binary structures that are still in place when it comes to engaging men.

Last, we need to continue reflecting on the divergence between academic theory and the ways it may get taken up in public discourse. While it is important for ideas to be engaged in the everyday public, sometimes this can lead to the loss of the nuances of concepts and ideas in favour of easily digestible, bite-size messages. Concepts are simplified for public engagement and that simplicity is then retaken up in academic discourse, such as in 'toxic masculinity', creating a circular effect. While I am mindful that theories and complex concepts do need to be simplified for everyday public discourse, we need to be more critical about the manner in which this is done, and what is lost in the process.

Notes

1. Strategic essentialism was first introduced by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (see Danus, Jonsson, and Spivak 1993). Spivak conceptualised this as a political tactic for minority groups, nationalities, or ethnic groups as a way to represent themselves. Spivak notes that through the recognition of a 'shared' experience such as that of gender, it can be advantageous to temporarily 'essentialise' a group identity in a simplified way to achieve certain goals.
2. This includes lack of individual attribution to female feminist writers, token gestures to feminist thought and pedagogy, the institutionalisation of men and masculinity studies as distinct from gender and sexuality studies as a way to direct resources away from the study of women and non-gender binary people, the lack of critical engagement with feminist work and theory, and the homogenisation of feminist work (for example, a clear disregard for the multiplicity and diversity of feminism).
3. Bondage/discipline, Domination/submission, Sadism/masochism.
4. Leather is in reference to Leather subcultures, a sexual subculture often connected up to BDSM practices and typified by the wearing of leather garments and/or use of leather items for sexual play (for example, leather floggers), as well as the eroticism of power and heightened masculinity and love of motorcycles and motorcycle cultures.
5. Numerous products, specifically that which might be connected up to femininity (for example, skin and beauty products) are often repackaged and relabelled to appear more masculine. This is achieved through use of colour (neutral colour schemes with one bold colour, such as red or blue), font style and shape of the package (harder lines rather than soft curves) and names of the product ('Facial Fuel' rather than 'Face Cream').

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