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Abstract

The recent release of the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why*, which focuses on the suicide of an adolescent girl, has been accompanied by a large amount of social commentary. However, most of this commentary focuses on the suicide itself and does not consider how the series constructs the root causes of suicide. In this brief article, we argue that from a feminist social work perspective, the series highlights a key root cause of mental health problems—sexual violence—and that the discussion of this violence has been woefully absent in the commentary on the series. To support this argument, we highlight relevant examples from the show and discuss three key themes: (1) the overwhelming presence of toxic masculinity, (2) slut-shaming as a form of devaluing the female body and female sexual expression, and (3) the failure of adult systems to adequately respond to youth. We then provide suggestions for adults who work with youth around how to better engage in critical discourse about series content.

Keywords

13 reasons why, sexual violence, toxic masculinity, youth mental health

First a best-selling novel, released over a decade ago, and recently a popular television series made for Netflix, *13 Reasons Why* has been consumed by millions of young adults across the globe; however, not without controversy. Following the release of the Netflix series, school boards began pulling the book from their shelves and issuing parental warnings about the concerning content in the book and series. The concern has been almost solely focused around the issue of suicide. For example, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2017) released a statement indicating that they “do not recommend that vulnerable youth, especially those who have any degree of suicidal ideation, watch this series. Its powerful storytelling may lead impressionable viewers to romanticize the choices made by the characters and/or develop revenge fantasies,” and the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA, 2017) warned parents that “the series may glamorize suicide, and that some content may lead to distress in viewers, and, particularly, in younger viewers.”

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Given the identified role of media contagion in youth suicide (SurgeonGeneral, 2012), these concerns are well founded. However, research on media contagion indicates that an important factor is *how* the suicide is portrayed, including a description of the struggles in the lives of people who die by suicide (Gould, Jamieson, & Romer, 2003). A number of commentators have discussed that *13 Reasons Why* does not describe mental illness experienced by the protagonist and thus does not adequately present the “psychology of suicide” and “why . . . the particular cruelties of high school hit her [Hannah] with such irreparable force” (Silman, 2017). However, we argue that from a feminist social work perspective, the series does highlight a root cause of mental health problems—sexual violence—and that the discussion of this violence has been woefully absent in the commentary on the novel and the series. As Silman (2017) so accurately describes, “the message the show really succeeds at conveying has to do with misogyny: how persistent objectification can erode a woman’s self-worth, and the many ways we fail young women by propagating a culture of silence.”

From a feminist social work standpoint, Hannah Baker takes her own life as a result of her continuous exposure to toxic masculinity and her subsequent experiences of sexual violence. For this article, we define toxic masculinity as “the most extreme versions of hyper masculine communities of practice . . . characterised by homophobia and the domination and subjugation of weaker men and women” (Creighton & Oliffe, 2010, pp. 414–415). This definition recognizes that multiple versions of masculinity may be performed by male-identified persons and that one particular performance is this toxic form of masculinity. In the series *13 Reasons Why*, this toxic form of masculinity is also presented as the hegemonic form of masculinity, that is, the “most honored way of being a man . . . requir[ing] all other men to position themselves in relation to it” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832).

In this article, we offer a critical analysis of the gendered violence that is enacted on the young people in this story, and highlight how this is an important issue that schools, parents, and youth should be discussing, and that given the role social work plays in schools in North America, social work practice is one location that could be fostering this conversation. We argue that the most consistent story line in the Netflix series is the presence and impact of toxic masculinity, and how aggressions fueled by the masculine norms depicted in the series shape the well-being of a young woman that ultimately leads to her taking her own life. We argue that it is this very toxicity in the body that builds up and erodes her resilience over time and that the numerous (micro)aggressions that Hannah experiences constitute a significant assault on the female psyche. In our view, it is not one single event that brings Hannah Baker to end her life but the culmination of numerous experiences of sexual violence. In this way, the show provides a very real commentary on what it means to be a young woman in Western culture in the 21st century, as it fully embodies how gender-based violence is a key risk factor for mental health problems. It also illustrates a distressing lack of societal responsiveness that could ameliorate these risk factors.

In this brief commentary, we focus on what we consider to be the three main themes of the show—(1) the overwhelming presence of toxic masculinity, (2) slut-shaming as a form of devaluing the female body and female sexual expression, and (3) failure of adult systems to adequately respond to youth—and what these themes mean for the mental health of both young men and women, and how social work can play an important role in addressing such systemic failures. Given that most discourse about the series is centered on suicide (Ayers, 2017), we write this commentary to argue that in addition, a focus on gender-based violence and aggression is warranted and indeed critical to understanding the actions of the protagonist.

The Overwhelming Presence of Toxic Masculinity

In every single episode of the series, the viewer is bombarded with images of toxic masculinity. From the 1st episode—in which Hannah’s experience of a tender first kiss with character Justin

Foley becomes fodder for a rumor of male sexual conquest—to the 12th, where Hannah is raped by an acquaintance, viewers are consistently shown examples of how toxic forms of masculinity erode Hannah's well-being, primarily through how the performance of this type of masculinity leads to sexually violent actions perpetrated by Hannah's peers. Take, for example, the first episode, in which a character named Justin (presented as Hannah's first boyfriend) takes a photograph of Hannah playfully going down a slide toward him. However, because of the angle at which it was taken, the photograph portrays Hannah with her skirt up and panties visible, allowing his friends to infer that he has had sex with her. Rather than risk emasculating himself through denying the conquest, he sacrifices her well-being to promote his own sense of power among his peers by allowing the false rumor to continue.

In Episode 3, a character named Alex, portrayed as a close friend of Hannah's, creates a "best/worst list" that sexually objectifies girls in the school, which he created to gain popularity among his male peers and to get back at his ex-girlfriend Jessica "because she wouldn't have sex with me." On the list, Alex labels Hannah as having the "best ass." Hannah is deeply hurt by her inclusion on the list, and this leads to the end of her friendship with Alex. Relating back to the portrayal of masculinities, Alex, a gentle musician, has an alpha male father who is a police officer in town and an older brother who also abides by the hegemonic rules of masculinity presented in the series. Alex is depicted throughout the series as struggling to fit their traditionally defined masculine mold. Thus, in this case, the list is used to perform masculinity in a way that will increase his own masculine credentials but, in turn, sacrifices the well-being of the most important young women in his life. The existence of the list directly leads to multiple males objectifying Hannah at school, with one actively grabbing her to perform his own "assessment," leaving her further humiliated. Her devastation at being on the list is not registered by her closest male friend, Clay (portrayed in the series as the "good guy"), who wonders why she doesn't feel flattered to have "at least made the list."

There are also numerous references to how toxic masculinity is bad for all genders and not just those who identify as female. In the same episode described above, Clay witnesses another character (Tony) and his brothers violently assaulting another male. Tony defends these actions as "payback" for something done to their sister (the allusion to sexual harm is clear), and thus, masculinity is presented as defending the female honor. As discussed by Cowburn and Dominelli (2001), "men's role as protector is a key feature of hegemonic masculinity and crucial to men's identity as men in their relationships with others, especially women and children" (p. 17). In another display of toxic masculinity, a group of males present as a united "gang" in an attempt to scare Clay into silence through threats of violence (Creighton & Oliffe, 2010).

A well-researched association in the literature on sexual and intimate partner violence is that between hegemonic masculinity and violence perpetration (Murnen, Wright, & Kaluzny, 2002; Santana, Raj, Decker, La Marche, & Silverman, 2006), which identifies dynamics of power and control and rigid gender norms as being directly linked with men's violence against women. The female characters in *13 Reasons Why* don't escape this consequence of toxic masculine norms. Episode 9 finds Hannah hiding out in her friend Jessica's room at a party. Justin and Jessica come into the room and start fooling around, but Jessica is clearly too drunk to consent and passes out. Justin does the right thing and leaves the room, encountering his friend Bryce (a wealthy and popular football player) in the hall, who decides to have sex with Jessica once he learns she is heavily intoxicated. Justin begs Bryce not to, but Bryce invokes the "bro code" and reminds him that they "share everything." Justin then tries to physically intervene, but Bryce overpowers him, locks him out of the room, and Justin makes no more attempts at intervention. Bryce then proceeds to rape Jessica, which Hannah watches and feels helpless to stop because of her own paralyzed state (further evidence of Hannah's own trauma resulting from previous experiences of sexual violence; Marx, Forsyth, & Lexington, 2008). In this situation, the viewer is presented with both male entitlement to female bodies, as well as how concerns about violating masculine norms interfere with prosocial

bystander intervention. In Episode 12, the sexual violence she has experienced to date culminates in Hannah's rape by Bryce, where Hannah is shown dissociating from the trauma (Marx et al., 2008). After hearing about this violence, Clay confronts Bryce, once again presenting a form of masculinity anchored in defending the honor of the female body. Bryce admits during his encounter with Clay that he does not believe what he did was rape as he is entitled to the female body.

In sum, the consequences of toxic masculinity—including violence and poor mental health—are on display throughout the series. We note that despite the heavy focus on toxic forms of masculinity, books are not being pulled off of shelves because of the promotion of these gender norms and ideals, despite their well-researched associations with poor well-being, including potential associations with suicide (Courtenay, 2000; Wong, Ho, Wang, & Miller, 2017).

Slut-Shaming as a Form of Devaluing the Female Body and Female Sexual Expression

Researchers have long been interested in the cultural existence of the sexual double standard of differing sexual expectations and permissions for men and women (Crawford, 2003; Jackson & Cram, 2003), including its link with adolescent peer acceptance and popularity (Kreager & Staff, 2009). In addition, scholars who study media framing of violence against women have consistently noted the presentation of a virgin-whore dichotomy, which presents the victim in a way that suggests her own culpability in the violence (Benedict, 1992; Meyers, 1997). Throughout the 13 Reasons Why series, the viewer is shown multiple instances where Hannah is held to a different sexual standard than her male peers and how she is implicated in her own victimization for her assumed past behavior.

In the first episode, the picture that is shared widely by Justin as an example of Hannah's promiscuity is related by Hannah herself as a first romantic experience. In the face of its distribution and subsequent negative rumors, however, her burgeoning sexuality is tarnished by the encounter: What was special and intimate has now resulted in humiliation and shame. In the series, we also see moments where young women are pitted against each other to defend their own sexuality. For example, the revelation of the "best/worst" list causes Jessica to angrily accuse Hannah of sleeping with her boyfriend (Alex): Instead of confronting Alex about the list, Jessica instead dramatically ends her friendship with Hannah, punishing Hannah for her assumed sexual transgression and in the process removing one of Hannah's few social supports. As a result of the swirling rumors about her sexual promiscuity, Episode 6 shows Hannah being sexually assaulted on her first date with a popular student named Marcus. In this scene, Marcus puts his hand up Hannah's skirt in front of his friends to confirm the rumor that she is "easy." When Hannah reacts with anger, he is surprised that she is upset by his actions. In Episode 8, Hannah shares her intimate poems with a fellow male student in a poetry workshop. In one of these poems, she experiments with her relationship to her own sexuality, and her peer chooses to publish it in the school newspaper without Hannah's permission. This results in even more slut-shaming and humiliation for Hannah and is yet another experience where she has not given consent about her own sexual experiences and sharing.

The series illustrates an additional consequence of "slut-shaming" when Hannah attempts to become intimate with Clay. In this scene, she finds herself experiencing a series of flashbacks of the multiple times she was sexually harmed by males in the series and is unable to enjoy this new healthy sexual experience. Hannah stops and pushes Clay (her last remaining social support) away from her. Clay does the right thing, stops and leaves the room at her request, but in the tape for this episode, Hannah says she is sorry he didn't stay with her. This is a complicated message for young men to receive, and requires skills in empathy and emotional literacy, skills the expectations of hegemonic masculinity described in Theme 1 make hard to achieve (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

From how it is portrayed, the series makes clear that the inability for Hannah to fulfill her sexual desires results from how she has been treated during her previous sexual encounters—this past experience removes her enjoyment of what is supposed to be a special experience and is consistent with the social messaging that young women receive about sexuality and “badness” (Griffin, 2004; Jackson & Cram, 2003). In particular, this episode reminds us that young women are constantly struggling with how to protect themselves and their reputations while also responding to their sexual desires, a phenomenon described previously by Tolman (1994, 2006) in her work on dilemmas of desire. The scenes described above illustrate and how toxic masculine norms (e.g., seeing women’s bodies as belonging to men) shape situations in ways which impede the use of affirmative consent (Emba, 2015). This theme of consent ties clearly to current discussions in sexual violence broadly (de Leon & Jackson, 2015; Medina, 2015) and raises important points about the potential links between toxic masculinity, consent and mental health in young women.

Throughout the series, female sexuality and desire are continually used as tools to hurt Hannah, and her narrative about the impacts of these experiences is clearly connected to her choice to die by suicide. While a limited amount of commentary has discussed bullying in general within the series, we close this theme by noting that it is important to describe the nature of this bullying and name it for what it is (sexual harassment and violence) in order to support dialogue that will lead to actionable change.

The Failure of Adult Systems to Adequately Respond to Youth

In the final episode of the series, we learn that Hannah attempted to get counseling from the school guidance counselor on the day of her suicide. In this meeting, she discloses her rape and he responds with victim-blaming questions (e.g., “Are you sure that’s what happened?”). This encounter is presented as the moment that solidifies her decision to end her life; it is after this disastrous counseling session that Hannah goes home and slits her wrists in the bathtub. While, as pointed out by NASP (2017), “the behavior of the . . . counselor in the series is understood by virtually all school-employed mental health professionals as inappropriate,” these types of responses are unfortunately not uncommon within adult systems, where survivors of sexual violence are often blamed for their own victimization. As he is the only adult Hannah reaches out to in the entire series, we believe he can be interpreted as a metaphor for the types of experiences youth have when they try to engage with adult-focused systems. We feel that this interpretation better supports critical reflection about how adult systems often fail to serve youth, including discussions with youth in school and community settings about how their needs are not being met. While uncomfortable, we believe this aspect of the series is a poignant reminder of our own need as adults in social work settings to continuously reflect on how we are serving the youth with whom we work and how our practice can be more empowering and youth-focused.

Hannah is not the only youth who is missed by the adults in this series. In the final episode, we learn that Alex has attempted suicide by shooting himself in the head, that another character named Tyler is hiding ammunition and guns in his room, and that a character named Skye has scars on her wrists (implied through dialogue to be the result of self-injurious behavior). Thus, adult systems have failed multiple teens, with the foreshadowed potential for even greater tragedy in the next season of the show. However, there is some cause to be optimistic. In the last episode, Clay takes all of Hannah’s tapes, including the one with Bryce’s description of his rape of Hannah and Hannah’s description of her encounter with the school counselor, and delivers them to the school counselor. We wait to see if Clay’s call to action is positively responded to by the adults in the upcoming season.

Finally, much commentary on the series alludes to how, if Hannah “had just reached out,” she would still be alive. While we certainly acknowledge the critical importance of seeking help for

mental health challenges, we feel this assertion implies that the support received when individuals reach out is always helpful, and again, believe this to be an adult assumption that needs to be troubled. As individuals working in the field of domestic and sexual violence, we know too well real-life cases that have devastated the young women who have tried to put a voice to their victimization. Documentaries like *The Hunting Ground* (Nicholas, 2015), and experiences like those of Rehtaeh Parsons (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2013; McMillan, 2015) too clearly demonstrate how victims of sexual violence are further victimized by the systems from which they try to seek justice. Even in the fictional case presented here, one need not think too hard about the ramifications for the unknown new girl (with a reputation of promiscuity) coming up against the beloved (and wealthy) high school football star. Thus, we challenge those adults who encourage youth to “reach out” to ensure that the systems to which they reach are ready to support them, empower them, and work with them to address the issues they face in their lives.

Summary and Recommendations

Thirteen Reasons Why portrays a suicide in the context of toxic masculinity, sexual violence, and broken systems. We feel discussion of these contexts has mostly been absent from social commentary and hope this article prompts deeper engagement with the central discourses of the series. In particular, our analysis highlights some key ways that adults and, in particular, social workers in youth settings (such as schools and child/youth mental health services) can better engage with youth regarding series content.

First, we encourage adults to be willing to participate in open and critical dialogue with teens engaged with the series or book. In part, critical dialogue means exploring root causes of poor mental health (including masculinities and sexual violence), and challenging stereotypes teens may hold about these. To this end, some literature (Chisholm & Trent, 2012; Pytash, 2013) explores using novels such as *13 Reasons Why* to improve teachers’ understanding of the young people they interact with. However, educators using this pedagogical tool should be ready to disrupt and deconstruct myths and stereotypes around masculinity and violence. Given that adolescents are still developing perspective taking ability (Selman, 1980), adults may need to scaffold adolescents to take more global perspectives on the characters and their actions (e.g., asking youth why Hannah had so much trouble at school and connecting Hannah’s troubles to structural issues of gender norms and sexual violence). Further, as social workers are trained to facilitate constructive dialogue around structural issues, we specifically encourage social workers to work with educators as part of interdisciplinary practice.

Furthermore, social commentary on the book and series to date has almost exclusively been adults discussing their concerns, and the absence of youth voice from this discussion is unfortunate. Adolescents may have many reasons for connecting to the series and we need to engage with adolescents in meaningful and equitable dialogue, instead of placing adult-based assumptions onto youth behavior. By displaying cultural humility in social work practice with adolescents, we may begin to repair our current, adult-centric systems of intervention, making them a place where youth can expect to find themselves supported instead of further victimized.

In a recently released Harvard Study on relationships (Weissbourd, Ross Anderson, Cashin, & McIntyre, 2017), the authors report that “misogyny and sexual harassment appear to be pervasive among young people and certain forms of gender-based degradation may be increasing, yet a significant majority of parents do not appear to be talking to young people about it” (p. 2). We wrote this commentary to highlight what is not being talked about when adults discuss the series, including the presentation of toxic masculinity, issues of consent, and consequent sexual violence. We hope the ideas we present stimulate more thoughtful and structural dialogue in order to disrupt systems that continue to reinforce poor mental health and self-harm in young women.

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