Understanding Masculinity:
The View of Lebanese Private School Adolescents

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Introduction

Male adolescents' poor mental health is a serious public health issue. In 2019, estimates showed that one in seven male teenagers were thought to have mental illnesses (WHO, 2019). This translates to an estimated 89 million boys worldwide. Adherence to hegemonic male gender roles strictly limit the emotions that boys and men are "allowed" to express and elevates other emotions such as anger (Chaplin, 2015). The issue of hegemonic masculinity is of utmost importance because it shows that most boys are not able to express themselves fully, especially if their true identity goes against hegemonic masculine norms. Most boys or even men are playing the role of a manly figure in order to fit in with society's definition of a man (Eisler & Blalock, 1991). Relatedly, some religious groups and doctrines oppose any changes to hegemonic gender identities, because most of their beliefs are rooted in normative gender roles (Morgan,1987). This paper is focused primarily on one stakeholder, the Antonine Sisters School of Ghazir, which is where the paper's survey was conducted. The paper concludes with a set of recommendations based on the findings of this survey.

Masculinity and Mental Health

There are many different types of masculinity, including toxic masculinity. It is thought that some masculinities are stronger than others—meaning, there is more cultural and societal buy-in to specific types of masculinity than others—which is consistent with the idea that there are various forms of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The concept of hegemonic masculinity, or the most socially accepted version of masculinity in a given period and location, is at the top of this hierarchy of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In countries all over the globe, this type of masculinity is "related with being white, heterosexual, and middleclass, and possessing classic masculine attributes of assertiveness, dominance, control, physical

strength, and emotional restraint" (Evans et al., 2010, p. 8). Many men aspire to this type of masculinity due to its relationship with social power and control, but few, if any, will completely attain it (Mankowski & Maton, 2010). As a result, a key mental health issue for men might be related to the struggle to achieve, but never being able to actually attain the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. For instance, the main drive of toxic and hegemonic masculinity is its focus on control, strength, and most importantly, power. This explains why men avoid, for example, seeking help for medical issues, given the belief that asking for aid indicates weakness or a loss of physical control (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). This idealized version of masculinity comes with a constrained emotionality, which is extremely harmful to mental health in particular (MacLean et al., 2010).

Gender Identity Development

A really important problem that adolescents find themselves tackling is identity. One specific factor of identity development is gender. The concept "gender identity" refers to what people consider themselves to be relative to the existing gender binary of male or female. For instance, people could be feminine, masculine, or even a combination of both (Bem & Lenney, 1976). They might have varying sexual preferences, or they might identify as "non"-binary or outside of the gender binary, meaning, that they do not feel fully represented by the binary identities of "male" and "female." Gender is defined by, among other things, the binary feminine and masculine roles assigned to individuals at birth. Gender is built through social roles, behaviors, and customs (Wood & Eagly, 2015). The definition of gender is based on qualities that change with respect to time and cultures.

During the early stages of adolescence, the meaning of gender is frequently stereotyped. This explains the typical engagement of young adolescents in rigid stereotyped conduct, often with conscious and/or subconscious support of adults in their lives. For instance, girls will engage in extremely feminine behaviors, while boys will gravitate towards aggressive and masculine behaviors and appearances. Usually, stereotypical behaviors are passed down from one generation to the next (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The real issue at hand is embedded and rooted in the patriarchal system. Boy adolescents are driven towards gender roles and gender expectations by their fathers, brothers, and grandfathers. These male figures pressure the adolescent's perception about masculinity by feeding him lines such as "to be a man you have to be strong" (Brooks, 2001). The same scenario repeats for girls: Instead of male figures, it will be their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. As individuals progress in the stages of adolescence, their gender identity becomes more flexible. They start becoming more confident and secure to engage in activities they are interested in, even if they were assigned a different gender at birth (Brooks, 2001). However due to social pressure and gender norms they will still feel that something is not right.

Methodology

Alongside a literature review, a survey on masculinity and gender identity was conducted at a private school called Antonine Sisters School Ghazir. The survey was only relevant to male students ages 15-16 (adolescents). Sixty male students in Grades 10 and 11 completed the survey. The survey was divided into three multiple choice questions. The aim behind the survey was to identify how adolescents perceive

masculinity and how it affects their mental health. The three questions in the survey target a certain aspect of this study. The first question targets the mental health aspect. The second targets gender roles and their effect on the students. The third question targets the origin of the problem at hand, which is the way males have been raised.

Literature Review

The understanding of masculinity for adolescent boys is not a topic to be taken lightly. Kimmel et al. (2004) argue that boys are socialized and molded to fit a limited definition of masculinity. After all, adolescent boys fear being mocked and ridiculed for being feminine (Phoenix et al., 2003). Masculinity and manhood are rigid, according to Kimmel et al. (2004): It is something that a boy either has or does not have. The concept of manhood in our society is considered something eternal, where it is all built on the biological composition of a man, or in other words: his penis (Kimmel et al., 2004). Moreover, statements such as "boys will be boys" and "be a man" are considered as destructive and not progressive (Phoenix et al., 2003.) The rigidity of what is considered masculine in a man can be challenged by blurring the definition of masculinity and identifying a man in a socio-psychological sphere. For that reason, Kimmel et al. (2004) believe that in order to create gender equality, a general definition of manhood should be established.

Kimmel (2000) not only argues for a new definition of manhood, but also divides and analyzes the different stages of manhood. For young boys, manhood is solely based on the desire to engage in violent acts. For adolescent boys, the fear of femininity is a powerful driving force constraining their expression of masculinity. This is the stage where boys seek approval from other boys the most (Kimmel, 2000). When it comes to young men, they should make sure that their acts are stereotypical, their behavior should be manly, and no emotions should be shown. In addition, the whole concept of manhood is an affirmation for other men in order to gain approval (Brooks, 2001). Men share their accomplishments with other men, and only seek approval from other men; this is what builds "true" masculinity (Kimmel, 2000). This is the main reason behind sexual contests, fist fights, and many other activities that men engage in to establish their masculinity. After all, manhood is a homosocial act, since men are granted manhood based on the heroic acts and risks they engage in as part of their relationships with and to other men, for their approval (Kimmel, 2000). The definition of manhood can also be analyzed through a different lens. For instance, men fear being emasculated or perceived as not real men. This fear breaks the established definition of manhood, because it depicts the weakness of men. Not only does it show men as weak, it also humiliates men (Phoenix et al., 2003). Consequently, men are afraid to be ashamed. Therefore, they remain silent. This silence is the reason behind the ongoing loop that men are stuck in and cannot escape from.

Findings

For decades, masculinity and manhood have been concepts that adolescents have struggled with. This struggle is a critical reason for some of the mental health issues that adolescent boys face. For instance, 21.6% (13 out of 60) of survey respondents stated that they have been discriminated at school because they are males. 53.4% reported that they have not been discriminated at school and 25% chose the "maybe, I am not sure" option. Strikingly, 80% of the participants felt that they are obligated

to engage (or to refrain from engaging) in certain activities because it is inappropriate for their gender; 20% did not have this issue. Also, 35% of the participants stated that their parents teach them that all men should have masculine characteristics and all women should have feminine characteristics. 41.6% reported having progressive parents that teach them that all genders are equal and that anybody can feel and do whatever suits them.

Analysis

The findings show that there are two main types of masculinity: gender-normative masculinity and non-gender-normative displays of masculinity (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Adolescents that abide by gender-normative masculinity tend to follow social norms and social roles assigned to the identities of "man" or "woman." Those that abide by non-normative masculinity tend to distance themselves from traditional normalized characteristics of a man. These individuals tend to focus on their own values and norms (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). The results also show that bullying and gender discrimination in schools are a real issue. 21 out of 60 respondents stated that they have been bullied at school because of their gender. The main reason behind this issue is that the characteristics of traditional masculinity do not apply to all boys. The bullies are taking advantage of this issue by bullying the boys that do not follow the "rules" of normative masculinity, in order to establish their dominance and win the approval of other men around them (Bem & Lenney, 1976). Moreover, boys are obligated to obey the gender roles given to them at birth, which dictate every single aspect of their life. 80% of the participants stated that their decisions are highly influenced by their gender. This shows that adolescent boys are living in a struggle between what they want to do and what they are supposed to do. Further, adolescent boys learn about the characteristics of a "real man" from male figures in their lives. For instance, 35% of the participants stated that their parents teach them that all men should be masculine, meaning, that they should be strong and should not show weakness. This shows that gender identity and gender constructs are traditional and that they are transmitted from generation to generation (Chaplin, 2015). Another important problem is that some adolescents have minimal information regarding gender identity and social constructs. The survey findings show that some adolescents have no knowledge about gender or gender issues. This is a critical issue, because gender is a part of a person's identity. If they are unaware of their identity, then they are unaware of who they really are.

Recommendations

Perceptions of masculinity and toxic masculinity are embedded in our education systems. The problem is that toxic masculinity is a belief: it is based on the social constructs created by societies all over the globe. Therefore, in order to abolish this toxic perception of masculinity, we need to start by lobbying for a change to the singular and hegemonic definition of masculinity. This change needs to start with the youth, and it needs to start in schools. There are several key recommendations for schools. First, schools should implement programs regarding sexual education. These classes should not only be about sexual activity, but also about sexual and gender identity. This introduces adolescents to a part of their identity and can therefore provide them with a better understanding of masculinity and how it works. If implemented correctly and consistently, proper sexual education classes can open

the eyes of younger generations to toxic masculinity and a variety of other gender discrimination issues. Another really important issue is that religious classes in schools have their own agenda and, therefore, must come under scrutiny relative to the types of hegemonic masculinity they support and perpetuate. Several recommendations can be made to address this issue. First, religious courses should not be obligatory for all students. Second, in religion classes, gender roles should not be discussed, because they shape the beliefs of young kids. Instead, gender roles should be addressed by experts who have knowledge on the subject. Therefore, not only do educators at schools need to be trained on how to deal with students having gender identity problems, but also awareness campaigns need to be implemented for parents. These awareness campaigns can be in any form of media that reaches the parents, such as Facebook posts, billboards, and other media tools. Moreover, the staff in schools should be monitored, in case they are pursuing their own ideological agenda relative to gender. They should be respectful and they should teach all students to be respectful to one another, no matter their gender identity. Staff that violate these principles should face different forms of discipline, to ensure that classrooms remain a safe and inclusive space. All of the strategies stated above are a small sample of what can be implemented in order to make schools a safe place for all gender identities, especially individuals that identify as non-normative.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study found that boys who do not abide by the masculine roles of society reported more depression, anxiety, and loneliness as compared to their gender normative peers. This problem is extremely significant because it affects our youth, who are the future political decisionmakers. Therefore, the solutions for the issue discussed are of utmost importance and should be implemented as soon as possible. If we educate our youth and guide them on the right path, then we are working toward a gender equitable and better future.

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