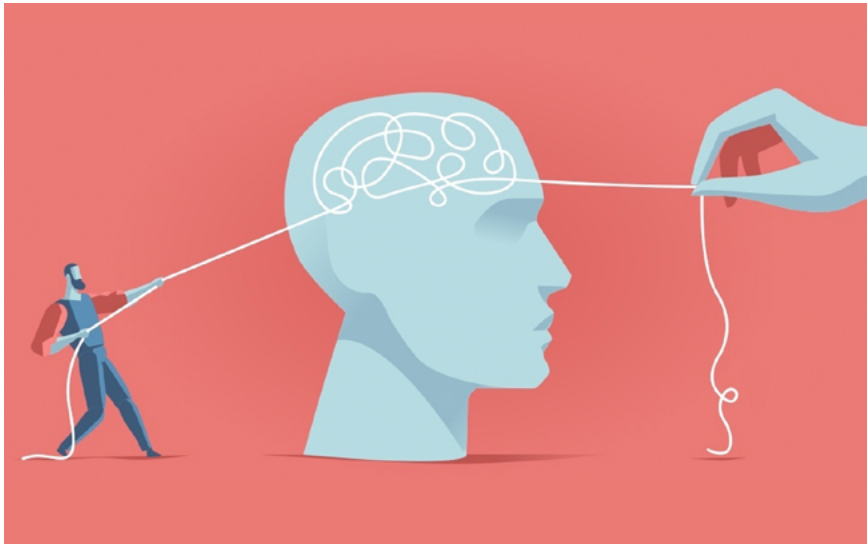


Academic Paper

Male Gender Role Conflict

Loosening the knot of stringent masculinity ideologies

By Luke Devlin



*For what is a man, what has he got?
 If not himself, then he has naught.
 To say the things he truly feels;
 And not the words of one who kneels.
 The record shows I took the blows -
 And did it my way!*

Paul Anka (1968)

Introduction

Levant (2011) argues that men’s mental health and the psychology of men has already received more than adequate focus over the last four decades and because of the dominance of men in academia, research and practice, all studies of psychology have been, in effect, the study of men. However, in documenting the cultural, societal, and familial shifts over the past four decades, O’Neil (2015) articulates

a pressing need in society to better understand how gender role socialization and sexism interact and affect childhood behaviour and human experiences over the adult lifespan leading to the development of stringent masculinity ideologies. This article will seek to chart the development of masculinity ideology and the growing understanding of male gender role strain and the subsequent experiences and impacts of male gender role conflict.

Chasing the shadows of masculinity ideology

Ó’Beaglaioich et al. (2013) describe masculinity ideology as an individual’s adaptation of the cultural beliefs about masculinity and the masculine gender. Gilmore (1990) charts succinctly the traditional masculinity ideological approach to caregiving as being a series of opposites and contradictions. These are:

- To support his family: a man must be distant, away hunting, fighting wars or working long hours
- To be tender: he must be tough enough to fend off any enemies or threats
- To be generous: he must be selfish enough to amass goods, often by defeating other men
- To be gentle: he must first be strong, even ruthless in confronting enemies, threats, and dangers
- To love: he must first be aggressive enough to get noticed and court.

Levant et al (1995) suggest that the rapidly changing dynamics in society, even if they are positive, place additional demands on men with the diverse roles they are now undertaking directly contradicting the masculinity ideologies they may have adopted. O’Neil (1981b) contends that it is through this rude awakening that men began to realise that they too might be susceptible to the consequence of gender role socialisation and sexism. Levant et al (1995) recommended

a gender specific examination of men to understand and alleviate the uncertainty and distress caused by these new pressures of active and involved parenting; understanding and articulation of one's emotive and cognitive aspects; and the shared familial duties and responsibilities; thereby providing men with a new sense of direction.

Levant (2004) describes the Gender Role Identity Paradigm as being the predominant theoretical construct that focussed on, and understood masculinity for five decades from the 1930s. This construct takes a biological and essentialist view of masculinity. Men, their lives, and behaviours were understood from the viewpoint of having an innate psychological need to have a gender-role identity. The probability of a man having a fulfilling life depended on his ability to satisfy this gender role identity by embracing and adopting the traditional masculine roles and ideologies. Men's inability or failure to achieve this gender role identity being subsequently hypothesised to cause homosexuality; negative and dismissive attitudes towards females; and hyper masculinity. (Levant, 1992, 2004).

Towards understanding: A new paradigm

Joseph Pleck's (1981) seminal book, *The Myth of Masculinity*, offered a timely response to the crumbling gender role identity paradigm by introducing the Gender Role Strain Paradigm (GRS). Pleck relocated the understanding of gender roles from the biological, deterministic entities of the gender role identity paradigm to a more fluid and wider perspective which acknowledged the impact of psychological and social constructs in determining gender roles, identities, and ideologies. Levant (2004) documents how this allowed divergent masculinities based on ethnicity, sexual

orientation, and culture to be viewed and understood in the context in which they had developed and also how it offered a platform from which to view masculinity, and the issues associated with it, as a far wider and deeper construct. Pleck (1981) condensed the complexity of such a wide-reaching construct into ten propositions.

- (1) Gender roles are operationally defined by gender role stereotypes and norms
- (2) Gender role norms are contradictory and inconsistent
- (3) The proportion of individuals who violate gender norms are high
- (4) Violating gender norms leads to social condemnation
- (5) Violating gender norms leads to negative psychological consequences
- (6) Actual or imagined violation of gender norms leads to individuals to over-conform to them e.g. hyper masculinity, working / exercising to extremes.
- (7) Violating gender norms has more severe consequences for males than females
- (8) Certain characteristics prescribed by gender role norms are psychologically dysfunctional
- (9) Each gender experiences gender role strain in its paid work and family roles
- (10) Historical change causes gender role strain

Pleck (1995) revisited his original theory by locating masculinity ideology at the centre of his gender role strain paradigm. In reorganising his ten original postulations as described as Male Gender Role Discrepancy, Trauma, and Dysfunction, he presents three newly

defined strain categories with each documenting how cultural standards for masculinity, as implemented in gender socialisation, have potentially negative effects on individual males.

Male Gender Role Discrepancy

Pleck (1995) states that a considerable proportion of males exhibit long-term failure to fulfil male role expectations. Levant (2011) discusses these expectations as being fuelled by the individual's own internalised and traditional ideals of manhood with the resulting disjuncture leading to low self-esteem, internalised self-judgements and social condemnation as well as other negative psychological consequences.

Male Gender Role Trauma

The second strain category that emerged in Pleck's (1995) update to his original theory of gender roles is trauma. This suggests that even if male role expectations are successfully fulfilled in social environments in which traditional masculinity ideologies were strictly endorsed, the socialisation process leading to this fulfilment is traumatic, or the fulfilment itself is traumatic, with long-term negative side effects. Levant (1992) discusses one of these negative side effects as being an expectation of men to deny and avoid expressing their emotional states and links this as being a principal component in the development of Normative Male Alexithymia.

Male Gender Role Dysfunction

The third strain, dysfunction, recognises that the successful fulfilment of male role expectations and ideologies can have negative and debilitating consequences. Pleck (1995) argues that many traditional masculinity ideologies can be inherently dysfunctional and incorporating and living up to these ideologies can lead to maladaptive

behaviours and affects for the man and others. O'Neil (2008) contends that the negative consequences of the dysfunction strain in men are experienced when restrictive gender roles are reported to be associated with higher levels of depression and lower levels of self-esteem. In adding to the discussion on gender role dysfunction, Mahalik (2000) documents that men's strict adherence to stereotypical gender roles leads to rigid and aggressive interactions and behaviours which in turn have negative impact on men's interpersonal relationships.

More about Normative Male Alexithymia and the therapeutic relationship

Levant (1995) describes a skills deficit in men who have experienced a traditional gender role training as a severe inability to identify, express and describe their own feeling states which he links to the psychological disorder of alexithymia. Literally meaning *no words for emotions*, alexithymia refers to problems identifying and describing emotions in the self and in others.

Traditionally understood as a clinical condition, Sullivan et al. (2015) discuss the work of Levant in identifying a mild to moderate form of alexithymia, which he termed Normative Male Alexithymia (NMA). This is a normative or gendered condition that forces men to repress their caring and vulnerable emotive nature which in turn causes them to be underdeveloped in the understanding and expression of emotion. This can be particularly impactful in a therapeutic context whereby a lot of the work and process can rely on an individual's capability to identify and articulate their own emotional states.

Quite often, in this author's experience and through anecdotal feedback from peers, most enquiries about a male's emotive state are answered by them being "fine" or

Quite often most enquiries about a male's emotive state are answered by them being "fine" or "grand"

"grand" with any extreme or deviation to these bookended by either anger or apathy.

Masculine mystique and the fear of femininity

In developing the gender role conflict paradigm, O'Neil (1981a, 1981b, 2008, 2013, 2015) discusses the relevance and impact of traditional masculinity ideologies in terms of a masculine mystique. He documents a specific set of beliefs and values that are learned early in a male's development from which all ideas, assumptions, and expectancies about being a man will be based. These are:

- Men are biologically superior to women, and therefore have greater potential
- Masculinity, rather than femininity, is the dominant and more valued form of gender identity
- Masculinity is displayed via power, dominance, competition, and control
- Vulnerabilities, feelings and emotions are femininity traits and to be avoided
- Interpersonal communication that emphasises any feminine traits is to be avoided Rational logical thought, perceived to be demonstrated by men, is the superior form of communication
- Sexual intercourse is primarily a means to prove one's masculinity. Affectionate, sensual, and intimate behaviours are considered feminine
- Vulnerability and intimacy with other men are not acceptable because (a) a man cannot be

vulnerable and intimate with a male competitor because he may be taken advantage of, and (b) intimacy with other men may imply homosexuality or effeminacy

- Men's career success is a measure of their masculinity
- Men's primary role is that of breadwinner or economic provider; women's role is that of caretaker of home and children. (O'Neil, 1981b)

Although it has been argued that many of these values have historically enabled the development of societies and communities and should be viewed as positive, they are now correctly understood to have facilitated the suppression of anyone other than the male. Thankfully now, they have also increasingly been recognised as contributors to many negative outcomes for men, primarily the fear of femininity.

Fear of femininity is a strong, negative emotion associated with feminine values, attitudes, and behaviours. Much of the dogma surrounding traditional masculinity ideologies highlight what is perceived as the implicit inferiority of femininity compared to masculinity. O'Neil (1981b) discusses a central tenant of the masculine mystique as being the devaluation of feminine values, attitudes and behaviours and he suggests that this devaluation is manifested and acted out firstly by considering feminine values, attitudes, and behaviours as inferior, inappropriate, and immature; and secondly by believing that women, men, and children who display feminine characteristics are inferior to men, inappropriate, and immature.

In the engagement with, displaying of, or portrayal of any characteristics that might be categorised as feminine in any way, a man runs the risk of being seen as weak, dependent or submissive which run counter to the masculine mystique. The perceived cost will be

disrespect, failure and emasculation by other men who uphold traditional masculinity ideologies.

O'Neill (1981b, 2008, 2015) uses this understanding of masculine mystique and the fear of femininity to build on Pleck's (1995) gender role dysfunction proposition by discussing Gender Role Conflict (GRC). GRC is a psychological state in which the socialised male gender role has negative consequences for the person and others, and it occurs when rigid, sexist, or limiting gender roles result in restriction, devaluation, or violation of the self and/or others. O'Neill et al (1986). The more that men endorse higher levels of Gender Role Strain and subsequently experience higher levels of GRC, according to Wexler (2009), the more likely they are to experience psychological distress, relationship dysfunction and problems with intimacy, think and act aggressively and abusively, and avoid seeking out any kind of counselling or other intervention for distress.

Gender Role Conflict as a Multidimensional Model

In order to represent, encapsulate and understand the complexity of men's lives, O'Neill's GRC paradigm has been operationally defined by four psychological domains, three personal/interpersonal experiences and four situational contexts. These domains provide the foundation on which to view and understand the phenomenological experience of GRC through four distinct patterns.

O'Neil (2015) argues that GRC affects men cognitively in how they think about and question gender roles, affectively in how a man feels about gender roles including his own, behaviourally in how a man responds to and interacts with others which produces negative interpersonal and intrapersonal outcomes, and unconsciously in how gender role dynamics beyond our awareness affect behaviour and produce

Gender Role Conflict allows men to believe that they are not vulnerable to sexual assault and therefore should not look for assistance if a sexual assault should take place

Kassing et al. (2005)

conflicts. These four domains operate and interact simultaneously in men's lives making the assessment and treatment challenging (O'Neil et al., 1995)

The three personal/interpersonal experiences of GRC according to O'Neil (2008) are: gender role devaluations – which are critiques and diminished positive regard of self and others; gender role restrictions – which occur when control or coercion is used to confine the self or others in order to conform to masculinity ideology, and gender role violations – which describes the harming of the self or others as a consequence of conforming to or deviating from traditional gender norms.

Four patterns of GRC

GRC consists of four factors described by Wisch et al. (1995) as:

- (1) Success, Power, and Competition (SPC) – relates to men's beliefs regarding success which O'Neil et al (1995) link to a constant worry about personal achievement, wealth, and career accomplishment. The desire for success being pursued and achieved via competition with and, dominance over any perceived competitor. (O'Neil, 2008).
- (2) Restricted Emotionality (RE) – is conceptualised as an ignorance of, reluctance to, and inability to express one's emotions (O'Neil et

al, 1995) and it is closely linked to Normative Male Alexithymia (Levant 1992, 1995).

- (3) Restrictive Affectionate Behaviour Between Men (RABBM) – pertains to self-imposed restrictions in men's emotional and cognitive expression around and with other men, as well as men's reluctance to touch other men. (O'Neil, 2008).
- (4) Conflict Between Work and Family Roles (CBWFR) – describes the problems men encounter in trying to maintain a balance between close personal relationships and their professional interests such as work and/or college (O'Neil et al., 1995).

Where is GRC experienced?

- GRC is experienced within the man (intrapersonal) as negative thoughts and emotions when experiencing gender role devaluations, restrictions, or violations.
- GRC is expressed towards others (interpersonal) when gender role problems cause a man to devalue, restrict or violate someone else.
- GRC is experienced from others and occurs when someone devalues, violates, or restricts another person who deviates from or conforms to masculinity norms and expectations.
- GRC is experienced during gender role transitions such as puberty, marriage and parenthood (O'Neil, 2015).

Meeting male GRC in the therapy room

Working with boys and adolescent men – In determining what stage in the lifespan of males that GRC first becomes an issue and active agent, Good et al. (2001) contend that to be considered masculine, boys and young men must be powerful and competitive, not show any vulnerability, emotions or weakness,

control themselves and others as well as their environment, be consistently rational, be sexually skilled and knowledgeable and be successful in their work and personal endeavours, all echoing traditional masculinity ideology. Blazina (2004) discusses this development of the 'boy-code' as a precursor to GRC and describes how this interferes with opportunities boys may have to transition through developmental experiences.

This process, he argues, leads to a weakening of the masculine self that then requires bolstering through psychological defences and maladaptive behaviours and personas. As therapists, we may have to navigate several of these personas before we encounter the young man. In discussing social anxiety and shyness, Bruch (2007) highlights that parents are more likely to admonish sons for any anxious or inhibited behaviours suggesting that critical parent reactions occur when the boy is deviating from the traditional gender norm. This reinforces the prevailing masculinity ideology and can generate friction within the parent and child relationship.

Watts et al. (2005) warn that adolescent males are at risk for a number of academic, social, and emotional problems which are related to GRC. Galligan et al (2010) document adolescent GRC in terms of decreased inter-male affection, limited emotionality, and an increase in school/ family / friend conflict. Whilst O'Neil et al (2009) discuss issues of stress, dysfunctional behaviour, low self-esteem, psychological problems, family problems, conduct problems, anger management and negative emotions as being early warning signals of GRC when they manifest in the therapy space.

Working with adult males – Increased levels and experiences of gender role conflict have been

correlated to a defined list of presenting and / or emerging issues in the therapy space which might be familiar to any professional working with men; *anger* (Blazina & Watkins, 1996), *anxiety* (Sharp & Heppner, 1991), *depression* (Good & Mintz, 1990), *difficulty with intimate relationships* (Sharp & Heppner, 1991), *homophobia* (Jome & Toker, 1998), *negative attitudes towards help seeking* (Good & Wood, 1995), *low self-esteem* (Sharp & Heppner, 1991), *stress* (Good & Wood, 1995), *substance abuse* (Blazina & Watkins, 1996), *poor attachment with parents* (Blazina & Watkins, 2000), and *psychological distress* (Wester et al. 2004). Cheung et al. (2009) document how men who experience greater GRC have a higher resistance to seeking help when they have been the victim of domestic violence.

This echoes the findings of Kassing et al. (2005) which stipulate that the lived experience of GRC allows men to believe that they are not vulnerable to sexual assault and therefore should not look for assistance if a sexual assault should take place.

O'Neil (1981b) states that these negative consequences are a result of a discrepancy between the real self and the ideal self-concept that is culturally associated with gender role. The ultimate outcome being the restriction of the person's ability to actualise their human potential or the restriction of someone else's potential. (O'Neill et al, 1986). It is this author's belief that an understanding of male gender role conflict can have a greater role to play in the treatment and risk management in working with male perpetrators of sexual abuse, domestic abuse and coercive control.

The picture that emerges for males, of all ages, who experience GRC is one of feeling greater psychological distress while being more reluctant to seek support. (Wisch et al. 1995). There is now, in this rich time of

ever-expanding conversations, understandings and acceptance of much wider, deeper and broader definitions around gender, sexuality and identification, a pressing need for the therapy space to be fit-for-purpose in being a viable option for any male affected by gender role conflict as well as being a place where any presenting issues and behaviours can be fully understood in context.

Conclusion

This article has charted the progression of the psychotherapeutic understanding of masculinity ideology, male identity and the development of male gender role conflict theory. In highlighting the possible reasons for any male experience and resulting behaviours, experiences and negative outcomes of gender role conflict, the author has offered some insights into the possible presentations of male gender role conflict within the therapy room. There is still much to be researched and understood around male gender role conflict and although O'Neill (2015) highlighted a 37-point strategic plan which included much-needed research around how to work therapeutically with gender role conflict, sadly, little of note has been done in the subsequent seven years. It is this author's hope that this article can, at the very least, start a conversation around male gender role conflict and its impacts on men and the people in men's lives. ☺

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