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Healthy Masculinity as a Form of Decolonization: A Preventionist's Guide to Analyzing Gender Norms in the US

“Anyone can experience or perpetrate sexual violence” (CDC). The need for normalizing healthy behaviors benefits all humans. In Western culture, masculinity is connected to manhood as femininity is to womanhood. As such, when brainstorming violence prevention strategies, promoting healthy masculinity is seemingly effective. As 79% of perpetrators of violent crime are men, preventionists and advocates are quick to recognize that many characteristics of masculinity are toxic (Morgan & Thompson, 2022). For example, dominating power or having “power over” is associated with being a man.

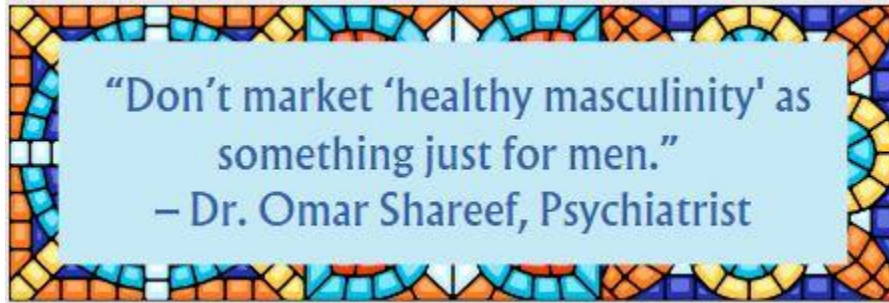


In this country, we have created what is called “the man box,” and it represents all of the traits, such as the above example of power, that are connected to masculinity (ACTM). Societal norms make it so that if a man steps outside of said box, he is no longer seen as masculine. As mentioned earlier, Western culture ties masculinity to manhood, meaning the more masculine you are, the more of a man you are. Accordingly, one strategy that has circulated the realm of violence prevention is to fill the man box with healthy behaviors (chivalry, reliability, communication, etc.) as a replacement for the dangerous ones (manipulation, intimidation, coercion, etc). However, regardless of the characteristics of masculinity being healthy or toxic, so long as we have masculinity associated with manhood or the man box, we will continue to be promoting rigid gender norms.





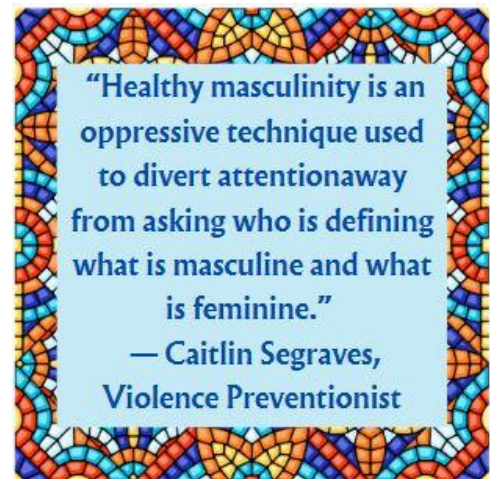
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Rather than replacing toxic traits with healthy ones so that men have something positive to practice, the ties masculinity has to manhood should be severed altogether and the same applies to femininity and womanhood. Instead of saying “men should have healthy behaviors to practice,” consider “men should have the choice not to engage in toxic behaviors.” These toxic behaviors are being modeled and praised in society, and it seems logical to enact initiatives that replace said model with one that is more positive and safe. No matter what you replace the model with, doing so will still ensure that men and people in general must adhere to the practices of *that* specific model. The man box will still be there.



The whole idea that it is masculine for a man to have ‘power over’ is reinforced by our history textbooks – *that* is our model. The history textbooks taught in K-12 public schools in the US focus on European history and an overall Eurocentric perspective. There is full transparency that Europe operated with a patriarchy: they colonized, trafficked, gentrified, and had dominating power. Even in recent decades, colonization has been described as a means that spread “European institutions and culture,” implying liberation (Nowell et al., 2023).





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However, colonizing any one of the many countries that Europe erased first began with isolating the region by cutting off native people's access to their allies. For instance, when it came to Africa as a whole, "European powers arbitrarily divided up Africa among themselves and started administering their new colonies" (Heldring, 2013). They conquered "through diplomatic pressure, aggressive enticement, and military invasions" (Barasa, 2019). This entire process took place under Europe's patriarchal society (Duncan, 1994). Therefore, patriarchal Europe's colonization modeled for students across America that by having power over others, liberation or salvation can come about.



Looking at how Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) progresses, the phases are an exact replica of that of colonization but on a smaller scale. In the West, power in many intimate relationships is centered around love. However, love can either represent influence or authority. For example, when love shows up as influence, a significant other will do things for their partner out of influential love (buy them a gift, write them a song, make them a snack, etc.). It is only when that love begins to resemble authority that abuse appears. An example of this would be how a partner could demand that if their significant other does not meet their desires, they will withhold their love as a consequence. That said, an abusive person will assert this dominance only after they've isolated their partner from support circles, similar to how European men in power arbitrarily drew African borders. People who perpetrate IPV will then attempt to convince their partner that they are dependable and are there to rescue them, "liberation" if you will. Once hyper-dependence on the abuser has been established, then comes the controlled resources. People experiencing domestic violence often report only having access to certain foods, clothes, and modes of communication at certain times (DomesticShelters, 2017). Just before the physical





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aspect of abuse surfaces come the threats, which is what Barasa (2019) described as “aggressive enticement” when referring to the strategies Europe used to terrorize Africa. Soon enough, the physical perpetration of abuse begins, which at this point, would be when the military invasions were initiated. Young people learn in schools that this was the practice of European men in power, the only model of masculinity shown in public school history textbooks.



Replacing our culture of violence with a safe, stable, and nurturing environment fostered by a culture of safety, begins with legislation regarding history textbooks in schools. In the US, “30 states allow local agencies or schools to choose textbooks. A total of 20 states and three territories—known as textbook adoption states— choose at the state level what textbooks can be used” (Scudella, 2013). Ergo, the majority of students in America are at the mercy of either their state or school districts to decide what type of material they will consume, whether that be a Eurocentric perspective or true world history.



Whereas in the UK, history and social studies curricula must go through five exam boards operated by former teachers and people from diverse backgrounds in order to be approved to be taught in schools (Penguin, 2021). To clarify, legislation in the UK does not dictate who will learn what, rather, they have passed laws that ensure the process of approving material is without fear or favor. Done equitably, this is the epitome of social justice. Students examining perspectives from various cultures will show that there are countless forms of masculinity and femininity, which is a must living in a country as populated and diverse as the US. In other words, people will be shown early on that there isn’t one “thing” or “behavior” that will make you more of a man or woman. What is masculine in one culture is feminine in another. Until now, our culture has forced on us that it is masculine to have dominating power and control, so





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much so that many people *only* know how to practice that. With that harmful perspective decentralized, people feel as if they have the option to engage in healthy ways of living instead. In a roundabout way, this would make it so that the man box ceases to exist.



Now the question is: What would the structure look like? Why is our current view of masculinity tolerated in today's world? Healthy behaviors must be accessible in order for them to be cultural, so what is step one?



As a young, first-generation American from Western Asia, I leave the questions above for the next passionate preventionist. In my experience thus far, I have learned that this work is generational. I wrote this with the tools the generations that came before me provided, all with the purpose of advancing the endeavors of the generations to come after me, directly or indirectly. Coming from my cultural background, I grew up with two different man boxes, American and Arab, each of which had entirely unique definitions of manhood. Hence, I essentially was able to cherry-pick what behaviors I wanted to associate myself with from the two boxes, true liberation. I can only imagine what future young people would feel if they had not two man/woman-boxes, but three, four, five, or six.





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