

Men Who Care: Analyzing Masculinity within Peer Support Organizations

By Victoria Ford

ABSTRACT. This study examines the concept of “healthy masculinity” through qualitative interviews with men in peer support roles. Men involved in peer support organizations highlighted values of empathy, understanding, and protecting others as being central to masculinity. Results revealed that men in peer support roles invoked cultural idioms or phrases of masculinity, which centered around the following themes: the lack of men, how men in peer support are different from other men, and how these are the “right kind” of men.

Introduction

“Healthy Masculinity? Never Heard of It.” This type of phrase was uttered in many interviews with peer support workers at McGill University. No participant struggled to define “toxic masculinity” as a simplified understanding of stereotypically masculine characteristics including strength, violence, suppressing emotions, and devaluing other genders (Elliott, 2018). However, “healthy masculinity,” (see Veissière 2018) remains a concept unfamiliar to many. How useful is it to label masculinity as toxic without presenting any “healthy” alternatives?

For the purpose of this study, peer support services are student-led initiatives which offer talk therapy to other university students, often on a volunteer basis. Within peer support, men are the minority of support providers and service users. In the present study, I explore the formation of male identities within the context of university peer support work, utilizing a cultural consonance model. According to Dressler (2018), cultural consonance is the degree to which an individual’s beliefs and behaviors align with those embedded in cultural models. Participants in

this study recognized the dominant models of masculinity in society and the current attitudes of distaste surrounding them. The men in peer support saw themselves as distinct from other men, and they explored a model of healthy masculinity that focused on emotions and empathy. These findings suggest that peer support centers can promote an alternative to dominant discourses of “toxic” masculinity and can provide a role model for men to engage within demonstrating “healthy” masculinity. These findings also support research that indicates that peer support groups are particularly valuable on university campuses due to low rates of help-seeking behaviors, especially in terms of men’s mental health (Byrom, 2018; Oliver et al., 2005). Studies have shown that peer support can result in increased empowerment, social support, personal growth, and reduced stigma (Byrom, 2018).

Methods

This study analyzes qualitative data from in-person, semi-structured interviews with peer supporters. Participants were recruited through an advertisement circulated on social media. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour and were held in the university library. Consent was obtained verbally, and participants were informed they could refuse to answer any question. Open-ended questions were asked, and free listing was used. Interviews with four men and six women were conducted, anonymized, and transcribed. Common themes emerged through line-by-line coding. Two of the men belonged to general peer support programs, while two worked within sexual-violence prevention. Subjects included undergraduate and graduate students, all of whom were in their 20s, straight-identifying, and of white or Middle Eastern origins. The following results focus primarily on interviews with the male participants.

Results and Discussion

What Is Peer Support? The peer support found in the university context is similar to peer support implemented in mental health settings where peers take the place of professional counselors (Byrom, 2018). One male peer supporter stated that, unlike therapy, peer support offers “support by someone who is an equal”; in this way, it is similar to “talking to a friend,” where “it’s a more casual setting, which can take some of the pressure off and make people less worried about the stigma of seeking help.” One participant explained that, within peer support, there is no power imbalance, and the experience is “vulnerable for everyone involved. It requires a lot of trust, confidence, and service.” Participants reported that individuals seek out such services for a variety of reasons, but most often for school stress, relationship issues, and family problems. Peer supporters at McGill are trained on a variety of topics, including active listening, responding to disclosures of sexual violence, navigating suicide intervention, and being aware of available services on campus. While the peer support services are open to all genders as both listeners and service users, the majority are women.

Where Are the Men? The peer support organizations featured in this study had less than 10% male representation.¹ One man related this phenomenon to other trends within men’s mental health in psychiatric or counseling services: “In mental health, [...] it’s less likely that men are going to be in those roles and much less likely that they’ll be accessing support.” While none of the participants claimed to know exactly why other men avoided peer support, many offered hypotheses. Peer supporters explained that other men “think of [peer support] as weak because it’s seen as super girly, very feminine. Guys will say ‘I need to be on a sports team, I’m

¹ Demographics for the six peer support groups interviewed were provided by individuals in these organizations, and men occupied 0-10% of positions.

not going to work for a call center.” The men voiced that stereotypes still frame peer support work as a female role due to its caregiving nature and its focus on emotional labor. As one peer supporter succinctly stated, “girls meet up at cafes and vent about their emotions.”

The expression “boys don’t cry” was used frequently by participants to explain societal expectations surrounding male emotions. Male peer supporters identified and criticized these social barriers and advocated for allowing boys to cry and express emotions freely. One participant explained that men are not encouraged to show emotions because “men crying is not as socially acceptable as when women cry, although there really shouldn’t be any divide.” Others agreed; one man stated, “women are seen as more emotional and compassionate, but that’s not really a real thing.” By recognizing that the social standards placed on boys and men are socially constructed, men in peer support felt they were able to express their emotions more freely. As one participant explained, we should not gender emotions: “It shouldn’t be seen as masculine or feminine to have emotions [...] or to want to help someone else deal with their emotions.”

Participants indicated that sometimes men want to join peer support but are not seen as qualified. Two of the men interviewed were executive members of peer support organizations and have been involved in the hiring process. They explained that the problem is not always that men lack interest but that they underperform in peer support roles. While both organizations received fewer male applicants than women, one executive stated, “what happens is that, through the application process and interviews, men tend to struggle” more than women do when dealing with topics of sexuality, sexual violence, and gender identity. One organization received over 40 new applicants, only two of which were men, and the executive explained that neither was selected, due to not meeting the hiring criteria. The unsuccessful participant was described

as being “not a good fit, not that he was a guy, just not a good fit.” Social factors were invoked to explain this phenomenon. One executive stated that men “have fewer experiences that allow them to have the ability to support others, in this type of fashion.” Further, “it’s the social upbringing; the way men are raised in society is very much ‘you have to be tough,’ and they don’t have as many experiences that help them develop these [emotional] skills.” Participants explained that men were apt to provide care but were less socialized than women in such skills.

Research has posited that men and women have different communication styles in terms of conflict and that men will often try to move to solutions right away while women desire to talk about problems and solve them collaboratively (Mohindra, 2012). However, this “male” problem-solving approach differs from the majority of peer support mandates that encourage non-directional and non-judgmental guidelines. Such findings indicate that most men are socialized to approach difficult topics differently than women do, and within peer support organizations, the stereotypical male way of approaching and fixing problems is not desired.

The Shame of Strength. Participants were asked what ideal masculinity was according to their own standards. Across the four male interviews, one common word came up, followed by immediate shame. “I hate myself for writing this,” one young man stated. Another scribbled the word down and then immediately ran his pencil over it repeatedly until it was blacked out. The common word that the men were not proud to write? Strong.

In recent years, the traditional qualities of masculinity have become challenged and labeled as problematic or toxic (Elliott, 2018). One man explained that “there’s a lot of stereotypes about the fact that men are supposed to be strong, and that it’s not good to be strong. That’s what toxic masculinity is: strength.” Another

interviewee explained his word choice in relation to outside influences, explaining that “some of society’s dominant standards did seep into mine, ‘strong’ relates to dominant standards.” The participant who scratched out the word “strong” explained that it was because society says that “guys should be strong, not show emotion.” Another participant, who initially hesitated about his use of the term “strong,” chose to redefine strength to fit his own standards of masculinity and peer support, explaining that strength could mean protecting and supporting others. These interactions highlight that men within peer support are drawn to the term “strong” but are hesitant to admit it due to perceived notions that strength is linked to “toxic” masculinity.

The Tornado of Toxic Masculinity. One participant stated that dominant masculinity is like a tornado: “it’s comforting.” His analogy is seemingly contradictory: as a tornado forms, the central eye becomes like a magnet, pulling everything nearby towards it, and everything becomes intensely attracted to it. While a tornado might appear chaotic, the participant stated that it was, in fact, comforting in the ease with which one can be swept up within dominant ideology. Dominant standards of ideal masculinity were commonly described in interviews as strong, composed, and powerful. Men explained that toxic masculinity is when individuals act in particular ways that they might know “aren’t right,” and yet, in spite of this, they continue to do so to appear more “masculine.” Toxic masculinity was also blamed for contributing to men being looked down upon when displaying emotions within society. Another participant explained that today many people view masculinity as “inherently toxic.” While acknowledging potential negative aspects of masculinity, this participant argued that some of the stereotypical masculine roles should be “highlighted more in a positive way.” While this participant in peer support identified himself as a different kind of man or the right kind of man

like the others in peer support are thought to be, he was also careful to not outright dismiss masculinity as inherently toxic or useless.

The Antithesis of the Frat Bro. Men in peer support positioned themselves in direct opposition to other men on campus, namely the “frat bro.” Fraternities were identified by one participant as “naturally male-dominated spaces,” as opposed to peer support groups, which are predominantly women. A “boys will be boys” attitude was said to exist within such male-dominated settings. One peer supporter working in sexual violence prevention stated that men in fraternities “don’t really think about the repercussions of what they are doing.” Another peer supporter defended the men in fraternities while also acknowledging that their environment is often problematic: “They’re not necessarily toxic people per se; there are great people in frats, but the environment that can occur in frat houses, the locker room talk, it’s easy for men to slip into a very negative and toxic way of viewing things.” Therefore, the men joining fraternities were not labeled as the problem, but the structures of fraternities were seen as hyper-masculine and unsafe spaces.

Further, the archetype of the “frat bro” was not limited to men who actually enrolled in fraternities; rather, it encompassed all all-male spaces where “bravado” and “aggression” were promoted. Other mentioned groups included men on sports teams, men in residences, and the “Bronfman bros” in reference to McGill business students. The men interviewed positioned themselves in relation to other men on campus and defined themselves as different from the norm or other expectations. One participant explained that, in high school, there were two opposing male groups: one that was “all for the boys” and another that was composed of “super positive, involved guys.” This division between different types of men was said to continue well after high school. While claiming that the “frat bros” were not “inherently bad men,” men in peer

support felt themselves to be on the right side of manhood and actively working against “toxic” forms of masculinity.

One individual working in sexual violence prevention argued that men do not engage in peer support because they do not recognize themselves as contributing to problems and therefore do not feel they need to be part of the solution. He stated, “the main reason is they think they aren’t doing anything wrong, so there is no need for support.” He explained that even men who were aware of their damaging or aggressive behavior do not seek to change. As he put it, “even if men identify that it’s an issue, they don’t act on that issue.” Therefore, men in peer support not only recognized that the societal messages surrounding masculinity are limiting and dangerous, but they were actively working against such norms.

The Influence of Women. Every woman interviewed advocated for more men, but not necessarily masculinity, to enter their peer support organizations. The six women interviewed struggled more than the men did in listing their own ideas of masculinity, stating that they found it inherently problematic or “faulty.” One female supporter explained, “I feel like masculinity doesn’t even play a role, and it shouldn’t. Not that guys who do [peer support] are un-masculine, but in the context I see them, their masculine traits aren’t what is prevalent.” Most women acknowledged that, while masculinity has a current negative connotation, it “doesn’t have to.” Women identified the role played by individuals more than societal ideals: “being masculine doesn’t make guys bad people, and there are feminine guys who aren’t good people.” Both male and female peer supporters agreed on the nuances of the current cultural status of masculinity and identified problematic behaviors held by some men within university settings.

Female participants identified the barriers faced by men wishing to enter peer support. One woman explained, “I understand that these resources are made for me.” The

women interviewed expressed frustration around men's tendency to avoid emotions in favor of being aggressive and violent in order to express their feelings. As one woman explained, she felt that such resentment towards men has been normalized: "I think it's pretty normal at some point in a woman's life to feel that all men are bad and feel a lot of anger towards them."

Interestingly, one male participant stated that he felt opposition from some women on campus. Pondering how much space was acceptable for a man to take up in peer support circles, especially in regard to sexual violence, he reflected on "how much of a role [men] have to play [in peer support]. I think it's larger than what a lot of female-identifying on the left want." However, the same participant explained that the women he works alongside are very welcoming and good at drawing men into conversations. Similarly, one man explained that he would not have known about peer support simply by going to class in the engineering building. Instead, it was by knowing women active in peer support or sexual-violence work that half of the participants became involved.

Healthy Masculinity. While most men in peer support had not heard of the term "healthy masculinity," they posited what it could look like. Healthy masculinity was framed as the opposite of toxic masculinity. The men explained that peer support has "no place for toxic masculinity" and that healthy masculinity is being able to support others, to be vulnerable, and to know that healthy masculinity includes knowledge that "it is okay to ask for help." Within the context of sexual violence support, one man stated that "there is a good type of masculinity and [a] negative [type]. Good type is stepping up for a girl, comforting her; and toxic is not caring." Men who subscribed to healthy masculinity were described as being "good males" and "good fathers" who "respect women." Therefore, healthy masculinity as described by S. Veissière (2018), relating to caring for others, protecting others, and

exploring femininity, was an ideology that men in peer support sought to emulate and transfer onto their peers.

Some participants related healthy masculinity to notions of femininity or gender-neutrality. One participant described healthy masculinity as taking a step back and “not being a stereotypical masculine figure” and as “crossing the divide between feminine and masculine and meeting in the middle.” Another interviewee echoed this sentiment by explaining that “the ideal qualities for a man in peer support roles are the same qualities for a woman: you’re looking for compassion, empathy, and emotional intelligence.” However, while stating that such qualities were “universally” desired, the men also acknowledged that such behaviors must be learned and others unlearned. Dealing with emotions was described as a process rather than something men were born being well versed in.

Implications/Recommendations

While peer support can provide men with an alternative and healthy process to examine and express feelings, the structures themselves may still act as a barrier. Peer support organizations on McGill University’s campus reject stereotypical masculine tendencies, such as advice-giving and problem-solving, and emphasize stereotypical female qualities, such as nurturing, being organized, and being emotionally available. Therefore, perhaps in order to encourage more male participants to engage in peer support, masculinity should be incorporated into discussions within the already-established training curriculum, beyond dismissing masculinity as inherently toxic. Research indicates that men are vital to movements that challenge cultural myths and stereotypes linked to masculinity, especially in cases of sexual violence, and groups should focus on drawing alliances between genders (Fabiano et al., 2003).

One surprising finding from this study was that, while men in peer support rejected what is now seen as

“toxic” masculinity, all the men still ultimately desired to identify with the term “strong.” Due to this, I would advocate for traditional masculine characteristics to be incorporated and promoted within peer support settings alongside traditionally feminine qualities. Peer support offers one way in which men can become role models in their community and can begin conversations with other men that address emotions and issues in a constructive manner.

Conclusion

Adding to work by scholars including Samuel Veissière (2018), this study illustrates how tropes of toxic masculinity are only normatively useful if presented alongside other nuanced gender archetypes. Only within this model can men be presented with the possibility to be both strong and caring, both masculine and not labeled toxic.

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