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Masculinity, Social Support and Sense of Community : The Mens Group Experience

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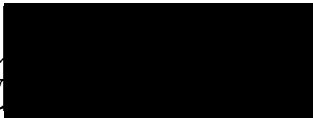for the Degree of
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5th November,1999

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Masculinity, Social Support and Sense of Community:

The Men's Group Experience

Abstract

Recently, there has been increased attention in understanding factors that influence men's health and wellbeing. This paper examines men's wellbeing and the 'male crisis' in Western Society. A brief historical overview is outlined to illustrate how social change has impacted on male gender roles. Men's role in society is discussed in relation to their response to feminism, and gender identity and the concept of masculinity as a social construction is outlined. Factors such as changing gender roles and subsequent role confusion are addressed in connection with men's health. This paper will then examine men's social support systems, with a focus on men's groups. The role and purpose of these groups is discussed as an alternative form of social support for men. It is suggested that men's support groups may be understood as a relational community with a common group narrative. For example, a community narrative shapes the social identities of members, and the exchange of personal stories facilitates personal change. Hence, previous research on psychological sense of community (PSC) and narrative theory are reviewed to illustrate how individual identity is embedded in the community context, and is facilitated by community and personal narratives. The process of identity transformation is discussed as an outcome from involvement in men's groups. Finally, qualitative research is discussed and future directions in research are outlined.

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During the last two decades, men's health and wellbeing has received increased attention (Morgan, 1992). Some have even documented issues surrounding men's wellbeing as a 'male crisis" (e.g., Biddulph, 1995; Coyle & Morgan-Sykes, 1998; Horrocks, 1994; Levant, 1992). This 'crisis of masculinity' has evolved from changes in traditional gender relations, placing men within a different social context. These changes developed from social and political forces such as the feminist and gay rights movements (Connell, 1995; Coyle & Morgan-Sykes, 1998).

A key aspect of the changes to gender relations has been captured in discussions on changed gender roles and the challenges to traditional notions of masculinity and femininity (e.g., Buchbinder, 1994; Kimmel, 1987; Levant, 1992). Gender roles are defined as "behaviours, expectations, and values defined by society as masculine or feminine" (O'Neil, 1990, p.25). Specifically, this crisis relates to male mental health and issues of emotion, in Western Culture (Fischer & Good, 1997; Badinter, 1995).

Scope of this Review

This article will examine the current crisis in masculinity in Western society. A brief historical overview is outlined to illustrate how social, political, economic and cultural change has impacted on male gender roles. Men's role in society will be discussed in relation to their response to feminism. Gender identity and the concept of masculinity is discussed. Factors such as changing gender roles and subsequent role conflict are addressed in connection to men's health. This paper will then focus on men's social support systems and processes.

The role of men's groups in alleviating gender role conflict and providing an alternative form of social support will be examined. These groups may be construed as relational communities with group narratives. Hence, a review of the literature will include studies on psychological sense of community (PSC) and narrative theory. These will be discussed in relation to how men's groups function to develop social support and provide men with an alternative form of masculinity. In this paper gender is viewed as a social and political construction, and examines the male crisis in an historical context. This approach suggests gender identity reflects an individual's present context and sociohistorical cohort. Hence, this paper will focus on how some men choose to revise their relationship with their social category system of gender, and reject it by re-defining their gender identity. Finally, this review will discuss qualitative approaches to research and explain how these methods may be beneficial for future research regarding men's social support networks.

Overview- Social and Historical Context

Throughout history men and women have experienced changes in gender roles. Several important historical events have contributed to these social changes. At the turn of the century, an earlier 'masculinist' movement was documented. The stimulus for this was the Industrial Revolution, which was a major turning point for gender relations and traditional values. Men began to work away from their homes and left women in a feminised domestic context (Biddulph, 1995; Levant, 1992). Not only did this separate the sexes, but it also channeled women into expressive roles and men into instrumental roles (Messner, 1998).

This break in the family system continued, until two world wars had a major effect on the traditional, dominant model of masculinity. The outbreak of both

these wars reduced the populations of men in western societies and required

women to take their place in the public sphere as workers. World War II was

particularly important in this regard. Men returning from war found women in

different roles which must have seemed like a radical revolution in femininity.

However, their return resulted in women returning to their domestic domains

(Buchbinder, 1994).

During the 1950's gender roles held little ambiguity. Traditionally, men went

to work and women became housewives (Buchbinder, 1994; Pritchard-Hughes,

1994). The 1960's saw a new man arrive. The Vietnam War, with its violence and

devastation challenged men's identity. At this time 'new wave' feminism, that is

the movement that evolved in the sixties (Horrocks, 1994), was in full force. In

turn, this forced men to re-examine their masculinity (Bly, 1992).

The feminist movement grew in response to women's oppression, and this

growth had a huge impact on society. In parallel, the gay rights movement

challenged 'normal' masculinity (O'Shaughnessy, 1999). During the 1970's, a

men's liberation movement grew in response to this force, as well as men's

increased awareness that patriarchal masculinity is damaging to them (Horrocks,

1995). Over the past 20 years, this upheaval has affected women's social position

with contemporary western society witnessing women's empowerment. These

changes have caused significant power shifts in gender relations (Messner, 1998;

Townsend, 1994), with consequences resulting in explorations of femininity and

masculinity as social constructions (Kimmel, 1987; O'Shaughnessy, 1999).

The notion that traditional, socialised gender roles may have negative

consequences for both sexes was highlighted by feminist critiques (Messner,

1998). Recognising their self-destructive images as oppressors of women, men

began to see the costs of such power and began breaking free from their rigid male roles (Karsk & Thomas, 1987; Webb, 1998). Gradually, masculinity has been re-constructed and re-defined (Brod, 1987; Levant 1992; Messner, 1998), requiring men to adapt to changed gender roles and identities (Kimmel, 1987; Rabinowitz & Cochran, 1994). This appeared to produce a crisis in masculinity. However, it was not until the eighties and early nineties that men's studies was acknowledged fully (Horrocks, 1994). More recently, discussions on the re-definition of masculinity agreed that it should not be defined in social isolation, as a sex-role, but as a relational construct. This re-construction should focus on changes in social and economic conditions, and the changing position of women in society (Kimmel, 1987).

Gender Identity: The Concept of Masculinity

In the literature, various approaches to gender identity have been documented by different writers. However, two central concepts of masculinity are apparent. These are the male/female distinction and the masculine/feminine distinction (Horrocks, 1994). Therefore, gender may be conceptualised from an essentialist or a social constructionist perspective. Essentialism bases gender differences on biological, genetic and psychological factors, suggesting that these determine behaviour and masculinity is innate. Social constructionism emphasises the socialisation process (Connell, 1995). From this perspective, gender identity is a personal, social and cultural construction that reflects an individual's present context and sociohistorical cohort (Kimmel, 1987). Further, identity development, maintenance and transition may then be assessed (Frable, 1997).

The concept of 'masculinity' is difficult to define because societies define gender in culturally specific ways (Connell, 1995). Additionally, the concept is inherently relational (Kimmel, 1995), where "masculinity does not exist except in contrast with femininity" (Connell, p.68). Connell defines masculinity as "a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (p.71).

Traditionally, gender identity belonged to the medical domain by referring to a person's sense of being female or male. This was useful for researching the male experience and was a basis for male 'sex-role' theory which focused on role associated traits (Pleck, 1987). However, this theory was inadequate in accounting for how men and women become socialised in different cultures (Kimmel, 1987). Early studies focused on a child's rearing environment as the best predictor of gender identity and suggested that this identity is not easily changed after age two and a half. Although researchers still acknowledge the influence of biology on the gender identity process, there is now less emphasis on this theoretical conception (Frable, 1997; Kimmel, 1995). Several other notions of gender identity exist in social psychology. These include an overall self-concept, where gender identity is a combination of social construction and biological facts, a social identity theory where women and men have an awareness and feelings for their gender category, a focus on context and gender identification, and a symbolic interactionist perspective which focuses on gender roles people play (Frable, 1997).

In discussing social construction and gender dynamics, Connell (1995) argues that gender is not fixed, but is constructed in social interaction. Identity is

related to an individual's "psychological relationship to particular social category systems" and is created from structured, social constraints (Frable, 1997, p.139). Tolson (1977) concurs, suggesting masculinity is a socially functional and culturally specific 'gender identity', with some negative consequences for men. Moreover, research suggests gender identity is multidimensional and fluid. Thus, if masculinity is learned and constructed, it can also be changed (Badinter, 1995).

Masculinity in Crisis

The literature on the psychology of men suggests that masculinity in Western society is in crisis (Horrocks, 1994; Kimmel, 1987). As discussed earlier, this crisis has been examined in the broad context of social and historical change. A shift in perspective would take into account developmental theory, and focus on life stages. From this perspective, the 'male crisis' may be attributable to a 'midlife crisis.' According to Levinson (1978), men are often faced with crisis in middle adult years (35-55), where they may find themselves in a period of transition. Feeling power at work, but distanced from family and relationships, conflict occurs. Men begin to question their identities and search for new meanings to life (Rabinowitz & Cochran, 1994). However, although mid-life crisis and the current male crisis share certain traits (e.g., an expressed need for change, redefinition of success), what distinguishes the preceding crisis from the one we are experiencing today, is social and historical change. For example, recent work concerning the reconstruction of masculinity (Mankowski, in press) has focused on consciousness-raising and drawing on symbols from cultural contexts in understanding how an alternative identity is adopted. Hence, social, cultural, historical and political changes are still acknowledged as powerful factors affecting shifts in masculine identity (Kimmel, 1987; Messner, 1998).

Gender Role Conflict and Men's Health

According to Kimmel (1987), men are confused about what it means to be a real man. Some have even suggested that the 'code' of masculinity has collapsed (Levant, 1992). O'Neil (1990), defines gender role conflict as a "psychological state in which gender roles have negative consequences on the individual or others" (p.25). Further this conflict results in the restriction of a person's potential, and occurs when "rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles, learned during socialisation, result in the personal restriction, devaluation, or violation of others or self" (O'Neil, 1990, p.25). Some writers (e.g., Grimmell & Stern, 1992; Horrocks, 1994) have argued that there is a strained quality about some sorts of masculinity and this reflects a significant inner conflict. Horrocks (1994) even suggests that perhaps the masculine gender is a defence against the fear of femininity.

Levant (1992) suggests gender role stereotypes and norms are often contradictory and inconsistent, and consequences have resulted in this gender role strain. The 'norms' of the traditional male role include restrictive emotionality (with the exception of anger), avoiding femininity, seeking status and success, aggression, fear of intimacy, self-reliance and homophobia. In essence, to be strong and silent is the traditional male ideal.

Buchbinder (1994) explains that the older model of masculinity is now viewed as rigid and narrow, and the rise of the "New Age Man" has blurred traditional distinctions between what is perceived as masculine and unmasculine (p.2). Men are now being asked to adopt new roles that violate the traditional male code. This requires skills they do not possess (e.g., nurturing, showing vulnerabilities, expressing intimacy, active parenting) and has resulted in

decreased self-esteem, gender role conflict and confusion (Levant, 1992). This cultural crisis in masculine identity has resulted in the need to address men's wellbeing.

In response to these social and cultural changes, there has been a growing interest in men's issues (Brod, 1987; Kimmel; 1987; Messner, 1998; Pease, 1999), with some studies specifically focusing on gender roles and gender role conflict. For example, Fischer and Good (1997) discuss how the masculine socialisation process has been hypothesised to encourage men to devalue and restrict much of their emotional experiencing. Their study of 208 men used three instruments to assess alexithymia (difficulty describing feelings), fear of intimacy and gender role conflict. A multiple-regression analysis was conducted on all scores. This study concluded by suggesting that men reporting greater degrees of gender role conflict also acknowledged higher levels of alexithymia and fear of intimacy.

Men's help-seeking behaviours have also been researched in several studies. These studies have illustrated how traditional gender role socialisation has influenced men to feel hesitant about asking for help, and how this relates to gender role conflict. Good, Dell and Mintz (1989) examined gender role conflict by testing theory that suggested the traditional male gender role was related to help-seeking behaviours and attitudes. The study used 401 undergraduate men who completed questionnaires measuring help-seeking behaviours and attitudes, and attitudes toward stereotypical male roles. Gender role conflict factors (e.g., competition, success, power, rigid emotionality, and restrictive affection toward other men) were also examined. Regression and canonical analysis revealed that traditional attitudes about the male gender role (such as concern about emotional expression and showing affection between men) were significantly related to

negative attitudes toward seeking professional psychological help and to less reports of past help-seeking behaviour. The likelihood of future help seeking was also significantly predicted by restrictive emotionality. This study concluded by suggesting that more research is needed in this area (Good et al., 1989). It should be noted, however, that the average age of participants was 19.3, and these were mainly freshmen. Hence, this study was limited in age range and this may have affected results. For example, an older group may have produced highly significant results and highlighted even more rigid traditional male socialisation.

Wisch, Mahalik Hayes and Nutt (1995) also hypothesised that men's gender role conflict would predict attitudes towards psychological help-seeking. Hence, they investigated the impact of gender role conflict (GRC) and counselling technique of psychological help seeking in men. A sample of 164 male undergraduates completed the Gender Role Conflict Scale (GRCS), viewed tapes of a counselling session that used cognition focused or emotion-focused interventions, and also completed a questionnaire to measure their attitudes towards seeking psychological help. Results revealed that men who scored higher on GRC who viewed the 'feelings focussed' session were less likely to seek psychological help compared to men in the other three conditions. This study concluded by suggesting that these results indicated that men's attitudes towards help-seeking were influenced by level of GRC, with men high in GRC tending to view help-seeking more negatively when they had been exposed to emotion-focused counselling (Wisch et al., 1995).

In a similar vein, Robertson and Fitzgerald (1991) suggested that men are less likely to seek psychotherapy than women. They suggested that this reluctance to seek help is related to traditional gender role socialisation. Furthermore, this can

be lessened by providing counseling interventions that are more acceptable and congruent with that socialisation. Levant (1992) concurs, explaining that men do not have the skills and behaviours required for psychotherapy. He suggests that male traits such as difficulty admitting they have a problem, difficulty asking for help, emotional rigidity and inexpressiveness, and intimacy fears all conflict with traditional therapy requirements and expectations.

The relation between psychological wellbeing, gender role and gender role conflict were also examined by Sharpe and Heppner (1991). Seven instruments were completed by 190 male undergraduate students to assess the relation between these two constructs (gender role conflict and gender role) and wellbeing. Scores on the Gender Role Scale were related to femininity scores, but not related to masculinity scores. Additionally, results indicated that gender role conflict was negatively related to nearly all the measures of psychological wellbeing.

Understanding men's socialisation and conflicting gender roles is a main aim in men's studies, together with facilitating men's growth and improving their wellbeing (Biddulph, 1995). For some, Segal (1990), argues, "masculinity has replaced femininity, as the problem of our time" (p.607). Traditional, male gender roles have been implicated in assault and homicide, domestic violence, rape, child abuse and even murder (Biddulph, 1995; Connell & Huggins, 1998). Karsk and Thomas (1987) suggest that men and women have colluded to produce a set of societal values that are often destructive to both sexes.

Recent literature in men's health has documented important differences in men's healthcare (Connell & Huggins, 1998). These reveal males commit suicide four times more often than women (Biddulph, 1995; Coyle & Morgan-Sykes, 1998). Further, higher levels of injury, alcoholism, drug use, and higher rates of

some physical disorders among men have been reported (Huggins & Connell, 1998). On average, men use health care services less frequently than women, and life expectancy is lower for men (Connell & Huggins, 1998). These problems often stem from restrictive emotionality, limited support and isolation (Thompson, 1991).

According to Lewis (1978), many of the barriers to emotional intimacy among men in our Western society stem from the acceptance of traditional male role expectations. Male traits such as the need to compete, aversion to self-disclosure and vulnerability, fear of homophobia, and also a lack of suitable role models, all create barriers between men. There is a need to address this problem and to encourage men to initiate and maintain meaningful male friendships (Lewis, 1978). Hence, the effects of patriarchal gender on men have also influenced men's social support systems. In Western culture the split between emotion and rationality tends to affect how they relate to people, and can leave them isolated (Horrocks, 1994).

Men's Social Support Systems

The study of social support systems and their links to health and wellbeing have been documented by numerous researchers (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Felton & Shinn, 1992). Felton and Shinn (1992) suggest the notion of social support is defined by exchanges of resources or transactions between people that are perceived to benefit their wellbeing. Further, the most commonly assessed component of support is the feeling of emotional support. From a community psychology perspective, they suggest it would be beneficial to expand notions of social support beyond the conception of significant others to encompass social integration. This concept would have an 'extra-individual referent', such as

communities, behaviour settings and group membership (Felton & Shinn, 1992). In view of the issues relating to men's psychological well-being, men's social support processes have been the focus of several studies (e.g., Barbee et al., 1993; Baumeister & Sommer, 1997; Burda & Vaux, 1987).

Although recent research suggests men's social support resources are inferior to women's because of their socialised sex roles, some literature has been mixed. Burda and Vaux (1987) hypothesised that men have developed methods of obtaining support which agree with their masculine values. They proposed that men seek nurturance from women, and that social drinking may be seen positively as this facilitates positive exchanges between males. Results supported these hypotheses. However, it is interesting to note that when men gather in groups in social drinking situations, it is often considered acceptable to adopt "unmasculine behaviours such as self-disclosure, emotional expressiveness, and even physical touching." Hence, in these situations men may behave in socially feminine ways without threatening their masculine identities (p.33). It should be noted that outside of these contexts these men will revert back to what is considered 'normal male' behaviour with negative consequences.

Barbee et al. (1993) review the impact of gender role expectations on the social support process. Focusing on gender differences, this research suggests that the female role (e.g., promoting emotional expression and nurturing) is more productive in activating and providing social support. Conversely, the male role (e.g., promoting autonomy, achievement and emotional control) impedes the development of social support. Hence, men often find it difficult to seek and obtain social support. However, the type of support needed, instrumental vs. social-emotional, is another factor. Men tend to offer instrumental aid

(e.g., repairing broken items) easier than social-emotional support (Barbee et al., 1993).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) examine the need to belong, and to form and maintain strong, secure relationships. They suggest a lack of attachments can be linked to ill adjustment, various illnesses and health problems, and wellbeing. A review of empirical findings supported their hypothesis that the need to belong is a powerful, basic motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In Western society, the expression of friendship between men is not easy. Men have not been socialised to verbalise feelings, or show affection toward other men (Wilson & Mankowski, in press).

The Men's Group

In response to some of these health and social issues, support systems have been developed. All-male support groups are an example of such groups that have developed to provide safe contexts and structured processes for men to deal with the challenges that confront them (Biddulph, 1995). Common motivations for membership in these groups are feelings of dissatisfaction with life and the need for personal growth. However, a crisis point in life is a main motivational factor. Life crises may include relationship breakdowns, divorce, custody battles or the loss of someone close, resulting in men questioning life choices and searching for meaning (Rabinowitz & Cochran, 1994). A re-evaluation of masculinity follows, with men asking themselves what it is to be man. Hence the experience of gender role conflict is another motivating factor.

According to Karsk and Thomas (1987), women and men often define themselves in relation to each other. The men's group attempts to help men define themselves in terms of themselves. Groups are usually made up of men who share

a common goal of personal growth and identity redefinition (Levy, 1978). Typically, these groups focus on emotional openness, intimacy, role-related personal growth, male-bonding, and social support networks (Karsk & Thomas, 1987; Rabinowitz & Cochran, 1994). Traits considered to be dysfunctional, (e.g., inexpressiveness) resulting from the male role socialisation process, are rectified by doing emotional work and learning new skills (Levant, 1992).

Qualities of all-male groups include realisation that they are not alone in their thinking, dealing with vulnerabilities, increasing their awareness of negative stereotypical roles they are locked into, being able to make decisions to change and learning how to express feelings such as anger and grief (Levant, 1992). The aim of these groups in not to separate the sexes, but to allow men to take time to assess themselves by looking inward. This provides them with more insight into their roles and relationships, and reduces gender role stress (Karsk & Thomas, 1987). The notion of 'father-hunger' is often a recurring theme in men's groups and is often addressed (Wilson & Mankowski, in press). Biddulph (1994) describes this "as the deep biological need for strong.……..masculine input" (p.25). In other words, it concerns the grieving men feel from being emotionally and physically separated from their fathers at a young age. Robert Bly's (e.g., Bly, 1992) work has contributed to this issue by addressing the grieving process that many men need to experience to come to terms with relationships with their own fathers (Levant, 1992).

Most men who participate in men's groups support the women's movement. However, several different strands of men's groups have developed. For example, some groups are politically minded, seeking change outside the group, while others focus on individual personal growth and are less concerned with social and

political change outside the group. Patterns of interaction within all-male groups have received some attention, with researchers focusing on the theme of masculinity (Dougherty, 1990). Generally, men exchange personal stories about their experiences of being male. Self-disclosure and honesty is encouraged, and this, in turn, creates intimacy and trust (Karsk & Thomas, 1987). Past studies have shown that self-disclosure is an important aspect of emotional intimacy (e.g., Lewis, 1978), and storytelling fosters empowerment (Rappaport, 1995). Shared group narratives are also used to provide members with an alternative view of masculinity, and this facilitates identity reconstruction through shared understanding (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995).

A mythopoetic approach to men's groups has also grown in popularity, particularly in North America. These groups rely heavily on narrative theory. Influenced by writer Robert Bly and inspired by Jungian psychology, these men's gatherings usually take the form of weekends away and are often given names such as 'Wild Man' retreats and 'New Warrior' trainings. Mythopoetic groups use storytelling , reinterpretation of myths and fairytales, and rituals (Rabinowitz & Cochran, 1994) to help men celebrate their manhood, restore their self-esteem and find their masculine identity (Levant, 1992). Based on mythology, these ideologies are usually borrowed from other cultures. This implies that masculinity is viewed as a cultural construction (Pleck, Sonenstein & Ku, 1993). Feminist writers who claim there is an emphasis on aggression and 'fierceness' have criticized this movement. Others claim it is a regression to the essentialism in earlier history, where men gathered for 'men only' retreats, and this encouraged separation from women (Levant, 1992).

The literature indicates that men's support groups provide a social network

system that facilitates wellbeing by encouraging emotional expression (Biddulph, 1995; Good, Dell & Mintz, 1989; Morgan, 1992). Issues such as gender role conflict and masculine identity are addressed within this supportive environment (Mankowski, in press). These groups are beneficial for men experiencing relationship problems or life-crises, where support systems and sense of community breakdown. More specifically, these groups provide a context for re-working and re-defining masculinity. Social identity and social roles are developed through shared personal stories and community narratives (Rappaport, 1993). However, it appears few empirical studies (with the exception of Mankowski, in press; Mankowski, Maton, Burke, Hoover & Anderson, in press; Wilson & Mankowski, in press), have documented how these groups function to lessen stress and develop social support. These gaps in the literature highlight the need for more research into men's support systems and how they function to create a psychological sense of community and facilitate identity development.

Psychological Sense of Community

Sarason (1974) presented one of the earliest concepts of psychological sense of community (PSC), defining it as the sense a person has of being a part of a "readily available, mutually supportive network of relationships upon which one could depend" (p.1). Accordingly, people need a PSC as this creates a sense of belonging. A lack of feeling of community results in isolation, loneliness and even a breakdown of society (Sarason, 1974). More recently, the notion of a psychological sense of community has been documented by numerous researchers and reviewers (e.g., Brodsky, 1996; Davidson, Cotter and Stovall, 1991; Hill, 1996; Prezza & Costantini, 1998; Puddifoot, 1996). These studies have distinguished

between the uses of the term community with a geographical (e.g., neighbourhoods or towns) and a relational (concerning human interactions) notion.

Psychological Sense of Community in Group Settings

McMillan and Chavis' (1986) proposed a psychological sense of community (PSC) model which could be used to examine various group interactions. This framework defines community by focusing on networks of people who interact as members within groups. Hence, individuals are brought together by commonalties and social relations rather than locality (Heller, 1989). Psychological sense of community is defined by McMillan and Chavis as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p.9).

Elements from this framework describe the dynamics of the PSC force. The four main themes are as follows: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Membership is a feeling of belonging, of being part, and a feeling that personal investment has earned a right to membership. The notion of Membership has five attributes: boundaries, common symbol systems, emotional safety, sense of belonging and identification, and personal investment. These attributes interact and contribute to a feeling of group membership, and to "who is part of the community and who is not" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.11). Boundaries determine who belongs in a group and who does not. Common symbol systems help to maintain boundaries and create unity amongst group members, and these are central to PSC. Symbols may also contribute to notions of acceptance, of belonging, and separateness. Common symbols are conceptualised as collective representations and may take

the form of rituals, rules, or customary behaviour. Moreover, they play an

important role in groups and group processes, and can facilitate identity

development. <u>Emotional safety</u> is concerned with the security members feel

within their own group. <u>Sense of belonging and identification</u> alludes to feelings

of acceptance by group members and devotion to the group. <u>Personal investment</u>

refers to time and energy given, and commitment to the group. Influence is

'bidirectional" and may stem from the member's input in the group and/or the

group's influence on members to attain conformity. Integration and fulfilment of

needs relates to reinforcement and rewards for members. Shared emotional

connection concerns shared histories, or members identifying with histories

(McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This theory has since been the impetus for

considerable empirical research (McMillan, 1996). Some (eg., Weisenfeld, 1996)

have even been critical of this notion of community, suggesting that this

conception of community, and related concept of 'we,' implies that these group

processes do not involve disagreements and intragroup diversity. In other words,

this concept of 'we' is an idealised vision of community life.

Numerous researchers have used the PSC framework to examine sense of

community in different behavioural and activity settings. A study by Sonn and

Fisher (1996) used the PSC framework to assess a politically constructed group.

The study interviewed 23 'coloured' South African people residing in Melbourne,

Australia. Findings suggested the model presented two different dimensions for

this group of people. The externally imposed and constructed definitions of group

membership, resulting from apartheid laws, were reflected in the first dimension.

The socially constructed notions of community within their group were reflected

in the second dimension. This study concluded by suggesting that the PSC model

was useful for examining "group-specific meanings and understandings of community" (p.417). It was also argued that experiences of security, belonging, and relatedness are facilitated by a PSC and that, in turn, PSC facilitates adaptation to new environments (Sonn & Fisher, 1996).

An exploratory article by Klein and D'Aunno (1986), examined the experience of PSC in the workplace. A conceptual approach to the "referents, determinants and consequences" of a sense of community in work environments was proposed (p.365). This paper focused on the effects of work on individuals, and suggested that a PSC may facilitate a worker's wellbeing. Positive effects included the development of social support networks, security, intrinsic gratification and a stronger sense of self-identity. In a similar study, Pretty and McCarthy (1991) extended the study of PSC in organisational contexts by exploring sense of community among women and men of the corporation. Consistent with Klein and D'Aunno, this study suggested that PSC is a positive force in work settings, and correlates with cohesion, involvement and solid support networks.

Pretty (1990) conducted a study on the relationship between PSC and social climate factors within a university community. One hundred and two university residents completed the Sense of Community Index and Residence Environment Scale. Results from a multiple regression analysis suggested that perceived PSC is related to interpersonal networks and social support, and perceived environmental performance demands. The study concluded by stating that PSC is related to particular characteristics of the psychosocial climate within this setting.

According to Sonn, Bishop and Drew (1999), findings from previous studies on PSC in different settings "reflect the centrality of solid social networks in the

experience of community" (p.208). Sonn and colleagues also suggest that the integration into social support networks provides opportunities that facilitate a sense of fellowship and meaningfulness, even in the face of adversity and stressors.

Support groups may be construed as a relational community with a common group narrative (Heller, 1989; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). They fulfil certain supportive functions including social-emotional support, a feeling of belonging, emotional safety and shared emotional connection. This suggests PSC is fostered in these settings (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Previous research has illustrated the potential of the PSC framework for understanding the nature and function of behaviour or other activity settings. This work suggests individual identity is embedded in the community context, and this is facilitated by community and personal narratives (e.g., Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995). In addition, these contexts provide people with social roles and social identities. If people have a strong PSC they may also become more involved in community life and this may alleviate stress. In turn, these social networks improve quality of life and the well-being of the group (Sonn et al., 1999).

Personal Stories, Community Narratives and Identity

According to Rappaport (1993, 1995), community narratives and personal stories can be used to understand a person's life within their community settings. Rappaport defines a community narrative as a story common among a group of people, and conceptualises community as a group of people with a shared narrative (Rappaport, 1995). Promoting holistic modes of inquiry, Rappaport highlights the potential of a narrative approach to understanding (Sonn et al., 1999). Narratives may be communicated in various ways, including writing,

personal contact, rituals and shared events.

As discussed earlier, mutual help organisations and support groups may be viewed as narrative communities where personal change and identity transformation are consequences of the processes of sociable communication through shared stories and narratives (Rappaport, 1993). People often join support groups to seek an alternative service, or a community of people with common life experiences. The group provides members with an identity through its community narrative, and this provides a basis for change in a member's personal identity story. Rappaport argues that narrative studies provide a strong methodological and analytical tool for studying the relations between special processes of communities and individual lives. Moreover, these studies provide a basis for developing theory for looking at the process of identity change in community settings (Rappaport, 1993). Mankowski and Rappaport (1995) utilised a narrative framework to explore identity development and transformation in social settings. They suggest masculine identity may be understood in terms of storytelling. From this perspective, dominant cultural stories guide social constructions of masculine identity. These stories may be in the form of myths or legends (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995). As noted by others, many men who join men's groups have experienced a loss of self-esteem and identity (Levant, 1992; Levy, 1976). The use of mythology is more common in mythopoetic men's groups, where men explore male spirituality and male psychology by way of rituals, literature, and art (Mankowski, in press; Wilson & Mankowski, in press). However, storytelling and ritualistic behaviour is common to most men's groups, where men gather to exchange stories and create alternative versions about masculine ideology (Mankowski, in press). Through shared community

narratives and personal life stories, social identity develops and personal change occurs. Additionally, a sense of community is established through membership in these social groups and this, in turn, facilitates identity development. However, there is a lack of research concerning how community settings facilitate identity development and adaptation (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995).

A recent study by Mankowski (in press) looks at reconstructing masculinity by focusing on men's group narratives. Mankowski proposed that one component of the group narrative is the role model, which is an idealised image of the self created in the life stories of men. This is particularly common in mythopoetic men's group narratives. As discussed earlier, these are based in a certain set of ideological belief systems. Bly's (1992) book Iron John is the central text of this movement (Levant, 1992). Inspired by Jungian personality theory, these groups describe a masculinity, which is spiritually based and includes archetypes such as the 'Warrior' to characterise masculine identity. Five members of a men's mutual support (MMS) group (age range 20-55), participated in this qualitative study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain life histories, experiences in the group and their evaluation of it. The study concluded by suggesting that men's mutual support groups do provide a successful setting for redefining masculinity and improving relationships with other men. Also, findings indicated that one of the most influential sources of role models for group members was other members, rather than idealised characters or archetypes from the literature (Mankowski, in press). This study suggests involvement in the group fostered feelings of emotional safety, intimacy and trust. Common symbol systems were used to create boundaries and feelings of belonging. Hence, this study illustrates how elements of the PSC framework created PSC in these groups, and in turn,

how this facilitates identity development through the sharing of personal and community narratives.

Recently, Wilson and Mankowski (in press) conducted an exploratory study to examine the group processes in a mythopoetic men's group. Semi-structured interview schedules were used to interview members from a weekly support group. Members were asked to describe their own ideas about the movement, their personal involvement and the resulting changes in their lives. Rituals and religious ceremonies borrowed from Native American culture (such as chanting, drumming and talking sticks) were again used in these groups. These are similar to common symbol systems that are discussed by McMillan and Chavis with regards to PSC framework. The main findings of the study indicated that these groups are a useful support source for men experiencing problems in life. However, it was noted that these men need to be emotionally ready for this sort of support group. In addition, most members were white, and issues primarily concerned men of 'privilege'.

Another study by Mankowski, Maton, Burke, Hoover and Anderson (in press) looked at a men's organisation and how these work to facilitate men's health and wellbeing. This rapidly expanding organisation is called the Mankind Project (MKP) and now has 23 regional training centres overseas. Participants begin with an experiential weekend away, which focuses on intense personal work. After this men are assigned to a small support group which is intended to help men to integrate the changes made during the intense weekend away into their outside lives (Mankowski, et al., in press). This recent literature on men's groups and men's organisations indicates these groups appear to be growing at a steady rate.

This would suggest they have been successful at providing men with a safe context for self-development and identity transformation.

The above studies illustrate the process of identity development that results from involvement in men's groups. From this perspective masculinity may be seen as an ideological construction, that is to be achieved. Other studies have looked at changing identities by using related concepts. For example, Markus and Nurius (1986) proposed the concept of possible selves which describes a person's ideal self, and also pertains to how one would think about their potential and their future. The idea of possible selves functions as an incentive for future behaviour and compliments the notion of self-knowledge. Self knowledge has two important functions. It provides "a set of interpretive frameworks for making sense of past behaviour," and secondly, "it also provides the means-ends patterns of new behaviour" (p. 955). It could be suggested that men's groups operate on this principle, using a group narrative to provide an idealised version of masculinity. With a similar notion, Antze (1976) examined the role of self-help groups and suggested that a specialised system of teachings is used to create 'ideologies' to help shape members. Each group will claim a particular wisdom relating to the problem it treats. These explicit beliefs are often taught in the form of rituals, behavioural rules, slogans, or chosen texts.

At this point, it is important to note that the reconstruction of masculinity should also inspire men. Hence, a main aim should be to separate out the valuable aspects of the traditional male role, and celebrate these, while identifying those that are dysfunctional and obsolete, and change these. Positive attributes include a man's ability to sustain hardship and pain in order to protect others, his willingness to forsake his own needs for his family, his ability to solve problems,

think logically and assert himself. These traits need to be appreciated and celebrated, so men can regain lost pride and self-esteem (Levant, 1992).

In discussing masculine identities, some have alluded to the masculine gender acting as a 'mask' or disguise, using the psychotherapy term 'false self' (Horrocks, 1994). This aspect of the men's group experience, and the process of identity transformation discussed in this paper, is captured by Colling (1992), with: "Like the tin man in The Wizard of Oz, men long for the ability to show their hearts, their soft centres. But the tin man didn't have to travel to Oz to find a heart: he discovered he had had one all along. He just didn't believe in himself enough to show it, and had to find the environment in which it could be revealed" (p.158).

With a main focus on men's groups, this review paper has examined literature from several seemingly separate areas: masculinity, social support, psychological sense of community and narrative theory. In reviewing this literature, these areas have been shown to be related, with each influencing the other. It has been suggested that men in Western society are socialised to be strong and silent, to be emotionally inexpressive, independent and 'armoured'. The negative consequences of this socialisation process include gender role conflict and isolation. A male crisis has been documented, with many men acknowledging a subsequent lack of social support and PSC. In response to this problem they may join a men's group. The literature suggests these support groups may be conceptualised as a relational community with a group narrative. PSC is developed within these groups and social support is central to this experience. A process of identity transformation occurs as a result of group

involvement. Narrative frameworks have been used to explain how these men achieve personal change and adopt an alternative way of viewing masculinity in these contexts. However, as discussed earlier, there have been few empirical studies (with the exception of Mankowski in press) investigating how men's groups function to develop social support and PSC in these settings. In addition, the majority of the studies reviewed in this paper have used quantitative methods.

Future Directions for Research

As discussed by Le-Compte and Goetz (1980), traditional quantitative designs may be limiting where meaningful data conveyed through personal stories is missed. However, some recent studies have used qualitative approaches to human science. These studies have been insightful, and have described the salient factors involved in the phenomenon they were investigating. For example, Massey, Cameron, Ouellette and Fine (1998) investigated resilience and thriving using a life story method of inquiry. Since thriving was conceptualised as a process, a qualitative approach was considered beneficial. A review of this approach also suggested this analysis opens up opportunities for future research (Massey et al., 1998). Another study by McLeod and Balamoutsou (1996) used qualitative methods to identify and categorize different narrative events in a single case in therapy.

Some interesting qualitative studies were also included in this review. For example, the studies investigating men's support groups (Mankowski, in press; Wilson & Mankowski, in press), and the study on a politically constructed group and development of PSC (Sonn & Fisher, 1996). These studies illustrated the value of developing a non-traditional, qualitative approach to human science by obtaining meaningful data that highlights the salient factors involved in people's

life experiences. Qualitative research involves naturalistic inquiry and an interpretive approach. This method of research can involve in-depth interviews and analysing textual data, focusing on meaning to develop insight into phenomena. The aim is to understand the complexities underlying the textual material (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In turn, this gives more insight into a person's psychological world by communicating their experience via stories (e.g., Mankowski, in press; Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995; Rappaport, 1993, 1995). Qualitative research allows you to "preserve chronological flow, see precisely which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.1). Semi-structured interviews and qualitative analysis are considered well suited to exploratory study which looks at personal issues and process (Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick, 1998; Patton, 1980; Smith, 1995).

Future research into men's issues may benefit from deploying qualitative approaches, particularly exploratory studies investigating men in transition where there is a need to focus on process. In general, men's groups have been shown to use a narrative framework. Therefore, more research into this context may also benefit from qualitative methods where personal stories and group narratives are examined. This knowledge may have implications for developing strategies and interventions aimed at improving men's social systems, and provide the foundations for future research. This may involve integrating some of the effective strategies used within men's groups into the broader community. Perhaps this could be achieved through workshops and seminars. These forums may attract men who are not ready for a men's group experience, but are seeking personal change and support.

Conclusion

This review has uncovered a significant amount of research detailing how masculinity has changed, and has been reconstructed, particularly during the last decade. From a psychological perspective, a crisis in masculinity is apparent. There are several main issues related to this problem. Firstly, social change has impacted on men in Western society resulting in gender role conflict. Many men are confused about their identities and are experiencing a transition phase. Secondly, one of the problems for these men in transition is a lack of social support and psychological sense of community. In response to these health and social issues, men's support groups have been developed. These groups function as an alternative support system for men and operate by using a narrative framework. The group offers a context where men can be vulnerable with other men, and the group process helps men to define and embrace their masculine identity. Specifically, these groups develop a new ideology and set of norms to facilitate identity transformation. Community narratives help men to re-define masculinity by shaping their identities. These may also be seen to function in the same way as common symbol systems. Personal story-telling and self-disclosure are used to enhance self-understanding, self-esteem and awareness. Additionally new skills are developed such as empathy, expressing emotions and relating to men in a new more positive way. In conclusion, men's groups provide an environment conducive to developing a strong masculine identity and promoting men's psychological health and well-being.

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Running Head: Masculinity, Social Support, and Sense of Community

Masculinity, Social Support and Sense of Community:

The Men's Group Experience

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Abstract

There has been an increasing interest in understanding factors that influence men's wellbeing and promoting men's health. One of the areas of research has centred on the role of men's support groups in addressing issues pertaining to the wellbeing of men. The present study aimed to gain an understanding of men's experiences in men's groups. Twelve men were interviewed about their experiences in these groups using an interview schedule developed to assess psychological sense of community and social support. Data was analysed thematically for recurring themes. Theme analysis was partially guided by the Psychological Sense of Community (PSC) model. Data showed that the elements of the model can be used to understand the structure and functions of the groups as experienced by these participants. Additional analyses revealed a process of personal change and identity transformation that takes place because of involvement in the men's groups. It is suggested that the PSC framework is a useful tool for understanding social networks, but it does not capture fully the process of transformation and reconstruction over time. Finally, the study highlighted the benefits of qualitative studies and suggestions are made for future research into masculinity.

Masculinity, Social Support and Sense of Community:

The Men's Group Experience

During the last two decades, men's health and wellbeing has received

increased attention (Morgan, 1992). Some have even documented issues

surrounding men's wellbeing as a 'male crisis' (e.g., Biddulph, 1995; Coyle &

Morgan-Sykes, 1998; Horrocks, 1995; Levant, 1992). These changes

developed from social and political forces such as the feminist and gay rights

movements (Connell, 1995).

The feminist movement grew in response to women's oppression

and this growth had a huge impact on society. In parallel, the gay rights movement

challenged culturally accepted models of masculinity (O'Shaughnessy, 1999).

These changes have caused significant power shifts in gender relations (Messner,

1998; Townsend, 1994), with consequences resulting in explorations of masculinity

and femininity as social constructions (Kimmel, 1987; O'Shaughnessy, 1999).

The notion that traditional, socialised gender roles may have negative consequences

for both sexes was highlighted by feminist critiques (Messner, 1998).

According to Horrocks (1994), the men's movement grew in response

to this force, as well as men's increased awareness that patriarchal

masculinity is damaging to them. Recognising their self-destructive identities,

some men acknowledged the contradictions and costs of such power, and began

breaking free from their rigid male roles (Karsk & Thomas, 1987; Webb, 1998).

Masculinity has been reconstructed and re-defined (Brod, 1987; Levant, 1992;

Messner, 1998), requiring men to adapt to diverse gender roles and identities

(Kimmel, 1994). Some have even suggested that the 'code' of masculinity has

collapsed. The 'norms' of the traditional male role include restrictive

emotionality, self-reliance, avoiding femininity, seeking status and success, aggression, fear of intimacy, and homophobia (Levant, 1992).

According to Buchbinder (1994), the older model of masculinity is now viewed as rigid and narrow, and the rise of the 'New Age Man' has blurred traditional distinctions between what is perceived as masculine and unmasculine, resulting in gender role conflict. O'Neil (1990) defines gender role conflict as a "psychological state in which gender roles have negative consequences on the individual or others" (p.25). This conflict results in the restriction of a person's potential, and occurs when "rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles, learned during socialisation, result in the personal restriction, devaluation, or violation of others or self" (O'Neil, 1990, p.25). This shift in masculine identity has resulted in the need to address men's wellbeing.

These social and cultural changes have fuelled the interest in men's studies (e.g., Brod, 1987; Kimmel, 1987; Messner, 1998; Pease, 1999), with some studies focusing on gender role conflict (e.g., Good, Dell & Mintz, 1989; Sharpe & Heppner, 1991). Understanding men's socialisation and conflicting gender roles is a main aim in men's studies, together with facilitating men's growth and improving their wellbeing (Biddulph, 1995). For some, Segal (1990) argues, "masculinity has replaced femininity, as the problem of our time" (p.607). Traditional, male gender roles have been implicated in assault and homicide, domestic violence, rape, child abuse, and murder (Biddulph, 1995; Connell & Huggins, 1998). Karsk and Thomas (1987) suggest that men and women have colluded to produce a set of societal values that are often destructive to both sexes. Recent literature in men's health has documented important differences in men's healthcare (Connell & Huggins, 1998) and these have been linked with

some aspects of traditional masculinity (Coyle & Morgan-Sykes, 1992). Studies have revealed that males commit suicide four times more often than women. Further, men have higher levels of injury and substance abuse, higher rates of some physical disorders, use healthcare services less frequently than women, and life expectancy is lower (Connell & Huggins, 1998). According to Thompson (1991), these problems often stem from restrictive emotionality, compulsive competition, limited social support and isolation. In response to these challenges men's groups have been developed.

Men's Social Support Systems and Processes

The study of social support systems and their links to health and wellbeing have been documented by many (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Felton & Shinn, 1992). Men's social support processes have been the focus of several studies (e.g., Barbee et al., 1993; Baumeister & Sommer, 1997; Burda & Vaux, 1987). The notion of social support is defined by exchanges of resources between people that are perceived to benefit their wellbeing. The most commonly assessed component of support is the feeling of emotional support (Felton & Shinn, 1992). Many of the barriers to emotional intimacy among men stem from the acceptance of traditional male role expectations, and a lack of role models (Lewis, 1978). Barbee et al. (1993) examine the impact of gender role expectations on the social support process. Focusing on gender differences, they suggest that the female role (e.g., promoting emotional expression and nurturing) is more productive in activating and providing social support. In contrast, the male role (e.g., promoting autonomy, competitiveness, achievement and emotional control) impedes the development of social support, encouraging isolation. Subsequently, men often find it difficult to secure social-emotional support, but tend to offer instrumental support (e.g., repairing broken items) instead.

All-male support groups are an example of groups that have developed to provide safe contexts and structured processes for men to deal with the challenges that confront them (Biddulph, 1995). Typically these groups focus on emotional openness, intimacy, role-related personal growth, male-bonding, and social support networks (Karsk & Thomas, 1987; Rabinowitz & Cochran, 1994). Traits considered to be dysfunctional, (e.g., inexpressiveness) resulting from the male role socialisation process, are rectified by emotional work and learning new skills (Levant, 1992). The aim of these groups is to allow men to assess themselves by looking inward. This provides them with insight into their roles and relationships, and reduces gender role stress (Karsk & Thomas, 1987).

Patterns of interaction within all-male groups have received attention, with researchers focusing on the theme of masculinity. It has been suggested that men's support groups provide a social network that facilitates wellbeing by encouraging emotional expression and self-disclosure (Good, Dell & Mintz, 1989; Morgan, 1992). Issues such as gender role conflict and masculinity are addressed within this supportive environment. More specifically, these groups provide a context for re-working and re-defining masculinity. Social identity is developed through shared personal story-telling and community narratives (Mankowski, in press; Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995; Rappaport, 1993). The literature indicates that all-male support groups are beneficial for men experiencing relationship problems or life crises, where support systems breakdown. However, it appears few empirical studies (with the exception of Mankowski, in press; Wilson & Mankowski, in press) have documented how these groups function to lessen stress and develop social support and sense of community. These gaps in the literature highlight the need for more research into men's support systems and their role in facilitating adaptation to cultural change.

Sense of Community, Stories and Identity in Men's Groups

Sarason (1974) presented one of the earliest concepts of psychological sense of community (PSC), defining it as the sense a person has of being a part of a "readily available, mutually supportive network of relationships upon which one could depend" (p.1). Accordingly, people need a PSC as this creates a sense of belonging. A lack of feeling of community results in isolation, loneliness and even a breakdown of society (Sarason, 1974). Since then, the notion of psychological community has been documented by many (e.g., Heller, 1989; Hill, 1996). These studies have distinguished between two uses of the term community, a geographical notion of community (e.g., neighbourhoods) and relational (human interactions). Support groups may be construed as a relational community with a common group narrative (Heller, 1989; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Rappaport, 1993). They fulfil certain supportive functions including social-emotional support, a sense of belonging, and emotional safety. This suggests PSC is fostered in these settings.

According to Rappaport (1993; 1995), community narratives and personal stories can be used to understand a person's life within their community settings. Rappaport (1995), defines a community narrative as "a story that is common among a group of people" (p.803). Narratives may be communicated in various ways including writing, personal contact, rituals and shared events. Mutual help organisations may be viewed as narrative communities where personal change and identity transformation are consequences of the processes of sociable communication through shared stories and narratives. People often join support groups as an alternative service, or a community of people with common life experiences. The group provides members with an identity through its community narrative, and this provides a basis for change in a member's personal identity story (Rappaport, 1993).

Narrative theory provides a strong methodological and analytical tool for studying the relations between social processes of communities and individual lives. Moreover, these studies provide a basis for developing theory for looking at the process of identity change in community settings (Rappaport, 1993). Men's support groups may be understood as a relational community with a narrative framework. In this way, the community narrative shapes the identities of members, and the exchange of personal stories (self-disclosure) also facilitates personal change through self-knowledge.

Mankowski and Rappaport (1995) used a narrative framework to explore identity development and transformation in social settings. They suggest masculine identity may be understood in terms of storytelling. From this perspective, dominant cultural stories guide social constructions of identity. Rappaport (1995) suggests dominant cultural stories are communicated through social institutions or mass media, and may be in the form of myths, fairytales or legends. Wilson and Mankowski (in press) suggest the use of mythology is more common in mythopoetic men's groups (Bly, 1992), where men explore male spirituality and psychology by way of rituals, literature, and art. However, story-telling is also common to most men's groups, where men exchange stories and create alternative versions about masculine ideology (Mankowski, in press). Through shared community narratives and personal life stories, identity development and change occurs. In addition, a psychological sense of community is established through membership in these social groups and this facilitates identity development. However, there is a lack of research concerning how men's groups facilitate identity change (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995).

A Framework for Psychological Sense of Community

McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed a psychological sense of community (PSC) model which could be used to examine various group interactions. This model defines community by focusing on networks of people interacting as members within groups. Hence individuals are brought together by commonalities and social relations rather than locality (Heller, 1989). Elements from this model describe the dynamics of the sense of community force – membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Sense of community is defined by McMillan and Chavis as, "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p.9).

Numerous researchers have used the PSC framework to examine sense of community in different settings. Some (Pretty, 1990; Pretty & McCarthy, 1991) have explored PSC in oganisational contexts, while Brodksy (1996) extended PSC to explore resiliency among single mothers. Sonn and Fisher (1996) used the PSC framework to assess a politically constructed group. Their findings suggested the model presented two different dimensions, an externally imposed dimension and a dimension constructed within group settings. Much of the research suggests PSC is related to interpersonal networks and social support but can extend beyond these structures. In line with Mankowski and Rappaport's (1995) suggestion, Sonn, Bishop, and Drew (1999) suggested that the potential of the PSC framework for understanding community can be realised by adopting and using more holistic modes of inquiry. The present study aims to explore men's experiences in men's groups and the challenges these men confront. Specifically, it aims to explore how these groups foster psychological sense of community and

social support through involvement in men's groups.

Method

The present study is exploratory and adopted a qualitative approach.

Qualitative research involves naturalistic inquiry and an interpretive approach.

This method of research can involve conducting in-depth interviews and analysing

textual data, focusing on meaning to develop insight into a phenomena. The aim is

to understand the complexities underlying the textual material (Denzin & Lincoln,

1994). In turn, this gives more insight into a person's psychological world by

communicating their experience via stories (e.g., Mankowski, in press;

Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995; Rappaport, 1995). Qualitative research allows

you to "preserve chronological flow, see precisely which events led to which

consequences, and derive fruitful explanations" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.1).

Further, other researchers have recognised the diversity underlying PSC,

suggesting this framework together with qualitative approaches may be beneficial

in future research into community settings and groups (Hill, 1996).

Participants

Participants were 12 males ranging in age from 40 to 60 years ($\underline{M}$ = 7.5, $\underline{SD}$ =

5.06). In qualitative research an adequate number of participants often involves a

sample of less than 15 cases, otherwise analysis may become too complex and

produces thin data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Burgess-Limerick and Burgess-

Limerick (1998) recommend a sample size of between eight and 20. Participants

who were information rich were recruited (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This is

referred to as intensity sampling (Patton, 1980), and means the majority of

participants had the knowledge and experience required to participate in this study (Patton, 1980).

The majority of the sample were Australian born, with one New Zealand born and one United Kingdom born participant. Recruited from the community through the Men's Health and Wellbeing Association (M.H.W.A.) of W.A. all had been, or were currently, members of a men's group. Ten participants came from group settings which focused primarily on men's issues, and two participants were involved with domestic violence groups. These all-male support groups provide a safe context for dealing with issues such as broken relationships, life crises, gender role conflict, re-working masculinity and personal growth. By sharing experiences these men explore relationships with each other and develop self-understanding. Group numbers varied from three members in one group, and a range of five to 30 in the other groups. Some participants were currently members of more than one group. At the time of interviewing, the average length of membership was four years (with a range of 6 months - 10 years).

A range of professional occupations were documented, however, these have not been listed to ensure participants are not identified. Educational backgrounds ranged from basic high school certificates to university post-graduates. Seven of the participants had been married, and six have children. Six men reported immediate family availability as a support network, and only three reported extended family availability. All participants were treated in accordance with the Ethical Principles of the Australian Psychological Society.

Instruments

Participants were given an introductory letter giving information on the purpose of the study, contact names and phone numbers should any queries arise

and a consent letter to sign (refer to Appendix A-1 and A2). Also, a demographics questionnaire included age, length of membership in a men's group, ethnicity, education, occupation and existing support networks (refer to Appendix B).

A semi-structured interview schedule was used to interview men about their experiences in men's groups. Some questions were developed to explore elements of McMillan and Chavis's (1986) PSC framework.(i. e., membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection). The questions were generated to answer the research questions. Prior to interviewing the questions were read by two people (one current member of M.H.W.A., and one previous member of a men's group) to assess face validity and clarity of questions (refer to Appendix C).

Following a pilot study, which involved conducting an interview with two men previously involved in men's groups, some questions were re-defined and redrafted (Smith, 1995). Changes included the re-framing of some questions and their sequence order, the omission of some theory-based questions, and the inclusion of more questions pertaining to the men's experiences. An audio-tape was used to record interviews.

Procedure

After contact was made with the M.H.W.A., a number of contact names and phone numbers were given to the researcher and the process of recruiting participants began. Copies of information and consent letters were sent to key members of several different men's groups and these were passed on to members. On expression of interest, members contacted the researcher by phone and an interview appointment was organised.

Prior to the interview participants were asked to read and sign the information and consent letter, which also explained confidentiality and anonymity issues. For privacy and convenience, most interviews were conducted in participant's own homes. This provided a familiar, less threatening setting for participant's and allowed less interruption for data collection (Smith, 1995). Participants were given the opportunity to refuse participation, or discontinue at any point during the interview. After consent was given, the audio-tape was switched on and interviews commenced.

The semi-structured interview schedule, containing 15 open-ended questions, was used by the researcher to collect data for analysis. Smith (1995) describes a semi-structured interview as one where the researcher is guided by a schedule containing a set of questions. However, this schedule is flexible and may vary during the interview process. Advantages include, promoting a better relationship between researcher and respondent, more flexibility to obtain information of interest as it arises, and allows the respondent to have more control in telling their own story. This structure lends itself to helping the researcher learn from the respondent's own experience and knowledge.

A funnelling technique was used to order questions in sequence. This allows the researcher to elicit the respondent's own views and then probe for more specific issues (Smith, 1995). Hence, questions began broadly and funnelled down to focus on more specific concerns relating to elements of PSC and gender identity issues. Additionally, prompts were used where more information was required.

Interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes and averaged sixty minutes. On completion, demographics were collected and participants were de-briefed and

any further questions regarding the study were answered. Finally, they were thanked for their participation and reminded of contact numbers for possible future inquiries.

A diary was kept by the researcher and entries were made after each interview. This raw material detailed reflections made by the researcher after interviews. These included the researcher's own values, interests and rationales. Documentations such as these give a more complete account of the research process (Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997).

After 12 interviews sufficient data was collected that saturation had occurred and interviews concluded. Saturation occurs when the researcher can account for and understand variation in the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Analysis

The interview material was transcribed verbatim to assure authenticity for data analysis. Qualitative analysis involves developing a framework for reducing raw data into more manageable 'chunks'. This is a cyclical process with an aim of identifying categories and themes generated from descriptive material by content analysis. Analysis was guided by elements in the PSC framework (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

As suggested by Smith (1995) analysis followed an idiographic approach, where one transcript was examined in detail and analysed before moving on to the next one. After re-reading the transcript several times, memos and notes were made and categorisation and coding for data reduction commenced. To facilitate data analysis, each paragraph of the text was numbered, and significant sentences were underlined in blue pen. These were determined by the meaning they conveyed in relation to answering the research questions and demonstrating the

salient features of the participants' experiences. This process is similar to that used in grounded theory where theory is generated by the researcher's close engagement with the participant's transcript material (Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997)

The next phase involved summarising each paragraph and listing these summary notes in the right hand margin. After further immersion in the text, more margin notes were made, and categories developed to describe what was happening. Emerging themes were developed and a code produced for each theme, and these were listed on the left hand side of the text. In line with Miles and Huberman (1994) and Smith's (1995) approach, this entailed selecting key word/words to describe and summarise the theme. Codes were used to mark the location of each theme in the margin of the text. Categories and themes were examined for verification and re-defined if necessary. This process was repeated for each of the 12 transcripts. In order to ensure themes and categories were common to each transcript, all texts were then compared and checked against each other. At this point some categories were dropped and more useful ones added. In the final stages, colour coding of significant sentences was used minimally to help locate themes and categories in text, and ensure quotations were only used once in reporting results. A final, master list of themes contained several categories. These themes and categories were similar to the PSC elements and provided the material for the main findings for this study.

To address the problem of contaminating data with researcher bias, a co-analyser was asked to independently read, interpret and verify the emergent themes and categories. Agreement of relevant and recurrent themes was decided after discussion and clarification of issues (e.g., reviewing relevant literature). This verification process ensures the text, or paragraphs, reflect the themes and

categories interpreted by the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln,1994). Secondly, where possible, member checking was employed (Mankowski, in press). Although limited, this involved contacting five participants and asking them to verify the researcher's interpretation and understanding of their transcripts to ensure authenticity. Additionally, data analysis was thoroughly documented.

Findings

The main aim of the present study was to gain an understanding of men's experiences in men's groups. The study used interview data to explore psychological sense of community and social support within these groups and examine their affect on gender role conflict and masculine identity issues. The themes that developed are organised according to the elements of the PSC framework (membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs and shared emotional connection). An additional theme, which was not captured by the PSC framework, also emerged. This theme reflected the process involved in the men's group experience and was termed Personal change and Identity transformation. Two categories were incorporated in this theme: <u>Personal growth</u> and <u>Gender role conflict.</u> The notion of social support was reflected throughout the texts and was predominantly reported under the theme of Integration and fufilment of needs. Quotations and keywords have been used in reporting to illustrate themes and to capture the experiences of the participants.

<u>Membership</u>

Membership is a feeling of belonging, of being a part, and a feeling that commitment has earned a right to membership (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). The notion of Membership has five attributes: boundaries, common symbol systems, emotional safety, sense of belonging and identification, and personal investment.

These attributes interact and contribute to a feeling of group membership, and to "who is part of the community and who is not" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.11).

Boundaries. Who belongs in a group and who does not is determined by boundaries (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Data collected suggested that boundaries are internally created for these groups. Social distance has been created and transcripts reflected feelings of us/them. For these groups, boundaries are determined by differences in the way these men think and behave compared to what is considered the 'norm' in a traditional Western society. For example, expressing emotions and showing affection for other men. These differences stem from change through experience in groups. Work places seemed to be common ground for these feelings to surface, where power, competition and other traditional male traits are displayed. For example, according to one participant:

.....but my way of relating to them [work colleagues] and my understanding of them is quite different of my experience in men's groups, because they can all pretend to be macho types, and to be a bunch of racists and sexists, but I also know that the vast majority of them have another side, although they are hiding it terribly well they do have it.... and it's only in rare moments when you get them by themselves, or sometimes you can shame them...... they are not a lost cause.

The participant continued: "They know that something is wrong but they haven't got to the point where its hurting them enough that they are going to do something about." This notion of us/them was also reflected in many participants' stories. This suggests feelings of not accepting the behaviours and attitudes of other men [them], who have not been through the transition process facilitated by this group experience [us]. Another participant said:

The thing is that the first form of behaviour is so ingrained in men….and consciously I am making a choice, and it's not a hard choice to make when I see a lot of other men in businesses like I was and they are just not living a life.

When asked whether group involvement had changed their relationships with others, one participant responded:

....I think being in that group,...one of the consequences and being part of the men's group is part of the whole growing process, [where] boundaries to me are far worse rigid and tight and meaningful,.....like for men to hug each other.

The concept of boundary-making was also noted with new members who did not fit because they did not adhere to membership protocol. This related to issues around domination, leadership, and listening to others' stories, and is illustrated by:

...there is no vying for leadership within the group. Although I have picked it up just once or twice with a newcomer who has come in and tried to just have, you know, some men have the kind of control, need for control.

Most members adhere to the rules, and follow the protocol of their group's structure. This aspect of boundaries is important and serves to create a context that is perceived to be separate from the 'outside world' and owned by members. One participant highlighted this by saying: "Because outside of that I don't have anything like that, so it's like my view for the common world."

Common symbol system. Common symbol systems help to maintain boundaries and create unity amongst group members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Symbols may also contribute to notions of belonging and separateness, and play important roles in groups (Sonn & Fisher, 1996). When participants were asked to give an account of a typical group experience they reported using particular social

conventions and collective representations such as "rituals", "ceremonies", "rules," and customary behaviour. Data revealed that these characteristics were common to most groups, and provided a social bond which facilitated smooth functioning within the groups, and emotional security. The following description illustrates a typical group format:

> .....the evening is broken up into I guess three major segments. Firstly, we start off with a meditation,... and there's a sharing circle format. Then we open the floor for sharing, and there's a talking staff and you take that, and they have an open floor to discuss - and they deal with whatever issue they want to with an atmosphere of non-judgemental listening, and you don't give feedback. And that goes on for about an hour or so, and about half an hour or so coffee break, and we chat. Then there is an open discussion from about ten for just any issues, dealt with in an open way....

Another participant's experience was:

> The guided meditations are often imagery.... and after that we ring a Tibetan bell and everyone would sit around and we light the candles on the floor and we read the charter for the Men's Group, which is that we meet for men's fellowship and there is an opportunity for personal growth... We speak from the 'I'. That is very important that we don't start lecturing or talking about other people. Everything must be from 'me' or 'my' personal experience... It has got to be our story and how we are feeling, the 'I' feeling.

Participants described other ritualistic behaviours such as "linking arms," "power circles," "staring at the candle" and "deliberate relaxation." One participant elaborated with: "...and ordinarily we would go round in a circle to say how you were and that would give a sense of sharing...."

An important rule that must be practiced and adhered to is listening to others. Personal story-telling is an important part of the group process, where each member is given a chance to tell their story. The "talking stick" is used to give the holder the right to speak without interruption. Used to organise the group, this ritual also serves to empower and honour a member - so they may be heard. The ideology behind the talking stick is explained by the following words:

> And we don't allow people to give advice - so we have a talking stick. So when you hold the stick it works. So in situations where men are together it is quite competitive, so one might tend to hold the fort more than others and interject, but with this system that can't happen.

Physical contact between members is encouraged and is an accepted characteristic of group behaviour. As one participant explains:

> We do things like when greeting you hug, and when leaving you hug. And sometimes we'd hold hands, sometimes sit in meditation together. Say at the end we might link arms and meditate for a while together.

Some participants reported weekends and retreats away where certain 'rites of passage' are performed. These may include activities such as, "drumming", "group walks" and general men's gatherings to celebrate manhood. These common symbol systems all help to create and maintain intimacy, trust and emotional bonding. Moreover, they provide the group with a community narrative.

Emotional safety. Emotional safety is concerned with the security members feel within their own group. Membership criteria establishes boundaries which provide the emotional security that facilitates group intimacy (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Interview data indicated that these men felt security and

acceptance among group members in the context they had created. For example, comments like: "it was a safe place to go....," and from another participant: "I have learnt in that environment to take risk...."

This sense of security stems from an understanding and agreement of membership protocol. Risk-taking generally related to truth-telling and self-disclosing when telling personal stories. Hence, "confidentiality is imperative" and "part of the charter" for all groups. This influences feelings of safety and confidence to "speak openly." The following comments explain:

So it [talking stick] gets them used to speaking at that kind of level of

intimacy....and that's another part of the charter, of course, confidentiality.

At the beginning they do say whatever happens in the group will remain in

the group.

Another participant explains: "You can talk from the heart on the basis that none of this information gets out. It is highly privileged. And you can talk about anything, knowing the next bloke is going to be just as open....." When asked what it has been like in the group, one participant responded:

It's been safe. I felt safe and confident. I look forward to going because I feel

safe telling them how I feel. I can't tell my mates how I feel... and I can delve

into how I'm feeling, and tell them almost anything....I don't mind speaking

from the heart and speaking about personal things....and the safety to be as

you wish........So we speak as openly as you feel for yourself.

Data revealed one of the most effective codes of conduct for membership was the notion of speaking from the 'I'. This frame of reference protects members by facilitating "non-judgemental comment" and reminds members to "never give advice." As one participant explained:

•

..where you can do it [talk] here because there is no judgement, no 'you said',

something I have learned, because it has to be 'I' or 'I' feel, feeling

ones... Your not sort of feeling that they are going to judge you and tell you to

do this or why did you do that. No accusing stuff.

Another respondent said:

..I could discuss and openly express feelings that probably I couldn't express

or deal with, you know, in any other forum....with an atmosphere of non-

judgemental listening, and you don't get feedback...not criticising or offering

advice.. .And it is created as a safe environment, and for many people it is the

first time they have really shared any of these things and feel they can......

Further, physical contact and sharing personal stories creates intimacy and trust

and a sense of emotional security. For example: "I think the sort of hugging and

stuff makes you really feel secure within the group - the physical contact," and,

from another participant: "so there is a sense of knowledge about those people and

a degree of trust comes out of that for me." Many respondents said they had

never revealed that much to anyone else before because they were among a group

of "common-focused people" with "shared values". For example:

..and you were taken very much at face value, in a supportive sort of

environment where everyone was there for pretty much the same reason,

because they were tired of the competitive male society, and it was a refuge

from it if you like....

This sense of emotional safety within the groups was consistent across transcripts.

Sense of belonging and identification. According to McMillan and Chavis

(1986), sense of belonging and identification alludes to feelings of acceptance by

group members and devotion to the group. This "involves the feeling, belief, and

expectation that one fits in the group and has a place there" (p.10). Responses

reflecting sense of belonging were mostly related to feelings of acceptance by the

group and a sense of relatedness. Data suggested these feelings were created and

maintained by a safe environment, familiarity with the group and shared value

systems. For example, when asked about a sense of belonging, one participant

responded:

> Yes, there is a sense of belonging. And I think sense of community is
>
> definitely there. You know because we gather weekly, so we have structure to
>
> our life in that sense, and we are all part of the group....a sense of being
>
> present somewhere without being judged or whatever, just a sense of
>
> fellowship and equality.

The following comments illustrate the notions of acceptance and relatedness, and

also reflect the presence of a 'unconditional positive regard' for members:

> And suddenly there was this forum where I could talk about the problems
>
> problems I was having with my kids .....and I didn't talk about that to
>
> anyone before that....they allow me to express my feelings and to
>
> recognise how I am feeling and also see other men doing the same
>
> thing.....And that is what I found was the greatest, or biggest thing for me was
>
> that I suddenly was among a group of men who I could relate to in quite a
>
> deep way, and trust, and a feeling of camaraderie that I had never experienced
>
> in any other place.

Another respondent said:

> ....the thoughts that I have are at some point I am included in the group, but I
>
> am not the same as other members, and it's like I am encouraged or allowed
>
> to come along.....And you can accept a person and get along with them to that

level of acceptance between each other, even if it might not work, but at the

level we choose it does.... what I have got out of it is the sense of being

part of something. And it's there once a month or whatever. So it's as

if we can pick up where we left off the last time... I can only say its a

family thing....a kind of blind acceptance, you know you might be a

smart arse sometimes, or whatever, but at some point they are not going

to say go away and stay away - so acceptance. I see myself as

accepted.....and it's a simple matter of having found a group of people

with common values.

Sense of belonging and identification is shown to be an important, positive

phenomenon for these men in transition, who have experienced feelings of

low self-esteem and vulnerability related to personal crises and gender role

conflict.

Influence

Influence is "bidirectional" and may stem from the member's input in the

group and/or the group's influence on members to attain conformity and control.

Studies have indicated there is a positive relationship between conformity and

group cohesiveness. Further, consensual validation suggests that people need to

know they share similar feelings and experiences as others, and this develops trust

(McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.11). It is important to know group norms and laws

so members understand codes of conduct (McMillan, 1996). Data collection

revealed most groups endorsed shared leadership where they: "acknowledge no

expert, so we take expertise from each other...and we take it in turns to be

facilitator." The role of influence is central to these groups as this is linked to

empowerment. This is explained in these words:

....And that [influence] is related to so many of these issues of what it is to be

a man. I mean part of our Western societies conception of man is ....top dog

sort of stuff. This is the traditional conception of maleness, the

competitiveness, top dog. But that's why there are certain understood

protocols.....in which their [member's] own sense of their worth is being re-

built through this process."

Traditional male-role socialisation encourages men to control others, attain power, achieve and compete. In men's groups, these behaviours are discouraged, and the notion of equality and honouring members is promoted through shared leadership and giving feedback when asked. This ideology fosters empowerment and a sense of mattering to the group and to other members.

Other responses reflected an intrinsic need for reciprocation with the notion of "giving something back" was common across texts. When asked what was valued from membership, one response was: "Friendship, the expression of my feelings and also the ability to be able to help men who are not coping too well." Another respondent said:

.....yeah, its quite amazing to have this link ......I suppose it means having

a connection with some other men that are a bit special and being able to

talk and open up with some men. It means I am available for them and they

are available for me.

Data collection reflected a need to conform by adhering to group protocol, and adapting to a new community narrative where an alternative way of viewing masculinity is taught. This involved changes in attitude and behaviours towards other men. Some members reported difficulties in adapting and one felt "quite

traumatised.... and unsettled by having physical contact with other men...." This is further illustrated by the following comments:

> ......so I am not used to hugging men...there was no doubt at all I was a homophobic. And I found a bit of stiffness about hugging men. But now I find it comes, maybe not naturally, but more easily, and I am certainly not homophobic........initially it was hard for me to fit in and the hugging was hard for me.....

And from another respondent:

> .....before I joined the Men's Group I was a bit homophobic - like not too keen on physical contact with other men, just because of the connotations that brought up in my mind, from when we were kids. So it has dispelled a lot of the phobia I had about homosexuals.

These responses reflect a traditional male role trait - homophobia. Although challenging, data suggested showing affection became an accepted way of relating to other men.

Integration and Fulfilment of Needs

Integration and fulfilment of needs relates to reinforcement and rewards for members, and is central to PSC. Needs are determined by values and goals, and if shared by members, need-fulfilment is facilitated. In turn, people are able to meet their own and other people's needs (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Data analysis reflected several important needs being met through membership in these groups. Common to most transcripts were shared goals, such as; "personal growth", "lifestyle change", and "the fellowship of other men." Joining a men's group gave members "new life skills" and "structure." Other respondents reported the benefits of learning new ways of behaving towards other men. For example:

"...to learn to relate to men and to learn to see men as friends, and helpers and people who can actually nurture me rather than being competitors...."

However, data suggested support played a central role in these groups and this was seen to be a major benefit of membership.

Most participants reported a "crisis" or "turning point' in their life which triggered a need to seek some form of support. This was reflected in comments such as: "I was at my wit's end," and: "I was in a state of pretty deep despair." Another respondent said: "I found that first group quite an anchor within my life, a life-buoy at that time." A common theme was relationship breakdown, where a lack of social support was felt. This created a need to re-structure their lives, and was illustrated by these comments: "It has given structure to the week, and if I didn't go I would feel a bit lost I think," and; ".... it's community, it's family if you like." Another respondent said: "It means somewhere I can go in the week, where I can share my problems."

A need for lifestyle change was also apparent in many texts, where conflict between family, work and social relations was realised. The following comment reflects this: "I worked very long hours and didn't have a good social network."

Data suggested membership offered support at three levels - social, emotional (or psychological) and physical. Physical support came from contact, such as "hugging," "holding hands" and "linking arms." Social and emotional support was reflected across texts, and was also offered outside the formal group structure. One participant explains:

.....so the men's support group essentially gave me a help with a support network where I could discuss and openly express feelings... and I guess it was a good forum to sort of deal with feelings and mirror feelings back at

myself - and I guess look at what I was doing just to make changes I needed to make.... we also have in the past what you would call support, where if there are any issues people really want to work on we'll have people phone that person up during the week.......and just offer support..... and we have all our phone numbers.....and a list of people to contact if we need to."

When participants were asked about their greatest gains the following words were echoed by many:

The feeling of support. Feeling of not being alone....I know now I have people I can phone up, or people I can go and see.

And from another respondent:

I have no idea what it would be like without the group now. But certainly it has improved my relationships with others, and developed my own conscientiousness.

Data suggested another rewarding experience, was learning the value of talking,' expressing emotions and sharing problems through personal story-telling. One respondent described this by: "...and I didn't talk about that to anyone before that, and it was like a pressure valve - a real release." Although self-disclosure and "emotional release" held personal risk, this need was reflected in many transcripts. For example: "So, I need to talk, I need to be able to let it out," and from another: ".....and the words - that letting it out is great. If someone just listens to me get it out....." This is further illustrated by the following comment:

It's a form of release as well. Speaking for me releases some of my deeper thoughts and emotions and actually puts them into words and helps me clarify what is going on and sometimes come up with solutions. That's the main benefit.

Many participants acknowledged the personal growth and improved lifestyles they had experienced with comments such as: "...it's been basically a big learning curve.," and: "..it has improved my relationship with my family......the awareness has improved." Generally, this growth referred to learning to relate to other men, express feelings, listen, empathise and increased self-knowledge.

A minor degree of dissatisfaction within groups was reflected in some transcripts. This concerned individual personal growth needs, and also a need for some groups to "congeal" and work on group cohesion.

For example, one participant said:

> But we have not really delved deeply.... but it has sort of got into a stalemate.....we need to go deeper.......

And from another:

> ....where some men were just not committed to raising their own consciousness and were staying stuck in their own issues, and in fact that is a big reason why our group is not as committed.....because I was finding my own personal growth was not advancing as fast as I would like it to. And really the group can't split into two, but the group of people I was with basically wanted to keep on a path of self-improvement and then the other half were very much stuck in their own story.....

Many respondents expressed a need to address issues around male sexuality more, suggesting this topic had been neglected in the past. Comments such as, "I was surprised how little sex was talked about," and from another, "it [sex] was just never brought up." One participant explained:

> It is a real confronting issue, especially for men, more than women. For blokes it is really confronting. The macho part - the lack of sensuality that

men have ....I'm learning now......

Data suggested this theme was slowly being introduced into groups.

Shared Emotional Connection

Shared emotional connection concerns shared histories, or members identifying with histories. Positive interactions, shared events, commitment and emotional risk taking in groups influence sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Sharing occurs within formal groups, during planned activities and retreats away. Strong friendships and bonding were reflected throughout all texts. The following comment illustrates this well:

The greatest gain would be the close relationships I have developed from it. And the people in the group for a long time are my friends, and they are people I know that I can depend on - and they can depend on me, and we will always be friends because of our joint experience. There is a sense of that we have gone through something together and that there will always be some connection around that.

One respondent acknowledged: "sharing my grief openly" and continued with:

you know, you just want that space for men who want to share their story, or their pain, or their joy - and they would be listened to.

Data suggested sharing similar problems and experiences fostered feelings of not being alone and feeling connected with others. This was captured in the following words: " ..and also the sharing of problems and joys of the past week , or whatever, and it becomes a shared experience..." And, from this respondent:

.......but I would probably say more that we were there as fellow travellers, if you like, and we related to each other...

Personal Change and Identity Transformation

Although the PSC framework was useful to unpack some of the experiences men have in their groups, it was only by viewing each transcript in its entirety that a clear picture of the process of change was revealed. This is a key function of these groups and was a strong theme evident in the data.

According to Mankowski and Rappaport (1993), "identity represents self-knowledge about the past, present, and future" (p.215). Identity, or sense of self, may also be conceptualised to include two levels of analysis - personal identity (the individual), and group or shared identity (sense of community) (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995). In the present study, personal change and identity transformation relates to the process these men have experienced in the groups, and the outcomes that result from group involvement. Men's groups provide a safe environment for members to gather, explore issues of masculinity and make these transitions.

The data showed these men joined groups for several reasons. However, a fairly consistent motivation across interviews specifically involved some form of crisis which challenges PSC. The group's purpose and function was reflected throughout the texts, and the PSC framework facilitated this description. PSC is developed within these groups and this functions to provide a safe context for dealing with crisis and re-working masculinity. This context is developed through the dynamics of elements from the model, which all interact and work together.

Data collection indicated many gains from membership, however a consistent gain across interviews was social support. The development of support helps these men through their transition phase. A community narrative is provided by the group and this is adopted as a new masculine ideology or narrative that facilitates

personal growth and lessens gender role conflict.   Data suggested numerous

responses that could have facilitated the development of identity transformation.

These were categorised as: personal growth and gender role conflict.

Personal Growth. Personal growth refers to increased self-understanding and

knowledge that these men acquired. Personal story-telling and sharing a

community narrative were important aspects of this process, and also facilitated

identity transformation. Participants reported positive learning outcomes such as:

....you will be exploring all sorts of different ways of expression...The other

aspect of that is learning perhaps through words, or the use of words to even

find out what feelings are inside, so for me part of my claiming manhood, or

finding manhood, is actually getting in touch with feelings, so talking.....

Another participant said:

The whole way of relating to people, if you are learning skills like

openness, and honesty and communication, and listening - and I am hearing

you - that is going to impact ofcourse on quality.... I have got in touch with

what is to be human, which is including relating to people....and all part of

that process has been involved in the men's group movement and part of that

has been ... getting in touch with those feelings and expressing them - and

that's big issues for men, and finding myself amongst men who are also –

discovering - its ok to have feelings...

Data suggested that these men had learnt new ways of relating to other men and to

seeing themselves. During this process they had also attained an increased

realisation of their own needs and values. However, in discussing personal of

growth, some participants expressed a need to seek outside help in conjunction

with group work, suggesting, "men's groups are not enough." Again, this

reflected the divergent needs of members with some content to "stay where they were", and others wanting more "challenges".

Gender Role Conflict. As discussed earlier, gender role conflict is "a psychological state in which gender roles have negative consequences on the individual or others"(O'Neil, 1990, p.25). Data indicated that for many of these men, this psychological state operated at two levels. Firstly, it served as a motivation and catalyst for joining groups, as one respondent explains:

....there hasn't really been any rights of passage for men, in our Western

society, no pathways. You know where am I learning what is a man?

Secondly, gender role conflict was often experienced during the transformation process, and caused confusion. Numerous responses reflected this experience during the initial process. This was illustrated by the following:

.....I thought I was losing it [identity]. I felt in the early days of the group I

really was losing it a bit there. I was really confused, and I didn't know

where I was going. A bit lost.....but [now] I feel I can still be a bloke, but I

don't have to be a man's man though. Yeah, I'm more myself. I am myself.

More than I can be for along time.....

When asked the question, "In terms of being a man, have you found your identity has changed," one participant responded:

....for me it has blurred the boundaries between the genders a lot more so

I feel more like just a person. And I used to feel I had to adopt the role in the

past of a male. I guess it has freed me up just to be a bit more myself...it made

me feel I can express things....and I don't feel I have to adopt certain roles.

Many respondents discussed identity transformation in relation to personal change, for example: "I have softened. I no longer consider myself like an island.

I felt I was probably a bit hard-core before...." However, it became apparent that these men did not perceive an identity 'change', but rather a sense of their "real identity" surfacing. For example: "I don't think I had an identity a few years ago......So now I can accept and know more who I am..." This is further highlighted by the following comments:

> You know I never liked that strong macho type, the big guy with muscles – because I am not there.....I thought I am not that person,...this is me..... and then coming to the group I progressed so much that - yeah, I am a man, I am not a strong one, but I am a lot stronger than I was. But my knowledge has made me stronger...and I have only more recently realised I know who I want to be and this group has helped guide me. You know you can be a man and just be yourself.....just be you....

Data analysis revealed this realisation of 'true identity' was a positive outcome, and was embraced by these men. This is clearly depicted in this response:

> ..[the question] implies there is a knowledge of what my identity was and that has changed from what it was to what it is now. I probably wouldn't respond to that [question], but it would be far more closer to the truth to say that a far greater and clearer sense of my identity as a male has emerged... ...it's great to be male.... But an identity of who I am has evolved out through sort of.... the part of the whole process I have been through has included the Men's Group. But in becoming increasingly happy with the person I am, and part of that is me as a man, and there are still challenges to that at times.

> Data suggested that these men had rejected their socially constructed male

roles and were now discovering and confirming their 'real self.' Although a

positive outcome, some participants expressed difficulty integrating this "true" identity into their lives outside the group, for example:

......I still find I am guarded in my workplace, dealing with all this corporate

stuff and it's a fairly macho type workplace. I guess I don't fit very well.

In some cases, particularly work-places, it was necessary to conform and revert back to societal norms. However, the group provided a context where authenticity could be enjoyed. For example: "It was a place to go where we took down our normal society mask, so we could just be ourselves - be frail, just be ordinary, don't have to be strong, or whatever."

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the experiences of men participating in men's groups using the McMillan and Chavis (1986) PSC model. The role and function of men's groups was demonstrated by elements of the framework. Additional analysis generated theory relating to the process of personal change and identity transformation resulting from involvement in these groups.

Findings showed that an alternative form of social support is developed through membership in these men's groups. This social support is central to PSC, and elements of the framework interact to facilitate its development. In turn, these groups provide members with a safe environment to exchange personal stories and learn an alternative way of viewing masculinity. Again, this context is developed through the dynamics of elements from the PSC model. For example, membership provides these men with a sense of belonging and acceptance, while boundaries and a common symbol system work together to foster emotional safety and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This creates trust

and encourages intimacy, honesty and self-disclosure (McMillan, 1996).

As suggested in previous studies, these men's groups can be construed as a relational community (Heller, 1989; McMillan & Chavis, 1986) with a community narrative (Mankowski, in press; Rappaport, 1993, 1995). Common symbol systems were seen to play a central role in these groups, and these helped to maintain boundaries by organising the group, providing structure and creating unity amongst members (McMillan & Chavis). Moreover, common symbols are similar to community or group narratives. Certain social conventions and collective representations such as rituals rules, ceremonies (e.g., sacred circle), and behaviours (hugging) are used in groups, and these create a group narrative. This study revealed that a narrative framework is used by these groups, and this facilitates personal change and identity transformation. As proposed by Rappaport (1995), there is a relation between community narratives and personal identity stories. People seeking change often find it difficult to maintain change without the support of a group that provides a communal narrative in which they can sustain changes in their own personal story.

The value of talking (personal story-telling) and expressing emotions was highlighted in the present study. This need to be expressive and self-disclose was perceived by members as a positive cathartic experience, and was strongly reflected across interviews. Although men have been socialised to be emotionally inexpressive, this finding implies that this male trait may be 'unnatural.' Past studies have shown that self-disclosure is an important aspect of emotional intimacy (Lewis, 1978), and story-telling fosters empowerment (Rappaport, 1995). As noted by others (Levant, 1992; Levy, 1976), many of these men had experienced a loss of self-esteem and identity. In addition, the notion of shared

leadership empowered members.

For these groups, boundaries have been internally created and provide a safe context that is perceived to be separate from 'normal' society. Some social distance is created between non-members and members, and this is mostly characterised by different attitudes and behaviours towards other men. Some participants reported having to revert back to old behaviour patterns to conform to societal norms, usually in workplace situations. For example, behaviours such as hugging in public, discussing and expressing feelings, and placing less emphasis on wealth and power are often confined to the group context.

Findings from the present study suggested several common motivations for membership in these groups, and these were reflected across interviews. Firstly, feelings of dissatisfaction with life and the need for personal growth work were reported. Secondly, a crisis point in these mens' lives was common across interviews, and was a main factor influencing group membership. Life crises included relationship breakdowns, divorce, custody battles or the loss of someone close, resulting in men questioning life choices and searching for meaning (Rabinowitz & Cochran, 1994). Many of these men's stories reflected some of these characteristics, including a re-evaluation of masculinity (Levant, 1992), with men asking themselves what it is to be a man. These groups were made up of men who shared a common goal of personal growth and identity redefinition (Levy, 1978).

The experience of gender role conflict was also a motivational factor for group membership. According to Karsk and Thomas (1987), women and men often define themselves in relation to each other. The men's movement attempts to help men define themselves in terms of themselves. Qualities of all-male

groups include realisation that they are not alone in their thinking, dealing with vulnerabilities, increasing their awareness of negative stereotypical roles they are locked into, being able to make decisions to change and learning how to express feelings such as anger and grief (Karsk & Thomas, 1987). The exchanging of personal stories helped men to realise that other men think and feel the same way, and having a common group narrative gave them an alternative masculinity to work towards. This illustrates a process of transition.

The present study showed that these men's groups function by using a narrative framework, lending support to Rappaport's (1993) narrative theory and methodology for mutual support groups. A community narrative shapes the identities of its members, and exchanging personal stories facilitates personal growth. Men's groups provide an environment conducive to developing a strong masculine identity, while embracing pro-feminist values. The group offers a context where men can be vulnerable with other men, and the group process helps men to define and embrace their masculine identity (Dougherty, 1990). This was reflected across most interviews, but it was evident that this process was still in operation.

Specifically, these groups develop a new ideology (consistent with Antze, 1976) and set of norms to facilitate identity transformation. Group narratives help men to re-define masculinity by providing a set of guidelines. Personal story-telling and self-disclosure are used to enhance self-understanding, self-esteem and awareness. Additionally, new skills are developed such as listening, empathy and expressing emotions. Levant (1992) suggests a main aim in reconstructing masculinity should be to inspire men by separating and celebrating the valuable aspects of the male role, while identifying and changing the dysfunctional traits

One of the key findings in this present study was that a process of 'self-discovery' had been experienced. These men were finding their true identities through group involvement and group process, rather than <u>changing</u> their identities. Others, (Horrocks, 1994) have alluded to the masculine gender acting as a 'mask' or disguise, using the psychotherapy term 'false self.' The idea of the 'mask' was referred to by several participants when discussing their real 'authentic' identities. This aspect of the men's group experience is captured by Colling (1992), with, " Like the Tin Man in <u>The Wizard of Oz,</u> men long for the ability to show their hearts, their soft centres. But the Tin Man didn't have to travel to Oz to find a heart: he discovered he had had one all along. He just didn't believe in himself enough to show it, and had to find the environment in which it could be revealed"(p.158).

Markus and Nurius (1986) proposed the concept of possible selves which describes a person's ideal self, and also pertains to how one would think about their potential. The idea of possible selves functions as an incentive for future behaviour and compliments the notion of self-knowledge (Markus & Nurius). It could be suggested that men's groups operate on this principle, using a group narrative to provide an idealised version of masculinity.

Although these men's groups were not identified as mythopoetic groups, it was noted that their group narratives (common symbol systems), were based in a particular set of ideological belief systems and expectations. As such, these groups share similar characteristics with mythopoetic groups. For example, rituals such as forming a sacred circle, storytelling, and using a talking stick (Mankowski, in press; Wilson & Mankowski, in press), have been borrowed from

other cultures, and are based on mythology. This implies that masculinity can be viewed as a cultural construction (Pleck, Sonenstein & Ku, 1993).

The findings from the present study emphasise the importance of social support for men, and the value of meaningful same-sex friendships for men (consistent with Wilson & Mankowski, in press). Some (e.g., Barbee et al., 1993; Burda & Vaux, 1987) suggest men are less likely than women to develop social-emotional support networks, and when faced with a life crisis they are often isolated and depressed. In addition, past studies suggest that men are less likely to seek counselling, preferring alternative forms of help such as workshops and group interaction (e.g., Good et al., 1989; Robertson & Fitzgerald, 1992). Consistent with Dougherty (1990), findings from this study indicated that these all-male support groups were well suited to dealing with crisis and men's issues. The fostering of social support and PSC within these groups facilitated adaptation to cultural change, thereby alleviating gender role conflict. As noted by Baumeister and Leary (1995), the need to belong has been shown to be an essential, powerful and pervasive motivation.

In line with recent studies (Wilson & Mankowski, in press; Mankowski, in press), the major findings in this study suggest men's groups are useful for men experiencing problems in life, especially those concerning manhood and masculinity, and for those interested in enhancing self-knowledge. Although group members are aware of the social forces contributing to their gender conflict, these groups focus on working with the individual, more than political and social changes (Wilson & Mankowski, in press). The dissatisfaction noted earlier by some members (relating to personal growth expectations) highlights the need for groups to provide a balance between the need for challenge and the need for

comfort and safety. If groups become effective in these areas there is less chance of divisions and splinter groups forming (Mankowski, Maton, Burke, Hoover & Anderson, in press). Tolson (1977) also acknowledges this common problem of 'further development' in men's groups. He emphasised that masculine identities, although shared, are also divergent, highlighting the difficulties in reconciling "different individual perspectives" (p.139).

The present study was designed to meet the available resources and time constraints, and therefore has some limitations. An additional quantitative method of research may have been useful for comparison of results with this qualitative study. This may have involved the development of a questionnaire to be used in conjunction with the interview schedule, and could have been filled out by a larger number of group members. However, initial delays in gaining access to some groups and subsequent time constraints made this difficult. Secondly, this research adopts a qualitative approach where subjective interpretation may influence data. Although measures were taken to address the problem of researcher bias, this study does not pretend to be totally objective. Thirdly, some insightful information has not been included in this study to protect the identities of participants. Finally, socially desirable behaviour cannot be excluded from this study and may be a confounding variable.

Conclusion

The findings in this study provided some valuable insights into the role of men's groups in developing social support systems from these particular men's perspectives. Further, the study demonstrated how the PSC model can facilitate a better understanding of the function of all-male groups for providing a context for alleviating gender role and identity conflict. Elements from the framework

interacted together to provide a safe environment for these men to address the issues challenging them. The process of personal change and identity transformation was also facilitated by using a narrative framework. Personal storytelling and a community narrative facilitated personal change and helped to shape identities.

This study illustrated the value of developing a non-traditional, qualitative approach to human science by obtaining meaningful data that highlighted the salient factors involved in the men's group experience. As discussed by Le-Compte and Goetz (1980) traditional quantitative designs may be limiting where meaningful data conveyed through personal stories is missed.   It should also be noted that several participants from the present study mentioned that the interview process had re-inforced the value of group membership, and this motivated them to continue. Hence, obtaining information by attempting to understand a person's own construction of their social world provided valuable information regarding men's successful coping and adaptation, and was beneficial for some participants. Moreover, this knowledge may have implications for developing strategies and interventions aimed at improving men's social support systems, and provide the foundations for future research. This may involve integrating some of the effective strategies used within men's groups into the broader community. Perhaps this could be achieved through workshops and seminars. These forums may attract men who are not ready for a men's group experience, but are seeking personal change and support. Future research could focus on comparing the success rate of men's groups and ongoing men's seminars.

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Appendix A-1

Information and Consent Form

Invitation to Participate in Research Experiment

Dear Sir,

As part of the fourth year Psychology (Honours) student program at Edith Cowan University, I am conducting research into the area of men's experiences within Men's Groups. This research complies with the guidelines provided by the Edith Cowan University School of Psychology Ethics Committee for the Conduct of Ethical Research.

For this research participants will be interviewed about their experiences in men's groups by myself. This interview will be tape recorded for later transcription. Initially, several demographic questions will be asked. These will include age, marital status and length of membership in the Men's Group. Interviews will take approximately 30 to 50 minutes of your time.

There are two requirements for this study. All participants must be aged 18 years and over, and be members of a men's group. Participation is entirely voluntary and participants are free to withdraw (without prejudice) at any time they please, in which case the data will be removed from this study. Names will not be documented with interview material at any stage. At the conclusion of this study a report of the results will be made available to participants on request. This report may be obtained by contacting either myself or my supervisor on the numbers listed below.

Any questions regarding my research may be directed to either myself on (08) 9448 1725 or my principal supervisor, Dr Christopher Sonn, of the Psychology Department, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup Campus, on (08) 9400 5105.   If you would like to participate, please complete the attached form indicating your name (first name will suffice), and you will be contacted to set up an interview. Your input and cooperation in completing this project is greatly appreciated.

Thank you for your help.

_____

Student Researcher (Julie Reddin)   **Date**

(This page is to be kept by participants)

Appendix A-2

CONSENT FORM

I,.., hereby certify that I have read the

information sheet and was given adequate opportunity to ask questions. Any

questions I asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand the content

of the information sheet and the implications of this study. I understand that I am

not obliged to participate in this study. I give my consent to participate in this

project and I understand that I may refuse to answer questions, and am free to

withdraw at any stage of the experiment. I realise that there will be no penalty

should I decide not to participate or to withdraw. I understand that information

gathered will be treated with confidentiality, and I agree that the research data

gathered for this study may be published provided I am not identifiable.

_____

Signature

_____

Participant Name (First name will suffice)   Date

Contact Telephone No:_____

Appendix B

DEMOGRAPHICS FORM

<u>DEMOGRAPHICS</u>

AGE:_____

LENGTH OF MEMBERSHIP IN MEN'S GROUP(S):_____

ETHNICITY:_____

EDUCATION:_____

OCCUPATION:_____

EXISTING SUPPORT NETWORKS: (Please circle)

Married/ in partnership/ widowed/ single/ children/ immediate family

availability/ extended family availability.

Appendix C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you tell me how you came to join a Men's Group? (their story).

2. How often do/did you meet?

3. Can you tell me what your first meeting with the group was like?

4. So what has it been like? What has happened in your time in groups?

5. What do you do (in groups)? How have these made you feel?

6. Can you recall any worst experiences? (Challenges?)

7. What has been the best experience? (Your greatest gain?)

8. So, what do you get out of these activities? What needs are met?

9. How openly do you feel you can speak?

10. Do you feel you have influence (input) in the group?

11. What other activities (linked with men/men's groups) do you participate in?

(coffees, movies, or structured forums). Do you meet men outside the group?

12. So, has the group provided social support? Do you feel you belong? (Sense

of belonging - PSC). How? (structure, identity, role).

13. What does being a member in the group mean to you? (What is

important/valuable to you?). How do you see yourself in the group?

14. Has being in a group changed your relationships with men? Others?

15. In terms of being a man, have you found your (masculine) identity has

changed?