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Original Article

THE MAKING OF MEN PROGRAM: A MIXED-METHODS EVALUATION OF A GENDER-SENSITIVE RITE OF PASSAGE PROGRAM FOR ADOLESCENT MALES

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ABSTRACT

Introduction

Current gendered health disparities impacting the wellbeing of boys and young men require new early intervention-focussed approaches. Health promotion programs developed with young men's health needs and preferences in mind commonly report positive outcomes. Male-specific rite of passage programs aim to formally acknowledge the life-stage transition from boyhood to manhood through a holistic focus on identity, community, and social responsibility. While these programs are growing in popularity, there is limited data available on their effectiveness.

Methods

This study undertook a pilot evaluation of the *Making of Men* rite of passage program in a sample of secondary school boys (*n*=61, age *M*=16.0, *SD*=0.5) and their accompanying fathers or male mentors (*n*=47, age *M*=52.1, *SD*=5.8 years) providing non-matched pre-test, post-test, alongside follow-up data for participating boys. Qualitative interviews were also undertaken with 15 individuals (5 mothers, 6 staff members, 4 fathers).

Results

Quantitative program feedback indicated acceptability, with most respondents providing positive feedback, particularly from participating fathers. Exploratory quantitative effects indicated potential improvements in subjective social support and open communication among boys. Fathers appeared to report lower conformity to traditional masculine norms post-program, in addition to more open communication. Qualitative interviews identified three main themes: enabling relational bonds, creating a men-specific context, and supporting developmental transitions.

Conclusions

Positive program acceptability and promising outcome effects highlighted the present rite of passage program as a promising mechanism for supporting healthy masculine identity development among adolescent males.

Finally, limitations and future directions are discussed, particularly in terms of gender equality integration for rite of passage programs.

Key words: Health promotion, adolescent, young men, gender-sensitive, rite of passage, social support.

Adolescence signifies a period of growth and change, where social and self-identity is in a state of rapid development.[1] Boys and young men represent a group with unmet needs regarding the support of prosocial identity development during this phase, particularly given that male suicide accounts for one quarter (24.4%) of all deaths of young people.[2,3] Boys and young men also exhibit heightened rates of externalizing behaviours such as substance use, aggression, and maladaptive risk-taking.[4] To address these disparities, gender-sensitive programming, defined as developmental interventions that are sensitized to the unique engagement needs of young men,[5] may help establish more positive developmental trajectories and aid in health promotion.[4]

Recent reviews examining adult and young male samples have concluded that gender-sensitive approaches to health promotion show positive outcomes in males more frequently than programs without a male-focused approach.[5,6] Masculinity is a particularly prominent social construct for adolescent boys in Australia[7] and influences mental health status and related behaviours.[8] An understanding of masculine socialization is critical to incorporate into gender-sensitive developmental programming. Normative behaviours and characteristics commonly associated with the historically idealized archetype of masculinity (particularly in western cultures) include stoicism, independence, heteronormativity, power, muscularity, and physical toughness.[9,10] Additionally, rigid conformity to male norms peaks during adolescence, the key phase where boys form their identities.[11] A wealth of evidence highlights associations between adherence to traditional masculine norms and a suite of negative psychosocial outcomes including reduced help-seeking,[12] increased externalizing symptomatology,[13] and suicidality.[14]

Understanding the extent to which developmental programs can redirect boys and young men towards enacting prosocial masculinities is an important and understudied area, particularly given the health and prosocial benefits that can be achieved via greater gender equity and freedom from restrictive and outdated gender norms.[15] Recent work by Keddie[16] discussed the limits of strictly pedagogical approaches to addressing the harms of traditional masculine gender socialization among boys and young men. As such, the development of programs and experiences that help boys understand and critique their masculine socialization and assist them in working towards a positive developmental trajectory is paramount.[17]

Programs reporting better engagement and effectiveness for adolescent boys are typically activity-based, group-based, and goal-oriented.[18,19] These programs aim to promote critical reflection and dedicate time to identity formation activities to support mental health and help-seeking in the context of distress.[5] As a gender-sensitive developmental initiative with growing international interest, rite-of-passage programs are growing in popularity and scope.[20–22] Male-specific rite-of-passage programs typically aim to support adolescent boys through their life-stage transition from boyhood to manhood through three phases; separation, learning, and return.[20,23] These programs typically occur in outdoor-based settings and include a holistic focus on shaping identity, connecting with the community, and developing social responsibility and self-driven motivation in participants.

Additionally, these programs often occur as gender-specific initiatives where boys or young men participate with their fathers or father figures.[21] The concept of a rite of passage may provide a practical framework for health promotion in adolescent boys by creating spaces and communities where boys feel comfortable and supported to explore their masculinities, values, and motivations. Enacting autonomy over one's beliefs and fostering social connections can be beneficial to wellbeing.[24,25] Moreover, by encouraging flexibility in adopting their (male) identity, adolescent boys may experience a decreased risk of adverse health-related

outcomes associated with rigid norm conformity.[26] As such, gender-sensitive rite of passage programs for young men may represent a viable avenue to provide the space for critical reflection on their masculine identities, allowing them to forge a positive, self-determined path.

Evaluative research for rite-of-passage initiatives in adolescent boys has been scarce relative to other formats of health promotion, such as exercise or sporting interventions, psychoeducation, and eHealth.[5] Research undertaken with male-specific rite-of-passage programs has been primarily qualitative, with participants reflecting changed perspectives of 'being a man,' reduced anger, and improved relationships.[22] While rite of passage programs are increasing in implementation, more rigorous evaluations of such programs are required. Additionally, given the shifting social climate regarding masculinity formation for boys and young men, it is important to understand any effects of continuing to implement rite of passage programs within-gender (i.e., boys with their fathers only to involving parents irrespective of gender). The within-gender approach is commonly justified with reference to a wealth of evidence highlighting that fathers are instrumental in shaping identity development among boys.[27] Yet, in the context of wider discussions around gender equality, the field has seen a broadening in the understanding of the diversity of influences on masculine identity development. In particular, mothers are increasingly understood to impart a strong influence on the nature of masculine identity development of their sons.[28] There is a clear need to investigate an optimal balance between the influences on masculinity development from both fathers and mothers, even in programs directed specifically toward father-son connection.

The present study aimed to undertake a preliminary evaluation of a modern, bi-generational rite of passage program entitled *Making of Men*. The program was implemented for secondary schoolboys and their fathers (or male mentors) in an independent all-boys school in Melbourne, Australia. The *Making of Men* program was implemented as a four-day, three-night outdoor experience that aimed to support participating boys in navigating their transition from boyhood towards a prosocial, self-determined adult masculine identity. Boys were accompanied by their father, or

a significant male mentor, as a way to connect generations and highlight the diversity, experiences, and challenges encountered in manhood. The program was founded upon traditional and multi-national indigenous 'Rite of Passage' principles, reflected in three marked stages of transition; *separation* from the community, *change* that positively impacts the individual, and *acknowledged return* to the community[21]. The program aimed to develop a sense of social responsibility, autonomy, and masculine identity development in boys by creating a community where participants feel safe and supported to share their experiences, challenges, and hopes for their futures. Around 10 boys and their male mentors participated in groups called villages along with two facilitators. Activities included talking circles, community-building games, and vision walks. The central activity was the "challenge" night, which required the boys to separate from the adults and experience challenges designed to promote self-reflection around what kind of man they want to become, what type of (boyhood) behaviours they will let go of, and what relationships they want to form with others. Following this, boys were accepted back into the community as men and honoured by the adults. The final ceremony was conducted with several adults speaking about the positive attributes they had witnessed from each young man during the program and overall.

The *Making of Men* program has to date not been formally evaluated, highlighting the need to understand any potential effects of the program on relevant psychosocial variables. For example, an element of the *Making of Men* program is the encouragement of reflection on participants' experiences of masculine role norms and an attempt to understand aspects of so-called traditional masculine norms with which they identify. Additionally, past research has highlighted the common influence of gender-sensitive programming on masculine role norm identification, highlighting participants' conformity to masculine norms as a construct of interest.[5] The program is also intended to create a dedicated, supportive space to foster father-son (or mentor-mentee) communication as a vehicle towards boosting a sense of cross-generational psychosocial support.[29] Given the evidence of positive relationships between these constructs and psychological

wellbeing,[30] it is possible the *Making of Men* program will also influence wellbeing for participating fathers (or mentors) and sons.

This study involved an exploratory pre-post evaluation of patterns in cross-sectional outcomes assessing conformity to masculine norms, wellbeing, social support, and parent-adolescent communication. The variables were explored separately for boys and fathers pre- and post-program. Program acceptability data were also collected from attending boys and fathers, with findings contextualized by qualitative feedback from parents (both mothers are fathers) and school staff.

METHOD

Design

The study adopted a mixed-method cross-sectional design across three non-matched time points. Survey data were collected pre- and post-program, in addition to a 16-week follow-up for the boys (but not fathers). Additional post-program qualitative interviews were undertaken with mothers, in addition to participating fathers and school staff.

Participants

Participants were secondary school boys (Year 10) from an independent boy's school located in Melbourne, Australia, and their fathers (or male mentors). All year 10 boys and a father figure or male mentor were eligible to participate in the program. Participants were included in the quantitative evaluation if they were boys or fathers who attended the *Making of Men* rite of passage program and provided informed consent. Convenience sampling was implemented for the qualitative interviews, whereby an email was sent to parents (mothers and/or fathers) of participating boys inviting participation in a qualitative interview to provide feedback on the Making of Men program. The corresponding samples consisted of 108 males for the quantitative evaluation (61 boys and 47 fathers) and 15 people for the qualitative evaluation (5 mothers, 6 staff, 4 fathers). The boys were aged between 15 and 17 years (M=16.0, SD=0.5), and the fathers were aged between 45 and 72 years (M=52.1, SD=5.8). For the qualitative evaluation, staff members were aged between 32 and 51 (M=40.2, SD=6.9), fathers were aged between 50 and 73 years (M=60.0, SD=10.6),

and mothers were aged between 47 and 54 years (M=50.2, SD=3.1).

Measures

Conformity to masculine norms. The 22-item version of the validated Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI)[31] assessed participants' acceptance of 11 westernized masculine norms: status, self-reliance, dominance, violence, risk-taking, emotional control, winning, power over women, playboy, the primacy of work, and disdain of homosexuality. For example, higher agreement with the item *"I make sure people do as I say"* indicates higher conformity to the dominance norm. Items are measured using a four-point Likert scale where 0=*strongly disagree,* and 3=*strongly agree*. In addition, an overall conformity score was calculated and used in this study, with higher scores indicating greater overall conformity to masculine norms (possible range, 0-66).

Father-son communication. The Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale (PACS)[32] measured the participant's view of how open or problematic their parent's (or son's) communication with them is. For the present study, the item anchors were modified to relate to the boys "father/significant male" or the fathers' (or male mentors') "son/student." The 19 items are measured on a five-point Likert scale where 1=*strongly disagree,* and 5=*strongly agree.* The problem communication subscale totals nine items (score range 9-45), and the open communication subscale totals 10 items (score range 10-50), with higher scores indicating the greater quality of parent-adolescent communication.

Program feedback. Seven items were developed for this study to evaluate participants' acceptance of the program. The items assessed if the individual experienced value, challenge, increased understanding of themselves and others from the program, and recommend the *Making of Men* program to others (see Table 1). The items were assessed on a five-point Likert scale where 1=*strongly disagree,* and 5=*strongly agree*, with higher scores on individual items indicating greater agreement with the item.

Social support. The abbreviated version of the Duke Social Support Index (DSSI)[33] measured subjective social support to form an individual's perceived feelings of support. Subjective support items for example *"Does*

it seem that your family and friends understand you?" are measured on a three-point scale where 1=*hardly ever* and 3=*most of the time*. Subjective social support can range from 7–21, with higher scores indicating greater levels of perceived social support.

Wellbeing. The Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS)[34] assessed an individual's experience of general wellbeing items such as feeling useful, relaxed, and optimistic over the past two weeks. The 7-item measure has a 5-point Likert scale where 1=*none of the time* and 5=*all of the time*. Therefore, the possible score range is 7–35, with higher scores indicating greater overall subjective wellbeing.

Qualitative interview schedule. The qualitative interviews focussed on the following questions for fathers and school staff (1. *One of the biggest parts of the program for the boys was the challenge night. What was the most significant part of the program for you and why*?) In addition, fathers were also asked 3. *What was your experience with the conversations you had about manhood/masculinity?* Given that mothers did not attend the program, they were asked 1. *What was the most significant aspect of the program for you and why?* And 2, *What changes, if any, did you notice in your son, or in others?*

Table 1. Percentages, Means, and SDs for Making Of Men Program Acceptability Survey Items from Participating Boys and Fathers.

		Response %				
		SD/D	**Neutral**	**A/SA**	**M (SD)**	**Mdn**
Boys, n=15*	Gained something valuable	13.3	40.0	46.7	3.60 (1.06)	3
	Better understanding of others	13.3	20.0	66.7	3.67 (1.11)	4
	Challenged ways of thinking	20.0	33.3	46.7	3.53 (1.30)	3
	Hard conversations now easier	20.0	46.7	33.3	3.20 (1.08)	3
	Found experience challenging	13.3	40.0	46.7	3.33 (0.98)	3
	Better understanding of myself	46.7	26.7	26.6	2.93 (1.10)	3
	Recommend program to others	13.3	53.3	33.4	3.40 (1.18)	3
Fathers, n = 27	Gained something valuable	0.0	3.7	96.3	4.59 (0.57)	5
	Better understanding of others	0.0	3.7	96.3	4.37 (0.57)	4
	Challenged ways of thinking	7.4	14.8	77.8	3.96 (0.85)	4
	Hard conversations now easier	7.4	22.2	70.4	3.81 (0.83)	4
	Found experience challenging	33.3	18.6	48.1	3.30 (1.20)	3
	Better understanding of myself	3.7	29.6	66.7	3.78 (0.75)	4
	Recommend program to others	0.0	7.4	92.6	4.56 (0.64)	5
All, n = 42	Gained something valuable	4.8	16.6	78.6	4.24 (0.91)	4.5
	Better understanding of others	4.8	9.5	85.7	4.12 (0.86)	4
	Challenged ways of thinking	11.9	21.4	66.7	3.81 (1.04)	4
	Hard conversations now easier	11.9	31.0	57.1	3.60 (0.96)	4
	Found experience challenging	26.2	26.2	47.6	3.31 (1.12)	3
	Better understanding of myself	19.0	28.6	52.4	3.48 (0.97)	4
	Recommend program to others	4.8	23.8	71.4	4.14 (1.03)	4.5

Note. *sample size reflects missing data;
SD = strongly disagree (1); D = disagree (2); A = agree (4); SA = strongly agree (5); Mdn = median.

PROCEDURE

All quantitative data were collected via online self-report questionnaires. Pre-program data were collected from participating boys during class in early November 2018, approximately one week before the *Making of Men* program. The *Making of Men* program was delivered in mid-November 2018, and post-program data were collected approximately one week after the program. Fathers were emailed a link to complete the pre- and post-program questionnaires at the same time as boys. Follow-up data were collected from boys in class around 16-weeks after the *Making of Men* program. Qualitative interviews were conducted either on-campus in-person, or via phone. All participants and associated personnel, including school staff and parents, were informed of the nature of the study. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Melbourne Human Ethics Sub-Committee (ID: 1852421).

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative Analysis

Means and percentages for program feedback items assessed program acceptability of *Making of Men program* attendees, with independent samples t-tests examining differences in mean ratings between boys and fathers. Scale reliabilities (Cronbach's alpha) were calculated for the outcome measures at each time point. Descriptive statistics were undertaken for the quantitative measures at the various time points. While the initial intention was to conduct matched pre-post dyadic data analyses, in practice, this was not feasible due to missing data (only 9 boys provided both pre- and post-responses, and only 3 father-son dyads reported complete data). Given this, we proceeded by reporting complete cross-sectional case data for the outcome measures at pre- and post-program, and 16-week follow-up (for boys only). This analytic approach precluded inferential tests of within-group changes. We reported exploratory effect sizes (Cohen's d) for boys' and fathers' data across the time points based on mean and SD values. Independent samples t-tests examined differences in outcome measures between boys and fathers at either pre- or post-program data. Exploratory correlations examined associations by group. All quantitative analyses were conducted using SPSS version 25.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Member checking was offered to participants. Transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's process of thematic analysis,[35] led and supervised by the senior author (SR) in collaboration with the first and second authors (MW, KG). The process was as follows: (1) the second author read transcripts in-depth, familiarizing themselves with the data and making jottings of initial codes; (2) they then assigned preliminary codes to the transcripts in order to describe the content of the interviews; (3) they then identified patterns in the initial codes across the different interviews, collating similar codes together into preliminary themes; (4) a review of the themes was then conducted in collaboration with the first author; (5) names and definitions of themes were then developed collaboratively; and (6) the analysis report was produced including pertinent quotes to exemplify given themes.

RESULTS

Response rates across time points were varied. Cross-sectional pre-program data were available for 22 boys and 38 fathers, post-program data were available for 31 boys and 27 fathers, and follow-up data at 16-weeks were available from 36 boys (see Table 1 for *n*'s by outcomes). Mean time at follow-up was 16.14 weeks post-program (boys only).

Acceptability Results

Program acceptability survey outcomes displayed in Table 1 indicate the percentage and means of responses from *Making of Men* attendees. The vast majority of program participants indicated they had a better understanding of the people around them (85.7%) and that they gained something valuable from the experience (78.6%), compared to the small percentage of those that disagreed (4.8% for both items). When examining boys' and fathers' responses separately, fathers provided more favourable program feedback on five of the seven items; *Gained something valuable* ($t[18.68] = -3.38$, $p=.003$; $d=1.16$), *Better understanding of others* ($t[18.10]=-2.29$, $p=.034$;

d=0.79), *Hard conversations now easier* (*t*[40]=−2.06 *p*=.046; *d*=0.63), *Better understanding of myself* (*t*[40]=−2.95, *p*=.005; *d*=0.90), *Recommend program to others* (*t*[18.66]=−3.51, *p*=.002; *d*=1.22). Overall, boys tended to be more neutral in their responses compared to fathers. Despite this, both boys and fathers endorsed or remained neutral (rather than responding negatively) on positive feedback items. Only one item had a larger percentage of disagreement than agreement, with boys indicating that they did not better understand themselves (46.7%).

Quantitative Outcomes

All outcome measures reported satisfactory reliability (see Table 2), although reliability did fluctuate for the CMNI across the time points for both boys and fathers. For the CMNI, there were no effects observed for boys between pre-post, or pre-follow-up comparisons (Cohen's *d*'s <.20). In contrast, there was a small effect observed for the fathers, where scores reduced at post-program. Boys endorsed higher CMNI scores relative to fathers at both pre-program, (*t*[58]=4.24 *p*<.001, *d*=1.12) and post-program (*t*[55]=5.28, *p*<.001, *d*=1.36). Boys reported lower wellbeing scores relative to fathers at both pre-program, (*t*[55]=−2.54 *p*=.014, *d*=−.70) but not post-program (*p*<.601). Medium positive effects were observed for social support at both post-program and follow-up for the boys, but no effect was observed for the fathers. Boys reported lower social support at pre-program, (*t*[57]=−4.83, *p*<.001, *d*=−1.15) but not post-program (*p*=.372). Improvements in open communication were observed for both the boys and fathers, of small effect size. While a small effect of reduced problem communication was observed for the fathers, there was no effect for the boys. There were no differences for open communication between boys and fathers at either pre-program (*p*=.200) or post-program (*p*=.451). Boys reported higher problem communication at both pre-program, (*t*[54]=2.98, *p*=.004, *d*=0.54) and post-program (*t*[45]=−3.30, *p*=.002, *d*=0.97).

Table 2. Means, SDs and Scale Reliabilities for Study Outcome Measures

	Pre-program			Post-program			Follow up			Effect size	
	n	M(SD)	α	*n*	M(SD)	α	*n*	M(SD)	α	*d* (pre-post)	*d* (pre-f/u)
Boys											
Masculine norm conformity	22	30.8 (5.9)	.62	30	31.1 (7.4)	.76	36	30.5 (5.2)	.49	0.04	-0.05
Wellbeing	20	24.0 (4.1)	.84	31	25.8 (5.0)	.87	31	23.6 (4.9)	.90	**0.39**	-0.09
Subjective social support	22	15.7 (3.2)	.82	24	17.6 (3.6)	.91	31	17.7 (3.0)	.82	**0.56**	**0.64**
Communication – Open	19	33.7 (8.3)	.92	20	36.6 (7.8)	.94	30	35.8 (9.4)	.95	**0.36**	**0.36**
Communication – Problem	19	26.0 (5.4)	.71	20	25.5 (5.9)	.79	30	25.4 (8.2)	.91	-0.08	-0.09
Fathers											
Masculine norm conformity	38	24.1 (6.0)	.73	27	22.3 (4.7)	.55	-	-	-	**-0.33**	-
Wellbeing	37	26.8 (3.9)	.89	27	26.4 (4.0)	.88	-	-	-	-0.10	-
Subjective social support	37	18.9 (2.3)	.78	27	18.4 (2.6)	.83	-	-	-	-0.20	-
Communication – Open	37	36.2 (6.0)	.85	27	38.0 (4.8)	.80	-	-	-	**0.33**	-
Communication – Problem	37	21.4 (5.4)	.80	27	20.0 (5.4)	.76	-	-	-	**-0.25**	-

Note. Bolded values reflect Cohen's d >.20.

Several differential associations were observed between the boys and fathers (see Table 3). For example, CMNI scores and problem communication were consistently moderately positively correlated in both the pre- and post-program samples for boys, but not fathers. Similarly, social support and problem communication were consistently moderately negatively correlated in both pre- and post-program samples for boys, but not fathers. Similar patterns of associations tended to be observed between the boys and fathers for the remaining outcomes.

Qualitative Outcomes

Thematic analysis identified three key themes across the interviews: (i) Enabling relational bonds; (ii) Creating a men's-specific context; and (iii) Supporting developmental transitions. Except for the second theme (men's-specific context), where divergent views were offered, there was consistency between reflections from the fathers, mothers, and school staff.

Enabling relational bonds: Participating fathers and staff members and interviewed mothers were unanimous in reflecting on the relational value of the program. They stated that the program provided extended time together (although this did create logistical challenges for some to take time off work) and that this extended time occurred without the pressures or distractions of everyday life, where fathers could connect with their sons in meaningful and authentic ways.

The nature of conversation that came post that experience was more mature in terms of their dialogue. Mother 001

So I think if it hadn't been prompted by the facilitators, we wouldn't have had those conversations. So that was the main benefit to me that it sort of forced the conversation. Father 012

It's very healing for the men involved and for the boys to be able to see that as well. Mother 005

For parent interviewees and some staff, reflections highlighted improved or deepened communication between boys and fathers (and to some extent also extending to peers and fathers of other boys). In this way, the sense of support developed throughout the program was broader than just strengthened father-son relationships and included a broader sense of community cohesion.

So less about the boys with their dads and those relationships, I'm sure what was built on were great. But within the villages, the relationships between boys and other parents, or staff members with parents, or staff members with boys and just the overall community feeling and relationship building was great. Staff (female) 006

He did also seem to be closer to his Dad and enjoyed the post-camp BBQs arranged by other Dads and sons. Mother 011

The program experience was also impactful for staff. The opportunity to share and meaningfully connect positively impacted instances of staff-student relationships.

For me personally as a staff member, I wasn't fully prepared for how close it would come to me, as well, and to be in that space, in that circle, as a staff member. All the things that are coming out, and we shared as well. Staff (male) 016

Personally, I know that the boys that I was in the village with, I might not talk to them particularly more than I did, but when I see them around I feel like I get an extra couple of seconds of a hello or... I feel it. Staff (female) 006

Table 3. Outcome Measure Correlations for Boys and Fathers

	Boys					Fathers				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
1. CMNI	–	-.38	-.19	-.32	.47*	–	-.27	-.12	-.17	.23
2. Wellbeing	-.13	–	.72***	.36	-.44	-.22	–	.57***	.03	-.28
3. Social support	-.26	.45*	–	.52*	.69**	-.18	.45*	–	.34*	-.31
4. Comm. openness	-.20	.75**	.52*	–	-.86***	.06	.23	.18	–	.51**
5. Comm. Problem	.50*	-.41	-.63**	-.66**	–	-.01	-.14	-.16	-.58**	–

Note. Correlations above the diagonal refer to pre-program; below the diagonal to post-program

Creating a men's-specific context: Reflections on the contextual factors that helped facilitate an environment of trust and openness were common. For example, there was an acknowledgment of the confidentiality of the program "*…there was a real cone of silence about it*", which the interviewed mothers (and others) thought enabled attendees to have the confidence to speak openly and authentically. Other contextual factors ranged from the skill of the program facilitators (including their ability to hold the space for boys and fathers to broach challenging subjects), the importance of night-time talking circles, and the backdrop of an open fire.

I think the most significant part of the program from my perspective was giving the boys and their dads or mentors an opportunity to be present and share their own authentic stories, to feel safe to be vulnerable in doing that, to create that space. Staff (male) 016

I would say that [circle time] was the most impactful time where, like we would allow silence, it's fine, it's just like, you never let silence just go for two minutes until someone's happy to say something. Found that really interesting and most impactful part. Staff (male) 010

And the campfire is brilliant. That's where people's inhibitions, you know, macho stuff fell away. Father 007

…our facilitator as well was an amazing man and he did an incredible job creating that safe space and setting up the agreement that would help enable people to feel safe. Staff (male) 016

There was a diversity of opinion regarding the male-only (e.g., father-son) focus of the program. Fathers and some of the staff and mothers were supportive of this. Including male-only attendees created a distinct environment that fostered a male-specific conversation.

Yeah, it's just being there with another group of dads, and another group of his friends, or other school mates, and having those type of discussions. Father 012

I promote it to mums who are questioning it and I'm not shy about giving my opinion of the fact that I think there are times where sometimes the boys need to do things with men. Mother 001

In contrast, several mothers raised concerns about their perceived exclusion in the offsite program (a pre-program workshop available to mothers). This was raised in gender equality and the risk of the program reinforcing outdated gender stereotypes. These mothers reflected that attempts to engage them seemed superficial; they expressed concerns that the program perpetuated that "*dads are the role models and not the mums*," and that the mother's involvement was cursory and somewhat "*scripted*," with fathers given a chance to have an extended outdoor experience with their sons. In contrast, the mother's involvement was limited to "*nice afternoon teas, where you have nice flowers on the table.*"

… it's really good that the school is focused on positive masculinity more broadly. I think that the evening I went to… the mums had actually expressed quite a bit of frustration, that they weren't involved in the program as parents, and that they couldn't participate in the camp, and that it was defined for dads only…The mums were very concerned about the strategy of really prioritizing the relationship between the father and son, as being one that didn't portray gender equality and respectful relationships which was important to them. Mother 011

From the way that the mothers were sort of dealt with in that, I just found very strange. Mother 013

Concerns from mother interviewees were not unanimous. Others stated that they provided "*…hugely positive feedback about it*", reflecting that "*…the male to male discussion was profound and needed*", and the program facilitated being "*…surrounded by other males talking as well [which] was really good*".

Supporting developmental transitions: By the program focussing on the transition from boyhood to manhood, several interviewees reflected the importance and value of a male-only environment (notwithstanding several female staff participating).

…it was talking about what it's like being a man, but a lot of it was your progression from being a younger person to manhood. Father 007

Some of the attendees discussed the importance of presenting a framework around transition from boyhood to manhood. Mothers also shared similar reflections regarding the programs emphasis on adopting adult behaviours.

They had a framework around describing what boy behaviour was, or adolescent behaviour, and then adult behaviour, and a lot of it's about how people respond or engage in different situations. So

if I see certain situations, whether it's something my son's going through or responding to, it creates a nice framework to have the discussion… Father 014

And I think also trying to teach the boys to take more responsibility, personal responsibility for themselves, and not have boy behaviour, have man behaviour, I think all of that is really very valuable. But to me, that's what the focus should have been. Mother 013

And also gives, say, myself and my son other reference points. So you can almost refer back to boy behaviour, man behaviour and relate it in a different context, which has been great. Father 014

DISCUSSION

This study presented an initial exploratory evaluation of a bi-directional rite of passage program involving secondary schoolboys and their fathers or male mentors, entitled *Making of Men*. The program ran over four days and primarily focused on providing space for participating boys and their fathers (father figures) to facilitate a positive transition from boyhood to manhood. Preliminary results provide evidence of program acceptability, with the program ostensibly received more favourably by participating fathers. When independently examining boys and fathers, the program appeared to impart positive benefits to boys' wellbeing, subjective social support, and father-son communication, in addition to a reduction in masculine norm conformity for fathers. Qualitative data underscore the perception of *Making of Men* as a vital initiative supporting male-specific developmental transitions, notwithstanding identification of necessary improvements to the program in future.

Program acceptability

The *Making of Men* program was generally well-received by participants, with particularly strong support provided by fathers. Despite a less pronounced endorsement from boys comparative to fathers, a more significant percentage of boys endorsed six of the seven positive feedback items. This signifies the overall acceptability of the *Making of Men* program, though there is scope to engage boys further. Future implementation efforts may seek to identify and incorporate specific preferences of boys attending the program. For example, past programs aiming to

establish positive masculine identity development among adolescent males have often been conducted in outdoor environments,[5] whereas other mental health-focused programs for young men are conducted in the sporting context.[36] Identifying ideal contexts for program delivery and leveraging these may help ensure young men's engagement with future program iterations. Additionally, given that boys did not report the program increased their self-understanding, there is scope for such programs to focus on awareness of individual factors related to masculine identity development to promote greater self-reflection.

The program may have been particularly well-received among fathers due to generational differences in opportunities for and comfort, engaging in open and honest discussions of vulnerability, masculinities, and identity development among one's same-gender peers. Notwithstanding fathers' lesser endorsement of masculine norms relative to sons observed in the present study, participating fathers may have been held to a more stringent standard of masculinity during their development, which may have precluded open and vulnerable emotional discussion opportunities *their* father figures were enabled by the camp. In addition, there is evidence of generational differences in the extent to which father-son communication involves discussion of emotional vulnerability, where the fathers of today are thought to be more emotionally involved with their sons' identity development than in previous generations.[27] Scholars have attributed this in part to the shifting nature of masculinities, whereby men are exhibiting greater flexibility in their adherence to dominant masculine norms that can restrict father-son emotional closeness.[37,38] Moreover, in the qualitative interviews, fathers communicated that the benefits of the program came from the provision of a dedicated time and space for engagement in open, honest, and vulnerable conversations. This suggests that creating the space for these conversations in typical family life was challenging. The unique opportunity afforded by an experience like the *Making of Men* program, and dedicated space for engagement with emotional vulnerability, may have contributed to its positive favour among fathers. While these results require validation in future work, they nevertheless suggest that while

the intended beneficiaries of rite of passage programs are often the youth, benefits can undoubtedly extend to men across the lifespan.

Exploratory Program Effects

When interpreting evidence for potential program effects on the various included psychosocial measures, it is essential to recognize the preliminary nature of these results, given the non-matched data reported here. For the boys, effect sizes suggested that parent communication's subjective social support and openness may have increased following the program. Though design limitations restrict the conclusions drawn concerning this, elements of the program may have been influential. Future research on mechanisms of action is required to verify this. One possible explanation is that the dialogical structure of the program encourages story sharing and relating with others, which may have strengthened feelings of social connectedness established on knowing each participant and building trust.[21] Additionally, fathers' conformity to masculine norms may have decreased following the program. Although speculative, given the non-matched data, this may have contributed to the boys' apparent increases in perceived open communication with their fathers. Through participating in the program, fathers may have realized potential areas of rigidity in their communication with their sons and may have attempted to reconcile this post-program by engaging more openly with their sons. Qualitative insights substantiate this idea, given that fathers reported that often external factors could "get in the way" of the father-son connection. Moreover, research has highlighted clear benefits to adolescent males' comfort to engage in open, emotionally-available conversations with a male role model.[27] Whilst wellbeing scores did not appear to shift post-program, future studies should aim to uncover longer term wellbeing effects of more open and supportive modes of father-son communication, potentially via increased help-seeking intentions, which were not assessed here.

Notwithstanding the evidence of positive effects on social support for both boys and fathers independently, correlational analyses indicated stability in correlations between masculine norm conformity and problem communication for boys, both pre- and post-program. Additionally, negative correlations between social support and problem communication also appeared stable pre- and post-program. These findings highlight that despite boys' and fathers' separate but unanimous perception that their open communication had increased post-program, when considered with masculine norm conformity, the avoidance of emotional closeness sanctioned by masculine socialization may persist as a barrier to effective social support. The program did not appear to have any cross-sectional effects on masculine norm conformity for boys, notwithstanding an ostensible reduction in conformity among fathers. One explanation for this could be the measure of masculinity applied, as the CMNI assesses the extent to which boys identify with a largely unitary, traditional archetype of masculinity, which the program may not have impacted.[31] Yet recognising the diversity of masculinities, the program may have affected masculine identity development in other ways aside from simply impacting "traditional" masculine norm adherence, given boys' program acceptability indicated positive effects on challenging ways of thinking and reducing the difficulty of challenging conversations.

Nevertheless, the lack of effect on masculinity norm adherence mirrors the findings of Smith,[22,] who, following the implementation of a rite of passage program in New Zealand, also observed mixed results regarding the extent to which the program shifted identification with harmful aspects of masculine socialization. This pattern of findings may be explained in that the programs offered do not aim to target masculinity ideologies specifically. However, suppose the intended goal of future programs is to shift identification with traditional masculinity. In that case, such initiatives may require a more direct discussion of wider norms around masculinity and how father-son dyads can work together to promote identification with healthy masculinities in order to achieve a more significant impact.

Rite of Passage Programs and Gender Equality

Critiquing the within-gender nature of the program offers some additional insights in explaining why masculine norm conformity did not appear to shift for the boys. This was highlighted primarily by some mothers during qualitative interviews, with

captured reflections articulating that the male-only focus of the program felt outdated and excluded their meaningful involvement. Some mothers reflected that the program privileged the father-son relationship and failed to respect ideals of gender equality, while mothers' involvement appeared tokenistic. Conversely, fathers and some mothers reflected that the male-only communication achieved in the program was essential in creating a male-specific space for reflection and growth. These conflicting experiences of involvement, or a lack thereof, highlight the complex balance in 21st-century programs designed to shift identity development towards more positive characteristics for boys, alongside a prevailing backdrop of masculine socialization largely categorized by patriarchal ideals that privilege traditional masculinities.[38,39] Scholars are only now beginning to understand that which constitutes "positive masculinity" for men, given the vast majority of scholarship in this space has been dominated by discussion of one archetype of "traditional" masculinity.[40–42] Given masculine norm adherence reduced for fathers post-program, perhaps the male-only nature of the program was essential for *fathers* to experience open vulnerability among a large group of other men, thereby normalizing male-to-male emotional disclosure for fathers. Conversely, for participating boys, perhaps if the program were to adopt a more flexible approach to the position of a role model in their identity development (i.e., by allowing boys to involve their mother as a role model if they wished), this may have impacted masculinity norms in ways alluded to by some mothers. Nevertheless, the present findings highlight complexities in promoting flexibility around masculine norm adherence while also recognizing the present and pervasive influence of "traditional" masculine norms for boys and young men of today.

There is a dearth of research examining the role of mothers in boys' masculine identity development. The field is primarily dominated by research investigating paths of influence exclusively between generations of men, yet there is evidence of the important role mothers can play in boys' masculine identity development.[43] Vargas and colleagues[28] examined identity development among urban young men from single-mother households and found evidence of the development of non-traditional masculinities characterized by equality and the recognition that positive characteristics should be embodied by all people, regardless of gender. Moreover, the young men interviewed exhibited a masculine identity emblematic of an amalgamation of traditionally masculine and feminine qualities, discussed as a "gender-inclusive sense of masculinity" (p. 480).[28] These ideas around the differential role of mother and father figures in boys' masculine identity development require exploration in future research, given solid evidence that a positive father figure is essential in buffering against maladaptive psychosocial outcomes for young men.[44,45] Overall, these findings highlight the multiple and pervasive influences on masculine identity development, an area requiring further study to delineate specific paths of influence, both positive and negative.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is primarily limited in terms of the small sample size and attrition prohibiting a within-group analysis of change, and this remains a critical gap for future evaluations to address. Additionally, we were limited in the extent to which we could compare participants to those who failed to complete post-training and follow-up measures, resulting in a lack of clarity regarding potential reasons for non-participation. Future program evaluations should aim to obtain complete data sets with randomized designs to allow for stronger inferences around program impact and mechanisms of change. The low-reliability values observed for several measures, particularly the CMNI in this study, mean any results concerning this measure should be interpreted cautiously. Future studies should consider using the newer 30-item CMNI, which has evidence of improved psychometrics.[46] Future studies should also explore additional constructs to assess in relation to the Making of Men program, as potential areas of interest not investigated here include effects on the progression of masculine identity development (which should be assessed qualitatively given the nascency of this construct[17]) and effects on peer relationships.

Additionally, the lack of follow-up data for fathers is acknowledged as a limitation, particularly given that the post-training data indicated preliminary effects for

fathers that may have persisted long-term. Nevertheless, the focus of this initial evaluation of the *Making of Men* program was to develop an understanding of the impact of the program for participating boys. It will be an area of future inquiry to develop a more nuanced understanding of any lasting effects for participating fathers/mentors.

There is scope for future iterations of the *Making of Men* program to better engage participants, both in the program and beyond. For example, a greater focus on encouraging students' voices and allowing boys to have autonomy and leadership over some program activities, rather than implementing a strictly fixed curriculum, could promote more profound engagement with the program.[47,48] Additionally, incorporating direct discourse surrounding current social norms of masculinity in the program itself could help to engage both adolescent and adult men with important factors (such as maladaptive stoicism and emotional rigidity) that are thought to underpin negative psychosocial outcomes for men and eventually lead to downstream effects on masculine norm adherence.[49] Finally, the lack of meaningful involvement of other social figures (e.g., mothers, siblings, non-school peers), likely limits the extent to which boys can continue on a positive developmental trajectory following the program.[50,51] This idea aligns with broader international scholarship around the socio-ecological effects on masculine identity development, with influences on this process stemming from numerous sources. To achieve practical reincorporation and true potential for identity shift following the program, follow-up sessions or events with fathers or mothers, family, and the broader school and additional guidance for boys to practice incorporating new skills could enable more significant change.

CONCLUSION

This study is the first of its kind to provide formal evaluation data regarding a rite of passage program for adolescent males, intending to further scholarship in this growing area of practice. The study design was limited by lack of analysis of within-group effects but strengthened by the inclusion of follow-up data collection, demonstrating evidence of the stability of cross-sectional effect sizes over time. Participation may have contributed to increased social support, alongside potential positive effects on open communication. A commitment to program development and community engagement is promising for the future health and wellbeing of boys and young men. In particular, building an understanding of the diversity of influences on masculine identity development and how these may be incorporated into rite-of-passage programs may lead to lasting positive change for boys and young men.

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