4
Perceptions of Masculinity in the Transition to Manhood

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Abstract

The literature identifies a lack of reports discussing the perceptions of adolescent males around issues of masculinity. That lack is even more apparent when spirituality is included in the picture. This paper seeks to contribute to that space, reporting on one aspect of a recently submitted doctoral thesis. The findings from interviews with a small group of young males are described, and discussed in the light of contemporary literature. Implications for counselling practice are included.

Introduction

Recent years have seen the development of significant interest in the study of gender. As part of this, much has been written about masculinity (see, for example, Connell, 2000; Kimmel et al., 2005; Pease, 2002). The literature, however, identifies a lack of writing that explores masculinity from the lived experience perspective of those transitioning to manhood (Tilton-Weaver et al., 2001). Studies such as there are tend to be quantitative in design, and more often from the perspective of fathers than the adolescents themselves; 'As a result, the literature ... is relatively ignorant of how it works from the inside – the motivations, struggles and triumphs of the process from the viewpoint of the ones experiencing it' (Latshaw, 1998, p. 1).

That lack is even more apparent when the place of spirituality and personal faith within perceptions of masculinity is considered (Grossoehme, 2001; Markstrom, 1999; Smith et al., 2003). The lack of writing needs to be set alongside reports that interest in spirituality, and involvement in spiritual activity among adolescents and young adults, are increasing (Tacey, 2003; Wright, 2000). This article reports on one facet of a recently submitted doctoral research project exploring the transition to manhood with particular focus on spirituality in relation to that transition. The project was set in New Zealand and contributes that particular perspective to the wider literature, which has principally come from North America and Australia.

Literature review

Perceptions and understandings of masculinity have changed over recent decades. Phillips' (1987) account of the Pakeha male and King's (1988) collection of essays by New Zealand men both suggest a shifting social scene. In the academic arena, change is equally evident (for an overview, see Connell, 2000). Prior to recent decades, role-stereotyping and biological essentialism were largely unquestioned. More recently poststructuralism has radically transformed ways of thinking about gender.

That masculinity is socially constructed has become taken for granted in much contemporary writing. Boyd et al. (1996) refer to three key concepts within this way of thinking. Firstly, the distinction between maleness and masculinity. Maleness (sex) is to be seen as a biological category, whereas masculinities (gender) are cultural constructs. Secondly, the concept of hegemony. Hegemonic masculinity 'has come to be a technical term designating the dominant construction of masculinity in our culture' (Boyd et al., 1996, p. xv). Thirdly, contemporary thought thinks in terms of masculinities rather than the singular, masculinity. The risk within a constructivist approach is that the anti-essentialist pendulum swings too far and ignores or forgets the reality of biology. In addressing this overreaction, Connell (2000, p. 12) states, 'Men's bodies are not blank slates,' and uses the term 'body-reflexive practice' in discussing the interaction between bodies and gender discourse.

Where, then, does spirituality fit in with constructs of masculinity? Boyd et al. (1996, p. xix) state, '... little has yet appeared that explicitly explores the relationships between religious traditions and the experiences of masculinities.' In the popular market, role stereotype and essentialist approaches dominate (e.g. Prince, 2000; Smalley & Trent, 1992). Perhaps surprisingly, much of this writing is pragmatic in its approach and lacks a sense of the transcendent nature of Christian faith. More satisfying in this respect is Leanne Payne's discussion of masculinity (1995). She discusses the 'beyondness' of gender as 'grounded in the Being of God and His creation' (ibid., p. 70). Ward (1999) echoes many of the themes of poststructuralists in terms of the recognition of, for example, masculinities and hegemonic masculinity, but seeks to counter the concept of masculinities as purely social constructions. Discussions such as that of Payne and Ward are encouraging in that they seek to integrate spiritual dimensions of personhood into the gender debate.

Studies examining the ways in which adolescent males understand masculinity in relation both to themselves and to those around them are not numerous. Two recent Australasian studies will be briefly mentioned here – one (Lashlie, 2005) was reported in a book written for a general audience, while the other (Engebretson, 2006) was reported in an academic journal. In her book *He'll Be OK*, Lashlie (2005) reports on

the background to and findings of the 'Good Man Project' – 18 months' work with 25 New Zealand boys' schools. As part of her discussions with the boys she asked 'what they thought were the top three qualities of a good man' (ibid, p. 197). The list was extensive, but the three qualities that emerged at the top of the list were trust, loyalty and a sense of humour.

In a recent report from Australia, Engebretson (2006) reports on a survey of 965 15- to 18-year-old boys from six schools – five Catholic schools and one Lutheran. The paper seeks to link perceptions of spirituality and masculinity. In answer to the question 'What kind of man do you want to be?' the most common responses related to personal integrity and relationship values. Engebretson comments on the way the findings demonstrate a departure from the traditional stereotype of the 'hard' Australian man. She argues that 'a key component of their spirituality is a growing tendency to challenge the hegemonic ideal of masculinity' (ibid, p. 91).

This section has sought to briefly overview the 'territory' to which this paper seeks to contribute. The next sections report on aspects of the doctoral study journey through the territory.

Method

Acknowledging the sparseness of qualitative research in this area, the project from which this article is derived used a life history research approach (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Triads of son (aged between 18 and 22), father and paternal grandfather were interviewed, on a one-to-one basis, exploring experience, family themes and perceptions of social trends, with a particular focus on how spirituality and faith-community are seen as part of the experience of growing up. The aim was to foreground the experiences and perceptions of the sons, using the interviews with the older generations to contribute depth and context.

The main criterion for selection, apart from availability and willingness to be interviewed, was that each participant had a current involvement in or association with a Christian church. Of the sons, two were 18 at the time of interview, two were 20 and two were 22. One of the 20-year-olds was married with an infant son. All were Caucasian second or third generation New Zealanders. Each participant was interviewed individually. The three main foci of the interviews were:

- the nature of transition;
- the destination of transition – perceptions of masculinity, and
- the facilitation of transition – the key people and institutions involved as support.

The interviews used a semi-structured approach. Within each conversation the following questions were addressed:

- What do you think makes a man a man?
- Where would you see yourself in the transition to manhood?
- Where do you see faith or church fitting for you in that transition?
- Who or what would you see has been a part of influencing your transition?
- What events or experiences do you think have contributed?

Each interview was audiotaped, transcribed and examined for themes using the principles of life history research as discussed in Goodson and Sikes (2001). Each son was given a pseudonym (e.g. Dan) and the others in the triad referred to accordingly as Dan's father and Dan's grandfather. This approach was used as part of highlighting the interviews with the sons. This paper selectively reports on the findings from the interviews in relation to the second of the themes – thoughts on masculinity and spirituality.

It is worth noting at this point that the participants were quite open in admitting that they had given little specific thought to the issues about which we were talking. Dan commented:

> *I never really thought about it that much until we got your letter and even then it kind of stumped me ...*

and Theo said:

> *I hadn't really pondered on this so I'm thinking on the spot here.*

Nevertheless, all the interviewees showed a willingness to share their thoughts and experiences.

Themes from the interviews

Before developing the discussion, I want to reiterate the particular characteristics of the participants as Caucasian by ethnicity, and Christian by faith. My aim is to comment on the findings in the light of current writing but, given my methodological stance, it is not my intention to generalise from those findings either explicitly or implicitly.

1. Perceptions of masculinity

Although there were differences in clarity of expression, the views conveyed showed a high degree of similarity. While there were some minor variations in the theme, the sons were consistent in describing masculinity in terms of character traits. While they were remarkably consistent in how they described masculinity, they were by no means

carbon copies of each other as people. They were a diverse group – from laid-back to energetic, robust rugby-playing to creative and artistic, intellectual to practical. Using their own words, they described manhood as:

- Steve: caring, wise, fearless, patient.
- Eddy: taking responsibility, fronting up to the consequences of your actions, setting an example.
- Martin: being able to stand up for yourself, humble, knowing what you believe, independence from home.
- Dan: learning from experience.
- Theo: taking responsibility, independence, not selfish.
- Michael: strong-willed, integrity, knowing what you believe.

Theo's initial response to the question was to refer back to his wedding vows and talk of being the provider and protector. He then went on to talk about responsibility and being caring. As the only son who was married, it seemed that he was locating the character traits in his own personal context more than defining manhood by the role. Eddy mentioned that, historically, manhood had been marked by being the provider, but commented that that was not so true today. Steve referred to being a 'warrior', but it was in the context of talking about protecting the weak. Steve, Michael and Martin all talked about older men whom they don't see as 'men'. When I asked them to explain, Martin talked about seeing these 'men' as not knowing what they believe. Steve said:

> *They've lied to themselves I think. I think they've become the best liars in the world.*

Manhood for the sons in this study was not about age or role. Rather it was an issue of character and how people relate. These findings parallel those of Engebretson's (2006) study in which personal integrity and relationship values were the most common expressions of hoped-for masculine traits. Also as reported by Engebretson, the findings demonstrate divergence from what might be thought of as the stereotypical 'Kiwi bloke'. It seemed that the consistent theme was that manhood was not about 'what you do', but 'how you do it'. However, rather than contrasting the two phrases, it would be more appropriate to integrate them – to think of characteristics in search of a context: 'Where can I be who I am?' Herein is an acknowledgement that people cannot be people in isolation – that 'being' is essentially relational. Being responsible, being able to stand up for oneself, and facing consequences are not abstract concepts, but by definition involve others.

As has been shown, the participants were able to describe a reasonably defined sense of their view of masculinity. However, when I asked them how they felt femininity might differ from masculinity, the clarity was very quickly lost. The consistent response was that there are definite differences, but articulating those differences seemed a challenge. Dan said he thought masculine had greater physical strength. Theo, Eddy, Michael and Martin all put the question into the 'too hard basket'. The character traits mentioned by the sons are obviously not exclusive to men. Linking the aspect of context with how masculinity and femininity sit alongside one another, Lashlie, reflecting on the characteristics of good men expressed by the adolescents she interviewed, comments:

> *In assessing those top three qualities of trust, loyalty and a sense of humour, it's possible to offer the argument that they're not qualities unique to men ... So are there really differences in the attributes considered ideal qualities for good men versus good women, and if so, where do those differences lie? My thoughts on this issue are still relatively underdeveloped, but my view at the moment is that the differences lie not in the qualities themselves but in how they're manifested.* (Lashlie, 2005, p. 198)

In discussing their sense of masculinity there was no sense of seeing it as distinct from their sense of the spiritual. Indeed the specific phrases used in relation to what makes a man a man seemed rooted in an 'inner sense', a gut-level awareness of their manhood. This inner 'knowing' was at once clear to them yet hard to articulate. It also seems both at odds with contemporary images, and deeper than a simple cognitive absorption of what they saw as Christian belief.

The thoughts expressed by the sons in this study seemed to balance this inner sense with the influence of context, both cultural and historical. In relation to the influence of context, however, some of the sons were uneasy about the idea of masculinity as social construct. Theo said:

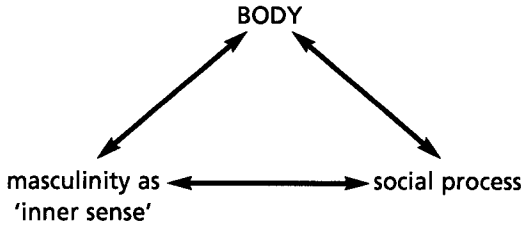
> *I know there's been a lot of talk at the moment about how gender is a social construct, whatever, and I totally disagree with that.*

On the other hand, they acknowledged both the part their fathers played in their own ideas on manhood and the awareness that other groups in society might define manhood and transition in different terms – implicit acknowledgements of constructivism at work.

Connell discusses gender as body-reflexive practice.

> *The relationship of bodies to social processes is difficult to analyse, constantly a sore point for theory. I think this is because a logically complex pattern of practice is involved, where bodies are both agents and objects of practice.*
>
> *Such body-reflexive practices are not internal to the individual.* (Connell 2000, p. 26)

This way of conceptualising gender, while giving a fuller sense than essentialist or simplistic poststructural approaches, still seems somewhat two-dimensional. The lack is an explanation or accounting for a sense of transcendence or of something 'beyond', that would be an integral part of not only Christian faith, but of any individual or community for whom spirituality is an integral part of existence. Hence, rather than a two-dimensional body-reflexive practice, I would like to moot the idea of a three-dimensional model.



This 'inner knowing' is a significant addition to understandings of gender in that it supplements aspects of simple physicality and social discourse with what could be variously termed the spiritual dimension of personhood, spiritual principalities or entities (Van Leeuwen, 2002; Wink, 1992), or Jungian accounts of the 'Universal Unconscious' (Tacey, 1997). It affirms Connell's view of bodies as both objects and agents of practice, and enlarges the arena in which such reciprocal activity occurs.

2. Arriving at maturity

In the course of each interview I gave each son a diagram of a bridge, with 'boy' at one end and 'man' at the other. I asked him to comment on the diagram as a representation of transition, and then, if it seemed appropriate, I asked if he would mark where on the bridge he saw himself. In talking about the point at which they either had arrived or would arrive at manhood, the group showed both diversity and ambivalence. Theo was the only one of the six sons to place himself at the 'man' end of the bridge diagram. However, he had difficulty in identifying the point of arrival.

> *I have a wife and I have a son and my job, I have a managerial position for my part-time job and all my different areas of – oh I don't know, I just, yeah, I consider myself there. I mean I'm sure I will develop my manhood. If this was a continuum I probably wouldn't put it there, but I see myself in there. Like, if the bridge kept on going I'd probably say well, you know, I'm not perfect yet, I'm on a journey.*

The ambivalence about 'arriving' was expressed by others of the sons. For example Michael:

> *I just think that from my perceptions of everything that it's not really a discrete scale at all, it's just a continuous sort of slider towards you know – one end doesn't have an end on it sort of thing. You know you're constantly progressing towards a more sort of independent, self-aware kind of state.*

And Dan:

> *Maybe a year ago I would have thought that I'd be three-quarters of the way there, but as you go you learn more, and through learning more I've realised that I still have so much more to learn and like, I can't be – well, I am a man but I'm not as knowledgeable as someone older than me ... But then, if I put it that way, then am I ever gonna make it to being a man? So maybe I should mark being fully a man now, but just always continuing learning. But I've marked halfway 'cos that's probably where I feel about now – about halfway between everything at the moment, just in the middle.*

Eddy thought that a rollercoaster would be a more apt image than a bridge. The consistent pattern throughout the comments seems to be one of, on the one hand, having a 'gut sense' about being a man, and on the other hand, a difficulty in articulating the how, when and what of arrival at that point.

The comments of the participants reflect the ambiguity around arriving at maturity described in the literature (Irwin, 1995; Tilton-Weaver et al., 2001; Wyn & White, 1997). It may well be that this diversity and ambivalence reflect a postmodern pluralistic society characterised by ambiguity and lack of definition. More positively, it reflects an awareness of the complexity of gender and the evolving nature of identity.

3. Changing societal views

Several of the sons talked about an awareness of changing perceptions of manhood in the society of which they are a part. As mentioned earlier, Eddy said that the provider

role of men was less apparent now than in previous generations, and thought there was more 'gender mutuality' today. Dan observed:

> *I guess the role of the young man has been downplayed quite a lot in the last hundred years and I think women have sort of gone overboard with their women's rights. Like I mean sure – and whatever – but it's almost like they're sexist against males now instead of – you don't notice it in, it's just every now and then you'll hear a girl say something or other and you'll feel put down but it's just the way it is.*

Martin said:

> *Times are changing and you've got women who are now in the workforce and things like that you know, and so women catching up with the blokes and I don't know whether they're trying to overtake, assume that man's position in the family. I don't know what's going on but the idea has certainly really changed.*

The general sense was that the perceived changes in gender roles are not yet stable, and that they were not sitting comfortably for this group. Martin was clear that some of the changes do not line up with his view of the biblical pattern. Others were more aware of a perceived negative impact on the way men see themselves.

This sense of change and potential instability has experiential implications for young males in transition. Smith has used the term 'stressed masculinity' (Smith, 1996, p. 9) to refer to situations where men, especially young males, feel pressure to conform to societal expectations of what 'being a man' means. However, the term is equally appropriate to situations where the expectations are unclear or shifting. The implication in Smith's description is that 'stress' is inherently harmful. I wonder, however, if this is necessarily the case. If an individual's sense of his own embodied masculinity is a constant interplay of different factors, a degree of tension or 'stress' would be expected. This could be paralleled with many physiological processes such as blood pressure or posture which are the result of forces in tension and which are, in most circumstances, aspects of health rather than disease. Pursuing the analogy in the physical context, it is possible for excessive stress of one form or another to create hypertension or deformity. Similarly, it may be that at times the interplay of forces causes the sense of masculinity to be particularly vulnerable. Hegemonic expressions of masculinity may not experience such vulnerability or dis-ease, but minority groups as well as individuals within the dominant culture could be at risk of experiencing heightened stress. Referring back to the men interviewed in this study, Steve seemed quite comfortable in saying:

> *Well, right from when I was young and that I was fairly, I reckon, feminine in a sense that I felt I definitely, you know just in the school yard and that I would definitely rather be sitting talking with the girls.*

However, it is not hard to conceive of situations where such honest expression could be stress-making. Reports have suggested that gay youth are at greater risk of suicidal behaviour than the general population, particularly at the time of 'coming out' (see, for example, Cato & Canetto, 2003).

It may be that the contribution of the 'inner knowing', a sense of spiritual anchoring, is significant in maintaining levels of 'stress' within the 'normal', manageable range. For example, Dan referred to his own experiences of feeling 'the reject' and of feeling suicidal during his intermediate years. He was aware of his own vulnerability during that period of his life but saw his faith as contributing to his strong 'just got to keep on going' theme. This throws an interesting perspective on how hegemonic and non-hegemonic forms of masculinity are thought about. It is easy to extrapolate from 'hegemonic' to intrinsically strong. However, the descriptions of Christian masculinity given by the sons in this study, while not culturally the dominant form of masculinity, would appear to convey a sense of inner strength and resilience when it comes to dealing with the challenges of life.

These observations need to act as a reminder to those working with young males not to make assumptions about clients' situations, learnings or values, or about how a client sees himself within his wider context.

4. The influence of others

When I moved the conversation to ask where they thought their ideas had come from – were they innate or learned, and if learned, where from? – the sons were again remarkably consistent. Theo commented:

> *Dad never talked to me about masculinity ever. He was brought up on a farm with four other brothers so he – he's a man's man I guess, he doesn't talk about emotional things whereas I do, see I'm quite, I think very differently but yeah – so seeing Dad in his role as a father and husband and man I guess obviously would've shaped that.*

Steve thought his father and grandfather had been the significant influences, and Eddy said the same, adding his mother as third, and his boarding school as fourth. Michael's response was that his family was most influential. He added that he had seen other ideas, but had chosen to stick with the family way of thinking. In this strong

emphasis on the role of their father it is, of course, possible that the sons were influenced by knowing it was the men of the family I was interviewing, and that this affected their responses. At face value, however, their fathers figured prominently as role models – but not, it needs to be said – and as indicated by Theo in the quote above – as proactive communicators about masculinity.

When I moved the conversation from the part they saw their father had taken to the influence of others, some interesting themes emerged. Firstly, while their own individual faith was important to them, they largely saw 'church' as irrelevant to their developing sense of manhood. Some of them expressed this impression in strong terms. Eddy's father commented:

> *At the moment? Where I see it? Totally irrelevant. Maybe that's an indication of where I'm at ... but I don't think if it's irrelevant for me it can be relevant for my boys.*

This disparity between spirituality and religious activity parallels other reports (Arnett & Jensen, 2002; Streib, 1999).

In thinking about the influence of school, two of the sons saw specific teachers as good role models, but generally their high school experience did not figure large in their thinking. Eddy talked about the influence of his boarding school. He felt that the environment created a 'staunch' image of maleness that was tough and strong.

> *Quite often there's boys – they just want to staunch it up, kind of put on a stone face and show they kind of, nothing actually gets to them or affects them just because they want to portray the image that they can deal with problems, that they're a hell of a lot older and more mature, more like – more manly – that's the term I'd use – than they are. So they kind of stifle emotional development because they want to project this image that they're already there so they kind of – they're not. And I think that's a problem not just at boarding school, I think it's a problem in the whole of New Zealand at the moment.*

Connell (2000) talks of school as both 'setting' and 'agent' in gender identity formation. It may be that as setting, school had been a significant if unconscious influence, but there seemed little sense of school as conscious agent, shaping their views of masculinity.

In thinking about individuals rather than institutions, we discussed their experience and thoughts on mentors. On the one hand, in talking about the people they recognised as significant mentors to them, they felt their learning was largely by observation and osmosis rather than intentional. On the other hand, when they talked

about mentoring in general, they saw relationship as being the most important element. For example, Steve commented:

> *All young people or all everyone's about really, it's all validation you know, like everyone just wants to be valid ... If it is valid cherish it man, hold onto it because there are a lot of people in that person's life that are probably gonna try and chip away at that validation.*

And Theo:

> *I mean it's just being part, being in their home you're kind of exposed to how they do it and how [name] is, how he is.*

Admittedly, for most of the young men, the learning by observation was learning from people with whom they had some level of relationship – an employer, a family friend, an older personal friend – rather than a complete stranger. The sense, however, was that the sons saw greater potential within the relationship for being taught. But then the paradox continues.

Steve:

> *I think more often than not if you're not trying to teach me something I would have just learnt something off you. If you're trying to pound something down my throat then what I would've learned from you is exactly the opposite of what probably what you were trying to teach me.*

Theo:

> *I guess you could probably teach until you're blue in the face but if the attitude of the person doesn't really want a mentor anyway ...*

Most of the people the sons mentioned either specifically or in general terms as mentors would not have been a great deal older than they were. Martin's mentor friend was only a few years older than him, and Dan commented:

> *Too old would be over 35 I guess, for someone who's a teenager to talk to about their problems ... maybe someone who's late twenties, early thirties type of thing.*

It seemed to me that I was hearing the importance of 'relationship', 'relevance' and 'realness' as a consistent theme. While the counselling relationship could be argued to be distinct from that of a mentor there is clearly overlap. Those of us who counsel young people would do well to listen to their perceptions of what actually constitutes helpfulness.

Conclusion

In keeping with the life history research approach I have chosen not to seek to draw tidy conclusions or make neat generalisations from the material presented. I am aware that in presenting extracts of the interviews I have already interpreted the material to some degree. I entrust the process of further interpretation to the reader.

However, one practical implication of the report is worth underlining. The men in this study clearly saw faith as integral to their sense of gender identity. This sits alongside the previously mentioned literature that suggests that spiritual awareness among young people is increasing and that spirituality is an important part of life for many of them. Wendel (2003), in a paper discussing spirituality and family therapy, has reported that in the very recent past spirituality and religious involvement has been seen in therapeutic circles as pathological and as evidence of neurotic disorder. It would seem that this stance is in need of review. Doherty, in responding to and affirming Wendel's paper, offers an important observation.

> *After a century of ignoring or pathologising religion, we cannot simply parachute with our existing gear into this foreign territory, give it our preferred name 'spirituality', and then colonize it with our own language and customs.* (Doherty, 2003, p. 183)

When relating to, and working with, young males, Doherty's warning needs to be seen as an encouragement to hear and respect the perceptions they have about their spirituality and its relation to their sense of masculinity.

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