Exploring Masculinity in the Family

Landon Gallup

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Heidi Heavyshield

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Hegemonic masculinity can be described as a form of interactions within the family system where the individual performs a masculine form of fathering. The masculine figure often carries out authoritarian or disciplinary actions, along with part-time parenting that stems from a distributed work-family balance (Albanese, 2018). Other manifestations of masculinity, such as hypermasculinity, similarly depict further exaggeration of masculinity, espousing greater tolerance for violence and performance of traditional gender norms such as entrenchment of male power and control in the relationship, along with callous sexual attitudes towards women (Prospero, 2006; Nelson 2010).

In pursuit of the social work values of respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons and social justice, social workers cannot passively avert their duties to enhance the functioning of family units and the systems they interact with (Alberta College of Social Workers, 2005). Considerations for exploring masculinity in families include an assessment of how masculinity in manifested within the family, how it influences (dys)function, and how it may intersect with adverse childhood experiences. Doing so recognizes health and development throughout the life course, along with implications of social learning that perpetuate thoughts and behaviors – such as violence and/or psychological suffering – that violate the inherent dignity and worth of persons and pursuit of social justice (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2015; Prospero, 2006; Garner & Saul, 2018; Brown, Perera, Masho, Mezuk, & Cohen, 2015; Ehrensaft, Cohen, Brown, Smailes, Chen, & Johnson, 2003).

One consideration is conventional western gender norms that have become increasingly difficult to maintain, as both social and economic factors which have contributed to changes in family labour and work roles males and females partake within the family (Ranson, 2010). This presents a new challenge to traditional masculine roles, as it highlights the contrasts between

new and stereotypical masculine archetypes. Examining and working with the dissonance between fulfilling conventional and modern masculine archetypes in the family can be explored.

Family Theories

Family Systems Theory

One of the lenses for viewing masculinity is through family systems theory. Family systems theory posits that the concerns faced by a family exist within the context of the family, as it is the interactions within the family system that shape conditions that lead to (dys)function (Albanese, 2018). Thus, it is not one specific individual who is examined, moving towards the interrelatedness of family members and their circumstances (Apgar, 2015). This allows for case workers to individualize their approach to the family circumstances and look at restoring homeostasis within the family unit (Holosko, Dulmus, & Sowers, 2013).

Restoration or maintenance of homeostasis can however be challenged by positive feedback loops within the family system. When examining masculinity, the functions of members within the family subsystem can be examined in parallel with the boundaries or resistance to change within the larger societal and community systems (Apgar, 2015). Doing so can allow social workers to examine where the family system (in)sufficiently adapts to changes from the outer systems in which the family (sub)system is a part of changing norms and roles within the family (Teater, 2010). Seeking to understand the adaptiveness in relation to the larger system provides further avenues to explore and understand strengths existent within the family subsystem. The strengths, in turn, may provide solutions that can be utilized to restore a less exaggerated form of masculinity, and work towards family homeostasis.

Marxist Theories for Families

Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx looked at distinct phases of human history, and their role in shaping human interactions. Looking at economics, we can explore how policies related to

access to resources shape the dynamics between the sexes and generations. This theory thus focuses on how the power and status of members in the family are mediated by power bestowed through resource access. Combining Marxist theories with systems theory highlights the importance of economics in shaping privilege or equality within a family system (Albanese, 2018).

Combining an economic dimension to systems theory underscores the imbalance of power in relationships though resource access between subsystems in the family subsystem within the community system. The imbalance of power can help understand entropy through structural inequalities by both gender and class that create the environment for hyper and hegemonic masculinity traits to flourish and be reproduced through circular causality (Valdimarsdóttir, 2018).

Research by Moreno-Bella, Williams, and Moya (2019) suggests that societies with greater economic inequality perceive their society has having more "masculine" than "feminine" traits. This brings into question the role masculine traits have to achieve the "success" of the "higher classes," along with the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and behaviors that become attributed to success and masculinity. This can be examined within the cultural meaning system of the society, along with its implications for a family system (Ranson, 2010; Castillo, 1997). These schemas of masculinity can be strengthened though consumerist mediums such as film, and other forms of media (see Schreoder, 2019). Further exploration of how the economics of systemic income inequality achieves a feedback loop of masculinity is in need of further research.

The reification of masculinity, commodifying an image of power and success, from the situationalist branch of Marxist perspectives, could suggest the realization of "being into having," has coopted the development of the masculine archetype (Debord, 1995, p. 16). Thus, one's relation to others mediated by access to commodities that provide a feeling of actualizing

the male archetype (Debord, 1995; Osgerby, 2003). Appearances of upholding the archetype, though the access to goods that suggest adherence may provide a pathway for reinforcement within the hypothetical feedback loop of masculinity (Debord, 1995; Castillo, 1997). Exploring ones preferred and actual self in relation to adherence of the hegemonic or hyper masculine archetype provides an avenue to explore with males and their families in relationship to both family and society.

Working with Families

Using the above theoretical orientations, social workers can incorporate ecological, critical, and constructivist approaches into family practice. If we are to look at social work practice at its most basic elements, our function is to improve the social functioning of the family (Zastrow, 2015). Enhancing family functioning through the aforementioned theories utilizes an examination of how social forces outside of the family unit influence and shape the narratives and understanding of self with the aim of complimenting interactions between members within the family unit (White & Epston, 1990).

Structural Family Therapy

Drawing from Minuchin, structural family therapy can be applied in conjunction with family systems and narrative therapy by looking at the family subsystems and seeing how membership in various subsystems changes the interactions between members of the family (Holosko, Dulmus, & Sowers, 2013). For exploring masculinity that could include the interactions between and within child-parent subsystem(s) and the parental and couple subsystems to examine the unspoken rules. Doing so provides opportunity to explore how the rules guide interactions, see if there are any circular causalities that reinforce exaggerated masculine attributes, such as gender norms (Corcoran, 2003) that reinforce the current narrative and family discourse.

Narrative Practice

Drawing from White and Epston (1990), the alternative discourses of masculinity that are repressed or disregarded to can be brought to life, along with their depth and breadth thickened through the narrative process. We can look for the "truth" of the individual, along with developing a richer narrative that is driven by clients rather than societal schemas. This can provide a basis to deconstruct their understanding of roles, along with their viability in past and present social locations or contexts.

Providing space to deconstruct masculinity and provide opportunity to reconstruct what masculinity is within their current ways of knowing, value systems, and social location can be an area of focus. Another area of focus is the messaging within the family system that is perceived to propagate the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and behaviors of exaggerated masculinity, and how the new narrative can incorporate ways of understanding that reevaluate the relationships within the family system. Reflecting on Marxist perspectives, this can open exploration to how we may consume ourselves into believing and adhering to the masculine archetype. This can also lead into conversations of whether or not the archetype maintains a healthy family system. The practitioners who utilize a narrative lens can highlight exceptions or resistance towards incongruent attributes of the masculine archetype to begin the course of facilitating the reconstructing a new narrative (White & Epston, 1990). This narrative can transition from appearing masculine, to a constructivist look at what masculinity for the individual is, and how their narrative creates healthy relationships within the family systems.

Bowenian Family Practice & Mindfulness-based practice

The risk of a narrative approach, if used in an individual context, is that it does not necessarily address the whole family or facilitate an environment to establish collective understandings of the barriers to enhanced social functioning. Furthermore, while it may

restructure the individual's relation to the presenting concern, it may not comprehensively reshape the relationships between members of a family. Drawing from a Bowenian frame of reference, understanding the person in the context of their contact with other family members can aid in looking at the relationships between one another, and ensuring that the resistance to change within the system is considered (Langer & Lietz, 2015).

Differentiation is a key construct of interest, as it allows the family member(s) to fulfill their space in the family without excessive influence from internal or external emotional pressures (Apgar, 2015). If the sense of self is less developed, the differentiation construct leaves room to explore if outside and inside influences on roles and perception of self for masculine identities within the family (The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, 2017). Work on building capacity for emotional independence though intervention is one route that can be pursued. Narrative interventions for multiple family members in this instance may be appropriate.

Another construct that emerges from Bowen, and is demonstrated in genograms, is intergenerational influence of events on families (Derrick, 2017). Reflecting on and providing space for exploration of transmission of intergenerational trauma (such as adverse childhood experiences related to masculinity) through the family, by way of tools such as the genogram, provides another means of relevance for anyone who has ancestors with adverse life experiences. This may also have specific relevance to First Nations, Métis, and Innuit families – complimenting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's eighteenth call to action (2015).

Mindfulness practice in many ways counters the stereotyped behaviors of hegemonic and hypermasculinity and would be congruent with how Bowen made sense of the interconnections of family members. Generally perceived as a tool to develop increasingly skillful responses to

stress, increased empathy, acceptance, and attachment in relationships, mindfulness training may

act as complimentary intervention to the Bowenian approach (such as addressing instances of

triangulation), when there is room for differentiation growth of a family member (Foose & Cicio,

2018; Khaddouma, Gordon, Bolden, 2015).

Practice Implications

Cultural Relevance & Anti-oppression

One of the primary implications for practice is the assumptions that arise in defining what

a "family" is. Family structures can include complex household memberships, multiple

caregivers, and different kinship systems and other constructs that do not fit with western

definitions of family (Tam, Findlay, & Kohen, 2017). Each of these family structures provide

different participants within a family that could interact with Bowen's family system constructs

with greater diversity than a nuclear family model. However, multigenerational families

examined under a Bowenian frame of reference can experience cultural relevance from the

practice model. Such concepts include multigenerational transmission, genograms, and the

inclusion of emotion in as a part of the family process (Derrick, 2017).

Derrick (2017) makes the argument that narrative practice used along with Bowenian

family systems theory can be culturally relevant, because it utilizes a social constructivist

approach in how we understand ourselves and the values of a dominant society. Taking this

approach provides opportunity to be anti-oppressive, by not enforcing the dominant culture onto

the family members. Masculine figures and the family as a whole can construct truths that can

provide new interpretations of the origin of exaggerated masculinity and what healthy

masculinity would look like in the family.

From an Indigenous lens, a constructivist approach could also take on both cultural

revitalization and spiritual dimensions. A noteworthy difference between Euro-western culture

and Indigenous perspectives are the differences in the nature of relationships between coupled men and women. The status of women as creators of life, and matrilineal family lineage can be complimented with the roles of fathers as creators of "safe, secure, and nurturing environments" for children of Mohawk tradition (Derrick, 2017). Similarly, the reverence for those who are two-spirited, or able to express a balance of the genders can counter the fear of holding feminine attributes (Derrick, 2017). Inclusion of counternarratives to Euro-western masculinity can provide a footing for explorations in narratives that go beyond the hypermasculine image and its associated thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and appearance(s) in a family context.

Practice & Service Delivery Systems

Combining Marxist, systems, and constructivist approaches influences service delivery in a couple of ways. First is the way in which we interpret presenting concerns. Drawing from the concept of circular causality, no individual is the source of a problem. It is the interaction patterns that create the conditions for dysfunction. This helps externalize the core barrier within the family system. Likewise, a narrative approach can complement Minuchin by continuing the externalization at an individual level. Backed by Marxist theories, the focus becomes a new narrative that is not imposed by dominant discourse but once that actively seeks to challenge it. This provides space for other discourses, such as indigenous ways of knowing, and countercultures to receive autonomy while still working to enhance the relationships in a family in the exploration of a new construction of masculinity. This fits with anti-oppressive practice by providing agency to the individuals in exploring how their experiences with intersectional components such as gender, sex, ethnicity, and class contribute to the presenting concerns, while seeking to not reproduce power hierarchies (Shera, 2003).

The nature of this approach brings the second consideration for service delivery, changing society. If systems are interconnected and influenced by larger systems, then structural

change of the society cannot be ruled out. The combined theories and constructs outlined

challenge both dominant discourses of "traditional families," gender norms, and the masculine

archetype. Not all service providers may share this perspective or position themselves as allies

of such an approach. Opportunities to counter dominant discourse provide opportunity to make

makes the personal political. While not imposing any ideology, this approach seeks to evoke the

reflection of how service users fit within a society, or if their perceptions of self, values, and

ideal self still fit with the dominant discourse. Such an approach provides opportunity to create a

family's own narrative and discourse when the dominant discourse is no longer a good fit.   For

families accessing multiple services, a common understanding of these theoretical constructs,

especially constructivism, would be important to effectively guide the family coherently through

the meaning and relations restructuring process within and beyond the family system.

Coordination and cooperation would be key.

Conclusion

The social issue of unhealthy masculinity in families is complex and can be addressed in

multiple theories working in tandem. First, drawing from Marxist theories, resource access and

its implications on the male schema are seen as a mediating factor in the construction and

perpetuation of hegemonic and hypermasculinity. Family systems theory provides a good

foundation to understand hegemonic and hypermasculinity's implications on the family because

it fits well with other social work theories such as systems theory - placing the family as a

subsystem of the larger societal system. If the goal is achievement of homeostasis,

considerations within and outside of the family system must be considered.

Examining unhealthy schemas of masculinity and dysfunction in the family system(s)

provides opportunity to explore constructivist concepts of masculinity and create or revive

meaning systems that are a better fit to the values and circumstances of one's role and relations

within the family. Narrative approaches aid in enriching a constructivist approach by not

imposing dominant discourses on the family. This provides space to separate the presenting

concerns from the family.

As the process develops, Bowen's constructs of differentiation and intergenerational

influence compliment the narrative by maintaining a focus on the relationships between members

of the family as the reconceptualization of self through narrative unfolds. Being aware that

multiple competing narratives or incongruent narratives may create resistance to change within

the family system – possibly requiring other changes within the system. This may be

complimented by mindfulness techniques that seek to improve many facets of functioning that

are underdeveloped in the masculine schema.

This process leads to a wholistic approach form theory to practice, that aims to create a

culturally relevant and individualized approach to working with the family. While a lot of the

process is guided by family members, there are practice implications. The transition of the

presenting concern originating from a family or individual to society may not be respected or

valued by all professions and service providers – having implications for coordinated and

coherent service delivery. In conclusion, the process of facilitating the change needed for

healthy masculinity in families is not only possible, but also in line with our professional code of

ethics.

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