"Masculine Identity Formation: Struggling with masculinity at the University of St. Gallen"

A guest blog post by Iñigo Schmid

What defines being a man in the 21st century?

This exact question was asked by the researchers of the company Equimundo in an effort to find common beliefs on masculine gender norms. The result yielded a total of seven pillars that men are expected to embody in order to be perceived as masculine in society: Self-sufficiency, acting tough, being physically attractive, adherence to rigid masculine gender roles, heterosexuality and homophobia, hypersexuality, and aggression and control (Heilman et al., 2017, pp. 21-22). Together, these pillars build the so-called "Man Box", the iron cage in which most men in society are unconsciously trapped. These masculine gender norms carry significant emotional and mental health costs. Men who are stuck in the "Man Box" report high levels of depression, isolation, and alexithymia, the most widespread consequence of masculine gender role embodiment (Krystal, 1982, and cited in Levant, 1992, p. 388; Pleck, 1995, p. 17). It is characterized by an inability to recognize and express one's own emotions, especially vulnerable ones.

Figure 1: The 7 Pillars of the Man Box

Original Source: Heilman et al., 2017

How are University of St. Gallen's business students affected by rigid masculinity norms?

If men are burdened with masculinity and these severe consequences of rigid gender norms, how does this affect business students at my alma mater, the University of St. Gallen? The business school context is particularly challenging as masculinity is firmly ingrained in its culture (Kelan, 2014). Furthermore, studying in St. Gallen has a strong influence on the identity formation of its students. Hence, it represents an ideal context to answer my question and deepen our knowledge on masculine identity formation! I conducted five interviews with male students and analysed them with a grounded theory approach for my bachelor's thesis.

Masculinity and mental well-being: Gender role strain

Analysing the interviews, I applied the Gender Role Strain Paradigm (GRSP). The GRSP assumes that normative beliefs on gender identity have severe effects for our mental well-being. It explains that gender role norms are contradictory, inconsistent, and psychologically dysfunctional, causing severe stress to individual men. For example, gender norms expect men to be stoic and strong, while simultaneously expecting them to maintain intimate, emotionally expressive relationships with partners. This example highlights how norms create intense distress where it becomes inevitable to violate them. As such, the GRSP suggests three different sources of strain causing continuous stress for men: the trauma strain, the discrepancy strain, and the dysfunctional strain. The trauma strain arises from adverse experiences during childhood as part of the natural process of role socialization. The discrepancy strain occurs when a man fails to embody his internalized manhood ideal. And the dysfunctional strain represents the negative effects that arise when living up to the standards of masculinity. In the following, I explain how the five male students I talked to experienced these sources of strain in their lives.

The trauma strain and socialization influences in men's childhood.

From the perspective of the GRSP, the process of masculine identity formation is inherently traumatic (Levant and Pollack, 1995). While male infants are more emotional and expressive in their primary years than females, modern culture teaches them to "tune out, suppress and channel their emotions" (Levant and Rankin, 2014, p. 61). Three socialisation influences create this social phenomenon: mothers, fathers, and childhood peer groups. The interviews highlight the importance of these influences, emphasising the role of fathers and peer groups in shaping masculine identity while acknowledging the impact of mothers.

Fathers often play an active role in forming male identity. Through roughhousing with their children from age four onwards, and by applying selective reinforcement towards emotions such as anger, they focus the boy's attention on the desired male behaviour (Levant & Rankin, 2014, p. 62). They use punishment towards vulnerable emotions and failure, as further mechanisms (Judith, 2004, p. 248). Participants reported that the expectations were implied through actions, such as by showing anger when they physically hurt themselves as children, instead of showing care. Another participant experienced strong emotional distancing and coldness, for instance when the desired grade for an exam was not met. This resulted in a strong feeling of shame inside the boys, of "not being good enough", and felt a strong pressure to uphold the masculine standards set by the father (Judith, 2004, p. 198). This ultimately created a sense of emotional distance between participants and their fathers, "Not quite there, to be honest. [relationship with his father]. I've struggled with my dad a lot. … he was always focused about being the provider. Always serious. [sadness in his voice]." All interviewed men highlighted how they had learned they could only relate to the father when meeting the desired standards.

Second, mothers shape their children's male identity in two forms, through contingent responding and parentification. In the first case, they use contingent smiling, mimicking of positive emotions, and downplaying or ignoring negative emotions such as pain or sadness to ensure that their sons learn to stay content. (Levant & Kopecky, 1995) In the second case, they use parentification, and it happens when a mother is "incapable of upholding her emotional or physical responsibilities as a caregiver and may relegate these duties to the child" (Engelhard, 2012, p. 46). Also, my interview partners reported internal conflicts seen in an inability to discern their perception of masculinity apart from their mothers' expectations, not wanting to disappoint their wishes. "I will never be against [her]", one participant reported. This reflects a form of parentification, where emotional feedback from the mother makes deviation from her male expectations feel unsafe. The child is put into the role of an adult, taking care of the mother's emotions so that she stays content.

The third socialisation influence, peer groups, was strongly recalled among the students interviewed. Peer groups shape boys' identity by defining what grants acceptance or leads to exclusion. There are two ways in which boys learn to prove their masculinity and gain acceptance. One by aligning with masculine activities such as playing soccer, or guns as opposed to dolls or paint. Second, by distancing themselves from anything feminine, such as

from mothers and girls (Chu, 2014, pp. 64 -71). The underlying mechanisms employed are coercion and fear, as not being masculine can result in separation from the group (Kimmel, 2008, p. 63). Participants have very vivid memories of those groups, which were characterised by a strong hierarchy, a very masculine leader, such as the best soccer player, and a strong risk-taking culture. One participant described a common dynamic, "It's like when you're young, you might be 'I'm never gonna smoke weed,' but then if all your friends do it, you're like, 'well, everyone's doing it.' [so I have to do it]". This quote shows the insecurity developed from masculine group dynamics and the recurring pressure to externalise it.

The discrepancy strain

The discrepancy strain arises when there is a failure to uphold the internalised standards of masculinity. Therefore, stress arises among the individuals experiencing this, in proportion to the gap with the standards (Levant & Rankin, 2014, p. 60). This generates strong feelings of self-doubt and self-criticism in men, which was corroborated by the participants. Two main correcting mechanisms were reported in these cases: balancing and avoidance acts. One example of an avoidance act was reported by one participant, "If I don´t feel masculine enough, … It would be reverting to bad habits and then staying at home … avoiding social interactions.". On the other hand, balancing acts are seen when the "stereotype of masculinity forces one to become more masculine as egos clash, people show off, and so forth.". Behind these acts lies a strong feeling of insecurity and fear of non-acceptance, creating a constant struggle for men to assert and maintain their masculinity (Pleck, 1995).

The dysfunctional strain

The dysfunctional strain is associated with the negative consequences stemming from men's embodiment of masculine stereotypes and gender norms. These reflect the negative consequences men experience from conforming to traditional masculinity (Pleck, 1995, p. 17; Levant & Rankin, 2014, p. 60). The participants recalled several examples of dysfunctional stress experienced due to their masculinity. The most predominant was alexithymia, an inability to relate to and express one's own emotions (Levant, 1992, p. 388). As one participant reported "I have noticed in the past, […] someone tells me something important. I don't care. […] I do struggle with empathy. […] That's definitely a part of being a man that sucks." Others recalled the intense pressure to pay for their partners' expenditures, or the long hours expected to be worked on the job, keeping them from being at home. These negative consequences leave men

with no outlet for the stress that masculine gender norms put on them and generates a strong confusion about what it means to be a man in the 21ˢᵗ century (Levant, 1992, p. 381).

My analysis shows that male gender norms cause the three types of stress to male students highlighted by the GRSP. In this regard, the students align with the seven pillars of the Man Box to assess their masculinity. This confirms that they are suffering from masculinity and a male role. Now, how can I answer my initial question: what does it mean to be a man?

The Male Identity Formation Framework
Reflecting on my findings, the theoretical perspective of the Gender Role Strain Paradigm, and the Man Box concept, I developed the Male Identity Formation Framework (MIFF). This framework provides an illustration of how traditional masculine identity is formed. Furthermore, it explains that alternative, healthier forms of masculinity also emerge, and form an «Out of the Man Box» perspective.
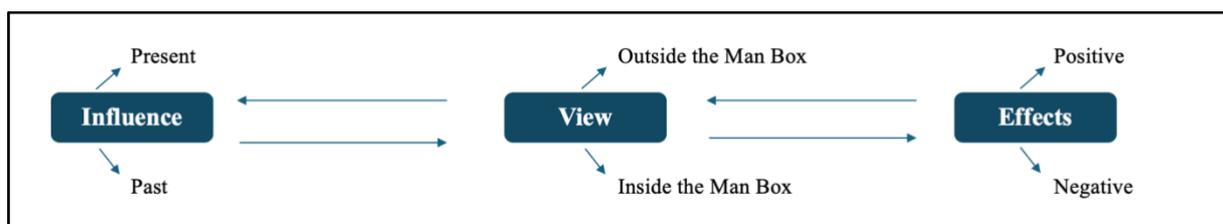
Source: *Authors own illustration based on research findings*

In the 21ˢᵗ century, and as also seen from my interviews, the MIFF works primarily from left to right. Several external influences shape individuals' masculinity and form it according to the seven pillars of an Inside the Man Box perspective. This leads to negative effects in the form of dysfunctional and discrepancy strains, self-doubt, and alexithymia. Nevertheless, as my interviews highlight, masculinity is also experiencing a shift. Individuals have started to become aware of these negative effects and have decided to work backwards, from right to left. These men have decided to change their view of masculinity to an out-of-the-box perspective and have started re-educating themselves on gender norms. In this pursuit, they have sought out other influences, such as a therapist or other social media sources, to reinforce an out-of-the-box perspective. One participant highlights his journey, "I just wanted to be fine with myself. And started to prioritize that. I started to see the futility in trying to always be perceived a certain way or meet standards that I imagined I had to meet.", "I eventually got, like a friend of mine who's a coach, and so I did a lot of coaching with him." As seen in the quote, this shift happened on the inside and worked its way outward. He began to define what it meant to be a man for

him and developed a healthier approach to masculinity. While it also caused stress to work against common standards of masculinity, these men report an increased sense of self-worth. Therefore, actively working with the social norms that limit the possibilities of what it means to be a man seems a vital way forward.

Conclusion

The exploration of masculinity at the University of St. Gallen reveals a harsh reality: the ideal man, as expected by society often comes at the cost of men's emotional well-being. Through the lens of the GRSP and the Man Box framework, we see how students internalize societies' rigid standards of masculinity, suppressing any form of vulnerability and emotional expression. Instead, they face continuous stress to meet the masculinity standards that are reinforced by family, peer groups and the university culture.

But there is also hope: In midst of this turmoil, a new form of masculinity seems to be surfacing. Through self-reflection, therapy and the braveness to challenge common beliefs, men are starting to step out of the Man Box. These men are showing that masculinity is not fixed, but that it can be unlearned, redefined and reshaped, giving room to healthier, more authentic forms of masculinity in the 21st century.

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