

Learning “Maleness”: Implications for Mental Health

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A number of mental health problems emerge in adolescence, making it a critical time for prevention. Effective prevention accounts for the broader sociocultural context in relation to mental health and wellbeing.

A growing body of research points to the connection between societal expectations for male-identified individuals and poor mental health. However, past reviews examining this connection have been narrowly focused and have not considered adolescents specifically.



Figure 1 Photo by Anna Shvets from Pexels. Public Domain

This systematic review focuses on exploring the associations between multiple facets of masculinity (role norm adherence, attributes, and identity) and internalizing mental health problems/social support among adolescent boys.

“The connections between masculinity and mental health in adolescence are important to understand, as poor mental health during this time may be an initial pathway to poor mental health as an adult.”

Highlights

We conducted a systematic review to explore the associations between masculinity and mental health specifically for adolescent boys.

Findings reveal the need to support adolescent boys to resist expectations of stereotypical masculinity (e.g., emotional restriction).

Methods

Through database searching, we identified 14,201 articles for this systematic review. To be included in the study, articles had to focus on adolescent boys (age 10-18 years, or those in middle/high school) and assess both a masculinity construct (i.e., roles/norms, attributes or identity) as well as a mental health outcome (i.e., internalizing behavior problems, like depression, and/or social support). A total of 29 articles were included in the analysis. Most of the articles used quantitative methods and were spread evenly across three broad categories: a) associations with masculine gender role norm adherence, b) associations with masculine attributes, and c) associations with masculine identity (primarily, ‘gender typicality’).

Results

- Greater identification with stereotypical masculine attributes (e.g., ambitious, assertive) was generally associated with better mental health (i.e., fewer internalizing behaviors like depression and greater social support).
- The more adolescent boys adhered to stereotypical gender norms, like not showing emotion, the more internalizing behavior problems they faced (e.g., depressive symptoms).
- Lower gender “typicality” (a measure of identity) was consistently associated with poorer mental health.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

Community Psychology stresses the importance of understanding individuals within their broader social and cultural context when addressing mental health. Most articles within our review were focused on the individual-level of analysis (e.g., an individual’s adherence to beliefs or endorsement of attributes), without consideration of their broader context. We recommend that the larger cultural and social context be considered in future research exploring connections between adolescence, masculinity, and mental health.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: Our findings identified that much of the focus in the research literature has been on individual adherence to masculinity beliefs or attributes. In other words, studies have very rarely focused on the broader contexts in which adolescent boys learn and play, how these contexts shape masculinities, and how these contexts themselves are related to mental health. This is a gap which Community Psychologists are well-positioned to address. Future research should focus on the contextual nature of gendered qualities, as well as the role that settings beyond the individual play in shaping gendered norms and mental health.

Practice: Our findings suggest that practitioners should consider the developmental importance of masculinities for adolescent mental health. They suggest that 1) adolescent boys should be supported to resist stereotypical expectations of Western masculinity and 2) that work is needed to make social settings, like schools, more accepting of gender non-conforming individuals. Taking these various settings, and their gendered norms and processes, into consideration is required for a holistic approach to promoting mental health and well-being for adolescent boys.

Social Action: Our findings showed that boys who reported higher gender 'atypicality' scores also consistently reported higher rates of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and lower self-esteem than their more gender-typical peers. Research has pointed to the marginalization and violence experienced by gender non-conforming boys. To make the connection between structural factors and individual outcomes clear, we would encourage researchers and practitioners to move away from terms that center the problem within individuals (i.e., terms like typical or atypical), and towards situating the problem within environments that are gender rigid or gender accepting. Advocating against policies and laws that discriminate against trans/non-binary individuals is one way to create communities that are more gender inclusive and accept boys for who they are. This is especially relevant given anti-trans legislation that is currently being/has recently been passed in many states.

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