

Toxic Masculinity: The Alpha Straw-Man

According to the intelligentsia, many, if not most, males today are diseased. The etiology of this illness is prolonged exposure to the toxic substance of traditional masculinity. No one is safe. The substance is everywhere, embedded in our traditions and media, and has been for generations. There is an epidemic of emotionally stunted barbarians contaminating our society, stomping and swaggering, boasting and berating, grunting and groping. The scourge of toxic masculinity must be eradicated for our civilization to have any hope of a humane existence.

Fortunately, this isn't true. Unfortunately, too many believe it is. Gillette's controversial [commercial](#) "We Believe: The Best Men Can Be," perpetrates it. The American Psychological Association makes it official with its ["Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men,"](#) although the APA doesn't use the term "toxic masculinity."

Actually, outside of the offices of the APA and board rooms of Procter & Gamble (the parent company of Gillette), the crisis in the real world is that by associating masculine ideals with a pathological hypermasculinity, we are losing the true value of mature masculinity, and suffering the consequences.

Masculinity does look pretty toxic if you think only of Harvey Weinstein, Donald Trump, and Hannibal Lecter. If we widen our view, things look much different. One [study](#) assessed over 27,000 men from eight different countries and found the following:

"Men's perceptions of masculinity differed substantially from stereotypes in the literature. Men reported that being seen as honorable, self-reliant, and respected by friends were

important determinants of self-perceived masculinity. . . . For quality of life, factors that men deemed of significant importance included good health, harmonious family life, and a good relationship with their wife/partner."

Unfortunately, most research on traditional masculinity goes something like this: define traditionally masculine values as those of a terrible person, and then show that men who hold such values are, in fact, terrible. It is not groundbreaking social science to show that men who rooted for Biff in *Back to the Future* make bad boyfriends.

Some researchers have been open to the possibility of [positive classic masculine](#) norms. A recent [paper](#) asked survey participants if these traits were actually seen as positive and if they were more characteristic of men than of women.

The researchers found that there were indeed many such norms, even ones associated with traits gender theorists have viewed as negative. For example: "being a leader," "being strong emotionally," "being independent," "providing safety," and "providing for one's loved ones." The researchers observed that "current instruments capturing normative male roles tend to focus on rigid, extreme, or restrictive fulfillment of such norms. Even though the norm may be viewed as positive, it might still lead to problematic outcomes when rigidly followed."

Outside of gender studies departments, most of us already know this. Virtues often rest between extremes and have to be balanced with other virtues. Honesty is the best policy, but there is only one correct response to "Do you like my hair cut?" or "If anyone has any objections to this union, please speak now or forever hold your peace."

What the APA denigrates as "restrictive emotionality" in reality isn't so toxic. Male norms regarding emotion are not about avoidance of emotion but rather about equanimity and

resilience. Emotional composure is rightly seen as an admirable trait in Stoic philosophy or Eastern spirituality; why, when the conversation drifts to masculinity, does it quickly become a flaw?

Another theme of the APA guidelines is that men have poor health outcomes because of traditional masculinity socialization, making them reluctant to admit problems and ask for help. There is some truth to this, as men rate their health better than women do, yet have higher mortality rates.

A recent [study](#) titled “Female Choice and Male Stoicism” found that for long-term mates, and regardless of how physically attractive a man was, women preferred men who worked while experiencing minor health problems rather than staying home.

Maybe these women are onto something—maybe a guy who spends all day in his Snuggie on WebMD every time he has a sniffle isn’t marriage material. And yet men should be encouraged to take better care of their health. The best approach balances the impulse to be useful instead of useless, instead of just dismissing that impulse as caveman bravado.

As a psychotherapist, I hear many a heterosexual woman express frustration that her significant other doesn’t express his feelings enough. Although men don’t talk about their feelings as much as women, this doesn’t necessarily indicate some deficit in emotional health.

I often challenge these women by asking, “Would you want him to talk about his feelings as much as you?” Most women laugh and say something like, “Now, wait, I didn’t say that.” One woman joked, “If I wanted to marry a woman, I would. It’s legal now.”

In general, men and women have different styles in addressing emotions. Healthy heterosexual couples are cognizant of those differences and develop communication patterns reflecting understanding and compromise.

So often the masculine ideal criticized by the dominant academic perspective is a man who is all powerful, dominant over everyone, and without fear or weaknesses. However, the classic masculine ethic never actually reflected this. You wouldn't need courage if you had no fear. A traditional model of masculinity would benefit young men like [“incel” Jack Peterson](#) just as much as, if not more than, the captain of the football team—it has always been about David, not Goliath.

Nelson Mandela first read the poem “Invictus” (Latin for “unconquered”) by William Ernest Henley while imprisoned on Robben Island. The poem inspired Mandela and his fellow prisoners. It contains messages which the APA might interpret as psychologically maladaptive:

“In the fell clutch of circumstance / I have not winced nor cried aloud . . . My head is bloody, but unbowed It matters not how strait the gate, / How charged with punishments the scroll / I am the master of my fate: / I am the captain of my soul. “

It is a good thing there were no gender theorists on Robben Island with Nelson Mandela.

Women should also take inspiration from Invictus and Mandela. Classically masculine ideals are not the exclusive property of males, and the same goes for the classically feminine ideals. Men should, as the cliché goes, get in touch with their feminine side, but the masculine side shouldn't be eradicated either.

Of course, traditions need to evolve. An ongoing conversation is needed to properly calibrate cultural norms, gendered or not. We can only do this if we understand those norms, so we know what to encourage and what to restructure. But instead we dance towards a cultural manslaughter: there is a gallant baby in that bathwater.

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