

Masculinity and Sport

In August 2018, the APA issued the first ever *Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Boys and Men* (American Psychological Association, 2018). These guidelines indicate that best practice involves promoting healthy relationships between boys and men. In addition, the guidelines suggest that supporting interventions tailored to be responsive to the specific needs of boys and men is an important component of this work. Clinicians are also encouraged to conduct advocacy, prevention, and educational outreach measures to this end. Given these developments in best practice for working with boys and men, further investigation into the ways in which this might translate to the field of sport psychology is warranted.

<i>Hegemonic masculinity</i>	The persistence of male dominance and the promotion of an idealized manhood to which all men are compared
<i>Fragile masculinity</i>	Perceived self-deficits in masculinity as a result of pressure on men to conform to hegemonic
<i>Toxic masculinity</i>	Extreme demonstrations of masculinity in response to fragile masculinity

Emerging research on hegemonic masculine norms indicates that “the drive to win” is one of three factors which make up “toxic masculinity” (Parent, Gobble, & Rochlen, 2018). As competitiveness is a fundamental component of many athletic activities and organizations, this indicates that an awareness of masculine identity and masculine norm development is especially pertinent in sport psychology. Research specific to dynamics within sports arenas indicates that athletic identity has been linked to increased conformity to toxic masculine norms (Steinfeldt & Steinfeldt, 2012). Hypercompetitiveness amongst male athletes has also been linked to increased endorsement of the legitimacy of aggression (Visek, & Watson, 2005).

Sports Interventions for Boys and Men

The need to enact certain aspects of masculinity is largely dictated by the perceived evaluation of other men, as it is a homosocial enactment (Kimmel, 2013). In the context of athletics, this implies that the social dynamics of team sport largely impact the pressure a boy or man feels to enact certain aspects of masculinity. Male participants in therapeutic sports interventions have reported that reduced emphasis on winning relieves pressures of competitiveness and the need to assert dominance (McArdle, McGale, & Gaffney, 2012). Sports interventions that radically reduce emphasis on the importance of winning may pose a novel intervention for decreasing toxic masculinity in male athletes. Such interventions may emphasize teamwork over individual talent and promote prosocial interactions amongst teammates.

Early adolescence is a crucial time in the development of attitudes towards gendered norms (McCarthy, Brady, Hallman, 2016), and boys are particularly susceptible to the internalization of these norms (Amin, Kågesten, Adebayo, & Chandra-Mouli, 2018). Small group participatory activities have been found to decrease endorsement of toxic masculine norms amongst boys (Ricardo, Eads, & Barker, 2011). Thus, team-based interventions for adolescent male athletes may present a timely intervention in the way a boy will continue to enact masculinity throughout the lifespan.

What Today's Young Athletes Are Saying

A recent article interviewed a series of male Generation Z athletes from across the U.S. regarding their experiences with sports and masculinity (Hong, 2018):



I think since you're with a bunch of other guys in team sports, there's more chance of conformity. You just have to fit in by acting a certain way... With my overall toughness and whether I got hurt or not and just going through it, I didn't want to show any weakness towards my friends. Those are the pressures I've felt.

Something I've learned is definitely that concept of being true to yourself and it's okay to feel the way you feel... I think for athletes now, it's stepping away from what the definition of what masculinity or toughness used to be. For example, I think it's tough to say how you feel if you're sad... I think that's pretty masculine to be honest cause if you do that, it takes a lot of bravery.



Clinical Implications

Practitioners working with male athletes may consider the following questions, informed by the *Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Boys and Men* (American Psychological Association, 2018), as a means of exploring issues of masculinity with their clients.

1. What does masculinity mean to you? In your culture?
2. Has this meant different things to you at different times in your life? In different contexts or environments?
3. How do you think these ideas about masculinity have helped you? Potentially hurt you?
4. How have they affected the way you relate to other boys/men? Teammates? Coaches?
5. How do they impact your role as an athlete? As a teammate?

Additional Resources

<http://www.apa.org/about/policy/psychological-practice-boys-men-guidelines.pdf>

<https://www.thomaspagecmbee.com/amateur>

<https://www.verygoodlight.com/2018/08/22/gen-z-athletes-are-rejecting-hypermasculinity-in-sports/>

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