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"THE POWER OF COMMUNITY TO BRING THOSE WALLS DOWN:"

EXPLORING THE INTERPERSONAL PROCESS OF MEN'S GROUPS

Dissertation

by

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"The Power of Community to Bring Those Walls Down:"

Exploring the Interpersonal Process in Men's Groups

by Michael Di Bianca

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Abstract

Headlines and scholarly research alike sound the alarm that boys and men are in crisis (New York Times, 2018; Way, 2011). In the United States, boys and men are at higher risk for psychological, physical, and interpersonal problems, including depression, anxiety, suicide, substance abuse, lower academic retention, loneliness, and both sexual and physical violence (against women, hate crimes against marginalized individuals, against other boys and men, and gun violence), as well as political attitudes such as social dominance, support for authoritarian leaders, and climate change denial (American Psychological Association, 2018; Ferree, 2020; Gerdes & Levant, 2013; Manowski & Maton, 2010; Nelson, 2020). Extensive research has established these negative outcomes as corollaries of a culturally-dominant socialization process, or the degree to which boys and men adhere to hegemonic masculine norms such as strength, hyper-independence, and aggression (Mahalik et al., 2003; Way, 2011). In efforts to "redefine" masculinity (Levant, 1992) to be flexible, healthy, and prosocial (Adams & Frauenheim, 2020), the American Psychological Association has called for engaging boys and men in preventative, health promotive, and social change interventions. Men's group programs are expanding both in prevalence and in the amount of scholarly attention they receive, yet there remains a lack of research focused on understanding how these groups work, Specifically, little empirical work has examined how the interpersonal process among members in a men's groups might play a role in engaging them in individual growth and social change related to masculinity.

Situated in a theoretical framework centering the quality of connection in interpersonal relationships as a central influence in hegemonic masculine socialization (precarious manhood theory; Vandello & Bosson, 2013), a primary factor in human growth and change (relational-cultural theory; Miller, 1976), and the therapeutic dynamics of groups (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), the purpose of this dissertation was to examine the subjective experiences and reflections of men who participated in a 10-week long men's group, offered by a non-profit violence prevention organization, A Call to Men. This group, called the "Circle of Influence," aims to support men in practicing "healthy manhood" and promoting it elsewhere in their lives (see A Call to Men, n.d.). To explore the role of the group interpersonal process in men's experiences of the program, this study posed the following research questions: 1) how do men understand changes in their own sense of masculinity and what it means to be a man? 2) how do men understand changes in the ways they promote healthy masculinity beyond the group? and 3) how do men understand their experience of the interpersonal process in the men's group as playing a role in these changes?

Using a qualitative descriptive approach (Sandelowski, 2000), semi-structured interviews with thirteen men who participated in the men's group yielded five themes: 1) the group enables interpersonal experiences that counter hegemonic masculine socialization; 2) the group enables men's development of insight into their masculinity; 3) the group enables positive shifts in men's close relationships; 4) the group enables men's participation in social action; and 5) men offer feedback for program development. These findings underscore the critical role of a community in which interpersonal dynamics counter those of hegemonic masculine socialization. As the findings suggest, such relationships can become catalysts for the goals of masculinity-focused interventions, such as insight and behavior change. Implications for intervention research and the application of relational-cultural theory to such interventions, the role of men's groups in creating broader social change, and future research directions are each discussed.

DEDICATION

To all those who show boys and men, and me, another path

Listen to me now, I need to let you know you don't have to go it alone …

Sometimes you can't make it on your own

– U2

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Expressing enough appreciation for the people to whom I relied upon for energy, wisdom, and support while writing this dissertation could fill the pages of a sixth chapter.

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I would not have weathered the adventure of graduate school alone, without my doctoral cohort companions: Alek Davila, Anna Hamilton, Courtney Colgan, Taylor Stewart Seegars, and Quang Tran, S.J. I will always cherish all that you have taught me, your kindnesses, and the many, many laughs we have shared. Through turbulent times, you kept me going!

Lastly and mostly, I wish to thank my mom, my sister, my family and friends for supporting me throughout my life and encouraging me to take leap after leap of faith in pursuing my education. I am reminded of a story about my grandmother, Mary Cooke, who died in 2008. As her high school years ended, she planned to find a job and take care of family members at home, as had been the norm in past generations for women in the working-class background of her family. As the story goes, one of her teachers recognized her passion for learning and helped her apply to college. She went on to not only continue learning, but to graduate school and eventually to a teaching career – a passion that she instilled and supported in her children and grandchildren, as had been done for her. Realizing how many people have played a similar role in my life – believing in me and helping me overcome obstacles to following what I am passionate about – is both astounding to me and not at all surprising, given the good-heartedness and generosity of the friends, family, and teachers who have crossed and shared my path along the way. There was a time not so long ago when attending college seemed unlikely at best, never mind graduate school. Looking back, I can confidently say that, thanks to the village that has assembled itself around me – especially the Cookes, Morins, Sendells, Kelsos, and Azevedos – that personal as well as professional doors were open for me that otherwise would not have been. I can only hope to pay it forward.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The set of guidelines for psychological practice with boys and men recently published by the American Psychological Association (2018) synthesized a robust body of empirical research from the past several decades documenting the clear connection between rigid adherence to the masculine social norms that are considered traditional or dominant in Western patriarchal culture (e.g., emotional invulnerability, hyper-independence, aggression, control, power over women) and an array of adverse health and social outcomes. These issues that negatively impact boys' and men's individual well-being and relationships, the other people in their lives, and society as a whole (Hill et al., 2020; Jewkes et al., 2015; Manowski & Maton, 2010). The most pressing of these risks include depression, suicidality, reluctance to seek both medical and mental health care, loneliness, substance abuse, school dropout and lower education attainment, and various behaviors that harm others (APA, 2018; Gerdes & Levant, 2018; Levant, 2022; Manowski & Maton, 2010; Way, 2011; Wong et al., 2017). This spectrum of men's violence exists against women and girls (e.g., sexual and domestic violence), bullying and violence that is motivated by homophobia, transphobia, racism, and xenophobia, gun violence, and violence toward other boys and men (e.g., bullying, sexual abuse, fighting; Levant & Pryor, 2020). Men's adherence to such masculine social norms that value power and dominance over others are also intertwined with attitudes that underly broader public health and sociopolitical issues, such as White supremacy and meritocracy (Liu, 2017), resistance to following public health guidelines such as mask-wearing or vaccinations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Mahalik et al., 2021), environmental destruction and climate change denial (Nelson, 2020; Pease, 2019), and even authoritarian trends in politics (Ferree, 2020). Both research and news media have recognized these risks stemming from socialization toward the dominant culture's model of hegemonic masculinity as a crisis in need of intervention (APA, 2018; Davies et al., 2010; New York Times, 2018; Way, 2011).

Given the highly socially and politically-charged nature of gender in the United States, calling attention to masculinity issues is often met with a rebuttal that "not all men are toxic," that traditional values are under attack from a radical left waging a "war against men," or that any feminist critiques of masculinity threaten to "feminize our boys into girls." Despite flexible ideas about masculinity being promoted more broadly as catalyzed by the women's movement, the political salience of masculinity issues is escalating, not fading. The appeal of "strongman" politicians uses traditional masculine tropes (Ben-Ghiat, 2020; DiMuccio & Knowles, 2021), which right-wing politicians weaponize in the service of White supremacist and authoritarian tendencies (e.g., Senator Josh Hawley's forthcoming book, *Manhood: The Masculine Traits America Needs;* Capehart, 2022). Prime examples include a reactionary backlash to the APA guidelines on Fox News (Gutfield, 2018; Ingraham, 2019), negative social media responses to Gillette's 2019 advertisement, "The Best of Men," that asked viewers to contemplate harmful masculinity issues in society (Benoit, 2019; Bogen et al., 2021), or the platforms of popular figures such as Joe Rogan, Jordan Peterson, and Ben Shapiro that appeal to a large audience of young men by framing feminism or critiques of the patriarchy as attacks on men and maleness.

However, a more nuanced understanding of the APA (2018) guidelines clearly shows the research does not support the idea that all boys and men are inherently unhealthy, violent, or bad. In fact, they offer a qualitatively different takeaway. Namely, that the root of the problems facing boys and men is not solely determined by gender, but a process of socialization toward specific norms of masculinity and the extent to which boys and men conform to them (see Mahalik et al., 2003). Furthermore, Barker (2020) argues that asking this question only at an individual, essentialist level – are *all* men *only* good or toxic? – overlooks their broader social context. He writes, "men are agentic, and individual men must be held accountable for harmful actions. But men's behaviors are influenced by individuals and structures around them" (p. 409), making the

case that facilitating shifts from harmful to healthy norms and behaviors requires a shift in social environments in which boys and men live.

It is not boys and men writ-large that are the problem, therefore, but a specific, culturally dominant, mainstream script of masculinity that a significant amount of the population of boys and men learn to enact in their lives, often taught through their relationships. This nuance is the "thick culture" explanation that Way (2011) calls for in order to avoid oversimplification and address the root causes of the issues making headlines in a "crisis of masculinity." While a broad spectrum of masculinities exists across individual and cultural diversity (Griffith, 2022; Wester, 2008), the majority of boys and men in the U.S. are exposed to the mainstream messages of patriarchy that always being strong and powerful over others (women, marginalized groups, other men) is the natural, normative, and only way to be a "real" man, referred to as hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Jewkes et al., 2015). This conceptualization of masculinity as a product of socialization rather than solely biology introduces the possibility that there is more than one way to be a man, including healthy and prosocial ways. A recent article in *The Lancet* argued that because "much research on masculinity and men's health draws on a deficit-based approach, whereby men are pathologized or masculinity is framed as inherently problematic or toxic… researchers should research healthy masculine norms that could promote healthy behavior" (Ragonese & Barker, 2019, p. 199). Scholars and activists have recognized the need to help boys and men become aware of and resist this specific set of sociocultural norms; to see them as malleable designs of culture that they have been taught as "the only real way to be a man," but that may not serve them or others well. They argue for "transforming" masculinity to be equitable, healthy, and flexible enough to allow the expression of boys' and men's capacities for emotion, connection, and empathy (Adams & Frauenheim, 2020; Davies et al., 2010; Elliot, 2016; hooks, 2004; Levant, 1992; Porter, 2016; United Nations, 2020; Way, 2019). In light of

extant research on the impact of these restrictive, harmful, but popular beliefs about gender, the American Psychological Association (2018) called for an expansion of health, prevention, education, and social change interventions to engage boys and men. One such application of this call to action is the variety of masculinity-focused groups and workshops at the community level, such as those taking place in schools and communities across the U.S. and around the globe.

Intervention-focused work in the field of men and masculinities studies has historically represented a smaller proportion of empirical research in the U.S. (Wong & Horn, 2016), while more general prevention efforts (e.g., bystander intervention; mental health stigma reduction) do not always address the root issue of hegemonic masculine socialization (Manowski & Maton, 2010) – that is to say, empirical research in applied settings has only recently started to examine the efficacy of masculinity-focused interventions. There is a broad consensus among scholars that more boys and men need to be engaged in the conversation around masculinity (e.g., Casey et al., 2018) as a means of effectively addressing problems that are rooted in the sociocultural layer of masculine socialization, such as men's suicide risk or men's intimate partner violence. Prevention efforts must target sociocultural norms of masculine socialization and engage boys and men in the work of deconstructing them. Intervention studies have begun to examine the outcomes of such programs, but it remains unclear *how* such interventions are meant to succeed in facilitating boys' and men's participation in challenging and changing these beliefs about masculinity, both among themselves and others. Put simply, what are the ingredients that make a masculinity-focused program effective? What kinds of experiences make a group a space where men can learn, grow, and change? This dissertation aims to explore the interpersonal process in men's groups, an approach supported by literature on a) the relational context of hegemonic masculine socialization, b) interpersonal dynamics in men's group interventions, and c) the unanswered questions in the empirical research base on masculinity-focused interventions.

Interpersonal relationships belong at the center of masculinity-focused interventions due to their influence as agents of teaching and reinforcing the lessons of masculine socialization. While messages about gender are communicated across levels of their environment throughout development (e.g., media), everyday relationships with peers, parents, role models, and coaches are the primary agent of socialization and act as the "arbiters" of what is masculine and what is not (Garbarino, 2000; Levant, 2005). A number of theoretical frameworks place the process of masculine socialization in this relational context. Precarious manhood theory, for one, views masculinity as status that must be earned through public performance, and can be revoked at any time (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). This illustrates the anxiety with which men perceive others' expectations and negative judgments of them if they deviate from being hypermasculine, thus motivating them to assert their masculinity to avoid having it questioned (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). This dynamic, the need to be seen by others as "man enough," becomes a "social worth" (Chu & Gilligan, 2019) that is "policed" (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016) in and through relationships. Feminist theorists' work on masculinity emphasize this interpersonal context from another angle, arguing that relationships can be a primary way to help boys reclaim the human traits that are labelled as exclusively feminine and thus off-limits to them (Chu & Gilligan, 2019; Way et al., 2014). Way (2011) goes as far as to reframe the crisis of masculinity as a "crisis of connection," arguing that hegemonic masculinity is not inevitable, but the product of malleable socialization that is amenable to the influence of close relationships that counter hegemonic messages.

Disrupting hegemonic masculine socialization is possible, but requires countering the relational dynamics of shame, rejection, or ridicule that boys and men learn to expect if they deviate from what is expected of "real men." In addition to how relationships can counter the harmful influence they might otherwise have, experiences in connection with others represent a promotive factor for boys' and men's healthy development and personal growth (Kiselica &

Horne, 1999; Way, 2011). Research has cited a dissonance between the masculine gender role and social-emotional capacities boys and men are socialized to deny or disavow (Way, 2011), underscoring the need to help boys form a sense of who they are as men that is congruent with healthy human development (Adams & Frauenheim, 2020; Chu & Gilligan, 2019; Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022; Eliot, 2016). According to relational-cultural theory (Millet et al., 1976), healthy human development occurs in the context of close relationships. Human beings "grow through and toward connection" (Jordan, 2017, p. 231), and relationships can foster growth, health, and healing when they are characterized by interpersonal experiences of empathy, mutuality, and empowerment. While the theory was developed with feminist roots in the context of a patriarchal field of psychology that attributed strength and maturity to those who had less of a need for connection in their lives (i.e., "the separate self;" Miller & Stiver, 1991), the tenets of RCT do not apply exclusively to women (Jordan, 2017), and can explain the disconnections occurring in hegemonic masculine socialization (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022). By uplifting connection as a transformative force, the theory provides the conceptual foundation for an interpersonal and group approach to interventions for boys and men.

    Men's groups represent such an intervention approach, in which members' experiences in relationships with other group members is central to individual change. In the decades since the women's movement, there has been a backlash of men's rights groups seeking to reclaim power that feminism supposedly took from men (Kivel, 1998), isolated young men have become main target of White supremacist hate groups (Kimmel, 2013; Rafali & Freitas, 2019), and an element of group identity belonging animates the dominance and exclusion of Trumpism (Murib, 2020). Contrary to group settings that channel masculinity in harmful ways, other spaces have emerged to bring men into the fold of the feminist movement, for their benefit and that of others. Such men's groups exist exclusive in psychotherapy settings (Rabinowitz, 2019), specifically for men

at a high-risk for domestic violence (Schrock & Padavic, 2007), or for any and all boys and men

in community settings (e.g., neighborhoods, university campus programs, support groups, online

meetings). These share a core mission of helping them navigate restrictive masculine

socialization and live healthier, happier, more equitable lives. In keeping with the theoretical

underpinnings of group work (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), men's groups are built on the impact of

connection, and a sense of universality in exploring shared challenges in a supportive space

(Rabinowitz, 2019). A group setting acts as a catalyst for reflection and conversation focused on

masculinity. This approach can be traced to the clinical practice of group psychotherapy with

men (Rabinowitz, 2019) and activist networks such as Paul Kivel's Oakland Men's Project (see

http://paulkivel.com/the-oakland-mens-project/). These spaces for "men's work" recognize that

ending the consequences of hegemonic masculine socialization needed to begin with bringing

men together to deconstruct how these harmful ideas were impacting their lives, relationships

communities (Kivel, 1998). Doing so in a group setting is thought to be of vital importance

because the relational dynamics in a men's group can offer an alternate social experience in

which men support one another in finding healthy ways to be men (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022;

Rabinowitz, 2019) instead of pressuring one another into hypermasculine behaviors (Cole et al.,

2019; Reigeluth & Addis, 2021) and as a result, exercise their influence beyond the group by

challenging harmful masculinities and working for social change (Kivel, 1998).

     While voices such as Davies et al. (2010), Kivel (1998), Porter (2016), and Way (2011)

have argued for such an interpersonal approach, an empirical focus on men's groups is still

emerging, with research across the world examining "masculinity-transformative" interventions

to engage boys and men in the work of deconstructing and transforming what masculinity means

(e.g., Europe, South Africa, South America, the U.K., and the U.S.). Preliminary quantitative

findings suggest participation in men's discussion groups can impact men's self-reported mental

health, social support, and decreased conformity to harmful masculine norms (Burke et al., 2010; Gibbs et al., 2018). Qualitative studies have also highlighted the importance of the social context in which interventions take place (e.g., groups, workshops, social circles, communities), citing boys' and men's experiences connecting with one another as a key factor in how interested they were in attending meetings and absorbing content (Di Bianca et al., 2021; Namy et al., 2015). The literature reviewed in this dissertation will also point to several limitations in the knowledge base of men's group programs. For example, the fact that attitude change often does not extend into action or behavior change after participation has been documented as a barrier to engaging men in primary violence prevention efforts (Casey et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2021). Likewise, relationships with other men themselves can also act as a barrier to success: the influence of men's peers can discourage deviation from hypermasculine norms, even in group settings that encourage doing so (Gibbs et al., 2018; Pierotti 2018; Precopio & Ramsey, 2017).

These unanswered questions point to a gap in the literature: the theory of change that is thought to guide existing masculinity-focused interventions. More specifically, there is not a coherent understanding of how such interventions are thought to effectively engage boys and men in changing harmful beliefs about masculinity and promoting healthier ones. How can interventions overcome the broader social context in which the expectation to perform hypermasculinity may be powerful enough to preclude participation in any conversation that could be labelled as feminist? How can changes that do happen for individual participants of a men's group translate into sustained action in spaces outside of a program after it concludes? Each of these questions underscores the need for interventions to address the interpersonal dynamics (e.g., policing of masculinity; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016) that stand in the way of change. In order to do so, interventions must be able to offer experiences that are equally influential in promoting healthier versions of what it means to be men. To this end, empirical

research on masculinity-focused interventions would benefit from a deeper, process-focused exploration of the interpersonal dynamics in men's groups that boys and men experience.

This dissertation examines the subjective experiences of participants in a men's group intervention through a collaborative research partnership with *A Call to Men*, a national violence prevention organization that seeks to engage boys and men in practicing and promoting healthy manhood. The organization defines their vision for healthy manhood as "valuing and respecting women, girls, and LGBQ, Trans, and nonbinary people – and respecting and valuing oneself by striving to live authentically" in order to help boys and men "become healthier and … build and sustain more equitable communities;" A Call to Men, n.d.). A community-based participatory approach was taken, in which staff members of the organization collaborated to determine the research questions, methods, and outcomes that were aligned with the organization's questions and goals of what they hope to learn from the project (see Goodman et al., 2017). In this qualitative descriptive study, thirteen men who participated in the 10-week long men's group program, The "Circle of Influence," were interviewed about their experience. This specific program was designed based on Kivel's (1998) approach, and is described by the professional staff as a blend of workshop and support group for connection and mentorship. With the goal of understanding how the interpersonal processes at play in men's groups may engage men in individual and social change, the present study posed the following three research questions:

1) How do men understand and describe their experiences in a men's group program with respect to their own sense of healthy masculinity in their personal lives?

2) How do men understand and describe their experiences in a men's group program with respect to how they promote and advocate for healthy masculinity outside of the group?

3) How do men understand and describe the interpersonal process of the men's group and the role it may have played in shaping their experiences described in the questions above?

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The empirical research base that links extreme adherence to masculine social norms with adverse outcomes for individual health and well-being, interpersonal relationships, and broader patterns of violence and injustice is ever-expanding (see Bradstreet & Parent, 2017; Gerdes & Levant, 2013; Wong et al., 2017). Although powerful, hegemonic masculine socialization is not inevitable or biologically hard-wired (Way, 2011), despite societal beliefs and the popularity of essentialist ideas about gender. Research and advocacy efforts alike recognize these problems as amenable, calling for work to promote healthier, flexible, and equitable beliefs about masculinity (Porter, 2016), both in the United States (APA, 2018) and internationally (UN News, 2020). Still, more concrete ways to effectively and meaningfully engage boys and men themselves in the process of redefining (Adams & Frauenheim, 2020; Levant, 1992) or transforming (hooks, 2004) masculinity have been less of a priority in empirical research, as Wong and Horn (2016) noted. This limits the field's ability to implement the APA's (2018) recommendations for prevention, health promotion, and social change interventions that extend beyond our academic work and reach boys and men. A better-informed of how men subjectively feel and think about programs with this goal, and the extent to which they experience interpersonal dynamics to counter those of hegemonic socialization with ones that promote healthy masculinities, would help to address this gap in the field and offer key insights for researchers and practitioners alike who design, facilitate, and evaluate the interventions beneath the umbrella of the APA's (2018) call to action.

This second chapter summarizes the literature that informs this dissertation by: a) framing hegemonic masculine socialization and its individual, interpersonal, and societal consequences in a conceptual framework drawing from precarious manhood theory and relational-cultural theory; b) applying this framework to an interpersonal theory of change for healthy masculinities, drawing again from relational-cultural theory and supplemented by group psychotherapy theory,

to establish experiences in connections as the active intervention agent to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity and develop healthy masculinities; and c) summarizing the extant empirical findings on masculinity-focused group and community interventions and their limitations with attention to the interpersonal realm. Overall, this review of the intervention literature highlights gaps in the knowledge base of how men's groups work to counter dominant-cultural dynamics, underscoring the need for the present study to focus on the relational process dimension of men's subjective experiences with one another in a group.

Placing Masculine Socialization in Relational-Cultural Context

A wealth of literature in the psychological study of gender, particularly in latter decades of the 20th century and since the women's movements, has recognized the division of qualities considered either masculine or feminine as molded by cultural ideals, rather than universal outcomes of human development in keeping with a binary nature of gender, or determined by biological sex (Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Pleck, 1995; Way, 2011). For example, Pleck's (1995) seminal work on "The Myth of Masculinity" theorized how men experience difficulties as they relate to the expectations that they feel to fit a hypermasculine mold, which has influenced the field's focus on problems arising when men strive to live up to unrealistic, and often unhealthy gender roles to a greater degree of adherence (see Gerdes & Levant, 2013; Mahalik et al., 2003).

Empirical studies continue to support a conceptualization of masculinity as socially constructed (see Addis et al., 2016, for review) rather than a static, universal identity, bearing out the philosophical legacy of the feminist movements (de Beauvoir, 1949; Gilligan, 1992). This relies on the critical distinction in the research between being male and holding certain beliefs about what men must be and how they should behave. For example, gender differences are often found in research: men are more likely than women to be physically violent (Levant & Pryor, 2020), and less likely to seek therapy (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2019). Such findings are often

interpreted as evidence of biologically-determined differences, or that certain problems are part of men's evolutionary nature or adaptations (Buss, 2021). However, the body of research in the APA (2018) guidelines offers more nuance than an essentialist interpretation, calling attention to the process of socialization and individual adherence to sociocultural masculine norms (instead of simply examining gender as a demographic predictor). This analysis, well-documented and replicated empirically (e.g., Gerdes & Levant, 2013; Wong et al., 2017) shows that boys and men are at risk for adverse outcomes not as a natural result of their sex assigned at birth or identifying as men; but rather based on the extent to which they adhere to masculine social norms promoted in their social environment. Therefore, outcomes in which boys and men are overrepresented would be better understood not as the normal trajectory of male development, but as the products of a specific socialization process that upholds, and compels boys and men to strictly adhere to, a restrictive narrative of what men should and should not be (Way, 2011). Even as the field's understanding has evolved, however, a set of traditional, rigid, and sometimes harmful norms of masculinity are still regularly taught and modelled to boys as the only, natural way to be a man.

Hegemonic Masculinity: Focusing on a Culturally-Dominant Definition

While the evolving critical study of men and masculinities (see Hearn, 2019) recognizes that there is not one form of "masculinity," and uplifts diversity and flexibility in how boys and men express themselves in the world, it remains necessary to examine the mainstream masculine gender roles and their implications for power imbalances in society (Manowski & Maton, 2010; O'Neil, 2015). The collection of social norms that make up this masculine gender role are shaped by powerful groups and systems in society (Mahalik et al., 2003), such that the power to decide what is "masculine" has historically been shaped by patriarchy, white supremacy, heterosexism, and Western cultural norms (hooks, 2004). At the same time that this socialization reifies power inequalities in society (e.g., across gender, race), it carries a cost even for the boys and men who

receive power and privilege from it: a script of masculinity that suppresses the social-emotional

capacities that make them most human (Chu & Gilligan, 2019; Jewkes et al., 2015; Way &

Rogers, 2017). This set of rules and behaviors that boys and men are taught they must always

abide by is often colloquially called the "man box" (Kivel, 1998), but has been conceptualized

from various academic approaches. These have included assessing men's masculine attitudes

(e.g., no sissy stuff, drive a big wheel, be a sturdy oak, give 'em hell; Brannon & Juni, 1984),

conformity to masculine norms (e.g., heterosexual self-presentation, primacy of work, power

over women; Mahalik et al., 2003) and adherence to gender roles (e.g., avoidance of femininity,

aggression, restrictive emotionality; Levant et al., 1992).

A variety of terms (e.g., traditional masculine ideology, toxic masculinity) are often used

interchangeably to describe harmful forms of masculinity. In this study, *hegemonic masculinity*

is used refer to the collection of masculine social norms that are prominent in the United States

and worldwide that most closely align with the hegemonic model (Connell, 2005). The term

captures how masculine socialization operates to reinforce power hierarchies (e.g., over women,

marginalized groups, other boys and men) harms boys and men themselves (Jewkes et al., 2015;

Manowski & Maton, 2010). This framework identifies common themes in what constitutes the

historically-mainstream masculine gender role, such as: never showing any sign of weakness

(e.g., crying, fear, anything deemed weak, feminine, or "gay"), neglecting one's own self-care,

being without emotion with the exception of anger, being independent to the extent of never

needing support from others, treating women in dominating, sexually objectifying ways,

presenting an image of heterosexual prowess and homophobia, and proving one's strength

through power, control, or violence.

It is critical to note that boys and men are not a monolith in representing this image of

manhood, and the hegemonic model also acknowledges the malleability and variation in men's

adherence to hegemonic masculinity. The salience and impact of this conditioning varies across cultural contexts globally and locally, experiences of privilege and oppression based on the intersecting identities they hold, and individual differences in adherence to masculine norms (Ojeda & Liang, 2014; Thomas et al., 2015; Wester, 2008). At the same time, hegemonic masculine social norms are deeply embedded in society and still accepted by many as normal and desirable for men. This can make them an almost unavoidable influence in the majority of boys' social environments (Reichert, 2019) with a "collective" socializing power (Porter, 2016) communicating culturally-dominant lessons that boys and men can internalize, believing that in order to grow up or be seen as "real men," they must disconnect from the depth their inner emotional lives, desires for meaningful interpersonal connections, and capacity for being nonviolent, prosocial, and compassionate toward others (Chu, 2014; Way, 2011; Way et al., 2014). Because these messages are conveyed and reinforced through social context, it is necessary to place a conceptualization of how boys and men embody or resist hegemonic masculinity in that same context.

A Relational-Cultural Framework for Hegemonic Masculine Socialization

Boys and men do not form an understanding of masculinity in a vacuum, or by following a trajectory predetermined at birth, but within the social contexts of relationships, communities, and society. To illustrate the role of these contexts in differentiating healthy and harmful development of one's understanding of masculinity, this study draws primarily from relational-cultural theory, as well as complementary insights from precarious manhood theory. Theories commonly applied to men and masculine socialization may overlap with this perspective, but a relational framework prioritizes the central role of experiences in relationships. For example, the gender role strain paradigm (Pleck, 1995) addresses how sociocultural standards have a negative impact on men through a felt sense of inadequacy compared to those standards, or consequences

of living up to them (i.e., discrepancy, trauma, dysfunctional strain). However, this framing does

not clarify how healthy development might alternatively occur through relational experiences.

The normative approach (Addis et al., 2016), on the other hand, focuses on individual adherence

to masculine norms, both prosocial (e.g., providing for family) and harmful (e.g., responding to

challenges with violence). Anchored in social psychology, this frames masculinity as learned by

observing others and from messages of what men should and should not do (i.e., descriptive

norms and injunctive norms). Although research links adherence to masculine social norms with

an array of negative outcomes (Gerdes & Levant, 2018; Wong et al., 2017), the normative

approach does not view socialization itself as problematic, but focus on benefits and costs of

conforming to certain norms (Mahalik et al., 2003). Applying RCT to the context of masculine

socialization, by contrast, provides a theoretical foundation to critically analyze its interpersonal

and societal dynamics, and illustrate how healthy masculinities may develop through connection.

The works informing this relational-cultural framework on masculine socialization come from a

number of feminist and Black feminist scholars, such as Carol Gilligan, Niobe Way, Patricia Hill

Collins, bell hooks, and the founders and theorists of relational-cultural theory, including Jean

Baker Miller, Irene Stiver, Janet Surrey, Maureen Walker, Dana Comstock, and Judith Jordan.

     Emerging from the Stone Center and Jean Baker Miller's work in the 1970s, RCT came

about amidst a patriarchal field of psychology that pathologizes women's experiences (e.g.,

empathy, seeking mutuality). Instead, relational-cultural theory (RCT) argues that human beings

"grow through and toward connection" (Jordan, 2017, p. 231). With feminist roots and contrary

to individualistic, White male-centric theories of development, the need for relationships is not

seen as a weakness, but as vital to being human throughout the lifespan. Disconnection is seen as

a primary source of suffering, while connections defined by authenticity, empathy, mutuality,

and empowerment are sites of growth, health, and healing (i.e., growth-fostering relationships;

Jordan, 2008; Liang et al., 2010; Miller & Stiver, 1991). RCT views systems of oppression as a primary source of disconnection as they silence authenticity, keep people isolated, and maintain injustice (Jordan, 2017). As such, it has been applied to studying impacts of sexism, racism, and homophobia on mental health and well-being (e.g., stigma, violence, marginalization; Hurst et al., 2013; Joe et al., 2020; Mereish & Poteat, 2015), and how patriarchy hurts men (Frey, 2013). The theory uplifts human experiences often artificially filtered by gender, and its concepts may resonate with men who do not wish to live in accordance with patriarchal norms (Jordan, 2017).

Through a relational-cultural lens, hegemonic masculinity can be seen as a "controlling image," (Collins, 2009) or an unrealistic yet widely-believed idea stemming from the dominant culture about who people should be (Frey, 2013). This image of masculinity is made up of rules such as that "real men" never show weakness (e.g., emotions, crying, anything seen as feminine or "gay"), never ask for help, and prove their strength through physical force (Hill et al., 2020; Mahalik et al., 2003). This image is influential because of how it is enforced interpersonally. From home, school, the locker room, media, and society, messages to "man up" are ever-present and powerful (Reichert, 2019). Precarious manhood theory (Vandello & Bosson, 2013) lends a complementary perspective on the relational dynamics at play when masculinity functions as a status that must always be proven, and can be revoked by others at any time, leading to constant anxiety to be seen by others as "man enough." Ways in which boys and men are conditioned to fit this image are evident in all-too-common condemnations from parents, friends, coaches, and other role models, such as "boys don't cry," labelling sensitivity as feminine or gay, and thus less-than. We see this in "hazing rituals, bullying, and tests of courage" (Reichert, 2019, p. 52) or the "policing" of men's behavior via ridicule or homophobic epithets (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). In this atmosphere, hypermasculinity is often preferred to authenticity (Way et al., 2014).

A relational-cultural perspective is also helpful because hegemonic masculinity is, by definition, about sustaining power inequality (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and linked with systems of patriarchy and White supremacy and their dehumanizing impacts (hooks, 2004; Way & Rogers, 2017). A relational-cultural framework aids in examining the intersectional ways that dominant ideals of hegemonic masculinity impact boys and men in light of the multiple identities they hold and by which U.S. society is stratified (Cole, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991). While this does not capture the fullness of all boys' and men's experience, given their varying adherence to these norms, diverse expressions of masculinity (Wester, 2008), and how masculinity norms center a White, heterosexual hegemony over experiences of boys and men who are marginalized. Still, hegemonic masculinity represents a form of power and privilege that evades critical attention (Manowski & Maton, 2010) and carries widespread health, social, and economic costs for all of society (Heilman et al., 2019; Hill et al., 2020).

Understanding hegemonic masculine socialization and its consequences through this relational-cultural theoretical framework explores three specific elements of culturally-dominant socialization to be seen as "man enough," which have been highlighted by Chu (2014) as part of a feminist-relational view of boys' and men's development:

a) anxiety to show invulnerability disconnects men from their feelings,

b) expectations to be seen as hyper-independent can be isolating, and

c) pressure to show toughness can promote violence.

These elements, while in reality co-existing with one another (e.g., the interpersonal having implications for individual well-being), represent three kinds of "disconnections" at the individual, interpersonal, and societal levels, illustrated by three core concepts of RCT: the central relational paradox, the separate self, and power-over beliefs. Through this lens, the

relational and cultural dynamics of shame, isolation, and marginalization are identified as active

in masculine socialization, giving rise to a host of negative outcomes.

The Central Relational Paradox, Shame, and Individual Well-Being

Despite how fundamentally human it is to feel and express a wide range of emotions,

boys and men often learn through the experience of being shamed by influential people in their

lives that vulnerable emotions (e.g., sadness, anxiety, hurt) are signs of weakness, and it is more

acceptable to disconnect from emotions or express only anger. Through a relational-cultural lens,

being shamed can forbid vulnerability and stifle authenticity (Jordan, 2017). Controlling images

of "boys don't cry" or "man up" can be internalized in what Levant (2005) calls "the hardening

of boys' hearts." This illustrates RCT's central relational paradox: shame and rejection teach us

to "keep feelings, experiences, and thoughts out of relationships, thus sacrificing authenticity and

mutuality to experience some semblance of acceptance and safety" (Frey, 2013, p. 178; Miller &

Stiver, 1997). One might hide pain from friends (e.g., "I'm fine") for approval of his masculinity,

but lose out on having his true feelings valued. Rigid emotional stoicism makes men more likely

to cope with stress or pain in "manly" ways, like using alcohol and drugs (Iwamoto et al., 2019;

Mahalik et al., 2015) or less likely to draw on positive coping skills or healthy aspects of their

identities (Ojeda & Liang, 2014). Shunning emotional vulnerability can discourage seeking help

in times of crisis (Cole & Ingram, 2019; Vogel et al., 2011), taking a toll on well-being (Kaya et

al., 2019), and increase their risks for both depression and suicidality (Wong et al., 2017).

The notion that men do not or should not feel pain has unique impacts across men's

identities. Suffering in silence can be a condition of the power afforded to White men, since

preserving their status calls for appearing unaffected by life's difficulties. This White-hegemonic

ideal compounds systemic racism (Liu & Wong, 2018) by upholding male invulnerability despite

pervasive adversity that men of color face in school, work, housing, health, and legal systems.

Even with immense tolls of systemic racism on health, Black boys and men are often expected to stay calm (i.e., "cool pose"; Majors & Bilsen, 1993) or "take it like a man" while surviving racial stress and trauma (Powell, 2012; Thomas et al., 2015). Shame may coexist with invalidation for boys and men of color, whose emotional lives include not only dehumanization and violence (Quam et al., 2020) but also "invisibility" of their mental health (Franklin, 1999). Likewise, Asian American men's distress is ignored based on the "model minority" myth (Iwamoto et al., 2010). Consider the masculinity-based shame in homophobia or transphobia. Queer-identifying boys and men, at higher mental health risks, may internalize stigma when others reject their identity as something for men to be ashamed of (Feinstein et al., 2012; Modrakovic et al., 2021).

Shaming feelings as weakness, defectiveness, or unmanly does not help boys to become strong men who are immune to pain. Rather, it invalidates feelings and pain they do experience, disconnects them from their inner self, poses a substantial risk to their mental health, and adds a compounded level of shame to the marginalization that many already experience. When boys' and men's social worth rests on the rule that "boys don't cry," some will inevitably be made to feel that they must "mask" their true self (Chu & Gilligan, 2019) to maintain others' approval and acceptance, even while wanting to be fully seen and known (Pollack, 2006; Way, 2011). To counter this shaming, boys and men need to experience empathy in relationships that validate vulnerability and authenticity for men, with permission and safety to freely express themselves.

The Separate Self, Hyper-Independence, and Interpersonal Well-Being

To be in connection with others is upheld as a profound human need and catalyst for growth, according to RCT (Jordan, 2017). Mutuality and closeness in relationships, however, can be undermined by the hypermasculine ideal that "real men" should be just fine on their own and "stand on their own two feet." RCT critiques this individualistic concept of "the separate self" which deems people as mature and stronger the less they need others (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Forgoing relationships that help humans thrive characterizes this patriarchal ideal that forbids asking for support or needing intimate connection. Way's (2011) research offers an incisive example, finding that throughout adolescence, boys across cultural backgrounds withdrew from the intimate friendships they once cherished out of fear that they would be called "gay" or seen as weak or immature men for needing them – marking a shift toward hyper-independence and homophobia that ran parallel with rises in depression and loneliness. Despite the vitality of social support in boys' and men's well-being across the lifespan (Kawada, 2017; Wester et al., 2007), intimate connection is labelled as weak, feminine, or gay (Way, 2011), working to suppress human needs for connection and furthering sexism and homophobia.

The result of socialization into hyper-independence is not autonomy or self-sufficiency, but isolation, visible in loneliness, exclusion from community, and perhaps most alarmingly in men's heightened risk of suicide, which has been directly linked to the standard of self-reliance (Oliffe et al., 2019; Pirkis et al., 2017). Hyper-independence not only brings men into isolation, but keeps them there, acting as a barrier to social support (McKenzie et al., 2018) and seeking psychotherapy (Vogel et al., 2011). Discouraged from expressing normal desires for closeness, some may self-isolate to avoid being seen as unmanly (Rogers & Way, 2018; Way, 2011). This lethality of loneliness is compounded by marginalization, such as minority stress for trans men who are also at heightened risk for suicide (Tebbe & Moradi, 2016). For men of color, pressure to be self-sufficient can exacerbate race-related stress when their experiences of racial trauma are invalidated (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019), acting as another barrier to help-seeking (Powell et al., 2016), and constraining connections with others. As another example, Latino men's perceived racism can add to pressure they feel to limit affection they show to others (Liang et al., 2011). Social class is also implicated here, as men experiencing financial stress or poverty may feel a

diminished sense of self-worth and less able to seek support (Liu et al., 2016). As such, isolation

can be "glue that holds oppression in place" (Laing, 1998, cited in Jordan, 2017).

Myths that hyper-independence is normal, or that wanting intimacy or needing help is

unmanly, are undermined by advances in relational neuroscience that support tenets of RCT.

Research tells us humans are "wired to connect" (Banks & Hirshman, 2016), highlighting links

between close relationships and health, empathy, and longevity (Coutinho et al., 2014; Holt-

Lunstad et al., 2010; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017). Dismantling this socialization into isolation

could occur through experiences of mutuality (Frey, 2013) that meet and encourage desires for

close meaningful relationships as healthy and human for boys and men's growth.

Power-Over Beliefs, Violence, and Societal Well-Being

Boys and men experience both "privileges and damages" (Manowski & Maton, 2010, p.

75) from hegemonic masculinity, in harming others and being harmed by it (Jewkes et al., 2015),

and a great deal of research has focused on the link between masculine socialization and men's

violence (Levant & Pryor, 2020), which can also be analyzed through a relational-cultural lens of

socialization into "power-over" beliefs and behaviors. Central to relational-cultural theory is a

critique of how patriarchy and its allies (white supremacy, socioeconomic inequality) shape

disconnection through these "power-over" beliefs and narratives about human nature and history

deepen a lack of empathy, maintaining oppression, violence, and marginalization (Jordan, 2017).

Hegemonic masculinity fits this critique as a force of maintaining subordination and inequality

(Messerschmidt, 2019). Specifically, boys and men learn to prove oneself along a certain line of

logic: masculinity is strength, and strength is exerted over others through control, aggression, and

violence (Bell & Bayliss, 2015). Peers can punish those who are unwilling or "too weak" to

assert masculinity this way (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). We need only look to media to see

masculinity equated with domination, such as sexual objectification, conquest, and aggression

(e.g., pornography; Mikorski & Syzmanski, 2017; *American Pie* films) and physical violence

(e.g., *Grand Theft Auto* games; Yao et al., 2010), embodied by "tough guys" (e.g., *Fight Club,*

John Wick), in male appearance standards (Hozba & Rochlen, 2009), executives idealizing

greed, power, and sex (e.g., *The Wolf of Wall Street*), and authoritarian "strong men" politicians.

Research links masculine norms of dominance and violence with sexual objectification,

harassment, violence against women, bullying and fighting, racist violence, homophobic and

transphobic abuse, gun violence, and environmental destruction (Davies et al., 2010; Levant &

Pryor, 2020; Liu, 2017; McDermott et al., 2015; Mikorski & Syzmanski, 2017; Pease, 2019;

Perez et al., 2020; Poteat et al., 2011). Though most individual boys and men are not violent,

they are responsible for the majority of violence, and are disproportionately impacted by men's

violence (APA, 2018; Levant & Pryor, 2020). Parallel to the "overdevelopment of aggression"

(Levant, 2005) in their socialization is dehumanization that creates a permission structure to

tolerate when others' human dignity is violated (Way & Rogers, 2017). Hegemonic masculinity

should therefore be framed in light of power afforded to men in a patriarchal society and its

layers of disempowerment. The domestic violence and #MeToo movements shed light on the

ways in which expressions of misogyny operate to objectify, harm, silence, or blame women.

Police killings of Black and Brown men, along with the backlash to discredit the Black Lives

Matter movement, exemplify this race-power hierarchy. The salience of racism and White

privilege is often obscured in the context of sexual violence against women, in which stereotypes

of criminality towards Black men judge them automatically as threats (Zounloume et al., 2021).

As another example, the notion that "real men" are straight and cisgender fuels bullying and

violence against queer-identifying boys and men (Perez et al., 2020; Sanchez, 2016).

In hegemonic masculine socialization, empathy and compassion are seen as weakness

and dominance as strength. Even men who are not violent can be taught to know if they show

sensitivity to others' feelings or rights, they risk being ridiculed as "soft." This is clear in the idea

that being a man and a feminist are incompatible (Precopio & Ramsey, 2017), in turn framing

work for nonviolence and equity as unmanly, desensitizing boys and men to how violence hurts

them, or teaching that violence against women is a "women's problem" instead of recognizing

the role all men have in ending it (Porter, 2016). Broader contexts supporting violence, in turn,

minimize a spectrum of harmful behaviors (Flood, 2015). Sayings like "boys will be boys" or

"it's just locker-room talk" represent social contexts that normalize harm instead of challenging

them. Rape culture is one pervasive example of how men's sexual violence is often dismissed,

tolerated, or lauded in the context of men's social circles (Barnett et al., 2018; Cole et al., 2019).

Socialization to be "real men" can occur at the expense of becoming good men (Kimmel,

2018), especially when boys are taught to dissociate from their caring capacity because their

harmful use of power is seen as the norm. Because empathy grows through relationships (Frey,

2013; Reichert, 2019) and "as empathy ebbs, violence increases" (Jordan, 2017; p. 242), forms

of masculinity that foster compassion and help boys and men to break patterns of violence and

inequality are needed, especially among those with social, economic, and political power and

privilege (Connell, 2005). Boys and men may learn to reject power-over teachings in the context

of empowering relationships that guide them in using their agency to treat all human beings with

respect and dignity. Such connections could foster sensitivity, compassion, and even activism

(Adams & Frauenheim, 2020), engaging boys and men in dismantling hegemonic masculinity.

Relational-cultural theory (Miller, 1976) supports this possibility, as people grow and

change through connections built on empathy, mutuality, and empowerment (Jordan, 2017;

Liang et al., 2010). Applying this theory to hegemonic masculinity and the "crisis of connection"

(Way, 2011) brings attention to the disconnections of shame, isolation, and violence that many

boys and men are conditioned into, exemplifying how relational-cultural theory's ideas of the

central relational paradox, the separate self, and power-over beliefs that are held in place by

dominant culture's "controlling images" of what men should be like (Frey, 2013; Jordan, 2017).

People in boys' and men's lives and communities, such as parents, coaches, peers, and role

models, can teach and reinforce hegemonic norms, or, conversely, empower boys and men to

resist them (Miller et al., 2020; Reichert, 2019; Way et al., 2014). With this in mind, efforts to

dismantle harmful masculine norms (e.g., "boys don't cry," "boys will be boys") and promote

healthy alternatives must come through an encounter powerful enough to reach boys and men in

their own lived experiences, often filled with messages to "stay in the man box" (Porter, 2016).

This socialization into "power-over" ways of being instead of "power-with" ways of using one's

agency in empowering, prosocial ways to foster mutual connection with others or in community,

as relational-cultural theorists differentiate between (Miller, 2008b; Walker, 2008a, 2008c).

Growth-fostering relationships, then, can be a force for growth toward healthy manhood by

rejecting sociocultural expectations of hegemonic masculinity, and instead validating boys' and

men's authenticity and vulnerability, encouraging and meeting their desires for connection, and

teaching them to be compassionate, nonviolent men (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022).

In summary, relational-cultural theory highlights shame, isolation, and power-over beliefs

as chronic disconnections in hegemonic masculine socialization. This connects the spectrum of

harmful outcomes as stemming from interpersonal pressure to embody a culturally-dominant

controlling image of manhood that promotes an unrealistic and harmful ideal way to be a man.

RCT's emphasis on the importance of empathy and mutuality also shows that teaching boys to

be "real men" by shaming vulnerability, connection, and compassion does not prepare them to be

strong, healthy men, but to suppress human parts of themselves and socialize them into power

hierarchies. Moving away from the "dominator model" (hooks, 2004; Eliot, 2016) as boys and

men use it toward self and others is deeply needed, as is an understanding of how to promote it.

An Interpersonal Group Theory of Developing Healthy Masculinities

Without experiences throughout their development that help them to resist and unlearn hegemonic masculine norms, boys and men may adopt the disconnected, even dehumanizing understanding of masculinity so often promoted in their social environments and linked to an array of psychological, physical, interpersonal, and societal consequences. Despite how embedded in dominant culture this socialization is, it is not set in stone (Way, 2011). Years of research underscore the importance of redefining and expanding what it means to be a man. hooks (2004, p. 115) frames this process as an inherently relational one:

> Our work of love should be to reclaim masculinity and not allow it to be held hostage by patriarchal domination … those of us committed to ending patriarchy can touch the hearts of real men where they live, not by demanding that they give up manhood or maleness, but by asking that they allow its meaning to be transformed, that they become disloyal to patriarchal masculinity in order to find a place for the masculine that does not make it synonymous with dominance or the will do to violence.

Alternative, flexible meanings of masculinity are already present in the literature, including possible masculinities as "healthy, responsible, tolerant, civil, and nurturing" (Davies et al., 2010, p. 348); positive masculinity as "prosocial attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors" (Kiselica et al., 2016, p. 126); caring masculinities as "rejection of domination and integration of values of care" (Eliot, 2016, p. 241); and liberating masculinity as living fuller lives and committing to others' liberation (Adams & Frauenheim, 2020). These definitions recognize the importance of healthier alternatives to hegemonic masculinity including the need for close connections, but do not address precisely how these alternatives develop. This next section provides a relational theory of change for how healthy masculinities that embrace vulnerability, connection, and compassion can develop through experiences in connection.

Rejecting Restricted Masculinity, Reclaiming Full Humanity

Redefining masculinity begins with boys and men developing and reclaiming their own fundamental human capacities that hegemonic socialization stifles. Keeping this in mind, healthy masculinities are defined as ways of being men that allow for the expression of vulnerability, connection, and compassion (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022). Healthy masculinities allow boys and men to value, feel, and express the full range of their emotions; fulfill their needs for growth, connection, and belonging through interdependence with others; and exercise agency and power with compassion, treating others with humanity and dignity. Critics of feminist approaches may decry such an articulation of masculinity as "feminization" of boys and men to the detriment of society. This represents the culturally-dominant myths RCT highlights: that pain is synonymous with weakness, independence as separation from others, or the only form of strength as power-over others. Some may view this focus on vulnerability, connection, and empathy as advocating for weakness, dependency, and powerlessness. On the contrary, healthy masculinities can be expressed by emotional regulation, balancing autonomy and connection, and compassionate agency, standing in contrast to alexithymia, isolation, and cruelty, respectively.

An understanding of healthy masculinities must center the interpersonal dynamics that can shape them. Just as hegemonic masculinity is learned and maintained in relational ways (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016), deconstructing harmful ideas about what "real men" are needs to happen in a relational context as well. Even though boys have an innate ability to resist harmful norms (Rogers, 2018; Way, 2011; Way & Rogers, 2017), doing so is more challenging when in isolation, or when any deviation outside of the "man box" can lead to social ridicule or rejection. Way et al. (2014) argue that "the key to helping boys thrive lies in fostering boys' resistance to masculine norms that encourage boys not to express their feelings, to engage in aggressive

behavior, and to deny their desire and need for relationships" (p. 242). This points to growth-fostering relationships as the primary context in which healthy masculinities can develop.

Growth-fostering relationships hold transformative power to "touch, move, and change" us (Jordan, 2017, p. 231), marked by the presence of (a) authenticity, or freedom to express oneself in connection, (b) mutuality in engagement and empathy, a commitment to be sensitive to and moved by one another, (c) empowerment, or a source of strength and agency to live from one's true sense of self and values, and (d) space to process diversity (Frey, 2013; Jordan, 2008; Liang et al., 2010; Mereish & Poteat, 2015). Applied to boys' and men's lives, connection with others can support both resistance of hegemonic masculinity and healthy development. As RCT explains, "interdependence rather than independence is the developmental pathway to intimacy and to an increasingly complex felt sense of self" (Frey, 2013, p. 178). This concept, applied to developing one's sense of self as a man in the world, highlights connection as critical.

While hegemonic socialization suppresses emotional vulnerability by toughening boys and men to "man up," self-compassionate emotional regulation and resilience can grow out of experiencing others' acceptance and validation of their feelings, so that boys and men learn to feel, value, and express their own emotional lives. Role models can disprove the shaming of vulnerability by assuring boys and men that it is natural to feel and express their vulnerable feelings – even to cry – and not defective features. While hegemonic socialization labels needing support or help as weak, freedom to be in connection with others and develop one's sense of self can grow from mutuality that honors each person's growth and need for belonging intertwined. Mutual relationships in which desires for closeness are met and affirmed and their growth is valued can support them in being interdependent and authentically autonomous, rather than feeling maturity calls for separateness and isolation. While hegemonic socialization instills values of domination and power over others, connections can be a source of empowerment that

guides boys and men to exercise agency and power in uplifting ways rather than harmful ones. Men's friends, for example, can oppose aggression and set new expectations for one another.

In conclusion, a relational-cultural framing is not only critical to understanding how forces of disconnection contribute to the consequences of hegemonic masculine socialization; it also points to experiences in relationships and community as sites for disrupting and altering that socialization. Without countering the "policing" influence of boys' and men's social context – the dynamic of needing to be seen as "man enough" by others in their lives – interventions may fail to address one of the most powerful barriers to engaging boys and men. The concept of growth-fostering relationships from relational-cultural theory provides a template for the kinds of connections and spaces that may directly counteract the messages that lead to shame, isolation, and marginalization, and offer relational experiences that promote healthy masculinities (e.g., empathy, mutuality, empowerment). Therefore, efforts to engage boys and men in health promotion, violence prevention, and social change may be strengthened by greater attention to, and reliance on, the social context of their experiences in connection and community.

Group Psychotherapy Theory, Interpersonal Process, and Men's Groups

Interventions that create space for relational dynamics that foster healthy masculinities may offer a more effective approach to engaging boys and men. While relational-cultural theory provides a conceptual basis for the importance of healthy relational dynamics in countering hegemonic socialization, it also points to the elements of mutuality that occur in a group setting (Jordan, 2018). Men's groups, even as they occur in community and professionally-facilitated settings, have been developed with the intention of offering "therapeutic experiences in non-therapeutic settings" (Davies et al., 2010; p. 351). As such, group psychotherapy theory offers a conceptual foundation for the ingredients that men's groups should have in order to create counter-cultural space for growth-fostering relationships for men.

The unique power of groups to be therapeutic is explained by Yalom's (1995) model of therapeutic factors, or the "intricate interplay of human experiences" (p. 1) in the interpersonal process of a group. They are:

1) *the instillation of hope*; a unique kind of hope found in a group when members who are "at different points along a coping-collapse continuum" are exposed through their time and relationships with one another to "individuals with similar problems who have improved as a result of therapy" (p. 5). In a men's group, hope may be installed for men who long to feel more connected to others but have learned "that is not what men want or do," but are then exposed to a living example of other men who have worked toward deeper emotional intimacy with others.

2) *universality*, or a realization that members are not alone in their situation or suffering. In Yalom's words, "many patients enter therapy with the disquieting thought that they are alone in their wretchedness … in the therapy group … the disconfirmation of a patient's feelings of uniqueness is a powerful source of relief. After hearing other members disclose concerns similar to their own, patients report feeling more in touch with the world and describe the process as a 'welcome to the human race' experience" (1995, pp. 5-6). In a similar fashion to hope, a men's group may contrast the idea that there are no other men who do not feel strong and confident all the time, or who struggle to measure up to an idealized version of masculinity.

3) *imparting information*, or the use of psychoeducation to accompany the interpersonal process dimension, which helps to explain, de-stigmatize, or make support known and accessible to group members. This could involve a facilitator or other group members talking about ways for men to care for their physical and mental health, particularly if such knowledge is tied to one's goals for being in the group.

4) *altruism*, which exists in the "reciprocal giving-receiving" of help between group members, such as suggestions and validation or that one's shared experience resonates. In a men's group, this may be particularly important as members are able to provide care to others even as they receive it, which traditionally is inconsistent with masculine gender roles. This then extends to altruism beyond the group.

5) a *corrective recapitulation of the primary family group*, or corrective emotional experience. Yalom (1995) explains that because the majority of members come to group with a "background of a highly unsatisfactory experience in their first and most important group: the family," it becomes part of the group process that "working out problems with therapists and other members is also working through unfinished business from long ago" (pp. 12-14). The group process is therefore meant to revisit, in constructive ways that help men grow, conflicts or areas of their growth that previous relationships had not facilitated. In a men's group, however, members' primary group may involve but not be limited to one's family of origin, and may rather be the entirety of relationships and social circles that influenced their gender socialization (e.g., fathers, friends, coaches).

6) the *development of socializing techniques,* which can occur in group spaces that are intentionally built with norms and expectations about giving and receiving feedback about how members are experiencing one another. The group becomes a kind of "social laboratory" in which men can learn (or unlearn) patterns of interacting.

7) *imitative behavior*, stemming from new socializing techniques, occurs when group members are able to learn from the example of facilitators or other members, and carry new ways of interacting outside of the group. For example, men may model and learn ways of expressing their emotions, or responding empathically when others do.

8) *interpersonal learning,* which can often be the mechanism of a corrective emotional experience. When group members' relationships with one another are valued as a primary source of insight, the group becomes a sort of stage for problematic patterns to manifest, and rather than being avoided or condemned, examined with a compassionate curiosity. In a men's group, this may look like facilitators or members directing the group's attention to the process when one man steers the conversation away from a vulnerable topic. This member may be invited to notice the discomfort he has with the subject, receive feedback from other group members about how they may feel unseen or unheard when he changes the subject, and by further extension, may make an effort in the future to tolerate his own discomfort and stay connected with others in and outside of group amidst difficult conversation.

9) *group cohesiveness,* or a difficult-to-define sense of "we-ness" (Yalom, 1995, p. 48) that comes to stand for how well the group is working and promotes an all-around sense of belonging, and in which members feel a sense of acceptance and belonging even when conflict and discomfort arise, as cohesiveness is not their absence.

10) *catharsis,* which refers to group being a space in which members feel safe enough to express their true feelings and having them valued. In the context of masculine socialization, the opportunity to "let out" what they may have been "bottling up" in other relationships holds enormous therapeutic potential and sociocultural salience.

11) *existential factors*, or ways in which the group confronts common elements of the human condition (e.g., pain, loneliness, death, injustice), as well as agency in life, or that even amongst company, they must be the ones to create the lives they want. In a men's group, this could extend to becoming the kind of man one wants to be.

These eleven factors, according to Yalom, co-occur with one another and at various stages along a group's timeline. Described only in brief above, each of them points to how an interpersonal group process could be uniquely therapeutic for men, particularly in light of how hegemonic masculine socialization forbids the vulnerability and intimacy of the process (Way, 2011). There is also considerable overlap between this theory and relational-cultural theory: for example, the centrality of interpersonal relationships as a source of meaning, re-enacting, and learning, the amelioration of isolation, and the idea that we heal and grow through our connections to others. However, relational-cultural theory places a clear and strong emphasis on the influence of power and culturally-shaped controlling images, while Yalom's work provides more specificity as to why groups are promising settings for growth-fostering relationships and experiences to occur. Therefore, these two theories offer a complementary conceptual basis for men's groups.

Conceptual Applications of Group Theory and Relational-Cultural Theory to Masculinity

Although intervention efforts have sought to address masculine socialization from both social norms and psychoeducational approaches (e.g., public health campaigns to destigmatize and normalize help-seeking; reframing social norms toward violence prevention; Amin et al., 2018; Mennicke et al., 2018; Rochlen et al., 2006), these interventions do not occur primarily through men's experiences in relationships, and carry limitations in the extent to which they affect broader social change (Casey et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2020). Recall Kivel's (1998) foundational idea of "men's work:" that interventions need to bring boys and men together to address masculinity collectively by talking and processing with one another. While empirical work on applying relational-cultural theory and group theory to the context of masculinity is lacking, existing conceptual scholarship from practitioners helps to flesh out this interpersonal approach. Specifically, Sternbach's (2001) model of the developmental stages in a men's group and Rabinowitz's (2019) overview of using the interpersonal group process to engage with

masculinity issues connect each theory to men's groups as a unique "social microcosm" that recreates existing dynamics from the outside world to explore (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

Sternbach (2001) outlined how the process of a men's group proceeds through the following stages: 1) creating safety, or "a holding environment where men overcome isolation, risk contact, feel included, find commonality, and reduce shame;" 2) building the group, or "achieving cohesion, intimacy, and empathy;" 3) differentiation, or "here and now affective sharing and self-disclosure, seeking and accepting critical feedback, high level of group autonomy, and true mutual aid;" 4) leaving the sanctuary, or "making changes outside group;" and 5) endings for individuals and the group (p. 62). He goes on to explain that "a safe environment… is necessary for a corrective resocializing experience through the group process" (p. 68), and makes direct reference to the relational-cultural group model of the Stone Center in advocating for a space where men can "work through" intra- and interpersonal conflict. Safety in the group is meant to stand in stark contrast to the "pervasive wariness of other men and fear of violence" along with "comparison, competition, mistrust, exclusion, scapegoating, bullying, and status rivalries… Feeling accepted and included, without these denigrating aspects, is itself a healing experience" (p. 63). Again, the model references RCT's focus on moving from "adaptive disconnection" into the ease and authenticity of growth-fostering connection. At the same time, this relational-cultural model resembles group psychotherapy theory by revisiting and correcting real-world dynamics (e.g., the move away from connection) and creating space for universality and catharsis, all through interpersonal learning. Building empathic connections in the group then becomes the foundation for "working through" as well as finding ways to bring what men have learned in group to their lives beyond it. Sternbach captures how men's groups can in this way serve as both for men who participate, and lead to broader ripple effects, saying that when men translate their learning beyond the group:

… growth becomes anchored in lived experience. Having found intrinsic satisfaction in the immediate, intimate subjectivity of the group, men can utilize these modes in the family, the job, the community and friendships. … without such an explicit focus, men in the groups will often feel the outside structures are too forbidding and impenetrable for them to navigate in new ways. Of course, testing out new ways and being rebuffed is part of the learning and provides grist for the mill in the group. When they were boys and suffered hurts and pain, most men have been told to grimace and suffer in stoical silence. As a result, their capacity to bear the usual and ordinary narcissistic injuries of relationship is limited. This stage offers further opportunity, beyond the give and take within the group, for men to share their wounds, own their feelings, and receive support from others. For many men this is a unique experience. (p. 67)

How do the interpersonal dynamics in a men's group enable the growth described above? This supports the rationale for an interpersonal approach to masculinity-focused intervention, which shares a core conceptual assumption with that of group psychotherapy, being that the social setting provides access to the challenges that individuals have experienced in their own relationships as well as creates an atmosphere of validation and solidarity as members explore difficult topics and may experience a sense of universality with other members as they do so (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). The salience of relationships in men's groups, however, is doubly relevant. Similar dynamics in how boys and men are socialized (e.g., to not show emotion) can be evoked and challenged by the group setting, which conversely is meant to be a validating space of connection and exploration.

Rabinowitz (2019) reviews this rationale for men's groups, drawing more explicitly from group theory and extending it into the cultural context of masculinity. He explains the central role of universality in a men's group: "by talking about the cultural norms of masculinity, men

can usually find some common ground around expectations they may have had to live up to" (p. 42). He also identifies potential themes of men's groups, such as exploring what it means to be a man, where this was learned, and how these meanings impact members' lives (e.g., trusting others, coping with crisis, forming intimate relationships, establishing a sense of self, taking care of oneself, etcetera). Such themes would be appropriate for imparting information, the giving and receiving of suggestions among group members, and the learning of new insights and behaviors. Exploring these themes, however, is made possible by the interpersonal atmosphere of trust, connection, and mutual support for men to translate what they have learned and how they have grown into their lives outside the group (Rabinowitz, 2019). In these ways, the concept of men's group interventions is a unique interpersonal process that, because of what is therapeutic in the group setting and in growth-fostering relationships within it, can be a space for deconstructing sociocultural pressure to be "real men."

More recent programs have drawn from the conceptual foundations outlined above. For example, The Men's Center Approach (MCA; Davies et al., 2010), for example, is a model for engaging groups of college men that views their growth as facilitated by relationships and group spaces of unconditional positive regard, therapeutic experiences in non-therapeutic settings, a respect for diversity, and commitment to social justice and activism (pp. 350-351). Bringing men together to share and listen to one another's experiences may combat certain stigmas (e.g., "there must be something wrong with me if no other men want to talk"). Likewise, feeling heard and validated by other men may disarm fear of being ostracized for being vulnerable or questioning the expectations of masculinity (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). As do men's interpersonal process groups, the MCA approach involves trained group facilitators as guides who are willing to connect with men and accompany them in the group process. Another example is found in the Men-Mentoring-Men program (M3; Adams & Frauenheim, 2020), a men's group that seeks to

harness interpersonal connections in order to create the psychological safety from being shamed by others. This, in turn, is meant to open space for vulnerability and growth: "given the opportunity to dive deeply into life experiences, men find safety, comfort, and solace in the company of other men" (p. 64). With permission to explore issues such as self-image or intimate relationships, men can have an enriching impact on one another as they share, listen, and offer encouraging guidance to support one another's growth. Again, however, empirical studies on this kind of men's interpersonal process groups are scarce.

These kinds of groups are not solely for the benefit of the individual boys and men who participate in them: they can have ripple effects beyond the group, arguably invoking the goals of group therapy as well as growth-fostering relationships. By embracing their own and one another's humanity through their group experience, boys and men can come to see and value the humanity of others (Kivel, 1998; Porter, 2016; Way, 2019). Sternbach (2001, p. 60), writes:

> Unreconstructed masculinity plays itself out in destructive ways in the larger societal context: ecological degradation, oppression of gay [people], women, and others; the institutionalization of violence; as well as in personal relationships. Work with men's groups is, therefore, part of a social change process, implemented on a clinical level. Men themselves will gain enhanced humanity as they find the courage to join together and help each other grow.

By creating a sense of safety in the group and establishing different ways of navigating conflict (i.e., processing pain or anxiety rather than asserting oneself over others), the content and process of men's groups lends itself directly to issues of social justice. Adopting healthy masculinities, therefore, can change the impact that men have in other areas of their lives, making them into "change agents" with "ripple effects" (Vera, 2020) in their families, relationships, communities, and society (Adams & Frauenheim, 2020).

Two examples of these ripple effects are found in the need to engage more men in combatting patriarchy, sexism, and violence against women, as well as the need to engage more white men in combatting racism. Spaces for men to critically reflect on hegemonic masculinity's idealization of sexual conquest, objectification, and aggression could foster their ability to redefine their own relationship with power to algin with nonviolent, feminist values. Mentors and facilitators, by teaching and modelling this through mutual and empowering relationships, can also model how to influence other men in their lives. Men's group advocates also see group work to dismantle hegemonic masculinity as an opportunity for reflection on White privilege and racism (Kivel, 1998, Porter, 2016). For example, in spaces where White men discuss racism with other White men, or listen to the lived experiences from men of color, relational dynamics could foster introspection, accountability, and growth toward antiracism (Kivel, 1998).

While this dissertation focuses on interventions for men in young adulthood and beyond, it is important to acknowledge that these concepts have implications for earlier work with boys. The critical formative role boys' social worlds play in their development (Levant, 2005) supports Way et al.'s (2014) call to foster boys' resistance to harmful norms through relationships. Parents, friends, teachers, coaches, and role models may be the most influential interventionists. When they feel listened to and accepted by people who are important to them, Reichert (2019) argues, empathic connection can empower boys to form a sense of self that is not contingent on meeting standards of hypermasculinity. This focus on connection informs existing programs, such as mentoring in school to foster social-emotional capacities (Way & Nelson, 2018), and helping fathers be engaged with their sons in sensitive and caring ways (Barker, 2018). Dissuading boys from feeling their social worth is synonymous with hypermasculinity (Chu & Gilligan, 2019) requires making space for the depth of their social-emotional development. In conclusion, bringing boys and men together in and of itself can be a powerful intervention when

it allows for them to connect around deconstructing harmful sociocultural norms of masculinity they may have learned, and together move toward living on their own terms instead. While there is a rise in programs that share this goal, the degree to which they disarm the relational pressures of hegemonic masculine socialization, provide the therapeutic factors of a group process, and create space for connections that help men grow into healthy masculinities requires further study.

Masculinity-Focused Interventions: A Review of Existing Findings

This third section reviews existing empirical findings on masculinity-focused group interventions, identifying key limitations in the research base that point to the purpose of the present study. Interventions for promoting healthy masculinities are beginning to receive more attention in empirical research, such as in the United States following the lead of existing efforts abroad (Abebe et al., 2018; Kato-Wallace et al., 2019). While findings in support of the men's group approaches above (e.g., MCA, M3) remain largely anecdotal (Rabinowitz, 2019), several studies bear out the potential of masculinity-focused intervention that take place in the group settings. The benefits of a men's group approach have been reported in many settings, such as support groups for men transitioning into retirement showing promising results in preventing loneliness and risk for suicide (Heisel et al., 2020), and process groups for men across sexual orientation to reduce internalized shame through relational dynamics of affirmation, authenticity, and developing close friendships (Provence et al., 2014). More generally, the evaluation studies reviewed below (both quantitative and qualitative) examine self-reported change in participants' understandings of masculinity and related outcomes (e.g., mental health, social support) in some cases, and in others explore participants' subjective experiences of growth in the group setting.

Burke et al.'s (2010) study on the ManKind Project International examined differences in men's self-reported before and after participating in a men's community support group that aims to draw on the influence of men's peers in order to "foster and encourage increased emotional

availability, prosocial behavior, community and social support, and a clear sense of life purpose"
in a way that promotes men's health and furthers gender equality (p. 188). Administering self-
report surveys before participation and after one year of men's time in the program (which
consists of masculinity-focused support groups), the study found men reported higher levels of
social support, better mental health outcomes (depression and anxiety scores), lower adherence
to dominant masculine ideology and less gender role conflict, and greater life satisfaction;
furthermore, these results were stronger as moderated by longer time in the program (at 18-
month follow up). However, the researchers note the limitations of lacking a control group and
relying on self-report without others in men's lives who may observe change or lack thereof.

A similar program in South Africa, Stepping Stones and Changing Futures, also takes the
approach of holding discussion groups for young men to critique harmful masculine norms and
explore nonviolent meanings of masculinity in order to reduce interpersonal and sexual violence.
This program shows a growing base of empirical support for changing participants' self-reported
hegemonic masculine attitudes over time (Gibbs et al., 2018; 2020), but shares the limitation as
Burke et al.'s (2010) study of lacking a control group. Furthermore, studies on this program do
not as of yet assess whether this attitude change is reflected in a decrease in violent behavior,
pointing to the need for research on how participants change beyond the group itself. As another
example, Exner-Cortens et al., (2019a) reported preliminary findings from a healthy relationships
workshop for young men in which self-reported attitude changes were found in a group setting,
but again without a control group and requiring further study which is currently underway. Other
programs based on a similar model of masculinity-focused discussion groups are in the process
of being evaluated (e.g., Manhood 2.0; Abebe et al., 2018; Kato-Wallace et al., 2019).

Qualitative approaches have also been applied to examine men's experiences in similar
group programs, particularly pointing to the significance of the relationships that exist through

these interventions. In a university setting in the United States, for example, Di Bianca et al. (2021) interviewed men in their first year of college who participated in a peer-led mentoring program focused on healthy masculinity as well as those who did not participate. Men who were a part of the program and attended weekly small-groups with peers and a male mentor student indicated the groups created space for reflection on vulnerability and authenticity, discussing social justice, and connecting with role models who encouraged personal growth beyond hegemonic masculine norms. These themes were less common in the experiences shared by men who did not participate, and findings also emphasized the powerful influence of male peer-mentors: being able to build connections with their group leaders, who they viewed as modelling healthy masculinities during sessions by giving permission for younger men to express emotion by modelling vulnerability themselves, facilitating difficult conversations, or offering guidance and setting an example that being a man does not have to mean being hypermasculine. Mirroring this finding, Namy et al. (2015) interviewed participants of a similar program in the high school setting that consists of recurring group discussions about masculinity, health, relationships, and violence. Findings concluded that connecting with mentors and peers were key for participants to engage in conversation and personal reflection on changing what it means to be a man, alluding to the potential for therapeutic factors and relationships to exist in men's groups.

Limitations of Existing Intervention Studies

Although the programs reviewed above report positive findings for participants, many critics (e.g., Casey et al., 2018; Dworkin & Barker, 2019; Vera, 2020) highlight the limitations of individual attitude change. Vera (2020), for example, makes the case for environment-focused prevention efforts that extend beyond the individual and incorporate work at the community, school, policy, systems levels. Part of this would be to create a "critical mass of potential change agents" who can "improve their social environments" to extend benefits of interventions beyond

those who directly participated in them (p. 16). This applies to how masculinity-focused interventions seek to benefit individual men and create broader social change, as deconstructing hegemonic masculinity represents a form of primary prevention. Consider the implications for the crisis in men's mental health and suicide risk if boys were not shamed as weak by their peers and coaches for talking about vulnerable feelings (Cole & Ingram, 2019), or the implications for violence prevention if sexual aggression was not normalized in their social circles or in media (Barnett et al., 2019). However, existing research on men's group programs offers little evidence for how or whether participants carry self-reported change into other parts of their life.

Researchers focused on preventing men's violence against women also make the point of how individual attitude change does not always translate into broader prevention (Flood, 2015) and interventions that prioritize individual attitude change may not bring about sustained social action (Brush & Miller, 2019; Casey et al., 2018; Dworkin & Barker, 2019). Even when studies find that programs reduce men's acceptance of myths from rape culture, research also suggests that attitude change does not lower the prevalence of college sexual assault (Wright et al., 2020). This critique does not dismiss individual attitude change as meaningless, but rather argues that successful prevention requires more than for individual men to be nonviolent. In keeping with Vera's (2020) approach to prevention, this would take a critical mass of boys and men who recognize that preventing men's violence against women is a responsibility shared by all men, who are willing to listen and learn from the experiences of women, and to hold other boys and men accountable for harmful behaviors (Flood, 2015; Porter, 2016). Likewise, Casey et al. (2018) see prevention as encompassing not only attitude change for the participants of a given intervention, but men's sustained social action after their time in a program, using their social leverage over others by inviting more boys and men to take similar action, and support for broader social change. Therefore, a key limitation of existing programs and their intended scope

of impact is an insufficient focus on how participants will go on to act as "change agents" (Vera, 2020) in their other relationships and communities. With this in mind, men's groups need to focus not only on helping participants develop healthy ideas of masculinity for themselves, but prepare them to translate such changes into action beyond their time in the group.

"Am I Seen as Unmanly?" Precarious Manhood as a Necessary Relational Lens

One possible explanation for the commonly-cited limitations of reliance on self-reported change and self-selection into such programs is the social context itself of hegemonic masculine socialization. Men's groups in effect run counter to the dominant culture of masculinity, which remain salient outside of the groups and may even be recreated within them (Gibbs et al., 2018). As such, relational pressures operate to maintain individual conformity to hegemonic masculine norms; for example, campaigns encouraging boys and men to seek help in times of crisis may be ineffective while their peer groups remain sites of stigma or invalidation. This is the salience of precarious manhood theory (Vandello & Bosson, 2013) and "policing" masculinity (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016) at work: any deviation outside of the "man box" can be punished, suggesting that disrupting hegemonic masculinity may require a collective effort rather than on an individual basis (Reichert, 2019). Interventions to deconstruct harmful forms of masculinity may face resistance to changing meanings of manhood when there is a lack of collective support for that change, as evidenced by Gibbs et al.'s (2018) study which while finding self-reported changes in men's masculinity ideologies, also identified the influence of men's peers as a primary barrier to engaging in the group (e.g., ambivalence to critique hegemonic masculine norms due to fear of being judged). This echoes a finding in research on domestic violence prevention with men: attempts to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity in a group setting can leverage community as a site for promoting nonviolence (Davis et al., 2020), but the same group setting can also keep in place men's adherence to patriarchal embodiments of masculinity (Schrock & Padavic, 2007).

In conclusion, limitations to these studies on men's groups underscore a lack of clarity on how the interpersonal process between men can be harnessed as the catalyst of an intervention, and how it can overcome hegemonic relational dynamics and empower men to carry changes from the group forward into how they act outside of the group. Furthermore, interventions in the research base often focus exclusively on gender and sexuality issues (e.g., violence against women, homophobia) without attending to more intersecting cultural issues in which hegemonic masculinity is implicated and to which relational-cultural theory calls into conversation (e.g., racism, power, politics; Agius et al., 2020; Ferree, 2020). Likewise, research has not paid sufficient attention to how men experience groups in light of the multiple dimensions of identity, raising considerations such as power imbalances in groups, balancing support and accountability, and being responsive to men's experiences of trauma and violence (Brassel et al., 2020; Brush & Miller, 2019; Davies et al., 2010). A window into men's individual experiences of men's groups would lend clarity on how the group process itself can be the key in addressing these limitations.

Purpose of the Present Study: A Focus on the Interpersonal Dimension

The need for reconstructing and transforming masculinity (hooks, 2004; Levant, 1992) has been clearly and consistently established, but the process by which interventions can engage boys and men remains unclear. As this literature review highlights the salience of interpersonal context as a significant driver of hegemonic masculine socialization and barrier to engaging boys and men in positive change, there is sufficient theoretical basis for the interpersonal process to be a foundational asset and mechanism of change for men's group interventions. Relational group dynamics may lend themselves well to the process of deconstructing and redefining masculinity, but without being attended to, they can also operate to keep men "in the man box." Existing intervention research does not adequately account for how participants themselves experience interventions and how the interpersonal dynamics in men's groups help them develop healthy

masculinities themselves as well as in their actions outside of the group. Outcome-focused

research examining whether such programs bring about changes, therefore, would benefit from

an extension into the process dimension. Ideas from relational-cultural theory and Black feminist

thought (e.g., controlling images; Collins, 2009; growth-fostering relationships; Miller 1976;

transforming masculinity; hooks, 2004) and ways masculinity scholars have integrated these into

men's group work (Davies et al., 2010; Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022; Kivel, 1998; Rabinowitz,

2019; Sternbach, 2001) underscore the importance of the process dimension as not simply one

important factor, but the most critical to consider.

A deeper understanding of how men experience the interpersonal space created by men's

group programs, and the ways to which it recreates or counters the broader cultural context of

hegemonic masculine socialization, may help to clarify the necessary relational components for

effective masculinity-focused interventions. This literature on the salience of relationships in

masculine socialization shows that a focus not only on the goals and outcomes of an intervention,

but of the process between group members, is needed. This empirical investigation of Di Bianca

and Mahalik's (2022) application of RCT to masculine socialization, summarized above in this

literature review, would help to develop a clear picture of the qualities of men's relationships as

a foundation for group programs to be structured around, and in turn, how those interpersonal

dynamics may help men move toward healthy masculinities. Men's own perspectives, in their

own words, on their experience in such men's groups represent a valuable source of such insight

into these dynamics from which researchers and interventionists can learn. To that end, the

present study aimed to develop a deeper understanding of men's subjective experiences in a

men's group program, specifically exploring a) how they experienced the interpersonal process

of the group, b) how the interpersonal process shaped their own masculinities, and c) how the

interpersonal process shaped their efforts to promote healthy masculinities outside the group.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Research Partnership with A Call to Men

This study was conducted through a partnership with A Call to Men, a non-profit

violence prevention organization that works to engage boys and men in redefining masculinity in

healthier ways in their lives and communities. Its mission is "to raise boys' and men's

consciousness about their collective socialization so that they can think critically about how they

might be reinforcing or passing on these harmful beliefs and so they can challenge those beliefs

in other men" (A Call to Men, n.d.). The organization's philosophy is informed by Kivel's

(1998) conceptualization of "men's work," the idea that boys and men must come together in

order to collectively dismantle "the man box." Their programs also target the masculine social

norms highlighted as risk factors in the recent APA (2018) guidelines, the beliefs that boys and

men: 1) should never show any sign of weakness (e.g., fear, backing away from fights); 2)

should not experience or express emotions, with the exception of anger; 3) should avoid any

traits or actions that could be deemed feminine; 4) should not need or ask for help (e.g., social

support, health care); 5) should treat women in devaluing and sexually objectifying ways; and 6)

should show their strength by being aggressive and dominant over others (A Call to Men, n.d.).

To this end, the organization seeks to promote the practice of "healthy manhood," aligned with

notions of healthy masculinities in the literature, which includes emotional expression and

vulnerability, interdependence, preventing violence against women and girls, working for social

justice, and modelling healthy manhood to other boys and men. The organization cites a social-

ecological approach to prevention, focusing on community-based efforts that empower boys and

men to be active participants in promoting healthy manhood in their social circles and

communities (for more details on A Call to Men's guiding principles, see Porter, 2016;

acalltomen.org/about/guiding-principles). They offer a variety of interventions, such as

consultations for professional organizations, violence prevention programs for high school and college men or athletic teams, and the focus of this study, a weekly men's group program called the "Circles of Influence."

Intervention Description: The "Circle of Influence" Men's Group

This study examined a men's group intervention offered by A Call to Men, the "Circles of Influence" program (see https://www.acalltomen.org/events/circle-of-influence/). With a goal of supporting men in practicing healthy manhood in their lives, relationships, and communities, the program is intended to create a space for participants to connect with one another, reflect on their experiences of socialization as men, and to both receive and provide mentorship in how they practice and advocate for healthy manhood outside of the group. The group is not precisely an interpersonal process group such as those facilitated by trained mental health professionals, but has elements of emotional support and mutual mentoring. The program consists of small-group meetings for a course of ten weeks (one meeting per week, with 8-10 men in each), taking place via online video calls for an hour and a half. Each 10-week cycle is "closed," so the same group of men meet each week. Participation in the program is voluntary, and costs $25 per meeting (total of $250, as most attend all 10 sessions). The group is open to all male-identifying individuals across age, race, gender identity, and sexual orientation. All group meetings are facilitated by a male-identifying professional staff member of the organization, whose training and experience is in men's groups and community-based violence prevention programming.

Each group session is structured in three parts: 1) a discussion of current events as they relate to healthy manhood or hegemonic masculinity (e.g., news, media, politics), 2) discussion of a weekly theme (e.g., patriarchy and violence against women), processing how it relates to participants' own experiences, and mentorship for how men can act as advocates, role models, and activists on the subject; and 3) "here and now" personal check-ins, in which men are invited

to share their own reflections, experiences, feelings, and offer one another support. The topics of weekly meetings throughout the 10 weeks include: 1) the collective socialization of masculinity, 2) emotional vulnerability, 3) the gender binary, homophobia and transphobia, 4) patriarchy and violence against women, 5) father-son relationships, 6) friendships and intimate relationships, 7) White supremacy, 8) self -care, 9) trauma, and 10) closing the group.

Collaborative Process for Developing Study Design and Questions

In partnership with A Call to Men, a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach was taken to plan this study. CBPR emerges from traditions such as liberation psychology and participatory action research (Fals-Borda, 2013; Freire, 1970), a paradigm which views psychology as a means of working toward social justice, and specifically utilized research to build a critical consciousness among citizens whose lives are shaped by oppressive structures, and by extension to combat forms of oppression (Goodman et al., 2017). As such, CBPR rests upon an expansive set of principles for partnerships between researchers and communities that aim to address social injustice through action-oriented research, guided by the needs, strengths, and goals of a particular community or partner. Goals and values of CBPR include mutuality in decision-making between researchers and community members throughout the research process, the sharing of power, knowledge, and resources, centering the expertise that community members bring to the subject at hand, and conducting research that has relevant and tangible applications for those closest to the topic at hand (see Goodman et al., 2017). CBPR can be conducted in many forms, allowing for methodological flexibility in pursuit of the shared goals of a given project (and therefore is not mutually exclusive from other research designs and analysis plans, such as qualitative description in this study).

In this study, I partnered with an organization aiming to involve men in the conversation about healthy masculinity, and in the effort to promote it on a broader scale as a way of working

for social justice. As such, a CBPR approach involved my immersion in the intervention and building relationships with facilitators and participants, a social justice orientation to qualitative research (Lyons et al., 2013), and the mutual planning of goals, research questions, and data collection. We also shared an interest in using feminist inquiry as a sensitizing concept for the study, which helped inform our decisions on research questions below. At the start of our partnership, the organization invited me become familiar with their mission by attending a workshop about their guiding principles, and then to join a previous cycle of the 10-week men's group program as a participant myself. The staff and I agreed that my familiarity with the intervention (e.g., content covered; the group dynamics) was a valuable way to develop our partnership and for me to learn directly about the intervention to inform our planning for the study (I address my participation in this men's group in more detail while discussing reflexivity).

After my participation in the 10-week program, we began meeting biweekly throughout spring and summer of 2021 to develop research questions that reflected what the organization wished to study. These meetings were attended by myself and two professional staff members from A Call to Men: Rickie Houston (Director of Training, and men's group program facilitator) and Lina Juarbe Botella (Director of Community Engagement). From the outset, there was significant overlap between their rationale for launching a men's group program and my academic interests: they wished to harness the mutual support and mentorship that men may create by connecting with one another towards the goal practicing and advocating for healthy manhood. This aim also matched my approach to research on reaching boys and men in their social contexts, rather than expecting positive change to occur on a solely individual basis. Likewise, because the Circle of Influence program had only recently been launched, the staff wanted to understand how men were impacted by having a space to connect with and learn from other men. This, too, mirrored by interest in how affirming spaces for men to deconstruct their

experiences of masculine socialization may serve as catalysts for engaging a critical mass of men in social justice and violence prevention work (e.g., how experience within a men's group might lead to actions men to take in their lives and social circles outside of the group).

By discussing our mutual goals, the staff and I identified the scope for the project to include learning from participants' voices about their experiences in the program, the potential influences of the interpersonal setting, and the implications of participants' experiences for promoting individual and broader change related to healthy manhood. Our meetings shifted to focus on collaboratively developing formal research questions and an accompanying interview protocol, which was went through a process of several revisions in order to incorporate staff members' feedback. As a result, the following three research questions were developed:

1) How do men understand and describe their experiences in a men's group program with respect to their own sense of healthy masculinity in their personal lives?

2) How do men understand and describe their experiences in a men's group program with respect to how they promote and advocate for healthy masculinity outside of the group?

3) How do men understand and describe the interpersonal process of the men's group and the role it may have played in shaping their experiences described in the questions above?

Methodology: Qualitative Description

In keeping with this study's focus on the process of the men's group dynamics and how participants were impacted by it rather than a pre-post evaluation of the program's impact on an outcome(s) of interest, this study took a qualitative approach. With the exception of Gibbs et al.'s (2018) and Provence et al.'s (2014) studies, where the interpersonal process of reconstructing masculinity was part of the findings but not the central research question, men's experiences of the interpersonal process within men's groups have not been extensively examined by empirical research before. As such, the theoretical arguments about the role of relationships within men's

groups made by Sternbach (2001) and Rabinowitz (2019) have not been thoroughly explored

empirically. Furthermore, this study's research questions have direct relevance for practice (i.e.,

focus on participants' experiences in an intervention). Both of these considerations make

qualitative description (Sandelowski, 2000) a fitting choice as the analytic approach for this

study in order to develop a basic understanding of participants' subjective experiences in their

own words.

Qualitative description is well-suited to answer the exploratory research questions above

in the ways that participants themselves would describe them, as it is meant to provide "a

comprehensive summary of events in everyday terms" (Sandelowski, 2000; p. 336). Compared

with approaches that aim to develop a complex theoretical understanding (e.g., phenomenology),

qualitative description focuses on clearly conveying the "basic nature" of events and experiences

that participants describe (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338) in "data-near" ways that allow for

participants to "speak for themselves to the greatest extent possible" (Gutowski & Goodman,

2020, p. 443; Kim et al., 2017). For example, the first level of coding resembles the original data

as closely as possible. As such, the approach emphasizes the stories that participants are telling

about their experiences. While no method of qualitative analysis can ever be purely atheoretical

and free of all interpretation on the part of the researcher (Sandelowski, 2000), qualitative

description involves a lesser degree of interpretation when compared to other approaches

(Sandelowski, 2010; Vaismoradi et al., 2013, such as grounded theory, which involves deriving a

more theoretical framework of explanations about participants' experiences (Charmaz, 2014).

Qualitative description can adopt practices from other methodologies (i.e., "hues and tones;"

Sandelowski, 2000). As such, researchers can employ an array of sampling methods to select

participants (e.g., relying on professional staff to recruit; Lyons et al., 2013), drawing from a

sensitizing framework to guide the research questions, such as feminist and relational-cultural

lenses on masculinity (Bowen, 2006), and analytic steps (e.g., constant comparison as described below; Boeijie, 2002) in order to incorporate adequate rigor and trustworthiness into the process.

Procedure

As part of my partnership with A Call to Men and this study's focus on the experiences of men who attended this specific men's group, participants were drawn only from the network of men who have completed A Call to Men's 10-week men's group program described above. At the time of data collection, six "cohorts" of the Circle of Influence program had completed, and there existed a total number of 52 "alumni" who had finished the program and were eligible for the study. By the end of data collection, this network had expanded to 68. A Call to Men staff facilitate recruitment for the men's group program as a separate process from this study (i.e., through social media, events at high schools and universities), but assisted with recruitment of research participants by sharing my invitation to take part in this study with the network of men who had completed the 10-week men's group cycle. This notice of an opportunity to take part in the study was shared with all participants from any cohort, inviting them to be interviewed about their experience in the men's group. The professional staff and planned to interview a diverse group of men, as the network of men who had completed the program varies across age, racial identity, and sexual orientation. In an effort to recruit a sample that represented the diversity of men in the groups, I relied on my partnership with A Call to Men's professional staff, namely, the group facilitator who ran each group session and had built rapport with potential participants (i.e., "gatekeeper support;" Lyons et al., 2013). He was willing to add his own encouragement to my invitation to participants, expressing that the program would value and appreciate the chance to learn from the experiences of men who held marginalized identities. All participants were given a $20 gift card as a small token of gratitude for being interviewed, even if they chose to skip interview questions or end the interview early. This compensation was delivered by email

on the day of each interview. Funding came from my summer 2021 dissertation development grant from the Boston College Lynch School of Education and Human Development.

Prior to data collection, approval for this study was granted by the Boston College Institutional Review Board (Approval # 22.128.01). Informed consent, which was provided to all participants ahead of time, was reviewed with each participant at the start of their interview. The final interview protocol (see Appendix A) was developed in collaboration with A Call to Men's professional staff and with input from former men's group participants. All participants were also asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire prior to the start of their interview.

To pilot and refine the interview protocol, I contacted two participants whom I had built personal relationships during my own time in the men's group program. They had previously expressed interest in my research, and agreed to test-run the interview questions with me and share their feedback on the questions (e.g., recommendations to phrase them differently; suggestions to ask about important aspects of their experience in the men's group I did not include). I approached these test-runs as consultations, and agreed with these men that they would not be included in the analytic sample. While they certainly would have had meaningful contributions to make to the study's findings, their input during the pilot interviews was focused mostly on the elements of the men's group that my questions were eliciting and how men might respond, not their own personal responses. Furthermore, both men acknowledged that us having gone through the program together and having built close relationships as a result made them feel as though they may be less focused on sharing their unfiltered experience in the group. After the interview questions were refined based on these pilot consultations, which I then reviewed with the program's professional staff as well as my dissertation chair, formal data collection and began. Semi-structured individual interviews with thirteen men who participated in the "Circle of Influence" men's group program were conducted by myself via Zoom audio or video call. All

interviews occurred after men's time in the 10-week program had ended. Their average duration was just over an hour (i.e., 68 minutes). My research team and I transcribed interviews manually.

Participants

This sample was diverse with respect to age, with the youngest man interviewed being 26 years of age and the oldest being 69 years of age ($M = 37$). The majority of men interviewed identified as cisgender ($n = 12$) with one identifying as a transgender man. There was a fairly diverse representation across race and ethnicity (note: many men reported both race and ethnicity, but some only reported race). Seven men identified as White/European American, one as White/Arab American, one as Black/African-American, one as Mexican, one as Latino, one as Indigenous/Alaska Native, and one as Biracial (Black and Latino). The majority of men reported their sexual orientation as straight ($n = 9$), with two men identifying as gay and two as bisexual. The majority of these men described their socioeconomic status as "Middle Class" ($n = 8$), with three men describing themselves as "Upper Middle Class," one as "Lower Middle Class" and one as "Working Class." Men also reported a variety of religious or spiritual identities, such as Christian ($n = 2$), Catholic ($n = 1$), Baptist ($n = 1$), Buddhist ($n = 1$), Indigenous ($n = 1$), with three describing themselves "Spiritual but Not Religious," one as Atheist, one as Agnostic, and three reporting no religious or spiritual identity. Regarding education, six men had earned their Bachelor's degree, one had earned his GED, and six had a graduate degree. With respect to political affiliation, the majority of men were on the left of the political spectrum in how they categorized themselves (Democrat, $n = 3$; Progressive, $n = 3$; Liberal, $n = 3$; Socialist/Antiracist, $n = 1$), with one man identifying as a "Moderate" and two others as "Independent," one of whom described himself as a former Republican. While fairly representative across age, race, and sexual orientation, this group of men differs notably from the general population of men in the United States, more specifically, being further left on the political spectrum than most men, less

likely to be religious, and more likely to have an undergraduate or graduate-level education (see

Pew Research Center, 2018; 2022; United States Census Bureau, 2022). This demographic

information along with participants' chosen pseudonyms for the study can be found in Table 1.

Analytic Process and Practices

To create a "comprehensive summary" of how participants described their subjective

experiences in the men's group in keeping with a qualitative descriptive approach, qualitative

content analysis was used for the coding process described in further detail below (Hsieh &

Shannon, 2005; Sandelowski, 2000; 2010). This method aims to conduct analysis as a mutually

constructive process between researcher and participants, so that findings are reflective of how

participants themselves would describe their experiences. The analysis was conducted by myself

and a team of 4 research assistants, all of whom were students in Boston College's M.A. in

Mental Health Counseling program, and conducted interview transcription and coding. I was

coached in coding by Dr. Goodman, given her experience in the methodology. I then asked my

team to read Sandelowski's (2000) article on this method, and conducted practice coding

sessions to orient them to the methods of segmenting transcripts into meaning units and staying

close to participants' words for first-level coding. Once the team was familiar with the process,

we began analyzing each interview as they were conducted.

Determining Saturation

I initially planned to interview roughly between 10 and 20 men who participated in the

men's group, and concluded data collection after interviewing 13 men. Finalizing this sample

size was based on the criteria of reaching saturation, the point at which new themes no longer

emerged from interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Sandelowski, 2008). Specifically, my team

and I were able to determine saturation by coding interviews on a rolling basis as I conducted

them, rather than waiting to analyze them all at once after deciding to end data collection without

a trustworthy way of knowing whether saturation had been reached ceased. This coding process, described in further detail below, involved constantly revisiting the entire set of codes and assessing how each interview might modify or add to them, which allowed me to determine when no new themes were emerging from interview data. When we coded the 10th interview into our evolving codebook, we began to see signs of saturation: no broad new themes were being added (e.g., all codes fit into existing clusters), and new content came in the form of different stories, examples, or perspectives that fit in with codes already in the codebook. As the 11th, 12th, and 13th interview continued this trend of only adding additional examples to the existing codebook, I was confident in the decision to conclude data collection, as this was a consistent indication that saturation had been reached.

Coding Process

Research assistants worked in pairs on first-level coding, while I coded independently. I reviewed and revised all interviews that research assistants coded, and the five of us gathered to discuss codes in biweekly team meetings where we also raised questions, came to consensus on disputed codes, and revised the codebook as it developed. After four interviews were conducted and had first-level codes, we began to sort our list of codes into areas of overlapping and shared ideas (these would become the categories), which were eventually sorted into broader clusters reported in the results. Below, these three levels of the coding process are described in detail, as well as the practices I relied on throughout the analysis to establish trustworthiness in the results.

Coding involved the following three steps, following practices of qualitative description (see Downe-Walmboldt, 1992; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Sandelowski, 2000). The first level was open, inductive coding of each interview by dividing interview data into meaning units (e.g., distinct/separate ideas) and labelling them by staying as close to participants words as possible, without moving into abstractions. This first step, for example, was the focus of repeated practice

among my research team to ensure that the coding process stayed true to a descriptive method,

The second round of coding involved combining first-level codes that express the same content,

and assigning a revised name that represented those codes. This also involved re-assigning codes

that expressed diverging ideas to a new or other code, a step that took place through constant

comparison (see below). As codes were sorted into categories of related but not identical content,

the third step involved arranging these categories into broader clusters. My practice throughout

the coding process was to return to the original transcript data in moments of doubt as to how a

code should be worded or in which category or categories a code best fit.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Rather than determining whether findings are "significant" or "non-significant," (i.e., "if

the intervention "works or not,"), I relied on the following practices throughout the interview and

coding process in order to establish the maximum degree of trustworthiness and rigor; qualitative

standards of assigning credibility to the findings (Creswell, 1998; Glaser & Straus, 1967;

Sandelowski, 1993; 2000). They include constant comparison, member checking, peer review,

and reflexivity (described in further detail below).

First, the coding process described above was conducted on a "rolling" basis as

interviews were conducted. This allowed for the dynamic practice of *constant comparison*

(Boeije, 2002; for an example of adapting this for qualitative description, see Gutowski &

Goodman, 2020). Codes from all interviews were revisited and revised repeatedly throughout the

analysis as more data was added to the codebook. By comparing each interview's set of first-

level codes with an existing list of codes, the codebook evolved along with our understanding of

themes emerging from the data. Throughout the process, namely after the first four interviews

were coded, categories and clusters were identified, revised, combined, and separated repeatedly

as new connections between ideas surfaced or new data clarified divergences between ideas. As

the codebook developed, subsequent interviews were analyzed through the lens of the themes

that made up the findings thus far, allowing me to identify where newly-coded data fit with

existing findings, raised reason to revise codes or categories, or added a new theme not yet

represented. This process helped me determine with confidence when saturation was reached, as

the last several interviews added data to the existing codebook without raising any new themes.

A second practice I utilized throughout data collection was *member checking*: consulting

with participants themselves to determine if findings are accurately reflecting their experience

(Gutowski & Goodman, 2020). I integrated this practice into the interview process itself by

asking participants about themes that emerged from the coding process that other participants

had raised, and asking them explore this further. For example, I shared the themes of "breaking

the silence around masculinity," "feeling isolated from like-minded men outside of group," and

the "domino effect of validation" in group, asking participants if and how these resonated with

them or if they had a different perspective. This allowed me to continuously check whether my

team and I were staying faithful to the reflections expressed by participants or adding our own

interpretations without realizing it. As an additional step, when my team and I had finished

coding all thirteen interviews, I shared the list of clusters, categories, and codes with all men who

were interviewed and invited them to offer feedback if they felt anything they tried to express in

their interview was not reflected in the findings. Four participants replied to this invitation, and

each expressed satisfaction that his experience was accurately reflected in our findings.

A third practice I used to check our coding process was *peer review.* Regular consultation

with Dr. Goodman regarding our emerging categories and codes helped me to examine whether

findings are making sense, identify any repetitive or overlapping categories or codes, and also

audit the mechanics of parallel structure and phrasing of results. As the findings took shape, I

consulted with Dr. Mahalik as an auditor with whom to discuss repetition or ambiguity in how

the findings were presented. Lastly, I consulted with my research partners at A Call to Men on

three occasions to share the results-in-progress, including once as they took their final shape. The

professional staff were not involved in the coding process, but provided feedback on emerging

findings based on their familiarity with the intervention being studied, and confirmed that the

questions of interest they had for the study were being well-represented in the findings.

Reflexivity

Mindful of my own influence on the research process as the researcher (Tracy, 2010), it

is essential for me to closely examine how my own biases, experiences, and identities shaped

how I interact with participants and the data. This required a consistent individual awareness of

my own subjectivity in how I read and code the data, practicing reflexivity with my research

team as we coded, and consulting with my committee. As a White, cisgender, middle-class,

straight, able-bodied man, my identities and privileges shape how I react to and make sense of

the data. For example, I have not lived the "double bind" of hegemonic masculine socialization

and systemic racism (Liu & Wong, 2017) that several of my participants spoke to, and I am

always susceptible to treating race as an "afterthought" in conversations about masculinity.

Remaining vigilant of this is essential to avoiding the erasure or minimization of experiences

shared by men of color, either in how I follow up on their statements during interviews or when I

look back on the data while coding. As another example, even as my personal experience of

hegemonic masculine socialization and being on the receiving end of "policing masculinity"

(Reigeluth & Addis, 2016) may help me connect with participants, I must remember that our

experiences are not identical. The presence of homophobia in my social life through bullying, or

the un-affirming culture in my family of origin, for example, does not allow me to assume I can

understand what it is like for a gay man to process their own internalized homophobia and join in

a men's group with other straight men. For example, my memo notes included several moments

of while interviewing a man with a different identity than me (most often across race or sexual orientation), he seemed ambivalent to voice his own experience, often wondering whether I would "get it" or, more often, if I was "interested since it isn't about masculinity." In such moments, it became my practice to draw from my clinical training and offer a gentle reminder and invitation: acknowledging I realize his experience as a man in the group was not separate from the identities he holds, a validation that he may be skeptical if I as a White, straight man would care about those intersections, and encouragement that I did indeed want to learn about his experience, while not forcing the issue if he did not wish to explore it further. In preparation for how I could interview a diverse group of men while being mindful of my positionality, yet not turning interviews into therapy sessions, I viewed this as an application of Davis et al.'s (2018) multicultural orientation (e.g., cultural humility, opportunities to learn). Without being at least mindful of these dynamics and noting these opportunities, I likely would have risked dismissing or overlooking pieces of men's experiences on a regular basis throughout the interviews.

I also guided my research team in reflecting on their own subjectivities and positionality, such as how their own lives or views on masculinity issues (i.e., as men, as women, as therapists in training) would impact how they make sense of the data. At the start of our year together, we all wrote brief written reflections on reflexivity that we could revisit throughout the coding process. I also tried to create an egalitarian atmosphere in our team meetings by sharing with them my own biases and inviting them to "check me" on them if, for example, they saw a code differently than I did. I also regularly encouraged research assistants that I wanted and welcomed their diverging perspectives or disagreements, in an effort to address the power dynamic between them and myself as a lead researcher and (White, male, cisgender heterosexual) doctoral student.

I consider the focus of this project to be deeply personal to me. As a man who has grown up in the United States, I recognize that I have been exposed to much of the socialization toward

hegemonic masculinity that this field of research critically analyzes. Even as my own conscious

understanding of what it means to be a man has grown such that I do not willingly adhere to

masculine norms such as emotional stoicism, self-reliance, or having power over women, I

continue to discover how my initial socialization has been internalized, and remains present in

my behavior or biases. Furthermore, I have regularly engaged in and benefitted from men's

groups and men's retreats for the past seven years, to the extent that I attribute a great deal of my

personal development to experiences in such programs discussing vulnerability, sexism,

relationships, homophobia, and violence. Mentors in my life, including professors, advisors, and

fellow therapists, are themselves engaged in men's group work. I therefore consider myself

invested in men's groups both personally and professionally, and am naturally inclined to view

them in a positive light that may skew my perspective and complicate my ability to stay "close"

to what participants express. Furthermore, because I attribute much of my own development as a

man to have been supported by relationships with others who have fostered my capacity to resist

hegemonic norms, I may hold assumptions about the "right" healthy way to express oneself as a

man in the world. For example, my values and ideas about what men "should" be doing may

obscure my appreciation of their experiences. Likewise, my role as researcher is certainly shaped

by my experience as a participant in the men's group program being studied here. I consider this

participation to be an invaluable source of insight into the organization's work that has enabled a

productive partnership as well as my ability to build rapport with men I interviewed. Even so, the

evenings I spent on Zoom calls sharing with and listening to other men were meaningful to me,

showing that I will need to stay mindful of listening to participants' own unique experiences

rather than revisiting, imposing, or seeing to re-create my own. I also used memo-writing to track

moments in interviews that I felt my personal experience evoked by a participants' words (e.g.,

hurtful recollections of male family members; self-consciousness about not speaking out to male

friends' misogyny) – which reminded me to attend to my own reactions separately, instead of imposing my own feelings on the coding process.

Another dimension of self-monitoring that I did not anticipate ahead of time but became necessary for me was managing my expectations and hopes of what story the results would tell. As the analysis proceeded, I came to realize these expectations arose in several ways: 1) an internal, critical voice that continuously asked, "is this study saying anything significant?", 2), my own personal reasons for being interested in preventing men's violence, and 3) my own reactions to the current sociopolitical climate, and my concerned feeling of "not doing enough about it." Much of these reactions in myself, I realized in monitoring them, stemmed from my own reactions to current political events, and particularly the weaponization of masculine norms for the purposes of White supremacist and authoritarian appeals (see Ben-Ghiat, 2020; Capehart, 2022). While this is by no means unrelated to the subject of this study, it was also necessary for me to hold these feelings cautiously as the project unfolded, so as to avoid derailing the study's focus on men's subjective experiences in relationships within their men's group. To this end, I found consultations with my committee members and doctoral peers to be helpful in self-monitoring and keeping this from driving my decisions in the coding process, and was better able to focus on the data by reminding myself the scope of this study and its research questions, rather than unknowingly trying to make the results into something that would satisfy these feelings of self-consciousness or worry in me.

Chapter 4: Results

Results from the thirteen interviews are presented in five general themes ("clusters;" the broadest grouping of codes) and within each cluster, specific "categories" (which are designated by section sub-headings) and their codes (designated by in-text italics), all of which are further illustrated by select quotes from participants. A complete list of clusters, categories, and codes can be found in Table 2. The clusters that emerged from our analytic process are: 1) group enables interpersonal experiences that counter hegemonic masculine socialization, 2) the group enables men to develop insights about masculinity, 3) group enables positive changes in men's close relationships, 4) group enables men's participation in social action, and 5) men sharing feedback for program development. Overall, these results represent men's various reflections on how they understood their own experience of the interpersonal dynamics within the men's group, as well as the ways in which that process had "ripple effects," both in and outside of the group.

The issue of "counting" in qualitative description straddles the line between abandoning any use of numbers and over-relying on them as the only way to establish "significance," and uses them in service of the study's narrative by providing context for how common an idea is among participants (Sandelowski, 2001). No code was excluded due to a low number of men speaking to it, in keeping with the spirit that only one participant voicing a topic does not make it insignificant, but rather a valuable addition (Hailes, personal communication, 2022). In this study for example, omitting codes that failed to gain a certain number of men's endorsement would have involved excluding certain reflections of the only trans man in the study and how that dimension of his identity shaped his experience in the group. To note the number of men who spoke to each category or code, the terms of *most* (more than 10 men), *many* (5-9 men), and *some* (4 men or less) are used throughout the results. These ranges are adopted from counting practices in qualitative descriptive research (Chang et al., 2009; Gutowski & Goodman, 2020).

Cluster I: Group Enables Interpersonal Experiences that Counter Hegemonic Masculine Socialization

In this first cluster, men described the interpersonal dynamics within the group, voicing how they countered the interpersonal norms of hegemonic masculine socialization. In Ian's words, this cluster speaks to "the power of community to bring our walls down." Another man, Alfonso, even found these dynamics to be the more memorable than the topics or content of the group: "I almost feel like the thing I remember the most was like, the actual formation of the group. Like, dynamics between us, as opposed to the specific conversations." Men spoke to these dynamics in several categories: a) men experience a relational gap in their lives outside the group, b) men feel safe enough to be vulnerable with other men, c) men experience a sense of mutual connection, d) men interact in ways that "break the conversation rules" around masculine socialization, and e) men feel a solidarity that encourages them to resist masculine norms.

Men experience a relational gap in their lives outside of group

While describing dynamics within the group, many men interviewed also noted the gap the group filled in their social lives. Wes noted, "I've been able to have a close group of male friends, but we never really delve into the conversations like we did in this space… I didn't have any space to talk about my own masculinity or men's mental health." Charlie, too, saw the relationships with other group members who "cared about similar issues" and "want to see better things for masculinity and men" as "a missing piece" elsewhere his life.

Many men spoke to this gap more specifically by explaining that *men stay silent from "taboo" conversations that critique masculinity with other men.* Alfonso used this language by discussing "the issues that are really systemic, really impactful for boys and men, what is it that makes them not brought up a lot, but that they can be brought up in a men's group like this? … politics and sexuality, in general, are like very taboo topics." Elaborating on these same topics of

politics and sexuality, Bobby reflected on his experience that "it's not only that I shouldn't think this but that I shouldn't talk about it with other men." Here, both men point to the silence surrounding relevant issues for boys and men. Offering a more interpersonal explanation for this "taboo," Wes reflected on the potential consequences of violating it, specifically, being judged or criticized by other men for criticizing the rules of the man box in other spaces:

> I still think the biggest thing for me that I see right off the bat is not being afraid to go against the man box when I feel it's safe. So I think there's definitely times that… maybe it's not always safe to go against the grain for a lot of men in a lot of different situations, when you wonder if men will snap back critically.

Many men also spoke to the next code, that *men feel isolated in the absence of like-minded men and positive male role models.* Alfonso elaborates on the absence of a group of men with whom he can have certain conversations,

> …It's just difficult to approach those conversations in a group setting. Like, I definitely have individuals in my life who I feel like I trust with those types of conversations, but disproportionately they're women, and when they are men, I wouldn't say I have a group.

Bobby makes a similar point, reflecting on his own family history and tracing the connection between not learning from a positive male role model and having "unlearning" work to do now:

> I never had a role model which resonates with who I want to be, with kindness. It's not something I've seen in any men. I did not have a role model of a strong kind man I can relate to. And I wonder how many men have the same issue, like those in the group. My relationship with what a healthy man is, is complicated. Mostly, because of my absent father, but I've seen other men with a present father who is also bad for healthy manhood. I think you need a person in your life who you can look at … and spend enough time with to learn their kindness. Unfortunately that was not my case. As a result, for me it is more about unlearning negative traits.

The final code in this category links the relational gap men described above with their interest in joining a men's group. Many men expressed how *men internalize hegemonic messages and feel the need to process this with others.* For example, Sean acknowledged that "I acquired a lot of bad ideas about masculinity just because by virtue of my age. I have generations of really bad messaging about gender and masculinity to unpack, as we all do, but I've got a lot."

Likewise, Charlie recognized that he could still benefit from a men's group even if he already agrees with its mission: "Even though I felt already there a bit, I was just wanting more of like, how much toxic masculinity has harmed people and still hurts me." Both show an awareness of how the messages of hegemonic masculine socialization have stayed with them even after the men became consciously opposed to them. Mason saw expressing he was "looking to do a little bit of work on myself, and so I wanted to connect with more authentic relationships with men." Charlie elaborates on how the group represented a contrast to what he experienced in his life:

> I definitely had friendships in high school that were like racist or homophobic humor – that was how you fit in with guys, and it is really unfortunate, but I have to say it was a big part of it. … and we talked about that stuff, and how it is *still taking space in your head.* Even still, you go to say, "I really care about you," too, and then you hear it. The group has opportunity to let you do that and not have that message there anymore.

Men feel safe enough to be vulnerable with other men

In this second category, almost all men described their experience of feeling safe enough to be vulnerable with other men in the group. This involved a degree of authenticity as the group members became more comfortable with one another, such as the experience that *men feel they can be their real selves in group,* which many men endorsed. Sean looked back on his own internal dialogue as he acclimated to the group:

> 'Oh, okay. All right. These guys are cool and I can be myself. And in fact, even if I feel uncomfortable, I should be myself. This is a great place to practice that.' So I just felt like I needed to practice getting over my own fear in being vulnerable.

He also noted that this comfort with vulnerability did not come right away:

> I was really hesitant, even though I trusted [the facilitator] … imagined that these were going to be cool guys, I still was hesitant coming into the group. The group had already started as well, and I just came in late. So they'd already built some level of trust and I felt like, oh shit, is this going to be another place where I'm an outsider looking in…But they asked me to be open and I tried to be as open-minded as I could, and it was really a new experience for me to be candid and be myself, and still feel legitimately masculine.

Sean describes how his development of trust in the group was needed for him to "be candid and myself," referring to his identity as a transgender man among all cisgender men, and whether he would feel welcome as a man in the group. As the following codes illustrate, space for men to be authentic and vulnerable was a valued experience that ran counter to what men were used to.

Many men acknowledged how dynamics in the group directly countered the idea that "boys don't cry," speaking to the experience that *men cry in the group without feeling ashamed pressure to show strength.* In Ben's words,

> …tears were shown many times, them and me. I was raised, without seeing men cry ever, right, and I don't think I've seen many movies growing up where men cry. I don't think I've seen men cry in real life. My formative years before I reached adulthood were not full of men crying, men showing tears. I personally struggle, as a result, with crying. I don't wish my tears away, but it was damaging, and now it's an emotional relief…

He continues, emphasizing what it means to him not only to cry as a man, but to cry with men.

> at least two times I and we actually cried, and it was you know, just an example how you know men are supposed to do these things, and you certainly don't do it in front of other men. You know, maybe at a wedding or a funeral something like that, or the Super Bowl championship. But otherwise on a day-to-day basis, no. So it shows how united they were in being open together, so I like that part of it, being open for real and tearful with each other, even though we men aren't supposed to do that, especially in front of one another.

Ben's reflections place the importance of crying in both the context of social norms (that men are never supposed to cry or only on rare occasions) and of the group's interpersonal dynamics, providing a clear example of how the group made space for what is otherwise not allowed. Bobby offers another example of how he was able to show his reactions to distressing news. He describes crying as "easier when nobody can see me or hear me," but felt the group was:

> …a safe space even to talk about my feelings, about the fear of World War III, I mean, with Ukraine. Another man had family who fled their country, in our group. And he sees this happen, Ukraine right now. I just started crying. And because he was impacted by this too, for me it was like, 'Oh well, I can let myself cry.' I felt very comfortable.

Both Ben and Bobby highlight how crying was met not with ridicule or discouraged by the expectation to be strong and emotionally invincible in the eyes of others. Alfonso picks up on this, describing how witnessing other men's tears normalized crying for him:

> I remember [name] crying in one of the sessions, I don't remember why he was crying. But I just remember, like, the fact that, you know, there was a space where [name] felt comfortable to cry with us, and that he needed that. Like–you know, he needed that to let that out. … it just made it more normal, I guess … pushed me more to be like, hey, maybe I should be doing this myself, with like my group, you know, my peers. And a lot of the men in this space that have just really impressed me with their vulnerability–have really shown their strength through what they express, and I want to do that too.

As alluded to above, most participants also described how *men find it cathartic to express their thoughts and feelings to others.* In Jack's words, it was a "relief" to "share openly around kind of sensitive issues that I might have been keeping secret." He gives the example of being honest about his own stress week-to-week:

> I did feel better just from able to share, or just kind of say, 'Yeah, me too.' And even if it didn't go further than that, I can say that it did help me in being able to release something that I had been hiding. Being in a group was beneficial… it was a relief to share.

Ian also speaks to Jack's point about sharing in a group, comparing it to spaces that were not as validating when he expressed his feelings: "I liked being honest on how I felt, because I had been ashamed for crying, I had shame for showing up in family and community." Taken together, these codes speak to a form of corrective emotional experience, unique to interpersonal dynamics of hegemonic masculine socialization: a space where men can cry and express their feelings to one another and find validation, instead of staying stoic and silent or being shamed for doing so. Allan shared a reflection that illustrated this cathartic role of a men's group in light of his history,

> …When meeting, I had this imagery that's helped me ever since … whether you're an eight-year-old or 27-year-old there's still a young boy that never got love and is still traumatized by that, and so I walked into our circle of influence with that ethos … So then I show up to the circle of influence and I start to see those young boys and see them starting to break down, seeing them starting to open up, and I got to affirm that and have it affirmed feeling safe and vulnerable.

Men experience a sense of mutual connection

Almost every man interviewed spoke to the sense of mutual connection they felt with other group members, which Alfonso described as "feeling that people were really seeing me," Ben characterized as the men "caring to get to know each other," and Wes feeling "so free and open to talk about what we wanted to talk about." This mutuality showed up in many forms, first being that *men show care and support for one another,* which many men spoke to (*n* = 9). Allan reflected that,

> When I was in the group, I felt very safe, very wanted, very supported. Even to say very loved, for such a short period of time, but it really speaks to how great the community was and the men in the group were.

Others reflected on their experience of showing support as well as receiving it. For example, Bobby recalls that "the struggle was shared… seeing people cry and being like, yeah dude I feel you…. It was powerful to connect, it's less lonely." Ian, too, remembers wanting to show this support after another group member had shown vulnerability:

> I just acknowledged him for allowing himself to say those words, you know what I just told him was, 'I see how hard that was, it was inspiring, and you have a lot of brothers here, you know and willing to listen.'

Jack reflected on this dynamic of mutual support, as well, but also placed it in the context of how the group was a unique space for men in this way:

> Asking people for like, emotional labor support, it's like… to ask other men for that and to have it be mutual is like, not a drain on society, essentially. As much as I think there's still like race and class issues there amongst men's groups, I can still be relying on people, and I try to be supportive too, to make it mutual. This diverse group of people is listening and is supportive of me and I want to be that for them too.

In a similar vein, some men felt they *experience a depth of connection in group they do not find with men elsewhere.* Charlie compared the mutual connection in which men in the group listened to one another to other social circles:

> I felt like I'm connecting when they say something, like "yeah I hear that" and we're connecting … they said words and it was like, I really resonate with that, but it wasn't

like an outward "hey man high five" … but it wasn't that kind of connection, which I would also be interested in, but it was like "whoa your words really made me think." you know so that I felt like that was the type of connecting.

Similarly, Sean describes connection in the group as of the kind of depth he is more used to with friends who are women:

I have a lifetime of talking intimately with women and with men, but conversations with men and women have often been very different. And there was something about that space that felt almost like it straddled the line of gender. There was enough candor and intimacy, that it almost felt like I was talking with my women friends, who are much more naturally able to be candid and to be intimate and talk about things, not just sports.

Many men also *see quality time to talk with other men as beneficial to their well-being,* describing it as "a space to decompress" in Nick's words, or "quality time with other men that I needed" in Bobby's. Speaking more directly to the benefit of being vulnerable with group members, Jack commented that:

I feel I have this place where I have this place of connection, and I can, it was, like, making me stronger and more calm, and just, like, a more grounded person for the rest of my life.

Mason also put words to this, emphasizing the benefit of being validated by other men in moments of vulnerability.

I was vulnerable and I don't typically... I don't share that with my friend down street or whatever, or even best friends I've had all my life, we haven't had conversations like that. … when you've never done it before, there's just a little bit of fear like, "Oh, okay, I'm just going to put this out there."   And so when it's instantly validated …you can just instantly see that what you're saying is resonating and people are either verbally or non-verbally acknowledging you. And then that in turn just makes you feel good, and then you want to do that for someone else.

Offering more specific content to this sense of mutual connection, many men spoke to *feeling they are not alone by bonding over negative experiences growing up as men.* This was described by Alfonso as a "realization that it's not just one person who's going through something." Junior elaborates on this, describing the circle as

> …a space where I could reflect and talk about what was happening in my world as well as sort of the world around me and especially as it related to topics around manhood, and what we're sort of being asked to deal with just as a man living in today's world.

Having such conversations about how men felt pressure to live up to rules of the "man box" growing up, for example, had a sort of normalizing effect. In Jack's words, "When people share things, and they resonate with me and with each other, we're just like, whoa, you can kind of start to feel like this is true for many men, right?" Connecting these normalizing conversations to a previous theme of men feeling alone in their experience outside the circle, Mason shares another perspective:

> I was downstairs talking to my wife about this, and I felt like I didn't know how to articulate it, and I just told her, I was like, 'I feel so alone.' And well, it's funny, then she took that to mean like, "Oh gosh, you need more from me and what's wrong?" But I was like, 'No, this is about... I'm just alone. It's nothing to do with like... You're an amazing partner and we have this amazing relationship, and we have the kids, and I have a big family and all that stuff. And I am extremely alone and isolated as a man.' I felt like doing the circle was the first time where I was like, "Oh, okay. I'm not alone." It was a sigh of relief of like, 'Okay. I'm not alone in this. Everyone's on a certain journey of it.'

> Speaking to a more specific example of mutuality, some men spoke about how they as

men of color feel more welcome with other men of color in the group. Nick compared this to another men's group he was a part of in which he did not feel the same mutuality:

> I think the issue I've had with a men's group I joined is…. no offense, but it is just heavily White, like literally like it is mostly White men 35 to 40 you know, trying to figure out issues with their lives and more than just trying to do better… I really appreciated that diversity was there and that Black men children were included in our conversation… it made me feel more comfortable, like didn't make me feel like I was just like an outlier.

Junior explains more about how the presence of other men of color in the group made him feel "seen and heard" when talking about his own biracial identity:

> We had a conversation that was connected to race …I remember feeling really validated. … I remember sharing that for me not too long ago I did one of the DNA studies and we had a very interesting conversation around that. … I felt seen, for the first time, and heard when we had that conversation. Everyone was like oh, like they understood, appreciated, they showed empathy for where I was coming from, and so I remember that was a great meeting for me, I left that that week like satisfied, like heard and seen.

Alfonso, too, connected the diversity of men in the group with how he felt attending meetings. For him, this allowed him to connect with group members, bring his own racial identity into the group, and explore its intersections with his experience of masculinity.

> One thing I really enjoyed was the fact that there was, like, diverse representation in the group. You know, with [facilitator] being a Black man; me, myself, being Mexican, and other folks being different ethnicities as well. I thought that was really nice. Cause you know, again, I've mentioned that it's difficult to find a group of men to have these conversations, and then just an extra barrier if you're trying to connect with them in terms of things like race and ethnicity. So, you know, I definitely brought that identity with me, and I was happy to be able to like explore that specifically. Cause you know, I don't think I can just talk about masculinity and gender in a bubble–in a race-neutral bubble–like absolutely not. And for myself, you know, a lot of my, a lot of my feminism, a lot of my growth with masculinity has, you know, been side by side with my sense of ethnic identity, and, you know, what that means for me. So that's definitely a big identity I brought to the table, or sort of brought with me to the space.

> Describing another interpersonal dynamic of the mutual connection in group, almost

every man interviewed voiced that they *experience a "domino effect" of validation when they resonate with what others share.* Men's reflections here involved enjoying "listening to what other men had to say that resonated with part of me," in Nick's words, or "listening to other men share so many similar stories and experiences and feelings that I had." The impact of this dynamic when it came to emotional vulnerability, or relevant topics to masculinity, was captured in depth by Jack, who recounted:

> As soon as someone else was vulnerable, in the group, I felt comfortable being vulnerable too … I remember one time when somebody said something about oh, a masturbation, like, I don't know if they call it a fixation or something, they felt like they were there was like too much like pornography. And it was like, even just like saying that out loud! And then like, someone else was like, 'Yeah, me too.' Like, I watched a lot of porn and this and that. And like, I remember just seeing it was almost like a domino effect of people going around and sharing and, and then I was like, oh, even for me, it was like, actually haven't that specific thing like pornography, you know, like, it hasn't been something that was part of my life. But I did resonate with it in other ways, like objectification, like hearing the way people were talking about it. I was like, Oh, my gosh, yeah. Like, it's the same. It's the same problem like, like coming from different, like, daily thoughts, or whatever, or different stimuli or something like that. It was seeing those connections from other people in the group.

In many ways, this passage from Jack's interview represents this entire first cluster, underscoring that the interpersonal context of a group – having others whose experiences one can relate to – was a defining feature of men's experiences in the group.

Men interact in ways that "break the conversation rules" of masculine socialization

Contrasting the "taboo silence" that men described above elsewhere in their lives, most men ($n = 10$) spoke to codes in this next category, describing how conversations and dynamics in group sessions "break the rules" or go against other specific masculine social norms. Jack, for example, saw this as "breaking the silence of masculinity and all its rules of what we talk about." This applied to many different subjects that the man box has rules for, as Wes explains:

> Sometimes I've been in conversation around men, and we talk about women or we talk about money, status, cars, whatever it is. The second you kind of throw that other idea out there in group, that you can go against the grain you see all the other men get like… They almost kind of gravitate towards it because they realize they don't have to live up to what they have had to for so long, they almost feel like a sense of relief.

More specifically, many men saw the group as a space to have *meaningful conversations contrary to "popular male opinion,"* contrasting these conversations to times that they would be expected to "toe the party line" according to masculine socialization. Ben, for example, noted that "to be able to talk with other men about the role men have to play in domestic violence prevention is usually a non-starter." Likewise, both Nick and Alfonso found the group to be a space where they could talk about sex as men without it "taking on the vibes of locker-room talk:" Nick noted, "It can be sometimes, like uncomfortable for men. I don't bring up sex to my guy friends as much as other people like to think … because of the policing how other guys do with it." Alfonso also appreciated:

> a space for men to gather and talk about things that I just feel like I don't really get a chance to talk about in groups of men. You know, like we've been talking about sex and sexuality, talking about healthy boundaries and abuse, and, you know, our own relationships with masculinity.

Allan reflected on a similar "breaking of the silence," but on the topic of father-son relationships.

He looked back on a session:

> Talking about fatherhood was really asking ourselves what is our image of fatherhood, and then what is the… you know what is our relationship with our fathers was. It was I think a conversation that I never really had with other men. It was a conversation I had with myself. But not with other men.

On a more process-oriented note, many men made note of how they *access and express emotions other than anger to one another.* Wes explains his experience of this:

> Group really taught me how to listen and how to communicate… you know, we talk about 'express your emotions,' well, anger's an emotion, and technically hitting and yelling is expressing it. So … what we were trying to do was you know truly understand our emotions and communicate them… stress or pain or loneliness. I feel like having the talks that we did, they were more than just talks, they were these deep dives and uplifting our communication skills as men, and taught me, and helped me learn a little bit more how to listen and communicate with others as well.

While Wes touches on the process of naming and expressing a wider range of difficult emotions,

Charlie reflects at length on an interpersonal example of expressing closeness and intimacy:

> I could talk about anger but also now relationships in a different way. Like, wanting to have a close relationship with a guy, and not having someone say like 'oh that sounds really gay,' you know, which unfortunately there's still people in my life who talk that way. And that was really nice… I felt connected to others. But this was really hard, I was telling myself like 'no wanting that is really strong.' But then when I thought about myself doing that, it still felt like "weak", you know that message. It makes it harder. But I thought I felt the real connection with people, and I think when people talk about sharing in terms of anger or that being angry is healthy and we can even talk about being angry, or just how we show it – that really resonated, that was one that was modeled to me by parents, like as a father. You know, that's how we deal with everything … I was really taught these things … So I like that people got it, and we could talk about wanting to be loved or experiences of people ridiculing you for having feelings.

Here, Charlie explains how the popular notion that "the only appropriate emotion for men to show is anger" has consequences that become internalized, such as how expressing affection to other men invites homophobic ridicule. The connection with other group members around this emotional conditioning that Charlie speaks to highlights how the dynamics within the men's group reflected, and in this case offered an alternative to, their experiences outside of group.

Contrary to the harsh enforcement of masculine social norms that often characterizes men's social circles (i.e., policing of masculinity; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016), many men remembered how group was a place in which *men use humor to critique the rules of masculine socialization.* In Alfonso's words, "we were able to talk about these things related to masculinity and the man box in a way that just felt so natural. And, oftentimes it's heavy, but it could be lighthearted, it could be very funny, and still very impactful." Several men, perhaps from the same circle cohort, even retold the same story: a conversation about how men had learned that sitting down to pee was unmanly. With laughter, Wes recounts:

> The story of us all sitting down to pee… there's few other things that really stay with me, … One guy was mentioning that he felt like his masculinity was taken away when he had to sit down to pee, and all the other guys chimed in …vulnerability doesn't mean it has to be like really deep, dark internal feeling … It could be something private, funny, or something you wouldn't usually say or tell. I guess the power of conversation and connection and safety within our group is what really resonated with me.

Drawing another connection between a conversation in group where men both laughed and made critiques of who and what is deemed "manly," Junior says:

> It's the funniest moments I remember… all those walls through funny little things, for all of us, shattered away … like, eating bananas in public, it's hysterical the conversations and the homophobic reasons men will give about not eating a banana. And it's just eating piece of fruit like we would we would have no qualms about eating that apple or a grape in public, but that banana, people get scared.

Drawing another contrast to the male social circles they experience elsewhere, many men explained how *men do not feel they have to "one-up" each other to feel belonging in the group.* Bobby references the norm: "there is usually this condescension with men, like 'I make more than you, I'm worth more than you because I do this,' and we rejected this in the group." The lack of this competition and hierarchy-setting helped Allan feel more valued, describing the attitude of his fellow, older group members as: "not 'this is a little kid who's better seen and not heard at the table, his voice is still going to be welcome, even though he's younger. I got a lot of

that, more than I expected, people were very interested in what I had to say." Jack also draws this

contrast sharply, sharing about how hierarchy-focused groups of men have been hurtful:

> I have felt over my life, very hurt by men, my friends in elementary school and middle school, just like the meanness, you know. Like, 'this week, we're picking on so and so next week, it's so and so' and then it's like, 'I've got to pick on them so it's not me next.' So I'm thankful for this group…I've been really hurt, and so I have stayed away from men before. As I've chosen my friends, since early years, it's been so many women or a queer community. I think I never really fit in because I was kind of like, well, I'm a straight guy. But these guys are my people that I want to be with.

On a similar note, many men *worry less about being seen as "man enough" or being*

emasculated in and out of group. Alfonso commented, "in other spaces, I might wonder like,

'Oof–let see how they're gonna react, what they're gonna think about me being manly.' And I

felt like in this space, I could introduce something, and trust that folks are gonna consume it with

good intent and not jump down my throat." Sean experienced this in a unique context, noting that

other men "really put me at ease. I didn't feel like an imposter in that group, which as a trans

guy, I get that feeling in other spaces." Wes contrasts the group setting to relationships with other

men, in which:

> When someone is trying to de-masculate you, they're trying to exercise some sort of higher power over you … and I would snap right in back. If someone was making fun of something that I love or that I did, I would immediately try to snap out of it and get like right back to what they thought of me before and try to be, I guess, more like them… but not with these guys, and less now because of them…There's isn't that piece of me anymore that's bothered when other people try to de-masculate me.

Men feel a solidarity that encourages them to continue resisting masculine norms

This last, standalone code in this cluster involves men's reflections that being in group

gives them a feeling of "not being in this alone" going against the man box. Allan, for example,

described his own self-doubts in this regard being reassured:

> It definitely affirmed, a lot of things for me from my experiences, because I came into this space feeling like, 'maybe there was something I have wrong, maybe I'm too far on the extremes of masculinity and how I think it should be healthier. And then I showed up to this space and God like I said, all of this respect and affirmation … I was like 'Oh,

> maybe I should do more,' then I realized it's because I mostly live my life in spaces
> where I've had to go against the norm.

He continues on to describe the group as "encouraging" in this regard, sending him the message:

'Keep it up.' It was this feeling of 'I'm not alone in wanting this masculinity, this wanting

connections like this. Likewise, Gandalf described the group as:

> …providing tangible evidence that there are other men thinking about these things, that
> are trying to do something about it …I think you know, being part of a network of people
> with similar intentions on some level, it validated my own thoughts of 'yes we need to
> make some changes as a society about what our notions about what being a man is.'

Ian felt the group "keeps him going" when "men are able to talk about who they are," and found

it "motivating when other men open up, it keeps me on my path." Junior references how men in

the group help validate his own path of his own definition of masculinity:

> Because of my own childhood trauma and being a gay man, it was good validation …
> And I'm working on this and digging a little bit deeper in therapy. But most of my life
> I've been trying to live by this definition of what I thought a man was supposed to be
> like, and it was just good to sort of see all different kinds of guys behave and talk about
> things in similar and different ways. And just showed me that just like we come in all
> colors, we all come in different variations of masculinity.

Cluster II: Group Enables Men's Development of Insight into Masculinity

The second cluster explores men's reflections on how the group sessions enabled them to

develop insights into their masculinity and their lives as men. While content in the first cluster

was in reference to interactions between group members, this second cluster included findings

focused on the individual, internal thoughts and processes that stemmed from men's time in the

group. These reflections here illustrate how group was a space for, in Bobby's words, "some

introspective work" specifically around how "sexism has been glorified and amplified my whole

life" and that before having a group, men "had to uproot it by myself," or "becoming more aware

of my own masculinity" in Mason's words. As will be the case in the third and fourth cluster,

quotes from participants in this cluster often refer back to the interpersonal dynamics described

in Cluster I, but at the same time describe extensions or "ripple effects" of those dynamics (in

this case, insights they facilitated). This cluster includes five categories: a) men feel group conversations helped them look inward and grow, b) men feel invited by others' reflections to examine their own past behavior; c) men grapple with their negative, critical self-talk; d) men notice connections between their personal socialization as men, violence, and politics, and e) men define masculinity as what is authentic, emotionally healthy, and prosocial.

Men feel group conversations help them look inward and grow

Almost all men reported that the group facilitated their own inward reflection and personal growth. Speaking to his decision to join the group, Nick shared, "I realized that it was, like, okay that I need to take a step back and work on myself." Jack described "time to go inward and really grow with a group of men" as "transformative," noting he had "never been able to do that." And, in Bobby's words, "I came to believe that evolving as a man in society takes introspective work." One area of introspection that some men spoke to was that *men realize what they want out of friendships with other men.* Jack saw this, comparing relationships with group members to other men in his life, saying that "they really did give me an example that, like, things can be different between men." Charlie made a similar comparison, sharing that "being in the group definitely made me think about the male friendships I've had, or rather the kind of male friendships I would like to have, specifically some of these pieces that were missing in my friendships," going on to name validation and affection as examples of those pieces.

A second area of looking inward that many men experienced was that *men reflect on masculinity and their family history through listening to others' stories.* In Wes' words, "when the other men talk about their fathers, or their children… I think about the fact that I'm a son, and my dad's job is super toxic…and he comes home and he still hides his emotions." Allan also pointed to this ripple effect of conversation, saying that "we would have conversations about generational trauma, and I've never had before, I'm a child of immigrants, so I got to finally for

the first time really think about what that meant for me." Ben, too, reflected on how the group

conversations brought up his own experience of masculine gender roles in his family life, namely

that caring for others at home in his youth helped him to embrace it throughout his life:

> The things that you're not supposed to do as a man, I was learning to do, that it's okay to
> do, and I enjoy them…reading to my little sister, when the other boys would probably be
> out running and not having the care work I had … Even though the rule is a woman takes
> care of things like that… I am heterosexual, I've been married 41 years, it's my only
> marriage and I believe it's worked because I learned to be more caring.

Elaborating on his perspective on the cathartic role of the group for the "young boy" inside men

that "never got love," Allan connects this to how he understands his own father:

> And I was looking at my father with that, like there's a young boy, and my father never
> what he needed and trying to explore that, but I didn't have opportunities to because I
> didn't have a lot of men outside of my age group in my life to do that with.

> For the third code in this category, most men of different ages and races explained that

they *learn more about themselves in a diverse group of men,* particularly across age differences

and cultural identities. Gandalf noted that "most of my friends are white, so I really appreciated

that in the, in the circle there was a mix of racial and ethnic or races and ethnicities … there was

something powerful about that, I learned a lot from perspectives I don't always hear." Likewise,

Mason felt that he was able to learn more about his own masculinity and White racial identity in

a racially diverse group: "The fact that I was the only white male in the group … I haven't had a

lot of venues in my life where that is the case." Sharing a memory from one session, Charlie

recalled how an Indigenous member of the group explained:

> …a tradition thinking about those before you, and how what would they look forward to
> for you and hope for you, and can you reflect on, where you are today? … We kind of
> had our eyes opened more… to maybe some of our ancestors did things right or didn't.

Allan felt strongly that the "joy of group" for him as a younger man was:

> the diversity in the ages, the diversity of the experiences … and parts of the journey that
> men had different input to give. I'm not a father now, but like… how do you want to
> show love to your child, how do you want to teach your child about the world, and how

are you going to explain morals and ethics when those problems arise or talk through feelings of discomfort and emotions?

Men examine their past behavior when listening to others' experiences

Many men found group sessions to help them develop insight by listening to others reflect on their past relationships, which in turn moved them to examine their own past behavior. Jack put words to this generally by saying that "it was a place to be grounded in, like humility, to just be like, 'Okay, wow, yeah, we can admit our problems, that we that we have things we want to work on.'" For some men, this meant *realizing how they have hurt a partner's feelings in their past.* In Nick's words describing the session on relationships: "I feel like I went down a path of thinking, I was this good boyfriend, a feminist… but wow I was a really shitty boyfriend and it took me until the breakup happened to see I've made mistakes." Providing a more specific example, Bobby spoke about more closely examining how he communicates:

> I have this dynamic with myself and my partner, where I yell or I get angry and then cause harm to feelings, and the reason why I do this is because I have seen this my whole life for men to express emotions as anger.

Many men also experienced group sessions as a space to *practice self-examination to "unlearn" masculine socialization,* citing examples such as how they had objectified women or avoided emotions. Sean found the group made him more aware of what he internalized and found it helpful to "watch myself, my own masculinity" and asking, "is that the kind of man I want to be in the world? Where am I not showing up like that?" Mason recalled "aha moments" about how he was not attending to his feelings or those of loved ones. Speaking to the example of sexual objectification, Gandalf shared the following:

> I really appreciated [facilitator's] clarity around, you know our society promotes, male supremacy tends to promote these three beliefs about women. That they are property, sexual objects, and of lesser value. And he had us go around and he's like, 'where do you see these beliefs surfacing in yourself?' I just really appreciated that self-examination too, where I can, you know, I can totally see moments that I have objectified women. … it was mildly uncomfortable but it was very meaningful.

Men grapple with critical self-talk

Many men reflected on how group conversations helped them become aware of, or helped them cope differently with, ways in which they are critical or harsh on themselves emotionally. Nick noted, "I definitely tend to be very hard on myself … in terms of relationships, in terms of expressing emotions," and that this was an area in which he wanted more "growth and understanding." Some men spoke specifically to how group helped them *practice being kinder to themselves through group sessions.* Wes found the group to be "an intentional space where we could be open, I think just truly shifted my overall mindset of how I treat myself." Charlie explained how another manifestation of the "domino effect" of the group process helped here: "when someone else would share something I would see it as strong and brave, but then there's still that voice of like wait a minute if I do that it's weak or something." Bobby echoed this, as well:

> seeing people struggle with the same thing, I looked at myself and think 'not good enough.' But I look at them and I feel compassionate. And I'm like 'oh, I'm failing to give myself this level of compassion, I'm doing the very same thing.' That was a very powerful experience. You need the child touch yourself like you would a friend. If I can feel compassion for these people … then I deserve the compassion for me to myself, and I should like give myself a break and continue doing the best I can.

Touching on a complexity that other men did not discuss, Bobby also noted the tension between self-compassion and holding himself accountable for changing his behavior, which he did not see as mutually exclusive:

> For me it's about how to grow out of it, how to make peace with my former self, how to make peace with my current self while I'm learning these techniques … I understand why so many men don't even want to start thinking about it, because what a blight at your ego. It's not easy work without any discomfort. For me, it's about yelling less or apologizing.

Reflecting on his recent divorce, Ian also shared how he had grown over time by making more space for his feelings as an act of self-care and self-compassion:

I wasn't taking good care of myself. Now, it's allowing myself to go through it, I feel it allowing myself to actually, finally, feel the hurt, the grief, because oh my God … I just covered it up with work non-stop. work, work, work, work. I was already working pretty hard as it is, but I never allowed myself to do it, last month I've never cried so much my life, you know, I'd never been able to express my anger. And I actually went outside by myself somewhere and yelled and allow myself to feel it and go through it. For a month, understanding where I put my anger, my happiness, my grief, trauma. And now … coping with those emotions as a man… it was very insightful for myself.

For one man, grappling with self-criticism took the form of *becoming mindful of when they pressure themselves to fit the mold of "real men."* Wes made this clear, saying:

It went deeper, more than just negative self-talk, but really being mean to yourself … it almost seemed intentional at times, like you had to kind of punish yourself. … I think that session was when I really recognized that toxic masculinity wasn't just for others to look at me, or for how I see other men, but it's also how I treat myself as well.

Some men gave another specific example of how an internal self-criticism arose during the group itself, that they as *gay and trans men push back on an internalized voice to "not be so queer."* Junior mentioned "feeling like I was still an outsider even with this group of men," wondering if they would understand his experience as a gay man were he to share it. As a gay, trans man, Sean shared an in-the-moment recollection of noticing, and intentionally pushing back on, this internal self-criticism:

[The other members] were very conventionally heterosexual men, in expression and aesthetic, in the way they seem to be in the world. And I can be very feminine of femme in my expression, and so I don't know how much of that I brought to the group, but I know I was like, 'Okay, this is going to stand out in this circumstance, me being a little bit of a flamer is going to come out." And at some point, I was like, 'I just have to be okay with that.' But … part of me was like, "'Oh, don't be so queer.' There's always that little voice, but part of me was like, 'Yes, this is the place, just fucking be yourself.'

Men notice connections between their personal socialization as men, violence, and politics

The next category involved many men's gaining an appreciation and awareness for how their own socialization as men was connected to broader issues such as violence and the sociopolitical climate. Bobby stated, "Its cultural, it's systemic that's the whole deal, and it takes effort for us as a man to first of all realize that there is an issue and then and then also take steps

to address them." Sean, too, expressed the perspective he had gained over time: "it's often

masculine behavior at the root of violence and sexual assault and this toxic masculinity or

whatever they're calling it… is shorthand for patriarchy, white supremacy, all that stuff."

Some White men reflected on how they *experienced group conversations as "wake-up*

calls" to their own privilege. This was a prominent theme in Mason's recollections:

> After the first meeting, it was so clear to me that as like a white cis male, I've just had my head in the sand, and that's been okay, because it's the way it was designed. It was like, I didn't know what I didn't know. Then just after one session, I walked away with, well, feeling really good but also really heavy. Around, 'Wow. Oh, shit.; It was like coming online to...the mountain of privilege that I've been sitting on, not really knowing it…

He continued on, noting how the group helped him move away from a "color-blind" attitude,

referencing back to an earlier topic of feeling isolated from other men to discuss this with:

> I saw myself as like, 'Well, I'm not racist. I treat everyone the same.' But that's not what it's about, right? It's bigger than that. I feel like it was actually conversations that I was having with my wife who was challenging me on some things that gave me the nudge to be like, 'Oh, shit. Maybe I am totally... I'm not getting it. Something's really off.' And so that is what precipitated me to start thinking about it, and then I immediately felt the sense of like, 'I am totally alone in this. I have no men in my life I can talk about this with. None. I can't talk to my dad about it, I can't talk to any of my closest friends about it. There's no one I feel comfortable talking about this stuff with at all.

Jack, on a similar note, found the group setting to be a place where he could "check himself"

when it came to his own privilege as a White man.

> I appreciate the way he was able to talk about it to be in a multiracial group. Like, and being able to, like, own his privilege. I would be curious, like how that felt to, you know, the nonwhite folks like, you know, BIPOC folks in the group, too? … Because privilege is so ingrained in me that it's like I really have to be conscious, or I could just be like, totally, like, unconsciously, like harming people… so when people in the group, we could name things like, 'I do this, and I don't like it when I do this.' Mm hmm. Hear that from other folks to be like, 'Oh, okay, I'm not alone. Like, I do that too.' … like explaining intentions, excusing myself, making denials.

Some men also *reflect on their own role in violence prevention work as men.* Ben,

describing how he has come to value the example he sets by doing domestic violence prevention

work with men by "trying to show them to see some of their male behavior. So it's not only

working with survivors of domestic violence and validating that this is not how you should have been treated, but trying to get through to other men around the behaviors they've learned." While not speaking to whether this session made him look back on his own past, Wes recalled how a conversation about sexual harassment made him look at his role in prevention:

> [The facilitator' said... 'is there a woman out there telling her story about you?' And we were essentially having this really deep conversation about a certain type of violence. … I think that kind of really put it into perspective for me, like this really is an effort that I need to be more involved in.

Some men pointed to the fact that they were doing this looking inward in a group setting, and *feel they learn more about feminism and masculinity in a group of men than on their own.* In Nick's words, comparing the group community to feeling isolated as a feminist man in his other social circles, "learning is a lonely process:"

> There is this book I have called "Men masculinity and love" by bell hooks … she talks about something where she felt like men were able to coalesce into groups and become more emotional and then solve the problem of patriarchy or this whole problem in supporting women are being allies to women, so I always try to see it through that lens of like I'm learning, but sometimes like it's a very lonely process… Even like my friends are like, 'what is that?' with what I'm trying to work on. So when somebody is understanding what I'm understanding … it's like, he's learning in the same way right? there's been so many things I feel like I'm trying to work on and … I don't feel like I can talk about it to friends …so I felt like I was in a space where it can be open about that.

Jack felt that having conversations about masculinity in a group was what made it important, describing it as "a profound situation, like this is historically significant. … woah, this doesn't happen a lot. It's something that like, men historically have not been doing… I felt every time I came, I was like, to have these conversations is really to break down the walls of patriarchy from the inside." Wes, also, pointed to these conversations as a response to the silence and isolation around masculinity issues he spoke about earlier:

> If I wasn't talking to anybody about my feelings or emotions or what I did, it was like me purposely blocking something out from my life or not establishing that connection where we could heal if need be. Without talking, we would kind of leave ourselves in the loop of not healing and essentially uplifting forms of violence on a broader level.

__Men embrace their own flexible, healthy definitions of masculinity__

The last category in this cluster reflects how men described their evolving understanding

of what it means to them to be a man, which almost all men reflected on in some way.

These definitions were unique to each man, but included themes such as taking care of one's

own emotions, being in the service of others, and being authentic to one's own values instead of

the rules of the "man box." Jack found the group to be an "anchor" in staying in touch with his

own definition of masculinity, saying that "there's no doubt that they [other men] helped me be

ground into my best self." For Sean, being a man "is really about being true to myself, so it's

about self-care, it's about caring for others…the kind of man that I want to be is the kind of man

who does things that are difficult, but does them in a humane way." For Wes, it is about "being

open and being honest with yourself." Alfonso emphasized flexibility instead of sticking with

one idea of what being a man means:

> just being flexible … I think that's, the most important thing now - more than like "it should be a certain way." … I want to show up and be good in different areas, whether it's cleaning or cooking, I can be flexible in all those domains, …But also, I need to show up in a way for my kids, modeling like strength and courage, but not in that Hercules way … we can stand our ground, sometimes you have different opinions different values, we decide for ourselves what we think is important, and keeping the lid on my anger because, I've seen myself like, sleep deprived, stressed, tired - it's like autopilot. And I'm like 'yeah that's not what it should be, I don't want my kids having it the same.' So being flexible in how you can be frustrated without being angry like that.

Gandalf spoke to being less bound to the rules of masculinity that he wants to "push back" on,

along with a curiosity of what he is coming to embrace in their place:

> healthy masculinity, I think about a lot of what it's not. For me there's like a pushing back on certain messages that are not men have to be tough all of the time. That we, can't cry that we can't express emotions that we can't have emotionally intimate relationships with other men. So for me it's like pushing back on a lot of those, but I'm still working on, yeah like what is its more, it's like it's like a vision that includes a lot more the possibility of being more whole more authentic of I think supporting men and really inquiring into what is really important to me and my life and what creates a greater sense of meaning. Connection and engagement in my community you know in a positive way

While discussing his own views about masculinity, Bobby noted the issue he takes with

essentialist ideas about sex and gender roles:

> I's about being a good man, a real man is a man who can be emotional… The problem is making such a list of positive traits is that every single one could describe a strong woman too. And none of them are about having a penis between your legs. And that's where it gets weird, do you want to be a toxic man, or do you want to be a healthy adult?

Cluster III: Group Enables Positive Changes in Men's Close Relationships

The third cluster involves men's reflections on how their experience in the men's group

"spilled over" into their close relationships with other people in their lives. The categories in this

cluster are: a) men reach out for social support beyond the group, b) men show up differently in

their relationships with loved ones, c) men feel motivated to talk about masculinity with other

men in their lives, d) men process their hesitancy and desire to challenge their male friends; and

e) men strive to set positive examples for other boys and men.

Men reach out for social support beyond the group

Many men found the men's group to be a catalyst for seeking connection and support

beyond the group. These men reflected mostly on their friendships, specifically with other men.

Jack, the same participant who earlier discussed his experience of being hurt in his relationships

with other men to the point of avoiding them, expressed:

> I feel a little bit more empowered to reach out to other guys… because I have a safe space to talk to men and see, 'hey, I can have positive relationships with men, we can agree to certain things' and, like, it's given me some confidence. I have been reaching out and forming relationships with more men, and trying to be very genuine about it.

Alfonso, on the other hand, reflected on how he feels his "strong sense of independence," which

he recognizes as a masculine social norm or "a celebrated quality of being a man, being very

self-sufficient" has made him "self-conscious" about reaching out to others in the past. He goes

on to explain how this view has changed for him, saying:

> I don't think that [being self-sufficient] has to come at the cost of my, like, emotional relationships with others. So yeah, I think there's that–that sort of like–the rule that's

underlying that and that, you know, was kind of preventing me. And… I think, in terms of rules of masculinity, we really reward people who, you know, put their nose to the grind in terms of work. We don't really reward people for being very emotionally open and being supportive for their friends, like…that wasn't something I learned.

Later in his interview, Alfonso noted that his support seeking outside of group included therapy: "after going through this [group], you know, it just reminded me of the importance of being able to talk. And, you know, I did start therapy… so, yeah, I think the fact of being in a group made me want to continue having a space to talk, to be vulnerable and share myself."

Men show up differently in their relationships with loved ones

Many men spoke to the implications of group sessions for close relationships in their lives. In Mason's words, "I was coming out of it, thinking about my relationship with my kids and my relationship with my wife." The first specific example of this "showing up in a different way," which four men spoke to, was that *men try to be better listeners and be more emotionally open with their partners.* Wes traces a connection between the "man box" content explored in group, such as accessing the full range of one's emotions, and a deepening in his relationship with his girlfriend:

> During and or around that time [I started the group], my girlfriend and I went to dinner, and I think that was the first time I cried to her over my emotions in probably our entire relationship. You know, I maybe cried over Wall-E, or Marley and Me. And that's you know, there had to be a really good reason to cry… and I think almost the [men's group] space, almost gave me that reason to cry and let it out. Having that space between my girlfriend and I really strengthened our relationship too.

A reflection that Bobby shared earlier also fits within this category:

> I have this dynamic with myself and my partner, where I yell or I get angry and then hurt her feelings, and the reason why I do this is because I have seen this my whole life for men to express emotions as anger. For me, it's about yelling less … the unlearning for me is learning to listen and apologize.

The second code in this category was exclusive to *men who are fathers affirming their children's vulnerability and gentleness,* which three men spoke to. Charlie connected having a space to "talk about the socialization of males" with his own role as a father:

> I have two boys that at the time were under five, and that really hit home of like, 'what message do I want to put out there and support them with?' I think having boys, there's a certain role for playfulness, like teaching them that you can play. The kids jump on me and we're playing, but can still be like soft and, it's not like an aggressive wrestling, it's a good way to use your energy. In terms of the parenting, right, there's a need for it, we don't want to do away with it. I'm here for words and hugs, but there's still playfulness and energy, but also you know, telling them how much I value things that they do and the ways that they show caring and that they're just naturally that way. That's kind of the shocking part, all the ways that gets slowly chipped away, or was in my experience.

Similar to Charlie's wish to not "chip away" the caring parts of his sons' personalities, Ian expressed hope that the kind of father he is teaches his sons that they can be vulnerable as men and take care of themselves emotionally:

> I hope me being so open helps my sons be open. … like even in this last month with my depression, everybody knows I was depressed and people would always ask, like 'how you doing?' And I would say "I don't know, I'm still working through some things, thank you, I appreciate that." And I still struggle with depression, but my sons see that I'm talking about it with someone, I'm feeling it and taking the steps needed to overcome it.

Men feel motivated to talk about masculinity with other men in their lives

Many men connected their time in the men's group to a new motivation to talk about masculinity with other men in their lives, and many of these men called this a "ripple effect" from their relationships in the group to those outside it. This involved being a "lifeline or lighthouse" to other men who may also want to talk about masculinity without knowing who they can do so with, as well as "starting this conversation with someone for what might be their first time," in Wes' words. For example, Mason felt that "talking about the man box with more guys" is the most significant impact he can have, "even if they don't listen at first." Allan also acknowledged that "just because you have the skills to do this, doesn't necessarily mean you'll be able to connect with people, but it's worth trying." Similarly to Mason, Jack felt the group helped him see this as both a responsibility and powerful role of his:

> Having that positive experience with other men is helping me even talking to other men. I mean, there are women in my life who are like, 'I don't talk to men, like I won't even talk to men, because they're just literally always assholes.' … So I've had these very frank conversations with women and queer, gender non-conforming folks that I have been so

lucky they are my friends. But so, I'm like, okay, I've got to talk to the guys…. That's a major ripple effect on me, being more conscious of it trying to make relationships with other men. … like, I can read all day long, or talk with other women…it's really different than talking to a group of men. Because like, we men need to talk to each other and like, figure this shit out.

Men process their hesitancy and desire to challenge their male friends

Another distinct category came from Charlie's interview, the only man who spoke to this idea of using the group to explore his conflicted feelings about speaking up when his male friends make offensive comments. Charlie was clear in naming this not as a shift or action that he was already taking in his friendships, but rather that the group helped him move closer to doing so in the future. Telling a story about the same male friend he mentioned earlier, Charlie says:

> The amount of times he would like make jokes, kind of putting down women, that in some circles are really acceptable jokes. And how many times I just didn't say anything or challenge it. Like, I was here, I'm like 'Mr. Into this stuff", and I shared in groups how that was really hard for me, that I felt like a phony. But it was kind of like I'm worried to have a conflict, because when I think of conflict, it's like 'is it going to be a fight?' It's either going to be an ending of the relationship … or it's a physical blowout, or they just dismiss you. So we talked about that in group, it really resonated with me … I still feel like I'm a beginner, with how I would handle those conflicts. … But yeah, it was making it less something that I could ignore the more I was there, and it made me think, 'this is obviously a good thing for me because it's really challenging.'

Charlie elaborates on this feeling of being a "phony," and how the group supported him in this:

> I talked about wanting to show up for gender equality … but then a friend makes a joke and it's like, 'ah, don't say anything,' and then I feel the pressure for a couple days. That was an ongoing dialogue in group, and I think it was good for me to hear from others, like how they were really feeling… like how we all want to be going out there.

Men strive to set positive examples for other boys and men

In the final category, most men reflected on their view of their role in setting an example for other boys and men who may look to them as a role model or influence when it comes to masculinity. One specific intention that men voiced was to *validate other boys' and men's emotions instead of shaming them,* which many men echoed. Wes saw this as the most powerful impact he can have: "I think the biggest thing I need to do is, you know, when I am with both

male youth as well as adults, just really trying to validate feelings and not shame boys and men

for talking about their feelings." Similarly, Gandalf discussed carrying the validation he found in

group to other boys and men: "I can definitely think of examples where you know where I'm

around sometimes kids, sometimes teenagers, just males who are upset or you know having a

tough time and at the very least, I've been able to just be like 'man, whatever you're feeling is

valid.'" Ian spoke not only to validating other boys' and men's expression of their feelings, but

normalizing it, or giving permission for it through his own behavior:

> Men are scared of what people will think, that's just how society has made men, so that's
> reason why they don't share. So when I share a story, you know, I do it because I hope
> that other boys and men can have moments like that, that they can share what they're
> feeling.

> Some men spoke to another way to set a positive example for others, that they *model*

more flexible masculinity to others. Nick emphasized accountability for one's mistakes,

discussing what he hopes other boys and men see as an example when they look at him:

> Well, when I look at myself, I want to be someone that takes ownership when they make
> mistakes, and is true to themselves for who they are. I feel like I want to take each person
> that I've had teach then to take ownership like that, and make sure that other men don't
> go down the same path that I have of not seeing them [mistakes].

Alfonso shared a different hope of the example he sets for boys and men, referencing both the

influence he has individually as well as recognizing a need for broader cultural ideals to shift:

> I would want for like future boys, to see stuff like, I think a lot of it has to do with like,
> understanding leadership through like a different, like, lens than we've been given–seeing
> the value in things that aren't traditionally seen as masculine. Like, more caring things.

While men all had different examples of what this modelling would involve, referencing the

healthy definitions they had come to embrace and discussed above in the third cluster, Wes

pointed to the role of the group in encouraging this example-setting:

> I think this group really helped me to recognize that you know, I wasn't the only person
> to build on my masculinity, my masculinity was built by others and once I understood
> that, I was able to really recognize the influence that others had on me, not just men but

men and women and even individuals who, of any gender, had on me – and then like, the influence I have on others in the same way and thinking about how I want to use that.

Cluster IV: Group Enables Men's Participation in Social Action

The fourth cluster focuses on how men felt being in the group supported their work in promoting healthy manhood as a means of social change. While themes in this fourth cluster may seem closely related to those in the third in terms of "going against the grain" (e.g., challenging male friends, reflecting on one's masculinity and reasons for activism), the findings included below focus specifically on the role played by the group in steps men took to promote healthy masculinities beyond the realm of their own close relationships, such as in their community, work, or other roles. In Jack's words, this impact of the group was about how "being true to a whole group of men really making me feel empowered, and grounded in the need to take it seriously everywhere [masculinity]." Men's reflections within this cluster do not suggest that being in the group changed them from "against social justice" to "for it;" rather, that they felt the men's group served as a supportive structure for the roles they want to have when it comes to their role as "influencers" in broader social change beyond the group itself. Allan captures the spirit of this cluster well:

> What we have here is a space where we can all then choose to be our own catalysts for this stuff in our own communities…. That wouldn't have happened without all that without feeling like they're this safety in numbers feeling.

The categories within this cluster are: a) men see their political activism as fueled by understanding themselves as men more deeply, b) men want to be better allies by listening to others instead of talking over them, c) men see a "space for their own work" as necessary for working with other boys and men, and d) men want to facilitate their own men's group to reach more boys and men.

Men see their political activism as fueled by understanding themselves as men more deeply

Two men spoke directly to their roles as activists, which they saw as supported by a

space to explore their own lives and masculinity. Nick, who had referenced the political nature of

his full-time job, shared:

> I feel like understanding myself as a man has helped this, interestingly. I feel like I'm
> getting to a point in this journey … like I'm coming to almost an end of one part of that
> journey which is like understanding myself emotionally and everything. But I feel like a
> call to action now. The group has helped me get to a point where the next part of the
> journey is understanding myself as who am I, and what am I trying to fight for?

Jack returned to his use of the word "empowerment," explaining how the group played a role for

him in "going against the patriarchy" in his growing understanding of himself as an activist,

which he saw as important to "not just leave group stuff in group." In his experience, the group

"created that space for me to be anti-patriarchy. And to hold onto that after our week... Because

you can go back to like, 'what's more normal life?' You know, some of these insights, they can

fade … So I did feel like really empowered… in living a better, more conscious life."

Men want to be better allies by listening to others instead of talking over them

Some men reflected on activism from a different angle, that group conversations helped

them become more aware of how they as men interact with others as men, and in turn how they

strive to be better listeners. Bobby cites "one of the things I've been working on unlearning is

how much I occupy space, like being and feeling entitled to speak over others. Especially in the

presence of women, but also in the presence of other people." Jack elaborated on this in

hindsight:

> I've had times when I wasn't a good ally, and I've had to learn from that in hard ways… I
> have relationships that I've lost, you know… with groups that face oppression, you know,
> women in particular, when I have like, been callous, or cold or whatever, like, I fucked it
> up, you know? Trying to always have something to say. And now … I feel like the circle
> really helped me be like, 'okay, just be your best self and trust that these people know
> way more than you - just be supportive.' … That's a huge ripple effect of the circle, like I
> can say that it has improved my ability to be a good listener to oppressed people.

On a similar note, Wes reflected on noticing his own "oversights" his in domestic violence

prevention work and how he talks with men who do not share his identities:

> I do violence prevention work and… of course a really big component is institutional
> racism … I think it was really tough for me and this is probably just part of my own
> privilege and whiteness and being male and being cisgender and not experiencing the
> form of oppression that so many others have witnessed … When it came to discussing
> violence prevention with other men, especially men of color, it gave me a much more
> wider window to look at it and talk about power structures.

Men see "a space for their own work" as necessary for working with other boys and men

Most men expressed in some way that they felt having a men's group of their own was

important for their work in advocating for healthy masculinity elsewhere, calling this "a space

for their own work." Here, they framed a group focused on them as a supportive structure for the

social change work they aspired to do elsewhere. Gandalf framed it this way: "I feel a very

strong aspiration to make a difference in this way of kind of helping to shift the social norms

around it, but I find I definitely need a lot of support, inspiration, kind of people to join with to

actually actualize that." In a similar vein to their reflections on having internalized messages

from hegemonic socialization in the first cluster, men acknowledged that, even though they were

"up for criticizing the man-box," they saw their growth as an ongoing process – or, in Wes'

words, "Rome wasn't built in a day… you need time with it and the repetitive weekly structure."

Or, in Ian's words:

> There's no Amazon delivery, no finish line of healing, you don't bust through the tape
> and say "I'm healed." It's a lifelong thing, so being in the group with men motivates me,
> it keeps me going and keeps me able to hold that space for other men… it reminds me
> why I do this work, and why I need to continue to stay on this path myself …

These reflections speak to how men feel they benefitted from a space to focus on themselves,

which in turn enabled them to better reach other boys and men. Charlie, too, found the group to

be "a good compass" that helped him "revisit how these masculinity things impact my week and

how I show up." Junior spoke to this as well, specifically with how he wants to reach more men:

> The group gave me a chance to experience and do all of those things on my own, for me, before bringing it some someone else – really helpful. I don't think I could have started my own group with the boys without having done the circle of influence. … it's given me a vocabulary. Like obviously when you bring up the topic of toxic masculinity, most guys they shut off or suddenly are like 'here's another person yelling at men and telling us not to be men,' but when you're able to talk about the man box and like use other words they are a little bit more open to listening the conversation and so it's just given me the vocabulary and tools to sort of have more of those conversations

Men want to facilitate their own men's groups to reach more boys and men

As the final category within this cluster, most men discussed their desire to start their own boys' or men's group as a way to extend their own group experience into broader social change. Wes saw this as "our responsibility to go against the grain and try to break down that man-box in other places, specifically by creating these safe spaces for others to do it." Another example of the "ripple effect" is touched on by Jack, discussing his desire and feeling of being "empowered" to lead his own group after participating in one:

> Now we're like a circle of *influencers* … people who want to lead a group. You know, like, we were all seeds that come out of that group to start other groups, and then we could also have a group together, to talk to each other about how it's going, to support each other with leading groups … I feel like that would be huge for society, and could really help make more groups but also help make those other groups stronger.

While most men in this category voiced their intent to extend their experience in the group to other boys and men by starting another one, some men had already taken action on this by the time they were interviewed. For example, some men *started workshops for boys about healthy relationships, homophobia, and violence prevention.* Gandalf spoke about how since being in the group, he had brought this idea to the school he works at: "I've been talking to my supervisor about, like, how it would be cool to form, you know, some kind of allies in violence prevention group for the younger guys, and we're getting ready for the first one now." Junior, too, had already started facilitating a group for younger boys, referencing how he drew from this men's group in how he now structures his own:

> Shortly after doing my circle, I actually started a similar program through my organization… we will talk about everything and anything that they feel, but then will often, well I also took the 'hot topic' piece, and like each time I will find a different hot topic. So of course the past couple of weeks it's all been about Will Smith and Chris Rock … there was always a lesson or topic for that week that [our facilitator] had planned and prepared. Like I said, I sort of modeled the program with my teen boys based on that… and so I hope that's what I'm doing with the group… creating a group where they're comfortable enough feeling like they all belong and can ask questions.

Three other men had also put this plan into action, but more specifically by *starting groups and conversations for White men to talk about race and gender,* both men identifying as White. Jack explained his decision this way:

> It's my responsibility to talk to other White people, like, Black people are tired of trying to like, get White people to stop being racist. So, it's like, White people have to talk to White people and men have to talk to men. That's why I wanted to start a masculinity and racism conversation for other White guys after our circle.

Allan shared a similar rationale, with an interesting twist:

> For our new group, we targeted it to White men, because we wanted to create a space where White men would start having the conversation, it's a hard one. And to not put the burden on people of color or women… and instead could maybe offer an alternative space, so these men don't end up in more hateful oppressive places to find acceptance.

While articulating his efforts to try and bring more White men into the conversation about masculinity and racism, Allan acknowledges the interpersonal and societal significance of doing so, naming "the belonging at Trump rallies" and "White kids being gotten by online extremism." He seems to suggest that, without being invited into an "accepting space" that facilitates growth in healthy and prosocial ways, boys and men are at risk for gravitating to other kinds of spaces that may offer a sense of acceptance, but channel it in "hateful and oppressive" ways.

Cluster V: Men Provide Feedback for Program Development

The fifth cluster gathers themes in the feedback men shared for the group program's development. All men interviewed were asked if anything was "missing" or "negative" in their group experience, and voiced their thoughts on the group's strengths and ways it could improve. The categories in this cluster are: a) men value the facilitator's role as the foundation of making

the group work, b) men express diverging perspectives, c) men reflect on reasons they "held back" in group, d) men valued and wished for more interpersonal connection, and e) men make recommendations for future groups.

Men value the facilitator's role as the foundation of making the group work

Most men voiced their appreciation for the man who facilitated all group sessions, describing how his role "laid the foundation" for creating community in the group. Men pointed to his "skills in making people feel comfortable." Specifically, many men expressed that they *feel the facilitator's accepting, non-judgmental style helps them open up*. Alfonso said that the facilitator "gets a huge shout out there… he's just, a great facilitator, great moderator, and just a great man. He was not just very cool, but he was very inviting to all of us." According to Jack, "all he asked of us is just to show up, and that was really such a boost, making me feel at ease and open." Charlie spoke to the facilitator's positive influence as a role model as well:

> He was a very good facilitator, and really framed things nicely. I think everyone who showed up, it was just like "oh I'm so glad there's other guys here for this." … Wanting to see like… the masculine can be a healthy thing, that you could support someone and really listen and give them space… that was just modeled and shown in the groups.

On another note, some men expressed that they *trust the facilitator as competent in guiding difficult conversations*. Junior described the facilitator as "a guide" that helped him engage in conversations on subjects like trauma, violence, racism, and homophobia. Sean, speaking from his experience as a gay trans man in a group of cisgender straight men, said:

> People venture into realms that maybe they aren't quite aware of or they don't know how to talk about it in ways that don't hurt other people. I know one of the guys in our group was really struggling with gender nuances, and could not wrap his brain around it… And so guys like that can potentially be triggering for other people in a group, not that that's even a bad thing because in that group, then process could happen. So for that, having a facilitator who can see that and navigate it is something you need, I appreciated really.

Men express diverging perspectives on exploring tension, conflict, and disagreement in group

This next category reflects a prominent theme in men's feedback about their experience in group: their perspectives on how the group could have explored potential points of tension or difference between group members. Many men spoke to this category, and expressed diverging perspectives on whether group sessions should have focused more on where members were "not on the same page" or should have included other men who were "not already on board with criticizing the man box." Gandalf felt most men were already on this page:

> Given who self-selects into the group, there was a fairly common understanding that the dominant idea of what being a man is tend to be no so helpful in a lot of ways. It felt like most, if not all people in the group came to it like, 'yeah there are some things we need to change.'

Whether this was a strength or a drawback of the group, however, varied across participants:

For example, many men *feel that social and political common ground among group members allowed them to be open in group.* Ben believed that "there's a benefit of talking with men who share your values because we don't always have that," an idea which Wes echoed, saying that "common ground helped me be more open. Alfonso elaborated on this, again pointing to the unique benefit of a space where men can worry less about other men's retaliations for speaking openly or critically about masculinity:

> Because we all sort of came to the table, maybe not like completely of the same mind, but generally, similar enough approaches and philosophies regarding masculinity, you know, I think we were able to talk about things without worrying about, like, other guys having a really vitriolic response like we might have all the other times and places.

On another note, many men *feel that group conversations need to include men who are "not already on board."* Jack reflected on the fact that "many men were not here that actually need to be here more than we do, or for different reasons at least." Wes expressed a similar view:

> I'd love to find a way to, for maybe the men who are going into this conversation for the first time, and maybe this group is the only opportunity to really talk about it. How do they get in here? You know, where they can talk about it more, and how to have these conversations more, and how they can … learn to be confident in who you are while going against the man box system that's always told you how to be.

Junior said that group sessions might be "harder but richer" if, as Wes suggests, they included

more men who were less familiar and perhaps more reluctant to go against masculine social

norms. Bobby acknowledged this limitation of who the group reaches, as well:

> If you see two minutes of Fox News, you see a lot of this kind of complaint, like 'feminism take it too far,' and now the idea is that we hate them. So the group material about systemic sexism and racism may not have found such an easygoing accepting audience for people who are not on board.

> Offering another perspective on the need for group to include men who have never talked

about masculinity before, some men *expressed thinking that reaching more conservative men is*

their job to do beyond group. Jack made reference to "men who aren't in or even are in our

political coalitions, who are, you know, visibly like harming other people sometimes in the way

they speak, or that way they brush something off." However, rather than trying to bring them

into this program, he reflected on his task now being to "build a bridge and e like, so we have a

place of positive connection and I can try to get them into conversation, like not just calling them

out and it ending there." Or, in Ian's words, "you have to really meet people where they're at,

because some men aren't ready, most men aren't ready for something like this, but if they have

someone who genuinely cares, it can really help, so maybe that's how we find them." Wes

touched on a similar idea, saying that:

> There's a lot of guys I play with who are pretty rigid with masculinity as well. And again I think just having that consistent connection and opportunity to talk in little small doses here and there, really brings out a lot. They eventually talk to me about some of their relationships and what they do and what they feel and how they think it's so shameful to have anxiety or depression and they try to hide it and things like that. So yeah. Now I see the effects of being open in this men's group show almost immediately in conversations that I have with other men.

Allan was clear in his perspective that rather than bringing more conservative or "anti-feminist"

men into this kind of group, it was group members' role to connect with them, describing his

theory for yet another kind of "domino effect" in reaching men across the political spectrum:

Our target isn't to find men that are already in these spaces, our target is to one day have men showing up that have never had these conversations before - men that might be close to the moderate or even like the far right… Instead of showing up to them with conflict, showing up with 'well, I'm going to keep listening and tell me more about why you feel this way… We all have this desire to be here [in this group], but we all now have to go put our energy to the men that are a little further away from us on the political spectrum, and then, when we get those men, then those men have the tolerance to get the next level. And then, after that have a tolerance to get the next.

Turning their attention to differences between group members, many men spoke to the fact that they *wanted space to go deeper than surface level on differing social and political views.* Gandalf, for example, "would have been very curious about just even like, going more into public policy discussions. I know the tiniest bit about Congress, like the Violence Against Women Act for example, but I don't know where everyone stands, and guys don't generally talk about it. Stuff like that would have been important for me to learn more about." And, according to Bobby, "sexuality and politics as part of the conversation were, I felt, not in the group as much as they should be." Alfonso "found the most value from these conversations when there was room for conflict … in the sense of, not that we were butting heads, but where we were kind of like, sifting through problems that were complex… so more would be needed." He wondered:

I also was sometimes curious about whether or not we explored all the differences amongst each other … I think about this a lot when I, like, talk politics, or talk whatever with folks where we assume we're like of the same opinion … sometimes I wonder, like, is there kind of an assumption that we're all on the same page when maybe we're not? And not, you know, of course we're not on the same page in that one of us thinks we're pro-healthy-masculinity, and the other one's like, you know, completely regressive … I'm sure folks had differences and disagreements that, you know, I am curious if, you know, we were so congenial together, if maybe some of it did go un-explored.

Alfonso connected this curiosity to a session in which he felt "heavy, mad, and sad" but was unsure whether to express it, recalling a session following the verdict in the case of George Floyd's murder. On one hand, he felt "it was validating to be able to talk about it in the space," but also that he saw this as a place where different perspectives were left unexplored:

It's like an example where maybe we assumed we were all on the same page but we weren't. I think when the George Floyd case came out, and we were having different

conversations about, 'is this a victory? Is this cause for concern?' And I know some other folks in the room were saying, 'Well, you know, there is some achievement to this.' And I think my perspective on it was a lot more fatalistic– where, I thought that this is an example of the system like adapting–of the criminal system adapting to, to survive.

Nick expressed a similar desire for more discussion of men's differing opinions in hindsight:

We were talking about sexual harassment, and I said something, but I felt like it was like, not 'the answer' and it felt like there was a clear answer that was wanted… I feel like we didn't go deep enough, it was almost like we have to say 'all this person did was wrong.' or like 'this person, like, it's good that they got fired' or whatever. But I'm like 'okay, that's the obvious answer. Great. But what's the second step, what's the third step? … If we're going to talk about feminism and patriarchy … what is our role?

Men reflect on reasons why they "held back" in group sessions

Many men voiced reasons they had for "holding back" from sharing their thoughts or feelings during group sessions. For Mason, this meant feeling "nervous that I was going to put my foot in my mouth and say something that was hurtful unintentionally, just because of my lack of having these conversations before." More specifically, two men recounted times at which they *filtered themselves based on sexual orientation or gender identity*. Sean, a gay trans man, touched upon this in a theme above while reflecting on an internal voice to "not be so queer" and not be himself with other men, which at times "made me feel not so at ease in group early on until I saw, okay, they're cool with me." Another gay man, Junior, put it this way:

There were maybe a couple times, where I was like in my head thinking specifically around the being gay thing, 'should I say something? What would be the reaction?' And so I ended up not doing it. I think not so much because of my experience, specifically with this group, but just my experience in general … so much of my life experiences has been being the 'other.' … No one [in group] was ever homophobic, but we did often talk about relationships in a traditional male-woman kind of sense … And that could also just be me as a gay man like projecting, because no one asked about being gay, but I felt like that a couple times…. it's weird because you just get so used to it.

A second reason for holding back was that some men *worried about being judged or accepted by other group members.* Junior offered a specific example, referencing how the first part of each group meeting focused on "current events" about masculinity often involved sports, which made him wonder "if I am less a part of it" because of his lack of interest and familiarity

with sports. He says, "I'm here, I am in a group of men, and I still feel like the outsider…. like we're still falling back on talking about sports, if that's what everyone is up for." On a slightly different note, Charlie put words to his own "need for self-monitoring," explaining how:

> It's because, well if I need to be liked by the group. I was there for me… but also like, that idea of still needing to be really strong. … And I don't always feel that way. But it was also kind of like 'well here's a chance to really talk to guys that are on the same page,' so I want everyone to be like 'oh you're a good one.' So I felt good with safety, but also had moments of like checking myself and then needing to almost reset every week so when I show up like back and forth between 'okay how am I going to open up today?" and still feeling a little bit on edge.

Alfonso also spoke to this complexity that the vulnerability he found in the group was sometimes interrupted by a worry of how other men would see him:

> I mean the vulnerability piece is an interesting one because there are ways in which I felt comfortable … and then and then there was always ways that 'I'm holding back.' And I think some of that is around, you know, the fear of not being seen as manly enough and others just might be in general, socially like 'nah, we don't talk about that feeling.'

Men value and wish for more interpersonal connection

Most men expressed their appreciation for the elements of the group that allowed for interpersonal connection, and wished for more of this. For example, many men ($n = 6$) made specific mention of how they *most appreciated the "check-in" time* of each group session, in which all men were invited to share how they were doing in their own lives. For Ian, this was how the group made vulnerability possible, by creating a time where "you don't have to give the standard line of 'oh I'm fine, I'm good,' you know. You can say it if you're just hurting that week, and we did." Charlie echoed this as well, saying that the check-ins "set the tone" for him and other men to open up"

> The check in opportunity was, just the way people showed up with struggles or things on their minds, or even just saying like, 'this has been not been a good week.' … People were really deep and vulnerable, and that check-ins sort of set the tone, right, of 'Okay, these men around me are pretty safe to share with, and they just want to hear how you're doing,' and so we could share when we were really struggling

Wes, as well, most appreciated these "here and now" check-ins, feeling that they were a way to invite all men to share how they were doing if they otherwise would not have felt comfortable speaking up: "we'd have like a round robin of just going around and throwing something in … and it was like, 'wait hold on, let's get to you, let's get to someone else,' and so having that structure just really helped everyone feel like we wanted to hear from them."

One man also *requested more time in group to hear others' life stories and deepen their connections.* Talking about the connections between group members, Nick felt they were both "the most important part of the group" and could have been made stronger by more time spent on getting to know each other:

> I didn't really get much of that [connection] because I was really curious to hear more about people's stories. You know, what makes them tick and who they are. I feel like that's something I missed and wanted more of… I think it's all part of the connection question. Maybe I'm a very nosy person, but like I want to know 'who is this person?' I felt like I was missing people's stories, and only got them in little snippets but I wanted more because sometimes a personal story really matters in how we connect around these things. So that was something I felt like I wish I got a little bit more of again.

Many men *experienced the conclusion of the program as a loss and wish for it to be ongoing.* Jack shared, "I wish we were all still in touch, because, yeah, that's a rare and good community right there." Allan, too, said "I wish it could go on longer, because it was such a good group of guys, it was good connections, it was great conversations." Sean named feeling "really sad that it ended, for me, it could have kept going." Ben "would have happily continued meeting with these people, even without a facilitator," but Alfonso noted that "we tried to meet once or twice after, and it kind of dropped off without the weekly structure." More specifically, Gandalf spoke to his feeling that the group was ending "just as we had gotten into a rhythm:" "There was a sense of cohesion and, sense of community that started to form, then it concluded."

Men make recommendations for future groups

This last category involved other recommendations for how the program could be run in the future, which many men provided feedback on. The first suggestion was shared by four men, that they *want initial ground rules about communication, turn-taking, and self-disclosure* at the start of the program. In Bobby's words, "some early ground rules about communication would have gone a long, long way." For example, Gandalf found himself curious "is this a therapy group?" and wanting "clarity" on the level of self-disclosure that was expected:

> I wish there would have been a little more clarity on how personal to get …by the middle, I think it week 5 or 6, someone divulged being sexually abused as a kid. And I found the group responded very compassionately to that disclosure, which made me think that maybe more of that would have been welcome or even expected from the rest of us, but again I just wasn't quite sure what the norm was… People shared some pretty vulnerable things, you know, experiences of past trauma or someone who experienced a death of someone he really cared about. So there were some moments, yeah this like vulnerability and people offering emotional support. Which was cool, but I found myself often just kind of wondering, 'is it that kind of therapy group?' Like, man here's what I'm struggling with or is it, know we would do some personal check ins, but again I didn't know how much to reveal. I would have been interested in getting more personal than it did, but sometimes I need an explicit invitation or a reassurance that it's welcome.

Charlie voiced a similar uncertainty:

> What are the rules? I think we skipped over that quickly, like 'oh yeah everybody gets how we do this.' More on that would be amazing and I think beneficial to everyone, you know. 'This is how we can we can start, how I can ask a question, how I can show up and respect others' space' … because I don't think men as a rule, are amazing at that.

Picking up on Charlie's point, Wes expressed that a session dedicated to guidelines around "learning how to listen and how to talk with one another… how to really communicate" would have been "really cool and helpful for our in-group time and just being men too."

Branching off slightly from men's reflections above on "how personal to get," one man *wondered if discussing trauma would overwhelm other group members who did not have their own mental health care.* Junior reflected on his own trauma-focused work in individual therapy,

invoking language such as "flooding" and "slower is faster" as he wondered what the group

session on trauma was like for other survivors in group.

> I started my individual therapy and, in the beginning, I remember me and my therapist had a very long conversation … there was part of me that like wanted to sort of discover everything that happened to me as a kid so that I could process it. And she was like, 'That is going to be less helpful than if we take it slow.' So in a group, there's definitely things in common, but it's also a very individual journey, at least for me. I was like 'oh wow, I'm surprised that we were going this deep' that week. Because of my own therapy it actually worked for me. Otherwise, I'm not sure how I would have felt about it, if it would have been too overwhelming or something.

The last recommendation that some men made was to *recommend the group be free of*

charge to be accessible for more men. While Junior described it as "fantastic and worth every

penny," he also acknowledged that "if more people could afford it, or if it was free, that would

absolutely be phenomenal to get more men here." Bobby, as well, saw the cost as "a barrier, in a

society where people cannot meet an emergency expense of like 500 dollars… it would be ideal

if this was accessible, free of charge, if you want to be in a men's group."

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to develop a deeper understanding of the relationships between members in a men's group. Specifically, I sought to understand: a) how men experienced the interpersonal dynamics within a men's group, b) how that interpersonal process may shape men's practice of healthy masculinities in their own lives outside of the group, and c) how that process may shape men's efforts to engage with others to promote healthy masculinities outside of the group. To that end, this qualitative descriptive study explored thirteen men's experiences in a weekly men's group program run by the organization A Call to Men, which aims to create a space for mutual mentoring, practicing, and promoting healthy masculinity. Findings were in support of the important role that the interpersonal process itself played as a critical foundation of participants' experience in the program, with men describing ways they experienced interactions in groups as running counter to those they had experienced previously in their history of being socialized toward a culturally-dominant model of hegemonic masculinity. Men in turn described these interpersonal dynamics as a context that helped them grow: developing insights, making changes in close relationships, and working for social change. The findings also included men's feedback for the program's development, which are discussed in the context of future directions.

This discussion section will a) summarize conclusions from the findings as they pertain to the three research questions of this study, including implications in support of or expanding on the existing research base, b) situate the findings within a broader theoretical conversation arguing for the relevance of relational-cultural theory to the psychological study of men and masculinities, c) revisiting the empirical literature on masculinity-focused interventions in light of the findings, d) review the limitations of the study, e) discuss how the findings point to practice recommendations for the facilitation of men's group interventions, f) spark ideas about the role of men's groups in broader social and political change, and g) raise directions for future research.

Summary of Findings

The research questions for this study were developed to explore men's experiences in group relationships, as well as the impacts of those relationships. Likewise, the study's findings are summarized in terms of participants' experiences of the group interpersonal dynamics and the impacts they felt those dynamics had for them. In words used both by participants and in the literature, this captures the group's dynamics, which participants described as made up of the qualities of growth-fostering relationships, and their "ripple effects" (Vera, 2020). Conclusions for the study's research questions are summarized below, along with their connections to existing literature, while findings specific to future directions are reviewed in the section on implications.

Research Question 1: Group Dynamics as a Corrective Relational Experience

The first research question in this study asked how men experienced the interpersonal dynamics within the men's group meetings. Findings that spoke to this question bear out extant literature on the central role of interpersonal relationships in hegemonic masculine socialization (Levant, 2005; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016) as well as the power of relationships to offer a counter-experience to that socialization (Chu & Gilligan, 2019; Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022; Way, 2011; Way et al., 2014), which was the theory of change in this study. Speaking to their lives outside of group, participants named a sense of silence and isolation in which they did not have other men to talk about masculinity with, and spoke to several ways in which the group provided what was missing or "off limits" for them growing up as men. This not only echoes RCT's language about isolation and silence, but speaks to the group's creation of universality, in which members found they were not alone in their experience or struggle, specific to their lives and socialization as men. This context, part of why men sought out the men's group, supports the argument made by Way (2011) as well as Chu and Gilligan (2019) challenging the popular notion that "men do not want to talk." Instead, boys and men long for people with whom they can be open about what

they learn men should not be (i.e., "taboo" in participants' words), but may refrain from doing so to avoid judgment or rejection of other men. The majority of findings, particularly in Cluster I, describe a space where this was possible.

Men's reflections on the relational dynamics they experienced in the group paint a picture of a community in which they together inverted the masculine social norms cited in the literature. One central example of this was men being able to express their emotional vulnerability to other group members, which they experienced as beneficial for their own well-being. This aspect of the group dynamic runs directly in contrast to the masculine norm that frames any emotion other than anger as weakness or a source of shame, or the expectation that boys and men must always be in control of their emotions, or simply not have them (Levant, 2005; Mahalik et al., 2003; Way, 2011). Men described being open in conversation with one another, particularly the fact that they were able to cry in group and feel affirmed by others while doing so, or to feel validated as they shared about their stresses and negative experiences with masculine socialization. This openness resembles a kind of group cohesiveness (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), as men felt their sense of belonging in the group enabled their sharing. Furthermore, this space for showing vulnerability and having it be met with the empathy of other men was a powerful encounter for participants that helped them reject a message that men across cultural backgrounds are taught from a young age: "boys don't cry." This is not only an example of catharsis as a therapeutic factor in groups, but an important counter-cultural dynamic, as research shows the idea that crying is something for men to be ashamed of becomes internalized, manifesting in decreased emotional expressiveness and willingness to seek help when they are struggling (Vogel et al., 2011). This men's group was characterized by the exact opposite: instead of shaming emotional vulnerability, men showed one another empathy.

Borrowing from the language of psychodynamic therapy, this finding illustrates how men

found connections and conversations in group to be a kind of "corrective emotional experience"

(Alexander & French, 1946; Stark, 1999), which is a core component of the group psychotherapy

process (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) and as relevant to an individual's cultural context, such as

gender socialization (Rabinowitz, 2019). This dynamic is also not mutually exclusive from RCT.

On the contrary, it is one of the elements of psychodynamic theories that the Stone Center Model

uplifted and saw in the healing power of relationships against the backdrop of a history of

disconnection (Miller, 2008a; Walker, 2008b). RCT would also view group relationships as a

source of mutual connection that can address isolation (Jordan, 2018). The interpersonal

dynamics revisited a source of conflict or pain – in the example of emotional vulnerability, the

shame that many boys and men learn to attach to tears when their fathers, friends, or coaches tell

them that "boys don't cry", and the ensuing process of cutting themselves off from their

emotional selves (hooks, 2004; Levant, 2005; Way, 2011). This time, however, the presence of

another person (in this case, the group members, instead of a psychotherapist) enables the

experience of having one's emotions validated, not dismissed or disavowed. This was evident in

the reflection that men did not worry about being seen by other group members as "not man

enough" or the ability to talk critically about masculine norms in ways that might normally earn

punishments of policing masculinity (Precopio & Ramsey, 2017; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). It

should be noted that this experience was significant for many participants even though they

claimed to be in support of men's vulnerability prior to starting the group. That is, men noted

how they had internalized masculine social norms and, even while consciously disagreeing with

them, the process of allowing themselves to be open and vulnerable with other men was a kind of

emotional counter-conditioning exercise. Overall, men's reflections on the space the group

created suggest that interpersonal connections and community are powerful therapeutic forces,

particularly when they mirror the social or cultural contexts that are salient to an individual's experience. In other words, the process of redefining, reconstructing, or transforming masculinity as is called for in the literature (Adams & Frauenheim, 2020; hooks, 2004; Levant, 1992) is a process that takes place not only on an individual basis, but in and through relationships.

However, the expression and validation of their individual emotional vulnerability was not the only piece of how men experienced the group dynamics. For many, group was a space where they both gave and received support; a community in which they could see and be seen. The significance of this finding itself should not be understated, given the health benefits of social connection in general (Coutinho et al., 2014; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017) and in light of how men's socialization toward hyper-independence can inhibit their use of social support and help-seeking (McKenzie et al., 2018 Sagar-Ourialgi et al., 2019). Summarizing men's reflections on what it felt like to be in the group directly echoes language from relational-cultural theory. Men described their enjoyment of their experience in the group in the terms of mutual connection and empathy (Comstock et al., 2008; Jordan, 2008; 2017; Miller & Stiver, 1997), but in this case built around their experiences of masculinity, mirroring the ideas of growth-fostering relationships and controlling images (or the deconstruction of them). This care for one another's well-being that men endorsed not only resembles a growth-fostering relationship, but also the therapeutic factor of altruism that exists in group psychotherapy (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), and bearing out the culturally-specific notion that men may be more likely to receive help if they can offer support in turn (Adams & Frauenheim, 2020; Rabinowitz, 2019). The group's conversations grappled with the expectations of what "real men" should be, evident in men's reflections of explicitly or humorously critiquing those societal gender norms and bonding over their rejection of them. This resembles almost an inverted kind of "locker room talk" in which boys and men bond via the use of shaming, homophobic epithets, or rape jokes

(Barnett et al., 2019; Cole et al., 2019), again pointing to relationship itself as an intervention that can counter the pressures of precarious manhood and policing of masculinity.

These conversations about gendered norms occurred in the context of relationships, which men saw as characterized by mutuality, empathy from and for others, and guidance. For example, men expressed that being part of a group of shared values encouraged them to continue going against the grain of hegemonic masculine socialization. Some men also noted how conversations touched on various dimensions of their identity, and wishing for more time with one another, touching upon two more elements of growth-fostering relationships: space to process diversity, and the desire for more connection (Frey, 2013; Jordan, 2017). For example, men of color spoke to a feeling of "being seen" by others not just as a man, but as one who grappled with masculinity and racism. A group not defined by "one-upmanship" and fear of others revoking their "man cards" allowed space for these growth-fostering qualities to exist – almost a direct undoing of the kind of social environment that precarious manhood (Vandello & Bosson, 2013) and the policing of masculinity (Reigeluth & Addis 2016) constitute. Here, the findings illustrate an environment in which group dynamics were not about "hazing or tests of courage" (Reichert, 2019) that characterize traditional masculine socialization and its strict enforcement (Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Levant, 2005; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). The absence of this interpersonal reinforcement of masculine norms, along with participants' experience of being open and honest in the group, seems to bear out Way et al.'s (2014) argument that boys and men often stifle their own authenticity out of a desire to avoid others' rejection or shaming.

Although not falling under the first cluster of findings, men's feedback for the program's development also applies to the group interpersonal dynamics, specifically, dynamics that were either missing from the group or inhibitory to their being engaged. For example, several men expressed reasons for "holding back" from saying what they had on their minds (e.g., subjects

such as racial injustice, sex positivity) which they felt may not be the majority perspective in the group. While the men who did raise this issue were not interested in elaborating in more specific detail, these reflections bear resemblance to the notion of the central relational paradox in RCT: filtering one's authentic self out of concern that others will not accept them, but in the process of doing so, losing out on true connection (Jordan, 2017). A sharper example of this hesitation was raised by one gay man and another trans man, who noticed their self-monitoring in a group of predominantly straight and cisgender men. On a similar note, the ability to work through conflict – to move from disconnection back into connection when ruptures inevitably occur – is a central tenet of RCT and task of relational-cultural approaches to the group process (Sternbach, 2001). Men largely concurred that tension and disagreement rarely if ever came up in conversation, but diverged in their explanations of why that was the case, with some feeling that the group would have been richer if areas of disagreement had been acknowledged and processed together. One man, interestingly, raised the possibility that rather than fearing others' rejection for stepping out of the man box as usual, members may have worried that expressing views against the grain would risk being seen as "not good enough" as feminist men. Interestingly, in a group focused on rejecting conformity, this finding suggests that there was still a felt sense of pressure to conform to having the right beliefs in line with healthy manhood. These possibilities of experiences in which men "filtered" themselves that were left unsaid in the interviews would fit into RCT's conceptualization of the central relational paradox, and would be critical to explore further in both research and practice on men's participation in interventions. Furthermore, the notion of group cohesiveness as a therapeutic factor of groups does not exclude but rather values the presence and processing of conflict (Yalom, 1995). As such, this will be discussed further as a study limitation and in future practice recommendations, but bears mentioning here as an aspect of growth-fostering relationships that did not emerge in the findings.

That these themes of empathic validation, mutual connection, space to process cultural dynamics, and feeling a strengthened resolve to continue "breaking out of the man box" arose out of men's responses makes a strong case in support of the relevance of relational-cultural theory's ideas for men's lives. A concrete conclusion that can be drawn from these findings is that men experienced growth-fostering relationships with other men in group, and furthermore, that such growth-fostering relationships in and of themselves represent a healing, empowering experience in light of how many men were socialized. This fits well with existing literature, as relational-cultural theorists saw their work as affirming women's experiences in a patriarchal field, but applying to human health and development in general due to how gender roles harm men (Frey, 2013; Jordan, 2017). More specifically, the voices of men in this study offer a window into how the qualities of growth-fostering relationships (e.g., validating empathy, mutual connection, empowerment) were experienced as a healthier relational experience that affirms and fosters what has been disavowed through hegemonic socialization (e.g., emotional vulnerability, desires for connection, compassion; Chu, 2014; Way et al., 2014).

The elements of connection men described as existing between group members, invoking aspects of growth-fostering relationships and therapeutic factors in groups, lends empirical support for a prominent theme in the literature, that supportive relationships are what boys and men need in order to resist harmful masculine norms (Chu & Gilligan, 2019; Reichert, 2019; Way, 2011; Way, 2019). Additionally, men in this study elaborated on this idea by explaining how such relationships, when existing with other men who could have expected conformity, can create a unique dynamic that may be healing or even liberating. For men who are open to the process of questioning and redefining their own sense of what masculinity means, universality and solidarity appear essential: interacting with one another is an integral part of the process for men that scholars advocate for (Adams & Frauenheim, 2020; Levant, 1992; hooks, 2004).

Research Question 2: Connection Fosters Men's Insight and Growth

The second research question sought to understand how men's experiences of the group dynamics shaped any change or growth men felt in themselves, specifically pertaining to what living out healthy masculinity meant in their lives. Across the areas of insight that men reflected on and the changes they were in the process of making in their personal lives outside of group, findings broadly indicate that men viewed these changes as not occurring in isolation, but as enabled by their experience in the group. These next summarized findings can be viewed as examples of the "growth" that emerged through growth-fostering relationships for participants.

Findings in the second cluster focused on how men described group as an opportunity to "look inward." In various ways, such as tracing the lineage of masculine norms in their family history or reflecting on their values and desires when it comes to male friendships, participants agreed that hearing about other men's experiences helped them more get in touch with their own. Hearing about others' past relationships, for example, served as an invitation for some men to realize times they had spoken to women in an objectifying manner, or to consider how partners may have experienced their behavior (e.g., yelling as the automatic way to address conflict, or dismissing a partner's feelings). This insight-through-relationships dynamic appears similar to the therapeutic condition of interpersonal learning, in which the interactions between members serves as the primary catalyst for individual growth. Men also touched upon the diversity of the group as a source of insight – for example, most of the White participants felt they had learned about both others and their own cultural identities through group conversation. Regarding racial identity and racism, some White men reflected on an increased awareness of their own racial privilege from having conversations about masculinity and White supremacy with a group diverse across race. This process of insight through cross-cultural dialogue replicates a similar finding by Provence et al. (2014), which found a similar dynamic across men's sexual orientation

in a process group. It is also indicative of what occurs in Lee Mun Wah's film *The Color of Fear,* in which a group of men of various racial identities process and grapple with the topic of race. Absent from findings here, as mentioned above, was the interpersonal conflict that men in the film worked through.

Men also described their growth as easier together than it would have been alone or in isolation, again adding support for the presence of universality in the group. This was evident to them in three particular areas of insight, regarding their self-criticism, their definitions of masculinity, and their overall learning process. Echoing literature on how the expectations of masculine socialization become internalized in the form of shame and self-criticism (e.g., strict body image and muscularity, being "strong" or "man enough," living up to the expectations of success or being a provider, strong dislike for oneself, even suicidality; Booth et al., 2019; McDermott et al., 2019; Parent & Moradi, 2011), men in the group found themselves working to reduce their negative self-talk. Many men found their bonds with one another, built around the rejection of hypermasculine expectations, helped to lessen expectations they still held themselves to. In another example, two men found themselves grappling with the internal voice that they "shouldn't be so queer" in front of other men, and once enough trust in others was built, they could feel more themselves in group. Another finding that highlights this insight-through-relationships dynamic was that men felt supported by the group in embracing different definitions of masculinity that felt healthier and more flexible to them. This echoed a similar finding in Di Bianca et al.'s (2021) study on college men's peer-mentoring groups, in which there was a "strength in numbers." That is to say, when other men are willing to explore alternative ways to be a man, it offers a kind of validation, permission, or safety to do so as well. This, perhaps, extends group theory into a specific cultural context of masculinity: universality is

not only therapeutic, but is an essential response to the shaming that boys and men experience if they dare to question the rules they are taught.

As the findings make clear, not all men held one exact definition of masculinity, but many of them touched on themes like authenticity, compassion, and an openness to what is good for them and others. On a similar note, men ascribed a similar dynamic to their general learning as men about feminism, masculinity, and politics, with one man keenly observing that "learning can be a lonely process," but that doing so in a group was energizing, compared to developing a feminist identity as a man in isolation – again, referencing a possible example of interpersonal learning and the altruistic potential of giving and receiving knowledge, feedback, support, and suggestions. In these ways, men described the group as a community that sparked their thinking and learning, and decreased their feeling of isolation in doing so as men.

In the third cluster of findings, men spoke to how insights they developed through group translated into their close relationships outside of the group – the relational and behavioral parts of their growth. Again indicative of a relational-cultural theme, the desire for more connection that comes from experiencing the energy of growth-fostering relationships (Jordan, 2017), men traced their experience in group to the kinds of relationships they sought in their personal lives but typically did not have. Notably, in light of a wealth of research on men's underutilization of mental health services as well as lower social support networks (APA, 2018), this included choosing to see a psychotherapist and leaning on male friends for support. In addition to this shift, some men also used the group to process changes aspire to make in the future, such as speaking up when a male friend says something sexist or racist. However, most of the content in this cluster focused on how men were striving to have a different relational presence with others. Men's definitions of what healthy masculinity meant for them were not confined to them as individuals, but as men saw it, translated into their efforts to be more emotionally available as

partners, and more intentional about the role they play as parents or role models in general.

Having experienced the influence of other men modelling healthier, more flexible masculinity,

many men saw their role as to "pay it forward" and set positive examples to other boys and men.

Many have argued for positive effects of close relationships (Chu & Gilligan, 2019;

Coutinho et al., 2019; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017; Reichert, 2019; Way, 2011), with

empirical support for their positive effects on men's well-being (Di Bianca & Mahalik, under

review). Way et al., (2014), for example, argued that relationships supporting boys' emotional

vulnerability, desire for intimacy, and capacities for compassion and nonviolence were necessary

to address their mental health challenges, increased social isolation, and harmful behaviors.

These findings of insights and shifts in men's close relationships were not presented by men as

"caused" only by the group, as if men had never reflected upon these issues before. Rather, men

saw the group as a helpful space to continue that growth and exploration. This distinction is

important, and is discussed further in the limitations section: insight and relational shifts were

enabled and promoted by the group, a space in which men had community that fostered their

development, a central tenet of RCT (Jordan, 2017). In this sense, the findings pertaining to the

second research question can be understood as a kind of growth that occurs through connection.

Research Question III: Men's Groups as Spaces to Empower Change-Agents

The third research question aimed to understand how men's experiences of the group's

interpersonal dynamics may have shaped their efforts in promoting healthy masculinities in

others and in their communities. Findings pertaining to this last question were focused on how

men described the group as a space that supported and left them feeling more "empowered" to

participate in forms of social action, such as prevention and activism. Men's reflections here did

not present their experience in terms of causality, but described group as a space that supported

and enabled them to engage in social action outside of the group. Participants' reflections on how

they developed insights also carried into this cluster of findings, such as the connection between this self-understanding and men's motivation to engage in activism. Furthermore, men described the group as a supportive structure for the challenges they encounter as men while engaging in social action, whether it be informally in their conversations with other men or in a professional role, such as prevention programming or running workshops for younger men. Here, the group was seen as playing an indirect but still important role in enabling the modelling or teaching that men tried to do with other people. This extension of in-group experiences to men's lives outside of group resembles a stage of Sternbach's (2001) relational group model for men where attention turns to how men will interact differently with others; this also overlaps with Yalom's (1995) model of therapeutic factors in which group members learn new socializing techniques and carry behavior they have had modelled to them in group into other spaces. The language one man used to connect this men's group with other spaces was that "a space for his own work" was helpful, perhaps in a similar way that the role of supervision or even individual psychotherapy would play in supporting a clinician's ability to work effectively with others. Men felt that this gave them the motivation to carry similar conversations into their efforts to promote healthy masculinity in others, such as workshops to facilitate conversations about masculinity, healthy relationships, violence prevention, homophobia, and racism.

While these set of findings will be discussed below within the limitation of not assigning causality to the program, they also represent a promising potential of men's groups as a space of connection that focuses on how men use their power in other relationships or roles, speaking to a core theme of RCT pertaining to social justice and social change (Jordan, 2008; Walker, 2008). Another insight from bell hooks (2000, p. 103) comes to mind:

> The soul of feminist politics is a commitment to ending patriarchal domination of women
>
> and men, girls and boys … Males cannot love themselves in patriarchal culture if their

very self-definition relies on submission to patriarchal rules. When men embrace feminist

thinking and practice, which emphasizes the value of mutual growth and self-

actualization in all relationships, their emotional well-being will be enhanced.

Here, hooks views men's emotional lives, experiences in relationships, and growth as feminists

as intertwined. Men's experience of the group as empowering their social action is indicative of

Vera's (2020) call for prevention interventions to have impacts beyond the individuals who

directly receive it, by helping participants become "change agents" who are then able to make

further changes within their relationships and communities. This finding would seem to respond

well to limitations of masculinity-focused interventions (Dworkin et al., 2019), and specifically

Casey et al.'s (2018) emphasis on how to sustain men's social action beyond the scope of an

intervention. One man in this study touched upon this very theme, saying that he and other men

who had participated in the Circle of Influence program had become a "circle of influencers." A

conclusion from this finding is that the men's group has the potential to not simply promote

change among its participants, but to have "ripple effects" through them and the change they will

go on to make elsewhere. However, the extent to which that change occurs requires additional

research in order to evaluate whether and how participants in men's groups alter the dynamics of

hegemonic masculinity in other environments when they are not surrounded by supportive men.

Implications for Program Evaluation: Revisiting the Empirical Literature

This study expands on the gap in the masculinities research focused on interventions

(Wong & Horn, 2016) and adds empirical data to the literature on interpersonal process with men

that remains conceptual or anecdotal in nature (Adams & Frauenheim, 2020; Rabinowitz, 2019;

Sternbach, 2001). However, it also builds on existing empirical studies of masculinity-focused

interventions discussed in the literature review, both quantitative and qualitative. Starting with

the emphasis this study's findings placed on interpersonal connection between group members,

this study adds to previous work that has underscored the role of social support for men's health (McKenzie et al., 2018), specifically regarding Heisel et al.'s (2020) finding that aging men who participated in a men's group focused on their life transitions experienced both less loneliness and reported a lower risk of suicide. Therefore, this study expands a finding in extant research that, in the words of RCT, "the relationship is the intervention" when group members connect.

The elements of growth-fostering relationships identified by participants in this study also overlap with the qualitative literature on men's groups. For example, in Provence et al.'s (2014) findings, participants felt the interactions between group members were a source of insight, growth, or catharsis, such as reduced shame and decreased internalized homophobia. The current study supports the need for men's groups to address not only shared experiences around gender and masculinity as the singular dimension of an intervention, but the differing dimensions of identity between members including but not limited to sexual orientation, particularly given a gap in gender-based violence prevention programming focused on sexual and gender diversity (Crooks et al., 2019). Furthermore, this study's emphasis on men's groups as a space for mutual mentorship and positive role modelling with which to emulate healthy examples to boys and men outside of group echoes a theme found in qualitative studies on mentoring groups, namely Namy et al.'s (2015) study with high school boys and Di Bianca et al.'s (2021) study with college men. In both, participants valued having male figures to learn from, talk with, and follow the example of. This offers a concrete implication for future empirical work: it is not only the "message" that matters, but the "messenger." When masculine socialization is taught by role models, authority figures, and media messengers that hold sway in boys' and men's lives, it follows that efforts to convey healthy messages would also benefit from a mentoring and role modelling approach. This study, however, had the added benefit of representing a tenet of the Men-Mentoring-Men model (M3; Adams & Frauenheim, 2020): men could both receive and give mentorship, feeling as

though they were not only "dependent" or "being the only one who needed help," but that it was a mutual, collective process, discussed below as another strength of group work (Jordan, 2018).

Turning to quantitative studies on masculinity-focused interventions, it is important to bear in mind that this study was process-focused, rather than an outcome-focused program evaluation. That being said, when we consider the limitations of those quantitative studies, these qualitative findings lend a unique perspective. For example, studies on the ManKind Project (Burke et al., 2010), Stepping Stones and Changing Futures (Gibbs et al., 2018, 2020), the WiseGuyz healthy relationships workshop (Exner-Cortens et al., 2019a) and Manhood 2.0 (Abebe et al., 2018) all cited positive attitude changes among participants after the programs, including lower depression scores, higher perceived social support, attitudes more consistent with healthy friendships and intimate relationships, and even lower adherence to masculine social norms. On one hand, this present study suggests that such desirable outcomes in group interventions may be best promoted interpersonally. On the other, the limitations of this study discussed below may bring light to the limitations shared by other interventions. More specifically, these studies above are subject to self-report as well as the potential disconnect between attitude and behavior change (Dworkin et al., 2019), and one program even found that the pressure to conform in the eyes of other participants was a barrier to change (Gibbs et al., 2020). As new "gender-transformative" violence prevention programs for boys and men are being piloted and evaluated in the U.S. (e.g., Kato-Wallace et al., 2019), quantitative studies that are not able to employ a randomized control trial (e.g., any that men self-select into, with no feasible comparison group) should consider how to address the social barriers to their participants engaging in the program, as well as ways in which they can design their programs to be focused more on community impact than individual attitude change (Casey et al., 2018), to be discussed further below.

Implications for Theory: Bridging Interpersonal Theory and Practice

Despite these limitations, this study represents a significant extension of existing research as an in-depth exploration of how the interpersonal process can be a central intervention in and of itself in men's groups programs focused on healthy masculinities. Prior studies have examined quantitative outcomes of interest, such as depression or social support (Burke et al., 2010), but did not account for how those changes came about through the lens of participants' experiences. Studies from a qualitative approach pointed to the importance of the interpersonal dimension of men's groups as spaces that the policing of masculinity can either be refuted or replicated (e.g., Gibbs et al., 2018), invoking theoretical work on the rationale for masculinity as a subject that is well-suited for an interpersonal process group (Rabinowitz, 2019; Sternbach, 2001). From this perspective, men's groups are about more than just the "content covered," and draw their power from the "process" between members – the interpersonal experience in which that content can be more effectively delivered. The primary gap in the research this study sought to address was in program evaluations of masculinity-focused interventions at the group or community level, specifically aiming to develop a better understanding of how men become or stay engaged. The context of social pressure to remain in conformity to social norms (Mahalik et al., 2003; Precopio & Ramsey, 2017; Reigeluth & Addis, 2016; 2021) was also cited as a potential barrier to participants of programs to prevent men's violence (Casey et al., 2018; Gibbs et al., 2018). Many signs pointed to the importance of the interpersonal process, clearly supported by this study as not only a barrier, but also a potential path to rewriting the rules of masculinity.

Henry David Thoreau wrote that "the mass of men live lives of quiet desperation," but these findings reframe that quiet-ness as a sociocultural mandate instead of a biological nature. Relational-cultural theory's critique of "the separate self" – the mainstream Western, patriarchal notion that developing towards not needing connection with others is a sign of strength and

maturity (Jordan, 2017; Miller & Stiver, 1997) – is evident in masculine social norms, as well. The gendered expectations to "take it like a man," "tough it out," or even "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" can pressure men away from connection that they may actually want. The voices of men in this study, therefore, lend credence to the malleability of masculinity and gender as socially constructed (Addis, 2016; Gilligan, 1992; Mahalik et al., 2003; Pleck, 1995), as well as for Way's (2011) framing the crisis of masculinity as a "crisis of connection" that places immense emphasis on boys' and men's experiences within interpersonal relationships and the extent to which those relationships enforce or push back on cultural norms of masculinity. Consider the relational "punch" that hegemonic masculine socialization packs (both literally and figuratively). It is a process where boys' and men's "social worth" in the eyes of others (Chu & Gilligan, 2019) is assigned by how well they live up to an unrealistic cultural ideal that demands they cut off parts of the emotional parts of their human self (hooks, 2004). Therefore, it makes sense that the antidote to such disconnections (from oneself, from others) must also carry an interpersonal power, but of a different kind. Men's voices in this study were consistent with RCT: relationships themselves can be the intervention, specifically growth-fostering relationships of empathy, mutuality, empowerment, and space to process the presence of controlling cultural images and identities of both people in the relationship (Frey, 2013; Jordan, 20017; Miller, 2008a). Sternbach's (2001, p. 67) point warrants revisiting:

> Growth becomes anchored in lived experience. Having found intrinsic satisfaction in the immediate, intimate subjectivity of the group, men can utilize these modes in the family, the job, the community and friendships. … Without such an explicit focus, men in the groups will often feel the outside structures are too forbidding and impenetrable for them to navigate in new ways … When they were boys and suffered hurts and pain, most men have been told to grimace and suffer in stoical silence … This offers further opportunity,

beyond the give and take within the group, for men to share their wounds, own their

feelings, and receive support from others. For many men this is a unique experience.

The findings in this study offer empirical support, in the form of how men themselves felt in and

after participating in a men's group, for this relational-cultural conceptualization of interventions

focused on masculinity. A wealth of prior research has documented the difficulty in engaging

men in mental health care as well as social change efforts, citing an array of barriers and stigmas

that may prevent individual participation that are rooted in what other people will think of them

if men deviate from what society expects from them (Mahalik & Di Bianca, 2021; Precopio &

Ramsey, 2017; Vogel et al., 2011). Given what we know about these barriers, also extensively

documented by the APA (2018), the interventions called for in the new guidelines would do well

to consider not only the content they wish to engage men around (e.g., promoting healthy social

norms surrounding mental health, interpersonal relationships, targeting the norms of emotional

control and self-reliance), but primarily how the dynamics within a group or workshop will serve

or hinder that goal. Returning to Barker's (2020) argument in the introduction, helping men

embrace healthier masculinities must involve changing the social structures surrounding them –

in this case, creating a space that is less threatening in terms of policing masculinity (Reigeluth

& Addis, 2016) and offers corrective, healing relational encounters that counter the lessons that

boys and men should be unemotional, hyper-independent, and dominate others (Chu, 2014).

Not only do these findings offer support for the application of relational-cultural theory to

working with boys and men, but also that groups represent a unique setting in which men can

find growth-fostering connection and experiences. Men's groups, whether they are facilitated by

a mental health professional or not, can offer "therapeutic experiences in non-therapeutic spaces"

(Davies et al., 2010). As such, Yalom's (1995) model of therapeutic factors in group therapy can

be examined as a possible structure for the kind of spaces that masculinity-focused interventions

might seek to create between members. Findings in this study would support that approach: men's reflections indicated that the experienced a sense of universality and instillation of hope (by finding shared experience with other men when they had previously struggled or questioned alone), catharsis and corrective emotional experience (by not only expressing their true feelings and selves, but doing so in front of other men and experiencing their empathy and support in contrast to shaming or invalidation they had been socialized to expect), interpersonal learning (in which their connections with one another led to new understandings and attempts to live out their values) and an altruistic dynamic wanting to model the same affirming and mentoring presence to other boys and men outside of the group. There is considerable overlap between these factors and the elements of growth-fostering relationships (e.g., mutuality, empathy, empowerment), but this need not be seen as mutually exclusive: groups are a setting in which such connections can occur (Jordan, 2018). And yet, the findings did not offer clear endorsement of other factors in group psychotherapy theory, namely an explicit discussion of existential factors or the specific element of group cohesiveness that allows for conflict and rupture to be openly expressed, processed, and resolved (mirroring the relational-cultural emphasis on working through tension and differences that arise; Sternbach, 2001). As will be discussed below, these theoretically-based factors that were un-named in men's reflections in this study would be an important theme for future group facilitation and research to focus on.

This study suggests that helping men to adopt healthier masculinities may need to be built on the interpersonal foundation of experiencing connections and communities that foster them. By bridging a gap on empirical knowledge of the interpersonal process in such programs, this study expands on the application of theoretical group models to the specific cultural context of men and masculinities work, specifically Rabinowitz' (2019) use of Yalom and Leszcz' (2005) group psychotherapy model and Sternbach's (2001) use of relational-cultural theory. More

specifically, the findings regarding how men experienced their connection with one another

offers empirical support for the theoretical framework of this study, the idea that healthy

masculinities develop through growth-fostering connection (Di Bianca & Mahalik, 2022). This is

anchored in the relational-cultural argument of change and healing: in the context of close

relationships, the detrimental effects of controlling images can become weakened, and people

can continue becoming their authentic selves (Miller, 2008a). To that point, this study suggests

that engaging men at the group level offers the advantages of meeting a fundamental human need

that has been often disavowed for many of them, and leveraging a counter-cultural interpersonal

experience in their relationships with one another to disarm these gendered restrictions. This

centrality of the interpersonal process presents a springboard for future masculinities work.

Study Limitations

These findings should be understood within the context of the study's limitations, starting

first and foremost with the consideration of self-selection. All participants who were interviewed,

as with all men in the program, joined the *Circle of Influence* men's group on a voluntary basis, a

fact with significant implications for causality and generalizability of the findings to other men.

A Call to Men recruits participants for the program through social media as well as from their

various other programming (e.g., online seminars, workshops with schools and athletic teams),

and the majority of men interviewed here indicated that they sought a men's group as a way to

support or continue their personal growth and activism. Therefore, it is safe to assume that all

men who joined this men's group *wanted* to do so, and were already invested to at least some

degree in conversations about healthy masculinities. These were not men who, by the time of

their participation in the group, "needed convincing" that hegemonic masculine socialization was

problematic or worth talking about with other men; many if not all of them already held that

insight, and believed in the mission of the program. Findings suggest that participants leave the group empowered to engage other men, but further research is needed on such "ripple effects."

In keeping with a study design of a process-focused study and not a pre-post outcome evaluation, these findings should not be interpreted as carrying a claim of causality. Specifically, the findings do not support argue that the healthier definitions of masculinity that men described, for example, was a "result" of the program only, or to claim that any man who joins the program would express the same sentiments or grow in the same ways regardless of where he is in his own learning (or un-learning) of masculinity – put simply, this program should not be seen as one that can "convert men from toxic to healthy" (a goal that seems to underlie much public conversation on masculinity). In summary, the findings of this study offer a compelling portrait of what *can* happen in relationships and groups when men come together for these conversations, but not a thorough explanation of how men may take those first steps of growth – of "showing up" – which the men in this study were already in the process of doing.

While the diversity of the sample across race and sexual orientation is noted as a strength of the study in light of the common limitation that marginalized men's perspectives are under-represented in research as well, the makeup of the sample still warrants consideration. As noted previously, this group of men self-reported as generally more politically progressive, more highly educated, and less religious (specifically, less Christian) when compared the general male population in the United States. As such, the experiences of the men interviewed in this study may differ drastically from those of other men, starting with simply their willingness to be a part of a group that is directly counter-cultural to hegemonic masculine socialization that runs mainstream in the U.S. and elsewhere. This is particularly significant in light of the literature on the integral role of traditional gender roles in White, working-class, conservative and religious communities in the United States (Katz, 2017; Kimmel, 2013; Sexton, 2019). Therefore, as more

than one participant voiced, men who need to be a part of these conversations about masculinity

are not generally in the A Call to Men's audience, and thus not represented in these findings. To

be clear, this does not refer only to the smaller group of men who commit violence (Levant &

Pryor, 2020), but also to the many men in the U.S. who ascribe to traditional masculine social

norms, would not describe themselves as "toxic" or "unhealthy" as men nor as "feminist" or

"progressive," yet might still be receptive to entering the conversation.

On this note, it is also crucial to recognize that the question itself of "what it means to be

a man" carries different meaning, risk, and implications for men based on their other identities

and social locations (Griffith, 2022; Liang, 2022; Mahalik & Di Bianca, 2022; Rogers, 2022).

For example, the participant in this study who identified as Native American spoke from the

perspective of unlearning certain masculine norms while also feeling like he was in a position to

teach other men about relating to themselves and their surroundings in ways that have been

systematically erased throughout the process of colonization. While the recruitment strategy

described in Chapter 3 of collaborating with trusted community partners to reach a diverse group

of men (see Lyons et al., 2013) was successful in some ways, it was limited in others, with the

under-representation of trans men ($n = 1$) as a clear example. Therefore, it should be clearly

stated that the lived experience of many men, such as trans men, and any whose voice or

existence has been (and continues to be) historically silenced and persecuted, were not fully

represented here. This also includes men living in economic conditions that prevent them from

participating in a men's group that costs both time and money.

On a similar note, caution should be exercised when making comparisons to other group

programs for men. For example, this program differs significantly from groups that are primarily

focused on domestic violence prevention, engaging men who are at high-risk or already have a

history of domestic violence (Schrock & Padavic, 2007). While not a focus of this group nor this

study, it should be made clear that intervening for men with a history of violence and preventing

future violence was not a focus of the intervention or a conclusion to be drawn from the findings,

given how much attention was paid in the literature review to socialization and men's violence

(e.g., Bell & Baylis, 2015; Levant & Pryor, 2020). From another angle, too, groups play a role in

the men's rights movement, with a focus on "taking back power that feminism has stolen from

men." Such groups, even as they likely rely upon a contorted version of the relational dynamics

to draw men in, carry a very different context of motivation, culture, and mission (Kivel, 1998).

For these reasons, these findings should not be seen as applying to "all men" irrespective of their

cultural, political, or individual relationship with masculinity issues, nor to "all men's groups,"

As a qualitative study, however, such broad generalizability from a small sample is not seen as a

goal; rather, the findings should be interpreted as a window into these men's experiences, and a

testament to what is possible if men come together willing to question the rules of socialization.

At the same time, conclusions drawn from the limitation of self-selection should not be

made in ways that discount the voices of the men interviewed here, or as a disqualification of the

trustworthiness and validity of the findings. While it is common for quantitative intervention or

program evaluation studies that do not employ the design of random assignment to conditions of

intervention and a control or comparison group to be questioned, this was a process-oriented

study, not an outcome-focused study. Its purpose was to better understand men's experiences in

an intervention, rather than to empirically measure the significance (or insignificance) of changes

before and after participation. While the questioning of who this program does and does not

reach is of vital importance to framing its impact, the reality of self-selection does not minimize

the understanding drawn from the experiences of the men interviewed and their relationships

with one another in the men's group. Furthermore, the aim of this study was to explore men's

subjective experiences in a men's group: the findings, naturally, are subjective and will not speak

to the experience of all other men. However, this should not be assigned a lack of credibility because they are not statistically significant. On the contrary, the analytic steps taken by the research team (e.g., coding collaboratively, reflexivity and habitually checking for over-interpretations, revisiting the original data, member checking, interviewing until saturation), were done in order to maximize the trustworthiness that the findings accurately reflected what men were expressing. This qualitative approach revealed, in men's own words, how their relationships with one another can be a counter-cultural opposition to hegemonic masculinity – an invaluable insight for the intervention field. As such, I would caution the reader against dismissing the empirical value of the findings based on the grounds that men chose to be in the program, or that changes they described cannot be solely attributed to the intervention.

Another area of limitations worth noting are the gaps in the findings themselves, in other words, what was *not* said in the interviews. All participants were asked the same set of questions (see Appendix A), and through the use of memo writing during all interviews, I was able to notice patterns where participants had less to say, seemed ambivalent to express, or at times had nothing at all to comment on. These subjects included negative experiences in the program and constructive feedback for the program, specifically when it came to the exploration of conflict, tension, disagreement and difference. I must be mindful of imposing my own subjectivity as a researcher, which I would certainly be doing if I were to make assumptions about what men could have said or wanted to say but did not. With this in mind, I believe this area of what was not said in the interviews may potentially represent an unanswered question, an unexplored area. Select reflections from some participants seem to suggest that they suspected the presence of conflict or tension – that not all men were on the same page), but that the group moved along as if they were. Paired with the processing of conflict as a missing element of growth-fostering relationships that emerged from the findings, the findings of this study do not adequately address

ways in which men experienced, worried about experiencing, or wished there could have been more conversation around. In light of the highly socially and politically charged topics that are discussed in the program, as well as the organization's clear position (see A Call to Men on Instagram), future research would do well to consider how to engage men who are interested or receptive, but feel uncertain, curious, or conflicted about the content being discussed. As is discussed further below, interrogating the audiences reached and not reached by men's groups is critical for engaging more men across the ideological, political spectrum, and address the barrier to participation that men are only welcome in the healthy masculinity conversation if they already have all the right answers or hold all the right views.

Lastly, the possible influences of my own identities and positionality on what men felt more or less comfortable sharing with me in their interviews warrants consideration. Every man interviewed in this project was interviewed by me – a White, cisgender, heterosexual man who is near the completion of a doctoral degree. My subjective experience of the interviews was that all men were enthusiastic to share about their lives with me, and that they welcomed the chance to talk with another man about the questions I asked. Still, while some of these identities as well as others, such as my relationship with religion or politics, and my socioeconomic history, may be less visible, it is worth noting the many reasons that other men may have felt less comfortable sharing with me based on what they knew and could observe about me. For example, it is possible that men whom I do not share a particular identity with (e.g., men of color, gay men, trans men) may wonder if I will "get it" if they share about their experience, or that they may have good reason to expect I would become defensive or even combative. On another note, I made a consistent effort to inform participants that I do not work for A Call to Men, it is possible that some of them may have wished to portray the program in a positive light. These possible limitations are worth considering in order to recognize that the findings summarized here are

likely not the "entire story," and that despite my own and my research team's best efforts to engage in constant self-examination around how we were interpreting the interviews, my clinical training teaches me that there is likely much more that was not said in the interviews themselves.

Future Directions in Practice, Social Change, and Research

In conclusion, this study found that the thirteen men who were interviewed experienced the *Circle of Influence* men's group as a space in which they benefitted from relational dynamics that countered those of hegemonic masculine socialization, enabling them to develop insights about their lives as men, make changes in how they show up in close relationships, and feel empowered to participate in social action. Much of the literature on masculine socialization and men's issues attends, appropriately so, to the specific sociocultural norms (e.g., emotional control, self-reliance, winning, violence; primacy of work, power over women, heterosexual self-presentation; Mahalik et al., 2003) as targets of change to promote boys' and men's healthy development. Despite political efforts to frame the APA guidelines (2018) as "man-hating," this was a key takeaway of the research they synthesized: the crisis of masculinity does not come from being a boy or a man, but comes when boys and men feel they must stay in lockstep with a specific set of rules that are dehumanizing or something that harms their development as fully human persons (clean this up for your own thoughts). However, a relational-cultural perspective shows that changing these rules requires engaging with the interpersonal dynamics that shape and maintain them. As both precarious manhood theory and relational-cultural theory recognize so clearly, our human longing to be in relationship with one another means that how others see us as acceptably or unacceptably measuring up to cultural norms can wield great power over boys and men. In the words of bell hooks, "learning to wear a mask is the first lesson of patriarchal masculinity that a boy learns" (2004, p. 153). A mask is work for others to see what it presents, and to keep from their sight the true face underneath. Presciently, hooks also wrote that

taking off the "mask" of masculinity requires being seen and heard, as the men in this study gave

voice to. She wrote:

> To create loving men, we must love males. we must love males. Loving maleness is
>
> different from praising and rewarding males for living up to sexist-defined notions of
>
> male identity. Caring about men because of what they do for us is not the same as loving
>
> males for simply being. When we love maleness, we extend our love whether males are
>
> performing or not. … In an anti-patriarchal culture males do not have to prove their value
>
> and worth. They know from birth that simply being gives them value, the right to be
>
> cherished and loved. (2004, p. #).

This "we," however, is not exclusive to women, as the burden of men's emotional expression has

so often exclusively fallen upon. Towards the end of hooks' (2004) book, *The Will to Change:*

Men, Masculinity, and Love, the need for spaces for men to come together is clearly stated:

> When men learn to affirm themselves and others, giving this soul care, then they are on
>
> the path to wholeness. When men are able to do little acts of mercy, they can be in
>
> communion with others without the need to dominate… The work of male relational
>
> recovery, of reconnection, of forming intimacy and making community can never be
>
> done alone… Healing does not take place in isolation" (pp. 166; 187-188).

The voices of men in this study bear out hooks' visions, as they described a space where they

affirmed and were affirmed by one another in their growth into healthy ways of being men. This

relational connection that can happen in men's groups, then, is not a tangential bonus of such

interventions, but the central catalyst. Creating spaces to alter the cultural norms in the mask of

masculinity without attending to the experiences of connection and disconnection that have and

continue to condition boys and men to adhere to them would be akin to trying to stop heat waves

by making lots of ice cubes instead of reducing carbon emissions. This issue is ecological, rooted in lived experience of boys' and men's relationships. The field's interventions must be as well.

The theoretical conclusions of this study are not only in general support of relational-cultural theory and its relevance in men's gendered lives, but are an argument for using the theory's guiding principles to inform the development and facilitation of masculinity-focused interventions. The ideas voiced by men in this study highlight the need for interventions to exist within communities by targeting men's social circles, and not only at the individual level (i.e., beyond a medical model), because in group settings, the dynamics of hegemonic masculine socialization can be counteracted by growth-fostering relationships. This final section discusses ways to translate the theoretical conclusions of the findings into practice, as well as listening to direct feedback men offered for the program's development involving issues of conflict and tension, facilitation, and accessibility. These implications are discussed as they pertain to a) developing and facilitating interventions, b) considering the role of men's groups in violence prevention and social change, and c) directions for future research.

Recommendations for Facilitating Masculinity-Focused Interventions

This study offers empirical support to incorporate relational-cultural tenets into programs for prevention, education, health promotion, and social change with boys and men that the APA (2018) calls for. This study offers clear direction for masculinity-focused interventions to adopt a process-focused approach in which the relational experience between participants is seen not only as of equal importance to the content of an intervention, but a necessary context in which to deliver it. Recall Chu and Gilligan's (2019) point that boys and men learn their "social worth" depends upon how well they live up to the standards of masculinity, especially in light of new developments in interpersonal neurobiology. Shame and rejection register as pain in the brain, we are neurobiologically "hardwired" to seek connection, and our experiences in relationships –

for better or worse – have a conditioning effect on our thoughts, feelings, and behavior (Banks &

Hirshmann, 2016; Coutinho et al., 2019). When we consider the everyday presence and influence

of group settings in men's lives, ranging from "locker room talk" and peer circles to men's rights

groups and extremist movements, it is evident that interventions seeking to promote a healthy,

prosocial masculinity (Eliot, 2015) need to offer an equally if not more powerful relational

experience. Doing so opens the possibility for groups to address dynamics of past and present

socialization, as they may operate as barriers to men's engagement around program content (e.g.,

conversation about healthy relationships, homophobia, mental health care). For example, men

may have been taught by their experiences with others that if they have conversations about

feminism, or about their feelings, they will be judged and shamed by others as less of a man

(Gibbs et al., 2018; Precopio & Ramsey, 2017). Attending first and foremost to the dynamics of

what it means as men to talk about such taboo topics, specifically in the presence of other men,

would lay the groundwork for mutual connection with which participants can then better engage

in intervention content with less hypervigilance of having their "man card revoked." In this way,

a relational-cultural and group approach to interventions serves to address the salience of

precarious manhood and the policing of masculinity as it occurs in participants' lives and could

occur between them during programs (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016; Vandello & Bosson, 2013).

Programs focusing only on content and not interpersonal process may overlook such barriers.

    Before reviewing recommendations for group facilitation, it is worth noting men's groups

in the literature vary greatly in this regard. While this study's group was run by professional staff

at A Call to Men with expertise in violence prevention with men, other are facilitated by mental

health professionals as group therapy or workshops (e.g., Davies et al., 2010; Provence et al.,

2014), some are peer-led without any professional staff present (Di Bianca et al., 2021; Namy et

al., 2015), and others operate in communities (Hansen-Bundy, 2019; Yao, 2019). It may even be

critical to conduct such interventions through outreach efforts or community partnerships that "meet men where they are" instead of expecting them to self-select into programs run by mental health professionals. Such a variety of engagement efforts might help to address the persistence of stigma around men's help-seeking (Mahalik & Di Bianca, 2021), the social cost of progressive stances on gender (Precopio & Ramsey, 2017), and that men may be more open to "therapeutic experiences in non-therapeutic spaces" (Davies et al., 2010; Shen-Miller et al., 2012). While future research could compare the advantages of each model, these recommendations are offered such that they could be applied by mental health professionals or trained community members.

Interventions such as those aiming to reduce men's violence or improve mental health outcomes may operate out of an understandable pressure to see results or have group sessions be driven by skills that men can use to cope with distress differently. However, in Jordan's (2018) words, "programs or groups called 'self-help' usually involve a high degree of mutual help" (p. 70), an argument to recognize the bidirectional support that group members show and receive in moments of vulnerability when they are in mutual connection. While existing programs appear to take a relational approach (see Adams & Frauenheim, 2020; Burke et al., 2010; Davies et al., 2010; Di Bianca et al., 2021; Gibbs et al., 2018; Namy et al., 2015), the findings of this study add more specificity to what this may look like in practice. Consistent with Sternbach's (2001) model of the relational stages of growth in a men's group, the first priority must be establishing a sense of safety to be vulnerable and authentic without fear of retaliation. This requires guidelines from a facilitator to introduce, encourage, and model ways of communication other than "prototypical male behaviors designed to establish a one up-one down hierarchy meant to wound or humiliate, … without regard for the feelings and needs of the other, and usually unmediated by reflection or self-awareness" (p. 61). This safety then serves as the foundation for men to build intimate and empathic relationships with one another (and perhaps, with less of a threat to one's masculinity

pertaining to homophobia), entering into vulnerable conversations about men's experiences in which support and guidance is offered mutually (and perhaps, with less of a stigmatizing and shaming threat), and making changes in how one reconstructs masculinity within and outside of the group (Sternbach, 2001). Men's voices in this study validate the importance of a safe and accepting interpersonal space that made more vulnerable, difficult conversations possible.

Building off the foundation of interpersonal safety, two more specific recommendations that stem from the findings of this study, supported by relational-cultural theory, are for program facilitators to work with points of conflict and tension, as well as to attend to differences among men's identities and not only their shared experience around gender. Both Sternbach's (2001) model for men's groups and relational-cultural theory include the working through of conflict and difference as opportunities for growth rather than problems to be avoided or minimized. For example, Sternbach (2001, p. 65) explains that disagreement or conflict:

> …does not imply any cutting off or severing of connection. Instead, it describes that point of maturity where people who care about each other can risk making themselves fully known in their individuality. As such, differentiation is a stage in relational connection. It is also the time when the most powerful growth can take place–when men are open and invite and welcome the perceptions and responses from others as trustworthy sources of wisdom and self-guidance.

The fact that participants in this study noted conflict or disagreement as an unexplored dynamic in the group but one that they felt would have enriched their experience (albeit for different reasons) underscores the importance of men's groups making space for disagreement among members. From a relational-cultural orientation, this process is invaluable and inseparable from the feeling of being seen and known that men in this group were so affected by:

The central relational paradox of honoring the yearning for connection and the protective

movement into disconnection plays out in the tensions between wanting to be known,

understood, and accepted, and the fears, so evident in a group, that one will not find

empathy or acceptance. A group offers ample opportunity for working on acute

disconnections; this builds relational resilience. (Jordan, 2018, p. 98)

As an example, one man felt there were conversations in which it was assumed by the facilitator

that all men were "on the same page" (e.g., the conviction of Derek Chauvin in the case of

George Floyd's murder), but that this participant "held back" feelings which he suspected were

not shared by others (e.g., anger). Others wished sessions had explored how men felt differently

about issues of masculinity and sexuality, suspecting that there were divergences among them.

These examples of wishing to work through difference also raise a recommendation that

comes from another dimension of the findings: that group sessions were not only about gender.

Several men in this study spoke to how other dimensions of their identity, such as race or sexual

orientation, were bound up in the group dynamics, as they were bound up in men's intersectional

lived experiences. Replicating a dynamic in Provence et al.'s (2014) study, gay men in the group

reflected on combatting shaming self-criticism which was linked to internalized homophobia, as

they opened up in a group of mostly heterosexual men. The group was a space not only for talk

about gender, but for White men to reflect on privilege and listen to the experiences of men of

color, and likewise for men of color to feel both identities as recognized and their experiences

validated. It is important to note here that the findings were mixed: men of color named feeling

understood, and at other times said that differences, tensions, and conflicts were left unexplored.

Both findings underscore the need for men's groups to explore differences in identity, culture,

and power between members (Brassel et al., 2020), in order to invite in experiences such as the

"double-bind" of racism and masculinity (hooks, 2003; Liang et al., 2011). Another example of

the positive exchange across men's experiences was age, with younger men learning from the wisdom of the older men in group, who in turn felt fulfilled by having something to offer. From a relational-cultural orientation and echoed in the literature on masculinity-focused interventions (Brush et al., 2019; Davies et al., 2010), men's groups should prioritize an intersectional analysis of power and disempowerment among men and the facilitation of dialogue around both shared experiences of gender socialization and ways in which men's other identities have shaped it in different ways. This echoes the literature on the fact that men's programs must hold the nuance that masculinity work is both about preventing men's violence as well as violence they survived themselves (Brassel, 2020; Brush and Miller, 2019, Davies et al., 2010; Levant & Pryor, 2020).

Men's Groups as Primary Prevention and Countercultural Social Change

The findings of this study were a clear testament to the fact that men's growth is not a completed when they decide they are "on board" with having conversations about masculinity, portraying it as more of a lifelong process that is much more than simply changing one's mind from "con" to "pro," as if one was changing their voter registration. For example, men in this study saw the group as facilitating their ongoing growth and unpacking of internalized masculine norms. Having acknowledged this merit, masculinity-focused interventions must also grapple with the question raised by the limitation of self-selection in this study, which was foreshadowed by participants' reflections. Put more simply, are men's groups (at least, those focused on healthy masculinities) preaching to the choir? Are they really attracting any men who do not already agree with its mission? Without minimizing the impact that a supportive space can have on men's mental health and continued growth, it is worth asking whether this kind of voluntary program are reaching men with whom they claim to be having a more transformative impact on. For example, the program in Di Bianca et al.'s (2021) study reaches approximately one quarter

of the male freshman class at its university – a considerable percentage – yet all those chose to

sign up for a men's program, begging the question of how to reach those who do not sign up.

In our political context, it is also worth remembering that men's groups focused on

healthy masculinity are not the only community attracting boys and men. Kivel's (1998; (p. 246;

252) views on the "men's movement," written almost twenty-five years ago, is prescient:

In the last few years there has been a movement among men to look at ways we have

been hurt by gender roles, have lost our power, and have not been able to find strong

male role models with whom we can identify. Generally, the movement seems to attract

middle-class white men who can afford to pay a fee for a workshop or gathering during

which they can reclaim their maleness. These events use a variety of exercises … to focus

on images of masculinity, personal empowerment, unlearning gender-based training, and

relearning the power of the male experience. The goal seems to be for men to achieve

increased personal growth, self-awareness, and personal power. Is this movement part of

the struggle to end gender roles, inequality, and violence, or is it part of the backlash

against that struggle? … We do need each other as men. We need to trust each other and

work to build a caring community. We need to stop violence among ourselves and those

around us … We don't need a men's movement to achieve those goals. We do need many

more men working with women in the feminist, gay and lesbian liberation, antiracism,

environmental, and peace movements to develop alternatives to violence.

The conceptual basis reviewed in the literature saw men's groups as part of the social change

process (Davies et al., 2010; Kivel, 1998; Rabinowitz, 2019), with Sternbach (2001) framing a

reconstructed, healthy sense of masculinity as addressing harmful ways that "unreconstructed

masculinity manifests" in power-over behaviors of violence and oppression. When we consider

the limitation of self-selection into such programs, as well as the social, cultural, and political

incentives men are receiving to double down on traditional masculinity that seems to be used as a tool for conservative, White masculinity (Capehart, 2022), Kivel's argument resonates as vital. A caring community in which men are able to need each other – to connect, support each other, learn from each other, grow together – is essential in bringing more men into social justice work. And yet, it is a reality that the threat to a man's social status posed by joining such a community, whether it be gendered, racial, political, remains a strong and salient deterring factor today (Precopio & Ramsey, 2017). Therefore, interventions may benefit from an integration of creating "therapeutic experiences in non-therapeutic spaces" (Davies et al., 2010) as well as empowering men who do join interventions to interact with others outside of the group. This may include not only being a "change-agent" (Vera, 2020) who can carry their group learning into their presence with others in both therapeutic and challenging ways, but also learning how to manage others' criticisms effectively and to not interpret them as a reflection of one's own inadequacy as a man.

Overall, men's reflections in study that present the group as enabling their insights, changes in relationship, and participation in social action uplifts the importance of programs that equip and empower men in their communities that the intervention will not. In addition to finding ways to engage more men in interventions to redefine masculinity as current research is already undertaking (Kato-Wallace et al., 2019), we should consider the promise of a paradigm expansion to what Vera (2020) argues for in interventions that help participants become "change agents" to create "ripple effects" in others' lives and communities even if the intervention itself never reaches them. This calls for a shift from targeting individuals to targeting social circles and communities, which requires that we reconsider the role men's social circles play in social problems that interventions target. Consider the new report from the organization *It's On Us* (Zenteno et al., 2022), which surveyed male college students across the U.S. and issued a series of recommendations for universities to better engage men in prevention. Among these were the

finding that awareness of sexual violence remained low among male students, and that those who were aware and active had friendships with women and queer students on campus, compared to men who only interacted in "all male" circles and whose thinking was heavily shaped by "locker room talk." Appropriately so, the report calls for exposing male students to other influences and combatting the impact of all-male social circles. However, strictly implementing this approach risks assuming that "locker room talk" which reinforces rape myths and harmful behavior (Cole et al., 2019) is the *only* possible influence of male social circles, even as it is a mainstream one. Instead of placing the task *only* on female and queer friends to educate (cisgender, heterosexual) male students, targeting male social circles as potential prosocial spheres of influence may also supplement the report's goals. With the primary barrier of this study and other interventions with regards to social change and violence prevention being self-selection and the disconnect between individual attitude change and broader social change (Brush & Miller, 2019; Casey et al., 2018), seeking to alter the dynamics within the social circles that reinforce harmful behavior may be a more ecological and root-cause-focused approach to prevention.

How might men's groups better empower their participants to overcome these limitations and become change-agents themselves? Returning to the description of the Circle of Influence meetings themselves, much of their focus was on insight and conversation: understanding and deconstructing harmful expressions of masculinity. My own experience in the program bears this out as well, and many participants expressed one form or another of the question: "where do we go from here?" For this group and others like it to create broader social change, Freire's (1970) notion of critical consciousness offers a helpful model. Critical consciousness, *conscientizacao* originally, refers to the process by which people who experience oppression are able to "think critically about inequitable social conditions and take action to change them" (Seider et al., 2022; Shin et al., 2016, p. 211). As its definition indicates, knowledge alone does not constitute critical

consciousness. In fact, an awareness of systemic conditions must by definition extend into action

that addresses them. Thus, the work in liberation and community psychology fields informed by

Freire's (1972) teachings and activism (see Deimer & Blustein, 2006; Martín-Baró, 1994; Watts

et al., 2011) conceptualizes critical consciousness as consisting of both critical *reflection* (being

able to "name and analyze" forces of inequality) and critical *action* (behaviors that "challenge

these oppressive forces," Seider et al, 2022, p. 452). Both pieces are thought to be necessary if a

person is to feel the protective psychological effects of critical consciousness (i.e., knowing

"where the problem is located," as a systemic injustice compared to an individual deficit), as

well as a sense of political agency to change unjust conditions (Seider et al., 2022).

Fostering critical consciousness aligns well with the goal of masculinity interventions,

given the need to ameliorate the ways in which hegemonic masculine socialization as a system

harms individual boys and men, and the need to engage more boys and men in action to address

it. Assessing the Circle of Influence program with the criteria of critical reflection and action, the

program would do well to continue its focus on critical reflection, but increase its focus on how

men can engage in critical action, and what they might need to do so. Beyond the limitations

already discussed, this study's findings revolve largely around what happened within the group,

leaving much unanswered in how the group experience translated elsewhere. For example, one

man reflected on times his values compelled him to speak out against a friend's sexist remarks,

but that he still stayed silent and felt like a "phony feminist." That this group reaches an audience

of men who are invested in critical reflection is not itself enough to create broader social change.

A deepened focus on how unpacking masculinity issues can carry over into action might require

that the group devote time to the teaching and practicing of skills and strategies. For example,

men could engage in "in vivo" communication or interaction role plays so that they are equipped

with how to react to "locker room talk," how to invite more reluctant men into a conversation

about masculinity, as well as direct planning about behavior change and even political activism.

A more action-focused agenda would also be consistent with group process theory's components

of interpersonal learning and new socialization skills (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Therefore, men's

groups such as the one in this study may more fully enact their goals of broader social change by

maintaining a balance between interventions focused on critical reflection and critical action.

Questions for Future Research

Both the findings and limitations of this study raise a series of questions that warrant

further exploration in empirical research. First and foremost, as noted above, research into how

men's groups participants act as "change-agents" in other spaces is a crucial direction to explore

in order to address the limitations of self-selection and program impact discussed above. This

could involve additional qualitative work focused exclusively on how "alumni" of masculinity-

focused programs work to use their relationships with other boys and men to be positive forces in

their socialization to promote healthier masculinities, or conversely what elements of relationship

men who have never been in such an intervention have found the most liberating in their ties

with other men in their lives. Another question that this study was not able to answer would be

investigating what kinds of experiences in men's lives serve as "turning points" or moments in

which they took the first step in their growth towards healthy masculinity. This might better

inform programs, even therapists or people in men's lives, how to best facilitate that beginning.

Similarly, future quantitative research could examine whether there are differences in a

variety of counter-cultural bystander intervention behaviors (e.g., disputing locker room talk, or

encouraging a male friend who is struggling to talk with a therapist) between men who have and

have not participated in such a community (or, perhaps more feasibly, as moderated by the extent

to which men experience a sense of growth-fostering relationships and ascribe to healthy ideas of

masculinity). Additionally, any attitude or behavior changes that boys and men endorse after

participating in an intervention (e.g., quantitative measures of social support, mental health, masculine ideology) could be examined to test for any moderating or mediating effects of their experiences in relationships with other men (Di Bianca & Mahalik, under review). This might offer valuable information into the impact that men can have in their own circles, using their influence on men that might never be exposed to a men's group. The steps toward broader culture change are many, but further understanding of whether and to what extent men who feel empowered by a men's group to create ripple effects elsewhere actually do so would offer further support for the indirect, ecological benefit of men's groups.

Future intervention studies should also delve further into the complexity of masculinity and intersectionality. This was a core theme in Griffith's (2022), Liang's (2022), and Rogers' (2022) critiques of the framework for this study, pointing to the research questions of how "masculinity groups" land in a felt sense with men across culture. hooks (2004) names this tension, that even as men are impacted differently by the patriarchal model of masculinity based on their other identities, all men do have at least some degree of processing, unlearning, and reconstructing to do. In keeping with the limitation and practice recommendation of exploring conflict and disagreement, future qualitative research could take a similar process-focused approach here. How do men experience group conversations that are designed to process points of tension, or even feelings of anger, hurt, or invalidation, particularly when they are facilitated so as to have men communicate in ways other than they may have been socialized to? More specifically, how do men experience their voice as welcomed or drowned out in such spaces based on the degree of power they hold or feel held over them by other men in the group? Again, Lee Mun Wah's film *The Color of Fear* comes to mind as an example of the dynamics that may exist under the surface in diverse groups of men (e.g., color-blind ideologies, bootstrap mythologies) but may go unsaid. It is also worth naming the challenge of how many health,

social, and cultural problems are connected to hegemonic masculine socialization, and thus how

easily an issue that feels salient to participants could be left unaddressed. An understanding of

how men, particularly men who also hold marginalized identities and are in a group of White,

heterosexual, cisgender men, experience such conversations would teach facilitators how to

sensitively navigate these challenging encounters constructively, and support the APA's (2018)

recommendations for working with a population of diverse men.

Finally, as an extension of the need to examine how many different men may experience

growth-fostering relationships, future research should also examine not only what this looks like

at the margins, but also at the center of social and political power. As a participant in this study

noted and many have commented on, at least part of the movement of Trumpism is fueled by

"being a part of something," even if that something is the stalwart defending of White male

supremacy (Helms, 2016; Kimmel, 2013; Serwer, 2018). For example, Kimmel's (2013) work

highlights how the loneliness and isolation experienced by many young White men makes them

targets for politician's appeals to aggrieved racial entitlement, or even for recruitment into hate

groups and extremist movements. In Capehart's (2022) words, men who feel their "self-worth

depends on [performing masculinity] the exact right way" will "latch on to" any guide that

comes along. More generally, future research on the kinds of relationships between men who are

White, Christian, and/or conservative politically might help to address Kivel's (1998) concerns

about how relationships are used in deleterious ways as well as growth-fostering ones. This

would constitute a primary prevention approach, where intervention efforts are not only focused

on supporting those who are harmed by men's individual and structural abuses of power, but

addresses the root cause of those harms. Men's groups where relationships between members are

a corrective and counter-socializing experience, then, could be a piece of a larger effort to

engage men with more social and political power to use that power differently, consistent with

relational-cultural perspectives on power (Miller, 2008; Walker, 2008b). This would embody Kivel's (1998) view that ending men's violence is the responsibility of all men, or to be more comprehensive, Helms' view that "only White people can end racism" (O'Hara, 2020). As broad in scope as these future directions are, the voices of men in this study point to the power of connection and community to lay the foundation for men's participation in such liberation work, which, in the spirit and words of the late bell hooks (2000, 2004), frees boys and men as well.

Conclusion

The Irish poet and theologian Padraig O'Tuama, who has facilitated post-conflict circles and dialogues across the social, religious, and political divides following The Troubles, reflects on a Gaelic saying, "*ar scáth a chéile a mhaireas na daoine.*" As it is most often translated, this means "it is in the shelter of each other that people live." However, O'Tuama (2015) points out that the word "*scáth*" can have more than one meaning when translated from Gaelic: it can mean "shelter" in the sense of safety, healing, and comfort, but can also mean "shadow" in the sense of darkness, burden, or pain. His writing goes on to suggest that it can mean both, that just as other people can cast a shadow over our lives, so too can they offer shelter, a healing home from the harms of the world. The *scáth* can be a cold isolation or a comfortable, cool shade from harsh sunlight. This dual meaning is mirrored in the poetry of Seamus Heaney and his emphasis on the interconnectedness between people and their world; an idea shared by relational-cultural theory: *we need each other.* And yes, that includes us men. It is in this spirit that I received the stories told by the men I interviewed for this project. Their voices echoed literature on how relationships had been the teachers and enforcers of hegemonic masculinity – a shadow – yet also spoke to how different relationships, in and beyond their men's group, can become places of growth and healing – a shelter. It is precisely because of shadows that some relationships cast that we yearn for the shelter other relationships offer. Again in the words of relational-cultural theory, isolation

is a hurt that community can heal. Therapists and healers across discipline, philosophy, and culture have known this for generations. As our field continues to design and evaluate group interventions for boys and men, we would do well to consider whether the most powerful piece of an intervention may not come from our expertise or knowledge, but rather exists in how boys and men experience a felt sense of connection with one another – one that offers the shelter of seeing their full humanity in ways that shadows of other relationships may not have done.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questionnaire

I. Introduction Questions

o Ask participants to share about who they are, background, identities

o How did you first become connected with ACTM?

o What was behind your decision to join the men's group?

o What were you hoping to get out of the experience?

II. Research Question #1: Men's Experiences of Connection in the Group

o Could you tell me about your experience in the weekly group meetings?

   • What topics/conversations resonated with you? How did they connect with your experience as a man?

   • What topics/conversations challenged you? Why?

   • Could you share an example of a conversation that has stayed with you?

o How did the space created by the group feel to you?

   • What was it like for you to talk openly with other men about the "man box"?

   • What was that like for you to get to know other men in the group?

   • Could you share an example of a moment in the group that has stayed with you? Of a relationship with another group member?

   • Did your experience in the group change over time? If so, how?

o What did you learn from listening to other group members? What do you feel that others learned from hearing what you shared?

o Were there any negative parts of the group experience for you? If so, why?

o Was there anything you found yourself wishing for in the group, but that was missing?

III. Research Question #2: Changes Men Notice in Themselves

o How do you feel being a part of the group has affected you?

o What does "healthy manhood" mean to you, in your own life?

- How did your group experience shape this?

- What did healthy manhood look like when it was happening in the group?

o How do you feel you've grown from the experience? How have you felt stuck?

- … in how you think about the rules of the "man box"?

- … in what it was like for you to connect with other men around these issues?

- … in how you think about preventing violence and social justice work?

- What was hard about each of these, and what was easy? Why?

o What was it about your experience that made this growth happen? Can you share an example?

IV. Research Question #3: Changes Men Are Making Going Forward

o How do you feel your actions outside of the group will be different going forward, after this experience? What in the group experience would you attribute this to?

o What kind of impact do you hope to make when it comes to healthy manhood?

- … with yourself

- … with people you are close with (e.g., family, partners, friends)

- … with other boys and men who see and follow your example

- … with the role you have to play in violence prevention and social justice work

V. Closing Questions

o What was most meaningful to you about this experience?

o What could the group have included that would have been meaningful to you, but did not?

o Is there anything that you would like to share about your experience in the group that we did not have a chance to talk about? Is there anything else you think I should be asking men to get a better understanding of what this experience is like?

Appendix B: Sample Demographics

Table 1
Demographics of Men Interviewed

	Age	Gender Identity	Racial Identity	Sexual Orientation	Socioeconomic Status	Education Level	Religion / Spirituality	Political Affiliation
Allan	20s	Cisgender male	White / Arab	Straight	Middle Class	Bachelor's	Agnostic	Moderate
Alfonso	20s	Cisgender male	Mexican	Straight	Middle Class	Master's	None	Independent
Bobby	30s	Cisgender male	White	Bisexual	Middle Class	Master's	Atheist	Socialist
Ben	60s	Cisgender male	Black	Straight	Middle Class	Bachelor's	Baptist	Democrat
Charlie	20s	Cisgender male	White	Straight	Upper Middle Class	Master's	SBNR	Liberal
Gandalf	40s	Cisgender male	White	Straight	Middle Class	Master's	Buddhist	Liberal
Jack	30s	Cisgender male	White	Straight	Middle Class	Bachelor's	None	Progressive
Junior	40s	Cisgender male	Biracial	Gay	Middle Class	J.D.	Catholic	Democrat
Ian	40s	Cisgender male	Alaska Native	Straight	Middle Class	GED	Indigenous	Independent
Mason	40s	Cisgender male	White	Straight	Upper Middle Class	Master's	SBNR	Liberal
Nick	20s	Cisgender male	Latino	Bisexual	Working Class	Bachelor's	None	Progressive
Sean	50s	Transgender male	White	Gay	Lower Middle Class	Bachelor's	SBNR	Progressive
Wes	20s	Cisgender male	White	Straight	Upper Middle Class	Bachelor's	Christian	Democrat

Notes. SBNR = Spiritual but not religious.

Appendix C: Summary of Results

Table 2
Clusters, Categories, and Codes

CLUSTER I: GROUP ENABLES INTERPERSONAL EXPERIENCES THAT COUNTER
HEGEMONIC MASCULINE SOCIALIZATION

Men experience a relational gap in their lives outside of group
    Men stay silent from "taboo" conversations that critique masculinity with other men
    Men feel isolated in the absence of like-minded men and positive male role models
    Men internalize hegemonic messages and feel the need to process this with others
Men feel safe enough to be vulnerable with other men
    Men feel they can be their real selves in group
    Men cry in the group without feeling ashamed pressure to show strength
    Men find it cathartic to express their thoughts and feelings to others
Men experience a sense of mutual connection
    Men show care and support for one another
    Men experience a depth of connection in group they do not find with men elsewhere
    Men see quality time to decompress with other men as beneficial to their well-being
    Men feel they are not alone by bonding over negative experiences growing up as men
    Men of color feel more welcome with other men of color in the group
    Men experience a "domino effect" of validation when they resonate with what others share
Men interact in ways that "break the conversation rules" of masculine socialization
    Men have meaningful conversations contrary to "popular male opinion" (e.g., sex, fatherhood)
    Men access and express emotions other than anger to one another (e.g., affection)
    Men use humor to critique the rules of masculine socialization
    Men do not feel they have to "one-up" each other to feel belonging in the group
    Men worry less about being seen as "man enough" or being emasculated in group
Men feel a solidarity that encourages them to resist masculine norms

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CLUSTER II: GROUP ENABLES MEN'S DEVELOPMENT OF INSIGHT INTO
MASCULINITY

Men feel group conversations help them look inward and reflect
    Men realize what they want out of friendships with other men
    Men reflect on masculinity and their family history through listening to others' stories
    Men learn more about themselves in a group of diverse men
Men examine their past behavior when listening to others' experiences
    Men practice self-examination to "unlearn" masculine socialization (e.g., objectification)
    Men realize how they have hurt a partner's feelings in their past
Men grapple with their negative, critical self-talk
    Men practice being kinder to themselves
    Men become mindful of when they pressure themselves to fit the mold of "real men"
    Gay and trans men push back on an internalized voice to "not be so queer"
Men notice connections between their personal socialization as men, violence, and politics
    White men experience group conversations as "wake-up calls" to their own privilege
    Men reflect on their own role in violence prevention work as men
    Men feel they learn more about feminism and masculinity in a group of men than on their own

Men embrace their own flexible, healthy definitions of masculinity

CLUSTER III: GROUP ENABLES POSITIVE CHANGES IN MEN'S RELATIONSHIPS

Men reach out for social support beyond the group
Men show up differently in their relationships with loved ones
    Men try to be better listeners and be more emotionally open with their partners
    Men who are fathers affirm their children's vulnerability and gentleness
Men feel motivated to talk about masculinity with other men in their lives
Men process their conflicted feelings about challenging their male friends
Men strive to set positive examples for other boys and men
    Men validate other boys' and men's emotions instead of shaming them
    Men model more flexible masculinity to others

CLUSTER IV: GROUP ENABLES MEN'S PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL ACTION

Men see their political activism as fueled by understanding themselves as men more deeply
Men want to be better allies by listening to others instead of talking over them
Men see "a space for their own work" as necessary for working with other boys and men
Men want to facilitate their own men's groups to reach more boys and men
    Men start workshops for boys about healthy relationships and homophobia
    Men start groups for White men to talk about race and gender

CLUSTER V: MEN SHARE PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT FEEDBACK

Men value the facilitator's role as the foundation of making the group work
    Men feel the facilitator's accepting, non-judgmental style helps them open up
    Men view the facilitator as competent in guiding difficult conversations
Men express diverging perspectives on exploring tension, conflict, and disagreement in group
    Men feel that social and political common ground allowed them to be open in group
    Men think reaching more conservative men is their job to do beyond group
    Men want space to go deeper than surface level on differing social and political views
    Men feel group conversations need to include men who are "not already on board"
Men reflect on reasons why they "held back" in group sessions
    Men filter themselves based on sexual orientation or gender identity
    Men worry about being judged or accepted by other group members
Men value and wish for more interpersonal connection
    Men most appreciated the "check-in" time of group sessions
    Men request more time in group to hear others' life stories and deepen their connections
    Men experience the conclusion of the program as a loss and wish for it to be ongoing
Men make recommendations for future groups
    Men want initial ground rules about communication, turn-taking, and self-disclosure
    Men wonder if discussing trauma would overwhelm others without mental health care
    Men recommend the group be free of charge to be accessible for more men

Notes. $n = 13$. See Table 1 for participant demographics.