

What's the Problem with "Traditional Masculinity"?

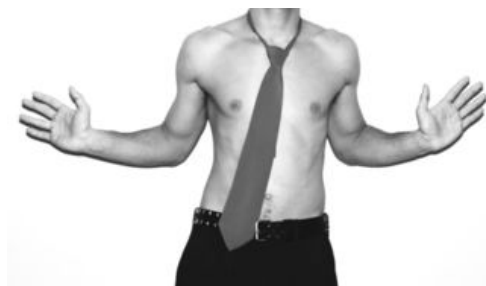
The frenzy about the APA guidelines has died down. What have we learned?

Posted March 10, 2019

Reviewed by Jessica Schrader



On the heels of the American Psychological Association's new *Guidelines for the Psychological Practice with Boys and Men*,¹ Gillette released an ad ("We Believe: The Best Men Can Be").² Both the ad and the guidelines were clearly intended to work toward ending male violence and the objectification of women, but both have been the subject of significant backlash. On YouTube, as of March 10, 2019, the Gillette ad garnered almost twice as many "dislikes" (1.4 million) as "likes" (778,000). The Egard Watch Company even created a counterpoint video "dedicated to all those [men] who sacrifice everything to make the world safer and better for all of us."³



Source: duduhp/freeimages

After several pointed critiques of the APA guidelines for (among other things) how "traditional masculinity" was defined as revolving around "anti-femininity, achievement,

INTL

responded with a (now deleted) message on its website, and on Twitter:

“It is the extreme stereotypical behaviors — not simply being male or a ‘traditional male—that may result in negative outcomes. For example, people who believe that to be a “real man” is to get needs met through violence, dominance over others, or extreme restriction of emotions are at risk for poor physical, psychological, and social outcomes (e.g., increased risk for cardiovascular disease, social isolation, depression relationship distress, etc.)... When a man *believes that he must be successful no matter who is harmed* or his masculinity is expressed by being sexually abusive, disrespectful, and harmful to others, that man is conforming to the negative aspects associated with traditional masculinity.”⁴

(Emphasis added.)

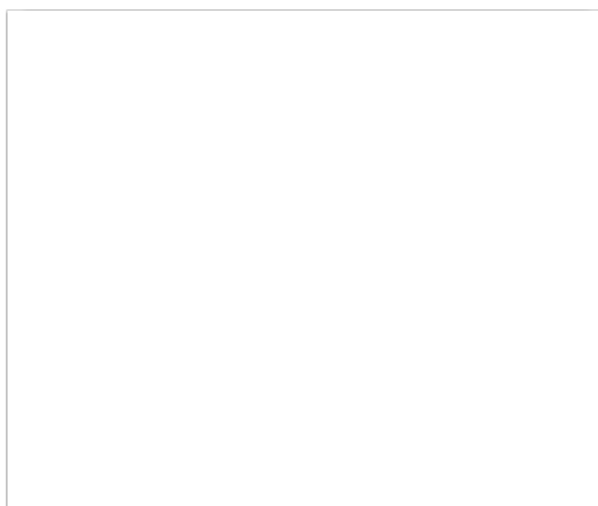
Clearly those aforementioned attitudes and behaviors are harmful, but why did the APA choose to define these negative behaviors as “traditional masculinity”? There is no diagnostic code for "traditional masculinity." Nor should there be. Psychologists already address abusive behavior in sessions—and are often legally mandated to report clients who are domestic or sexual abusers. And appropriate diagnoses already exist for people who use others and don't care who is harmed. But this kind of behavior is not exclusive to men. The Broadway show *Mean Girls* is a smash hit in part because the audience recognizes the truth in the premise: among girls and women, social success is often achieved at the (painful)

INTL

named" is "traditionally masculine." Should women who mistreat their subordinates be labeled "traditionally masculine"? Or because they aren't men, should they be excused as "tough bosses" who have "high expectations"?⁵

Psychologist Chris Ferguson, a member of the APA who reviewed the draft guidelines before they were finalized, warned the authors that they were portraying traditional men as "nearly monstrous, their cultural values associated with everything from sexism to promiscuity to their own declining health (which essentially places blame on them, something we generally try to avoid with other groups)." He added, "Probably the document's main weakness is that much of it, instead of reading as an actual practice guideline, tends to read as an invective against 'traditional' masculinity."⁶

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT



Psychiatrist Sally Satel wrote in the Washington Post, "when the APA encourages practitioners to engage in vaguely defined activities—'address issues of privilege and power related to sexism' or 'help boys and men, and those who have

INTL

more focused on a political agenda than on the patient.”⁷

Although they were ostensibly designed to reduce the stigma that men might experience regarding masculinity (which, as Ferguson recognized, they do “admirably for non-traditional masculinities”) the guidelines reinforce stereotypes of what traditional masculinity is. As a practical matter, how does this kind of stereotyping advance clinical practice? And how are practitioners to employ the guidelines? It is not only difficult to find practical tools within the guidelines, it's impossible to uncover the methodology by which the guidelines were found to be empirically beneficial to boys and men—because there appears to be no science behind them.

Engaging in what the APA calls “gender-sensitive” clinical practice is questionable, as Satel warns, “because it encourages clinicians to assume, before a patient even walks in the door, that gender is a cause or a major determinant of the patient’s troubles.” Ferguson warned the authors that the guidelines could even be seen as “advocating therapies that are not too different from other problematic ‘conversion’ therapies for those who do not adhere to a set of rigid gender norms (ironically, in this case, gender norms enforced by a progressive movement opposed to traditional masculinity).”

Among the first things that most aspiring psychotherapists learn is the importance of “unconditional positive regard.” Psychologist Carl Rogers had the essential insight that a psychotherapeutic relationship is effective when clinicians set aside their negative assessments, and for the duration of psychotherapy, provide a space of acceptance that allows the

INTL

ior. But when a therapist’s positive regard for a client is conditional, the client can react by becoming defensive about exactly the aspects of his or her self-concept, attitudes, and behavior that effective therapy could successfully address—or by being unwilling to participate in psychotherapy at all.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT



On social media, men lash out at the APA (<https://youtu.be/iUp4gYObjoc>)

Source: Screenshot from Dr. Shawn T. Smith's video, "Hey APA, Discuss Your Guidelines With Me"

We are seeing this play out in the reactions to the guidelines. Particularly for boys and men who would like help *developing* behaviors that could be considered traditionally masculine (like assertiveness, risk-taking, emotion-regulation...etc.), it isn't unreasonable to think twice

about engaging a psychotherapist. It is precisely for this reason that these guidelines may have the effect of dissuading boys and men from seeking help at all.

INTL

Ferguson cited "copious use of progressive jargon throughout: power, privilege, intersection, 'perform masculinity,' microaggressions... [etc.]," and explained that this language instead of "careful, neutral and objective language" would "tend to be identified mainly with the progressive movement" which made the document seem "more ideological than scientifically objective and neutral." He warned that "if clinicians were to implement some of the recommendations, the potential for harm to some clients is non-trivial." The APA seems to have ignored his concerns, and the backlash represents exactly what Ferguson predicted.

This could have been avoided. In 2015, social psychologists Duarte, Crawford, Stern, Haidt, Jussim, and Tetlock, in their article *Political diversity will improve social psychological science*,⁸ describe the same problems in social psychology that these APA guidelines seem to expose in the clinical field. A lack of political diversity can undermine any field's validity by embedding ideological values into research questions and methods, and playing into the confirmation bias. This produces both conclusions that are ideologically skewed and mischaracterizations of alternative views. When political diversity is embraced, on the other hand, "institutional disconfirmation" defeats confirmation biases because they are canceled out in the process of everyone grappling with one another's concerns. If the authors of the guidelines had taken seriously the concerns that Ferguson brought them, their guidelines could have been revised to be empirical instead of ideological, and may have been more widely embraced.

After the publication of the guidelines, Ferguson and eleven

INTL

One essay, [Shawn T. Smith](#), a clinical psychologist who works with boys and men, noted that people seek therapy in moments of vulnerability. He saw the guidelines as an ironic illustration of the toxic qualities that the APA attributes to "traditional masculinity," exemplified by seizing on boys' and men's vulnerability in order to indoctrinate them into the APA's preferred ideology.

Perhaps next time, the APA will seek out and listen to a diversity of views before finalizing a new set of guidelines. ♦

Pamela Paresky's opinions are her own and should not be considered official positions of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education or any other organization with which she is affiliated.

References

1. [APA GUIDELINES for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men](#)
2. [We Believe: The Best Men Can Be | Gillette](#) (Short Film)
3. [What is a man? A response to Gillette](#) (Egard Watch Company)

[More](#)

ADVERTISEMENT