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## THE ILLUSION OF TOXIC MASCULINITY

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### ABSTRACT

*The various theories, models and terms associated with anti-social actions of boys and men need to be questioned. Some are unscientific, and others promote a false and negative image of masculinity. This negativity creates a confused generation of boys and men who are reluctant to express themselves and realize their full potential. The result is that many males are vulnerable to mental-health disorders.*

**Keywords:** boys, health, male, men, toxic masculinity

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In March 2022, when an American actor, Will Smith, slapped Chris Rock, an American comedian, at the Oscars, the hot topic of toxic masculinity again emerged in the public discourse (Georgiou). Terms as *toxic masculinity* have regularly been used to depict seemingly negative or anti-social male behaviour. During the 1980s, there was *Peter Pan Syndrome*; later the label *Man Child* was used to refer to men who were seemingly trapped in childish behaviours. Some accepted these terms, and a more derogatory and caustic term was introduced into our discourse: *toxic masculinity*. Unfortunately, toxic masculinity and misguided notions of males as *mansplaining* are not limited to pop psychology; they have slowly seeped into mainstream psychology and our daily discourse. These terms attempt to restrict men's freedom of expression.

Such distorted notions of males and masculinity often originate from recognized and acclaimed sources and eventually infect mainstream media. The skewed APA Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men (2018 APA Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men) are a good example. Likewise, some companies have inflicted considerable damage on the men's movement as evident from the controversial advertisement from the razor company, Gillette, in 2019. There is a long list of alternative terms—*toxic behaviour*, *toxic environment*, *toxic work environment*, *toxic atmosphere*, *toxic attitude*, or *toxic upbringing*—that could be used in explanations or descriptions of unhealthy and anti-social behaviour. It is obvious that toxic attitudes and toxic socialization contribute to toxic behaviour.

Journalists, practitioners and scholars should be careful when rushing to denigrate masculinity. Many have casually and carelessly accomplished a hatchet job on men, and it might be too late to salvage bruised and battered masculinity. It seems as if everyone is an unqualified expert on masculinity and can easily identify toxic masculinity. Some spout psychobabble whilst others are like snake-oil salesmen peddling false cures for masculinity. It feels as if any writer or speaker has the privilege and authority to casually attach *toxic* to *masculinity* and inadvertently cast aspersions on all men. Millions of men have been wrongly branded, falsely accused, stigmatized and stereotyped. During the past five decades, the above-mentioned unhelpful terms have been devised and liberally used to identify seemingly negative behaviours, attitudes and language of males. These harmful unscientific theories, behaviour models and cosmetic terms can be lumped into a new category: *mumbo-jumbo masculinities*. Yes, men have positions of power,



but not all men are empowered. Yes, a patriarchy exists, but not all men are guilty of creating and supporting this system. Many men and boys are forced into the now-toxic Man Box as they become frustrated that their rational opinions are ignored, and logical arguments are mocked. Furthermore, studies have proven that older men face certain challenges adhering to traditional narratives of masculinity (van den Hoonaard). Indeed, in the 21st century, if men attempt to challenge socio-cultural norms, then some persons in our society are quick to judge them as toxic.

Can we separate these two words: *toxic* and *masculinity*, or have the two words become permanently entwined in the 21st century? During the past five years, it certainly seems that toxic masculinity has become a cliché. Unfortunately, it is not a harmless cliché: it has repercussions for masculinity, gender relations and the mental development of our boys and men. It is impossible to use one broad term, *toxic masculinity*, to depict all masculine traits. Furthermore, in any analysis of boys and men not conforming to societal expectations of masculinity, there is need to consider factors as age, religion, ethnicity, class, environment and education level. The environment is often a crucial factor. An illustration is men who have been jailed for such toxic crimes as murder, drug smuggling or kidnapping. The prison is a form of punishment but it is also supposed to have an element of reform to positively transform the lives of the incarcerated. Instead, the toxic prison culture becomes fertile ground for men to continue anti-social behaviour. It is even worse when one considers that the toxic behaviour contributes to poor mental health care in prisons (Kupers).

I agree with the argument that “*Toxic masculinity* is not good for men because it can result in abusing substances, spending time in jail, and committing suicide” (Savin-Williams). Additionally, the links among negative masculine norms, alcohol abuse and aggression among college students should be a cause for concern (Locke & Mahalik). Some of the other negative masculine norms in our society include violence, racism and risk taking. Some have identified these as characteristics of masculinity which have been branded as toxic. It’s unfortunate that often traits such as kindness, tolerance, empathy and forgiveness or being providers and protectors are overlooked by many in society as masculine norms. It seems as if masculine norms have a negative label and dominant masculine norms are being twisted to become deviant



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masculine norms. Some have a fervent desire to rewrite the masculinity narratives. However, the narratives are being rewritten to seemingly suppress masculine traits that are used as boundary markers in defining boys and men. A recent online pilot study has also proven the negative impact of the term *toxic masculinity* to the behaviour of men and boys (Barry, John; Walker, Rob; Liddon, Louise; & Seager, Martin). Undoubtedly, the ambiguous label is loosely used to make men feel inferior and guilty in our increasingly judgmental, politically correct and overly sensitive society. The volatile scenario is even worse because the cancer of cancel culture has spread and become entrenched in our society. Any efforts to suppress masculine traits and create a genderless or sexless world will have repercussions including an increase in mental health disorders, suicides and a generation of confused boys and men.

Many fail to realize that actions and language deemed as negative by one person can be easily justified as positive or interpreted as beneficial by another. For instance, it is easy to decide that soldiers fighting in a war is symbolic of toxic masculinity. The violence and death amidst a war can be deemed evil, illegal or unlawful. It is debatable that wars are unnecessary and unjustified. However, it certainly seems wrong for peace activists to use a broad brush to claim all soldiers exhibit toxic masculinity. Imagine the world in the 21st century if there were no fearless (and frightened) soldiers fighting for democracy and freedom during the First and Second World Wars in the 20th century. The issue is relevant for today. What about the men in Ukraine defending their homeland, women and children in 2022? Is it fair to refer to these men in Ukraine as toxic? Likewise, it is easy to say that men in protests, revolts and revolutions are displaying toxic masculinity. However, if the seemingly anti-social action is for better working and living conditions or to save lives, then we need to question the use of the adjective *toxic*. If brave men are protesting against racism and religious discrimination, then toxic masculinity cannot be marching alongside these men. These men sacrificed their lives so that many of us can have a better future. Men who decided that the most suitable action is to overthrow a dictator, a corrupt government or end a decrepit institution surely do not display toxic masculinity. Today, the real, ongoing war and revolution is the fight to save the image of masculinity! I am not defending anti-social behaviour, just attempting to defend masculinity from unwarranted attacks. Boys and men who reject current societal expectations are unfairly judged as displaying toxic masculinity. These roles create stress for men (Lash, Copenhaver and Eisler). Why must males allow prescribed



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gender role dictate their emotional, psychological responses to negative situations and people?

Some in society have been applauding when they see men crying because they believe that men who cry in the public are not showing toxic masculinity. Indeed, sadness is an emotion but it is not the only emotion. Should men and boys only express sadness? What about anger, fear, aggression and depression? These emotions have been red-flagged as part of the toxic masculinity illusion. Furthermore, men displaying the typical signs of toxic masculinity could be misinterpreted. These could be men suffering from borderline personality disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder or antisocial personality disorder. Some men have been accused of being toxic because they are not concerned about their health. The reality is that some men are poor and lack insurance to afford proper health care. Furthermore, men who live in rural areas or slums are either not aware of the importance of health care or find it inaccessible.

For the past decade, a friend, who is of Indian descent, described the mental anguish he faced. My friend was overlooked for promotion and bypassed for appointments at a Caribbean university. The issue of merit, quality of service and qualifications were overlooked and non-academic issues of ethnicity and gender were given priority in an academic institution. He felt pain, disappointment and hate – which could be easily classified as toxic masculinity. However, this blatant racism and biased decisions did not result in any outburst, lawsuits or affect his public behavior. Instead, he ignored these racists and flattered these misguided and pathetic persons for their so-called wise decisions and leadership. More importantly, he avoided their presence. Fortunately, he was able to channel this negativity by focusing more on his writings and activism. He focused on his family life and also religion. The cause of my friend's toxic emotions was the injustices against him by toxic men and women, of African descent. He chose to react positively and productively.

Men in similar hurtful, unfair and stressful situations need to identify the origins of the toxicity and avoid reactive and impulsive behaviour that could be wrongly branded as toxic. The next stage is to channel their negative feelings into something constructive and positive. There is an urgent need for males, experiencing any distress, to develop coping mechanisms to adequately handle toxic employees, peers, bosses, teachers and relatives. Non-governmental organizations and groups focusing on helping and saving males need to be accessible to those needing



emotional and psychological support. Groups, especially those comprising fathers, boys, single-men, divorced men, serve as important support systems to prevent or curb the incidence of nervous breakdowns, depression and suicides. It is unfortunate that men seeking help are ridiculed. Those being counselled by a professional as a psychiatrist or psychologist, entering a rehab centre or taking medication are often stigmatized as weak or having mental disorders.

The problem facing society is how and where should we begin to detox and promote positive masculinities. It's a pity that there is an absence of terms and theories to describe and dissect positive masculinity.

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