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Men and Masculinities
2020, Vol. 23(1) 104-126

DOI: 10.1177/1097184X18780945
journals.sagepub.com/home/jmm
SAGE

# Impacts of Men's Gender-transformative Personal Narratives: A Qualitative Evaluation of the Men's Story Project

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**Abstract**

Gender-transformative interventions have been found to help ameliorate gender-inequitable norms and improve health outcomes for women and men. While narrative-based strategies are increasingly being used in public health programs, no evaluation publications exist to date for gender-transformative programming that employs men's public narrative-sharing as a central means for promoting healthy masculinities. The Men's Story Project (MSP) creates live productions in which diverse men publicly perform personal narratives that challenge hegemonic masculinity, promote gender equality, and highlight intersections of masculinity with other social identities. This study draws upon six focus groups with thirty-one audience members (AMs), two weeks after an MSP production at a US public university. The MSP led AMs to reevaluate key pillars of hegemonic masculinity, including a singular conception of masculinity, essentialist notions of gender, restricted emotional expression, and use of violence; AMs also gained an expanded understanding of intersectionality. Directions for future research are discussed.

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**Keywords**
culture, emotion, gender equality, hegemonic masculinity, peer influence, performativity, pro-feminism, violence, masculinities, narrative, role models

A rapidly-growing international body of research has found men's adherence to narrow and constraining masculinity norms to be associated with health risks and adverse outcomes for people of all genders, including men's perpetration of sexual and physical violence against women (Jewkes et al. 2011; Santana et al. 2006), sexual risk behaviors (Noar and Morokoff 2002; Santana et al. 2006), aggression toward sexual minorities (Parrott, Peterson, and Bakeman 2011), physical violence against other men, substance abuse, risky driving, and inhibition of care-seeking for physical and mental health needs (Mahalik, Burns, and Syzdek 2007; Bila and Egrot 2009; Seidler et al. 2016; Sabo 2005; Courtenay 2000). Gay men and transgender individuals, among those who may not conform to hegemonic masculinity norms, experience prejudice-, stigma-, and discrimination-related costs for their nonconformity including elevated levels of gender-based violence (GBV) victimization, school dropout, homelessness, substance abuse, depression, suicidality, and HIV/AIDS (Advocates for Youth 2016; Chikovore and Naidoo 2016; Betron and Gonzalez-Figueroa 2009).

Hegemonic masculinity is the idealized version of masculinity for men in a given societal context and is defined in hierarchical relation to women and subordinate masculinities (Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Courtenay (2000) and other scholars have argued that men's enactments of masculinity contribute to men's higher rates of risk behaviors and lower rates of health-protective behaviors as compared to women of similar backgrounds. While not all components of hegemonic masculinity are negative and other masculinities can also involve harmful behaviors, the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been useful in shaping public health programs (e.g., for GBV and HIV prevention), which aim to promote gender-equitable practices and dismantle the notion that there is one correct way to "be a man."

Working to transform gender norms in support of healthy, gender-equitable masculinities is a productive approach to improving health and well-being for many populations. In a review of evaluations of fifty-eight programs around the world that engaged men and boys for purposes including sexual/reproductive health, fatherhood involvement, GBV prevention, and maternal and child health, the gender-transformative programs—that is, those which involved participants in critical reflection on social constructions of masculinity and the impact of gender norms, so as to promote gender-equitable beliefs and practices—had the highest rates of effectiveness (Barker et al. 2010). A subsequent systematic review by Dworkin, Treves-Kagan, and Lippman (2013) also found that several gender-transformative programs had positive impacts on outcomes pertaining to men's gender-inequitable attitudes, HIV risk, and violence against women.

To our knowledge, no gender-transformative programs have implemented and evaluated public performances of men's nonfiction, personal narratives as a central strategy for challenging hegemonic masculinity. This article, based on focus groups (FGs) with a total of thirty-one audience members (AMs) who attended a live production of the Men's Story Project (MSP, described below), examines how men's public presentation of personal narratives stimulated critical reflection on and shifts in masculinity-related perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions.

## Hegemonic Masculinity and Gender-transformative Programs

Defining hegemonic masculinity as "the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue," Connell draws upon Gramsci's concept of hegemony and applies it to masculinity to explain the continuity of men's power in society, where men's gendered dominance is vulnerable to change, and how gender inequality is built into social structures in ways that insulate it from immediate challenge (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832). This analytical framework has gained widespread use for several reasons: it is powerfully anti-essentialist, challenging notions that men's violence is natural or inevitable; it dovetails well with intersectional perspectives; and it focuses on concrete social actions and cultural attitudes that support or alter gendered power relations (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Focusing on the social construction, reproduction, and contestation of a given gender order makes the concept of hegemony one that can be useful in enacting positive social change and/or improving health.

Hegemonic masculinity is not an internal set of characteristics present or absent in an individual; it is a culturally idealized set of practices that outlines the one "right" way of doing masculinity in a given social context, granting power to those who are (at least temporarily) able to approach or approximate it over those who are less able to do so. This means that those closest to the hegemonic ideal access power not only over women, but over subordinated men who less closely approximate this "right" set of practices. This single way of appropriately enacting masculinity is often defined so narrowly as to exclude, implicitly or explicitly, men who are socially marginalized by race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, caste, religion, and so on, thereby helping to justify their oppression.

While it is neither inherent in male bodies nor attached to any individual men, hegemonic masculinity is protected and legitimized by the widely accepted idea in many societies that some men naturally have and "deserve" power. That is: hegemonic masculinity is in fact socially constructed, but maintains social ascendancy by hiding this fact behind an essentialist facade. The constituent practices of hegemonic masculinity vary by social context, but in most discussions it is understood to include such characteristics as restricted emotional expression (with the exception of anger), heterosexuality (demonstrated either by prolific sexual conquest or marital fidelity),

dominance over women and other men, willingness and ability to enact violence, self-sufficiency, and financial success. While not all components of hegemonic masculinity are negative, many have been linked to men's higher rates of risk behaviors, lower rates of health-protective behaviors, and perpetration of physical and sexual violence, as noted above (Bila and Egrot 2009; Courtenay 2000; Jewkes et al. 2011; Mahalik, Burns, and Syzdek 2007; Noar and Morokoff 2002; Seidler et al. 2016; Sabo 2005; Santana et al. 2006).

In recent years, several explicitly gender-transformative intervention programs (e.g., Jewkes et al. 2008; Pulerwitz et al. 2006; Verma et al. 2008; Dworkin et al. 2013) have been found to have positive effects on men's attitudes, behaviors, and health outcomes in areas including sexual health, GBV, and gender equality. Gender-transformative programs are those which overtly aim to transform gender norms and promote gender-equitable attitudes and practices, as opposed to those which accommodate gender differences without attempting to alter gender norms (gender-sensitive), and those which do not address gender or take it into account (gender-neutral; Gupta, Whelan, and Allendorf 2003). While there are "gender projects" in the United States that work to engage men in feminism and the prevention of sexual violence, few are gender-transformative (Messner 2016; Messner, Greenberg, and Peretz 2015). Those that are gender-transformative are primarily ongoing one-on-one or small group programs, focusing either on teenagers (e.g., Male Advocates for Responsible Sexuality, Coaching Boys into Men, and Joven Noble) or a targeted subset of adult men (e.g., Men Count; Dworkin, Treves-Kagan, and Lippman 2013).

Numerous social and behavior change communication initiatives that employ mediums including radio and television serial drama and theater have also been found to have positive impacts on AMs' attitudes and behaviors in relation to GBV and sexual health (e.g., Ahrens, Rich, and Ullman 2011; Silvestre, Weiner, and Hutchinson 2016). While some of these programs have explicitly aimed to be gender-transformative (e.g., Solorzano et al. 2008), most have not. Narrative-based strategies are increasingly being used in public health programs, but to our knowledge, no evaluation publications exist to date for gender-transformative programming that employs men's public narrative-sharing as a central strategy for challenging male gender norms in given societal contexts. The methodology used by the MSP—that is, men's personal, public narrative-sharing in a manner that is open-invitation, appropriate for large audiences, and/or targetable to subgroups of youth or older adults—is readily scalable if shown to be feasible, acceptable, and effective.

## The Men's Story Project: Model and Applications

Initiated in San Francisco in 2008, the MSP is a social and behavior change communication initiative that fosters critical reflection and community dialogue about masculinity by creating mainstream forums where men publicly share personal narratives that challenge hegemonic masculine norms and model healthy,

gender-equitable masculinities. In each MSP presentation, diverse men—and more broadly, individuals who identify with maleness in any regard—employ expressive mediums such as poetry, prose, and music to share personal, nonfiction narratives with a public audience.

The presenters' narratives address topics pertinent to the nexus of masculinities, well-being, and social justice, such as romantic and family relationships, men's violence against women, violence between men, sexual orientation, gender identity, homo/transphobia, racism, xenophobia, HIV/AIDS, processes of personal change, and intersections with other axes of identity including race, ethnicity, class, and religion—all with a framing focus on examination of masculinities through the lens of their life experience. The stories highlight costs of dominant notions of manhood (Courtenay 2000), celebrate men's resistance and self-assertion in the face of harmful norms, and demonstrate men's enactment of healthy, gender-equitable masculinities. The stories often address how the presenters' life experiences link to cultural and structural factors; the curations intentionally include diverse men who embody dominant and subordinated/marginalized masculinities and varying forms and degrees of social privilege. The presentations are followed by facilitated audience–presenter discussion and accompanied by a staffed community resource fair, which presents local support resources (e.g., counseling services and HIV testing) and social action opportunities. MSP productions can be recurring (e.g., yearly campus initiatives), supplemented with community engagement campaigns, integrated into broader education programs, and filmed to create locally relevant educational tools and media. The content of the MSP production that was the basis of this study is summarized in Table 1.

## MSP Theoretical Framework and Pedagogical Approach

The MSP holds a social constructionist view of gender (Courtenay 2000), understands masculinities as collective practices, and aims to be a gender-transformative initiative. It is informed by a framework of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) and aims to help AMs understand how people's life experiences are shaped by their multiple, interacting social identities (along axes including sex, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class) which are linked with varying degrees of privilege and oppression. The personal narrative approach of the MSP is guided by Social Cognitive Theory (SCT; Bandura 1986, 2004) and informed by research in the fields of narrative communication and entertainment-education.

SCT posits that narrative-based interventions can stimulate changes in viewers' attitudes, values, and behaviors via both direct influence and socially mediated pathways. In the direct pathway, social modeling serves "instructive, motivational, social prompting and social construction functions" (Bandura 2004, 78). Realistic narratives that depict the societal context of the viewer can directly foster observational learning by showing how peers or prestigeful others enact particular attitudes and behaviors, and highlighting the positive or negative consequences received; this

**Table 1.** Content Summary of Men's Story Project (MSP) Presentation.

1. The MSP director introduced the rationale for the MSP, including the importance of mainstreaming healthy, gender-equitable masculinities, intersections of masculinities with other axes of identity, and the relationship of masculine gender norms and gender relations to health and justice issues including GBV, homo/transphobia, HIV/AIDS, and gender equality. *(Jocelyn; prose)*
2. A black man in his forties with cerebral palsy discussed the multiplication of marginalization faced by black disabled men, learning to assert his beauty and sexuality, and a need for society to re-examine notions of black masculinity. *(Leroy; spoken word)*
3. A white man in his thirties discussed leaving his corporate job to become a poet, and confronting his father's racism when he became engaged to a black woman. He also discussed his wish to be in a committed relationship rather than have many sex partners. *(Ekabhumi; spoken word)*
4. A queer, trans, mixed-race poet in their twenties discussed life lessons from being perceived as male and female, and their first experience of being feared by a woman on the street at night because they were perceived as a man of color. *(Amir; spoken word)*
5. A white heterosexual man in his thirties spoke of the inhibiting effects of homophobia on his expression of affection for his male friends. *(Jeff; prose)*
6. A nationally known activist—a black man in his forties—described his path from growing up amidst community violence to facilitating a truce between two major gangs and forgiving the man who killed his son. He also spoke of childhood sexual abuse, and silence-breaking as a means for destigmatization and healing. *(Aqeela; extemporaneous talk)*
7. A local antiviolence activist—a white man in his twenties—spoke of being physically abused by his father; physically abusing his girlfriend; perpetrating violence against male peers; substance abuse and self-harm; and his process of reflection and change. *(Galen; spoken word)*
8. A Mexican-American two-spirit man in his twenties discussed self-assertion, pride and resistance to the gender norms espoused by his family and cultural community, and deep friendships with other men. *(Yosimar; spoken word)*
9. A black queer man in his early twenties discussed self-assertion, pride, and resistance to his experiences with homophobia at church and in black communities. *(Terry, spoken word)*
10. A white man in his thirties presented a humorous piece on men's posturing and his experience of anxiety while men stood near him in a public restroom. *(Michael; spoken word)*
11. A retired dancer in his sixties and a ballet dancer in his twenties did a modern dance duo reflecting a mentoring relationship between black men, where the mentee is initially recalcitrant and then comes to learn from the mentor. *(Clover and F; dance)*
12. A white Orthodox Jewish man in his thirties discussed witnessing domestic violence as a child, preparing to kill the abuser if needed, and later serving as defense attorney for a woman charged with the murder of her abusive boyfriend. *(Joshua; prose)*
13. A white man in his twenties described his admiration for his father, who has pulmonary polio and has served as a role model of personal strength and integrity. *(Abe; spoken word)*
14. A sixty-nine-year-old former member of the Black Panther Party discussed how he unlearned homophobia as an adult after his young gay cousin, who died of AIDS-related complications, did not seek his support on his deathbed because of this homophobia. *(Mack; spoken word)*

*(continued)*

**Table 1.** (continued)

15. A white man in his thirties discussed being diagnosed with testicular cancer, the notion that men should "do what it takes" for professional success regardless of physical or emotional pain, preparing to lose part of his body, and notions of personal wholeness. *(J.; prose)*
16. An Asian man and a white man in their twenties did a duo on men's efforts to show their masculinity and the inhibiting effects of homophobia on expression of affection between men. *(Matt and Stephen; spoken word)*

prompts and motivates viewers with regard to what is socially accepted. Narratives foster self-efficacy (i.e., confidence in one's ability to enact a given behavior in a given context) in viewers by depicting how peers develop the ability to execute particular actions; this builds viewers' confidence that they, too, can execute such actions. Narratives are also posited to serve a social function, shaping "public consciousness" and affecting viewers' perceptions of societal norms and values—which, in turn, may affect viewers' own values and behaviors (Bandura 2004).

In addition to the mechanisms posited by SCT, diverse theoretical and empirical efforts have been made to explain the effects of narrative communication initiatives on AMs. For example, the Transportation-Imagery Model of narrative persuasion suggests that vivid, realistic narratives may have persuasive effects on listeners via "transporting" them into the story—which may foster vicarious experience, circumvent the defensive responses that can arise when people encounter didactic content that engages them on a more cognitive level, and lead the listener to identify with and/or develop strong feelings for the characters portrayed (Green and Brock 2002). Hinyard and Kreuter (2007) note that the "narrative mode of learning and knowing may be especially useful when addressing issues involving morality, religion, personal values, . . . complex social relationships, and other issues for which reason and logic have obvious limitations" (p. 778). This functionality may be valuable for efforts aiming to shift entrenched perspectives such as sexism, homophobia, racism, espousal of hegemonic masculinity ideals, and belief in the acceptability of GBV.

Applying this background to the realm of men's gender-transformative personal narratives, MSP presenters are conceptualized as serving as salient role models of men (i.e., local peers and opinion leaders) who are challenging hegemonic notions of masculinity, engaging in critical reflection and growth, and actively aiming to live in a manner consistent with healthy masculinities, equitable gender relations, and social justice. On the collective level, the MSP aims to generate mainstream, public instances where diverse men discuss their masculinity experiences *as gendered*, connect them to intersecting identities (race/ethnicity, religion, gender identity, HIV status, etc.), model healthy masculinities and cross-group solidarity, and take a public stand for social justice (Kimmel 1987). The individual stories and overall productions illustrate counter-hegemonic masculine attitudes and behaviors, highlighting them as valued in the community (e.g., via audience applause, exposure of

AMs to expressions of support between presenters, exposure of AMs to reactions of fellow community members, and media coverage).

This article is part of a larger study that included FGs and interviews with AMs and MSP presenters and included a wider investigation of emotional impacts, attitudinal and behavioral changes, and the social learning mechanisms by which live, personal narrative-sharing fostered these effects. The focus of this article is the impacts of an MSP production on AMs' attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral intentions in relation to hegemonic masculinity.

## Study Methods

### *Study Aims*

This analysis aimed to (1) examine perceived impacts of the MSP for AMs, including what, if anything, they felt they gained or learned and (2) examine AMs' perceptions of the MSP's personal narrative format, overall value, and potential future directions. The study was approved by the University of California-San Francisco Committee on Human Research.

### *Public Presentations*

Two live MSP presentations took place on sequential evenings at a public university on the West Coast of the United States, in the Spring 2009 semester, with a total of approximately 350 attendees. The seventeen presenters were diverse with regard to factors including age (range 20–69 years), race, ethnicity, class, immigration status, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and physical ability. Eight presenters had prior experience with public self-disclosure, via speaking engagements, print media, and poetry competitions.

The MSP director recruited pieces for the production by distributing an open call for submissions and, in some cases, inviting specific men to submit pieces that addressed theoretically salient life experiences or identities (e.g., a transgender man, a man who experienced sexual abuse in childhood, and a man who could discuss his intersectional experiences as a black gay Christian). Once the final group was selected, most presenters participated in at least two of the four scheduled group "playshops" over the course of six weeks, in which they discussed their motivations for participating in the MSP, continued honing their pieces, exchanged feedback on their works in progress, shared emotional support, practiced public speaking skills, and reviewed the staging for the live presentations. Some presenters also received one-on-one feedback on their pieces from the project director.

The MSP production included a director introduction, thirteen personal stories, and two representational pieces (a dance duo and a poetry duo), as described in Table 1. Presented in two acts, the event had approximately 110 minutes of content. It was followed by a 30-minute audience–presenter discussion, which was co-facilitated by the MSP director and a presenter. The production was co-sponsored

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for Study Participants.

| | Male Audience Members (AMs) | Female AMs |
|---|---|---|
| Number of participants | 11 | 20 |
| Age range (median) | 18–36 (22) | 19–30 (21) |
| Race/ethnicity | | |
| White | 1 | 11 |
| Black | 2 | 0 |
| Hispanic | 0 | 1 |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 3 | 4 |
| Other | 1 | 2 |
| Multiracial | 4 | 1 |
| No response | 0 | 1 |
| Sexual orientation | | |
| Heterosexual | 5 | 11 |
| Gay/queer | 5 | 2 |
| Bisexual | 1 | 2 |
| Questioning | 0 | 3 |
| No response | 0 | 2 |

and publicized by campus groups including the Gender Equity Resource Center and the campus chapters of the Vagina Monologues and National Organization for Women.

## *Recruitment*

AMs were recruited for the study via a sign-up sheet placed on the event entrance table. The sheet described the study purpose, methods, consent process, and payment amount for participation. Fifteen men and twenty-seven women provided their contact information; all were subsequently invited via e-mail to participate in a FG. Two weeks after the presentations, three FGs were conducted with a total of eleven male AMs (median age twenty-two), and three FGs were conducted with a total of twenty female AMs (median age twenty-one). Almost all of the men and over half of the women were non-white, and over half of the men and almost half of the women were gay/queer, bisexual, or questioning. Participants were undergraduates, graduate students, and recent graduates; names were changed in the text of this article so as to eliminate possibility of identification. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics.

## *Data Collection*

A research team was trained in qualitative methods to conduct the FGs; the training addressed FG facilitation techniques, ethical research practice, and the relationship between masculinities and diverse health and justice challenges. The FGs were conducted by three graduate students in sociology and psychology

and one undergraduate student in sociology. The second author of this article co-facilitated two FGs (one with male AMs and one with female AMs) when the assigned facilitator was unable to attend. With the aforementioned exception, the FGs were led by interviewers of the same gender as the participants. Feedback for quality control regarding FG facilitation was provided by the second author by reviewing audio recordings of the FGs. Participants signed informed consent forms in person for the FGs. The FGs lasted between sixty and ninety minutes, and participants were paid US$50 by check after their participation. In the geographic area of the study which has a high cost of living, we determined that US$50 for sixty to ninety minutes of participants' time was reasonable, respectful, and noncoercive.

A FG guide structured the group discussion, with flexibility to pursue discussion topics that naturally emerged. The FG introduction included a setting of ground rules including confidentiality, "agree to disagree," and the right to pass on any question. To facilitate candor and discussion of socially undesirable content (e.g., no impact of the MSP, or discussion of personal prejudices), AMs were invited to speak openly, including "about things that might be challenging." AMs were asked about how they learned of the MSP production; why they chose to attend it; what, if anything, they felt they had learned or gained from the MSP (this was presented as the main question of the FG); whether there were any presenters' stories that led them to think about or feel something in a new or different way; whether they found any content to be offensive or harmful; whether they discussed the MSP with anyone after seeing it; and what they thought of the MSP overall, among subjects. Focused questions explored AMs' learning or reflection on particular issues addressed in the presenters' stories (e.g., "Some of the pieces addressed homosexuality and homophobia. How did you feel about those pieces?"). These questions were supplemented by prompts asking what, if anything, those stories led AMs to think about, whether there were any new or challenging ideas there for them, whether they affected or affirmed AMs' thoughts or feelings in any regard, and so on.

## Analysis

The FGs were audio recorded and transcribed; the transcripts were uploaded to the Dedoose online application for analysis of qualitative data (Dedoose Version 7.0.23 2016). The first and second authors co-developed the codebook based upon a reading of all transcripts, with input from the senior author who also read the transcripts. Using a grounded theory approach, codes were developed to reflect emergent themes observed in the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The first and second authors each coded all of the data after using Dedoose's interrater reliability test to reach a pooled Cohen's $\kappa$ statistic above .90. Data were analyzed for key themes and other salient ideas; those related to hegemonic masculinity are discussed below.

## Results

### A Plurality of Masculinities

Among AMs, most men and many women described gaining an expanded conceptualization of masculinity, beyond stereotypical or hegemonic notions they had held. Rob stated: "I think at the very core, it showed me that there's a broad spectrum of masculinity—and that challenged the idea I used to have of masculinity." Some men noted that the presenters served as models for them of more multidimensional, character-based formulations of masculinity, based on qualities such as "integrity of spirit" and resilience:

> I definitely had that linear, very narrow definition of what masculinity is. It's not until I watched the performance that I realized how masculinity . . . can be approached from many different angles . . . I'm used to the notion that masculinity is emotionally limiting, a person who is very engaged in career . . . in marriage with a partner. But not until watching the performance did I start to redefine my own definition of masculinity . . . examining more in terms of my ethos and life and . . . the spiritual, emotional facets. (Anthony)

Along similar lines, Jeremy stated: "One of the stories that really stuck with me was [story #15 in Table 1] . . . Because when you think about what makes you a man, the guy was talking about how he overcame this huge problem—his disease—and what's inside is what makes you a man. And I guess I never really thought about that before."

Challenges to a singular notion of masculinity differed by AM gender: several female AMs noted that the presenters' stories helped "humanize men" to them and ameliorate stereotypes they had held about men as a group—that is, the stories helped them to understand men as diverse (rather than a monolithic group), multidimensional, multifaceted "human beings" who experience social pressures and have "vulnerabilities," "needs and wants." They noted that the MSP helped them perceive men (as a group) as more "accessible" and relatable, and less inherently hazardous. Some women reflected on their prior conceptions of men as competitors and oppressors; their reflections pertained to men in general and their own relationships. Said Renata:

> Okay, "men's story" . . . You would expect, this is what a guy would be like and he's probably going to tell me this kind of story—and it's not. It's people who have real problems—and it makes them somehow more accessible. Like, you can identify with them a little bit better . . . You know, they need to protect themselves from so many things and . . . you have to reach out and find the common ground . . . And I think it's so important that it's not just somebody out to get you or hurt you or abuse you . . . It's a person, just like you.

Nina described how the stories helped her to see her father as more fully human: "My dad . . . wasn't around much in my childhood. I used to think of him as kind of a villain . . . Seeing men present their stories really helped me to think of him more . . . as like a real, feeling being."

The intersectional nature of the MSP narratives supported this challenge to a singular definition of masculinity. Many AMs described learning that an intersectional understanding of masculinity is needed in order to understand men's experiences. Through reflection on the presenters' narratives, AMs gained insight into the fact that men embody multiple identities (and often multiple marginalized identities) and that being part of one identity-based community may reduce one's acceptance in another. Several noted story #2 in Table 1, shared by a black disabled presenter: "His circumstance made me question: 'What does that mean, to be a person of color and a person who might be queer-identified and also a person who might be disabled?' It made me think about the power of privilege, but at the same time thinking about how you navigate in this society . . . if you're not necessarily fitting into the mold" (Anthony). Several AMs also noted story #9, on homophobia in black communities:

> [Terry's piece] demonstrated how much it hurts when you don't have anyone . . . He doesn't have room to be a gay man in his African-American community—so it really presents those hard choices you have to make when you have two identities and those two groups won't allow you to be both . . . How can you possibly expect someone to make that choice, to choose which aspect of their person is more important, to take one and abandon the other? . . . It was really devastating, because what do you do? (Brooke)

AMs' reflection on intersectionality often incorporated reflection on prejudices and stereotypes (their own and those of others), masculinity expectations in different communities, and social consequences when men fail to meet these expectations. Most AMs noted that the MSP exposed them to men of identity groups with which they had had little prior personal interaction, and perspectives from men occupying marginalized social positions that they had never or infrequently encountered or considered. These exposures led many AMs to examine their own prejudices and stereotypes, learn new facts, and feel a newfound sense of empathy and common ground with people of identities and experiences different from their own. Several women and some men noted developing more positive, multidimensional perceptions with regard to men (or, more broadly, "people") of backgrounds different from their own—extrapolating from the specific presenter to identity groups of which the presenters were part (e.g., black gay men, Latino immigrants, transgender people, men in gangs, men of low socioeconomic status, and people with disabilities). In other cases, AMs applied insights from the stories to their conceptions of people in their own lives, coming to view them with more compassion or as more multidimensional.

The MSP's highlighting of intersections between masculinity and other identities also functioned as a notable public support for men of marginalized groups. Some

gay male AMs felt affirmed in seeing MSP presenters who were LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans) allies or self-assertive gay men who "triangulated homosexuality to a masculine strength," and felt bolstered by seeing these presenters' perspectives highlighted in a mainstream forum as a means of challenging hegemonic masculinity narratives. In response to story #16 on homophobia, Steven stated: "I think it's really cool, just knowing that . . . there are people on my side." Alvaro appreciated a presenter who served as an exemplar of a strong gay man of color and "actually made a new paradigm" of strength and possibility with his narrative (#8 in Table 1):

> One thing I really appreciated about Yosimar's piece was how he incorporated cultural elements that were especially important to him into, like, flourishing his own masculinity and his—his own person. He created this idea that all the elements of his identity are here to make him a strong person . . . It's really easy for a person of color to internalize different ideas from dominant whatever about what you're supposed to do, and how to be a man . . . And in [the story] . . . all the negative internalized stuff was just kind of discarded for ways to think about the same things that actually make you stronger . . . It was cool . . . I feel like if you're trying to change a kind of ideology or mindset, as opposed to just attacking it all the time, the best thing you can do is . . . flip it upside down. That way, you, like, deconstruct it, and you make yourself empowered in the process.

Importantly, some AMs noted that the MSP caused them to reflect on their own masculine-norm-enforcing comments and actions; some men stated intentions for their future language and behavior to be less labeling and more resistant. Rob stated: "[I'd] find myself saying, 'Oh, that's such a guy thing to do, that's such a guy thing to do.' So I'm gonna think twice before I say that now. [laughs] . . . I used to label it myself, so I guess [the MSP] challenged that." Steven noted:

> [The MSP] made me aware that . . . to be masculine, I unconsciously and consciously do things that . . . make me come off as masculine. Consciously, I'm like, "Screw it . . . I want to reject all of this." But I find myself doing things, like . . . I listen to my iPod really loudly. And if I listen to a really quote-unquote girly song, say Britney Spears . . . and say a football player or something would walk by me, and he could hear it, I would unconsciously lower the volume. So I feel like I'm more aware that I'm doing this, and that I just need to blast the music even louder if that's the case [laughs].

Kate reflected on her perpetuation of masculine gender norms:

> In my own relationships, [the MSP] made me question. My boyfriend—I used to kind of joke around about him being feminine because . . . he loves to cook, he loves to prune his roses with his mother . . . But after seeing [the MSP], it was just like, that's not what it's about, you know? It's not about defining my boyfriend as feminine or something—he's just a beautiful person all around, and embraces all the different sides of him. So I was very appreciative to have that perspective . . . I realized, "What do I

> perpetuate?" . . . I needed to keep myself in check, and realize that I was putting a man in a box instead of recognizing that there's so much more in each of us as beings. We're humans—we're not really . . . masculine or feminine . . . If we were more free in society to express that, it'd be so beneficial.

## *Undermining Essentialism*

Hegemonic masculinity operates in part by appearing to be natural—an inevitable part of the gendered order of human social life. This essentialist notion of masculinity was undermined by the MSP as many AMs gained an understanding that masculinities are constructed performances of gender—that is, hegemonic masculinity is not natural or inherent in men, and contemporary gender norms are not inevitable. The MSP led some men to challenge the common conflation of masculinity with sex and biological features such as penis size: "I guess one of the more . . . obvious lessons we can learn is just to realize that gender is not natural." AMs gained an understanding that masculinities are socially constructed and "lived by different people in different ways," and that dominant notions of masculinity are unnecessarily limited and limiting. The MSP also helped several AMs to see that gender is not just a "women's issue" but rather that men are gendered beings, too; for example, Elena noted:

> I went to the performance with my boyfriend . . . Afterwards, we talked about it throughout the rest of the night . . . That was really great, because I talk to my boyfriend about feminine issues sometimes . . . but we never talk about, like, masculinity issues. So for us to go to [the MSP] together, and then for me to think about it—like, yeah, there are issues on that side as well.

Most men and several women described gaining an expanded sense of the range of social and health challenges that are entwined with masculinity norms, and reflected on links between masculinity and homophobia, transphobia, ableism, racism, men's violence against women, and violence between men; several men expressed an increased desire to engage with these issues. The presenters' stories helped many AMs better understand how masculinity norms and gender policing can affect men's enactments of masculinity—ranging from projection of toughness and limited expression of affection with guy friends to "having to fight for your life." Several women noted that this "unexpected" learning and "realization" fostered shifts in their interpretations of men's behavior. For several AMs, the MSP narratives led them not only to rethink essentialist notions of masculinity but to challenge the validity of social categorization more broadly:

> Let's say you have a bunch of cards and you want to organize them and set them in their different spaces and these neat little categories. I felt like that night, somebody just came and messed with all those categories, those cards, and just left them

> everywhere . . . the constructs that we make up through categories, through society, media, whatever . . . So it's not . . . good or bad and that's it. It's messy. It's complicated . . . But that's what makes it hopeful . . . It can be changed. (Amber)

As a counterpoint, one man challenged the idea presented in the MSP that societal notions of masculinity can be transformed:

> I think [the MSP] makes the situation a little more urgent than it actually has to be. Like, how masculinity is a problem—I never really thought of it being a problem until I went to this performance. And then somehow, it blew up into this thing where it became a problem . . . I feel like a lot of people already know about the problems that . . . exist. And these are problems that are probably—you can't really find a solution to. By having such a performance, I feel like people all of a sudden feel like there's a need to change this kind of problem, which I don't really see . . . it being possible. (Rob)

## *Rethinking Violence and Emotional Expression*

AMs stated that the MSP led them to reconsider specific practices of hegemonic masculinity, especially those linked with restricted emotional expression and the use of violence. Anthony felt affirmed with regard to the importance of valuing men's emotions, in contrast to the dictates of hegemonic norms: "When you talk about masculinity, we talk about suppressing our emotions . . . But [the MSP] made me feel how important it is that we value how we feel . . . If we don't take a look into, you know, how we're feeling, then we're much dehumanized." Several men critically reflected on their own socialization that linked masculinity with use of or readiness for violence. Some men and women noted that a presenter's narrative on former perpetration of partner violence and violence against male peers (#7 in Table 1) challenged their stereotypes about men who perpetrate such violence, and helped them to understand links between childhood victimization and subsequent violence perpetration. The narrative also challenged the hegemonic notion that violence is a natural outcome of maleness or men's anger, and led AMs to perceive that familial cycles of violence can be broken and men who use violence can change.

> I learned that people who have issues of being violent can turn around, you know? . . . I was just so surprised that someone would be so open about that . . . and that they could turn around like that and say, "This is what I did, and I'm changing, and I want to help other people change." I thought that was very powerful . . . I never really heard any stories from the perspective of a perpetrator of violence. (Elena)

Several AMs noted that the act of public self-disclosure by a man who had formerly perpetrated intimate partner violence was rare and socially valuable; some also valued his silence-breaking regarding men's experiences of childhood abuse:

> When I hear about domestic violence, it's always from a woman. So to hear it from a guy's perspective and to not hear him rationalize it, but just give his experience . . . his participation but also the roots of it . . . was intense . . . I really appreciated the fact that he got up there . . . There's a lot of men who are abused and don't discuss it. So the fact that this kid—and he seemed pretty young to me—could get up there and share that kind of experience is amazing. (Earl)

AM statements such as the one below further show that presenter #7's story helped AMs understand how childhood victimization and negative male socialization can increase risk for subsequent perpetration of violence—but also highlight the fine line between interpreting such narratives as explanatory versus somewhat exculpatory, potentially obfuscating the key element of personal responsibility:

> Being there in person definitely was beneficial . . . It just changed my way of thinking of—like, certain people . . . Galen admitting to, like, why he was so violent . . . He explained it in a really eloquent manner, which was really surprising. And how it was a vicious cycle, and I really saw that. Before the performance, if I were to see him—honestly, I would avoid someone like him just 'cause—out of fear. But it was just really great to see that, you know, he had a reason for why he did that. (Steven)

## *Support in Reevaluating Masculinity*

Most men and some women noted feeling personally affirmed or bolstered in some way by the presenters' personal narratives. Several men—including men who embodied both privileged and subordinated masculinities—had had experiences similar to those shared by the presenters, and valued seeing they were not alone with regard to challenges including having a male friend who had been sexually assaulted, dealing with family members' racism, expressing affection for male friends, and feeling intimidated or inhibited by other men. Said Anthony: "Too often, there are social caps—things you don't say, morés, things that are outlawed, things that if you do say, you're ridiculed, criticized. This, though—to get in touch with what you're feeling, why you're feeling, and to get to explore it in a public environment . . . It's perfect, exactly what's needed."

Some AMs noted that the presenters' stories led them to feel a sense of self-efficacy and social acceptability with regard to sharing their own silence-breaking stories on gender and health—and, more broadly, that they could venture beyond rigid gender norms to further develop a healthy personhood. Earl stated: "It was just really inspiring to see men up there sharing their stories, these really powerful experiences . . . For me, it made it seem more accepting or possible to share a story like that." Maya noted:

> When [Presenter #7] said that he used the MSP, as a way to feel like the community was holding him accountable, I thought that was so brave . . . Something that . . . really

> touched me is feeling like maybe I could share some of the things in my own life . . . and then have the community hold me accountable in making these really positive changes in my life. So, not only was the MSP an amazing way to learn more about what it means to be a man—or more than that, just a human being—but it was also therapeutic, and trying to see how I could change myself to be more than just like a gender, a woman, to just a human being or a positive person.

Some AMs felt affirmed in their problematization of hegemonic masculinity and reflection on gender-related issues which were rarely or never discussed in their social spheres:

> I gained some . . . *acknowledgement* of the thoughts I was having before about some of the problems with masculinity, and how I felt that it tied to a lot of things like homophobia and violence . . . Before, it was a very nebulous thing, this idea about . . . direct consequences to masculinity and hyper-masculinity . . . I wasn't sure if . . . it was just something I was seeing because I had some sort of strange relationship with masculinity . . . There was no venue to talk about it. (David)

Nearly all men and most women described viewing the presenters as role models with regard to the central content areas of the production as well as personal qualities they demonstrated; this modeling was fundamental to MSP impacts for AMs. AMs often noted qualities they respected in specific presenters such as their strength of character, "wisdom," capacity to assert "their own version of masculinity," willingness to show emotion, courage in speaking out with candor and vulnerability, ability to move forward through adversity and loss, resilience in the face of stigma and marginalization, and their choice to apply their life lessons to work for social change (including via the sharing of their stories).

Several AMs stated that the presenters also served as role models in realms including willingness to engage in self- and societal examination, ending one's own perpetration of violence, taking action to prevent community violence, cultural pride, and forgiveness even in extreme circumstances ("I see the direction that I want to be developing towards, to get to a place where I can be like that"). Several AMs viewed the presenters as models for unlearning homophobia ("Just seeing his turnaround is very valuable") and loving friendships between men:

> I really liked [Presenter #8's] piece . . . It gave me this feeling, almost a little bit of envy. Like, man, it'd be so fun to go out with these guys and have a good time like that, and just have that kind of connection with people. And it seemed like they just really stood up for each other, cared about each other. And . . . I think that could be a very powerful thing. I don't know if it's something that maybe people would say, "Oh, they can do that because they're homosexual and they're far more comfortable, you know, loving each other and that kind of thing." I hope it's a powerful thing that can be kind of extended in general, how people could be really—I don't know—so close, have such a strong, sort of fun-loving tie. (David)

The presenters' modeling overall was experienced by AMs as both specific and generalizable (i.e., extrapolated by AMs to broader insights such as how to deal with challenges in their own lives), expanding many AMs' sense of possibility for themselves and others.

## Discussion

This evaluation of an MSP production found that the MSP stimulated critical reflection and change for AMs with regard to knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral intentions pertinent to the nexus of masculinities, well-being, and social justice; these effects were assessed two weeks post-event. AMs reported that the MSP supported them in valuing a plurality of masculinities rather than one hegemonic form, understanding masculinity as more intersectional, challenging stereotypes and prejudices they had held, noting diverse costs of hegemonic masculinity, disconnecting masculine practices from essentialist notions about male bodies and unhealthy behaviors, and rethinking hegemonic masculine practices around emotional restriction and use of violence. Similar positive impacts for AMs have been informally observed with fifteen additional MSP presentations in the United States and Chile, prior to and after the one examined in this study (via email correspondence and hundreds of anonymous, post-event audience feedback forms).

Although many impacts of the MSP production were event-specific—that is, related to the particular presenters, content, and context—many broadly applicable insights were gained from this study with regard to how knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral intentions can be affected via public presentation of personal narratives and subsequent reflection and dialogue. The live, nonfiction, first-person, candid, narrative-based format of the production was fundamental to the perceived effects it fostered. AMs gained firsthand exposure to perspectives of men of identity groups with which they had previously had little or no interaction, and exposure to life experiences they had not previously considered. The stories evoked empathy, respect, and identification with the presenters, and led AMs to view the presenters as role models.

AMs were highly receptive to the personal narrative and performance format of the MSP. They viewed the MSP as a novel and needed initiative which makes masculine gender norms visible and creates a safe space for men to publicly and critically discuss their experiences regarding masculinity; a need for critiquing masculinity has long been discussed in the sociological literature (Kimmel 1987; Messner, Greenberg, and Peretz 2015) and a need for safe spaces to do so has also been emphasized (Dworkin 2015). Future men's story-sharing productions should emphasize clearly (ideally within the content of the stories themselves) that men who perpetrate violence are responsible for their actions—such that discussion of childhood victimization or men's "socialization" does not run the risk of being misunderstood as an exculpatory "reason" for abusive behavior, reducing or obviating personal responsibility.

## Study Weaknesses

This study is subject to the weaknesses of a short-term post-program qualitative assessment. Future MSP evaluations should employ more rigorous study designs and include longer follow-up periods, larger sample sizes, and use of quantitative as well as qualitative methods. The findings of this study may over- or under-reflect impacts of the MSP production; future qualitative assessments should use in-depth interviews in addition to FGs so as to obtain maximally rich data on sensitive content such as participants' socially undesirable perspectives and behaviors and MSP impacts on AMs in these realms. The study included almost twice as many female as male AMs; a greater number of male participants would likely have yielded richer data from men. The FGs also took place during the finals period, which may have affected the overall number of study participants. The study findings may also reflect selection biases; people more open to change may have been more likely to attend the MSP, making it difficult to generalize from the MSP audience. Amongst event attendees, study participants may have been more positively affected by the MSP than nonparticipants. On the other hand, participants may have been more likely to have already held perspectives consonant with those of the MSP, such that they may have "learned" less than nonparticipants from the production.

## Future Directions

The study findings indicate that it would be fruitful to implement and evaluate men's gender-transformative personal narrative productions in diverse contexts, including ones in which harmful masculinity norms are linked with high prevalences of men's violence against women, violence between men, HIV/AIDS, oppression of gender and sexual minorities, gender inequality, and other health and justice challenges. It could also be fruitful to evaluate narrative productions that focus on specific issues such as men's violence against women, with participants addressing the issue from diverse personal standpoints (e.g., bystander intervention, former perpetration, and supporting survivors). Personal narrative productions could be implemented and evaluated as public culminations of existing multi-session, gender-transformative education programs, whereby program participants could opt to publicly share what they gained from their participation; this could serve as an evaluable program component for participants in addition to fostering impacts for AMs. Personal narrative productions could also be evaluated as community-level complements to mass media entertainment-education programs (e.g., serial dramas) and as a component of multi-modal public health initiatives that use diverse strategies to engage individuals and communities. Films and curriculum based on the productions should also be evaluated as educational tools.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by Award Number T32MH019105 from the National Institute of Mental Health. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institute of Mental Health or the National Institutes of Health.

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