



The Men's Story Project: Promoting Healthy Masculinities via Men's Public, Personal Narrative-Sharing

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Abstract

The Men's Story Project (MSP) is a scalable social and behavior change communication initiative that fosters critical reflection and dialogue about masculinities by creating public forums where men share non-fiction, personal narratives that challenge male norms and model healthy, gender-equitable masculinities. Via focus groups and in-depth interviews, this qualitative evaluation study examined impacts of the MSP for 20 MSP presenters and 31 college audience members who attended an MSP production at a public university in California in the Spring 2009 semester. Key thematic findings for MSP presenters included value placed on the men's group experience; having their stereotypes and prejudices challenged; empowerment and healing; reinforced commitment to cease/prevent men's violence; and expanded gender justice engagement. For audience members, key thematic findings included gaining an expanded conceptualization of masculinity; learning about intersectionality; having their stereotypes and prejudices challenged; and finding significant overall educational and social value in the MSP. The MSP's effects on audience members were facilitated by experiences of emotion, empathy, parafriendship and role modeling elicited by the first-person narratives, and the social learning environment fostered by the collective, public experience. Directions for further international research and practice are discussed.

Keywords Masculinity · Masculinities · Narratives · Testimonials · Gender-based violence · Intersectionality · Role models

That isn't something you hear very often... Women - it seems like we've traditionally had a space, at least among ourselves, where we can talk about these things... Men, it seems, aren't able to make those statements in public and don't seem to have a space to be able to share even among themselves in private... This is a space that needs to be created - that if you create that space, it'll be filled, you know. (Helen, MSP Audience Member)

Around the world, men's adherence to harmful masculinity ideologies has been found to be associated with many health risks and adverse outcomes for people of all genders (Bila and

Egrot 2009; Courtenay 2000; Jewkes et al. 2011; Mahalik et al. 2007; Noar and Morokoff 2002; Oliffe and Phillips 2008; Sabo 2005; Santana et al. 2006). "Toxic masculinity" is an oft-discussed explanation for why men have higher rates of risk behaviors and lower rates of health-protective behaviors than women (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), and men's perpetration of gender-based violence (GBV) has been linked to masculinity norms in multiple studies across continents (Jewkes et al. 2011; Noar and Morokoff 2002; Santana et al. 2006). To prevent GBV, gender-transformative interventions are needed which promote and normalize healthy, gender-equitable expressions of masculinity (Greig et al. 2015).

The Men's Story Project (MSP) is an innovative public health and movement-building program which creates public spaces for collective dialogue on masculinities, promotes gender-equitable attitudes and practices, and aims to dismantle the notion that there is one correct—and often harm-fostering—way to "be a man." It engages groups of diverse men in creating public events where they share candid, personal narratives about masculinity as it relates to their own experiences with relationships, violence, privilege and oppression, other intersectional identities (e.g., race, sexual orientation),

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and other topics. Via their stories, the presenters challenge toxic masculinity norms and model healthy, gender-equitable masculinities. Seventeen MSP presentations have taken place in the United States (U.S.) and Chile, and (as of September 2018) new productions are being planned in the U.S., Canada, Gaza, and the West Bank.

This qualitative evaluation study, based on focus groups (FGs) and interviews with 20 MSP presenters and 31 MSP audience members (AMs) in northern California, discusses the research background and theoretical framework of the MSP, key thematic findings from FGs and interviews with AMs and presenters (with emphasis on GBV-related findings), and the MSP's potential for helping to prevent GBV and related social harms.

Harmful and Healthy Male Norms

Men's adherence to dominant masculinity ideologies is linked with many behaviors that harm men themselves, their partners and families, and their communities. These include sexual and physical violence against women (Jewkes et al. 2011; Santana et al. 2006), HIV risk behaviors (Noar and Morokoff 2002; Santana et al. 2006), violence against other men, substance abuse, risky driving, and reduced care-seeking for physical and mental health needs (Mahalik et al. 2007; Bila and Egrot 2009; Oliffe and Phillips 2008; Sabo 2005; Courtenay 2000). Men in marginalized populations, such as gay and trans men, experience costs for their nonconformity including elevated levels of GBV, HIV/AIDS, depression, and substance abuse (Connell 1987).

It has been increasingly recognized that working to transform gender norms in support of healthy, gender-equitable masculinities is a productive approach to improving health and well-being for all people. In a review of evaluations of 58 programs around the world that engage men and boys for purposes including sexual/reproductive health, fatherhood involvement, GBV prevention, and maternal and child health, the gender-transformative programs—i.e., those which engaged participants in critical reflection on the social construction and impacts of gender norms, so as to promote gender-equitable attitudes and behaviors—had the highest rates of effectiveness, as compared to gender-sensitive and gender-neutral programs (Barker et al. 2010). In recent years, several gender-transformative intervention programs (e.g., Jewkes 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.

By working to transform masculinity-related attitudes, practices and norms for the promotion of health and gender/social justice, the MSP aims to be a gender-transformative initiative. To our knowledge, no other gender-transformative

programs have implemented and formally evaluated men's public, personal narrative-sharing as a core program strategy.

Intervening Through Public Storytelling

Theoretical underpinnings of the MSP include a social constructionist perspective that views gender as a collection of norms and practices that vary across time and place and are malleable in response to human action (Courtenay 2000). Intersectionality theory informs how the MSP addresses inequality and vulnerability (Crenshaw 1991), such that it 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, class, religion, and (dis)ability) which are linked with varying degrees of privilege and oppression.

The public, personal narrative approach of MSP is guided by Social Cognitive Theory (SCT; Bandura 1986; Bandura 2004), which posits that narrative-based interventions can foster shifts in viewers' attitudes, values, and behaviors via both direct influence and socially mediated pathways. In the direct pathway, realistic narratives that depict the social context of the viewer can foster observational learning by showing how peers or role models enact particular attitudes and behaviors, and depicting the positive or negative consequences received; this informs and motivates viewers with regard to what is socially accepted. By depicting how similar others perseveringly develop the ability to carry out specific actions in given contexts, narratives also build viewers' confidence that they too can learn to carry out such actions, regardless of obstacles that may arise. This form of confidence is referred to as self-efficacy, and is posited by SCT to play an important role in shaping which challenges people take on and their willingness to persist until they have succeeded. Narrative programs that include peers and "prestigious" role models can also influence viewers' perceptions of social norms and values—which, in turn, affect viewers' own values and behaviors (Bandura 2004).

With regard to socially mediated pathways, prior studies have found that a key catalyst of viewers' personal change in relation to narrative program content is the "social learning environment" that is created when viewers critically discuss the content with members of their social network. This dialogue and debate helps viewers vet the ideas presented in the program, gain a sense of whether such ideas are (or could become) socially acceptable and practicable, and build self and collective efficacy (i.e., confidence that a group can take collective action to bring about social change) (Bandura 2004). Community dialogue about narrative programs also stands to expand the impact of the program beyond those who directly viewed it (Singhal et al. 2004; Noar 2006).

Complementing ideas from SCT, the Transportation-Imagery Model further suggests that vivid, realistic narratives

may exert persuasive effects on viewers by “transporting” them into the story—which may foster vicarious experience, circumvent the defensive responses that can arise in response to more didactic content, and lead the listener to identify with and/or develop strong emotions for the characters portrayed (Green and Brock 2002). Hinyard and Kreuter (2007) note that narrative-based programs “may be especially useful when addressing issues involving morality, religion, personal values,... social relationships, and other issues for which reason and logic have obvious limitations” (p. 778). This capability stands to be valuable for initiatives which aim to shift entrenched views such as sexism, homophobia, racism, espousal of hegemonic masculinity ideals, and belief in the acceptability of GBV.

The Men’s Story Project

Initiated in San Francisco, California in 2008, the MSP is a social and behavior change communication initiative that fosters critical reflection and community dialogue about masculinity by creating public forums where men and boys share non-fiction, personal narratives that challenge dominant masculine norms and model healthy, gender-equitable masculinities. A total of 17 MSP productions have taken place thus far on university campuses in California, Oregon, Minnesota, Missouri, Rhode Island, and Georgia, and popular theaters in California and Santiago, Chile; new productions are presently being planned for 2018 at universities in the U.S. and Canada, and with community-based organizations in Gaza and the West Bank.

In each MSP presentation, diverse men—and, more broadly, individuals who identify with maleness in any regard—use expressive mediums such as prose, poetry, and music to share personal narratives with a live audience. The presenters’ stories address topics pertinent to the nexus of masculinities, well-being, and social justice in their local context, such as GBV, romantic and family relationships, sexual orientation, gender identity, homo/transphobia, racism, xenophobia, HIV/AIDS, processes of personal change, and intersections with other aspects of identity such as race and religion. The stories demonstrate costs of dominant notions of manhood as experienced by the presenters themselves, celebrate men’s resistance and self-assertion in the face of harmful norms, and highlight men’s journeys toward, and enactment of, healthy masculinities. The stories often address how the presenters’ life experiences relate 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, HIV testing) and social action opportunities.

MSP presenters, who are usually local peers and opinion leaders, are conceptualized as serving as role models of diverse aspects of healthy masculinities. On the collective level, the MSP aims to generate mainstream instances where men discuss their life experiences *as gendered*, model cross-group solidarity and collective efficacy, and take a public stand for social justice (Kimmel 1987). The MSP creates community-based events (i.e., based on geography or other social factors) so as to maximize social relevance and personal identification of AMs with the presenters and their stories. MSP productions can be recurring (e.g., yearly campus initiatives), and integrated with broader education programs and advocacy efforts; productions are also filmed to create locally relevant social media, documentaries, and accompanying educational tools. The MSP is structured as a scalable movement-building project that can be created in diverse global settings by locally led teams, with presenters sharing true, personal stories that are pertinent to the nexus of masculinities, health and justice in their societal context; an MSP training guide (Lehrer 2017) and training/consultation are provided to support local teams.

Methods

Study Aims

The overall study aimed to examine (1) What, if anything, AMs felt they had gained or learned from the MSP; (2) AMs’ perceptions regarding the MSP’s personal narrative format, overall value, and potential future directions; (3) How the social learning environment may have played a role in AMs’ learning in relation to the MSP; (4) What, if anything, MSP presenters felt they had gained or learned from MSP participation; and (5) Feedback from MSP presenters regarding the production process and potential future directions for the MSP. This article provides an overview of findings in several of the above areas, with emphasis on participant learning, social learning environment, and GBV-related findings.

Recruitment and Data Collection

Presentations AMs interviewed for this study attended one of two live MSP presentations which took place on sequential evenings at a public university in northern California, in the Spring 2009 semester, with a total of approximately 350 attendees. Presented in two acts, the event had approximately one hundred and ten minutes of planned content, followed by a 30-min audience-presenter discussion (see Table 1).

Recruitment—Presenters The MSP director recruited pieces for the production by disseminating an open Call for

Table 1 Men's Story Project presentation content

- 1) The MSP director introduced the public health and social justice rationale for the MSP.
- 2)* A black man in his 40s with cerebral palsy discussed intersecting oppressions faced by black disabled men, and the process of learning to assert his beauty and sexuality.
- 3)* A white man in his 30s discussed leaving his corporate job to become a poet, confronting his father's racism, and his wish to be in a committed relationship rather than have many partners.
- 4)* A queer, trans, mixed-race poet in their 20s discussed their first experience of being feared by a woman on the street at night because they were perceived as a man of color.
- 5)* A white heterosexual man in his 30s discussed how homophobia limited his expression of love for his male friends.
- 6)* A nationally-known activist—a black man in his 40s—described his path to facilitating a truce between two major gangs and forgiving the man who killed his son. He also discussed childhood sexual abuse, and silence-breaking as a means for healing.
- 7)* A white man in his 20s discussed being physically abused by his father; his physical violence against his girlfriend and other men; substance abuse; self-harm; and his journey of change.
- 8)* A Mexican-American queer man in his 20s discussed his resistance to gender norms espoused by his cultural community, and deep friendships with other men.
- 9)* A black queer man in his 20s discussed self-assertion, pride, and his experiences with homophobia at church and in black communities.
- 10)* A white man in his 30s discussed his experiences of anxiety in public restrooms.
- 11) A retired dancer in his 60s* and a ballet dancer in his 20s performed a modern dance duo reflecting a mentoring relationship between black men.
- 12)* A white Orthodox Jewish man in his 30s discussed witnessing domestic violence as a child, and serving as defense attorney for a woman charged with the murder of her abusive boyfriend.
- 13)* A white man in his 20s described his admiration for his father, who has served as a model of strength and integrity amidst chronic illness.
- 14)* A 69-year-old former member of the Black Panthers described unlearning homophobia.
- 15)* A white man in his 30s discussed having testicular cancer, the notion that men should deny physical or emotional pain, and notions of personal wholeness.
- 16) An Asian man* and white man in their 20s did a duo on men's posturing and effects of homophobia on expression of love between men.
- 17)* A Latino man in his 30s discussed his former perpetration of violence against a female partner, and his journey toward becoming a GBV prevention educator.
- 18)* A Latino gay man in his 20s discussed his unwillingness to be affectionate in public with his partner, due to fear of social consequences.
- 19)* A black man in his 60s discussed his parents' homophobia and father's lack of emotional expressiveness, and his expressiveness with his own children.
- 20)* A black man in his 20s performed a modern dance piece addressing societal images of black men's bodies and masculinity.
- 21)* An Asian man in his 20s described growing up without positive male role models, experiencing emotional abuse from men as a child, and becoming a feminist.
- 22) The stories were followed by a 30-min audience-presenter discussion, which was co-facilitated by the MSP director and an MSP presenter.

Table 1 (continued)

AMs were informed that the cameras which had been filming the event had been turned off. Presenters remained onstage, and AMs stepped up to a microphone to ask questions of the presenters and share their reflections on the event content. The discussion included inquiries as to how and why the presenters decided to share their stories, expressions of appreciation, some inquiries as to why certain demographic identities were not represented amongst the presenters, and the sharing of personal experiences related to the presenters' stories.

* Indicates presenters interviewed in this study. Pieces 1–16 were shared at the MSP production viewed by AMs interviewed in this study; pieces 17–21 were shared only at prior productions.

Submissions, and, in some cases, inviting specific men to submit pieces based on their socially salient experiences or identities (e.g., a man who could discuss his intersectional experiences as a black gay Christian man). Once the final group was selected, most presenters participated in at least two of the four group “playshops” over the course of 6 weeks, in which they discussed their motivations for MSP participation, honed their pieces, exchanged feedback on works in progress, shared emotional support, and practiced public speaking.

Fifteen of the presenters in this study participated in the MSP production viewed by study AMs; we also interviewed five presenters from prior MSP productions. Presenters were recruited for the study via a group email invitation from the MSP director, who described the study purpose and instructed them to contact the interviewer directly if they were interested in participating. Participation was presented as optional, and no positive or negative consequences with regard to the MSP (e.g., future participation opportunities) were noted. Overall, the twenty presenters in this study were diverse with regard to age (range 20–69 years), race/ethnicity, class, immigration status, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other factors. Their demographics and the topics addressed by their pieces are summarized in Table 1.

Recruitment—Audience Members The MSP production was publicized via flyers posted around campus, leaflets distributed on campus and nearby cafes, campus group listserves, word-of-mouth from MSP presenters and production team members, and announcements made in related classes (e.g., gender studies) and public events (e.g., poetry slams). Once at the event, 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. Interested AMs provided their contact information, and were subsequently invited via email to participate in a FG. A total of 11 male AMs and 20 female AMs participated. Participants were undergraduates, graduate students, and recent graduates; almost all the men and over half of the women were non-white, and over half of the men and almost half of the women identified as gay/queer, bisexual, or questioning. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for audience members (AMs)

Demographic characteristics	Male 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
Multi-racial	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

Data Collection—Audience Members Two weeks post-event, six FGs were conducted—three each with male and female AMs. A research team of four graduate students and one undergraduate student was trained in qualitative methods to conduct the FGs. The second author of this paper co-facilitated two FGs (one with male AMs and one with female AMs) when the scheduled facilitator was unable to attend. With the aforementioned exception, the FGs were conducted by two interviewers of the same gender as the participants. The FGs lasted between 60 and 90 min.

The FG introduction included a setting of ground rules for the discussion, including confidentiality, “agree to disagree,” and the right not to respond to any question. AMs were encouraged to speak candidly about their reflections on the MSP presentation. To emphasize that it was acceptable to say socially undesirable things (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 heard of the MSP production; what led them to attend; what, if anything, they felt they had learned or gained from the MSP (this was posed as the central question of the FG); whether there were any presenters’ stories that led them to think about or feel something in a different or new way, whether there were any pieces that that they found to be offensive or harmful in any way; whether they discussed the MSP with anyone after seeing it; and what they thought of the MSP overall, among topics. Specific questions explored AMs’ learning or reflection on specific issues addressed by the presenters’ stories (e.g., “Some of the pieces addressed homosexuality and homophobia. How did you feel about those pieces?”). These questions were accompanied by

optional 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 way, etc. Similar questions addressed topics including men’s violence against women; trans identities; notions of masculinity in diverse race/ethnic communities; the nexus of disability, race, and sexuality; and notions of masculinity more broadly.

Data Collection—Presenters Two weeks post-event, three FGs were conducted with a total of 11 MSP presenters. Six to 8 months later, in-depth interviews were conducted with 9 additional presenters. The FGs lasted between 60 and 90 min; the interviews lasted 45 minutes and covered the same questions. The FGs were led by a male graduate student who was part of the team described above, with assistance from other male team members. The telephone interviews with presenters were conducted by a male post-doctoral research fellow.

As was the case for AMs, the FG introduction included a setting of ground rules (e.g., confidentiality, agree to disagree), with openness and honesty encouraged. Questions inquired as to what led presenters to participate in the MSP, how the process of crafting their piece and participating in the group playshops was for them, any undesirable aspects to their experience, and how it was to share their stories publicly. As for AMs, the central question was what, if anything, they felt they had gained or learned from having participated in the MSP. To probe further, presenters were asked whether their participation in the MSP had had any effect on their perspectives, feelings, or actions in any way, with regard to their own experiences that they had discussed, or topics that the MSP addressed. Presenters were also asked about feedback they received from AMs, whether or not their experience with the MSP had had any effect on their subsequent interests or activities (presenters were told it was okay to say “no”), and their thoughts on potential future directions for the MSP and ways to strengthen it.

Ethics The study was reviewed and approved by the University of California-San Francisco Committee on Human Research. Presenters and AMs who participated in the FGs signed informed consent forms in person before the FGs commenced, and were paid \$50 after their participation. For presenters who did interviews by phone, verbal consent was obtained, and participants were paid \$25.

Data Analysis

The FGs and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim; transcripts were uploaded to the Dedoose online system for analysis of qualitative data (Sociocultural Research Consultants LLC 2016). With guidance from a senior researcher, the first and second authors independently analyzed and coded randomly selected transcripts from two

men's FGs, two women's FGs, and two presenter FGs, and three presenter in-depth interviews. The coders then discussed ideas regarding primary and secondary themes, which led to development of the initial codebooks for AMs and presenters. Codes were based on either emergent themes observed in the data (e.g., empathy, parafriendship, emotionally moved, presenters as role models) or study participants' responses to questions posed to them (e.g., regarding social learning environment, conceptualization of masculinity, responses to the pieces on violence against women) (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The coders then re-coded the initial nine transcripts, discussed the coding again, and further edited the codebook and the codes in the transcripts; this process was iterated twice more to consolidate and clarify codes and subcodes. The coders then tested their inter-rater reliability using the Dedoose testing functionality. Because this study had two co-equal coders, each one made a test for the other based on transcript excerpts, and then discussed the results to clarify code usage. The coders then created new tests and re-tested each other (twice each) until both coders' tests received a pooled Cohen's kappa statistic above .90 (a score of .97 was achieved). The coders then each coded all of the data. To support application consistency, most codes were accompanied by written definitions within the data analysis program. Once the coded data was exported, analytical memos (Lofland and Lofland 1995) were written to facilitate analysis of content within codes and subcodes, and then to synthesize this content into key themes and other salient findings.

Findings

Coding of the FG and interview data identified several themes, detailed below. For presenters, the key themes included valuing the experience of men's community; having their stereotypes and prejudices challenged; empowerment and healing; reinforced commitment to cease/prevent men's violence; and expanded gender justice engagement. For AMs, the key themes included gaining an expanded conceptualization of masculinity; learning about the intersectional nature of masculinities; having their stereotypes and prejudices challenged; and finding significant overall value in the MSP. The MSP's effects on AMs were facilitated by factors including emotion, empathy, parafriendship and role modeling, as well as the social learning environment fostered by the production.

Presenters

Safety in Men's Community The experience of engaging with a group of men in a manner that involved open discussion and sensitive interaction about deeply personal, gendered topics was new for most presenters. Two presenters said the MSP was the first time they had felt "safe" in a group of men, and

another noted that he had previously been accustomed to friendships with men that were "not healthy"; this feeling of safety related directly for some presenters with experiences of violence:

I have issues around just men in general, and feel unsafe around men. Because I didn't have any experience, growing up, of it being safe to talk to men. Like, there was just so much - I got so much violence from men... Part of what I learned about in this [MSP] process was that it's not always unsafe, and that in fact, there are men who are working on their healing and are wanting to share their stories.

Presenters greatly valued the experience of feeling accepted and connected with a group of men (e.g., a "sacred circle"); some described having gained intergenerational mentors and friends, and some felt personally affirmed regarding issues of masculinity and/or closely-held experiences such as childhood abuse. A presenter stated:

We talked about issues men deal with that we never talk about... It's like a relief, you know? I'm not alone, you know? That guy experienced the same thing!... He was a victim of parental abuse growing up - me too, same thing!... I was empowered, I gained - what's the word, when you're recognized by somebody? Community. It corroborated my feelings, my concerns around masculinity. I had never talked to anyone about masculinity, except maybe some female friends. Being with a group of men, talking about it - I'm on the right track. Instead of off on left field, losing it, you know. It's ok, perfectly natural to be concerned about how we're socialized, you know, told you don't cry, you don't show feelings, you don't touch another man.

Stereotypes and Prejudices Challenged The MSP group process provided a novel opportunity for presenters to interact on a personal level with men of backgrounds different from their own. Connecting with fellow presenters and hearing their stories fostered the amelioration of some presenters' long-held stereotypes and prejudices, and helped presenters develop an expanded sense of empathy and common ground (e.g., with black men, disabled men, trans men). For example, one man stated:

One of the presenters was transgender, and that is an identity that I have often derided... I just didn't get it. So interestingly, one of the people that I bonded with the most was this man... I definitely got it again with this individual. And talking to this individual and like... I never would have thought that you - really? Like you

were brought up as a girl? And you always knew and felt, and just - you were a man? And you happened to be in a girl's body. And that's so interesting, because I just can't imagine that. But yet, here you are. And that's awesome that you feel that this is what's right for you. And I would feel comfortable now hanging out with you as a dude. You know, so I think that that, in a very real way, kind of opened my eyes.

Empowerment and Healing Several presenters noted that participating in the MSP led them to feel a sense of empowerment, meaning-making and/or healing. Empowerment was related to factors including the achievement of publicly sharing their silence-breaking stories; realizing that people wanted to hear their story; feeling understood or seen by the audience; and learning that others had had similar life experiences. Several presenters felt empowered by the sense that they were challenging patriarchy via the collective work of the MSP, contributing their voice to an important public dialogue, bringing more visibility to stories of members of their identity groups (this was noted by some men with marginalized identities), and helping audience members learn.

MSP presenters who shared personal stories about violence perpetration and survivorship described gaining a sense of meaning and healing from MSP participation. For these presenters, the act of crafting and publicly sharing their story became part of the arc of their narrative—such that their “story” did not end with the painful experiences they were discussing, but continued into the act of sharing these experiences and lessons learned, so as to benefit themselves and others. Seeing that their story had helped others (via AM feedback immediately post-event and in subsequent weeks, including random encounters with AMs who approached them on the street) further contributed to a sense of new meaning and healing. For example, a presenter who discussed witnessing domestic violence in childhood noted that MSP participation led him to move from a sense of “victimhood” to a sense of “survivorship,” and led him to feel “like you possess an experience that makes you richer.” A presenter who discussed his perpetration of violence against women and other men stated:

For me, it was like, “Finally, someone understands.” Some of the women that came up [after the presentation] - those were the women that I felt like I could never get to understand what it was like to be a violent person, to be angry... And then for them to give me this response, “I understand” - it's like finally, you know... I'm not just stigmatized or demonized as this horrible person who'll never heal, that people are scared of - I've had a ton of experiences like that. For people to understand that side of it - you can be doing horrible things and it's

destroying you inside. So, that was a beautiful reaction to get from the piece - somebody saying they got so much hope from the piece, when I was so scared they would be angry or judging... People can hate me, but I'm gonna walk away knowing that I told my truth and this community is going to hold me accountable. People were so healed by it, so transformed by it, or at least the people that came up to me. Maybe it has more of a place than I even thought myself.

Another presenter whose story addressed his experience of childhood sexual abuse described feeling bolstered by his fellow presenters:

I feel like now I have more tools to extend myself into different arenas, because I'm not the only one who's talking about these types of things that are very intimate and taboo in a certain sense, you know? So I'm not the only one telling the story. The more people that tell it, I think the more open people become - to knowing that it's okay. It's okay to have those experiences, and we don't have to define ourselves by what we experienced.

Reinforced Commitment to End Violence Presenters who discussed their former perpetration of partner violence noted that publicly sharing their journeys of change led them to feel a reinforced sense of commitment to no longer use violence and prevent perpetration by other men. For one presenter, sharing his story generated a desired sense of public accountability:

This was a chance for me to tell that story in a way that I could get support from the community to hold me accountable for the lifestyle I wanted to live. I felt that community accountability would ensure that it wouldn't just be a vision this time, that I wouldn't just stop these behaviors...that I would do everything I could to get support from other men, healing groups... men's groups, therapists, and that I'd do whatever I needed to transform that behavior and begin to live a healthy life that's not only reflected in my relationships but a healthy masculine identity... ways to relate with women, intimacy, and all that.

Gender Justice Engagement For several presenters, the MSP experience was an important step in a broader trajectory of gender justice activism, helping them progress from an initial awareness or interest to a deeper engagement (e.g., embarking on writing a full-length memoir on childhood witnessing of domestic violence). For some presenters, the MSP reinforced and refreshed an existing commitment: “I think there was one part of me that was in a kind of comfort zone... and

[participating in the MSP] made me more aware of my role as an educator, as a man committed to ending violence.” Others deepened their commitment and engagement:

[The MSP] was my segue into gender-based activism. Afterwards, I joined the campus chapter of the National Organization for Women... I also got involved more with the Gender Equity Resource Center, and this entire school year has been defined by my studies on the one hand, and what I’ve been doing in terms of... pro-feminist activism.

Audience Members

Masculinity Expanded Most men and many women noted gaining an expanded conceptualization of masculinity, beyond narrow and stereotypical notions they had held, and an understanding “that it is lived by different people in different ways.” Several AMs learned that masculinities are socially constructed and enacted—“that gender is not natural”—and gained an understanding that dominant notions of masculinity are unnecessarily limiting. Said Anthony:

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... But not until watching the performance did I start to redefine my own definition of masculinity, examining more in terms of my ethos... and the spiritual, emotional facets.

Most men and several women described gaining a greater understanding of ways in which male norms contribute to problems such as homophobia, men’s violence against women, and violence between men; several men expressed an increased interest in engaging with these issues. Most men also noted feeling personally affirmed in some regard pertaining to masculinities; for example, some gay male AMs described feeling affirmed and inspired by seeing presenters who served as models of proud, self-assertive gay men. As a counterpoint, one male AM challenged the idea that societal notions of masculinity can be transformed, stating that the MSP “makes the situation a little more urgent than it actually has to be. Like, how masculinity is a problem... 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.” Two other men and one woman also stated they didn’t learn anything new from the stories because they were “already aware of the issues,” but the men appreciated hearing “people voice them”

and found them affirming “as a man exploring the understanding of masculinities,” respectively.

Stereotypes and Prejudices Challenged Most AMs noted that the MSP exposed them to perspectives from men of marginalized groups that they had rarely or never encountered or considered (e.g., black gay men, Latino immigrants, men with disabilities). Many expressed increased awareness of and empathy for experiences of members of these and other groups, endeavoring to “imagine what it might be like to stand in the shoes” of a given presenter and reflecting on what they might feel or do in presenters’ situations. Along with this, several AMs stated that the MSP led them to notice, reflect on, and re-evaluate some of their stereotypes and prejudices—about men as a group, and about particular groups of men. Said Maya: “It really, profoundly changed me... Even though I consider myself a gender-conscious person, even I really needed to hear that... There’s so much that still needs to be worked through, and I still have my own preconceptions.” Alice’s prejudices were not fully ameliorated, but the MSP fostered some self-reflection and change in social perception:

The disabled man was really powerful, because - I know why people with mental illnesses and people who have physical disabilities - I know the evolution reasons why we’re afraid of them and everything, and I still keep my distance. I’m still not completely - it’s still difficult for me to feel relatedness, as I would do [with] like somebody else. But I do feel like all the [MSP] pieces brought together... like African-American men - there was two men walking behind me two days ago and I just felt pretty comfortable and that was really freeing for me... I think that has been the impact for now of the MSP.

Intersectional Awareness Via reflection on the presenters’ narratives, AMs gained insight into the fact that men embody multiple identities (including multiple marginalized identities) which jointly shape their life experience, and that being part of one identity-based community may reduce one’s acceptance in another. Reflecting on a story shared by a black disabled presenter (story #2 in Table 1), Anthony said: “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.” Several AMs also noted a story shared by a black gay man (story #9 in Table 1): “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 choose which

aspect of their person is more important, to take one and abandon the other? (Brooke) For many AMs, their reflection on intersectional masculinities incorporated reflection on stereotypes and prejudices (their own and those of others), masculinity expectations in different communities, and consequences when men fail to meet those expectations.

Overall Sense of the MSP Almost all AMs noted that the MSP production had significant educational and/or social value. AMs viewed it as creating a genuine, “unifying” and “revolutionary” social space—“a space to be honest”—which “broadens people’s horizons” and “creates community,” where people could share their perspectives, “taboo” topics could be brought to the fore, and stereotypes, prejudices, and norms could be challenged and broken down. Rob stated: “I feel like projects like the Men’s Story Project need to be had if we want to go about social change. Gender differences are just institutionalized in our society...and again, you have to ask yourself, what is masculinity? Projects like this question that and take this concept and just screw it up because it needs to be.” Some AMs also highlighted the importance of doing broad publicity and outreach to draw more audience members who hold views that “completely disagree” with the content being shared.

Functions of Public, Personal Narrative

AM data indicate that the live, personal narrative format of the MSP stimulated experiences of strong emotion, empathy, and parafriendship for AMs, and led most AMs to view the presenters as role models. AMs were also inspired to discuss and reflect upon the MSP and related themes with members of their social networks. These experiences likely facilitated AMs’ learning outlined in the section above.

Emotion, Empathy, and Parafriendship The personal narrative format of the MSP was highly valued by AMs; almost all noted having been strongly emotionally moved (e.g., “blown away”) by the stories and presenters. AMs valued the “very personal” stories which gave them an “an inside glimpse” into the presenters’ lives and made the experience “raw,” “powerful,” and “real”:

You never really see it ’til someone actually tells you about it and it’s right in front of your face; it’s a story, it’s a real...It hits harder when it’s right there in front of you... It’s just like...this is actually something that’s happened, and it’s happened to this person who’s standing there right in front of me, telling me about it. (Mike)

AMs’ experiences of emotion and empathy were also related to parafriendship—i.e., a sense of “knowing” or having

a friendship with the presenter (this was stated more often by women) and the reflection on AMs’ own lives that the stories elicited (Singhal et al. 2004):

It kind of felt like it was your friend telling you these really emotional stories and it’s kind of challenging because... there’s this person you completely don’t know... but at the same time, they’re telling you something so personal and it really - it brings you closer. And the fact that...it’s a real story, it really, really happened to this person. And they’re really conveying the emotions to you, and it makes you want to be like, “Yeah, I understand what you mean.” So it makes you - you’re not just a passive person anymore - it definitely involves you. (Renata)

Role Modeling Almost all male and most female AMs noted viewing the presenters as role models with regard to central content areas of the MSP production (e.g., ending one’s use of violence) as well as personal qualities they exhibited; this modeling was a central means by which the MSP exerted impacts on AMs. Many AMs expressed respect for the presenters and described viewing them as models of courage, resilience, willingness to express emotion, capacity to enact “their own version of masculinity,” self-assertion in the face of oppressive forces, unlearning homophobia, taking action to prevent community violence, loving friendship between men, and forgiveness, among many topics. Over half of men and most women noted gaining an expanded sense of hope or optimism in some regard from the MSP. Many AMs described gaining an expanded sense of life possibility, and considered how they might apply lessons learned from the presenters’ stories to their own lives, relationships, and actions; for example, one man stated intentions to resist gender norms through small acts such as turning up his “non-masculine” music, and a woman stated intentions to stop her own gender policing of her boyfriend. They noted stories that had moved or inspired them:

“I think it’s helpful... [Presenter #7 in Table 1] showing how violence can be overcome... that he could recognize what he was doing and try to make an intervention to stop it. I think for maybe people in the audience who are struggling with that, it could help them see that that’s possible.” (Ryan)

Some AMs noted that the presenters’ stories led them to feel a sense of self-efficacy and social acceptability with regard to topics including support-seeking, support-giving, and sharing their own silence-breaking stories on gender and health (e.g., healing from self-harm)—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.

Social Learning Environment Many AMs stated that they attended the MSP because a friend or acquaintance was participating in it or a friend wanted to go. For some men, respect for a given presenter was key to the choice to attend: “I like him and I respect him, so...that gave it some credibility” (Earl). After the event, nearly all AMs discussed it with others; the total discussion time for individual AMs ranged from a few minutes to 10 to 20 hours (i.e., “a big chunk of my life the last two weeks”). Several men and almost all women spoke with others with whom they had attended the event, and most spoke with others who had not attended (e.g., romantic partners, colleagues, mentees, friends, acquaintances); one exception is a male AM who found it hard to discuss the MSP with others who had not been there to “get the feeling” for themselves, and abandoned the effort after one conversation with a friend. The range of social network members with whom female AMs discussed the MSP was broader than that for men, including a “complete stranger” standing next to them in line.

Most female AMs described acting as proactive messengers, educators, and supporters following the event, making an effort (on their own or with other female attendees) to “bring” and “share” their experience of the MSP with others who had not attended, especially men whom they felt would benefit. Some women explained to men that the MSP “wasn’t just about homosexuality,” based on men’s “preconceived notions of who would be there,” and “defended” the MSP by telling them about the diversity of presenters and issues addressed. Most women stated intentions to continue discussing ideas from the MSP with men in their lives.

When I came back that night, I was going around on my dorm floor, trying to get all the guys psyched about it. 'Cause I was still in tears after I got back. I was just really, really moved, and I really wanted all the guys

on my floor to go see it... Some of the guys were kind of laughing it off at first, and then they saw that I’d been, like, crying hysterically, and I really, really tried to pound it in to them - how much this meant to me, and how much this needed to be addressed. (Kate)

For men, the richest post-event dialogues most often occurred with other attendees, though some noted meaningful and even conflictual discussion with non-attendees: “It was really clear that people’s values came out.” For both men and women, discussing the MSP with others sometimes led to a deepening of those relationships:

I dragged [my ex-boyfriend to the MSP]... During intermission... he was like, “There’s no way I’m leaving.”... He’s president of his fraternity and... someone I definitely felt needed to hear some of those stories... We had a breakthrough after watching it. We were both so touched that we started talking - he brought up how he was feeling about our relationship... [The MSP] enabled him to feel empowered to talk about how he was feeling, and that to me was really beautiful because he’s so bottled up. So not only did we talk about the performance, but it facilitated our own conversation, which was really important. (Maya)

Overall, post-event dialogue served as a means for most AMs to reflect on, debate, and integrate ideas from the MSP, including with members of their broader social networks.

Discussion

In this study, we found that MSP presenters greatly valued the experience of supportive, gender-transformative men’s community. Many noted gaining a sense of empowerment, meaning, and healing, and rethinking stereotypes and prejudices they had held. Some felt reinforced in their anti-violence commitment, and several became more engaged in gender justice activism. Among AMs, many expanded their understanding of masculinities and intersectionality, gained a sense of affirmation, and noticed and rethought stereotypes and prejudices they held; almost all stated that the MSP had significant educational and/or social value. The personal narrative-sharing format of the MSP (which fostered emotional engagement, empathy, parafraternity, and role modeling) and the social learning environment stimulated by the production were significant aspects of how the MSP fostered effects for AMs; these findings are consistent with what would be predicted by the theoretical framework underpinning the MSP.

The need for safe spaces to critically reflect on and challenge masculinities has long been discussed in the sociological literature (Dworkin 2015; Kimmel 1987; Messner et al.

2015), and the MSP seems to have fostered this kind of space for presenters and AMs. Our finding of women's serving as active messengers and supporters for men's sensitization in response to the MSP is also consonant with prior research showing that women have played key roles in men's feminist sensitization and engagement (e.g., Casey and Smith 2010; Messner et al. 2015).

The MSP was originally conceptualized as a program aiming to affect AMs' beliefs and behaviors pertaining to masculinities and gender justice, but this study also found a range of powerful impacts of the MSP for the presenters themselves. Our findings regarding presenters' expanded gender justice engagement indicate that creating spaces for men who are willing to critically reflect, publicly share their stories, and serve as *de facto* role models in their communities stands to foster further ripple effects as presenters grow via the MSP process, develop a strengthened sense of themselves as change agents, and gain confidence in their ability to undertake individual and collective action. Our findings regarding reinforced commitment for GBV prevention amongst men who had formerly perpetrated partner violence are notable in various regards, including that it has been rare to date for GBV prevention programs to create public forums where men can discuss their prior use of violence and journeys of change.

The MSP's effects regarding stereotype/prejudice reduction for both presenters and AMs are also notable, and underscore the power of in-person storytelling for helping people become humanized to each other. Overall, our findings indicate that the MSP's live, personal narrative-sharing format is a feasible, acceptable, and promising approach for stimulating critical public dialogue and change in knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors related to the nexus of masculinities, health, and social justice, for MSP presenters and college audience members.

With regard to scalability and cross-cultural applications, it should be noted that the MSP has also been successfully implemented outside the US. An MSP production took place in Santiago, Chile in 2010, and while there was no formal assessment of impacts that could be included in this paper, feedback received informally via audience feedback forms and presenters' verbal reflections approximately 2 weeks post-event tends to mirror the findings here. In that production, national celebrities, community leaders, and men who had never spoken publicly shared personal stories; their presentations addressed locally relevant topics such as witnessing intimate partner violence in childhood and being a loving father for their own children, healing from bullying, the pressure for men to be emotionally stoic, self-acceptance as gay after having become a Catholic monk so as to "cure" themselves from being gay, love and childbearing in a heterosexual HIV sero-discordant partnership, becoming the first transgender man to legally change sex in Chile, manual labor and dignity, etc. Educational goals of the production were developed via key informant interviews in Santiago with researchers, advocates,

health educators and others. That the production took place in Chile's socially conservative context (in contrast to the liberal context of northern California) showed that it is possible to find men who are willing to share deeply personal, silence-breaking stories even in such a context.

Future men's narrative-sharing productions in diverse cultural settings should identify their target audiences and key issues at the nexus of masculinities, health, and justice in their contexts, consider the sorts of stories and voices that it would be helpful to highlight, and consider partnering with and finding champions within groups that engage men who more often adhere to socially harmful masculinity norms (e.g., athletic teams, military, fraternities). It will also be important for presenters to consider whether they are willing to assume the risks involved in sharing their stories in given societal contexts, such as those where same-sex relations are highly stigmatized or illegal.

Future Directions Our findings suggest that it would be fruitful to implement and evaluate men's gender-transformative personal narrative productions in diverse international contexts, including ones in which harmful masculinity norms are linked with high prevalences of GBV, HIV/AIDS, oppression of gender and sexual minorities, gender inequality, and other challenges. It could also be fruitful to evaluate narrative productions that focus on specific issues such as GBV, with participants addressing the issue from diverse standpoints (e.g., bystander intervention, childhood witnessing, survivorship, supporting survivors, former perpetration). Personal narrative presentations 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 program participants in addition to fostering impacts for AMs. Personal narrative presentations 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 live productions should also be evaluated as educational tools. Future evaluation studies should further examine whether and how self- and collective efficacy are affected by personal narrative live events and media.

Many gender-transformative programs with men around the world have focused on men as actors for gender equality and prevention of HIV and GBV (Dworkin 2013b). Our study findings suggest that engaging program participants in locally relevant reflection on a broader range of health and justice challenges that are entwined with masculinities can help them to gain an overarching understanding that hegemonic notions of masculinity foster diverse costs for both men themselves and the people of all genders around them. Programs that

focus on men as actors for HIV/GBV prevention and gender equality, without helping participants unpack broader costs of masculinity norms, may miss an opportunity to help participants gain this overarching understanding and engage as actors for change more broadly. And when discussion of GBV is situated in a broader discussion of masculinity norms and their relationship to diverse challenges, it is possible that men may be all the more receptive to messages related to gender equality and GBV.

Limitations 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. Future qualitative assessments should use in-depth interviews with all study participants, rather than FGs, so as to elicit maximally rich data on sensitive content such as participants' socially undesirable perspectives and behaviors, and to be better able to distinguish between non-responses and disagreements. In FG analysis, it is not often possible to know whether a participant agreed with a point already made by another FG participant (and said nothing to avoid redundancy), disagreed (and said nothing to avoid conflict), or had nothing to say (and therefore said nothing), among possibilities.

The study findings may also reflect selection biases; people more interested in gender-related issues may have been more likely to participate in and/or attend the MSP. Publicity for the MSP may have disproportionately reached individuals who were already interested in gender and social justice (e.g., poetry slam attendees, friends of MSP presenters, and members of gender-related email lists), though most AM said they came because they knew someone in the production (which does not necessarily signify *a priori* agreement with all MSP content). Among audience members who attended the MSP production, study participants may have been more positively affected by the MSP than nonparticipants. On the other hand, participants may more likely have already held perspectives consonant with the aims of the MSP, such that they may have "learned" less than nonparticipants from the production.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest Statements The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures involved in this study, which involved human participants, were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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