

“Cracking the Code on Machismo:” A Qualitative Evaluation of the Men’s Story Project

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BACKGROUND: WHY MEN’S STORIES?

The Challenge: Male gender norms contribute to many health and justice challenges - including men’s violence against women, violence between men, homo/transphobia, HIV/AIDS and gender inequality. On the positive front, it is increasingly understood that working to shift gender norms toward healthy masculinities is a productive and needed approach to improving well-being for all people. Given these facts, it is notable that there are still few mainstream, public forums where impacts of male gender norms are critically discussed, and healthy forms of men’s human expression are highlighted and supported.

The Men’s Story Project (MSP) is a replicable, testimonial-based community dialogue initiative that works to address this gap by bringing critical exploration of masculinities into public forums - through men’s less-often-heard voices and stories. The MSP aims to strengthen attitudes, behaviors and ultimately social norms that support healthy masculinities - through public story-sharing events, films and other media based on these live events, and related educational tools and community engagement efforts.

In each live MSP production, diverse men share true, personal stories with an audience - with unusual candor – that explore social ideas about masculinity. Topics include family relationships; violence; sexuality; gender identity; HIV/AIDS; personal transformations; and intersections with factors including race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES) and religion. The stories collectively celebrate men’s humanity and note costs of dominant notions of manhood. Diverse mediums are employed (e.g., prose, monologues, poetry, dance). Presenters have included celebrities and other opinion leaders, artists, activists and men who had never spoken publicly. Two MSP productions (CA, Chile) have been filmed to create educational films.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The MSP pedagogy is rooted in the constructs of **observational learning** and **self-efficacy**, from Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1987) respectively. The MSP framework is also informed by research on the diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 2003) and **narrative communication** for health.

The MSP contributes to the fields of health communication and movement-building by exploring the use of **personal, locally-relevant, live testimonial-sharing** – with the aim of affecting knowledge, attitudes and behaviors in relation to *entrenched, emotion-laden areas* such as the acceptability of violence, masculinity beliefs, homophobia, and identity-based stereotypes and prejudices.

MSP presenters are envisioned to function as *de facto* role models of healthy masculinities - i.e., men who are endeavoring to critically reflect, change, engage in healthy self-expression and relationships, and take action for health and justice. The local, live, community-based model of MSP presentations is also intended to foster cultural/social relevance, personal identification and accountability; affect perceived norms; and ultimately, through replication, become a normative, ongoing part of local social landscapes.

The MSP may also function as a **sentinel event** in a community, presenting a potentially unprecedented act of men’s public self-disclosure, challenging of masculinity norms, and solidarity amongst diverse men (including mainstream opinion leaders and men embodying marginalized identities) - signaling that “change is coming, and this is some of what it looks like.”

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social Learning Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
Bandura A. (1986). Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
Rogers, E. (2003). *Diffusion of Innovations, 5th Edition*. NY: Simon & Schuster.



STUDY AIM: To examine self-perceived impacts of having attended or participated in the MSP, for audience members and presenters, respectively.

STUDY METHODS

MSP Presentation & Discussion

2 nights at a public university in Berkeley, CA. Spring 2009. Total attendance: ~350.

The 17 MSP presenters included opinion leaders, artists and activists, and men who had never spoken publicly. They were diverse with regard to factors including age (20-69 yrs), race/ethnicity, SES, religion, physical ability, sexual orientation and gender identity. Mediums included poetry, monologues, extemporaneous speech and dance.

Presenters’ stories addressed topics including friendship between men; intersections of race, physical disability and sexuality; testicular cancer and personal wholeness; unlearning homophobia; pride in the face of homophobia; transitioning from female to male form; witnessing domestic violence in childhood; a journey from partner violence perpetration to anti-violence activism; violence between men; childhood sexual abuse; challenging a father’s racism; forgiveness after the murder of a teenage son; co-facilitating a gang truce; and family relationships.

There was a post-event discussion with counselors present, and a resource table highlighted opportunities for personal support and community engagement.

Data collection

- Focus groups with 30 audience members (11 men, 19 women) and 11 MSP presenters, 2 weeks post-event
- In-depth interviews with 9 additional presenters, 6-8 months post
- Approved by UC-San Francisco Committee on Human Research

Analysis

Focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed. Coding and analysis was conducted by the first and second authors, with inter-rater reliability of .96. Data were analyzed in Dedoose.

RESULTS - Audience members (AM)

- Discovery: “There’s something to talk about” with regard to constructions of masculinity, and men “need” more spaces for discussion of these issues
- Respect for and unexpected empathy/identification with presenters
- Viewing the presenters as “friends” and role models
- Learning about masculinities and intersectionality
- Amelioration of stereotypes related to race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status & physical disability
- The “humanization” of men, including men with marginalized identities and experiences

RESULTS - Audience members, cont’d

- Reductions of gender norm-enforcing behavior
- 100’s of collective hours of post-event discussion
- Experiences of affirmation, healing and empowerment
- An AM told a presenter that he realized he needed to seek help for his own partner violence perpetration
- A sense of inspiration to share their own stories and encourage others to do so

“I think at the very core, it showed me that there is, like, a broad spectrum of masculinity. And that challenged the idea of what I used to have of masculinity.” –Male AM

“You never really see it until 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.” –Male AM

“They were just so raw. Um, it kind of felt like it was your friend telling you these like really emotional stories and I guess 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... It’s a real story, it really, really happened to this person. And they’re like, conveying the emotions to you and it’s just, it also 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.” –Female AM



“That’s what, you know, brought up some tears. It’s just to think about the pockets of pain that these individuals - heroes, in a sense - able to present their pockets of pain and just capture it in a mere story and reflect on that and share it. Not privately. Publicly, in front of 200 people or so. Now, just that truth...reminded me of what more I need to do in life and, uh, how humbled I was by their strength in moving forward... I mean...build bridges, you know, socially, develop connections, appreciate the differences, you know? Create, you know, dialogue and... embrace the differences.” –Male AM

“I almost felt like... let’s say you have a bunch of cards and you want to organize them and set them in their different spaces and like 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.” –Female AM

RESULTS – Presenters

- A sense of pride and empowerment
- “Generation of meaning” - finding redemptive value in seeing that sharing their life experiences could help others
- “Victimhood” to “survivorship”
- Significant value placed on having worked and learned with diverse men in a context of emotional safety
- Reductions in homo/transphobia
- Learning about masculinities and intersectionality
- Expanded sense of empathy and common ground with men of backgrounds different from their own
- A sense of public accountability to honor their commitment to no longer use violence (against women and other men)
- Developing a sense of pride in their story
- Expanded social engagement regarding issues addressed in the MSP (e.g., founding a campus men’s collective, publishing a full-length memoir)

“His story was just so powerful, I was just like, shit! You know? Growing up, you know, gay, and the issues that you had to deal with in your family at home, you know. And then he talked about him and his three boys, them riding shotgun, and them going out to kind of like... He made a statement, man, that just really touched me deeply. He said that when they went out to dance, ‘we didn’t just go out to shake our... to shake our ass basically, we went out to shake our souls.’ He said, to shake off all the negative energy, and all the, you know, pre-judgments and stuff that people projected on them, you know? I’m like, man! I’m like, and here it is. We’re so judgmental. We pre-judge everything, you know. And, you can have all types of, uh, pre-judgments of somebody like Yosimar, but then you sit down and hear his story, and it’s like, you’re like, ‘Wow, this cat is just like me.’ You know? Yeah - so, just a beautiful experience.” – Presenter, 8 months post

Conclusions

The study findings indicate that the MSP’s live, testimonial-based format is a **feasible, acceptable** and **promising** approach for stimulating critical public dialogue and individual-level change in knowledge, attitudes and behaviors related to the nexus of masculinities, health and justice – for MSP presenters and college audience members.

Future Directions

- Larger studies, longer follow-up, mixed methods
- Expanded community engagement strategies
- Create & evaluate new live productions, films + curriculum and community engagement campaigns in diverse contexts
- Curriculum for MSP presenters
- Evaluate whether incorporation of a public testimonial-sharing component may augment the impacts of existing gender-transformative programs