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 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 explorations of masculinities into public forums - through men’s less-often-visited 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.

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
• Amplification of stereotypes related to race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status & physical disability
• The “humanization” of men, including men with marginalized identities and experiences

RESULTS – Presenters

• A sense of pride and empowerment
• “Generation of meaning” - finding redemptive value in seeing that sharing their life experiences could help others
• “Victimization Recall”
• Significant value placed on having worked and learned with diverse men in a context of emotional safety
• Reductions in homo/transphobia
• Learned 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)

This 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 that 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 event

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 significance of men’s 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