

“BOYS SHOULDN’T HAVE TO JUST BE BOYS”:  
THE ROLE OF ART THERAPY IN HELPING ADOLESCENT MALES TO OVERCOME  
HARMFUL PARADIGMS OF MASCULINITY

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## ABSTRACT

### “BOYS SHOULDN’T HAVE TO JUST BE BOYS”: THE ROLE OF ART THERAPY IN HELPING ADOLESCENT MALES TO OVERCOME HARMFUL PARADIGMS OF MASCULINITY

NIA NEUMANN

Studies of masculinity and its construction have been the subject of gender studies for decades; however, perspectives on its nature and value are evolving. *Masculine* denotes a particular and celebrated way of being in the world for boys, and is perpetuated through institutions, families, peers and the media. But what about those individuals who identify as male and do not represent stereotypical qualities of masculinity? How does this incongruence complicate their sense of identity or authenticity, and affect their relationships with others? The common trope “boys will be boys” has reverberated through Western society, dismissing male behavior as a simple and harmless inevitability of biology. However, *toxic masculinity*, a narrow and restrictive description of manhood which celebrates status, aggression, violence, anger and emotional repression, has emerged and has been increasingly studied over the past decade (O’Malley, 2016). Toxic masculinity is affecting the health of boys and men, and securing more insidious consequences for all members of society. This philosophical inquiry argues that art therapy can be used with adolescent males to challenge the damaging and constricting parts of the social construct of masculinity. Existing literature will be reviewed to explore why there is danger in the perpetuation of toxic masculinity, strategies for conducting effective therapy with adolescents and boys in particular, and how art therapists are uniquely positioned to facilitate the repudiation of masculine paradigms using specific art therapy approaches and interventions. The research will contend that undermining the power of the traditional masculine paradigm using art therapy techniques will allow today’s young men to address societal expectations of masculinity, reconcile their true selves, thrive as healthy adults, and to break violent and damaging intergenerational cycles of thought and behavior which result in social inequality and oppression.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

Justin Baldoni is a famous actor known for playing characters who embody masculine machismo and charisma, to an outcome of incredible Hollywood notoriety and success (Baldoni, 2017). However, in his 2017 TED Talk, “*Why I’m done trying to be ‘man enough’*,” Justin unravelled this convincing yet heartbreaking façade:

I’ve been pretending to be a man that I’m not my entire life. I’ve been pretending to be strong when I felt weak, confident when I felt insecure and tough when really I was hurting. ... I’m tired of performing. And I can tell you right now that it is exhausting trying to be man enough for everyone all the time. (Baldoni, 2017)

If this actor, who has seemed to effortlessly epitomize the spirit of masculinity, can admit that this false self is exhausting and confusing, there is reason to suspect that others feel the same. The term *toxic masculinity* has become as a pertinent and controversial topic in today’s culture (Berlatsky, 2014; Jensen, 2019; Morgan, 2019; Oregon State University, 2013; Salter, 2019). Lexico describes *masculinity* as “handsome, muscled and driven,” a very particular and, arguably, celebrated way of being a man (Masculinity, n.d.). Hearn (2007) has defined masculinity as the description of what is expected of men in society, and a male individual’s sense of what it means to be a man. Masculinity has manifested more colloquially as toughness, autonomy, stoicism and anti-feminism (Hartman, 2017; Pollack, 1998; Way, 2013). However, many individuals who identify as boys and men do not personify these qualities; they are at risk of a skewed sense of identity, sexuality and role in society, and their ability to measure up to social standards may affect their relationships, success and general mental health (Hearn, 2019; Renold, 2004; Trombetta, 2007). Masculinity in and of itself is not the problem; rather, it is masculinity under a system of patriarchy which is a structural power woven deep into the fabric of our society (Ford, 2019). Patriarchy is a vast system, a consequence of which is the rigid constraint of men into conforming to societal expectations of how they should look, feel and exist, and which inherently facilitates harm and oppression (Ford, 2019).

A great deal of literature exists on patriarchy, feminism and masculinity, including history and social construction (American Psychological Association [APA], 2018; Butcher, 2014; Clemens, 2017; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Fortin, 2019; Gerdes et al., 2018; Grieve et al., 2019; Hogan, 2020). Extensive literature also exists on adolescents and strategies for conducting therapy with them (Chen et al., 2007; Crenshaw, 2008; Edgette, 2006; Emunah,

1990; Greydanus & Omar, 2014; Linesch, 2015; Miller, 2011; Moon, 2012; Riley, 1999). However, research into the construct of masculinity and its consequences under patriarchal systems is still relatively new, and there is limited literature describing the impacts of toxic masculinity on men's mental health, or on the efficacy of art therapy with males in general (Barbee, 1996; Englar-Carlson, 2014; Groth, 2019; Hogan, 2020; Liebmann, 2003; Rice et al., 2011; Trombetta, 2007). Art therapy intersects with critical methodologies which can greatly affect political and societal social change (Talwar, 2019). Art therapists have a unique ability to facilitate social justice and change through embodied, interpersonal, internal and affective responses against suffering and oppression (Sajjani, 2012). This research will attempt to contribute to filling the gap in research that examines the way toxic masculinity can be considered within the modality of art therapy, and which tools may be effective with teenage boys to facilitate personal and cultural transformation.

The researcher is aware of the impact of language on perpetuating outdated ideologies, and has weighed the risks of using gender-binary language in the consideration of masculinity. However, for the purposes of simplicity and clarity in this paper, and because this research is looking specifically at males, "he/his" pronouns have been utilized and are intended to include any individual who identifies as male.

The purpose of this philosophical inquiry is two-fold: first, to argue that toxic masculinity exists and has dangerous implications for society; and second, that art therapy can be used with adolescent males to address and overcome common symptoms of toxic masculinity. The paper will begin by outlining the methodology of philosophical inquiry and the researcher's process will be described in depth, including ethical considerations, validity and reliability, and assumptions. Then a review of the existing literature will be conducted to examine the nature and formation of masculinity gender norms, its nature as a social construct, why there is danger in the perpetuation of toxic masculinity within developing males and how art therapy may intervene. Finally, the discussion segment of this paper will synthesize the information gathered in the literature review, identifying how art therapy may specifically address common toxic masculine traits as they affect adolescent males. Perspectives of prominent gender theorists, art therapists, and the role of art therapy will be integrated throughout each section of the paper. In order to enrich the philosophical nature of this inquiry, the paper will conclude with the researcher's own reflections on the literature and the topic in general.

## **Chapter 2. Methodology**

The purpose of this research project is to argue that art therapy can be used with adolescent males to challenge the social construct of masculinity. The primary research question for this inquiry will be: how can art therapy be used to explore identity and overcome or override harmful paradigms of masculinity in adolescent males? A set of secondary research questions will also be presented, which examine specific aspects of the topic such as gender norms, definitions and history of masculinity, facets of and social construction of masculinity, inherent privilege and power, criticality of gender stereotypes in adolescence and possible unique outcomes of art therapy.

### **Philosophical Inquiry**

The philosophical inquiry method examines issues from an axiological perspective, as in the study of value (“Axiology”, 2015). Questions such as “what is toxic masculinity and why is it important to consider?” and “how can art therapy be a valuable tool in intervening with adolescent males?” are intrinsic to this inquiry. This method seeks to facilitate communication between different theoretical traditions, in an effort to remediate practical problems and stimulate the development of sophisticated theory (Davieson & Skewes, 2002).

Philosophical inquiry exists “in the realm of what should be – conceptually and morally”, whereas empirical research examines “what is” (Golding, 2015, p. 206). It is the position of the researcher that the harmful outcomes of toxic masculinity are a danger to society. However, this statement is not factual and may not be a universally held value; thus the topic remains fundamentally in the conceptual and moral realm. The researcher will identify problems related to toxic masculinity, how these might affect adolescent males and identify why overcoming masculine paradigms is a value worth arguing for. As such, philosophical inquiry aligns well as a method to answer the research question. Founding an argument and providing relevant theoretical grounding are important precursors to translating this project into future research.

Philosophical inquiry “involve[s] critical reflections on knowledge, ethics and aesthetics, in dialogue with sciences and various human practices” (Stige & Strand, 2016, p. 1064). This methodology seeks to critically examine assumptions and expectations of the human world, one of which the literature has suggested is the social construct of masculinity (Connell, 2001; Stige & Strand, 2016). Stige and Strand (2016) have urged that the most important approach to the philosophical argument is “being encouraged to think for [one]self instead of merely accepting



what others would want to have [one] believe” (p. 1067). It could be argued that the existence of toxic masculinity is not only an issue of mental health but also of systemic significance. If researchers and readers are supported in appropriately challenging the status quo, enduring and impactful societal change may be enacted. It is vital in the context of modern culture to ask philosophical questions that are of worldly, practical importance; philosophical inquiry closely intertwines with this socio-political context (Stige & Strand, 2016).

Four characteristic components are included in the philosophical inquiry method (Concordia University, 2015). The writer will clarify and explain terms which are critical to the project’s philosophical stance. Second, the writer will attempt to expose and evaluate the assumptions of other theoretical models. Then, connections to other theoretical systems may be identified and used to support the argument. Lastly, the philosophical inquiry uses argument as its primary mode of inquiry. These procedures will be followed within this research project.

The intention of this paper is not to discuss the biological bases of gender and what socially or scientifically constitutes gender, as this is only marginally relevant to the topic. Rather, the scope of this paper will be limited to discussion of gender only inasmuch as it contributes to understanding the social construction of masculinity, in order to provide suitable context. Additionally, the scope of the literature search will not be limited to “adolescent males,” but will include existing research on art therapy with adolescents, art therapy with males and key tenets of art therapy in general, as important information may be found which can be refined and more specifically applied to adolescent males as the research continues.

The search for this literature review was conducted mainly through the Concordia University online library catalogue. The researcher began by examining the first stream of information using the following keywords to initiate the search process: “masculinity”, “masculin\*”, “gender”, “gender norms” and “history and gender”, “privilege” and “hegemon\*”. For the second and third streams, the keywords “adolescen\*”, “developmental stages”, “identity” and “teenag\*”, “art and therapy”, “therapy and men”, “therapy and adolescen\*” and “art and adolescen\*” were used. These main search streams provided several relevant resources, including academic journal articles, e-books, books and popular culture resources, such as periodicals and TED Talks. The researcher deemed it important to access both academic and non-academic sources, as the topic of toxic masculinity is currently culturally relevant and controversial, and vital information could be drawn from pop culture sources. To further expand

the breadth of material, the researcher began to refer to the reference lists contained within each academic source.

Some important considerations should be mentioned concerning this research. Negative or positive meaning is not being attached to the term masculinity, but rather it is discussed it as a set of qualities which have assigned societal significance. The research topic intends to discuss concepts of masculinity, not assigned gender. Connell (2001) has emphasized the differentiation of “masculinity” from “men”: referring to “men” supposes a diametric position from women, which is not helpful in discussing social constructs to which all genders have contributed (p. 21). Describing and elaborating on the biological bases of gender and sex are outside of the scope of this paper. Rather, the social construct of masculinity, including its formation, perpetuation and outcomes will be discussed. The term *gender* has traditionally been defined in the physical and binary realm, as one of two sexes, but society has adapted to understand gender as a spectrum (Bradford et al., 2019; Bornstein, 1994; Nestle et al., 2002; Rimes et al., 2018; Roen, 2002). The experiences and identities of genderqueer individuals (who do not identify as male or female) have increasingly been the focus of empirical research but are still largely omitted from research conversations (Bockting, 2014; Clark et al., 2014; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Hastings, 2015; Rimes et al., 2018).

This research only considers biology and gender inasmuch as it necessarily centres males (and individuals who identify as male), because toxic masculinity, while its consequences affect everyone, is an issue of male representation and expression (Kaufman, 2012; Okun, 2018). The social construction of gender, or “the psychological, social and cultural experiences and characteristics associated with the social statuses of girls and women or boys and men,” is more relevant to this research (APA, p. 2). This research topic intends to discuss concepts of masculinity, not assigned gender. The researcher has emphasized the differentiation of an individual identifying as male from the societal construct of masculinity. Additionally, it is important to note that cultural interpretations and influences of masculinity vary drastically; the researcher explicitly articulates that this research considers the topic through the lens of “Western” society, which itself is a social construct and must be examined critically (Appiah, 2016; Catlos, 2018). Western culture is actually an historical amalgamation of influences from across nations where various cultures and religions existed side-by-side; what is considered “Western civilization” or culture is in fact a “process of borrowing and innovation that laid the

foundations for the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Scientific Revolution, ... and eventually the global domination of the European world, and then America” (Catlos, 2018). The term Western combines an eclectic array of societies while delicately excluding others, and has essentially transformed into a euphemism for white (Appiah, 2016). As a result, non-white, non-Christian societies, especially Muslim and southern cultures, are marginalized (Appiah, 2016). For the purposes of this paper, the researcher has used the term Western culture as a reference to North American and European ideals, while remaining cognizant of the problematic generalizations which may accompany that decision. Conceptions of masculinity are nuanced, and it is critical to remember that male ideals differ vastly across regions, according to religion, class, language, cultural values and ethnicity.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected with this method has been existing literature, including peer-reviewed academic journal articles and books. The researcher has synthesized the information and developed two arguments to support the role of art therapy in intervening with adolescent males in combating harmful masculine paradigms. To begin, the researcher conducted an extensive literature review in two thematic streams: the concept of masculinity (including its history, construction and meaning) and art therapy with adolescents. Throughout the process, the researcher has compiled significant concepts and suggestions from the literature in a document organized according to theme. The search for literature on this topic was conducted through the Concordia University online library catalogue and internet searches. Several online journals, e-books and books in the realm of art therapy, gender studies, development and philosophical inquiry were accessed. The researcher will begin by examining the first stream of information using the following keywords to initiate the search process: “masculinity”, “masculin\*”, “gender”, “gender norms” and “history and gender”. For the second stream, the keywords “adolescenc\*”, “developmental stages”, “identity” and “teenag\*”, “art and therapy”, “therapy and adolescenc\*” and “art and adolescenc\*” will be used. These main search streams provided several relevant resources. To further expand the breadth of material, the researcher referred to the reference lists contained within each.

Additionally, reference material in the realm of music therapy were accessed. There is a lack of specific art therapy research performed in this methodology so the researcher needed to gather information and inspiration from across modalities to ascertain a thorough understanding

of the philosophical method. Some adapting was required by the researcher to transfer the valuable connections between music therapy and philosophical research to art therapy. In order to analyze gathered data, the researcher engaged with the material in phases. First, clarification and definition of key terms were established. These may include “masculinity”, “hegemony”, “adolescence” and “gender”. These key terms assisted in developing themes. Then, the literature was searched and saved according to theme. The search results were reviewed and filtered in a process of open, axial and selective coding (Neuman, 2006). The first review determined whether or not the material was relevant (and consequently separated into two folders). The second review necessitated that the researcher re-read the “yes” material and highlight the most relevant and important data. Lastly, key topics and themes most applicable to the research question were highlighted and compiled in order to form the structure of the philosophical argument. As the process of coding continued, the researcher watched for opportunities to identify consequential material that was out of scope, or gaps in the literature, which may be pursued in future research.

An additional step crucial to the philosophical method was the researcher’s recording of her own assumptions relative to the compiled literature. The researcher composed a section of the document with personal reflections and thoughts on the findings. Because of the moral and conceptual nature of philosophical inquiry, and its intrinsic focus on value, it was important to the researcher to record her personal perspectives and reactions to key points in the literature. As this is theoretical research, conclusions have only been made to the point of hypothesis.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Due to the theoretical nature of this research, ethical considerations focus on the conduct of the researcher and quality of contribution, rather than on ethical treatment of participants. According to the Canadian Art Therapy Association [CATA], it is important for the researcher to contribute to the field of art therapy with integrity and professionalism (CATA, 2003-2004). The researcher has a responsibility to consider a thorough breadth of theories, practices, approaches and principles to appropriately synthesize information (The Association des art-thérapeutes du Québec [AATQ], 2001). Additionally, the researcher is encouraged to maintain knowledge of concurrent research and development in the field in order to best serve other professionals and clients (AATQ, 2001). The researcher should prioritize enhancing the quality of services in the art therapy field (AATQ, 2001).

Specific components of art therapy standards of practice have been identified as relevant and important to this research. The CATA Standards of Practice (2003-2004) has stated that:

- D.2 – This article discusses the importance of honouring the intellectual property of others. Credit should be assigned appropriately to other professionals who have created or contributed to existing research (p. 4).
- E.12 – This article argues the necessity of consulting with professionals to ensure that research should be undertaken (p. 5).

If the results of this theoretical research were furthered and developed into intervention-based research with participants, the ethical considerations would require reanalysis.

However, the method of philosophical inquiry, by nature, goes beyond ethics of good practice – of not doing harm – to encompass issues of inequity and injustice (Stige & Strand, 2016). Because the methodology expands into the conceptual and moral realm of what should be, it is important to clearly state the researcher's personal biases and delineate matters of personal opinion from empirical fact (Golding, 2014). This paper will highlight connections between gender studies, racial and social justice and oppression, and will urge that art therapists have an important role in maintaining a multicultural approach to their academic and clinical practice for the safety and inclusivity of all clients (Talwar et al., 2004). The researcher believes that she is ethically obligated to ensure that the argument formed at the finale of this project poses maximum benefit to all members of society.

### **Assumptions and Bias**

Intrinsic to this research is the argument that there exists a societal problem with toxic masculinity, which must be addressed in order to enhance mental health. Bias will include the researcher's belief that the issue of hegemonic masculinity is a practical problem of our current culture which affects the well-being of not only adolescent boys but all members of society, and thus compels restitution. The researcher has made two important assumptions: that there is a practical problem which needs to be addressed, and that art therapy is an effective modality when working with adolescents. These assumptions have stemmed from anecdotal experience as a woman, as a member of a modern Western society, and from experience working with adolescents.

## **Validity and Reliability**

Validity and reliability have been considered in the process of collecting research and discussing the literature. Validity was enhanced in this project by ensuring that each identified theme contains a saturated amount of data; the researcher returned to the data several times to confirm that the categories, constructs and interpretations remain consistent and sensible (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Crucial to maintaining validity was also the researcher's ability to reflect on and self-disclose her biases, assumptions and values (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The researcher should be self-reflexive, looking back and forth between the data and her reflections upon it; the researcher constantly compared emerging insights to her own understandings and assumptions (Fischer, 2014). Reliability was accomplished by the researcher's diligence in seeking out peer-reviewed literature sources and using dependable, academic search tools. As previously stated, this philosophical inquiry is inherently connected to the pop-culture concept of toxic masculinity; to gain insight into the current landscape of the adolescent male experience, the researcher has deemed it appropriate to access such mass media material as TED lectures, periodicals and blog posts. The writer acknowledges that some of these sources are not academic but urges that they are relevant and critical for providing context.

## **Conclusion**

The philosophical inquiry is a theoretical research methodology which considers value and positions an argument. In this particular research project, the researcher has formulated an argument, based on personal values and existing literature, for the use of art therapy to intervene with adolescent males in overcoming harmful paradigms of masculinity. The research question, method of data analysis, ethical considerations and biases have been discussed in this paper. This project may lay the groundwork for future theoretical research, or developing interventions to be measured quantitatively with a sample group.

### Chapter 3. Literature Review

Philosophical inquiry, by nature, examines, evaluates and compares various theoretical approaches and makes connections with the proposed argument (Concordia University, 2015). The researcher has found perspective within elements of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) and intersectional feminist theory, which concerns political, social, economic and personal equality (Talwar, 2019). More specifically, this research has extensively utilized the work of Joseph Pleck (1981), Raewyn Connell (2001, 2014), William Pollack (1998, 2014) and Susan Hogan (1997, 2019, 2020), leading theorists who were foundational in the development of modern gender studies. Together, these sources contextualize the concept of hegemonic masculinity, its consequences, and the integration of art therapy practice.

Joseph Pleck, Ph.D. has been at the forefront of modern masculinity studies as a published Professor Emeritus and researcher on fatherhood, masculinity, adolescent masculinity and male sexual behavior (MIT Press, 2020). In his renowned book *The Myth of Masculinity* (Pleck, 1981), he has contested the validity of the traditional *male sex role paradigm*, which emphasized actual differences between men and women, and instead proposed the radically novel *sex role strain paradigm* and *masculinity ideology*. This conceptualization offers a reinterpreting of stereotyping in gender roles, a critique of the argument for biological bases of masculinity and manhood as a range of varying ideals (MIT Press, 2020; Levant & Richmond, 2016). Pleck's (2020) formative ideas provided a framework for a breadth of new research, focused on identity incongruence as a major source of internal conflict (Levant & Richmond, 2016).

One of the pioneering figures in the formulation of hegemonic masculinity has been Raewyn Connell, an Australian academic and researcher internationally known for her theory of masculinity and studies of class and gender relations (Connell, n.d.a); Wedgwood, 2009). Connell has been widely published in academic journals and an active contributor to global political and social justice conversations (Connell, n.d.a). Connell's work has provided critical analysis of masculinities from a feminist perspective, and examined the roles men play in perpetuating typical dominant forms of masculinity (Wedgwood, 2009). Connell has also offered a unique perspective on the realm of masculinity and gender, as she is a transsexual woman who transitioned late in life (Connell, n.d.a). Her earlier work was published under a gender-neutral

name and she has integrated her own personal experience into extensive writing on gender justice, feminist politics and transsexual women's issues and dilemmas (Connell, n.d.c). Although Connell's recent work has been more focused on revising education and global knowledge, her earlier investigation of masculinities and gender provides invaluable background for modern discussions of masculinity (Connell, n.d.b). Connell's theory has had a massive impact on the field of gender studies: in fact, Wedgwood (2009) has suggested that Connell's work introduced a new sociology of masculinity. Because her older work is so critical and influential in contextualizing masculinity, it has been utilized at length in this paper in juxtaposition with more recent sources, in order to describe evolving constructs of masculinity.

William Pollack, Ph.D., is an internationally recognized clinician and authority in the realms of boys' development and education, men's roles, gender, parenting, school violence and safety, psychotherapy and psychology (Pollack, n.d.). He has held several academic and clinical positions in the field of clinical psychology, was a Founding Member and Fellow of The Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity, and served on high-ranking political campaigns supporting safety in schools and against youth violence (Pollack, n.d.). He founded an educational program called *Real Boys*, which aligns with his best-selling books, *Real Boys: Rescuing our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood* (1998) and, more recently, *Real Boys' Voices* (2001) and *Real Boys Workbook* (2001). While much of Pollack's work is now over 20 years old, he was an important contributor to the field of psychology and research into the impact of masculinity on boys; as such, his ideas have been integrated extensively into this paper as a foundation for understanding boys and men and how art therapists may intervene.

Susan Hogan is a professor in arts and health at the University of Derby, who focuses on interdisciplinary research centering women's issues and the arts in health (University of Derby, n.d.). Hogan has authored numerous books and academic articles which discuss women's health and rights, women's issues, women in medicine and psychiatry, the body, and art as therapy, including art, dance-movement, drama, photo therapy and music (University of Derby, n.d.). Hogan has also founded several special research projects, including using creative arts to examine aging in older women, participatory arts as community building and *The Birth Project*, which uses the arts to explore the impact of birth on new mothers and health care professionals (University of Derby, n.d.). Her research has spanned decades, and her more recent work has been especially useful in contextualizing modern approaches to art, therapy and gender studies.



The literature will be summarized in three main thematic streams. The first stream will provide background on the concept of masculinity, including definitions and interpretations, and outline the tenets of toxic masculinity. The second stream will seek to discover important elements unique to adolescence and challenges of engaging this population. The third stream will examine existing research on art therapy, including the benefits of art therapy and how it may be effectively utilized in intervening with young men. This review will aim to center recent literature, but for the purposes of providing background and context, some older sources will be utilized, especially in describing masculinity and its social construction within patriarchy. Research about art therapy specifically with men and boys is still limited, so this paper will juxtapose older sources with more recent ones as much as possible (Barbee, 1996; Liebmann, 2003; Trombetta, 2007).

### **Masculinity**

The term masculinity is derived from the meaning “male person,” “male,” or “male gender” and dates back to the fourteenth century (Hearn, 2013). Concepts such as “virility” and “power” began to be associated with masculinity in the seventeenth century as expected qualities of the male gender (Hearn, 2013). Historically, various theories have provided a framework for studies on men’s masculinity and mental health, including psychodynamic, social learning, social constructionist, essentialist, evolutionary, and gender role paradigms (Levant & Richmond, 2016; Pleck et al., 1993). Additionally, interpretations of masculinity and gender roles in Western society have especially evolved through, and been cemented by, periods of war, division of labour, the industrial revolution and the transition from a more collectivist culture in the pre-war era to the capitalist, individual-driven culture of the Baby Boomers (Hearn, 2013; Sexton, 2019). In the 1960s and 1970s, masculinity began to be considered more as an internalized role, demonstrated by personality or individual disposition, and became more centered on men’s consideration of and behavior towards women (Hearn, 2013). More recently, the conversation has developed into consideration of plural masculinities, which emphasizes not a binary account but a spectrum of concepts and characteristics (Butcher, 2014; Hearn, 2019; Mathews, 2017; Wheeler, 2019).

### ***Spectrum of Masculinities***

The notion of masculinity or femininity as dualistic absolutes is socially constructed (Hogan, 2020; Mathews, 2017; Sexton, 2019). The construction of masculinity has developed in

opposition to the feminine, and thus a hierarchical dichotomization of opposites has been ingrained into Western culture (Mathews, 2017). This division has evolved to normalize a system of patriarchal domination, in which anything considered to be masculine transcends and overpowers the feminine (Mathews, 2017). A binary construct of masculinity versus femininity has been borne out of, and entrenched into society through, this pervasive duality (Mathews, 2017).

Instead, it is critical to consider a spectrum of masculinities and femininities when discussing toxic masculinity. Masculinity is not simple or homogenous, and a great variation of qualities exist even within groups of men (Connell, 2014; Hearn, 2019; Hogan, 2020; Pringle, Hearn, Pease & Ruspini, 2011; Walters & Valenzuela, 2020; Wheeler, 2019). Central to the discussion of toxic masculinity is that the spectrum results in “masculinities [which] have multiple possibilities concealed within them” (Connell, 2001, p. 19). This continuum includes descriptions such as “hegemonic, complicit, subordinated, marginalized or resistant” (Hearn, 2013, p. 150-151). Binary masculinity does not account for diversity and precipitates an intrinsic inequality of power (Connell, 2014; Hearn, 2019; Rimes et al., 2019; Wheeler, 2019). Ultimately, masculinity is an extremely multifaceted social construction which impacts identity and intersects with class, race and sexual orientation; each man conceptualizes masculinity differently, which in turn affects his behavioral, psychological and physical health outcomes (APA, 2018; Clemens, 2017; Clemens, 2018; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Kimmel, 1987; Levant & Richmond, 2007; Orenstein, 2020; Samuels, 2019).

### ***Social Construction of Masculinity***

Central to the understanding of masculinity, and critical within the context of this research project, is that masculinity is a social construct, rather than biological (Hearn, 2019; Levant & Richmond, 2016; Sexton, 2019). Biology may contribute to boys’ desire for action and rough physicality, however it can easily become an ample excuse for violent behavior in general; there is little evidence to prove that a correlation exists between biology and expressed masculinity (Miedzian, 2002; Pollack, 1998).

The assumption that boys are naturally predisposed to aggressive, controlling and misogynistic behavior, colloquially chalked up to “boys will be boys,” permits us to believe that combating dangerous manifestations of masculinity is out of our control (Ford, 2019; Pollack, 2006; Sexton, 2019). Ford (2019) has asserted that abiding by the myth of masculinity as “one

particular, immutable thing” (p. 37) permits the assumption of aggression and violence as predetermined and inherent to boys’ nature, “so that [masculinity] becomes both a prison and a weapon” (p. 37). Impulses toward aggression and violence can be negated and healthily channeled into adaptive, positive behavior with adequate support systems (Pollack, 1998; Pollack, 2006). In fact, testosterone can contribute to positive intensity in a variety of adaptive activities, including academics and intellectuality (Pollack, 1998). Katz (2006) has proposed taking an active approach in combating violent tendencies in boys: he has emphasized the importance of addressing boys not only as perpetrators of violence but also victims.

Gender, masculinity and femininity are features of social identity (Hearn, 2013; Hogan, 2020). Connell (2001) has recognized the critical “role of institutions – the family, and the workplace under industrial capitalism [and] the large scale structures of modern society” (p. 23) as critical to the construction of gender. Cultural practices and institutions “imprint and [mold] gendered bodies [and] accentuate and create differences between the sexes” (Hogan, 2020, p. 8). Gender representation in the context of Western culture, such as literature, art, medical practice, and especially in modern society, mass media and social media, is fundamentally important in understanding that culture’s perception of gender difference and gender health (Hogan, 1997; Sexton, 2019). Jones (2003) has emphasized that “attitudes are inherited as readily as genes” (p. 187). If this is true, it is critical to consider the cultural and societal effect on personal attitudes in an effort to break damaging cycles of behavior. Socialization appears to play a huge role in the disparity of emotional representation between the sexes (Grieve, March & van Doorn, 2018). Research has shown that, early in a boy’s life, masculinity is implicitly and explicitly reinforced through family, peers and media (Berlatsky, 2014; Cheung & Gardner, 2016; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Ford, 2019; Pleck, 1981; Sexton, 2019). Even young girls contribute to this male narcissism by being trained early in life to value men’s opinions and desires more highly than their own (Ford, 2019; Orenstein, 2020). What is considered socially appropriate behavior is different for boys and girls (Pleck, 1981). For example, agency, dominance and aggression are typically encouraged in boys, while the same traits would likely be considered undesirable and negative in girls (Grieve et al., 2018; Orenstein, 2020). This disparity is socially learned, is shaped by patterns of punishment and reinforcement, and ultimately integrated into the belief system of the individual child (Grieve et al., 2018). As a result of this inconsistency, parents often interact more roughly with their sons, and more sensitively with daughters (Grieve

et al., 2018; Pollack, 1998). Even well-intentioned, progressive parents, who aim to be unbiased and flexible, influence their children's internal working model and personal expression through larger, systemic conditioning which they themselves have likely internalized (Jones, 2003).

Connell (2001) has offered that “masculinities are composed, historically, and also may be de-composed, contested and replaced” (p. 20). Considering that definitions and meanings of masculinity have been constructed and evolved throughout history, it is possible to assume that they may change (Connell, 2001; Hearn, 2019; Sexton, 2019). Indeed, the literature has begun to discuss the shifting discourse on harmful paradigms, even specifically in art therapy, and the need to re-evaluate them (Clemens, 2017; Clemens, 2018; Connell, 2014; Hearn, 2019; Ruspini et al., 2011; Solomon, 2018; Talwar et al., 2004). Societal expectations are something that “children ... can learn about, and learn to change” (Connell, 2001, p. 22). Art therapists can intervene in helping these children to explore and reconcile their authentic selves, by allowing for expression of painful and hidden emotions, inner conflicts, fears of rejection and shame and inability to communicate verbally (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020; Miller, 2011; Moon, 2012). Art as a form of communication can also help the therapist in better understanding the perspective of young clients, especially when the therapist and client are not gender-matched (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020).

### ***Hegemony***

What is colloquially known as toxic masculinity may be formally described as *hegemonic* masculinity. The term hegemonic is defined by Oxford Dictionary as “ruling or dominant in a political or social context” (Hegemonic, n.d.). Hegemonic qualities are highly visible or dominant in a given setting, providing members of this subgroup inherent cultural authority (Connell, 2001). Hegemonic masculinity has been sustained through male-dominant institutions (military, corporations, government and schools) and marginalizes women, other sexual orientations or race, and those who identify as male but do not fit traditional criteria (Connell, 2001, p. 18; Hirschman, 2016; Kimmel, 2012; Renold, 2004). This perpetuation has partially occurred through *intellectual hegemony*, which refers to a dominant set of ideas inherently active in the experience and consciousness (both personal and collective) of all members of a society; these ideas naturally embed into large cultural, economic and political institutions (Hogan, 1997). Patterns of thought exist at a collective level, with this dominant knowledge becoming diffused into the common sense of the society, influencing people's judgements, stereotypes and

belief systems (Connell, 2001; Hogan, 1997). As a result, a social arrangement, and self-perpetuating cycle of marginalization, is strengthened by both individuals and cultural institutions together, which insentiently sorts people into categories and determines how they are treated (Hogan, 1997; Johnson, 2001). A persistent and precise masculinity ideology has been maintained beneath the surface of Western society: a hegemonic expression of maleness which is rooted in whiteness and heterosexuality (Blackburn & Scharrer, 2015; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Walters & Valenzuela, 2020). Those who identify with this dominant expression gain cultural capital, which directly relates to their power and privilege (Bourdieu, as cited in Talwar, 2019).

Hegemonic masculinity assures that, even within the sphere of masculinity, particular groups of men are oppressed, including gay men, racialized communities and those who do not represent an obvious machismo quality (Connell, 2001; Hearn, 2013; Johnson, 2001; Pollack, 2006; Walters & Valenzuela, 2020). An important aspect of this hierarchy is the disparity and resulting power differential between heterosexual and homosexual men (Johnson, 2001). Because the hegemonic subgroup in Western society is heterosexual, gay men are less socially valued and ultimately exposed to homophobia and resultant danger (Butcher, 2014; Johnson, 2001). Disparagement and fear of the feminine – one of the traits of toxic masculinity which will be discussed in this paper – is rooted in homophobia.

### ***Toxic Masculinity***

Toxic masculinity is a nuanced and complex topic which must be conceptualized cautiously; generalizing the term “toxic” to masculinity as a whole, or to all men, is misleading and damaging (Clemens, 2017; O’Malley, 2016; Salam, 2019). *The Good Men Project* defines it as follows:

Toxic masculinity is a narrow and repressive description of manhood, ... defined by violence, sex, status and aggression. It’s the cultural ideal of manliness, where strength is everything while emotions are a weakness; where sex and brutality are yardsticks by which men are measured, while supposedly ‘feminine’ traits ... are the means by which your status as ‘man’ can be taken away. (O’Malley, 2016)

This restrictive characterization of masculinity causes boys to become hardened with shame, fear, anxiety, self-esteem issues and role confusion (Pollack, 2006; Salam, 2019). Art therapists must be acutely aware that even seemingly “normal” boys may be covering their

genuine voice and true scope of emotions, and it is critical to employ empathy in working with them (Moon, 2012; Pollack, 2006; Riley, 1999). By remaining calm, uncritical, and supportive of boys' need to retain their pride when asking for help, the therapist may aid in facilitating self-expression and help them to avoid further shame (Pollack, 2006). Further, through the creation of art, boys have an opportunity to explore imagery and express the superficial qualities of society's "optimal" man: this may allow them to objectively question the unwritten rules of their culture and of patriarchy as a whole (Riley, 1999).

**Principles of Toxic Masculinity.** A variety of characteristics have been identified as embodying toxic masculinity including, but not limited to, power, dominance, aggression, risk-taking, emotional inhibition, status-seeking and heterosexuality (Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Giaccardi et al., 2016; Gerdes et al., 2018; Lewis, 2017; Orenstein, 2020; Trombetta, 2007; Warren, 1983). Many of the reviewed studies identified similar qualities and so, for the purposes of this paper, the researcher has synthesized these into themes: restrictive emotionality, celebration of anger, disparagement or avoidance of the feminine, control and power, aggression and violence, and sex.

**Restrictive Emotionality.** One of the most prominent and pervasive qualities of toxic masculinity identified in the literature was that of restrictive emotionality (Miedzian, 2002; Orenstein, 2020; Pollack, 1998; Trombetta, 2007; Walters & Valenzuela, 2020). Feminist and civil rights scholar, bell hooks (as cited in Ford, 2019), has stated:

Patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, and that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves. If the individual is not successful in emotionally crippling himself, he can count on patriarchal men to enact rituals of power that will assault his self-esteem. (p. 3)

Expressing emotion is interpreted as weakness in the realm of hegemonic masculinity, and garners shame and embarrassment (Miedzian, 2002; Orenstein, 2020; Pollack, 1998; Trombetta, 2007). This social conditioning commences in boyhood and lasts into adulthood; boys and men are less likely than their other-gender counterparts to express fear, pain, loneliness, feelings of depression and other mental distress (Orenstein, 2020; Slayton, 2012; Trombetta, 2007). As a result, it can be extremely difficult to diagnose depression in men, and they often live with anxiety, isolation and loneliness (Barbee, 1996; Johnson, 2001). Clinicians must be

aware of these consequences as they can further affect a male client's willingness to participate in art therapy (Barbee, 1996).

A useful metaphor to demonstrate how boys and men protect themselves from emotional vulnerability is a mask (Howes, 2017; Millar, 2011; Pollack, 1998). A hypothetical mask is adopted as a protective shield against vulnerability, which allows boys to externally appear secure and confident while internally suffering from anxiety, depression and isolation (Katz-Mazilu, 2019; Miller, 2011; Pollack, 1998). Mask-making in art therapy can be useful in exploring the inner and outer self, in regards to awareness, feelings and perception of identity in an external form (Miller, 2011). The client may depict how they believe others perceive them on the outside of the mask, while describing their authentic self on the inside of the mask; this process can facilitate connection and integration between outer manifestation of inner emotions, and beliefs about others and the self (Miller, 2011). Masks are also helpful in providing a non-verbal, indirect form of communicating threatening or painful aspects of identity for the adolescent client (Miller, 2011). If boys' creative expression is embraced and celebrated, without shame or censure, boys can be encouraged to hold compassion and kindness for others, and disruption of patriarchal damage can occur (Ford, 2019).

***Anger As Only Acceptable Emotion.*** The one single emotion which society has deemed socially acceptable for males to exhibit is anger (Heifner, 1997; Orenstein, 2020; Pollack, 1998; Trombetta, 2007). In her study on male depression, Heifner (1997) discovered that, in addition to all interviews reporting the value of strength, control, and self-sufficiency, a distinct key component was an avoidance of all emotions except anger. In his art therapy research with adult males, Barbee (1996) has suggested that anger was almost always readily identified, was destructive in its presentation in the artwork, and seemed to cover underlying feelings of sadness and pain. Similarly, Trombetta (2007) has highlighted an art therapy research participant who expressed that "feelings of desolation, of abandonment ... were converted into anger" (p. 30). This funneling of the normal human range of emotions silos boys and men into very limited outlets; feelings of victimization and pain, with nowhere to be expressed, result in subsequent retribution of persecution and violence towards others (Trombetta, 2007).

Adolescents in particular may be prone to strong feelings of aggression and anger (Miller, 2011). These feelings of anger and frustration may be projected onto the therapist, and it is critical for the therapist to maintain a stance of acceptance, validation and responsiveness to the

adolescent client's needs (Miller, 2011). Art can be a useful platform to manage, contain and transform expressions of anger using metaphor (Gussak, 2016; Miller, 2011; Riley, 1999; Trombetta, 2007). For example, by externalizing the emotion into an image of a "monster," the anger can be examined from a distance and identified, named and addressed. Alternatively, creating an image of a volcano can be cathartic in expressing triggers of anger and how to "cool down" following an emotional eruption.

***Disparagement of the Feminine.*** Rejecting the toxic masculine standard may suggest that a boy is weak and dangerously close to appearing "feminine": the fear of which is another central ingredient of toxic masculinity (Ford, 2019; Orenstein, 2020; Pollack, 1998; Pollack, 2006; Trombetta, 2007). Research has found that for a boy to protect his reputation, he must avoid being viewed as even remotely close to feminine (Trombetta, 2007; Orenstein, 2020). Research by art therapist Michael Barbee (1996) has found that men often expressed resistance to engaging in art therapy, which stemmed from believing that art was too feminine or childish, and they felt uncomfortable participating as adult males.

Pollack (1998) has offered one explanation for this fear of the feminine. Since women are largely responsible for raising children in Western society, girls have an easy task of gender identification, as they can relate to their primary caregiver: their mother. Boys are socially expected to separate from their primary caregiver earlier than girls and are shamed if they do not; therefore, rather than out of a positive identification with the father, the boy's masculinity is demarcated as the negation of the mother, and inherently as avoidance of the feminine (Pollack, 1998). This causes an enormous rift between masculinity and femininity in his internal experience, setting the tone for dangerous dissociation (Pollack, 1998).

This fear of femininity can embed beyond the surface of mere reputation and optics, into a deeper, more menacing threat of identity confusion, misogyny and homophobia (Butcher, 2014; Pollack, 1998; Trombetta, 2007). Trombetta (2007) has asserted that the subtext of fearing being perceived as feminine is actually a fear of being perceived as homosexual: an innocently-disguised homophobia which is unconsciously conditioned into men. This automatically perpetuates heterosexual privilege, and the collective perception of both women and homosexual men as less valuable (Trombetta, 2007; Pollack, 1998).

***Aggression and Violence.*** Transgender artist, professor and speaker Vivek Shraya (2018) has asserted that "sexist comments, intimidation, groping, violating boundaries, and



aggression are seen as merely ‘typical’ for men. But typical is interchangeable with ‘acceptable’” (p. 70). This is especially concerning when revealing statistics on adolescent perpetration of violence. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation has reported that four out of 10 high-school aged boys have experienced some form of physical assault, and one in four has been threatened with a weapon (Common et al., 2019). Nearly one in four high-school aged girls have already been exposed to unwanted sexual contact at the hands of male classmates, and even other males are on the receiving end of this inappropriate sexual conduct (Common et al., 2019). In Canada, two-thirds of varsity athletes have reported experiencing some form of hazing during their sports career (Campigotto, 2018). Regardless of these staggering statistics, only half of the victims of school violence reported the incident, fearing the risk of being labelled “a snitch” and prioritizing cohesion with the peer group over the health of the individual (Common et al., 2019). Many victimized boys, who witness trusted caregivers dismiss violence and refuse to intervene, lose the will to speak openly about their experiences of bullying at the hands of other boys (Reed, 2019).

When boys are encouraged to be not only assertive and determined, but exceptionally competitive, the risk of using antisocial or violent means to achieve success is increased (Kimmel, 2018; Miedzian, 2002). Once a boy has been labelled as violent, it can be difficult for him to shed this identity, and this perception is often maintained through social interactions (Gussak, 2016). Art therapy can be useful in developing adaptive interactions and diminish aggression in boys (Hass-Cohen et al., 2018; Howie, 2016; Hussak, 2016; Laffier, 2016). It is important to acknowledge that aggression is not inherently negative. Miedzian (2002) has suggested that *constructive aggression* can be extremely healthy and useful, giving boys the opportunity to be assertive and determined in a variety of adaptive interests such as academics, sports and intellectual endeavours. Through creative expression and reflection, the aggressor may be able to externalize his experiences and emotions, and transmute maladaptive aggression into useful behavior (Gussak, 2016). The art therapy process may interrupt the cycle of aggression through facilitating a strengthened sense of self, providing an outlet to express negative emotions such as sadness or fear, creating new meanings and developing empathy (Gussak, 2016). Art is a safe and acceptable form of expressing hostility and may allow a victim or aggressor to feel understood and validated (Gussak, 2016).

**Control, Power and Sex.** Control is often obtained through aggression and violence, and the most effective way for a “real man” to prove that he is in control is through his sexuality (Johnson, 2001; Miedzian, 2002; Orenstein, 2020). Thus, a hegemonic link emerges between control, power and sexuality, and ultimately some form of violence is perpetrated by a dominant group against those who are subordinate: mainly women and/or gay men (Johnson, 2001).

The dangers of hegemony in the realm of love, attraction and sex has come increasingly to the forefront in modern society, and is no longer easy to ignore (Ettachfini, 2017; The Editors of GQ, 2018; Orenstein, 2020). Recently, *Glamour* and *GQ* magazines conducted a large-scale survey of 1,147 American men to gauge their understanding of, and esteem for, the tenets of the #MeToo movement – an initiative founded by Tarana Burke in 2007 which empowers victims of sexual assault to share their experiences (Gitlin, 2018; Hearn, 2018; The Editors of GQ, 2018). The study reported concerning gaps in political and cultural awareness of men and identified that many of the social structures designated to protect society have failed (The Editors of GQ, 2018). Nearly half of the participants reported a lack of interest in the foundational epithets of the #MeToo movement, and 50-60% of participants agreed with the statement that men are entitled to sex and sexual acts from their female partners (The Editors of GQ, 2018). Further, Edwards et al., (2014) have found that 31.7 percent of college men would have non-consensual sexual intercourse with a woman if there were no consequences.

When hegemony integrates with sexuality, a dangerously thin line is drawn between healthy and destructive behavior (Johnson, 2001; Kaufman, 2014; Orenstein, 2020). This poses an exceptionally dangerous obstacle for adolescent boys, who are just beginning their sexual discovery and are absorbing the messaging of older men into whom patriarchy has embedded (Orenstein, 2020). Eve Ensler (2009), founder of the *V-Day* program (a global activist movement to end violence against girls and women) has alluded to a “secret code of dudes,” which prohibits men – even those who are not perpetrators – from speaking out about sexual violence: this male solidarity reinforces toxic masculinity and results in lack of protection of victims of all genders (Ensler, 2009). Conditioning for aggression and dominance in a young man’s life is strengthened through various societal and cultural factors: members of family (especially fathers, who are willing or unwilling role models), the subculture in which the boy was raised (traditions and values) and mass media (especially social media; Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Meyer, 2009; Miedzian, 2002).

Research has confirmed staggering rates of sexual assault and misconduct among adolescents; in 2014, American teenagers under 18 years old accounted for 20% of arrests for sexual offenses, nearly 30% of rape cases and 14% of aggravated sexual assaults (Greydanus & Omar, 2014). These statistics are evidence of an immense problem (Beres, 2020; Greydanus & Omar, 2014; Johnson, 2014; Schwartzman, 2019). However, if society approached adolescents' understanding of their sexualized bodies in a more proactive way – by providing young men with explorative outlets such as art therapy – the outcomes may be very different (Beres, 2020; Johnson, 2014). Patterns of violence may be intercepted through personal exploration and expression.

### **Role of Mass Media**

Mass media is a powerful influencer of modern culture: self-identity, cognitions, emotional health, and expressions of gender norms and roles can be robustly impacted by its messaging (Arnett, 1996; Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019; Cheung & Gardner, 2016; Giaccardi et al., 2016; Potash, 2009; Scharrer, 2013; Slater, 2015). The media imposes imagery and standards which influence societal expectations of how people should look or act (Giaccardi et al., 2016; Potash, 2009).

Research has demonstrated that popular culture and electronic media are especially influential on adolescents (Byxbee & Zucker, 2017; Potash, 2009). Social media has become a pervasive presence in the adolescent's world; on average, adolescents spend 7.5 hours per day on social media platforms (Byxbee & Zucker, 2017; Cheung & Gardner, 2016). Adolescents are particularly drawn to social media, as these sharing platforms allow them to validate their existence, assert themselves and receive feedback and instant gratification (Byxbee & Zucker, 2017). Different social media platforms have provided various avenues for attention-seeking, affection, connection, information sharing and social influence, including text-based and image-based communication (Pittman & Reich, 2009). While these platforms have made communication faster and arguably more effective, they can be detrimental to the quality of relationship between users (Pittman & Reich, 2009). The speed and immediacy with which posts and information are shared has resulted in an expectation of accessing, retrieving and processing information at a rapid speed, and may condition users to expect consistently faster returns (Potash, 2009). This can pose challenges, especially in the realm of therapy, where slowing down, engaging in reflection and deciphering identity are valuable (Potash, 2009). While it might

seem plausible that social media has expanded avenues for interpersonal connection and improving psychosocial health, research has proven that the opposite is in fact true (Pittman & Reich, 2016). Olds and Schwartz (2009) have asserted that, while online use and connectivity are at an all-time high, rates of loneliness are substantially higher now than in any previous generation. Social media has the ability to empower harmful social paradigms and perpetuate conditioning of damaging attitudes and beliefs (Giaccardi et al., 2016; Pittman & Reich, 2009).

Hirschman (2016) has asserted that “the mind is a cultural mind and the body is a cultural body” (p. 2). Bodies are unfailingly endowed with meaning and are assigned value based on culture and context (Hogan, 2020). Connell (2001) has suggested that true masculinity is thought to emerge from one’s body. An unavoidable paradox of humanity is that human beings essentially exist in two realms – the physical and the internal; one consequence of patriarchal influence is that how one presents externally may or may not reflect one’s internal experience, and may not be consistent with the authentic self (Hogan, 2020). The type of imagery offered to young people through the media causes them to be especially vulnerable to the masculine emphasis on the physical body, as it is so linked to self-esteem (Potash, 2009; Walters & Valenzuela, 2020). Through social media, television and celebrity culture, males are inundated with potent and desirable images of “macho” masculinity (Potash, 2009; Walters & Valenzuela, 2020). Self-esteem can be hindered by misalignment between ideal attributes proposed by the media and the adolescent’s true sense of self (Cheung & Gardner, 2016). When the ideal self is built around others and there is a lack of realistic role models and intimate, person-to-person relationships, the individual’s self-perception may be skewed (Cheung & Gardner, 2016).

Much of the media targeting teen males glorifies the macho masculine body, and celebrates aggression, violence, dominance or risky behavior (Giaccardi et al., 2016). In the media, violence and warfare are not only accepted as natural to the human experience, they are transmuted into heroic and sensational events (Miedzian, 2002). One of the areas of popular culture in which sensationalism of aggressive masculinity is most potent is in modern video games (Blackburn & Scharrer, 2018). Extensive research has been conducted to establish correlations between violent video game play and real-life violence, and results are still somewhat inconclusive (Carnagey et al., 2007; Engelhardt et al., 2011; Ferguson et al., 2016; Olson, Kutner & Warner, 2008). However, less often the focus of research has been on the narrow expressions of masculinity in video games and broader gaming culture (Blackburn &

Scharrer, 2019). The writer conducted an online search for the top-rated video games of 2020, and the results confirmed a celebration of masculinity and violence: more than half of the game title images contained at least one figure brandishing a gun, many used a blatant image of warfare or destruction as a background, and several of the main characters representing the game were so blatantly massive and muscular that they seemed almost caricatured (Nero & Sherrill, 2020).

Giaccardi et al. (2016) have stated that “media portrayals have been shown to support and reify hegemonic constructions of masculinity that highlight the importance of power, aggression, risk-taking, promiscuity and heterosexuality” (p. 152). The writer argues that it is critical to consider the impact of social media and video games on perpetuating harmful social constructions in the belief systems of adolescents.

### **Adolescence**

Adolescence is a period of massive change, growth and maturity (Crenshaw, 2008; Emunah, 1990; Hass-Cohen, Bokoch, Findlay & Witting, 2018). It is important to consider the key goals of adolescence, in order to understand how art therapy may help teenage boys to find flexibility, self-confidence and maintain healthy relationships. These key areas of development are identity formation, separation from the parental figures, peer group formation and sexual maturity.

Erikson (1968) was particularly interested in defining identity in the context of adolescence: he defined identity broadly as an organizing principle which is fundamental to humanity and continues to develop over the course of the lifespan. He has suggested that the vital task of the developmental stage of adolescence is identity versus role confusion, a time in which adolescents seek their own identity, establish independence and autonomy, and discover who they will be as an adult. Positive resolution of the developmental task results in affirmed sense of self, satisfying and high-quality relationship with others, and enhanced mental health for adolescents (Dumas et al., 2009; La Guardia, 2009; Walsh et al., 2010)

Adolescence is often “the most perilous and confusing time of a boy’s life” (Pollack, 1998, p. 146). During these formative years, young men are trying to develop a unique sense of identity and desires for the future, but are also attempting to navigate their way through societal expectations of “real men” (Pollack, 1998). As the literature has shown, the traditional perception of a man is one who is stoic, strong, non-emotive and dominant; conversely, the

modern, progressive conception is empathic, egalitarian and expressive (Connell, 2014; Orenstein, 2020; Pollack, 1998; 2006). Pollack (1998) has identified a “double standard,” in which boys are expected to simultaneously exemplify all of these contradicting characteristics. In order to prove his assertion, Pollack (1998) conducted research with boys, rating their scores on the Sex Role Egalitarian Scale (which measures perceptions of gender equality) and Pleck’s Traditional Male Role Attitude Scale (Pleck, Sonenstein & Ku, 1993). Results were high on both tests, affirming that subjects simultaneously held egalitarian, female-sensitive views but also valued traditional male-role ideals. Pollack (1998) has explained that if participants felt secure and certain in their stance on masculinity, they would have scored high on one test and low on the other: scoring high on both “revealed profound inner turmoil” (p. 166). The societal expectation for boys to be both egalitarian and embody traditional male roles may cause them to have difficulty reconciling their identity (Pollack, 1998).

Because adolescents are in a natural stage of identity questioning and self-exploration, using art as a non-verbal form of communication can be especially effective (Miller, 2011; Riley, 1999). Themes of identity can be explored safely using art interventions which help the adolescent to learn more about his worries, wishes, dreams, thoughts, relationships and beliefs about the self (Miller, 2011). Using images and metaphor, the adolescent client can begin to compare and resolve contradictions between the societal expectations placed upon him and his own authentic self-perception (Miller, 2011; Riley, 1999).

Detachment from parental figures naturally occurs during adolescence (Jager et al., 2015; La Guardia, 2009; Pollack, 1998; Rageliene, 2016; Riley, 1999). Teenagers begin to relinquish their view of parents as omnipotent, formulate their own opinions and unique viewpoints, and rely less on their parents for help (Hartup, 1996; Jager et al., 2015). The adolescent seeks a new sense of belonging in his age-mate peer group, who become increasingly influential in his thought and behavior patterns (Chen et al., 2007; La Guardia, 2009; Rageliene, 2016).

Peer influence can have both detrimental and positive effects on the developing adolescent (Hartup, 1996; La Guardia, 2009). Winning the approval of friends can exacerbate the damaging expectations of toxic masculinity; drug and alcohol use, excessive risk-taking behavior and delinquency may result from individuals attempting to conform to the norms of the peer group they have identified with (Stewart-Knox et al., 2005). However, peer relations are also critical in satisfying the adolescent’s need for belonging, relatedness and personal identity

formation (La Guardia, 2009; Pollack, 1998). High-quality relationships with peers actually correlates with resolved identity: teenagers can negotiate, explore and understand their identity safely with peers, ultimately enhancing self-esteem, communication skills and defining the self (Allemande et al., 2015; La Guardia, 2009). A close network of supportive peers, with whom adolescent boys can share experiences and depend on in times of distress, will reinforce their attempts to develop an authentic self in the context of their community (Pollack, 1998). Peer group experimentation can allow for adolescent boys to test and confirm their perceptions of masculinity (Greydanus & Omar, 2014). Connection with peer groups contribute to enhanced mental health in adolescents and better adjustment to their environments, and function as protective factors against anxiety and depression (La Greca & Harrison, 2005).

Because of the importance of connection and belonging, group art therapy can be an effective platform to facilitate self-expression while simultaneously strengthening interpersonal relationships (Miller, 2011; Slayton, 2012; Williams & Tripp, 2016). The client's relationship with the therapist and with other group members can allow him to non-verbally communicate his feelings about separation or abandonment, while simultaneously relating to his peers and reflecting on ideas of connection, vulnerability and attachment (Miller, 2011). By unifying individuals within a group, all members can find strength and empowerment to activate change (Slayton, 2012). Group therapy can enhance self-regulatory ability while enabling social interactions and novel experiences, and an individual's personal or familial experiences can be mimicked in the dynamics of the group itself (Marks-Tarlow & Haen, 2019). Additionally, in the group setting, adolescents have the opportunity to process trauma and witness other participants' emotional rupture and repair, providing a model for adaptive behavior (Marks-Tarlow & Haen, 2019; Quinlan et al., 2016). Groups can provide the opportunity for adolescents to test out various roles, empower them to step into the ones that feel most authentic, and experience shifts in how they relate to others (Khadar et al., 2013; Marks-Tarlow & Haen, 2019; Williams & Tripp, 2016). Specifically, art-based group therapy can provide the opportunity for adolescents to see themselves as artists, a role which may empower a sense of mastery and autonomy (Malchiodi, 2007; Marks-Tarlow & Haen, 2019; Quinlan et al., 2016).

Another critical element of the stage of adolescence is sexual maturity (Erikson, 1968; Ford, 2019; Omar et al., 2014). Just as the search for identity and establishment of peer groups is critically affected by toxic masculinity, so too is the young man's perception of his body and his

sexual role in society (Orenstein, 2020). Research has found that adolescents are often not adequately educated about the pubertal changes in their body (Omar et al., 2014). As a result, not only is the boy's perception of his physicality at risk, but also his means of using this newly mature body. Often, stereotypes perpetuate the notion that teenage boys' sexuality is uncontrollable and uncontainable, which is false, restrictive and risks direct harm to others (Ford, 2019). The teen boy's inability to healthily discover his sexual identity may make him vulnerable to society's expectations of sexually mature males (Orenstein, 2020).

While the developmental stage of adolescence certainly presents challenges, it can be an incredibly exciting time of growth, rich exploration and self-discovery (Emunah, 1990; Pollack, 1998; Riley, 1999). The individual's emotional and intellectual capacity becomes broader, he begins to formulate his own opinions and decisions about life, politics, culture, self and others, pursue and excel at activities that he is passionate about, and make important contributions to society and the world (Pollack, 1998). *Next Gen Men*, a North American organization whose programming addresses the difficulties of masculinity with 12-14 year old boys, has identified three pillars of gender-transformative health, including self (self-esteem, acceptance, self-awareness), health (mental, physical and emotional) and others (empathy, diversity, relationship and inclusivity; Next Gen Men, 2020). Through the exploration of personal identity, strengthening of peer relationships and mastery of his skills and passions, there is opportunity for the teen boy to develop an unwavering sense of self-esteem, to understand that he is inherently valuable as a unique human being, and that he is a contributing member of his larger community (Next Gen Men, 2020; Pollack, 1998).

### **Art Therapy**

The writer has proposed that the consequences of patriarchy, including emotional restriction of boys, and celebration of aggression, dominance, sexual misconduct and oppression, could be characterized as a collective trauma in Western society (Voznesenska, 2019). However, the creation of art can facilitate healing through collective expression and testimony: for example, collections in museums, film, photo albums, exhibitions, statues and installations, and memorials (Voznesenska, 2019). Further, art therapy may provide an opportunity to empower clients to address issues which negatively affect their community: in this case, contributing to the collective processing of trauma by creatively intervening before manifestations of toxic masculinity fully take root (Slayton, 2012; Voznesenska, 2019).



Adolescents can be a challenging clientele to engage in therapy: they often attend therapy by the mandate of others, may have a mistrust of authority and thus harbor a resistance to collaborate with the therapist (Crenshaw, 2008; Edgette, 2006; Riley, 1999). Sharing of emotions can feel foreign and undesirable for all adolescents, but this may be especially potent for males who have adopted masculine norms and avoid the shame and stigma often associated with therapy (Crenshaw, 2008). However, the benefits of engaging adolescents in therapy far outweigh the initial challenges; within the therapeutic space, a teenager can process physical changes, reconcile contradictory aspects of himself, consolidate his sexual identity, minimize susceptibility to risk-taking behaviors, broaden his worldview, tolerate loneliness and strengthen relationships (Barrett, 2008; Bromfield, 2005; Goldner & Ruderman, 2020; Oetzel & Scherer, 2003; Potash, 2009). Art images can be less judgemental, less threatening and less contaminated by established meaning than words (Riley, 1999). Additionally, art therapy can invite gender fluidity; therapists have a responsibility to consider the client apart from how they physically present, from an intersectional standpoint (Hogan, 2020). Therapist and client can engage in “exploration of gender ... through art-making, and via the therapeutic relationship” (Hogan, 2020, p. 9). Outside the therapy room, harmful expectations of masculinity thrive, leaving little opportunity for boys to feel vulnerable and sensitive; art therapy can provide a safe realm for personal insight, facilitating the adolescent male’s ability to reflect on his masculine identity, share what he is experiencing and ultimately enhance his confidence and agency (Hogan, 2020).

Emunah (1990) has suggested that “adolescents are on the brink of explosion,” in regards to body image, abstract thinking, sexuality and identity (p. 102). For young males who are struggling to match their own interpretation of these changing facets to the norms of society, this can be especially volatile. The use of metaphor allows teens to distance themselves from, and form unique perspective on, emotional regulation, thought and identity (Moon, 2012; Potash, 2009; Riley, 1999; Rubin, 2016). Freedom, depth of insight and exploration of the self can be safely facilitated in the consequence- and judgement-free context of art therapy (Emunah, 1990; Moon, 2012). Emunah (1990) has asserted that art therapy can provide an optimal setting for adolescent boys to “engag[e] the new and emerging capacities in adolescence” (p. 107) and “discover their true self” (Moon, 2012). Research has shown that art therapy can facilitate boys’ processing of their experiences, and integrate these internally, reducing aggression, trauma and the negative outcomes of victimization (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020; Hass-Cohen et al., 2018;

Howie, 2016; Laffier, 2016; Miller, 2011; Yan, et al., 2019). Engagement in creative arts enhances development of self-control, emotional regulation, motivation, attention, executive functioning and relationship to others (Hass-Cohen et al., 2018). Empathic connections can be strengthened through the creation of artwork, and also by witnessing others creating (Hass-Cohen et al., 2018).

Some potential limitations to the engagement of adolescent boys in art therapy have been explored. Men are much less frequently referred to therapy than women, and even within the therapeutic space, men tend to desire autonomy in handling their own problems and be less engaged with the art process (Barbee, 1996; Goldner & Ruderman, 2020; Liebmann, 2003). Research has identified extra steps which may aid in the therapeutic process: the therapist should recognize the personal and societal hurdles these clients must overcome, focus on active art-making within therapy sessions and implement structure, which would reduce the anxiety of personal expression (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020; Hogan, 2020; Trombetta, 2007). Research has shown that even behavioral disorders, such as oppositional defiance disorder, can be improved in boys using art therapy (Khadar et al., 2013). Providing autonomy and offering a range of non-traditional art media may also entice a hesitant male client (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020). Barbee (1996) has found that that male clients displayed a cognitive approach to their therapy, but that the platform of art therapy expanded their ability to be flexible, accept ambiguity and embrace existential, rather than concrete, issues. Art forms such as comic strips, graffiti, wood carving, building and three-dimensional media may more comfortably facilitate emotional expression, self-disclosure, recognizing and transforming of aggression, and ease anxiety which results from perceived lack of control (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020; Trombetta, 2007).

Art therapists have an important and special role in working with adolescents, and especially in working with boys. Transparency and honesty of the therapist is critical in building authentic relationships with this population group (Riley, 1999). In order to provide the most inclusive, sensitive and effective treatment for young men, it is critical for the art therapist to cognizant of evolving constructs of gender, gender fluidity in clients and of the potential challenges of gender mismatch between therapist and client (Hogan & Cornish, 2014). Research conducted by Hogan and Cornish (2014), which surveyed art therapists' viewpoints of gender, demonstrated that the therapists' consideration of gender both at the outset of treatment and during treatment was 'quite important,' suggesting that gender identity enters the therapy space

even at the time of initial assessment. Some respondents held open perceptions about gender, claiming to not make assumptions about their clients, while others admitted that they believed that cultural norms relating to gender would unconsciously be present in their therapeutic relationship. A majority of the surveyed art therapists reported that their own gender was either extremely or very important. Interestingly, male art therapists reported that they had often assumed a female role in the transference relationship with their client, affirming that gender is felt and not biologically predicated. The implications of these results are not clear, but they confirm that gender is in fact a consideration in the therapy space and art therapists are not united in their understanding of gender. This is an area in which further research could be pursued.

## **Conclusion**

The literature has outlined common attributes of toxic masculinity and how they have been reinforced by the patriarchal structure in Western society. However, the literature has also suggested that social conditioning and structures are not concrete and are able to change. Ford (2019) has urged that society should be deeply concerned about permitting toxic masculinity to envelop boys and has warned against “lazy” (p. 11) acceptance of toxic masculinity as the norm. The type of boy that toxic masculinity begets is not an inherent state of being; rather, gender inequality is learned in the home, in institutions, is perpetuated in the media and persists into organizations and governance in adulthood (Ford, 2019). Using art therapy to help adolescent boys explore, express and reconcile the self with expectations of others, in a safe, non-judgement space, can be effective in implementing change.

A few important themes emerged through the review of literature. First, research has concluded that masculinity is a social construct created by, and actively sustained, by society. A spectrum of masculinities exists which includes varying features. Culture, mass media and institutions impose an expected, hegemonic masculinity on adolescent males. Conceptualizations of self-esteem, body image, identity, empowerment and societal pressure were raised as primary concerns for adolescent boys. A second theme was the challenges to, and tools for, engaging adolescents in therapy. Therapy may be especially challenging with adolescent boys, considering the aversion of stigma, shame and appeared weakness intrinsic to hegemonic masculinity. It is incredibly valuable for art therapists to understand the adolescent boy’s search for identity, abstract thought and expression of sexuality, and how societal constructs might enter the therapy space.

## **Chapter 4. Discussion**

### **Revisiting the Research Question**

Based on the reviewed literature, the writer has developed a two-fold philosophical argument: first, that toxic masculinity is a critical problem of modern Western society, which inherently perpetuates privilege and oppression and must be addressed. Second, that toxic masculinity is especially damaging during adolescence, and can be examined, challenged and overcome using art therapy. Undermining the power of the traditional masculine paradigm is critical in allowing today's youth to develop, reconcile their true selves, and to break violent and damaging intergenerational cycles of manhood.

### **Toxic Masculinity and Teenage Boys: Implications for Art Therapy Practice**

The literature has suggested that the relationships and psychosocial, mental and physical health of boys who do not represent prescribed qualities of hegemonic masculinity may be negatively impacted. Additionally, their ability to reconcile their authentic selves may be compromised. The potential for shame, risk of threatened identity and assumed proclivity to violence is a strong tide against which adolescent boys must swim (Pollack, 1998; Reichert, 2019). How boys conceptualize themselves, what value they believe they hold and how they will communicate their worth to the world is founded in boyhood and adolescence (Reichert, 2019). Reichert (2019) has likened these many pervasive challenges to the “thousand cuts of boyhood”; in order to facilitate the emancipation of men from the confines of masculinity, art therapists can begin helping boys to find their voice, build confidence in their self-worth and break rigid patterns of thought and behavior.

In treating adolescents who are suffering from the consequences of patriarchy, such as depression and identity confusion, it is critical for the art therapist to untangle the possible sources, such as developmental maturity, personality and environment (Riley, 1999). Adolescents who are exposed to socio-economic disadvantage, racial discrimination or lack of caregiver support may be especially susceptible to the oppression of toxic masculinity and resulting symptoms (Riley, 1999; Talwar et al., 2004). Because of the intersectionality between toxic masculinity, racism, sexism and oppression, art therapists must be cognizant of the potential ability of therapy to transmit societal values and maintain the status quo; a multicultural approach must be adopted in order to safely and inclusively support clients (Talwar et al., 2004). It can also be helpful for art therapists working with adolescents to adapt their therapeutic style

to suit the needs of the client: for example, if the client is active, the therapist might provide a range of art materials and facilitate spontaneous, free-association art-making, whereas if the client is reserved, the therapist may model an art technique or engage more personally (Riley, 1999). Riley (1999) has encouraged art therapists to think creatively and adapt the therapy in non-traditional ways for adolescent clients.

Societal change is possible, and in the realm of toxic masculinity, men are at the forefront of responsibility for breaking patterns which perpetuate this paradigm (Ford, 2019; Hearn, 2018; Orenstein, 2020; Trombetta, 2007). However there are ways in which all members of society can help, and in particular, art therapists can utilize the expressive and communicative benefits of art therapy to facilitate a paradigm shift (Talwar et al., 2004). In the literature review, characteristic features of toxic masculinity and the unique challenges of adolescence were separately identified. However, the researcher will now explore more deeply how the themes of toxic masculinity synthesize into, and uniquely affect, the adolescent population, and specific art therapy approaches or interventions which may be useful in addressing these issues.

### ***Addressing Identity Formation and Emotional Expression***

Identity is a critical concept in the discussion of both toxic masculinity and adolescence. Identity congruence results in lower expression of somatic symptoms, depression, anxiety, suicidal tendencies, greater emotional adjustment and stability, and generally enhanced psychological well-being (Chen et al., 2007; Crocetti et al., 2008; Dumas et al., 2009; Ramgoon et al., 2006; Sandhu et al., 2012). However, while identity is central to the adolescent boy's search for meaning, his success in achieving it is profoundly impacted by the expectations bestowed upon him by hegemonic masculinity. Many of the key themes of hegemonic masculinity, including restrictive emotionality, disparagement of the feminine and self-sufficiency, are inevitably woven into the young man's formation of identity.

As discussed in the literature review, adolescent boys face a reconciliation of "two selves" (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020). The first is the boy's expectation to express himself according to the societal view of the male gender, and the second, to permit himself to be fully human and express his true emotions and weaknesses (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020; Pollack, 1998). Art therapy can facilitate adolescent males' exploration and reconciliation of internalized dichotomies of masculinity, and discovery of their authentic identity (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020; Potash, 2009). Art therapy interventions can be structured to build on the boy's existing

skills and expand his sense of autonomy and mastery (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020; Potash, 2009). As a result, the boy's self-esteem and confidence are enhanced, and he is permitted space to shift attention from patriarchal stereotypes and focus instead on his own strengths and abilities (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020).

Extensive literature describing the prevalence of macho stereotypes in the media was reviewed. By penetrating the realms of identity, sex, body image and peer influence, celebration of the dominant and aggressive male has been preserved through the media and amplified for young males (Orenstein, 2020; Miedzian, 2002). However, because media is entrenched in contemporary Western culture, especially for adolescents, it is beneficial to understand how art therapists can utilize it positively. Art therapy poses a unique opportunity to integrate pop culture imagery, and as a result, examine its impact on adolescents and mitigate any negative outcomes; art therapists are responsible for adapting to modern times and are urged to extend their work into the online space in order to provide accessible and relevant services to clients (Byxbee & Zucker, 2017; Potash, 2009). Images from the media can be incorporated into and transformed within an adolescent's artwork, permitting them deeper understanding, mastery and control (Potash, 2009). Rather than disregarding or ignoring the messages provided by the media, adolescents can be encouraged to transmute their meaning, and become active versus passive media consumers: this can aid in developing healthy, conscious and critical personal relationships with the media and the adolescent's own body and self-worth (Voznesenska, 2019).

In the art therapy space, media can be used two ways: media images can be viewed, discussed and reflected on; or media forms, such as short films, photographs, or gifs or memes, can be created (Voznesenska, 2019). Research with youth who have experienced trauma has proven that the use of visual communication, such as photography, enhanced their ability to share difficult experiences and tell personal stories (Rice et al., 2014). Also, while it is important to consider the risks involved in publicly sharing art created in therapy, research has suggested that extending the reach of clients' creative process by sharing of the client's media art therapy on the internet could assist in social connection, recognition, emotional support, meaningfulness and group identification (Byxbee & Zucker, 2017; Voznesenska, 2019). Since social media is familiar and relevant to this population, Byxbee and Zucker (2017) have suggested creating "Instagram selfies": providing the client with a template resembling an Instagram post, and inviting him to create a selfie using art materials that would hypothetically be shared on the

social media platform. This may permit the client to explore and share his identity in a social context, rather than in isolation, and consider how he relates and expresses himself to others.

### ***The “Mask” of Masculinity***

As mentioned in the literature review, masks can be a powerful metaphor for the internal conflict of masculinity, including the search for personal identity and emotional expressivity (Miller, 2011; Pollack, 1998). There are two significant meanings behind this metaphor. The first meaning is that, through its two-sided nature, the mask represents the powerful dichotomy that young men face in the expectation to value and embody traditional male expressions of anger and aggression, while simultaneously espousing progressive, modern attitudes toward emotionality and sensitivity toward women (Connell, 2001; Pollack, 1998; Trombetta, 2007). The second potential meaning behind the mask is literally that of covering one’s true self (Miller, 2011; Pollack, 1998; Sexton, 2019). Boys may become comfortable hiding behind a mask – a shield of bravado and machismo – which hides their vulnerability and underlying feelings of sadness, loneliness, shame, fear and ambivalence (Pollack, 1998; Riley, 1999; Sexton, 2019; Trombetta, 2007).

Often, boys so skillfully wear this mask that they appear to be externally happy and fulfilled, while suffering on the inside. Often, even supportive caregivers are blind to the performance of this mask (Pollack, 1998). Boys’ inner turmoil then spills into other critical areas of life, including academic performance, relationships with family and peers, victimizing or becoming victims of bullying, and developing depressive or anxiety symptoms (Pollack, 1998; Trombetta, 2007). Even further, the distress caused by this spillage results in explosions of dangerous maladaptive behavior: inciting violence, fighting, delinquency, drug and alcohol use, diagnoses of clinical depression, ADHD, or conduct disorder, and even suicide (Pollack, 1998). Emotional repression can have lasting and incredibly detrimental effects on the young man (Pollack, 1998; Trombetta, 2007). Efforts must be made to help boys remove this mask, or to avoid putting it on in the first place (Pollack, 1998). Art therapists should remain sensitive to the signs of the mask (poor grades, inappropriate behavior, appearing quiet, depressive symptoms, perpetrating violence, and using drugs and alcohol, while stating externally that “everything is fine”); if boys are not supported, they may retreat behind this mask so inclusively that it becomes an extension of themselves, inhibiting them from connecting with their authentic thoughts and feelings (Pollack, 1998).

Masks have an ancient historical significance in a variety of cultures, representing spirituality, political ideas, power and control, fear, private feelings, transformation, death and cultural identity (Furuki, 2011; Paoletti, 1992). In art therapy, masks can be powerful symbols of the client's identity and internal conflicts, and can be used to examine relationships, communication and processing of trauma (Fiet, 2014; Hinz & Ragsdell, 1990; Medina & Kouli, 2009). Mask-making could be especially meaningful for adolescent males who are conflicted between societal expectations of traditional masculinity and their authentic identity (Pollack, 1998). By representing the duality of outer self and inner self, the client may be able to objectively examine and gain perspective on any disparity between the two facets of himself (Walker et al., 2017). Unspoken perceptions of shame, guilt or identity confusion may be expressed in the decoration of the mask, and then with the help of the therapist, the boy can reconcile the various parts of himself (Walker et al., 2017).

### ***Appealing to the Feminine-Avoidant Artist***

Often, an obstacle to engaging boys in art therapy is that art may be considered a “girly” activity which contradicts the hegemonic male stereotype (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020). Some art therapists have found it effective to actually adhere to traditional masculine stereotypes of art-making in order to spark creativity and build trust with their adolescent male clientele (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020). Art interventions which require physical action, three-dimensional projects (sculpture) or providing materials which necessitate physical force or building, such as wood, clay, metal, found objects and hot glue, may be extremely effective in initially engaging boys and keeping them involved in the therapy (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020). Art materials which have functional, mechanical or building properties may offer an opportunity to address masculinity and ego strength (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020). Boys will often gravitate toward expressing their world through functionality, rather than simply decoration; by inviting boys to create things which connect to their world, art therapists might facilitate deeper reflection, strengthened relationship and ultimately, enhanced insight into the boy's authentic self (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020).

Utilizing technology in art therapy can be a unique and dynamic way of appealing to boys. Most of today's adolescents were born and raised in a technologically dependent world, and are comfortable with technology as an extension of themselves (Jamerson, 2017). Design, drawing and rendering apps on a tablet are likely familiar tools for teenagers, and can provide a



flexible, impermanent, and approachable format for artistic expression (Elkis-Abuhoff et al., 2017). Jamerson (2017) has offered that art therapy is in need of a shift in terms of techniques and approach with teenagers, to incorporate more modern tools such as digital media art. He has proposed several interventions using iPads, smart phones and digital platforms to promote transformation through digital storytelling, “expressive remixing”, animated digital mask-making and virtual world creation.

### ***Resolving Anger, Aggression and Violence***

As the literature has suggested, violence imprints into boyhood both overtly, in the form of bullying and fighting, and implicitly through the social conditioning imposed by society (Reichert, 2019). Nearly every interaction a boy encounters, both with male and female peers, tests his ability to prove himself to be “manly” and puts the non-conforming boy at risk of being exposed as violating the “boy code” (Orenstein, 2020; Pollack, 1998; Reichert, 2019).

One of the areas in which control, power and aggression dangerously combine for adolescents is in the realm of sexuality. Sexuality is unquestionably challenging territory for teenagers and is one microcosm of society in which controversy is especially rife and opinions are bold (Omar et al., 2014; Orenstein, 2020). In recent years, popular feminist movements such as #MeToo and *Time’s Up* have highlighted the dangers of toxic masculinity and demanded critical examination of what boys are learning about sexual consent (Orenstein, 2020). The intricacies of the very robust and complex relationship between toxic masculinity, men and sexual violence are numerous and complex, and are mostly out of the scope of this paper. However, as one of the realizations of adolescence is sexual maturity, it is important to discuss the topic of sex and masculinity specifically as it relates to the adolescent male population (Omar et al., 2014).

Art therapy can be a safe space for adolescents to explore anger, aggression and sexual identity (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020; Potash, 2009; Riley, 1999). Chilton (2011) has emphasized the benefits of creating altered books in art therapy: altered books are an accessible, non-threatening and unique format for self-discovery and community-building. By utilizing existing books, clients can adapt and transform the pages to reflect their own experiences, identity and feelings; these books can also be created together as a group, so that connections between participants can be strengthened and experiences can be shared (Chilton, 2011). Altered

books can be a creative art form which can be a “symbolic rebellion against the status quo” (p. 63), aligned with the aim of helping young men to rebel against expectations of the patriarchy.

Creative activities may also provide a form of relaxation for clients who are susceptible to anger or aggression. One possibility could be for the therapist to provide a variety of images, and invite the client to select several which he finds to be relaxing (Attwood, 2004). These images could be cut out and placed into small cue cards or playing cards, which the boy can keep in his pocket or wallet. These are reminders to slow down, take a breath and relax during moments of agitation (Attwood, 2004). Another possibility is the use of comic strip storytelling. The client is invited to reflect on a situation when his anger was building, when he acted aggressively toward someone, or an inappropriate sexual conduct. The client tells the unfolding story through drawings and words. Once the story has been externalized, the art therapist invites the client to reflect on the unfolding events and indicate moments of intervention which may have produced a different outcome (Jamerson, 2017; Liebmann, 2004). This narrative therapy approach may help the boy to understand his behavior more thoroughly and interrupt his own negative patterns in the future (White, 2007).

### **Patriarchy and privilege**

There are pressing and important reasons for this research to be conducted. Gender is an aspect of being human, but is also a construct which has been understood in new ways in recent years (Bockting, 2014; Clark et al., 2018; Connell, 2014; Hadley & Gumble, 2019; Hansbury, 2005; Hearn, 2019; Hogan, 2020; Mathews, 2017; Rimes, 2018). There is an intellectual purpose for research in this area, which is to illuminate variances in masculinities and provide alternatives to the expected gender representations (Connell, 2001). There is also a very evident practical purpose for this research, in that the toxic effects of contemporary masculinities are severe and diverse (Connell, 2001). Traditional masculinity can incite men to neglect medical care and mental health needs, drug abuse, increased aggression, conflict with other men and incarceration, and threatens their mental and physical quality of life (APA, 2018; Fortin, 2019).

Just as damaging are the ripple effects of these traits into the lives of others, manifested as misogyny, assault, racism, homophobia and violence. In the era of modern feminist movements, many will argue that there is no space for men’s rights or men’s health. Additionally, recent societal paradigm shifts such as *Black Lives Matter* (founded by Patrisse Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi) which might appear unrelated on the surface, are

inherently linked to hegemony (Briscoe, 2020; Cohen & Jackson, 2015; Issar, 2020; “Our co-founders”, n.d.; Okun, 2018). The privilege intrinsic to hegemony results in an “ongoing epidemic of violence” (p. 61), which threatens women, homosexual individuals, people of color and even other men – an offensive pattern which must be disrupted (Johnson, 2001). The writer also argues that a society in which healthy, strong and authentic men can thrive is also one in which women and all members of society are respected and valued; thus, this is simultaneously an issue of women’s rights and of everyone’s rights (Katz, 2006). If we are raising young men to believe they have an alternative to the expected “macho masculinity”, we are permitting them to thrive and feel powerful in their own authentic identity, and enhancing society as a whole.

### **Personal Reflections of the Researcher**

It might seem strange that a cisgender, heterosexual woman would be so enthusiastic about helping young men to identify and override toxic masculinity. As the researcher, I have not personally experienced being raised as a boy and the expectations associated with that. However, I have certainly experienced the implications of being identified as a woman in Western society. Recent cultural movements have brought to light the consequences of toxic masculinity, especially in the realms of sexual consent and assault and gender injustices; these are areas in which I have personally experienced the difficulties of being female. As such, I firmly believe that it is important to consider this topic as a problem not only of men, but of people of all genders and society as a whole.

I admit that I often felt overwhelmed and discouraged by this material. The literature has assured that patriarchal values are so entrenched into Western society that, at times, it may feel nearly impossible to consider overriding them and creating long-term change. However, society’s recent collective outcry against social injustices has demonstrated that when enough people band together under a common goal, change is within reach. Through the process of engaging in this research, I have become emboldened in my belief that toxic masculinity is prevalent and dangerous, and intrinsically linked to systemic oppression in Western society. I have extensively broadened my understanding about the intersection of gender inequality, feminism, and social and racial justice. As such, I have developed a revitalized and impassioned desire for continued learning, and a greater understanding of privilege and power. As a researcher, clinician, and member of society, I have been invigorated with a belief that collective

transformation can occur. I have a desire to utilize the learnings from this theoretical research in my art therapy practice, and potentially further it into future subject-based art therapy research.

### **Limitations**

Some important considerations should be mentioned concerning this research project. The researcher personally identifies as a cisgender woman and therefore has depended on her own anecdotal experience as a woman in daily life, on her experience working with adolescent boys as an art therapy intern and as a volunteer facilitating art workshops with young men to contextualize the literature. She also exists within the context of North American culture. As a result, she has naturally viewed the topic through a biased lens of personal experience, social location and cultural influence. It is critical for art therapists working with adolescents to remember that all humans maintain bias and prejudice, even if they are unwilling to admit or recognize it (Riley, 1999).

The suggested benefits of art therapy in addressing the specific traits of toxic masculinity are theoretical in nature. Literature discussing the benefits of conducting art therapy with men is limited, and with adolescent boys, even more so. Additionally, much of the literature and research about art therapy with boys has been conducted by female researchers, and thus the personal experience or bias of the researcher may affect interpretation of results. The researcher has suggested various intentions of art therapy interventions, but these are not tested in this particular study.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Many of the potential consequences of hegemonic masculinity have been outlined in the literature review section of this paper. However, the central features of masculinity, such as restrictive emotionality, acceptance of anger and celebration of aggression can extend into sinister realms of misogyny, gendered racism and homophobia (Butcher, 2014; Johnson, 2001; Okun, 2018; Orenstein, 2020). These are important and complex topics, each deserving of its own individual research studies. Due to the scope of this research project, they have not been examined thoroughly enough to truly do justice to the pervasiveness and danger of these outcomes for society. However, this paper has aimed to introduce the inherent connections of hegemonic masculinity and oppression, and warn of the consequences for those members of society who are excluded by hegemony.

Discussion of upending patriarchal systems and hegemonic masculinity cannot occur without touching on the deep-rooted issues of racism, sexism and privilege in Western society (Okun, 2018). While white privilege and resulting oppression have been present for generations, they have come abruptly and undeniably to the forefront of culture. Numerous profeminist men's movements have formed in the past decade and, even within the weeks before this paper was submitted, *Black Lives Matter* gained substantial traction world-wide ("Our co-founders", n.d.; Okun, 2018). Central to the movement has been the call to dismantle white patriarchy and defund police organizations in order to alternatively amplify community and social supports (Diverlus et al., 2020). Similar large-scale movements have garnered incredible patronage, mainly facilitated by social media, for societal change in regards to sexual rights, authentic identity expression and social/racial justice. Western society may be ready for a paradigm shift, and more than ever, the time to intervene with young men to dismantle patriarchal values is now.

Okun (2018) has suggested that men have an important role in releasing outdated interpretations of manhood and equalizing the platform for social justice. How art therapists can intervene with boys in an effort to eliminate shame, increase emotional expression and raise their authentic voices requires more extensive exploration. Research has suggested that therapeutic alliances may be stronger and therapy may be more effective long-term if therapist and client are gender-matched (Wintersteen et al., 2005). While therapeutic work with adolescent males is important, urgent and should not be delayed simply because a therapist identifies as female, it would be worthwhile to recruit more male-identifying art therapists to enhance work with this population in the future (Trombetta, 2007).

## Conclusion

Social conditioning under the Western system of patriarchy has led us to accept that boys are naturally more active, more sexually driven, more angry, and aggressive than their gender counterparts. Conversely, girls have historically been portrayed as helpless individuals who should learn to shield and protect themselves. Society dismisses poor behavior and outdated stereotypes as products of testosterone, chalking them up to inevitabilities of boyhood. Yet these seemingly benign assumptions veil a culture of embedded hegemony, misogyny, homophobia, oppression and restriction. “Boys will be boys” is no longer an acceptable refuge for entrenched patriarchal values. The mental and physical health of boys and men, and consequently of all other members of society, is severely at risk.

Pollack (2006) has suggested that “we’re getting ready for [another] gender revolution” when it comes to boys and their self-expression (p. 194). There is hope for society in that the meaning of gender is and always will be open to challenge by those who wish to disrupt the established order and resulting dangerous outcomes. Within the past decade, critical thinking in the realm of art therapy has increasingly gained traction; art therapists have been encouraged to actively understand how hegemonic structures affect their clients and have shaped traditional philosophies of psychopathology and therapy (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020). Recent cultural movements have highlighted a collective urgency for deviation from the traditional paradigms which have, for many centuries, dictated how people think, act and exist. Never before has it been so critical for art therapists to focus not only on the individual client, but also on the collective needs of society as a whole.

This philosophical inquiry has proposed that hegemonic masculinity is a prevalent and pressing problem in modern Western culture, invoking injurious consequences for society as a whole. In order to support this argument, the researcher has described the nature of masculinity as a social construction, discussed the history and perpetuation of gender norms, and identified the inherent connection between hegemony and systemic oppression. Second, the argument has been made that art therapy may be an effective tool for intervening with adolescent males who are pressured to reconcile confusing societal expectation, and facilitate individual, interpersonal and collective change (Goldner & Ruderman, 2020; Malchiodi, 2007; Miller, 2011; Trombetta, 2007). By helping adolescent boys to explore their true identities and find alternatives to the patriarchal values of emotional restriction, aggression, machismo and violence, we are

facilitating disruption of entrenched patterns of hegemony, privilege and oppression (Johnson, 2001; Pollack, 1998). Perhaps if boys were given a choice and a voice – an opportunity to access their full humanity – they would step into a new paradigm of masculinity which aligns each boy with his authenticity. Pollack (1998) has asserted that “the best and perhaps the only way [a boy] can successfully define a strong, independent, and individualistic masculine identity is with ... help, support, and love” (p. 145). In the art therapy space, boys can use art to explore and reflect on masculine identity, emotional expression and self-awareness. Art therapists may have a powerful role in helping them to become confident, expressive and transformative members of their communities, who are willing to refute patriarchal expectations and rewrite the narrative: “boys don’t have to just be boys”. They can be anything they want to be.

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