

COMMENT REPLY

Response to Commentaries on Masculinity Ideologies

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We respond to the separate commentaries by Cuthbert, Isacco, and Wade to our original article, again drawing attention to our critique of masculinity ideologies. There are important conceptual matters that the field of the psychology of men needs to confront when considering the construct of masculinity ideology, and we maintain that our distinction between “masculinity ideologies” and “masculinity beliefs” is an important one. We argue that the context of men’s lives is crucial and largely uncharted, consequently there is need to extend research attention to ideologies other than “traditional.” We agree with the commentaries that qualitative studies and mixed-methods are needed to refine measurement and understanding of the impact of masculinities on men.

Keywords: masculinity ideologies, qualitative studies

We were pleased by the opportunity to review the last two decades of scholarship involving measures of masculinity ideologies. One of our wishes in writing the opening article in this forum (Thompson & Bennett, 2015) was to offer a review that would inspire wait-a-minute questioning, new discussion, and even debate about the meaning and measurement of masculinity ideologies. If the principal points voiced by the anonymous reviewers and raised in the preceding three commentaries are representative, our wish has been granted. In this response, we address a few of the key matters others put forward. Our expectation is that this response will refine the arguments we originally made and affirm many key points in the commentaries.

Conceptual Matters

Construct

Cuthbert (2015) and to some extent Wade (2015) suggested that our heuristic distinction between “masculinity ideologies” and “masculinity beliefs” was a difficult one to agree to. Wade thought our distinction was based on the measures reviewed and was troubled by the absence of clear criteria to sort measures into those assessing ideologies or beliefs. Cuthbert similarly commented that the distinction was problematic since none of the measures reviewed asked respondents to identify cultural standards.

Our response is that we do feel our distinction is justifiable, because the starting point is not the measures. We argued that within discourses on “masculinity ideologies” there have been two dissimilar conceptualizations. The starting point is the discourses. One locates ideologies as “cultural things” external to the individual (cf. Connell, 1995; Wentzell, 2013). These societal-wide, regional, and local ideologies comprise cultural traditions *and* social practices—that is, the bodies of ideas, doctrine, myth, expectations, and normative patterns of interaction that endlessly (re)structure gender relations and (re)sculpt people’s understandings of gender. This “cultural thing” target is precisely what Brannon (1976) and many others tried to capture with their multidimensional measures of the social norms that the “mainstream” masculinity ideology communicates. “Our culture’s blueprint” was part of the title of Brannon’s seminal essay. Cultural ideologies are what the developers of the Multicultural Masculinity Ideology Scale (Doss & Hopkins, 1998) unambiguously targeted with their critique that most measures of masculinity ideologies impose the universality of Anglo American conceptions of masculinities onto other cultures.

The other discourse shifts the target away from the “cultural things”—the ideologies—to the realm of subjective experience. The underlying premise is that people acquire through social learning their own “masculinity ideology” (cf. Mahalik et al., 2003; Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1993), which makes researchers keen to chart exactly what different people see as normative. Because this discourse targets an individual-level belief system, it was our contention that studying individuals’ internalized beliefs (whatever type of beliefs) is not the same as bringing to light the cultural ideologies that underpin those beliefs. For one example, homophobic beliefs might well covary with intolerance of gay men marrying, but they do not equal the ideology or institutionalization of heterosexism.

We argued in our original article that the discourse about individual-level “masculinity ideologies” solidified with Pleck,

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Sonenstein, and Ku's (1993) proposal that "masculinity ideology" maps "the endorsement and internalization of cultural belief systems about masculinity" (p. 88). Their theoretical footing for this line of reasoning was gender role strain theory, which we discuss shortly as inherently an individual-level analysis. We continue to maintain that assessing people's attitudes toward masculinity ideologies is not the same as assessing the masculinity ideologies themselves. Thompson, Pleck, and Ferrera (1992) recognized that developers of masculinity ideology measures operationalized "the ideologies and institutions involved in maintaining different masculinity standards" (p. 576)—the ideologies—but the measures "index the extent to which individuals endorse the ideas and beliefs that serve to justify gender scripts and gender relations" (p. 576).

This was why we ended up choosing the construct "masculinity beliefs." It was a heuristic means to urge those involved in the field of the psychology of men to recognize that investigating men's (and women's) attitudes toward an ideology tells us little about what ideologies actually exist within the community or what ideologies individuals might align themselves with. Our decision to tag the individual-level discourse as one addressing "masculinity beliefs" was also intended to urge scholars to not lose sight of the sources of those acquired belief systems—the (forever changing, often competing) masculinity ideologies embedded within cultural traditions *and* social practices.

Our logic was the same that Whitehead (1925) argued in his philosophy of science—namely, all objects should be understood as fields having both temporal and spatial extensions (p. 64), as well as we must avoid the error of mistaking the abstract for the concrete (p. 72). Translated into the study of masculinity ideologies, the target discussed by most developers of the first-generation measures was the "mainstream" masculinity ideology of the 1970s and 1980s, and it may once have been hegemonic. This ideology was surrounded by many other masculinities, some complicit, some marginalized, and some contesting (cf. Messner, 1997). We are encouraged that Isacco (2015, p. 3) and Wade (2015, p. 7) agree with us on this point: These other masculinities remain largely uncharted, if not ignored. We remain unwavering in our concern that whenever a discourse about individual men's personal norms or level of acceptance of societal norms is equated with masculinity ideologies, the error of misplaced concreteness looms. The mistake is to liken self-defined conformity to, attitudes toward, or beliefs about an ideology with the ideology.

Level of Analysis

Gender role strain theories (cf. O'Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 1986; Pleck, 1981) have had an impressive history of spurring basic and clinically useful scholarship in the field of the psychology of men, and this seems to be one reason Cuthbert (2015, p. 5) prefers an individual-level analysis of "masculinity beliefs." By the mid-1980s, psychologists had largely stepped away from the essentialism associated with personality (trait) theories of masculinity and adopted a role theory perspective, rooted in social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), to argue that most of everyday activity is performance—the "acting out" of the rights, social norms, and cultural traditions associated with socially defined categories (e.g., man, husband, breadwinner). The "male role" became "a sensitizing concept that summarize[d]

the general expectations men face" (Thompson & Pleck, 1986, p. 531), and the gender role strain paradigm helped develop propositions about the possible ill-effects of the "male role" on individual men and the character of their relations with women.

In comparison with the role theory perspective, the social constructionist perspective evident within Bourdieu's (2002) and Connell's studies of gender (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985; Connell, 1987, 1995) directs attention to power relations and gender inequalities, not roles. As Cuthbert (2015, pp. 6–7) comments, this perspective has yet to make much headway in the field of the psychology of men. But, we believe, it warrants adoption. We proposed in our article that a new generation of thinking about measuring masculinity ideologies¹ could move the field beyond gender role strain theorizing and studies designed to reveal the deficits of ("traditional") masculinity. The field has demonstrated many deficits, and will invaluablely continue to (cf. Sloan, Connor, & Gough, 2015).

Here is one example: A growing body of literature highlights the adverse consequences of adherence to "traditional" masculinities on some men's health and health behaviors—from engaging in more risky cardiac-related behaviors, to failure to consult medical providers. This line of scholarship is different from the legions of epidemiological studies that show men disproportionately represented among (social) problem populations—perpetrators of violence, the homeless, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) sufferers, or fatal victims of homicide. What has distinguished the psychology of men and masculinities from the epidemiological search is that it directs attention to ask which men are at greater health risk.

However, we believe that role theory perspective can become a slippery slope, with "role strain" prone to pathologizing men's lives. Medicalization, according to Conrad (2007), is a process by which nonmedical conditions are (re)defined as medical problems, usually as disorders or illnesses. For example, when psychologists frame men's emotional control and self-silencing through a prism of role strain, this can lead to the premise that all sorts of men are at risk of the (sub)clinical disorder alexithymia. Social epidemiological findings from the United States find consistent but small sex differences in alexithymia (Levant, Hall, Williams, & Hasan, 2009) and Finnish population studies (e.g., Kokkonen et al., 2001; Mattila, Salminen, Nummi, & Joukamaa, 2006) show us that some marginalized—low socioeconomic status (SES), older, less educated—men are more likely to exhibit what fits the clinical condition alexithymia.

A change of perspective can turn these findings into the *ordinariness* of self-silencing among particular men or men at particular times. As they adapt to their social worlds and hone their interpersonal skills, the low SES, older, less educated Finnish men's self silencing more likely represents the *respected* masculinities of their communities, and well-crafted adaptations to class inequality (Kauhanen, Kaplan, Julkunen, Wilson, & Salonen, 1993). Their demeanor is a situated social practice of a class and birth cohort. Context matters. Cuthbert (2015, p. 9) highlighted Ussher and Perz's (2010) study of men's self-silencing when

¹ An excursus: It is noteworthy how the 1980's construct *male role* was replaced by *masculinity ideology* and shortly afterward the plural *masculinity ideologies*.

caring for their partners with cancer. She noted that these men were cognizant of the gender norm about never expressing vulnerability; foremost, however, they consciously prioritized the needs and concerns of their partner. One man said, “I meter everything I say to C. She’s going through an even more personal experience than I am.”

Our concern was that as researchers glom onto any variant of theorizing about *the* “male role,” the contextual influences on men’s lives remain ignored, matters of inequality remain masked, and theory development is inhibited. Sorely needed is a broadening of perspectives to help determine how the relational character of masculinities and thus gender inequalities are influential as well as lived. How birth cohort, age, class, skin color, ethnicity, and one’s “home” community (re)produce similar and different masculinity ideologies is a difficult question, but a critically important one as our social worlds become more global and thus less “mainstream” in normative structure.

Measurement Matters

Ideologies and Measures

Wade (2015, p. 3) interpreted our original article as asserting that pre-1995 measures were designed to assess masculinity ideology, whereas after 1995 the new measures might assess masculinity ideology or masculinity beliefs. This interpretation was not our intent. All 16 developers of the pre- and post-1995 measures of masculinity ideologies aimed to operationally define one or more masculinity ideologies. For example, Brannon (1976) introduced a multidimensional mapping of seven “traditional” norms, and both Levant et al. (1992) and Mahalik et al. (2003) similarly designed their measures to map a range of normative expectations men likely face. Masculinity ideologies were being operationalized.

But, measurement instructions and response scales shifted the measures to map “masculinity beliefs,” along with social learning theory’s axiom that belief systems link individuals to their culture. When operationalizing the stoicism aspect of expectations to “do (traditional) masculinity,” an item from the Brannon Masculinity Scale asked “When a man is feeling a little pain he should try not to let it show very much.” Respondents could have been asked if this statement continues to be consistent with the expectations men live with as men, with their Likert scale anchored by *yes, absolutely* and *no, not at all*. This response format would have helped keep masculinity ideology as the target, even if individuals’ opinion was sought. However, Brannon and Juni (1984) and most other developers of masculinity ideology measures mapped individuals’ belief systems. The respondent was asked to report how much s/he agrees or disagrees with the statement. But what is endorsed? Is the response assessing a belief system about the *legitimacy* of the norm that a man should never show feelings? Is the respondent also being asked about her/his preferences in what makes a man masculine? Or, is (dis)agreement tapping a belief system about the *inescapability* of this norm in men’s lives? Can individuals agree with the idea that the norms detailed in a measure are present, even practiced in the community by men in general, without personally approving of the same norms, or having internalizing these cultural mandates? Whatever the “true” meaning of people’s responses, existing measures of masculinity ideologies typically

(a) assess personal beliefs about descriptive and injunctive norms, and (b) are not designed to be sensitive to contextual influences. In addition, Isacco (2015, p. 4) flagged how many of the existing measures were developed with college-age populations whose late adolescence developmental stage seems to avow different masculinity ideologies than common to adulthood.

Wade (2015, p. 9) too called attention to the absence of any measure that could chart contextual influences, and he mentioned a response format that would tap the extent to which a particular descriptive or injunctive norm applies, such as “none of the time” to “in all situations” or “depends on the situation” compared to “none of the time.” Isacco (2015, p. 10) similarly notes how existing scales can be modified to assess community standards rather than personal ones, and his insight is in sync with Wong, Horn, Gomory, and Ramos (2013) construction of their Measure of Men’s Perceived Inexpressiveness Norms, where the social norms of reference groups are investigated. Collectively, these strategies shift the target assessed to the existence and salience of particular masculinity ideologies.

Other than “Traditional”

The three commentators to our article recognize the dearth of measures that examine anything other than “traditional” masculinity ideologies, and the three also urged inclusion of qualitative research. First, we concur with the observations that “nontraditional” masculinity ideologies deserve attention and need to be defined; and, we too warn that disagreement with “traditional” ideologies is not the pathway to charting “nontraditional.” Second, we concur with Gergen, Josselson, and Freeman (2015) that it is time for the field of the psychology of men to fully support qualitative research and mixed-method approaches (cf. Cuthbert, 2015, p. 8; Isacco, 2015, pp. 8–9; Wong et al., 2011). The field will be enriched. Here is one example that Wade (2015, pp. 6–7) also highlighted. Janey et al. (2013) initially used qualitative work to identify the social norms scripting masculinities in Russia before a deductive scale construction strategy was adopted. Their mixed-method work serves an invaluable guide for developing new measures of masculinity ideologies. Third, returning to the earlier comment about the developmental stage of the participants recruited to develop existing measures, we argued in our article that most measures were not designed to assess adult men’s masculinities. Needed are new qualitative investigations of what the masculinity ideologies adult men live with and then contextually based quantitative measures can be constructed to determine adult (age 40–85) men’s masculinity ideologies with regard to their work and family based lives before and after becoming a grandfather, retiring, or widowerhood. Bennett’s (2007) grounded theory study of how older men negotiate the conflicting emotional experiences of widowerhood exemplifies theory-building on later life masculinities and understanding the ideologies this population of old men recognized as salient to their public and private lives.

Conclusion

We found it an honor to read the commentaries on our article and we genuinely appreciated the opportunity to respond to these scholars. Their work and ours will surely kindle more discussion, questioning and rethinking, new research and theorizing on the meaning and significance of masculinity ideologies.

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