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The Effects of the Suppression of Men's Emotion in Western Society

Despite popular belief, gender and sex are not the same thing. In *Assumptions Made About Gender Roles*, David Tresemer goes in depth about the key differences between gender and sex. He says that sex is the "... distinction between male and female based on physiological characteristics" and that gender "... refers to the psychological and cultural definitions of the dimensions "masculine" and "feminine"" (308-309). Here he is saying that sex is how you are categorized physically and gender is defined by cultural and social standards. Tresemer is also sure to define gender roles as "learned roles" (309), or how our environment forms our genders and therefore roles in society. In this case, the environment is society and people around us who decided our gender roles since we were born and first dressed in either pink or blue based on our sex.

In a study, by John Oliffe et al., it was found that men make up only about a third of the total amount of people that are formally diagnosed with depression, the rest being women (302). This startling statistic brings up the question: Why are fewer men diagnosed with depression than women? The gender gap can be accounted for by the high expectations put on men by society, the fear of judgment men have when they do decide to express emotion, and the drastic difference between the amount of clinical studies on men with depression versus women.

In western society, we have strict masculine gender roles in place that create high expectations for men, but more often than not with men who identify as heterosexual. Many of these expectations include the man always being the brave protector, the breadwinner of the family, and the stable or sane one in a relationship or any given situation. In comparison to men,

women are generally expected to be emotional, unstable, and therefore dependent on their male counterpart, leading to even more responsibility put on males. For most couples and families, these expectations are understood because they are seen as traditions that we should not stray away from. If a family were to not follow these traditions, then they would risk being ridiculed by their family and peers. In turn, these standards suppress men's expression of emotion because they are afraid to break away from the societal rules that tell them that showing emotion would be straying from tradition and therefore disobeying all that they have grown up knowing is the correct way to conduct themselves.

By not being able to express themselves, many men become aggressive, abusive, depressed, or even suicidal because they live in fear of not being seen as tough and manly. Some research has even shown that heterosexual men do not only fear being seen as lacking masculinity but are afraid of being seen as feminine. In a study done by Burriss et al., the fear of not being seen as feminine becomes transparent when they surveyed a group of college-aged men. They began by having the participants read a supraliminal message, saying either "real men care", "girly men care", or "the people are walking" (280). Then, the participants read a short story designed to evoke a strong emotional response and then rate how much emotion they felt on a scale of 1-7, with 1 being not at all and 7 being very much (280). Burriss et al. discovered that

"... when exposed to either a neutral subliminal prime or one that equated male caring with girlishness, high instrumentality men tended toward a lower self-reports of empathic concern relative to their instrumentality peers: This is consistent with the suggestion that empathic concern threatens masculine self-identity..." (283).

In other words, the men were afraid of being seen as feminine when they wanted to express concern for the characters in the story because they would not be seen as a strong, masculine figure. Over time, this fear that has been instilled in men can lead to them holding back from talking about how they truly feel which has been shown to escalate to depression and suicidal thoughts. Not only can these strict masculinity expectations be harmful to men, but it can also be potentially dangerous to their relationships with others, especially women.

One of the most detrimental effects of the suppression of men's emotions is the pain men feel and aggression they project from it. In fact, many of the psychological research studies that do focus on men with depression or suicidal thoughts result in how suppressing a man's emotions can eventually lead to pent up anger. Psychologists Berke et al., in a study done in 2017, asked men to complete a word completion task where the anxiety and anger of the men could be measured based on how they completed different incomplete words. An example of this is whether or not the person completed the word KI __ with SS or with LL to create the words KISS or KILL (64). Obviously, the latter of the two options shows someone who has more aggressive and anxious thoughts. Along with this simple test, the psychologists did a complete assessment of just how much gender discrepancy there was by asking a series of phony questions concerning masculinity to groups of both men and women (64). Using information gathered from these test questions, Berke et al. said, "... we found that gender-threatened men endured significantly more pain than their non threatened counterparts" (67). Meaning, men who feel like their masculinity is threatened tend to suck it up and deal with the pain rather than speak up about how they feel to get help or resolve an issue. Another study targeting the effects of the suppression of men's emotions, by Geisler et al., which came to a similar conclusion. Geisler et

al. write, “Expressive suppression was positively associated with conflict resolution” (557). In other words, when a couple is arguing over something, the man would rather give up by lying about how he really feels, thereby suppressing himself. Men would rather lie to themselves and others in order to resolve conflict faster. Although this method may work most of the time, the long term effects of not telling their significant other how they really feel can be damaging to men’s health and to their relationships. As previously stated, by men continuously holding back how they really feel from fear of embarrassment or rejection, men are more likely to lash out with built up aggression. The victims of this out lash often times are their significant others or other loved ones in their lives.

However well done the previous studies were conducted, another psychologist disagrees with their theses, and mine, along with the overall aim of the studies and surveys. Addis, a psychologist at Clark University, believes that the way most studies concerning male depression have one major flaw. Addis writes, “... clinical literature often suggests that men are more likely to experience anger or somatic symptoms and less likely to experience sadness” (155). In comparison to studies done on depression, without particularly focusing on depression found in men, researchers tend to define depression as a long term feeling of sadness whereas studies about male depression focus on aggression and conflict. Addis also brings up that many published studies and other related articles about women with depression largely outnumber the amount written about men with depression by a more than three to one ratio (153). To paraphrase, he adds that with this imbalance of research there can not be a thorough understanding of how both sexes are impacted by depression because there is not enough research on male depression to even compare to female depression (153). Addis is completely

valid with this part of his argument, but I have to disagree with men's depression not becoming even slightly aggressive.

If anyone is suppressed for too long, they will eventually lash out because of all of the tension building up inside. The people whose emotions are suppressed the most in western society, though, just so happen to predominantly be the male population. In Jennings and Murphy's Psychology article, *Male-Male Dimensions of Male-Female Battering: A New Look at Domestic Violence*, they bring up the fact that the pecking order in young males is generally established based on violence. "The weaker male is expected to back down when challenged, and the stronger male allows the weaker male to escape..." (27). Then as male children continue on with their lives, an attack at their social esteem will trigger them to become destructive by using violence once again, just like how they had learned to react (27). By abiding by these learned social norms, heterosexual men in western society today are well known for becoming aggressive with each other. The relationships men form with each other translate to their relationships with women, leading to possible cases of domestic abuse. Although most of us know that domestic abuse is wrong, the man in an abusive relationship most likely feels like it is his duty as a male to protect his masculinity by lashing out because it is what he learned was his role in society.

It is not only family and significant others that have taught men to suppress their emotions, but also their peers. Surprisingly, stigmas concerning the expression of men's emotions are very common amongst men themselves. I say this because of a study called *Stigma in Male Depression and Suicide: A Canadian Sex Comparison Study* by John Oliffe et al. who surveyed a variety of men and women on their college campus via an online assessment asking

participants if they strongly agree, agree, neither, disagree, or strongly disagree with the statements shown to them (304). Some of these statements included: “Men with depression are dangerous” and “Men with depression could snap out of it if they wanted to” (305). The large majority of the men and women surveyed agreed with these statements, but one statement was not as well endorsed as the others. The one with the least amount of agreement from men than women was “I would not vote for a male politician if I knew he had been depressed,” (305). For some unknown reason, the majority of the male participants did not agree with this statement when the majority did agree with the rest of the stigmatizing statements, hopefully showing that there is some social change. Another reason I agree with Oliffe’s argument is because of a study done by Sharon Bird titled *Welcome to the Men’s Club: Homosociality and the Maintenance of Hegemonic Masculinity*. In the study, Sharon Bird interviewed well educated men of different ages from a college campus about how they interact with other men in their social groups to gain insight as to what stigmas they might have towards each other based on expression of emotions. Bird writes “The men interviewed indicated that emotions and behaviors typically associated with women were inappropriate within the male homosocial group” (125). She later adds that “What these men explained was that within the male homosocial group, emotional detachment is viewed not only as desirable but as imperative” (125). Surprisingly, Bird found that men stigmatized each other in social situations even when the opposite sex, women, were not around to possibly judge them. Although Oliffe et al. found a glimmer of hope in that a small percentage of men may not be stigmatized by other men with depression, I still believe that men themselves are also a part of the growing problem with western society’s masculinity norms which Bird supported with her interviews about the homosocial groups.

An example of men in my personal life creating roots for stigmas in the younger generations can be traced back to my childhood. Growing up, I would often go to my grandparents' house for family gatherings on the holidays, like Easter, Christmas Eve, and Independence Day. With all of my aunts and uncles came my cousins who would sometimes get pretty rambunctious. I can recall numerous occasions when my grandfather, sometimes even my own dad, would pick up one of my younger cousins who had fallen and scraped his knee. With my cousin crying, my grandpa would say something along the lines of "Quit your whining" or "Boys don't cry". Although my grandpa meant well, these seemingly harmless phrases planted a tiny seed into my cousins' heads that men are supposed to be tough. Even worse, "Boys don't cry" can easily be reformatted through a simple process of elimination to say "Girls do cry". Therefore, in a way, they are telling the boys that acting more feminine is wrong because they are supposed to act masculine. As I watched my cousins grow up, I saw them enter into puberty and struggle to manage the raging hormones that caused a lot of emotional distress within them. Due to my family's western culture of having high masculinity standards, my cousins suppressed their emotions as much as they could when they went through puberty and it showed in their actions. One of my cousins in particular, who I will not name for privacy reasons, began to physically punch, kick, and scream at his older sister. He was so aggressive because he was never given the proper tools to express how he felt so he expressed them the only way he knew how.

Thankfully, the gender gap of the number of men versus women seeking help for their depression is shrinking over time, according to Addis (154). If we as a society do not start to work together to create social change, though, more men will continue to struggle with their

depression alone. It starts with us being more understanding of how other people feel and not allowing fear of ridicule create road blocks between us and our loved ones.

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