



Men's mental health in the context of hegemonic norms of masculinity: A developmental and interdisciplinary literature review¹

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Abstract: This article is a review and provides an interdisciplinary analysis of the relationship between socio-cultural constructions of masculinity and men's mental health based on the current state of research. The aim of the study is to identify the mechanisms through which hegemonic patterns of masculinity influence the emotional functioning of individuals, as well as to indicate the possibilities for transforming these patterns through educational and self-educational activities. The authors analyze masculinity norms as social constructs that reinforce patterns of behavior promoting independence, strength, emotional restraint, and detachment from one's own mental health struggles. From a pedagogical perspective, attention is drawn to the need to redefine dominant models of masculinity towards patterns that support the development of reflectiveness, empathy, and readiness to take pro-health actions, including seeking psychological help. In order to formulate conclusions, a systematic review of the scientific literature available in key databases was conducted: PubMed, PsycINFO, Embase, Web of Science and Google Scholar. The search was based on logical combinations of keywords related to masculinity, mental health, cultural gender, upbringing, and emotional expression. The analysis of the collected material confirms the existence of a strong link between the internalization of traditional models of masculinity and a limited ability to recognize and express emotions, a reluctance to seek professional support, and the reinforcement of beliefs that hinder adaptive mental functioning. There is a growing need to create educational and upbringing environments that will foster the development of masculinity as an open, flexible construct integrated with the well-being of the individual. The article presents a proposal for emotional life pedagogy as an area of influence that supports men's mental health and enhances their relational and psychosocial capital. The conclusions drawn from the analysis can form the basis for the design of educational programs and social strategies aimed at supporting men in the process of identity building in accordance with the values of a contemporary, multidimensional model of health.

Keywords: emotionality, gender norms, men, mental health, pedagogy.

Introduction

Men's mental health is increasingly becoming the subject of research and analyses of growing significance, due to the specific emotional conditioning of this group. Psychological research data indicate that men more frequently than women conceal the difficulties they experience and are slower to undertake self-seeing actions, which is associated both with the internalisation of norms concerning "masculine" resilience and with fear of judgement from their surroundings (Frąckowiak-Sochańska, 2016). These difficulties may manifest in risky, impulsive

or self-destructive behaviours that often develop in conditions of silence, shame and a sense of helplessness (Kucharska, 2023).

From a psychological perspective, emphasis is also placed on the role of emotion regulation mechanisms, which in many men develop under conditions of limited opportunity to express fear, sadness and despair – a situation that promotes the use of avoidant strategies or the suppression of experienced states (Stradomska, Kielan, Walewska-Zielecka, 2020). There is also empirical evidence that men may be at greater risk of death by suicide because they are socialised

¹ Article in Polish language: https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/65pl_dwor.pdf

to adhere to certain masculine norms. These norms promote engagement in painful and provocative life events, resulting in a greater “acquired capability” for suicide (Granato, Smith, Selwyn, 2015). Furthermore, excessive pressure on men to conform to traditional masculinity patterns increases the risk of suicidal behaviours (Pirkis, Spittal, Keogh, Mousaferiadis, Currier, 2017; Struszczyk, Galdas, Tiffin, 2017).

From a pedagogical perspective, emphasis is placed on the influence of the upbringing and school environment, in which boys often function under high expectations of self-reliance, control and resilience in the face of adversity. This limits the development of emotional competencies and reinforces the belief that revealing weakness is something undesirable (Modzelewska, 2024). The emotional functioning of adult men is also influenced by family experiences and intergenerational messages that may determine patterns of responding to stress and interpreting one's own experiences (Ochońska, 2025).

Social norms that define appropriate masculine roles and behaviours are assimilated from the earliest years. The pressure to conform to masculine ideals can be enormous, and boys and men who deviate from normative masculine roles and behaviours are often socially punished. Being limited to a set of behaviours deemed appropriately masculinity-affirming can seriously restrict healthy behaviours and emotional responses that could buffer young men during the often stressful period of adolescence (King, Shields, Sojo, Daraganova, Currier, O'Neil, King, Milner, 2020).

In the context of contemporary health and educational challenges, there arises a need for a broader perspective on masculinity as a cultural construct subject to transformation. This approach requires an interdisciplinary perspective combining psychology, sociology, pedagogy and the philosophy of education. From a pedagogical perspective, it becomes important to promote models of masculinity based on a balance between strength and sensitivity, reason and emotionality, action and reflection. Only such an approach enables the creation of environments supporting the development of men's full potential and the reduction of risk arising from normative, rigid gender roles.

The aim of this article is a comprehensive analysis and synthesis of current knowledge on the relationship between socio-cultural constructions of masculinity and men's mental health, taking into account the risk of psychopathology and barriers to seeking support. The discussion also focuses on identifying pedagogical strategies of upbringing and self-education that may support the formation of masculinity norms conducive to emotional openness and psychological well-being. In this connection, the following research question was formulated: What is the relationship between socio-cultural constructions of masculinity and men's mental health, and what pedagogical strategies can support positive changes in this area?

In order to answer this question, a review of English-language literature available in five key databases was conducted: PubMed, PsycINFO, Embase, Web of Science and Google Scholar, using combinations of keywords: men, suicide, risk, masculinity norms. The article takes the form of a narrative review with elements of a systematic approach; clear inclusion criteria were applied, although no formal quality assessment of the studies was conducted.

The article is based on an interdisciplinary approach combining the perspectives of psychology (research on men's mental health and emotionality), pedagogy (strategic educational and upbringing interventions), sociology (analysis of social and gender norms) and the philosophy of education (reflection on identity, development and self-education of the individual). Such a framework enables a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon and the identification of solutions at both individual and systemic levels.

1. Masculinity as a relational and culturally variable construct

Culture permeates human behaviour, including the meanings and interpretations shared by individuals and social groups. The identity of every person is nourished by and rooted in the world of culture (Kwiatkowska, 2024). Which emotions are considered socially acceptable for men? What constitutes a man's social value? The answers to

these questions are encoded in cultural norms, systems of meaning, and potentially play a key role in intensifying the psychological pain experienced by individuals, depending on whether or not they meet these standards (Iacoviello, Valsecchi, Berent, Borinca, Falomir-Pichastor, 2022).

Traits and behaviours considered masculine and/or feminine are actively constructed by their social and historical context and thus change across culture and time. Contemporary Western culture typically defines masculinity and femininity as orthogonal constructs, with masculinity encompassing traits such as strength, independence, ambition, authoritative leadership and rationality, while femininity is associated with traits such as care, sensitivity, dependence and emotions (Neilson, Singh, Harper, Teng, 2020). However, dominant norms and expectations regarding the psychosocial functioning of men also exist in other cultural contexts, e.g. camps for displaced persons in Uganda (Kizza, Knizek, Kinyanda, Hjelmeland, 2012), rural farming communities in Australia (Kunde, Kólves, Kelly, Reddy, de Leo, 2018), and inner cities in Brazil (Meneghel, Duran Gutierrez, da Silva, Grubits, Hesler, Ceccon, 2012).

Although masculinity norms take diverse forms in various cultural and social contexts, traditional ones are usually described as hegemonic because they contribute to maintaining the advantageous position of men in the gender hierarchy (Messerschmidt, 2019). Hegemony refers to male cultural power in society, perpetuating gender inequality by encompassing both the domination of men over women and over other (often minority) groups of men. Masculinity norms are contextualised (changing across time and space) and relational (hierarchically positioned and referenced against femininity and non-hegemonic masculinities). Although conceptualisations of masculinity have moved away from the notion of a “single” masculinity toward the recognition of “multiple” masculinities, among these many masculinities there exists an idealised, hegemonic masculinity that represents the universally recognised standard (Jewkes, Morrell, Hearn, Lundqvist, Blackbeard, Lindegger, Quayle, Sikweyiya, Gottzén, 2015).

As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) indicate, hegemonic masculinity describes the dominant and “currently most honoured way of being a man” (Connell, Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832).

Endorsement of socialised masculinity norms and traditional ideologies about what contemporary men should be like – so-called traditional masculinity ideologies – can be understood as socially and culturally defined ideas about what a hegemonic man should be and how he should behave. There is empirical evidence that the internalisation of traditional masculine norms varies with age, and that conformity to masculinity is most strongly endorsed by young men (King et al., 2020).

A systematic review of studies on gender attitudes from 29 countries (primarily Western) found that physical strength, endurance, competitiveness and heterosexual performance are of key importance for teenage masculinity norms (Kågesten, Gibbs, Blum, Moreau, Chandra-Mouli, Herbert, Amin, 2016). In turn, Australian research demonstrates that young men are becoming more progressive with respect to certain elements of masculinity. They declare less support for norms concerning violence, greater openness to participation in traditionally feminine activities such as housework or cooking, and greater openness to having non-heteronormative friends. At the same time, certain masculine norms remain entrenched – many young men retain the ideals of “acting strong,” being “the primary breadwinner” and “fighting back when pushed around” (The Men’s Project & Flood, 2018). In the Polish context, attention is drawn to the fact that the process of these changes does not lead to the disappearance of traditional patterns but rather to their reformulation. Urszula Kluczyńska (2017) describes the phenomenon of hybrid masculinity, combining elements of sensitivity with traditional patterns of strength, which in effect produces a new form of male dominance and reproduces existing power structures.

Despite the increasing diversity of masculinity patterns, hegemonic norms continue to play a dominant role in the socialisation process, which generates the need to analyse their impact on the psychosocial functioning of the individual and men’s mental health.

2. Men's mental health in the context of masculinity norms

Research on boys' maturation indicates that mental health constitutes one of the most serious developmental challenges, with as many as 47% of teenagers reporting difficulties in this area – difficulties that often remain beyond the possibility of open disclosure due to social expectations concerning “masculine” emotional restraint. From a developmental perspective, boys thus function in a space of tension between genuinely experienced difficulties and norms mandating control, self-reliance and resilience (*Dojrzewanie polskich chłopców* [Maturation of Polish Boys], 2023).

In the process of upbringing, boys are socialised into traditional masculinity ideologies through disapproval from parents, peers or teachers, or through social sanctions. In this way they adopt and internalise (at least partially) traditional masculinity norms. However, strict adherence to these norms entails negative consequences and limits the ability to live to one's full potential. Some men may fear negative social reactions or negative judgements when they do not behave in accordance with traditional masculinity norms. As a consequence, they may experience gender role conflict (Eggenberger, Komlenac, Ehlert, Grub, Walther, 2022).

Since hegemonic masculinity norms often portray men as tough, aggressive, independent and emotionally inexpressive, having mental health problems, expressing emotions, sensitivity or worries, or needing help from others may be a situation in which some men experience gender role conflict (O'Neil, 2013).

Data from the World Health Organisation report (2018) on men's health demonstrate the influence of gender norms on mental health and the necessity of developing new strategies aimed at meeting the needs of their well-being. The American Psychological Association Boys and Men Guidelines Group report (2018) indicates that men who tend to conform to hegemonic patterns are at greater risk than women of being victims of violent crimes, imprisonment or death in road accidents. As Anna M. Kłonkowska (2024) observes, research on masculinity shows that aspiration to traditional

masculinity patterns is associated with numerous risky and anti-health behaviours, such as substance abuse, reckless behaviour, avoidance of medical help, denial of bodily weakness or treating the act of asking for support as a sign of weakness. These behaviours, although harmful, are often a form of demonstrating belonging to hegemonic masculinity or an attempt to achieve it.

Anisur Rahman Khan, Kopano Ratele and Najuwa Arendse (2020), based on their research, demonstrate that men who value more traditional masculine norms are more frequently engaged in health-damaging behaviours and less likely to undertake health-promoting behaviours. These men also exhibit tendencies to conceal weakness, ignore self-care and reluctantly seek medical and professional help. These practices can adversely affect various aspects of physical and mental health, increasing the risk of illness, injury and death. Socially learned norms of traditional masculinity limit men's ability to seek support or disclose feelings. During crises, men also exhibit weaker protective capacities than women, based on social networks, family bonds and a sense of meaning in life. They are, however, more inclined to externalise their social and individual turmoil. Conducted meta-analyses also indicate that certain masculine norms are associated with poorer mental health outcomes (Wong, Ho, Wang, Miller, 2017).

Due to patriarchal, traditional masculine norms that discourage some men from showing weakness, cisgender men often feel constrained in revealing their emotional and physical ailments to others. They may be reluctant to seek support for fear of social stigmatisation, ill treatment or being perceived as weak or disturbed. Moreover, the pursuit of certain masculine norms, such as self-reliance, is associated with poorer mental health in adults (Cleary, 2019).

As Lynch, Long and Moorhead (2018) indicate, in general terms self-reliance appears to be a positive trait, as it promotes independence. However, the potentially positive effects of self-reliance may be limited if they inhibit communication and help-seeking during anxiety or mental health crises. It is evident that the stigmatisation of mental health constitutes a barrier to seeking support; however, additionally,

for young men this may be more acutely felt, as poor mental health and help-seeking may be at odds with their internalised masculine norms.

Men are typically socialised in ways that discourage them from admitting to feelings or showing sensitivity (Seidler, Dawes, Rice, Oliffe, Dhillon, 2016). For this reason, they may suppress emotions for fear of being perceived, or perceiving themselves, as weak or unmanly (Rice, Oliffe, Kealy, Seidler, Ogrodniczuk, 2020). Norms of emotional suppression undermine men's ability to understand, process and manage their own emotions and psychological suffering (Akotia, Knizek, Hjelmeland, Kinyanda, Osafo, 2019).

Empirical evidence indicates that men are less likely than women to use formal mental health services (Frąckowiak-Sochańska, 2017). This difference may result from higher levels of stigmatisation of men regarding mental illness and help-seeking (Mackenzie, Visperas, Ogrodniczuk, Oliffe, Nurmi, 2019) and/or a lack of services aligned with men's preferences (Liddon, Kingerlee, Barry, 2018). Research findings from German-speaking samples suggest negative associations between endorsement of traditional masculinity norms and help-seeking. War veterans, when asked why they did not seek help for psychological issues, cited an aspect closely related to masculinity norms: "individual coping" (Siegel, Dors, Brants, Schuy, Rau, 2018). Furthermore, men with strong gender role conflict were less likely to raise the topic of sexual health in conversations with a specialist (Komlenac, Siller, Bliem, Hochleitner, 2019). Finally, men who strongly identified with traits traditionally perceived as masculine proved less inclined to utilise psychotherapy (Eggenberger, Fordschmid, Ludwig, Weber, Grub, Komlenac, Walther, 2021).

An important issue concerning mental health remains the problem of depression. According to the concept of male depression, men more frequently experience externalised symptoms such as aggression and substance abuse, while women more frequently experience internalised symptoms (Price, Gregg, Smith, Fiske, 2018). It has been found that the presence of externalised symptoms reduces men's ability to seek help and leads to less favourable treatment of depression compared to men who exhibit inter-

nalised symptoms. A number of qualitative studies concerning men's views on mental health provide evidence indicating that they perceive depression as inconsistent with expectations concerning the male gender role (Krumm, Checchia, Koesters, Kilian, Becker, 2017). They associate it with feminine attributes such as weakness or do not take it seriously as a disease (Rondet, Parizot, Cadwallader, Lebas, Chauvin, 2015).

In this context, the persistent difference in suicide statistics is particularly alarming – the number of suicides committed by men exceeds the number committed by women in virtually every country in the world (Naghavi, 2019). Women more frequently attempt suicide, while men more frequently use "lethal" methods such as firearms or hanging. Suicidologists link this tendency with the cultural pressure for effectiveness and the identification of non-fatal self-harm with failure. Additionally, lower rates of utilisation of psychological and psychiatric services among men may contribute to higher global rates of death by suicide (WHO, 2020).

The complexity of the suicidal phenomenon encompasses both epigenetic and structural factors (Pirkis et al., 2017; Turecki, Brent, Gunnell, O'Connor, Oquendo, Pirkis, Stanley, 2019); however, the literature emphasises a strong association between male suicides and psychosocial factors such as unemployment, occupational and relational crises, depression and substance abuse (Yang, Lau, Wang, Lau, 2019). In a systematic review conducted by Bennett and colleagues (2023), as many as 68 risk factors for male suicide were identified – including addiction, single status and a diagnosis of depression (Richardson, Robb, O'Connor, 2021). Critical analyses of masculinity indicate that pressure to meet unattainable masculinity ideals and the suppression of emotions may be key predictors of suicidal behaviour (Andoh-Arthur, Knizek, Osafo, Hjelmeland, 2018; Cleary, 2019; Granato et al., 2015).

Based on the literature review, it can be stated that hegemonic masculinity norms exert a significant, multidimensional impact on men's mental health, limiting their ability to express emotions, seek support and adaptively cope in crisis situations. This phenomenon points to the necessity of incorpo-

rating a pedagogical perspective, encompassing the processes of upbringing and self-education, in order to promote alternative, more inclusive masculinity patterns conducive to psychological well-being.

3. The role of upbringing and self-education in taming emotionality and redefining masculinity

Contemporary masculinity patterns are sometimes perceived as restricting emotional expression, which can be interpreted as the effect of a culturally entrenched model of emotional restraint and self-sufficiency. From early childhood, men learn that emotional expression threatens their position and belonging to the group, and that showing sensitivity exposes them to exclusion and loss of respect. This suppression constitutes a form of psychological violence towards themselves, which men learn as an element of growing up. Paradoxically, the cultural imperative of insensitivity means that men often experience emotions intensely but ineptly – which results in frustration, isolation and an increase in self-destructive behaviours, including suicidal ones (Reeser & Gottzén, 2018).

There is a growing need to redefine masculinity norms – ones that promote self-awareness, empathy and openness to help. This transformation is supported by both upbringing and self-education, which enable a departure from oppressive gender patterns and the development of healthy emotional mechanisms. The family – as the primary socialisation environment – plays a key role in transmitting norms concerning emotionality and gender. Boys learn through observation what is “masculine” and what is “non-masculine,” and often internalise stereotypes reinforced by media, peers and institutions (King et al., 2020).

In households where emotions are a taboo subject and gender roles are rigidly divided, the risk of psychological withdrawal and loneliness increases. Conversely, in families where there is balance and conversations about emotions are the norm, alternative masculinity patterns develop – ones open to closeness

and relationships (Waling, 2018). Self-education gives men the opportunity to question harmful patterns and shape their own integrated identity.

Developing emotional intelligence, empathy, relational competencies and the skill of asking for help can have a preventive effect against suicidal risk (Gwyther, Swann, Casey, Purcell, Rice, 2019). Social programmes and campaigns are also needed that not only educate but also reduce the shame and stigmatisation associated with male emotionality. However, they should avoid simplified narratives that reinforce stereotypes, for example by linking help-seeking with a new “heroism” (Chandler, 2019). Otherwise, even good intentions may unconsciously perpetuate the belief that a man must first suffer in silence in order to earn the right to support (Seidler et al., 2016).

Upbringing and self-education should be recognised as key processes for shaping alternative forms of masculinity, free from oppressive scripts, yet deeply rooted in personal responsibility for one's own development. Emotional education, conducted both in the family and in the public sphere, can become a tool for men's emancipation from cultural roles that limit their ability to experience, name and regulate emotions. When a man receives permission – both social and internal – to experience weakness, fear, dependence or despair, a space opens for building healthy, authenticity-based relationships with oneself and with others. In this way, the redefinition of masculinity ceases to be merely a theoretical postulate and becomes a life practice, embodied in everyday gestures, language, attitudes and educational decisions that shape future generations of men.

In the context of the presented analyses, it is also worth indicating specific pedagogical strategies that may promote the redefinition of masculinity norms and support men's mental health. These include, among others, emotional education programmes (e.g. based on the SEL model – Social and Emotional Learning), equality education initiatives, and the introduction of content concerning diverse masculinity patterns into curricula and educational programmes. It also becomes essential to prepare teachers for working with boys in a manner that

takes their emotionality into account without reinforcing gender stereotypes. The pedagogy of emotional life as an educational project can, in this context, serve as a form of cultural correction, supporting the process of taming emotions and health-promoting behaviours.

Summary and conclusions

The conducted analysis points to a clear relationship between socio-cultural masculinity norms and men's mental condition, with particular emphasis on the risk of suicidal behaviours. Traditional patterns of hegemonic masculinity, based on strength, self-sufficiency, emotional restraint and achievement pressure, constitute a significant risk factor for men's mental health. Their internalisation results in the stigmatisation of behaviours associated with seeking psychological support, which may lead to emotional exclusion, a sense of isolation and the intensification of self-destructive tendencies.

In response to these challenges, the article emphasised the importance of upbringing and self-education actions aimed at developing emotional competencies, interpersonal openness and the conscious reformulation of harmful gender patterns. The implementation of educational strategies based on promoting alternative masculinity models – taking into account the balance between strength and sensitivity, rationality and emotionality – may constitute an effective element in the prevention of mental health problems and suicidal behaviours among men.

In the context of rising suicide rates, the need for a thorough revision of the dominant narratives concerning masculinity and the development of prevention programmes that take into account the social and cultural conditions accompanying male socialisation appears well-founded. This process requires an interdisciplinary approach integrating psychological, pedagogical, sociological and health perspectives. It is essential to continue research into

how different socio-cultural contexts shape masculinity patterns and influence the ways in which men cope with emotions and crises.

It is also advisable to develop specialised forms of psychological and social support that are sensitive to the influence of gender norms. Creating safe spaces conducive to emotional expression, relationship-building and lowering the threshold for reaching out for help should constitute one of the main directions of intervention. Education in the area of mental health and masculinity, conducted both at the level of educational institutions and in the public sphere, should encourage critical reflection on traditional norms and support the development of positive and flexible gender identities.

The transformation of masculinity norms towards more inclusive ones that support mental health requires pedagogical actions aimed at developing emotional, communicative and relational competencies. The most important educational strategies include: emotional education implemented at all stages of education; the inclusion of the themes of masculinity and mental health in educational content on socio-emotional development; workshops developing interpersonal skills; and mentoring programmes for boys and young men presenting diverse masculinity models. Educational environments play a particularly important role – the family, school, peer groups and the local community – which, by strengthening reflectiveness, empathy and acceptance of emotionality, create space for self-education. It is precisely these environments that can initiate processes of self-reflection on gender identity, serving as a buffer against the pressure of social and cultural stereotypes.

Effective suicide prevention requires the cooperation of many sectors, including the education system, healthcare, social policy and non-governmental organisations. Only integrated, multidimensional strategies can meaningfully contribute to reducing risky behaviours and promoting men's mental health in the conditions of contemporary socio-cultural transformations.

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