

Will Boys Be Boys: An Exploration of Social Support, Affection, and Masculinities within Non-Romantic Male Relationships

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Abstract

The current study examines males and the intricacies of social support and affection within their male-centered social networks. The results from data collected from focus groups of 71 self-identified college males identified three emergent themes: the acknowledgement of masculinities as fluid, the importance of time and trust among male centered networks, and the influence and impact of fathers and father figures' affection and communicative engagement. These themes suggest that the fluidity of perceived masculinities, according to the self-identified men in this study, demonstrate a shift in how men view themselves, view one another, and engage in intimate, affectionate non-romantic relationships. In addition, these findings further support Inclusive Masculinity Theory (Anderson, 2005) and extends its application outside of previous research situated in fraternity and athletic settings.

Keywords: Affection, inclusive masculinity theory, male relationships, social support

There was a point in history when it was assumed that men were from Mars and women were from Venus, suggesting that both genders were distinctly different and exist as binary constructs. However, research has embraced a rich spectrum of gender and a plurality of gender identities, including a range of masculinities and femininities (Butler, 1990). Considering that many individuals perform or are “doing gender,” (West & Zimmerman, 1987) how individuals engage in affection and social support may vary considering their gender identities and communicative interactions among their social networks. Considering this, the current study specifically explores the influence of masculinities, social support, and affection among self-identified men within their same-sex, non-romantic relationships.

Defining and Conceptualizing Masculinities

Seminal scholarship on men, masculinities, and gender dates back over 40 years (e.g., Kessler & McKenna, 1978; Tolson, 1977). However, the reframing of masculinities with

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relation to performance and practice, as well as its association with power dynamics among women and men of varying demographics, was not prominent until the mid 1980s (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985). Since that time, the concept of masculinities has undergone a variety of definitions and terms; however, the current study recognizes masculinities as one's ownership of varying gender performances and is based on the socio-historical context and information transmitted within a given interaction (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Drawing from scholarship, this definition allows for qualities that are inclusive, and demonstrates how masculinities vary regarding culture, demographics, and positionality. For example, heterosexual Anglo-European masculine identity may embrace individualist, competitive, or hegemonic practices (Grazian, 2007; Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016; Pascoe, 2007). However, gender-queer masculinities may embrace collectivistic and non-dominant practices or reject all of the above.

Defining masculinities may seem complex and therefore rendered complicated. However, this research argues that because masculinities are socially constructed and malleable (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Grazian, 2007; Iwamoto, Cheng, Lee, Takamatsu, & Gordon, 2011; Mahalik et al., 2003; Sumerau, 2012), the complex and intricate spectrum of masculinities is "performing" exactly as it should. Essentially, masculine identity is created on the body, by the body, and for other bodies to encounter and engage with, meaning it may be defined differently by different individuals considering their complex and intricate interactions.

Social Support and Affection in Non-Romantic Relationships

Social support, the degree to which a person is integrated in an encouraging social network, and affection, are communicative behaviors that contribute to the quality of human relationships (Floyd, 2002; Floyd & Morman, 2000; Floyd & Morman, 2009). Both are considered a basic component of personal relationships and an important aspect of fulfillment within intimate networks (Burlison, Holmstrom, & Gilstrap, 2005). Likewise, both are proposed as a resource that may reduce the harmful consequences of stress, mental fatigue, and other life challenges.

Social Support and Affection: Similarities Among Men and Women

Past research has emphasized that gendered behavior for many men is the idea of addressing emotions in private but never in public, and this intentional choice may leave men lacking in connectedness within their social networks (Bennett, 2007). However, research has also acknowledged that men's relationships with one another are not inherently less intimate or affectionate than those of women; in addition, men communicate affection and demonstrate support for one another differently, usually through sharing activities and physical support (e.g., loaning money or helping with a moving project; Floyd, 1996; Morman & Floyd, 1998; Swain, 1989). Scholars agree that both men and women value and seek close relationships and they

want those connections to be meaningful and satisfying (Jones, 1991; Reisman, 1990; Wood & Inman, 1993). Moreover, self-disclosure and intimacy has been demonstrated among male social networks, including men of various sexual identities (Lee, 2010). Collectively, social support and intimacy exists among men of varying masculinities and sexual orientations and men have similar expectations as other gendered individuals regarding intimacy, affection, and social support.

To illustrate this, Burleson (2003) investigated how social support operates within interpersonal relationships, specifically assessing how culture and gender affect individuals' engagement in emotional support processes. Burleson's work demonstrated that gender did not have bearing on individuals' expectations of their relationships; rather, both males and females have similar classifications of intimacy and closeness within their interpersonal relationships. In addition, Burleson assessed message perceptions through the lens of person-centeredness to examine if men and women viewed the same messages as effective (or ineffective) in reducing emotional distress. Results demonstrated that both genders value expressive and intimate communicative interaction, thus highlighting the expectation for social support across both gendered groups.

Influences on Men's Perception and Enactment of Social Support and Affection

Many of the stigmas affecting males expressing emotions, such as withholding feelings or expressing only aggressive behaviors, may stem from U.S. popular culture as the narrative may be more in line with stereotypical ideas of media dominated masculine behavior (Click, Holladay, Lee, & Kristiansen, 2015). However, gender research suggests men have a baseline expectation of receiving social support within their social network, especially outside of romantic relationships (Burleson, 2003; Burleson, et al., 2005) from close male friends (Feng & Xie, 2016).

Morman and Floyd (1998) expanded the body of knowledge concerning male non-romantic relationships by identifying variables that moderate the intimacy and affection males show one another. This work demonstrated three factors that moderate the influence of male—male non-romantic relationships, including relationship type (e.g., siblings), the emotional intensity during a specific circumstance (e.g., funerals), and private versus public displays of affection. Within this research men are more accepting of intimacy and affection in emotionally charged situations, but also engage in affection among their male networks in a variety of other contexts depending on circumstances.

Reddin and Sonn (2003) demonstrated evidence that men seek out and engage in intimacy and social support among their male peers within support groups. Their findings highlight males' openness to affectionate behaviors (e.g., hugging), self-disclosure, and fostering emotional safety where identities are examined and reconstructed. Men within this study looked to support groups to foster community and similar to past research, demonstrated an expectation of support and communicative engagement from their male peers.

Research on social support and affection have concentrated on positive outcomes which are substantial; however, missing from our understanding are specific factors and expectations from men regarding engagement in social support and the pursuit of communicating affection among men within their male social networks. Focused attention on the expectations among men that allows them to engage in social support and affection within male social networks may address questions that aid in the understanding of behaviors that are problematic and have been simply attributed to "boys being boys." To this end, an exploratory examination was conducted to further understand self-identified males' communication practices within their male-centered networks. Considering the implications of hegemonic and toxic masculinities that are impacting society (i.e., mass shootings and sexual harassment), a humanistic approach to exploring how males view their masculine identity and engagement in social support and affection within their network is timely and critical.

Inclusive Masculinity Theory

To frame this analysis, the current research utilizes Anderson's inclusive masculinity theory (IMT; Anderson, 2009). IMT states that in an emerging culture of gender fluidity, sexual expression, and a spectrum of identities, it is becoming more permissible for men to express social freedoms that were once (and arguably still can be) highly stigmatized. In other words, some men may express non-stereotypical masculine ideas and practices, which were once ridiculed, within their same-sex social networks without penalty to their social status or social capital. In Anderson's (2005) initial research on white, middle-class, former high-school football players, he first used the term inclusive masculinity to theoretically describe the social process addressing the emergence of an archetype of masculinity that weakens the principles of hegemonic masculine values. Presenting an expanding examination of the previous theory, hegemonic masculinity, (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) Anderson argues that IMT allows men to publicly express emotions, affection, social support, and intimacy among their same sex friends without the perception of an intimate relationship. Moreover, Anderson (2005) states

Hegemonic masculinity theory is incapable of capturing multiple masculinities of equal cultural value, simply because it is predicated upon one dominating (hegemonic) archetype, which is replaced by yet another hegemonic archetype. Hegemonic masculinity theory does not account for the varying masculinities that are found to flourish, without stratification... (Anderson, 2005, p. 340)

This study is not aiming to take a position on the longstanding argument of the direction of masculinity scholarship (see O'Neill, 2015). However, the inclusiveness of IMT as a way of studying and explaining the shift in young men (specifically in this study) who express feelings of dismantling the notion of any form of masculinity that places patriarchy, homophobia, and male privilege above equality and agency deserves attention.

The Current Study

The purpose of this research was to examine, in an exploratory, but comprehensive manner, the attributes males consider significant regarding social support and affection within their male social networks. In addition, men are uniquely different from one another, and how they define their masculine identity is specific to their own identities and lived experiences. Past research exploring male non-romantic relationships offers significant insights into these interpersonal interactions, (Good, Dell, & Mintz, 1989; Mormon & Floyd, 1998; Reddin & Sonn, 2003; Reisman, 1990) however, less is known about males' self-reported perceived masculine identity and its influence on receiving affection and social support among men. This research extends previous work via exploration of masculine identities through a qualitative, focus group approach intentionally exploring the role of perceived masculinities, social support, and affection. This research endeavor started with initial guiding questions concerning characteristics that men seek out regarding affection within their male-centered social networks. Likewise, the study aims to further understand the types of individuals men reach out to for social support and proposes that males' description of their masculine identity influences their engagement in social support and affection. To address this, the following research questions are presented:

RQ1: How do males define/describe their encounter with masculinities in society?

RQ2: How do males define/describe their personal perception of masculinities?

RQ3: How does their individual definitions of masculine identity influence engagement in social support and affection within their male social networks?

Method

Participants

Seventy-one undergraduate self-identified male participants were recruited from a West Coast university ($M = 19.87$ years). All participants received course credit for participation per their undergraduate communication classes. Prior to participating in focus groups, each participant answered anonymous demographic questions. Participants' racial/ethnic make-up included 31% Caucasian, 29.6% Latino, 22.5% Asian, 7% Mixed-Race, 2.8% other races (e.g., Armenian), 2.8% Black, and 4% did not report their race/ethnicity. Participants' sexual orientation included 78.9% who identified as heterosexual, 8.5% as gay, 1% reported as bisexual, and 11% did not report sexual orientation. To aid in creating a comfortable space for participants, each demographic question provided the option to not report information, with the exception of age.

Procedures

Prior to data collection, the human subjects review board approved all research procedures. Initial focus group questions were pilot tested and revised per recommendations from participants (unrelated to the final study). This research relied on focus groups for data collection as they provide an interactive setting that allows multiple participants to exchange ideas and further engage in specific topics, as opposed to other qualitative data collection methods such as one-on-one interviews or diary logs. This method provided context through peer commenting, questioning, elaborating, and encouragement which traditional one-on-one interviewing may lack.

A total of 15 focus groups were conducted with a minimum of three and maximum of six participants per group. Sessions lasted between 30 and 35 minutes. Focus groups were audio recorded solely for transcription purposes. Audio recording allowed the moderator(s) to engage in a conversational interviewing strategy with participants, thus lessening the tension during the focus group interviews (Orbe, 1994). There were two male moderators for each focus group and the gender choices were specific to create a conducive space where other self-identified male participants would be more likely to disclose personal or sensitive information. Additionally, separate research assistants prepared written notes to compare to transcriptions of the focus group interviews, these assistants were both males and females and their identities were concealed behind one-way glass.

Data Analysis and Coding

Data analysis was initially done by the primary researcher and research assistants using line-by-line coding, thematic coding, and constant comparison methods (Charmaz, 2014). Coding did not begin until all focus groups were complete, and all transcripts were finalized. During the initial analysis, numerous themes and subthemes relating to the research questions emerged and the degree of consensus among participants in the focus groups was clear and compelling. Data included 224 pages of focus group transcripts. Audio recordings of the focus group interviews were transcribed by four research assistants. Transcripts were coded by five coders for general categories, resulting in 28 overall categories. Categories that were repeated among the initial analysis were identified as prominent themes. Subsequent focused coding was conducted to determine the strength of each theme and subtheme across the focus group data. Diagramming was used to further engage and refine the categories identified and the research team would consult the original transcripts in search of data that supported or refuted the concepts that were presented. Lastly, the most salient themes and subthemes were examined in relationship to the research questions and further organized into categories with descriptive summaries. This process continued until agreement among the research team was met and saturation of the data was achieved. All steps of the analysis and the results were presented to an external auditor for verification.

For this study, we specifically focused on coherence and cohesiveness for verification, versus traditional validity measures (Crockett, Brown, Russell, & Shen, 2007). Similar to Crockett, et al., (2007), several procedures to solidify the results were conducted, these included A) identifying rich, supportive details and descriptions to explicate the research questions and B) conducting an external audit by an individual unrelated to the research project.

Results

In the results that follow, the most prevalent themes relating to the research questions are presented. Three themes emerged from the analysis regarding the self-identified males who participated in this study: the social construction of masculinities, the expectation of spending time together and building trust, and the role of fathers and father figures within male social networks. Additional subthemes within each of these are also discussed. Although these themes may or may not accurately account for the experiences of all self-identified males, nor are these themes recognized as fact, they represent data from the self-identified males in the current study. The themes and their definitions are outlined in Table 1. The results section further explains each theme and representative excerpts from select participants are included.

Table 1. Themes, subthemes and descriptive summaries

Theme	Description of Category
The social construction of masculinities	
Defining individual masculinities	Participants defined their perceptions of masculinity as fluid, evolving, and interpreted by their individual experiences
Social impact of masculinities	Participants describe their perception of masculinities as individual and not influenced by outside forces or societal pressures
Spending time and building trust	
Expectations	Participants expressed an expected baseline of time and commitment from their friends; likewise, participants expected trust to be earned through the longevity of the relationship and the vulnerability of self-disclosure.
Social trust and Social ties	Participants acknowledged that their male networks were created through mutual trust and vulnerability. These qualities reduced uncertainty and created bonds that exceeded surface level relationships.
The role of fathers and father figures	
Provider/Advisor/Friend	Participants in discussing their fathers referred to them as "advisors", "providers", and "best friends" demonstrating that the role of fathers exceeds baseline expectations outside of caretaker.
Depth of disclosure	Participants consistently agreed that their fathers were important figures regarding support and affection. However, the level to which they self-disclosed varied. Some participants mentioned that they share everything (e.g., drug use, financial issues) while others specifically stated that they only shared good news as not to disappoint their fathers.

The Social Construction of Masculinities

A theme that emerged from the focus group discussions were males in the study explicating masculinities in general, and the social impact and influence of masculine identity within their male social networks, specifically. The comments and conversations that resulted from these focus groups identifying and acknowledging masculinities were diverse and innumerable. In our results, we focus primarily on the perception of masculinities and how the concept, according to males in this study, is considered fluid and progressive.

A great majority of the males in this study defined masculinities as malleable and open to interpretation. One participant stated,

I don't think there are certain words that should be associated with being masculine. Men can be emotional and caring, it depends on the relationship and the circumstances. Likewise, men can also be other things...tough, athletic, I wouldn't say some concepts don't associate with being masculine just because some are viewed as being opposite or different.

Participants also discussed how their perceptions of masculinities have fallen outside the scope of traditional or stereotypical male practices and many expressed that they embrace affection and self-disclosure within their male social networks. These quotes demonstrate that men are redefining masculine identity, focusing on their social and psychological well-being versus a singular narrow view of masculine identity. These actions are recognized within literature, but lack prominence addressing male engagement within their male social networks (Reddin & Sonn, 2003). When asked to further elaborate on defining masculinities, participants were forthcoming describing the role of masculine identity in their male relationships and how social support is reciprocated among their same-sex friends. Several participants stated, "I don't think a body part (e.g., chest, arms) is what represents masculinity, I think it's mental. I think doing stuff with, and listening to the people you love, is how you show masculinity." Another statement included, "Being aware of your emotions and feelings is pretty masculine and people should be willing to take those steps in expressing that."

Addis and Mahalik (2003) discuss how "masculinity can be understood as a process that is actively created and confirmed by men as they behave in potential help-seeking contexts" (p. 9). Within this data, not only were masculinities considered fluid, but also the way men interact with one another, especially in supportive situations, played a role in how males describe their masculine identity. Participants echoed this sentiment as they described how their behaviors, which they classified as masculine, broke away from traditional stereotypical expectations. These behaviors, sharing and engaging in personal disclosure, support the narrative that

expands the notion of what is considered male gendered behavior. The males in this study adopted those same behaviors, and those behaviors were demonstrated within their socially supportive environments. One participant shared,

Talking and listening, it makes you vulnerable and that can have a negative connotation, but as a man if you put yourself out there, it makes it easier for other dudes to do the same. My friends, we behave in ways that aren't old fashioned, and that's what makes us friends. It's important to cry and to let things out and to talk about things and not bury them.

Spending Time and Building Trust

Many of the participants stated that their male social networks were created and influenced a great deal by time and trust. Time was a major factor as it allowed for experiences and enrichment to take place and to be fostered between males. Trust, another factor that embodies closeness and comfort, resulted in shared experiences that allowed for participants to disclose personal information and for social support and affection between males to emerge within their networks. Males in this study stated that the longer they were in their male friendships the stronger the potential of self-disclosure. Trust is believed to be associated with honesty and intimacy and was highly valued among participants as a precursor of engaging in affection and social support.

Analyzing content from the participants showcased several examples of time and trust as factors in demonstrating affection and social support. One participant stated, "A lot of my friends, we grew up together, grew as people, played sports, have classes together, I would say over time that builds trust and that's important." Another participant shared, "I don't think it's just time, that's important, but it's also the experiences, the similarities we have among each other, that builds trust and shows how you can relate to that person." Each of these examples illustrates how quality time and enriching experiences went hand-in-hand, creating trust among participants' male social networks.

Social trust and social ties. A sub-theme that emerged within time and trust was social trust and social ties. Social trust is a belief in the honesty, integrity, and the reliability of others within an individual's social circle (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). The relationships that develop due to that trust creates social ties. Social ties are capital that allow individuals to have accountability and spaces to engage beyond surface dialogue. Several of the participants mentioned that trust and time, within the space of their male social networks, created opportunity for social support and self-disclosure.

The satisfaction from time spent developing relationships and experiencing trust and affection was present among participants in the study. One participant stated, “I share private stuff when I want to take my friendships to the next level, I care about them and being around them makes me comfortable, and I guess happy.” Other participants shared similar sentiments,

I’ve had the same best friends since I was in preschool. We are completely open with one another. I am never nervous about expressing my feelings with my best friends. So, I could probably say that I have a really tight group, I trust them and I’m not afraid to tell them anything.

These demonstrations of social trust and created social ties illustrate additional positive outcomes including disclosure and intimacy. These features further show the importance of creating comfort and safety within networks, resulting in affection and social support among participants.

The Role of Fathers and Father Figures

Fathers played a significant role within male social support systems across many of the focus groups. Participants referenced their fathers consistently when asked, which male figures would you reach out to for social support? Many participants’ immediate responses were that they reach out to their fathers or stepfathers for support; however, there were considerable and unique limitations in what types of support participants felt that their father and father figures could offer.

Participants described an array of relationship types with their fathers in which different power dynamics affected how they would reach out for social support. One participant expressed that his dad has a tendency to take on an advisory role, stating, “I can tell my pops a lot, when it’s something exciting, I’ll tell him, but I don’t always want his advice, so sometimes I should just say ‘I want you to listen’.” Another participant distinguished between the nature of his friendships and his relationship with his father, stating, “I have friendships and then I have a relationship with my father, and uncles of course, but more importantly my relationship is with my father, he’s the dominant male figure in my life. I can talk to him.” Some participants viewed their relationships with their fathers as a form of friendship, a particular participant describes this,

I was gonna say my dad is who I can talk to, my dad is like my best friend. He and I are very similar, like if you meet my dad, you are just like ‘That is just old [name].’

Past studies have shown that affection between young men and their fathers; is instrumental in creating healthy relationships among friends, family, and significant partners (Beatty & Dobos, 1992; Floyd & Mormon, 1998; Morman & Floyd, 2002; 2006).

An important aspect of these relationships is the degree to which information is disclosed and affection is shown. A set of participants revealed that they have intimate and personal conversations with their father and father-like figures. When questioned about the male figures in his life, and whom he would reach out to, one participant answered that he has in-depth discussions with his dad,

Umm, for me it would have to be my dad, we can go deep, what I talk about with others wouldn't be as deep as the conversations that I would normally have with my dad, but I still have other guys in my life. If I just want to get something answered, I'm in the Undergrad Mentorship Program here on campus and I talk to my mentor guy. But again, we don't go as deep as with my dad.

Others admitted that they limit information disclosure with their fathers despite having close relationships. One participant revealed:

I mean for support I go to my dad, I like my dad. He's my dad, I can go to him for anything...but, I sort of censor what I say because there are still certain things that we haven't felt comfortable talking to each other with yet.

The topics that males discuss in their relationships with their fathers varied as well. Participants revealed seeking support on topics including confronting emotional objectives, seeking guidance, or simply sharing general content about their lives. Among participants, different topics were considered acceptable and others taboo. One participant reported that party topics were off limits:

For me, it's probably my older brother and then my dad. I wouldn't talk to my dad about what I did on the weekend or stuff like that, but my brother I could talk to him about that stuff so it's just a little different, but he's older, he's like another dad too.

In opposition to this participant's statement, another participant reported he would feel completely comfortable engaging in taboo conversation with his dad:

I can go to my dad for stuff like partying or smoking weed. He revealed to me recently that he used to be a pothead back in college. So now I can talk to him about that stuff. I was surprised but in my mind now I can talk to him about anything.

Interestingly, one participant stated that it was his father's personality, not the topic, which determined if and how he shared particular types of information, "I would talk to my dad about some topics, but not others. I feel like he would be biased but that's just how my dad is and

acts.” These comments point to an important aspect of paternal relationships, where individual parenting styles and personal characteristics are strongly linked to parent-child relations (Ahmeduzzaman & Roopnarine, 1992). The males in these focus groups illustrated how father-son relational dynamics affect the types of support and affection these males expect from their dads. This in turn, framed the communication practices that they would engage in with their fathers.

To further understand the communicative practices, our participants were asked to describe examples of topics they share with their dads. One participant stated, “If I got an ‘A’ on a report card I’m for sure calling my dad to show him I’m not just drinking the night away,” while another clarified, “I usually just go to him [Dad] but it’s more with positive news. I don’t really go to him for negative news because...I don’t wanna portray that I’m failing.” A third participant stated, “My dad is my best support, he’s always so excited, for work, or good grades, he’s like my big champion....so I’ll tell my dad things because he gets excited for me, sometimes more than I ever would.” This trend suggests males have a higher tendency to reach out for support and encouragement from their fathers regarding happy information, while at times concealing negative news.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the experiences of young men engaging in social support and affection within their male-centered social networks. The focus group discussions, and the subsequent data, suggest the growing importance of social and group-based means of understanding social support, affection, and their relation to masculine identity among male social networks. The value of expressing emotions and personal storytelling regarding self-disclosure among males within a safe and controlled environment was highlighted in the present study. Past research has shown that self-disclosure is an essential aspect of emotional intelligence and story-telling promotes empowerment among participants (Ruddin & Sonn, 2003).

Masculinities, as described by the males in this study, were viewed as fluid and open to interpretation, thus supporting our adoption of IMT. Among these participants, their perceived masculine identity played a role in how they expressed and embraced affection and engaged in social support. Males expressed that their perception of masculinities in the past might have been viewed as stoic and rigid, but an overwhelmingly majority of the men in this study described their current perception of masculinities as aligned with specific individuals’ various identities which are uniquely adaptable to the individual.

Extending Morman and Floyd’s (1998) body of work that examines factors that may impact male non-romantic relationships, this research identifies a potential variable, perceived

masculinities, which may contribute to further examination of characteristics that lead to successful male non-romantic relationships.

In addition, masculine identity shifting from being considered a hindrance, to now a loosely defined construct allowing for a wide spectrum of engagement among men, was an unexpected but welcomed surprise. The possibility that masculinities and social support exist as fluid entities that can co-exist and even support one another is promising. It must be noted, as previous research states, the situational context and the particular individual(s) within each social network play a large role in the adoption of affection and social support among these men (Morman & Floyd, 1998). However, the fact that social support and affection are present within a sample representing male social networks introduces new directions for this area of research.

According to the participants in this study, time and trust were baseline expectations regarding affection and social support. Prior research demonstrates that beneficial qualities created within social networks where social support takes place, including establishing trust and a commitment to time, improved individual's happiness among friends and family members and created more sociable and positive interpersonal communication (Valenzuela, et al., 2009).

In addition to time and trust, the men in this study overwhelmingly referenced fathers and father figures as central in providing social support and affection. Fathers' abilities to provide affection and communicate effectively have been found to have positive socialization impact on their male children (Floyd & Morman, 2005; Morman & Floyd, 2002; 2006). In addition, research has indicated that the negative connotation of male affection is attenuated by healthy father-son relationships (Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Morman & Floyd, 1998) and because father figures emerged as a common link within these males' individual social networks, it was important to assess how unique father-son relationships fostered different types of disclosure.

Altogether, the father figures in these participants' lives repeatedly appear as a source for social support and affection, even if in varying ways. These results support past research, which demonstrates that paternal involvement is positive and advantageous regarding child development, including communication behaviors and emotional health (Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Morman & Floyd, 1999; 2002; 2006). Likewise, children are better off in terms of their sex-role development, achievement, and psychosocial adjustment when their relationship with their father is close and warm (Floyd & Morman, 2000; 2005; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Morman & Floyd, 2002; 2006). In addition, young men with highly involved fathers are characterized by increased cognitive competence, increased empathy, less sex-stereotyped beliefs, and are better able to resolve conflict (Brody, 1996; Floyd & Morman, 2000). As this research reveals, when

males engage in social support and receive affection from their fathers, males are positioned to effectively process their thoughts and emotions.

Overall, these results, coupled with the findings from previous research, suggest that in contemporary U.S., men are embracing a diverse and inclusive form of masculinities (Anderson & McCormack, 2016). Likewise, the men in this study demonstrated that there is a strong expectation from their male social networks to commit and engage in deep, meaningful ways, where affection and social support are outcomes. Likewise, past research has demonstrated that men engage in a distinctive style of love and friendship that has its own vocabulary, logic, expectations, and priorities (Wood & Inman, 1993). These results contribute to the full scope of masculinities and its impact as a fluid and constant evolving identity among self-identified men.

The performative act of “doing gender” in the U.S. has recently resulted in implications that effect society in real ways. Young self-identified men witnessing behaviors that hinder other genders and sexual minorities is troublesome. Any potential shifts in attenuating those actions result from the tolerance of society to shut down problematic behaviors which will take the work of everyone, including young men who have the opportunity to create new and positive narratives regarding their masculine identity. The majority of males in this study embraced masculinities as fluid, open to interpretation, and accessible to any individual. Considering this, the ways in which self-identified men engage with one another and outside of their networks is crucial if a shift in healthy masculine identity is going to occur.

Conclusion

Within this study three themes resulted in further understanding men’s engagement in affection and social support within male centered networks: (A) the social construction of masculinities is constantly evolving and fluid and men within this study did not feel the need to conform to one type of masculinity, nor did they feel the need to restrict others regarding their masculine identities, (B) males within this study expect their male social networks to be robust regarding the time committed to those relationships and the concentration of building trust among the network, and (C) the role of fathers and father figures is consistently valued and significant among the men in this study, similarly to past research. Results, while not generalizable, indicate that the male participants in this study are suited to address their mental and emotional well-being including facing negative factors such as stress and anxiety. Likewise, these males embrace a support system that is proactive in care, social support, and healthy displays of affection.

While this research study's results lend itself to scholarship concerning social support and affection centered in male social networks, we acknowledge some potential weaknesses of focus groups as our method of data collection. Like many other studies employing focus groups, we are not able to generalize our results as the sample is small, geographically limited, and does not encompass a variety of demographics (e.g., age and socioeconomic status; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Another concern was that participants might influence the responses of others, or that responses may become polarized as more extreme views may emerge from participants. We acknowledge that some participants can dominate discussions, causing others to contribute less in a group setting (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Although these are important considerations, focus groups have advantages that outweigh these concerns, including encouraging participants to offer comments and experiences that may not be shared during one-on-one interviews because of the natural, extended interaction that takes place among and between participants (Morgan, 1997). In addition, the group members' responses enabled immediate comparison and cross-validation of experiences between participants which may not have been revealed in one-on-one interviews.

Despite these limitations, the results allow for continued exploration regarding social support and affection within male social networks. Suggestions for further exploration include expanding the age of participants and in doing so, discover additional themes that may emerge from a wide spectrum of men discussing support and affection within their networks. Other ways of building on this research include specific foci on male social networks within organizations or mentoring communities. The subtle ways men self-disclose via their communication practices within varied social networks and within organizational structures may increase our knowledge regarding gender communication scholarship.

The present study has elucidated an important aspect regarding the direction of studying masculinities and its potential impact on male social networks. Masculinities, according to the males in this study, can be considered a malleable and adaptable concept, and this notion deserves further attention regarding affection and social support among this population. The potential to explore masculinities from this vantage point is limitless, exciting, and may create rich conversation shifting the narrative of future scholarship on masculinities and other gender research.

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