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The Interaction of Masculinity and Control and its Impact on the Experience of Suffering for an Older Man

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Abstract

Previous work suggests that control and suffering are related to one another. Although it would be expected that within cultures which emphasize the importance of masculinity, as well as personal control, there would be greater suffering among individuals who lose their sense of masculinity or control, how these constructs relate to each other and are individually negotiated has been largely understudied. This paper takes a case study approach to further exploring how the constructs of control, masculinity, and suffering are related in the lived experience of an older European American man, Mr. Gregor. Analysis of this case shows that masculinity is related to control and that these constructs act as themes which interact over Mr. Gregor's lifetime in a variety of ways. The level of control maintained by Mr. Gregor in different aspects of his life affects his sense of suffering. In some instances his sense of masculinity helps to protect Mr. Gregor against suffering; in others, it contributes to his suffering. These findings support the notion that there are culturally dependent possibilities for how control and masculinity are related.

Introduction

Despite the increase in the work done on masculinity theory over the past two decades, the subject of masculinity in later life has not been well studied. Recently, this lack of research into older men's masculinity was highlighted in a special issue of the *Journal of Aging Studies* (December 2007) which helped fill gaps in the literature. The current paper contributes to research in this area. Specifically, it explores the pathways through which each construct—masculinity and control—exerts its influence on the other in old age, and how these constructs are individually mediated by personal identity to either protect against suffering, or help an individual endure it. For instance, although it would be expected that within cultures which emphasize the importance of masculinity, as well as personal control, there would be greater suffering among individuals who lose their sense of masculinity or control, how these constructs are related and individually negotiated has been understudied. This paper will take a case study approach to further exploring the relationship between the constructs of masculinity, control, and suffering in the lived experience of an older European American man. First, the work done to date on masculinity, control, and suffering will be reviewed.

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Masculinity

To begin, we will discuss masculinity. Masculinity is a cultural construct that may be defined at its core by certain physical features and an inner sense of being male. It is also characterized by certain behavioral and affective traits such as toughness, power, control, independence, differentiation from womanhood, restricted emotions, physical and sexual competence, assertiveness, and aggressiveness, among other characteristics. Although these ideal qualities may not be held by all men, these traits are culturally constructed to inform what a “real man” should be within the American sociocultural environment and can be considered this culture’s hegemonic masculinity script (Calasanti & King, 2007; Emslie, Hunt & O’Brien, 2004; Peterson, 2003; Schofield, Connell, Walker, Wood, & Butland, 2000; Smith, Braunack-Mayer, Wittert, & Warin, 2007; Spector-Mersel, 2006).

Research suggests that there are wide ranges in the “possible ways through which men can live out their maleness (Cameron & Bernardes, 1998, p. 686)” and that within a single culture and across various cultures and environments there are differences in ideas of what constitutes masculinity (Schofield, Connell, Walker, Wood, & Butland, 2000). Age, cohort, class position, ethnicity, and even disability status are thought to contribute to the differential experience and expression of masculinity among men (Connell, Hearn, & Kimmel, 2005; Thompson, 2006). Take age as an example. Within North American culture there appears to be varied expectations and ideals of manliness based partially on age differences and the influence of age-dependent cultural codes. For instance, the meaning of independence for older men has been found to differ from the prescriptions of hegemonic masculinity. In later life, having and maintaining daily function, and therefore independence, becomes intimately tied to an older man’s quality of life and symbolizes “successful aging” (Smith, Braunack-Mayer, Wittert, & Warin, 2007). Although this trait is important to men throughout the life course, it becomes increasingly significant to an aging man whose health is in decline and who is confronted with threats to other aspects of his manhood.

As noted, the work done to date on masculinity has largely ignored the experiences of older men (Calasanti & King, 2005; Thompson, 1994). However, it has been suggested that despite being in a social position of privilege in relation to women, being a man may be especially challenging, particularly for the aging man who compares himself to dominant masculinity scripts and yet lacks fundamental characteristics of these (Bennett, 2007; Calasanti & King, 2005; Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2003; Thompson, 2006). That is, aging may be accompanied by declines in strength, control, independence, social power, sexual competence, and self-reliance (Bennett, 2007) and thus, to a masculine identity, and may lead to a sense of personal suffering. In addition, because Western society lacks an acceptable model of the roles that older men can potentially have during the later stages of adulthood (Spector-Mersel, 2006), this time of life may present unique challenges. While men in early and middle adulthood are given clear guidelines about how to act if they are to be dominant, the standards of manhood may terminate *before* old age, leaving older men with an ill-defined model for how to “be men” in later life (Spector-Mersel, 2006). And yet, because men have natural, age-related changes, the scripts for middle age should not be the same for older ages. However, just as at any other point in one’s life, when experiences do not fit within prescriptions of hegemonic masculinity, there is the potentiality to reformulate what constitutes an ideal man; modifications can be made to which masculinity traits are considered most important (Smith, Braunack-Mayer, Wittert, & Warin, 2007).

Additional disadvantages confronting older men are a lack of social networks (Fleming, 1999) and the difficulty for some men in exiting the workforce (Gradman, 1994; Spector-Mersel, 2006). However, there is some research to suggest that this is not the case for all aging men. Proponents of the “Third Age” (Laslett, 1991) and of the “Productive Aging” paradigm (Bass, 2000) contend that old age is a period of opportunity in which many new roles are

possible such that the notions of masculinity held prior to retirement, for example, could be creatively adapted or reinvented for this newer, perhaps freer, period of life. Retirement may not be a difficult time for all men, but may be a time when retirees can take on personally fulfilling lifestyles that are distinct from their working lives (Gilleard & Higgs, 2002) and provide a context for an enhanced sense of effective masculinity. Bennett (2007) has found that as the needs and experiences of older men conflict with the masculine ideal, the masculine role is either abandoned or reconstructed so that a sense of masculinity is maintained. This maintenance is primarily achieved through the use of masculine discourses which enable older men to transform potentially feminine experiences into ones in which control, rationality, responsibility, and success are maintained (Bennett, 2007), such as caregiver (Black et al., 2008). This supports the notion that masculinity is an individual-level, creative process incorporating numerous types of masculinities that vary over time (Spector-Mersel, 2006; Thompson, 2006).

Control

The second concept this paper will explore is control. A distinction is made between the idea of having personal control over one's environment, termed primary control, and secondary control, which serves to expand or lessen loss of primary control. These two aspects of control are quite interrelated and individuals can vary their sense of control according to the challenges they encounter and the life stage they are in (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995). Secondary modes of control, which are considered more common among older populations, are cognitive processes that allow individuals to make adjustments by disengaging from action and taking more of an inner role; rather than having control over one's external environment, control is maintained through internal thoughts. Examples of this type of control might be assigning value to alternative goals or engaging in protective social comparison (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Lachman, 2005). Similar to the notion that masculinity exists within or is shaped by a particular context, research suggests that an individual's degree of perceived control varies across cultures. For instance, Americans have been found to have a relatively strong belief that they are in control of outcomes compared to persons from other countries (Lachman, 2005). In comprehending the experiences of European Americans it is important to note how American culture imposes its ideals of control on society's members.

Control is a central aspect of the Western hegemonic masculinity script and as such is important to consider in the context of aging. For instance, men in particular have been socialized to believe that they can control their world and shape it according to their needs (Canetto, 1992). Although the ability to control events, the body, and the self are important aspects of masculinity, the true experiences of aging men often conflict with these abilities and challenge masculine identity. And, as mentioned, because of age-related physical changes, older men may potentially be denied the opportunity to live up to the hegemonic standards of masculinity as well as the ability to maintain control (Calasanti & King, 2005). However, the postmodern message that adults can take personal responsibility for their health and youthful appearance is evident in Western culture. Through the consumption of prescription drugs, surgeries, and the like, the idea that older men can reclaim control and youthful virility is now a pervasive one (Calasanti & King, 2005; Rubinstein & Canham, 2008). The amount of control an older man has in late life is thought to be related to his desire, social standing, ethnicity, financial resources, and prior exertion of efforts (whereby those who "played" too hard as younger men pay a price in old age; Black, 2001; Calasanti & King, 2005). Thus, it is easy to conjure up an image of an aging man who has lost control (Thompson, 1994). Since the loss of control has been found to be an element of suffering (Black & Rubinstein, 2004), a person's ability to stave off suffering may also be related to the ability to maintain control in later life. However, the loss of control does not necessarily change a man's view of himself as a man or how others

might see him. Although issues related to the loss of control could make an individual feel “less of a man” it may be possible that other core masculine characteristics are retained.

Suffering

The last term with which we will deal is that of suffering. This is a fluid concept that is individually defined and influenced by a society’s norms and methods of communication within a society (Black, 2006; Black & Rubinstein, 2004). Although some experiences of suffering are considered universal, local cultures (such as the culture of Western masculinity) affect subjective meanings of suffering (Black & Rubinstein, 2004). The current article will attempt to explore some of the ways in which an older male actor negotiates potential suffering since it has not been adequately studied to date. Suffering can be experienced as a public trauma or a private matter and can be experienced either directly or vicariously through others. It is considered painful and often a non-normal condition of being that may cause the sufferer to reevaluate personal meanings and identities (Black & Rubinstein, 2004). Suffering can result from experiences which run counter to cultural or personal values, such as the failure to maintain masculinity and control in later life, the topic of this paper. However, because there is much individual specificity in the experience of suffering in later life, these suffering experiences can be generalized only to the extent that similar cultural ideals of masculinity are held by different persons (Black & Rubinstein, 2004). Thus, being unable to live up to masculine ideals in later life may not be a source of suffering for those men who do not adhere to such ideals.

Since suffering has been previously reported to lead older adults to reevaluate and attempt to reintegrate aspects of their selves that had been threatened or diminished (Black & Rubinstein, 2004), understanding how older men experience suffering is important. As Giddens (1991) has suggested, the self not only develops in social experiences, but it continually restructures itself as a result of these experiences. Rather than new constructions or suffering causing disruption to the existing self, it may be that certain experiences, ideas, and influences are incorporated into the existing self, while other, older ones that are no longer relevant, can be edited out (Giddens, 1991). As Baltes and Baltes (1990) have recognized, as physical and emotional resources become limited only those aspects that are central to an individual’s identity are maintained. As evidenced by the high rates of suicide and alcoholism among older men throughout the world (CDC, 1999; The Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 1998), the reintegration of a disrupted self following suffering may not seem possible for many men.

Case Study

We will now explore how an aging European American man, Mr. Gregor (a pseudonym), conceptualizes his own masculinity and what relationship this conceptualization has to personal notions of control and suffering. This randomly selected case study illuminates the relationship between self-aggrandizement and masculinity. That is, the sense of accomplishment presented by this older male narrator is deeply associated with his identity and masculinity. As Mr. Gregor narrates his story and reflects on his life, his attempt to maintain his sense of masculinity and accomplishment are observed as crucial because failing to maintain a sense of masculinity (or accomplishment) could reflect loss of control and be a form of suffering. After describing this case study, the ways in which Mr. Gregor has experienced suffering will be explored.

Mr. Gregor is a tall, 94-year-old, broad shouldered, widowed European American man who carries himself well and who lives with one of his three daughters in an executive-style home in a well-established neighborhood. During interviews he wore old, comfortable and fine looking slacks and short-sleeved, buttoned-up, collared shirts (either Hawaiian prints or pastel colors). He was well-spoken and presented himself as an elder statesman. Mr. Gregor married his only wife of 38 years when he was 32 years old, and she had passed away 24 years before

the interview. For much of the last three and a half years of his wife's life, she was sick with cancer. Fortunately, according to Mr. Gregor, when she died, she was surrounded by her loved ones: "And she had cancer for three and a half years, so we just stayed here. And then all the children and I had our arms about her and she handled it wonderful." In addition to his three daughters, whom he reports to be the most important persons in his life, Mr. Gregor has one grandson and four granddaughters. He also reports to having been close to a few women since the death of his wife; he dated one woman for ten years. The woman he currently dates is much younger than he is.

At the time the interviews were conducted, Mr. Gregor rated his health as "fair" in response to the question, "How would you rate your health: excellent, good, fair, or poor?" In Mr. Gregor's narrative, he speaks of becoming increasingly forgetful: "I also know that the mind isn't as sharp as it once was." In addition, he spoke about sexual impotence and his opposition to taking drugs to improve sexual function or marrying again. In his narrative, Mr. Gregor repeated a comment he made to his wife's doctor shortly after his wife died. "And I told the doctor, I shall never marry again." In discussing relationships with women since the death of his wife he described himself as "just a local gentleman who – I can't say I never have kissed her, but it's hardly been – there are lots of things at my age, as you'll recognize that you can't do. I wouldn't try. I guess they have medicines, but I don't want any of that". It may be that Mr. Gregor is able to maintain his sense of masculinity and control by making these life choices, deciding that they are best for his current situation, and voicing them so as to show that he *is* in control and still masculine. Mr. Gregor also reports having had a stroke after which his doctors told him he should no longer drive. And although Mr. Gregor reluctantly abides by these orders, he admits to not wanting to endanger other drivers. These experiences are further explored below.

Although Mr. Gregor reports that he and his wife had discussed returning to their home state before she got cancer, they were unable to move once she became sick and following her death he remained in their home. At the advice of a friend, Mr. Gregor did not follow through with his plan to retire at the age of 65 since this was the year his wife died. Instead, he threw himself into his work and continued to work until past the age of 80. In part, this was done as a way to cope with the loss of his wife and as a way to stay focused on something other than his wife's death.

Over his lifetime Mr. Gregor reported having worked as a paper boy, a Sunday school teacher, and as a State Senator for 10 years before climbing higher on the government ladder to become a high-ranking official. Mr. Gregor's identity was very much linked to his lifetime of working and being involved with other people. He stated, "You can never quite forget that you were a politician, but I was a hand-shaking, baby-kissing guy who had rung all the door bells as a paper boy and then as a politician". Although at the time of the interviews he no longer worked as a politician, he continued to make financial donations to political causes and to voice his opinions to leaders in the American political scene. Mr. Gregor states, "I do tend to give money to politicians if I like them, if they're honest, and it doesn't matter whether they're Republicans or Democrats". This ability to contribute financially to political causes was a theme that ran throughout Mr. Gregor's narrative and may have been one mechanism by which he maintained a sense of control. In addition, his mention of donating to both sides of the political divide indicates that he is able to look beyond party lines. It is the meaningfulness of a political agenda and the qualifications of a person that are the criteria for Mr. Gregor to provide his support. Fair play appears to be a part of Mr. Gregor's ideals for how an influential man should act: charismatic, honest, and standing above the fray of partisan politics.

When the interviewer first met Mr. Gregor at a local senior center, he was having lunch with a younger woman, and he suggested having the interviews in a restaurant. The interviewer,

however, guaranteed him that whatever the state of his home, it would be fine. Although the interviews were conducted at his home, Mr. Gregor stated, "I have been interviewed by a number of reporters and I've gotten them all to go to the restaurant". Although Mr. Gregor was unable to control the location of the interviews, he was able to control their timing; he monopolized the interviewer's time despite her attempts to impose time limits. For instance, when setting up interview times Mr. Gregor indicated that it was urgent to complete the interviews immediately since he could die or change his mind at any moment. This recognition that "time is running out" is a theme common among older persons (Black & Rubinstein, 2004). When the interviewer arrived at Mr. Gregor's home he opened the front door just a few inches and peeked out hesitantly as if to prevent an uninvited visitor from seeing the disarray inside.

The inside of Mr. Gregor's home was filled with to-be-donated clothing, assorted papers, and piled-up boxes, leaving minimal walking and sitting room. The front yard was steeply sloped near the house, and although it appeared "manicured" from the street, overgrown shrubby made entry by way of the front door almost impossible. Mr. Gregor commented to the interviewer that he was "surprised you got across there [the front walkway]." Because the house is almost totally obscured, the debris on the front porch was invisible from the street, driveway, and yard. Mr. Gregor reported that although areas of his yard are neglected he stopped mowing the lawn about two years ago because of complaints from neighbors that he was endangering his health. The extent of his current yard work involved gathering dead tree limbs. He reported that although he hired help to clean up the yard, his daughter insisted she would do the work. Yet, during the course of the interview sessions the yard remained untended. As explored below, this lack of attention to household disorder may be related to mechanisms of control and identity maintenance.

Throughout the interviews Mr. Gregor discussed his importance and influence by mentioning his high status within the political arena; this appears to be a central aspect of his identity. Although he reported being less well-known within the state where he currently lives, he discussed how he had been honored in his home state: "They named schools and a few other things for me". These comments suggest that Mr. Gregor finds esteem in being a well-known contributor to society. The importance he places on giving to others is further reflected in the following:

"And where I can, with the Sunday school groups or other groups or those little black kids I lectured – I told them how successful blacks can be and what they should do and they were all quite interested in asking me questions and so forth...so I do tend to get involved in many ways. That's the politician in me".

This remark indicates that being a positive influence to others is an enduring aspect of his identity and connected to his sense of masculinity, regardless of how superficial his desire to give may be. His comments reflect his perception of the social gap between himself and those to whom he gives advice.

Mr. Gregor's sense of masculinity is further reflected in the following response to the interview question: "If you had to summarize your life in one or two sentences, what would you say?"

Mr. Gregor: "If I were to summarize my life – well, I'm male".

Interviewer: "That's not much of a summary".

Mr. Gregor: "It's a total summary..."

The centrality of masculinity to Mr. Gregor's narrative is apparent in his descriptions of achievements that reflect power positions within American culture. In addition to presenting himself as successful, important, and well-known on the American political scene he also spoke

to the importance, success, and brilliance of his three daughters: "...my daughter was one of the best ever...she is very bright." Also, his wife was portrayed as the proper and supportive wife of a politician: "She was magnificent politically." These descriptions appeared to portray his family as an extension of himself: successful, contributing, and well-respected members of society. Mr. Gregor's wife and daughters were presented as trophies who came second to his career.

As the interviews progress and Mr. Gregor's identity is further revealed, it seems clear that his self-identity and sense of masculinity have changed with age. At one time he was a powerful force in society; now he has little influence over others and his sexual prowess has waned. He stated, "I like to be a fast runner, but now I'm a limping old guy" and "But in this period of time it looks like I've lost the race. I cannot be as effective and in public attention as I was. I get up every morning and what am I going to do? I try to do the best I can. And yet if I ring somebody up on the phone, I don't always get the response that I want". Mr. Gregor believes that others see him as losing or having low power. Because of this, he must renegotiate and redefine not only his sense of masculinity, but also his entire sense of self. Metaphors for how he used to be—a fast runner—highlight his current decline. His idea that "life is a race" highlights his competitive nature, which is a typical masculine characteristic. The fact that Mr. Gregor makes charitable contributions, attends political functions, and dates, helps to augment his loss of other masculine traits. Mr. Gregor seemingly tries to keep up the appearance of being important and attractive. In fact, he acknowledges his lack of control over this area of his life: "You live your life and you can't always control it and you have to adjust and adapt". Previous research (Cameron & Bernardes, 1998) discussed the idea of negotiated gender and its usefulness to individuals with health problems who must regularly redefine and renegotiate their gender identities in new ways. Individuals do this in order to maintain control over their self-definition. Although Mr. Gregor's sense of masculinity has declined over time, he attempts to adapt to a renegotiated gender identity; he "works around" the loss of features central to hegemonic masculinity, such as sexual functioning (Cameron & Bernardes, 1998). It is clear from Mr. Gregor's case study that the renegotiation of gender and identities occurs over a lifetime and into old age.

When asked to describe a typical day, Mr. Gregor discussed his desire to organize the films of his travels and the daily diaries he maintained throughout life. These remarks hint at a sense of helplessness and inescapability. He states, "I am sometimes blue, the things I want to do before I die are beyond my ability to do them". Through the recognition of the inevitability of death, Mr. Gregor feels a lack of control over the amount of work to be done with his personal effects. This lack of control both diminishes and challenges his sense of masculinity. He stated, "I guess I have to box things and say what to do with them when I die". Despite feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work required to catalogue his memories, he indicates that he has the final say over what happens to his belongings when he dies, suggesting that he retains some control over his life and death. Still, Mr. Gregor's suffering seems tied to his crumbling self-image as a busy, strong, and virile male. This type of suffering may be unique to older men who have placed value on typically male characteristics such as being influential and authoritative. As the next section further explores, it appears that life experiences can result in a variety of outcomes that potentially threaten one's masculinity as well as offer mechanisms to compensate for possible losses. As discussed below, a potential threat does not always lead to suffering.

Findings

The death of Mr. Gregor's wife provides one example of how a single experience, threatening to masculine ideals or the loss of control, can be dealt with in several ways. For instance, in responding to the question "How would you define suffering," Mr. Gregor replied:

“Well, I think we all know what suffering is. We don’t feel good, the mind is bad and you worry, you even get to the point of wanting to commit suicide. My wife died in my arms and I’d have just as soon ended it then, but I had three children. I had to stay and fight the fight, and I did”.

In the above account, Mr. Gregor uses typical masculine terms, such as “fight the fight” to suggest that he has control over his choice to live or die. He later comments:

“People can control their own suffering. That depends entirely on the strength of the individual. There are many who can’t and commit suicide”.

In these remarks, Mr. Gregor discusses suffering in reference to his own life experiences and thus, becomes a narrator for older manhood. Taking responsibility to “fight the fight” indicates that Mr. Gregor intends to live up to traditional ideals of masculinity. Although he recognizes the option of committing suicide, he chooses life; a choice that shows he controls his own destiny. Mr. Gregor’s embodiment of typical masculine values is further expressed in his desire to provide for his family:

“I am trapped by the fact that I am going to die. What does a man do before he dies? I have to see that all the children are well taken care of – that they get their fair amounts”.

Despite the threats that the inevitability of death presents to his sense of self and masculinity, Mr. Gregor upholds certain ideals of hegemonic masculinity, such as preserving the role of patriarch and provider, which are integral to his sense of self.

A second outcome of the death of Mr. Gregor’s wife is related to the maintenance of the home, an area not typically included in the realm of masculinity. Although Mr. Gregor’s home is extremely cluttered, performance of household chores is delegated to his daughter.

Observations recorded by the interviewer report:

“The foyer was cluttered with boxes and piles of books and papers with narrow pathways leading to other, equally cluttered parts of the house. He directed me into the large living room where incredible amounts of clothing were piled and strewn about, unfolded, covering virtually every visible surface save for two chairs. He later mentioned that his daughter “collects” clothing for charity and got behind in her mission”.

Mr. Gregor reports that prior to her death, “my wife kept this place immaculately clean”. Although her death has led to a lack of order in the home, the disarray does little to affect Mr. Gregor’s identity or sense of masculinity. Living “clutter-free” is not significant to his sense of identity; loss of control over this aspect of life does not lead to suffering.

Another outcome of Mr. Gregor’s wife’s death was the loss of regular female companionship. However, Mr. Gregor seemed to thwart any loss of masculinity by having girlfriends and noticing when women were attracted to him. He states, “I can’t quite say that there weren’t some women who seemed to like me”. These women helped Mr. Gregor feel masculine and aided his self-view that he is an attractive person: “I boast – I was voted the handsomest man when I left college”.

Also related to the loss of his wife is his loss of sexual function. This loss, however, does not appear to challenge Mr. Gregor’s manhood. Rather, as discussed above, it is his choice to not take performance enhancement drugs. Perhaps our culture does not require someone who is 94 years old to be sexually active; being unable to perform sexually poses no threat to his identity or to the expectations of older manhood.

“Then there’s the woman I take out. That’s hardly passionate or anything like that – she’s just a very good friend. Oh, I kiss her good night when I leave or something like that, but at my age, you can’t do all the things that some lovers do. Even if you wanted to and I don’t have any urge to do so anyway. So I am willing to be a friend and to be helpful if I can”.

This statement is related to the findings of Smith and colleagues (2007) which suggest that maintaining control over health issues is one way in which older men define independence. That is, those who control their problems are able to maintain a sense of independence. For Mr. Gregor, having choices may be a form of secondary control. He negotiates the potential loss of masculinity and control by acknowledging his decline in sexual functioning as a result of the aging process, which is beyond his control. Yet, the choice to take performance enhancement drugs remains within his control. This control allows him to maintain identity consistency despite a lack of fit within the prototypical view of the masculine self. Despite his numerous losses (e.g., his wife, his ability to drive, his influence in politics, and his sexual competency), Mr. Gregor is able to maintain a sense of stability. He comments: “If there’s a woman that happened to be interested in me for sex, I’m afraid she’s going to be very disappointed”. This statement reveals that Mr. Gregor still views himself as attractive and worthwhile enough for a woman to consider as a partner. He recognizes that for purposes of sexual engagement, however, he is no longer a contender. Yet, this does not affect his identity.

Having a stroke was a second lived experience that had several outcomes for Mr. Gregor and further impacted a potential loss of control. Following the stroke, Mr. Gregor’s doctor suggested that he stop driving and that he give control of his checkbook to the daughter with whom he lives. Her management of his checkbook is a major source of frustration for Mr. Gregor. “So [my daughter] is sending out all my checks now, which annoys me. At least she’s doing it. That’s been a troublesome thing”. The insinuation, according to Mr. Gregor, is that he is no longer competent to keep track of his finances.

“I am a little annoyed with me these days because, as I told you, I could call 70 people by name. I could take one of those books on Eisenhower and tell you what it said, but all of the sudden, my mind is not as good as it was, which disturbs me”.

As suggested by previous work (Black & Rubinstein, 2004), the lack of control Mr. Gregor experiences over the circumstances surrounding his loss of financial freedom leads to suffering. Prior to his stroke he was financially responsible; he donated to political and religious groups and provided for his family. Because those who have money also have power in Western culture, Mr. Gregor’s inability to control his money challenges his sense of power. Being unable to live up to his ideal as a provider is a source of suffering. This suffering will continue until Mr. Gregor can integrate the modified role of being dependent on his daughter into his identity. This may never happen.

Another outcome following Mr. Gregor’s stroke is the loss of his ability to drive. The ensuing loss of independence has been found by previous research (Smith, Braunack-Mayer, Wittert, & Warin, 2007) to be important to older men who value independence and consider the loss of independence (symbolized by no longer being able to drive) to reflect a loss of masculinity. Mr. Gregor pays people to drive him places when his daughter cannot:

“I said, now doctor, I came to get the answer to one question. I want to drive my car. And he said, ‘No, you’re not’. That’s the worst thing in all of this, my car. It’s being driven and all these men who drive these other things [other vehicles] know and take me where I want to be, for a fee”.

According to Mr. Gregor, these drivers are paid well for their services: “I do spend a lot of money on renting. All of the renters know me and I try to give them a good tip”. [When Mr.

Gregor refers to “renting” he is talking about hiring drivers to take him where he wants to go]. These two aspects of his identity—being well known and financially generous augment his inability to drive. Being able to buy his transportation enables Mr. Gregor to maintain power over the “renters.” Also, as Mr. Gregor renegotiates his identity and agrees with doctors that driving may endanger others’ lives, he maintains control; as a service to society he relinquishes his driving status. He states,

“One, they say, don’t drive an automobile. You may be driving it fine right now, but if that happens to come back [the stroke], you might kill yourself and three or four other people. So, I have – with great reluctance – obeyed what they said, with maybe one exception”.

Similar to findings reported by Black and Rubinstein (2004), despite being dependent on others for his transportation needs, Mr. Gregor still has options from which he can choose, and having these allows him to preserve a sense of control over his life.

As this case study has shown, Mr. Gregor has been exposed to several experiences which could potentially lead to suffering: the death of his wife and declining health following a stroke. Yet, he did not always suffer. Seemingly, the experience of suffering was contingent upon whether Mr. Gregor maintained a sense of control over his life. These findings show that the experience of suffering is related to an individual’s perception of what is most valuable in life (Black, this issue).

Conclusions

Our case study reveals that masculinity is related to control, and that these constructs continually interact over one’s lifetime to lead to suffering as well as to protect against suffering. Those experiences which caused suffering for Mr. Gregor may be different from the experiences that would cause others suffering. There is a continuum along which different individuals will report suffering. Primarily, Mr. Gregor suffers because of his lost ability to drive and to manage his own checkbook; experiences which are deeply linked to his masculine ideals. Although declining mental function resulted in the loss of primary control over certain areas of his life and challenged his masculine identity, Mr. Gregor makes mental adjustments for why these losses have occurred, exemplifying an increase in secondary control. He places emphasis on those areas in which he continues to excel, such as donating money and giving advice to younger generations.

We acknowledge the influence that a female interviewer had on the responses provided by Mr. Gregor, as well as the fact that the outcome of the interview might be different had the interviewer been male. In addition, although the findings of this case study may help to shed light onto the neglected topic of masculinity in later life, as masculine ideals continue to change, and masculine roles are reconstructed, this work will need to be revisited in future cohorts. For instance, the impact that advertising and anti-aging companies have on masculine ideals will likely grow as their influence on the marketplace grows. Potentially, the cultural message that it the self’s responsibility to control one’s body through diet, exercise, and medicine will alter the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Since some men attend to these messages more readily than others, understanding what influence they have on the aging man will be key. Also, since hegemonic masculine ideals vary across cultures and societies, understanding the role of control and suffering in maintaining these ideals in different cultures is important.

As discussed, there are social and cultural elements to masculinity and identity formation (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2003). And it is likely that masculinity, control, and suffering relate to one another differently for different persons. For instance, although Mr. Gregor lost his ability to drive, his relative economic advantage allows him to pay others to drive. Although

not explored in this paper, having an economic advantage may be one way in which Mr. Gregor is protected from the potentially severe mental suffering experienced by those with fewer economic and personal resources. Future work should examine the role that poverty and racism have on the loss or maintenance of masculinity and control.

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