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Poetry therapy, men and masculinities

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Abstract

Therapists have long utilized poetry with various at risk male populations. Yet, in spite of its use, therapists have also been aware of the dilemmas associated with using poetry in a population whose behavior and identity may at times run counter to the core tenants of poetry therapy. However, the literature of poetry therapy does not fully explore what therapists need to know about men and masculinities in order to work with them. This article helps prepare therapists using poetry to become more sensitive to gender issues and utilize this understanding in their practice with men. It explores some of the key concepts from gender and masculinities studies and provides examples for how these concepts can be used in practice.

Keywords

Masculinities; Poetry therapy; Men

Introduction

Therapists and clinicians have long utilized poetry and poetry therapy with various at risk male populations. For example, poetry has frequently been used in clinical settings with male veterans (Geer, 1983), inner city male youth (Tyson, 2002) and prisoners (Berger & Giovan, 1990). Yet, in spite of its use, poetry therapists have long been aware of the dilemmas in using poetry with a population whose behavior and identity may at times run counter to the core tenants of poetry therapy. For instance, poetry therapy stresses the importance of expressing softer emotions, such as vulnerability and doubt, the centrality of human creativity, self awareness and introspection, and the willingness to engage in a process that at times does not have clear outcomes (Mazza, 2003). Each of these conflict with aspects of traditional masculinity.

Scholars have noted that men and boys may often be resistant to poetry due to their own conceptions of masculinities. Gardner (1993), in discussing her work with runaway youth noted that:

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A number of the boys resisted the idea of poetry altogether, finding it too threatening for their masculinity or protected themselves from exposure by refusing to cooperate (p. 218).

Poetry is often viewed as a feminine art form. Indeed, this compounds the tendency that art in general may be viewed as anti-masculine by traditional, working class men.

While the frequent use of poetry with men and boys is evident, what has not been fully explored are the specific mechanisms of masculinities that may hinder and/or facilitate the uses of poetry in therapy with men. This is lamentable, as understanding masculinities and how it may influence practice, is essential to the success of our interventions with men (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). This recognition is congruent with culturally competent and sensitive approaches to practice which contend that different cultural factors, in this case gender socialization, will have profound impacts on treatment outcomes (Kosberg, 2002; Kosberg, 2005). This article will help prepare poetry therapists, creative arts therapists, and other clinicians to become more sensitive to gender issues and utilize this understanding in their practice. It explores some of the key concepts from gender and masculinities studies and provides examples of how these concepts can be used in practice as well.

Poetry therapy and masculinities

A review of the literature reveals little in terms of the relationship between poetry therapy and gender. Hodas (1991) utilized music lyrics to help adolescents explore their gender identity and sexuality. Travis and Deepak (2011) utilized hip-hop music lyrics to explore the connections between positive youth development and empowerment, and between person and environment. While poetry therapy has been practiced extensively with men, little has been written about engaging men *as* men. In other words, what knowledge, skills and values do we need to possess in order to more successfully engage men in poetry therapy *as* men? In this section, key issues from masculinities and gender studies that can be used in poetry therapy are explored.

A central concept from gender studies is that gender itself is largely socially constructed (Kimmel, 1996; Oliffe, 2005). We are born male or female, but we become men and women through the socialization of our families, schools and other important social institutions. Society teaches men the rules by which masculinity must be preformed, what is expected of them, and what they are expected not to do. It is also important to recognize that masculinities, as with many other factors related to human identity and culturally sensitive practice, are diverse. Men from different societies and at different times in history understand and “perform” masculinities differently (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Correia & Bannon, 2006). However, within each society a dominate form of masculinity is evident, one by which men are judged by themselves and others: hegemonic masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

While masculinities often vary, within North American society there is normally one accepted form of masculinity which becomes the model that shapes and contours men’s feelings, thinking and behavior; this is referred to as hegemonic masculinity. Most of us can identify various traits of this “ideal,” and clearly recognize when a man is breaking the rules

of hegemonic masculinity. These ideals include traits such as bravery, sexual prowess, stoicism, control, autonomy and independence, competitiveness and aggressiveness. Men are also supposed to be well employed in a good profession, powerful, heterosexual, muscular, and homophobic. A real man must not share his feelings, admit to vulnerability, or admit weakness.

These roles and traits are often exceedingly restrictive, and often lead to poor health outcomes (Courtenay, 2000; Courtenay, 2003) and poor longevity (Shye, Mullooly, Freeborn, & Pope, 1995). In addition, few, if any men, can actually achieve these overly restrictive roles, try as they may, due to powerful socializing forces which tell men what “real men” must do and be.

Mahalik, Lagan, and Morrison (2006) explain that:

one potential explanation of why men have less healthy lifestyles is that males are socialized to adopt masculine ideals that may put their health at risk. A gender role socialization framework posits that males are reinforced for adopting behaviors and attitudes consistent with traditional masculine norms (e.g., risk taking, self-reliance, and emotional control) and punished or shamed when they do not conform to traditional masculine norms (p.192).

The consequence of not being able to achieve these roles is referred to as gender role strain (Pleck, 1981) – the constant pressure and awareness that a man is always, to some degree or another, failing in his most important task – to be a man. This pressure, and men’s perceived failure from falling short of achieving this ideal and being “real men”, can lead to many emotional and psychological problems that lead to, and present strategic dilemmas in therapy.

The more disengaged and disconnected men become from their traditional sources of meaning, from social institutions, and from their capacity to conform to social expectations about what it means to be a man, the more likely they are to act out their emptiness, pain, and angst (Furman, 2010, p.39).

Many men come from communities where conceptions of masculinities are at odds with some aspects of the hegemonic ideal. This leads to a further exacerbation of a variation of gender role strain. Minority men and men from oppressed communities often face intense conflicts when attempting to honor their “local” masculine identity and the hegemonic ideal.

There are several implications of the notion of hegemonic masculinities for therapists utilizing poetry with men. Most significantly, the very act of poetry therapy runs counter to the hegemonic idea. Creating poetry demands an attention to the subtleties of one’s feelings, in particular what are often referred to as “softer” feelings such as sadness, doubt, tenderness, and fear. Hegemonic masculinities teach men that the only acceptable feelings are anger and lust. While identifying softer feelings are difficult for many men, even some men who are able to identify a broad range of feelings are reluctant to share them with a stranger, thereby admitting weakness. This at times requires a great deal of patience on the part of therapists, as they slowly work with their male clients on becoming more acclimated to expressing a wide range of emotions. Men who do not express “softer” emotions are not

being resistant, but instead are performing what is expected of them in many social situations.

Given this lack of fit between therapists views of emotions and those of many men, Glicken (2005) contends that therapist must pay careful attention to what their male clients want from the helping process in general, as well as from each individual session. This builds from a collaborative relationship based upon respect for a man's belief systems. As such, therapists should work with men on selecting the types of poetry to be read and experiences to be engaged in for each session, carefully working with clients to establish weekly links between the clients stated desires and overall treatment goals.

There are several techniques therapists can use to counter some of the dilemmas caused by hegemonic traits and help their clients engage with poetry. First, since poetry is often viewed as feminine, it is important to find ways to counter and challenge this perspective. One of the ways to do this is to begin by reading song lyrics with clients, particularly those written and preformed by men with whom clients may identify. The reading of poetry can be a helpful first step in helping men begin to engage in the affective aspects of the therapeutic process. Reading poems can be used to help men who have a hard time identifying their feelings. Reading poems with clear emotional content can help a man learn to increasingly identify his feelings and find resonance between the work that is being read and his feelings. This can serve as a springboard to writing exercises and the creation of his own poetry. For instance, the lyrics to Bruce Springsteen's song, "The River" is a wonderful portrayal of many of the emotions of working class men, sung by a man who is usually viewed as masculine. Another way to challenge the notion of the femininity of poetry is to focus on poetry by men who conform to more traditional forms, such as the counterculture poet Charles Bukowski. Throughout his work, Bukowski admits to his struggles with depression, and uses writing as a means of overcoming it. Therapists can encourage their male clients to reflect upon how these artists were able to express feelings of vulnerability without having their sense of masculinity diminished. Therapists can also help me to discuss what it would mean for them to express their feelings in such a manner, and what it would mean to their own sense of masculinity.

This is not to say that these are the only poetic sources that should be presented to men, but instead may be valuable during the initial phase of therapy to help, to borrow a term from social work "start where the client is" (Cameron & King, 2010). Of course, it is essential that the therapist carefully select poems that do not inadvertently reinforce aspects of hegemonic masculinity that are implicated in the client's challenges. For men whose alcohol abuse is at least partially an expression of their own sense of masculinity, poetry that present a glamorization of drinking or glamorize the impact of alcohol use on masculinity should be avoided, or at least used carefully and be balanced by poetry that presents the deleterious impact of alcohol on the lives of men.

Another important concept from masculinities studies is the notion of masculine scripts. Mahalik, Good, and Englar-Carlson (2003) developed an approach to understanding male behavior that describes the various scripts by which men live their lives. These scripts are easy ways to understand the internalization of many rules and roles by which hegemonic

masculinity operate. In different contexts and for different reasons, men will often blindly follow each role with as much faithfulness as an actor would his lines.

The strong-silent-type script propels men toward emotional restriction and stoicism. Mahalik and his colleagues reported powerful consequences of adhering to this script, including depression, anxiety, and social isolation. The tough-guy script is learned from an early age, as boys must act bravely and suppress any vulnerability. Boys learn that real men should never be soft. Boys fight, do not back down from fights, thereby placing themselves at a high-risk of violence or harm. By adopting this script, not only do men and boys increase their risk of perpetrating and being the victims of violence, but they learn to act out their feelings instead of discussing them. The give-em-hell script, a close relative to the tough-guy script, suggests the ideal that men do not back down from conflicts, but instead demonstrate their power and willingness to use violence as a means of exerting their will (Gomez Alcaraz & Garcia Suarez, 2006). Men who conform to this script are at high risk of engaging in violence in intimate relationships, and may have legal problems as well. When men live their lives by the playboy script, they seek sexual relationships not connected to emotional intimacy. Having suppressed the capacity to feel and express their own emotions, sex becomes a primary means of achieving connections. Men who live out this script equate their ability to have sexual conquests with their own personal worth. Sexual conquests become a means of achieving personal acceptance. Adhering to this norm predisposes men to problems maintaining long term, loving partnerships and places them at risk for sexually transmitted diseases. The homophobic script has powerful consequences for men and their capacity to form intimate relationships with each other. Men adhering to this script seek to prove their own manhood by shunning connections with other men, in fear of being viewed as homosexual. According to the hegemonic ideal homosexuality is anti-masculine; men adhering to this script will go to great lengths to prove they are not gay, often eschewing any type of relationship that could be construed as homosexual. The homophobic script leads to isolation and often to denial of aspects of oneself. The authors note the importance of the winner script to American culture, in which men are expected to be competitive and successful. While competition has its place, and their material and career success are of value, rigidly holding this script as the only way to achieve valuing and meaning leads to difficult consequences. Extreme adherence to this script can be associated with heart disease and other health concerns. It may also make it difficult for men to connect to others in non-competitive contexts. Lastly, the Independence script refers to men's adherence to a hyper-independent relationship style that leads to isolation and disconnection. This script also has strong health seeking consequences, as men who adhere to this script believe that they can solve their problems on their own. Seeking and receiving help are viewed as weaknesses.

Clearly the concepts included in the notion of masculine scripts overlap with other concepts we have and will explore. The power of the notion of masculine scripts is that it provides an easy to understand metaphor that can help therapists and their clients to explore the nature of their scripts and the impact on their lives. Each of these scripts lend themselves to personal reflection and discussion, and can become the fodder for the creation of poetry in therapy. In this sense, the use of masculine scripts can be both an assessment guide that can help therapists select other interventions, or can be used directly with clients as a starting point of how these scripts impact their lives.

The goal for therapy is not to compel men to eliminate their adherence to masculine scripts, but to increase their awareness about when they are acting according to scripts, and to increase their self-awareness so they can have more behavioral choices. For instance, a man who frequently employs the winner script should not be told this script is “bad” or “wrong” for him; given that his enacting this script may have often led to a great deal of success, a therapist would not have credibility if they implied it did not have value. One exercise that can help a men examine the script is for him to write two poems, one about when the script is working, and one about potential negative situations. Writing two poems about the same phenomenon will help him explore the subtleties and complexities regarding how the scripts are applied. The therapist’s role is to serve as facilitator of an open exploration of how masculine scripts impact their clients lives.

One of the areas in which each of these scripts manifests is in men’s relationships with each other. Adhering to these scripts contributes to men treating each other as competitors and rivals. In so doing, men often devalue the place that friendships with other men can have in their lives; research has demonstrated the importance of friendships to psychosocial health and well-being (Greif, 2008). A poem that I have found useful in helping men dialog about their friendships is the Gerald Locklin’s (1976) poem “Weightlifting.” The simple narrative poem presents the bench pressing ritual of the poet and his friend. It focuses on the simplicity of the task, yet throughout alludes to something more meaningfully transpiring between them. The last paragraph pushes this theme to the center.

we do not rush our workouts.
there’s time to speak of nixon, king lear, women.
it is the best part of the week. we’ve something there,
In our ramshackle gym, that many do not have

The first author of this article has frequently used this poem while working with men. Therapists should start with a slow and careful reading the poem, remembering not to rush through it, in spite of its simplicity. After the poem is read, the therapist using this poem may ask the men to reflect upon the poem and discuss what is occurring. At times, a more direct approach is needed, as men are often not accustomed to exploring the dynamics of their relationships. A good prompt to stimulate discussion is to ask for clients to elaboration on the last sentence by asking “What is it that they have that others do not.”

In addition to treating each other as competitors or rivals, men also negotiate the complex processes of holding themselves and their peers accountable. One poem that speaks to this is Haki Madhubuti’s (nee Don Lee, 1970) poem “Change-Up”

change-up,
let’s go for ourselves
both cheeks are broken now.
change-up,
move past the corner bar,

let yr/split lift u above that quick high.
 change-up,
 that tooth pick you're sucking on was
 once a log.
 change-up,
 and yr/children will look at u differently
 than we looked at our parents

The second author of this article used this poem in working with a group of middle and high school aged, African-American and Latino young men. Written in Chicago, during the Black Arts Movement, this poem still spoke to the group in present-day California. The young people felt that the straight-forward word choice was effective in conveying the urgency to “keep it real” and “change your ways.”

Men's views of the helping process

As was previously mentioned, men learn that they must be autonomous and independent. They learn that they must solve their own problems, pick themselves up by the bootstraps, and be there for others. When they need help, they perceive it as a failure. Not only did they fail, but they failed at being a man, in other words, failed as a person.

As we have explored, there exist incongruities between the emotional repertoire of many man and therapy. Brooks (1998), as presented in Kosberg (2011) explores the feelings that are typically required in the therapeutic process, and presents the corresponding emotion that hegemonic masculinity demands. Therapist must become familiar with this discrepancy, as it helps them work on their own expectations and reactions, and contextualizes the behaviors of men engaged in the therapeutic process. Observe the list, and note the how frequently the emotions demanded by traditional masculinities conflict with therapy.

Typical psychotherapy demands	Masculinity demands
Disclosing private experience	Admitting ignorance
Relinquishing control	Maintaining control
Nonsexual intimacy	Sexualizing intimacy
Showing weakness	Showing strengths
Experiencing shame	Expressing pride
Acting vulnerable	Acting invincible
Seeking help	Being self-reliant
Expressing feelings	Being stoic
Being introspective	Taking action
Addressing relationship conflict	Avoiding conflict
Confronting pain	Denying pain
Acknowledging failure	Feigning omniscience

Without becoming aware of this discrepancy, therapists risk shaming men for their current emotional capacities and skills, and risks making them feeling like failures in therapy. Such expectations decrease the likelihood that men will continue in treatment, and make it less likely that they will seek help in the future. It is important to remember that the process of change is often slow, especially for changing decades lived patterns or learning to expand our emotional range and reactions.

Clinicians and therapists have has several tools at his or her disposal to help a man feel less like a failure and be increasingly open to receiving, and ultimately seeking help. First, it is important to adopt a strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2002). A strengths perspective, where the primary focus of the work is on the strengths, capacities, hopes and dreams, aspirations and successes, is highly congruent with poetry therapy and other arts based approaches to change (Furman, Jackson, Downey, & Bender, 2002).

talked about the feel of the cut stick, the way the ball sounds when it strikes another or drops its shot successfully into the pocket, the whirr of the dropping ball down the wooden chute beneath the table. I explored that pool wouldn't be the same without the sensations, and life would not be the same, and that poetry was simply a way of noticing and appreciating those aspects of experience that please and transform us (Gardner, 1993, p.219)

The previous discussion most likely has lead to the impression that the author and the literature contend that all men are the same, have the same responses and reactions to helping, and view poetry and poetry therapy in the same manner. This is untrue. Men are not a monolithic group, and hegemonic masculinity and the roles and rules that it forces upon men do not constitute the totality of who men are. In fact, when speaking about masculinity, it is often best to speak about masculinities, both in terms of the alternative forms of masculinities that exist within groups, yet also alternative masculinities within men. For instance, a man, by virtue of being brought up in American society, may adhere to some aspects of the hegemonic idea, yet may also have been influenced by a father who developed a more inclusive, feminist masculinity which includes an appreciation and acceptance of feelings and a strong valuation of male friendships. Many men do enjoy poetry. Men are able to explore a full array of feelings, and are able to engage eloquently in therapy. Indeed, many men have worked tirelessly at examining and exploring the deleterious effects of constraining men to develop their own conceptions of what it means to be a man. Yet, all men are powerfully shaped and pulled by the coercing, constrictive norms of hegemonic masculinity, and therapists would be well served to understand the powerful ways in which it influences consciousness, behavior, and feelings. As Sabo (2011) observes regarding his own sense of masculinity he performs while teaching in a prison.

It sounds crazy, but the twinges of paranoia almost feel good. Indeed, there are parts of me, call them "threads" or "echoes" of masculine identity, that embrace the distrust and welcome the presumed danger and potential for violence (p.84).

Indeed, transcending the vestiges of our socialization, no matter how confining, is a complex process that never is fully complete.

Additionally, it is also true that not all aspects of traditional or hegemonic masculinities are always problematic. For instance, bravery may have potential health consequences when “applied” to all situations, but firefighters and police officers behaving bravely in crisis situations can insure the survival of innocent people. Men know, intuitively, that some of these attributes of hegemonic masculinities have led to their success. Aggressiveness, competitiveness, an unwillingness not to “win” may be powerful attributes that lead to career success. Therapists should never challenge the powerful benefits that these traits have had; to do so would lead them to lose credibility with their clients. Instead, men should be helped to see the contextual nature of these attributes. For instance, aggressiveness may have a functional quality in some work contexts but may be extremely detrimental to personal relationships. Therapists can help men see these attributes as “tools,” and help them learn how to develop new tools for new context.

One helpful exercise may be to help men create poems which explore the contextual usefulness of some of these attributes. For instance, asking them to write from the stem: “My anger works for me” and then “my anger does not work for me” helps them view their anger from multiple perspectives. Exercises such as this encourage men to explore for themselves the complexities of their feelings and masculine identities helps create awareness, along with cognitive and behavioral flexibility.

Therapists must always adopt a strengths based approach when working with men, helping maximize their resources and increase their capacities. Therapists who focus too much energy on what is “wrong” with men may find themselves seeing very few male clients for second or third sessions. Therapists must be aware of the impact of hegemonic masculinity without “forcing” men into this small and confining box. All human beings are a complex constellation of strengths, capacities and concerns.

Once men are comfortable with exploring the emotional content within poetry, and hopefully the emotional content of their own creative writing, more challenging material can be provided about the nature of masculinities. For example, the performance poem “Manly Man” by Bradley Hathaway (2010) presents a complex and nuanced perspective on what it means to be a man. The author explores the aspects of his personality which are congruent with the hegemonic idea, yet explores how his more traditionally “feminine” characteristics are equally representative of his masculinity. Playing the video of the performance, along with a study of the words, can help stimulate a powerful discussion regarding conceptions of identity. When therapists take such risks, they may find men responding with sexist or homophobic language. Much care must be taken in exploring the implications of these language choices. To not comment may be perceived as condoning sexism and homophobia, yet being confrontive may be shaming and thwart open dialog. It is best that the therapist asks open-ended questions about the meaning of such language, and help men explore the meaning of language which often comes up in such dialog.

Conclusion

In this article, we explore some of the key concepts from masculinities studies, and demonstrate their importance to understanding the therapeutic process and in working with

men. Practical suggestions for how to integrate this knowledge were presented. While this article discusses some key issues relevant to engaging men in poetry therapy, it is by no means a comprehensive exploration of masculinities studies and its implications for poetry and art therapy, which would be far beyond the scope of any single article. It is imperative that when therapists work with any culturally different population that the therapist becomes increasingly knowledgeable about culturally sensitive and competent practices. It is the contention of the authors of this article that men, indeed, are a culturally distinct population with their own preferences, capacities and needs. Therapists and others who use poetry with men would be well served to continue to explore lessons from masculinities studies, gender studies, and theorists and practitioners who have integrated lessons from these fields into their work. Lastly, it is important for therapists to familiarize themselves not only with techniques and interventions useful for working with men, but also to the poetry of and about men which can be a valuable means of understanding the experiences of men, for instance the classic anthology by Bly, Hillman, and Meade (1993).

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