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Forests, Trees, and Streams: Why an Integration of Discursive Psychological Frameworks and Gender Role Strain Paradigms Is Needed

Wizdom Powell Hammond

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Abstract

The current article provides commentary on Wetherell and Edley's (2014) article, "A Discursive Psychological Framework for Analyzing Men and Masculinities." Using examples from their published research, the authors present and challenge methodologies stemming from the gender role strain paradigm (GRSP). The core argument presented in their article is that discursive psychological approach (DP) provides a better framework for capturing situational masculinities. In this commentary, I argue for less methodological essentialism in the psychology of men and masculinities. DP has great utility for examining the ways men talk about situational enactment of masculinities. However, they do not resolve all of our methodological dilemmas. Chiefly, I suggest that we have more to gain from integrating DP frameworks and GRSP than from using either of these methods alone.

Keywords

psychology of men; masculinities; gender role strain; discursive psychology

The psychology of men and masculinities has significantly advanced scientific understanding of the myriad costs (i.e., social, emotional, and physical) associated with rigid adherence to hegemonic masculine ideals. The roots of this scientific advancement can be traced back to the gender role strain paradigm (GRSP; Garnets & Pleck, 1979; Pleck, 1981, 1995; Thompson & Pleck, 1986). Before the application of GRSP, studies framed males almost exclusively as biological—as opposed to social—beings. This limited framing led to a fundamental misattribution of power and privilege to men regardless of their social positioning or level of adherence to dominant gender role norms. A core contribution of GRSP rests in its putting discrepancy-strain arguments in the forefront of debates about the role of gender in male psychological outcomes. The acknowledgment by GRSP that male social privilege and power are not equally distributed or leveraged in men's everyday lived experience meant that gender role standards could alas be appreciably interrogated. GRSP's interrogation of discrepancies between gender role standards and individual gender role characteristics birthed an unparalleled body of empirical research. In this issue, Wetherell

and Edley (2014) shine a light on these contributions and also on the (important) limitations of the methodological and psychometric approaches stemming from GRSP. The authors also challenge the overwhelming reliance on quantitative approaches in dominant North American masculinity scholarship and suggest discursive psychological (DP) frameworks as a more viable alternative. Undoubtedly, GRSP and the measures developed to assess its underlying ideologies moved the psychology of men and masculinities forward in vital ways. Without this rich body of work, there would be no theoretical basis for exploring discursive inconsistencies and processes of contradistinction (Said, 1978) in men's enactment of masculinities.

Wetherell and Edley (2014) artfully lay out the methodological limitations of current psychometric approaches to the psychology of men masculinities. The most notable limitation described was the striking resemblance between our current psychometric approaches and the past trait-based assessments of masculinity we fought long and hard to distance ourselves from. I agree that the psychometric approaches we use most often to measure and evaluate gender role strain as it emerges in the lives of men lag somewhat behind our more expansive understanding of gender role norms variability. Yet, I remain convinced that something valuable can be learned from examining scores obtained from scales designed to assess gender role strains, conflicts, and ideologies. The authors make a compelling case for the examination of men's discursive practices and patterns not just as means to an empirical end—but rather as legitimate ends. Their case for employing qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, approaches is grounded in a primary assumption that the former methods offer a methodological advance. Another assumption is that the broader application of DP will lead to improved assessment of naturally occurring shifts in the ways that masculine roles play out in men's lives. The crux of their argument is that North American scholarship on GRSP has not paid enough attention to the nuanced ways men talk about masculinities. While this assessment is fair, next I point to, examples of North American scholarship that focus on the first-hand accounts of struggles for normativity among African American males.

The primary objective of this illustration and my commentary is to encourage an integration of GRSP and DP in the interest of advancing the application of methodologies that yield more holistic assessments of how masculinities are experienced and enacted. My chief argument is that to ultimately solve the pressing “wicked problems” produced when males strive to achieve hegemonic masculine ideals at all costs, we need to invoke methods that allow us to unearth upstream and downstream processes. Both inductive and deductive methods of inquiry are necessary. We need a substantive assessment of how men think about masculinities on average, how they speak about the inherent strains arising from performing masculinities, *and* how they actually perform masculinities in situ. In other words, We need to be able to see the forests *and* the trees.

Making the Case for Integrating DP Frameworks and GRSP

While North American studies investigating GRSP are arguably more quantitative, the stream of scholarship devoted to investigating masculinities among socially subordinated groups of men (e.g., African American men) has largely relied on qualitative approaches. I

briefly describe some of this scholarship to make the case that the integration of psychometric assessments of GRSP and DP frameworks provide a more viable option. Another reason for providing this description is to provide examples of North American scholarship devoted to discourse-centered analysis. A notable amount of African American masculinities research focuses on meaning-making processes and places an emphasis on discursive patterns—the ways African American men talk about routinely enacting masculinities (Cazenave, 1979, 1981, 1984; Hunter & Davis, 1992, 1994; Staples, 1978). Although this research does not explicitly invoke the DP approach, it is closely aligned with its principles of focusing on the ways men talk about masculinities.

For instance, in a qualitative study about African American manhood meaning, Hammond and Mattis (2005) demonstrate that in the face of blocked socioeconomic opportunities, African American men's narratives reflect a proactive reformulation of themselves as spiritual and emotional providers. Hunter and Davis (1992, 1994) also used qualitative methods to explore men's narratives and to move beyond static or fixed categorization of African American masculinities. A major theme of the qualitative African American masculinity scholarship is the discrepancy-strains induced as a consequence of being forced onto the margins of masculinities. The narratives analyzed in these studies illustrate that even where dominant North American paradigms govern, nondominant groups of men forge considerable campaigns of identity resistance and do so through meaning-making processes. By coupling what we have learned from qualitative work with psychometric assessments of masculinity norms, we have a better understanding of how they might at times positively impact African American male health outcomes (Hammond, Matthews, Mohottige, Agyemang, & Corbie-Smith, 2010, 2010b, Hammond, Matthews, & Corbie-Smith, 2010). As a consequence, we have a better understanding of the lack of uniformity in the health impacts of presumably fixed masculinity norms. I firmly believe that GRSP carved out a discursive space for African American men and allowed researchers to use their hidden voices to challenge dominant ideologies. There is evidence of North American research that "pays closer attention to the nuances of men's talk" while also building upon the strengths of existing psychometric assessments.

The point here is that the discrepancies and strains that men feel when carrying out socially prescribed (or proscribed) masculinities are at the subtext of their narratives and discursive patterns. Even in Wetherell and Edley's (2014) article, it is difficult to separate the ways that male participants talk about enacting masculinities in situ from cognitions more reflective of the gender role strains that undergird them. It appears that the authors are forcing an unnecessary dichotomy between belief or cognitions and speech. Furthermore, talking about masculinities, even as established repertoires, is not equivalent to performing them.

Fostering More Theoretical and Methodological Integration

It is a fair indictment by the authors that psychometric instruments birthed by GRSP assume that masculine role norms are fairly fixed. However, these instruments also assume that these role prescriptions are multidimensional in nature. The multidimensional construction of these measures implies that men's patterns of endorsements are not necessarily always uniformed. Even if psychometric approaches adopted by GRSP researchers appear to

assume consistency of enactment, it is clear that authors presumed, and even expected, that men might score high on scales reflecting extreme self-reliance and, at the same time, obtain low scores on measures assessing restrictive emotionality. The challenge less successfully addressed by these approaches lies in trying to analyze this data in ways that capture this presumed within-person variability. It is plausible that person-centered application of latent class analytic methods could capture this intraindividual variability more accurately. This approach does not fully address the issues raised by Wetherell and Edley (2014), but it gets us a bit closer to the goal of moving beyond assuming (at least methodologically) that masculinities are enacted in fixed, static, or uniformed ways.

The authors adeptly note that men shift, sometimes fluidly, between hegemonic, subordinate, and complicit masculinities. The DP approach offers significant possibilities for examining these shifts. But, to fully grasp a sense of how men move fluidly between hegemonic, subordinate, and complicit masculinities, we could also use quantitative methods that allow us to assess these shifts more proximally. Similarly, to assess situational patterning of masculinities, scores on psychometric instruments measuring GRSP could be captured with repeated-measures designs. In other words, our application and measurement of GRSP does not have to lead to determinate models of masculinities. Real-time data capture (e.g., ecological momentary assessment techniques) is also a viable option for examining situational patterning of masculinities. Situational patterning of masculinities is critical to pen down, especially because of what is known about the role of immediate social contextual exposures in shaping behaviors linked to male health disparities. Applying life-course developmental frameworks and using them to inform the quantitative and qualitative methodologies we employ could also serve to bridge the divide. For example, we could use life history analysis, as applied to research on urban low-income African American males (Aronson, White-head, & Baber, 2003), to examine shifts in discrepancy-strains as men age and confront new role demands. It will be especially important to determine which life-course transitions exacerbate discrepancy-strains and which mitigates them. Such a determination can only be made after conducting longitudinal research. Lastly, there is also the matter of measurement scale and appropriateness. There is an underlying assumption in the authors' argument that the DP approach can be aptly used to answer all (or at least most) research questions related to situational masculinities. Any one-size-fits-all approach applied to such a complex set of phenomena will leave many pressing questions for our field unanswered.

Conclusions

We are at a critical empirical juncture in the psychology of men and masculinities, marked by unprecedented national interest in the health of men and boys. Hence, it is imperative that the next wave of masculinity scholarship address the looming methodological limitations. Doing so will establish a more cohesive evidence base from which federal and philanthropic leaders can draw guidance for new policy initiatives (e.g., My Brother's Keeper) designed to improve the well-being of men and boys. What is most needed at this juncture is a focus on theoretical integration and a push back against our own methodological essentialism. The singular application of DP to the study of men and masculinities will not necessarily yield better results or as the authors note solve all of our methodological dilemmas. Also,

overlooking the inherent limitations of our psychometric assessments of gender role strains, norms, or ideologies and proceeding with research as usual is also not the way forward. GRSP provides an extremely useful framework for examining the architecture of assumptions that underlie discursive patterns and practices. I remain convinced that something valuable can be learned from examining scores obtained from scales designed to assess gender role strains, conflicts, and ideologies. However, I do believe that the criticism offered by the authors is constructive and should be viewed as a challenge to our field to use scales stemming from GRSP far less often in isolation and to develop additional methods that better assess how masculinities are routinely performed. Most ideally, our methodological approaches to the study of psychology of men and masculinities would allow us to use the full continuum of methods and a variety of angles and lenses—that is, to fully appreciate and investigate the forests, trees, and streams.

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