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Sex and gender

Men: say how you feel! Well, sort of...

Dr John Barry reviews Channel 4's 'How to Be a Man' documentary.

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Who else was excited to hear about the new Channel 4 two-part **documentary** 'How to be a Man'? It starts with the narrator, actor Danny Dyer, taking an online test of 'toxic masculinity'. Exasperated at his scores after several attempts, he admits "even when I cheat it still tells me I'm toxic". The important lesson here – though not mentioned in the documentary – is that **measures of masculinity** created since the 1980s are almost universally biased towards making men look bad.

The focus then turns to the popularity of Andrew Tate's ideas with schoolboys. This is a serious topic but the discussion with a group of schoolchildren was disappointing (more on this later in this article). Next, the treatment of another frowned-upon influencer, Ed Matthews, seemed somewhat dismissive, with little exploration of *why* schoolboys gravitate to people like Tate and Matthews rather than their parents, teachers, or other potential role models.

The next section of the documentary improved considerably, with MP for Mansfield, Ben Bradley, who made the point that all too often men are looked down on. As Bradley put it, you can't lift men up without being accused of pulling women down.

The topic of male victims of female domestic violence was an important inclusion, and Dyer's reaction proved this: "I didn't realise how much [violence against men by women] was going on". We heard then about a harrowing family court case, where a man called Matthew experienced domestic violence from his wife. However the courts believed her lies about him being a violent drug abuser, so granted him only two hours per month supervised access to his son. After 6 years of abuse towards their son, she murdered the boy. The impact on Dyer - shock, anger, sympathy, and a recognition that the system is broken - was one most viewers will have been able to relate to.

Dyer visited a gay men's choir in Brighton. Probably the loudest message from this section - though it was not made explicitly - is that gay men have overcome their problems in a way that straight men have yet to; they have done so by uniting and supporting each other through thick and thin, which is something men in general have had great difficulty doing when it comes to issues around domestic violence, being cancelled for having 'unacceptable' views, being falsely accused of sex crimes, etc.

The second part of the documentary started with an exploration of the importance of men as stay-at-home-dads (SAHDs). The benefits to men and children of having a father in the home was made, though for those of us who are aware of the phenomenon of **parental alienation**, it would have been interesting to explore whether it is more difficult to alienate dads who have a much greater role in the daily lives of their children than the average full-time working man is able to.

Dr Becci Owens, module leader of the first course in the world on male psychology (it's **official**), talked about how evolution and biology impact masculine and feminine behaviours. This is an important issue, because many 'experts' on masculinity see it as merely a 'gender norm', something we learn from the world around us rather than inheriting - to some degree at least - in our biology. The reality is that masculinity is a product of both nature and nurture, and it was important that this documentary include a nod to the much-neglected nature half of this reality. The issue is more than just an academic debate though, because if you think men's behaviour is just something they learn via their upbringing and environment, then you tend to advocate - as many masculinity 'experts' do - that problem

behaviours such as aggression can merely be unlearned. But as Dyer rightly pointed out in the section on the mental health benefits of boxing: “Men are physically stronger and more aggressive than women. That’s a key difference and that’s surely part of the future of men as well as the past. But it doesn’t have to be dangerous... you can channel it in the right way”.

The documentary included a few sections that had less impact, such as the bit set in a Brighton sex shop which was mostly about sadomasochistic sex. Dyer commented “it’s confusing, how much men should push the boundaries”, and for sure the issue is more nuanced – and with more legal implications – than the documentary allowed time for. Also in Brighton, the section on men dressing flamboyantly seemed a less relevant topic in relation to the majority of men. Dyer commented that being yourself will make you more confident, and confidence makes you attractive, but seeing him dressed in a floral boiler suit didn’t exactly support this point.

In perhaps the best section, working class lad Dyer is very lucky have had his “first ever lecture” delivered by consultant clinical psychologist and expert in male psychology, Martin Seager. Those of us who have seen Martin speak will relate to the positive impact it had on Dyer, who commented: “He’s really given me a bit of a lift and a bit of a spring in my step about why this show really needs to be told... I was feeling bogged down by it all... but then Martin comes up...”.

The final section was a men’s retreat hosted by ex-stuntman and MSc Psychology graduate Doug Robson. The retreat was based on Jungian ideas, and will be familiar to fans of Robert Bly and Robert Moore. A point Robson made was that men need to rediscover the space they used to have in the traditional pub, where they could connect with each other as men. His retreat definitely offered a lot more than my local pub, including an ice bath, drinking hot cacao, dancing, sharing thoughts and feelings (we already do that at my pub), breathing exercises, and meditation, most of which were enjoyed by Dyer, or as much as the documentary shooting schedule would allow him.

It’s fantastic that Channel 4 took a risk in daring to suggest that **masculinity** might not be such a terrible thing as we have been led to believe in recent years. I agree with Dyer’s conclusion: there are groups and activities out there that men can go and join (boxing, retreats etc), *so go out and find one of these groups and express yourself*. However there is an important caveat he overlooks, and which is my only real issue with the documentary: although the message of expressing yourself is well made, it didn’t address Martin Seager’s point that that mental health services need

to be much more ready to listen to men. (Here is some [advice on finding a male-friendly therapist](#)). This relates to earlier in the documentary where schoolchildren were asked to express what they think about Andrew Tate. However, they were asked to express themselves in circumstances that could not have made them feel safe to do so, for three reasons: they were on national TV; a female teacher was present who was clearly hostile to support of Tate; it wasn't clear that the group was male-only. What boy would be brave / foolhardy enough to voice uncritical support for Tate in these conditions? It reminds me of The Clash lyric: *"You have the right to free speech... as long as you're not dumb enough to actually try it"*.

The elephant in the room here is why are we so eager to prevent boys from saying what they think. Sure, there has been a wave of RSE workshops in schools to persuade boys they shouldn't listen to Tate, yet his popularity remains. Perhaps we should be discussing this issue with boys in good faith, not just desperately responding with the conversational equivalent of finger-wagging. The same applies to men, who are urged to talk about their feelings, but might not get a favourable reaction if they complain about being the victim of female violence, female bullying, or other verboten topics that might earn them more scorn than sympathy.

Overall it has to be said that the documentary was a significant step forward for terrestrial TV, and for that, congratulations are in order to all involved. I wonder if the BBC, Sky and others will see the light and follow suit? Let's not hold our breath for this, but I hope at least that this documentary is a catalyst for some more open, honest, good-faith conversations.

You can see both episodes of the documentary [here](#).

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