

Why have people started distancing themselves from the term 'toxic masculinity'?

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A lot can change in a few years. In 2018 the phrase 'toxic masculinity' was ranked second on the [Oxford University Press \(OUP\) Word of the Year list](#).

The OUP commented *“the term toxic masculinity has well and truly taken root in the public consciousness”*.

In 2019 [Martin Seager and I wrote](#) *“There is a serious risk arising from using terms such as ‘toxic masculinity’. [...] Negative labelling and terminology usually have a negative impact, including self-fulfilling prophecies and alienation of the groups who are being labelled.”*

We were not alone in our concerns about this terminology. [A survey](#) by myself and colleagues published in in 2020 found 85% of people didn’t like the term ‘toxic masculinity’. In July 2023 [my article](#) ‘Toxic masculinity is toxic terminology’ was published, outlining my [new research finding](#) that the more men believed masculinity made them behave badly, the worse their mental health.

Myself and [many others](#) had been warning about the potential harms of negative conceptions of masculinity for years, especially since the furore about the APA guidelines in 2019. You might be surprised that many people employed in psychology – including men’s mental health – take the view that masculinity is a significant cause of many of men’s problems. Their views are typically based on ideas such as patriarchy theory, hegemonic masculinity (*“[the dominance of men and the subordination of women](#)”*), and the assumption that masculinity is nothing more than a social construct, and is harmful to men’s mental health.

For this reason I was somewhat surprised when, at a meeting in August 2023, one such person enthusiastically announced that people should stop saying masculinity is toxic. I hadn’t expected this statement, and thought it

was a one-off, until a similar thing happened a few weeks later. Then I started seeing people saying it on YouTube, on X... I was initially puzzled but optimistic about what this meant, until I began to realise that although they were distancing themselves from the specific term 'toxic masculinity', they hadn't abandoned their core idea that masculinity is a problem. It looked like they were distancing themselves from the term because they realised so many people found it a huge turn-off.

In an ideal world the public reaction against the term 'toxic masculinity' might have made them pause to ask themselves whether the general public were correct. I suspect the reason they didn't is because of the lack of viewpoint diversity in their training; when psychologists or sociologists etc. learn about the psychology of men, they learn about patriarchy theory, social constructionism, hegemonic masculinity, and a similar narrow range of negative views of masculinity. They very rarely, for example, hear a proper critique of those theories, let alone look at men's psychology from perspectives such as positive psychology. The negative views are reinforced by the media, government policy, and their employers, which is a great shame because it deprives them of an evidence base of different ways to understanding men and masculinity that would help them to more deeply connect with men and boys.

In any case, a few weeks ago I was delighted to be invited to answer some questions about the term 'toxic masculinity' for [an article](#) in The Independent newspaper, written by Ben Bryant. As is usual for articles like this, several other people gave their views and from the stack of resulting material only small portion of my answers were used. Much of what was

said in the article by the various interviewees gave food for thought, but giving viewpoint diversity a boost, readers of *Male Psychology* will find it interesting to read the parts of my answers, with a few edits for clarity, that didn't make the final edit. The Q&A below includes some quotes from the Independent article, and the journalist's questions to me are ***in bold italics***.

What does your research show about the impact of viewing masculinity negatively on boys?

I haven't done any research on boys, but [a survey](#) by myself and colleagues found around 85% of men and women agreed the term 'toxic masculinity' is insulting, unlikely to improve men's behaviour and possibly damaging to boys if they hear or read about the term.

My [research with 4,000 men](#) found that thinking masculinity causes you to engage in bad behaviour (e.g. inclined to be violent towards women) was correlated with worse mental wellbeing, but – as quoted in the Independent article – *“thinking masculinity causes you to engage in good behaviour (e.g. inclined to be protective towards women) was correlated with good mental wellbeing. A key question is where these beliefs come from, and my guess is the negative beliefs are being promoted daily in the media, academia, governments, NGOs etc. and these messages impact men.”* The findings of this study are correlational so don't prove the beliefs cause the change in wellbeing, but I controlled for many other variables, and in the end it makes sense that there is causality here, even if it's not

definitively proved. Further research is need on this topic, but there is virtually no interest in this issue in the social sciences.

Why is 'toxic masculinity' a bad phrase (and should it be retired)?

As quoted in the Independent article: *"No matter what people claim they mean by the term, it's much too easy for it to sound negative, especially in a culture where negativity about men and masculinity is fairly common"*.

The survey I mentioned found 85% of respondents thought it was insulting and possibly harmful, and I think the majority of people in the general population would agree.

A related problem is that, as quoted in the Independent article, *"in saying that bad behaviour is caused by masculinity, the real causes of criminality in men (as in women) are overlooked. The real causes are things like adverse childhood experience, such childhood neglect or sexual abuse"*. In fact a good sense of masculinity is what boys need growing up, and absence of a father from the home deprives them of the best possible role model (provided of course the father isn't abusive). So a more hidden but no less insidious thing about the 'toxic masculinity' narrative is that it diverts attention and resources from where they might help (e.g. marriage guidance, parenting classes), and instead fuels a pointless ongoing diatribe against masculinity. The diatribe is fuelled by a [mountain of low-quality research](#) based on a false premise and coming to false conclusions (e.g. that masculinity causes suicidal thinking).

Does the phrase 'toxic masculinity' imply that masculinity is bad by default?

Some people who use it say they don't mean that masculinity is inevitably or inherently toxic, just that some expressions of it are toxic. However as we point out in the British Psychological Society (BPS) textbook [*Perspectives in Male Psychology*](#) "it is difficult to use a compound term like this without implying that toxicity is part of masculinity" (Liddon & Barry 2021, p.249). As quoted in the Independent article: *"If you think about terms like 'toxic Blackness', 'toxic femininity' or 'toxic Islam', it suddenly becomes clear that it's difficult to combine the word 'toxic' with any demographic without it sounding pretty damning of that demographic"*.

There has been a trend in the past couple of years of people proclaiming 'Oh, I don't think masculinity is toxic'. The first time I heard this I was surprised and impressed, but then realised that although they were saying masculinity isn't toxic, they believed that aspects of masculinity are harmful, such as 'social norms' to be stoical, competitive etc., all of which they view as learned behaviour, with no influence of biology or evolution. The reality is that any belief can become bad, typically if it is adhered to too rigidly e.g. "I absolutely have to win or else I am worthless". But this applies to any beliefs – in the 1990s the Aum Shinrikyo cult in Japan even turned Buddhist teaching into something destructive. But in any case masculinity is not what causes behaviour that people call 'toxic masculinity' – other factors such as trauma and depression cause these problems.

Why is pathologising masculinity bad?

It is pathologizing something that is positive for men and society. Also, my research suggests that the negative narrative has a negative impact on men's wellbeing.

How do you feel about alternatives like 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' masculinity (which are currently being used in workshops with boys)?

In a culture that respected men, these terms would be ok. However in a culture that is routinely negative, these terms get twisted so that for example 'healthy masculinity' becomes a way of saying 'masculinity is unhealthy, unless you behave in XYZ healthy ways'. So often it's just a subtle way of denigrating masculinity.

In 2019 the NYT defined toxic masculinity as 'suppressing emotions or masking distress', 'maintaining an appearance of hardness', and 'violence as an indicator of power'. Do you agree that these things are 'toxic'?

Through the millennia, men have learned to behave in these ways because in some situations it has survival value e.g. during times of war. Also during times of emergency e.g. dealing with street crime, these behaviours can be necessary too. I think part of the problem is that so many people have comfortable lives these days, in air conditioned offices, that they can't imagine having to deal with a real life emergency. It's a bit like the fight or flight response – people don't think it's important until they need it.

Furthermore some people who suffer from panic attacks find the fight or flight response highly unpleasant. Regardless, it's a survival mechanism and we would be extremely foolish to try to get rid of it.

Is it bad for organisations like the APA, charities working with boys, or the prime minister to continue to use the term?

Definitely. Every time negative terms like 'toxic masculinity' are used it fans the flames of hostility to men and boys. The APA should know better, but then again most of academia has been captured since around the 1980s with the idea that masculinity is a problem. Unfortunately everyone else – the charities, government, media, NGOs – take on board the flawed research findings apparently confirming negativity about masculinity. It's a massive problem, being [made worse by AI](#) which regurgitates information from the mountain of poor research. Advancements in science should be about standing on the shoulders of giants, but in the case of masculinity research we are not standing on the shoulders of giants.

Do you agree with the [APA](#) that 'traditional masculinity—marked by stoicism, competitiveness, dominance and aggression—is, on the whole, harmful'?

These characteristics are usually presented as a caricature of a man who is devoid of emotion, irritatingly competitive, annoyingly domineering, and unbearably aggressive. With proper understanding of masculinity they would appreciate that all of these things evolved for a reason and typically

are beneficial to men and society. Sadly, many organisations have fallen for extreme ideological ideas about men e.g. hegemonic masculinity, which paint a painfully cynical view of men and masculinity.

When it comes to educating boys, what is the appropriate way to navigate the real harm that some men enact upon women (eg rape and violence)?

We should avoid conveying the idea that all boys are potential rapists. Sex offenders are a small minority of men (and women), so, as quoted in the Independent article, *"we shouldn't talk about the statistical minority as if they are the majority. There will probably always be a hard core of damaged boys that for one reason or another tend towards bad behaviour. But that doesn't mean we should talk to all boys as if they are potential rapists"*. It is important to know that in telling boys 'don't be that guy' there is a risk of making the hard core worse, and a risk of harming the other boys e.g. some will feel deep shame at being male, or angry and alienated that they are being treated like sex offenders.

Do you think we do enough to celebrate the positive contributions of men, eg the contributions of the male-dominated STEM industries, or the construction industry?

Good question. No, as a culture we fail terribly, and in fact the narrative probably makes boys feel ashamed that they excel in some subjects, or enjoy winning, team sports etc. Also we fail to recognise the positives of

masculinity. There is almost zero interest in this in academic research, but there is evidence that masculinity is good for mental wellbeing (e.g. [Barry et al., 2020](#)).

Is male achievement undervalued or disparaged because male-dominated industries are regarded as conspiratorially exclusive of women?

I don't know. Probably. The mind boggles at the conspiracy theories about men, patriarchy theory foremost among them, with hegemonic masculinity a close second.

Selected references / recommended reading

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