2049521

For this paper, I read *The Mask You Live In*, which is a documentary on toxic masculinity (also referred to as hypermasculinity). Wikipedia provides a good definition of the term toxic masculinity: “adherence to traditional male gender roles that restrict the kinds of emotions allowable for boys and men to express, including social expectations that men seek to be dominant (the "alpha male") and limit their emotional range primarily to expressions of anger” (Wikipedia). The documentary argues that it is not so much that there are inherent differences in biological sex as that men are socialized to act a certain way and their brains change as a result of the experience. The main themes of the documentary are best explained in the three conclusions of a finding from a study done by the Surgeon General: men are socialized to be less sensitive to pain and suffering, fearful of the world, and more aggressive. In addition, the documentary also takes some time to discuss possible solutions. In this essay, I will start with addressing the three main issues as listed above, then talk about the possible solutions, then present my evaluation of the documentary as a whole.

One major part of toxic masculinity is “big boys don’t cry” - expression of any emotion other than anger is seen as weakness. Men who are too emotional (or otherwise unmasculine) are seen as effeminate and insulted as sissies, gay, or both. A common example of this is that in many cases where a man compliments another man, he’ll follow it up with “no homo”. Men tend to be starved of emotional and physical intimacy because if they are intimate with other men (even platonically), people will call them sissies or gay. This is related to a discussion we had in class in which we associate certain actions/traits (in this case, emotion and physical affection) with women and thus view those actions/traits as inferior (and society associates feminine traits in men with homosexuality). This devaluing means that men have difficulty showing empathy and vulnerability, and they are more likely to internalize their problems to depression and/or externalize their problems into violence. Several boys and men in the documentary talk about their individual struggles with this and describe problems such as difficulty finding friends, peer pressure, depression, and substance abuse.

The second point is that men become fearful of the world. Society states that there are certain status markers that are not only indicators, but prerequisites for being masculine. Athletics and economic success are two common examples. As a result, men who have neither athletic skills nor economic success have a hard time experiencing self-worth. As the documentary pointed out, although sports coaches can be great sources of character-building they can also intentionally or unintentionally reinforce hyper masculine stereotypes that teach men to be physically strong and not express emotion. In some cases, this also means playing through pain despite what is best for the body. Men have very high standards to live up to and feel bad when they can’t meet those standards.

Thirdly, men tend to be more aggressive. As mentioned earlier, society doesn’t afford men much of an outlet to express and cope with their emotions and problems. However, it is socially acceptable and in some cases even expected for men to be angry, tough, and violent. Men get a lot of representation in media (movies, tv, books, music, etc.), but in many cases it is toxic masculinity that is portrayed. The documentary lists a few common male archetypes: the strong silent type (tough, never shows weakness, not very expressive), the superhero (incredibly tough, rarely shows weakness, perfect at everything), the thug (violent, dangerous, typically a person of color), the manchild (selfish, immature, and overly emotional - this is sometimes portrayed as endearing and sometimes portrayed negatively, and which one of these it is usually depends on how emotional the character is). The nerd (smart, weak, no social life) is not mentioned in the list, but one of the boys in the documentary does point out earlier how the hyper masculine culture says it’s “not cool to be smart”. The positive role models men get are aggressive and otherwise emotionless. The people portrayed as bad examples are the ones who are too weak, too emotional, etc.

These examples are also seen in video games - a lot of video games (e.g., Grand Theft Auto) involve violence and illegal activities. Playing video games causes people to habituate. As psychologist Zimbardo explains, habituation is adaptation to a stimulus such that the original response it provokes is diminished with subsequent exposure. The original shock factor of violence wears off over time, and so does the adrenaline rush. This means that men engage with more and more violent media in a sort of “arousal addiction”. This effect is particularly pronounced with video games because players are active participants instead of passive consumers. Another relevant case is pornography. Many men are exposed to pornography whether they are looking for it or not, and many of them actively seek it out. Pornography acts as a sort of sex education, teaching people what sex is like or should be like. From there, people get the ideas that male violence and coercion of women is normal and even desired by the women. This also contributes to a lot of the myths of rape culture - women who dress a certain way are “asking for it”, no means yes, rape isn’t that big of a deal, etc. And as with other forms of media, people become addicted and habituated to pornography as well. People with this skewed view of sex are more likely to commit sexual assault, and they are also more likely to believe in/participate in rape culture, thus perpetuating the social injustices that stigmatize victims of sexual assault and the systemic injustices that make it harder for victims to get help and perpetrators to be stopped (or, failing that, punished according to the law).

The documentary also talked a little bit about possible solutions to toxic masculinity. At the forefront of the suggestions was positive role models. It is very important for people in positions of authority (parents, teachers, coaches, political leaders) to promote and exhibit positive examples of masculinity and help steer men away from toxic masculinity. For example, it is very important for fathers to be expressive and open emotionally with their sons and encourage their sons to do the same.

I appreciated the documentary as a whole, but I think there were a few things that could be improved. I appreciated how the documentary presented the voices of a variety of people (boys, young men, older men, a psychologist, etc.). The main themes of the documentary were clearly established, explained, and exemplified. However, I found the section about possible solutions somewhat lacking. Role models are important and individual interactions are good, but I would have liked to see suggestions on how to deal with the problem on a systemic level. I would also have appreciated more time and examples to be devoted to the solution section in general. As it is, however, I thought the documentary did a good job of describing a problem and briefly touching on solutions.

Newsom, Jennifer S, Jessica Congdon, Jessica Anthony, Regina K. Scully, Joe Ehrmann, Michael S. Kimmel, Caroline Heldman, Lise Eliot, Michael G. Thompson, William S. Pollack, Carol Gilligan, Madeline Levine, Judy Y. Chu, Terry A. Kupers, Niobe Way, Pedro Noguera, Philip G. Zimbardo, Byron Hurt, James Gilligan, John Behrens, and Eric Holland. *The Mask You Live in*. , 2015.

“Toxic Masculinity.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 10 May 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toxic\_masculinity.