



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.

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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:

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

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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 dominant 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,

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