

What is “Toxic Masculinity” and Why Does it Matter?

Abstract

Coined in late 20th century men’s movements, “toxic masculinity” spread to therapeutic and social policy settings in the early 21st century. Since 2013, feminists began attributing misogyny, homophobia and men’s violence to toxic masculinity. Around the same time, feminism enjoyed renewed popularization. While some feminist scholars use the concept, it is often left under-defined. I argue that talk of toxic masculinity provides an intriguing window into gender politics in any given context. However, feminists should not adopt toxic masculinity as an analytical concept. I consider the term’s origins, history, and usage, arguing that it appears in individualising discourses that have historically targeted marginalized men. Thus, accusations of toxic masculinity often work to maintain gender hierarchies and individualise responsibility for gender inequalities to certain bad men.

I’ve been teaching and studying gender-based violence since around 2000. For most of that time I rarely encountered the term “toxic masculinity,” despite relying on the concept of masculinity in my research and teaching. In my undergraduate course, “Reflecting on Violence,” I introduce students to the concept of masculinity and teach them that gender-based violence is historically and culturally specific, involving both structural and situational power relations. However *toxic* masculinity is not part of the sociological or feminist theories I have drawn on to analyse gender-based violence.

This changed in 2018 when during a discussion of mass rampage shootings in my “Violence” class, one student commented that the weekly reading’s analysis of mass shooters described “toxic masculinity,” although it did not use the phrase. I was struck by the confidence with which the student referenced the term as a concept anyone would know. On my way home that day, I tuned into a radio interview with Clementine Ford discussing toxic masculinity as the theme of her book *Boys Will be Boys*. I wondered where this term had come from and why everyone was suddenly talking about it.

I searched academic databases to learn more about toxic masculinity. My searches confirmed that the term had suddenly exploded into popular feminist usage: Between 1990 and 2011 texts referring to toxic masculinity never numbered above 20 a year. Academic texts made up the largest proportion of returns until 2014; after 2017 returns numbered in the thousands, mostly non-academic. Nevertheless, toxic masculinity increasingly appeared in academic texts after 2016.

The term took off as part of what some scholars have called a new “feminist moment,” intensifying after 2014 (e.g. Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017, 885) with Beyoncé’s MTV Video Music Awards performance in front of a giant, glowing sign reading, “FEMINIST.” This performance prompted Jessica Valenti (2014) to write that today’s “zeitgeist is irrefutably feminist: its name literally in bright lights.” Critics argue that this newly popularized feminism conflates political resistance with women’s individual defiance and achievement, but distracts us from making structural changes (Gill, 2016). Rosalind Gill (2016) argues that popular feminist media articulates a post-feminist sensibility: a neo-liberal relegation of gender inequality to the past.

Toxic masculinity appears as a key term within this newly “post-feminist” popular feminist vernacular, treating sexism as a character flaw of *some* men. The term has shaped conversations about Trumpism and the #metoo movement (Pettyjohn et al., 2019). It appears in feminist scholarship on issues such as sexual harassment (McGinley, 2018) and mass shootings (Blair, 2016). Indeed, toxic masculinity has become a framework for popular *and* scholarly understandings of the gender factor in social problems. However, scholars who use the concept frequently fail to define it or integrate it within broader theorization of masculinity. I surveyed 60 scholarly articles published since 2016 mentioning toxic masculinity. More than half of those did not define it, relying on it to signal disapproval. The book *Toxic Geek Masculinity* (Salter & Blodgett, 2017), for instance, uses the term frequently without definition.

This essay suggests that feminists should treat talk of “toxic masculinity” as a window into contemporary gender politics but not adopt the term as an analytical concept. I argue, in agreement with Andrea Waling (2019), that the term depends on an individualizing toxic/healthy binary that serves to reproduce gender hierarchies. Here, I do not define the concept, but rather articulate how it has been

understood and used since it first appeared. I trace the term's origins in late twentieth century men's movements and its adoption by, often conservative, policy makers, therapists, and others engaged in working with troubled/troubling men. I argue that the therapeutic concerns of such actors produced an individualizing discourse that sought to reform marginalized men labelled as "toxic," because of violence, lack of engagement in family life, and employment. I then unpack feminists' scholarly adoption of the term, highlighting the lack of conceptual clarity. Finally, I discuss feminist research which analyses how condemnation of toxic masculinity by elite men can bolster gender hegemony. I conclude that feminists should critically analyse the meanings attributed to toxic masculinity but not assume those meanings are stable, well-conceptualised, or even feminist.

Origins

Toxic masculinity emerged within the mythopoetic men's movement of the 1980s, coined by Shepherd Bliss. Bliss confirmed to me in a 2019 email that he coined the term to characterize his father's militarized, authoritarian masculinity. In a 1990 interview, Bliss told Daniel Gross: "I use a medical term because I believe that like every sickness, toxic masculinity has an antidote" (Gross, 1990, p. 14). During the 1990s and early 2000s, toxic masculinity spread from men's movements to wider self-help, academic and policy literature. This literature posited that emotionally distant father-son relationships produced "toxically" masculine men. In *Man Enough: Fathers, Sons, and the Search for Masculinity* (1993), family therapist Frank Pittman argues that men who lack adequate fathering pursue unrealistic cultural images of masculinity and feel a constant need to prove their manhood. Pittman's regular column on men's issues in *New Women Magazine* may have helped popularize the term. Family therapist Steve Biddulph (1997) similarly argued that boys need a strong bond with a father figure/male mentor to avoid becoming toxically masculine men. Boys need the right kind of masculinity, the idea goes, and mothers can't give this to them.

These psychologists posited toxic masculinity as culturally normative but curable through engaging men with fatherhood, positing an essentialist notion of masculine emotional development. Turn-of-the-century policy discourse picked up on this prescription. For example, the founder of the U.S. National Fatherhood Initiative, Don Eberly (1999a, 1999b), cited Pittman on fathering as an antidote to toxic

masculinity in both his 1999 testimony to the U.S. House Judiciary Committee on youth culture and violence (called to discuss the Columbine school massacre), and in his edited book, *Renewing the Sacred Vocation of Fathering* (Eberly 1999a). Eberly suggested that emotionally absent fathers contributed to young men's violence and was likely a factor in the Columbine shootings: "Young men badly need to see mature masculinity modeled (sic) out. Well seasoned masculinity fundamentally transforms the aggression of young males by capturing their masculine energy and directing it toward socially constructive pursuits" (Eberly, 1999b). For Eberly, if young men turn to violence, they probably grew up with single mothers or at least had emotionally absent fathers.

The prescription of engaged fatherhood as an antidote to toxic masculinity harmonized with 21st century recommendations for heteronormative family life in an era of neoliberal globalization. Toxic masculinity provided a discourse for diagnosing men's problems in the face of the gendered fall-out from deindustrialization, during which well-paid jobs in "masculine" occupational sectors disappeared while feminized service sector occupations expanded. Influential organizations, such as the OECD, recommended increasing household incomes in such conditions by drawing mothers into paid work, while promoting shared parenting (OECD 2007). There were calls for welfare systems to include fathers when offering family services. An Irish family policy report argued for engaging men with fatherhood so that "their wildness is tamed to the extent that they can adjust to the discipline of domestic routines and remain with their children and partners and in their families (as opposed to prison, for instance)" (Ferguson & Hogan, 2004, p.8). Similarly, Jennifer Randles' (2013, p.869) research on the U.S. "Thriving Families" programme for low-income, mostly minority, parents found it promoted heterosexual marriage and engaged fatherhood as, in the words of the programme's executive director, "a civilizing influence on men."

The label toxic masculinity tended to be applied to marginalized men. Terry Kupers' research on men in prisons argued "toxic masculinity involves the need to aggressively compete and dominate others and encompasses the most problematic proclivities in men. ... Toxic masculinity also includes a strong measure of the male proclivities that lead to resistance in psychotherapy" (Kupers 2005, p.713-714). Similarly, Deevia Bhana's (2005, p.206) study of Black South African schoolboys linked their violence

with both toxic masculinity and poverty, describing them as valuing “an oppositional street masculinity ... associated with a flashily dressed black male street thug frequently a member of a gang and armed with a knife or weapon.”

Used in the above ways, toxic masculinity provided a framework that essentialized marginalized men as aggressive and criminal, discursively packaged in a way that it was presented as concern for men’s wellbeing. The idea of toxic masculinity harmonized with conservative political agendas concerned with the social control of low-income, under-employed men and with patriarchal family values. Reliance on toxic masculinity, thus, did not reject the gender hierarchy or a binary gender order as anti-feminists often assume. Instead, therapeutic discourses on toxic masculinity typically invoked notions of “natural” male dispositions.

Nevertheless, critics of those like Eberly who, for example, linked school shootings to toxic masculinity imagined the label as part of a feminist project motivated by misandry. Christina Hoff Sommers (2003), complained that “gender equality experts” in government wanted to socialize boys away from “toxic masculinity” out of misguided rejection of differences in the character, interests, and abilities of men and women. Likewise, an article on family therapy argued that the phrase had become “part and parcel of the scholarly and popular clinical literature” that represented a “deficit perspective” toward men (Dollahite, Marks, & Olsonm, 2002, p. 262). From this perspective, talk of toxic masculinity indicates a feminist anti-male bias even though proponents of the term were often conservatives seeking to “reform” marginalized men and stabilise patriarchal heterosexual family norms.

Feminism and toxic masculinity

Feminists have adopted toxic masculinity as shorthand for characterizing homophobic and misogynist speech and violence by men. Since 2016, a notable number of media stories used “toxic masculinity” in discussions of U.S. President Trump and the #MeToo movement to describe the poor behaviour of powerful white elite men in contrast to its earlier applications to marginalized men. Indeed, feminist scholars have adopted toxic masculinity as a useful frame for responding to resurgent masculinist right-wing politics. For instance, anti-feminism’s long history has been reinvigorated within what media

studies scholars label “networked misogyny,” defined as “an especially virulent strain of violence and hostility towards women in online environments” sometimes linked with off-line violence; toxic masculinity sums-up this strain (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016, p. 171).

According to my count, feminist scholars’ use of toxic masculinity increased as the term became more publicly popular. Academic databases show that, since 2016, scholars across disciplines have used the term. Surprisingly, more than half of the top sixty returns provide no definition: the term is used descriptively, without theorization or operationalization. Many linked toxic masculinity with other disparaging labels. An analysis of the TV show *Game of Thrones* (Askey 2018, p.50), for example, notes in its abstract that the show reflects “western misogyny, hetero- and cissexism, and toxic masculinity.” Those who provided a definition most often mentioned violence, domination, aggression, misogyny, and homophobia.

Few scholars discuss how to conceptualize toxic masculinity in relation to feminist theories of masculinity. Bryant Sculos (2017) describes Kupers’ (2005) article as providing one “of the most prominent scholarly usages of the concept.” My survey of feminist articles published since 2016 confirmed the popularity of Kupers’ (2005) use as a subset (Parent et al. 2019) of hegemonic masculinity surfacing in specific contexts, such as prisons or imagined national threats. Thus, the toxic/healthy therapeutic understanding of masculinity carried into feminist scholarship via citation.

As an alternative, I suggest analysing condemnations of certain forms of masculinity for their political effects. James Messerschmidt (2010) and Betül Ekşi (2017) have both shown how male elites can bolster their power by condemning toxically masculine men. Messerschmidt shows how Presidents Bush Sr. and Bush Jr. depicted themselves as “masculine heroes” rescuing “feminized victims” from the “toxically masculine villain,” Saadam Hussein. Ekşi (2017) shows how branches of the Turkish National Police disparaged other branches as toxically masculine, situating their own violence as “restrained.” However, neither of the Bushes nor the Turkish Police use the term “toxic masculinity”; rather, Messerschmidt and Ekşi apply it as shorthand. Nevertheless, their approach of analysing what condemnation of other men’s masculinities achieves politically seems promising.

Thus, we might analyse the politics behind condemnations of toxic masculinity. Recent theorizations of inclusive masculinities suggest shifts away from homophobia and misogyny especially among white, masculine elites. While Eric Anderson (2009) hails such shifts as indicating a weakening of gender hierarchies, others have argued that normative masculine disavowal of homophobia and sexism can disguise ongoing gender inequalities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). By distancing themselves from such “toxic” elements of masculinity, men may represent heterosexual masculine privilege as a thing of the past even as it continues to structure institutions.

Conclusion

Following Raewyn Connell’s (1995) discussion of masculine hegemony as a field of discursive positions and practices, we can see how disavowal of toxic masculinity can serve the interests of already privileged men. Feminist applications of the term to the likes of Trump and Weinstein depart from a conservative focus on marginalized men’s “toxic masculinity.” However, such condemnation still individualises the problem to the character traits of specific men. Condemnation of toxic masculinity allows men to position themselves as against misogyny, homophobia and violence, while simultaneously acknowledging masculinity as implicated in such problems. Sexual violence and harassment can then be discussed as features of “backward” and “mentally unwell” men. Thus, the institutional and structural privileges men accrue (what Connell terms the “patriarchal dividend”) are systematically obscured. Toxic masculinity carries inflections of postfeminist relegation of patriarchy to the past and individualizes sexism as a question of personal attitudes. Feminist scholars should thus be wary of using toxic masculinity as an analytic category.

Toxic masculinity continues to appear in media and scholarship. I’ve caught myself using it as a shorthand: I understand that its appeal lies in its ability to summon a recognisable character type. However, I take care not to use the term as a scholarly concept. In 2019, for the first time, the term appeared in some of my students’ essays, although I do not use it in my teaching. I noticed that students who didn’t use it gave fuller analyses of masculinity and different forms of violence. Possibly, the term has spread into feminist scholarship to an extent that it should be addressed in the classroom. Indeed,

explaining why it is *not* a useful concept could highlight the value of less individualised approaches to gender and power.

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