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Why I'm done trying to be "man enough"?:

Thematic Analysis of [Justin Baldoni's TED Talk](#) about Redefining Masculinity

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Abstract

Recent evidence suggests that traditional gender norms are changing, and men are starting to adopt feminine traits. The effect of this feminization on both men and women remains unclear. The social stigma around masculinity is having a negative impact on men's well-being and their relationships with other people. Based on Social Role Theory and Gender Role Conflict, the author conducted a thematic analysis to investigate how a male actor perceives men's and women's social roles as contributing to a gender role conflict. Results showed that societal stereotypes had negatively impacted the participant's life and relationship with women. The implications of these findings for gender equality and gender relations are discussed.



Introduction

A profound question about human life is "why men and women, and boys and girls, behave differently in many circumstances" (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 458). No one discipline can provide a unified answer as biologists, sociologists, economists, developmental researchers or evolutionary psychologists, for example, all have distinctive perspectives. The present research begins from the social psychological standpoint that highlights men's and women's social roles and later interlinks gender-role beliefs to understand their impact on the individual and others.

Social Psychology

The difference in behaviour between men (boys) and women (girls) is a reflection of gender role beliefs that are a representation of people's perceptions of men's and women's social roles in the society they live in (Social Role Theory, Eagly & Wood, 2012). Gender theories (Social Role Theory, Gender Schema Theory) highlight that learning about gender starts in early childhood and continues throughout a person's lifespan (Bem, 1981). It is possible to counteract traditional gender and role schemas with counter-stereotypic behaviour and ideology, but recent research found no immediate prompting (Belle et al., 2021).



Before the deconstruction of gender that started to take place in the 1970s, children were raised by the traditional masculinity ideology (TMI): men should not be feminine; men should be motivated by the respect of others; men should socialise with other men only; men should never be weak; and men should be adventurous and take a risk, even tolerate violence if necessary (David & Brannon, 1976).

A driving force for such behaviour is an individual's desire to be socially accepted and belong (Allen et al., 2022), starting in early childhood and continuing in adulthood. Conformity to social norms is a prerequisite for in-group membership and leadership position establishment (Nesdale, 2017). However, failure to meet gender roles might result in a conflict itself. Non-compliance with masculinity dogma might be due to internal conflicts (Namibia, 2019) due to the discrepancy between actual self-concept and TMI. In his cognitive dissonance theory, Festinger (1957) explains that a person exposed to opposing beliefs will aim to eradicate the contradiction. A recent study revealed that the more time a man spends on stories related to gender equality, the more likely they will change their perception and attitude towards gender even if they believe in TMI (Nguyen & Tarp, 2022).

To take things further, Levant et al. (1996) developed the Male Role Norms Inventory (MRNI) and added three more dimensions to TMI: men should not be emotional, should develop objectifying attitudes toward sexuality, and should have negative attitudes toward homosexuals. In order to be accepted by peers and feel part of the



group, men (boys) should conform to these social norms. TMI's main objective is to validate and sustain traditional gender roles (TGRs) and gender hierarchy. However, one of the gaps in empirical research that the current study aims to address is how social norms affect the individual's attitudes and behaviour both in childhood and later on in life, and also, relationships with other people.

Feminist scholars challenged the traditional view of masculinity and saw it as a problematic construct rather than a normative referent (Levant, 1996). Recent evidence suggests that men in Western societies are adopting perceived feminine attributes in recent years, although the predominant ideology of the general public remains traditional masculinity (Levant & Wong, 2013).

Numerous celebrities have actively joined the feminist debate in recent years. A mixed-method study (Bir, 2021) reported that while some people believe that the endorsement of the cause is genuine, most of the general public sees this support as a personal effort to gain popularity. Nevertheless, if it is an act or authentic activism, no research has directly examined men's genuine attitude toward gender equality, considering the perception that men's social norms are becoming more feminine and how this affects their behaviour towards women (Valsecchi et al., 2023). This research aims to start filling that gap.



Developmental Psychology

This section will examine how the societal stereotypes about gender roles listed above can negatively affect men and their behaviour and strain their relationships with other people. Gender role conflict theory (O'Neil, 1995) explains the culmination of this conflict as the individual's restriction to realise their full potential or restricting other people's potential. However, a point that O'Neil (2013) makes himself thirty years after his theory was published based on the feedback received is gender role adherence within different situational contexts, i.e. men's behaviour and attitudes might alter depending on the individual's social role in different situations. Also, there is limited research regarding the positive dimensions of masculinity. Hammer and Good (2010) have noted that specific masculine norms, e.g. risk-taking, may induce positive behaviour – courage, independence, and resilience.

With his self-role discrepancy theory, Pleck (1981) argues that even if men diverge from the sex roles status quo, they would still suffer negative consequences in some cases. In their research, Reigeluth and Addis (2015) revealed that if boys did not conform to TGRs, they might face emotional and physical bullying, homophobic insults, and judgement. Therefore, many boys and men adhere to gender norms to avoid public shame and negative emotions.



The *will to masculinity*, however, seems not to be a solution, as it is not only insubstantial in meaning but can also be harmful, as outlined by gender role strain (Schermer & Holmes, 2018). The adherence, or the attempt to adhere to TGRs, can lead to four significant strains for men: (a) success, power, and competition; (b) restrictive emotionality; (c) restrictive affectionate and supportive behaviour between men; and (d) conflicts with family, colleagues and spouses (O'Neil et al., 1995). A common finding is that TMI prevents men from seeking help, affecting their health and wellness and, respectively, that of their family and loved ones (Addis & Mahalik, 2003).

Recent empirical research (Rua et al., 2021) presents original findings of some of the adverse practical consequences TGRs endorsement has on both men and women in the workplace and personal life. Mixed-gender negotiations, for example, are more likely to favour men than women, and the intensified relationship conflict between outgroups facilitates the negative connection between TGR endorsement and the gender pay gap. Western governments seem concerned about gender inequality and increasingly introduce unconscious bias training (Williamson & Foley, 2018). Researchers are very sceptical about this approach, though, as sending the message that biases are unintentional and common essentially standardises the bias, causing more prejudice rather than reducing it.



Unconscious aspects of gender roles, social norms and the negative consequences of TGR on men's well-being are aspects this paper will examine to answer the research question, i.e. *'How does a male perceive men's and women's social roles as contributing to a gender role conflict?'*

Method

Design

Interpretivism, particularly the present study, promotes qualitative research in the quest for a deeper contextual understanding of a particular situation (Myers, 1997). The focus is on understanding an individual's perceptions of the world (Streubert-Speziale & Carpenter, 2007) and in-depth analysis of that person's experiences and reality. Qualitative research is often criticised as complex, challenging and time-consuming, with limited theoretical attention (Queirós, 2017). To be more theoretically grounded, the data was analysed sequentially, starting with an inductive approach to derive codes from the data and allowing the data to drive knowledge (Thomas, 2006). Subsequently, the research applied a deductive approach by "basing analysis on pre-existing theory" (Gale et al., 2013. p.3), social role theory and gender role conflict theory.



Participants

Actor, filmmaker, social entrepreneur and an outspoken feminist - Justin Baldoni.

Materials

Video recording and transcript for analysis.

Procedure

The present study was based on reading a transcript of a TED Talk presentation and then conducting a reflexive thematic analysis.

Analytical Strategy

The qualitative data (a transcript of the Ted Talk) was analysed following a six-step thematic analysis (TA), a commonly used approach in psychology. Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to TA as a foundational method of qualitative analysis, which is particularly appropriate for investigating how individuals conceptualise the social experiences or phenomena they are experiencing (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). TA is a flexible method suitable for a study that employs inductive and deductive approaches to achieve a "rich interpretative data analysis", as described in Azungah's (2018) research on human resources practices. The process started with (1) checking the



transcript against the original audio recording for 'accuracy', (2) reading and re-reading the data and noting initial ideas. Afterwards, (3) initial semantic and latent codes were generated as outlined in Appendix A - a colour-coded transcript from which the themes were later generated. (4) As a next step, the codes were collated into potential themes, which were reviewed to see if they worked well with the coded extracts. After an ongoing analysis to refine the particulars of each theme and the overarching story the analysis tells, clear definitions and names of the themes were generated (Appendix B) (5). In the final stages, vivid and comprehensive extracts were selected and analysed to produce the present report (6). This "flexible, straight-forward and accessible" method (McLeod, 2011, p.146) has been applied, for example, in psychotherapy process research (Mortl & Gelo, 2015); in counselling research to explore clients' experiences and views (Hunt, 2013); in feminist theory-informed TA (Shah-Beckley, 2017). Braun and Clarke (2019) developed the method in later editions of their work. They introduced the reflexive approach to thematic analyses, emphasising the active role of the researcher, who is encouraged to engage with the data attentively. Respectively, a reflexive approach was applied to the present study.

Social constructionism (SC) through the lens of a male feminist perspective formed the theoretical frame for this report. SC explains that conventional knowledge of individuals' perceptions and experiences is not necessarily based on objective, unbiased world observations but on the proposition that reality is socially, culturally and historically constructed (Burr, 2015). In SC's view, language roots individuals'



constructions of themselves and social forces influence how individuals construct their reality. Several limitations of SC should be addressed – the concept of relativism is overemphasised, so it assumes countless perceived realities, resulting in unfocused research. Also, the focus on language almost removes the aspect of agency from the individual (Conner, 2014).

Despite some critique, SC epistemology has been extensively used in psychological research exploring how individuals construct their own experiences. Gauci et al. (2022) and Lesch et al. (2021), for example, examine gender inequality, also employing reflexive thematic analysis with feminist social constructionist epistemology. Thus, it is considered the relevant approach to this study.

Ethics

The research utilised secondary data from a TED talk.

Results

This paper reports two themes: 'Societal stereotypes about gender' captures the socially constructed gender roles beliefs acquired from the gender division of labour that a society embodies, and 'Gender roles negative consequences' reports how the socially accepted stereotypes might negatively impact an individual or others when



they oppose following the socially accepted man's behaviour. Examining these themes aim to partially answer (given the scope of the research) the research question: 'How does a male perceive men's and women's social roles as contributing to a gender role conflict?'

Societal Stereotypes about Gender

The first theme explored gender stereotypes, i.e. generalised preconceptions about characteristics that men and women possess and the roles they should play based on gender. These stereotypes start forming in early childhood, from family, friends, media, school, and religious bodies, for example, and continue in adolescence.

Here, the participant discusses the recollections of early expectations since he was a young boy and now as a grown-up man:

I've been pretending to be strong when I felt weak, confident when I felt insecure and tough when really I was hurting [...] I've been told the kind of man that I should grow up to be. As a boy, all I wanted was to be accepted and liked by the other boys, but that acceptance meant I had to acquire this almost disgusted view of the feminine, and since we were told that feminine is the opposite of masculine, I either had to reject embodying any of these qualities or face



rejection myself. This is the script that we've been given. Right? Girls are weak, and boys are strong.

[Lines 30-31 and 40-45]

Baldoni referred to the socially constructed TGRs and the "script" society has written for how men and women should behave. However, he explained he had been "pretending" while performing his social role, which contradicts this widely adopted social perspective. His desire to "be accepted" and his need to belong (Allen et al., 2022) made him conform to group expectations, even though it contracted his own sense and feelings that he did not want to "reject embodying" feminine qualities. His experience aligned with the theoretical assumptions of social identity developmental theory that it is of prime importance from early childhood to be socially accepted by other children to pursue social group memberships (Nesdale, 2017). Baldoni explained he wanted to "be liked by the other boys", and theory has evidenced that children socialise mainly in same-sex groups that polarise the male and female social groups (David & Brannon, 1976).

Baldoni described his actor roles centred around the socially constructed view of masculinity as "machismo, charisma and power", as outlined by social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) but described his opposing definition of being a "good man" to be the reason he had become distanced from the wider societal attitudes surrounding



"being a man". However, more reports and research indicate this is not always the case (Bir, 2021).

However, this eventually led to cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) whereby Baldoni's desire to belong had perhaps impacted his attitudes and behaviour until he realised:

Well, I came here today to say, as a man that this is wrong, this is toxic, and it has to end. [...] Guys, this is real. And I'm just scratching the surface here, because the deeper we go, the uglier it gets, I guarantee you. I don't have time to get into porn and violence against women or the split of domestic duties or the gender pay gap. But I believe that as men, it's time we start to see past our privilege and recognise that we are not just part of the problem. Fellas, we are the problem. The glass ceiling exists because we put it there, and if we want to be a part of the solution, then words are no longer enough.

[Lines 48 and 225-230]

Strong language like "toxic", "wrong", "uglier", "porn and violence", for example, demonstrated his internal conflict (Namibia, 2019), stating that "it is exhausting trying to be man enough" according to the socially constructed definition of a 'man' and he is challenging other men "to be part of the solution" to a "serious problem" and break



the stereotypes surrounding men's and women's social roles. Baldoni directed the attention to the results of gender roles, for example, the "gender pay gap", and he actively promoted "gender equality" as his core values were in contraction with the widely adopted social perception of masculinity. He stated that this "has to end", meaning it should change. Baldoni was "advocating the voices of women" and calling for action, not just words. Even though TGRs are still the norm, increasingly more studies indicate it is not always the case (Levant & Wong, 2013).

Gender Role Negative Consequences

The second theme examined the negative consequences of gender roles on individuals and others.

In the abstract below, the participant shared his struggle to share his feelings and emotions with other people:

*I know a man who would rather die than tell another man that they're hurting.
[...] As an example, a little while ago I was wrestling with an issue in my life that I knew I needed to talk to my guy friends about, but I was so paralysed by fear that they would judge me and see me as weak and I would lose my standing as a leader that I knew I had to take them out of town on a three-day guys trip
[...] I realised that I wasn't alone, because my guys had also been struggling.*



And as soon as I found the strength and the courage to share my shame, it was gone.

[Lines 90-91, 107-110 and 116-118]

Baldoni's use of particularly strong language, for example, "a man who would rather die than tell another man they are hurting," emphasised the socially constructed understanding of the way men are expected to cope with emotions even if they are in pain, although shared he "needed to talk" and to express his feelings which contradicted this widely adopted social perspective. Baldoni explained how he was "paralysed by fear" before sharing emotions with his male friends, aligning with men's fear of femininity research that has evidenced men's struggle to integrate their feminine sides (O'Neil et al., 1995). However, overcoming his fears and realising other guys also "suffer in secret" and expressing his feelings contradicted the societal norm surrounding men's emotionality and affectional behaviour, although increasingly more reports and research indicate that this is shifting (Bir, 2021). Another concern Baldoni communicated was that if he shared his issue, his friends would "judge" him, see him as "weak", and he would lose his authority and "standing as a leader" - aligning with gender role conflict theory (O'Neil et al., 1986), which indicates what society expects from a leader, even though recent studies suggest that definition is changing.



Here Baldoni explained the way he had been feeling throughout his life and how it affected him and the people he "loves the most":

But I'm just a guy that woke up after 30 years and realised that I was living in a state of conflict, conflict with who I feel I am in my core and conflict with who the world tells me as a man I should be. But I don't have a desire to fit into the current broken definition of masculinity, because I don't just want to be a good man. I want to be a good human. [...] This is serious stuff. I've had to take a real, honest look at the ways that I've unconsciously been hurting the women in my life, and it's ugly.

[Lines 52-56, and 207-208]

Baldoni discussed the difference between the socially constructed definition of a 'man' and how society expected him to behave, which contradicted who he felt he was at his "core" and that had caused an internal conflict (Namibia, 2019) for "30 years". He referred to that "definition of masculinity as broken" and had distanced himself from societal norms that he indicated are no longer working, perhaps should be changed, and are also in contrast with what he believed a "good human" is. He suffered negative consequences when he failed to live up to the socially constructed gender roles, aligning with the self-role discrepancy theory (Pleck, 1981). Unconscious bias-based research has reported how unconscious beliefs and stereotypes about gender



influence individuals' behaviour beyond their conscious awareness (Williamson & Foley, 2018). Baldoni shared that he had realised that his behaviour and actions had unconsciously "been hurting" the people in his life, aligning with gender role conflict theory (O'Neil et al., 1986). He called that behaviour "ugly", suggesting that he disapproved of how he had been acting and did not fit in his definition of a "good human", and perhaps it needs to change.

Discussion

This research investigated how traditional TGRs negatively impact an individual's life and relationships with others from a man's perspective. The theoretical framework for the study was derived from social role theory (Eagly, 1987) and gender role conflict theory (O'Neil et al., 1995).

A vast amount of research (Rua et al., 2021) examines the negative consequences of stereotypical gender social roles on women, e.g. gender pay gap, discrimination at work, impact on mental health, and caregiving responsibilities for instance, but very limited how this affects men. Although the scope of the research was limited to exploring only two themes from the data, this paper aimed to start filling the gap in the theoretical and practical implications of the negative impact that TGRs have on men and how they affect their well-being and interactions with others. The author reported



two significant findings regarding the role of TGR societal endorsement on a man's behaviour and relationships.

Gender roles are obtained early in childhood and continue to develop in adolescence (Bem, 1981). Firstly, the present findings are consistent with research that reported ample evidence of negative responses to deviations from gender roles (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016). 'Bullying', 'shame', 'fear', 'judgement', 'weakness', and 'gay shit' were some of the negative feelings the participant reported he had to face if he chose not to follow socially constructed norms of behaviour.

Secondly, the participant suffered from restrictive emotionality for thirty years. For example, Baldoni had difficulties sharing his feelings with friends, realised that he had hurt his wife with words and actions, and could not express his true self because he was concerned about public embarrassment (O'Neil, 1986). However, the data aligned with a critique that GRC theory had often received, i.e. the situational context and the different social roles in which the participant experience GRC (O'Neil, 2015).

The participant proposed that a 'call for action' is the solution to the negative consequences of TRG, as "words are no longer enough". Celebrities' endorsements for feminism have been on the rise in recent years (Bir, 2021) and seem a crucial part of the fourth wave due to its engagement with social media. There is minimal research, however, on the authenticity and how genuinely committed celebrities are to gender



equality, as one might question whether the aim is not gaining popularity and power within and beyond the entertainment industry.

Also, studies investigating the consequences of the perceived feminisation on in-group and out-group relations are limited. No research has directly evaluated how men's attitudes toward gender equality are impacted by the perception that men's role is becoming more feminine, so this area should be further investigated. Furthermore, there is only single research that reports the potentially detrimental consequences for the out-groups (i.e. women) that change in men's gender norms might have, even though the out-group might not be responsible for this social change (Valsecchi et al., 2023). Future research might focus on whether the perceived feminisation is liberating for less traditional men and poses challenges for more traditional ones.

The present research is a starting point for understanding the possible negative consequences of the TGR of men on their well-being and relations with others. At the same time, some limitations should be addressed. Firstly, the present study is based on a very limited sample of one participant's online lecture, so the results are not empirically generalisable. Also, the study context is very specific – Justin Baldoni is an actor from Jewish – Italian ancestry, born and raised in the United States. Future research should consider integrating interviews in the research design with a larger sample with more diverse participants' cultural backgrounds.



A limitation of thematic analysis using a social constructionist approach is that results might be biased by the researcher's personal experiences and social and cultural background (Conner, 2014). Therefore, based on the most recent research on gender norms (Valsecchi et al., 2023), the author suggests a quasi-experimental mixed-method design to reduce subjectivity with a larger sample of men from diverse cultural backgrounds. Quantitative research might examine their motivation to protect traditional masculinity or endorse feminisation. Then, a randomised sample from both groups should be invited for individual interviews. This mixed-method design will provide a better insight if participants endorse traditional gender norms or if they are negatively affecting their well-being.

Exploring the negative consequences of societal stereotypes about gender on men's well-being and relationships with others is crucial on both theoretical and practical levels. TMI sometimes prevents men from seeking psychological help, makes them feel they have to "suffer in secret", and in many cases, is detrimental to their relationships with the people they "love the most". So, investigating if the benefits of feminisation outweigh the costs is vital.



Reflection

Introspective

Consciously considering how the author's thoughts, feelings, and experiences have contributed to and influenced the qualitative data analysis process is essential in understanding the level of bias.

The author's professional work involves relationship discussions with both single men and women and couples, so Baldoni's lecture was of immense interest to the author academically and professionally. The way men talk to women and how that makes women feel, the difficulty men face in expressing their feelings, and the way men are raised are topics the author regularly discusses with clients. So, due to the previous experience of discussing the negative consequences of gender roles for both men and women and their effect on relationships, the author was able to relate more to the comments made by the participant, with increased confidence when analysing and discussing the data.

The author lives in an Eastern European country where traditional gender roles are the norm. It is not socially accepted for men to publicly express their feelings and emotions, not to mention attitudes towards feminism. The author was raised by a father who was himself raised by very traditional masculine ideology. In the country



the author lives, it is national psychology for individuals to tend to be suspicious of people advocating for change without any personal financial gain. A few of the reasons are the level of corruption and the country's poor economic state, which lead to the lack of trust in people. So, it might be possible that have influenced the author's decision to choose a research question that will entail exploring the motivations of the participant to advocate feminism. However, the author consciously made an effort to reduce the risk of interpretation error or bias when analysing the data. Furthermore, the author had also previously lived in the UK for fifteen years, a very different culture. So, having an in-depth understanding of the cultural differences between the East and the West, and the gender stereotypes in both countries, has allowed the author to interpret the data from a cultural perspective and further reduce bias.

Methodological: discussions and analysis

Qualitative methodology enabled a detailed exploration of the personal experiences and attitudes of a feminist actor and his reflective observations of his behaviour. The scope of the research was limited to two themes, meaning the research question could not be addressed in-depth. However, the author aimed to develop the most important, interesting and relevant points regarding the negative ways societal stereotypes about gender affected the participant's life.



Thematic analysis was chosen as a method of analysis. The author intended a combined approach, where the data would naturally drive the development of themes while basing the analysis on two critical theories that were not pre-determined, however. That gave credibility to the research data as the generated themes reflected previous social and developmental psychological research. The analyses needed to accurately reflect attitudes, behaviour, feelings, and experiences.



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