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“Toxic Masculinity” in the age of #MeToo: ritual, morality and gender archetypes across cultures

Ritual,
morality, and
gender
archetypes

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to take the “toxic masculinity” (TM) trope as a starting point to examine recent cultural shifts in common assumptions about gender, morality and relations between the sexes. TM is a transculturally widespread archetype or moral trope about the kind of man one should not be.

Design/methodology/approach – The author revisits his earlier fieldwork on transnational sexualities against a broader analysis of the historical, ethnographic and evolutionary record. The author describes the broad cross-cultural recurrence of similar ideal types of men and women (good and bad) and the rituals through which they are culturally encouraged and avoided.

Findings – The author argues that the TM trope is normatively useful if and only if it is presented alongside a nuanced spectrum of other gender archetypes (positive and negative) and discussed in the context of human universality and evolved complementarity between the sexes.

Social implications – The author concludes by discussing stoic virtue models for the initiation of boys and argues that they are compatible with the normative commitments of inclusive societies that recognize gender fluidity along the biological sex spectrum.

Originality/value – The author makes a case for the importance of strong gender roles and the rites and rituals through which they are cultivated as an antidote to current moral panics about oppression and victimhood.

Keywords Morality, Masculinity, Archetypes, Ritual, Sex and gender, Virtue-signalling

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction: in and out of sex work

In the introduction to his ethnography of drug-dealing in Spanish Harlem, Bourgois (2003) jokes that he fell into crack by accident. I used to joke that I fell into sex work by accident. From 2006 to 2009, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the streets of Salvador da Bahia in Brazil. The way I tell the story now, I was studying “social ontology, resilience, and emerging modes of sociality among street kids and sex workers”. I did not use that language then. I had been trained in political anthropology and postcolonial theory, and I wanted to learn how people facing extreme marginalization (“oppression” was the word I used then) learned to make sense of the social, cultural, economic and political structures in which they were embedded. The Field turned out to offer many surprises – not all of which were pleasant (see Veissière, 2009, 2010). I never found the noble victims and bad perpetrators I had been looking for. I did find people who were almost invariably more competent than I was at making critical sense of and moving within structures that still did not make sense to me, despite (or because of) the esoteric social science concepts I had been equipped with. I also found that my informants aimed at and often attained a different kind of social mobility than what I had expected. The strange book that came out of my first Brazil cycle^[1], thus,



describes the lives of poor black women and their attempt to escape the lowest ranks of a pigmentocratic, highly stratified society by marrying foreign “gringo” tourists (Veissière, 2011).

The transactions I observed did not look like sex work in the typically patterned sense of the term. The bar patio seduction rituals were no more explicitly performative than other kinds of effortful social interactions anywhere (such as job interviews or meeting one’s in-laws). Seduction rituals, when well executed, must produce the impression of not being seduction rituals. In the transnational Brazilian bar version of the ritual, gender roles are reinforced by being underplayed. The woman saves face by never explicitly asking for money, and the man saves face by never explicitly offering to pay. The women who were most successful at this game were those who were most adept at picking men who could also play the game well. The women who were best at signalling that they were “not like those other women who go after gringos” were best at finding the men who were good at signalling that they were not like “those other gringos”.

The stories that I documented, my own included, did not always end well. From the women’s lives in Europe (most of my informants ended up in or had returned from Italy, Germany, France and Spain), I collected many stories of dreary small towns, bigoted families, horny priests and brothers-in-law, evil-eyed mothers-in-law, miscarriages, deportations and the occasional truck-stop brothel. Save for my own, I left most of the men’s stories out of my ethnography. There were some happy ones. But the bad stories (of which there were more) showcased recurring themes of estrangement from suspicious families and departed children and a downward curve towards financial, social and physical ruin.

It took some effort to disentangle myself from sex work. As the post-colonial theory which I had laboured over in my juvenilia was morphing into mandatory “anti-oppression training” on college campuses, I found myself weary of returning to predictably scripted arguments about gender, victimhood and “sex trafficking[2]” at academic conferences – arguments which, as a white man (by, 2014 a “cis white man”; by, 2016, a “cis-hetero white-presenting man”), I was now told lacked the “experiential authority” to comment on. As I moved on from postmodern autoethnography to third-person cognitive anthropology, I turned to more general questions about the psychological underpinnings and embodied effects of culture, sociality and ritual behaviour (Ramstead *et al.*, 2016; Veissière, 2016a, 2018).

These general questions and varied approaches – from the masculine stories I left out of my first-person ethnography to third-person generalization of evolutionary anthropology – inform about my efforts to make sense of the current crisis in gender relations. They also assist me in examining the meta-ethical foundations of gender normativities across cultures. In the end, what I learned from these stories also assists me in making tentative recommendations on the kinds of gendered rituals, rites and archetypes that might work best for the human species.

1.1 Masculinity in 2018: What’s in a camping trip?

The stories we tell ourselves are often more normative than descriptive. They usually tell of how the world *should be* according to our cultural norms. They are also performative. Stories have strange ways of bringing the world they describe into being (Hacking, 2002). When stories change, so do our innermost assumptions and experiences.

In a recent class discussion on the experience of bliss in nature, my anthropology students shared stories of their favourite childhood moments. A young American woman in her early 20s smiled as she evoked memories of father–daughter camping trips. This yearly event, she recounted, had been something of a family ritual deemed worthy of its own name.

Picking up on an awkward pause in the class conversation, she commented with a hint of irony that in today's age, the sight of a father and daughter sharing a small tent would "seem a little creepy".

That comment gave me pause to wonder. The intuitive ease with which the father and daughter concepts could be associated with "creep" mark the widespread normalization of a rapid cultural shift in common assumptions about gender, sexuality and social interactions at large. This much, the cultural anthropologist in me could recognize. This shift is now described by social scientists as being concurrent with a growing culture of victimhood, and an emphasis on "adverse mental health outcomes" stemming from processes of "oppression" along with increasingly pervasive "social justice" and "intersectional" moral culture on north American college and university campuses (Campbell and Manning, 2014; Lilienfeld, 2017; Haidt, 2017). Commenting on these shifts at the level of gender ideology, cultural critic Laura Kipnis (2017), elicited a fierce controversy by pointing out that the emphasis on women's victimhood and men's aggression resembled the kind of patriarchal narrative that first- and second-wave feminists had sought to overturn. Kipnis remarked that as she was coming of age in the 1970s, she had been culturally primed to associate female sexuality with freedom and liberation. By her account, sex in the late 2010s is now primarily associated with risk, passive, vulnerable women and predatory men.

As a man and father of two boys, another part of me – this one, closer to the heart – felt more troubled by my students' comments. I thought of my young boys and wondered what it might be like to be discovering one's manhood in a culture that actively preaches against "toxic masculinity" (TM); a culture, to be precise, that overwhelming associates masculinity with risk, violence and an inner essence tainted with sexual aggression. I also knew (the evolutionary anthropologist in me now) that these associations were not entirely unfounded.

1.2 Stereotypes and archetypes in cognition and culture

The human mind is not well-equipped to reason about to counter-intuitive facts that violate our expectations. Counter-intuitive facts tend to produce strong responses. They will be dismissed as nonsense when they depart too far from common stories (Boyd and Richerson, 1998), and will be highly attention-grabbing and memorable when they combine common stories in unusual ways (Boyer, 2008). Such facts can elicit automatic responses and even violence when they contradict the moral core of implicit social norms (Greene and Haidt, 2002; Haidt, 2012).

Our expectations are heavily modulated by cultural norms. These are norms we all know and obey, often without knowing that we know them (Ramstead *et al.*, 2016). In a culture where one version of feminism has become an obligatory moral norm (Kipnis, 2017), pointing out that men fare much worse than women in many indicators of well-being (see for example, Bilsker and White, 2011) is likely to be interpreted as "misogynist". Any talk of men's issues is also likely to be read as a call for victimhood. In this version of the victimhood story, some men get to claim that women are the "real" oppressors. It is both interesting and alarming to note that competition for victim status is found on both sides of gender equality debate (Campbell and Manning, 2014).

Stereotypes about genders and other categories of persons are found in all cultures. Those stereotypes have likely been around for as long as we have been symbolic species (Hrdy, 2011). In general, stereotypes co-evolved (in cognition and culture) for the purpose of informational efficiency. They describe, however crudely, patterns of behaviours and statistical regularities in the world that can be figured out with no explicit instruction. To cognize, in other words, is to categorize (Harnad, 2017). Babies recognize patterns in the world, and they form mental templates to organize information into stereotypes.

A stereotype is also the hallmark of patterned behaviour, in both animal and cultural forms of life (Boyer and Liénard, 2006).

Stereotyped behaviour along sexed lines in the animal kingdom looks roughly like stereotyped gendered behaviour among humans. This is why, in addition to roughly similar gender archetypes found across cultures, we know that human behaviour and the cultural patterning of behaviour are rooted in our evolved biology (Eagly and Wood, 1990). Stereotypes can also be plain wrong. Because the human mind is not good at handling complexity, it tends to simplify the world and infer patterns where there are none. This is why we are prone to gambler's fallacy, superstition and conspiracy theories (Swami *et al.*, 2014). Cultural groups need to produce efficient stories to promote and enforce social norms that are good for the survival of group. Lay people call this kind of story-telling "morality". Psychologists call this as rule-governed behaviour (Schmidt *et al.*, 2011).

All cultures actively promote different stereotypes and ideal types. Some cultural stories are nuanced and others less so. Some are simplified to the point of promoting conspiracy theories. Archetypes that promote crowd madness, witch-hunts, public hangings and genocides are like mind viruses. The human mind's vulnerability to zero-in on single actors and intentional culprits and its propensity to give in to collective pressure has been recognized for a long time. Take, for example, an old story from the Talmud: "When a man is unanimously condemned to death, he must be released at once".

1.3 Gender archetypes as normative ethics

Gender archetypes usually describe *worst-case* and *best-case ideal types* of men and women. The archetypes propagate and promote *moral stories* about the kinds of men and women we *should and should not be*. Across cultures and throughout histories, these archetypes have proven to be highly similar. For a cultural anthropological view on morality across cultures, (see Keane, 2015); for a psychological, evolutionary view (see Tomasello, 2016); and for a biocultural view on sex and gender roles, (see Fuentes, 2015).

The worst-case ideal type for men is usually too aggressive, selfish and not caring enough. The worst-case ideal type for women is usually coddling and manipulative (Eagly and Wood, 1999). Similarly, cultures do not differ very much in where the best-case ideal type should fit on this spectrum (Schmitt *et al.*, 2008).

The best-case archetype for a man is usually strong, protecting and generous. The ideal woman is usually beautiful, caring and generous. There is broader cultural difference in the next ideal sub-type, but the general picture looks something like this: traditionally, men's role in care-giving is to protect the family. In childrearing, men usually toughen up children and socialize them to face the challenges of the outside world. Women typically attend to minute needs that men are not very good at noticing. Both boys and girls are generally recognized to need masculine types to toughen them and feminine types to make them more delicate and attentive. Evolutionary and cross-cultural research has shown that fathers usually favour rough-and-tumble play over fine-motor subtle play (Hrdy, 2011; Lamb, 2000; Lamb and Goldberg, 1982). Universally, most cultures have devised some version of the child-father camping or hunting trip ritual.

All cultures recognize the complementarities of men and women, from the anatomical complementarity that makes coitus and reproduction possible, to the complementary ways in which men and women use their strengths to help keep the species alive. The spectrum of masculine and feminine ideal types is also universally recognized as porous (Fuentes, 2015). Men can – indeed, by most accounts, should – embody some feminine traits, and women can and should be masculine in some domains. All cultures, thus, have an archetype for effeminate men and masculine women. Some cultures, like the Amerindian *berdache* type

(Trexler, 1999, the Filipino *bakla* type (Manalansan, 2003) type, or the Brazilian *travesti* type (Kulick, 1997) have fully accepted social roles that ‘opposites’ can integrate. Many cultures identify very masculine women and very effeminate men as unbalanced, or negative types (Trexler, 1999).

Sexual preference does not always correlate with the sex-and-gender spectrum. Warrior cultures that promoted aggressive men types, like Ancient Greece or Japan, also permitted and encouraged homoeroticism and man-on-man love (Trexler, 1999). Many cultures have permitted homoeroticism and love-making among men without any implication of homosexuality. In most of Melanesia and Polynesia, boy-on-boy love was tolerated as a normal part of transgressive child-play (Mead, 1939). In this cultural package, boy-on-boy love was discouraged once one became a ‘serious’ married person. In some parts of Brazil, the act of ‘actively’ penetrating men can be seen as a sign of hyper-masculinity – the ‘homosexual’ role in such instances is reserved for the ‘passive’ man who becomes feminized through penetration (Kulick, 1997; Hecht, 2006). This kind of macho homoeroticism is also found, albeit in a more covert way, in many athletic, gang and prison cultures that promote aggressive, “hyper-masculine” male archetypes (Lancaster, 2005).

1.4 Negative gender archetypes across cultures

The risk of over-aggression in males and over-nurturing in women is recognized in all societies. The same is true of social cluelessness in males and social manipulation in women (Stoller and Herdt, 1982). Robust brain and cross-cultural psychological findings support the view that male and female behaviour traits are normally distributed along biological lines. Males are more aggressive and impulsive on average and not as good as females at paying attention to other people’s needs (Soutschek *et al.*, 2017; Rand *et al.*, 2016; Buss, 1995; Schmitt *et al.*, 2008). As in all normal distribution curves, there is a considerable amount of overlap and individual differences.

Cultural differences in masculine and feminine types often mirror the idealized archetypes elevated as moral models in different societies. Philosopher Ian Hacking calls this phenomenon “looping effects”: human biology, experience and personality traits can be malleable and tend to fit the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of the world (Hacking, 2007). One, however, should remain attentive to the strong limits of this malleability. One might think of cultural malleability as a spectacular ‘add on’, rather than the founding core of symbolically-enriched human biology. This final point bears retelling and helps clear the muddled conceptual waters surrounding the contemporary archetype of “toxic masculinity”. I address these epistemological contradictions in the next sections.

1.4.1 *Virtue or virtue-signalling? the sacred and the taboo in evolutionary perspective.* In his introduction to psychologist Jordan Peterson’s (2018) controversial book on *12 Rules for Life*, the Canadian psychiatrist Norman Doidge raised concerns about the deep, invisible contradiction that underpins the current culture of social justice on university campuses.

On the one hand, Doidge pointed out, most young people schooled after the 1990s have been taught that all morality is relative, and that everything from sex to power to success is socially constructed. This leaves little room for identifying evolutionarily stable patterns of behaviour and places the *locus* of – or the “blame for” – all problems on nebulous “social forces” (e.g. “colonialism”) that appear to possess intentions of their own. In more extreme, conspiracy-like versions of this story, the blame, agency and intentions are placed on malefic, usually white male single social actors.

The next set of contradictions is harder to discern. It takes a more minute conceptual look to notice that the intersectional worldview moves from:

- Ultra-constructivist ontological commitments (*all behaviours are the result of socialization*);
- to a radically individualist, “standpoint” epistemology (Harding, 2004) granted to some, but not all social actors (*reported first-person experience is the ultimate authority on all matters of truth and justice, but if and only if one speaks from the position of the oppressed*); and
- universalist ethical commitments to the “undoing” of gender and most social norms, to be led by those who hold marginalized standpoints.

In spite of its relativist claims, thus, the culture of social justice actively promotes *one kind* of highly rigid normative morality about power, sex and human relations. This moral story is then grounded in highly stereotyped models and ideal types of “identity”. In this model, gender and ethnic identities are typically cast on the same plane of social construction, but gender “and not ethnicity” is seen a “violent” patriarchal imposition that must be undone. “Ethnicity”, in turn, is described as a virtuous marker of colonial victimhood that must be valorized and accommodated but not undone. All those who are not identified with the “cis-heteronormative white supremacist patriarchy”, then, get to leverage their “disempowered” identity status as a marker of virtue.

Doidge calls this model “virtue-signalling” and sharply contrasts it with the Aristotelian model of virtue ethics, which emphasizes depth of moral character (MacIntyre, 2013). From an anthropological perspective, virtue-signalling is found in all cultures as a form of reputational management (Tomasello, 2008). In any given culture and context, one must invariably signal how one abides by and excels at the terms of social norms that regulate good social and moral standing (Leary and Kowalski, 1990).

Psychologists have pointed out that social norms that regulate virtue aim to promote a symbolic ideal of purity while marking those who do not play by the rules as “polluted” (Haidt, 2012). Across cultures, things, substances, persons, ideas and practices that are deemed sacred typically signal purity, while taboos signal pollution (Douglas, 2003). The sacred and the taboo, finally, tend to elicit the most automatic, often virulent responses. While the sacred, by definition, cannot be questioned or desecrated, the taboo cannot be touched or defended. When individuals or ideas are symbolically marked as taboo, they typically elicit strong disgust responses from purity-seekers. It is pertinent to note that disgust-sensitivity responses, which recruit subcortical brain structures like the insula and amygdala, are evolutionarily ancient mechanisms optimized to deal with threats and poisons in the environment. The presence of taboo among *Homo sapiens*, in turn, activates disgust systems by applying a poison-detection formula to symbolic stimulus (Phillips *et al.*, 1997; Rozin *et al.*, 2009; Tybur *et al.*, 2013). While disgust-sensitivity is a normal brain function among vertebrates (particularly mammals and humans), some individuals and cultural groups are known to be more sensitive than others. Conservatives, for example, have often been shown to score higher in disgust-sensitivity than liberals (Haidt, 2012). A recent study, however, found that those who espoused authoritarian left-wing views of political correctness scored as high as conservatives in disgust-sensitivity (Haidt, 2012; Brophy, 2015).

This amicable cultural separation from biology, which accounts for the symbolic activation of most deep-brain functions, has often been described favourably to account for humanity’s unique evolutionary “success” over other species. An important addition to this “cultural intelligence hypothesis” (Henrich, 2015), however, could cast this mechanism as a potential problem. One might term this the “cultural stupidity hypothesis”.

This evolutionary detour helped me re-ground my argument in a general meta-ethics of interpersonal relations: people invariably form intuitive moral judgements and

performatively manage their reputations around ideas of purity and pollution consistent with those of their time and sub-culture. How different social norms capture and enforce this spectrum, thus, will largely determine the experience of different classes of people marked as a clean or dirty.

If masculinity is increasingly marked as a disgust-eliciting taboo in the new moral culture, we should now examine the TM trope in broader historical, cross-cultural and evolutionary contexts.

1.4.2 Toxic masculinity in comparative focus. “Toxic masculinity” is a highly salient but awkwardly-fitting feature in the conceptual architecture of the “social justice” moral culture I discussed above. In the grander scheme of human structures of myth, TM is simply a worst-case ideal type, i.e. a fairy tale with some basis in biology and broad cross-cultural relevance. The TM myth serves the useful purpose of promoting socially desirable behaviour among males: men should not be bullies, and men should not rape. What healthy mind would disagree with that?

In the current scheme of twenty-first century social justice mythology, the TM story is also the master archetype in an archetype-hungry culture that pretends not to use archetypes.

Invoking the “Toxic Femininity” (TF for shorts, a worst-case female ideal type) in a twenty-first century discussion is not likely to be well received. TF archetypes, however, are also universal. When psychoanalysis still dominated the psychological science scene, a slew of children personality traits from autism to introversion were routinely blamed on a spectrum of feminine bad-mother types, from hysterical, castrating harpies to “refrigerator mothers” (Severson *et al.*, 2008).

In spite of the demise of TF tropes in public culture, female gender archetypes still permeate everyday cultural assumptions on many levels. Many female professors, for example, report that their male students are culturally ill prepared to respect female pedagogical authority. In this argument, most men and boys are said to perceive women leaders through a binary archetypal lens in which one can either be a “sexy girlfriend” or a “bitchy mother” (Hay, 2015, for a discussion). It may be, then, that many boys do not know how to interact with and perceive women outside of these cultural templates.

I suggest that current Ur-socioconstructivist gender ideology (which provides no clear bearings on what to expect from and how to behave towards other sexes) perpetuates, rather than addresses this problem. On an extreme end of this misgendering spectrum, confusing expectations and an obscurantist denial of biology may also accentuate tensions surrounding so-called “rape culture”. While the act of rape constitutes a universally recognizable wrongdoing, what I call “rape culture-culture” presents a contradictory and, ultimately, unexplained story on the aetiology of male sexual aggression. As Doidge points out, the advent of third-wave feminism – which denies masculine and feminine essences outside of socialization processes (Butler, 2011) – has now sacralized the denial of nature on the one hand and the invisible imbalance of essentialising men only for their worst-case traits.

If we take cross-culturally recurrent tropes about good persons as a reliable indicator of moral wealth, the TM story certainly has a place in the human record. A normative ethics of gender relations, thus, may begin with a recognition of biology. From this lens, an analysis of the distribution of sex-based selected traits would undeniably lead to the conclusion that men *do* require strong cultural nurturing to balance their aggression, temper their domination and cultivate protecting roles. This is an old evolutionary story. On average, father-child interaction is almost entirely absent among our closest cousins the great apes (Hrdy, 2011), but a rough outline of “healthy masculinity” is found in the primate record.

Some chimpanzee males, thus, have been observed to step up and occasionally rescue, adopt and raise orphaned baby chimps on their own (Boesch *et al.*, 2010).

Successfully securing paternal investment – an essential predictor of quality offspring in humans – has been and remains an important biocultural challenge for human females. There is always a strong risk that men, after impregnating women, will take off forever into their cultural equivalent of the long hunting trip and binge-drinking session. This is also why, on average, human females have evolved to be uniquely attractive to males and signal their attractiveness in highly effective ritual ways. Contrary to popular belief in, 2018, women across cultures are much more likely than men to use their attractiveness and genetic status to gain socioeconomic mobility (Henrich *et al.*, 2012). This is a phenomenon I routinely observed in the context of my fieldwork in Brazil (Veissière, 2011). For men of low social status, genetic status (in the form of health and attractiveness) matter little. In highly stratified societies, low-status males are most often excluded from reproductive rites and rituals, as high-status males monopolize the high-quality females. This is particularly true in polygamous, polygynous societies. Predictably, societies that produce packs of sex-starved, mate-less, purposeless males run into a lot of trouble (Veissière, 2011). This is when the camping-drinking sessions run out of hand. All cultures, thus, have produced stories about the tragicomedy of this challenge. The bachelor party rite found among Anglo-Saxons is likely an important ritual way to keep bidding farewell to this evolutionary problem.

A common worst-case female archetype across cultures, thus, warns against the *femme fatale* who secures social success through her attractiveness and sexual favours and leads men to social, financial and emotional ruin (Forouzan and Cooke, 2005; Hanson and O’Rawe, 2010). In the traditional men’s huts of the Amazon and Papua New Guinea, ethnographers report that common talk among men centres on the awe-inspiring, terrifying power of the all-swallowing vagina. Gossip from the female hut usually centres on the gullibility of baby – like men who think with their penis (Rival, 2011). This is the cultural equivalent of the men-in-the-sauna and women-at-the-hair-salon rituals.

Like the TM story, these TF stories serve an important social purpose. In the pragmatic, bio-culturally-based meta-ethics of gender relation I am advocating here, both TM and TF stories should be told. In turn, the good versions of both stories must be actively promoted.

It may be for this reason that cultures have crafted elaborate, costly and highly sought-after rites of initiation for boys and girls (Turner *et al.*, 1987). In addition to promoting solidarity, meaning and an identity (Whitehouse *et al.*, 2014), the no-nonsense pragmatic logic behind such rituals is that girls fare better when they initiated by older women into the arts of womanhood, while boys also benefit from initiation led by older men. Complementariness and good models of gender relations are similarly socialized through different rituals. Across cultures, there are opportunities for boys to learn from women role models, from their girl peers to learn to relate to and to seduce and be respectful to the other sex. The same is true for girls. Boys and girls, finally, need rites of passages to get to know one another and learn to consume and cultivate their need for seduction. All cultures, in other words, need their equivalent of Bar mitzvahs, Bat mitzvahs, prom nights, marriages, father-son, father-daughter and mixed-family camping trips with strong aunt, uncle and grandparent role models (Hrdy, 2011). In the language of public health, having access to varied kinds of gender-specific and mixed-genders seduction, interaction and initiation rituals grounded in a rich cultural folklore is an immense protective factor against poor life outcomes. In strength-based language (Smith, 2006), these gendered rituals are crucial mediators and indicators of community well-being. Contemporary psychologists recognize the importance of same-gender role models for women, particularly in the context of educational and career achievement, but often argue that men’s success do not require same-

sex models (Lockwood, 2006; Young *et al.*, 2013). I suggest that this reflects a contemporary bias against masculinity proper rather than a universal psychological finding.

Rites of boyhood and manhood, such as the ones cultivated in fraternities and athletic cultures are now overly associated with the “toxic” archetypes. Those who promote the importance of initiation into manhood, like the poet Bly (2001), psychologist Peterson (2018) or motivational speaker Deida (1997), are typically dismissed as quack mystics, misogynists or “ALT-right” conservatives (see Burns, 2017, for an example of this view).

Consider this essay a rational call for the importance of such rites and for the return of masculinity as a good ideal type.

2. Conclusion: How should we raise our boys?

I began this essay with reflections on my intellectual journey as anthropologist who has examined complex questions of gender and sex differences from ethnographic and evolutionary perspectives. I grounded my effort to present a general meta-ethics of gender relations on stable patterns of recognized ideal types in the cross-cultural record. Drawing of these transculturally stable models, I proposed that “toxic” male and female archetypes were pedagogically important to provide boys and girls with clear counter examples of the kinds of good moral persons they should become. As such, I argued that TM and TF archetypes were most useful when presented together along with a discussion of evolved differences and opportunities for same-gender and mixed-gender rites and rituals of initiation.

Returning to what I understand best as a man and a father of two boys, I conclude this essay with a tentative call for a normative, character-virtue-based ethics for the imitation of young boys.

The following story, which is often attributed to the US military folklore and discussed in light of its “toxicity” (Sparrows, 2015), presents what I take to be a fairly universal trope in the education of boys. The story describes three ideal types: wolves, sheep and shepdogs. Wolves are painted as lonely, strong and mean. Wolves prey on sheep and weak wolves alike. Sheep are described as naïve and weak. They are eaten by wolves. Shepdogs, who protect the sheep against the wolves, are elevated as strong and reliable. Boys in this story (like my own boys) are then encouraged to be shepdogs (the good ideal type) but not wolves or sheep (the ideal types for weak and aggressive men).

This emphasis on strength, autonomy, altruism and reliability has been found in many cultures, from Western stoicism to Vedic and Buddhist wisdom and hunter-gatherer pedagogies (Haidt, 2007). On an interpersonal level, men in this story are encouraged to be caring and protecting. On a personal level, character strength is taken to entail a sense of ownership over one’s feelings and actions. You will never be well, as the transcultural story goes, if you expect the world to conform to your desires.

One may further extract the following set of principles from this stoic model:

- You should be strong and caring and should protect the weak.
- You should respect your elders and hierarchies – question them when you are being encouraged to be weak or selfish.
- You should offer your services to women, children, elders and the sick.
- As a rule, your needs always come last. If you do not take care of yourself well, you will not be able to take care of others.
- You should never be a victim; when bad things happen to you, the onus is on you to create the right mindset to recover and thrive.

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- You should never blame others for your own feelings.
- You should not encourage victimhood in others.
- It is good to cry for the joys and pains of others. You should never cry out of pity for yourself.
- You should always be firm, kind and generous and know your boundaries.
- Rights and obligations are given, but privileges are earned.
- You should try new things and learn new skills that will make you a good protector.
- The simplest stories are often the best ones; the simplest solutions are not always best; you should choose stairs over elevators.
- Be open to changing your mind; do not change your mind too much.
- Go on a walkabout at least twice in your life.
- When about to give up, try just a little longer; try a little longer after that as well.
- You should have women friends you will not seduce and spend time with aunts and grandmothers.
- You should observe and study the mysteries and beauties of femininity.

In this version of the stoic tenets, which I borrow from my teachings as a father, the story is gendered first and foremost because I am a man. I have no daughter of my own, but I teach the same story to my sisters' and friends' girls when I take them outside for initiation into the world. This story is similarly applicable to children who may feel a stable sexual attraction towards their own sex.

Where the new archetype of “gender fluidity” fits in this picture is a difficult question. This archetype is still under construction in its current form, and it is still counter-intuitive to many people. For parents of children who cannot fit into a clear side of typically gendered stories and archetypes, it may simply be useful to teach the full story – the story of masculine and feminine types, good and bad.

Notes

1. For the second, sexless Brazil cycle, see [Veissière, 2016b](#)
2. For an ethnographically and statistically grounded critique of the “sex trafficking” panic, see [Agustin, 2007](#); see also [Lancaster, 2011](#).

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