

Is there only one way to be a man? Rethinking masculinity in the age of gender fluidity

February 4 2019, by Jane Chamberlin



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How to be a "real man": Shake hands. Bump shoulders. Gimme five. Up high. Down low. Bulk up. Try out. Make gains. Make the team. Pump iron. Don't iron that. Talk hockey. Talk a lot. Not about feelings. Get angry. Put them in their place. Don't get emotional. Don't do drama. Wear black. Wear blue. Not light blue. Explain things. Keep it straight. Be a man. Don't be a girl. Got it?

What are we to make of the long list of things our society says "real men" are supposed to do? We might prefer to think such a stereotypical view of [masculinity](#) is outdated, but rewriting the "real man" list remains a high-priority item, according to Dr. Michael Kehler, Ph.D., of the University of Calgary.

Kehler is a Werklund School of Education research professor, specializing in masculinity studies. His research focuses on how [boys](#) and men learn what it means to be a man, particularly as they navigate the fraught spaces of schools—from classrooms to locker rooms. His research questions traditional views of masculinity, the power and privilege of being a "real man," and the gender biases in [education systems](#).

Gender bias 101

Unfortunately, school systems often perpetuate gender stereotypes. "There's always been a perception that boys are reluctant to buy into education because the classroom is feminized," says Kehler. Schools often have more female teachers than male, and some educators feel that

girls are more passive learners than boys. "Some teachers continue to draw on gender biases when they teach," says Kehler. "They still think there are 'girl books' and 'boy books.'"

If the education system harbours [gender biases](#), it's not surprising; gender stereotypes like the "real men" list above linger in many aspects of our culture. "There are traditional ways that boys and men express themselves, from shaking hands to wearing dark colours," says Kehler. "These are aspects of masculinity that are deeply embedded in our culture. It's how you show you belong to the boys' club."

Behind the scenes in the boys' club

Belonging to the boys' club can involve more than a benign hand shake. An Ontario all-boys' school [made headlines recently](#) for [its hazing rituals](#), with several students facing criminal charges for assaulting other students. The allegations have sparked concerns about [toxic school environments, hazing and bullying](#). One of the assaults is connected to the football team and appears to have taken place in the locker room—a space of great significance, where masculinity is concerned.

The locker room, according to Kehler, is a breeding ground for the dark side of masculinity. "It's a space of hyper-masculinity and highly gendered banter," says Kehler. "It's also an unsupervised space, and this is where some boys exercise their strength and privilege over others. They may not be as capable academically, so these boys use the locker room as a place where they can dominate, make homophobic remarks and belittle other boys."

Here, between lockers and benches, the masculine pecking order springs to life. "There is no intervention by teachers," says Kehler, "so it's up to the boys to sort themselves out. They figure out who's who in terms of strength, masculinity and aggression."

For boys who don't fit the typically masculine mold, locker rooms can feel like the circles of Hell. "It's the boys who are less confident in general, and less confident of their bodies, who would rather not go into the locker room, period," says Kehler. But abstaining from the hyper-masculine locker room culture is a no-win situation. "If you find somewhere else to change into your gym strip, your absence from the locker room is scrutinized," says Kehler. "It makes you different. Kids will say, 'Oh, he must be gay. That's why he won't change clothes with us.'"

Like the "real men" list above, the locker room has been problematic for years, but has yet to be addressed. "That's why it's so troubling to me as an educator," says Kehler. "You have to admit that nothing's really changed in a long time."

Striving for gender equality in schools: redefining masculinity

Through his work, Kehler hopes to improve the gender balance in schools. His research challenges the idea that gender is a natural, biological state, and suggests that treating girls and boys equally would result in an education system that works well for all children. Part of the push for gender equality involves redefining masculinity as a more diverse concept.

"We have to get away from this idea that there's only one way of being a man," says Kehler. "My studies show that there are competing and overlapping rules. So let's talk about masculinities in the plural."

Allowing for this pluralistic idea of the male acknowledges how diverse boys and men actually are, reflecting elements like race, economics and sexuality. "Being male isn't this one essentialized thing," says Kehler.

"People today are realizing that there is actually a vast depth to masculinity."

Kehler's research shows it's healthy and productive to get boys and girls rethinking masculinities and femininities. "What I see in my studies are boys who want to be openly honest and authentic. They want to reveal their vulnerabilities without being judged for being less than a boy."

A safe place for risk-taking

Pam Krause, CEO of Calgary's Centre for Sexuality and UCalgary alumna (BA Political Science, '86), echoes Kehler's suggestion that young people's views on masculinity need to change. The Centre for Sexuality runs a program called "[WiseGuyz](#)," for grade-nine boys, designed to help them rethink what masculinity means—and what it should mean. Begun in 2010, WiseGuyz takes place weekly in participating Calgary junior high schools.

"The young men delve deeply into issues of masculinity," says Krause. "They talk about what it's like for them to be boys in society today, and how they envision being a man. It's a safe place for them to discuss things that boys aren't normally encouraged to discuss."

The Centre for Sexuality partnered with Dr. Deinera Exner-Cortens, Ph.D., from UCalgary's Faculty of Social Work, to create WiseGuyz as an evidence-based program and scale it across Canada. Krause says the impetus for the program came from the observation that school is often not a positive environment for boys.

"Many boys are really struggling at school," says Krause. "In fact, young men are at a [much higher risk for committing suicide](#)." So the Centre for Sexuality decided an intervention was in order. "It turns out, putting boys in a circle to have frank conversations was just what they needed," says

Krause. "These boys say when they come to WiseGuyz they take off their masculine face, become whoever they really are, and then when they leave, they put that masculine face back on."

The WiseGuyz program helps boys articulate what they see as problematic about traditional masculinity, such as the inability to connect with their own feelings and the feelings of others. Program leaders help boys open up about why these traits are not desirable.

Masculinity and homophobia: a symbiotic relationship

One benefit of the program, according to Krause, is that it reduces homophobia. Krause's team measures homophobia in their participants at the beginning and end of the program. What they find is that, year over year, the boys actually become less homophobic through the course of the program.

The strategy for reducing homophobia includes examining the link between masculinity and homophobia. Krause describes this link in terms that many teenaged boys will understand all too well, and in terms that recall Kehler's description of locker room banter.

"For a 13-year-old boy, one of the worst things in the world you could be called is a 'fag,'" Krause says. "That is the deal-breaker. But our boys learn that that term actually has nothing to do with people's sexuality. It's that thing that is tied to femininity or not exerting hyper-masculine behaviour."

In other words, by questioning their masculinity, boys can express dominance over other boys in almost any social situation.

When boys start to understand the layers of meaning behind the word, they develop empathy for those who are different. "They see that it's okay to accept people for who they are," says Krause. "They develop empathy and they get that not everyone is the same."

The "WiseGuyz" program is working on several levels. Not only are students having these moments of empathetic epiphany, they're sharing what they learn with others. Says Krause, "They're going into the hallways and saying, 'Dude, what you just said is homophobic. That's not okay.'"

Thinking outside the "man box"

Krause hopes that programs like WiseGuyz will help create a population of boys and men who will step outside the box built by masculinity. Krause calls this the "man box." Inside that box are all the culturally acceptable traits assigned to men, such as dominance and stoicism. "The man box is very real," says Krause. "And it's strangling those who live inside it."

Getting boys, and particularly men, to step outside that box isn't always easy. "I think that at the root of the issue is fear," says Krause. "Historically, many men have done well in our society. They don't want to lose their power and their status." If, as Krause and Kehler both suggest, the masculine pecking order needs to change, some men will see that power shift as a threat. "The question this raises," says Krause, "is instead of holding on so tightly to your power, what's wrong with sharing that power?"

Queering the new masculinities

One of Krause's colleagues at the Centre for Sexuality, Nolan Hill, is

equally concerned with the power dynamics of masculine traditions. Hill runs a program at the Centre for Sexuality called "Totally Out Right," which focuses on health and leadership issues for queer, bisexual, gay, and Two-Spirit men who are either cisgender or transgender. As a long-standing advocate for the Calgary queer community, Hill sees the changing concept of masculinity from a unique perspective.

"As a gay man and a queer man, my relationship with masculinity is quite complicated," says Hill (BA, Women's Studies, '19). "I think that for folks in the queer community who identify as male, there is a lot of relief that the concept of masculinity is being revisited." Hill is glad to see masculinity loosening its grip on traits like strength, power and dominance.

"We're seeing more conversations about masculinity evolving," says Hill. "But we're still coming up against those very dominant ideals." Hill cites LGBTQ rights as an area where concrete progress has been made. "The high-level discourse is changing, but is life on the ground for, say, trans people, really any better? Maybe not."

Hill raises the example of [a recent Tweet](#) in which a father paints his fingernails as a show of support to his son. "The story suggests a wonderfully accepting attitude," says Hill. "But the reality is that there are still guys painting their nails, presenting a non-conforming type of masculinity, and they are being harassed every day."

Shaking the foundations of masculine power

Just as Kehler sees the education system as freighted with gender-bias baggage, Hill adds that schools are just one of many such systems. "We have to remember," says Hill, "that masculinity is ingrained into our political systems, our financial systems and our economic systems." These systems were originally constructed by men, for men.

"Yes, these systems are evolving. But the foundations were laid well before women were considered persons," says Hill, "and well before anyone started talking about gender as something fluid, rather than a binary." So the process of changing a cultural norm as entrenched as masculinity will be a slow one.

Performing masculinity: the myth of the Marlboro man

Dr. Jean-René Leblanc, Ph.D., associate professor of digital arts in UCalgary's Faculty of Arts, is also in the business of rethinking masculinities. He is looking for signs of change in the rodeo arena, and is interested in gender as a performance – rather than a biological – marker.

To explain the idea of performing your gender, Leblanc points to the things we do consciously, every day, that express our gender. "It's the idea that your gender isn't something you're born with, physically. It's the things we do with our bodies, the way we move, the way we speak, the way we dress. This is how we create meaning and define our gender."

To study how people perform their gender, Leblanc is currently focused on cowboys. "In this culture, masculinity is performed in a very particular way," says Leblanc. "Cowboy culture has this biologically male marker. But really it's a large umbrella that includes men and woman."

Talking cowboy culture with cowboys

Leblanc's SSHRC-funded research project is two-fold. Along with a team of Canadian researchers, he will first interview about 20 people who participate in rodeos as cowboys. He will ask questions like:

- What is a cowboy?

- Do you identify with cowboy culture?
- Is the ideal cowboy the romantic "Marlboro man?"
- Are rodeo cowboys real cowboys?
- What is a cowgirl?
- What objects define you? Your belt buckle? Your boots?

Leblanc sees the interview process as immersive, a vehicle for him to get inside the heads of cowboys. "It's moving beyond the theory of scholarship to the more grassroots level," he says. "My participants are the true face of the cowboy identity."

His goal is to find out how his subjects perceive and define masculinity and femininity. "We tend to assume that cowboy culture sees masculinity in a very conservative and traditional way," says Leblanc. But like Kehler, Leblanc sees masculinity as a diverse, pluralistic concept. He wants to unpack the stereotypes around the hyper-masculine world of cowboy culture and see if those stereotypes still hold true.

"What really interests me is the romanticization of cowboy culture," says Leblanc. "You see it in things like rodeo posters. It raises the question: Is that an accurate representation of how cowboys think of themselves today?"

When he interviews his subjects, Leblanc will also be asking about the objects that define them. "I want to know all the stories behind these objects," says Leblanc. "What is their cultural significance? What is their deep-rooted meaning?" He anticipates hearing about objects like steel-toed boots or the belt buckles given as rodeo prizes. "You might win a hundred thousand dollars at a rodeo," says Leblanc. "But it's the belt buckle that's the really precious prize. That's what shows that you're a champion."

New representations of the cowboy

The other side of Leblanc's three-year research project is an artistic manifestation of his findings. He's hoping that some of the cowboys he interviews will become the subjects of his art. "We'll be working with our subjects to create new forms of representations of cowboy identities," says Leblanc.

Leblanc specializes in digital work, so the artistic component of his project will feature everything from virtual reality to 3-D animations. "These technologies help us reveal the relationship between our subjects, the objects they value, and the way they perceive masculinity," says Leblanc.

The project, titled "Real-Life Cowboys: Representing New Male Subjectivities in 21st Century Cowboy Art Using Participatory Visual Methods and Research Creation," will be put on display beginning in 2020.

The changing face(s) of masculinity

Through artistic representations, research and education, the concept of masculinity is slowly evolving. As Kehler and Hill suggest, the tradition of masculinity is so deeply embedded in our culture that any changes are bound to be laborious, and battles for gender equality will be hard-won. But by reflecting on the implications of traditional masculinity, and by actively promoting tolerance and change, Kehler, Krause, Hill and Leblanc are offering step-ladders to those who wish to climb out of the "man-box."

All four of these advocates and researchers are enthusiastic about launching a generation of men who are ready to leave hyper-masculinity behind. "We're trying to create a critical mass of young men who don't fit into that man-box," says Krause. "These young men are willing to step

out of the box and give those around them a helping hand too."

Adds Kehler, "the stereotypes of masculinity are rooted in day-to-day interactions and institutions that are narrow and restrictive, and limit what it means to be a boy and a man. We're trying to resist and break down the barriers that prevent many boys and men from being unlike the rest of the boys."

Provided by University of Calgary

Citation: Is there only one way to be a man? Rethinking masculinity in the age of gender fluidity (2019, February 4) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-02-rethinking-masculinity-age-gender-fluidity.html>

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