The Science and Politics of Transforming Masculinities

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Abstract

In his important book, Tom Digby argues that warrior societies breed warrior masculinities – conceptions of masculinity organized around the goals of protection, providing and procreation. Misogyny is built into warrior masculinities and functions to preserve a binary conception of gender. In this reply, I applaud Digby's analysis of warrior identities and his call for the transformation of masculine identities in the service of reaching gender parity. I take issue with two polarizing claims -- namely that gender identities emerge through a process of "cultural programming", and that misogyny is a central property of warrior masculinity. In place of these assertions, I offer a bio-cultural account of the development of gender identity. I argue that the goal of gender parity requires that we move beyond polarizing modes of adversarial discourse. In its place, we should seek social transformation through a dialectical approach that integrates the goals of power equalization and mutual understanding.

In *Love and War*, Tom Digby makes the case that asymmetry in gender relations have their origins in the cultural construction of masculine identities. Digby argues that in warrior societies, males are "culturally programmed" to define masculinity in terms of a warrior identity. The warrior identity calls upon men to be tough, to inhibit their concern for the suffering of others, and to assume the primary roles protector (i.e., warrior), provider (i.e., breadwinner) and progenitor (i.e., fathering children) in heterosexual relations with women. Digby suggests that *misogyny* is a necessary part of the warrior identity. Identification with the warrior role involves it devaluing that which has traditionally been understood as feminine. Dismantling the warrior mentality thus becomes central to the eradication of misogyny.

Digby is correct that achieving gender parity will require transformation in cultural conceptions of masculinity – and especially in the warrior identity he so clearly identifies. However, research indicating that gender differences are not "simply socialized" is overwhelming (Davies & Shackelford, 2008; Geary, 2010). Socialization if of obvious importance (Leaper & Friedman 2007); but biology plays a role as well (Berenbaum, Blakemore & Beltz, 2011). If this is so, why endorse a strictly cultural approach? One reason might involve the fear that acknowledging the role of biology may make it difficult to move toward gender parity in society (Campbell, 2012). I suggest, however, that such a fear is unwarranted. Although it is biologically constrained, human development also exhibits considerable plasticity (Shu & Chang, 2019); there is ample room for social experience to modify gender-related behavior to achieve societal goals. Further, failure to acknowledge the role of biology may actually be harmful to the cause of reaching gender parity. Seeking social transformation based on a flawed theory of gender is unlikely to be successful in producing desired social outcomes. For example, cultural arguments tend to direct attention *away* from biological biases that *do* motivate problematic behavior in men.

In what follows, my goal is to offer novel ways to frame the problem of gender inequities. I offer an epigenetic approach (Gottlieb, 2003; Lickliter & Honeycutt, 2020; Mascolo, 2013) to understanding the origins of gender differences in individuals and societies. In this approach, gender roles and identities are neither cultural constructions nor essential properties of fixed natures. Instead, they are emergent outcomes of relations between biology and culture. The epigenetic approach gives us the tools to acknowledge biological contributions to problematic behavior and mitigate them. Further, in political discussions, if meaningful gender differences emerge over the course of development, then it becomes important to understand those differences and how they mediate social tensions. Instead of pursuing purely adversarial routes to socio-political change, approaches that combine the analysis of power with the goal of fostering of mutual understanding may be effective tools in the quest for gender parity.

The Epigenesis of Sex and Gender

Digby suggests that masculine warrior identities are the result of "cultural programming". This position embraces a strong *environmentalist* conception of development. It is opposed by those who suggest that sex differences exist as products of biological evolution (Davies & Shackelford, 2008; Geary, 2010). This debate it but the most recent iteration of the nature-nurture debate, which should by now have been long past us. This is because the nature versus nurture issue is

based on a flawed remise – namely that nature and nurture, genes and environment, biology and culture are separable forces that exert independent influence on development (Gottlieb, 2003; Mascolo, 2013. The perpetuation of this idea functions to maintain polarizing conceptions of gender and of other questions about "human nature" (Bixler, 1980). Its dismantling suggests new ways of thinking about gender that transcends dichotomous thinking.

Humans are relational beings (Mascolo, 2019). Humans develop as a product of *relations between* biology and culture – rather than as a result of either process acting independently. This view is expressed in both classic and contemporary *epigenetic* conceptions of human development (Gottlieb, 2003; Jablonski & Lamb, 2018; Lickliter & Honeycutt, 2020). Epigenesis is the idea that anatomical and psychological structures emerge in development as a product of the mutual influence of genes and environments (Gottlieb & Lickliter, 2020; Mascolo, 2013; Waddington, 1957).[1] Nature and nurture are not independent processes; they influence each other over the course of development (Mascaro, et. al., 2017). The question is not whether human action is "genetic" or "environmental" – it is how do genes and environments work together in the actual *formation* of patterns of human action?

The epigenetic landscape is illustrated in Figure 1. In this metaphor, first proposed by Waddington (1957), *heredity* is represented as a tilted landscape containing a series of hills, valleys and canals. *Development* is represented by a ball located at the top of the landscape. As the ball rolls down the landscape, it reaches a series of *choice points* where development can move in several possible directions. The ball is most likely to move down the deepest canals – those made most probable by heredity. However, that which occurs in environment of the landscape can always move the ball from one path to another. In this way, development is simultaneously biologically constrained and open-ended. For any single genetic code, there are multiple pathways that development can take.

While culture plays an important role in the development of gender, biology plays a predisposing role in the development of gender (Berenbaum, Blakemore & Beltz, 2011; Geary, 2010). The most obvious biological biases occur in the development of sex-related anatomy and physiology (e.g., physical size and strength; reproductive functions). Further, at the level of the group, research also suggests that males and females develop along different trajectories in the areas of spatial and verbal skills (Asperholm, Högman, Rafi & Herlitz, 2019); aggression and empathy (Tremblay & Côté, 2019); jealousy (Bendixen, Kennair & Buss, 2015); and various aspects of sexuality (Raisanen, et al., 2017; Regan & Atkins, 2006). Biological males tend to develop a greater interest in things while females tend to develop a greater interest in people (Su, Rounds & Armstrong, 2009).

[1]The concept of epigenesis has a long history (Gottleib, 2003). Mascolo & Bidell (2020) have differentiated between two current uses of the term *epigenetic.* Epigenesis in the *broad* sense refers to the idea that genes and environments are inseparable as causes of development. Anatomical and psychological structures are formed in the process of development; they are neither preformed nor predetermined. Epigenesis is the *narrow* sense refers to the local processes by which genes are "turned on" and "turned off" by biological processes (methylation and histone modification) that occur "above" the level of the genes. While both uses are valid, in this paper, I use *epigenesis* in the broader sense of the term.
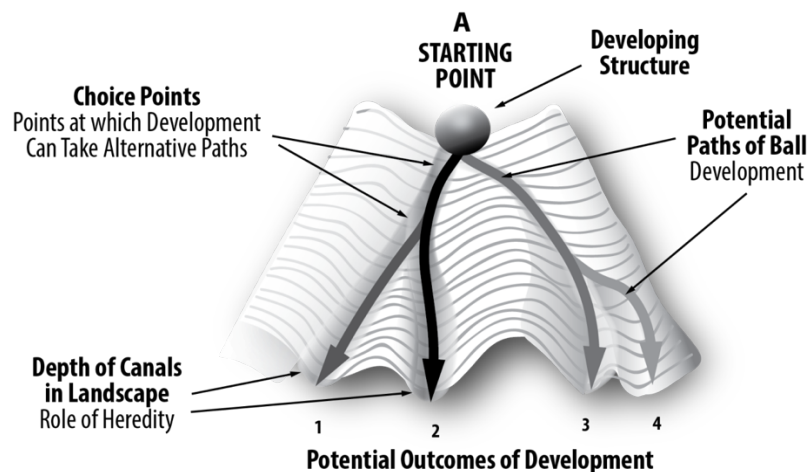
Figure 1. The Epigenetic Landscape Metaphor of Development

The development of sex differences is an epigenetic process (Warin & Hammarström, 2018). While biological processes bias males and females toward different developmental pathways, biological constraints are *probabilistic* -- not *deterministic* (Gottlieb & Lickliter, 2007). Biologically-biased actions influence and are influenced by a child's environment (Mascaro et al, 2017; Zosuls & Ruble, 2018). Adults not only hold different expectations for boys and girls, they also treat boys and girls differently (Leaper & Friedman, 2007). Environment matters. But even here, environment is not independent of biology (Eagly & Wood, 2013; Endendijk, Groeneveld & Mesman, 2018). For example, boys and girls often exhibit differential preferences for toys and activities early in life. Such preferences influence how socialization agents treat their children.

The Politics of Gender Relations

The task of differentiating the concepts *misogyny*, *masculinity* and *threats to masculinity* is an important one. Failure to differentiate these concepts risks conflating misogyny with masculinity. This practice contributes to both scientific and political polarization on the issue of gender. As a term of opprobrium, *misogyny* functions as a rhetorical or evaluative concept; however, it fails to function as an adequate explanation of problematic behavior.

Digby identifies the root causes of male domination in *misogyny*, "which is at the emotional core of the gender binary as it is experienced in boys and men in militaristic societies [and] is intrinsic to the cultural ideal of warrior manliness" (p. 62). Digby defines misogyny primarily through example, that is, in terms of that which "run[s] throughout our culture, including sexual harassment, sexual discrimination, sexual assault, and heterosexual homicide" (p. 30). He suggests that misogyny is revealed by the threat many men feel by being called a woman:

> To say that a man is womanly…is the most profound insult that can be hurled at men, precisely because they buy into the profound stigmatization of women that is inherent

in misogyny. To be deemed a girl or woman is not only a sign of failure as a man, it is a sign of having fallen to a status that is implicitly understood to be profoundly inferior. To be female is to have a status that is deeply despised—and feared—by boys and men. That is why misogyny is such an effective means of culturally policing their lives (pp. 62-63).

To suggest that misogyny is a defining feature of traditional masculine identities is to conflate masculinity, misogyny and threats to masculinity. These are distinct concepts. At base, *misogyny* entered our lexicon as a political concept (McKinnon, 1989). It is structured by a set of ideological assumptions and function in the service of political goals. It entered the social sciences with its ideological assumptions largely intact. For example, *misogyny* has been defined as "hatred of women or girls, expressed as disgust, intolerance or entrenched prejudice, serving to legitimate women's oppression" (Ussher, 2016). It has been used both to both refer to and explain a broad range of attitudes and behaviors directed toward women, including religious and cultural beliefs, jokes, objectification of women in art and pornography; hostility toward women; disgust about women's excretions; sexual harassment; sexual assault; rape and other actions (Ussher, 2016).

If we accept Ussher's ideological interpretation of the concept of misogyny, we can see how Digby's use of the term can be misleading. As a descriptive term, it brings together a broad range of behaviors of various levels of severity into a single category. These behaviors are identified as acts of misogyny *by definition*. As such, an ideological characterization of these behaviors is built into the very terms used to describe to them. As a result, upon witnessing such acts, they are immediately understood as products of misogyny. In so doing, unwanted and offensive behaviors are understood as a product of a *generic malevolent disposition* – hate -- located within individuals and institutionalized systems. However, the relation between hate and the target behaviors is at best unclear. Thus, the concept of misogyny serves rhetorical and political functions, it fails as an explanation of the origins of male patterns of domination.

Explaining Patterns of Male Domination

In place of moral characterizations, there is a need to develop models that explain origins of patterns of male dominance in relation to women. Figure 2 provides a model of the functioning of traditional masculine identities under various social conditions. Dominating behavior often has its origins in threats to masculine identity (Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2016; Mescher and Rudman, 2014; Peralta & Tuttle, 2013). The process begins with some perceived (a) *threat* to (b) *masculine ideals* which is often experienced as a source of (c) *shame* (Scheff & Retzinger, 2000; Lindsay-Hartz, de Rivera & Fischer, 1995). In shame, the threat of a spoiled identity leads to variety of outcomes. The individual can (1) seek to deny or eliminate the threat to identity through *rage* (Jakupcak, Tull, & Roemer, 2005); (2) succumb to the threat and move toward humiliation, withdrawal or depression (Rice et al., 2016); or (3) *take responsibility* for moral infractions and confront the task of self-transformation. The reconstruction of identity is a social process that best occurs when shame can be managed and mitigated in the context of supportive relationships.
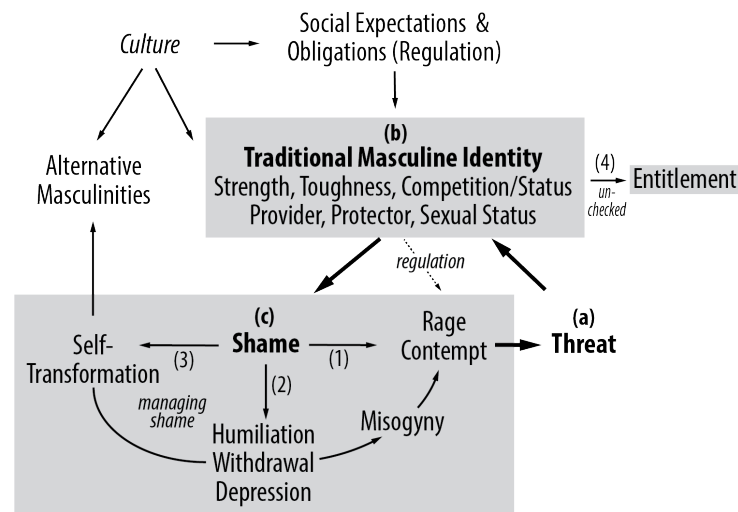
Culture → Social Expectations & Obligations (Regulation)

Alternative Masculinities

**(b)
Traditional Masculine Identity**
Strength, Toughness, Competition/Status
Provider, Protector, Sexual Status

(4) un-checked → Entitlement

regulation

**(c)
Shame**

Self-Transformation   (3)   (1)   Rage Contempt → **(a) Threat**

managing shame   (2)

Humiliation Withdrawal Depression   Misogyny

Figure 2: Masculine Identity Processes

In this model, dominating behavior of men toward women has its proximal origins in the threat to masculine identity. It outlines several pathways to the emergence patterns of male dominance – not all of which are mediated by misogynistic attitudes. The first arises from identification with traditional gender relations (Point a in Figure 2), including gender-based divisions of labor and roles that put men in positions of provider, protector, and initiators of sexual activity. In such contexts, gender relations that might have seen as normative at the midpoint of the 20th century might be regarded as instances of sexual harassment today.

A second source of domination arises from the cycle of shame and anger that occurs under the threat of a spoiled identity (Scheff & Retzinger, 2000) – in this case, a threat to traditional masculine ideals. While neither of these two are necessarily born of misogyny, each is indeed capable of fostering misogynistic attitudes. Generalized resentment and even hated toward women can develop from the sense – real or imagined – of long-term or sustained threats to masculinity in the areas of work, domestic relations or sexuality (Beneke, 1975). A third source of misogyny arises from a sense of masculine *entitlement* (Point 4 in Figure 2) that develops when masculine ideals operate outside of the context of shared rules of social constraint and obligation (Hill & Fischer, 2001). Such feelings can be identified as misogynistic when they are mediated, for example, by attitudes of superiority in relation to woman (Schwartz & Tylka, 2008).

Transforming Masculine Identities

Discourse about gender tends to occur as a battle between adversaries. On one side, lack of gender parity is understood as the product of patriarchal systems of oppression and misogyny. On the other, gender imbalances are understood as the result of a natural order, where men and women live out their essential natures. The epigenetic approach rejects the dichotomy on which these divisions are based (Adams, 2020) If we are to achieve gender parity, we must do

so against the backdrop of an acknowledgement of gender differences and their role in creating imbalances of power.

This task raises a series of seemingly contradictory imperatives. We begin with the observation that, at the group level, significant power differentials exist between men and women. In conflicts involve power differentials, dominant parties rarely cede power spontaneously (Sharp, 2013). As a result, it becomes necessary for the less powerful party to seek some degree of parity with the more powerful party. Power struggles, however, rarely resolve the source of conflict between parties. Instead, they create winners and losers where the more powerful party typically prevails. In circumstances in which less powerful parties succeed, the formerly powerful party is rarely transformed. Instead, the shame of defeat fosters resentment, and the conflict resurfaces in a different form. Authentic conflict resolution thus requires a transformation in the *relationship* between conflicting parties. But transforming relationships requires deep engagement and the formation of mutual understanding (Shapiro, 2017). How, then, it possible to transform gender relations in the context of systematic power differentials?

One approach is to seek social transformation through *dialectical engagement* (Mascolo, in press; Marginean, Lambert, La Torre & Mascolo, 2020). Dialectical engagement seeks to resolve social conflict by transforming relationships between conflicting parties. It does so by bringing together *power and mutual engagement*. Through mutual engagement and collaborative problem-solving, conflicting parties move past entrenched positions by seeking to identifying and meet the underlying needs, interests, and concerns that motivate each party in a conflict. In the case of gender relations, the process of dialectical engagement would involve:

1. Seizing Power and Affirming Dignity. Social transformation is unlikely to occur in circumstances that involve either differentials or disregard for the dignity and humanity of the other. In the context of power differentials, *power* is achieved through social organization, non-cooperation, passive resistance, civil disobedience, and other forms of assertive but non-violent communication of the idea that "you cannot do this to me." The quest for social power is accompanied by authentic demonstrations of respect for the dignity and humanity of the other.

2. Mutual Engagement. Advances in social power open up the opportunity for mutual engagement. Against the backdrop of moral humility, each side seeks to understand the experiences, needs, interests and concerns of the other. Over time, the capacity to hear and to be heard can generate trust, empathy and even compassion on both sides of a conflict. In this way, combining power and mutual engagement can create conditions for genuine social transformation. In this regard, the expressed interests of women would almost certainly include the need to be heard; to be safe from physical, emotional and sexual harm; for equity in the workplace and in the home; to be respected as full persons; and so forth.

3. Constructing Novel Identities. Once the needs, interests and concerns of both parties to a conflict are articulated, it becomes possible to seek novel ways to meet those needs. For men, the question would become, what would it mean to be man who honors the needs of women? How can I accommodate my sense of masculinity in ways that enhance and do not diminish

women? In this regard, understanding of the processes outline in Figure 2 becomes important. Gaining a reflective understanding of what it means to experience the self as masculine is necessary if men are to assume responsibility for the behavior that flows from some forms of gendered experience. It is only by understanding their masculine identities that men can come to terms with the need for self-transformation.

Collaborating with the Opposition

Disputes about gender are forms of social conflict. We typically view social conflict as a kind of zero-sum game – a battle in which advances by one party come at the expense of the other. In the context of systematic differentials of power, it is difficult to view gender conflict as a type of power struggle. While it is necessary to equalize power in the service of social transformation, power assertion is rarely effect in transforming relationships between opposing parties. The process of transforming identities and relationships requires the development of mutual understanding of what it means to experience the self from the standpoint of different genders. It requires an understanding of how gendered interactions cause pain in both the other and in the self. And so, in addition to the equalization of power, transforming gender relations requires deep engagement, radical sociality and compassion. As this happens, we can begin to move more rigorously toward the type of society that Digby calls on us to create.

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