WHAT IS IT ABOUT MEN THAT MAKES THEM DO THE THINGS THEY DO?

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The title for this paper comes from the chorus of a song by the feminist folk singer, Judy Small, which was written in reaction to the massacre of fourteen female students at the University of Montreal in December 1989. This incident, which made headlines around the world, occurred when a young male entered a classroom at the University of Montreal, Canada, dismissed the male students, and then lined up the female students and, after accusing them of being 'feminists', shot them. Small's song summarises so well an issue that we, in Men Against Sexual Assault (MASA), have attempted to personalise—what is it about men, about us as men, which makes us do the things we do?

MASA members feel that, given the nature and extent of male violence in our society, this may be one of the most important questions of our time. To us, it is certainly the most important question men can ask themselves—more important than why do we die seven or eight years earlier than women (which for many women may be a blessing), have such difficulty with intimate relationships, feel so distant from our spouses and children, are four times more likely to complete suicide, and comprise about 75 per cent of all substance abusers (except cigarettes and tranquillisers). Given the fact that 97 per cent of all childhood sexual assault, 95 per cent of all domestic violence, about 98 per cent of all adult rapes are committed by males and that 96 per cent of the prison population is male, and given that at least one in four girls and one in about six boys will be sexually assaulted before age eighteen, that as many as one in two women may be sexually assaulted across their entire life-span, and that one in three marriages will be marred by at least one incident of domestic
violence, male violence takes on a frightening urgency that makes it one of the most vital issues for our culture to solve if we, as a species, have the slightest hope of long-term survival. As the amount of destruction one person can do with a weapon increases, it is extremely important that we address ourselves to this question: what is it about men which makes them do the things they do?

It is not accidental that most violence is committed in our society by men. Violence is so deeply embedded in the traditional male role that the real issue for men becomes how to be traditionally masculine and yet set limits on our aggression so that we do not violate others' rights. That so many men become confused about where these limits are is not surprising—what is surprising is that there is not much more male violence than there is already. (This is not to imply that any level of violence is acceptable, of course, only that the traditional masculine role places men in the double-bind of requiring them to be aggressive but not completely aggressive.)

Learning 'Masculinity'

If developmental psychology has taught us anything, it is that learning starts very early for children. Babies are not 'roly-poly sponges soaking up TLC', as one psychologist called them in the early 1970s (Rappoport 1972, p. 151), but rather extremely active learners:

Unless he's [sic] practically starving, any baby worth his [sic] salt would rather look than eat', says [child psychologist David] Stern. That is what babies spend most of their lives doing, looking and listening. They have an avid push to explore all that's going on outside (Friday 1985, p. 334).

And to the baby, who is starting to build up what Piaget, a Swiss Psychologist, called 'schemas', one of the first things he or she notices is that the world is divided into groups called 'boys' and 'girls' and that which category she/he is a member of matters a great deal, especially to his/her parents.

There is a philosophical tendency in our culture, dating at least as early as Augustine (see Dollimore 1991), to divide the world into opposites—for example, 'black-white', 'good-bad'. The very young child quickly learns that one of these opposites is 'male-female'. Arguably, it is one of the first dichotomies the developing child learns, and therefore it becomes the guide-line to the way so much of the child's growing knowledge base will be structured.

This is why it is so important to children to 'get-it-right' when it comes to gender. It is one of the first things they learn. It is one of the most fundamental things they learn, and it serves to both model and structure so much of their further learning. This is also why children, from very young ages, act in traditional 'gender-appropriate' roles: girls playing with dolls and boys playing with trucks—so that it often looks as though this is some sort of sex-role genetic program that compels a little boy to reach for a gun or a truck rather than a doll or a toy dish. This is also why little boys, in particular, are so hard on other little boys who deviate, those little boys who do play with dolls and toy dishes. This sort of 'deviation' is immediately calling into question the sex-role schema the other little boys are 'rehearsing', thereby challenging one of the most fundamental cognitive structures the children have attained so far in their lives.
It is a well-known fact, again established through the work of Piaget, that children use play to explore the adult world of which they will one day be a part (see Phillips 1984). Therefore, the play children indulge in can tell us a great deal about the understanding children have been given about what constitutes 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviour. Davies (1989) observed and played with children in four different preschools. She discusses one particularly memorable incident in which a little girl who had a doll taken by a little boy, first goes to a box of play clothes, puts on a man's waistcoat, and then goes over and recovers her doll from the little boy. Having thus made her point, she then returns the vest to the play clothes collection and becomes a little girl again (Davies 1989, p. 16-17).

This incident can be seen as an exemplar of a template of masculinity and femininity that little boys and little girls learn very early and spend the rest of their lives trying to fit. Authors like Chodorow (1978) and Dinnerstein (1978) have argued that this is particularly true if the little boy has limited contact with a father who is absent, at a place called 'work' most of the time. Horsfall extends their argument to point out that if the little boy does not have enough contact with his father to identify with him as a person, he will identify with the male 'position' as normally presented to him through the media and society at large instead:

Positional male gender identification allows for the incorporation of accessible cultural stereotypes of masculinity into the actual gender identity of the male. This process incorporates macro-social behaviours into the intra-psychic processes; and it renders consciously apprehended material part of some unconscious stereotyped way (Horsfall 1991, p. 61).

There are two cultural stereotypes of 'masculine' behaviour that are particularly relevant for an understanding of male violence. The first of these is that real men are aggressive, and the second is the phenomenon of objectification. With regard to the first stereotype, many women may not be aware of how vital a part aggression plays in traditional masculinity. For example, here is a quote worth pondering from a book written for young Christian men in the early 1970s:

A man of steel is a masculine man. He is aggressive, determined, decisive and dependent . . . He rejects softness and timidity. When he has made a decision based upon the best of his judgement, he is as unbendable as a piece of steel. These qualities of masculinity set him apart from women and children and weaker members of his own sex (Andelin 1974, pp. 18-19).

It is interesting to note that this book is not written as an army training manual, nor does it necessarily wish to encourage men to get into violent fights with other men. It certainly does not seek to encourage male violence against 'women, children and weaker members of his own sex'. Its purpose is to educate young men into a standard of Christian manhood. But it still equates that manhood with aggression.

Others are less reticent about the link between masculinity and the ability and willingness to express aggression, at least against the enemy or on a battlefield. (This was especially so before weaponry became too sophisticated to make war 'feasible'):

The nation that has trained itself to a cancer of unwarlike and isolated case is bound, in the end, to go down before other nations which have not lost the manly and adventurous virtues . . . There is no place in the world for nations who have become enervated by the soft and easy life, or who have lost their

Whatever we may feel about these sentiments, aggression is a commonly accepted part of masculinity. This is not intended to deny the need for courage, self-discipline, emotional and physical strength in facing the challenges of the future. It is rather to raise the question why these qualities should not also be encouraged in little girls, and most importantly, to ask if it is such a wise idea to create one sex role (boys) in which the only emotion that can be expressed is anger and aggression without any nurturing or tenderness to temper its expression.

Ganley, writing about feminist theory with men, is one of the few counsellors who has dealt with this issue:

While much has been written in the men's liberation field about men being socialized to avoid expressing emotions, less attention has been given to the reality that men are oversocialized to use the emotion of anger as a mask for other emotions. The issue is not so much that they do not express feelings, but that they usually express all feelings as anger. Women are socialized to be emotional and men are socialized to be angry. This has particularly serious consequences when this emotional pattern is paired with the behavioural pattern of violence. While all men do not physically batter their partner or children or strangers, most misuse anger. When experiencing the full range of human emotions, such as happiness, sadness, fear and anger, men tend to identify and express the negative emotions of sadness and fear in all their varying degrees as anger/upset. Consequently, guilt, anxiety, hurt, disappointment, etc. result in inappropriate angry expressions. (Ganley 1991, p. 12)

On the face of it it seems completely crazy to take all the human attributes, divide them in half and assign all the soft, tender ones to one sex and the hard, aggressive ones to the other sex. Far from being surprised that most violence in our society is committed by men, it is more surprising that there is not more violence than there actually is!

The second 'bit' of traditional masculinity the little boy learns is objectification. This involves treating people as instruments, or objects, and using people to achieve one's own ends rather than treating people as ends in themselves. To paraphrase the philosopher Martin Buber, every relationship becomes 'I-It' rather than 'I-Thou!' This diminishes the little boy's ability to take others' points of view and may account for the fact that men's morality tends to be based on abstract principles rather than relationships (see Gilligan 1982). Where male violence is concerned, objectification makes it impossible to identify with the victim's distress, caring only about the victim as a means to an end. This underlies all male violence, including soldiering, as well as much male competition.

This attitude also entered the practice of science, so much so that scientists performing experiments on animals in the last century were able to assert that the animal only appeared to feel pain! Contrast the late Nobel prize-winning geneticist Barbara McClintock's attitude towards her ears of corn: 'I know them intimately and I find it a great pleasure to know them' (cited in Belenky et al. 1986, p. 144) with this statement from one of the founders of modern psychology, John Watson, who later became one of the founders of modern advertising: 'I began to learn that it can be just as thrilling to watch the growth of a sales
curve of a new product as to watch the learning curve of animals or men' (McClintock cited in Karier 1986, p. 135).

Others (see Capra 1982, 1988; Easlea 1981; Merchant 1980; Schiebinger 1989) have written at length about objectification in science. Recently, Knudtson and Suzuki (1992) have pointed to the world view of native peoples which refuses to objectify the environment. In a sense, this is what the Aboriginal land rights debate is about—will Australians objectify our country? Cowan (1989, p. 23) quotes T.G. Strehlow as saying that to the Australian Aboriginal 'The whole countryside is his living, age-old family tree'.

As this applies to the development of men, then, it becomes an expectation that men will be able to 'objectify' outside the home in business competition, in war and in sport but somehow leave this ability behind when they re-enter the home at the end of the day. Yet, men are not given the slightest clue how to do this. This may be one of the major barriers in male friendships as well—the tendency to see all other men as competitors, rather than as persons (see Stoltenberg 1990). Together with the tendency to compact all emotions into anger, and an encouragement to act aggressively, objectification almost ensures that it will be men who are responsible for most of the violence in society.

The good news is that few men really fit the template of masculinity. Most men worry that they are not masculine enough, unaware that most of their 'mates' are probably worrying about the same thing! This is, of course, the irony of traditional masculinity. Traditional masculinity is actually very easy to throw off as soon as men face the fact that they do not really fit its ideals in the first place. The reason men do not shed the ideals of traditional masculinity, of course, is that they fear they will be thought of as 'less than a man' if they do. But until the structure of masculinity is challenged, as Judy Small puts it 'the question still remains'.

**Men Against Sexual Assault and Sexual Violence**

If masculinity serves the purpose of some structural, systemic entity, the name of this entity is patriarchy. If we sincerely intend to reflect critically on the implications that patriarchy has for the construction of masculinity and for male perpetrated sexual assault, we turn to feminism.

Some feminist theories perceive rape as a 'conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear' (Brownmiller 1975, p. 15). The effect of rape and all male violence against women serves to remind women that men have physical, economic and social power. The threat of rape is a weapon men use to perpetuate their dominance of women. In this respect all men benefit from rape, and all men are potential rapists.

A continuum of male behaviour is said to exist which extends from seemingly 'innocuous and harmless' actions such as wolf-whistling and sexist jokes, through to violent rape. All men who act out behaviours anywhere along this continuum contribute to an environment where rape is possible, even inevitable.

Men's sexual behaviour is viewed not as some expression of an innate biological imperative, but as having been socially constructed to be aggressive, exploitative and objectifying. As such it has contributed to an effective system for the subordination of women. The system is constructed by men, in men's interests, for the benefit of all men.
Rape has nothing to do with an uncontrollable sexual urge; rape is an expression of power and hate. Men rape to cause fear and pain and to prove their superiority.

A woman who is not ‘protected’ by a man (father/husband/lover/pimp) cannot move freely at the risk of being raped. Men want women to be protected and punish them if they are not. Any display of independence by women is often interpreted as ‘asking to be raped’. By seeing autonomous behaviour by women as incitement or proof of consent to rape, the law absolves rapists and legalises it. Men control the whole situation from the physical rape itself, to the way society perceives the act, to the final judgement in court (Rhodes & McNeill 1985, p. 39).

While not everyone would agree with such an analysis of sexual assault, it is not possible to deny the central and indispensable role that the work of feminists have had in forcing the issue of sexual assault before the public eye. Without the dedication and commitment of many feminists over many years, such a conference as this would not have occurred, and a group such as MASA would never have come into being.

MASA is best characterised as a pro-feminist, male positive and gay affirmative group of men who are confronting male responsibility for rape and sexual assault on both individual and societal levels. As a group we owe an unremitting debt to feminism for our perspective and ideology, but we do not seek to appropriate their space. It is only because of feminism that males are able to begin to create a ‘Critical Theory’ of men by men. This work is still in its infancy, and as Helene Cixous has written, ‘men still have everything to say about their own sexuality’ (Cixous cited in Jardine & Smith 1987, p. 60). However, groups such as MASA are a starting point for such an analysis.

Briefly put, MASA aims to encourage all men to accept responsibility for choosing non-violent, non-abusive behaviour, and to redefine aspects of traditional masculinity that culturally support sexual assault. To these aims we have worked with feminist groups to agitate for rape law reform; developed and run programs focusing on personal and social change for males in schools, universities, workplaces, prisons and the general community; developed media campaigns that challenge sexism and violence; lobbied government and other agencies to implement programs designed to prevent sexual assault, as well as organised annual rallies and marches in most Australian capital cities.

Given what MASA has and is aiming to achieve, what does it mean for a man in a patriarchal, misogynist and homophobic society to take such a stance and actively work to end sexism and male violence? On a personal level, it means being free to throw off the shackles of a masculine imperative that many men do not feel comfortable with. To have the opportunity to explore their emotional, sensual and nurturing qualities previously left underdeveloped. It means becoming a fuller, richer and more complete individual. Politically, it means to reclaim masculinity for males who want to live in a just and equitable society—to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity and all that it involves.

At first glance this strategy may seem to involve a distancing from what we traditionally view as masculine and all the associated horrors men perpetrate. The reality however is quite different. If men are to effectively confront and challenge masculinity in its present construction we must not distance ourselves from it, but identify with it. It is only by such a process that we can hope to understand and eventually change male attitudes and behaviours.

The last thing MASA needs is hoards of self-congratulatory men saying ‘Of course I am against rape’ yet not recognising their own responsibility. Many men will flock to
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disassociate themselves from 'those awful men who rape'. Men expect to be thanked for not raping and for adopting anti-sexist positions when such attitudes should be a societal given. We must recognise that the minority of men that do try to dissociate themselves from acts of violence and sexism are still given more power, freedom and wealth than women. We must not distance ourselves from 'rapists', but identify the common elements we share and confront these both in ourselves individually, and in societal structures generally.

While MASA acknowledge that structural factors are implicit in masculine construction, this recognition should never absolve men of individual responsibility for their actions. Men attack others because they choose to take a course of action that results in another's suffering. We need to be careful that structural analyses do not provide men with a rationale for the denial of responsibility through an emphasis on external factors. The ideology of blaming the system provides an escape route from male responsibility, and men have been very adept at avoiding it up to now. It is important that the tension between social construction and individual responsibility is not misunderstood. Both factors need to be addressed in a 'double-pronged' strategy which does not ignore the inter-relations between them.

When considering the construction of masculinity and its relationship to sexual assault, male sexuality is of central concern. Traditionally, it has taken the form of an aggressive, objectifying, supposedly uncontrollable obsession with penetration, as well as the ability to separate sex from emotion, affection and sensuality. Given these characteristics it should not be surprising that a person who encapsulates them, unmediated by other more 'feminine' qualities, would rape. What exists in this stereotype to prevent it?

While we would like to believe that no single man could exhibit only these traits, we must recognise that they are present in all men in some measure and mix. This reality raises more questions than we have answers for.

What does it mean when a man looks at a body as if it were an object, a thing, and the man becomes sexually excited?
What does it mean when a man with one hand is paging through a magazine containing pornographic images, and with his other hand is masturbating?
What does it mean for a man to pay for sex with a stranger in preference to an intimate sensual exchange with a loved one?
What does it mean for a man to believe that if a person says 'no' to sex they really mean 'try harder'?
What does it mean for a man to use emotional blackmail or physical force to ensure he comes inside a body?
What does it mean that such a man is 'normal'? (Stoltenberg 1990, p. 50).

Changing Male Attitudes

MASA has set itself three tasks: activism, education and support for men to change. Whereas in activism we are basically seeking to confront and challenge patriarchy, in education and counselling we are seeking to convince men to change themselves. Counselling is a bit easier in this regards because one begins with the issue brought in by the counsellee, an issue that therefore becomes the focal point of change. Not all issues in counselling are related to gender, but gender and gender-role play a part in shaping many issues.
In MASA, Brisbane, we have tried first to apply the feminist critique of masculinity to ourselves which, of course, is a continuing process. We have found a number of issues have brought the members of MASA to approach the need to change ourselves. Many of us have lived with someone of strong feminist principles who has kept probing our masculinity and brought us to question it ourselves. We owe a debt to these women which cannot be repaid. For other members, we have lived with a victim of sexual assault or been victims of sexual assault ourselves and are aware of how power is used against women, children and other men by men in our society. For still others, the breakdown of an important relationship led us to question our abilities to relate intimately and, therefore, the limitations of the traditional male sex-role. This can be an important turning point for a man. Still others have felt victimised by homophobic attitudes and sought greater intimacy with men—some of these men are gay but others are hetero or bisexual.

There are two issues often expressed by men in counselling that particularly open the door for change for men. One is the breakdown of a relationship. There is much research that men tend to see relationships as they see much else, instrumentally (see Abbott 1990; Bograd 1992; Brod 1987; Friday 1985; Levinson 1978; Michaelis 1983; Stoltenberg 1990). In intimate relationships, men often use the relationship as a secure launching pad from which to develop their lives outside the home. As a result, they often ignore their most intimate relationships until they are beyond repair. This is a crucial time for men, who are often left feeling angry, hurt and confused. At this point, men have the opportunity to question how they have contributed to the breakdown of the relationship, and this usually means challenging how they have viewed masculinity. The other option, unfortunately at least as often exercised, is to channel the anger into bitterness against women, feminism, the Family Court, and similar 'objects'. (For example, in 1992, on the television program A Current Affair, the leader of the Perth-based Men's Co-fraternity argued that 'feminism has gone too far' and that 'women should return home and nestle'.)

The other issue that often arises with men is their resentment at how little time their fathers had for them as children. In the USA, the poet Robert Bly, amongst others, has built the so-called 'mytho-pactical' movement (also called the 'wildman' movement) around this need (Bly 1990). Many men have determined to play a much more active role in their own children's lives, which is the very tonic Chodorow (1978) and Dinnerstein (1978) recommended in the late 1970s. This should greatly contribute to the demise of the traditional male gender-role, although current research with fathers indicates only a small portion of fathers are following this trend. (see Greif & Bailey 1990; James 1988; Risman 1986; Russell 1983). However, many men have a lot of anger about their fathers, and this can be used in counselling to promote change.

Education with men is more difficult because the issue does not automatically engage them. Like the Biblical parable of the sower, a lot of the seed tends to fall by the wayside! It is useful with men to begin with compelling statistics to keep them from dissociating themselves with male violence. It is human not to like to hear potentially disturbing things about ourselves and the typical male reaction when we first hear this material is 'that is other men they are talking about, not me'. When men realise how common male violence is, and how little difference there is between sex offenders and other men, we can then question how traditionally masculine we are. Stoltenberg's description of male sexuality in Refusing to be a Man (1990, p. 46–61) is particularly hard for men to deny.
Other men are quick to feel themselves under attack, particularly if that 'horrible' F-word—Feminism—is used. Still others agree that men generally have a problem with violence, and that this problem is not being overstated by feminists but believe that nothing can be done about it. They appeal to genetics, animal behaviour or testosterone to argue that men will always reproduce a patriarchal world. (A number of authors have refuted this very deftly; see Kaplan & Rogers 1990).

Just as a 'discount hierarchy' was once developed to chart people's willingness to come to terms with child sexual assault, there is a sort of discount hierarchy amongst men whom MASA attempts to educate:

- **Level 1** — 'This may be true of a few men who are sick and deviant, but is not true of me';
- **Level 2** — 'OK, it may be true of many men, but feminists have gone too far';
- **Level 3** — 'OK, the feminists are right but there is nothing I can do about it for genetic and biological reasons' (that is, 'I cannot change');
- **Level 4** — 'The feminists are right, but I have already changed'; and
- **Level 5** (the final level, where men at MASA try to live) — 'Change is an on-going process and we must continually challenge our beliefs and attitudes and ask ourselves are we a part of the problem, or a part of the solution'.

Men can improve the odds of our being part of the solution greatly if we continually challenge ourselves to see how far we can change. This is the adventure of MASA.

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