

Reconstructing masculinity

Men must be able to explore all their feelings – including aggression and violence – in therapy without being judged if they are to move towards positive change, argues *Manu Bazzano*. Illustration by *Joe McLaren*

‘Certain widespread masculine traits and behaviours are dangerous and costly to both individuals and society’.¹ So wrote sociologists Cynthia Cockburn and Ann Oakley in the *Guardian* on International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women last year.

They produced an alarming inventory of statistics from hell to support their case. Men commit 87 per cent of all traffic offences and 81 per cent of all speeding offences. Over 90 per cent of the first 466 defendants brought to trial following the riots in UK cities in August 2011 were male. Men perpetrate 91 per cent of all violent incidents in England and Wales, including 81 per cent of incidents of domestic violence, 86 per cent of assaults, 94 per cent of attacks involving wounding, 96 per cent of muggings and 98 per cent of robberies. If this were not enough, men are responsible for 98 per cent of sexual offences, 92 per cent of drug offences and 89 per cent of criminal damage. And to top it all, 99 per cent of child sex offenders are male.

The ‘most masculine crimes are the most expensive’, Oakley and Cockburn argue: ‘A homicide, a sexual offence and a serious wounding cost £1.4 million, £31,438 and £21,422 respectively.’ If men committed as little crime as women, they justifiably conclude, the money saved would pay off the current economic deficit. With its insidious penchant for violence and unpleasantness, they argue, masculinity is a costly business.

All is not lost, however: masculine characteristics can be changed for the better; ‘the culture of masculinity can be, and should be, addressed as a policy issue,’ they conclude.

What is masculinity?

The Oxford dictionary defines masculine as ‘having qualities or appearance traditionally associated with men’.² Unsurprisingly, it says nothing about

violence. That the term should effectively become synonymous with unacceptable behaviour is worrying. It could mean that, for a sizeable section of society, masculinity *per se* is a bad thing.

What Cockburn and Oakley describe might perhaps more accurately be called machismo, which is a caricature of masculinity – the sort of virility associated in mainstream media with characters played by John Wayne and Arnold Schwarzenegger: fictional characters such as Rambo or, more recently, Don Draper in *Mad Men*, the latter a cynical and debonair advertising executive who embodies the greed and brazen allure of New York’s Madison Avenue in the 1960s. Draper also personifies the misogyny, emotional illiteracy and sheer unpleasantness of a world seen through the lens of a retro aesthetics – partly tongue-in-cheek, partly nostalgic, yet surprisingly timely in view of the profligacy and swagger demonstrated by bankers and traders in recent years.

As documented by many therapists working with male clients, it is often difficult for a man to express his subjective experience of masculinity.³ The image of masculinity portrayed in contemporary culture and the media confuses things further, and the routine headline-grabbing outbursts of male celebs, all too happy to confirm the stereotype, do not help.⁴

What masculinity is not

In trying to answer the question ‘What is masculinity?’, it may be useful to think about what masculinity is not. It is surely not machismo – that is, exaggerated male pride born out of a sense of inferiority. Nor is it the overt demonstration of virility to conceal the terror of being perceived as vulnerable. Adler’s approach to the difficult topic of masculine pride is inspirational:⁵ instead of chastising it, he reformulated it, first as ‘aggression

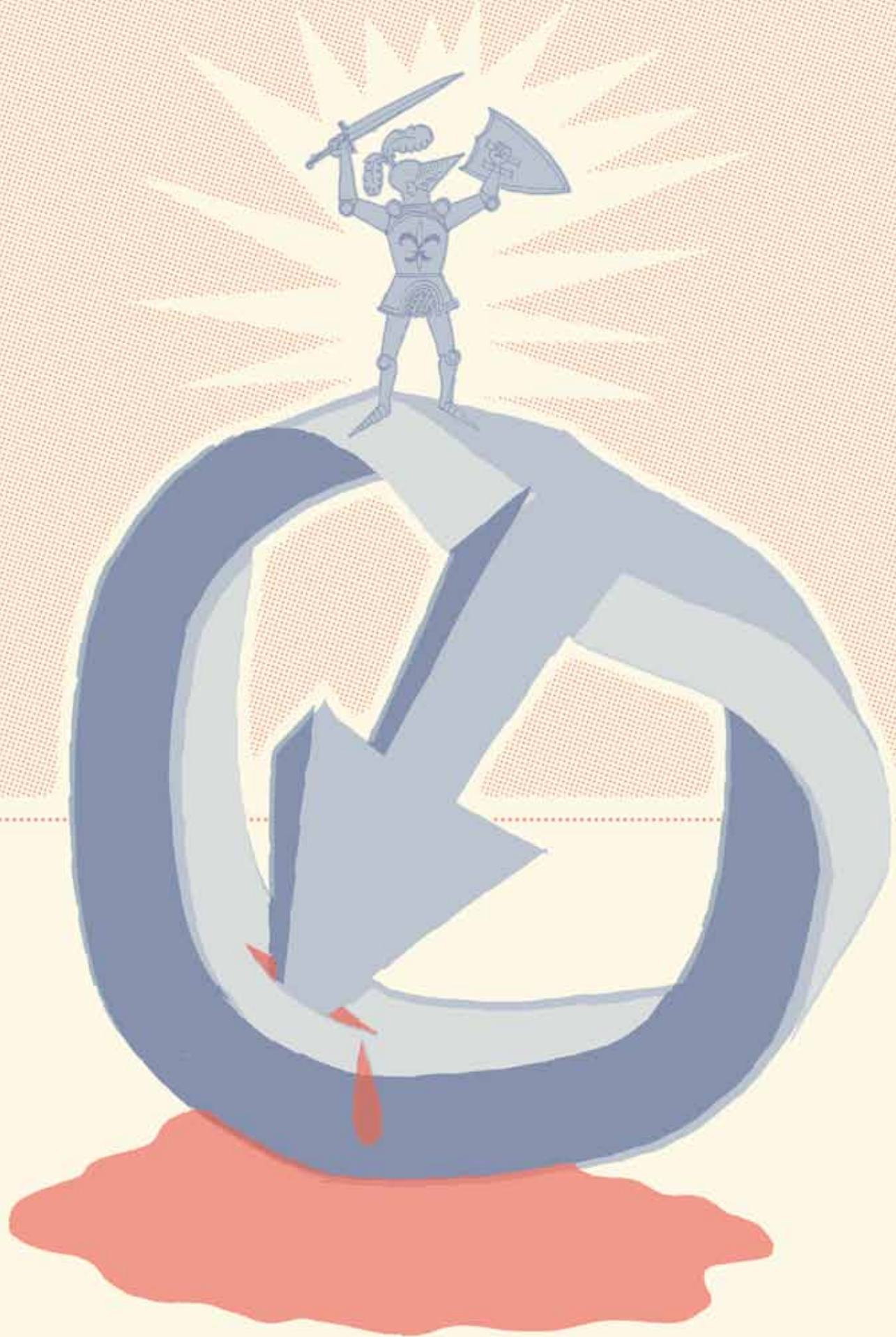
drive’, then as ‘striving for superiority’, and eventually as ‘striving for meaning’. The result is an individual who has undergone therapy successfully – who has experienced an awakening of ‘communal feeling’ and an aspiration to contribute to society. This is, of course, very different from the manipulation of men’s energies for the purpose of war.

Adler was not speaking of men only, but what matters here is that he emphasised the need to redirect aggression towards a force for common good. The very word ‘aggression’, from the Latin *aggredi*, simply means the act of moving forward without hesitation;⁶ the movement is not directed at something or someone. Adler’s suggestion seems to be: explore, describe and, to a certain degree, understand what male aggression is; in other words, do not demonise it.

Beyond gender bias

Some men who have suffered the consequences of their own overtly belligerent behaviour come to therapy hoping to find a route towards positive change. In some cases their hard exterior begins to crack and the light may get in. It takes time for both client and therapist to build some intimacy. It takes time for ‘hard men’ to feel more comfortable about showing vulnerability, to feel that they don’t need to wear body armour when entering the therapy room.

John, a counsellor colleague, described to me his experience of working with Ian, a man in his 30s with a history of violence in his family. Regularly beaten up and belittled by his father as a boy, he had grown up with the dread that he might have somehow inherited his father’s violence. He had come to therapy mainly because he had noticed signs that his behaviour was beginning to confirm this greatest of fears. During an argument one day he had pushed his wife, and was horrified by this. The therapy lasted a year and went well, all things considered,



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John said. A helpful factor had been John's ability to stay with and help Ian explore his aggression and frustration without judging him.

During one particularly difficult session, Ian reported an argument with his ex-partner over the child care arrangements. He voiced his frustration by saying: 'I swear sometimes I feel I want to strangle her.' As he spoke, John said, Ian looked unbelievably sad. 'We sat in silence for a couple of minutes, then I reflected back to him his anger, his frustration, as well as the fact that he looked so sad,' John told me. A minute later Ian smiled. John smiled back. Then Ian said: 'It feels good to just be able to say that, to say what it really feels like at times for me. That really helps.' Precisely because John created a space where aggression could be voiced, Ian felt accepted and this enabled him in turn to look more closely at the nature and causes of his aggression.

Proud of this particular piece of work, John decided to present it as a case study at his psychotherapy course. The case study was assessed by two women tutors, who deemed it inadequate. They both saw the interaction as problematic, as 'two men smiling on the topic of strangling a woman'. They also criticised John for not taking prompt measures to ensure the safety of his client's ex-partner. John was mortified, as well as baffled by what was, in his view, a misinterpretation. I couldn't help but sympathise with his predicament and annoyance at what he saw as gender-bias – the difference being that, in this case, the bias came from two women.

Sometimes it takes a man to listen to another man;⁷ there is a specifically masculine place of healing where aggressiveness and frustration, but also vulnerability, sadness and joy, can be voiced and heard without judgment. I am not suggesting that only a male therapist can work effectively with a male client;

rather, I am arguing that both female and male practitioners need to rise above gender bias if we want to be of service to our clients.

The good, the bad and the ugly

Lyndell Weaver, a counsellor who works as an advocate with survivors of domestic abuse in Glasgow, examined the effectiveness of domestic violence programmes that have now become standard in probation services across the UK.⁸ These are 'highly structured' and combine 'a basic feminist analysis of men's violence – as a tool for gaining power and control... with the cognitive behavioural therapy of social learning'. How truly effective this kind of approach is remains an open question. What Weaver emphasises is the need to prioritise the quality of the therapeutic relationship, to allow clients 'to fully explore all their thoughts and feelings without any need for defensiveness'. Addressing more specifically working with men who have been perpetrators of domestic violence, she writes: 'Rather than directly challenging men's attitudes and beliefs about their wives... practitioners would allow men to uncover and explore their sense of themselves, including their identity as men, their various social roles and masks, as well as the rationalisations they hold for their violent and controlling behaviour.'⁸

It is by accepting his deepest feelings, 'the good, the bad, and the ugly' in himself,⁸ that the violent male client can move towards positive change.

Political correctness

Masculinity is also misrepresented by what Robert Bly, James Hillman and Michael Meade, in their pioneering work with men in the 1990s, called the 'naive male':⁹ the man who has identified with one-dimensional feminine characteristics and who is afraid of

thinking, saying or doing anything that might, in his view, disappoint women. This is the type of man who 'believes he can save women, hear them, take away their loneliness, make them happy and harmonious'.¹⁰ This is also the type of man who becomes a heroic over-achiever in order to (consciously or unconsciously) impress his mother. The problem with this stance is that it is often accompanied by an inability to acknowledge the dark side of women and, more generally, the ungainly aspects of reality itself.

Perhaps both machismo and naivety may be seen as reactions to a new consensus, with its own array of injunctions. These no longer depend on patriarchal values, as might have been the case until a few decades ago, but increasingly originate within that intricate net of opinions commonly known as political correctness. Originally a commendable ethos of fairness and sensitivity towards gender inequality, as well as a confrontational response to the idiocy and vulgarity of a male-dominated world, political correctness has mutated into a set of introjected prohibitions and injunctions. We have probably reached the point where it is fair to ask: is political correctness the new super-ego?¹¹

At the risk of oversimplification, I will say that most men with whom I work oscillate somewhere between the polarities of machismo and naivety. Each individual is of course different, yet what they all share is a sense of general unease about being male.

Knights of good conscience

Mark, softly spoken and sensitive in appearance, is committed and hard-working. He came to see me because he found it hard to cope with a ruthless work environment and a demanding and narcissistic boss. His entire life was dominated by what he called the

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‘noble aspiration’ of wanting to do the right thing: the honourable thing in relation to his wife, the ethical thing in relation to society in general, the correct thing in relation to a challenging work environment. What made him most unhappy was the fact that he was unable to come to terms with a secret love affair in the past that had put him in touch with a part of himself he didn’t know existed. Paradoxically, the transgression gave him back his own self. It could well be that transgression is, as psychoanalyst Adam Phillips argues, ‘a quest for solitude’.¹² In a life dominated by duty and obligations, transgression and the secretiveness it engenders may paradoxically help rebuild, particularly in men, the shattered fragments of an inner life.

In the end Mark tried to resolve his dilemma by doing what he considered to be the right thing: he told his wife about the affair, because he didn’t want to ‘act like a bloke’. But the result was so distressing that it made him question whether he had done the right thing after all. Still undecided on that, he told me that having a ‘heartfelt and bloke-ish’ conversation in therapy was very helpful, as at times he seriously thought he might spend the rest of his life ‘going around saying “sorry” to women yet consistently failing to please them’.

Unlike the stereotypical aggressive males whose attitude is born out of defensiveness, naive males are usually gentle, sensitive, dedicated to their work and their partners, yet still profoundly unhappy. What seems to emerge in therapy is the sad feeling of having given up something vital, sometimes articulated as emasculation: a general loss of vitality and trust in oneself.

There is an echo of this in contemporary culture, particularly in the world of advertising, which

now, as Graham Allen argues, ‘use[s] the dumb fool man often paired with sassy, sexy, knowing women’ to sell products.¹³ This is a world where men are ‘reduced to lager drinking football crazies’ while the women exude confidence and sassiness. She always knows what she wants, some media advertising seem to convey, while he is just a ‘dim witted clown’.¹³ Allen’s conclusions are unsettling. There seems to be, he writes, a ‘diminishing visibility of men in a certain confident role [which] is bad for both sexes’.¹³

The 19th century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard,^{14,15} who continues to have an influence on humanistic and existential psychotherapy, was a champion of subjective experience against the pressures of social conformity. He described the knight of faith: the person who, in response to a higher calling, needs to sometimes consider the suspension of the ethical. This is possible only when the ethical domain has been thoroughly absorbed and embodied. Then there comes a moment when, having ticked all the boxes and obeyed all the rules and regulations, a person finds that he/she may be considered ‘ethical’ by society yet fail to be ethical in a deeper sense.

Perhaps the knight of faith is an anachronism today. Perhaps the best we can manage is to be a knight of good conscience. But that would be a pity, for it would mean that the only way to measure what is ethical is in relation to the general consensus. A man can do what is widely considered the right thing yet betray his internal locus of evaluation. A man can try to accommodate all his partner’s wishes yet lose himself in the process. A man may confess to his partner a past wrongdoing in order only to unburden his guilt. A man can apologise to women throughout his entire life yet fail to be in touch with his very core and thus, in a sense, lose himself.

Reconstructing masculinity

After reading the article ‘Manifesting men’ by Nick Duffell in the November 2011 issue of *Therapy Today*,¹⁶ a male colleague commented that he was sick of reading yet another article on deconstructing masculinity. I knew what he meant. We have had several decades of deconstruction of masculinity following the valuable feminist critique of the 1970s,¹⁷ but they seem to have fostered more prejudice and division than understanding. Could it be that we need to reconstruct masculinity? I agree with Duffell when he states that group work may well be the antidote for ‘extreme males’,¹⁰ but what kind of group work? A one-sided, overly apologetic stance is still, in my opinion, a denial of masculinity. Subdued, guilt-ridden males might be more manageable for society than aggressive ones in the short run, but neither extreme involves a genuine exploration of masculinity, and this failure affects the wellbeing of the community in the long term. The apologetic stance might also reinforce a puritanical view of therapy as geared towards ‘evolution’, ‘greater consciousness’ and ‘cure’¹⁶ rather than active acceptance of the nitty-gritty, the everyday, and what Jung called ‘the shadow’. What is therapy about? Is it searching for the light or being more fully aware of the darkness?

Adam Jukes asks, in his book of that title, is there a cure for masculinity?¹⁸ Personally, I would rather ask: is there a way to approach masculinity with the willingness to listen, feel and understand? Is there a way to set aside our biased views and meet masculinity more directly? Is there a cure for our current prejudice against masculinity? I sincerely hope the discussion will continue. ■

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