

Masculinity mini essay (weird) - *What's Therapy?*

The following are a few thoughts I explored when working on the section of the Breaking Bad video about masculinity. Some of the points are off topic, others are relevant and are points that honestly I wouldn't have minded finding places for in the actual script, but I didn't. This is not an expert's sociological scholarship, but hopefully it's interesting and provides some useful ideas.

To me, healthy, mature masculinity involves managing emotions well, containing them when appropriate, expressing them when appropriate. An unhealthy, immature masculinity involves containing emotions inappropriately and expressing emotions inappropriately. I would never call some trait a toxic part of masculinity unless it was both part of masculinity and also harmful. As Tim mentions in his video essay, much of Walter's worst behavior has nothing to do with toxic masculinity, like his responsibility in Jane's death. You could argue that his toxic approach to the provider aspect of masculinity was such an overarching motivate that it was there in the background, but a lot of the time Walter was mostly being selfish, and all genders can be selfish to a pretty similar extent, just in perhaps some different ways or contexts. Walter was selfish in so many contexts that his selfishness seems pretty separate from his relationship to masculinity.

Let me ask you an honest question: Am I less masculine than Dwane 'The Rock' Johnson? Seriously, what is your answer, am I less masculine than him? Look at me, listen to me. Am I less masculine than The Rock? I think if you say "no" you're slightly lying to yourself. I think it's blatantly true that I am less masculine than the Rock. That a skinny weak guy working in a helping profession about emotions is less masculine than a buff strong guy working as a body builder turned action movie star. I'm not sure how many times Men's Health Magazine has featured a therapist on the cover, but I would guess it's pretty minimal. I'm not lacking in masculinity because I'm a therapist, but I'm a therapist for reasons connected to why my relationship to masculinity is less apparent than Dwane Johnson's. But now here's another question: Am I less of *a man* than Dwane Johnson?

Maybe some people who would say yes, those are synonyms, and maybe some would say they're not. One's a quality and one's an identity? So, how many masculinity points make someone a man? At the end of the day, I personally don't care whether some people would say I'm less of a man than The Rock, as I'm sure the Rock wouldn't really care if anyone said he's less masculine than some buffer, stronger, and more successful guy. We both were just propelled into the deep, vast realm of concepts connected to masculinity and manliness, and we fit into certain grooves and qualities more than others, for innumerable reasons related to circumstances, context, genetics, goals, personalities, desires, limits, and so much more. The idea that someone can be more or less masculine or manly than someone else is the idea that there's a quantifiable difference when comparing differences in two constellations of the qualities associated with man-ness. Some people like to try to universalize their concepts and really believe in an ideal form, but personally I see that as just some kind of secular religion, and I believe concepts humans use are simultaneously accessed and created by the accessing. I think we genuinely do not all have a shared definition of masculinity, just like we don't have a shared definition of most complex phenomena. And some people will look at Andrew Tate and Donald Trump and see masculine men, where I see whiny babies with no impulse control, emotional regulation, or higher order cognition.

But as we all must have working concepts of things whether consciously or not, I'd like to try to have the most useful definition of masculinity that I can have. As far as a useful definition, I want to be able to see masculinity for both the good and the bad, in all the ways people go about thinking their being more manly, whether it's how I personally would/could do it or not. But beyond just defining it, as I define my own masculinity, my own approach to being a man, I whittle the definition down to the question of the most practical and relatable ways that I think about it. First of all I obviously want to cut out the bad, since I personally don't like doing bad things or hurting people, so aggression or any ways people relate to masculinity that are likely to cause harm are out of my masculinity from the jump. Next I take out anything that is beyond my capability, and anything that's completely outside of my style and aesthetic. What I'm left with, personally, is that I don't even think of masculinity as being in contrast to femininity. I think masculinity is more about what separates men from boys, rather than what separates men from women. This is just to me, personally, and I know many people view masculinity and femininity as in some sort of contrast. That might not always be an inherently unhealthy distinction to make, but it's not one I find useful for myself.

All this is to say, I don't think it helps me be a better man to think about how to not be a woman, but I do think it makes me a better man to think about how to not be a child. How to be more adult, to be more responsible. Just as I think it's blatantly true that I'm less masculine than The Rock, I also think it's blatantly true that I am more masculine than a child, than any child. And while that might seem like a weird flex, I'm just trying to think of a generalizable claim I can make about masculinity that would be unconditionally true. But actually, as I think this, it's actually not unconditionally true, because technically there could be like a 16 year old kid who could hypothetically have more responsibility than I do—it would be very unlikely, since I run a business, have clients, maintain a variety of relationships, and so on, but it is theoretically possible that there could be some kids who have loads of responsibility while also performing qualities of masculinity I don't have skill or interest in.

Let me ask a strange question. Compare a father who shows empathy for their family members and a father who doesn't—is one of them more masculine? I would say...no. What about a father who provides for the family compared to a father who doesn't—is one more masculine? If you're tempted to say yes, consider the contextual factors that can impact this, the economy or other impediments beyond any one person's control. You hear a fair bit of reactionary dialogue in the media about how there's a quote unquote crisis of masculinity, and while people often say this when referring to a man in a dress or something, the real crisis is how the cost of living rises while wages stagnate, so men, who have been taught their manliness is tied up with their ability to provide, are stretched more and more thin in attempting to do so. This lack of control leads to hyperfocusing on secondary and far less essential aspects of manhood...like pride.

We know of course that Walter did not need to make drugs, he could've swallowed his pride and worked with Eliot. Pride can never be valued more than safety, certainly not more than the safety of multiple people who have their own pride and won't be able to have pride if they're dead because of the way their dad or husband acted on their pride. You can only have one first priority, and Walter's first priority was his pride, not providing for his family. Pride is important too, it's important to feel happy about who you are, and when we meet Walter in episode one, on his knees cleaning his annoying student's car, we see him at a low point with his pride. The question is, how to regain pride without neglecting the needs of others (or other needs of oneself).

I guess one thing I just haven't said yet but would like to is this. It's my general impression that the Breaking Bad viewership, while surely mostly a positive force, has also generated a fair bit of negativity in terms of impact on the world. You could look at the experience of Anna Gunn being harassed and abused by viewers, and being sent death threats. Were those viewers in psychotic psychiatric states, with no sense of reality? Or profoundly confused? Or, it's the scariest to think, were they people you might pass on the street and think nothing of? Unfortunately I'm sure that was the case for some. I think some otherwise stable people watch media in a way where they perceive emotional cues like aggression and dominance, and they enjoy the intensity without perceiving the negative valence, we could say. And most societies have been incredibly patriarchal up until very recently, with women being treated as literal property, which is just so hard to conceptualize but is actually true. But see, when I say it's hard for me to conceptualize—unfortunately it's not hard for everyone to conceptualize.

I spend too much time on the Internet, which allows me to see what people express from all kinds of corners of the planet, or to simply see the thoughts of my neighbor who I'd never otherwise interact with. And one thing I've seen on the internet is men who literally and unironically don't think women should have the right to vote. I'm sure these people wouldn't support nonbinary people voting either but I don't recall seeing that. And voting is just the beginning of course. People can become famous influencers preaching to young men that women are property. They only need to say it once in a while, and then the rest of the time just go on about other stuff. And I don't really even think many young men consciously want women to be their property, usually they're just at an impressionable time in their life, and/or they are privileged to lack an understanding of the material harm of misogyny, such as gendered violence and harassment. Most human beings have the capacity, I think, to for instance read Anna Gunn's op-ed and never again make a misogynistic comment about her on the internet. But there are enough people that lack any ability or motivation to learn and grow, and that small group is going to be relatively big in an enormous viewership as large as Breaking Bad has. Instead of me speculating about the social forces that collided in the negative reputation this aspect of the Breaking Bad viewership has, let's ask the question: Is the misogyny problem in the Breaking Bad fanbase a function of purely contextual social and timely factors, or does any of it have to do with the show itself? (I talk about this a bit with Simply Snaps in our chat available for channel supporters, by the way, so check that out if you haven't yet.)

If we even just look at the first scene in the show, besides the wild cold open, we see a domestic scene of a mother, father, and son. Skyler's enforcing health standard, serving veggie bacon. [1.1 5:20 "Believe or not, zero cholesterol and you won't even taste the difference."] And I mean, I eat fake meat all the time but let's not lie there's usually a noticeable taste difference. But anyway, we see Skyler enforcing healthy fitness, and then telling him to not work too late. We see her chide Jr. for being late to breakfast, and then tell him to wake up earlier, with sass. It's our introduction to Skyler and it codes her as 1) well meaning, 2) forceful or annoyingly direct, and 3) slightly oblivious. And I don't want to go all Sigmund Freud on you people but I think it's fair to say Skyler reminded a lot of the male viewers of a mother-type of figure. I mean anyone give or take 10 years of Jr.'s 17 was watching this, and anything annoying they felt about their mom they put onto her, forgetting to have empathy.

As an extremely rushed conclusion to this miscellaneous mini essay, I'll just say that we need to teach boys that they require empathy for their manhood as much as they require a job, a car, or any of the other accouterments of masculinity. We socially construct these concepts that influence our lives.