

Trouble in Paradigm: “Gender Transformative” Programming in Violence Prevention

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

The goal of this article is to review what is meant by the term “gender transformative intervention.” The article defines gender transformative programs as “interventions [that] engage men and boys to reflect critically on – and then to challenge and change – gender-inequitable attitudes and behaviors”

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends gender-transformative approaches as an important violence prevention strategy. However, as these programs are newer in the field of violence prevention, it is important to specifically explore what we mean by gender-transformative programming. This article in the special issue explores how the theory of social norms is used within gender-transformative programs, and also explores the role of trauma during childhood, homophobic bullying, and the contribution of feminist understandings in relation to gender transformative programming.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The researchers provide an overview of evidence supporting a gender-transformative approach, as well as specific rationale for why this approach is promising for violence prevention. They then present a public health gender-transformative paradigm which is based on a social norms approach (misperceptions of how our peers think and act). For their social norms approach, they specifically focus on the Reasoned Action Approach (RAA). The RAA includes social norms as one important piece of predicting behavioral intentions and behavior. Social norms include both descriptive (what others are doing) and injunctive (what someone should do) norms. The RAA posits that our behaviour is influenced by misperceptions about how our peers think and act, and so we can change behaviour (specifically, use of violence) by challenging and changing these norms (e.g., challenging the norm that violence is ‘manly’).

In addition to social norms approaches, however, the authors argue that additional aspects are needed for gender-transformative interventions to be successful. Indeed, the authors suggest that gender-transformative programs can teach participants to think critically, self-reflect, and challenge their current perceptions of inequity. Specifically, it is argued that researchers can develop a better sense of how these unequal power relations are fuelled by studying trauma and violence exposure among children and youth (i.e., how early childhood abuse is a risk factor for perpetration in future relationships), homophobic teasing (i.e., how boys and men use disrespectful, derogatory, homophobic language as a means to joke with each other), and supporting boys and men to develop healthier social norms (i.e., how we can begin to create a “new normal” for boys and men that mitigates restrictive masculine norms).

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:

- Gender transformative interventions are becoming more and more common
- This work has several implications for the larger community because it recognizes how attitudes and behaviours are shaped by our society, and how gender transformative programs can encourage men and boys to challenge negative gender assumptions.
- This work acknowledges that social norms rooted in our everyday life can influence boys and men to adhere to inequalities between males and females.



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WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

The researchers argue that in order to reinforce the global process of gender transformation among boys and men and deter them from holding negative ideologies about women, we first need to recognize where these social norms come from. According to the research, cultural processes of gender conformity (i.e., “being a man” and “acting like a man”) endorse and normalize patterns of violence perpetration against women. Second, the researchers argue that addressing homophobia may offer insights as to why men endorse these norms. Specifically, the researchers discuss that homophobic teasing is a way men and boys try to monitor each other’s masculinity. This language is problematic because it can lead to disrespectful behaviours towards women and girls. Lastly, this work states that major adjustments need to be made to the way in which social norms are embedded within our society. Indeed, these negative thoughts are upheld by leaders, public figures and policy makers which then strengthens attitudes of social conformity within our society. The researchers argue that these norms must to be addressed because they are the driving force behind our way of life. Therefore, it is suggested that if all genders challenge these norms, we could see a change as to what is deemed “normative behaviours”.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This work can be used by researchers and practitioners who are looking to build on the assumptions about social norms that are embedded in our society. Specifically, future work is needed in order to develop more evidence-based literature that examines ways in which our society can challenge the social norms created for boys and men. Therefore, this work is a critical starting point that outlines how we can begin to conceptualize a way to address factors that support gender transformative work and reduce violence against women.

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