Leisure Helps Get the Job Done

Intersections of Hegemonic Masculinity and Stress among College-Aged Males

Joel Blanco
Jeremy Robinett
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Abstract

This paper presents empirical findings of how hegemonic masculinity influenced college-aged men’s choices about using leisure activities to negotiate stress. Among our participants, there was a pattern of employing specific types of leisure to escape stress. Participants reported that their understandings of masculinity involved stress as part of being action-oriented and getting the job done, and that engaging in leisure activities was how they escaped pressures. Leisure activities perceived as masculine allowed participants time to build the energy, both physical and mental, necessary to negotiate stress. Based on the analysis of in-depth interviews, three categories emerged: masculinity involves getting the job done, stress is part of getting the job done, and masculine leisure helps escape stress.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity; leisure activity; stress; emergent adulthood

Joel Blanco is a doctoral student and Jeremy Robinett is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism at the University of Illinois. Please send correspondence to Jeremy Robinett, Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism, University of Illinois, 1206 S. Fourth St. Champaign, IL, 61820, phone: (217) 333-4410, robinett@illinois.edu
From early childhood we are exposed to statements such as “You throw like a girl,” and “Real men don’t cry.” We hear these messages during leisure activities, in classrooms, on popular television shows, and in countless other settings. For most people, there are shared beliefs that give these statements meaning. We rarely question what is meant by suggesting someone throws like a girl or how crying is related to being a man.

It is common to assume and expect that those recognized as men act in certain ways. Butler’s (1993) concept of performativity is useful for examining how specific behaviors become expected of certain bodies. Through experiences, we negotiate understandings of how certain bodies are supposed to behave in specific contexts. Performativity encompasses both individual and shared perceptions given that expectations often exist before the individuals who encounter them. Interactions involve reconciling individual understandings with social expectations. For example, we have an idea of what it means to be a man. Therefore, when we meet someone we identify as a man, we already have expectations about how he will look and behave based on our pre-existing understandings. If someone wants to be classified as a man, he represents himself in ways compliant with shared and personal understandings of what makes someone a man. It is not simply an individual’s body, but also his actions that are involved in how he presents himself and is perceived by others. To tie this back to the opening statements, if man throws like a girl, then he faces being labeled as feminine; if the dominant belief is that real men do not cry, then a man who cries faces a perception of not being masculine. Even though everyone involved in an interaction may recognize his body as male, his actions may contribute to him being perceived as more or less of a man by himself and others.

Common practices in the United States link sex and gender as interchangeable. For example, surveys often ask individuals to identify either their sex or gender as male or female. Before an individual is ever born, expectations exist that he or she will either be male or female. He/she, male/female are the binary options. Other options are perceived as less than normal. Through social practices, an individual’s sex and gender often become linked. Sex and gender are intersecting, but not interchangeable, aspects of identity. While sex is best conceptualized using biologically determined categories (i.e., male, female, intersex), gender deals with more than anatomical characteristics. Gender involves how people represent themselves and meanings attached to bodies, appearances, and behaviors. Blank (2012) argued gender “refers to all the manifestations of masculinity or femininity that are not immediately, demonstrably biological. These include mannerisms, conventions of dress and grooming, social roles, speech patterns, and much more” (p. 17). The male body takes many different forms, and masculinity is embodied through a wide array of behaviors. Feminist frameworks and empirical findings suggest that meanings attached to sex and gender change at both individual and societal levels and that social expectations related to them are affected by race, ethnicity, life stage, able-bodiedness, social class, religion, and culture (Butler, 2004; Pascoe, 2005; Scott, 1986; Wellard, 2006). This study was based on the assumption that people negotiate their gender and their identities through lived experiences and societal expectations.

Negotiating societal expectations can be stressful, especially if there is inconsistency between how society perceives an individual should behave and how that individual chooses to behave. Evidence indicates that stress and depression may be especially prevalent among 18- to 24-year-old college and university students due to a unique stage of development. Literature indicates that, within developed nations, a developmental phase known as emerging adulthood may be theoretically distinct from both adolescence and early adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Access to higher education can play a key role in determining whether an individual is considered part
of this developmental phase (Blinn-Pike, Worthy, Jonkman, & Smith, 2008). College students may delay markers of adulthood such as financial independence, career, and family and instead continue role and identity exploration into their early 20s. Research has suggested that perceived social pressures related to appropriate behaviors and expectations of independence may contribute to college-aged men engaging in behaviors that contribute to substance abuse, academic underachievement and violence (Addis, 2011; Arnett, 2005). How men negotiate perceived social pressures involves complex interactions. For example, if a man negotiates stress by engaging in practices that are seen as inappropriate because of gendered expectations, additional stress may have to be negotiated.

This study was designed with the assumption that there are individuals recognized as men who share understandings of masculinity that often influence their behavioral choices. Research has suggested that in the United States, it is still common for most people to expect men to be “aggressive, tough-minded, taciturn, rational, analytic, and promiscuous” (Connell, 2009, p. 60). This assumption led to questioning, if and how, through negotiating understandings of masculinity, did participants gain awareness that some behaviors and leisure activities were more socially acceptable than others for dealing with stress. Given that leisure and stress affect identity development and personal health, they are critical arenas that merit further examination. Thus, the purpose of this study was to further investigate how hegemonic masculinity influences college-aged men’s understandings and behaviors related to negotiating stress.

**Hegemonic Masculinity**

Many theorists have explored ways that power is practiced through gendered expectations. Connell (2005, 2009) theorized extensively about the intersections of expectations, institutions, and masculinity. She argued that societies function through institutions (e.g. schools, military, organized sports, etc.) to create gender arrangements that are “at the same time, sources of pleasure, recognition, and identity, and sources of injustice and harm” (p. 7). Some men gain social privileges and a sense of identity related to gender, but all men negotiate tension in meeting gender expectations. Rather than conceptualizing a world where all men are equally privileged based on an assumed inherent masculinity, Connell (2005) intersected Gramsci’s conceptualization of hegemony with gendered expectations and argued, “At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted” (p. 77). Connell conceptualized the contextually privileged form of masculinity as hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity does not suggest that simply by being male an individual enacts masculinity. Based on individual characteristics and abilities, as well as historic and cultural practices, some men engaging in particular enactments of masculinity are hierarchically more privileged than others. Based on previous literature, we believed that hegemonic understandings of masculinity prevalent in the United States privilege those men who are, “aggressive, tough-minded, taciturn, rational, analytic, and promiscuous” (Connell, 2009) to appropriate levels in given situations. Men who meet hegemonic expectations are not required to explain their behaviors; however, research suggests that men who demonstrate femininities or alternative embodiments of masculinities are subjected to more homophobic discourses and practices, regardless of their sexual orientation (Anderson, 2005; Connell, 2005; Messner, 2002; Pascoe, 2005; Pronger, 1999).

Connell (2005) did not conceptualize hegemonic masculinity as never changing and argued that hegemony “…does not mean total control.” Connell argued, “Whatever is significant in issues about masculinity involves both personality and social relations; centrally, it involves
interplay between the two” (p. 43). Much like Butler’s concept of performativity, hegemonic masculinity involves understandings and expectations that are changeable and influenced by institutional and cultural environments as well as individuals’ accumulated lived experiences.

**Hegemonic Masculinity and Leisure Activity**

Leisure activities, because of their contextual nature, offer many ways of not only reifying, but also changing and challenging hegemonic masculinity. Kleiber (1999) argued that leisure contributes to identity formation when it allows for exploration of new interests, the interests are personal and match the individual’s values, feedback from the environment reinforces interests, a degree of competence can be achieved, there is some level of commitment to the activity and others involved, and, there is a comfort with others in relation to those interests. Given these arguments, it would seem that hegemonic masculinity might play a role in how men determine which leisure activities to engage in based on their own values and the positive or negative reactions from others.

While Wearing (1998) argued that, “it is not unusual for men to use their leisure to prove manhood” (p. 86), there remains a lack of empirical examination of how masculinity expectations may be influencing men’s leisure activity choices. As was noted by Kivel and Johnson (2009), “Within the research literature about adolescent development and leisure, there are very few empirical investigations that explicitly address socialization processes around gender and none (apart from sport investigations) that exclusively examine masculinity” (p. 113). Hegemonic masculinity has often been used as a framework for exploring men’s leisure activities. While competitive sports are not the only way that men can demonstrate masculinity, they are commonly used throughout men’s lives to demonstrate masculinity. Connell (2005) argued that in certain schools, various masculinities are exalted through competition, and “…sporting prowess is a test of masculinity even for boys who detest the locker room” (p. 37). One of the reasons that competitive sports are such a rich context for exploring hegemonic masculinity is that they offer a lens for exploring practices of privilege. Very few men will ever reach the top echelons of the sporting world; however, because the men who do are often privileged with rewards such money and fame, their enactments of masculinity become a shared goal that is reified when men mirror their behaviors. Those athletes who succeed are often valorized as “real” men and serve as models for others, However, resistance to competitive sport can also be used to demonstrate how hegemonic forms of masculinity are not the only way to demonstrate masculinity. Connell (2005) highlighted the experiences of a group of men who rejected the privileges conveyed by participating in competitive sports and instead chose to run the school newspaper. The men were not rewarded for participating in sport, but found another way to earn respect and social standing. Hegemonic masculinity was present, but negotiated differently based on the men’s abilities, interests and contextual situations.

A secondary purpose of this study was to broaden the scope of masculinity beyond sports to more fully appreciate how hegemonic masculinity influences men’s leisure activity choices.

**Hegemonic Masculinity and Stress**

Given that gender expectations are perceived as both positive and negative in relation to individuals’ identities, it is important to explore how hegemonic masculinity is influencing men’s understandings of stress and the behaviors they use to negotiate it. Stress has been defined as “a complex pattern of emotional states, physiological reactions, and related thoughts in response to external demands” (Greenberg & Baron, 2000). Stress occurs most often when individuals encounter situations that are unfamiliar, unpredictable, or perceived as being uncontrollable ( Dick-
erson & Kemeny, 2002). Individuals experiencing chronic stress will have negative impacts on their immune system (Bauer, Jeckel, & Luz, 2009), poor cardiovascular health (Dowd, Simanek, & Aiello, 2009), and greater difficulty in regulating obesity (Holmes, Ekkekakis, & Eisenmann, 2010).

Researchers have explored how college-aged individuals negotiate mental health issues, including stress. In their examination of freshman adaptation to university life, Dyson and Renk (2003) found that levels of stress, coping strategies and depressive symptomology were similar among male and female college freshmen. However, men were more likely to engage in problem-solving coping, whereas women were more likely to engage in emotion-focused coping. It should be noted that while this gendered pattern of depressive coping is widely seen, more recent evidence indicates that this is largely due to societal gender role norms as opposed to “innate” differences between the sexes (Cox, Mezulis, & Hyde, 2010). While Dyson and Renk's results are not necessarily inaccurate, a more complex examination for the factors leading to these findings may be warranted.

Individuals may cope by attempting to either actively confront and deal with stress, or simply disengage and escape from stress for a finite amount of time (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). College undergraduates often use leisure as a form of escapist coping rather than actively confronting stress (Patry, Blanchard, & Mask, 2007). In addition, it appears that there are differences between how men and women employ leisure as a coping strategy. Women appear more likely to use leisure as a method of preventing stress, while men are more likely to focus on the process of leisure while they “play hard” and attempt to create a sense of control through their leisure coping (Iwasaki, Mackay, & Mactavish, 2005).

Studies have demonstrated that men often engage in behaviors compliant with hegemonic understandings of masculinity to cope with mental health issues (Dyson & Renk, 2006; Li, DiGiuseppe, & Froh, 2006). Addis and Mahalik (2003) noted that men, regardless of age, ethnicity, and social background, are less likely than women to seek help for a wide variety of health issues, including mental health, and argued “Men's difficulty with accessing health services is thus attributed to a mismatch between available services and traditional masculine roles emphasizing self-reliance, emotional control, and power” (p. 12). Li, DiGiuseppe, and Froh (2003) identified rumination and distraction as two types of emotion-focused behavior. Men more likely engaged in problem-focused coping and used distraction as an emotion-focused coping method. Women more likely engaged in rumination, which they defined as repeatedly worrying or thinking about a problem. While women and men are both likely to utilize substance abuse as a coping strategy for mental health issues, women are much more likely to seek treatment for drug use and more likely to achieve success in these programs (Drepalski, Bennett, & Bellack, 2011).

Empirical research has demonstrated links between hegemonic masculinity and mental health; this study attempted to further investigation of how hegemonic masculinity influences college-aged men's understandings and behaviors related to negotiating stress. Healthy recreation and leisure activities can have many positive effects when humans encounter stress in their daily lives. In particular, physical activity has shown many benefits in both lowering stress and minimizing the negative consequences when stress occurs (Gerber & Pühse, 2009). However, it appears that leisure activities have additional positive correlations with stress negotiation than simply staying physically active. Leisure activities can aid in protecting oneself and recovering from many negative life events that can increase stress (Klieber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002), and can serve as a useful buffer for those with lifestyles that are high in stress (Iwasaki, Mannell, Smale, & Butler, 2002).
Based on a review of empirical literature, it is reasonable to suggest that hegemonic understandings of masculinity influence college-aged men's leisure behaviors related to stress negotiation. We chose to explore these intersections through in-depth interviews centered around two questions: how does hegemonic masculinity affect participants' understandings of stress, and how does hegemonic masculinity affect the leisure activities used by participants to negotiate stress.

Methods

This study was designed to determine if patterns of understandings and behaviors could be found among participants related to hegemonic masculinity, leisure activities, and stress negotiation. We chose inductive qualitative methodology (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), because we wanted to be able to describe individual and collective patterns of leisure activities used to negotiate stress. Charmaz (2006) defined induction as "a type of reasoning that begins with a study of a range of individual cases and extrapolates patterns from them to form a conceptual category" (p. 188). We purposefully sampled from 15 volunteers to select 10 men between the ages of 21 and 24, enrolled at colleges in the Midwest, for face-to-face interviews during the winter and spring of 2012. Because we wanted to do face-to-face interviews, all participants lived within four hours of our educational institution. The interviews followed an informal protocol and took place at locations chosen by the participants.

Participants

Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggested that for research to be credible, participants must be experienced with the phenomena being explored, knowledgeable about what is being explored, and represent a wide range of perspectives among a group who do share commonalities. In order to be a part of the study, participants had to be males enrolled at colleges or universities between the ages of 21 and 24. Based on preliminary conversations with volunteers, we sampled participants so that the data would provide us with varied perspectives (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). We selected participants to give us a range of diversity based on race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual identity. We chose these markers because research has demonstrated these affect understandings of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). We did not ask participants to supply documentation of their demographic markers; rather, we garnered the information from stories shared during the interviews and then asked them at the end of the interview to make sure we represented them accurately. Each participant selected his own pseudonym and demographic information about them can be found in Table 1.

A possible limitation of this study is that we chose to limit the participants to those over the age of 21; however, this means that we missed out on discussions with younger men who might have been experiencing higher levels of stress related to transitioning to college/university environments.

Recruitment and Data Collection

University services related to advising, counseling, and disability were useful in recruiting participants because their missions included supporting students experiencing stress. Five of the men were solicited from names suggested by these offices. One participant responded to a research invitation posted on a campus bulletin board. Four men responded to solicitations we posted on social networking sites. Of these four, two were acquainted with one of us and the other two were strangers who had seen the research solicitation reposted on another friend's site.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Motorcycle</td>
<td>Motorcycle is a sophomore at a Big10 University. His leisure activities include working on his motorcycle and physical exercise. He was born in the United States to immigrant parents from Europe and the Middle East. He identifies as multiracial and shared that he has dated women. He has no children.</td>
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<td>Otto</td>
<td>Otto is completing an associate’s degree at a community college. His leisure activities center around coaching sports and spending time with his friends. He was raised in a two-parent family with a sister to whom he is very close. Otto is Caucasian and openly shared he has been in sexual relationships with both men and women. He has no children.</td>
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<td>Brian</td>
<td>Brian is a graduate student at a Big10 institution. He described his leisure activities as broad and having changed greatly through his life, but sports, martial arts, and video games have always been a large part. He was raised in the northeast United States in a two-parent household. He is Caucasian, and shared that he has dated women. He has no children.</td>
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<td>John</td>
<td>John is a senior at a large university. His primary leisure activities are working out and running, though he also is active in theater and a choir group. He was raised in a two-parent household in a rural Midwest town. He identified as gay. He shared that he has not yet told his family about his relationships with men, though a few friends do know. He is Caucasian and has no children.</td>
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<td>PG</td>
<td>PG is a junior at a large university. He grew up in a single-parent household in a major metropolis. His primary leisure activities center around sports. He shared that he spends most of his time working and has a daughter. PG is African-American and did not share his sexual history.</td>
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<td>Dylan</td>
<td>Dylan is completing an associate’s degree at a community college. He grew up in a single-parent household and very clearly shared that his mother had the most masculine impact on his life. He is Caucasian and openly identifies as gay. His primary leisure activities include video games, reading, and spending time with friends. He has no children.</td>
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<td>Superman</td>
<td>Superman is a Caucasian senior at a large university. He grew up in a two-parent household and participated actively in sports throughout his life. His career goal is to work as part of a sports team. Based on his comments, it was apparent that Superman had a difficult time entering college and navigating the academic environment. He did not share information about this sexual history, but did indicate that he has no children.</td>
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<td>Jay</td>
<td>Jay is a Caucasian graduate student at a large university. He grew up in a two-parent household in a suburban neighborhood of a major metropolitan area. He shared that smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol are a big part of his leisure repertoire. During the interview, he said he is heterosexual and has no children.</td>
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<td>Runner</td>
<td>Runner is a graduate student at a large university. He is a first-generation immigrant of Mexican descent and was raised in a major metropolis in a two-parent household. His leisure activities have centered around sports and spending time with his family. He identified as gay but has not openly shared his relationships with men with his family. He has no children.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Julian</td>
<td>Julian is an African-American junior at a large university. He grew up in a two-parent household in a major metropolis and indicated that his leisure has always centered around sports, but now he spends most of his time working. He did not share information about his sexual history.</td>
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Interviews were scheduled via email. From the research solicitation, they were aware that the interview topics were masculinity, leisure, and mental health. Interviews followed a protocol, but were done in a conversational fashion mindful that, “...the interviewer and the interviewee should try to build a relationship in which they share responsibility for finding the words and concepts in which ideas can be expressed and lives described...” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 26). In order to facilitate a more relaxed flow, we answered questions posed to us by the participants during the conversations.

Interviews began with conversations about leisure activities. Due to scheduling constraints, one researcher did seven interviews and the other conducted three. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. On average, the interviews lasted 45 minutes. Not only were participants asked to list their own leisure activities, but we also shared our own leisure repertoire in an attempt to foster rapport (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In some situations, participants used one- or two-word responses to answer interview questions, but more often they shared stories to demonstrate or explain their answers. We encouraged them to share stories or to provide examples so that we would have a better understanding of the words they used (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). During the interview, participants were asked for adjectives they would use to describe someone as masculine. They were then asked what made those characteristics masculine. Another series of questions asked them to explain to what extent they felt masculinity expectations affected their leisure activities. In order to explore participants’ views on stress, they were asked for adjectives they would use to describe someone as stressed. Participants were also asked questions about if, and in what ways, they felt leisure activities helped them and others negotiate stress.

During transcriptions, member checking was done for clarification of demographic information (Charmaz, 2006). It was also used when clarification was necessary about what participants meant when they used certain words or to clarify the point of specific stories. Most of the time, member checking was done via e-mail, though in two instances, follow-up conversations were had regarding the use of the word escape in relation to leisure and stress. These follow-up conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Separately, we both listened to every interview as we read through the transcripts. We examined the data for similarities and differences related to descriptions of masculinity and stress. We then met together for the purpose of inductively exploring the individual cases for patterns (Charmaz, 2006). Our goal was to broadly explore the intersections among our participants’ understandings and choices related to hegemonic masculinity, leisure choice and stress. Conceptual ordering was used to analyze the data into categories related to masculinity, stress and leisure. Working together, we used the participants’ stories and descriptions to cluster the quotes and stories into a thematic conceptual matrix (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). This type of matrix allowed us to group similar responses together and examine them for unifying concepts, similarities and differences. Masculinity, stress and leisure were categories and the descriptions, behaviors and stories used to describe them became our sub-categories.

Results and Discussion

Our participants’ stories offered evidence that hegemonic understandings of masculinity play important roles in their beliefs about stress and how certain leisure activities help them manage it. Common threads running through the narratives were that masculinity was action-oriented and determined by successfully completing tasks. Hegemonic understandings of masculinity were visible in participants’ stories involving competition, violence, and a need to not
appear unable to handle challenges. While participants voiced that men or women could do things in masculine ways, they expressed that there were consequences for men who acted in ways that deviated from hegemonic understandings of masculinity (Connell, 2005; Plummer, 1999).

The discussion section is organized into three categories. The first category, masculinity means getting the job done, represents comments that ran through most participants’ narratives. The two subcategories it contains—physicality and control—highlight specific hegemonic masculinity understandings identified by participants. The second category, stress is part of getting the job done, shares narratives focused on the intersections of masculinity and stress as parts of getting the job done. A sub-category, management as masculinity, emerged which suggested that while stress was not itself gendered ways of negotiating it were more or less masculine than others.

The final category, masculine leisure helps escape stress, describes intersections between hegemonic masculinity and leisure activities as stress negotiation. While discussions related to masculinity and stress focused on “getting the job done” and positioned masculinity as action-oriented, when participants discussed leisure as stress management they spoke of escaping and avoiding. Rather than seeing leisure as an opportunity get the job done, many participants spoke of particular patterns of leisure activities seen as masculine as ways to build up the energy, both mental and physical, to come back and get the job done. Aspects of hegemonic masculinity were present in the participants’ narratives including awareness of social expectations, aggressiveness, competition, and self-reliance (Connell, 2005).

Masculinity Means Getting the Job Done

Participants’ understandings of masculinity involved self-reliance, fulfillment of obligations, and reluctance to reveal vulnerabilities that were consistent with previous findings demonstrating a shared understanding of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). Participants stressed that not succeeding in tasks and failing to get the job done were antithetical to masculinity. Participants voiced that masculinity is not unique to males; they expressed that masculinity was about the actions being done.

Masculinity was embodied through being in charge and capable. Otto felt that while expectations regarding masculinity may be waning, “…the perfect masculine person is someone who is completely self-sufficient and can cope with any feeling that ever comes about him and can fix anything and can take care of himself and can take care of a family.” Throughout Otto’s narratives, being self-sufficient was often equated with masculine behavior. This was consistent with Dylan, who said, “I’d rather be seen as someone who doesn’t need a lot of help. I’d rather feel more independent than have to rely on people.” This perception existed in stark contrast to femininity. As Motorcycle stated, “Masculine is active. It’s empowering. Feminine, a feminist perspective is generally passive.” These types of comments represent participants’ stories, which focused on getting the job done and not needing help as masculine.

Similar to previous research, the participants’ comments suggested that certain actions were masculine regardless of the sex of the individual doing them (Connell, 2005; Messner, 2002). Actions were not described as feminine when women did them; they were still masculine. John expressed beliefs common among participants when he said that while society typically views men as the breadwinner and the female as being able to stay at home, “Women can be masculine, because whenever you see a girl get down and dirty or go out and chop wood or something like that or change oil in a car.” In addition, Jay saw the consumption of marijuana as a specifically “masculine” activity because of the smoky and “dirty” nature. Even when female friends of his
took part in this activity, which they frequently did, Jay perceived they were engaging in “masculine” leisure. Actions that involved getting dirty, being physical, and being in control were often equated with masculinity by participants.

**Physicality.** Physical activity itself was not necessarily seen as masculine; the type of physical activity was essential in categorizing something as masculine. Superman said, “I mean, yeah, in society you’re raised that guys that do ballet aren’t necessarily masculine per se, or I guess cheerleaders are kinda in the same route,” and indicated some sports and physical activity were more masculine than others. The participants viewed highly physical and competitive sports as masculine activities, but noted that women often play these sports. Otto said, “Right off the bat when you think of masculinity, you think of muscles, testosterone, and a really stout heavy beer for some reason.” He then spoke at length about his sister’s involvement with Ultimate Fighting and how she demonstrated that women could do even the most masculine activities. In addition, Brian added the element of aggression, saying men should be able “to take charge, kind of an aggression. I think a lot of times people relate masculinity only to physical aspects.” Our participants’ comments suggest that perceptions of some sports as being more or less appropriate based on sex may not be as clearly bounded as previous research has suggested (Messner, 2002). A few participants suggested that sports and physical activities should not be viewed through gendered lenses. Motorcycle shared that throwing a tennis ball around with a female relative was one of his favorite leisure activities and he did not consider it gendered in any way, it was simply fun. These types of comments suggest that for these participants competitive sports may play a lesser role in demonstrating physicality and hegemonic masculinity than indicated by previous studies.

**Control.** Participants indicated that privileged patterns of masculinity are determined contextually based on a wide range of social and personal factors, including life stage. Participants’ comments offered evidence of the intersection of hegemonic masculinity, leisure choice, and emergent adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Several participants marked adulthood as choosing their own leisure involvement and having control over where and when it was done. They also suggested that feeling the pressure to meet masculine expectations lessened as they entered adulthood. Brian talked at length about how often his leisure was controlled by his parents in his youth. Runner offered that prevalent Latino cultural beliefs led to sports dominating his leisure activities, and that young men earn “…machismo through playing soccer.” He went on to explain that because of his success in college, he no longer feels it is necessary to play soccer, though he still plays for enjoyment. Consistent with hegemonic masculinity, awareness of expectations related to success and control were present in the participants’ comments (Connell, 2005), but how they demonstrated masculinity altered as they gained new experiences and moved into new contexts.

Almost all of the men expressed that as adults their leisure activities have broadened based on lived experiences. John talked about gendered expectations he negotiated in high school and how those changed as he aged. He said, “I do what I want, I realized that going from high school to college. In high school, being in sports and drama conflicted. You had to choose one or the other. Now, in college, it doesn’t matter.” Dylan expressed that adults’ leisure involvement was determined by individual factors, such as money, time, and what they were interested in doing, more so than hegemonic masculinity. However, participants seemed reluctant to publically share leisure activities that they viewed as feminine. For example, Julian explained that wanting to be seen as masculine would keep him from publically admitting that he greatly enjoys bubble baths. PG shared that he would never go out to get a manicure, but he is glad that he can get them at home because he likes having his hands look nice.
Stress is Part of Getting the Job Done

This study furthered the exploration of hegemonic masculinity and stress in that it offered evidence of how participants integrated managing stress as a measure of masculinity. Based on narratives and member-checks with participants, negotiating stress was seen as demonstrating masculinity when it involved elements of emotional control and getting the job done.

Participants felt that masculinity and stress intersected as aspects of getting the job done. Several of the participants expressed that stress demonstrated they were meeting the requirements of hegemonic masculinity. Brian clearly stated his belief that being stressed demonstrates masculinity, "I think my idea of masculinity, you wouldn't really be that masculine if you didn't have something in your life that, like if you lost it, there would be no consequence to it." While Brian was the most explicit in stating his perceptions about stress and masculinity, many other participants echoed his statement and voiced that stress was an acceptable, and necessary, part of being masculine. Dylan said, "I would attribute to being, you know, a masculine, like mature, masculine person, is you, you can take care of yourself. Like you don't need to, to, I guess I'd say, you know, someone that is like just dependent on another person to take care of them is not a mature person to me." Some participants believed they demonstrated masculinity by taking care of themselves and others.

Masculinity measured by management. Stress itself was not seen as masculine or feminine, but behaviors exhibited when stressed were gendered. Common themes among the participants’ stories were a need for emotional control and reluctance to seeking help. This is similar to previous empirical findings that have suggested that hegemonic understandings of masculinity influence mental health behaviors (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Participant’s narratives highlighted that seeking help to negotiate stress was most beneficial when it did not require publically admitting failure, was seen as likely to be effective and contributed to “getting the job done.” Dylan stated that he would not ask for help unless he was “100% convinced that it will be something that I cannot figure out on my own,” and that publically admitting failure would affect his perception of being masculine. Runner echoed this saying he did not want others to judge him as a failure, so he rarely shared with others if he felt stressed. Similar to leisure choice, the negotiation of stress involved both personal choices and public admissions.

Masculine Leisure Helps Escape Stress

Most of the participants indicated that in regard to stress, leisure activities served the purpose of escape. While this is consistent with findings that college undergraduates use leisure as a form of escapist coping (Patry, Blanchard, & Mask, 2007), it seemed to contrast with the action-oriented behaviors participants expressed as masculine. However, participants were still taking action, even if it was not directly related to solving a problem. For Dylan, stress was often conceptualized as a buildup of aggression. He highlighted specific activities that he used to alleviate stress, saying, “I have a couple of point and shoot games that are mostly for the stressful days. Well, if you have a bad day in particular, it's a good like outlet for like aggression, I would say.” To make sure that we were clear about if their intended uses for leisure activities were as problem-solving and/or emotional coping, we engaged in member checking (Charmaz, 2006). It quickly became clear that participants viewed leisure activities as a form of avoidant coping. As Julian stated, “When I used the word escape, I mainly meant to avoid thinking about other things. Escape from the stresses and just get distracted for the time being.” Julian's comment was similar to many other comments that expressed escape as a primary purpose of leisure related to stress.

Through member checking, we gained an appreciation that participants’ understandings of masculinity intersected with their leisure activities because they assisted in getting the job done.
By escaping for measured amounts of time, leisure activities allowed them to build the necessary energy, both mental and physical, to solve problems when they came back to them. It was this understanding, that leisure ultimately enabled them to get the job done, that allowed them to view leisure as masculine. Doing what they had to do in order to accomplish the goal was what was most important.

Common activities used to escape stress were hanging out with friends and media consumption and physical activities such as running. Almost all participants spoke of ending their days watching television or playing video games at the end of the day to decompress and not think about life for a while. For some of the men, creating an active social life was the way they used leisure activities to negotiate stress. Dylan stated, “Like when my ex and I broke up, the first thing I, I left. I just went and hung out with my friends, constantly, constantly.” Others, like Motorcycle, spoke of physical activities as ways they negotiated stress and explicitly linked them to his understandings of masculinity. He said, “Physical things for me help me relieve stress. Now, I suppose you could tie that into masculinity because I am able to do those things. That’s a masculine characteristic.” Leisure practitioners interested in programming for college-aged men should consider that participants may be interested in physical activities that do not necessarily require competition. While some men, such as Motorcycle, may want physicality, they do not always desire activities that require them to engage in competition. Many of the participants spoke of solitary activities being used to negotiate stress. Providing non-competitive contexts that allow them to engage with others may increase college-aged men’s participation in leisure offerings.

Not all leisure activities perceived as masculine were seen as “healthy” forms of escaping. Substance abuse was one of the coping strategies that some participants perceived as masculine and therefore socially acceptable. This is consistent with research that positions substance abuse as a way of coping with mental health issues (Drepalski, Bennett, & Bellack, 2011). Otto stated that drinking alcohol was a socially acceptable way for men to negotiate mental health, stating, “I think it’s more socially acceptable for a depressed male to drink heavily than it is for a depressed female.” Jay stated that smoking weed was also a masculine leisure escape, saying, “The activity of just smoking weed is sometimes perceived as more masculine . . . how it is makes it masculine, because it’s not really a clean activity.” Similar to comments about stress management as a measure of masculinity, there was a measurement aspect that placed being too reliant on substances as not masculine that suggested the influence of hegemonic understandings of masculinity. Using a substance could be seen as masculine, but becoming reliant or dependent on one would indicate a lack of control; thus, overuse of a substance to deal with stress could be seen as not masculine. This suggests that mental health programs for college-aged males should take into consideration that gendered expectations may privilege substance abuse to a certain point and consider possible ways to address those expectations.

**Conclusion**

The primary purpose of this study was to further investigate how hegemonic masculinity influences college-aged men’s understandings and behaviors related to negotiating stress. Participants’ understandings of masculinity suggest that there are hegemonic expectations influencing public and private daily activities, understandings of stress and choices of leisure activities as coping. Hegemonic understandings of masculinity appear to be simultaneously positively and negatively affecting understandings of stress and choices made about leisure activities. Rather than explicitly focusing on relationships between hegemonic masculinity and leisure activity or
hegemonic masculinity and stress negotiation, this research suggests that there may be behavioral patterns and choices intersecting many aspects of men’s lives, warranting further studies. Understanding intersections that exist among them may allow educators, mental health providers, and leisure practitioners better ways to address hegemonic expectations’ negative impacts on men’s lives and choices in ways that benefit not only men, but society as a whole.

References


