# Still Just Hegemonic After All These Years?

## *"Worst Thing S/He Thinks About Me" Predicts Attitudinal Risk Factors for High School Healthy Relationships Program*

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**Abstract:** Men and boys are commonly viewed as perpetrators and/or facilitators of relational violence, but this biological essentializing oversimplifies "masculinity" as "bad." Connell illustrated the complex roles of bodies, structural order maintenance, and "pupils as agents, school as setting" (Connell 2000: 161) in shaping masculinity processes. Our study examined these factors by examining how peer perceptions of gendered identity threats relate to beliefs negatively affecting power relations. Students ($N = 87$; $n = 36$ males, 51 females) from four classes at two high schools in Connecticut provided pre- and post-test data for a Sexual Violence Prevention Program. Results show unhealthy attitudes related to peer perceptions as a basis for violence scenarios. We discuss primary-prevention curricular implications by addressing masculinit*ies* as social relationships involved in adolescents facilitating healthy relational practices.

**Keywords:** gender bias, identity threat, interpersonal violence, primary prevention approach, relationship abuse, social learning

Connell (2000) argued for focusing on how boys *and* girls influence masculine embodiments within social systems, but in the last 20 years scholarship has focused largely on masculinity as a type (usually hegemonic) and as male (Messerschmidt 2019). This is particularly true in the realm of violence prevention, where the common educational focus in both North American and many European contexts has been on men and boys (presumed hegemonically masculine) as perpetrators and/or facilitators (whether directly or implicitly) of relational violence (Morris and Ratajczak 2019).

Certainly, "men predominate across the spectrum of violence" (Connell 2000: 214). However, as the sole focus of many primary prevention curricula, masculinity in this form is oversimplified, which is problematic at best. Secondary school programming (particularly in the United States, Canada,

and England) typically equivocates sex and gender, and assumes that all gendered messages are equal and/or affect gendered ideologies in similar ways (Baumgartner 2020; Murnen et al. 2002). This oversight prioritizes views of bad-hegemonic-males, while also failing to account for complicit (and other types of) masculinities' roles among youths of all sexes. In doing so, practitioners continue to essentialize negative, masculine attributes—a problem Connell (2000) warned against early on.

To address these concerns, our study used Connell's (2000) Gender Relations Approach (GRA) to understand masculinities as situated among other gender configurations. We discuss U.S. education practices to frame a self-report study of high school students' perceptions of gendered identity threats relating to beliefs about male-female power relations. Finally, we discuss adolescents' perceptual gender norms as applied to how relational violence (and its assumed tie to "masculinity") is taught or societally managed.

## Connell's Gender Relations Approach as Framework

Focusing on Connell's (2000) three GRA factors led us to explore how structures, bodies, and gender configurations shape adolescents' understandings of variables shown to relate to healthy and unhealthy romantic relationships in their current and future lives.

### Structures

To illustrate the mistaken impression that structural norms are unchangeable, Connell (2000) pointed to schools—systems which most people encounter. Even formal structures, however, involve informal elements. Peers' social relations and extracurricular interpersonal interactions both reinforce systemic values communicated by formalized systems (McElhaney et al. 2008). As such, Connell's admonition to view "pupils as agents, school as setting" (2000: 161) is particularly important for exploring multiple interacting processes that shape identities. Although larger structures (e.g., curriculum, formatting, policies) can be difficult for individuals to change, taking into account the students themselves as (positive or negative) change-agents provides new possibilities for teaching and managing society's relational violence.

Secondary schooling is a vital period during which to address issues related to sex, sexuality, gender, and power in individuals' lives (Austin 1995). Youths (i.e., students) in educational settings outside the home form iden-

tities while coordinating constantly evolving impressions via romantic and platonic relationships (McElhaney et al. 2008). Family members strongly influence children's relationship expectations (Babarskiene and Gaiduk 2018; Epstein and Ward 2011), norms for which are also reinforced by media (Kretz 2019).

To capitalize on this volatile time in students' lives, U.S. interpersonal-skills training and violence awareness programs are proliferating, as government attention (with intermittent funding) has gradually increased over the past decade (White House 2014). Relying on *primary prevention approaches* to change-making, these programs use a socioecological model whereby known "risk" variables (e.g., rape myth acceptance, hostility toward women, traditional gender role beliefs) associated with unhealthy relationships are addressed via classroom instruction "early on" (e.g., elementary- to middle-school levels) to challenge norms learned from families, media, and social networks (Crooks et al. 2019). We began our study with a preliminary test of this typically implemented outcome-assessment standard.

> H1: Masculinity training will affect risky gender beliefs, such that healthier relationship attitudes will be exhibited after undergoing training.

Certainly, these programs are positive in that they move beyond institutions such as "school-level" programming; in the United States, they often are administered in coordination with communities as part of national programs. However, results of these practices frequently are duration limited and produce mixed-outcome results (Brush and Miller 2019). Further, by drawing from the larger *gender order*'s narratives, specific school systems' *gender regimes* are unchallenged (Connell 2000). For example, many of these programs focus on implementing an "intervention" to "save" boys and girls from masculinity in its presumed hegemonic "form" (Flood 2011). If this issue is more complex than masculinity-as-bad or as contributor to relational violence, then other factors comprising gender relations must be explored. Therefore, before testing a particular program's effectiveness, we questioned hegemonic masculinity as the primary contributor to "unhealthy" relationship beliefs in the first place.

> H2: Traditionally masculine attitudes will be associated with unhealthy relational beliefs, such that those with more gender-biased attitudes will endorse (a) more controlling aggression and (b) less likelihood of intervening as bystanders.

Although beliefs and attitudes are certainly influenced by numerous, intersecting socio-ecological factors outside school settings, as youths transition from pre-adolescence to adulthood, relational gender views become influ-

enced by peers at school (Hertzog and Rowley 2014). Yet, despite scholars' frequent attention to curricula outcomes, actual practices of youths navigating their *own* perceptions of gender influences remain largely unexamined (Bartholomaeus and Tarrant 2016). Connell's (2000) GRA allows for consideration of multiple simultaneous gender enactments via different outlets, taking different forms across settings; it is ideal for framing the complex negotiations that youths experience every day in school. Students are privileged as active participants in the construction and reinforcement of knowledge and understanding, particularly as it relates to the formation of gender identities. This approach further considers hegemonic masculinity as a *discourse*, rather than as a static type or entity. Thus, moving beyond mere program-outcome assessment, our study had two primary goals. We sought to examine (1) how high school students view others' hypothetical perceptions of their gendered performances, and (2) how those gendered understandings interplay with students' views of healthy relationships.

First, we asked:

RQ1: What gendered messages do students identify as the most personally harmful?

## Bodies

A second component of the GRA is the presence and constant shaping of physical bodies. For teenagers especially, it is not only their psychological identities that become uncertain or active experiments. Adolescence is a time where identity-seeking/experimentation is largely affected by teens' abilities (or lack thereof) to control their bodies' presentation. Fluctuating hormones, bodily maturation, and the uncertainty these changes provoke are well-documented as affecting males' and females' insecurity during this period (Warner 2020). Just as they become hyper-aware of gender role expressions, youths also become overly sensitive to otherwise innocuous cues from others (i.e., perceiving things as being worse than how others actually see them). Those cues are driven by the *heteronormative* conditions, or values placed on or by those upholding hegemonic constructions of heterosexuality and sex-corresponding gender enactments (e.g., masculine males attracted to and attracting feminine females) (Butler 2006; 2011). For many youths, anything perceived as a threat or challenge to their gender identity is often intertwined with, and seen as an attack on, their physical presentation (Francis and Paechter 2015; Zimmer-Gembeck et al. 2018). This is further exacerbated by expectations that "straight" men and women will outwardly appear as though they embody "ideal" heterosexuality (Wittig 1980)—not to mention more extreme repercussions for those born inter-

sexed, trans, or otherwise nonconforming sexed/gendered identities (Butler 2011; Schudson et al. 2018).

Deviations from heteronormative expectations occur across many categorizations. Sex and gender also intersect with specific embodiments depending on race, class, able-bodiedness, age, and family values, among other factors. As such, there are many arenas in which youths are susceptible to *identity threats*, the implicit personal and structural and the explicit social enforcement of performance standards via potential ostracization and sanctions for failing to uphold dominant norms (or even "non-dominant" co-cultural norms, such as those found in queer communities, e.g., Szymanski et al. 2019). If identity threats influence perceptions of their embodiments, then youths could be more likely to endorse normative standards as imposed on others, too, via standards-enforcing beliefs that maintain a patriarchal status quo (Bartholomaeus and Tarrant 2016). To determine whether this is the case, the nature of bodily sexed *and* gendered identity threats must be explored. Bodies typically are categorized biologically according to two main purposes—how they appear and what they can do. They are both "objects" and "agents" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

In terms of appearance, every culture holds expectations for what constitutes male and/or masculine versus female and/or feminine appearances. Sexual attraction often is associated with these culturally valued gendered characteristics (Etcoff 2000). For example, females expected to embody *emphasized femininity* (Connell 1987) might choose aspects such as meek voice, frilly or sexy dress, and/or adherence to "female" roles in relationships. Males often are expected to convey a masculinity that strives toward (because it can never be fully attained as a "type") hegemonic forms through aspects such as aggressive voice features and bodily behaviors, physical strength, sexual prowess, and/or physical size (see Messerschmidt 2012 for studies emphasizing these "traits"). In this sense, attractiveness (and its moderation via hygiene and clothing) is often tied to what society deems the ideal norm (i.e., *prescriptive*) as opposed to what is actually normative or *descriptive*. Additionally, as with all other aspects that comprise gender, it must be consistently (re)enacted over time and place (Fausto-Sterling 2019).

Because of differing notions of masculine versus feminine *genders* (assumed by many to equate to *sexes*), youths' understandings of identity threats necessarily interact with their biologically assigned sex (Baumgartner 2020; Fausto-Sterling 2019; Westbrook and Saperstein 2015; also see Francis and Paechter 2015 for discussion of this categorization problem

in educational research). Unfortunately, girls hoping to embody ideal femininity are subject to a double standard wherein being *too* feminine-ly attractive can backfire (e.g., large breasts change perceptions of basic t-shirts) when people associate appearance with behaviors. Students might not be free to express themselves as preferred, as "possibilities [for gen-der enactment] are constrained massively by embodiment" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 843). Combined with sexual double standards, the attributional tendency (e.g., "beautiful is good") (Asch 1946) to perceive external traits as representative of internal characteristics suggests that fe-males might view gendered messages differently than do males. We tested this via the following.

> H3: Sex will predict perceived gendered identity threats such that females will worry about different identity threats than will males.

## Gender Configurations

Finally, bodily enactments are inseparable from those they are enacted *with*: relationships between and among men and women. Knowing more about youths' *gender projects*, or their "process of configuring practice" (Connell 2000: 28), can elucidate how the "'hidden curriculum' in gender relations" operates within the "explicit curriculum" in "strategic" school settings (Connell 2000: 148–149). Inseparable from the bodies where they *do* gen-der are the psychological and/or behavioral aspects that configure gender with others. Youths practice self-presentation both by learning their own bodies and expected roles via *altercasting* (Weinstein and Deutschberger 1963), or others' communicated expectations, and via *social comparisons*, judging others/self against peers to determine self-worth (Fausto-Sterling 2019). These personality "rehearsals" are another site for identities to be threatened or questioned and for social evaluations to be made.

As a result, students (i.e., adolescents in school settings) constantly monitor themselves to fit in and avoid gendered stigmas, violence, conflict, or negative attitudes from others (McElhaney et al. 2008). Rather than actually embodying a specific type of gender expression (e.g., a teenage boy acting hypermasculine *because* he is male), it could be the volatility and uncertainty associated with finding a comfortable enactment at a pivotal time in their lives (*see* Austin 1995) that instead causes youths to follow safe, traditional norms or commonly held, stereotypical beliefs about gen-der. We tested this alternate yet corresponding understanding of sensitivity to peer-influence as a predictor of the same negative outcomes typically attributed to a sex (i.e., males) or gender (i.e., masculinity).

H4: Perceptions of gendered identity threats will predict unhealthy relationship beliefs, such that those more concerned about gendered identity threats will endorse more unhealthy attitudes than those who do not fear peers' judgements.

## Methods

### Sampling and Participants

As part of U.S. Department of Public Health (DPH) initiatives testing CDC-funded Sexual Violence Prevention Programs, this study's data were collected from 10th-grade students in four classes at two rural, small-town high schools in northcentral Connecticut. Students at these schools largely were low- to mid-range socioeconomically. Parents, typically notified of programs by their school districts, passively consented (i.e., informed, opt-out option) on behalf of children, whereas verbal assent was obtained from students for pre- and post-test surveys, completed by $N = 87$ ($n = 36$ males, $n = 51$ females) aged 15 to 16 years old.

### Procedures

#### Curriculum

The program was administered by the same YWCA community educator in each class across 30 to 40-minute sessions spanning two weeks. Curricula varied by school district, depending largely on local agencies' priorities in terms of how often, how extended, and when to implement each program. All training, however, focused on changing gendered attitudes as part of a primary prevention approach to reducing relational aggression and furthering healthy relationships. Educators covered topics related to gender stereotypes and bystander interventions; topics were influenced by this particular center's motto to eliminate racism and empower women.

#### Measures

A self-report scale was created to measure attitudes prior and subsequent to the program. Students reported agreement with nine problematic statements via 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; lower scores indicated "healthier" attitudes toward the item). Items were created to assess particular curricula's stated goals and comprised four subscales: three items each on (a) gender-biased or sexist attitudes and (b) controlling aggression, two items on (c) bystander attitudes toward inaction, and one item on (d) knowledge of sexual violence prevalence (*see* Table 1).

Table 1: Within- and Between-Group Differences by Pre- Versus Post-Test and Male Versus Female Scores

| | Pre M (SD) | Post M (SD) | Pre-Post $t$ (df) |
|---|---|---|---|
| TOTAL UNHEALTHY ATTITUDES SCALE | 2.71 (0.46) | 2.57 (0.58) | 1.75 (169) |
| Males | 2.95 (0.41) | 2.80 (0.54) | 1.37 (65) |
| Females | 2.54 (0.42) | 2.41 (0.55) | 1.30 (93.59) |
| M-F difference  $t$(df) | 4.56 (85) *** | 3.08 (80) ** | |
| OVERALL GENDER BIAS | 2.64 (0.79) | 2.58 (0.87) | 0.48 (175) |
| Males | 2.99 (0.75) | 2.95 (0.88) | 0.22 (65) |
| Females | 2.40 (0.73) | 2.31 (0.80) | 0.56 (100) |
| M-F difference  $t$(df) | 3.58 (85) *** | 3.34 (80) *** | |
| *It's the man's job to "take charge" in relationships* | 2.30 (1.02) | 2.31 (1.14) | 0.06 (175) |
| Males | 2.64 (0.83) | 2.65 (1.08) | 0.04 (65) |
| Females | 2.06 (1.09) | 2.00 (1.10) | 0.28 (100) |
| M-F difference  $t$(df) | 2.70 (85) ** | 2.60 (80)* | |
| *Girls get away with a lot more things in life than boys do* | 3.03 (1.15) | 3.18 (1.18) | 0.86 (175) |
| Males | 3.36 (1.20) | 3.48 (1.06) | 0.43 (65) |
| Females | 2.80 (1.06) | 2.98 (1.19) | 0.81 (100) |
| M-F difference  $t$(df) | 2.29 (85) * | 1.93 (80) [a] | |
| *Men who get raped must be kind of weak/wimpy* | 2.60 (1.11) | 2.25 (1.19) | 2.02 (174) * |
| Males | 2.97 (1.08) | 2.71 (1.24) | 0.92 (65) |
| Females | 2.33 (1.05) | 1.96 (1.11) | 1.73 (100) |
| M-F difference  $t$(df) | 2.76 (85) ** | 2.83 (80) ** | |
| OVERALL CONTROLLING AGGRESSION | 2.26 (0.51) | 2.04 (0.66) | 2.47 (167.20) * |
| Males | 2.48 (0.48) | 2.15 (0.61) | 2.49 (65) * |
| Females | 2.11 (0.47) | 1.96 (0.68) | 1.27 (89.24) |
| M-F difference  $t$(df) | 3.63 (85) *** | 1.30 (80) | |
| *It's best to have control over the people around you* | 2.76 (0.88) | 2.34 (0.99) | 2.98 (174) ** |
| Males | 2.97 (0.88) | 2.32 (0.87) | 3.03 (65) ** |
| Females | 2.61 (0.85) | 2.34 (1.08) | 1.39 (92.94) |
| M-F difference  $t$(df) | 1.94 (85) [a] | 0.07 (79) | |
| *It's never OK to lose an argument* | 2.38 (0.85) | 2.42 (1.14) | 0.27 (164.61) |
| Males | 2.44 (1.00) | 2.61 (1.28) | 0.61 (65) |
| Females | 2.33 (0.74) | 2.25 (1.06) | 0.44 (89.55) |
| M-F difference  $t$(df) | 0.60 (60.95) | 1.37 (80) | |
| *If a woman says "no" it's sometimes OK to think she meant "yes"* | 1.64 (0.78) | 1.37 (0.66) | 2.48 (174) * |
| Males | 2.03 (0.77) | 1.50 (0.63) | 3.01 (64) ** |
| Females | 1.37 (0.66) | 1.29 (0.67) | 0.61 (100) |
| M-F difference  $t$(df) | 4.24 (85) *** | 1.36 (79) | |
| OVERALL BYSTANDER ATTITUDES | 3.49 (0.75) | 3.36 (0.71) | 1.21 (175) |
| Males | 3.61 (0.83) | 3.53 (0.69) | 0.42 (65) |
| Females | 3.40 (0.69) | 3.24 (0.69) | 1.23 (100) |
| M-F difference  $t$(df) | 1.28 (85) | 1.90 (80) [a] | |
| *If a guy hits/pushes a girl, it's best not to get physically involved* | 3.68 (1.28) | 3.73 (1.22) | 0.27 (174) |
| Males | 3.89 (1.30) | 4.10 (1.09) | 0.70 (64) |
| Females | 3.53 (1.26) | 3.49 (1.26) | 0.16 (100) |
| M-F difference  $t$(df) | 1.30 (85) | 2.21 (79) * | |
| *The way strangers in a relationship fight is none of my business* | 3.30 (1.11) | 2.98 (1.09) | 1.93 (174) [a] |
| Males | 3.34 (1.16) | 2.97 (1.09) | 1.33 (64) |
| Females | 3.27 (1.08) | 2.98 (1.10) | 1.34 (100) |
| M-F difference  $t$(df) | 0.28 (84) | 0.51 (80) | |
| OVERALL PREVALENCE KNOWLEDGE | 2.09 (1.00) | 1.54 (0.71) | 4.21 (154.99) *** |
| Males | 2.47 (0.88) | 1.67 (0.61) | 4.27 (65) *** |
| Females | 1.82 (0.99) | 1.51 (0.78) | 1.75 (94.85) |
| M-F difference  $t$(df) | 3.14 (85) ** | 0.94 (79) | |

*Note.* Columns show curricular difference scores: $t$-test results for pre- and post-tests of composite and male ($n$ = 36) and female ($n$ = 51) subsamples, respectively.

* p < .05.          ** p < .01.

*** p < .001.          [a] p = .06.

To determine gender-based messages considered most identity-threatening, students answered two open-ended questions pertaining to same- and opposite-sexed peers' perceptions ("What's the worst thing you worry a guy/girl could think about you?"). These open-ended responses initially were analyzed using a constant-comparative method producing a list of themes (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Two independent coders reached high interrater reliability ($\kappa$ = .82 to .85) for cross- and same-sex identity-threat themes.

## Results

### Masculinity Training (H1, H2)

Paired-samples comparisons showed that the four classes did not significantly differ from one another, and so data were collapsed in subsequent analyses. To test curricula targeting "negative" masculinity, we predicted that students' gendered relationship attitudes would be positively affected. H1 was not fully supported in that only males' scores were significantly changed from pre- to post-test, and these only for attitudes related to controlling aggression and knowledge of violence prevalence (Table 1).

Females endorsed less pre- ($r$ = -.37, $p$ < .001) and post-test ($r$ = -.35, $p$ < .01) gender bias, pre-test controlling aggression ($r$ = -.37, $p$ < .001), and overall pre- ($r$ = -.44, $p$ < .001) and post-test ($r$ = -.33, $p$ < .05) total unhealthy attitudes than did males. Independent samples $t$-tests (*see* Table 1) showed that males and females differed from one another in overall endorsement of unhealthy attitudes both pre- and post-training. Throughout the program, females were less likely than males to endorse gender bias, controlling aggression, and bystander inaction, and more likely to possess knowledge of violence prevalence. Further tests for H2 showed that, prior to the training, gender-bias scores were positively correlated with controlling aggression ($r$ = .52, $p$ < .001), but not bystander inaction. Post-test scores for gender bias positively correlated with controlling aggression (H2a: $r$ = .57, $p$ < .001) and bystander inaction (H2b: $r$ = .28, $p$ < .01).

### Identity Threats (RQ1, H3, H4)

Ten non-overlapping identity-threat themes were identified (RQ1): attacks on (a) male sexuality (e.g., gay, player, man-whore), (b) female sexuality (e.g., slut, easy, whore); denigrating (c) male physicality (e.g., weak, fat, ugly, gross), (d) female physicality (e.g., ugly, fat, butch); judging female personality as negatively (e) masculine (e.g., bitch, mean, rude) or (f) fem-

inine (e.g., ditzy, whiny, gossip); judging male personality as negatively (g) feminine (e.g., pussy, narc, pushover) or (h) masculine (e.g., dick, asshole, jerk); and explicitly stating that they "didn't care" what (i) males or (j) females thought of them. We aligned these scores with self-reports of biological sex and pre-test open-ended reports of perceived peer-perceptions.

Table 2: Perceptions of Others' Identity Threats by Sex of Perceived Sender

| Theme | Males' "Worst" Fears | | Females' "Worst" Fears | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | From Same Sex n (%) | From Other Sex n (%) | From Same Sex n (%) | From Other Sex n (%) |
| "Don't Care" | 8 (34.8) | 5 (20.8) | 6 (14.0) | 3 (6.5) |
| Sexuality | 4 (17.4) | 3 (12.5) | 11 (25.6) | 13 (28.3) |
| Physicality | 2 (8.7) | 3 (12.5) | 3 (7.0) | 17 (37.0) |
| Any Personality Trait | 9 (39.1) | 13 (54.2) | 23 (53.5) | 13 (28.3) |
|    Masculine Personality | 4 (17.4) | 11 (45.8) | 12 (27.9) | 5 (10.9) |
|    Feminine Personality | 4 (17.4) | 1 (4.2) | 11 (25.6) | 6 (13.0) |

*Note.* Except for the first row, all rows indicate negatively valenced responses. All are within-sex percentages.

For H3, chi-square tests indicated that males and females significantly differed in identity-threat perceptions. Table 2 shows that females predominantly feared men would think they had negative physical attributes or sexual qualities, whereas males expressed that they either "didn't care" what other men thought of them or worried about males' perceptions of their personality traits (e.g., "pushover" or "asshole"), $\chi^2 = 22.92$, $p < .01$, $\eta = .59$. From women, males feared judgment of negative masculinity, whereas females worried about other women thinking their personality was either too masculine or too feminine, $\chi^2 = 31.13$, $p < .001$, $\eta = .67$.

Finally, we tested particular identity threats as regression predictors of unhealthy gender attitudes, with independent samples *t*-tests probing differences between those who did or did not fear particular identity threats (H4). Table 3 shows results reaching and approaching significance. Overall apathy toward male perceptions predicted likelihood of viewing it acceptable to call women "bitch" or "ho" and to think sexist jokes were acceptable. Parsed by sex, only lacking opposite-sex (not same-sex) concerns predicted significant outcomes. Males who "didn't care" about women's judgments were more likely to see girls as societally privileged and to avoid interfering in boys' fights. Females who "didn't care" about boys' opinions were more likely to view "bitch" and "ho" as acceptable terms, but less likely to condone ignoring females' consent.

Table 3: Pre-Test Relational Attitudes Predicted by Perceptions of "Worst Thing Guy/Girl Could Think About Me"

| Predictors with attitudes | Expressed M (SD) | Not Expressed M (SD) | t (df) | F (df) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Boys Who Fear …** | | | | |
| **Sexuality Judged by Males** | | | | |
| *Disregard female sexual consent* | 2.25 (0.50) | 1.51 (0.66) | 2.19 (67) * | 4.80 (1, 67) * |
| *Avoid male-victim intervention* | 2.25 (0.50) | 3.36 (1.19) | 3.82 (5.45) * | 3.42 (1, 66) b |
| **Physicality Judged by Males** | | | | |
| *Overall bystander inactivity* | 5.00 (0.00) | 3.46 (0.72) | 2.13 (67) * | 4.52 (1, 67) * |
| **Sexuality Judged by Females** | | | | |
| *Overall gender bias* | 3.56 (1.17) | 2.58 (0.79) | 2.05 (65) * | 4.21 (1, 65) * |
| *Overall bystander inactivity* | 4.50 (0.50) | 3.42 (0.72) | 2.56 (65) * | 6.54 (1, 65) * |
| *Believe men should control relationships* | 3.67 (0.58) | 2.20 (1.00) | 2.52 (65) * | 6.33 (1, 65) * |
| *Avoid female-victim intervention* | 5.00 (0.00) | 3.56 (0.58) | 8.88 (63) *** | 3.64 (1, 65) a |
| *Total unhealthy attitudes* | 3.38 (0.63) | 2.66 (0.43) | 2.76 (65) ** | 7.63 (1, 65) ** |
| **Physicality Judged by Females** | | | | |
| *Feel should treat M/F differently* | 1.00 (0.00) | 3.15 (1.06) | 16.32 (64) *** | 8.07 (1, 65) ** |
| **Girls Who Fear Sexuality Judged by Females** | | | | |
| *Acceptability of using "bitch/ho"* | 1.45 (0.69) | 2.11 (1.09) | 1.91 (65) a | 3.63 (1, 65) a |
| ***Anyone* Who Fears Personality Judged by Females As …** | | | | |
| **Negatively Feminine** | | | | |
| *Overall gender bias* | 2.14 (0.77) | 2.73 (0.80) | 2.35 (65) * | 5.51 (1, 65) * |
| *Feel females get privileged* | 2.42 (1.08) | 3.11 (1.17) | 1.89 (65) a | 3.56 (1, 65) a |
| *Believe males raped only if weak/wimp* | 2.00 (1.13) | 2.76 (1.14) | 2.11 (65) * | 4.45 (1, 65) * |
| *Disregard female sexual consent* | 1.25 (0.62) | 1.71 (0.76) | 1.95 (65) a | 3.79 (1, 65) a |
| *Total unhealthy attitudes* | 2.42 (0.43) | 2.75 (0.45) | 2.36 (65) * | 5.56 (1, 65) * |
| **Negatively Masculine** | | | | |
| *Believe males raped only if weak/wimp* | 3.00 (1.17) | 2.43 (1.13) | 1.93 (65) a | 3.74 (1, 65) a |
| *Disregard female sexual consent* | 1.91 (0.90) | 1.48 (0.63) | 2.31 (65) * | 5.36 (1, 65) * |
| *Feel should treat M/F differently* | 3.57 (0.84) | 2.84 (1.16) | 2.65 (65) ** | 7.00 (1, 65) ** |
| *Feel strangers' conflict should be private* | 3.74 (1.01) | 3.07 (1.13) | 2.39 (65) * | 5.72 (1, 65) * |
| **Boys Who Fear Personality Judged As …** | | | | |
| **Negatively Masculine by Males** | | | | |
| *Believe males raped only if weak/wimp* | 3.75 (1.26) | 2.74 (0.93) | 1.87 (21) b | 3.49 (1, 21) b |
| *Feel should treat M/F differently* | 4.00 (0.00) | 3.11 (1.13) | 3.33 (17.00) ** | 2.38 (1, 20) |
| **Negatively Feminine by Males** | | | | |
| *Overall controlling aggression* | 2.08 (0.17) | 2.58 (0.46) | 2.11 (21) * | 4.46 (1, 21) * |
| **Negatively Masculine by Females** | | | | |
| *Disregard female sexual consent* | 2.36 (0.67) | 1.77 (0.60) | 2.29 (22) * | 5.23 (1, 22) * |
| *Feel strangers' conflict should be private* | 3.82 (0.98) | 2.92 (1.19) | 1.99 (22) a | 3.95 (1, 22) a |
| **Girls Who Fear Personality Judged As Negatively Masculine by Males** | | | | |
| *Avoid male-victim intervention* | 4.00 (0.00) | 3.20 (1.33) | 3.88 (40.00) *** | 1.80 (1, 44) |
| *Feel it's not OK to lose an argument* | 2.00 (0.00) | 2.39 (0.80) | 3.11 (40.00) ** | 1.16 (1, 44) |
| ***Anyone* Who Said "Didn't Care" About …** | | | | |
| **Males' Judgments** | | | | |
| *Acceptability of "bitch/ho"* | 2.73 (1.27) | 1.91 (1.03) | 2.31 (67) * | 5.34 (1, 67) * |
| *Sexist dirty jokes OK* | 2.45 (1.13) | 2.89 (0.89) | 1.83 (65) b | 3.36 (1, 65) b |
| **Females' Judgments** | | | | |
| *Acceptability of using "bitch/ho"* | 2.55 (1.21) | 1.89 (1.00) | 1.91 (65) a | 3.63 (1, 65) a |
| **Boys Who Said "Didn't Care" About Females' Judgments** | | | | |
| *Believe females get privileged* | 4.00 (0.00) | 3.11 (1.41) | 2.77 (18) * | 1.95 (1, 22) |
| *Avoid male-victim intervention* | 3.71 (0.76) | 3.13 (1.06) | 3.72 (18) ** | 3.52 (1, 22) b |
| **Girls Who Said "Didn't Care" About Males' Judgments** | | | | |
| *Acceptability of using "bitch/ho"* | 3.33 (1.53) | 1.84 (0.95) | 2.55 (44) * | 6.50 (1, 44) * |
| *Disregard female sexual consent* | 1.00 (0.00) | 1.42 (0.70) | 3.93 (42) *** | 1.06 (1, 44) |

*Note.* Table includes only significant predictors/differences. Higher scores indicate more agreement with problematic statements, and lower scores indicate "healthier" attitudes.

\* *p* < .05.
\*\* *p* < .01.
\*\*\* *p* < .001.
a *p* = .06.
b *p* < .07.

In contrast, males who feared other men judging their sexuality were more likely to disregard female sexual consent and to intervene amongst two men fighting. Fearing women attacking their sexuality also predicted more unhealthy attitudes overall—gender bias, bystander inactivity, beliefs in male relational dominance, and avoidance of intervening on behalf of female victims. Females who feared other women's sexuality judgments tolerated less "bitch/ho" usage. Males whose worst fear was that men and women would judge them physically were more likely to be inactive bystanders and to support sex-differential treatment, respectively.

For personality judgments, anyone who feared women judging them as negatively feminine reported less overall gender bias, overall unhealthy attitudes, beliefs that women are privileged and that raped males are weak/wimps, and disregarding of female sexual consent. Parsed by sex, females fearing other women judging them as too feminine were more likely to intervene in male fights. Males fearing other men would judge them too feminine were less likely to exhibit overall controlling aggression.

In contrast, anyone fearing women judging their personality as negatively masculine was more likely to perceive raped men as weak/wimps, to disregard female sexual consent, and to endorse male/female differential treatment and ignoring strangers' aggressive conflicts. Parsed by sex, females who worried that men judged them as negatively masculine were more likely to express it acceptable to lose arguments and to be passive bystanders in male fights. Males who feared other men judging them as negatively masculine were more likely to endorse sex-differential treatment and to view rape as happening only to weak/wimpy men; males who feared women would see them this way were more likely to ignore female sexual consent and to avoid intervening in strangers' romantic conflict.

## Discussion

Working from an assumption that boys' unhealthy attitudes must be addressed, much violence-prevention programming fails to differentiate masculinities from individual men and never explores which gendered peer-messages actually affect negative beliefs and practices where they do occur. In this study, Connell's (2000) GRA accounted for structure, bodies, and relational configurations in student's descriptions of identity-threatening messages.

Students' reports of what they found identity-threatening reflected concerns of many women and men in society (see Sweeney 2013). The

male/female double standards found in this study for image-concerns were unsurprising, as males frequently report concerns about threats to their masculinity or being perceived as "too" feminine (Bird 1996), whereas many women manage a double-bind of being *both* too masculine and too feminine (Endendijk et al. 2020; Gaunt 2012). More interesting for a GRA was the source of students' perceived identity threats.

Female students expressed more concern that women would judge their personalities and men would judge their physicality and sexuality. In this context, the sexuality theme was tied less to perceived desirability than to reputation and assumed behavior. As such, results challenge what is commonly perceived to be the case that girls worry about other girls' sexual gossip destroying their reputation (e.g., Berbary 2012); girls in this study worried more about men seeing them this way. Instead, girls were more worried that other females would view them as too "soft" or as pushovers (e.g., negative emphasized femininity) or too "bitchy" (e.g., negative female masculinity, see Hoskin 2019; or masculinized femininity that reinforces hegemonic gendering, see Guendouzi 2001; or over-asserting femaleness Butler 2006)—speaking yet again to women's ever-present double bind. In contrast, boys' concerns centered on others' (same- and opposite-sexed peers) perceptions of their (mainly, negatively masculine) personality traits.

Confirming decades of prior research, present data identified attacks on male and female personalities with aspects of gender-sex role reversals as negative descriptors. So-called female descriptives such as "pussy" were seen as most threatening by boys, whereas negatively masculine attributes were the most threatening for girls. Although this seems a simple cross-attack indicating that each sex is threatened by being seen as the other, it is a bit more complex. "Female" is sexed, whereas "masculine" is gendered. Both perceptual attacks—for male and female students—were those attributed to women. Put another way, males feared being seen *as* women, whereas females feared being seen as not "appropriate" women (i.e., not embodying femininity appropriately). The issue is then one beyond simplistic heteronormativity. Instead, femaleness (sex) and masculinity (gender) are used to attack both women and men, respectively. Teens' potential personality attacks, then, serve as another form of structural order-maintenance. Personalities and bodies play a role, but are merely parts (and indeed, are different parts in different contexts) of larger, ongoing processes of power enforcement, identity shaping, and resultant censure experienced by perceptual targets *and* facilitators.

Most students—both male and female—feared being judged as possessing negatively masculine traits. On the one hand, this is encouraging in that it shows a distinct trend toward not wanting to associate with hegemonically controlling, aggressive, or emotionally lacking behaviors. On the other hand, when looked at in combination with other findings in this study, the results become a bit more nuanced and potentially problematic.

"Worst" identity threats associated with unhealthy beliefs or attitudes toward women suggest a specific type of student who might or might not be best suited to masculinity-attacking primary prevention strategies. Most unhealthy relational beliefs were unsurprisingly tied to worries one would expect from people concerned about threats to their gender enactments. For example, men who worried about women viewing them as weak, passive, or "gay" endorsed traditional, gender-biased attitudes and lacked intent to intervene on victims' behalf. Seemingly overcompensating, worries about women viewing them as anything less than "macho" men increased men's identification with overall controlling, aggressive behaviors. Thus, it was not merely a characteristic of men that indicated risk, but rather a characteristic *in relation to* women.

Although masculinity is putatively addressed in programming such as that examined here, it is too often presented as a negative force. Students clearly already view it this way, as pre-test associations in this study indicated. Even students with unhealthy views of relationships and male-female equality recognized negative masculinity traits as something they did (or should) not want others to identify with them. In this case, programming that simply reinforces those views will do nothing to change the fundamental attitudes (e.g., gender equality, views of romantic relationships and women) that those "negatively masculine" boys already possess.

Increased understanding of pro-social knowledge and attitudes (e.g., bad to be controlling or aggressive—both masculinely perceived traits) was the most apparent result of this training. That this finding reached statistical significance only among males has multiple explanations. One is that the curriculum intentionally targeted "unhealthy" or "toxic" masculinity as a purported violence-contributor; as such, it could be that males felt "targeted" by the training and therefore learned most—particularly in the masculine-ascribed traits of control and aggression. However, females' pre-test scores already were higher than males' and as such already might have reached a "ceiling effect" whereby their changes could not reach significance in this sample, despite actual improvement. In contrast to the male changes on those attitudinal variables, attitudes toward gender equality and stu-

dents' bystander intervention likelihood were least affected by this education. Ultimately, this study highlights how adolescents' gendered relational attitudes interrelate with and possibly are informed by peer perceptions as the basis for future unhealthy or violent scenarios.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Common to many curriculum evaluation studies, this research was conducted with limited time available for both assessment and training. Students could have been rushed to complete measures to increase actual education time. Necessarily, scales were limited in amount (topically and in number of items assessing each larger construct) and depth (complexity and items' nuance were restricted to a less than sixth-grade reading level). This possibly was reflected by the "don't care" theme, which might have captured students' genuine apathy. However, that these same students also expressed so many unhealthy beliefs matching peers who *did* care suggests that, in schools with mandatory programming, these students either were rushed or used their free will in the one manner they could—to not answer the question. To clarify the extent and nature of topical programming, scholars are urged to pursue outcome- or treatment-based approaches to the problem of unhealthy relationships—from the perspective of what the programs specifically have to offer (rather than simply whether they "work" to affect one or two outcomes already present in participants).

## Conclusion

Knowing how boys' masculinities are shaped by both same-sex and differently sexed peers has important implications for Connell's (2000) original work—shown to be just as important today as when originally constructed. By considering how gendered understandings interplay with students' views of healthy relationships, we find that renewed emphasis is needed on Connell's original call to look at masculinities as "*relational* . . . the connections between the differences and hierarchies among men, and the relations between men and women" (Connell 2000: 23). Doing so also will help reorient scholars to move from an emphasis on what hegemonic masculinity "looks like" to a focus on "what it accomplishes" (Bridges 2019: 28). By refocusing attention on what has *not* been accomplished 20 years since publication of Connell's (2000) work, we could begin to see the positive, gendered processes of masculinities two more decades from now.

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