

THE IMAGINATIVE SPACE OF ADOLESCENT MASCULINITIES IN THE MIGRATION  
TO HIGH SCHOOL

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**Abstract**

Adolescence is a period marked by significant social pressures as young individuals attempt to negotiate between who they are and who they aspire to become. For adolescent males, the social pressures of navigating a gender conforming masculine performance in a sexist society adds to this already heavy burden. Therefore, this research aims to understand the young masculinities being enacted as males transition from an elementary school to a high school context. This research utilizes the methodology of narrative inquiry and draws on Daniel Coleman's concept of narratives of refraction, shifts in perspective resulting from a migration from one culture to another. This research employs Raewyn Connell's theory of masculinity which views masculinity as pluralized and diverse and highlights the diversity within men as they strategically negotiate the varying demands of everyday situations. Based on the Positive Psychology/Positive Masculinity (PPPM) model, this work explores the positive aspects of adolescent masculinities. Interviews were conducted with two male participants to gain a deeper understanding of the healthy, positive aspects of their gender enactment, as well as to explore their stories to live by that resist or reinterpret traditional enactments of masculinity. In attending to stories of masculinity and sport, positive enactments of masculinity were considered in relation to the problematic culture of sport which may promote and perpetuate antifeminine, misogynistic, and sexist attitudes. Additionally, remaining attentive to silence was identified as necessary because adolescent males are navigating dominant narratives of masculinity that dictate stoicism in the face of difficulty. The significance of this body of research is the potential for it to open spaces for healthier, more adaptable gendered behavior. The findings of this research highlight the need for curricular resources that address the heteronormative, patriarchal systems of power operating in our schools.

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*Keywords:* adolescence, masculinities, positive psychology, patriarchy

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**Dedication**

This work is dedicated to  
the women in my life  
that are out there breaking glass ceilings, changing the world,  
and loving me unconditionally at the same time  
and  
to the great men in my life  
that could write the textbook on positive masculinities.  
Thank you for your patience, generosity, and endless support.  
You make the world a better place.

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## Chapter 1

### Narrative Beginnings

In the narrative inquiry tradition, it feels important to position myself within the boundaries of this research and so I shall start with a narrative beginning. In a narrative inquiry, the narrative beginning is composed of “personal stories that narrative inquirers explore to ‘make evident the social and political contexts that shaped their understandings’” (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 171). At the beginning stages of this inquiry, I began reflecting upon my stories to live by (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999), a narrative term illustrating the connection between narratives and identity. I began by asking myself, ‘What stories to live by have been the most influential in shaping my views of gendered constructs?’ This reflection drew out a series of stories in the midst, that is, ongoing in my personal and professional lives and, “shaped by attending to past, present, and unfolding social, cultural, institutional, linguistic, and familial narratives” (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 170), whose storying and restorying have been significant in shaping my enactment of femininity.

\* \* \*

It is early morning on a Sunday. There is little sun, and the fog hangs heavy in the air. I am training for the London Marathon, which is only a few months away. I am focused on my training, and I am fitting in an early morning run because I know that I have a busy day ahead. I am nearly an hour into my run. I am growing tired, but a happy, energetic tune is pulsing through my headphones. It adds a bit of spirit to my pace. I run strongly around the corner, about to head back up one of the two big hills in Dartford, a suburb of London, where I am living. A man, I guess to be in his mid-twenties, is standing on the sidewalk and he appears to be waiting to cross

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the road. I take little notice of him as I go to run past. I am nearly by him when he grabs me. This interrupts my pace and I stumble beside him. One of his hands is still on me. He appears to want to say something to me, but I think the shock and fear on my face make him change his mind. I shake him off, and despite my desire to chastise him, I am unable to say anything. I set my gaze back up the hill and run on.

\* \* \*

While teaching at a public school in southeast London, one of the 15-year-old boys in my form (similar to a Canadian high school's homeroom) was badly injured while playing a game of football with some of his friends. He had been kneed in the face and was bleeding heavily from his nose. The young boy was notorious for getting into trouble in his lessons, mouthing off to teachers, and was one of the 'lads' that many other boys at the school looked up to for his confidence and attitude. After having worked with him quite closely for three years, I felt I might be able to provide some comfort while he waited in the school's front office for his father to pick him up. When I arrived, I asked him if he was feeling okay. He had his head between his knees and when he lifted his eyes to look at me, it was clear that he had been crying. I knelt down to speak to him quietly because it was obvious that he was very upset. Instead of talking to me, he was repeating over and over to himself "I just need to toughen up. Why am I even crying? I just need to toughen up." It was heartbreaking to witness this young boy, clearly in need of comfort, unable to ask for what he needed, and unable to acknowledge his true feelings even to himself.

\* \* \*

It is 5:30 pm. The sun is still warm, and the evening is peaceful. I am living and teaching in southeast London at the time. I stopped at ASDA (A British supermarket chain) after work to pick up some groceries. The bags are heavy, and I do not drive in England, so I decide to take the

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short cut down the back alley behind the grocery store rather than opting for a longer trip up the main road. As I round the corner of the grocery store, I can hear a group of rowdy young men. I dig through my purse, struggling to find my headphones before I am spotted by the men. This is a defense I do not recall learning, but it is one I employ regularly when walking alone.

Unfortunately, I do not have time to put my headphones in before I am spotted. I cast my eyes downwards, one grocery bag in each hand and pick up my walking pace a bit. I hear the men's conversation die down as they observe me. One of them calls out to me, "Hey! Come here!" Pretending I have not heard, I neither turn to look nor do I acknowledge the comment in any way. A different man calls to me this time, "Hey, beautiful!" Again, I ignore the remark. I am nearly out of the back alley. My back is to the group of men. My heart is pounding, and unease has settled like a pit in my stomach. This is when a third man calls out, "It's alright, love. I could fuck you if I wanted to." His voice is calm and clear as he utters this threat. I am now out of sight, but I hear the men laugh at this remark together, as though it were all a playful bit of fun. The laughter rings through the alley as I continue my walk home alone.

\* \* \*

### **Unpacking my narratives: Considering gender and experience**

Gender is a lens through which we learn to constantly dichotomize our world - *blue is a boy's colour, dance is a girl's activity*, etc. Gender is considered to be made up of the characteristics socially and culturally associated with masculinity and femininity, and, from birth, our engagement with the social world teaches us and subsequently reinforces which performances of gender are gender conforming and which are gender non-conforming. Acceptable gender performances are heavily impacted by context, so as we grow older, we learn to navigate our gender performance based on our context and our audience. The ubiquitous nature of gender norms

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results in gendered behaviour that is considered, by many, to be a consequence of intrinsic forces. The social structures perpetuating these norms are often invisible and taken for granted. For me, it was a handful of moments that brought the effects of a restrictive, sexist system into clear focus.

This research comes about as a result of my experiences and the ongoing process of making meaning from my experiences. My social experiences have taught me that some men feel entitled to my body. Some men feel that they have the right to touch me without my consent. Some men feel that they can take anything they want from me because I am a female and, therefore, have less social power. Maturing into a woman has been a continuous process of finding my voice and resisting sexist power structures. In this process of becoming, I engaged with feminist literature and, as a result, I have come to understand that it is not just women that are negatively impacted by heteronormative, sexist social structures. In the process of retelling the story of my young, male student, one of the harmful aspects of hegemonic masculinity became apparent to me. Restrictive emotionality (Smith, et al., 2015) is a common characteristic of traditional masculinity and, in this particular instance, it prevented the young boy from getting the care that he wanted or needed for fear of enacting an incorrect gendered performance amongst his peers. Inquiring into my own stories of experience deepened my curiosity about the nature of gender roles and the impact they have in the lives of others.

Therefore, this research is born of the moments detailed here, but also those that slid away without recognition. These stories have laid the foundation for how I see myself as a gendered person and for how I go about representing that gendered person in my personal and social spheres. They have shaped how I act, dress, and engage with men. These stories in the midst have stuck with me so distinctly, they continue to inform my actions in the present day and thus, I cannot help but wonder if these moments, too, have stuck with the men in my stories? I

wonder if they revisit and reflect on these moments still? I wonder if these moments were as foundational in the formation of their gendered selves as they were to the formation of my gendered self? This developing sense of curiosity and my desire to better understand individual experiences with masculinity has led me to this academic undertaking.

### **Understanding my Personal Context: An Unpacking of sorts**

I grew up in Saskatchewan. Saskatchewan is a province of many small, rural farming towns and consists primarily of working-class residents. In my experience, there are few acceptable forms of masculinity or femininity available to those attempting a gender conforming performance in this context. I am a cisgender, straight, Caucasian female. I grew up in a family with three siblings and parents who have now been married for 30 years. Both of my parents set examples for what it means to be loving and respectful individuals. I grew up feeling safe, supported, and cared for. My mother has a master's degree in statistics and has worked part-time since she had kids. Her strong feminist ideals and her active role in promoting positive social change in our community has always made her a role model for me. Following high school, I moved to Saskatoon to attend the University of Saskatchewan. It was during my third year of university that an educational foundations course in my education degree opened my eyes to the existence of hegemonic social structures, how they operate and how they are perpetuated. The revelations I made during that university course fostered a passion for social justice which has greatly influenced my teaching philosophy and personal belief system.

Following university, I accepted a position teaching full-time mathematics at a secondary school in Kent, England. It was during my time in England that I realised my desire to pursue my master's degree in educational foundations. This was due to the fact that I was witnessing and confronting restrictive and damaging heteronormative structures on a daily basis, not only in my

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classroom, though that was certainly where I felt the impact most deeply but, also in my budding social life in the small suburb of London. Bullying and the use of sexual slurs focused, primarily, on sexual orientation were rampant throughout the school. Teaching in a school of predominantly young men, I also personally encountered a significant amount of sexism. The students' sexist comments and sexually aggressive behaviours left me feeling embarrassed, ashamed, and silenced.

When I returned to Regina in 2016, I accepted a position teaching grade 2/3 at a small community school in a neighbourhood with a transitional, primarily immigrant population. I wrongly assumed that I would not be faced with issues of gender and sexuality in the classroom while working with seven- and eight-year-olds. I was mistaken. The issues I faced were presented differently than what I had encountered at the secondary school level, but these new issues were undoubtedly two sides of the same coin. I encountered students who had learned to constantly police gendered behaviour and to dichotomise objects and experiences into male and female. Boys were taught that to want to play with the girls, wear pink, paint their nails, read certain books, and even excel in certain subject areas was at odds with a gender conforming masculine performance. Much, though not all, of this gender-policing came from the male students and was directed at their fellow male peers. For the female students, I heard reiterations of some old classics like girls are not good at math, women should do the cooking at home, and females are not as physically capable as their male-counterparts. I have heard countless versions of similar sentiments repeated by the middle years students at the school, as well. As this policing of gendered behaviour occurs between students of all ages at the school, it seems clear that this policing is normative. Little has been done to effectively counter this aspect of the school's culture. These are powerful messages

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for students to be reinforcing on a daily basis, particularly as children transition into adolescence and students feel more pressure to be accepted by their peers.

This inquiry provided me with an opportunity to reflect on my stories in the midst, whose telling and retelling, storying and restorying will open up space for a critical examination of my gendered self. Additionally, this research feels essential, politically and socially, not just in Saskatchewan where I make my home, but also globally. Domestic violence, gun violence, and political attacks on the bodies and autonomy of anyone not cisgender and male are all symptoms of the oppressive systems of sexism that are being perpetuated in North American social structures. To this research, I wish to bring a feeling of hope — hope that bodies of work, such as this, may create space for the varied and diverse individual expressions of gender.

### **Introduction**

From a young age, boys learn to navigate what is colloquially referred to as the ‘boy code,’ seen as a guide for a gender conforming masculine performance and while, “there may be a single ‘boy code,’...there are also a variety of ways in which different boys and men relate to it, embrace it, and enact it—in short, there are a variety of young masculinities” (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1451). While there is a growing body of research interested in exploring these diverse expressions of young masculinity, context and lived experience play vital roles in one’s relationship to and subsequent expression of gender; as such, narrative inquiry, as a qualitative research method, will provide necessary insight into masculine gender performances.

Adolescence, being a period of tremendous growth and development, offers a unique opportunity to study gendered behaviour and attitudes. In present day North American culture, this transition from childhood to adulthood is a period marked by significant social pressures and fraught with emotional turmoil as young individuals attempt to negotiate between who they are

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and who they aspire to become. For adolescent males, the social pressures of navigating a socially acceptable, gender conforming masculine performance adds to this already heavy burden. In a sexist system, males rigidly adhering to hypermasculine norms supposedly reap the greatest rewards, which may be status amongst peers or colleagues, professional and financial success and, popularity with potential romantic partners. Sexism can be understood as “a form of systemic discrimination which ensures the power of one group in society over another group. Sexism isn’t just what individuals say or do, it relates to the entire way we’ve set up a male-dominated society” (Novogrodsky et al., 1992, pp. 69–70) and, as a system, it operates by enforcing and policing strict gender roles for both sexes. For adolescent males trying to fit in, build friendships and find success within their school environments, the ‘correct’ gender performance may be seen as paramount, in this regard.

To achieve a hypermasculine standard, and thereby reap the rewards of a sexist system, males learn to conduct themselves in a manner which exemplifies power, authority, aggression, and heterosexuality, all characteristics of the masculine ideal. However, a rigid adherence to the masculine ideal is also associated with feelings of isolation, alienation, aggression, violence, and decreased feelings of self-esteem. Some males are unwilling or unable to conform to such a narrow view of masculinity and must find ways of adapting or subverting masculinity to suit their own purposes. A gender conforming performance is highly context-based and,

in the day-to-day complexities of social life, individuals conform to, reject, appropriate, and subvert social norms in a wide variety of ways...It would also be possible and productive, to examine individual difference and contextual variables that influence when, where and how men will resist or conform to masculine norms. (Addis et al., 2016, p. 87)



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In this regard, this study aims to understand the young masculinities being shaped and enacted as males transition from an elementary school to a high school context.

Daniel Coleman's (1998) *Masculine Migrations* posited that "the migrant male's narrative of refraction offers a unique opportunity to examine masculinities in moments when their usually assumed ideologies and structures become exposed to conscious reconsideration in the encounter with a new cultural environment or medium" (p. 3). As Coleman considers it, the narratives of refraction are the distortions and tensions produced as one moves from one distinct culture to another. If we may extrapolate on this theory and consider a male's transition from elementary school to high school as a migration of sorts, acknowledging that different schools inevitably have a unique culture and, thusly, a unique set of acceptable gender practices, then this study aims to explore and understand the narratives of refraction produced in this migration.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to understand the lived stories and stories in the midst which have implications for how male students enact a masculine performance as they migrate from a Saskatchewan elementary school to high school. Narrative inquiry recognizes that "our participants are always in the midst of their lives and their lives are shaped by attending to past, present, and unfolding social, cultural, institutional, linguistic, and familial narratives" (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 170). In the storying and restorying of our gendered lives, it is my hope that this research, emancipatory in nature, may contribute, in a small way, to establishing greater gendered freedoms for everyone. In educational settings, it is my hope that this research might "challenge teaching discourses that create and re-create sexist power relations" (MacNaughton, 2000, p.12).

**Research wonders**

1. How do, and what, stories to live by contribute to how adolescent males enact a masculine gender performance?
  - a. What narratives of refraction are composed in the *migration* of adolescent males from elementary school to high school?
  - b. What stories to live by enable adolescent males to resist or reinterpret hegemonic masculinity in order to enact positive masculinities?

## **Chapter 2**

### **Situating the Inquiry**

I began by situating my lived experiences and stories in the midst into context, as they pertain to this particular body of research. In this chapter, the current literature in the field regarding adolescent masculinity will be reviewed and synthesized. The methodology and methods to be undertaken by this study will then be detailed and issues regarding validity of the study will be examined before I discuss the potential significance of this research.

### **Framing the Literature Review**

In conducting the literature review, two significant findings became apparent in order to situate this research within the context of the existing body of research on masculinities and gender. First, there is a noticeable gap in research in the fields of education and psychology regarding adolescent masculinities. Much of the available literature focuses on adult male's enactment of masculinity. This becomes problematic when we consider the complex and shifting nature of gender performance. Gender performance, being deeply rooted in context, makes narrative inquiry a suitable research methodology, particularly given that a gender conforming performance for an adolescent male may look markedly different than that of an adult male. As such, further research into adolescent masculinities would serve as a beneficial addition to the field. Secondly, it has become apparent that a significant body of research exists that employs a deficit model of the psychology of men and masculinity, that being an approach which pathologizes traditional masculinity. Therefore, it is in the course of conducting this literature review that I have identified the need for research which attends to the complex, storied experiences of adolescent males, in particular, those which emphasize the positive aspects of adolescent masculinities.

### **Literature Review**

Psychological research on men and masculinity became particularly prevalent in the 1980s and has since become a specialty area within psychology. Psychologists realized that masculinity plays a central role in the lives of men and “with socially prescribed notions of masculinity [comes a unique set of] psychological and social problems for boys and men” (Kiselica et al., 2016, p.123). With the release of the American Psychological Association (APA) Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men in August of 2018, public interest was piqued by the relevant and timely information detailed in the report. While a significant body of research now exists on the psychology of men and masculinity, the APA Guidelines make apparent that there are still considerable gaps in the field yet to be addressed. This narrative inquiry will explore the context-based nature of adolescent masculinity in the migration from elementary school to high school, paying particular attention to the ways that adolescent males conform to or subvert traditional masculine standards in the transition. In order to position this research in context, a review of the available literature on masculinity has been conducted. This literature review provides a brief examination into the specific nature of hegemonic masculinity, the conceptualization of adolescent masculinities, the intersection between adolescent masculinity and violence, detrimental psychosocial and somatic health outcomes of hegemonic masculinity, the recent shift towards research into positive masculinities, and issues of gender in educational reform. In conducting this literature review, I hope to make apparent the the issues facing adolescent males in our schools, as a result of restrictive, hegemonic gender roles. In examining the shift towards studies of positive masculinities and conducting my research in this vein, I hope to position this narrative inquiry as a hopeful, transformative body of work.

According to Bartholomaeus (2011), while characteristics of hegemonic masculinity vary dependent on context, typical Western realisations of hegemonic masculinity share the following

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characteristics: heterosexuality, homophobia, physicality, the domination of women and particular character traits, such as authority and competitiveness. A minority of males enact a hegemonic form of masculinity. However, the power of the patriarchy is maintained through complicit masculinities, those enacted by “men who received the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of masculine dominance” (p. 832) in conjunction with the compliance of heterosexual women. The model of multiple masculinities was originally put forth in an article entitled, “Towards a New Sociology of Masculinity” (Carrigan et al., 1985), and was subsequently “integrated into a systematic sociological theory of gender” (Connell, 2005, p. 830). Connell’s theory of masculinities features two key understandings. The plural, *masculinities*, was used to signify the diversity of masculine enactments—even amongst seemingly homogenous populations, there is no unitary masculinity. Connell notes that “masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to gender relations in a particular setting” (p. 836). Additionally, Connell emphasizes the notion of hierarchy with regards to hegemonic masculinity. While being enacted by only a minority of males, hegemonic masculinity “embodie[s] the currently most honored way of being a man, it require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it” (p. 832) resulting in subordinated and complicit masculinities. Lomas et al. (2016) notes that “power over subordinate and marginalized masculinities [is maintained] through the ability to levy social penalties on men who deviate from expectations” (p. 290). Therefore, we can see that being unable to satisfy all of the criteria of hegemonic masculinity, and therefore unable to be full recipients of patriarchal dividends, benefits awarded to those who have access to and conform to hegemonic masculine ideals, young boys and adolescent males must adapt to a more contextually appropriate masculinity. As such, the concept of multiple masculinities is

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particularly fitting for adolescents because, at a younger age, males do not yet have access to a fully formed version of hegemonic masculinity, meaning that adolescent males must reinterpret the principles of hegemonic masculinity so that they may enact an age-appropriate form of masculinity.

The fragile and tenuous nature of masculinity is noted in much of the literature (Addis et al., 2003; Mansfield & Syzdek, 2010; Egan & Perry, 2001; Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000; Women's Network PEI, 2012). Running throughout this particular branch of research is the idea that one's masculinity is not a fixed and certain notion. To ensure one's status as masculine, and thereby secure one's power, masculinity must be continuously re-asserted through a variety of gender conforming performative acts—displays of machismo, athletic prowess, and assertions of heterosexuality (Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000). Failing to do so may result in one's manliness and even sexuality being called into question. Evans (2016), reflecting on the question posed by Wypijewski (2010), 'what does it take to pass as a man?' noted that,

it is interesting that she does not write 'be a man,' but rather 'pass as a man,' suggesting that there is something uncertain and tremulous in their relation to their masculinity, that it is more a performed masquerade than any sort of inborn reality. (p. 6)

The ongoing need to reaffirm masculinity may lead some adolescent males to feel a sense of uncertainty and to be desirous for a clear road map to an acceptable gender performance. In attempting to fit in with their peers and thereby access the benefits of the patriarchy, adolescent males develop

an inauthentic voice of constant posturing, of false bravado, of foolish risk-taking and gratuitous violence—what some have called the 'boy code' ...Very early on, one may become a stoic, uncommunicative, armor-plated man. They 'ruffle in a manly pose,' as

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William Butler Yeats once put it, ‘for all their timid heart.’ (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1450)

It is clear that to be an adolescent male and to find acceptance amongst their peers and in society more broadly, is no easy task. It is one, undeniably, fraught with challenges and stumbling blocks.

Felt pressure and masculine gender-role stress (MGRS) have been identified in the literature as two causes of negative enactments of masculinity. Aggressive or antisocial displays of masculinity derived from a place of fear, anger, and anxiety are closely linked to these two key concepts. Halim and Ruble (2010) defined felt pressure as “the degree to which children feel compelled to engage in gender-congruent conduct. Pressure to conform to gender-congruent conduct can come from parents, peers, the media, and other socializing agents” (p. 498). Both males and females experience felt pressure. To individuals strictly adhering to gender stereotypes, such pressure to conform may have distinct, negative psychosocial and somatic health outcomes. MGRS, “defined as the experience of distress in the context of situations that an individual appraises as a threat to his masculine identity” (Copenhaver et al., 2000, p. 406), consists of “five factorially derived domains: feeling physically inadequate, expressing vulnerable or tender emotions, feeling threatened by women in power, feeling intellectually inferior, and failing to perform in work and sex” (Fisher, 2007, p. 331). Lommers-Johnson (2016) made the distinction that gender-role strain is the psychological distress related to gender-roles whereas gender-role stress is the measurable stress resulting from the gender-role strain, though much of the literature uses these terms interchangeably. According to Eisler, Skidmore, and Ward (1988), a questionnaire developed to measure MGRS indicated that “increases in anger, increases in anxiety, and poorer health habits” are results of individuals experiencing

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MGRS. Therefore, “individuals who rigidly conform to a stereotype of the male role will feel threatened in unmanly situations and experience greater levels of MGRS” (p. 139).

When exploring the relationship between MGRS and psychological variables, results of their study indicate that men’s scores on the MGRS scale correlated more with feelings of anger, whereas women’s scores on the MGRS scale correlated more with anxiety. These findings align with socially acceptable, gender conforming performances for men and women. Egan and Perry (2001) note that

It is felt pressure for gender conformity, not a perception of the self as gender typical, that is harmful. Thus, children’s adjustment is optimized when they (a) are secure in their conceptions of themselves as typical members of their sex yet (b) feel free to explore cross-sex options when they so desire. (p. 459)

So, while a sense of gender typicality is important to a healthy sense of self, a critical element is also the sense of freedom to express oneself with a more fluid expression of gender.

Deeply tied to the gender binary is the oppressive system of heterosexuality. Heterosexuality, as a system of power, privileges the heterosexual while simultaneously enforcing strict adherence to masculine and feminine gender roles. Chesir-Teran and Hughes (2008) described heterosexuality as “a systematic process of privileging heterosexuality relative to homosexuality, based on the assumption that heterosexuality and heterosexual power and privilege are normal and ideal” (p. 964). While frequently operating as an invisible social structure, heterosexuality wields significant normative power. In grappling with the production and insidious nature of the gender binary, Judith Butler (1990) notes

The internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, thereby requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality. That institutional heterosexuality both requires



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and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system. (p. 22)

The feminine subject is differentiated from the male subject through “the practices of heterosexual desire” (p. 23). The impacts of a heterosexist system are felt primarily by non-heterosexual individuals, however, “it also extends to heterosexual identities which do not conform to familial, marital, or reproductive norms” (Carroll, 2012, p. 1). Given that the subject—man or woman—is viewed as stable and oppositional, within the confines of a binary gender system, we see the erasure or impossibility of certain identities.

Influential poet and feminist, Adrienne Rich (1980), brought forth the theory of *compulsory heterosexuality*, a system that demands heterosexuality and maintains its power through physical violence and false consciousness. Rich explored the erasure of lesbian existence in feminist scholarship as a result of heterosexuality and as well as the resulting social implications. Regarding these social implications, Rich states

Woman identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, curtailed and contained under the institution of heterosexuality. The denial of reality and invisibility to women’s passion for women, women’s choice of women as allies, life companions, and community, the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation and their disintegration under intense pressure have meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other. (p. 34)

As a result of heterosexuality those expressions of gender and sexuality which do not conform to compulsory heterosexuality are viewed as failed or errant identities, abhorred and outcast from

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mainstream society. Therefore, heterosexuality serves to reinforce the notion that if a male fails to conform to the prescribed characteristics of masculinity, he must not be heterosexual.

In schools where strict adherence to a heterosexist system is enforced, any individual not performing in a gender conforming manner becomes a target for homophobic bullying, regardless of their sexual orientation. As Mandel and Shakeshaft (2000) note, when this system remains unchecked, research indicates that in a school context, the perceived prevalence of harassment of sexual minorities, homophobia, misogyny, and male dominance increases. The question arises then, how do we, as educators, use our position of power and influence to interrupt such heterosexist systems? How do we encourage adolescent males to enact resistant forms of positive masculinity?

Through an egalitarian lens, one undeniable stumbling block resulting from enactments of traditional masculinity may be seen in the fact that homophobia is central to the notion of hegemonic masculinity. According to Kimmel and Mahler (2003), “as an organizing principle of masculinity, homophobia—the terror that others will see one as gay, as a failed man— underlies a significant amount of men’s behavior, including their relationships with other men, women, and violence” (p. 1446). Homosexuality, or accusations of homosexuality, may be the greatest threat to an individual’s masculinity. In their examination of heterosexist gender relations in middle school, Mandel and Shakeshaft (2000) note that

Homophobic beliefs and attitudes permeated male students’ beliefs about what it means to be a boy. In particular, boys’ comments revealed disdain for hypomasculine and gay males. Boys expressed fear of being looked at, touched by, liked by, or associated with another boy. Students unanimously agreed that a student who is gay would be made fun of, would have to hide, [and] would not be treated very well. (p. 94)

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Much of a gender conforming masculine performance, then, is seen as the constant assertion of one's heterosexuality and the total rejection of the feminine.

Seen throughout the literature, is the powerful ability that homophobic bullying has to marginalize populations of males, many of whom are not necessarily homosexual but, are outsiders to some aspects of the heterosexual, masculine ideal. When examining similarities in profiles of male school shooters, Kimmel and Mahler (2003) note that

Nearly all had stories of being mercilessly and constantly teased...and threatened. And most strikingly, it was not because they were gay...but because they were different from the other boys...Theirs are stories of "cultural marginalization" based on criteria for adequate gender performance, specifically the enactment of codes of masculinity. (p. 1446)

Regardless of one's actual sexuality, being targeted and bullied as if one is homosexual can have the ability to alienate one from their peers and may have significant impacts on emotional well-being. Boys may be targets for bullying as a result of self identifying as queer, though, it is common that heterosexual, gender non-conforming males are frequently the targets of homophobic bullying, as well. As heterosexuality, or the appearance of heterosexuality, is essential to a successful hegemonic masculine performance, males may develop a sense of inadequacy as a result of frequent bullying. It is "from this place of unworthiness, incompleteness, and inferiority, that boys begin their efforts to prove themselves as men...Shame, inadequacy, vulnerability—all threaten the self; violence, meanwhile, is restorative, compensatory" (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003, p. 1452). In order to enact a gender conforming masculine performance, and thereby feel like a more complete and worthy male, violence may be seen as the most effective tool to assert dominance.

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Another stumbling block for adolescent males attempting to navigate a gender conforming masculine performance is the concerning link between violence and hegemonic masculinity. A significant portion of the available literature on adolescent masculinity focuses on the intersection between masculinity and the perpetration of violence, aggression and/or school shootings (Katz, 2000; Evans, 2016; Wypijewski, 2010; Risler, Skidmore, & Ward, 1988). Calling into question one's sexuality may be seen as the greatest affront to one's masculinity. When one's masculinity and/or sexuality are called into question, violence and aggression may be seen as the "avenue through which to display and affirm their mastery and dominance— traits coded as highly masculine" (Evans, p. 19, 2016). In other words, violence and aggression may be seen as indelible proof that one is truly masculine. In her examination of the murder of Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old university student in Laramie, Wyoming in 1998, Wypijewski (2010) notes that "it's just as possible that Matthew Shepard didn't die because he was gay; he died because Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson are straight" (p. 62). Here, Wypijewski demonstrates the concerning link between hegemonic masculinity, homophobia, and violence. A violent act typifies toughness and dominance, hegemonic masculine traits, and some males, having had their masculinity and sexuality repeatedly called into question, may view public displays of violence as a means to regain control of their personal masculine narrative. Egregious public violence, such as a shooting or murder, commonly grips international media outlets ensuring that the perpetrator of the violence receives a certain degree of notoriety or fame for their undeniably hegemonic masculine display. In this way, the male may feel that their status as masculine is secured indelibly in the public sphere.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual violence (SV) are complex social issues resulting from a variety of cultural and societal factors, but it has been noted that a strict

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adherence to hegemonic masculinity is an effective predictor of the perpetration of such violence. As hegemonic masculinity demands dominance “in interpersonal interactions and this involves the objectification or dehumanization of others, particularly women” (Smith et al., 2015, p. 5), those adhering to these strict masculine norms are more likely to be perpetrators of IPV and SV. Moore and Stuart (2004) conducted experimental research with two groups of male participants, those with high self-reported MGRS scores and those with low self-reported MGRS scores. Researchers analyzed responses from the participants as they reacted to gender-relevant and gender-irrelevant situations. From their research, they concluded the following:

relative to low MGRS men, high MGRS men reported greater anger, negative attributions, and verbal aggression in response to masculine gender-relevant and masculine gender-irrelevant situations... [and found] that high MGRS men reported greater attributions of negative intent to partner behavior in masculine gender-relevant and gender-irrelevant situations compared with low MGRS men. (p. 139)

Strict adherence to traits of hegemonic masculinity can be seen as a factor, among many, underlying perpetration of IPV.

The deleterious effects of SV have been well-documented, and the findings indicate a need for intervention and change. According to Tjaden and Thoennes (2006), long-term psychological and social consequences of SV include reduced productivity, time away from work, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. As SV can begin at any time and most IPV typically commences during adolescence, it seems necessary that a comprehensive curriculum be provided which educates about IPV and SV, as well as addressing the role that boys and men have to play in the reduction of gender-based violence. There are presently gaps in the research

regarding the success of various interventions into IPV and SV but, upon reviewing the available literature, Lundgren and Amin (2014) found:

School-based interventions targeting younger adolescents show emerging evidence for improving gender-equitable attitudes and increasing self-reported likelihood to intervene in situations of bullying and partner violence... These programs aim to build communication and negotiation skills among early adolescents with the assumption that these healthy attitudes and skills will carry through as they transition into later adolescent years and form long-term intimate relationships. (p. 547)

As noted by Colpitts (2019), there is an undeniable shift occurring in the field of gender-based violence which aims to include adolescent males and men in initiatives to prevent IPV and SV.

Kenya-based research conducted by Keller et al. (2017) sought to address the high rates of gender-based violence including SV by leading participants through a 6-week curriculum on relevant topics such as positive masculinity, gender equality, and how to safely and effectively intervene in situations of gender-based violence. The intervention group, comprised of male students between the ages of 15-22 years received instruction from trained, expert facilitators over the course of 6 weeks. Findings from their research indicate:

the intervention group demonstrated significant positive changes in attitudes toward women immediately post-program... In contrast, the control groups' attitudes became slightly more negative, suggesting that adolescents may be more likely to endorse rape myths over time, in the absence of intervention. These findings suggest that adolescence may be an opportune time to intervene in the attitudes and behaviors that contribute to sexual violence. (p. 548)

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The findings from this research provides reason to believe that targeted educational intervention offers a powerful means to address IPV and SV preventatively with adolescent participants.

In order to engage men effectively a concerted effort must be made to address their personal experiences. And yet, Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994) cautioned that “in appropriating the personal, there has been a tendency to forget the political and ignore the vested interest many men have in resisting change” (p. 333). Within the context of a narrative inquiry, the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, composed of temporality, sociality, and place, will ensure that the personal stories of masculinity are embedded within a rich context. With the patriarchy, it is men who currently hold power and, as such, it benefits them to maintain the status quo. Therefore, a program addressing IPV and SV, seeking to engage adolescent males, must also address the complex, context-based nature of gender-based violence. So, “while most men are not violent, men commit most of the violence” (Women’s Network PEI, 2012, p. 3), and to this end, I wonder how adolescent males that do not utilise violence reinforce their masculinity when they feel that it is challenged?

Strict adherence to hegemonic masculinity is also associated with a number of negative psychosocial and somatic health outcomes. It has been noted that “despite men having greater socioeconomic advantages than women in every ethnic group, the age adjusted death rate has been found to be at least 40% higher for men than women” (American Psychological Association, 2018, p. 4). Courtenay (2000) concludes that while there are many complex factors that account for one’s health, men have higher death rates than women in heart disease, cancer and 7 out of 10 of the most common infectious diseases. In addition, antifemininity, one of the tenets of hegemonic masculinity, involves the total rejection of the traits and behaviours considered stereotypically feminine. This may include restricted emotionality and demonstrating

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a facade of toughness. Therefore, antifemininity may play a role in inhibiting men's health-seeking behaviours because, through this lens, discussing one's mental health or seeking necessary medical attention may be seen as feminine and, therefore, can be considered a sign of weakness. A prime example comes from the covert nature of men's depression symptoms.

According to the American Psychological Association (2018) irritability, distancing oneself from friends and family, sensitivity to threats to self-esteem and self-respect, as well as difficulty with motivation and concentration are manifestations of depression in men. Alarming, despite having a lower documented depression rate, men have a suicide rate 4 times that of women. Again, it becomes clear that health-seeking behaviours are greatly impacted across gender lines.

A significant body of research suggests that gender is one of the most important factors influencing health-seeking behaviours. According to Slade et al. (2009), adolescent males have higher rates of mental disorders and yet, when compared to other populations, they demonstrate lower rates of mental health-seeking behaviors. Clark et al. (2020) explored mental health literacy, health-seeking behaviors and alignment with norms of hegemonic masculinity in adolescent males. They defined mental health literacy to be "knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders which aid their recognition, management or prevention" (p. 1). Their findings indicate:

higher anxiety mental health literacy was positively associated with more favourable attitudes towards formal help-seeking in adolescents with low or average alignment with norms of hegemonic masculinity. However, no relationship between anxiety mental health literacy and help-seeking attitudes was found in adolescents with a greater alignment with norms of hegemonic masculinity. (p. 6)

These findings suggest that simply addressing mental health literacy in males with greater alignment with norms of hegemonic masculinity is not enough of an intervention to increase



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health-seeking behaviors. I wonder if addressing hegemonic masculinity and positive masculinities alongside mental health literacy would positively impact health-seeking behaviors?

Hasan and Aggleton's (2020) body of work explores the health-seeking behaviors amongst South Asian men across generational divides. Their body of research acknowledges the role that contextual and social factors play regarding health-seeking behaviours. While set in the context of South Asia, this research feels relevant because it highlights the need for health intervention that attends to individuals holistically. Their findings indicate that:

Under the influence of patriarchal and religious ideologies, older and middle social generation men, as well as several younger social generation men in his study sought little help for hardships in general, and for sexual health issues in particular. Most older social generation men had not even felt the need to seek help and information, believing themselves to be protected by Allah or God. (p. 45)

The confluence of many social factors can be seen as having a hand in the health-seeking behaviors being enacted, or not, by the men in this South Asian context. I wonder how health intervention and education might attend to these gaps in health-seeking behaviors in a manner that is culturally relevant and holistic?

In terms of life expectancy in developed countries, on average, women live longer than men. According to Lipsky et al. (2014), in the 1970s, the gap in life expectancy between men and women was 8 years. This gap has been narrowing since, the reasons being multifactorial, but include increase in mortality in women from lung cancer and decrease in mortality from heart disease among men. Their findings also indicate that “nearly 3 out of 4 persons who die before the age of 65 years from a heart attack are male, and premature death from heart disease accounts for more than half of the difference in life expectancy” (p. 139). Additionally, “the years of lost

life for men from suicide, accidental injury, and motor vehicle accidents remain twice that of women” (p. 139). Particularly relevant to this body of research is the finding that “the longevity gap is greatest in adolescents and young adults largely due to greater risk for men dying from an accident, a violent act, or suicide” (p. 139). These findings suggest significant opportunities to increase men’s life expectancy. Courtenay (2000) notes that “Being a woman may, in fact, be the strongest predictor of preventive and health-promoting behaviour” (p. 1386). So, while health is undeniably tied to complex, interconnected social and cultural factors, rigid gender norms play a significant role in one’s enactment of health-seeking behaviours which may lead to negative impacts for men strictly adhering to gender norms. In addressing the restrictive, hegemonic nature of masculinity, there is the potential for improving psychosocial and somatic health outcomes for men.

### **Positive Masculinities**

Recently, there have been calls for research and literature regarding the exploration and development of positive masculinities (“Women’s Network PEI, 2012; Kiselica, Benton-Wright, & Englar-Carlson, 2016). Kiselica and Englar-Carlson (2010) note that the positive psychology/positive masculinity (PPPM) model came about as a result of literature on the psychology of human strengths and positive psychology that began to emerge in the early 2000s. At the core of the PPPM model, there are two main beliefs. The first being that “positive psychology emphasizes the study of strengths and virtue over disease, weakness, and damage. Second, positive psychology is focused on building in people what is right rather than fixing what is wrong (p. 277). Positive psychology aims to build on the favourable aspects of traditional masculinity which would include behaviours and attitudes that promote masculine ways of caring and foster well-being amongst males. A deficit model of the psychology of men and

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masculinity seeks to correct psychopathology resulting from hegemonic masculinity. The PPPM model is in contrast to this more prevalent model of the psychology of men and masculinity. Applying a PPPM lens to expressions of traditional masculinity, one is able to identify many resultant positive outcomes. Kiselica and Englar-Carlson identified 10 male strengths: male relational styles, male ways of caring, generative fatherhood, male self-reliance, the worker/provider tradition of men, male courage, daring and risk-taking, the group orientation of boys and men, the humanitarian service of fraternal organizations, men's use of humor, and male heroism. Though it is noted that "the 10 male strengths listed above is a representative rather than an exhaustive inventory of male assets and that... cultural and contextual factors may influence the definition and development of male strengths" (pp. 278-279). As the male participants of this narrative inquiry story their gendered lives, I am interested to learn what positive aspects of masculinity the participants identify within themselves and the male figures in their lives.

Many males resist or reinterpret hegemonic masculinity in order to be true to themselves and to act in a manner that they feel is morally right. When considering the resistance or reinterpretation of hegemonic masculinity, it becomes apparent that flexibility and adaptability are necessary traits for a healthy expression of gender. To illustrate this point, we may consider that some health-seeking behaviours may be seen as feminine, and therefore unfavourable for males adhering to hegemonic masculinity. However, those men open to a more adaptable form of masculinity may be "willing to seek help if it helped to support more valued aspects of masculinity, such as work identity" (Lomas, 2013, p. 178). This does not depict resistance to hegemonic masculinity but is rather a re-interpretation of traditional masculinity that allows the male to feel more comfortable with his health-seeking behaviour. Therefore, "health and well-

being for men rests in the ability to flexibly adapt one's sense of masculine norms in accordance with what is beneficial for self and others in any given setting" (Kiselica, Benton-Wright, & Englar-Carlson, 2016, pp. 132-133). I wonder, then, how school contexts may play a role in developing resistant forms of positive masculinity in adolescent male students? What factors encourage an enactment of masculinity which subverts traditional hegemonic masculine standards in favour of a more adaptable, health-seeking approach to masculinity?

### **Masculinities on the School Landscape**

As institutions, schools possess tremendous power and influence. As Yates (1999) envisions it, "schooling is a selecting mechanism in relation to post-school power, income and privilege" (p. 316). Inevitably then, the consequential success for people of any gender is a direct result of the policies enacted by educational institutions. There exists a large body of literature that addresses the outcomes and perceived outcomes of gender equity programs intended to improve academic and professional outcomes for women. In the early 1980s, "governments became aware that girls were being disadvantaged in schooling. They developed policies and funding to improve girls career aspirations, to make curriculum and pedagogy more 'girl-friendly,' and to ensure equal spending on girls and boys" (p. 305). As more girls began completing schooling and performing successfully in traditionally male subject areas, concerns began to arise about boys' academic performance, or lack thereof, in education. As a result, a popular rhetoric, fueled by the media, became 'what about the boys?' Resultantly, researchers set about addressing the new concerns regarding boys' real or perceived shortcomings and the implications for future educational policy (Mac an Ghail, 1996; Martino & Meyenn, 2001; Yates, 1999; MacNaughton, 2000). Despite the fact that girls are now outperforming their male counterparts in standardized academic examinations, "data suggests that less than 5% of Fortune

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500 CEOs are women, less than 15% of executive officers, and less than 20% of full professors in the natural sciences and only 6% of partners in venture capital firms” (Gino et al., 2015, p. 1). Therefore, to view this one measure, performance on standardized tests, as a success, in terms of gender equity educational policy, is misguided and short-sighted.

As outcomes of academic and professional success between the sexes are often viewed in opposition to one another, the assumption that follows, then, must be that women’s lack of success is a direct result of men’s success. Therefore, it is interesting to note that the American Psychological Association (2018) indicates that “boys and men are overrepresented in a variety of psychological and social problems” (p. 3). For example, boys are disproportionately represented among those with learning difficulties, and behavior problems such as bullying, aggression, and school suspensions. Males are also “overrepresented in prisons, are more likely than women to commit violent crimes and are at greatest risk of being a victim of violent crime” (p. 3). Additionally, transgender, and non-gender conforming youth are also not having their needs met by educational institutions. National survey results indicate that 75% of transgender youth feel unsafe in their schools, are more likely than their peers to miss school, and are less likely to plan on continuing their education. These youth are singled out for expressing their gender identity or for using restrooms that align with their gender identity, concerningly, even at the hands of school officials (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2022). It can be argued, then, that no one is yet having their best interests served by present educational institutions and it is fruitless to argue who is being least served. Instead, a gender equity program which fosters healthy, fluid expressions of gender is a necessary endeavor for our educational policy makers. As this research is underpinned by a transformational framework, the aim is to explore the stories in the midst which influence adolescent males’ masculine gender performance, with the hopes of

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creating space for healthy, fluid expressions of gender. As a social structure possessing so much power and influence, it is undeniable that schools have a role to play in the development of safe, egalitarian spaces for such gender exploration.

The concept of discourses, as they relate to the formation of gendered behaviour, has implications for our classrooms, and the formal curriculum. Generally, discourse is taken to mean written or spoken language. However,

Feminist poststructuralism recasts discourse to refer not just to language but to the historically and culturally specific categories through which we give meaning to our lives, practise our lives, invest emotionally in our lives and constitute our social structures...[in this way,] discourse is recast to include the emotional, social and institutional frameworks and practices through which we make meanings in our lives.

(MacNaughton, 2000, p. 8)

Further, MacNaughton states that at any given time, a society only has a certain number of discourses in circulation. These discourses are tied to

historically- and culturally-specific power relations. In other words, particular discourses enable particular groups of people to exercise power in ways that benefit them. They are able to do this because discourses constitute particular ways of being as normal, right and, therefore, desirable. (Davies, 1993, p. 32)

Within the formal Saskatchewan curriculum there are only a handful of indicators that address gender and other factors which shape one's identity. Typically, these indicators are buried among a long of list many others. The Saskatchewan curriculum may provide this small selection of entry points into conversations regarding gender, yet the onus falls primarily on the teacher to

seek them out and utilise them. Teachers wishing to remain ‘neutral’ may view this terrain as too laden with personal and professional risk to engage with in the classroom.

In my own experience as an educator, I sense trepidation amongst my colleagues when contemplating opening up discussions regarding sexuality and gender in their classrooms. They feel it is safer to remain ‘neutral’ on what they consider to be contentious topics. With regards to teacher neutrality, Cho (2017) states, “it is actually bizarre for schools to encourage teachers to be ‘neutral’ on contentious topics when schools as institutions actively take sides on issues, promote certain viewpoints and values, and advocate for their teachers and students to do the same” (p. 30). In failing to meaningfully address gender and associated oppressive systems formally in the curriculum, the power associated with particular discourses of gendered behaviour are permitted to reign unchecked. The result for those enacting non-traditional versions of gendered behavior is marginalisation because “the moral nature of the preferred definition of normal, right and desirable ...precludes debate, therefore marginalising and/or silencing alternatives” (MacNaughton, 2000, p. 10). One has to wonder, then, what messages are students receiving about gender from the hidden curriculum in Saskatchewan schools?

As educators, it is essential to remember that what is excluded from the curriculum teaches our students just as much as what is included. As MacNaughton explains, Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), a common early years’ theory of education, may provide educators with a lens which sees children as innocent or unknowing of gender and gendered behaviour. Following in the same vein,

this discourse has constructed a very particular pedagogy in early childhood education:

‘The discourse of innocence most obviously implies lack of knowledge or ignorance, as opposed to adults who are not innocent but intelligent...Knowledge is either considered

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non-existent or of poor quality. This innocence requires that access to additional knowledge be withheld or controlled with only 'safe' knowledge being allowed.'

(Cannella, 1997, as cited in MacNaughton, 2000, p. 5)

Acting as if our students are 'gender innocent' and omitting critical examinations of gender and power from the classroom may have deleterious effects on our students as they attempt to navigate, interpret, and invest in the various gendered discourses in their social sphere. I wonder, then, which discourses are most impactful in the formation of gendered behaviour for adolescent males as they enter high school? Additionally, I wonder what role teachers and administration have in shaping gendered discourses in the school context?

While one invariably interacts with gendered discourses, whether explicitly taught or otherwise, it is Dewey's (1938) theory of experience that allows us to understand how these discourses may be engaged with. Continuity and interaction constitute Dewey's theory of experience. Continuity of experience means that "every experience both takes up something from 'those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after'" (p. 35). In the same way, interaction with discourses of gendered behaviour sees that something is taken up from the discourse and in enacting the subsequent gendered behaviour, the discourse is in some way modified or altered. As a result of this interaction, both the subject and the discourse are altered. Because of this, MacNaughton (2000) observes that "it is possible to see human subjects as not fixed but constantly in process, being constituted and reconstituted through the discursive practices they have access to in their daily lives" (p. 8). It is for this reason that I am hopeful in engaging in a narrative inquiry into the stories of adolescent masculinity. In the telling and retelling of our gendered stories, we allow ourselves to engage with gendered



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discourses in new and hopefully critical ways. In the storying of our gendered lives, space is opened up for a more egalitarian enactment of gendered behaviour.

An experience with a gendered discourse by no means guarantees that behaviours and attitudes associated with that particular discourse will be adopted and subsequently enacted. As with all discourses, gendered discourses are not mindlessly digested, and it may be considered in this way: “Although the subject in poststructuralism is socially constructed in discursive practices, she none the less exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices (Weedon, 1987, as cited in Macnaughton, 2000, p. 8).”

So, while adolescent males are subject to a selection of available discourses for gendered behaviour, their agency allows them to reject or reinterpret traditional masculinity where and when they feel it is necessary to do so. Through the process of inquiring into the stories of our gendered lives, may the gendered discourses often operating unexamined and behind the scenes become more apparent so that our gendered behavior may be enacted in a more thoughtful, purposeful, and positive manner. In what ways will this inquiry impact future enactments of gender for the adolescent male participants, for me, and for the wider audience engaging with this body of research? For as Dewey (1938) noted, “every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the grounds of what it moves toward and into” (p. 38). I enter into this narrative inquiry hopeful for the equitable gendered spaces that may be opened up as a result.

The body of available research on the psychology of men and masculinity is vast. Since the early 1980s, researchers have been expanding the field and examining the experiences of men. Still, there exist gaps in the field, particularly regarding the unique realities of the

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adolescent male, especially research which attends to the social and contextual nature of those young masculinities. According to Kiselica et al. (2016),

a man's social identities are not separate categories that can be examined in isolation; rather, they are constructed through the intersection of multiple influences. A man's identity and expression of masculinity are connected to his social class, race, sexual orientation, ability status, religion, and other salient identities and roles (Shields, 2008).

Therefore, any conversation about male strengths and positive masculinity would need to be conducted within a framework that embraces the context of one's identity. (p. 126)

It is for this reason that a narrative inquiry, attentive to temporality, sociality, and place is the ideal methodology to explore the complex nature of young masculinities, particularly as the adolescent males migrate to a new environment.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Methodology**

Beginning with respect for ordinary lived experiences, the focus of narrative inquiry is not only a valorizing of individuals' experience but also an exploration of the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted-but in a way that begins and ends that inquiry in the storied lives of the people involved. Narrative inquirers study an individual's experience in the world and, through the study, seek ways of enriching and transforming that experience for themselves and others. (Clandinin, 2006, p. 42)

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As a methodology, narrative inquiry examines experiences narratively. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) states that narrative inquiry may be viewed as, "a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study" (p. 479). This methodology, at its core, employs narrative ways of thinking about phenomena. As introduced in the previous chapter, this research methodology is underpinned by Dewey's theory of experience (1938), wherein continuity and interaction are cited as two criteria of experience. In this view of experience, concerning continuity, it is acknowledged that "every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (p. 35). It is additionally acknowledged that every experience involves interaction between internal and objective conditions. Experiences are tied to the social and temporal contexts as well as being rooted in place.

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It is a Deweyan ontological framework that provides the philosophical foundations for narrative inquiry. In this view of experience,

lives are composed and re-composed in relation with others who are also living storied lives. It is through story that people are able to understand, make meaning of, and relate experiences, because story is how people make sense of their existence (Clandinin, Huber, & Murphy, 2011). A narrative ontology thus calls upon researchers to enter into what Dewey (1934) termed "ordinary experience," both theirs and their participants'—that is, to enter the practice and artistry of lives lived. (Caine et al., 2013, p. 576)

When considering interaction, Dewey's first criterion of experience, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) notes that, "People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context" (p. 2). On the second criterion of continuity, Dewey (1938) notes that, "As an individual passes from one situation to another, his world, his environment, expands or contracts. He does not find himself living in another world but in a different part or aspect of one and the same world" (p. 44). In viewing experience narratively, we understand the stories people tell as meaningful and situated in rich social and temporal contexts.

Stories to live by is a narrative inquiry term used to demonstrate the interconnected nature of narrative and identity. Stories to live by can be thought of as the stories of our identity. These are the stories of who we are in our worlds. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) noted that, "people shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories" (p. 479). The stories to live by of our gendered selves are constantly being altered and adjusted because "in the process of building identities, the individual and the social world do not just interact—instead they are interdependent and

mutually constructing” (MacNaughton, 2000, p. 8). So as one migrates to new social contexts, their stories to live by are renegotiated and reinterpreted. This concept is strengthened by Dewey (1938) who states that

As an individual passes from one situation to another, his world, his environment, expands or contracts ...What he has learned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow. (p. 44)

This inquiry seeks to derive an understanding of masculine gendered identity formation from the stories to live by of two male individuals in the migration between elementary school and high school and it is in the narratives of refraction that the renegotiation of the stories to live by of the gendered self may become apparent.

It is acknowledged that researchers conducting narrative inquiries are entering into lives in the midst. Researchers, too, conclude the inquiry in the midst, as there is no final telling of a story. A narrative inquiry process involves the living and telling, reliving, and retelling of stories in the midst. Clandinin and Connelly (1998) state that

the promise of storytelling emerges when we move beyond regarding a story as a fixed entity and engage in conversations with our stories. The mere telling of a story leaves it as a fixed entity. It is in the inquiry, in our conversations with each other, with texts, with situations, and with other stories that we can come to retelling our stories and to reliving them. (p. 251)

It is in the reliving and retelling of stories that the potential for personal and social transformation becomes a possibility.

## THE IMAGINATIVE SPACE OF ADOLESCENT MASCULINITIES

This study aims to understand how one's performance of and relationship to masculine identity shifts and adapts with regards to the context. Specifically, the intention is to inquire into the stories to live by which have played integral roles in the development of the participants' sense of masculine gendered identity in varying contexts, in this instance, in the transition from elementary school and high school contexts. Generally, then, this forms the basis for this study's three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. Three-dimensional narrative inquiry spaces, composed of temporality, sociality, and place, form the foundation of the narrative inquiry process, though "these dimensions are often intertwined and knotted. In some ways the three dimensions form the fabric of life experience. The knots tie stories to place, people, and time, and one dimension cannot be understood without the others" (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 172). As three-dimensional narrative inquiry spaces are critical to work in narrative research, it is then necessary to define the terms temporality, sociality, and place as they will be used in this study. The terms can be defined in this way:

temporality comes into play in two ways: the first is that field texts are composed over multiple interactions with participants, and the second is that field texts are co-composed through participants' and researchers' reflections on, and of earlier life experiences. Sociality directs attention inward toward the participants' and researchers' thoughts, emotions, and moral responses and outward to events and actions. Place directs attention to places where lives were lived as well as to the places where inquiry events occur. (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p. 167)

The narratives told throughout this inquiry are set in many places and based in the past, present, and the future. The process of narrative inquiry seeks not to separate the narrative from its time, place, or context. Instead, narrative inquiry seeks to analyze and interpret a narrative while

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remaining “attentive to the larger contexts and relationships within which lives are nested” (Clandinin, et al., 2017, p. 91). It is through this attention to the broader contexts of the lived stories and stories in the midst explored during this research process that this research becomes applicable to those outside of the narrow lens of my focus.

The field texts produced through this research process were co-composed, as a practice that aligns with the definition for three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. As co-composition is an important element in a narrative inquiry, it is necessary then that “both the researcher and the research participants are actively engaged in the process of producing knowledge. This active process involves reflection, examination, scrutiny and interrogation of the whole research process” (Renganathan, 2009, p. 4). The deeply relational aspect of narrative inquiry is one of the reasons that this methodology was selected for this particular study. I am a female who is an outsider to the lived experiences of males. However, my stories to live by have undeniably been constructed and shaped within a sexist system. As a female, I have an important stake in the dismantling of sexist systems, but this cannot be done without the dedicated participation of males.

Narrative inquiry consists of the composition and/or co-composition of field texts, interim texts, and final research texts. According to Clandinin and Caine (2013), the term field text

refers to the records...that are composed or co-composed by researchers and participants.

We use the term field texts rather than data to signal that these texts are experiential, intersubjective texts rather than objective texts. Field texts are co-compositions reflective of the experiences of researchers and participants. (pp. 166-167)

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It was through negotiation with the participants that field texts, interim texts, and final research texts were produced. Negotiation, as described by Clandinin and Caine (2013),

refers to the ongoing relational work of narrative inquirers with participants as they live together in the field, co-compose field texts, and co-compose interim and final research texts. Negotiation involves a continuous dialogue, in which both participants and researchers are equally engaged. (p. 167)

By working relationally, co-composing texts for the research, and working intimately with the participants of the study, the aim is to better understand young masculinities and how, when, and where males subvert or reinterpret traditional standards of masculinity.

In this narrative inquiry, in addition to the field texts composed and co-composed as a result of individual interviews, journaling was utilised to further extend research conversations and add texture to the narrative inquiry. I composed journal entries throughout the course of the narrative inquiry and extended this option to the participants to help them consolidate their developing understanding. However, as I negotiated relational spaces with my participants, I tried to remain open to the possibility of the utilisation of a diversity of field texts. As Clandinin and Caine (2013) noted,

It is important as researchers to stay awake to the multiple ways to tell and live experiences. Each form of field text, and each negotiation of the same, tells us about how others make sense or meaning from experience, and might also point us to possibilities of diverse final research texts, that is, the representations of retold stories. (p. 172)



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While I negotiated the ways that my participants make meaning, and as I learned alongside them, we determined that, for us, a more traditional final research text felt most appropriate and comfortable for demonstrating our understandings.

A transformative paradigm was selected to underpin this narrative inquiry in order to keep issues of social justice and privilege central to the research being conducted. According to Mertens (2010), a paradigm in qualitative research acts as “an organizing metaphysical framework that enables researchers to examine the underlying belief systems that guide their work” (p. 470). Specifically, “the transformative paradigm provides such a framework for examining assumptions that explicitly address power issues, social justice, and cultural complexity throughout the research process” (Mertens, 2007, pp. 212-213). Central to this paradigm is the belief that issues of power and privilege should be regularly evaluated and addressed throughout the research process. In narrowing the research focus for this inquiry and in conducting the literature review, I began to critically examine the sexist structures which reproduce inequality between the sexes and maintain the privilege and power associated with masculinities. In designing the methods for this narrative inquiry, I tried to ensure that the participants viewed themselves as collaborators, inquirers, and co-composers throughout all stages of the research process. In doing so, I hoped to meaningfully address some of these issues of power and inequality as they were revealed through the participants’ stories to live by. Narrative inquiry, as a research methodology, was selected because it allows us to “see the pedagogical possibilities and long-term commitment to those we work alongside that comes from this interweaving of a narrative view of experience with narrative inquiry as methodology” (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013, p. 575). In viewing our research relationship as a long-term commitment, rather than a brief, extractive affair, the potential exists for a transformative,

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counter-sexist outcome. The hope is that this research may open a space for greater gendered freedoms for everyone and perhaps act as the catalyst for the development of curricular documents or resources for school divisions, administration, and teachers.

Narrative inquirers have an ethical obligation to their research participants to develop relationships which are based on mutual respect and reciprocity. Clandinin and Caine (2013) note the importance of relationships in narrative inquiry, and states that:

A relational ethical stance is founded in an ethics of care (Noddings, 1984) and is the starting point and stance that narrative inquirers take throughout a narrative inquiry. A commitment to relationships and reciprocal respect (Bruno, 2010) are key elements; to live in collaborative ways in which we can co-compose and negotiate stories. (p. 167)

It became clear that from the outset, throughout, and, indeed, following the completion of the final research text, I had to work towards forging and maintaining a meaningful relationship with the research participants. To this end, it was important to establish trust and respect with participants from the beginning.

My intention was to produce a study which attended to the holistic nature of the human experience through storytelling, and that offered adolescent males the opportunity to critically inquire into their experiences with masculinity. The narrative inquiry methodology has been selected to allow the participants to influence each stage of the process from selection of research questions through to data collection, analysis, and presentation of results. A narrative research project, especially one dealing with youth and gender, relies heavily on the foundation of strong, positive relationships. As previously stated, this research was undertaken with a transformative framework at its core. The deeper the relationships that are formed, the more meaningful and

lasting the impact of the research will be and I feel strongly that narrative inquiry, with its holistic, storytelling approach will allow these enduring relationships to develop over time.

### **Methods**

Narrative inquiry, as a methodology, served as the foundation for this research into the experiences of adolescent males in the *migration* from elementary school to high school. I employed the theoretical touchstones of narrative inquiry to guide and justify the choices made throughout the course of the inquiry.

### **Participants and Site**

The participants selected for this research were two cisgender, male individuals—one in grade 9 and the other a young adult male. The inclusion criteria employed was as follows: (a) participants must identify as male, (b) participants were selected upon returning signed consent forms. Both participants selected are attending or attended high school in Regina. To find suitable participants, I first reached out to fellow teachers for help in identifying male students who might be interested in working alongside me. When this strategy did not help me find suitable participants, I reached out to family, friends, and acquaintances to see if they knew anyone that might be willing to participate. Recruitment of participants proved to be quite challenging and took significantly longer than I anticipated at the outset of the research.

### **Data Collection**

The main data collection method involved in this research was individual interviews with the participants. Though I laid out initial research questions to focus the study, reflexivity, and negotiation throughout the course of the inquiry meant that the research trajectory was altered and adjusted as the narrative inquiry progressed. The intention for this research was to produce a

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final text that represented a meaningful body of work for myself and the participants. Due to my lived experiences and personal identity which makes me an outsider to the male experience, I could not have known at the outset of the research if the questions I asked were the necessary questions. It was through negotiation between me and the participants that the inquiry was guided in the necessary direction. As a narrative inquirer, I tried to allow myself to be guided by the process.

I conducted four individual interviews, roughly an hour in length, with each of my participants. The interviews spanned the course of approximately four months. Prior to each interview session, I established a theme/guiding question for discussion. In doing so, the participants were able to reflect in preparation for the interview. I strived to keep the interviews informal and conversational to help participants to feel at ease. I made field notes throughout the interviews to note emerging resonant threads reverberating across the narratives, to highlight important quotations and to indicate further questions that developed throughout the interviews. In addition to this, as large passages of direct quotations were necessary for the data analysis, I felt it was necessary to record audio during the sessions.

To build reflexivity into the study, in the interim between interview sessions, I composed journal entries in order to extend and consolidate my stories in the midst. My journal entries reflected upon the interview sessions, emerging understandings, further inquiry into the research process, and detailed experiences or stories in the midst from my life in a broader context. The content of some of my journal entries were discussed in interviews to extend and consolidate our collective understanding.

With the underlying epistemological assumptions inherent in this research, I felt that observation of participants in the ‘field’ would add depth and value to the conducted research. I intended to observe participants in different personal settings. The settings would have depended heavily upon the selected participants but may have included observing them at home, while participating in sporting events, involvement with clubs, etc. Observing individuals in different contexts and being able to see “where the participants live and work... are important contexts for understanding what the participants are saying” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 21). The three-dimensional narrative inquiry space identifies the necessity of context and place with regards to narrative research. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 protocols, I was unable to observe my participants in personal settings. All interviews were conducted digitally to maintain health and safety in accordance with these protocols.

### **Ethical Considerations**

At the heart of this research is the principle of reciprocity. The participants in this study generously volunteered significant amounts of their own time. They invested themselves, personally, and shared stories of their experience, both of which are a lot to ask without promise of return. As such, ensuring that this relationship was one of reciprocity rather than extraction, taking without return, was a major ethical consideration throughout this project. Clandinin and Caine (2013) note that “[i]t is important to understand narrative inquiry spaces as spaces of belonging for both researchers and participants; spaces that are always marked by ethics and attitudes of openness, mutual vulnerability, reciprocity, and care” (p. 169). The outcomes yielded by this research, policies created, teaching practices altered, should positively impact the lives of the participants. Maintaining an open, respectful relationship with the participants throughout this process has allowed them to feel comfortable sharing their vision for the final research text.

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Due to the personal, private nature of the data collected, pseudonyms were used for participants to ensure their privacy is maintained. As this project involved research with humans, this project received approval from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board. This narrative research project involved minimal risk for participants, meaning the “risk of harm anticipated in the proposed research are not greater, considering probability and magnitude, than those ordinarily encountered in daily life...” (University of Saskatchewan, 2016, p. 2). Additionally, I received consent from the participants, as well as the parents/guardians (where necessary), before commencing any research activities. In line with data policies, all physical data collected was stored in a locked cabinet and all digital data was stored on a password protected computer during analysis and then moved to a University of Saskatchewan storage (OneDrive) for long-term storage. All identifying information was stored separately from data.

### **Personal, Practical, and Social Justifications**

In the planning and execution of a narrative inquiry, it is important that narrative inquirers “justify their inquiries in personal, practical, and social ways. Throughout the inquiry, researchers continuously revisit these justifications and engage in negotiations with participants to clarify, substantiate, or shift justifications” (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, pp. 166-167).

### **Personal Justifications**

I know the complex layers of fear, silence, indignation, power, and ferocity that weave through the multifaceted stories to live by as a woman. Every day, I feel the constant bombardment of other people’s opinions of what I should be, of what a woman should be, and

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I often feel their stories of me bumping up against my stories to live by, stories that are multiple, multifaceted, experiential, contextual, and always shifting. Feeling this weightiness and the bumping up of, at times, conflicting stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) caused me, over time, to construct a defensive wall of silence. (Saleh, Menon, & Clandinin, 2014, p. 247)

At times, the narrow and restrictive gendered discourses that I have engaged with have caused me to shrink myself down, and to keep my stories to myself in an attempt to enact a gender conforming female performance. It is hard to feel confident in your talents and intelligence when society tells you that you are only valued for your looks and ability to bear children. It is terrifying to try and forge your own path, independently, when you see women berated, abused, and murdered every day, just for living their lives. In engaging, narratively, with my own gendered stories to live by, I hoped that the defensive walls of silence that I had constructed might be lowered and that I could re-engage with some of the harmful gendered discourses that I carry with me. In doing so, I hoped that I might rediscover the power of my own stories. In her own narrative inquiry, Cardinal (2010), considered what making a space in the world for herself meant, writing, “I am very likely not the Indian you had in mind. I am often not even the kind of Indian I myself had in mind, and this story to live by... impacts the way I see the world and my place in it (p.1). At the outset of this research I hoped that this opportunity to inquire narratively into my lived experience and my stories to live by would allow me to make space for myself in the world. In the telling and retelling of these stories, space might also be opened up for others who could find solace in these stories. While this inquiry centers around performances of and relationships with masculinity, the purpose is to create space for more fluid and healthy gendered attitudes and behaviour. This space is intended for everyone.

### **Practical Justifications**

My stories to live by of gender inevitably have an impact on the students in my classroom. Both the stories I tell and the stories I do not tell impact the ways that my students view and accept gender roles. Additionally, my students' stories to live by of gender that are privileged in the classroom may serve to reinforce hegemonic gendered discourses. Stories of diverse expressions of gender that are silenced in the classroom may have deleterious effects on how students engage with discourses of non-traditional gendered behavior and attitudes. Through the lens of a narrative inquirer, curriculum

might be viewed as an account of teachers' and children's lives together in schools and classrooms ... [In this view of curriculum making] the teacher is seen as an integral part of the curricular process ... in which teacher, learners, subject matter and milieu are in dynamic interaction. (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992, p. 392)

With an integral role to play in curriculum making, it is important that teachers have an understanding of the hegemonic, heteronormative nature of the patriarchy so that they may work to open space within their classrooms for adaptable, fluid gendered behaviour and attitudes. On a broader scale, it is my hope that this narrative inquiry might make curriculum makers, school divisions, and school administration more attentive to counter-acting restrictive gender roles and patriarchal values. As the review of the literature has made clear, few, if any, narrative inquiries have been conducted inquiring into adolescent masculinity. It is the intent of this research to contribute a fresh perspective and provide new understandings to the field of the psychology of men and masculinities. Additionally, this research will contribute to an understanding of the making of relationally safe spaces for diverse expressions of gender.



### **Social Justifications**

Presently, there exist large gaps in the body of available research regarding adolescent masculinities. The majority of existing research attends to masculinity by employing a deficit model of the psychology of men and masculinity. As such, a significant portion of the research pathologizes masculinity. The dominant stories of masculinity are those of violence, aggression, stoicism, and anger. In inquiring into lived experience and narratives of refraction composed in the migration from elementary school to high school, this research sheds light on stories to live by of gender that demonstrate resistance or reinterpretation of masculinity. As stated by Clandinin and Caine (2013), “Listening deeply and inquiring into our changed lived and told stories calls forth the possibility to attend differently, to shift practices, and to create possible social—political or theoretical places we can impact as narrative inquirers” (p. 171). In the telling and retelling of these stories, there exists the possibility for opening up space for the positive aspects of adolescent masculinity to flourish.

### **Validity**

When asking the question: Is the account valid, and by whose standards? it becomes clear that the group most integral to the validation of my research findings is the participants. From the outset, through to the final research text, it was essential to have the participants of the study as involved as possible. An important element of narrative inquiry is negotiation which “involves a continuous dialogue, in which both participants and researchers are equally engaged and that is reflected in the conversations, actions, and commitments to the ongoing relationship” (Clandinin & Caine, 2013, p.167). It is through this ongoing negotiation between researcher and participants, that the validity of the research text is confirmed. For this reason, then, the validation strategy that will best suit my research is seeking participant feedback. The

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participants are most intimately familiar with the data that has been collected as it speaks to their own lived experiences and stories in the midst. Therefore, the participants played a significant role in the validation of the data, interim research texts and interpretations of the findings for the final research texts, as well as the format of the final research text. The reflexivity that was embedded throughout the narrative inquiry played an essential role throughout the validation process. The participants and I continuously critiqued the process, our assumptions and the results, thereby increasing validity.

Wells (2011) argues that two standards, truth and relevance, should be considered when assessing the validity of a narrative inquiry. In establishing truth, a narrative inquiry relies heavily upon a thoughtful and thorough description of the methods and methodology being employed. I have ensured that methods and methodological descriptions provided are detailed and transparent. Additionally, this research was designed with close attention being paid to ethical considerations and reflexivity. With regards to establishing relevance, Wells asserts that this “may hinge on the investigator’s ability to help the reader to understand the nonobvious meanings of the narratives studied and how an individual study fits within a larger body of work” (p. 6). In producing the final research text, it was necessary to demonstrate to the reader how, throughout the process of inquiry, beginning right from the research design stage, that I remained attentive to the broader context of the study. The final research text produced has established clear connections to existing literature in the field.

### **Significance**

The significance for this body of research is the potential for it to open spaces for healthier, more adaptable gendered behavior. Egan and Perry (2001) found that “children’s

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adjustment is optimized when they (a) are secure in their conceptions of themselves as typical members of their sex yet (b) feel free to explore cross-sex options when they so desire” (p. 459). And yet, schools, as systems of power, presently serve to reinforce heteronormative, patriarchal attitudes resulting in the strict policing of gendered behavior and restrictive gender roles. With gender being only rarely addressed in the Saskatchewan curriculum, many of these hegemonic norms are unquestioningly perpetuated to the detriment of our students. The negative outcomes of hegemonic masculinity are well-documented in the field of psychology of men and masculinities. These outcomes include homophobic bullying, violence, interpartner violence and sexual violence, and negative psychosocial and health outcomes. No gender is spared the damaging effects of a patriarchal system.

By inquiring into the lived experiences and stories in the midst of adolescent males, with particular attention being paid to narratives of positive masculinity and narratives of resistance against hegemonic masculinity, it is my hope that a deeper understanding of adolescent masculinities may be gained. Significantly, this may allow for the identification of strategies and policies that will enable educational professionals to foster the healthy, positive aspects of adolescent masculinities. Kiselica and Englar-Carlson (2010) note that “the teaching of positive masculinity in psychoeducational groups and classes should be an important form of primary prevention designed to enhance the development of boys and men” (p. 283). As such, it is my hope that this research highlights the need for curricular resources that address the heteronormative, patriarchal systems of power operating in our schools.

## Chapter 4

### Learning Alongside

#### Introducing Justin

Justin is the son of a woman my father works with. I had been unsuccessfully attempting to recruit participants for a handful of months when Justin's mother reached out to inform me of his interest in participating. She explained to me that her son is not a talkative boy but that he was happy to be involved in the research. As Justin and I lived alongside one another over the course of the inquiry, I learned for myself that he is a funny, interesting, physically active, and, at times, quiet, boy. When we initially met, I asked him to tell me a bit about himself and he informed me that, he "like[s] hockey and video games and biking outside, and like, playing football outside" (Justin, Research Conversation, July 9, 2021). Throughout the course of the inquiry, Justin was making the most of his summer holidays, at home with his tight-knit family, and eventually making the transition into high school in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Over the course of our research conversations, Justin was navigating *unprecedented times*, with an overall sense of optimism and a seemingly laid-back demeanor.

This inquiry sought to explore stories in the midst of positive adolescent masculinities during a time of great upheaval and change, the transition to high school. I have deep gratitude for Justin's willingness to come alongside me in this inquiry process, both of us not knowing where the telling (and my subsequent retelling) of our storied lives would lead us, especially when the inquiry dug into *sacred stories*, those stories which are held most tightly and act as the puzzle pieces that make up our identity. Crites (1971), considering the meaning and relevance of sacred stories, states that they are "like dwelling-places... These are stories that orient the life of people through time, their life-time, their individual and corporate experience and their sense of

style, to the great powers that establish the reality of their world” (p. 295). At times throughout the inquiry, I felt weighed down with the responsibility of representing the participants’ storied lives in meaningful ways. I wanted to ensure that the final research text was, both, respectful to their lived experiences and added to the current body of educational literature regarding gender. As I turned my attention to the stories and the tensions revealed in the process, I attempted to think *with* (Morris, 2001) the stories rather than to think *about* them, the distinction being that “we as thinkers do not so much work on narrative as take the radical step back, almost a return to childhood experience, of allowing narrative to work on us” (p. 55). In thinking *with* the stories, while composing interim and final research texts, I wove in my personal stories and sought to connect all of the new understandings to our broader contexts. In this way, I imagine this final research text as a rich tapestry, not finished, still in the process of becoming.

### **Positive masculinities and physical activity**

As I continued to get to know Justin, it became increasingly apparent that he felt his happiest and most confident when engaged in almost any kind of physical activity and sport. Through our conversations, I also came to see that for Justin, physical activity and sport were tied deeply to his understanding and enactment of masculinity. During our research conversations, I asked Justin to tell me about his definition of masculinity or what he thought it meant to be a man. Justin responded by identifying athletics and sport as defining features of masculinity, stating that a man, “I guess, [is] just very athletic and does stuff like that. Does sports and yeah” (Justin, Research Conversation, July 7, 2021). Sports and athleticism became recurring themes throughout our conversations. For Justin sports served as a positive outlet and provided an environment that helped foster camaraderie and friendships amongst his male peers.

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When asked to identify positive traits of masculinity, Justin detailed the benefits of a masculine gendered performance in which athleticism is central to its enactment. He stated,

I guess it helps you to be like,

if you say strong muscles that helps you to be how to, like,

eat healthier or like to work out so you're in shape

and stuff like that

and I guess it's just like a positive outlet for stuff.

Like, if something's going on in your life,

you've got, like, a sport to play or something like a favorite sport.

You've got some friend or something that you like doing it with that, or stuff like that.

(Justin, Research Conversation, July 7, 2021)

In relation to the positive aspects of masculinity, Justin detailed the benefits of athleticism and sport. A healthy, active lifestyle, a positive outlet for handling life's stresses, and an environment that fosters friendships were all identified as contributing to positive aspects of masculinity.

In our conversations, it became clear that Justin had positive male role models that served as guides for his own masculine gendered performance. These two individuals, his grandpa and his dad, are both physically active individuals that Justin looks up to and aspires to be like.

When asked what made his grandpa a positive role model for masculinity, Justin said "because he works hard. A lot. And he never really gets off his feet to sit down. And he's very kind to other people and respectful to other people. And he just treats a lot of people with respect"

(Justin, Research Conversation, July 7, 2021). As a result of his grandpa's influence, Justin saw

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physical activity and hard work as enactments of a positive masculinity. Additionally, acts of service and respect for others were identified as admirable masculine traits that his grandpa demonstrated.

When speaking about his relationship with his father, it seemed that athleticism and sports played an important role in binding the two together, as well. Physical activity seemed to serve as a space where the two found common ground. Justin's father acted as a coach for some of his sports teams – like flag football and hockey. When asked if he liked having his father as a coach of his sports team, Justin stated,

Justin: Ah, yeah, sometimes.

Kristen: Why sometimes?

Justin: Because sometimes it's the best, and sometimes it can be hard.

(Justin, Research Conversation, July 7, 2021)

When asked to elaborate on why it was hard sometimes to have his father serving as the coach, Justin identified high expectations and pressure as the source of his occasional frustrations. While sports played an important role in the tight-knit relationship between father and son, Justin experienced some tension surrounding the high expectations his father held for him while acting as the coach.

However, outside of organized sports, quality time between father and son was still composed of athletic endeavors. When asked what they like to do together when they're at home, Justin stated, "sometimes we go out, go out in the back and play catch or sometimes play soccer or something like that or maybe, sometimes not all of the time, but we bike or go for a bike ride or something" (Justin, Research Conversation, July 7, 2021). With his father and grandfather

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serving as engaged, and physically active role models, it is understandable that Justin's enactment of masculinity relied heavily on sport and athleticism.

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In the process of inquiring into Justin's stories of sports and athleticism and attempting to make sense of them contextually, in terms of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, a wonder emerged for me, a thread needing to be tugged at to elicit deeper understandings. How did Justin's stories of sports and athleticism align with wider, cultural narratives of sport and masculinity? Adams (2011) acknowledged that from a Western perspective "organized, competitive teamsport provides men an opportunity for doing gender in the most culturally esteemed way" (p. 580). Commonly seen to perpetuate violence, aggression, heterosexuality, while also vehemently rejecting anything feminine, sports may be understood, culturally, to reinforce hegemonic masculinity. Anderson (2008) considers teamsport athletes to be members of a cult of athleticism, highlighting their uniformity of thought and actions— "reverent to the ideology of orthodox masculinity" (p. 261). Anderson uses the term orthodox masculinity to "refer to the conformity of the achieved variables that currently align with social dominance, something that *all* men can attempt to approximate" (p. 261). The difference being that hegemonic masculinity requires males to demonstrate both the achieved *and* ascribed traits of dominant masculinities within the particular social context.

On the landscape of teamsport, Anderson points to the many negative outcomes of orthodox masculinity. For example, the emotional damage inflicted on individuals as a result of marginalization within constructed social hierarchies around athleticism in school culture is noted. These structures are particularly exclusionary to those not identifying as heterosexual or those perceived as not being heterosexual. Anderson also considers teamsport at least partially



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responsible for the reproduction of antifeminine, misogynistic, and sexist attitudes, the objectification and sexualization of women, the promotion of violence against other men and violence against women, as well as highlighting the concerning rates of sexual assaults perpetrated by student athletes. Ironically, despite the well-documented slew of negative outcomes, socially, sport is viewed as *sociopositive* institution, according to Anderson.

When exploring athletic affiliation and perpetration of violence against women, Crosset (1999) cautions that it is not helpful to paint all athletes with too broad a brush. Sports teams are not *culturally homogenous*. Different teams, different sports, and different levels within a sport are all factors that account for variation in experiences. Crosset notes that “productive discussions and research questions should center on why some positions, teams, sports, or programs are prone to committing specific types of violence against women” (p. 249). Crosset encourages a more nuanced approach be employed in conversations about athletic affiliation and perpetration of violence. Factors such as alcohol consumption, head injuries, social learning/socialization, peer support (peer-influenced participation in risk-taking behaviors and misogynistic attitudes), and institutional support may increase the likelihood of perpetration of violence. At the heart of this conversation lies the need for structural change. Crosset states,

I argue here that it may also be fruitful to view male athletes’ assaults on women as structurally encouraged or as a situationally appropriate means to constructing and maintaining one’s place in masculine hierarchy. Viewing athletes’ violence against women in this way directs our attention to the perpetrators’ capacity to commit a crime within a social context. (p. 254)

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It is not enough to address individual behaviors and attitudes. Intervention programs aimed at reducing violence against women must address the structural and systemic factors that make the perpetration of violence appear to be situationally acceptable.

As sports presently serve as an institution with significant social power and influence, one seeking to dismantle hegemonic structures may view athletic spaces opportunistically. By addressing the context and spaces where traditionally hegemonic masculine traits are reproduced, there exists the potential to foster healthier enactments of masculinity through sport. Drummond et al. (2022) explore the opportunity to address adolescent mental health through sport.

With “intentional self-harm [being] the leading cause of death among Australian children and young people aged 15-24 years, with 75% being male” (p. 1) the need to address adolescent mental health becomes undeniable. Drummond et al. acknowledge that sporting clubs can be social spaces that promote and perpetuate traditionally hegemonic masculine traits and yet “by changing these traditional hegemonic masculinized environments, these sporting clubs could potentially have the opportunity to offer spaces for young men to thrive emotionally within inclusive and understanding environments” (p. 2). When spaces of sports and athletics are shaped critically and with intention, Drummond et al. notes that these spaces can foster a positive sense of belonging, shape respectful relationships amongst athletes, coaches, and community, and help youth develop skills for open and honest communication.

Weighing the negative social outcomes that frequently result from sport against Justin’s primarily positive stories of sport, I feel as though I am wading into murky water—sand and silt swirling to obscure my view—preventing clarity. Sports are widely viewed as *sociopositive* and yet they can be seen to promote and reproduce the negative aspects of hegemonic masculinity. I find myself experiencing tension as I reflect on this broader picture of an imperfect reality. In

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this inquiry, I have trained my eye to seek out positive masculinities and I still choose to view Justin's experiences with sport and athletics as positive. In placing these stories in context, however, it must be acknowledged that the spaces in which Justin's stories set are rife with problematic masculine norms. While I view Justin's experiences as an enactment of positive masculinity, I do not view them as enactments of resistant masculinities. Indeed, Justin acknowledged that sports and athletics allowed him to *fit in* and be accepted amongst his peers at school. Though his stories do not express counter-sexist themes nor a desire to dismantle hegemonic social structures, they are still worthy of being told for they highlight aspects of masculinity that are favorable.

While sport may be seen as a tool to privilege certain boys and men for their gender conforming masculine performances, it was the positive aspects of sport that remained the focus of the conversations I had with Justin. Justin attributed sport and athleticism with his sense of belonging amongst his peers, provided him a positive outlet for dealing with personal issues, and bolstering his self-confidence and sense of personal pride. Dominant stories of sport are shifting along with wider narratives of masculinity. Organized sports are becoming spaces that are more welcoming of diverse and inclusive masculinities. Culturally, there has been a decline in homophobia in recent years which has created some space for a recalibration of masculine norms (Loftus, 2001). Adams (2011), on the shifts occurring in the dominant narratives of masculinity and sport, states

Despite overt homophobia and femphobia being the leitmotif among sportsmen in the 1980s and 1990s, contemporary research points to the growing esteem attributed to progressive attitudes and behaviors among men in teamsports today. This is especially true of young men...Indeed, there is a growing body of literature in which young men

today are described as rejecting orthodox or hegemonic tenets of masculinity: the homophobia, misogyny, femphobia, emotional stoicism, and aggressive acts of physical violence that are characteristic of it. (p. 582)

Justin's stories of masculine identity which place sport and athleticism as central to a masculine performance, particularly when considered in the context of a shifting and gradually more inclusive teamsport narrative, allows one to see the many positive aspects of this type of masculine enactment.

### **Composing narratives of masculinity in silence**

Gender, our understanding of it, and thereby our performance of it, are all socially constructed endeavors. We make meaning from the stories to live by of gender and identity of those around us. So, we must ask, what are the consequences when the sharing of stories to live by of masculinity are considered to be taboo or are being silenced by dominant stories of gender? Blix et al. (2021), reflects on the social impacts of silence, stating "our personal stories are made possible or impossible, by the stories and the silences surrounding us. Stories and silences open and close "the imaginative space" in which we can compose our narratives" (p. 585). Therefore, without hearing the stories to live by of masculinity of the boys and men in their social sphere, it is nearly impossible to compose and tell their own stories. This silence may be seen as closing the imaginative space for the composition of masculine gendered stories.

As I went back and listened to the research conversations between Justin and I, and composed interim research texts, I started to realize the importance of being attentive to the silences as much as the words being said. Just as we understand narrative inquiry as a relational inquiry, so too can silence be understood as *in relation*. Andrews (2010), considering silence, states "silence always and only exists in relation to that which surrounds it. It is the blank spaces

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between words, and as such it helps to frame not only the meaning of what is said but that which can be said, a refuge for both the unsaid and the unsayable (p. 161). Therefore, in the process of composing interim research texts, I inquired into the stories being told in the silences, too.

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Kristen: So, your sister, she was in grade 12? She was just starting grade 12 when you started grade 9?

Justin: Yep.

Kristen: Okay. So, did you find that made you feel a lot more, sort of, confident about starting?

Justin: Yeah, 100 percent.

Kristen: Oh, that's good. It's nice to have someone to kind of guide you through it. So, what about your friends? Were they quite nervous as well?

Justin: I didn't really talk to them as much, but they didn't really seem like they were.

(Justin, Research Conversation, July 29, 2021)

From our research conversations, it became clear that Justin had a close and positive relationship with his immediate family members – his mom, dad, and older sister. Justin relied on his relationship with his older sister for positive guidance and support. He felt that with her presence at his new high school he would be able to more confidently make the transition to a grade 9 student. While being nervous, himself, about the transition to high school, Justin felt that his friends were not nervous because “they didn’t really seem like they were” (Justin, Research Conversation, July 29, 2021) even though they had not discussed their feelings surrounding the transition to their new school. Clandinin and Connelly (1996), while conceptualizing the professional knowledge landscape of teachers, explain that *cover stories* are composed

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When teachers move out of their classrooms into the out-of-classroom place on the landscape, they often live and tell cover stories, stories in which they portray themselves as experts, certain characters whose teacher stories fit within the acceptable range of the story of school being lived in the school. (p. 25)

For teachers, their classroom is seen as a safe place where they may tell *secret or sacred stories*. Cover stories, on the other hand, are composed by teachers in spaces outside of their classroom in order to portray themselves in an acceptable fashion. Applying this understanding to gender performance and adolescent males, cover stories may be seen as one's gender performance and the stories one tells of their gendered experience in certain spaces where one may not feel safe enough to enact or tell secret or sacred stories of gender. Their cover stories allow them to "fit within the acceptable range" (p. 25) of gender performance.

At home, and with his family, Justin was able to seek guidance and support for the impending transition to high school. As a grade 12 student, his sister acted as a shepherd to ease the worries and guide him steadily into grade 9. The safe space of home allowed Justin to tell secret or sacred stories of his feelings and, in turn, receive support. At school, and with friends, Justin felt compelled to tell cover stories to portray himself as calm and confident about the transition into high school because these were also the stories being composed by his friends. Because Justin experienced discomfort or felt that speaking about emotions with his friends was a gender non-conforming performance of masculinity, we see the closing of the imaginative space where the potential exists for the co-composition of masculine gendered stories regarding the transition to high school and the associated emotions.

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When inquiring into stories composed of silence, they can be understood more easily when one takes into account the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space where these stories are being composed. Throughout the process of recruiting participants for this research, I came to understand that speaking about masculinity with boys and men is more taboo than I had initially understood it to be. In attempting to open a space for male emotional vulnerability, I had failed to fully acknowledge how my position as a female placed me as an outsider to the masculine gendered experience. As I discussed my thesis topic with the men in my life, I was met with discomfort, nervous laughter, and, at times, outright derision. I was asked on more than one occasion if the research I was conducting was even necessary. The tension experienced by the male individuals that I attempted to speak with caused the conversations to be shut down quickly, thereby, closing the imaginative space I sought to open.

I experienced male discomfort on the school landscape as well. One day, as I attempted to recruit some male grade 8 youths to an in-school, small group anxiety workshop seeking to develop self-regulation strategies and foster resilience, I was met by a wall of resistance. The male youth that I felt would most benefit from participation in the workshop were adamant that they had no interest in it because they felt like it would be too awkward. “Why would I want to talk about that stuff with strangers?” inquired one male student. “It’s hard for us boys to talk about that stuff,” said another. The dominant narrative of masculinity in many Western cultures sees “these attitudes emerge from a socialization that teaches boys the importance of projecting strength and concealing emotions and pain. This can prevent the development of emotional knowledge” (Cleary, 2011, p. 499) which may result in the experience of discomfort or shame when a male individual considers health-seeking behaviors. Boys adhering more closely to hegemonic masculinity are more likely to enact a more stoic, self-sufficient gendered

performance. Despite acknowledging that anxiety was something that they struggled with, the boys felt too uncomfortable with the thought of discussing their feelings to give participation in the workshop any fair consideration.

While some of the male youth with whom I work were resistant to participation in the anxiety workshop, others were not only open to the idea of participation in the workshop, but they were also enthusiastic about speaking openly about their personal struggles with anxiety and worry. Cleary (2011) notes that “masculinity is not a homogeneous, nor consistent, entity in any social grouping” (p. 499). The stark difference between the position of the male youth in my class – those opposed to participation in the anxiety workshop, and those very much open to participation—presented the class with an interesting opportunity to inquire into the differing convictions. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) envision bumping places as “conceptual spaces...where tensions become apparent” (p. 58). The tension we were experiencing created a unique opportunity to address and reflect on the dominant narratives of masculinity. In this way, bumping places open a space ripe with educative possibility and the potential for resistance. I wonder then, how might educators intentionally open spaces where youth feel safe enough to explore and question beliefs and convictions about their personal identity? How might schools foster health-seeking behaviors in adolescent males?

### **Inclusive Masculinities on the school landscape**

In making the transition to a new school division this year, following a move from Regina to Saskatoon, I realized quickly that the youth and staff that I am now working with were well-practiced at *pronoun checking*, “asking another person what pronouns they would like used when being referenced” (Brown et al., 2020, p. 77). While this had not been routine in my previous division, it was a practice that I immediately recognized as being more inclusive and I



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made the effort to learn more and embed it in my personal practice. Having had this brought into my awareness on my professional landscape, a spark of curiosity was brought into my research, as well. As we are always in the midst, and continually learning, I wondered what educative experiences Justin had with pronoun checking or the use of gender-neutral pronouns?

Kristen: When did you start having those conversations? Do you remember, like, was it this year that that was really common, or have you introduced yourself with your pronouns before?

Justin: I think, like, kind of like the grade that you're teaching, I think that's when our teachers started to, like, talk about it and some stuff like that, because I had the same teacher for grade 7 and 8 and she kind of like, I guess, it is important to her or something to, to know everybody's pronouns and stuff.

Kristen: Sure, so how does that kind of conversation make you feel, I guess?

Justin: Bored, I guess because it doesn't really apply to me.

(Justin, Research Conversation, September 28, 2021)

Justin clearly recognized the value that his grade 7 and 8 teacher placed on the practice of pronoun checking but it seemed that he, himself, felt removed from this practice, as a cisgender individual. He felt that this practice did not apply to him. However, a study by Brown et al. (2020) indicates that “regardless of gender identity, youth in the study discussed appropriate pronoun use as an important marker for what makes a space feel safe for them in their communities” (p. 77). Pronoun checking and having others make an effort to use correct pronouns allowed individuals to feel more supported and less stressed, especially when they did not have to “constantly come out to counter people’s assumptions” (p. 75).

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While Justin's grade 7 and 8 teacher evidently saw value in pronoun checking, Justin did not yet see how he, as a cisgender individual, fit into this practice. Unless one is othered by the socially constructed, rigid gender dichotomy, unless one is constantly singled out, their otherness serving as an ever-present reminder of their displacement from dominant narratives, perhaps, gender identity shapes our world in a silent, unquestioned manner. We are not forced to call into question its power over our thoughts and actions. We do not realize the privilege that this position affords us. To maintain patriarchal power structures, cisgender, heterosexual males are cast, not as allies working towards reduced inequalities, but, seemingly, as outsiders without a stake in pursuits for gender equity. Pronoun checking and using preferred pronouns are two small examples of inclusive practices which help foster safer spaces in our schools and communities. Justin seeing himself as an outsider of this practice led me to wonder, how educators might facilitate educative experiences which allow all youth, **cisgender** or otherwise, to develop a deeper understanding of the importance of pronoun checking and the use of preferred pronouns? How can educators make this practice feel relevant to all youth? How can we help our youth to see themselves as allies?

### **Reflecting**

Across the various landscapes that I found myself living and working on, as an educator, researcher, and female, and as I tried to open safe spaces for conversations about masculinity, I found myself living in a tension-filled midst. The counter stories I was trying to co-compose around positive masculinity, emotional vulnerability and resistance were rubbing up against dominant stories of masculinity wherein emotional vulnerability could be seen as a sign of weakness or even femininity. However, in the process of learning *with* Justin's stories to live by and attending to tensions as they arose, I caught glimpses of the diverse enactments of adolescent

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masculinities as he lived and learned on various landscapes. Thinking about experience as Dewey (1938) does, we understand that “every experience both takes up something from ‘those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (p. 35). In the process of telling and retelling our stories, I cannot help but wonder about how the quality of this experience will impact future enactments of gender?

### **Introducing Griffin**

Griffin is a young elementary school teacher in Regina, Saskatchewan that reached out to me regarding participation in the research after I broadened my search for participants to also include adult males. I was feeling disheartened after the long search for a suitable participant and, resultantly, having had to slightly alter my research methods, but in the process of coming alongside Griffin, my spirits were buoyed. Griffin is an interesting, and open individual. He is naturally charming and introspective, while also being extremely passionate about health and physical fitness. His keen willingness to participate reinvigorated my enthusiasm for the project. As I came to know Griffin better throughout the research process, I soon identified his passion for self-improvement, both physical and mental, as one of his fundamental personal characteristics. Our research conversations often centered on self-discovery, personal growth, and the people that inspired Griffin's ongoing pursuit of self-improvement. It seemed that the opportunity for self-reflection offered by the inquiry process may have been Griffin's draw for participation.

Throughout our research conversations, Griffin was asked to reflect on his experiences as an adolescent male. Now being an adult, his adolescence is a period of life from which he is relatively far removed. As a narrative inquirer, I tried to remain attentive to the fact that

As individuals construct past events and actions in personal narratives, they engage in a dynamic process of claiming identities, selves, and constructing lives. Furthermore, how individuals recount their history (what they emphasize or omit) has a direct bearing on what they can claim of their lives. (Sparkes, 1999, pp. 18-19)

Generally, then, the identity that Griffin seemed to claim for himself in the storying of his life was that of a health-conscious, physically active, heterosexual male. Most importantly, though,

Griffin seemed to have constructed a life centered around his notions of strength, “and like what I mean by strength is, like, physical strength, mental strength, an ability to accomplish difficult tasks” (Griffin, Research Conversation, January 12, 2022). As I came to know Griffin better, it became clear that this definition of strength seemed to underpin much of what he worked towards and aspired to be.

### **Positive masculinities and physical activity**

From our first research conversation, reminiscent of the first conversation I had with Justin, it became clear that much of the identity that Griffin claimed for himself in the storying of his life was deeply tied to physical activity and sport.

Kristen: Introduce yourself. Talk a little bit about who you are, where you’re from. You could talk about your family, hobbies, interests? Any of that kind of stuff.

Griffin: Okay, cool. I am from Regina, Saskatchewan. I am 31 years old. I have been a teacher for 7 years now. Growing up, I played a lot of sports. Played a lot of hockey, did some wrestling. A lot of pick-up games and stuff. At university I wrestled. Then became a personal trainer. Started doing Strongman competitions, started doing that. Now I started getting into cycling, getting into squash. Um, yeah. Anything else that I can answer about? (Griffin, Research Conversation, January 12, 2022)

Griffin first identified where he lived and his profession, but then went on to thoroughly detail the physical activity that clearly comprised a major facet of his identity. As a physically active individual myself, I was already aware of many of the significant health benefits afforded by regular participation in physical activity and sport. However, in the process of composing interim research texts, a wonder emerged for me as I inquired into this key aspect of Griffin’s identity—

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how does involvement in physical activity and sport specifically benefit adolescent males?

According to Taliaferro et al. (2010),

Regardless of year, age, or race/ethnicity, compared to nonathletes, male athletes were more likely to report engaging in vigorous activity, consuming fruit, and using a condom, and were less likely to report trying to lose weight, carrying a weapon, seriously considering suicide, attempting suicide, and smoking cigarettes.... Findings from this investigation that indicate athletes engage in more positive health behaviors and in fewer negative behaviors suggest opportunities for prevention, and merit consideration in school health policy and planning. (p. 408)

Therefore, participation in sport offers adolescent males significant benefits, especially regarding positive health behaviors. The importance of having access to the necessary funding to offer a wide variety of athletic opportunities to students should be of note to school administration and policymakers. In the process of storying his life, and thereby claiming an identity for himself, Griffin's athletic, 'jock' identity may align with an enactment of traditional masculinity, however, involvement in physical activity and sport clearly corresponds with significant positive health behaviors, too.

Sport and athleticism were also central to Griffin's understanding of his adolescent friendships. When I asked Griffin to describe his closest adolescent friendship, he stated

Like, my closest friend, he was very similar, very jock. We're both pretty good athletes at everything we did, very competitive. That was good. Actually, that was one thing that really kind of took us through high school is actually, like, rollerblade, like, skating, not skate boarding, but rollerblading. That was the big thing that we did that really connected

[us] well and did a lot and that was something that was something that we just focused on a lot in high school. (Griffin, Research Conversation, January 12, 2022)

In his account of this close, personal friendship, Griffin clearly emphasized the activities that he enjoyed doing with this friend, and detailed the athleticism demonstrated by himself and his friend. He identified how this commonality—a love of sport—bonded the friends and helped to carry the friendship through the course of high school.

In speaking about his adolescent male friendships, Griffin did not address matters of emotional closeness or intimacy. According to Grief (2010), male “friendships are maintained at a physical and emotional distance because men fear emotional and physical closeness, which they link to homosexuality... As a result, men develop shoulder-to-shoulder or side-by-side friendships based on doing activities together, like sports” (p. 18). This emotional distance can be seen in Griffin’s accounts of his male friendships throughout his adolescence—there is little to no mention of emotional intimacy. Instead, these friendships can be considered shoulder-to-shoulder friendships, they are composed, primarily, of activity and *doing*. This view of friendship, where physical activity is seen as central to its enactment, seems to align with how Griffin understood himself, too. He made sense of himself in terms of what he was *doing*, more than anything else. From our research conversations, it seems clear that physical activity is an important aspect of Griffin’s identity but also acted as a mechanism to build and maintain friendships.

### **Outgrowing silence: Co-composing narratives of masculinity**

Getting to know Griffin throughout our research conversations, it quickly became apparent to me that he was a verbose, and talkative individual. As I inquired into his stories to live by, and began to compose interim research texts, I noticed that Griffin’s stories were rarely,

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if ever, punctuated by silence, in the way Justin's had been. However, silence as it related to masculinity, again, emerged as a thread needing to be tugged on. In attending to my newly emerging wonder, I found myself reflecting more deeply on how we are shaped by experience. I, again, returned to Dewey's (1938) thoughts on experience, and the idea that "the quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences" (p.13). In considering how all previous experiences play a role in shaping future experiences, I found myself wondering how Griffin's enactment of masculinity impacted silence as he moved from adolescence to adulthood, as he learned, grew, and experienced more of the world?

When reflecting on his adolescence and discussing his experiences with the transition into high school from elementary school, Griffin described an experience similar to that of Justin's. When I asked Griffin if there was anyone, at the time, that he would have spoken to regarding his nerves, he replied, "not at all" and when asked how he dealt with those anxious feelings he stated that

You just kind of shrugged it off your shoulders and went to school the next day...It was just kind of one of those things where you just kind of push...not push it under the rug, but you just kind of rolled through it, if that makes sense.

(Griffin, Research Conversation, January 12, 2022)

As with Justin, Griffin did not feel like he was able to speak with anyone about his feelings regarding the transition to high school. Instead, Griffin felt like he needed to shrug the feelings off, rather than seek support or comfort from a close friend or family member. At this point in his



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life, Griffin did not have access to narratives that opened the imaginative space wherein he may have co-composed stories of processing and managing strong feelings with his closest friends.

In the course of our research conversations, Griffin related a story to live by from a period in his early adulthood wherein he was challenged with processing and managing strong feelings. At this time in his life, Griffin did not have access to narratives of masculinity which proved helpful for working through his emotions because of this, Griffin intentionally sought them out. Griffin explained

I went through a divorce like four or five years ago. I just found that that was a time where I mentally really struggled, and I just sought out a lot of strong individuals to kind of help with my self-coping. Like, Ross Edgley is a guy who swam around England, and Wim Hof is a guy who lost his family and develops this meditation through ice baths and Cameron Hanes is this guys that hikes 10, 12 miles and then goes hunting so I've kind of, like, followed a lot of, like, mentally, physically strong male figures. I found that has really kind of shaped and allowed me to kind of help me get through what I was getting through. It just really helped shape my idea of masculinity in that sense.

(Griffin, Research Conversation, January 12, 2022)

While going through a divorce, a difficult time in his personal life, Griffin may not have had access to the kinds of narratives that he was seeking in his immediate physical context to provide him with the support he felt he needed. Virtually, however, Griffin had access to narrative accounts of masculinity, via podcasts, YouTube, and the internet. The narratives of masculinity that Griffin sought were grounded in the union of physical and mental strength. In seeking out and engaging with these particular narratives of masculinity, we see the opening of the

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imaginative space wherein Griffin was able to compose narratives of himself as a more resilient individual, capable of navigating the personal struggles he was going through. Sparkes (1999) notes that “How I make sense of myself is shaped by the kinds of story that have been made available to me in the various sub-cultures and cultures that I inhabit. That is, I cannot transcend my narrative resources in telling a story about myself or in restorying myself if I desired to do so” (p. 20). After his divorce, Griffin sought ways to restory himself. Engaging with narrative accounts of other males who had accomplished difficult things, in spite of their own personal struggles, Griffin felt empowered to do the same.

As I sought out contextual space for Griffin’s narratives of masculinity and health seeking behaviors, I found that, culturally, a shift had occurred in recent years which had publicly opened space for more honest conversation regarding masculinity, mental health, and positive health seeking behaviors. Butler (2020) explored the potentiality for significant cultural benefits to men resulting from famous public figures, men with a “strong sense of masculine identification” (p. 444), openly sharing their mental health struggles with the world. Among others, Butler considered the example set by men such as Bruce Springsteen, and their willingness to openly share their experiences navigating challenging times. Springsteen demonstrated immense vulnerability by publicly sharing his long-term struggles with depression and his experiences with therapy in his autobiography. Butler notes that Springsteen’s example “offers a new view of masculinity; rather than a fearful, worried, handwringing seeker of therapy, he brings together a macho style in conjunction with honest emotion and vulnerability” (p. 449). Culturally, having access to more stories of strong, male figures, and icons of masculinity opening up and demonstrating positive health-seeking behaviors opens the imaginative space for the re-imagining of a healthier, more resilient masculinity.

When I asked Griffin about his closest adult friendships, speaking about one close male friend in particular, he indicated that his friend is a social worker and that “he’s really good at talking and listening” (Griffin, Research Conversation, February 2, 2022). Unlike his description of adolescent friendships which were activity centered, when speaking about his friendships as an adult, Griffin immediately commented on the emotional support that the friends provide for each other. As Griffin elaborated on his experiences with his adult friendships, he noted that, “we’re both really good at supporting each other, like, with the stuff he’s got going on in his life, I’m a support for him. The stuff going on in my life, we support each other” (Griffin, Research Conversation, February 2, 2022). Unlike his friendships in adolescence, when speaking about his close friendships as an adult, Griffin seemed to place more emphasis on the emotional support that the friends were able to offer each other rather than the activities that they did together.

Griffin’s narrative account of his life depicted an identity in flux. His stories to live by were those of young man in the process of becoming. As Griffin moved from experience to experience, he was inevitably altered and his stories to live by reflected those changes. Puplampu (2020) notes that “our stories to live by are who we are and are becoming, an unfolding view of identity making that shows that each of us are always in the making” (p. 880). As a self-reflective individual, Griffin tried to learn and grow from the experiences and contexts that were shaping him. In doing so, he sought out narratives of masculinity that aligned with his holistic view of strength and the vision of the man he wanted to be. As Griffin got older, attended university, and became a teacher, fostering closer relationships and the ability to communicate his needs became more important to him. Therefore, as an adult, Griffin surrounded himself with a core group of friends that were emotionally supportive of each other and were comfortable discussing problems and issues in their lives.

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The development of such relationships may have only been possible because Griffin sought out and interacted with narratives of masculinity in which emotional intimacy was depicted as a facet of strength. In reflecting on Griffin's stories to live by of masculinity as they relate to silence, I find myself imagining Griffin opening the imaginative space as one might throw open the curtains—purposefully and with the hope of seeing something new. The narratives of masculinity, emotional vulnerability, and resilience that he needed during a challenging period of his life were not readily available in his social context but in seeking them out and sharing what he learned—with friends, co-workers, and his students—Griffin made space for the co-composition of such stories in the future.

### **Masculinities on the school landscape**

In thinking narratively about Griffin's life and his stories to live by on the school landscape, more than ever, I was able to visualize a rich interwoven tapestry of stories. I sat with the fact that our stories—some contradictory, others in perfect alignment with the vision of who we are or who we want to be, and always in the midst—cannot be sufficiently represented in a single telling. In composing interim research texts and then final research texts, I have tried to attend to the multiplicity of Griffin's stories to live by on the school landscape—both as a student and a teacher.

When asked about how he felt he fit in with his peers in grade 9, Griffin indicated that his athleticism, or perceived athleticism allowed him to comfortably fit in at his school. Reflecting on his sense of belonging at school, Griffin added

I joined wrestling and a lot of times people kind of made fun of you if you wrestled because you had to wear those skin tights or whatever. I was pretty confident in who I

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was that [I thought], ‘well whatever, I’m doing it’ and because of my personality I did it without being made fun of. (Griffin, Research Conversation, January 12, 2022)

Griffin’s story demonstrated a sense of awareness regarding the social positioning of wrestling at his high school and how his participation may have been viewed by his peers. A gender conforming performance of masculinity dictates that one must constantly re-assert their heterosexuality and Griffin’s story indicated an awareness of the homophobia present in his social context during high school. However, Griffin felt it was his self-confidence that allowed him to navigate the precarious landscape of peer relations without facing any social repercussions.

Returning to the notion of a hierarchy of masculinities, which varies depending on the particular setting or the social context, it is interesting to consider where high school wrestling fits within this social order. Michael (2015), exploring high school wrestlers’ relationship to inclusive masculinity, explains

Whereas participation in high school sports such as American football or basketball usually provides an increase in masculine capital (Anderson, 2005) and heterosexual privilege (Messner, 1990, 2007; Whitson, 1990), being a high school wrestler oftentimes has the opposite effect. ... wrestlers have to negotiate the popular claim leveled against them that ‘wrestling is gay’—a claim usually centered on the skin-tight outfits wrestlers wear in competition (derisively referred to by others as ‘leotards’). (p. 913)

We see, then, that high school wrestling offers male participants less social capital, compared to other high school athletics, due to the fact that their heterosexuality is called into question.

Considering the hierarchy of masculinities, especially within the context of high school athletics,

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it seems that high school wrestling participants fit lower in the social order. Despite the fact that the identity that Griffin claimed for himself was that of a ‘jock,’ and this status afforded him certain social capital, Griffin was not immune from gender policing and peer judgment.

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In reference to cover stories told by teachers, Olson and Craig (2005) state that “individuals, to varying degrees, live and tell particular narratives in order to fit in with the perceived canonical version of ‘how things should be’” (p. 164). Working as a male teacher on an elementary school landscape, a female dominated area, Griffin felt compelled to tell certain cover stories. When asked about his relationship to masculinity with regards to being a teacher, Griffin said

I also look at masculinity as being physically strong and I definitely portray that character, that role, as a teacher in school. A part of it, too, is to encourage kids to be physically strong and to be active. So, I think I play that role quite a bit. (Griffin, Research Conversation, February 2, 2022)

In trying to make sense of his identity in the classroom, Griffin composed a cover story in which his physical fitness was central to his teaching persona. He viewed this version of himself as a character that he played for the students—leaning more heavily into that particular facet of his personality. This cover story may have been Griffin’s attempt to make space for himself on the school landscape, as a male teacher in the female-heavy profession. While considering Griffin’s cover story, I found myself particularly curious about the experience of male teachers on the elementary school landscape, especially with regards to enactments of masculinity.

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Exploring how male elementary school teachers construct identities for themselves, Sargent (2000) notes

The proscriptions against “doing anything feminine” (Pleck 1987) or against being close to the children carry far more serious implications than simply causing others to question the men’s masculinity, and this result in their questioning their own manhood. Suspicions of homosexuality and the conflation of gayness with pedophilia are powerful sanctions that carry legal implications. Loss of one’s job and threats of jail time can bring even the most rebellious gender outlaw into line. (p. 414)

Gender policing, in this way, serves to keep male teachers in line. It prevents them from displaying the nurturing characteristics that would otherwise been seen as positive traits in female teachers for fear of having their sexuality questioned or, worse, raising concerns about pedophilia. This constraint is especially an impediment for those male teachers in primary teaching roles. I wonder, then, if Griffin’s cover story on the school landscape served to highlight his masculinity and eschew femininity so that he may protect himself and his reputation from such ramifications?

These stories to live by on the school landscape are indicative of the social constraints that males operate within on a daily basis. A gender conforming masculine performance demands boys and men walk a fine line in order to avoid the social sanctions that might result from a misstep. In Griffin’s case, a positive sense of self allowed him to join wrestling without too much fear of repercussion, but as a male elementary school teacher on a female-dominated landscape, Griffin employed a cover story about masculinity and physical fitness to make space for himself.

**Reflecting**

Many shifts have occurred on the social landscape, with regards to acceptable gender performance. Griffin's stories to live by and how they have changed over the course of his life are indicative of adaptations he made as a result of the shifting social landscapes. Over the course of this research, I was frequently reminded that I was coming alongside Griffin's life at a later point compared to Justin, but still very much in the midst. Griffin's stories to live by were those of change, and growth as he experienced more of the world and moved into adulthood. But as our time together drew to a close, I could not help but wonder what further opportunities for growth and change might emerge for Griffin as a result of his participation in this narrative inquiry?



## Chapter 4

### Conclusion

#### Stories to Live By: in hindsight

In trying to negotiate an exit from this narrative inquiry, I found myself looking backwards. I read and reread words that I had scrawled into my personal journals over the years with the hopes that in seeing where I had come from, I might find clues about the way forward. I framed my reading with the wonder: Who have I been? A few passages from my journals struck a chord with me and, as I wove together a conclusion of sorts for this inquiry, I found myself making connections between my new understandings and my existing stories to live by of gender and identity. The composition of this final chapter, again, draws forth the image of a rich tapestry woven from the interconnected stories of who we are and who we are becoming.

#### Story 1

Before we begin, there is something you should know:

I am proud of myself.

I don't think that is a phrase that is said enough

or thought enough

I am proud of myself.

Such a simple, kind thought and yet it is so frequently buried with self-doubt and uncertainty.

I am proud of myself.

Part of me feels guilty and egotistical for announcing this, like, maybe this is a dirty secret that I should keep within.

Keep quiet. Don't draw attention. Eyes down. Go about your business.

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In this regard, we are selling ourselves short.

I am proud of myself.

22 years.

Passion, warmth, and bravery.

Never one to take life too seriously.

I live with a perpetual laugh on the tip of my tongue.

A calmer of tempers and a fanatical hugger.

I have traveled, worked, and loved.

I live with enthusiasm and heart.

Reader, listener. The voice of a flight attendant, secretary, or voice actress. Ridiculous and impractical at my very core.

Impatient and unmanageable. Independent and strong.

Spirited and wild. Guarded and uncertain.

Up for anything. Anything for a laugh. For the ones I love, anything.

I have made mistakes, taken risks and been afraid.

Carrying a sense of wonder throughout life.

Amazed and in awe of the remarkable capacity for love in this world.

I have made a place for myself.

I am not perfect

but I am proud.

Surely this is not such a ground-breaking, earth-shattering realization and, yet it feels that way.

(Personal Writings, April 27, 2014)

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Elements of this story still strike a chord with me today, with regard to how I view myself as a woman. However, my experiences over the past ten years—moving away from home for the first time, attending university, living abroad, and beginning my graduate studies—have facilitated personal growth and have challenged me to become a more self-assured version of myself. Looking back, I can see that in the process of composing journal entries, I was negotiating my gendered identity. I was trying to make space for myself, trying to understand myself in relation to the wider world. In line with Dewey's (1938) theory of experience, I can see that my experiences and interactions fostered a continuous and ongoing process of *becoming*. As I entered into this research, I sought out and interacted with a variety of socially constructed, gendered discourses. Especially enlightening was the time spent alongside my brave and interesting participants. The process of engaging in this narrative inquiry has shaped and will continue to shape my gender enactment in the future. In this way, I exit this narrative inquiry, as I entered it, in the midst.

The same holds true for Justin and Griffin. The beginning of the narrative inquiry process found them in the midst of their lives and as we prepare to exit this narrative, both participants are still in the midst. I find myself making sense of the concept of 'in the midst' in the way that Clandinin et al. (2009) describe change, as "a parade in which everybody participates, entering or leaving at different places and times as the parade meanders in spontaneous ways across an expanse or field" (p. 142). In this way, I imagine the narrative inquiry picking us all up—myself, Justin, and Griffin—in different places and depositing us, too, in our own unique spaces as the parade continues to zigzag onward. Justin and Griffin will continue leading complex, multi-faceted lives on a multitude of shifting social landscapes, but I wonder about the ripples that will be produced in their lives as a result of having participated alongside me in this inquiry. In what

ways will this impact their future gender enactment? For me, I will move forward, continuing to tug at the remnant narrative threads, my lingering wonders.

### **Narrative Thread: Hope and Ripples of Change**

I entered into this inquiry excited by the transformational change that might come about as a result of this research. As I revisited previous sections of this inquiry and allowed the stories to work on me, more than anything, what stood out was a feeling of hope. Standing back and reflecting, now that the research is drawing to a close, it is clear that as my focus shifted to *doing research* and *being a researcher*, I lost sight of my purpose. The adage ‘you can’t see the forest for the trees’ rang true with this realization. Previously, I had written “To this research, I wish to bring a feeling of hope—hope that bodies of work, such as this, may create space for the varied and diverse individual expressions of gender” (Thesis, p. 8). I started this research with a spirit of hope, and somewhere along the way I lost that attitude. Resultantly, I wonder what hope looks like as I negotiate an exit from the research? Further, how do we, collectively, move forward with a spirit of hope with regards to gender equity?

Having closely examined major facets of the patriarchy—homophobia, violence, and the domination of people outside of the cisgender, heterosexual male label, to name a few—it is clear that the patriarchy remains deeply entrenched in modern society. As previously examined, the negative effects of the patriarchy cause harm to all people. Considering Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), for example, the Government of Canada (2021) reported that “overall, 44% of women who had ever been in an intimate partner relationship reported experiencing some kind of psychological, physical, or sexual abuse in the context of an intimate relationship in their lifetime.” Indigenous women in Canada are even more vulnerable in this regard, with 1 in 6 Indigenous women having experienced at least one form of IPV—psychological, physical, or

sexual— in the past year, compared with 12% of non-Indigenous women (Government of Canada, 2021). As for men,

unrealistic societal and peer pressure to be “real men”, to always be the breadwinner, to refuse help because it shows weakness, or to respond with aggression to any challenge just because “that is what men do” ... can lead to serious problems such as stress-related illnesses or substance abuse, and, in some cases, even suicide. (Government of Canada, 2019)

No one can be truly free in a patriarchal system, particularly when we consider the fact that the roots of the patriarchy are entangled around nearly every aspect of our lives.

When considering the far-reaching, detrimental impacts of the patriarchy, it is no wonder, then, that there are times when it feels difficult to maintain a sense of hope. So, when faced with tackling such a large-scale, systemic problem, how do we sustain our sense of hope? Loeb (2004) notes that hope does not spring up from nowhere. Instead, he envisions hope as an interconnected chain. He states

The links in any chain of influence are too numerous, too complex to trace. But being aware that such chains exist, that we can choose to join them, and that lasting change doesn't occur in their absence is one of the primary ways to sustain hope, especially when our actions seem too insignificant to amount to anything. (p. 19)

With this in mind, it is critical that we remain engaged with the positive stories of masculinity— those that resist or reinterpret hegemonic masculinity. These are the stories that open the imaginative space, create space for future narratives of positive masculinities and, in turn, sustain our spirit of hope for greater gender equality.

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Reflecting on the stories of positive masculinities told by both participants, I felt buoyed by a renewed sense of hope. Both Justin and Griffin told stories about supportive male friendships, using athletics and sport as a healthy outlet and a space to foster peer relationships, and the mentors that encouraged their self-improvement. Discussing a particularly helpful peer mentor and friend that assisted in his smooth transition into high school, Griffin stated

I had my one friend on my street, he's a couple years older than me. He was a good guide going into high school. He kind of gave me a lot of tips. He drove me to school my first year. So, it was kind of nice having him stick up for me. Not stick up for me, like, kind of guide me. Show me the ropes. So that made it a lot easier to transition. (Research Conversation, January 12, 2022)

Having a trusted peer, particularly one that was a couple years older and more experienced at the high school, provided Griffin with a sense of security and confidence. As for Justin, his father served as a positive role model of masculinity, one that was actively engaged in his life. In addition to coaching some of his sports teams, Justin stated that he and his father “go out in the back and play catch or sometimes play soccer or maybe, sometimes, not all of the time, but we go for a bike ride or something” (Research Conversation, July 7, 2021). Both Griffin and Justin told stories of the support they received from other male individuals in their lives and how these relationships guided them towards a healthier, more self-confident enactment of masculinity.

In terms of inspiring hope, I found one of Griffin's narratives particularly heartening. When he was going through a divorce and having a difficult time, he did not have access to narratives of resilient, positive masculinities in his social sphere. When access to these narrative resources were limited, Griffin sought them out. With the help of technology, he found male role models that inspired him to persevere through his personal challenges in a manner that fostered

personal growth. In seeking out these narratives and adapting his gender enactment as a result, he opened the imaginative space for others in his social sphere, including the students that he worked with every day. Griffin created space for narratives of masculinity that managed personal difficulties with health-seeking behaviors, such as therapy or participating in physical activity. As Griffin was inspired to persevere through hard times by learning from the stories of others, I am inspired by Griffin's narratives. For this reason, Loeb (2004) explains that

Nothing buoys the spirit and fosters hope like the knowledge that others faced equal or greater challenges in the past and continued on to bequeath us a better world. Even in a seemingly losing cause, one person may unknowingly inspire another, and that person yet a third, who could go on to change the world, or at least a smaller corner of it. (p. 19)

Considering this, what, then, are the implications for how we move forward with a spirit of hope?

Like Loeb, if we envision hope as an interlocking chain, then these narratives of positive masculinities are the links in the chain. Each telling and retelling further open the imaginative space for males seeking to enact flexible, health-seeking, and resilient forms of masculinity. In the telling of Griffin and Justin's stories of masculinity, and sharing these stories more widely, it is my hope that the positive masculinities explored here create ripples, broadening the possibilities for socially acceptable enactments of masculinity.

## **Narrative Thread: Dominant Narratives of Gender**

### **Story 2**

Don't forget that you, too, are entitled to opinions,  
to feelings, to discomfort.

You have a right to emotions and fear.

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Why is it that I have been taught to question what I feel at my core?

Why is it that my own mind is fighting my instincts?

If I know something to be wrong, is that not enough?

(Personal writings, May 12, 2016)

Rereading this journal entry, it is clear that I was struggling with the weight of the expectations placed on women to act a certain way. In trying to enact a gender conforming female performance, I was feeling inhibited, and confined. I struggled with assertiveness and making my own needs known. I was terrified of the possibility that I might upset someone. I thought that in order for people to like me, and to be accepted by my peers, I should always present an optimistic, cheery front. That particular mask was tiresome and heavy. In writing this journal entry, I was contemplating the tension that I experienced as the stories I told of who I am rubbed up against dominant narratives of femininity.

To be a woman is to grow accustomed to experiencing fear as you go about your everyday business, to spend a significant portion of your time taking measures to maintain your personal safety, and to be judged and maliciously discredited should you ever need to publicly defend yourself and your truth. A gender conforming performance of femininity is not enough to protect you from the consequences of the patriarchy. It is a system designed to keep women in line. Considering the long history of misogyny,

Dworkin argues that a deep, ingrained prejudice against women informs aspects of society from legislation to cohabitation. As she summed it up two years later, ‘As women we live in the midst of a society that regards us as contemptible. We are despised ... We



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are the victims of continuous, malevolent, and sanctioned violence against us.’ (Dworkin, 1974, as cited in Aron, 2019)

It seems unsurprising, then, that I experienced tension as I tried to navigate the dominant discourses of femininity I was surrounded by. In a patriarchal system, how might women create space for enactments of femininity that feel healthy, fluid, and comfortable?

For me, the process of seeking out the narrative resources and positive role models that allowed me to open the imaginative space wider to allow for a more fluid enactment of gender took place over time and across a variety of landscapes. I intentionally sought out stories of powerful, bold women, but, also, as I traveled through landscapes, first, as a university student, then as a new teacher, I encountered these powerful women all around me. During this period of my life, my understanding of feminism was deepened by engaging with narratives by authors such as Roxane Gay, bell hooks, Simone de Beauvoir, and Audre Lorde, to name a few. Additionally, as I went through university and eventually began teaching abroad, my new social spheres brought me into contact with friends, housemates, and colleagues that seemed comfortable enacting a more fluid gender performance than I had previously encountered. Rather than feeling confined and restricted, as a woman operating in a system that disparages the feminine, I began to feel powerful and started to explore how I, too, might use my stories to create change.

While empowering women is an important aspect of feminism, gender equity seems significantly less attainable without male allies. A discourse that serves as a significant barrier is the belief that gender equality has already been achieved and that feminism is not really a cause for males to take up. As Holgren and Hearn (2009) state, “Much of men’s practices, in public and in private, are commonly not seen as gendered. They are often done, perceived, and felt as

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(if they were) ‘normal’. They are not usually gender-conscious activity: they ‘just happen!’” (p. 404). For males, those with more social capital than females, particularly cisgender and heterosexual males, it is easier to ignore or deny the existence of the patriarchy as they go about their everyday lives. Therefore, when called upon to engage in simple actions that promote equality and dignity for others, it may feel like an unnecessary imposition on them.

When considering practices that promote gender equity, the sharing of preferred pronouns when introducing yourself is a simple yet important one. However, both as a teacher on the school landscape and in my social spheres, I have encountered the dominant narrative that preferred pronoun sharing is not relevant or it is a practice does not apply to straight, cisgender males. In a research conversation, Justin explained how he felt about the practice of sharing pronouns.

Kristen: Okay, so, going around and doing that, like, introducing yourself with your pronouns, how do you find that? Tell me about it.

Justin: I don't really have to because, I guess, people don't really need to ask for mine because they know what mine are. Just based off how I, like, I guess, talk to people and I haven't really talked about like anything with pronouns and stuff, but I don't really go through any of that. So, I can't really... (Justin, Research Conversation, September 28, 2021)

Justin's belief that the sharing of preferred pronouns is a practice that does not apply to him, makes his privilege as a straight, cisgender male apparent. As a teacher, however, I see this misconception as an educative possibility. Opening conversations in the classroom that address gender, sexuality, and privilege may help males understand their important role as allies. I wonder how else teachers might foster male allyship on the school landscape?

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As I continued to tug on this narrative thread and reflected on the powerful role that dominant discourses play in our gendered lives, I came upon an article about Terry Crews, former National Football League linebacker and well-known actor, that filled me with a deep sense of gratitude. In 2017, in the midst of the #MeToo movement, Crews, added his voice to the efforts. The movement sought to have perpetrators of sexual harassment and sexual assault held accountable for their actions. As Crews tells it, he was sexually assaulted by Hollywood agent, Adam Venit, in 2016. Reflecting on why he felt the need to add his voice to the #MeToo movement, Crews stated, “If I was silent, it would mean I’m consenting to all of it. I always have felt women have been able to take care of themselves, 100%. But men need to hold other men accountable” (Dockterman, 2017). Following the public disclosure of his story, voices in the media echo chamber asked why, with all his muscles and his large size, did he not defend himself or prevent the unwanted sexual contact? On Crews’ motivation to avoid a physical altercation, Brookshier (2019) notes

In addition to not wanting to lose everything for which he had worked, Crews also exemplified his desire to move away from the patterns of toxic masculinity that he had witnessed as a kid,” that of his father physically abusing his mother. Crews wants to use his platform “to help others change what it means to be a man.” (pp. 41-42)

The example that Crews set, publicly, for other men is allyship at its finest. Openly resisting the tenets of hegemonic masculinity by avoiding physical confrontation and by demonstrating emotional vulnerability in the sharing of his personal narrative of sexual assault, Crews opens wide the imaginative space for the composition of narratives that resist or reinterpret hegemonic masculinity.

While the #MeToo movement is an example of a large-scale, global shift in the discourses regarding gender enactment, the smaller, everyday actions of the people in our social spheres also impact how we perceive and enact gender. We live in an ever-changing world, and resultantly, we must be able to reflect and adapt. Approaching discourses of gender with a critical eye may allow one to reject or reinterpret those discourses that do not bring them a sense of security and satisfaction in terms of their own personal identity and gender enactment. As previously stated, gender enactment is healthiest when fluid and adaptable. These traits of gender performance are important because we live on shifting social landscapes. Clandinin et al. (2009) note that “Part of learning to compose stories to live by that are fluid is learning to think narratively about lives...Part of sustaining teachers and ourselves as teacher educators is knowing how to navigate, to live on and in, shifting landscapes” (p. 146). As with teachers on the ever-shifting school landscape, so too must people be able to navigate gender performance on shifting social landscapes. I wonder, then, how teachers might facilitate educative experiences, emancipatory in nature, that respond to the shifting landscapes of gender?

### **Narrative Thread: Masculinities on the school Landscape**

Kristen: How did masculinity impact your experience at school?

Griffin: I kind of think of it, like, as my idea of what masculinity was back in grade 9.

You know, you want to be athletic, like a strong man, doesn't show emotions, and always trying to chase girls. Kind of like, be the man. I guess would be a part of that, how I acted in high school, and I guess, part of that too was that behavior kind of, kept you in the group of your friends, right? It was kind of like, not a rite of passage, but just kind of expected behavior of grade 9 boys. (Griffin, Research conversation, February 2, 2022)

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For Griffin, as a grade 9 boy, a gender conforming performance of masculinity allowed him to feel more secure in his relationships with his male friends. He felt that he was acting in a way that was expected of a grade 9 boy and this helped him experience a sense of belonging. At the time, this more traditional narrative of adolescent masculinity may have been the only one that Griffin had access to in his social sphere. For Griffin, his educational experiences in elementary school did not include explicit teaching about matters of gender nor the patriarchy. I wonder what the impact may have been if Griffin had the opportunity to explore and discuss these issues at school with his peers during adolescence?

For Justin, on the other hand, his understanding of what it means to be a man was shaped, in part, by explicitly taught lessons at school.

Kristen: So, what experiences do you think might have shaped the idea of what it means to be masculine, or what it means to be a man?

Justin: Probably like having a mentor, like a dad or definitely going over it and stuff and learning about it in different grades and classes.

Kristen: Sure, I think it's quite good actually that you've talked about it in school. I wasn't sure if that was something that had been covered or talked about.

(Justin, Research Conversation, July 9, 2021)

Some of Justin's understanding of masculinity was developed through explicit instruction in the classroom and then examined and discussed with his peers. Lessons, like this, at school that facilitate a critical examination of the gender dichotomy may allow students a chance to consider the, often, invisible social structures that maintain gender inequality.

While writing the conclusion section of this narrative inquiry, a bill, dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" bill by critics, was passed in Florida on Monday March 28, 2022. This bill, which "forbids

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instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through Grade 3 or in a manner that is not age appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students” (Associated Press, 2022) serves to maintain patriarchal and homophobic social structures. In preventing teachers from exploring sexual orientation and gender identity with students, shame and stigma become associated with these topics. In the imposed silence, marginalized youth become further marginalized. A bill, like this, can be seen as closing the imaginative space for the co-composition of narratives of gender and sexuality that are non-normative. In this way, youth are left to navigate the complexities of gender, sexuality, and personal identity independently. In direct opposition with this bill is my belief that youth, of all ages, need safe, supportive spaces that promote self-exploration and that validate and amplify the voices of those in marginalized communities.

Lennon (2020) explores the concept of home, not as a physical place, but as an imaginary, aspirational space that offers safety and a sense of belonging to those seeking refuge. Lennon states that “home is imagined as a positive good, something central to peoples’ well-being...The home which we yearn for is, of course, an imaginary place but it is imaginary towards which we direct our actions, and it informs the choices we make and the places and people we seek out” (p. 208). In this sense, a classroom can and should be a home. As teachers, we direct our actions towards making learning spaces safe and inclusive for the young people we have the privilege of working alongside. Considering necessary aspects of this imaginary home, Lennon identifies *recognition* as being central to one’s well-being. Lennon notes that “Without recognition from others we cannot recognize ourselves, or more complexly, it is only in negotiation with others that our sense of self can emerge” (p. 209). To feel at home or to feel safe in a space, one must feel seen, that is to have others “notice the distinct mode of being in the

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world, which is central to our sense of ourselves, and to find that mode of being a legitimate and valuable one” (p. 210). As teachers, then, it is of the utmost importance that we foster this sense of recognition in our learning spaces. However, bills and legislation like the “Don’t Say Gay” bill hinder teachers’ abilities to make their students feel seen because these bills determine which identities are acceptable and appropriate for representation within the walls of the school. Members of the LGBTQI+ community and those enacting non-conforming gender performances are cast as ‘others.’ With their voices silenced and their existence seemingly erased, these individuals are left to yearn for a sense of home in their learning spaces.

Despite the hurdles placed in front of educators by those who wish to further silence marginalized voices, there exist opportunities within our learning spaces to make the young people we work alongside feel at home. Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2016) examine pedagogical matters related to interrupting heteronormativity and dealing with sexual minority issues in elementary school classrooms. Even on pedagogically precarious terrain, Janice, a queer identifying female teacher, strategically finds ways to open conversations about same-sex families/relationships and expressions of gender that are non-normative in her classroom amidst her personal fears and vulnerabilities as a queer woman. Martino and Cumming-Potvin note that “[Janice] spoke of being “strategic” in her pedagogical approach in drawing on student comments, such as “you’re so gay,” to open up conversations about homophobia and to build knowledge about the reality of same-sex desire, and to introduce her students to both its recognizability and avowal (p. 817). From these conversations, Janice introduced LGBTQ-themed texts to “enact a queer and trans-infused curriculum” (p. 824). Despite her personal fears and vulnerabilities “as an open lesbian teacher in a potentially charged anti-gay context fueled by a specific form of religiously motivated homophobia” (p. 816), Janice enacted a curriculum in

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which she created space for her own stories of identity as well as creating space for her students' diverse experiences with gender and sexuality.

The resources that we, as teachers, choose to bring into our classrooms either affirm and celebrate the experiences of diverse and marginalized communities or they exclude and silence those voices. The resources we include have the potential to make the young people in our learning spaces feel seen and valued, but they also have the potential to engage young people in critical thinking about normative social structures. Paterson (2018) explains “The use of anti-oppressive storybooks in the classroom may additionally have a ripple effect of sorts, in which children who read them in the classroom may start engaging in a process of interpretation and reflection of social justice issues with themselves, friends, and family members” (p. 370). Narratives that resist or reinterpret normative discourses of gender and sexuality open the imaginative space for the composition of stories to live by of greater gender fluidity and, hopefully, validate the experiences of those trying to find a sense of belonging with their gender enactment. As teachers, our classroom resources are critically important because they demonstrate whose voices are worthy, and whose stories are worthy of being listened to.

With such an important role to play in the classroom, it is essential that teachers are taught to be reflective, anti-oppressive educators. Thinking broadly, then, the goal, “is to create teacher education spaces for helping teachers compose stories to live by that will allow them to shift who they are and are becoming as they are more attentive to shifting social contexts, to children's, youths' and families' lives, as well as to shifting subject matter” (Clandinin et al., 2009, p. 146). As the educational landscape is constantly in flux, pre-service and in-service teachers must remain attentive to these shifts so that they may critically address issues of social justice as they arise. Based on their own research, Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2016) “point to the need for



both pre-service and in-service teachers to be introduced to important knowledges and theories that can provide them with analytic frameworks for critically reflecting on issues of gender expression and sexuality in both their own lives and in the lives of their students” (p. 824).

Considering this in terms of masculinity on the school landscape, I wonder how teachers might open the imaginative space in their classrooms to help adolescent males develop fluid stories to live by that remain attentive to the shifting social landscapes of gender? It is my hope that the opening up of these imaginative spaces in our classrooms might allow more boys to feel comfortable and safe co-composing narratives of positive, adaptable adolescent masculinities.

### **Narrative Thread: The Transformational Paradigm**

When I asked Justin to reflect on the process of co-constructing field texts, and whether or not he thought he would continue to think about the topics we had discussed during our time alongside one another, he seemed hesitant, and stated, “partially, yes” (Justin, Research Conversation, November 28, 2021). He left it at that. There was a pause of silence between us and I, too, chose to leave it at that. We moved on to a different topic of conversation. But this moment created tension for me because it was bumping up against the stories I told myself about what *successful* research looked like. Initially, I felt inclined to exclude this moment from my final research text because I felt it proved that I failed to do what I had set out to do. The stories I told myself about successful research, most importantly, were typified by a visibly transformative experience for the participants. I longed for a *happily ever after* moment or, perhaps, tidy, straight-forward proof that this research had made a difference for my participants. I was tempted to smooth out the story. About this tendency towards simplification, Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) state that “almost all of us—it is almost unimaginable that we could not—come to narrative inquiries with various versions of formalistic and reductionistic histories of

inquiry...we are forever struggling with personal tensions as we pursue narrative inquiry” (p. 58). Rather than exclude this moment from the final text, I opted to sit with the tensions and see what insight could be elicited.

While it is human nature that drives us toward a reductionistic narrative, simplified and tidy, our role as narrative inquirers is to keep the door open for the *messy*. Huber and Clandinin (2002), note that “narrative inquiry was messy and emergent, often creating, as Eisner wrote, a collage rather than the ‘construction of a building’” (Eisner, 1991, as cited in Huber & Clandinin, 2002, p. 787). In this way, the narrative inquiry leads and we, as narrative inquirers, follow as best we can. Bumping spaces can be points for further inquiry. When attending to tension, Clandinin (2013) explains that *conflicting* and *competing stories* may emerge and that, “these narrative ways of understanding...that do not smooth out tension,” (p. 66) enable the narrative inquirer to continue their inquiry into their interactions and experiences. By attending to the tension, rather than smoothing it out, I enabled my inquiry to continue.

While sitting with the tensions I had experienced in that moment, I determined that the outcome of this research cannot be dichotomized in black and white, nor as success and failure, despite what the reductionist voice in my head says. As a teacher, I know that we cannot force change. All we can do is open the door to learning, share our sense of wonder and hope that we have done enough to inspire further learning. The rest is up to the individuals we work and learn alongside. I wondered, then, how could I reframe this moment of tension to find a sense of satisfaction or peace with the research that had been conducted? As Dewey (1938) notes “every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the grounds of what it moves toward and into” (p. 38) The opening of a greater space for reduced gender inequalities moves us towards a more just and equitable society—the pursuit of which has value in its own right.

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I have spent a long time wondering what Justin may go on to do, particularly with regards to the kind of man he will go on to be. He is a young adolescent and the migration to high school is a period of significant growth and adaptation. While this research may not feel profound or relevant for him in this present moment, my hope is that it helped him realize the importance of listening to and telling stories as he explores his relationship to masculinity. Polkinghorne (1988) states that

The realization of self as a narrative in process serves to gather together what one has been, in order to imagine what one will be, and to judge whether this is what one wants to become. Life is not merely a story text: life is lived, and the story is told... The story about life is open to editing and revision. It can be changed. (p. 154)

I have been altered by this experience. Some changes feel blatant and easily recognizable. Others, I might never acknowledge or realize. In this same way, Justin and Griffin have also been altered. As we exit this narrative inquiry, it is with the knowledge that we have worked to open the imaginative space regarding positive masculinities and as we move forward into whatever comes next, we are continuously open to editing and revision.

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