

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

What is masculinity in a contemporary Australian context?

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(Steven Litherland)**Abstract**

Background: Social norms around gender have been rapidly changing around the world. As a psychological variable, “masculinity” may be at a “critical juncture” in Australia where old definitions are now open to challenge and where new and more useful definitions may be necessary. **Methods:** The present exploratory study investigated the meaning(s) of masculinity in a contemporary setting with data derived from semi-structured interviews with 39 adult Australian citizens or permanent residents for whom issues of masculinity likely resonated. The present study employed a qualitative methodology with thematic analysis used to examine contemporary accounts of masculinity among 39 participants (18 males, 15 females and 6 non-binary) aged between 21 and 74 years (Mean Age = 36.1 years, Standard Deviation = 17.18) and recruited from a large capital city of Melbourne and a regional city of Geelong. **Results:** Thematic analysis identified three broad themes, namely (1) “Physical and Performative”, whereby physicality was important in contemporary versions of what is masculine, with masculinity also typically deemed a performance or persona; (2) “Prosocial Masculinity”, in that it now incorporates mostly positive attributes; and (3) Is “Evolving” from old stereotypes usually seen as dysfunctional to attributes now viewed as essentially human qualities. **Conclusions:** The present findings suggest there exists a “myriad of masculinities” that are largely performative with characteristics once labelled as “masculine” no longer viewed as gendered phenomena. For some interviewees, the label of masculinity is outdated, playing little to no role in their lives. The concept of masculinity in Australia, or at least in this sample, appears in transition, with the present findings suggesting that it is indeed at a “critical juncture” with new meanings emerging and where new and more useful concepts may need to be considered.

Keywords

Masculinity; Multiple masculinities; Masculine; Prosocial masculinity; Evolving; Performative; Australian context

1. Introduction

Researchers continue to struggle finding adequate ways to understand, conceptualize and measure masculinity that are both culturally sensitive and universally accepted [1]. Researchers have failed to define masculinity as a psychological construct in related studies despite the fact so many instruments have been developed to measure it [2]. The lack of conceptual clarity around masculinity supports the need for further research, although such an examination can be difficult given each individual forms a “calculus” for assessing, integrating, and regulating information about his or herself as a gendered being [2–4].

It has been suggested that from a “cultural construction of masculinity perspective”, men in Western societies are educated in how to be masculine, with these lessons emphasising strength, emotional control, self-reliance and aggression [3, 5, 6]. Further, it has been argued that regardless of era, race,

ethnicity or cultural upbringing, there remain three universalized roles to which men must adhere and or achieve, in order, to meet the “socio-cultural” status as men, namely, to provide, procreate and protect (or act as warrior) [7]. The concept of “hegemonic masculinity” has also received significant attention and has typically been applied using mostly negative characteristics which depict men as unemotional, non-nurturing, dispassionate and aggressive with these seen largely as the causes of criminality [8].

It has been argued there are several important limitations in the literature on masculinity and violence, much of which involves male aggression against women, including a failure to address why most men do not perpetrate such violence [1, 5]. Moreover, “feminist” and “gender role socialization” theories cannot adequately explain why it is that men can be exposed to the same dominant cultural norms with respect to masculinity yet differ so markedly with respect to aggression and or violence [9].

1.1 Is masculinity performative?

A widely accepted view is that masculinity is a performative expression of gender [10, 11], with the “doing” of gender appearing both situational and interactional [12]. Thus, it can mean different things at different times to different people [13, 14]. Such performances are conducive to the display of multiple and often contradictory aspects of the self, the result of which is a significant degree of “haziness” around the making of these many masculinities [15]. Indeed, it has been noted that we can all tailor-make versions of masculinity to suit ourselves and those around us, meaning expression of such performances are fluid, ever-evolving and dependent on the setting while also adapting as we age [16, 17]. In this sense, it is possible to define “a thousand and one” potential variations of what is considered masculine [8]. It has been argued that if we are to comprehend and or predict the likely conditions under which masculinity is “performed” we must dig deeper into the contextual factors that can influence subsequent behaviours, as in keeping with a functional and pragmatic perspective, masculinity may not be “anything”, instead its meanings could depend upon the way it is used and its consequences [18]. Until such time, it is noted that there exists very little evidence that the construct of masculinity and related incarnations have been demonstrated to influence male behaviour in any meaningful way [19].

1.2 Multiple masculinities

The challenge of identifying what is masculine has been a source of frustration for more than a century with Freud writing “...in human beings, pure masculinity or femininity is not to be found in either a psychological or biological sense. Every individual on the contrary displays a mixture of the character traits...and he shows a combination of activity and passivity, whether, or not these character traits tally with his biological ones” [20]. Indeed, it has been noted that masculinity remains a “fuzzy” concept given men are now plural with the codes of the masculine multiplied after substantial shifts and because they are used in individualized ways [15, 21]. These “masculinities” have multiple meanings and vary significantly over time and across contexts, with differences also observed with respect to social roles and social groups [22, 23]. Masculinities can relate to what individuals believe about themselves and others and can vary depending on situational cues and the nature of social interactions as well as broader ecological influences on groups and societies [22]. Within the scope of “multiple masculinities”, it is now implied that while often related to the male body or men, they can now also transcend such classification, available to all, regardless of biological sex [22]. This accessibility has evoked an anti-traditional masculinity to emerge in contemporary discourse [23, 24], adding to the confusion over what is meant by the term masculinity and indeed, when and how it should be applied. It is therefore important to examine these potential variations to keep contemporary analysis dynamic.

Several reviews and critiques of masculinity call for subtle approaches to aid our understanding of the contingent and contextual factors within the lives of men with the notion of a “crisis in masculinity” evolving from doubts over its

meaning in contemporary contexts given the many changes evident in social values which means that old definitions no longer work and new definitions are yet to be established [25]. These re-definitions are required as are new approaches to the measurement of masculinity. Indeed, among the criticisms of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is it now appears both undermined and outdated given in many cultures men no longer feel compelled to act in hyper-masculine ways to affirm their masculinity while also being able to engage in behaviours once deemed feminine without being perceived as weak or gay [21, 26]. Further, it has been noted that younger people now explore their gender in different ways with the emergence of more inclusive and less homophobic expressions of masculinity [26].

1.3 Masculinity in an Australian context

It has previously been argued that Australian hegemonic masculinity is centred on stereotypical images of strong, white men who have featured in local mythology including being convicts and bushrangers, lifeguards as well as explorers, all of whom could be linked with the processes of “settler colonialism, dependent industrialization and contemporary globalization” [27]. However, there is emerging evidence suggesting changes to how masculinity is perceived and enacted in a contemporary Australian context. Indeed, a recent qualitative study among a small sample of Australian men (n = 8), found participants distanced themselves from prevailing stereotypes of a heavy drinking sports fan that treats women as sexual objects while avoiding the expression of emotions and valuing strength, toughness, and dominance [28]. Further, participants claimed to embrace more “softer” masculinities in their personal and professional lives, including aspects of “care” for others [28]. Some of the participants acknowledged more progressive attitudes which valued intellect over violence and domination with some also recognising the importance of physicality in that they invested significantly in their bodies, trying to shape the hard and muscular physiques typically expected of young men in a contemporary Australian context [28].

Quantitative research reinforces aspects of these narratives with an anonymous voluntary online survey of Australian construction workers affirming the potential shifts taking place in our understanding of masculinity [26]. It was found that construction workers in Australia were not highly homophobic, nor did they significantly endorse restrictive emotionality or male dominance with the authors concluding that this sample may be more inclusive and less hegemonic than previously argued [26]. These findings indicate potential shifts occurring in our understanding of masculinity in Australia and require replication in different samples of males, females and those who identify as neither (non-binary) given all may have unique insights into what is masculine and the role, if any, that this often-elusive construct plays in their own lives. Understanding these potential changes may also inform researchers of the most appropriate quantitative scales to employ among Australian samples and or inspire the creation of new measures that better suit local ideologies.

1.4 Research question

As a construct, masculinity remains elusive yet is routinely measured and theorized to be a relatively static construct that exerts a significant influence on subsequent behaviour, despite a common assertion that it typically means different things to different people in different settings and situations [29–31]. To address the dearth of research among Australian samples and to better understand if typical approaches to the study and measurement of masculinity still resonate, the present study examined the following question, “What is masculinity in a contemporary Australian context?”

Qualitative research designs enable multiple perspectives and provide greater equality between interviewer and interviewee in relation to ideologies inherent in the construction of masculinity while also being a voice to culturally diverse groups such as those identifying as non-binary (neither male nor female) in respect to gender identification [32] with a number, of non-binary participants included in the present analysis. It is argued researchers may benefit from allowing every individual, regardless of gender identity, to discover and determine what masculinity means to them by posing questions such as “What do you mean by masculinity?” [2]. The current study utilised such an approach given the likely “variability” in both meaning and performance of many masculinities and thus was best suited to qualitative methods [33]. Indeed, qualitative inquiry is also useful in the development of theory and item generation for subsequent quantitative scales [32], and with respect to masculinity in a contemporary Australian context, there is a need for both new theory and measures.

2. Methods

The current exploratory qualitative study was designed to investigate what constitutes masculinity in a contemporary Australian context among a sample of males, females and those who identify as neither in order, to examine the nature of any changes to the attributes assigned to the masculine, which to date has received little attention. Qualitative research is appropriate when seeking to understand more about complex constructs [32], such as the meaning of masculinity given the likely variability in interpretations of, and behaviours associated with the masculine [33].

Data was derived from semi-structured interviews lasting between 20 minutes to one hour with the final sample comprising 39 adult Australian citizens or permanent residents (Mean Age = 36.1 years, SD = 17.18) aged between 21 and 74 years with 18 males, 15 females and 6 who identified as neither (non-binary). After providing informed consent, participants answered a series of demographics-related items (see Table 1). While not a representative sample, substantial variations in age, backgrounds, education, occupations and experiences with gender were observed. Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HEAG_H12_2017).

Participants were recruited via word-of-mouth and social media posts. Snowballing techniques were also used with some reliance on having participants nominate others for subsequent participation. Approximately half of the interviews

were conducted face-to-face at Deakin University or at the participant’s home or residence with the remainder conducted via phone given restrictions imposed during the covid-19 pandemic. Interviews were recorded on iPhones or iPads with permission received prior to any recordings. Interviews were conducted between 2017 and 2021 by three researchers (2 females, 1 male).

Participants were informed of the broader purpose of the study via the following statement: “The purpose of the study is to get your perspective on gender norms in Australia. “Gender norms” is a term that refers to how we expect men and women to act and think. We would like to talk about your beliefs about gender norms in Australia and about your experiences with gender norms”. The interview schedule for the semi-structured interviews relied on a set of nine questions (see **Supplementary material**).

All interviews were transcribed “verbatim” [34] largely by student researchers before a fellow researcher listened to the audio of the interview in order, to double check the accuracy of each transcription. If the original transcription contained many errors and or omissions, then the transcription process would be re-done by more senior researchers. “Inductive” thematic analysis identified significant themes with analysis driven by the data without a pre-existing framework for coding, allowing the process to evolve organically [34]. All sections referencing masculinity were coded and after a thorough revision process, significant themes were identified and defined before a second researcher undertook a similar coding process on 9 (23.1%) randomly selected transcriptions. After double coding was completed, and similar themes confirmed, the most compelling extracts were selected [34] to best answer the question “what is masculinity in a contemporary Australian context?”

3. Results

Among a sample recruited from a large capital city of Melbourne and a regional city of Geelong, three recurring themes were identified in relation to the meaning(s) of masculinity in a contemporary Australian context; namely, (1) “Physical and Performative”, in that masculinity is physical as much as psychological and typically a persona or façade one adopts that is context-dependent and enacted differently in private as opposed to public spaces; (2) “Prosocial Masculinity” in that contemporary masculinities incorporate many positive attributes that can benefit the self and others; and (3) “Evolving”, in that the construct is changing significantly, moving away from the old, well-worn stereotypes that typically described masculinity as a collection of dysfunctional characteristics. As a result of this evolution masculinity is becoming increasingly difficult to define which casts doubt on its usefulness as a meaningful construct predicting behaviours with serious consequences.

3.1 Physical and performative

Physicality was often considered as, if not more, important than the psychological in contemporary interpretations of the masculine.

John (male, partnered, 36): “...you see a big six-foot-three fella with a shaved head, covered in tattoos working behind a

TABLE 1. Participants' demographic information.

Pseudonym	Age (yr)	Gender	Education	Relationship Status	Current/Most Recent Occupation
Allen	24	Male	Year 12	Single	Car Detailer
Carol	27	Female	University	In a committed relationship	School Teacher
Chad	53	Male	Year 10	Married	Truck Driver
Dennis	70	Male	TAFE	Married	Retired (Stay-at-Home-Father/Storeman)
Eloise	24	Female	University	Married	Employment Consultant
Gary	42	Male	TAFE	Married	Train Co-Ordinator
Jess	27	Female	Year 10	In a committed relationship	Administrator
Josie	25	Female	TAFE	Single	Employment Consultant
Jacinta	66	Female	TAFE	Married	Community Support Officer
Karen	60	Female	University	Married	Research Administration Officer
Kelvin	59	Male	TAFE	In a committed relationship	Horticulture-Small Business Owner
Ken	24	Male	University	Single	Marketing
Mark	23	Male	TAFE	Single	Plumber
Mick	24	Male	TAFE	Single	Chef
Melissa	23	Female	University	In a committed relationship	Student/Waitress
Neve	44	Female	University	In a committed relationship	Research Fellow-Public Health
Penny	27	Female	University	In a committed relationship	Student/Hospitality
Rita	27	Non-Binary	University	In a committed relationship	Online Education
Reg	68	Male	Year 10	Married	Retired (Railway Worker)
Shilo	43	Non-Binary	TAFE	Single	Factory Worker
Terri	27	Female	University	Single	Client Care Advisor
Zoe	22	Female	University	Single	Student/Waitress
Mali	23	Non-Binary	University	Single	Writer
Kel	21	Male	University	Single	Forklift Driver
Missy	23	Female	University	In a committed relationship	Student
Joey	21	Non-Binary	Year 12	In a casual relationship	Arts
Simon	32	Male	TAFE	In a casual relationship	Council Worker
Nick	25	Male	TAFE	In a committed relationship	Business Manager
Cat	21	Non-Binary	TAFE	In a committed relationship	Kitchen Hand
Kieran	29	Non-Binary	University	Single	Disability Support Worker
Nigel	74	Male	University	Married	Retired (Social Scientist)
Casey	21	Male	University	In a committed relationship	Mental Health Support Worker
Phil	72	Male	University	Married	Retired (Academic)
Serena	30	Female	University	Separated	Education Support
Mal	22	Male	University	In a committed relationship	Student/Kitchen Hand
Des	50	Male	University	Married	School Teacher/Tradesman
Kerrie	48	Female	University	Married	School Teacher
John	36	Male	Business College	In a committed relationship	Sales/Spare Parts
Tasmin	21	Female	University	In a casual relationship	Cashier

TAFE: Technical and Further Education.

concrete truck and think yeah, there's a masculine fella".

Eloise (female, married, 24): *"...masculinity is you know, that big, tall guy that's coming in, you know he's more muscular, he could move mountains, that's what you need to be..."*.

Jacinta (female, married, 66): *"It's a physical look...I'm looking at his physique"*.

Kieran (non-binary, single, 29): *"I guess the clothes I wear, um, and now that I have facial hair...you have to express*

yourself physically".

Karen (female, married, 60): "...well they like to have a moustache or a beard...that's a fairly masculine look isn't it".

In addition to one's height, physique and presence of facial hair, physical roles were also often seen as exemplars of the masculine, with references to firefighters and "tradies" (i.e., construction workers) while associations were also drawn to certain types of activities.

Nick (male, partnered, 25): "Yeah, like the wilderness you know, I guess that whole vibe...it's the type of landscape that the word masculinity, you know like you go into the wilderness and you chop lumber and hunt deer".

Penny (female, partnered, 27): "...chopping wood...yeah, I think chopping wood's very masculine because you're using brute force to smash something".

In accordance with physicality, masculinity was considered largely performative, being a persona or façade that one adopts that is context-dependent and enacted differently in private as opposed to public spaces.

Mali (non-binary, single, 23): "...when I'm feeling masculine it feels like I'm taking up space in a different way and it mainly comes out when I'm around other people and it has, something to do with the way I'm interacting with them...".

Cat (non-binary, partnered, 21): "...it's a lot more sort of common for people in my age group to play around with masculinity...it's a lot less rigid in terms of you were born this way, you will behave this way and identify this way".

Penny (female, partnered, 27): "...yeah, it's totally relative to your surroundings as well...being masculine you know, of course it varies depending on where you are in the world".

Gary (male, married, 42): "Yeah, I believe so, yeah and the roles can change depending on what the circumstances...um, today, I'm just as masculine as I was yesterday but I've done three loads of washing, I've taken the little one to swimming and we've been out for coffee and a few other bits and pieces you know so, doesn't make me more feminine but I suppose some people might see that as feminine type roles but we've got a household that takes two to keep it".

3.2 Prosocial masculinity

For many participants, masculinity was a prosocial concept, with many positive features at the core of contemporary versions. The masculine are no longer "over-powering" decision makers, especially within family units, but rather seek to reassure, collaborate, inspire self-sufficiency and serve as a "rock", especially in respect to "fatherhood". Also valued were, leadership, guidance, a willingness to lend a hand in times of adversity and a healthy degree of "softness".

Chad (male, married, 53): "...a man looking after his family, kids, wife...support them, yep, that's a man, a strong man who's there when the chips are down, he's the backbone (of the family)".

Simon (male, partnered, 32): "I mean you can be masculine and be kind and you can be masculine and not be so, domineering, because there's nothing wrong with being a man and masculine and having a sense of kindness and that sort of thing".

Des (male, married, 50): "...it's (masculinity) actually, be-

ing very, very soft. It's being strong, quiet, soft and keeping a sense of aura and peace around us".

Nigel (male, married, 74): "Protective, very yeah, I'd say that's a strong word, protective...if there's anything about being male and protective of your family, your daughters, your sons".

Care giving was also another powerful symbol.

Mick (male, single, 24): "...someone that can look after themselves and people he cares about".

Shilo (non-binary, single, 43): "I think saying men as being able to be empathetic, to be care-givers, to be compassionate, hmm...I think it's becoming more acceptable".

Some associations were still drawn between masculinity and "toxic" effects such as aggression and emotional constraint.

Nigel (male, married, 74): "Many may see masculinity as negative because they're associating it with aggression".

Joey (non-binary, partnered, 21): "Like toxic masculinity usually results in violence whereas toxic femininity is like more psychological".

Nick (male, partnered, 25): "...emotionally in the dark I would say, not very in touch with their feelings and emotions".

Jess (female, partnered, 27): "Because masculine is linked to men and men have a very high suicide rate and as far as I know the majority of it is them not reaching out and expressing themselves because then it would not be man-like and the only other word that ties that is masculinity...it always comes back to being masculine, there is nothing else".

However, such factors were not a feature of most narratives with a broader acknowledgement that aggression and or emotional restraint were now features of an insecure identity.

Des (male, married, 50): "...that's not real masculinity, that's what a hyper-broken masculinity...it's, it's what we associate with masculinity, but it's not really what being a male is".

3.3 Evolving

For many, the very concept of masculinity is now open to challenge and or even obsolete.

Serena (female, separated, 30): "...just the idea of having to categorise ourselves as masculine or feminine is probably part of the problem to begin with".

Jacinta (female, married, 66): "...so I think that's a horrible word actually, masculine...thinking about it now, masculinity and femininity, I mean they're both outdated aren't they, these words? ...because the genders are a lot more blended now...I see it as being a lot different now, men will happily go and do the shopping and quite happily do the ironing and the cooking and the cleaning".

Mali (non-binary, single, 23): "...they (masculinity and femininity) feed into each other and people no matter what their gender is, and where they sit on the spectrum of gender they can exhibit both of these qualities...because these are human qualities we are talking about".

Carol (female, partnered, 27): "...it's fluid and changing and masculinity is no longer specific to one sex or the other...yeah, cos from my point of view everybody has both qualities".

Nigel (male, married, 74): "Well I think things have shifted since the time I was 20 years old to a 74-year-old...I think

masculinity has become a bit par se...I don't even think of it as a particular set of attributes".

The evolution described by participants with respect to masculinity has made it increasingly difficult to define the construct in a contemporary Australian context, no longer perceived to be a set of largely dysfunctional characteristics typically assigned to 50% of the population.

Simon (male, partnered, 32): *"Just the fact, you know, when you really think about it, so vague and so intersectional, like I said, it's just you know, there's no true traits or set of traits to really define masculinity".*

Penny (female, partnered, 27): *"...like it's not you're either masculine or feminine, there's a thousand different grades of gender identification between them...ah, well it's hard because I honestly don't think there are masculine, feminine characteristics".*

Kerrie (female, married, 48): *"What does that even mean? What does the construct even mean now, particularly given people who are gay, people who are non-binary, people who are transitioning, people that don't want to be defined by their genitalia, they don't want to be defined by a label such as to be feminine, to be masculine and I think, yeah, I'm really, I think it's a good thing that we're evolving as a society and not pinning down according to a label really".*

Mali (non-binary, single, 23): *"...when you sit down and think about them, it's really hard to put your finger on...yeah, I think we, our definitions, of our collective definitions of what a masculine person is or what these qualities are, they don't exist".*

4. Discussion

The current exploratory study examined the meaning(s) of masculinity in a contemporary Australian context with participants recruited from the capital city of Melbourne and regional city of Geelong. Three recurring themes emerged from the data, namely; (1) "Physical and Performative" in that physicality was important in descriptions of the masculine with masculinity often seen as a performance, persona or façade that is context-dependent; (2) "Prosocial Masculinity" in that the construct now comprises many positive attributes, and (3) "Evolving" in that masculinity is transitioning away from old, well-worn stereotypes which has, by extension, made defining the concept increasingly difficult.

The diversity in descriptions suggests there is no universal, all-encompassing masculinity but rather there now exists "multiple masculinities" [10, 21, 25, 30]. Further, many of the traits or characteristics once thought to be gendered phenomena are understood by this Australian sample to be essentially just human qualities, available to all regardless of gender identification, casting doubt on the utility of "supposed" traditional masculinity factors in the prediction of serious behaviours and outcomes.

4.1 Physical and performative

A strong narrative emerged suggesting masculinity was as much, if not more, physical than psychological, with a person's physique, attributes, and activities a regular feature within

participants' descriptions of the masculine as was the presence of facial hair. This accords with previous research indicating beards can enhance men's apparent age, social dominance and aggressiveness while also being associated with feelings of masculinity and endorsement of pre-conceived gender roles [35–38]. The importance of masculinized features such as facial hair may reflect its influence on socio-sexual attributes recognised by females with beardedness potentially thought representative of fathers more likely to both protect and invest in offspring while also serving as a sign of good genes and sexual maturity [37, 38]. As for other males, facial hair may be a biological marker of potential advantages in inter-male fighting [38] which can enhance perceptions of masculinity.

An emphasis on physicality is unsurprising given in many Western cultures a physical sense of maleness is often central to interpretations of gender [39]. Indeed, during any first encounter men are generally appraised by prominent stereotypes associated with masculinity such as body types, physical features, and other specific signs of biological maleness [40]. The present findings may problematize treating masculinity as a psychological variable in isolation without consideration of the physical requirements potentially necessary in its construction. For instance, endorsement of some masculine norms may be inconsequential for many men if they do not possess the attributes necessary for their enactment. Further many men may be unable to attract the attention from females required to become a "playboy" or be promiscuous. Nor are all men who recognise "violence" as a masculine norm going to have the size or skill typically necessary to repeatedly engage in aggression, particularly against other males in public spaces. Adding to the complexity, some participants merely excluded many men from ever acquiring a masculine status if they do not first possess the prized, muscular physiques often associated with renowned athletes or action movie stars.

Similarly, participants also reported masculinity was largely performative, a persona or façade adopted to suit environmental and situational factors. Therefore, masculinity has many different scripts enacted in different ways and which can be re-written depending on the circumstances [41]. Thus, these scripts and subsequent behaviours can be adaptive in some settings and maladaptive in others with these variations often determining consequences [41]. The present findings, therefore, align with features of "role theory" which builds on Erving Goffman's (1959) contention that gender-related roles are performances typically dependent on the patterns presented during social interactions [42]. Thus, we are all social actors with various modes of "stage craft" implemented during everyday performances, meaning roles associated with being masculine are actively realized according to the social setting [42]. This results in contemporary masculinities being context-dependent with likely differences in private as opposed to public spaces, which aligns with reviews indicating these variations are a partial response to "gender pressure" rather than internal forces [15, 43]. These "gendered performances" can be highly problematic given most existing measures of masculinity-related constructs are not sensitive to contextual influences [19], meaning it may be problematic taking gender stereotypical behaviours at face value given they may contrast with how many individuals really feel about such actions

internally [15].

4.2 Prosocial masculinity

Many participants considered masculinity as an inherently positive concept which contrasts with many of the stereotypes often used to represent the masculine, most of which are dysfunctional. A man's willingness to sacrifice personal needs for dependents or risk their own safety in the service of others complemented additional prosocial qualities such as dependability, reliability, being supportive and protective of others. Thus, masculinity in a contemporary Australian context can be considered a nurturing concept.

In addition to traditional roles such as being the "provider" and "breadwinner", there is also a greater emphasis on care giving, compassion and nurturance in personal relationships, particularly with respect to "fatherhood" and as partners in the private sphere with a blend of old and new in respect to more "companionship-based masculinities" [15]. Engaged fathers are now celebrated with a man who cares for his children now seen as the "bigger bloke" comparative to a man who does not [14, 25, 44]. The role of "fatherhood" in shaping perceptions of the masculine is unsurprising given new and expectant parents, regardless of sex, have shown similar physiological responses to infant-related stimuli, with fathers often forming a "paternal bond" resembling mother-child attachment, especially when granted early and ongoing exposure to his offspring [29]. Further, when men become single parents or actively co-parent with a former partner, they can behave similarly to "conventional mothers" by encouraging their children equally, regardless of sex, while exhibiting similar interaction styles with their sons and daughters while avoiding the rigid stereotypes and the rough-and-tumble play often associated with traditional fathers [45]. Greater understanding and appreciation of such prosocial components to contemporary masculinities is deemed necessary given they provide modelling of highly prized qualities of human beings, irrespective of gender identification [19].

4.3 Evolving

For many of the people we spoke to, masculinity is a construct in transition. It is evolving from constructs describing a masculine Australian man as a heavy drinking, emotionally closed tough guy who treats women as sexual objects [28], towards "softer" versions embracing fatherhood and a greater openness emotionally with contemporary males willing to share their feelings within ever-widening social circles. Contemporary conceptualizations now allow for highly personalized versions of masculinity where individuals can embrace characteristics they feel reflect the masculine while not attaching great significance to those they do not possess [2]. In this sense, many participants appear to have attained "gender self-acceptance" in that they have relatively secure gender identities while not necessarily viewing it as a critical component to their broader identity as human beings [2]. The present findings also suggest the emerging association of positive attributes with contemporary masculinity which have typically been overlooked or dismissed as possible features. Importantly, the current data also reinforces the need to develop and use measures that include

more positive attributes among diverse Australian samples to evaluate how normative they are.

Interestingly, many in the current sample claimed masculinity played no, or only a minor, role in their lives with some suggestions the very concept is now outdated and unnecessary given many traits and attributes once considered gendered phenomena are now essentially just "human qualities". This supports previous findings that endorsement of traditional masculine behaviours, values and attitudes can be weak [29], with the many variations and ambiguities now available in the construction of a masculine identity continually being re-worked, re-imagined, and re-interpreted across different developmental phases [20].

Given the fluidity in contemporary masculinities where individuals can "channel-hop across versions of the masculine" [15], it is understandable that a number, of participants in the current investigation reported difficulty in describing a set of attributes or characteristics that determine who or what is masculine. By extension, these variations have made it difficult to adequately define masculinity which aligns with the view that the behaviours of men particularly are far too complex for any universal masculinity to be revealed [14, 30], and that these variations will ensure a lack of consensus as too exactly what masculinity is [1, 12]. This inherent complexity has, at times, led some to overlook that there appear greater observable differences among men and among women than between them with males, females and those who identify as neither reflecting unique gender identities and not the gender(s) of the other(s) [2].

More broadly, understanding or revealing the essence of masculinity is further complicated by a pattern observed at times during the interviews used for the present study. There were some participants who demonstrated a degree of cognitive dissonance by discussing certain features thought representative of masculinity, only to then later contend the construct had little resonance and was difficult, if not impossible, to define. This problematic pattern has been experienced by others using "discursive psychology" which treats masculinity not as an essence to be uncovered, but rather as a host of variable practices in relation to other forms of identity in certain cultural contexts [42]. This pattern does not lend itself to stability, instead inspiring participants to change positions rapidly and dynamically [42]. This is likely to ensure masculinity remains an elusive construct, with such issues potentially limiting scientific inquiry into its influence on subsequent behaviours given they inhibit efforts to reach a consensus as too what constitutes a suitable working definition [18]. In this respect, the present findings reinforce previous postulations asserting the need to identify new and potentially more useful concepts [40].

5. Limitations

The present sample was not representative which may limit generalizability to Australian adults. It was largely a convenience sample that was not stratified by age, ethnicity or other potentially influential demographics variables. However, the current sample was relatively diverse in terms of age, occupations, and backgrounds, meaning many of the

sentiments expressed would likely resonate in other Australian samples. It is also important to note that this study was not designed to determine the average Australian's understanding of masculinity but rather was an exploratory study seeking diverse views from a sample featuring those from both urban and rural/regional areas for whom the construct likely had some relevance.

Further, not all interviews were conducted in the same way with approximately half conducted face-to-face with the remainder undertaken via phone during the covid-19 pandemic given the restrictions of movement and contact imposed. The change in methodology may have resulted in some differences in responses, although significant contrasts were not immediately apparent during analysis. Finally, not all interviews were conducted by the same interviewer with 9 of the 39 interviews undertaken by two female researchers and the rest by one male researcher which may have resulted in subtle differences in the responses, although these were not apparent during analysis. Previous research has reported differences in the responses of male student participants in relation to gender and masculinities when interviewed by a male as opposed to a female researcher with the young adult male interviewees more open with the former and more, opaque, with the latter [46]. However, it was noted these differences may have been a consequence of other power dynamics which prevented rapport building given each of the researchers interviewed different samples with different features and thus, the researchers could not be certain the observed contrasts were the result of the respective interviewer's gender [46]. While cognizant of the potential influence exerted by the researcher's gender, it did not appear to be a significant factor in the present study with similar themes emerging across most interviews. Further, the potential problems associated with the genders of interviewer and interviewee, as well as other potential issues with respect to power dynamics may have been lessened in the current study given most interviews were conducted via phone due to covid-19 restrictions, meaning greater anonymity for the participant. Still, future research may benefit from ensuring gender symmetry between interviewer and interviewee. Also, researchers seeking to replicate or extend on the present findings may benefit from using a representative Australian sample stratified by gender, age, race, religion and other key demographics-related variables, in order, to generalise results.

6. Conclusions

There was significant diversity in contemporary accounts of masculinity in an Australian context. Many participants considered it to be based on the physical as much as the psychological while also being performative and prosocial with many of these views contrasting with the stereotypes typically used to define the masculine which suggests an evolution in how masculinity is now conceptualized. Importantly, many participants also felt the construct now lacks resonance and is outdated and unnecessary, casting doubt on its utility in the prediction of serious behavioural outcomes such as aggression and or violence given masculinity may not mean anything [23], leading to uncertainty as to the influence it actually exerts over and above more well-defined, easily measured and better

understood variables. Indeed, the present findings accord with theorizing that while there may be some agreement among some people on a particular definition of "masculinity" or "masculinities", it is unlikely such a definition will ever be fully agreed upon and will thus, always be contested and open to challenge [23].

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The datasets generated and or analysed during the current study are not publicly available as they are the property of Deakin University and all interviewees only provided consent for their data to be used by Deakin University and the named researchers and authors. The data may be made available by the corresponding author on reasonable request and if given permission by Deakin University.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

SL and PM—designed the research study, provided help and advice on the research and manuscript preparation. SL—performed the research, analysed the data and wrote the manuscript. SH—provided advice on manuscript preparation. All authors contributed to editorial changes in the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Approval for the study was granted by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HEAG_H12_2017). Informed consent was given prior to participation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at <https://oss.jomh.org/files/article/1895348843926437888/attachment/Supplementary%20material.docx>.

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