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COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH WITH A MUTUAL HELP ORGANIZATION FOR MEN ADDRESSING MASCULINITIES: CROSS CUTTING ISSUES AND THEMES

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ABSTRACT

Introduces the part of a special issue on men's groups that includes three studies conducted with the Mankind Project, a men's mutual help organization. Situates the articles within the history of the collaborative research partnership between the authors and the mutual help organization and in the literature on the health and social problems associated with the socialization of traditional masculinity. Directions for future research with mutual help groups for diverse men concerned about masculinities are suggested.

Keywords: self-help, community-based participatory research, Mankind Project, mutual help organizations

Men's normative socialization and its resulting impact on their masculinities and behavior have been implicated in a number of health and social problems such as suicide, incarceration, intimate partner violence, gun violence, and substance abuse (Connell, 1995; Courtenay, 2000; Kilmartin, 2009; Messerschmidt, 1993). Significant disparities exist between diverse groups of men with different racial/ethnic backgrounds, incomes, sexual orientations, ages, and other characteristics in these health outcomes and in the degree to which men are impacted by these social problems (e.g., Griffith, Metzl, & Gunter, 2011). These disparities and the contextual and structural forces underlying them must be considered in attempts

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to prevent and intervene in these problems. However, across contexts, approaches that engage men as gendered beings both directly and as bystanders to other men's behavior increasingly are advocated as ethical and effective (Davies, Shen-Miller, & Isacco, 2010; Mankowski & Maton, 2010; World Health Organization, 2007), including mutual help groups for men (Mankowski & Silvergleid, 1999-2000). The Mankind Project (MKP) is one such mutual help organization intended to engage interested men in addressing challenges they experience as gendered beings by providing peer support for reconceptualizing and transforming their conventional sense of masculinity (Anderson, Maton, Burke, Mankowski, & Stapleton, 2014; Burke, Maton, Anderson, Mankowski, & Silvergleid, 2003).

In this section of the special issue, the authors report findings from three studies completed during a nearly 20-year collaborative research relationship between the authors and the MKP. Two of the studies (Anderson et al., 2014; Mankowski, Maton, Burke, & Stephan, 2014) were conducted early in the collaboration, between 1996 and 1999, with the Greater Washington, DC Center of the MKP. The preliminary findings of these studies were shared throughout the MKP International at their national conferences, in organization newsletters, and at academic psychology and men's studies conferences. Leaders of the organization found the studies useful in further developing the introductory weekend training and I-Groups. The position of a national research coordinator was created in the organization to support the continued self-evaluation and improvement of the organization through ongoing research. This coordinator advocated with the organization to conduct an expansion of the initial evaluation study that was completed with the Greater Washington, DC center. This larger study would involve all of the regional centers across the nation and internationally in order to replicate and extend the findings from the local center to the larger organization. Between 2006 and 2009, survey data from approximately 1200 participants at 40 MKP centers were collected from throughout the United States and in Australia, Canada, and South Africa. Members at each center were trained by the research coordinator and members of the research team on how to administer surveys and return them for analysis to the national research coordinator. One of the goals was to build capacity within the organization to conduct independent self-evaluation research. Due to a variety of factors, discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article, this goal has been met with varying degrees of success across the centers. Some centers were able to implement the research protocols with a great deal of fidelity and maintain high response rates across the 2 year study; others were less successful. Consequently, in the current study (Maton, Mankowski, Anderson, Barton, Karp, & Ratjen, 2014), data from only the 12 centers with the highest response rates across the 2-year period of follow up surveys are analyzed, in an effort to minimize bias due to sample attrition.

Consistent with calls for community based participatory research models in mutual help (Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin, & Lord, 1998), this special issue is

jointly authored by MKP participants, participant-researchers, and researchers who are not participants in the MKP. The experiential reports presented in the preceding section are written by participants in the MKP. Several of the authors of the research studies reported in this section are both long-term, active participants in the MKP as well as researchers trained or working in academic settings during the time when the studies were completed. While the authors have not drawn formally on their participant observation in reporting this research, the experience of the researchers as participants in the organization has certainly benefitted the quality and validity of the research studies. These participant-researchers were especially capable of asking useful and relevant research questions; of earning the trust of the organization about the integrity and value of the research; of involving many other members of the organization in the research as both participants and survey administrators; of developing survey questions that had face validity and contextual relevance; of drawing on extensive practical knowledge of the organization to help interpret findings; and, finally, of sharing the knowledge from the research within the organization in ways that led it to be valued and utilized. Other members of the research team made unique contributions to the research specifically because they do not self-identify as men and/or they are not participants in the mutual help groups and other activities of the organization. These researchers brought sometimes different perspectives or theories (e.g., regarding the nature and origins of gender) to the research questions and interpretations to the analysis of the data. They asked naïve questions of participant-researchers that helped surface assumptions. Together, the balance of these insider and outsider perspectives increased the validity of the research and furthers an understanding of mutual help beyond the knowledge provided by either perspective alone. The contribution of both the experiential reports and the research studies presented in this special issue reflects such synthesis of knowledge.

Different from the descriptively rich personal stories of participants that comprise the first section of this special issue, collectively the studies demonstrate a systematic, replicable, and transparent approach toward the creation of knowledge about the process and outcomes of participation in a mutual help organization. Both sections contribute uniquely to an understanding of this mutual help organization and its participants. In the studies, a wide range of data sources were used to address questions about the group and organizational dynamics of the mutual help organization and about the impact of participation on a variety of dimensions of attitudes, beliefs, goals, and sense of well being. These included validated surveys of the participants before, during, and after their participation in the organization, historical records from the organizational representatives about individual participation and group life cycles (in addition, participant observations, interviews with individual participants, and surveys of participants' peers were utilized, though analyses of these data are not presented as part of the current studies).

Following Maton's call (1993) for multi-level analysis of mutual help groups to capture the transaction between individual participants and mutual help groups, the research reported in this special issue, taken together, spans multiple levels of analysis (i.e., individual, group, organizational) and follows each level across time (i.e., within persons, within groups, within the organization). Specifically, changes in participants' outcomes over time are analyzed (Anderson et al., 2014; Maton et al., 2014) and both the duration of individual participation and group survival (Mankowski et al., 2014) and changes over time in participation and group formation and survival within the organization are described (Mankowski et al., 2014). Certainly, however, more sophisticated models and methods of analyzing change over time could be fit to the data (e.g., ones that include a more sophisticated treatment of missing data and that account for the nesting of individuals within groups over time) in order to more precisely assess the success of the organization in achieving its goals for all men who self-select as participants.

It should also be noted that the research presented in this special issue builds upon and extends findings from earlier studies with the MKP. Previously, the authors have examined short term changes in men's attitudes, beliefs, and well-being within a single local center of the organization (Burke, Maton, Mankowski, & Anderson, 2010), and described the characteristics associated with I-Group survival using interviews with group representatives (Mankowski, Maton, Burke, Hoover, & Anderson, 2000). The current studies address some of the same questions, utilizing longer-term follow-up surveys, more sophisticated modeling of change (i.e., survival analysis, latent growth curve modeling), and/or larger, more representative groups of participants from multiple centers of the organization or missing data imputation.

To the extent that mutual help is seen as an alternative to professional care and remains largely unfunded and operated by non-professional volunteers, one recurring set of questions about mutual help groups concerns their viability over time. The first article titled "Group formation, participant retention, and group disbandment in a men's mutual help organization" contributes to this literature on the dynamic lifecycle of mutual help groups (Archibald, 2007; Maton, Leventhal, Madera, & Julien, 1989; Wituk, Shepherd, Warren, & Meissen, 2002; Zimmerman, Reischl, Seidman, Rappaport, Toro, & Salem, 1991). Reports from I-Group representatives about the dates of participation of members in the I-Group, dates of group formation, mergers and disbandment, and characteristics of the I-Group (e.g., meeting frequency, location, perceived effectiveness) were gathered to address several questions about the lifecycle of the groups and factors related to their longevity and survival. The research was aimed at providing a number of indices of the lifecycle of mutual help groups and members' participation, and factors related to these indices. Such information helps contribute to an understanding of mutual help organizations as dynamic entities, and how various contextual factors might be addressed by self-help advocates, policy makers, and others in order to contribute to their continued survival and development.

Participants and researchers have been characterized as having to some extent differing views about the relevance of outcome evaluation research to demonstrate the value of voluntary mutual help group participation (Humphreys, 2004). These differences reflect a conflict between conceptualizing self help as a voluntary, self-run organization versus a treatment program. The second article in this section, by Anderson et al. (2014) titled "Changes in conventional masculinity and psychological well-being among participants in a mutual help organization for men," can be seen as a merger of these perspectives by attempting to verify the MKP's own theory about how masculinity is damaging to men's well being and how participating in MKP's training weekend and mutual help groups leads to changes in masculinity and well being. Specifically, the authors assessed and found evidence that a construct that they refer to as conventional masculinity (i.e., adherence to masculine gender role norms and stereotypes) decreased over time and partly mediated changes in men's psychological well-being. These findings corroborate the organization's own understanding of how beneficial outcomes of participating in their men's mutual help groups occur among this self-selected population. Future studies of mutual help would do well to take up questions and assessments designed by participants in collaboration with participant-researchers in this manner (Nelson et al., 1998).

Research on the effectiveness of mutual help groups generally testifies to their effectiveness in addressing the concerns held by the people who attend them (Kyrouz & Humphreys, 1997). The third article in this section titled "Long-term changes among participants in a men's mutual-help organization" addresses whether the largely positive changes in a broad range of participant outcomes found in preliminary research with the Greater Washington, DC center are representative of participants in MKP International more generally. Specifically, Maton et al. (2014) analyzed possible changes from before participation in MKP up to 2 years later on participants' psychological well-being, social support, MKP-I related beliefs, gender role conflicts, and sexist attitudes toward women. The findings provide evidence that for a self-selected, largely White and well educated group of men facing challenges that many experience as related to their sense of masculinity, participation in the MKP mutual help organization was associated with positive changes in most of these outcomes, but not in their sexist attitudes toward women. With this important exception, the mutual help provided in MKP appears to provide a valuable adjunct or alternative setting to professional help for men who seek it. These outcomes should be viewed in light of data on men's lower rates of seeking professional help and healthcare utilization and their association with gender role stress and conflict (Mansfield, Addis, & Courtenay, 2005).

In sum, the articles in this section provide substantial evidence to demonstrate how the MKP as a mutual help organization provides a relatively accessible, stable source of peer support in which, on average, participants experience positive changes in a wide range of social psychological and well-being outcomes, the latter of

which are mediated by changes in their adherence to conventional masculinity. It remains a puzzle as to why the research found participation to be associated with a decrease in conventional masculinity, markers of which have been associated with hostile attitudes toward women (O'Neil, 2008), but in a more representative sample we found low levels of sexist attitudes toward women but short-term increases therein. Critical analysis of the archetypal theory of gender underlying the MKP (Moore & Gillette, 1990), which views masculinity and femininity as separate essences, could generate some hypotheses about this dynamic.

Clearly, also, it is important to point out that the MKP is not for all men. The large majority of these self-selected men are White, heterosexual, with high levels of formal education, and prior experience in both professional counseling and mutual help groups—many characteristics that mark relative advantage in studies of health disparities among men. Further still, some of the men who begin participation in the organization do not continue beyond a few weeks and do not experience positive changes in their well-being or masculinity. The same holds true for the survival of some of the peer-led, mutual help groups (called I-Groups in MKP)—some disband after only a few months or less.

Thus, the findings of these studies stimulate useful directions for future research on men's mutual help groups. Due to space limitations, two will be described here; each article discusses additional possibilities. First, research should investigate further the nature of the fit between MKP mutual help groups and diverse men who may seek help for concerns associated with their being men or the influence of traditional masculinity in their lives. Why do some men who learn about MKP and other men's mutual help groups decide to participate while others do not? Second, as we continue to learn more about men as gendered beings and the connection between various masculinities and health and social problems, studies should examine how participation in various mutual help groups of men affects any relationship between men's well-being and their sexist attitudes and behavior. What kind of mutual help group structures and worldviews are associated with both decreased adherence to traditional masculinity and decreased sexist attitudes? With the accumulating evidence regarding the nature and scope of health and social problems linked to traditional masculinity and its socialization (e.g., Courtenay, 2000; Griffith et al., 2011; Kilmartin, 2009; Messerschmidt, 1993), the answers to these questions urgently call for discovery.

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