

Is there a crisis of
masculinity?



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Critically discuss the notion that there is a ‘ crisis of masculinity’?

The term ‘ masculinity’ has become undeniably ambiguous. Discussions about what is meant by the concept has become widespread, many believing the term ‘ masculinities’ to be a more prevalent term that reflects contemporary society; especially with regards to the diversity of masculinity today. There has been many studies that have taken place to determine whether or not masculinity is something that is innate or socially constructed; with psychologists and sociologists arguing the latter. During the last century, not only has society changed socially, politically and economically, but also how people perceive society; particularly in relation to the position of women. This has ultimately led to there being a ‘ knock-on’ effect and questions are thus raised in order to define what is really meant by being ‘ masculine’. Many sociologists, researchers and media outlets alike have argued that there is now a ‘ crisis of masculinity’. Within this essay, what is meant by the concept ‘ crisis of masculinity’ will be thoroughly explored, how it came to be and whether or not this is prevalent in contemporary society, as well as outlining any specific factors that have also arisen due to this notion.

Firstly, in order to look closely at the notion of there being a ‘ crisis of masculinity’, it is detrimental to start this essay by looking at what traditional masculinity is, as well as the coined term ‘ hegemonic masculinity’. John Benyon (2002) has stated that “ masculinity is always interpolated by cultural, historical and geographical location and in our time the combined influence of feminism and the gay movement has explored the conception of a uniform masculinity and even sexuality is no longer held to be fixed or

innate” (p1). Benyon connotes that masculinity has always been a fluid aspect of society, and also emphasises that society does and has stayed away from terms that were once deemed ‘ traditional’ due to a variety of factors. From looking at this fluid nature of ‘ masculinity’, an important question is still yet to be answered; what is meant by the concept ‘ masculinity’? By basic definition, the Oxford Dictionary defines the term ‘ masculinity’ as ‘ qualities or attributes regarded as characteristics of men, i. e. handsome, muscled, and driven, he’s prime example of masculinity’. This definition provides a very static and simplistic idea of what masculinity is, which is a complete contrast to what Benyon has stated in his research. An Australian sociologist, Raewyn Connell (2005), whom is most famous for her work on gender and was hugely influenced by Marxist sociologist Gramsci, states that the term ‘ hegemonic masculinity’ is defined as a practice that legitimises male domination and justifies female subordination. Theoretically, hegemonic masculinity is a term that proposes to explain how and why men have been able to maintain dominant social roles over women, as well as other gender identities which can be seen as being ‘ feminine’. Gramsci’s influence on this concept is irrefutable. Whilst Gramsci studied cultural hegemonic, which thus analyses the power relations among the social classes, it is clear the term ‘ hegemonic’ refers to the societal and cultural dynamics by means of which a particular social group claims and withstands a leading and dominant position in the social hierarchy. Nevertheless, hegemonic masculinity exemplifies a type of social organisation that has both been socially challenged and changed. As traditional masculinity has adapted to social change, it is argued that this has stirred the notion of a ‘ masculinity in crisis’.

Moreover, it has been put forward that a notion of a 'masculinity in crisis' has in fact developed. Researcher, McAllister (2010), explored how men are now attempting to search for a new role in this modern society; seeing fundamental changes in factors such as within the labour market as a source of strain and stress. Deindustrialisation and the replacement of manufacturing industries, such as factories, by technology has thus allowed more women to be able to enter the work force, removing that connotation and emphasis on physical strength and mentality. This new development has led to the male no longer taking on the dominant 'breadwinner' role, and allows the controlling of finances to be split within the household. This thus connotes that the crisis in itself has also been attributed to the questioning of male governance and female oppression, especially following the wave of feminism within society. Sociologist researcher MacInnes (1998) has argued that there has always been a crisis within masculinity, one way or another. Following on from this, Benyon (2002) suggests that masculinity and men are actually often integrated with one another, and what he advocates is that it is ambiguous whether it is in fact masculinity, men or even both in crisis. Benyon then makes the claim that this crisis is not something that has happened recently, in fact, is it something that has happened in numerous periods of time, even before the feminist movement. He states that these crises of masculinity throughout history is due to 'masculinities' own fluid nature and thus "crisis is constitutive of masculinity itself". Alternatively, Maguire (1995) has suggested that this notion of a crisis of masculinity is actually more concerned with men's social role and identity. Due to society changing, these uncertainties of what it means to be 'masculine' have thus manifested themselves in terms of violence, increase levels of suicide, as

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well as abusive behaviour towards them or others. Overall, this notion of there being a crisis of masculinity may not be a recent occurrence, however the effects this is now having on the contemporary male is detrimental in studying the crisis itself.

Furthermore, the use of the word 'crisis' implies a very negative effect that has arisen due to this notion. There have been numerous concerns expressed within the media, as well as within research studies, that men and boys are now falling behind and even failing within education, the labour markets and in relationships. Notably, due to the increased popularity of and references made referring to 'girl power' and feminism, men and masculinity has been side-lined which has led to numerous negative connotations arising due to the oppressive gold masculinity has had on society, especially over women. Within education it has become apparent that girls are now outperforming boys at every level of education, whether this is due to girls now having the access to education or from boys feeling that added pressure is uncertain. From a health perspective, more boys are now being diagnosed with mental health illnesses. Mac, Ghail and Hollywood (2012) have explained this recent phenomena as stating its due to boys having either 'too much' masculinity or 'not enough'.

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