

NEGOTIATED MASCULINITIES: POLISH AND US TRANS MEN ON SOCIAL AND PERSONAL ASPECTS OF MASCULINITY

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ABSTRACT: The paper is based on a qualitative research project carried out in Poland and the United States. It intends to compare the attitudes of trans men toward dominant notions of masculinity in their respective countries. Focusing on people who had been recognized as female at birth but whose experienced gender is male, the paper addresses their definitions of masculinity, attitudes toward accomplishing socially acknowledged patterns of maleness and re-defining their gender identity. For this purpose, the study compares the ways in which the research participants conceptualize dominant models of masculinity, their childhood socialization to locally and globally defined gender roles, the cultural context they grew up in, and its influence on negotiating one's own gender identity. As a result, conclusions from the study present a comparison of Polish and US trans men's efforts to negotiate personal and social identity in light of dominant masculine ideals (e.g., their potential reworking, acceptance, and rejection of various elements of those ideals and explore how alternative notions of masculinity shape different experiences of female-to-male transition in both countries.

KEYWORDS: trans masculinity, Poland, USA, hegemonic masculinity, identity, gender socialization

The knight is a man of blood and iron, a man familiar with the sight of smashed faces and the ragged stumps of lopped-off limbs; he is also a demure, almost a maidenlike, guest in hall, a gentle, modest, unobtrusive man. He is not a compromise or happy mean between ferocity and meekness; he is fierce to the nth and meek to the nth. (...) The man who combines both characters – the knight – is not a work of nature but of art; of that art which has human beings, instead of canvas or marble, for its medium. (Lewis 1986: 13-15)

Social studies on men and masculinities have undergone significant development during the past three decades, with the majority of literature being published in English (e.g. Connell 1995, 2016; Hearn 1992, 1998, 2015; Kimmel 1992, 2010, 2013; Gilmore 1990; Haywood and Mac an Ghail 2003; Anderson 2009; McCaughey 2012; Rosin 2012; Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Additionally, there is an increased focus on trans masculinities (e.g. Devor 1997; Cromwell 1999; Kotula 2002; Rubin 2003; Noble 2006, heinz¹ 2016), however, this area of masculinity studies remains under-investigated. In Polish social sciences, masculinity studies have emerged later (e.g. Arcimowicz 2003; Melosik 2006; Fuszara 2008; Kluczyńska 2009, 2017; Wojnicka 2011, 2016; Suwada and Plantin 2014, Suwada 2017; Śmieja 2016), and to a large extent refer to theories developed in the United States and other Anglophone countries. Also, in the Polish studies on men and masculinities, there is hardly any attention focused on the specificities of trans masculinities *per se* (e.g. Bieńkowska 2012: 132-149; Kłonkowska 2018).

Notions of masculinity among trans men may help us understand the socially acknowledged patterns and expectations of maleness, whether performed by cis or transmasculine people. Transgender persons, who develop their gender identities and gender performativity consciously – unlike those among us who had been socialized to their femininities and masculinities since infancy, and have embraced them to a large extent subconsciously – tell us more about our gendered selves. Being true “self-made-men”, trans men are in a unique position to concurrently embrace the socially uncontested concepts of masculinity and distance themselves from them. For the aforementioned reasons, this paper’s research study investigates the personal and social factors in constructions of masculinities among trans men. This article aims to present the interviewees’ efforts to meet the imposed social expectations to be recognized as male, their compensating for and theorizing on socially acknowledged attributes of maleness, and their negation of some male box features that they distance themselves from. It shows the efforts to strike a balance between expectations, possibilities and needs, thus working out their own masculinities: their negotiated masculinities that find a way to satisfy both: their personal attitudes and social notions of maleness.

Thus, to build a bridge between theories of masculinity that have evolved in the United States (along with other English-speaking countries representing the Western culture), and notions of masculinity commonly acknowledged in Poland, this research was designed to be a comparative study of both: US and Polish trans men’s percep-

¹ matthew heinz’s name and surname are written with lower case letters, accordingly to heinz’s wish.

tions and productions of masculinities.

METHODS

The methodology for this study has been inspired by grounded theory in its constructionist approach (Charmaz 2006). To allow the concepts gradually emerge from the data, without adopting any antecedent assumptions, I have collected 57 in-depth, intensive, semi-structured interviews among trans men: 30 interviews in Poland and 27 in the United States. No hypotheses had been put prior to data collection and analysis.

The respondents came from two different Polish voivodships and two other States: both from metropolitan cities and small towns. Additionally, in each country, I followed a few individuals in their everyday lives and during chosen activities related to the process of medical, legal, personal, and social transition. All Polish respondents identified within the same ethnical/racial group, while the US respondents were diverse in that respect, which reflected the relative ethnical/racial homogeneity of the Polish society and heterogeneity of the US society. The respondents originated from various age ranges and represented different levels of education, however people with a college degree/B.A., as well as persons in their 20s and early 30s composed the majority of research participants in both countries.

The research participants were recruited through the snowball sampling technique. Initial contacts were made thanks to the local NGOs and meeting groups supporting LGBT+ persons. The interviews collected in Poland were conducted in Polish with selected citations translated into English. All of the interviewees were informed of the scope and purpose of the study. All the interviews were recorded, with the consent of the research participants. I have personally collected, recorded, and transcribed all of the interviews, due to the fact that many of the research participants would not have felt secure about third-party access to the recordings. Each interview was done so privately, individually, and in a place chosen by the research participant.

Having followed the grounded theory approach when applying qualitative data analysis (Charmaz 2006), I used open coding as a basis for deriving axial and selective codes in order “to make comparisons and to identify any patterns” (Gibbs and Taylor 2010). It was a cross-case analysis. Being aware that the interaction between the researcher and participants “produces the data, and therefore the meanings that the researcher observes and defines” (Charmaz 1995: 35), I have paid particular attention to immerse myself - as a researcher - “in the data in a way that embeds the narrative of the participants in the final research outcome” (Mills, Bonner and Francis 2006: 31), and keep the participants’ voices present in the theoretical outcomes.

The names of the respondents have been changed. Of note is that some of the interview participants are cited more frequently than others. It was the author’s intentional choice, as those respondents concisely and aptly express thoughts representative for other interviewees who share their opinions.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Dominant Model of Masculinity

While discussing the social constructions of masculinities, all my respondents referred to the dominant notions of masculinity in their respective countries and their own attitudes towards it. However, the Polish respondents were more likely to talk about masculinity (as one dominant model),

Well, masculinity is masculinity... There are some features that are simply manly. It's not that all men are exactly the same, but this [masculinity] likens them to each other and makes them different from women. [Wojtek PL]

while the US respondents more often pertained to masculinities (as many concurrent models). The US research participants were paying particular attention to differences dependent on the person's racial or ethnical background:

I think there are a few models, and I think that is due to a different context (...). Masculinity is performed differently. Even as an American person, depending on, like, for example your race or depending on, for example your age. I think those are two biggest contributors in the ways, in which certain characteristics of masculinity manifest themselves or are being performed. [Roberto USA]

The lack of reference to racial/ethnical context in Polish respondents does not surprise, since Poland is in this regard a very homogenous country (GUS 2015). Among the US respondents, it was mostly members of minority groups who would particularly highlight the dependence of a notion of masculinity based upon one's family background.

I think that [the notion of masculinity] really depends family to family, or culture to culture in America. (...) I know mostly Hispanic families, that's what I am and where I grew up, that's mostly Hispanic. And some are different types, or ways... [Terry USA]

Yet, I found one thing especially surprising: even though the US respondents would indicate the diversity of masculinities, the descriptions they gave me – always referred to similar characteristics, encompassing strength (both physical and psychological), power, being non-emotional, being a breadwinner and a protector.

Men are expected to be... just like these big strong people and whether or not like those things manifest themselves through physical traits of being like a tall person or very strong or muscular person or through the way one conducts themselves, like interpersonally, (...) not showing any weakness. [Roberto USA]

The man is the one that (...) makes things easier for the rest of the family. Like the breadwinner. That's typical what I've seen. The man is the one who makes sure the house is taken care of and that the family has what they need. [Terry, USA]

They're supposed to be strong, supposed to be non-emotional, I guess that's the

main two [features], really. Like, you know, supposed to be the breadwinner, I guess. Strong and non-emotional. [Chuck USA]

But the declared diversity of masculinities and the homogeneity of the actual descriptions do not have to be perceived as a paradox. Maybe – as one of my respondents said:

I think it's different takes on a same model. Like it's the same general idea, but it might differ slightly depending on a culture or a family. [Terry, USA]

But there was another observation that I found more challenging: even though most Polish respondents claimed that there is basically one dominant model of masculinity, the descriptions of this “one model” that they gave me, did not seem to be fully compatible. Their characteristics of the dominant model of masculinity oscillated from a self-possessed protector and guardian; through an acquisitive, achieving, assertive leader; to a macho-like character, etc.

Strength, courage, loyalty, fight, spear, and sword. Some knight, a fighter. [Edward PL]

Protectors and guardians, providers – this is a bookish ideal [Bartek PL]

They [men] are more likely [than women] to be leaders. And people would listen to a man more likely than to a woman, men are more assertive... (...) [Men] can speak out for themselves, but not only themselves. [Marian PL]

When I think about masculinity, I think about power... maybe macho-like. Men are supposed to be strong, they shouldn't show weaknesses, (...) they should be ready to protect their women, it's something about the whole demeanor. [Andrzej PL]

At first, this left me puzzled: Was the diversity of descriptions simply a trait of culture, as is pointed out in the common Polish joke, which says that if two Polish people discuss something, at least three different opinions will appear? First of all, it could be that Polish people are aware of how homogenous (concerning ethnicity, religion, culture, etc.) their society is. Thus, they may assume that their opinion should be relatively representative for a general population (hence the idea that there is basically one dominant comprehension of masculinity). And yet, there may be more differences among perceived masculinity models, than they suspected (hence differences in descriptions given). However, hardly any evidence for this explanation came from the collected interviews.

Instead, analysis of the dominant masculinity models' conceptualizations given by the Polish respondents, indicated that despite the seemingly divergent models of masculinity they relied upon, my respondents were referencing similar core beliefs. Of note is that most of the Polish interviewees would also – just like the US respondents – mention strength (understood as both physical strength, and a feature of personality), power, a demeanour of protecting others, and not expressing emotions denoting weakness – as features linked to masculinity. Thus, it seems very likely that after all –

just as one of the interviewees has aptly expressed this – it is also just “different takes on a same model”.

Gender Norms in Childhood

Also, the descriptions of how boys are brought up and socialized to be men, seemed to be coherent in both countries.

Boys are raised up to be tough. For example, since they are little there is no consent for them to cry. Even already at preschool, you know, if a girl cries over something, she will get everyone’s sympathy and the teachers will hug her and try to comfort her, but if a boy cries, he will be told that ‘boys don’t cry’ and that he mustn’t be a crybaby. So, they learn that. [Henryk, PL]

Boys are expected to be more independent than girls, in childhood even. And they’re expected not to be emotional. Telling them not to cry, don’t be a sissy. I mean at a pretty young age they are getting those messages, that they are supposed to be strong, not emotional, independent and, you know, if they don’t fit that model, then supposedly there’s something wrong with them. [Chuck USA]

These descriptions highlight those features that the respondents also mentioned as generally associated with socially acknowledged, dominant model(s) of masculinity: strength, being strict, and hiding emotions that might reveal weakness. Also, both US and Polish respondents agreed, that

...masculinity is (...) taught and learned as not-femininity (...). Boys are expected to be just masculine. (...) And when they do not adhere to those hegemonic ideas of gender, then it is instantly perceived as a feminine trait, whether or not it’s something a woman actually does. [Roberto, USA]

and any feminine-like behavior in boys is punished in the traditional upbringing, while, at the same time, children assigned female gender at birth are allowed to be ‘tomboys’.

Girlish characteristics in boys are always more frowned upon than masculine characteristics in girls. [Andrzej, PL]

Many (although not all) of my respondents recall experiencing this from their own childhood:

I guess, I never got those pressures to be like, you know, feminine, or put on makeup, or grow my hair longer, you know, be less independent or strong. [Chuck USA]

Even though I was born female, I would always play with whatever I wanted. [Adam USA]

The same was being recalled in case of my Polish respondents:

In fact my dad... - I guess he’s always wanted to have son, but he had three daugh-

ters -, so he's always been happy if I helped him with painting the fence or fixing my bike. (...) I mean, it was hard at first when I finally come out one day, but when I was a kid, I think he even liked me more than my sisters for being such a tomboy. [Bartek PL]

One of the research participants aptly pointed out a possible reason for this double standard:

The performance of those roles [masculinity and femininity] are regulated and enforced differently. Because masculinity is inherently tied to a power, that plays a huge role (...). Whereas women are inherently perceived to be second to men and therefore less powerful, so there is a degree to which, even though fluidity in femininity is subversive and against gender norms (...), there is a degree to which it's not even taken seriously... [Roberto USA]

Thus, because it is perceived as desired and elevating, at the same time masculinity represents a set of rigid norms, to which one can aspire, but may not renounce (compare: Kłonkowska 2018: 12-14).

Negotiating Masculinities

Both the US and Polish respondents said that they try to distance themselves from the dominant, socially expected model in their own production of masculinity. Sometimes, they even defined and shaped their own identity by referring to what kind of man they did not want to be. They also seemed to be more aware than cisgender men of masculinity's social construction and more critical towards it (compare: Devor 1997: 513-582). This is probably because transgender people – due to their more complex socialization to gender norms – are in a unique position to tell us about our gendered selves. And maybe this awareness of social construction of masculinity could be the reason that most of my respondents found it difficult to explain how they became the men they are:

I'm not sure what it is that I possess that makes me feel masculine, I certainly don't have any of those qualities. That's kind of a social thing that obviously I didn't grow up with, so there is something more internal that gives you masculinity, I'm just not sure what it is (...). I don't have physical strength at all, any physical strength, really. (...) I don't have a lot of confidence. So I don't have most things that I actually describe as masculine. Yet, something internally tells me I have masculinity. That is most likely the thing that you are born with. (...) It's something that is internally in there, it's always been there. I just don't know what that is. [Lance USA]

My masculinity has never been obvious to me. I mean, it's always been obvious that I am a man, but not so obvious what type of men. I never got the upbringing that cis guys get, I had to find myself. [Czesław PL]

It could be, that the respondents' personal productions of masculinity – which they “had to find themselves”, instead of taking anything for granted – comprise a middle

ground between social constructions of masculinity as well as personal convictions and insights. That is why these seem to be “negotiated masculinities”, constituting a distinctive compromise of meeting the social standards in order to be recognized as male, and satisfying personal attitudes and needs. It is clearly visible when related to some – featured below – aspects of masculinity productions.

Male Performativity

Thus, on the one hand, my respondents would – to some extent – distance themselves from the dominant notion of masculinity, yet, on the other hand, they wanted to blend in. Male gender performativity and passing seemed to be important for them. But their opinions (both in Poland and in US) on whether the skill how to “be masculine” – in their behaviour, body language, and other ways of expression – was something inherent, something they were born with or something acquired – would differ.

For certain things – I had to learn how to be masculine. (...) I’ve been told that I have some feminine characteristics that make me seem I’m a gay guy, because that’s how people view it. ‘You have some feminine characteristics, then you must be gay’. So, obviously for me that’s not the case. I have feminine characteristics, because that’s how I was raised. I was raised and socialized to be feminine, so that’s how I was taught: ‘you have to sit up straight, like a lady, you know, cross your legs,... so I had to break myself off these habits. Cause you know, people see the way you stand and if you stand with your hip pointed out – that’s how a woman stands. But if you stand straight – that’s how a man stands. So, for certain things, I have to break myself off certain habits. Especially before, I looked and sounded not as masculine as I do. And always people were confused how to call me, what gender I was. Because they would [think], like.. ‘you dress like a guy, but you carry yourself this way, and sound...’ and all becomes complicated. So, I had a certain sense of masculinity, but I had to develop it. And the way I did it, was... I just based it on the people I had around me. Carlos came around, my step-dad, and certain aspects around him... obviously I would change it towards me, but I would see that this is the way he handles certain things, this is the way he walks. [Terry USA]

...this is not an external thing. This is something you are born with. No one taught me how to walk, or sit, or throw a ball. I have a natural way of doing it. And it was never on the feminine model. And if someone suggested: ‘why you’re sitting like this?’ - it was all natural to me. Someone would say: ‘you walk, you know, masculine’ – that was not anything I was taught or I didn’t model it after my father. It just... came naturally. There is a joke about throwing like a girl: ‘you throw like a girl’ I never did that. I automatically picked up the ball and threw it. [Lance USA]

Also, some of my respondents, mostly the Polish ones, would say that at the beginning of their transition they tended to be hyper-masculine in their gender performance as if they were trying to convince themselves that they are “manly enough”:

I've tried to be this kind of turbo-guy (...). Only later I realized that I don't have to be ideal. [Edward PL]

Among Cis Men

Some differences appeared when I asked my respondents how they felt among cis men. Some of the people interviewed in the US complained that they could not stand some cis men behaviours

Cis guys make certain comments about females, like sexist comments. Certain locker-room talks I'm ok with, but certain are like derogatory. And I'm like: 'bro, how are you ok talking like that – you've got a mom!' I would never want to talk about a female like that, because I've got my mom, my sisters. [Terry, USA]

and their lack of tact

Yes, actually one of my co-workers was... wanted to show me how to be a real man. (...) There was more like: 'I need to show you how to walk, talk, act' (...). I felt slightly offended. But he wasn't trying to be offensive. [Terry, USA]

Some of the US respondents also mentioned their anxieties:

Among cis men I'm like sooo anxious, because I can't help to feel like cis men would either see me as... see me as something that I'm not. Whether or not, they would see me as a gay male, which I'm not. Or see me as not male at all (...). I'm way more focused on like how I perform masculinity, specifically I'm focused on minimizing the feminine aspects, like mannerisms or even things like the way I laugh, or the way I gesticulate. (...) In my production of masculinity I feel very threatened. (...) And a part of that is also on the level of myself as a person who still has a biologically female anatomy. And I'm having like paranoid anxieties about that stuff. (...) But it's in my head. It's not necessarily like there is going to be like a direct attack on my body, or anything, but it's more like: 'we see these feminine traits in you. We're gonna use it to undermine you'. (...) It's like suddenly I have this very strong comparison of everything I am not. [Roberto USA]

In the case of Polish interviewees, those feelings were shared mostly by those among the research participants who identified as more gender-fluid trans men. They were more likely than trans men who more definitively self-identified as binary, to complain about cis men behavior and to mention anxiety they feel while being among them. The binary identified trans men often declared that – while among cis men – they feel just like „one of the guys”.

I've always had male friends. (...) They treated me normally, like other buddies. Brawls, not brawls, you know (...) normally. [Sebastian PL]

While referring to their attitude towards cis men, both US and Polish respondents who had an unambiguous binary perception of gender in relation to their identity and rejected any degree of gender fluidity, also mentioned issues connected with anatomy.

Multiple feelings about this. I'm grateful that they don't seem to question an-

anything about me. Yet, still you have a little bit of a sense that you're not equal with them. There is this kind of feeling like I'm not... like I'm just a little bit below than they are. I'm still... I don't mean below like they're better than me, but I just don't feel completely at the same level with them. Maybe because I didn't have the upbringing, the comradery, you know, whatever, the locker room thing, or maybe I don't have physical... equal physical... (...) I mean I did hang out with a lot of guys and they did include me, but I still didn't have... I still wasn't completely in their circle. (...) I don't know if it's one of those things I'm making bigger because it's something that I didn't have, but you know, male physical anatomy tends to be something that other men put a lot of weight into. Even if it's not the physical penis, it's the idea of it, it's... they use it in expressions: 'oh, he's got a big set of balls', that means, you know, he's very aggressive. It's the central concept. And so lacking that naturally... it puts you conceptually in a lesser position than other men, because it's such a... a focus... Like if a guy drives a very fancy sports car, they would say, you know, that it's an extension of his penis. Many masculine ideas hold that as a central piece of a puzzle and when you're lacking that – it automatically makes you feel less masculine, less than equal to them. (...) I can promise, that if you ask any other guy that walks out of the building: 'would you rather lose your penis, or would you rather lose your arm' – they would rather lose their arm. [Lance USA]

...for me it's always the fact which body parts I have, and which I don't – this is substantial, at least for me. (...) I find it difficult to accept, that I don't have a penis... that I won't be a man in 100%. [Marian, PL]

Previous Socialization to Femininity

Those among the US respondents who had feelings of uncertainty and lack of self-confidence while being among cis men usually blamed those feelings on being brought up as a girl. And – even though they stated that children assigned female at birth could be more flexible about their gendered behaviour – differentiating socialization that boys and girls receive was often mentioned in this context:

...let's take gender and speech and how women are taught to be quiet, at least in United States. And men – oh my god! – freaking culture and gender. Because in American culture women are taught to be quiet, reserved, you know, not speak unless spoken to. [Roberto USA]

Boys are raised to be the responsible, (...) they are kind of protector, to have a family and high paid job. There's kind of pressure with that. And girls are kind of raised and taught, either by the society, or their friends, to be more like... looking for that protector, instead of trying to be independent. [Adam USA]

Many men have a self-confidence about themselves (...). And even if they feel maybe insecure inside, they still conduct themselves in a manner that conveys

strength, that is self-assuredness (...). I'm not sure why women don't carry that outward confidence, and I would tend to think that, unfortunately, women that do, tend to be insulted for it. [Lance USA]

However, Polish respondents did not mention their previous socialization to femininity as a factor that has significantly shaped their masculinity production. A few of the Polish respondents claimed that they have always been assertive "in a masculine way". Staś, who lives in a small town, recounts an extreme act of "assertiveness" after local bullies ridiculed him and his gender identity several times:

There are arguments and arguments. I have a few friends, who are, to say so, able to persuade something either with the strength of their speech or with a strength of their fists. And they are on my side. So I really don't have to worry about this who I am. Others either accept this, or are quiet, cause they're scared. And I'm lucky to have buddies and friends, who are really tall and have such "paws" [arms]... So if they punch somebody once and for all, then nothing bothers me. Everyone, if they had something against me – they have told that long time ago and now they are quiet, cause they see the it won't change anything. And if anyone still has something against... also... would rather be quiet, cause either me, or someone else may punch them for that. It was simply a forced tolerance. [Staś² PL]

According to him, acting like that brought him respect not only because the bullies were afraid of him and his buddies, but also because by such acts he proved to be "a real man" who "has guts" to do this.

Even though I haven't punched anybody in the face for a long time, they still remember and know that, nevertheless, I can do this. [Staś PL]

Of course, such extreme ways of dealing with lack of recognition of their experienced gender and with intolerance are rare, yet, some of the Polish respondents recalled their attempts of being assertive when it came to questioning their gender identity:

I've always been like that, I had to tell something back. I would always say something back, and, you know, then it would eventuate in one way or another. [Sebastian PL]

This inclination among some Polish trans men to say something back if offended might be connected with a slightly different socialization to femininity in their childhood if compared to what the US respondents recall. It could be the heritage of gender socialization in communism, promoting an iconic model of a more assertive, self-reliant femininity (see: Stańczak-Wiślicz 2013; Toniak 2008; Keff-Umińska 2009; Fidelis 2010), which either my respondents have experienced, or their mothers did and passed it on them as primary "gender role models".

Interestingly, some of the US respondents – with Hispanic family background – also mentioned this kind of assertive attitude either in themselves or in other persons who

² Interview with Staś was a part of a larger research study (see: Kłonkowska 2017).

received female gender socialization in Hispanic families. This could be derived from a specific gender role socialization in childhood and from what they observed in their mothers. They connoted an image of a “loud Latina”, a strong feminine figure, with the status of a mother, caregiver, who speaks out loud for herself.

Females... in my family, if someone says something to you, you say something back, you don't let them do all over you, but they are more encouraged to cry about it, whereas boys are not. [Terry USA]

It's not me (...) but there is also the position of the loud Latina, who speaks out for herself, who has a strength in her femininity, but does also embody this very, very... status... like mother, like nurturer, caregiver. (...) My sister (...) who is married and has a kid, she came into her loud assertive self. And she was shown to be that person through my mother. [Roberto, USA]

Thus, paradoxically, the model of female socialization the trans men received in their childhood and what notion of femininity they observed in their mothers – may have had an influence on their level of assertiveness in their masculinities.

Male Privilege

Quite a few of my US and Polish respondents recall experiencing some kind of male privilege after transitioning.

A man will always get a better job than a woman. [Sebastian PL]

I had an across street neighbor (...). And a flood happened that washed her car... into a... it was like a flash flood (...). So she was on the phone with the insurance company, trying to get through to someone to find out how to process the claim. And when she made the phone call they transferred her left and right, this person to that person. By the time I got to her apartment, she was just so overwhelmed and frustrated, so I said: ‘let me try to call, let me see, you know, if I can get further than you. (...)’. And she was ok, so she handles me the phone, I get on the phone and I get a woman on the phone. And I said: ‘Hi, my name is Damon and I'm calling on behalf on my friend. And I need some answers to some questions. Are you able to help me?’. “Oh, absolutely. Yes, absolutely.’ I got further than she did, so for me that was my first male privilege experience – over the phone. It was astonishing. [Damon USA]

The Polish respondents, however, were more likely to recall situations that were substantial for their career, professional lives, in a few cases also family status. In contrast, the US respondents referred more to regular contacts with other people. And those who did not recall such experiences, sometimes seemed to feel obliged to have done so,

... for sure I did... I just can't recall a good example right now. [George, USA]

or – especially in case of the US interviewees – rejected the idea of having personally experienced advantages related to their male gender status, however without a denial

of the male privilege phenomenon in some people.

... it depends on the situation and people (...) it all depends on place and person and the situation. [Terry, USA]

Generational Differences

I have also noticed some generational differences. The US interviewees in their 30s/early 40s and older were more binary in their experienced gender than those who were younger. They were also more likely to identify with the notion and image of the so-called “true transsexual” and conform with the socially acknowledged masculinity model.

At the same time, younger people, were more distanced from the normative masculinities, more of them identified their masculinities as to some extent queer or fluid. Even though identifying as trans men, a few among them would rather use pronouns *they, them, their* than *he, him, his*.

The older trans men were also slightly more inclined toward the medical view of transgender, while the younger respondents thought of transgender more in cultural and social categories. The older among my respondents seemed to be more stabilized in their gender identities, sometimes no longer perceiving their masculinities in terms of “trans”, and less often looking for support from LGBT+ organizations.

At the same time, more individuals among the younger respondents seemed to be “seekers”, still reworking their identities, and they were closely associated with the LGBT+ communities and trans-affirmative groups.

A similar generational difference seemed to be taking place among my Polish research participants as well, however, it appears to have occurred almost a decade later, with observable differences between individuals in their late teens/early 20s and those who were older. Additionally, those generational differences seemed to be slightly less explicit among Polish respondents.

DISCUSSION

The research participants in both countries expressed ambivalent attitudes towards dominant models of masculinity in their respective countries. On the one hand, the fact being recognized as “truly masculine” seemed to be of great importance to them, especially in the case of trans men who unambiguously identified with the binary perception of gender. On the other hand, in their personal productions of masculinity, the interviewees seemed to distance themselves from those socially acknowledged norms associated with being a man. As one of the pioneers of social studies on transgender - Aaron Devor - noticed in his classic study of trans masculinities:

Because participants were positioned to make observations from vantage points afforded to a few members of society, they had the potential to see women and men differently than those of us who have never lived as anything but either woman or men” (1997: 513). “Some of the sensibilities which they had acquired

among women also inoculated many participants against some of the more virulent aspects of masculinity. (p. 551).

Thus, similar to the participants of Devor's research study, my interviewees also developed a sensitivity to sexism that "largely prevented them from succumbing to (...) peer pressure to act in sexist ways toward women" (1997: 551), or even to passively witness so-called 'locker-room talks'. For the same reasons, my interviewees were able to distance themselves from some of the characteristics that they perceived as inherently linked to the dominant model of masculinity, which are being imprinted in boys in the process of socialization. Thus, they "largely rejected masculine socialization, which favoured the suppression of all emotions save anger and acquisitional desires" (p. 551).

Since there were also intergenerational differences in the interviewees' perception of their own male identities and masculinity productions, it seems probable that the research participants tend to follow the dominant discourse when their coming out and/or transition took place. Although almost all respondents claimed that their masculinities evolved in time and with consecutive lifespan stages, the older individuals among my research participants were more likely to align with the depicted as "traditional", the hegemonic concept of masculinity and often labelled themselves as "transsexual men" or "ex-transsexual men" (compare: Cromwell 1999: 104). The younger participants were more likely to embrace the inclusive or hybrid masculinities and escape unambiguous identity categories, by self-identifying as gender-fluid-, queer- or non-binary trans masculine persons. As matthew heinz accurately depicts it:

This is a significant discursive shift from earlier discourse, perhaps most easily captured in the proliferation of identity labels transmasculine individuals select to describe themselves to others, in the increasingly common rejection of selecting a particular label and in the growing stress on deemphasizing gender identity while claiming the validity of transmasculinity. (2016: 217)

Interestingly, male anatomy also arose in relation to complying with socially recognized standards of normative masculinity. The lack of penis made some of the interviewees feel uncomfortable or even lesser in the company of cis men. The assumption that "gender presentation is genital representation" (Bettcher 2009: 105) added a symbolic dimension to having this particular bodily organ. This issue, raised by the previously prevalent "wrong body" discourse, becomes relegated to the background by the newer discourses on transgender. Thus, it could be that the problem is not as much the lack of penis *per se*, but "the attitude that without surgically reconstructed penises they are not real men or even able to be categorized as such" (Cromwell 1999: 135; see also pp. 112-113).

A stronger dependence on the country where the research participants lived, rather than on generational differences was visible, especially in two issues raised by the interviewees.

One of them was a male privilege experience. The Polish respondents recalled such situations more easily than the US respondents, and by far less frequently distanced themselves from the idea of having experienced it. Considering that the situations of

gaining male privilege recalled by the Polish interviewees referred mostly to their professional lives, the reason could be sought in differences in social policies to entrench more gender equality in public sphere and workplace. However, another possible explanation is that in Poland – contrary to the US – the issue of privileged and underprivileged social groups is hardly present in the public and media discourse (which could be caused by relatively greater homogeneity of the Polish society as well as different historical and social experiences). In the US, discussions regarding social privilege are undertaken not only in academia but also in popular culture discourse. Ambivalent attitudes towards being granted privilege based on one's social or demographic characteristics and a lot of controversies aroused in the USA might have also influenced trans masculine discourse in that matter:

Transmasculine discourse affirms and denies the granting of male privilege; it differentiates transmale from cisgender male and qualifies male privilege by recognizing intersectionalities. (heinz 2016: 213)

Another instance where cultural rather than generational differences could be observed was the impact of prior socialization to femininity. The availability of a self-reliant model, assertive femininity in cultural background experiences, and seized to underlie the initial feminine socialization, could have had an impact on general personality characteristics that influenced a particular production of masculinity later in life. According to Devor's (1997: 529) reflections regarding trans men,

Their backgrounds as women, no doubt contributed heavily to their success both in terms of what they have learned from living as women, and in the judiciousness with which they selectively accepted the masculine socialization which was directed at them.

Thus, different experiences in backgrounds as women, including those based on different culture family backgrounds, could have influenced those contributions.

CONCLUSIONS

The Polish and US interviewees who participated in this study revealed a high awareness of the social constructions of gender and their personal masculinity productions. They consciously embraced masculinity and developed critical attitudes towards 'traditional' hegemonic masculinities and rigid social norms of maleness.

In the context of experiences related to their background culture, they expressed critical attitudes towards differentiating gender socialization in children.

The masculinity models adopted by the research participants seem to be a resultant of a few factors: dominant models of masculinity in their respective countries; possibilities and limitations to meet those expectations; intervening factors; and – above all – personal attitudes toward socially-expected constructions of masculinity. The interviewees' productions of masculinities result from finding a middle ground between the social and the personal; between implied patterns and one's own attitudes. These are "negotiated masculinities" that allow obtaining social recognition and maintaining a unique identity.

Among the noticed intergenerational and culture/country of origin related differences in the productions of masculinity, the influence of family cultural background and related initial socialization to femininity needs further investigation. However, as the present study did not provide enough data to provide further conclusions on the latter topic, future investigations might yield additional insights.

FUNDING: This work was supported by the Fulbright Foundation under Senior Research Fellowship Award.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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