

## The Therapeutic Value of the Mythopoetic Men's Movement: A Phenomenological Study

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### Abstract

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews to investigate the personal meaning of the mythopoetic men's movement. Participants included three organizers of a national mythopoetic men's gathering. All participants lived in the same town, attended the New Church, were married with children, and were white males between the ages of 44 and 54 with household incomes over \$50,000 per year. Analysis revealed three themes, including the mission, the self, and the struggle. The men described their activities within the men's movement as part of a mission. They discussed personal changes that they had made after becoming involved in the movement. And they alluded to a struggle between membership in the movement and membership in the larger community of men. Potential lessons for counseling men are discussed.

### **The Therapeutic Value of the Mythopoetic Men's Movement: A Phenomenological Study**

Most men enter counseling only at the insistence of other people or institutions in their lives (Brooks & Good, 2001). Multiple studies have consistently found that men of differing nationalities, ethnicities, and ages seek mental health help less frequently than women (Addis &

Mahalik, 2003). Even among counseling professionals, women attend counseling more frequently than men (McCarthy & Holliday, 2004). This may suggest that men have less psychological distress than women.

Some scholars have questioned this assumption, suggesting that risks and prevalence rates for some mental illnesses may be higher for men than women (Robertson, 2001). Cochran (2001) suggested that men may experience higher rates of depression than women. This suggestion is supported by research findings that men are at least four times as likely as women to complete suicide (Brooks & Good, 2001; Cochran, 2001; Moller-Leimkuhler, 2002). Men represent the higher percentage of the homeless population, violent offenders, those who abuse or are dependent on substances, and victims of violence, including childhood abuse (Brooks & Good, 2001; Cochran, 2001).

Given this potential need for services, the lack of mental health help seeking among men is a concern for the profession (Cochran, 2001; Moller-Leimkuhler, 2002). One reason for this lack of help seeking may be the potential lack of fit between the culture of counseling and that of men (McCarthy & Holliday, 2004). Current research suggests that this misfit is related to the incompatibility between counseling demands and men's gender role socialization (Brooks & Good, 2001; Mahalik, Good, & Englar-Carlson, 2003). Men who engage in counseling are often asked to betray their masculine beliefs and values, particularly if those values are based on traditional models of masculinity.

Over the past twenty years, these traditional definitions of masculinity have been changing from a bipolar view of masculinity and femininity to a more androgynous view of masculinity (Moller-Leimkuhler, 2002). For many men, the definition of a "man" is no longer restricted to what O'Neil (1981) described as the masculine mystique, but can include

traditionally feminine qualities such as interdependence and vulnerability. If the main reason that men do not seek psychological help is the conflict that counseling creates between men and their masculinity, then this change in the construction of masculinity, which incorporates the more traditional qualities needed in counseling, should lead to an increase in help seeking among men. However, data derived from multiple samples of men in multiple traditional helping environments show no such change (Moller-Leimkuhler, 2002).

*Men Are Seeking Help from the Mythopoetic Men's Movement*

Though men's help seeking among traditional services has not increased, there has been an increase in the membership in groups within the men's movement (Fox, 2004). Many men voluntarily participate in the mythopoetic men's movement even at considerable financial and temporal cost. Many men reportedly believe that they have lost power in society and state that they are joining these groups to represent their interests (Ferber, 2000). Others are joining to gain the skills and support necessary to adapt to a changing set of societal demands on men, which have been brought about by the changing roles of women (Wissocki & Andronico, 1996).

The men's movement can be thought of as two major movements, the pro-feminist men's movement and the neoconservative men's movement (Andronico, 2001; Ferber, 2000; Silverstein, Auerbach, Grieco, & Dunkel, 1999). Neoconservative men's groups, the larger and more organized of the two movements, are often affiliated with religious groups. They typically stress belief in biological differences between masculinity and femininity, a hierarchical relationship of men over women, and a desire to build strong families and marriages, seek spiritual wholeness, and develop relationships with other men. Some factions of this movement have been criticized for being racist and sexist and for condemning homosexuality (Ferber, 2000; Silverstein, et al., 1999). Neoconservative men's groups such as Promise Keepers, the White

Power Movement, and the Million Man March often hold rallies that attract as many as 200,000 men.

The neoconservative men's movement includes a large sub-movement called the Mythopoetic Men's Movement. The mythopoetic movement was started around 1980 and based on writings by authors such as Robert Bly, James Hillman, and Michael Meade (Fox, 2004; Wissocki & Andronico, 1996). The term "mythopoetic" refers to the characteristic of creating myths. The mythopoetic men's movement utilizes ritual, symbolism, imagery, psychodrama, activity, and ceremony in the context of gatherings, retreats, and group meetings as mediums for change in men's personal constructions, or myths, of masculinity (Andronico, 2001; Silverstein, et al., 1999; Wissocki & Andronico, 1996). Men who participate in the mythopoetic men's movement tend to be white, between thirty-five and sixty years old, middle class, college educated, and heterosexual (Andronico, 2001; Ferber, 2000).

#### *Why Men Seek Help through the Mythopoetic Men's Movement*

Review of current literature suggests that these men seek help through the mythopoetic men's movement for four common reasons. First, they are dissatisfied with the way that they feel. They are pained by a struggle with the internal voices that criticize them for not living up to the version of masculinity that they have learned (Brooks & Good, 2001). As a result, many of these men feel guilt and shame about their identity (Ferber, 2000). They feel empty and crave increased spirituality in their lives (Andronico, 2001).

A second common reason that men seek help through this movement is a discomfort with and uncertainty about their roles as men. What they learned about masculinity when they were children is cast in doubt by modern society (Andronico, 2001; Brooks & Good, 2001; Wissocki & Andronico, 1996). They struggle to keep the old while adjusting to the new.

The final two reasons are related to men's feelings of disconnection from other men. Men who join the men's movement often feel isolated from other men and wish for closer emotional connections (Andronico, 2001; Brooks & Good, 2001). They want to be part of a male community. Many believe that they must be initiated and socialized into that community by other men (Ferber, 2000). Therefore, some join to find that connection.

A second set of men joins to actively make those connections. These men feel an intense need to mentor the next generation of men into manhood (Brooks & Good, 2001). Having discovered what they believe men need, they want to carry their message forward.

#### *How the Mythopoetic Men's Movement Helps Men*

Men benefit therapeutically from participation in the mythopoetic men's movement (Andronico, 2001). It is the environment created within the mythopoetic men's movement that most contributes to their ability to benefit and participate. This environment can be thought of as consisting of three key parts, including group format, the structure of events, and the relationships between individuals who participate.

For several years, the group format has been used to meet the therapeutic needs of men (Rabinowitz, 2001). Men's movement events commonly are conducted in all-male groups (Andronico, 2001; Fox, 2004). From early in their lives, men are actively involved with other men in social, sports, and community groups (Rabinowitz, 2001). Utilizing the group format in counseling provides a culturally acceptable setting for assisting men with meeting their psychological needs.

Group counseling with men is action-oriented and based in support and trust between participants (Rabinowitz, 2001). When men feel emotionally safe in counseling groups, they can address issues such as difficulties with interpersonal interactions, unconscious conflicts, and

finding meaning in life. Likewise, this group approach may contribute to the therapeutic value of men's movement events.

Events in the mythopoetic men's movement rely on structure based on ritual and myth, which allows men to enter a less demanding world of fantasy (Wissock & Andronico, 1996). The rituals and the setting of the event remind them of important rituals from their lives and lend significance to the event (Andronico, 2001). One ritual that is viewed in the literature as especially important is the initiation ceremony, during which men symbolically welcome each other into the ranks of manhood, thereby signifying rite of passage, acceptance, and belonging (Ferber, 2000).

The relationship between men at these events is the third key part of the environment. As men work to conform to new roles, it is vitally important that they have the support of other men (Silverstein, et al., 1999). Challenging old roles and expectations is a fearful pursuit for many and the permission, encouragement, and acceptance that is provided by the other men in the movement reduces fears of shame and humiliation (Andronico, 2001).

### *The Purpose of this Study*

The counseling profession can better serve men by understanding the draws and benefits that lead them to seek help through the mythopoetic men's movement. Review of the literature revealed no studies which have asked individuals to explain the personal meaning that each gains from participation. The purpose of this study is to investigate the personal meaning of the mythopoetic men's movement, including its draws and benefits, as explained by three organizers of a national mythopoetic men's gathering.

## Method

### *Theoretical Perspective*

This study was conducted from a phenomenological perspective, which involves describing the meaning that people make of an experience and the ways in which they integrate that meaning into their personal construct (Patton, 2002). In this case, the phenomenon was participation in the mythopoetic men's movement.

There are two major assumptions which underlie the phenomenological approach (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). Phenomenologists assume that the experience and the individual's interpretation of that experience combine to create reality for the individual. By comparing the meanings described by individuals, researchers can gather the essence of the shared experience. Accordingly, coding and interpretation in this study involved bracketing statements to present the larger essence of the experience.

### *Participants*

Prior to contacting participants for this study, the university's human subjects review board granted approval. Participants were recruited from a national mythopoetic men's gathering. The author attended the two day gathering and participated in the events. Immediately following the gathering, the author contacted the lead organizer of the event by e-mail. That individual announced a request for participants at the next organizer's meeting and contacted the author with e-mails of interested men. The author contacted those potential participants and arranged interviews to be held three weeks after the event.

As the popularity of the mythopoetic movement has diminished, a few key groups have maintained strong membership and involvement (Fox, 2004). One of those groups is known as the Mankind Project (see <http://www.mkp.org>). The participants were members of a group that was organized as an offshoot of this survivor of the movement. All of the participants had been members of the same mythopoetic men's group for eight to ten years.

All participants were members of the New Church, a division of Christianity based on the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg (see <http://www.newchurch.com>). All participants lived in the same town, were married with children, and were white males between the ages of 44 and 54 with household incomes over \$50,000 per year. Because the participants belonged to a relatively small sub-group and in order to protect confidentiality, their names have been changed in this article.

### *Interviews*

Individual interviews were conducted with each participant for approximately two hours. The researcher used guiding questions to invite the participants to describe what they were like before becoming involved in the mythopoetic men's movement, how they got involved with the movement, what aspects of the movement are important to them, and how they have changed as a result of participation in the movement. The focus of the interview was on the experience of the individuals and the personal meanings that they have created about the movement. Participants determined the interview location with guidance to consider where they would feel most comfortable discussing personal information. Two interviews were held in private offices and one was held in a public coffee shop. The interviews were audio-taped and hand notes were taken.

### *Data Analysis and Coding Procedures*

Each interview produced approximately 20 pages of transcribed text. Each transcript was reviewed several times, using an inductive approach to analysis. Discrete categories were identified and then organized into themes. A word processing program was used to create folders for each major theme and files for sub-themes. The author then reviewed those themes and built

a coding outline from them that appeared internally consistent and provided a whole picture of the accumulated data (Patton, 2002). To check for completeness, a doctoral student, who was familiar with the project, reviewed the coding scheme and independently coded several pages of text. To further ensure completeness, all of the participants were asked for feedback on how data from their own interview had been coded.

## Results

The combined experiences of the men revealed three common themes. The men described being called to a mission that was fulfilling for them. They discussed personal changes that they had experienced and had attributed to their participation. And they alluded to a struggle that they faced as men who were exploring a new path.

### *The Mission*

The men described their becoming involved in the men's movement as a process. Their involvement started with a search for help and evolved into a personal mission. The process began with struggling to change the way they felt and the way they were relating, or not connecting, with others.

They tried mainstream methods, including self-help books and couples counseling. All were involved in some type of traditional counseling. One man explained, "I'd been in counseling for probably a good six years." Another man stated, "I think we wound up seeing three different couples therapists over the year." Even after several years, they found that traditional treatments did not meet their needs.

One problem with traditional interventions was that there was no change in the way they felt. Another was that they started to realize that the issues they were facing involved their

relationships with other men and that they needed to interact with other men to address them. They saw a need for a different type of treatment for men.

Dan: I got clearer and clearer that there were issues with me as a man that I wanted to work on...and so that made finding other men look like the right idea.

As the participants told their stories, it became obvious that they saw a clear difference between men and women, especially with regard to relationships. One man said succinctly, “men and women connect in different ways.” They seemed to agree that women are “nurturers” and men are not.

Dan: It’s a stereotype, but I happen to believe that there’s a lot of truth in it...that women really are nurturers and gatherers. So, when they’re going through anger or a negative emotion or resistance, their peers and their support groups tend to nurture them through that. When men are going through anger and resentment and things like that, men aren’t inherently nurturing. We either back away or we have a lot of judgment about why they’re not doing it right.

Todd: I mean, women it’s kind of woven into the way that they are but I don’t think it is for guys.

Even within this close, homogenous community, there were two views about the origin of this difference. On one side were those who believed that men are “inherently” competitive, that there is something about the nature of men that leads them away from nurturing and into competition. On the other side were those who believe that men are “conditioned” to be different than women in relationships. Proponents of this view argued that there is no biological “excuse” for men’s lack of nurturing ability.

Despite a difference of opinion regarding origin, the men seem to agree that they can benefit from a more supportive, caring, and open style of relating to others, especially other men.

Dan: That's the stereotypical men's version. You know, we're all tough. We gotta do it ourselves. If you're having a problem, it's your problem. You know, you're obviously just not good enough or a jerk or whatever...however your brain works. So I saw that men had to figure out, not necessarily a nurturing model, but we had to learn how to support each other.

Jeff: The old model was, especially in a religious community, you got divorced, you left town. You were really alone, you know, you weren't welcome anywhere. And that model doesn't work. I mean, a guy has to get back into integrity and accountability, but that doesn't mean there's not a chair there for him.

They seem to see this as a central benefit of men's groups. They believe that, by participating in these groups, they can learn to develop "deeper" relationships with other men. They see this as a contrast to a society that values "superficial" relationships between men. The groups, then, are creating a new "model" of masculinity.

Within this model, men learn to "live in integrity." Living in integrity involves choosing and following a "path."

Jeff: Integrity is a big word...integrity is little things too. You know, you might just slip on a little thing. But if you keep slipping, then that goes to bigger things. It's real important to live a life of integrity, I believe, and to have things like men's gatherings, men's weekends, and things like that, men's groups that help remind you, oh, wait a minute, I wanna stay on this path."

It is unclear exactly what the rules are for staying on the path, whether they are individually determined or somehow ordained. However, it is clear that the men believe that they need the support of other men to stay on that path. Therefore, the model requires that they be open with each other about their emotions and current stressors, be honest with each other, caringly confront discrepancies, and be trusting and trustworthy.

Participants suggested that following this belief system had helped them to change the way that they relate to others and to feel better. The men believe so strongly in their model that they carry it forth on a mission to educate and help others.

Dan: I also have that, my mission, which is to...talk about the things that are never talked about...to acknowledge that these are real things in people's lives and men struggle with them just like everybody else.

Jeff: Because of the benefits that I've gotten from men's work, I like to pass it on, because I've gotten a lot of benefit and I've seen it turn men's lives around in just remarkable ways.

Dan: What I've really realized is that...there's more power to change by changing one man at a time. If one man finds a path where he stops abusing his children or gets healed from his own abuse, stays in a relationship but makes it solid and better and doesn't leave his children with divorce. You know, one man comes back into sobriety from whatever that is and begins to be productive at the level he can be, that has a chance to change the world. The other stuff, yeah, I mean, it'll...national policy and that...but, changing the world one man at a time and what we say in SWET [Spiritual Warfare Effectiveness Training] is, 'changing the world one man at a time from the inside out' because that's where our real battles take place, starting with our spiritual battles.

During the interviews all of the men suggested that the author attend a weekend men's retreat. One man recommended men's self-help books. Another recommended a play about masculinity. The third urged the author to talk with his father before he dies.

For these men, promoting the mission has benefits both to other men and to themselves. A good example of the dual benefit of the mission is seen in the nature of mentoring, an important component of the movement. The men acknowledge a need to "pass on," through mentoring others, what they have learned. They feel a responsibility to "give back" to the movement. Their intention is to help "the next generation" of men and to relieve the suffering of those who seek their help.

Though their intention is to help others and to give back to the movement, the men find that they are rewarded with some personal benefits of mentoring. The "deeper" relationship that is developed is one reward. Another reward is the "joy" that comes with taking part in relieving another man's suffering. Finally, mentoring "keeps it green." That is, the problems that the mentee is facing remind the mentor of his own issues and struggles and help the mentor to "stay on the path."

The men carry out their mission in their daily interactions with others, in their jobs, in their families, and through the many men's movement events. Events include weekend retreats, group meetings, and gatherings. At these events, a "container" is created wherein men are safe to explore their own issues and to support others who engage in that process.

Todd: If the right container is built to do that, then there isn't the fear of, hey, this person's going to make fun of me. This is going to be used against me.

Jeff: One of the things I loved was it was just one day of all men...just all men. And that made it safe for all kinds of stuff to happen. Guys who were dealing with sex addiction,

pedophilia, gender identity. Whatever that is, it somehow became a safe place for them to come because there were no female distractions around.

The container is created when men relate to each other on an emotional level, rather than an intellectual level that they see as more comfortable. The men had difficulty describing the elements of the container, explaining, “You just know it when you’re in it.” But, they talked about some of the things that lead to the development of the container.

Dan: The basics of the safe container, as you know, are confidentiality, active listening, being up front with the limits, you know, ‘if you say you’re going to kill yourself, I am going to do something.’ If I think you’re in danger, I am going to break confidence. Short of that, you have my full confidence. You know, ‘yes, I know your father and you have my full confidence’ ...and the last thing is everything’s welcome here. Your shadow is welcome here. Your goal is welcome here. And I think that people with intention of that can set a place where people sense it.

The men discussed the need for the container to be made up of all men. In particular, they described the importance of elders who model an accepting and open manner and who encourage others by blessing them. The elders help others by acknowledging their own struggles and by recognizing the way in which hearing the struggles of others has touched them personally.

Dan: I think the guys my age and older have figured out how to show up with it not being about judgment, with it not being about ‘you’re bad and wrong,’ but about...it’s almost like the Henry the 5<sup>th</sup> when he bares his scars on Crispin Day, you shall know I fought there. We know what our battles have been, we’re seeing what our battles are, and we don’t have to judge you. We don’t have to fix you...and we’ve learned the tools to build a safe container.

The accepting manner modeled by the elders encourages others to share without fear of being hurt or rejected. Through a series of such experiences, the men increase their level of trust.

Jeff: If it's men who haven't been together before, it's going through a series of short experiences that you start to trust that, OK, this group is here. We're really here for each other. We're really...you know, nobody's out to use or hurt me or people care. You can sort of sense when people are there for you and really...you know a container when you're in it.

This trust may be bolstered by rules related to confidentiality and its limits, by members' use of "active listening" techniques, and by a norm that "everything's welcome here."

### *The Self*

Within the container and in the context of carrying out their mission, the men believed that they have experienced the change that they were seeking. Unlike their experience with traditional methods, they saw their new approach as quite effective. The growth that they described was in two main areas of their lives. They were continuing to improve their relationships with others and to connect with and better express their emotions. With regard to each, the participants described the person they were before becoming involved in the movement and the person they have become since becoming involved.

Prior to becoming involved in the movement, the men had some common fears about relationships, centered on a lack of trust of others. They stated that were afraid to rely on others because of a concern that they would be "let down" or "hurt." The men also expressed fear that the friendship of others was insincere, that others might leave them behind when they found someone they "liked better."

The participants reported that, as a result of these fears, they were “closed down,” “guarded,” and “constrained” in their relationships. They were concerned about what others thought about them. So, they put forth an image of a strong, aloof, independent individual who had it “all together.” They did not talk to each other about those things that were “really going on” in their lives.

Dan: I had one close male friend. I define close friend as somebody you could call at four o'clock in the morning with a problem and they'd show up...and you'd be willing to call them at four o'clock in the morning when you needed the help.

Todd: I was single...pretty guarded. I hadn't really started doing personal therapy. So, I would say pretty constrained or self-restricted I think.

Jeff: I would never share what was really going on with me. You know, you didn't do that. You didn't talk about, 'Hey, look, you know, I'm really sad about this and, you know, this is going on in my life.'

They perceived that their relationships were “superficial.” Many of their friendships followed the pattern described by Todd: “You bust on me and I bust on you back.” Interactions with other men often involved competition, particularly over their ability to attract women. Though they had friends, their friendships lacked “depth.”

The men described a “deeper” relationship as a “connection that you don't typically find in your day to day life.” That connection allows them to share all of their thoughts, both emotional and intellectual, rather than keeping those thoughts to themselves. They can talk about “the things that really matter” in their lives. The connection provides support, normalization of one's problems, and hope for the future. Part of its depth may come from a belief that the connection is reliable and sincere, that those men with whom one has a relationship are willingly

available and will express their care and concern. The men perceive the resultant relationship as one in which the other knows as much or more about the person as he knows about himself.

Jeff: I thought I was a decent father before, but I think it's made me even a better father because I can be who I am. I can not be afraid to show my tears to my kids.

Dan: I have 40 men, at least, that I could pick up the phone and they'd be there. If it was humanly possible for them to be there, they'd be there. And I have that same commitment to them.

Jeff: It feels like a real connection. It's not just a, 'Hey, let's go watch the Eagles and drink a beer and, you know, B.S. about this and that.' You know, it's...I don't know how I can describe it other than that. It just feels like a real connection.

The men explained that the benefit of such a relationship is an ability and willingness to take risks. Given the container and the deeper relationships that are created, the men believe that they are able to risk being open and honest with each other. One way that they do this is through caring confrontation. The participants stated that they are able to confront others about what they need and take the steps to ask for help. Without compromising their premise of acceptance, they can confront each other on discrepancies in behavior and offer conflicting opinions. This openness leads to the feeling of "silent support." The participants described an internalization of these confrontational but supportive voices and an ability to incorporate those voices in their decision-making and coping processes.

The men believe that experiencing the benefits of deeper relationships and the behaviors associated with creating those relationships has improved the other relationships in their lives. Because they perceive an increased number of deep relationships with other men, they feel less

pressure to engage in the superficial conversations and competitive displays. They are less concerned with portraying an image and more concerned with being “who they are.”

Todd: I think I’m more open. I think I’m more confident. I think I’m more aware of what’s going on inside. So, I worry less about what people think.

The participants described reduced need to control and increased ability to trust others. They reported that they are more relaxed, open, confident, and self-aware in their relationships. As a result, they believe that they have an increased ability to feel and display empathy. This increase in empathy may translate into actual skills. The men have found that approaching others from this stance has proven more effective, especially in approaching difficult situations.

Jeff: [referring to seeing a man pounding on a wall at the airport and reflecting on how his own behavior, prior to involvement in the men’s movement, was similar] I was the guy pounding the wall. It was humorous and sad for me to watch because it’s just like, ‘Hey, dude, whoa’ (laughing), ‘is that going to get you to your destination faster? Is that going to solve the problem?’ And the other thing is the abuse that the poor people behind the counter take. And it’s amazing how much more you get by going up and just saying, ‘Hey, this must be tough on you and, yeah, what can you do to help with...’ They’re much more willing to do whatever they can to help you. So even though you’re not trying to use [empathy], it actually works to help improve things in a bad situation.

Their capacity for empathy and their increased ability in relationships are closely related to the changes they have made in the acknowledgment and expression of their emotions. The participants believed that their increased ability to participate in deeper relationships rests partly on their ability to express their feelings, especially feelings of care and concern. They also reported progress in connecting with other feelings.

The men reported that prior to becoming involved in the movement they had difficulty accessing their emotions. They explained that they protected themselves, mainly through avoidance of their feelings, because of their fears of being hurt if their feelings were exposed. To avoid looking vulnerable, they employed an image of strength. Though they could express anger, they had difficulty expressing, for example, love, loneliness, or sadness.

Todd: I had a real tough time accessing my feelings, my emotions, what's really going on with me, because I'd learned to build up a pretty good wall.

Dan: Men put armor over their feelings. And that's to both give them strength and to protect themselves. And the picture I got was, 'OK, now I'm safe, but the sunlight can't touch my skin, the breeze can't blow over.' I mean, that's really the strong image I got. So, the resistance was, are you willing to risk taking off your armor, are you willing to risk to go into a group of men and say, 'I'm not what I try really hard to appear to be.' Am I willing to risk putting that out.

The participants explained that a main reason for accessing and expressing all of one's emotions is to improve relationships. However, they also expressed a need to connect with and express all of one's emotions because of the experience of past tragedy or the anticipation of some future tragedy. The men expressed concern about how they have coped with tragedies in the past and a fear about how they will cope with tragedy in the future. They fret over not expressing their emotions to people in their lives who have died and they feel a need to express their emotions to those important people in their lives who are still alive. They also value having a support network, made up of deeper relationships, which will help them when future tragedy occurs.

Jeff: I think it's important to say it here...and part of that comes from my father died quite suddenly, just went to bed and didn't wake up the next day. I was 24 years old and really wasn't very awake emotionally or other things like that. So all the work I've done has had to be with him absent and part of what I got was...I have the control to say it while people are alive, if I'm willing to put it out.

Todd: I mean, both my parents are alive. My kids are OK. I haven't had to deal with any kind of tragedy. But, knowing that there's people there that would support me. And that I think is pretty comforting. So that's a nice thing about it. To me, I think it kind of allows you to go through life in a more peaced out way. I don't have to worry about what life is going to throw me because I feel like I have the people in place or the tools in place to deal with it if it happens. So, I don't have to worry about something happening. I can be more centered and relaxed and if it happens, well, there's help to deal with it and there's people around that I could call up or, even if I don't call up, they would hear about it and they'd call me up, which is neat.

To this end, they have learned to access and express more of their emotions.

Jeff: It's been removing that wall and just being who I am and really, that it's OK to be in touch with the...whatever my feelings and emotions are.

They are more aware "of what's going on inside." Some of the things they are feeling are painful, including guilt, loneliness, and powerlessness. One man stated, "I still feel a lot of loneliness...and isolation." Another said, "there'll probably always still be a little bit of guilt in there." They acknowledge that learning to recognize how they feel is an ongoing process. In fact, one man pointed out that he still has difficulty truly feeling sadness.

Todd: There's people there that go and they emote and they're open. I am not. I mean, my emoting is probably when we're doing the blessing and I might be moved to tears but...I still think I'm pretty reserved and there is a lot more work to do.

### *The Struggle*

The participants cited the improvement that they have seen in their relationships and the increased connection with their emotions as support for carrying out their mission. However, they alluded to a struggle that the mission creates. The struggle that emerged was between the men in the movement, the "in-group," and those men with whom they interact outside the movement, the "out-group."

Prior to becoming involved in the men's movement, the men saw themselves as most connected with the out-group. The behaviors in which they engaged prior to becoming involved in the movement are those behaviors that they see as common in the out-group. The men associated these behaviors with traditionally masculine norms, such as competition, restricted emotional expression, and restricted affection between men. They stated that participation in the men's movement helped them to strive to engage in new, more effective, behaviors despite the perceived risk of rejection by the out-group. The in-group supports and encourages those new behaviors and the men feel accepted among the in-group.

Enter the mission. The men, compelled to share their new found knowledge in order to help others, bring their ideas from the in-group into the out-group. This function is the "bridge." These men, who see themselves as capable of operating in "both worlds," the in-group and the out-group, incorporate into their mission the view of themselves as bridges. They see themselves as uniquely qualified to serve as a bridge between the in-group and the out-group.

Dan: One of the things is I now see myself as a bridge person. And by a bridge person, I mean that I can operate in this fire company and this ambulance and with pilots and with veterans and with guys who tend to be...I won't say all of them, but there's a culture of mano a mano, macho, don't talk about anything touchy, feely or anything like that. So, I've got an in here. My credentials are good here. But I also have a place where I can be the guy who says, 'hey, I see you struggling with that...I see ya...you know, what's going on...how's your relationship going?' It gives me permission to be here and it also gives me permission to bring my mission into it.

Todd: Like I kind of dance in two worlds. Like, I play hockey...an old men's league. And so I'll be there playing hockey and I hung out with lots of people that...growing up, that partied. So, to do this, I got tons of shit for doing it. But, I think, I'm kind of used to getting shit from people. So, it allows me to be in those two worlds.

They may believe in this function because they have experienced the value of the bridge first hand. As the men were struggling to make change in their lives, each was approached by a bridge, someone from inside the movement who encouraged them to participate.

Jeff: I guess it really started with a minister friend of mine who moved back to the area. He'd been away for many years. He moved back to the area and he decided to have a men's weekend, just to invite some men up together to work on issues...I'd never been to anything like this. I didn't know what would be involved.

The men take from that model as they work to help men in the out-group cross the bridge to the in-group and a more effective model of masculinity.

But being a bridge means coping with the possibility of rejection. The men had clear views of what those in the out-group tend to think of those in the in-group. They have heard

criticisms that the movement “isn’t right,” that it feminizes men. They have been accused of being a “good old boys” network, created for the purpose of protecting men. They are often characterized as men who “sit around and cry” or “run around naked.” Indeed, a common criticism that the men have heard is that the men in the movement, who cry openly, hug each other, and spend periods of time with other men must be “gay.”

Jeff: There’s people who are distrustful of it. You know, that somehow this isn’t right or you shouldn’t be doing this.

Todd: It’s well, it’s kind...it’s...’you’re feminizing.’ It’s too feminine to talk about this stuff or who wants all these guys who sit around and cry or they run around naked.”

(laughing)

Dan: It’s funny all the different issues that get tied onto it. If you say a men’s gathering, well...whatever a person’s issue is it’ll be like, ‘I saw two men hugging, are there gay people there?’ Or, ‘I saw this or that.’

In reaction to the criticisms of others, the men in the in-group have developed beliefs about those men in the out-group. They pointed out their perception that although those in the out-group purport to have “very informed, confident opinions” about the men’s movement, they have not experienced and are unwilling to experience movement events. This leads the men to conclude that the men in the out-group have certain characteristics. They believe that the men of the out-group are angry, distrustful, and probably in pain. They see those men as lacking understanding about the movement and lacking insight. They feel sympathy for the men, citing the out-group members’ unwillingness to explore their own issues and their intense fear of self-exploration. Interestingly, they see in those men all of the characteristics that they described when explaining who they were prior to becoming involved in the movement.

Jeff: I judge that a lot of men just have a lot of fear. If you really cut through it, they say, 'agh, that's not for me. That's a bunch of nonsense.' But what the real truth is...is that they're scared to death. They don't want to go there. They don't want to look at what's really going on.

Dan: Really what's underneath that judgment is, 'I, you know, I don't want to go there. I don't want to even...you guys are nuts. I don't even want to go there.'

The in-group has, thus, internalized the criticisms by the out-group and their own criticisms of the out-group. This leads to a struggle for in-group members between life within the group and life outside the group. The in-group members see themselves and believe that they are seen by others as different from the out-group members. As a result, they become somewhat isolated, dedicating more time to in-group activities and struggling to make their new behavior effective and acceptable in the out-group setting.

## Discussion

### *Comparison with Current Literature*

This research helps to clarify and support the assertions made in current literature. As previously mentioned, the structure of the environment created within the men's movement is thought to be a catalyst for therapeutic change among men in the movement. Though the literature suggests that the action-oriented nature of the events is a way for men to more easily express their emotions, these men stressed the importance of verbal expression and encouraged verbal expression in others. The information provided by the men in this study suggests that the setting of the event is not as important as the container that is created at the event. They see the way that the men relate to each other as more important than the incorporation of myth and ritual into the event.

However, the men did express the power and importance of the blessing ceremony, a ritualistic component of most events in which men ask for and give blessings to one another. As is suggested in the literature, it is the connection with and acceptance by others that is most important and beneficial to creating the container and reducing fears among the men. In fact, the need for support and acceptance is so strong that transferring skills to the external world, where those skills may not be accepted, leads to some fears of rejection.

The men's story supports the view in the literature of the four aspects of the movement that draw men to participate. The men in this study did feel dissatisfied and were searching for some way to change. The men knew that they needed men to address their issues, but they did not make the connection between their dissatisfaction and their own "male chorus." They were experiencing problems negotiating their view of masculinity and the demands being placed on them by others.

The men did feel a need for a deeper connection with other men. Once involved in the movement, the men embraced a mission that included mentoring others as a strong component. The men valued mentoring as a way of spreading their mission. However, they also found that involvement with a mentee had benefits for the mentor, including reminding the mentor of aspects of himself that have been addressed and may need to be watched and considered.

#### *Potential Lessons for Counseling*

Reflecting on the experience that these men shared leads to several considerations for the counseling profession regarding providing more effective services for men. First, aggressive outreach may be an important part of helping men. These men were partly pulled and partly drawn to the men's movement. They were searching for something. The traditional methods they sought were not working. While they may have been drawn to the men's movement by their

search for a change agent, it was a bridge person who pulled them into the movement and facilitated their active involvement. Counselors could learn to be bridges for men.

From the men's descriptions and personal experiences, one can draw the elements of the bridge person. For these men, the bridge was someone they knew. The bridge was able to connect with men who are part of the out-group and to communicate to them the benefits of the movement. The bridge himself was involved in the movement and could invite men to concrete events and activities designed for men's participation.

Rather than being a bridge into the men's movement, counselors could be bridges to counseling. To do so, counselors would need to reach out and connect with men in the community. With an understanding of some common issues men face and the pressures on men to conform to models of masculinity, counselors could articulate the potential benefits of counseling for men. To be an active bridge, counselors could actively recruit men in the community to concrete events and activities that are palatable to men.

The counselor as bridge could be the first person to affirm other models of masculinity. The second consideration suggested by the results of this study is that men may benefit from such an affirmation. The men in this study reported that participation in the men's movement has helped them to improve relationships, recognize and begin to label their emotions, and develop some meaning and purpose in their lives. These are common goals of counseling.

The men claim that they wanted to and were able to make these changes. However, traditional approaches to counseling were ineffective. They stated that they needed other men to do it. It seems possible that the involvement of other men helped the men to feel as though they were not turning their backs on masculinity. Interestingly, these men were able to believe that

message despite their perceived disapproval of the larger community of men. While working with men, it may be important for counselors to provide the same affirmation of masculinity.

While such affirmations may help men to move forward with making change, a third consideration suggested by these results is that making that change may lead some men to feel isolated from the larger community of men. Some men who challenge traditional masculinity may start to see themselves as part of the in-group. As they develop this perception, they may begin to make assumptions about how they are viewed by the perceived out-group. It may be beneficial for counselors to attend to these changes in perception.

### *Limitations*

This study provides a rich, contextual description of the personal meaning of three men's experiences of the mythopoetic men's movement. However, the sample, which was quite homogeneous, may not be representative of all men in the men's movement. Additionally, it is unclear to what extent the religious beliefs of the participants, rather than more generic beliefs within the men's movement, are being discussed. For example, "living in integrity" may be part of the men's religious background. Finally, the small, homogeneous community in which these men live is likely a contributor to their views of the in-group and out-group.

### *Suggestions for Further Study*

In order to increase understanding among counselors of the experience of the men's movement, this study should be replicated. Future studies should examine other men's experiences. Participants might be solicited from other mythopoetic men's groups, other men's groups within the neoconservative men's movement, and groups from the pro-feminist men's movement. A tapestry of experiences could be created that better explains the context of change for men within these groups.

Additionally, some of the constructs that emerged within this study should be further examined. In particular, it would be beneficial to explore the meaning of “living in integrity” and the components of the “container.” The in-group out-group struggle and the role of the “bridge” should be examined. Finally, it would be helpful to perform a longitudinal study of the nature of personal change among men in the men’s movement.

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