

## PEER REVIEWED PAPER

### Searching for menswork that works: a report on an experiment in therapeutic groups for men

Nick Duffell\*

*Psychohistorian, London, UK*

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Group therapy can be more effective for men than individual therapy. Since men learn defensive masculinity in groups of men, they can best unlearn it in groups, as a step towards maturity. Many males grow up with inadequate fathering, which affects their own masculinity, building in a sense of distance. But what men missed in their own fathers they may find in other men in order to ‘re-programme’ their internal lack. Exploring identity issues and practising being emotionally present in groups facilitate better family and work relationships. Supported by therapeutic menswork, men can challenge the patterns of dominant masculinity to become a force for social change in their own communities.

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#### **O brother, who art thou?**

‘The artist Grayson Perry says that masculinity is finished as an idea’, said the voice on the radio. I stopped in my tracks. It was one of those mornings when I was trying to avoid getting down to the writing I was supposed to be doing. The BBC’s Justin Webb (Radio 4’s *Today* programme) brought me back to task with surprising synchronicity.

In popular media culture, any remotely serious initiative about men thinking about being men is usually turned into a big joke, often with reference to tree-hugging. There are many ways that we Brits use humour, but it’s commonly employed defensively, so my first thought was that referring to the frock-wearing artist was an attempt at ridicule, perhaps an attempt to counterbalance academic over-seriousness about gender. Googling the reference took me to reports of the first *Being a Man* festival, of February 2014, which I had heard of but not attended (<http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/whatson/festivals-series/being-a-man>). Its female organizer, Jude Kelly, explained the rationale for these events:

You can’t have half of the population walking about and talking about identity – which is what women and girls have been doing for a very long time – and then not have the other fifty per cent of the world considering their identity. (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/why-the-being-a-man-festival-is-really-important/>)

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\*Email: [nickduffell@btinternet.com](mailto:nickduffell@btinternet.com)

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This took me right back to 1987 when I first began to work as an assistant in men's groups – on one series as a co-assistant alongside *Self & Society's* own John Rowan. The groups were only partly about sharing, though the men always seemed to be relieved to be given the permission to share and to feel. They were primarily about men's doubts and identity. Inspired by the pioneers of the women's liberation movement, the central questions asked in these groups included:

- What does it mean to be a man?
- What are the values of deep masculinity?
- What are the images that guide who we become?
- How should we regulate our sexuality and aggression?
- What about our attitudes to women?
- Where is the masculinity to be found that we can willingly identify with?

I was new to men's groups, having accepted a bizarre invitation from my then therapist, following a dream he'd apparently had about masculinity in which I had played a role. I had, however, spent my whole life experimenting with alternative lifestyles, trying to become a different kind of man from those who had brought me up. Different from my father, a dedicated achiever who had pulled himself up from the streets of Hackney, and different from those I met in public school and the venerable university that his efforts had made possible for me; different again to the carpenters and builders I had afterwards hidden among for many rebellious years.

I didn't know the answers to the questions the men's group posed either, and I wasn't much of an assistant. But the questions seemed worth asking and I began to learn on my feet. And though we had a nicely themed programme featuring archetypes and so on, I soon realized that the real-time events in the lives of our participants constituted the coal-face we were mining. No more so than when one of our number got into serious trouble in his relationship and ended up killing his wife in a fight and being sent to prison.

Visiting him in HM Prison Cardiff, situated right in the centre of the Welsh capital, it was crystal clear to me that posing these questions meant much more than having the middle class luxury to indulge our angst. I was used to all-male institutions: boarding school, army barracks on cadet-force weeks, followed by college dining rooms and then building sites. But there is nothing quite like prison. Mostly it's the sound, a specific aural backdrop to the confinement of hundreds of men who, for one reason or another, had acted out their anger or got involved with other desperate men, or thought there was some kind of short-cut to the good life. I had little doubt that most were there out of a lack of good guidance, probably without fathers around to model presence, restraint and relating, and that many were acting out the fall-out of social deprivation.

Therapeutic men's work, if it is to be real, has both to engage with men's interior questions as well as the outer events set in their framework of social and political realities. Nor can it be confined to simply thinking about being male: as sons, husbands, fathers, our attitudes to women are an integral part of the work. Our willingness to move beyond inherited patriarchal values and how our visions of partnership interface with our unconscious misogyny based on idealization, fear and contempt of the other sex is a difficult but important challenge.

Nearly 30 years later, the job seems to be about the same. The 2014 *Being a Man* festival did not ignore the exterior constraints on transforming conventional ideas of masculinity. Ziauddin Yousafzai, father of Malala, the teenage girl shot by the Taliban for demanding the right to be educated, called for ‘men to unlearn all that they had been raised to understand of any single dominant masculine identity’ (<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/feb/02/being-a-man-festival-masculinity>). In his corner of remote Pakistan, just cooking for his family was considered women’s work and therefore a treacherous political act. Not only should all girls be educated, he proposed, but boys must be educated to believe that girls should be educated. ‘Being a man [lies] not in the exercise of power, but in the equal sharing of it’, was his challenge to the men of the world.

Finally, right at the end of the *Guardian* report on the festival, I found what Grayson Perry had actually said: ‘We men ask ourselves and each other for the following: the right to be vulnerable, to be uncertain, to be wrong, to be intuitive, the right not to know, to be flexible and not to be ashamed’.

### Men in groups

Perry seemed to me to be pretty on-message about the kind of interior examination of masculinity that a good therapy culture might encourage. Classically, masculinity used to be defined by what it was *not*: primarily not feminine, not childish, not soft, not loving, not vulnerable, not irrational, and so on. This identity illusion helped put Western society into a hyper-rational trance, and permitted the over-exploitation of our world, which elsewhere I have called the ‘Rational Man Project’ (Duffell, 2014, p. 159). Over the past 40 years, the boundaries of this definition have been challenged, while the plasticity of gender identity has become one of the principle cornerstones of our Western post-modern society. Feminism and its offshoot, the men’s movement, have been part of this movement to differentiate and re-explore the meaning of both gender roles and sexual differences.

And yet, as Manu Bazzano (2007) has importantly pointed out, many men born and raised after feminism are deeply bewildered about what it means to be a man, especially those raised without a father present and struggling to find a good reputation for masculinity. Some are furious with their world, their elders, their mothers or their fathers. Increasingly, it seems that Western parents, educators and therapists who, it could be argued, are tasked with guiding young males towards inhabiting an authentic sense of self rooted in a masculinity they can have faith in, are at a loss to know what to say to the young. While acknowledging the male traps and blind spots, therapeutic menswork must not be confined to apology or guilt: it must have a vision of what is fine about being male, to help men occupy a realistic and grounded deep masculine identity that those growing up can identify with.

I was lucky in my day to have the benefit of working in many men’s gatherings led by luminaries such as Robert Bly, James Hillman, Michael Meade, Malidoma Some and Martin Prechtel, who all understood this delicate balance between the need to not be ashamed and to evolve as a man. I also learned from them how frequently men’s anger with their fathers could in reality turn out to be more *longing* than disgust. In the mid-1990s, I was able to combine what I had learned with them with my training in systemic, somatic, developmental and transpersonal therapies to

begin running my own themed programmes for men over long weekends and weeks, including once a two-week retreat at Dina Glouberman's centre. These events were always very powerful; both participants and staff alike frequently returned home aglow. But I still wanted to create something that might outlast the 'workshop high' – an ongoing format to see what could emerge in a group when men really committed to each other over time.

In those days, weekly or fortnightly self-run men's groups were fairly common, but I still thought there was a value to having a facilitator. Primarily, for the task of steering men away from giving each other advice when they shared in the group, which can prevent the emergence of deeper meaning or learning from further experimentation on the problem instigated by a group facilitator. A facilitator, while observing the group process, can also instigate individual process work in a group, which is very difficult in a self-run affair. In terms of continuity, I also appreciated how the payments made in therapy, whether individual or group, represented a way to ring-fence the time and membership as an ongoing commitment – a further advantage over the voluntary set-up.

Ideally, I wanted to set up something that was easily affordable in terms of minimal time and financial commitment for all involved – myself included. So in 2000 I experimented with a men's group combining facilitation with a regular membership in an ongoing commitment that would meet only four times a year for a longish day. It would take in new members whenever someone gave notice to leave, in what is classically called a 'slow-open' format. Despite infrequent but regular meetings, this format seems to have worked, and I am proud to say that, at the time of writing, nearly 16 years on, that original group is still going. Nearly half of the participants were founder members, we have had one member die and there are currently no vacancies. A second group started a couple of years later, and we now have four groups, all long-running, with a maximum of 12 participants (due to the room size) and four staff members, including myself, who meet for supervision at the same quarterly intervals.

The group work combines sharing, process work, reflection on various themes, and sometimes somatic 'experiments'. Not everyone makes each date, but their places are reserved by booking a year ahead. As for the age of participants, over the years we have had men aged between the late teens to the early 80s, but mostly in between. We'd have preferred to attract more young men, but nevertheless the developing relationships between participants, as they age together, in particular between the oldest and the youngest in the groups, have stirred us all.

We've had our ups and downs, and not everyone finds the limited format to their taste or sufficient. Some are ambivalent: 'Every time I set out to go to London and the men's group, I wonder why', said one participant in feedback to us. In general, such wrestling proves useful. 'As soon as I am there I know', he continued. We have witnessed men build extraordinary trust among themselves to engage with both touching support and delicate challenge. The long open time-frame allows transformation – when it arrives – to happen in its own time. Some group members meet each other from time to time outside the group time, and others do not. As a facilitator, I have noticed how I also benefit from the meetings, since although the boundaries between participants and staff are maintained, our barriers to each other have progressively reduced as time goes by.

### Searching for my father

I named these groups ‘Searching for my Father I found my Self’ (<http://www.genderpsychology.com/searching>). My premise was that many of the difficulties that men experience in learning to share their feelings, or practising empathy and relating alongside the more normal skill in agency as well as having trouble in finding a good masculinity to identify with, have to do with insufficient fathering, in a way I will explain.

In particular, males of every age seem not to have had enough of what I called ‘the father with a heart’, a sort of male ‘ego ideal’. This is a father who knows how to be present; he listens and supports more than he gives advice. A ‘father with a heart’ is not perfect but he has developed his own emotional skills. He is no longer afraid or ashamed of his vulnerability, and is therefore less scared of his partner’s. His emotional availability is not his sole dimension but it assists whatever other qualities he has, such as resourcefulness, practical, intellectual or technical abilities, to give him balance. He is therefore able to teach his son how to regulate his emotions, providing a rounded rather than partial model of masculinity, *free enough* from the traditional definitions I outlined earlier. In other words, through a skilful heart he is able to model a mature or awakened masculinity which is what, unbeknownst to him, every boy is looking to identify with to help him on his own journey of maturing and awakening.

In patriarchal cultures, emotions are sometimes thought to be un-masculine, or the domain of females and undesirable. And yet emotional presence and courage seem to be exactly what boys and men have most missed from their fathers. This lack, I surmise, is what lies behind much of men’s unconscious longings, anger, restlessness and their compensated misogyny – in short, the problematic and partial nature of masculinity. Having heard countless stories from men over the years and processing many in role plays, I remain convinced that this is so. The partial and emotionally distant side to masculinity can then be reframed as ‘only a starting point’. Men can make the effort to mature and individuate and thereby inhabit an evolved male ground. But it’s not easy to do on your own: the support of other men with a similar agenda is crucial, so therapeutic menswork is a good place to experiment with this idea.

Central to the idea of those ‘Searching for my Father I found my Self’ groups was my suspicion that in most men there is to be found some of the qualities that another man lacks and is searching for. Given the right conditions of trust, safety and process skills, these qualities may be released and provide healing. This can fill the void left by the lack of contact with ‘the father with a heart’ in the participant who is searching. The lacking experience can be ‘re-programmed’ – as it were – into a participant by enacting a suitable process in the therapeutic group environment. Under such conditions, the man has an experience of genuine grounding, of ‘finding his Self’ through his searching. What I witnessed over the years, particularly in enabling process dyads where such exchanges took place, was not only that both parties involved in such work benefited, but that the whole group did. In fact, such experiences could bring on a level of maturity for the whole group as they experienced their own agency to facilitate change in each other.

I know these are strong statements, so I think it might be useful at this stage to name some of the other premises or hypotheses that these groups attempt to put into practice. Knowing how hypotheses easily turn into assumptions and then theory, I have to remind myself of what the French physiologist Claude Bernard, born in 1813, who first coined the term ‘homeostasis’, said (Bernard & Greene,

1957, p. 165): ‘Theories are only hypotheses, verified by more or less numerous facts. Those verified by the most facts are the best, but even then they are never final, never to be absolutely believed’.

So, avoiding too much theory, here is a short list of some of the basic ideas that have guided these groups:

- The one-to-one therapy encounter is often too intense a learning ground for many males.
- Groups can be more effective for sharing unvoiced concerns such as relationships, addiction, pornography, etc., and another member’s experience is often more helpful than that of an ‘expert’.
- Groups mitigate habitual male tendencies towards isolation.
- Men learn dominant or defensive masculinity in groups of men, therefore they can best unlearn it and learn a new way in groups of men.
- Defensive masculinity is an immature position so that unlearning it is a step towards individuation or maturity.
- In the post-industrial West, many males grow up with inadequate contact from their fathers, and this affects their own masculinity by building in a sense of distance.
- This distance is most readily replicated in relationships, where the immature male finds sharing his own feelings a challenge and therefore fears his partner’s feelings.
- Men in therapeutic groups can safely practise sharing feelings, being empathetic and supportively challenging to each other.
- What men missed in their own fathers they may find in other men; they may then be able to ‘re-programme’ their internal lack.
- Men can learn to embody ‘the father with a heart’ for the sons to identify with, and to be a safe and present support for their daughters.
- When men are supported to explore their identity issues in therapeutic menswork, they are better placed to stand in the eternally difficult world of intimate relationships.
- The experience of being more emotionally present and skilful in the group setting is good practice for other outside relationships, especially in family and at work.
- Men supported in therapeutic menswork can challenge the patterns of dominant masculinity back in their own communities and be a force for social change.

### **Searching for a future**

How do we in the Searching staff team view this experiment in therapeutic groups for men going forward? In line with our vision, we would like to contribute to narrowing the gap between the internal world of therapy and the outer world of society. We ourselves have learned so much in these groups and have seen so much grounded and sustainable transformation take place, and would like to spread this work beyond the traditionally middle class, middle-aged arena of the therapy room. We would particularly like to involve more young males and those from less privileged backgrounds. From some of our participants there has arisen a wish to learn how to facilitate

menswork in groups, and we are considering how best we could engage with this request, whether by an apprenticeship scheme, a training programme or some other initiative. Other members have suggested we somehow try to widen our scope to cooperate with other schemes already in place out in the wider society.

One idea that came from one of the groups is to connect with the initiative begun by the London rap artist Stephen Manderson, known as Professor Green, who has campaigned to encourage men to talk about their problems and not be so ashamed of having feelings. Manderson's motivation has to do with his own father, of whom he knew very little, and who committed suicide at a young age without having given anyone around him the notion of how unhappy he was (<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/oct/27/professor-green-men-suicide-documentary-bbc3>). Traditionally, men sharing their problems was not the way things were done in the East End. Manderson's search for his father, which seems to have deepened and empowered him and took him into therapy, was featured in a hard-hitting BBC television documentary (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b06mvx4j/professor-green-suicide-and-me>). The film reveals how many friends and relatives of men who take their own lives did not see it coming. Jane Powell of the *Campaign Against Living Miserably* (CALM) hopes the documentary will kick-start a wider debate on men's mental health:

We have to give permission for men to say, 'I don't know how to go on', and that not being a criticism of their gender, because at the moment it is. For a guy to say 'I can't cope' is to say 'I'm not a man', and I think that's why it's taken decades for the Department of Health and the media to tackle this. (<https://www.thecalmzone.net/>)

This brings us squarely back to Grayson's manifesto, and the problem is still with us. If readers have ideas about how to take these things forward, we would love to hear from you. You can contact the 'Searching for my Father I found my Self' team by emailing [hankdavidearl@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:hankdavidearl@blueyonder.co.uk).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Notes on contributor



Nick Duffell is a psychotherapy trainer and psychohistorian who co-founded the Centre for Gender Psychology and founded Boarding School Survivors. He is the author of *The Making of Them* and *Wounded Leaders*, and a contributor to the University of Surrey's *Dictionary of Personal Development*. Nick also co-authored *Sex, Love and the Dangers of Intimacy* (with Helena Lovendal-Duffell, Lone Arrow, 2012) and *Trauma, Abandonment and Privilege* (with Thurstine Basset, Routledge, 2016).

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