

AN EXPLORATION OF MOTHERS' ONLINE QUALITATIVE SELF-REPORTS  
CONCERNING THEIR PERCEIVED INFLUENCE IN THEIR ADOLESCENT  
SONS' DEVELOPMENT OF MASCULINITY

A DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

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### AN EXPLORATION OF MOTHERS' ONLINE QUALITATIVE SELF-REPORTS CONCERNING THEIR PERCEIVED INFLUENCE IN THEIR ADOLESCENT SONS' DEVELOPMENT OF MASCULINITY

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This purpose of this study was to study mothers' values, beliefs, and behaviors relating to topics of masculinity as well as their perceived influence on their sons' development of masculinity. Mothers are under-represented in the literature related to gender role socialization and gender role ideology. While it is widely acknowledged that rigid forms of masculinity are detrimental to boys and men, and the literature is plentiful reporting interventions to address the issues caused by gender role strain in a way that involves men such as fathers, male teachers, mentors, community members, or therapists, the literature does not address what mothers do and can do to assist in mitigating issues related to adolescents' development of masculinity. A qualitative study, using a grounded theory approach, was used to gain understanding about what mothers believe related to masculinity, how they interact with their sons concerning topics related to masculinity, and how they perceive their impact on their sons' development of masculinity. Through convenience sampling, 23 mothers of adolescent sons participated in the study. The following five research questions were addressed in the study: (1) What traits and characteristics of masculinity and male gender roles do mothers value? (2) How are

mothers' beliefs about masculinity and gender roles related to their discussions with their sons about masculinity ideology? (3) How do mothers report what works and what does not work when they talk to their sons about issues related to masculinity and gender roles? (4) What are the challenges or motivating factors that influence mothers' approaches to discuss topics related to masculinity? (5) Do mothers fear that some traits of positive masculinity will result in femininity in their sons?

Using an online survey, data were gathered and themes were constructed. Four themes were identified: (1) Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others, (2) Respect--Treatment of Women, Treatment of Others, Emphasis on Humanness Over Masculinity, (3) Moms' Attitudes and Approaches towards Emotion with Their Son(s), (4) Moms' Important and Unique Role in Sons' Development. An analysis of the data provided insight into the ways mothers value and reject traits of masculinity, how they approach topics of masculinity with their sons, and how they perceive the impact they have on their sons' development of masculinity. The mothers in this study did not relegate the exploration and development of masculinity to someone else; rather, they were involved and clear about their goals for their sons. Likewise, it was discovered that mothers conceptualize their role to develop good people or quality human beings, and the qualities of masculinity that they value most are not gender dependent. Based upon the findings, recommendations are given for including mothers in the research on gender role socialization and gender role ideology, as they are a valuable, untapped resource.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of Problem.....	8
Statement of Purpose.....	8
Theoretical Framework.....	10
Research Questions.....	13
Definition of Terms.....	15
Person of the Researcher.....	16
Summary.....	17
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	19
Distress and Disconnection.....	20
A Possible Culprit: Negative Gender Norms.....	21
Gender.....	21
Paradigm.....	22
Masculine Ideology.....	22
Gender Role Conflict.....	23
Adolescent Development and Identity Formation.....	24
Psychosocial Theory.....	24
Masculinity.....	26
Are Fathers the Only Available Resource?.....	27
The Influence of Mothers.....	27
Mothers Are an Untapped Resource.....	30
Mothers and Traditional, Western Masculinity.....	31
Summary.....	33
III. METHODOLOGY.....	34
Sample.....	34

Sample Recruitment.....	35
Procedure.....	35
Protection of Human Subjects.....	36
Data Collection.....	37
Summary.....	43
 IV. RESULTS.....	 44
Sample Demographics.....	44
Findings.....	44
Research Questions and Central Questions.....	48
Validity.....	66
Trustworthiness.....	67
Summary.....	67
 V. DISCUSSION.....	 69
Themes.....	73
Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others.....	73
Respect-Treatment of Women and Others, Humanity Over Masculinity.....	78
Moms' Attitudes and Approaches towards Emotion with Their Son(s).....	80
Moms' Important and Unique Role in Sons' Development of Masculinity.....	85
Connection to Theory.....	89
Limitations.....	91
Implications for Future Research.....	92
Recommendations.....	92
Summary.....	93
 REFERENCES.....	 94
 APPENDICES	
A. Participant Social Media Recruitment Post.....	110
B. Participant Recruitment Email.....	112
C. Primary Online Survey.....	114
D. Secondary Online Survey.....	121
E. Research Questions, Central Questions, and Interview Questions.....	123

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Demographic Data of Participants	39
2. Theme: Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others: Traits of Masculinity	45
3. Theme: Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others: Conditionally Accepted Traits	46
4. Theme: Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others: Qualities Mothers Value	47
5. Theme: Mothers' Attitudes and Approaches to Emotion With Their Son(s)	48
6. Theme: Mothers' Attitudes and Approaches to Emotion With Their Son(s)	49
7. Theme: Respect: Treatment of Women, Treatment of People, Emphasis on Humanness over Masculinity	51
8. Theme: Mothers Have an Important and Unique Role in Sons' Development: Mother's Perception of Their Impact	52
9. Theme: Mothers Have an Important and Unique Role in Sons' Development: Mother's Belief It is Their Role to Influence Development of Masculinity	53
10. Theme: Mothers Have an Important and Unique Role in Sons' Development: Mother's Satisfaction in Guiding Son(s)	55
11. Theme: Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others: Values Communicated in Culture	57
12. Theme: Mothers' Attitudes and Approaches to Emotion with Their Son(s): Mothers Worry That Show of Emotion Means Son is Gay, Soft, Feminine or Makes Him Vulnerable	58

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **What is happening with our boys?**

The “boy crisis” has been debated for well over two decades in popular media and research (Kleinfeld, 2009; O’Neil, Challenger, Renzulli, Crapser, & Webster, 2013; Stoet & Yang, 2016). Researchers suggest that these struggles are leading to increased adverse outcomes such as violence, premature death, injuries, suicide, bullying, high school dropout, and arrests among American boys (Kleinfeld, 2009; Levant, Richmond, Cook, House, & Aupont, 2007; O’Neil et al.). It also appears that boys are struggling in the educational arena as well, with low rates of literacy, low grades and low engagement in school, higher rates of placement in special education (O’Neil et al.) and lower participation in higher education (Stoet & Yang, 2016).

#### **Gender Gap**

Much debated as to whether there is indeed a crisis, a “boy problem” or not (Kleinfeld, 2009), the research, across various fields of study, suggests that boys are struggling in significant ways that impact their growth, development, and life trajectory (Kleinfeld, 2009; Levant et al., 2007; Pollack, 2006). The continued gender gap in suicide rates in the U.S. is the signal or the evidence of a “boy crisis” according to Kleinfeld (2009). While female suicide rates for girls ages 10-14 are rising from .5 to 1.7 percent per 100,000 and tripling over 15 years (Curtin, Warner, & Hedegaard, 2016), yet boys have always taken their lives at higher rates than girls, “in 2014 the age-adjusted rate for males (20.7) was more than three times that for females (5.8)” (p. 2). Whether a “boy

crisis” actually exists is secondary to the question of how professionals can help boys who are struggling and how professionals can know what is contributing to the challenges of young adolescent boys and, subsequently, men.

### **What Are the Expectations That the U. S. Society Has About Its Boys?**

According to the research, one contributor points to restrictive masculine norms in western culture as a critical factor in the struggles that adolescents face (Good et al., 1995; Pollack, 2006). Vogel, Heimerdinger-Edwards, Hammer, and Hubbard (2011) suggest that the messages of the dominant culture’s expectations of masculinity begin from a very young age. Western gender socialization defines masculinity in terms of stoicism, independence, physical toughness, dominance, restrictive emotional expression, competition, and anti-femininity (O’Beaglaioich, Morrison, Neilson & Ryan, 2015; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Levant et al., 2007; Mahalik, 2003). The messages to “man up,” “don’t cry,” “don’t throw like a girl,” “suck it up,” “stand on your own two feet,” “be a little man,” and “don’t be a ...mamma’s boy, a sissy, a wimp, a fag” begin early and persist throughout the life course for boys and men (Grant, 2004; Kleinfeld, 2009; Pollack, 2006). In particular, this sort of masculinity ideology is speculated to have far-reaching implications for males.

### **Traditional Masculinity**

The impact of masculinity ideology cannot be understated as Kindlon and Thompson (1999) pointed out that boys “grow up in a culture of cruelty that significantly hinders growth and development” (p. 191). Restrictive norms of masculinity result in negative consequences and gender role strain for many, if not most, boys (Pleck, 1981;

1995). In 2015, O’Beaglaioich, Morrison, Nielson, and Ryan ask the simple and very relevant question: “What is *masculinity*?” (p. 313). O’Beaglaioich et al. further stated, “Hundreds of studies have demonstrated significant correlations between individual difference variables and measures of masculinity; however, the ontological and epistemological status of the term is rarely questioned.” (p. 313). O’Beaglaioich et al continued by pointing out that other scholars in the field, “argued that masculinity is an ambiguous, socially constructed term that should be carefully scrutinized” (O’Beaglaioich et al. 2015, p. 313). Connell (2005) states that masculinities are “configurations of practices associated with the social position of men, the life-histories of boys are the main site of their construction” (p. 13) and, as such, there has come to be recognized that there are more rigid conceptualizations of traditional masculinity that often lead to negative outcomes, such as gender role strain. Masculinity is dynamic, not a rigid, one-size-fits-all term. Some forms of masculinity are more affirming, healthy, and positive, while others are damaging to those attempting to live up to the norms prescribed to him (Connell, 2005).

### **Positive Masculinity**

As discussed in the literature, a more strengths-based approach to masculinity has been termed positive masculinity (Englar & Kiselica, 2013); this shift in perspective has derived from the outpouring of research in the past three decades that has focused upon the psychology of men and masculinity (O’Neil, 2013). Pollack and Levant (1995) coined this framework of scholarly work “a new psychology of men”, as it questions the established, traditional Western gender male norms and considers the impact of more

rigid, Western norms of masculinity on males. Kiselica (2011) defined positive masculinity as focusing on strengths and virtues rather than weakness, damage, and pathology. Tenets of positive masculinity could include concepts such as telling the truth, taking responsibility, courage, altruism, resiliency, service, protection of others, social justice, positive fathering, perseverance, generativity, and non-violent problem solving (O'Neil et al., 2013). Positive masculinity takes into account the context and culture of the boy or man, potentially incorporating traditional and nontraditional aspects of masculinity that is tied to one's culture and identity. Thus, this is not the masculinity of White American men, but rather it embraces the uniqueness of men. For example, Englar and Kiselica (2013) noted that while much is discussed about machismo in Latin cultures, the research does not support this image. Rather there is research that highlights caballerismo or the opposite of machismo, conducting oneself with dignity, honor, respect, familial responsibility, and an emphasis on the role of provider for men. Other cultures and their unique focuses on masculinity are also discussed in the positive masculinity literature. Positive masculinity is not about being rigid but strength based in a manner that promotes well-being and "is notable for providing a broader understanding of men and masculinities that is tied to societal and cultural context" (p. 403).

That such a concept as positive masculinity could lead to improved outcomes is certainly hopeful; the question becomes, how can males be helped and who can help them? The literature overwhelmingly considers how men can help boys, whether that is fathers, male teachers, mentors, therapists, community members, while mothers are left out of the literature. Thus, this researcher is interested in what is a mother's role in

interacting with an adolescent son concerning affirming ideas rather than the more traditional ideas that have led to gender role strain, which is described in greater detail below.

### **Role of Mothers in Developing Masculine Identity in Their Sons**

Research states that the relationship between mothers and sons has been explored related to theories of socialization and transmission of attitudes regarding gender (Davis & Wills, 2010; Grant, 2004), but in fact, the research on how mothers impact gender role strain is lacking (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2015; Carlson & Knoester, 2011; Davis & Wills, 2010; Floyd & Mormon, 2013). Most of the existing research studies including maternal factors focus on gender ideology, which looks at the relationships between gendered division of labor, family responsibilities, and the influence of parents' beliefs on intergenerational transmission (Davis & Wills, 2010; Hess, Ittel & Sisler 2014; O'Bryan, Fishbein, & Ritchey, 2004). As Crouter, Whiteman, McHale, and Osgood (2007) asserted, "A growing body of evidence suggests that families are important contexts for gender socialization, but little is known about how family circumstances are linked to gender development" (p. 911). Hess, Ittel and Sisler (2014) specified that the separate influences of fathers and mothers regarding the development and transmission of gender role orientation are lacking.

### **Fathers' Influence on the Masculine Development of Their Sons**

There is a tremendous amount of research on how fathers impact sons relating to gender attitudes, prevention of gender role strain and gender ideology. Defranc and Mahalik (2002) suggested:

Preventative efforts might include teaching fathers how to make connections with their children and subsequently supporting this effort that would involve changing their restrictive gender roles. For example, fathers may be encouraged to include the role of nurturer along with the traditional roles of provider and protector functions. (p. 58)

This study also notes that it is important to account for the son's perception of the father's gender role strain in order to understand the various variables in parental attachment and separation. This is not unusual in the literature. However, Davis and Wills (2010) concluded that it is fathers who are particularly influential in creating the context in which gender attitudes are transmitted, while Crouter et al. (2007) contended first that little is known about how families are linked to gender development and secondly, they cited Tenenbaum and Leaper's (2002) meta-analysis of 43 studies that find consistency between parents' gender schemas and their children's gender-related schemas of self and more generally.

### **Gender Role Strain Paradigm**

The four components of the gender role strain paradigm or gender role strain examined in the literature are (Pleck, 1995). Gender role strain is a paradigm that encompasses the various components of the experience of males that leads to the difficulties that endure.

### **Gender Role Conflict (GRC)**

As a construct in men's studies, gender role conflict is defined as a "psychological state in which socialized gender roles have negative consequences or impact on the

person or others” (O’Neil, 1981, p. 203). A recent review of the 30 years of GRC research highlights the links between GRC and poor self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse as well as the role GRC plays in overall well-being (O’Neil et al., 2013).

### **Gender Role Stress (GRS)**

Gender role stress is defined as “stress resulting from men’s appraisals of failing to live up to traditional masculinity standards” (DeFranc & Mahalik, 2002, p. 52). The male’s working model of self becomes uncertain, as he perceives an inability to live up to the societal expectations of what it means to be a man. Much like attachment style, the individual can become anxious, fearful, and even depressed as the human needs for protection, support, and care are still inherent but the messages from society and even caretakers seem to value other qualities of masculinity: stoicism, toughness, restricted emotions (DeFranc & Mahalik, 2002).

### **Masculinity Ideology**

Masculinity ideology refers to the internalized cultural beliefs males develop regarding gender. This speaks to Connell’s theory that masculinity is much more of a fluid idea, a construct resulting as the product of one’s lived experience (Connell, 2005).

### **Conformity to Masculinity Roles**

The components of gender role strain are gender role conflict (GRC), gender role stress, masculinity ideology, and conformity to masculinity roles. The fourth component of gender role strain, conformity to masculinity roles, refers to the degree to which someone conforms to the dominant, cultural expectations prescribed to him by virtue of the biological sex of the individual (Levant, 1996; Pleck, 1995).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Gender role strain is the result of gender role development gone awry. However, to date, gender role development and identity of boys are not fully understood (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; DeFranc & Mahalik, 2002; Lipowska, Lipowski, & Pawlicka, 2016), and there exist many masculinity ideologies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Pleck, 1995). In addition, the literature predominantly focuses on the role of fathers in mitigating challenges associated with gender role strain for their sons (Acock & Bengston, 1978; Davis & Wills, 2010; DeFranc & Mahalik, 2002).

What has been neglected is an examination of the role of mothers in fostering concepts of affirming, positive, or healthy masculinity and how or if mothers serve a role in impacting gender role strain. Examining the experiences of mothers of adolescent boys are needed to better understand the role mothers may have and the ways in which mothers and sons interact around topics of masculinity. By and large, the literature (Davis & Wills, 2010; Grant, 2004) overstates the research that exists including mothers, focuses on parents and children in various configurations or when the study is specific to boys hones in on how fathers impact sons.

### **Statement of Purpose**

What is missing from the conversation about the gender role strain experienced by boys in America is the role of mothers and mothers' influence in mitigating gender role strain in adolescent boys, thereby fostering healthy or affirming masculine ideology. While there are 30 years of research regarding gender role conflict (O'Neil et al., 2013), mothers are missing from the research regarding GRC and gender role strain in entirety,

how they can assist in fostering healthy masculinity, and how they can serve as a preventative factor or intervene in addressing gender role strain. Examining how mothers interact with adolescent sons in regards to issues of gender roles or masculinity is a first step in determining their ability to influence and intervene in this area of adolescent identity formation. This research filled in the gaps in the literature regarding the behaviors, beliefs, and perceptions mothers have related to their impact on their adolescent sons related to issues of developing masculinity.

From the outset of researching the mother-son relationship, this researcher was flummoxed by the apparent lack of research that specifically studies the mother and son, not parent and child, mother and child, father and son, or father and daughter. Challenged by this seeming lack of research, this researcher sought assistance from the TWU family sciences reference librarian who confirmed the meager findings on the topic of mothers and sons. On occasion, a journal would allude to an abundance of mother/son research, only to seek out those sources and discover that the information was not abundant but scarce and perfunctory at best. Morman and Whitely (2012) state in the abstract of their study, “The purpose of the current project was to investigate critical moments affecting closeness with the historically understudied mother/son relationship” (p. 22). In Floyd and Morman’s (2013) *Widening the Family Circle*, the authors discuss the “vast body” of mother-child research from a number of theoretical perspectives including their specific focus on the mother-daughter relationship in their first edition, adding, “...however, the same is not true for scholarly focus on the mother-son relationship, which is unfortunate, because just like with daughters, mothers play a vital role in several important

developmental issues for their sons” (p. 2). These findings were shocking and this research sets out to add to the body of work that specifically focuses on the mother-son relationship.

The purpose of this study was to study the mothers’ values, beliefs, and behaviors relating to topics of masculinity as well as their perceived influence on their sons’ development of masculinity. With the long list of challenges that adolescent boys face, which then, subsequently, impact men, family systems, and society, it is imperative to further explore the role mothers play in fostering healthy masculinity in adolescent boys (Kleinfeld, 2009; Levant et al., 2007; Pollack, 2006). Through this qualitative study, the researcher investigated and explored the ways in which mothers engage with sons on topics related to masculinity in order to demonstrate how mothers are an untapped and unstudied resource in the study and exploration in how to reduce gender role strain. The qualitative findings gained from this study will hopefully encourage more research on maternal impact in fostering healthy masculinity and mitigating gender role strain in adolescent boys.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Various theories are presented in the literature to explore and frame the multidimensional construct of gender studies. For the purposes of this study, the theoretical framework was Bowlby’s (1958) attachment theory to support the author’s goal of exploring the relationship between mothers and sons and the ways in which concepts of masculinity are conceptualized and attended to in that relationship.

Bowlby (1958) postulated that infants are social from birth and pre-adapted to interact with and respond to a human caregiver. Attachment is defined as an enduring bond to specific “attachment figures,” sometimes one or more attachment figures, which is said to emerge in the second half of the first year of life when the infant can seek the attachment figure, follow them, and have proximity (Bowlby, 1958, 1960; Bowlby & Ainsworth, 2013). At 12 months, almost all (but not all) infants have developed a strong tie to the mother-figure. Bowlby asserted that full attachment does not occur until the 3rd year. Differences in predictable accessibility of an attachment figure to the child that become patterns, by the end of year one, become internalized into what is known as an "internal working models" of self and other in a relationship (Bowlby, 1969). The internal working model functions to help forecast and interpret a caregiver’s behavior, and then later to forecast a partner’s behavior as well as to plan one’s own behavior in response to a partner (Bowlby, 1982).

While most of the early attachment studies focused on the study of infants, over the years more researchers have applied attachment to a lifespan perspective (Bartholomew, 1990; Colin, 1996). In infancy, attachment is studied using observational methods that look at the behavioral dimension of attachment, and this dimension represents the attachment figure’s reliability and accessibility. In adults and adolescents, a person's working model of attachment is a representation of self, of attachment figures and of relationships, based on experiences with attachment figures over time (Bowlby, 1982; Colin, 1996), and this can be measured with self-report measures (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). This self-reported dimension of attachment looks at cognitive

expectancies that are part of an individual's internal working model, rather than behavior, is called the affective/cognitive dimension (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Bretherton, 1985).

The research suggests that the quality of adolescent to same-sex parent attachment decreases throughout adolescence while the quality of opposite parent and adolescent “shows a more erratic, nonlinear developmental pattern with stronger increases and decreases” (Buist, Dekokvic, Meeus, & van Aken, 2002, p. 174). The hypothetical explanation given for this phenomenon is that according to psychoanalytic theory the same-sex parent becomes the reference point for identity formation and the adolescent distances from the same-sex parent in an attempt to develop autonomy (Buist et al., 2002). This sort of need to establish a sense of self and autonomy leads to more conflict in the same-sex parent as well, offering the opposite sex parent the opportunity to exercise well-conceived and intentioned influence.

While there is an established research tradition in the literature focusing on adolescents and the attachment aspects of non-familial, peer relationships, there is good reason to focus on the parent/adolescent attachment relationships, too. Adolescence is a crucial period for attachment relationships with parents (Gorrese & Ruggieri, 2012). Additionally, the quality of the mother-adolescent relationship is linked strongly to attachment security enabling teens to have a safe base from which to explore their worlds, which all is connected to maternal attunement with the adolescent as well as support of the adolescent (Allen et al., 2003), while the father-adolescent attachment has been shown to impact adjustment in different ways. For the purposes of this study, the

strength of the mother adolescence attachment relationship will serve to bolster the idea that mothers continue to be resources of support for their adolescent sons, and the research supports this idea not only during adolescence, but in how it impacts later adult attachment relationships (Buist et al., 2002).

### **Research Questions**

In this study, the research questions were formed by using constructs on masculine gender socialization and masculinity ideology found in the literature (Brannon & Juni, 1984; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Levant et al., 2007; Mahalik et al., 2003). This study demonstrated how and why mothers address issues related to gender roles and masculinity in order to further encourage research into how mothers can work to address the impact of gender role strain in adolescents as a natural and available resource. In addition, it gave some insight into the lived experiences of mothers and adolescents navigating issues of masculinity and gender roles in this milieu.

### **Research Questions**

1. What traits and characteristics of masculinity and male gender roles do mothers value?
2. How are mothers' beliefs about masculinity and gender roles related to their discussions with their sons about masculinity ideology?
3. How do mothers report what works and what does not work when they talk to their sons?  
About issues related to masculinity and gender roles?

4. What are the challenges or motivating factors that influence mothers' approaches to discuss topics related to masculinity?
5. Do mothers fear that some traits of positive masculinity will result in femininity in their sons?

### **Central Questions**

1. What qualities of masculinity do mothers value?
2. What are mothers' responses and beliefs related to expressions of emotion, such as crying, sadness, outbursts of anger?
3. What qualities of masculinity do mothers not value or believe are unimportant for their sons?
4. What do mothers see as their role to contribute to teaching, discussing, and clarifying ideas related to masculinity ideology and gender roles?
5. What sorts of conversations do mothers find themselves having around the qualities of masculinity they value or do not value for their son?
6. Do mothers believe it is important for them to impact or shape their son regarding the type of values he develops related to masculinity?
7. Of the traits and qualities of masculinity, what messages are communicated most strongly about masculinity in Western culture and do mothers agree or disagree with them?
8. What fears do mothers have about new gender roles that seem to be encouraged or accepted in the culture and the outcomes these roles may produce?

## Definition of Terms

The following terms are applicable to this study and its purpose:

1. *Positive masculinity* – a term to use to refer to traditional male roles that are strength-based, positive, and non-pathologizing that could improve the lives of men and those around them (Isacco, Talovic, Chromik, & Yallum, 2012).
2. *Toxic masculinity* – “socially regresses male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence” (Kupers, 2005, p. 714).
3. *Masculinity* – “an ideology can be defined as an individual’s internalization of cultural belief systems and attitudes toward masculinity and men’s roles. It informs expectations for boys and men to conform to certain socially sanctioned masculine behaviors and to avoid certain proscribed behaviors” (Levant & Richmond, 2016, p. 31).
4. *Gender role* – “Nonphysiological components of sex that are culturally regarded as appropriate to males or females. Behaviors, expectations, or role sets defined by society as masculine or feminine which is embodied in the behavior of the individual man or woman” (Solomon, 2013, p. 10).
5. *Gender role strain* – A combination of four components: gender role stress, gender role conflict, masculinity ideology, and conformity to masculinity (Pleck, 1981, 1995).
6. *Gender roles stress* - “Stress resulting from men’s appraisals of failing to live up to traditional masculinity standards” (DeFranc & Mahalik, 2002, p. 52).

7. *Gender role conflict* - “Psychological state in which socialized gender roles have negative consequences for the person or others” (O’Neil, 1981, p. 201).
8. *Masculinity ideology* - internalized cultural beliefs one develops regarding gender (Pleck, 1995).
9. *Gender role socialization* – “The process by which children and adults acquire and internalize values” (Solomon, 2013, p. 10).

### **Person of the Researcher**

I am a Family Therapy doctoral candidate at Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas. Additionally, I am a White woman who is a single parent of an adolescent son, age 14. I first became interested in the topic of mother and son relationships well over a decade ago, as a layperson, wanting to learn more about the specific issues and challenges related to parenting a son. At that time, in 2007, layperson-friendly texts on the subject were scarce. Upon becoming a family therapy graduate student, to my dismay, I learned that the literature on the topic of the mother-son relationship remained scarce, and the books I purchased many years ago still stood as the few books on the topic of raising boys. I am the product of a single parent home and an extended family that, for the most part, is well educated (college degree and above) but has experienced alcohol and drug abuse, benign neglect, domestic abuse, untreated mental illness, and infidelity. As a conscientious mother, I set out to learn more about the mother-son relationship, which began long before graduate school and has culminated into a deeper interest in the topic of masculinity and gender roles socialization.

At a time when toxic masculinity is on display in the highest bastions of American life, when many of the hard-fought civil rights directives of many decades are being called into question, I am aware that my education, family, past experiences and the political and social climate of 2018 impact my perception of the issue of masculinity and its impact not only on adolescent boys, but, in turn, on the men they become, and the society they are part of. With these biases in mind, I will conduct this study with steadfast consideration and mindfulness to explore the topic without the interference of my judgment. I will identify and suspend preconceived assumptions or theories, consciously setting aside my biases, in order effective conduct this research.

### **Summary**

At a time when every week there seems to be a new story of a man or adolescent boy acting out with violence, sexism, misogyny, abuse of power, sexual violence, dominance, or degradation of others, it seems all the more pressing to consider the factors at play that contribute to boys growing up with an affirming, positive, productive view of masculinity versus a limiting, rigid or toxic view of masculinity. Although there is a strong body of research detailing the obstacles of boys and the impact of more traditional, rigid notions of masculinity in creating gender role strain (O'Neil, 2010, 2013), the research tends to continue to offer up similar solutions to address the issue, almost all of which include adult men interceding, whether that's fathers, teachers, or mentors. There is no exploratory research on how mothers impact gender role socialization and contribute to or mitigate gender role strain. This study provides a better understanding of

the beliefs and conversations mothers and sons are having around issues of gender and masculinity.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In popular media and research articles alike, concerns over the challenges and poor outcomes experienced by boys, adolescents, and men in American culture abound (Kleinfeld, 2009; O’Neil et al., 2013; Pollack, 2006). While in boys and adolescents this phenomenon has been referred to as “the boy crisis” (Pollack, 2006, p. 190) in scholarly writing for well over two decades the concern has grown that many American men are struggling economically, physically, and emotionally as well (Weir, 2017). The literature, indeed, supports that boys are struggling in many ways that impact their development and future (Kleinfeld 2009; O’Neil et al., 2013; Pollack, 2006).

According to Pollack (2006), “Boys are in crisis—boys in treatment and boys next door” (p. 190). While this is not new research, Pollack’s call to listen to the voices of real boys served to bring to “consciousness the struggles and pain everyday boys next door are struggling with, often in silence, because of boy code” (p. 190). The current statistics in the literature bear out that little has changed, “Indeed, it seems present socialization systems are dangerous to boys’ physical and mental health” (Pollack, 2006, p. 190). The statistic that most brings home the gender gap is the suicide rate. While boys have always taken their lives at higher rates than girls, the gender gap in suicide rates is the most compelling evidence of a boy crisis according to Judith Kleinfeld (2009). Data from the National Center for Health Statistics Vital Health Statistics System reveal males outnumbered females by 12.5 suicides per 100,000 compared to 2.8 suicides per 100,000

among 15-19-year-olds (Kleinfeld, 2009). Boys also drop out of school at higher rates than girls, are more likely to be placed in special education, incarcerated, and abuse substances (Kleinfeld, 2009; Levant et. al., 2007; O’Neil, et al., 2013).

### **Distress and Disconnection**

The literature tells the story of distress and disconnection for boys and men (O’Neil et. al, 2013). The literature explores many facets of multidimensional gender studies: identity formation, gender role socialization, gender role conflict, and many possible solutions to address the challenges boys and men face.

For men, the picture of distress and undesirable outcomes is equally compelling. According to Alan Krueger (2016), while the labor force has been declining for decades, 11% of men age 25 to 54 are unemployed and not seeking work. Furthermore, Krueger adds that half of those unemployed men are taking pain medication on a daily basis. There is also the ubiquitous opioid epidemic as described by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Rudd, Aleshire, Zibbell, & Gladden, 2016) where the numbers of opioid prescriptions have quadrupled from 1999-2014 as have deaths related to opioid overdose. In addition, longstanding epidemiological research in the United States shows that men are four times more likely to commit suicide than women (Kamali, Oquendo, & Mann, 2001; Moscicki, 1997). Men are also more likely to engage in violent behaviors, exhibit anger, and abuse substances than are women (Glaze, 2011, Minton & Zeng, 2016). The individual and systemic impact of such distress societally is tremendous when boys and men are struggling so profoundly, warranting the investigation into possible causes and ways to address issues.

### **A Possible Culprit: Negative Gender Norms**

As highlighted in the preceding section, while there are numerous studies illustrating in what ways boys and men are struggling, there is also a body of research that contends that restrictive gender roles can cause negative psychological consequences for boys and men (O'Neil, 2013). Englar and Kiselica (2013) stated directly:

When taken as a whole, it would be hard to say that the wealth of data on the lived experiences of men is inaccurate. There is now a firm understanding of how restricted gender roles affect men and women, such that the damaging effects of patriarchal sexism on men are slowly emerging as a social justice issue". (p. 400)

#### **Gender**

As a construct, gender is multi-dimensional and includes gender-typed personality traits, gender-related interests, global sex role behaviors, masculinity ideology, gender role conflict, gender role stress, and gender role conformity (Levant et al., 2007). In particular, this study considers the research impacting boys' psychological health that deteriorates using the Gender Role Strain Paradigm consisting of four masculinity constructs: masculinity ideology, gender role conflict, gender role stress, and conformity to masculinity roles (Levant & Wimer, 2014) and the ways in which the research has found that restrictive gender norms correlate are associated with negative outcomes for boys and men. For example, Green and Addis (2012) found that masculine gender norms are associated with a long list of symptoms and mental health concerns such as depression, irritability, anger, somatic complaints, general psychological symptomology, and lower rates of help-seeking. In particular, these outcomes could be connected to

adherence to the traditional masculine norms of self-reliance and emotional restriction (Green & Addis, 2012).

### **Paradigm**

Gender Role Strain Paradigm (GRSP) has been described as one of the most important paradigms for investigating men's health to arise in the past three decades (Levant & Wimer, 2014). It is a combination of masculinity ideology, or the cultural beliefs regarding gender roles that become internalized (Levant, 1996; Pleck, 1995), and gender role conflict (GRC), which will be defined in greater detail below. "The GRSP posits that, in the US and Western Europe, traditional masculinity ideology influences how parents, teachers, and peers socialize children and those how children and adults think, feel, and behave in regard to gender-salient matters" (Levant & Wimer, 2014, p. 23) particularly, as it relates to "social interactions resulting in reinforcement, punishment, and observational learning, traditional masculinity informs, encourages, and constrains boys to endorse and conform to the prevailing male role norms" (Levant & Wimer, 2014, p. 23).

### **Masculine Ideology**

Traditional masculine ideology emphasizes features like toughness, dominance, self-reliance, heterosexually typical behaviors, restriction of emotion, and feminine attitudes and behaviors (Levant, 2016). There is the idea that men who subscribe to these gender norms and traditional masculine ideals may feel threatened by societal shifts where more fluid and egalitarian roles are becoming acceptable (Weir, 2017). However, there is another side to this issue and that is that the adherence to traditional gender roles

is one of the culprits of creating gender role strain. In a 2016 meta-analysis, Wong, Hong, Wang, and Miller (2017) found that men who conform to traditional masculine gender roles had higher rates of mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression and lower rates of positive mental health. While the concepts of gender role strain are not new, looking at the relationships between health behaviors, help-seeking behaviors, mental health, and masculine gender socialization constructs is just beginning in scholarly work.

### **Gender Role Conflict**

(GRC) is “a psychological state in which socialized gender roles have negative consequences on the person or others [that] ... occurs when rigid, sexist, or restrictive gender roles result in personal restrictions, devaluation, or violation of others or self” (Good et al., 1995, p. 165). Over 30 years of studying GRC, a conceptual model has been developed as well as an assessment to determine men’s GRC in the context of gender role devaluation, restrictions, and violations.

### **Gender Role Stress and Conformity to Masculine Roles**

Gender role stress is defined as resulting from a boy or man’s own appraisal of shame in not living up to traditional masculine norms (Eisler & Skidmore, 1987). Finally, conformity to masculine roles is the degree to which one conforms to dominant, cultural, social expectations prescribed to individuals by virtue of the biological sex. Again, these four constructs together comprise the Gender Roles Strain Paradigm and come into play as this research investigates the ways that restrictive masculine norms impact adolescent boys and how and if mothers play a role in mitigating gender role strain.

## **Adolescent Development and Identity Formation**

Adolescent development is another important consideration. As this proposed research is an exploration of an element of adolescent identity formation, gender role socialization, it is important to consider adolescent development and identity formation. The dynamic nature of the scholarly work in the field of the study of adolescence is important to point out; however, even now there is no one theory on the development of adolescents. Hall introduced the concept of “adolescence” in 1904 as a biological term representing a fixed stage of human development. Freud considered adolescence as a psychosocial stage of development (Silverman, 1986). Erikson (1950) considered it a stage of growth when identity problems abound and Inhelder and Piaget (1958) considered it the final stage of intellectual development known as formal operations and enabling the individual the capacity to function in the adult world (Connell, 2005).

### **Psychosocial Theory**

Erikson (1968) characterized identity formation as an important task of adolescence that is dynamic. Erikson (1968) even asserted that the constant changing and uncertainty during the identity formation process is normative, a finding that is supported by contemporary studies (Becht et al., 2016; Klimstra, 2013). Erikson wrote of adolescents experimenting with identities, knowing that day-to-day changes and uncertainty is part of developing a stable sense of self. While adolescents can look, behave, and even converse in seemingly sophisticated ways that sometimes lead parents to think they are needed less, Becht et al. (2016) demonstrate that supportive, empathetic

parents are still very much needed: Overall, we found that a considerable proportion of adolescents tend to show a pattern of

identity uncertainty across adolescence (Erikson, 1968), evidenced by (temporary) decreasing strengths of their current identity commitments and continued consideration of identity alternatives across adolescence. These findings suggest that many adolescents are in a phase of identity experimentation in which their identity is not yet fixed and stable. (p. 2018)

Connell (2005) contended that adolescence is not a fixed stage at all but rather a “terrain of encounters between growing persons and the adult world” (p. 11) rendering the notion of fixed stages obsolete. However, there is not consensus on this in the literature, and that is beyond the scope of this review. What is agreed upon is the impact of familial relationships on adolescent development (Bussey & Bandara, 1999; Connell, 2005; Crouter et al., 2007; Whittle et al., 2014).

During this tenuous time of tremendous psychosocial and physical growth, research reveals parents desire to keep adolescents “on the right track” as they transition into adulthood (Jones, O’Sullivan, & Rouse, 2006). The delicate balance supporting adolescents as they strive for autonomy while continuing to guide and protect them is an identified struggle for parents in the literature as well (Young et al., 2008). This is a time when mothers stand to influence adolescent sons regarding masculinity that will set them on a healthy life course trajectory (Floyd & Morman, 2013; Morman & Whitely, 2012).

## **Masculinity**

There does seem to be more agreement on the conception and formation of gender socialization and masculinity (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Crouter et al., 2007; Connell, 2005). While scholars who work in this area concur that “gender development is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon and that the dimensions of gender development are not tightly related” (p. 911), there is seeming agreement that one of the consistent variables is “families are important contexts for gender socialization” (Crouter et al., 2007, p. 911). Masculinities are conceived as dynamic constructions that reflect social diversity and inequality (Connell, 2005). The importance of the confluence of the period of adolescence, whether indeed a stage or a period of time and experiences, and the donning of masculinities lies in the ways that existing masculinities, often described as “traditional masculinity” are appropriated and utilized, and on the other hand how traditional masculinity will be rejected and replaced with healthier, less rigid masculinity, often referred to as “positive masculinity” (Connell, 2005). As Connell highlighted in his 2005 seminal work, a 2002 study “found adolescent boys more often reported being emotionally close to their mothers than to their fathers” (p. 13) and yet more research from the 1950s and 1960s “showed mothers figuring more often than fathers as most influential person in teenagers’ lives” (p. 13). This research sought to fill in the gaps in the research and explore whether mothers are helpful in assisting adolescent boys to navigate adolescence when it comes to fostering positive masculinity.

### **Are Fathers the Only Available Resource?**

As it relates to male psychology, masculinity ideology, gender role strain, and the various topics related to gender studies, there is a vast amount of research that looks at the father-son relationship as well as the adult male to boy relationship (mentors, teachers, male family members). Just as an example, Davis and Wills (2010) concluded that it is fathers who are particularly influential in creating the context in which gender attitudes are transmitted. This particular article also overstates the inclusion of mothers in the literature, "...much of the previous research on intergenerational transmission of gender ideology focuses on maternal influence" (p. 584). When the references are checked and a thorough investigation of the literature was done, this does not turn out to be an accurate statement. There is a paucity of scholarly materials on the mother-son relationship or maternal influence on gender ideology (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2015; Carlson & Knoester, 2011; Davis & Wills, 2010; Floyd & Mormon, 2013). Hess et al. (2014) investigated the role of fathers in the transmission of gender role orientation and conclude that mothers and fathers play a role in the transmission of gender role beliefs, and they note that there is not enough research on all possible parent-child dyads, to include same- and cross-sex dyads. In short, there is no shortage of men studying men and how men impact men. The list of articles is seemingly endless (O'Neil, 2013).

### **The Influence of Mothers**

What are missing from the professional discussion of how to help boys are mothers (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2015; Carlson & Knoester, 2011; Davis & Wills, 2010; Floyd & Mormon, 2013). How do and can mothers play a role in helping their sons?

What is missing from the scholarly writing is how mothers and sons interactions impact masculinity ideology, gender socialization, and mitigate gender role strain. What is missing is how mothers could be part of the solution, particularly as mothers are often a built-in resource in boys' lives (Connell, 2005; Floyd & Mormon, 2013; Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002). What is offered time and again are predominantly male-centric solutions, such as father interventions, same-sex mentors, therapy, etc. (Crouter et al., 2007; Davis & Wills, 2010; DeFranc & Mahalik, 2002; Stoet & Yang, 2016). Hopefully, this proposed research will begin to shine a light on how mothers matter in a discussion of how to help boys navigate adolescence to become productive, holistically healthy men.

The idea that there is limited research on the mother-son relationship seems implausible. As Floyd and Mormon (2013) stated:

Researchers have increased scholarly emphasis on mother-daughter relationships; however, the same is not true for scholarly focus on the mother-son relationship, which is unfortunate because just like with daughters' mothers play a vital role in several important development issues for their sons. (p. 3)

The following current research is a sample and representation of the kinds of work that demonstrate the impact mothers and mother-son relationships have on sons' lives. In 2012, Morman and Whitely analyzed incidents of closeness in the mother/son relationship. While again, the gap in the literature is noted, "A significant amount of research on the interpersonal qualities of the parent-child relationship has been conducted. A gap in the knowledge regarding opposite-sex parent parent-child relationships, however, continues to exist" (p. 22). Nonetheless, this study found that

mothers and sons achieved considerable agreement concerning a large number of critical incidents of closeness in the mother/son relationship (Morman & Whitely, 2012). Despite the lack of the mother-child research in past decades, even though an abundance is alluded to that does not, in fact, exist, the overwhelming consensus is that mothers wield considerable influence and that the “mother/child relationship is truly consequential” (Morman & Whitely, 2012, p. 22) and patently obvious as the following research exemplifies.

In Aznar and Tenenbaum’s 2015 study of gender and age differences in parent-child emotion talk, mothers mentioned a higher proportion of emotion words than dads. This study points to useful information as it relates to how mothers naturally foster positive masculinity, for example in such areas as the ability to express emotion or problem solve non-violently. In a similar study, the findings were that mothers and fathers talked more with sons than daughters and that mothers have more affiliative speech while fathers have more assertive speech (Shinn & O’Brien, 2008). This study suggests that parents “convey implicit information about gender and social status to children through everyday interactions” (Shinn & O’Brien, 2008, p. 61).

In yet another Bohanek et al. 2006 study of family narratives, self, and gender in early adolescence, the authors found that mothers express and explain more emotions than fathers and that such positive expressions of emotions within family narratives are related to positive self-esteem and adjustment in sons and daughters. Whittle et al. (2014) demonstrate the impact of “positive parenting” and the power of mothers in their 2014 longitudinal study that investigated the effects of positive maternal behavior (warm and

supportive) on structural brain development using MRI during early to mid-adolescence (pp. 11-13).

Some of the recent mother-son research looks at storytelling, conversation styles, brain research, and closeness, but what it all illustrates is that the relationship between mother and son is a fundamental aspect of development and deserves much more attention in the research (Morman & Whitely, 2012). This relationship is one that spans the lifespan and understanding the ways in which mothers and sons, relate, provide support, and negotiate important developmental tasks such as developing masculinity ideology deserves to be investigated and understood.

### **Mothers Are an Untapped Resource**

There are many reasons to include mothers in the research concerning adolescent boy gender role development, but the most glaring is that mothers are an often present, and heretofore untapped studied resource in the literature on how to mitigate gender role strain. Although not all adolescent boys have a mother in their lives, most do.

How mothers' marital status and SES impacts the mother-child relationship is an important factor to consider. Single motherhood is now becoming a new norm in the United States, with 4 out of 10 children born to single mothers, and around 17.2 million children being raised without a father (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Mothers as single parent head of the households are the majority at more than 80%, according to the 2016 U.S. Census. Around 49% of single mothers have never been married, 51% are divorced, separated, or widowed. Half have one child, 30% have two. Single mothers work outside the home at slightly greater rates than married mothers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics,

2016); however, single mothers earn less than married mothers and the disparities between the two groups is large with single mothers more likely to live in poverty, experience hardships such as food insecurity or even homelessness (USDA, 2016). The majority of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients are single mother households. As well, single mothers are less likely to have healthcare coverage.

In two-parent households, 7.2% of women did not have health insurance compared to 14.6% in single mother households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Single mothers spend over half of their income on housing, another third on childcare, leaving little else for expenditures to change the trajectory of their lives, such as education (USDA, 2015). Does marital status and all that comes with having a two-income household versus a single income household impact parenting as it relates to concepts of masculinity; it would seem impossible that it would not. As such, the relational arrangement of the mother was an important component of this study.

### **Mothers and Traditional, Western Masculinity**

It is important to note that not all traditional western gender norms are negative nor do all boys and men follow a template. For example, stoicism is not an inherently negative trait. When it becomes problematic is when it is prescribed, expected, and restrictive (Englar & Kiselica, 2013). Toughness is another trait that is not inherently negative or even gender-specific: mental toughness, physical toughness. Of course, there is a time and a place. And perhaps counterintuitively, it may not be patriarchy that keeps such time-honored, rigid ideas of masculinity in place, but also women have a role in maintaining the status quo. Lipowska, Lipowksi, and Pawlicka (2016) write, “The role of

sexism in the shaping the attitudes of moms toward sons is most prominent—it seems that it guards the manliness of young boys” (p. 224). As Wiseman (2014) joins in regarding Western gender norms or boy culture, “We don’t collectively challenge boy culture. We either buy into it ourselves or don’t notice it. We don’t see boys as complex, nuanced individuals” (p. 16).

So, is it by choice or is there a fear associated with fostering a wider range of traits and qualities of masculinity for adolescent boys? Is there some part of positive masculinity that concerns women, that boys will not be adequately prepared for adult life or that they may become feminine or gay? In fact, Watts and Border (2005) demonstrate in their qualitative study that boys “felt societal pressure to avoid emotional expression as well as the expression of affection to other men” (p. 275) and that a theme of homophobia was part of the discussions of these pressures. Wiseman (2014), who after writing the bestselling *Queen Bees & Wannabe*, has turned her expertise to “boy world” expresses the societal pressure she has observed more bluntly, “I have watched countless parents say they don’t want their son to bury his feelings, then tell him to ‘get yourself under control.’ I’ve seen parents say nothing when their sons’ coaches call them ‘pussies,’ ‘fags,’ ‘little girls,’ or ‘ladies,’ or their sons report they’re being accused of ‘running like they have sand in their vaginas’” (p. 24). Another question becomes do mothers believe adolescence is a time to toughen up? That emotion is weakness?

Most mothers want what is the very best for their sons. What do they believe that is? And are they moving away from the rigid Western masculine norms towards more egalitarian, affirming, flexible values and traits of masculinity?

## Summary

As the research has borne out the predominant masculinity ideology in American culture has often done harm and has in recent years begun to be replaced with more affirming, positive masculinity ideology (DeFranc & Mahalik, 2002; Englar & Kiselica, 2013; O'Beaglaioich et. al., 2015), it is also time for the scholarship to take a look at how mothers play a role in the lives of their adolescent sons as it relates to the masculinities they promulgate and support. To uphold that men, whether fathers, male family members, community members, therapists, teachers, etc. should shoulder the load of mitigating the challenges boys face is untenable. To do so overlooks the obvious, undeniable, and irrefutable bond and impact mothers have on sons throughout the lifespan.

There is a rich framework of research in the psychology of men and positive masculinity (Englar & Kiselica, 2013), but it is missing where the mother and son relationship fits, how it fits. The purpose of this research is to investigate how mothers are engaging with their sons around topics of masculinity. With this study, the research will add to the body of knowledge concerning the mother and son relationship in general and specifically during the adolescent period, as well as how it pertains to masculinity ideology. This study examined the mother and adolescent son relationship in hopes of adding to the scholarly work in the area of gender role strain and how to combat it.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research seeks to gain a deeper understanding of an observed phenomenon as it occurs in everyday life in order to gain insight and generate solid theory or next steps in research (Morse & Field, 1996). Grounded theory is a framework of methods of conducting inductive, qualitative inquiry (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) asserts that there is choice in how to utilize the tools of guided theory and, “You can adopt and adapt them to solve varied problems and to conduct diverse studies, whether or not you aim for theory development” (p.16). By using a qualitative, grounded theory, this researcher sought to examine the perspectives, perceptions, and lived experiences of mothers and adolescent sons in relation to topics of gender identity, masculinity, boy code, gender roles, as well as gender role strain. Using an online survey, the researcher gathered demographic and narrative data from participants related to experiences of mothers and adolescent sons concerning gender identity, masculinity, boy code, gender roles, as well as gender role strain. This chapter will describe the sample and methodology of this study.

#### **Sample**

The sample consisted of 23 respondents who met the participant criteria and completed all the questions in the online survey. The criteria for participating in this study were as follows: mother of an adolescent son(s) currently between the ages of 13 and 19, living in the United States. Participants needed to have Internet access and know how to use a computer.

## **Sample Recruitment**

The researcher recruited participants using convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling method comprised of people who are easy to access (Babbie, 2015) to participate in an online survey. The researcher utilized two methods to inform participants about the study: email through the Texas Woman's University listserv (see Appendix A) and through social media posts on Facebook (see Appendix B). One reason this methodology was chosen is that people have become accustomed to utilizing technology in their daily lives, which translates to participants' likely willingness to participate in an online survey. The email and social media posts described the confidential study, explained the participant criteria for the study, requested that qualified individuals participate in the study by completing the online survey, provided instructions and a link to access the survey online, and informed participants of a drawing to receive one of three \$30 Amazon gift cards.

A total of 26 participants attempted to complete the survey. Of the 26 participants, one participant was disqualified for not meeting the gender requirement.

Upon completion of the survey, participants were informed that they could access a second survey (see Appendix D) to request an executive summary and/or be entered in a drawing for one of three \$30 Amazon gift cards. At the conclusion of the data collection portion of the research, the researcher provided a thank you note and a \$30 Amazon gift card via email to three randomly selected participants.

## **Protection of Human Subjects**

### **Institutional Review Board Approval**

The researcher followed all of the guidelines set forth by the Texas Woman's University IRB as well as took precautions to do no harm either mentally or physically to the research participants. Per university policy, IRB approval was received before beginning the study. Participants were informed that participation is voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The participants also were provided with the researcher's email address and phone number. Information regarding when and how the participants could be provided results of the study as well as the incentive of entry in a drawing for a \$30 Amazon gift card was described at the end of the survey.

### **Study Risks**

Participants were informed of potential risks to include confidentiality, emotional discomfort, fatigue, and loss of time. For the risk of confidentiality, participant identity was kept confidential and participation was voluntary. No personal information was requested in this survey. All reasonable efforts were made in order to keep information confidential.

Participants might have experienced emotional discomfort such as uncomfortable feelings from recalling and sharing occurrences about their relationship with their adolescent son(s). At the end of the survey, mental health and wellness resources were offered.

This survey took approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. If participants felt fatigue, they could take breaks from the survey at any time without any penalty. There was the potential for the loss of time in completing the survey. Participants could withdraw from the survey at any time without any penalty.

### **Data Collection**

#### **Step One**

Potential participants received a participant recruitment email via the TWU list serve or Facebook post. The participant recruitment email and post provided information about the study, participant requirements, gift card incentive, and a website link to the online survey at the PsychData platform. Each participant entered PsychData from an Internet-accessible device at her personal disposal. Upon selecting the link to the PsychData survey, participants were given a brief description of the survey, along with an estimate of the time to complete the survey (30-45 minutes), the participant eligibility requirements, and information concerning their consent to participate in the study. At this point, on the first page of the website, participants were given the opportunity to read about the study, acknowledge their understanding of the participant requirements and expectations and consent to participate. Regarding confidentiality, participants were notified that every effort would be made to keep their information confidential. At the end of the survey, participants were directed to a separate survey in order to provide their email address to request entry in the drawing for a \$30 Amazon gift card and/or an executive summary of the study.

## Step Two

Once participants indicated that they were giving their informed consent by selecting “yes” in the first question of the survey, that action took them to the demographic portion of the survey where they were asked to provide the following: how many sons between the ages of 13-19, ethnicity, age range, educational level, household income level, and marital status, if their son(s) are biological, stepsons, adopted or foster, and what percentage of time the son lives with the mother now.

## Step Three

After completion of the demographic questions, participants answered one multiple-choice question and ten open-ended questions that addressed the research questions and central questions. This portion of the survey instructed participants to reflect upon their experiences as the mother of an adolescent son(s), age 13-19. Upon completion of the survey, participants received a message their survey was complete and were prompted to the second website in order to provide information to be entered in the \$30 Amazon gift card drawing and/or receive an executive summary. Questions 7-17 are provided below:

10. Below is a list of traits and qualities commonly used to define the term **masculinity**. Choose the traits or qualities you hope your adolescent son will possess as he matures. Select as many or as few as you wish by checking next to each box. (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Levant et al., 2007; Mahalik et al., 2003; O’Neil et al., 2013)

List of Terms of Masculinity	Definition of Terms
Telling the truth	Being honest

Stoicism	The endurance of pain or hardship without a display of feelings and without complaint
Taking responsibility	Willingly being accountable or taking the blame for something
Independence	Capable of thinking and acting for oneself
Altruism	Selfless concern for the well-being of others
Physical toughness	Ability to endure physical pain or discomfort and withstand difficult conditions
Resiliency	Capacity to recover quickly from difficulties
Dominance	Power and influence over others
Protection of others	Someone who will protect others from harm
Restrictive emotional expression	Not outwardly expressing emotions
Family engagement	One who engages in activities such as caregiving, play, and learning and who are accessible to a child/children when needed
Competition	Someone who will compete to win or achieve something
Perseverance	Determination to do something despite difficulty or delay in achieving success
Anti-feminism	Opposed to feminism, feminism is the supporting of women's rights on the basis of equality of the sexes
Non-violent problem solving	Someone who seeks to solve problems without aggression or violence
Other	

11. Of the traits/qualities above that **YOU DID NOT CHOOSE**, please discuss why you believe one or more of these qualities are unimportant for your son's development as he enters manhood.
12. What kinds of talks are you having with your son around qualities of masculinity and values related to becoming a man?
13. In your culture and family, what messages are communicated most strongly about masculinity or what it means to be a "good man"? Do you agree or disagree with them?
14. Tell me about a time that your son showed emotion or cried during adolescence and how you handled the situation?
15. Tell me about a time your son showed extreme frustration or an outburst of anger and how you handled the situation?
16. Do you recall a time when you had a conversation with your son about an issue related to masculinity or being a young man when you felt like you "got it right" in guiding him in the direction that you would like for him to grow into as a man?
17. Do you believe it is your role as a mother to have involvement and influence concerning your son's development as it relates to the concept of masculinity and learning values related to becoming a man? Why or why not?
18. Do you worry if your son shows emotion that he may be feminine, gay, soft, vulnerable to mistreatment? How do you handle this?
19. In what ways do you believe you impact your son's ideas about what it means to be a man? What behaviors do you encourage? What conversations do you have? What behaviors do you discourage?
20. Is there anything else you would like for me to know about you and your son that you have not been able to share? Please share your thoughts below.

#### **Step Four**

Upon entering the second website, participants were asked if they would like to be entered in the drawing for a \$30 Amazon gift card and to receive an executive summary. If the participant answered "yes" to either question, then they were asked to provide their

email address for the gift card and only their email address for an executive summary. Once they submitted this information, a message informed participants that the three secretly chosen recipients of the \$30 Amazon gift cards would arrive in 6-8 weeks, while the executive summary would arrive following the completion of the research. The study sample came together in three weeks, the gift cards were sent out in one batch, two weeks later.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative research requires reading and rereading the data, coding and categorizing the data, sorting, and analyzing the data in an effort to gain deeper understanding (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2017). This researcher conducted three levels of coding with the data resulting in the identification of major themes and sub-themes related to the research questions. Coding is the process of taking segments of the data, finding key terms, naming concise categories in order to develop ideas for interpreting the data (Charmaz, 2014). The results are illustrated in tables that list themes, sub-themes, and participants' direct quotations provided from the survey.

The researcher downloaded the participants' answers from the primary and secondary surveys from the PsychData website onto two Excel spreadsheets. Their demographic data from the primary survey were reviewed to discern if any participants were ineligible to participate in the study, if any participants did not finish the survey, or if any of the questions were answered inappropriately. Each participant was assigned an identification code using sequential numbering. At that time, the data reported by single male respondent were eliminated from further study.

The researcher began coding the participants' answers in an initial coding (Charmaz, 2014) whereby the strategy was to "remain open, stay close to the data...preserve actions, compare data with data, move quickly through the data" (p. 120). This initial coding allowed the researcher to identify keywords and phrases that stand out in the research that can be utilized later in the next level of coding and a higher level of categorization. The researcher met with her academic advisor who also utilized initial coding of the raw data and together they compared their findings for congruency.

Next, a second level of coding was conducted by categorizing words and phrases from the initial coding into a focused code (Charmaz, 2014). Focused codes are more conceptual as they are born out of the ideas identified in the initial level of coding. Focused coding allows the researcher to begin to "synthesize, analyze, and conceptualize larger segments of data" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138). Again, this researcher's academic advisor served as a second coder. In the subsequent level of coding, the focused codes were grouped for each survey question and survey questions were paired to reflect concepts that worked together to address specific research questions. Next, themes and sub-themes from the groupings were created. After this second round of coding, the two coders achieved an 80% agreement via Cohen's Kappa comparison. At this point, the third coder was recruited to check that the coding reflected the participants' answers, that the themes and sub-themes reflected the research, and that the groupings of codes had been correctly attributed to the appropriate theme or subtheme.

## **Summary**

Using qualitative research methodology, masculine gender role socialization was explored as it relates to the relationship between mothers and their adolescent sons. The sample was gathered by convenience sampling and the data collected through an online survey in order to categorize the information into themes. Numerous steps of collaborative data analysis were conducted to ensure that the patterns detected and themes highlighted accurately reflect the experiences of the study participants. Through this methodological process, this researcher gained insight into how mothers and sons relate regarding masculinity ideology and if mothers play a role in fostering positive masculinity with their adolescent sons.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

Using a qualitative, grounded theory approach, this researcher surveyed mothers of adolescent boys to explore the ways in which mothers engage with sons on topics related to masculinity as well as to explore mothers' perceptions of their impact on their sons' development of masculinity. Utilizing demographic, multiple choice, and open-ended questions delivered via an online survey, this researcher gathered data from 26 participants, but 23 sets of participant responses were analyzed. These data were submitted to qualitative coding in an effort to learn about mothers' perceived influence and beliefs around their sons' development of masculinity. The research yielded four themes and one subtheme synthesizing the mothers' perceptions and experiences, as follows: *Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others; Respect--Treatment of Women, Treatment of Others, Emphasis on Humanness Over Masculinity; Moms' Attitudes and Approaches towards Emotion with Their Son(s); and Moms' Important and Unique Role in Their Sons' Development.*

#### **Sample Demographics**

The total sample consisted of 26 respondents, but three were disqualified because one was a male and two were test responses by this researcher and advisor to ascertain that the online survey was functioning properly. The final sample consisted of 23 mothers of adolescent sons who live in the United States. The majority of respondents ( $n=11$ ) ranged in age between 40-45 years old. The youngest respondent reported her age as 33 years old while the ages of the remaining participants fell between 46 and 57 years old

(see Table 1). The ages of the son(s) were not captured, although some mothers shared this information in their answers to various open-ended questions. Of the 23 participants ( $n=22$ ) reported their ethnicity to be White/Non-Hispanic while one participant reported their ethnicity as Black/African American. All but three participants ( $n=20$ ) identified their marital status as married, while the remainder ( $n=3$ ) reported being divorced. Of the 23 participants, all reported finishing high school and all mothers entered college with 87% earning at least a bachelor's degree or higher (see Table 1). The percentage of participants with master's degrees or professional degrees was 30.3%, and 26% have doctoral degrees. Household income varied with the greatest number of participants ( $n=7$ ) reporting that their household income fell into the \$200,001 or more category. The remainder of the participants ( $n=16$ ) were more evenly distributed throughout the range of household incomes. Only seven respondents reported an income level of less than \$100,000.

Table 1

*Demographic Data of Participants*

Age	Data	Frequency $N=23$	Percent of Sample
	33 years	1	4.3%
	40-45	11	47.8%
	46-50	6	26.0%
	51-57	5	21.7%
Ethnicity			
	Black/African American	1	4.3%
	White/Non-Hispanic	22	95.6%
Marital Status			
	Married/domestic partnership	20	86.9%

	Divorced	3	13.0%
Education Level		Frequency N=23	Percent
	Some college	1	4.3%
	Associate's degree	1	4.3%
	Bachelor's degree	8	34.7%
	Master's degree	6	26.0%
	Professional degree	1	4.3%
	Doctoral degree	6	26.0%
Household Income			
	Less than \$25,000	1	4.34%
	\$50,001 to \$75,000	3	13.04%
	\$75,001 to \$100,000	3	13.04%
	\$100,001 to \$125,000	3	13.04%
	\$125,001 to \$150,000	4	17.39%
	\$150,000 to \$175,000	2	8.69%
	\$200,001 or more	7	30.43%

### Findings

To gather information through the online study that related to mothers' perceptions of their influence on their adolescent son(s) development of masculinity, this researcher utilized five research questions and 9 central questions. The following research questions and central questions were explored in this study:

1. What traits and characteristics of masculinity and male gender roles do mothers value? (RQ1)

Central Questions:

- A. *What qualities of masculinity do mothers value?* (CQ1)
- B. *What are mothers' responses and beliefs related to expressions of emotion, such as crying, sadness, outbursts of anger?* (CQ2)

*C. What qualities of masculinity do mothers not value or believe are important for their sons? (CQ3)*

2. How are mothers' beliefs about masculinity and gender roles related to their discussions with their sons about masculinity ideology? (RQ2)

Central Questions:

*D. What sorts of conversations do mothers find themselves having around the qualities of masculinity they value or do not value for their son? (CQ4)*

*E. What do mothers see as their role to contribute to teaching, discussing, and clarifying ideas related to masculinity ideology and gender roles? (CQ5)*

*F. Do mothers believe it is important for them to impact or shape their son regarding the type of values he develops related to masculinity? (CQ6)*

3. How do mothers report what works and what does not work when they talk to their sons about issues related to masculinity and gender roles? (RQ3)

Central Question:

*G. What do mothers see as their role to contribute to teaching, discussing, and clarifying ideas related to masculinity ideology and gender roles? (CQ7)*

4. What are the challenges or motivating factors that influence mothers' approaches to discuss topics related to masculinity? (RQ4)

Central Question:

*H. Of the traits and qualities of masculinity, what messages are communicated most strongly about masculinity in Western culture and do mothers agree or disagree with them? (CQ8)*

5. Do mothers fear that some traits of positive masculinity will result in femininity in their sons? (RQ5)

Central Question:

- I. *What fears do mothers have about new gender roles that seem to be encouraged or accepted in the culture and the outcomes these roles may produce?* (CQ9)

Analysis of the participant data yielded four themes that are discussed below along with selected participants' quotes. The four themes are: *Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others; Respect--Treatment of Women, Treatment of Others, Emphasis on Humanness Over Masculinity; Moms' Attitudes and Approaches towards Emotion with Their Son(s); Moms' Important and Unique Role in Sons' Development.*

### **Research Questions and Central Questions**

**Research question one.** The first research question: *What traits and characteristics of masculinity and male gender roles do mothers value?* led to three central questions (RQ1):

1. *What qualities of masculinity do mothers value?* (CQ1)

Survey Questions:

- A. *Below is a list of traits and qualities commonly used to define the term **masculinity**. Select the traits or qualities you hope your adolescent son will possess or come to possess as he matures. Select as many or as few as you wish.*
2. *What are mothers' responses and beliefs related to expressions of emotion, such as crying, sadness, outbursts of anger?* (CQ2)

Survey Questions:

*A. Tell me about a time that your son showed emotion or cried during adolescence and how you handled the situation?*

*B. Recall a time your son showed extreme frustration or an outburst of anger and how you handled the situation?*

*3. What qualities of masculinity do mothers not value or believe are important for their sons? (CQ3)*

Survey Question:

*A. Of the traits/qualities above that **YOU DID NOT CHOOSE**, please discuss why you believe one or more of these qualities are unimportant for your son's development as he enters manhood.*

**Qualities of masculinity: CQ 1.** Based on central question 1, participants responded to the following multiple-choice survey question: *Below is a list of traits and qualities commonly used to define the term **masculinity**. Select the traits or qualities you hope your adolescent son will possess or come to possess as he matures. Select as many or as few as you wish.* Responses to this question generated one major theme: **Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others.**

**Participants chose positive values.** Mothers overwhelmingly chose characteristics of positive masculinity: telling the truth, taking responsibility, altruism, resiliency, protection of others, family engagement, perseverance, anti-feminism, and non-violent problem solving. (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Theme: Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others: Qualities of Masculinity*

Qualities of Masculinity	Frequency of Mothers who chose the characteristic/Percent of total
Taking responsibility	23/100%
Resiliency	23/100%
Telling the truth	23/100%
Perseverance	23/100%
Anti-feminism	23/100%
Family engagement	22/96%
Non-violent problem solving	22/96%
Protection of Others	21/91%
Altruism	19/83%
Competition	9/39%
Physical toughness	8/35%
Dominance	2/9%
Stoicism	2/9%
Restrictive emotional expression	0

**Values rejected as not important.** Participants were asked to discuss those traits that they did not choose as important in the following survey question: *Of the traits/qualities above that **YOU DID NOT CHOOSE**, please discuss why you believe one or more of these qualities are unimportant for your son's development as he enters manhood.* Analysis of participant responses yielded four categories of qualities that mothers addressed as unimportant for their son's development. In their narrative answers,

participants named 73 qualities of masculinity that they rejected, as follows: 6 of the rejected qualities were qualities of positive masculinity, while the other 67 were qualities of traditional masculinity (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Theme: Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others: Rejected Traits of Masculinity*

Subtheme: Rejected Traits or Qualities of Masculinity (n=9)	
Quality	Participants' Quotes
Could hurt another person n=5	<i>I do not think that traits that lessen the value of others are beneficial (anti-feminism, dominance). (P1)</i>  <i>Dominance leads to treating people poorly and not respecting people. (P18)</i>
Negatively impacts quality of life n=5	<i>Stoicism, physical toughness, and restrictive emotional expression are not important for my son to possess because I believe those are omni-present in the world and I don't feel like I need to raise sons who will add to that population. (P10)</i>  <i>Stoicism, dominance, physical toughness, restrictive emotions, and anti-feminism I believe are stereotyped male behaviors propagated through the media that are not conducive to a happy and content life or meaningful, positive relationships. (P15)</i>
Philosophical reason n=1	<i>I disagree with teaching anyone to oppose feminist values. (P14)</i>
No impact on son's development n=1	<i>I do not believe that being "tough" in a physical sense will define them and cause them to develop in a proper manner. (P3)</i>

**Values identified as conditional.** Mothers also addressed qualities of masculinity that they believed to be conditional, rather than unequivocally valued or rejected. The participants expressed that these traits of traditional masculinity were not inherently

negative but rather it depended upon how they are applied. Competition was valued when it was approached from self-improvement; physical toughness was valued to a certain extent for all people, not just boys, and dominance was normalized as inherent in children. Thus, the three qualities that participants deemed conditional were competition, dominance, and physical toughness, all qualities of traditional masculinity (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Theme: Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others:*

*Conditionally Accepted Traits*

Subtheme: Qualities of Masculinity That are Conditional (n=7)	
Quality	Participants' Quotes
Competition n=5	<i>Competition is healthy, but it isn't the most important part of life. I'd rather my son enjoy things for the sake of participation and not feel like he has to win. (P18)</i>  <i>Competition is situation dependent as well as how it's approached. Competition while maintaining morals and integrity can be healthy. (P21)</i>
Dominance n=1	<i>I am a bit nervous about competitiveness because I think it can lead to some other behaviors such as the need to display dominance but I also believe that it is somewhat inherent in my children. (P10)</i>
Physical toughness n=1	<i>I am on the fence about physical toughness – I think we can all use a little of that, but not at the expense of other traits. (P23)</i>

**Qualities that were not valued.** Despite not having been asked about those qualities that mothers did value, participants chose to share that information in the survey question 11: *Of the traits/qualities above that **YOU DID NOT CHOOSE**, please discuss why you believe one or more of these qualities are unimportant for your son's*

*development as he enters manhood.* Because the majority of the participants chose to share what they did value, that data is also being included. Qualities mothers valued were grouped into three categories and occurred 27 times in a question that did not inquire about what was valued (see Table 5).

Table 5

*Theme: Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others: Qualities Mothers Value*

Subtheme: Qualities Mothers Value (n=27)	
Quality	Participants' Quotes
Positive treatment of women n=9	<i>I believe in an egalitarian approach to life and roles and opportunities and hope to pass along those ideas to my son. (P4)</i>  <i>I think it is very important that the boys understand that having a relationship with a female needs to be equal and balanced. (P7)</i>
Care for personal health n=3	<i>My desire is for all of my teens to stay healthy and fit, and that includes eating a good, balanced diet and exercising. (P3)</i>  <i>I would agree physical strength and health are important for both men and women but no one should have to withstand physical pain because it shouldn't be administered to anyone. (P9)</i>
Positive emotions of sons n=15	<i>I want my son to be comfortable showing emotion. (P5)</i>  <i>I believe it is really important to have the ability to express yourself and your emotions. (P7)</i>

**Central question 2.** Based on central question 2, participants were asked about how they handled their sons' emotions such as crying or anger. The survey question 14 asked: *Tell me about a time that your son showed emotion or cried during adolescence and how you handled the situation?* Responses to this question generated one major

theme: Mothers' attitudes and approaches to emotion with their son(s). Mothers handled situations where their sons cried in two ways: mothers either took a relational approach or isolated and ignored their son when he was emotional. Four participants either replied that their teenagers did not show emotion or chose not to answer the question (see Table 6).

Table 6

*Mothers' Attitudes and Approaches to Emotion with Their Son(s): Crying*

Subtheme: How Mothers Handled a Show of Emotion Like Crying (n=24)	
How Handled	Participants' Quotes
Relational response: reach out/support/teach n=19	<i>Gave him a tissue, not a big deal, treated him the same as my daughter. (P2)</i>  <i>My son cried when he found out an acquaintance committed suicide. I hugged him, I empathized and I let him talk about his feelings – of sadness, frustration, and confusion. (P17)</i>
No response or reported no emotion display in adolescence n=4	<i>He doesn't often show emotion. (P15)</i>  <i>I can't think of a time by kids cried or got really emotional. Even when we announced our divorce last year they were both okay. I've not seen either one cry in their teen years. (P9)</i>
Isolated son/ignored emotion n=1	<i>In this case, I ignored the outburst but didn't scold him for it either. (P1)</i>

**How participants handle extreme emotion.** In a similar question based on central question 2, participants responded to Survey Question 15 concerning how their sons showed extreme emotion or anger: *Recall a time your son showed extreme frustration or an outburst of anger and how you handled the situation?* Responses to this question also fell under the single theme for this central question: Mothers' attitudes and

approaches to emotion with their son(s). Participants responses were grouped into three categories that are similar to the categories asking about crying. All participants answered this question, whereas four participants chose not to answer the question about crying in Table 6.

Table 7

*Mothers' Attitudes and Approaches to Emotion with Their Son(s): Anger or Frustration*

Subtheme: How Mothers Handle a Show of Emotion, Specifically Anger or Frustration (n=21)	
How Handled	Participants' Quotes
Isolated son/ignored emotion n=1	<i>He would throw himself on the couch and rant and rave. Because it was so dramatic the rest of the family usually ignored it or teased him about it. (P1)</i>
Relational response: reach out n=18	<i>My son was irritated about being taunted and not playing fair. We talked later about how he could be a good influence on the other boy without getting frustrated with him. (P5)</i>  <i>First, I told him to take a break. Then we discussed the problem to find solutions. (P6).</i>
Other: isolation/escalation n=2	<i>At 17 he became violent and I called the police. (P2)</i>  <i>My older son is very calm and collected, and then it builds up until he has an outburst. It almost always makes me furious and our fights escalate quite quickly. I handle it one of two ways: the first is to ask him to go to his room until he is ready to have a normal conversation. The second is to continue to argue and fight. (P10)</i>

**Research question 2.** The second research question *How are mothers' beliefs about masculinity and gender roles related to their discussions with their sons about masculinity ideology?* yielded three central questions?

1. *What sorts of conversations do mothers find themselves having around the qualities of masculinity they value or do not value for their son? (CQ4)*

Survey Question:

A. *What kinds of talks are you having with your son around qualities of masculinity and values related to becoming a man?*

B. *Do you recall a time when you had a conversation with your son about an issue related to masculinity or being a young man when you felt you “got it right” in guiding him in the direction that you would like for him to grow into a man?*

2. *What do mothers see as their role to contribute to teaching, discussing, and clarifying ideas related to masculinity ideology and gender roles? (CQ5)*

Survey Question:

A. *In what ways do you believe you impact your son’s ideas about what it means to be a man? What behaviors do you encourage? What conversations do you have? What behaviors do you discourage?*

3. *Do mothers believe it is important for them to impact or shape their son regarding the type of values he develops related to masculinity? (CQ6)*

Survey Questions:

A. *Do you believe it is your role as a mother to have involvement and influence concerning your son’s development as it relates to the concept of masculinity and learning values related to becoming a man? Why or why not?*

Participants responded to Survey Question 12: *What kinds of conversations are you having with your son around qualities of masculinity and values related to becoming a man?* This question and the following question were coded for content first. *Do you recall a time when you had a conversation with your son about an issue related to masculinity or being a young man when you felt you “got it right” in guiding him in the direction that you would like for him to grow into a man?* The content in the responses to these questions generated one major theme: Respect--Treatment of women, treatment of people, emphasis on humanness over masculinity. The content was categorized into 5 categories and mothers shared the particulars of the content of their conversations 70 times in their narratives (see Table 8).

Table 8

*Respect-- Treatment of Women, Treatment of People, Emphasis on Humanness over Masculinity*

Subtheme: Content of Conversations (n=70)	
Content	Participants' Quotes
Expression of sexuality n=9	<p><i>Currently we are having conversations about consent and sexuality. He is getting many messages, living in a very conservative state, that do not always mesh with our home values. (P1)</i></p> <p><i>We talked a few times about sexuality, and the challenges that they might face when exposed to so much stimulation without an outlet. (P10)</i></p>
Sons show respect for all persons n=11	<p><i>My son and I have talked much about being respectful of all people, and especially, being respectful of women. (P20)</i></p> <p><i>We also talk about respect of others and in particular girls as it relates to dating (how to be a gentleman, handling conflict appropriately). (P21)</i></p>

<p>Sons would develop these positive qualities n=19</p>	<p><i>We do discuss things like respecting others' boundaries, how to empathize with others, stand up for others, care of others, how to be more self-reliant and independent. (P14)</i></p> <p><i>We talk about what it means to have integrity, to choose what is difficult over what is easy and convenient. (P4)</i></p>
<p>Sons would learn from behavior, their own and others; development n=28</p>	<p><i>We talk about honesty and what it means to be a good friend. We talk about tolerance and ways to reduce stress. We talk about being true to yourself and not feeling pressure to be and act how others think you should. (P15)</i></p> <p><i>My son and I have talked much about being respectful of all people, and especially, being respectful of women. We speak often about not just being a "taker" but always seeking ways to give back. (P20)</i></p>
<p>Sons would express spirituality, development n=3</p>	<p><i>The way he shepherds young people. His actions point others to Jesus. (P5)</i></p> <p><i>We talk about Christian faith and how we should show God's love in the things we say and do. (P6)</i></p>

Participants responded to Survey Question 19: *In what ways do you believe you impact your son's ideas about what it means to be a man? What behaviors do you encourage? What conversations do you have? What behaviors do you discourage?*

Responses to this question generated one major theme: Mothers have an important and unique role in sons' development. Participants spoke of their behaviors that impact their sons as well as positive qualities they encourage in their sons and qualities they discourage. The responses were organized into the following sub-themes: How mothers perceive their impact on their sons and what mothers discourage. In the first subtheme, mothers discussed their behavior that impacts their sons as well as the qualities they teach and emphasize that impact their sons. All of the participants expressed that they have a

positive impact on their sons. In the next subtheme, mothers describe the qualities they discourage, which also demonstrates their values (see Table 9).

Table 9

*Mothers Have an Important and Unique Role in Sons' Development.*

Subtheme: How Mothers Perceive Their Impact on Their Sons (n=66)	
Perceptions	Participants' Quotes (n=66)
Mothers Positive Behaviors n=10	<p><i>I believe I do impact my son's ideas about what it means to be a man without saying, "This is what makes you a man," because I teach and guide him regularly in how to be a good human being. If he focuses on treating others well, being respectful, kind, considerate, responsible, honest, full of faith, and full of integrity, then he will be a good man. (P20)</i></p> <p><i>I believe they respect women. I strongly encourage respect for what has been given to them. We have had many talks on how to be a good employee and good boyfriend, being respectful and committed. (P3)</i></p>
Positive Qualities of sons n=33	<p><i>I teach him to hold the door, to allow adults to go in first (especially elderly), to be kind. I discourage inappropriate discussions, being loud or crass or cruel in any way. (P9)</i></p> <p><i>Here in our household everyone is equal. Everyone is expected to help with everything. Whether it's housework, gardening, taking care of pets, or loading supplies for work. (P13)</i></p>
Subtheme: What mothers discourage	
Anti-feminism n=1	<i>I discourage anti-feminism and any sort of marginalization of others. (P4)</i>
Demeaning others n=2	<p><i>We strongly discourage making fun of those who are different than we are, and those who do not share our same viewpoints in life. (P3)</i></p> <p><i>I discourage competition in the form of putting others down. (P4)</i></p>
Use of strength/violence n=4	<i>We talk about how physical strength isn't the only kind of strength and isn't to be abused. (P1)</i>

	<i>I discourage violent conflict resolution as a first means of approach. (P4)</i>
Illegal/inappropriate behavior <i>n=9</i>	<i>I discourage sexist, racist, xenophobic, homophobic, etc. talk. I discourage derogatory words like “bitch” to describe a woman they do not like and have them choose more accurate adjectives. I discourage “boy talk” when they make crude references to their own anatomy. I do not allow crude references about women’s anatomy. (P17)</i>  <i>I discourage succumbing to peer pressure, judging people, and just being a jerk. (P21)</i>
Negative personal qualities <i>n=7</i>	<i>We strongly discourage being untruthful and not being true to yourself. (P3)</i>  <i>We discourage foul language, any illegal behaviors (such as underage drinking), and behaviors that isolate him from others (such as playing video games alone for hours). (P11)</i>

Participants responded to Survey Question 17: *Do you believe it is your role as a mother to have involvement and influence concerning your son’s development as it relates to the concept of masculinity and learning values related to becoming a man? Why or why not?* Responses to this question generated one major theme: Mothers have an important and unique role in their sons’ development. All mothers agreed that they should have a role in influencing their son’s development of masculinity. Seven mothers acknowledged that while their role is important, so too, is the child’s father. Only one mother spoke of her role being more influential. (see Table 10).

Table 10

*Mothers Have an Important and Unique Role in Their Sons’ Development.*

Subtheme: Mothers’ Belief That it is Their Role to Influence the Development of Masculinity ( <i>n=37</i> )	
Belief about influence	Participants’ Quotes

<p>Mother influential n=23</p>	<p><i>I feel very influential in the type of man they grow into. Their dad is not around often and so that leaves me to influence their manners and how they develop. (P9)</i></p> <p><i>I believe it's important that I guide him to be a good human being who respects his fellow human beings. (P8)</i></p>
<p>Acknowledges importance of father, too n=7</p>	<p><i>I think both parents are important in developing a "man". A mother shows her son how he should treat a woman when he is an adult. (P6)</i></p> <p><i>Yes, I believe that my role is just as important as my husband's in helping our son develop these values. I am able to give him the perspective as a woman that my husband can't and vice versa. (P11)</i></p>
<p>Lead by example n=6</p>	<p><i>I think that it is important for me to help develop really good people, and since I am raising sons I think that also means showing them that being masculine or a good man does not necessarily mean that they have to act like what they see in pop culture. I think that teaching values is incredibly important, but that actions and pointing out good or bad examples is much more critical and effective than discussing it. (P10)</i></p> <p><i>My perspective as a female is important. I am hopeful my contribution helps him see when he is in healthy relationships and being treated well by his partner. (P21)</i></p>
<p>Mother more influential than father n=1</p>	<p><i>I believe that in some ways I have had more influence than his father. For the most part I have controlled the situations he encountered and the people he came into contact with early on. (P1)</i></p>

**Research question three.** The third research question: *What do mothers see as their role to contribute to teaching, discussing, and clarifying ideas related to masculinity ideology and gender roles?* yielded one central question:

1. *What do mothers see as their role to contribute to teaching, discussing, and clarifying ideas related to masculinity ideology and gender roles?* (CQ7)

Participants responded to Survey Question 16: *Do you recall a time when you had a discussion with your son about an issue related to masculinity or being a young man when you felt like you “got it right” in guiding him in the direction that you would like for him to grow into as a man?* Responses to this question generated one major theme: Mothers have an important and unique role in sons’ development. In this question, this researcher was most interested in mothers’ perceptions of getting it right in guiding their son. Of the 23 participants, 18 reported feeling satisfied with their guidance; two reported mixed or mostly satisfied, and one reported uncertainty (see Table 11).

Table 11

*Mothers Have an Important and Unique Role in Sons’ Development.*

Subtheme: Mothers’ Satisfaction in Guiding Son(s) (n=21)	
Satisfaction	Participants’ Quotes
Yes, satisfied n=18	<p><i>I have had many, many conversations with my son about being a good person/being a good human being, and I do feel like I have gotten many of those conversations correct. (P20)</i></p> <p><i>I think we have had conversations in the past about not talking about girls as if they are property or sexual objects in reference to comments he shared with me that a friend had made about a girl they knew. I think I have “gotten it right” in the past... We talk very regularly about a lot of things: school, friends, growing up, and in general I think we do pretty well most of the time. I like him and think he’s a good kid. (P14)</i></p>
Mostly satisfied/mixed satisfaction n=2	<p><i>I would say that I feel mostly satisfied in guiding him in the direction we would like for him to grow as a man. (P11)</i></p> <p><i>I don’t know. I feel like I’m trying really hard in this area, and I suspect some gets in, but I also feel like I am missing it, too. I use examples and metaphors and cautionary tales we see on tv. And yet he still makes</i></p>

	<i>decisions that are some of this hyper-masculine crap. (P4)</i>
Uncertainty n=1	<i>Ha! I'm never sure if I'm getting it right. I just want him to be happy, confident, and caring. (P21)</i>

**Research question four.** The fourth research question: *What are the challenges or motivating factors that influence mothers' approaches to discuss topics related to masculinity?* yielded one central question:

1. *Of the traits and qualities of masculinity, what messages are communicated most strongly about masculinity in Western culture and do mothers agree or disagree with them? (CQ8)*

Survey Question:

*A. In your culture and family, what messages are communicated most strongly about masculinity or what it means to be a "good man"? Do you agree or disagree with them?*

Mothers again reiterated the values of masculinity they accept and reject in the question: *In your culture and family, what messages are communicated most strongly about masculinity or what it means to be a "good man"? Do you agree or disagree with them?*

Responses to this question fell under the major theme: Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others. Mothers spoke about culture in the nuclear family, extended family, and the culture at large. What was considered was if the cultural values reported more aligned with the qualities of traditional or positive masculinity and then if the mother agreed or disagreed with the values (see Table 12).

Table 12

*Theme: Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others*

Subtheme: Values Communicated in Culture: Nuclear Family, Extended Family, or Culture at Large (n=15)	
Values	Participants' Quotes
<p>Traditional masculinity qualities valued, mother disagrees n=7</p>	<p><i>In our culture, there are many negative messages about manhood—the need to always be in control of one's emotions, take care of others to the neglect of yourself, asserting your dominance, etc. This isn't communicated strongly in my family, but my husband is more likely to advocate not expressing outward emotions, "being a man", etc. than I am. We sometimes disagree about some of this, which my son is very aware of. (P14)</i></p> <p><i>In my culture, there seems to be quite a bit of pressure on boys and young men to be physically strong and competitive. Being the "best" at something is valued more over team accomplishments. Not showing emotions is valued, "boys don't cry". I think my husband agrees with these values and messages, but I think they can be damaging to boys who do not emulate them. These values are not all bad, but if they are overemphasized I think they can be damaging. (P15)</i></p>
<p>Positive masculinity qualities valued, mother agrees n=8</p>	<p><i>The key messages are that men are kind and caring, and that they are just as responsible as women for the well-being of the family. I think that they do receive some conflicting messages from our culture in that they know they are not "supposed" to demonstrate emotions. (P10)</i></p> <p><i>The messages they convey about being a good man or good person are mixed. Some I agree with—being honest, helpful, and kind. Being financial successful – to me this is not as important as being happy and self-sufficient. They would value stoicism whereas I don't mind if men show emotions. (P16)</i></p>

**Research question five.** The fifth research question: *Do mothers fear that some traits of positive masculinity will result in femininity in their sons?*

1. *What fears do mothers have about new gender roles that seem to be encouraged or accepted in the culture and the outcomes these roles may produce? (CQ9)*

Survey Question:

A. *Do you worry if your son shows emotion that he may be feminine, gay, soft, or vulnerable to mistreatment? How do you handle this?*

Participants responded to Survey Question 18: *Do you worry if your son shows emotion that he may be feminine, gay, soft, or vulnerable to mistreatment? How do you handle this?* Responses to this question generated one major theme: Mothers’ attitudes and approaches to emotion with their sons. Of the 23 participants, 19 reported they were not worried about a show of emotion, one reported she was worried, and three participants misunderstood the question, instead speaking to issues of their sons’ sexuality. Of the 19 who were not worried about a show of emotion meaning their son was gay or feminine, three sub-themes were yielded (see Table 13). Three respondents misunderstood the question and instead provided answers discussing their sons’ sexuality. This information did not relate to the intention of the question.

Table 13

*Mothers’ Attitudes and Approaches to Emotion with Their Sons*

Subtheme: Mothers’ Worry That a Show of Emotion Means Son is Gay, Soft, Feminine or May Make Him Vulnerable to Mistreatment (N=23)	
Attitude (Worry)	Participants’ Quotes
Not worried, but concerned vulnerable to insensitive people n=4	<i>I don’t worry that by showing emotion my son may be feminine or gay. I do worry that he might be vulnerable to mistreatment if he were to cry or become upset around a group of male peers. (P11)</i>

	<i>I would worry more about him being vulnerable to mistreatment than anything else. I encourage close family and friend connections so he has a “safe” network of people where he feels comfortable expressing his feelings. (P21)</i>
Not worried, believe time and place for emotion <i>n=2</i>	<i>No, definitely not. Again, there is a time and a place for everything. One needs to consider his audience, but emotion is not weakness, but quite the opposite. I’d like him to continue to show his emotion, speak his emotion in order to know how to harness his emotion as he becomes an adult. It seems many men are stunted in this area. (P4)</i>  <i>No, I do not worry one bit about those things. I believe men should show emotion at an appropriate time for an appropriate reason, just like women.</i>
Not worried <i>n=13</i>	<i>Nope. My husband has wonderful raw emotions. He is a manly man and his emotions were what drew me to him. (P5)</i>  <i>I absolutely do not believe there’s anything wrong with a boy showing emotions. In fact I think it is a great quality to have and allows a woman to connect better with a man that way. I have expressed to my boys that there’s nothing wrong with them being vulnerable is showing emotion and that they should be proud of themselves for that. (P7)</i>
Worried <i>n=1</i>	<i>I have at times and I am a firm believer of standing up for the courage of your convictions whether male or female. Strong is important in order to not be taken advantage of. (P2)</i>
Misunderstood question <i>n=3</i>	

### Validity

In an effort to produce a quality study and increase the validity of the study, this researcher employed a collaborative coding (Saldana, 2015) approach inviting stakeholders, such as the researcher’s major professor to oversee and code or pre-code data and meet regularly to discuss and supervise findings. This approach served to

mitigate the researcher's biases and beliefs about the data (Saldana, 2015). Additionally, the researcher recruited a colleague and graduate in the family therapy program to validate the coding. This colleague completed her Ph.D. in family therapy and was knowledgeable about the qualitative methods used to analyze the data. After several rounds of coding and meeting with the third coder, the data were compared for congruence and presented to the researcher's major professor to ensure that the coding, groupings, themes, and organization of the data accurately reflected the data collected (Patton, 1999).

### **Trustworthiness**

In an effort to produce a study with transferability, this research sought to recruit a diverse group of participants. The predominant qualifying criteria were that the participant is the mother of an adolescent son currently between the ages of 13-19. Additionally, thorough information regarding the research will be kept should another researcher want to replicate the study with another sample at later date. Finally, this researcher worked to ensure that neutrality is the watchword guiding the study and that personal expectations or biases do not influence the work, outcomes, or reporting of results.

### **Summary**

In this qualitative, online study, 23 participants provided information related to their perceptions of their influence on their son's development of masculinity. The participants shared traits of masculinity that they value and reject, the conversations that they have had with their sons, and their perception of their effectiveness in guiding their

son. This researcher identified four themes related to the participants' perceptions and experiences with their sons including: Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others; Respect--Treatment of Women, Treatment of Others, Emphasis on Humanness Over Masculinity; Moms' Attitudes and Approaches towards Emotion with Their Son(s); Moms' Important and Unique Role in Their Sons' Development. The analysis of the qualitative data revealed that the majority of the participants believe they play an important role in their son's development of masculinity and are satisfied in the way they are guiding their sons to become men.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

Rarely a week goes by that the plight of boys and masculinity, hyper-masculinity, or toxic masculinity is not the topic of an article in a major, national newspaper. The sample of current headlines in 2017-2018 suggests a real crisis for boys and men:

“Men aren’t monsters: The problem is toxic masculinity” (Zimmer, 2017)

“Guys tell us about their struggles with toxic masculinity” (Bell, 2018)

“The boys are not all right” (Black, 2018)

“Philip Roth’s toxic masculinity” (Lipsyte, 2018)

“What men say about #MeToo in therapy” (Klein 2018)

“The toxic link between masculinity, violence and weakness” (Scott, 2018)

“Why can’t we hate men” (Walters, 2018)

“Toxic masculinity is killing us (Graham, 2017)

The terms *toxic masculinity* and *hypermascularity* have entered the popular vernacular evidenced by their use in newspaper articles, such terms are no longer relegated to peer-reviewed journals. In this study, mothers were asked to choose traits of masculinity that they value and reject. These traits of masculinity are from the literature and encompass traits considered to be positive and those considered to be rigid and potentially detrimental.

The hypotheses for what is causing boys and men to struggle and have poor outcomes are in the literature on the psychology of boys and men that spans the past three

decades. Researchers have focused on masculinity extensively as an area of study (Wong & Wester, 2016) and elements of traditional masculinity and toxic masculinity have long been identified in the research as variables that lead to negative outcomes for boys (Berger, Addis, Green, Mackowiak, & Goldberg, 2013; Levant & Richmond, 2016; O'Neil, 2010; Wong et al., 2017). The trait of restrictive emotionality was of particular interest in this study, as it is most often identified as a trait of masculinity that impacts boys and men negatively. In this study, mothers overwhelmingly expressed that they value and encourage emotion.

Negative outcomes have been written about in the literature and they are graphically presented in the nightly news: mass shootings at schools exclusively perpetrated by young men, gross misconduct in the workplace, almost exclusively perpetrated by men, the #MeToo movement, conflict and violence perpetrated by men, many are left wondering, what is wrong with men? Many men concur something is shifting, and it can be confusing times for men. What does it mean to be a good man? What roles and qualities are valued? These are questions asked of mothers in this study.

In a 2018 Pew Research Center released a study looking at how Americans describe what society values and does not value in each gender. The Pew Center asked 4,573 participants questions and the respondents answered with 1,500 unique words describing what they valued and did not value:

These [Pew Research Center] findings suggest that there is often no consensus on society's expectations for men and women. Yet some clear patterns emerged.

People said traits related to strength and ambition are especially valued for men in

society and that compassion, kindness, and responsibility are particularly valued for women (Walker, Bialik, & van Kessel, 2018).

This makes a confusing landscape to be a boy, a man, and a parent of a boy in 2018.

Walter, Bialik, and van Kessel concluded that, “As for whether society values independent women or caring men, it’s a mixed bag” (2018, manuscript in preparation).

In this study, mothers were clear about what they value in their sons and how they work to impact the development of masculinity in their sons. In fact, an unexpected outcome of the study is that mothers emphasized that the positive, affirming qualities of masculinity they value are not relegated for boys only, but in raising “good human beings”. Time and again, mothers made the distinction that their goal is to raise good people, and the traits they value are not so much about being masculine but being a valuable and healthy member of society. Several mothers made the point to say they would raise their daughters with the same values and hopes.

Researchers studying positive masculinity focus on the non-pathologizing boys and men, on strength-based, positive approaches towards male roles (Kiselica, 2011; O’Neil et al., 2013). While new methods of working with boys and men are suggested, more father involvement, male mentorship, therapy, etc. what continues to be overlooked is the mother’s role in shaping sons’ gender ideology (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2015; Carlson & Knoester, 2011; Davis & Wills, 2010; Floyd & Mormon, 2013). In the most recent publication of the APA Handbook of Men and Masculinities, there are many chapters to address the issues that confront men: history, gender role strain and conflict, social norms, positive masculinity and so forth, 34 chapters in all. One of particular

interest is chapter 24: Furthering fathering: What we know and what we need to know (Wong & Wester, 2016). One may presume there is a similar chapter about mothers, what we know and what we need to know. However, there is not. And this lack of research past and present was the motivation for this study.

This study sought to explore how mothers are helping their sons navigate the development of masculinity and about their approach and attitudes concerning masculinity. This researcher gained an understanding of what traits of masculinity mothers value and reject, mothers' beliefs about masculinity and gender roles and how it shapes their approach to raising their sons, mothers' attitudes towards restricting emotion versus showing emotion, mothers' perception of their role in their sons' development, and mothers' important and unique role in their sons' development of masculinity. Using a grounded theory approach, descriptive coding and analysis were used to analyze mothers' written responses to open-ended questions presented in an online qualitative survey.

Study results suggest that mothers believe it is their role to be part of their sons' development of masculinity and they perceive that they are influential in this regard in their sons' lives. The research yielded four themes based upon mothers' answers to the survey questions. The themes that emerged explore new areas of information regarding the mother and son relationship related to the development of masculinity. Additionally, connections between Attachment theory and themes generated from the study were identified. A summary of the themes and their expansion upon the current research of the

development of masculinity and masculinity ideology as well as Attachment theory are discussed.

### **Themes of the Research**

Through the analysis of the mothers' data, four themes emerged related to the sample's experiences in raising their sons as it relates to their approach to and impact on the development of masculinity. This researcher identified the following themes: (1) Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others; (2) Respect-- Treatment of Women, Treatment of Others, Emphasis on Humanness Over Masculinity; (3) Moms' Attitudes and Approaches towards Emotion with Their Son(s); and (4) Moms' Important and Unique Role in Sons' Development.

#### **Balancing Between What Impacts Sons and Sons' Impact on Others**

Despite the lack of research on mothers' views and approaches concerning masculinity, in this study information was generated first as to what traits of masculinity mothers value and reject; this was the first question mothers were asked after the demographic information. Next, this research study generated sub-themes related to mothers' experiences and views: rejected traits/qualities of masculinity, accepted traits/qualities of masculinity, qualities of masculinity that are conditional, qualities mothers value generally, values accepted or rejected that are communicated in culture. What was revealed in the data is that mothers accept and reject traits and qualities of masculinity and values that are not only beneficially for the healthy physical, emotional, and psychological development of their sons but also balanced with qualities, traits, and values that impact others in positive or healthy ways.

Overwhelmingly, mothers accepted the traits and characteristics that the literature identifies as traits of positive masculinity. Of the traits of positive masculinity, mothers accepted the following: altruism, protection of others, family engagement, and non-violent problem-solving. The most highly valued were taking responsibility, resiliency, telling the truth, perseverance, and anti-feminism, accepted by all 23 mothers. By contrast, the traits and qualities of traditional masculinity were rejected or accepted conditionally. All 23 mothers rejected restrictive emotional expression. Most mothers rejected stoicism, dominance, physical toughness, and competition.

**Conditionally accepted traits of masculinity.** In a subsequent question, mothers were asked to talk about why they rejected specific traits, and mothers expressed that competition, dominance, and physical toughness were conditional traits, not inherently invaluable, but dependent on how they are employed. Of the five mothers who cited competition as conditional, all expressed that competition can be healthy when it is about their son striving to do his best without demeaning or dominating another. Again, mothers struck a balance between what is best for their son's development while also being mindful of others. In analyzing what values of masculinity mothers rejected or accepted, Connell's seminal work (2005) comes to mind, where he describes masculinities as a dynamic construction reflecting the environment. Connell posited that adolescence is a time when boys are experimenting and trying on what they are exposed to, whether it is traits of traditional masculinity or positive masculinity or something else. This study reveals that mothers are exposing their sons to qualities of positive masculinity.

Mothers were interested in their sons' impact on peers, family members, the elderly, and women. Mothers also spoke of equalitarian approaches in the home, from helping with the household to more generally in society, in not demeaning or dominating others. For instance, one participant spoke of her conversations and what she strives to teach her sons, *I teach them to respect women and others of both sexes and all races and ages. I tell them to hold open the door for others, to allow older men and women to go first, to be respectful of others. I do the same and don't see certain skills as more masculine but perhaps just to ensure you're a good person* (P9). Weir (2017) spoke of the shifting landscape for men, how men with traditional masculine ideals or who subscribe to traditional gender norms may feel threatened by the societal shifts leading to equalitarian roles becoming more acceptable; however, mothers in this study are normalizing and living in such a way that an egalitarian approach would not be so jarring as young men enter adulthood.

In Survey Question 11, mothers were asked to select one or more of the traits of masculinity they did not choose and discuss why they believe the qualities to be unimportant for their son's development. While all of the mothers answered the question as asked, fifteen mothers chose to describe qualities they value and are working to instill in their sons. These qualities fell into three categories: positive treatment of women, care for personal health, and positive emotions of sons. The qualities ranged from having manners, kindness, and independence to an egalitarian approach, equality, and positive treatment of women. These mothers offered unsolicited information in question eleven

and again it reflected a propensity to focus on not only on their sons but also on their sons' impact on others.

It is worth noting that this sample of mothers represent high familial socio-economic status (SES) and the literature has noted that, "earlier studies offer evidence of higher levels of parental education and income correspond to more egalitarian attitudes regarding gender role attitudes" (Hess et al., 2014, p. 214). Not only is the focus on equality and egalitarian principles noteworthy among the mothers' answers, but also it is important that these mothers feel empowered and eager to discuss their views on the questions asked and add what they deem important and relevant to more fully capture what they experience, value, and want for their sons. This speaks to what mothers later communicate as their role in the development of masculinity in their sons. As will be discussed in a later theme of the research, mothers' clear empowerment and certainty in their role with their son contradicts Hess et al. (2014) that claimed, "Fathers may feel more responsible than mothers in the communication of their values to their children" (p. 223).

Mothers were asked what messages are communicated most strongly about masculinity in their family and cultures. Some mothers chose to speak about their nuclear families, others spoke about their extended families, and yet others addressed culture more broadly. Over half of the mothers specifically addressed whether they agreed or disagreed with the messages communicated about masculinity and what it means to be a "good man". The viewpoints of the cultures were coded as either more closely aligning with traditional masculinity or positive masculinity. All the mothers who spoke of

exposure to a culture that values traditional masculinity indicated that they disagree with the messages and qualities encouraged by that culture. All of the mothers who spoke of exposure to positive masculinity indicated that they agree with the messages and qualities encouraged by that culture. In several instances, mothers voiced that while they agreed or disagreed with the values of their culture, that their spouse did not. One participant wrote, *In our culture, there are many negative messages about manhood—the need to always be in control of one’s emotions, take care of others to the neglect of yourself, asserting your dominance, etc. This isn’t communicated strongly in my family, but my husband is more likely to advocate not expressing outward emotions, “being a man”, etc. than I am. We sometimes disagree about some of this, which my son is very aware of* (P14). By contrast, another participant shared: *The key messages are that men are kind and caring and that they are just as responsible as women for the well-being of the family. I think that they do receive some conflicting messages from our culture in that they know they are not “supposed” to demonstrate emotions.* While mothers shared cultural views and their acceptance or rejection of those views and messages, the majority of mothers stated their stance on the issues with clarity and resolution.

## **Respect--Treatment of Women, Treatment of Others, Emphasis on Humanness Over Masculinity**

Closely aligned with the theme of caring for the qualities their sons will possess as well as balancing the needs and consideration of others, the next theme that the data generated was respect and treatment of women, treatment of others, emphasis on humanness over masculinity. Mothers expressed caring about and discussing the following topics: expression of sexuality, sons show respect for all persons, sons would develop positive qualities, sons would learn from their behavior and others, sons would express spirituality and develop in this area. Even when discussing sexuality with sons, many mothers took a systemic approach that considered the son as well as any partner. Mothers discussed consent, being respectful of partners, and not being overcome by hormonal urges but rather behaving the “right” way when interacting with someone they find attractive. The qualities that mothers want their sons to develop are what one would expect: independence, kindness, perseverance, but what came up time and again in the data was an emphasis on their sons and how their sons will impact others.

Closely aligned with the theme of caring for the qualities their sons will possess as well as balancing the needs and consideration of others, the next theme that the data generated was: Respect--treatment of women and treatment of others. Mothers in this study were asked how they talked about masculinity with their sons and if the mother felt they were effective in those talks. Nearly all of the mothers expressed satisfaction with their effectiveness across five sub-themes: expression of sexuality, sons show respect for

all persons, sons would develop positive qualities, sons would learn from their behavior and others, sons would express spirituality and develop in this area.

While the topics of discussion with sons were diverse, mothers again focused on their sons' development and responsibility to consider others. For example, in the nine narratives where mothers talked about have conversations about sexuality with their sons, six addressed topics such as consent, social morality, and balancing respect and attraction. One mother describes the conversations she has had with her son: *We talk about "No means no," and also that they need to ask for consent about all aspects of physical contact with girls/women. We discuss not pressuring women to do things they are not comfortable doing* (P17). Another mother speaks to the challenges of being a young man in a culture where sex sells: *We talked a few times about sexuality, and the challenges that they might face when exposed to so much stimulation without an outlet. I think this is a challenge for them because many of the role models they see are highly sexualized men. I feel as though this conversation of balancing respect and attraction and managing themselves under difficult hormonal swings was very effective* (P10). The theme of showing respect for all persons continues throughout the narratives the mothers shared about the kinds of conversations they have with their sons as well as another subtheme that emerged time and again.

For the mothers, it was important to impart of a sense of social benevolence to their sons and many wrote about how they do not talk about what it means "to be a man" or frame discussions or values as traits of masculinity. In fact, several mothers outright rejected the term "masculinity". These mothers instead embraced and communicated

their desire to raise good people, good human beings. One participant shared, *We don't talk about "becoming a man" per se, but rather focus on being a good person.* She adds that conversations revolve around how to behave and how to treat others, *We follow current events where, unfortunately, we get a lot of examples about how NOT to act, speak, or treat women. We talk about empathy and compassion and both my husband and I try to lead by example* (P17). Another participant clarifies that they speak of issues, not labels as she explains their conversations, *We really do not use the word, "masculinity," or "masculine" in any of our discussions. We speak to issues, rather than labeling things. My son and I have talked about being respectful of all people, and especially, being respectful of women...So, in essence, it seems we speak about the values that I feel it is important to pass down to him; but these are just "values", and they have not been categorized as "values of masculinity," but as values of being a quality human being* (P20). As Connell (2005) summarizes, "Adolescent boys' lives and emotions, then, will not be categorically distinct from adolescent girls'. But when a society's dominant gender ideology insists on the absolute difference between masculinity and femininity, a development dilemma is created" (p. 13). The mothers in this study expressed a sense that many qualities are not gender-specific, such as showing emotion, kindness, and empathy.

### **Moms' Attitudes and Approaches Towards Emotion with Their Son(s)**

How mothers handle shows of emotion was of particular interest as restricting emotion is often cited in the literature as one of the particularly harmful expectations of boys and men. To get a glimpse of how mothers approach emotion, tender or sad

emotion, in order to see how they conceptualize it and handle it with their sons was of primary interest. Halperin and Perry-Jenkins (2016) cite a 1991 study of 346 children, age five and under, in which parents concluded that fathers' communication about gender roles is directed more to sons than daughters and that ideologically more traditional fathers pass along these views and "enforce more traditional behavior in children" (Fagot & Hagan, 1991). Previous research studying family narratives, self, and gender in early adolescence, determined that mothers express and explain more emotion than fathers and that these open expressions of emotion in the family were linked to positive self-esteem and adjustment in sons and daughters (Bohanek, Marin, Fivush, & Duke, 2006). To get a more complete picture of how a broader range of emotions are handled by mothers, this researcher also asked mothers about their approaches towards their son's show of anger, as this emotion is more acceptable in the paradigm of traditional, Western masculinity (Vogel et al., 2011). All 23 mothers in this study did not endorse restrictive emotional expression and nearly all did not endorse stoicism.

Mothers were asked how they handled a show of emotion such as crying, three sub-themes emerged: mothers isolated or ignored son, mothers had a relational response, such as reaching out, supporting, or teaching, mothers did not respond to the question or reported no display of emotion in adolescence. The participant who ignored her son's display of vulnerable emotion, crying, ignored him. This mother also reported the same reaction to a show of displayed anger. Of the four mothers who did not respond to the survey question, one chose to discuss a different emotion, happiness, another reported her sons did not display emotion, even during major life events such as the parents' divorce,

and the remaining two of the four reported their adolescents did not show emotion. This researcher chose to pay attention to these responses because they could reflect discomfort with emotion in boys. Due to the restrictive nature of an online study, follow up and clarifying questions to confirm or refute this hypothesis could not be explored. It is impossible to know where these mothers are coming from by their responses. Do they subscribe to the messages “suck it up” “boys don’t cry” “man up” and “don’t be a momma’s boy” that boys hear from an early age and persistently throughout life (Grant, 2004; Kleinfeld, 2009; Pollack, 2006) or is something else at play?

On the other hand, the majority of mothers took an engaged, interactional approach when their sons cried. Mothers described all kinds of scenarios that led to their sons feeling upset: a health emergency, a sick sibling, failed test, friend’s suicide, break up, an emergency call from summer camp, being overscheduled and tired. While the events precipitating the upset varied, mothers’ responses were fairly congruent. In certain situations, mothers responded more pragmatically. For instance, in the case of the failed test, the difficult situation at summer camp, and the challenges with learning to type, mothers asked questions, had discussions, offered suggestions, helped their sons problem solve, and normalized, validated, and reframed. In the instances where sons were dealing with heavy emotions, fear or a real sense of sadness, mothers responded with kindness, reassurance, support, physical closeness, space, and discussions. These mothers did not turn away or discourage emotion, but rather they honored and encouraged it.

These mothers revealed an approach that could help to mitigate gender role stress (GRS), the stress resulting from boys and men believing they do not live up to

masculinity standards (DeFranc & Mahalik, 2002). By accepting their sons' show of soft or tender emotions, they are validating their sons, which works to create a working model of self that allows for emotion. As DeFranc and Mahalik (2002) explain when one needs protection, support, and care but the messages from society or caretakers value qualities of traditional masculinity such as stoicism or restricted emotions, the boy can become anxious, fearful, and even depressed. These mothers leaned into their sons' experiences and validated that crying is appropriate and human.

Survey Question 15 was devised in case mothers turned away from or rejected their sons' vulnerable emotions in order to ascertain if there was a different level of comfort with a show of anger. The mothers did not turn away from either show of emotion, and the majority of mothers described how they handled their sons' show of anger or frustration. Again, the anecdotes that led to the anger were diverse: bad grade, changing schools, peer conflict, learning a new skill, parent pressure about grades, video gaming rationing, sibling argument, breakups, and disagreements with parents. Most of the mothers had some sort of discussion with their sons. Another common approach when dealing with anger is that mothers gave their sons time and space to calm down, nine of the 19 mothers reported using this strategy. Nine mothers took the opportunity as a teachable moment, offering options, problem-solving, and coping skills. As with the previous question about crying, when the situation created more sadness than frustration, such as a breakup, mothers were there to offer affection, compassion, comfort, physical and emotional support. Mothers sensitivity and accessibility aligns with the minimal research on mothers and adolescent sons such as a 2002 study that "found adolescent

boys more often reported being emotionally close to their mothers than to their fathers” (Connell, 2005, p. 13) and yet more research from the 1950s and 1960s that “showed mothers figuring more often than fathers as the most influential person in teenagers’ lives” (Connell, Francis, & Skilbeck, 1957).

In order to get a more explicit and clear answer concerning mothers’ attitudes towards shows of emotion such as crying, one last question was asked where mothers were asked if they worry that a show of emotion means their son is gay, soft, feminine or may make him vulnerable to mistreatment. In literature devoted to gender ideology and gender role conflict, sexism played a role in shaping mothers’ attitudes towards sons’ gender ideology, even guarding the “manliness of young boys” (Lipowska et al., 2016, p. 224) or it is posited that parental fear of homosexuality plays a role in encouraging hypermasculinity (Watts & Borders, 2005). Do mothers fear a show of emotion reveals anything about one’s personality, sexuality? In this study, the majority of mothers said they do not worry about their son showing emotion or attribute greater meaning to it. In this question, three sub-themes emerged: mothers who are worried a show of emotion could make their son vulnerable to insensitive people, mothers who believe a show of emotion is fine but there are a time and a place for it, and mothers who were categorically not worried about their son’s show of emotion. One mother wrote about her worry that her son could be vulnerable to mistreatment, *Only that he may be vulnerable to mistreatment. He has chosen a friend that would not make fun of him, but that doesn’t mean that the general population is that enlightened* (P21). This mother’s response

reveals her understanding of the dichotomies at play. While she can subscribe to tenets of positive masculinity, those viewpoints do not represent the public at large.

This research demonstrated that mothers' attitudes and approaches to shows of emotion more closely align with the traits and characteristics valued in positive masculinity. Whether the emotion is vulnerable or not, the majority of mothers viewed showing emotion as normative human behavior and warranting their attention.

### **Moms' Important and Unique Role in Sons' Development of Masculinity**

Previous literature time and again emphasizes the impact that fathers have on sons' development of gender ideology and the impact fathers and men can have on intervening in gender role strain. By contrast, earlier research overstates the focus on mothers in the literature (Davis & Willis, 2010; Crouter, Whiteman, McHale, & Osgood, 2007; Hess et al., 2014) while overstating the impact of fathers as the parent who is particularly influential in creating the context in which gender attitudes are transmitted. More recent research speaks to the lack of research pertaining to the mother/son dyad (Aznar & Tenenbaum, 2015; Carlson & Knoester, 2011; Davis & Wills, 2010; Floyd & Mormon, 2013; Halpern & Perry-Jenkins, 2016) and calls for more research open to the impact of both parents on their children, "Mixed findings in this literature highlight the need for more research that addresses the roles of parent gender and child gender in the process of children's gender socialization" (Halpern & Perry-Jenkins, 2016, p. 528).

Levant, Gerdes, Jadaszewski, and Alto (2018) shared that the "father-as-gender-role-models" perspective came out of psychoanalytic theory where mother was the primary caretaker of all genders but father had a gender-specific effect on their sons, the

Oedipal conflict, whereby the son renounced the love interest of his mother and gravitated toward the masculinity and heterosexuality of the father. Later theorists named this concept the “essential father” hypothesis, where it is fathers who are uniquely positioned to contribute to the development of masculinity; however, this hypothesis today has “received modest support” (p. 128). Lamb (2010) forwards another theory that contradicts the research on the causes of gender role strain, the rigidity of traditional, Western, gender ideology. Lamb suggests whether a father conforms to the traditional traits of masculinity or not, that is much less influential than the quality of the father/son relationship. With that, this next theme looks at the relationships mothers perceive they have with their sons and the important and unique role they have in their development.

When mothers were asked about their perception of their impact on their sons, mothers offered a wealth of information regarding how they believe they impact their sons. The information was categorized into mothers’ positive behaviors, positive qualities taught or exposed to the son, and what mothers discourage. One participant shared her perception, *The most important things that I’ve taught my boys is that to be a good man means to be loving, caring, and nurturing* (P7). Another defines her impact has a role model in her relationship and role in the family, *I think by demonstrating a healthy relationship with my husband that works hard at balancing roles is the best way for me to impact my sons’ ideas for what it means to be a man* (P10). Another mother speaks to how she impacts her son in a way that the literature supports as a strength of mothers. Aznar and Tenenbaum (2015) discuss how mothers mention a higher proportion of emotion words than fathers in their study of gender and age differences in parent-child

emotion talk. This propensity for mothers to have more affiliative speech than fathers is also studied by Shinn and O'Brien (2008). The participant shares, *By my example of how I work in the world, the way I treat him and the way I talk to him—these would all impact his ideas...I also talk about his interests and listen to him when he has a story to tell. Sometimes they are long but listening is critical (P19).*

When mothers wrote about what they discourage, five sub-themes were generated that closely align to principles of qualities of traditional masculinity: anti-feminism, demeaning others, use of strength/violence, illegal/inappropriate behavior, and negative personal qualities. Some of the inappropriate behavior mothers discourage are using foul language, intolerance, crassness, lying, cheating, and using drugs or engaging in illegal behaviors such as drinking. The negative personal qualities included arrogance, making poor choices, laziness, myopia, meanness, and rudeness. It became clear as the survey progressed, and all mothers appeared to answer questions thoughtfully and fully, that they were clear about how they hope to impact their sons and who they want them to mold them to be. When mothers were asked if they were satisfied in the types of conversations they were having and on the guidance they were imparting, about two-thirds of the mothers concluded that they were satisfied with the guidance, direction, and impact they were having on their sons.

The final question in this theme where mothers were asked if they believed it is their role as a mother to influence the development of masculinity in their son received a resounding reply. All 23 mothers believed it to be their role to influence their sons' development of masculinity. As throughout the survey, mothers were thoughtful and

egalitarian in their assessment. Of the mothers, less than half acknowledged the importance of their role but also acknowledged the contributions, support, and importance of fathers. One mother believed she was more influential than her spouse; however, she acknowledged her husband's support. Many of the mothers were enthusiastic in their response to this question,

*Of course, I think I have a role in their development as men! I think as an important person in their lives, I can dispel misinformation they may get from the media and their peers about what it is to be a man. I can do this through conversations with them and also by demonstrating (with my husband) appropriate attitudes and behaviors toward women. I also think my roles as a mother helping them become men also involves clarifying concepts about women. My boys understand women are intelligent, strong, self-reliant and capable. By dispelling false messages about what it means to be a woman, I think I can help my sons develop into better men (P17).*

Another mother wrote with passion, *Absolutely, mothers have an important perspective and interacting with an emotionally healthy mother will impact a son's perspective. A male point of view alone is just too narrow and the product of a certain set of experiences. Adding a mother's perspective to the mix adds richness, hopefully creating well-rounded individuals (P4).* While the literature has yet to take on the study of mother's impact on their son's development of masculinity, it is evident that these mothers believe they are impactful, important, and provide a unique experience to their sons' lives.

## **Implications for Family Therapy**

In a clinical setting, the impact of restricting emotion and masculine ideology come into sessions as boys and men often relate not knowing how to voice and express emotion or being discouraged to emote in their families and social circle. The language and messages to suppress feelings that is so ingrained in male clients. While the literature on gender role strain encourages interventions involving eliciting male relationships (Acock & Bengston, 1978; Davis & Wills, 2010; DeFranc & Mahalik, 2002), this research demonstrated that mothers can be involved in exploring and mitigating the messages and issues that arise for a client who does not feel empowered to reveal his authentic self, whether that involves feelings, interests, sexuality, or ideas. Instead of looking to men as the only resource in a boy's life, therapists can also check in and consider mothers as a potential resource to support their sons in their development of healthy masculinity.

## **Connection to Theory**

Attachment theory is a theory originally conceptualized to observe, categorize, and explain the behavior and distress of infants and toddlers when separated from their caregiver (Bowlby, 1973). According to the theory, experiences with caregivers in early childhood serve to form one's internal working model of self and others, which leads to how one conceptualizes the accessibility, responsiveness, and engagement of others in future relationships (Bowlby, 1973). Bartholomew (1990) developed a four-category model of attachment that is used to assess strategies of connectedness and disconnection.

This model of attachment styles in adulthood is based on two dimensions, a person's self-image and their image of others (Bartholomew, 1990).

Attachment style (Bowlby, 1984) can be affected by culture such as gender role expectations (Akdogan, Aydin, & Ekin, 2018). According to Blazina and Watkins (2000), gender role conflict has been linked to anxious attachment to parents. Part of gender role conflict involves the fear of the feminine that comes from rigid interpretations of masculinity. O'Neil (2010) also linked gender role conflict to parental attachment, particularly the trait of traditional masculinity, restrictive emotion. Restrictive emotionality was found to have the strongest correlation to anxious attachment with parents (Blazina & Watkins, 2000).

The current study provides evidence that mothers value the qualities of masculinity that reduce gender role conflict as well as engender secure attachment. Not only do the majority of the mothers in this study normalize emotional expression, but they also value and encourage open communication, flexible gender roles, and an egalitarian outlook to relationships and more broadly. Continued emphasis on success, achievement, and control of others, tenets of outdated, traditional traits of masculinity, perpetuate insecure attachment (Blazina & Watkins, 2000). This approach to masculinity is precisely the approach that the mothers in this study rejected unequivocally.

Stavropoulos, Mastrotheodoros, Burleigh, Papdopoulos, and Gomez (2018) wrote, "More recently, gender differences regarding avoidant romantic attachment tendencies have been associated with specific behavioral facets which appear to be higher in males. These include "self-reliance" and "discomfort with closeness" (p. 22). The majority of

the mothers in this study describe a level of involvement that indicates that they are accessible, reliable, and engaged, which also serves to create secure attachment. As well, this cohort of mothers has positive and affirmative views of masculinity that do not reinforce the rigid ideas that boys must “buck up”, “suck it up” behave stoically or suppress emotion. Goodman et al. (1997) contended that adolescents who are not exposed to significant risk factors increase their level of attachment security in late adolescence, which is another strong argument for mothers and sons continue to have a connected and engaged relationship as boys transition into men.

Napolitano, Mahalik, and Kenny (1999) found that college-aged men who reported less gender role conflict and anxiety and greater attachments to both parents had better identity development. While adolescence is a time when age-related changes related to romantic attachment are forming, the mothers in this study are present to serve as a bridge for their sons to transition to a higher quality romantic relationship in addition to developing a healthier sense of self devoid of rigid, outdated ideas about what it means to be a man in turn leading to better propositions for identity development as well.

### **Limitations**

This qualitative study was limited to 23 participants recruited through convenience sampling of TWU affiliated individuals through limited email listservs as well as a local FB mom’s group in Plano, Texas through social media. The sample is not representative of all mothers in the United States, as it lacks diversity ethnically and related to socioeconomic status (SES). This researcher was unable to capture the ages of the participants’ sons which left out a degree of detail to describe the sample.

Additionally, because the participants were encouraged to recall anecdotes and experiences, their recollections may be influenced by the more positive experiences of family interactions that are not representative of the mother/son dyadic relationship. Finally, as this survey was completed online, a small number of questions were not answered, some were incomplete, and others would have benefited from follow up or clarifying questions in order to better understand participants' points of view.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The current research study generated several implications for future research, which will be described below:

1. Future research could include quantitative and qualitative studies of a larger, more diverse sample of mothers in order to explore mothers' experiences and perceptions of their impact on their sons' development of masculinity. A quantitative or mixed methods study could take into account adolescent boys' ages and the differences in experiences, expectations, and outcomes perceived by mothers.
2. Further research that captures the experiences of sons and their perceptions of their mother's expectations of them and values their mothers emphasized when they were growing up.

### **Recommendations**

This study provides compelling insight into the relationships and impact mothers have related to their sons' development of masculinity. With shifting roles in families, shifting expectations and roles of men in society, coupled with the challenges boys and

men are facing navigating expectations of traditional masculinity and positive masculinity, an exploration of how a valuable, and often available resource, mothers, approach and impact masculinity could lead to new thoughts on how to intervene, mitigate, and ameliorate the challenges boys are facing today. This researcher discovered that the mothers in this study did not shirk their responsibility in influencing their sons' development of masculinity and demonstrated their willingness to combat messages of toxic masculinity as well as to actively strive to impact their sons in their development of masculinity, rather than relegating this role to fathers or other men.

By involving mothers in the body of research on mitigating gender role strain and positive psychology, it could open up a whole new avenue of research to tap into how mothers contribute to their sons' development of masculinity and how they can help in combatting the negative outcomes that are the result of gender role strain. The issues impacting boys and men and, thereby, impacting our society have become so prevalent that they are part of the national dialogue despite being a topic of research for previous decades.

### **Summary**

This study examined the experiences and perceptions of mothers of adolescent sons related to their development of masculinity. The mothers in this study described their involvement in their sons' development and day-to-day lives as it relates to issues of masculinity. All of the participants rejected restricted emotional expression as a trait of masculinity, and the majority rejected the other four traits of traditional masculinity. More than three-fourths of participants accepted the traits of positive masculinity, with all

of the participants accepting taking responsibility, resiliency, telling the truth, perseverance, and anti-feminism.

Regarding the topic of restricting emotion, the majority of the participants encouraged and responded to their sons' shows of emotion in a relational and positive way. This approach held true for tender emotions that led to crying as well as for anger. The majority of participants in the study did the opposite of restricting emotion, instead allowing it and attending to it as the situation and child necessitated.

Mothers in this study described a wide variety of conversations they have with their sons, many of which address issues of masculinity. The majority of participants described relationships where communication was ongoing and broad in content. Conversations foster new understandings and bonding, both of which is positive for boys' development. And these conversations and topics are of consequence particularly in that all of the participants believe it is their role as a mother to have involvement and influence concerning their son's development of masculinity. Not content to relegate this task to the man in the family or men in the child's life, participants were clear about this being part of their role, and the majority felt satisfied in their ability to guide their sons and the impact they are having on their sons. Through this grounded theory study, the researcher gained insight into mothers' attitudes, actions, and perceptions concern their role in their sons' development of masculinity. It is this researcher's hope that this study will serve as the impetus for mothers to be studied in order to continue to address the challenges facing adolescent boys in our culture.

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APPENDIX A

Participant Social Media Recruitment Post

Greetings,

**Are you the mother of an adolescent son(s) currently between the ages of 13 and 19, living in the United States?**

If you answered “yes” to this question, you are invited to participate in a research study about how mothers interact with their adolescent sons and perceive their influence related to their son’s development of masculinity.

If you meet the criteria listed below, I welcome you to complete the online survey at the following website (address here).

Criteria:

- Are you the mother of an adolescent son(s) who is currently between the ages of 13 and 19, living in the United States?
- You must have access to a computer and the Internet to complete this study.
- Are you willing to share your experiences and perceptions related to interacting and parenting your adolescent son(s)?

My name is Melissa Hudson and I am a doctoral student at Texas Woman’s University. I am recruiting participants for my dissertation research concerning how mothers interact with their adolescent sons and perceive their influence related to their son’s development as he grows up to be a man.

If you meet the above criteria, I would like to hear about your experiences as the mother of an adolescent son. To participate in this study, you will complete a consent form and an anonymous, online survey that will take about 30 minutes. You will have the opportunity to register for a drawing for \$30 Amazon gift card and receive an executive summary of the study findings at the end of the survey. The study is anonymous; you will only be asked to provide your email address.

Should you have questions please feel free to contact me, Melissa Hudson, MS, MS, LMFT at (214) xxx-xxxx or by email at [Lmelissahudson@gmail.com](mailto:Lmelissahudson@gmail.com). You may also contact my research advisor, Linda Ladd, PhD, PsyD at [lladd@twu.edu](mailto:lladd@twu.edu).

Please go to the following website (address here) to complete the survey.

Please forward this information to any mother of an adolescent son.

Thank you for your time.

APPENDIX B

Participant Recruitment Email

Greetings,

**Are you the mother of an adolescent son(s) currently between the ages of 13 and 19, living in the United States?**

If you answered “yes” to this question, you are invited to participate in a research study about how mothers interact with their adolescent sons and perceive their influence related to their son’s development of masculinity.

If you meet the criteria listed below, I welcome you to complete the online survey at the following website (address here).

Criteria:

- Are you the mother of an adolescent son(s) who is currently between the ages of 13 and 19, living in the United States?
- You must have access to a computer and the Internet to complete this study.
- Are you willing to share your experiences and perceptions related to interacting and parenting your adolescent son(s)?

My name is Melissa Hudson and I am a doctoral student at Texas Woman’s University. I am recruiting participants for my dissertation research concerning how mothers interact with their adolescent sons and perceive their influence related to their son’s development as he grows up to be a man.

If you meet the above criteria, I would like to hear about your experiences as the mother of an adolescent son. To participate in this study, you will complete a consent form and an anonymous, online survey that will take about 30 minutes. You will have the opportunity to register for a drawing for \$30 Amazon gift card and receive an executive summary of the study findings at the end of the survey. The study is anonymous; you will only be asked to provide your email address.

Should you have questions please feel free to contact me, Melissa Hudson, MS, MS, LMFT at (214) xxx-xxxx or by email at [Lmelissahudson@gmail.com](mailto:Lmelissahudson@gmail.com). You may also contact my research advisor, Linda Ladd, PhD, PsyD at [lladd@twu.edu](mailto:lladd@twu.edu).

Please go to the following website (address here) to complete the survey.

Please forward this information to any mother of an adolescent son.

Thank you for your time.

APPENDIX C

Primary Online Survey

AN EXPLORATION OF MOTHERS' ONLINE QUALITATIVE  
SELF-REPORTS CONCERNING THEIR PERCEIVED INFLUENCE  
IN THEIR ADOLESCENT SONS' DEVELOPMENT OF MASCULINITY

***WELCOME & INFORMED CONSENT***

Welcome! Thank you for your interest!

The intent of this study is to learn more about how mothers and sons interact and have discussions related to topics of masculinity and gender roles.

*This research study is being conducted by this researcher, Melissa Hudson, MS, MS, LMFT, in order to fulfill the requirements for a PhD in Family Therapy from Texas Woman's University (TWU) in Denton, Texas. Our research oversight board, the TWU Institutional Review Board, has approved this research study.*

If you answer "yes" to all of the following questions, you are invited to participate in a research study about your experiences as the mother of an adolescent son.

**PARTICIPATION CRITERIA:**

1. Are you the mother of an adolescent son(s) who is currently between the ages of 13 and 19, living in the United States?
2. You must have access to a computer and the Internet to complete this study.
3. Are you willing to share your experiences and perceptions related to interacting and parenting your adolescent son(s)?

If you meet the criteria above and would like to complete the study, please read the information below about the risks of this study AND what this researcher has done to minimize those risks:

**Confidentiality**

Your identity will be kept confidential and your participation is voluntary. No personal information other than an email will be requested in this survey. All reasonable efforts will be made in order to keep your information confidential; however, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

**Emotional Discomfort**

Participants may also experience uncomfortable feelings from recalling and sharing occurrences between you and your adolescent son(s). At the end of the survey mental health and wellness resources will be provided.

**Fatigue**

This survey will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. You may take breaks from this survey at any time without any penalty.

**Loss of Time**

There is the potential for the loss of your time due to completing the survey. You may withdraw from this survey at any time without any penalty.

**Benefits**

Once you complete the survey, you may choose to be entered into a drawing for one of three \$30 Amazon gift cards for your participation. At the end of survey, you will be given the option to provide your email to receive one of the three \$30 Amazon gift cards if you are selected in the drawing. Also, you may request the summary of the results of the study upon its completion. Should you be interested in the executive summary or the gift card drawing, you will be directed to a separate website to provide your email.

You may only take the survey one time.

*Research investigator: Melissa Hudson, MS, MS, 214-xxx-xxxx*  
[Lmelissahudson@gmail.com](mailto:Lmelissahudson@gmail.com)

Linda Ladd, PhD, PsyD, Professor, Family Sciences, TWU  
[lladd@twu.edu](mailto:lladd@twu.edu) 940-898-2694

Do you understand and agree with the above statements and agree to voluntarily participate in this study? If so, please click on “YES” below and proceed to the next page. Your continued participation in this survey constitutes your consent to participate. *This survey will take approximately 30 minutes to complete. Thank you for your participation*

**Survey and Instructions**

Instructions are provided throughout the survey to guide you in each section. You may exit the survey at any time.

**Questions and Instructions**

1. Do you understand and agree with the above statements and agree to voluntarily participate in this study? Yes/No
2. How many sons do you have currently between the ages of 13 and 19?

3. Please identify if your son(s) are your biological, stepson(s), half, adopted, or foster

4. Do your son(s) live with you and what percentage of the time is he in your custody? (e.g. 50% with me, 50% with his father or 100% of the time with me)/ Please write whatever the custody situation is for your adolescent son(s).

5. What is your ethnicity (choose one)?

Hispanic or Latino

Black or African American

Native American or American Indian

White

Asian/Pacific Islander

Other

6. What is your age?

7. What is your highest level of education?

Some high school

High school diploma

Some college

Bachelor's degree

Master's degree

Professional degree

Doctoral degree

8. What is your relationship status (choose one)?

single

cohabitation

separated

widowed

divorced

married/domestic partnership

remarried

9. What is your gross household income level (choose one)?

Less than \$25,000

\$25,001 to \$50,000

\$50,001 to \$75,000

\$75,001 to \$100,000

\$100,001 to \$125,000

\$125,001 to \$150,000

\$150,001 to \$175,000

\$175,001 to \$200,000

\$200,001 or more

Below is a list of traits and qualities commonly used to define the term **masculinity**.

List of Terms of Masculinity	Definition of Terms
Telling the truth	Being honest
Stoicism	The endurance of pain or hardship without a display of feelings and without complaint
Taking responsibility	Willingly being accountable or taking the blame for something
Independence	Capable of thinking and acting for oneself
Altruism	Selfless concern for the well-being of others
Physical toughness	Ability to take physical pain or discomfort and withstand difficult conditions
Resiliency	Capacity to recover quickly from difficulties
Dominance	Power and influence over others
Protection of others	Someone who will protect others from harm
Restrictive emotional expression	Not outwardly expressing emotions
Family engagement	One who engages in activities such as caregiving, play, helping, teaching, or learning
Competition	Someone who will compete to win or achieve something
Perseverance	Determination to do something despite difficulty or delay in achieving success
Anti-feminism	Does not agree with feminism or the idea of equality of the sexes and supporting women's rights
Non-violent problem solving	Someone who seeks to solve problems without aggression or violence
Other	

10. Choose the traits or qualities you hope your adolescent son will possess as he matures. Select as many or as few as you wish by checking next to each box.
11. Of the traits/qualities above that **YOU DID NOT CHOOSE**, discuss why you believe one or more of these qualities are unimportant for your son's development as he enters manhood. Include the trait/quality with your explanation.
12. What kinds of conversations are you having with your son around qualities of masculinity and values related to becoming a man?
13. In your culture and family, what messages are communicated most strongly about masculinity or what it means to be a "good man"? Do you agree or disagree with them?
14. Tell me about a time that your son showed emotion or cried during adolescence and how you handled the situation?
15. Tell me about a time your son showed extreme frustration or an outburst of anger and how you handled the situation?
16. Do you recall a time when you had a discussion with your son about an issue related to masculinity or being a young man when you felt like you "got it right"? Do you feel satisfied in guiding him in the direction that you would like for him to grow into as a man?
17. Do you believe it is your role as a mother to have involvement and influence concerning your son's development as it relates to the concept of masculinity and learning values related to becoming a man? Why or why not?
18. Do you worry if your son shows emotion that he may be feminine, gay, soft, or vulnerable to mistreatment? How do you handle this?
19. In what ways do you believe you impact your son's ideas about what it means to be a man? What behaviors do you encourage? What conversations do you have? What behaviors do you discourage?
20. Is there anything else you would like for me to know about you and your son that you have not been able to share? Please share your thoughts below.

AN EXPLORATION OF MOTHERS' ONLINE QUALITATIVE SELF-REPORTS  
CONCERNING THEIR PERCEIVED INFLUENCE IN THEIR ADOLESCENT SONS'  
DEVELOPMENT OF MASCULINITY

Thank you for participating in this study. Your time is valued and greatly appreciated, as is the information you provided to us. You may invite others to participate in this study by directing them to the following website:

Finally, if you would like a summary of this study's findings or would like to be entered into the drawing for one of three \$30 Amazon gift cards as a thank you for your appreciation in the research study, click here to go to a separate website to provide your email.

*If you would like more information about mental health, wellness, or desire support for you or your family members, you may contact any of the following resources below:*

**Mental Health Information Websites:**

The National Institute of Mental Health

[www.nimh.nih.gov/](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/)

National Alliance of Mental Health

[www.nami.org/](http://www.nami.org/)

MentalHealth.gov

[www.mentalhealth.gov/](http://www.mentalhealth.gov/)

**Mental Health Provider Websites**

American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy

[www.aamft.org](http://www.aamft.org)

American Counseling Association

<http://www.counseling.org>

**Local Mental Health Clinic**

Texas Woman's University Counseling and Family Therapy Clinic

<https://twu.edu/counseling-family-therapy-clinic/>

940-898-2600

*Research investigator: Melissa Hudson, MS, MS, doctoral candidate*

[Lmelissahudson@gmail.com](mailto:Lmelissahudson@gmail.com)

APPENDIX D

Secondary Online Survey

AN EXPLORATION OF MOTHERS' ONLINE QUALITATIVE SELF-REPORTS  
CONCERNING THEIR PERCEIVED INFLUENCE IN THEIR ADOLESCENT SONS'  
DEVELOPMENT OF MASCULINITY

1. Would you like to receive a brief summary of the study upon its completion? Yes No
2. Please enter your email address below:
3. Would you like to be entered into the drawing for one of three \$30 Amazon gift cards as a thank you for your participation in the study? Yes No

AN EXPLORATION OF MOTHERS' ONLINE QUALITATIVE SELF-REPORTS  
CONCERNING THEIR PERCEIVED INFLUENCE IN THEIR ADOLESCENT SONS'  
DEVELOPMENT OF MASCULINITY

Thank you for your participation in this study.

If you chose to receive a summary of the study or be entered in the drawing for a \$30 Amazon gift card, please read below. Otherwise, again thank you so much for your time and participation.

If you provided the requested email and you are drawn to receive one of the three gift cards, you will receive the \$30 Amazon gift card within 6-8 weeks. You will receive a summary of the results of the study upon the completion of the study.

## APPENDIX E

Research Questions, Central Questions, and Interview Questions

Research Questions	Central Questions	Interview Questions
1. What traits and characteristics of masculinity and male gender roles do mothers value?	1. What qualities of masculinity do mothers value?	7. Below is a list of traits and qualities commonly used to define the term <b>masculinity</b> . Select the traits or qualities you hope your adolescent son will possess or come to possess as he matures. Select as many or as few as you wish.
2. How are mothers' beliefs about masculinity and gender roles related to their discussions with their sons about masculinity ideology?	4. What do mothers see as their role to contribute to teaching, discussing, and clarifying ideas related to masculinity ideology and gender roles?	16. In what ways do you believe you impact your son's ideas around what it means to be a man? What behaviors do you encourage? What conversations do you have? What behaviors do you discourage?
3. How do mothers report what works and what does not work when they talk their sons about issues related to masculinity and gender roles.	4. What do mothers see as their role to contribute to teaching, discussing, and clarifying ideas related to masculinity ideology and gender roles?	13. Do you recall a time when you had a discussion with your son about an issue related to masculinity or being a young man when you felt like you "got it right" in guiding him in the direction that you would like for him to grow into as a man?
4. What are the challenges or motivating factors that influence mothers' approaches to discuss topics related to masculinity?	7. Of the traits and qualities of masculinity, what messages are communicated most strongly about masculinity in Western culture and do mothers agree or disagree with them?	10. Of all of the above-listed traits and qualities of masculinity, what messages are communicated most strongly about masculinity or what it means to be a "good man" in Western culture and do you agree or disagree with them?
5. Do mothers fear that some traits of positive masculinity with result in femininity in their sons?	8. What fears do mothers have about new gender roles that seem to be encouraged or accepted in	15. Do you worry if your son shows emotion that he may be

	the culture and the outcomes these roles may produce?	feminine, gay, soft, or vulnerable to mistreatment? How do you handle this?
1. What traits and characteristics of masculinity and male gender roles do mothers value?	2. What are mothers' responses and beliefs related to expressions of emotion, such as crying, sadness, outbursts of anger?	11. Recall a time that your son showed emotion or cried during adolescence and how you handled the situation?
1. What traits and characteristics of masculinity and male gender roles do mothers value?	3. What qualities of masculinity do mothers not value or believe are important for their sons?	9. Of the traits/qualities above that <b><u>YOU DID NOT CHOOSE</u></b> , please discuss why you believe one or more of these qualities are unimportant for your son's development as he enters manhood.
2. How are mothers' beliefs about masculinity and gender roles related to their discussions with their sons about masculinity ideology?	7. Do mothers believe it is important for them to impact or shape their son regarding the type of values he develops related to masculinity?	14. Do you believe it is your role as a mother to have involvement and influence concerning your son's development as it relates to the concept of masculinity and learning values related to becoming a man? Why or why not?
2. How are mothers' beliefs about masculinity and gender roles related to their discussions with their sons about masculinity ideology?	5. What sorts of conversations do mothers find themselves having around the qualities of masculinity they value or do not value for their son?	8. What kinds of discussions are you having with your son around qualities of masculinity and values related to becoming a man?
1. What traits and characteristics of masculinity and male gender roles do mothers value?	2. What are mothers' responses and beliefs related to expressions of emotion, such as crying, sadness, outbursts of anger?	12. Recall a time your son showed extreme frustration or an outburst of anger and how you handled the situation?
1. What traits and characteristics of masculinity and male	1. What qualities of masculinity do mothers value?	10. What messages are communicated most strongly about masculinity or what it means to be a

gender roles do mothers value?		“good man” in your culture and do you agree or disagree with them?
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