The Culture of Masculinity in an Australian Indigenous Community

JAN HAMMILL

ABSTRACT *Jan Hammill relates the evolution of undisciplined masculinity in a former Australian Aboriginal reserve. Decades of suppression and oppression have resulted in a contemporary social environment where violence in many forms is endemic and normalized. An intervention to encourage father/child interactions, although not successful in its intent, had positive repercussions for the young people of the community.*

KEYWORDS *child abuse; fathering; social learning; toxic environment; violence*

Introduction

Australia's Indigenous masculinity has been forged by two centuries of discriminatory and inequitable public policy subsequent to the mass expropriation of ancestral lands. The malice of the created environment, one bereft of the benefits and guidance of traditional law-makers and cultural role models, robbed Aboriginal men especially of their basic human rights to function as individuals and within family and community. The legacy of the trauma is today manifest in aberrant and antisocial behaviours into which young people are programmed early. This results in contact with the criminal justice system and an expectation that a majority of young males in many communities will serve at least a term in detention and/or prison. It is a complexity of frustrations created by intergenerational oppression which is now reflected in their ill-preparedness for relationships, fatherhood and for life generally. This article demonstrates how the toxic environment of a rural Indigenous community has profoundly altered the evolution of male identities and adversely affects attempts to rectify the situation.

Men under the microscope

Aboriginal masculinity is a sensitive topic, particularly if it is dissected by a sister, and in my study of family violence in a rural Indigenous community over

the course of four years (Hammill, 2000), I invaded the space in which men live, work and interact. My involvement was primarily in a negative context of deliberate scrutiny through exposure to the physical and emotional injuries they inflicted on families, mostly women and children seeking shelter; through men 'in charge' of organizations; and, to a lesser degree, men I knew as husbands, partners and male relatives of my female colleagues. These women, many of whom increasingly are sole parents, operate and maintain vital service agencies which they have established out of necessity and built to prominence.

My work was conducted in a former reserve for the detainment of Aboriginal people, where the patriarchal and parochial model of masculinity was dictated by the administrators and their collaborators, the missionaries. Patriarchy was therefore significant in the formation of a contemporary Indigenous masculine identity based on sexist dominance with dominance being central to the broad definition of violence. This is paradoxical in that oppressed males then assume oppressive identities, ensuring the cycle of violence is perpetuated whereby even the most disempowered man can retain power through his violence. Under these circumstances, women are seen as threatening to men's identity because of community dependence on women. In this context the angry person spares no one, least of all himself. In a study of young Tiwi men, Hiatt (1996: 181–2) cites Robinson who claimed young men resented their 'psychological dependence on maternal kin, well beyond adolescence, and a conflict-laden enmeshment of vicissitudes of the parental family' and sometimes were driven to suicide. Hiatt attributed this confusion to the loss of traditional roles and male role models.

The value of real work is remembered as an essential component of the Indigenous male identity. Today older men, of whom there are few, speak with pride of their years of hard work as stockmen and labourers, often working alongside their fathers and uncles, albeit for only a token wage, but there was no question of worth. It was an identity from which an Aboriginal man could garner esteem. Most community men are now unable to procure 'real work' from which to construct self-worth and an identity.

There seems to be a shift, though, in Aboriginal men admitting their violence and seeking alternatives to it. In 1999, 50 men from the rural community came together for the inaugural meeting of a men's group. Soon after, they were interviewed for a television station programme. They spoke about how they regretted their shameful violent pasts. One man said that he thought it was his right to bash his partner and if he hadn't gone to jail he would have killed her. Nevertheless, two weeks later, only five men supported the women by their presence at Domestic Violence Awareness Week activities. Perhaps, by speaking out publicly, by controlling their own public shaming, these men were able to regain a degree of control. But for various reasons, their regret for bashing did not commit them to the co-operative endeavours of the women nor to ensure that their sons and grandsons would not bash women.

The lack of participation from community men reflected the wider situation too with few men involved in national domestic violence prevention initiatives except for relevant police, politicians and bureaucrats. Domestic violence prevention appears to be a matter for the survivor, her concerned sisters, and those handling departmental budgets. Women are left to find their own solutions, that is, the sufferer has to find a cure for what is seen as her affliction.

Socializing the child

Children in the study community experience a unique rite of passage which handicaps them from birth. The mother is likely to be young and without a supportive partner, and she could well have been using alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, inhalants or all four, throughout the pregnancy. Early years will have regular periods of deprivation and neglect when there is absence of nurturing and inadequate food supplies (Hayes, 1998: 70). These periods will, in all probability, coincide with episodes of violence in the house and the child will witness or experience physical and even sexual abuse. If his father is not present to protect him, there is a fair chance that other men in the house will not show fatherly devotion and he will be abused emotionally, physically and maybe sexually by them also.

Clinical diseases too are hazards of early years, especially in overcrowded conditions – bouts of colic, gastro-enteritis, upper respiratory tract infections, otitis media, scabies, measles, chicken pox and fevers of unknown origin. Such bouts of illness, like family violence, sexual abuse, lack of parental guidance and affirmations, invariably affect the child academically.

Boys learn from that which they witness. There are no language taboos. They will form bonds with other boys and in time join them when they become bored and angry and commit acts of vandalism – smashing bottles, breaking windows, stealing goods and destroying property – and engaging in whatever relieves their tedium. It may be sniffing inhalants, drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, using marijuana and dominating others. Watching pornographic videos, when the adults are drunk and incapacitated, heightens sexual desires which can be sated on younger siblings or peers. It may precipitate pack rapes. Thoughts of suicide may tempt as an escape from a difficult life. A boy may have a friend or relative who has already chosen this end, and he may have seen a body hanging.

Detention centres and prisons have become transitional residences for community men at certain stages of their life. There is no shame attached to a boy's detention because the punitive justice system simply adds value to the crime. It is another community to which he has entry and where he will reunite with other mates and learn further negative life skills. Upon his release, the boy's next life goal is likely to be that of fatherhood, which progresses him into the cycle of violence as a perpetrator and reproduces the experiences of his own upbringing.

There is some predictability about the rites of passage for the boy, a description common across many Indigenous communities in their hapless journey through life. It is a disjointed and dislocated passage where the participants learn more of the workings of parole boards, good behaviour bonds, masculine dominance and uncontrolled aggression than they do of their ancestral culture.

Men as victims too: the sick male body

Aboriginal women, staunchly supportive of even their most violent men, tend to consign men's deviant behaviours to illness categories and they place the blame on these same causative agents – alcohol and substance abuse – and childhood experience of traumas and/or having grown up in the boys' dormitory. In essence, they contextualize men as being emotionally ill, without personal power and therefore unable to accept responsibility for their actions. The emotionally sick role provides and allows a socially acceptable means of understanding and accepting deviant behaviour, even rape. Girls who report being raped are often sent away to prevent them being bashed by the man's female relatives.

Conversely, men do not interpret women's behaviour as being related to bodily sickness. Neither is alcohol blamed. Rather, the woman is told to take responsibility for behaviours which men see as anti-social. Even murderers are exonerated when alcohol can be implicated. Alcohol, as the weapon, not the person who has imbibed it, in effect becomes culpable. 'Yeah. He killed her when he was drunk. They was always on the grog, him and her' (female informant).

When men cease to drink they usually cease to bash and this usually coincides with their ageing. Ceasing to be violent then earns the man accolades and, if he speaks out publicly about his violent behaviour, he earns praise and is labelled a 'role model'. Merely speaking out is enough to earn this recognition.

Case study to better socialize children

In 1997, in an attempt to encourage community men to interact positively with their children in a non-threatening environment, the women's group invited a prestigious car manufacturer from a southern city to come and make billycarts with primary school children and their fathers. We believed that this would be the start of a programme to enhance emotional well being, whereby fathers could view the interaction of outside men with children and learn positive ways to be better fathers and reclaim relationships with their children.

The initiative was an outstanding success in that about 300 children participated and many

23

representatives from television and radio stations came to film and record the event. The great billy-cart venture made news across Australia as smiling Indigenous children and the non-Indigenous male visitors studiously sawed, hammered and painted billycarts. It was an enthralling week and the children were treated to days of fun and play. Little ones quickly chose their favourite visitor and claimed them.

The final gala day arrived and as news media helicopters hovered overhead, the billycart derbies were held. In spite of an abundance of notifications, however, only about five fathers came. Others were occupied with their usual Saturday pursuits – betting on the weekend races, watching sport on television, and consuming alcohol. In evaluating the initiative, the organizers concluded only that there were huge benefits for the children who discovered they had a caring community in a far away city.

The visitors returned the next year to help the children build a traditional food and medicine garden. This time almost all the community came for the gala event. There was feasting and games as well as traditional dancing which continued on into the evening. The visitors were given a rousing farewell and the community vowed to find funding for the children to visit the city and see the car manufacturing production line. Within several weeks the school garden had died through lack of water. Roaming dogs and vandals desecrated the last of the plants and all that remained were the border outlines. On several occasions meetings were held to discuss ways of locating funding to take the children to visit the city but no one carried out their promise. The children are still waiting and the future of the initiative remains in doubt even though the car manufacturer has made it clear that they are disposed to the project becoming an annual event.

Concluding remarks

The erosion of Indigenous men's roles and the effects of transgenerational trauma have profoundly affected their capacity to function as role models and to produce happy, healthy and well-adjusted children.

It appears that these men, as a collective, choose to continue as largely dysfunctional, rather than summon their brothers to rein in their aggression, stop their violence towards women, protect their offspring and to claim the father role. While some men are individually accepting responsibility, they cannot claim to be non-violent if they continue to ignore the regular atrocities committed around them.

Although the project goals were not explicitly achieved, in our intervention we did discover that the incorporation of a prominent mainstream company was most beneficial for the community's children and it stimulated wide interest. The relationship we sought – that is, stimulation of father/children interactions – did not appear to be greatly enhanced, but we did see a strong bond form between the company and the children, who found people who care for them outside their own group and learned that maybe life outside is not so threatening, and that there are opportunities for Indigenous children like them to aspire to greater things.

What does this initiative then tell us? If relationships are the learning ground for teaching positive behaviours, at least the children were exposed, however briefly, to safe and rewarding activities with men, albeit non-Indigenous men. Consequently, by expanding the scope of the project to include the active participation of all stakeholders and not narrowing the evaluation to the target group, we saw our goals attained by a broader perspective on what to evaluate.

References

Hammill, J. (2000) 'Culture of Chaos: Indigenous Women and Vulnerability in an Australian Rural Reserve'. PhD Thesis, the Australian Centre for International and Tropical Health and Nutrition, University of Queensland.

Hayes, L. (1998) 'Children of the Grog: Alcohol Lifestyle and the Relationship to Foetal Alcohol Syndrome and Foetal Alcohol Effects'. Report for the degree of BAppHSc(IHP)Hons, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Queensland.

Hiatt, L.R. (1996) *Arguments about Aborigines: Australia and the Evolution of Social Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.