Reviewer’s report

Title: Doing masculinity, not doing health: A qualitative study among Dutch male employees about male ideologies, health beliefs, and company exercise.

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Reviewer: James Smith

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This manuscript is on an interesting topic – the intersections between Dutch male health beliefs and company exercise. In general, the paper reads well. Unfortunately the manuscript is not at a standard suitable for publication in an international public health journal (yet). In this instance, I have provided an unusually long review. I have done so as this article has significant merit, and will undoubtedly be worthy of publication subject to some major revisions. However, it may well fit better with a content (men’s health) journal, such as the International Journal of Men’s Health.

The following provides an account of some of the key considerations that ought to be addressed as part of a major revision process.

Abstract
What do the authors mean by men’s health situation? (status?)
‘health promotion is often related to femininity’ - does the empirical literature demonstrate this? I’m not entirely convinced. It is difficult to justify this claim when there are so few references to (men’s) health promotion scholarship.
‘Hardly’ x 2 – rarely (?), minimally (?) may be more appropriate

Background
The term ‘male typed activities’ (p4) is used. The authors could explain this in greater detail? There are certainly plentiful examples of feminised sports and activities as well – which could explain similar participation rates between men and women. Interestingly, the three most popular sports mentioned are relatively ‘gender neutral’.
‘Workplaces show great promise….at work’ (p5) is a poorly structured sentence. Please re-write.
‘High job demands…in company exercise’ (p5) – sentence is too long and convoluted.
‘Maleness is an advantage…’ (p6) - perhaps ‘maleness can be perceived as an advantage…’ would be more appropriate?

There are some broad generalistions and sweeping assumptions that need to be justified and/or explained in much greater detail. For example:
‘…men’s privileged access to resources…’ (p6) – does this refer all men? The
authors could better explain which men, why and under which circumstances?

Why hand-pick a qualitative study from the UK (Gough & Conner 2006)? There are plentiful international qualitative research examples that could be equally cited on the same or similar topics. See suggested references at this end of this review. The same applies to the ‘discussion’ and ‘implications of the study’ sections of the manuscript.

‘Another explanation is that men lack the knowledge to prevent and detect health problems’ (p6). This myth has been repeatedly challenged in more contemporary men’s health scholarship (see some of the suggested references below – particularly those of Robertson, Oliffe, O’Brien and Smith) and national policy positions. For example the recently released Australian male health policy has supporting documents relating to ‘healthy workers’ and ‘access to health services’. The Ireland Men’s Health Policy also discusses men’s health from a strengths-based or salutogenesis framework. Essentially, such literature identifies that men’s help-seeking is both complex and poorly understood. It also suggests that men do seek help if provided with an appropriate environment in which to do so. Perhaps this would be a more appropriate argument to develop (or at least acknowledge) within this paper.

‘Gender is, therefore, best understood as a dynamic social structure…’ (p7) – I think the work of Will Courtenay, John Oliffe and/or Steve Robertson would be useful to reference here. They explicitly talk of multiple masculinities and the notion of contested and renegotiated masculinities. Whilst acknowledged, they are only mentioned in the manuscript briefly (p7-8, p27-28). This discussion needs to be expanded, as these concepts appear to be central to the contradictions Dutch men express in relation to masculinity (although I’m not sure the authors have realised this just yet).

‘Men’s studies aim to understand…risk-taking behaviour and ill health’ (p8). I think men’s studies do much more than this – some are now challenging male-deficit viewpoints.

‘Equating masculinity with success makes it harder for men to accept why they are ill’ (p8). Is this really about acceptance or is this about men taking action in a timely manner? (see Smith et al 2008)

The initial description of ‘worksite health promotion programs’ (p9) is extremely limited. There is much work being completed in areas relating to health screening, provision of health insurance, infrastructure considerations (such as end-of-trip facilities – showers, lockers, etc) and healthy workplace policies. This needs to be discussed if published in an international journal such as BMC Public Health.

The claim ‘to our knowledge there are no studies looking at masculinity in the setting of lifestyle and work’ (p9) is questionable. I’d suggest revisiting the literature using terms such as worksite and/or workplace health promotion and you may find that this changes. Likewise, if the authors refine searches to look at
sub-populations of men such as blue collar or construction workers they may also be inclined to alter this statement.

Methodology
How many interviews – were they one-off???

The authors mention that the interview guide was ‘piloted and accommodated’ (p10). What do they mean by accommodated? What did this look like? How was the interview guide changed?

A claim is made that ‘men deduce the interviewer’s orientations during the interview…’ (p10). This orientation could presumably relate to age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and other social and cultural considerations (and relate to inter-subjectivity). I think this needs to be stated much more clearly (a sentence would be sufficient). If focusing on gender, explain why this is the case. What would be useful is a short descriptive reflection (perhaps boxed) about how the interviewer managed the gendered nature of conversations. Steve Robertson (2006) has written a lovely autobiographical piece that would be useful to use as a benchmark. Smith et al (2008) also deal with this in the methods section of their self-monitoring paper. Both could be used as examples to guide such an addition.

Note: some of this is picked up on p21 (in relation to discussing intimate issues), p27 (in relation to interviewing and gender-relations) and p28 (in relation to homophobia). This would be better situated within the methodology. Additional references or acknowledgement of literature about interviewing men is also warranted (beyond the Oliffe & Mroz article). Here are some relevant examples:


The authors talk hypothetically about some men ‘taking control’ which ‘immediately provides information about how closely the men align with expressing masculinity through dominance’. This is a quantum leap – there are a range of reasons why men may take control in an interview context which (in their view) may have nothing to do with their masculine identity.

The section describing the interviewer’s background (p11) should be stated up-front within the methodology. This would provide better contextualisation.
How did the researchers look for a mix of exercisers and non-exercisers? (p11)

Variation in sample usually refers to breadth, not depth. Could the authors please explain.

How was theoretical saturation reached? At what point did the researchers/analysts know and why?

Box 1 – the interview outline is interesting. However, I don’t get a feel for what the interview process actually looked like. Did the researchers ask any specific questions in relation to each of the thematic areas to commence discussions in these areas?

Table 1 – were participants asked explicitly asked about their sexuality, is it assumed, or did this become apparent during interview discussion?

Results

Be careful using judgement statements like ‘showing off’ (p12). The participants’ may just have been sharing this information.

There are numerous references to masculinity within the results section. It would be good to delineate ‘hegemonic masculinity’ from ‘alternative’ or ‘marginalised’ versions of masculinity. This would provide a deeper and much more detailed analysis than that provided at the moment.

‘Almost all men…as regards career and sports’ (p13) – this sentence does not make sense.

The term ‘masculinity standard’ is used. Could the authors please explain exactly what is meant by this term?

Some of the claims against the empirical evidence are exaggerations or misrepresentations. For example:

Raymond (p13) – he doesn’t talk about drinking to excess. Therefore is it about ‘competition’ or just fitting in?

‘The interviewees state how men try to impress each other in work, sports, and in other situations such as discussions, risky behaviour, using humour and joking, and story-telling’ (p14) – the quotes don’t really support this statement at all!

Tom excerpt (p15) – the intersection between age(ing) and masculinity could be fleshed out further here. Smith et al (2007) might be a useful reference here.

Woud (p16) – he doesn’t ‘frame masculinity’, rather he talks about men exercising for the wrong reasons.

‘Real masculinity is exposed in having a good sense of humour, handling work stress, or stoicism in times of illness’ (p17) – there is no evidence provided to substantiate this claim.

These are only handful of examples, there are many others.
Both Tom, Ben and Woud (p15-16) speak about fitness. The reader is pondering why participants opt to use the term fitness in contrast to exercise or sport???. Is there an underlying reason about the different meanings men give to these terms and how they relate to their masculine identity(ies)? Raymond’s comments (p23-24) might provide some insights to answer this question.

The author mentions that Woud ‘challenges’ and that Martijn ‘opposes’ certain masculine constructions in relation to exercise/fitness. If they are challenging norms relating to masculinity then this needs to be made much more explicit in the description of the analysis. It may also mean the title of the section needs to be revisited!

The ‘real man is not a whiner’ section reads well.

Discussion
The main findings section is very brief and could better explore consistencies and inconsistencies with international studies. Essentially, how does this study compare to others?
The interviewer reflections would be better placed in the methodology section
The limitations section is well written. Move the reflection about asking about men’s sexual orientation (p28) to the methodology.

Implications of the study
This is, by far, the strongest section of the paper. It is nice to see a paper that uses empirical data to show that men’s health behaviours, when viewed from a gender perspective, are complex – ultimately meaning that different health promotion approaches are warranted.

Conclusion
Could be a little more pithy.

General comments
The term company exercise has limited meaning to an international audience. Perhaps other terms such as ‘workplace health promotion’, ‘workplace physical activity’ and ‘corporate exercise/sport/physical activity’ are alternative terms that should be explored (at the very least an acknowledgement that different terms are used in international scholarship). This is certainly worthy of discussion within the introduction. This may require the authors to return to existing literature on these topics. For example, the current manuscript fails to acknowledge key literature that advocates for using work as a setting to engage/connect with men in relation to their health; and a broader literature relating to men’s health promotion (this would fit neatly between the sections on masculinity and male employees). This would substantially strengthen the paper. Indeed, an overview of literature relating to men and workplace health (in contrast to the more narrow term ‘company exercise) is warranted.

The results section could be substantially strengthened if the authors more
critically analysed the interview content (particularly in relation to the first theme – the ideal man is a winner). For example, it would be worth separating-out (and discussing) what the men say about others (men as a category/population/group) in contrast to what they say about themselves (as individuals). This is particularly important in delineating ‘perceived’ vs ‘actual’ behavioural patterns.

There is rich data in this paper. One senses that too much is trying to be said within the one paper. For example, there is much discussion about men’s help-seeking and the way men view their health, which does not necessarily relate directly to company exercise programs. Perhaps this manuscript would be better if it were separated into two different (but linked) manuscripts??

Consider revising and resubmitting to a men’s health journal – possibly the International Journal of Men’s Health.

I wish the authors all the best in revising this paper and strongly encourage them to do so, as it will make an important contribution to men’s health scholarship.

Suggested references and/or (re)reading:


Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests