

## COMMENTARIES

# Unpacking Masculinity as a Construct: Ontology, Pragmatism, and an Analysis of Language

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Understanding the target article requires clarity about the foundational assumptions of functional contextualism. In this article, we explain why adoption of a pragmatic truth criterion necessarily implies abandonment of any interest in the relationship between knowledge claims and the preanalytic organization of reality. If that is correct, pragmatism can be either incoherent or a-ontological. The problems and possibilities of an a-ontological perspective are discussed. Among other benefits, an a-ontological perspective in principle allows researchers to better coordinate knowledge about gendered social learning and the practical ethics of such knowledge. Application of a functional contextual theory of cognition to gender bias is also discussed, and cognitive defusion is suggested as a way to deal with both with the verbal results of a history of gender bias and to help researchers avoid the ontological error built into common sense language as they construction functional pragmatic alternative to mainstream approaches.

*Keywords:* functional contextualism, relational frame theory, acceptance and commitment therapy, masculinity

## Unpacking Masculinity as a Construct Ontology, Pragmatism and the Analysis of Masculinity

In the article, “Is “masculinity” a problem?: Framing the effects of gendered social learning in men,” Addis, Mansfield, and Syzdek provide a compelling argument for the importance of a pragmatic and functional approach to the study of masculinity as a psychological construct. This is a subtle article that will be difficult for some readers to understand, because it is boldly attempting to do some work while at the same time commenting on the psychological and philosophical aspects of doing that work. Doing some work about gendered learning requires speaking about it, for example, but the authors also try to catch in flight the fact that how one speaks about gendered learning has powerful consequences.

In several recent articles we have discussed how a pragmatic and functional approach similar to the one Addis et al. put forth might be built into a more comprehensive contextual approach to behavioral science (e.g., Hayes, Levin, Plumb, Boulanger, & Pistorello, in press; Levin & Hayes, 2009; Vilardaga, Hayes, Levin, & Muto, 2009). While we are not researchers or scholars in the area of the psychology of men, we have applied a functional perspective to an analysis of cognition, Relational Frame Theory (RFT; Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001) and to an applied extension of that analysis, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). These approaches in turn have been applied to the understanding and modification of human stereotyping in several areas (e.g., Kohlenberg, Hayes, & Hayes, 1991; Lillis & Hayes, 2007; Masuda et al., 2007). In this brief commentary, we plan to expand on a philosophical issue that is central to Addis and colleague’s treatment of the issue of masculinity: avoiding the pernicious and needless insertion of ontology into psychological accounts. We will also describe some ways that RFT and ACT may apply to the issue of masculinity.

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### The Ontological Assumptions of Mainstream Behavioral Science

Early in the article, Addis and colleagues argue that progressive science needs to be based on coherent and compatible perspectives on ontology (e.g., what *is* gendered social learning), epistemology (e.g., how do we *understand* its effects), and practical ethics (toward what ends *should* we be working). In part, the authors are just arguing that a thoroughgoing philosophy of science is needed to do behavioral science well, and indeed the authors then rightly lay out their own functional pragmatic assumptions. But we are concerned that readers will think that the authors are going to attempt to speak within this structure in a literal sense and thus eventually will attempt to say what gendered social learning *is*. Once that issue is confused, the later discussion of a social learning perspective on gendered behaviors is likely to be misunderstood as the fulfillment of that promise and the authors will be taken to be addressing the ontological level in their analysis. In fact, these authors cannot say anything about what gendered social learning *is*. They cannot, because although it is true that any research program requires a coherent and compatible *perspective* on ontology, the perspective of a functional pragmatic, or what we call a “functional contextual” approach, is that ontological claims must be abandoned.

A functional pragmatic or contextualistic approach is inherently a-ontological because ontological terms can add nothing to pragmatic science as measures against its own goals. We know that the authors realize this. They argue, e.g., that “terms like “masculinity” do not refer to things in the world . . . [and that] . . . like all psychological and social constructs, their utility can be evaluated by the degree to which they allow for successful working in the field.” We are concerned that readers may view this idea too narrowly, however. The nature of the point being made might thus be clearer if the qualifiers are removed: “terms do not refer to things in the world . . . like all constructs, their utility can be evaluated by the degree to which they allow for successful working.” That bolder statement is indeed the pragmatic view.

The pervasive view of masculinity within psychology, according to Addis and colleagues, has been that masculinity’s ontology—whether

conceptualized as in-born or taught—is as a trait which men possess. The authors bring to light the limitations of the conceptualization of masculinity as a trait, especially in terms of providing insight into how to influence these behaviors in order to affect personal and/or societal change. The authors attempt to refocus the science on the enactment of gendered behaviors in context, because this level of analysis allows for the identification of manipulable variables and, indeed, the actual manipulation of those variables.

The reader who has not been systematically exposed to contextualistic thinking might incorrectly believe that the authors are arguing in an ontological sense that masculinity is not a trait, but rather that it is a socially learned and contextually situated gendered behavior. This article is actually making a set of different points, both of which are orthogonal to mainstream scientific assumptions, not just in the area of the psychology of men, but in revised form in all areas of behavioral science. Firstly, it is not helpful to gender equity and other important goals to view masculinity in an ontological sense. Secondly, if you view masculinity more pragmatically, it is not useful to view it as a trait. The authors show their concern over needless ontology when they argue, for example, that contextual analysis of gendered social learning may be useful in part because it can help undermine the essentialist qualities of public discourse about gendered behavior. Essentialism can only live inside ontological systems of thought and reducing essentialism (needless ontology) is beneficial in many ways. We agree.

Doing science a-ontologically requires some care about analytic assumptions. As the article argues, habits of mind that are established by the culture tend to dominate, including habits of mind on the part of scientists. While that point was originally being made about the psychology of men, it applies with equal force to the habits of mind that needed to ontological claims. Thus, we would like to do some of that heavy lifting around the issue of ontology, so that this interesting article can be better understood.

### Why Contextualistic Perspectives Must Eschew Ontology

The authors correctly characterized a contextualistic perspective, and they note that the various stakeholders to these issues are all also behaving

organisms. Any attempt at identifying ontology itself involves the behavior of the researcher acting within a sociocultural context and personal history. Thus, the interpretations of a scientist are as much influenced by the researcher's history of social learning as the participant being studied. From a contextual and pragmatic view of knowledge, the scientist making claims about ontological reality has seemingly taken "some special point of vantage, 'perched on the epicycle of Mercury'" (Skinner, 1974, p. 234), that is, outside the sociocultural and political contexts in which discussions of masculinity (or anything else) necessarily occur. Addis and colleagues are careful throughout the article to consider the role of science as situated within the scientific context and should be applauded for encouraging the researcher to consider his or her effect not only on the field of psychology but also the larger sociocultural environment. They ask the researcher to carefully consider how his or her behavior is part and parcel of the entire scientific enterprise from study design through dissemination. It is far more difficult to be mindful of the consequences of scientific talk within an ontological system, however, because scientists can always avoid responsibility by hiding behind "reality." One real benefit of pragmatism is that it explodes the "reality made me do it" defense of socially ineffective science by dismantling ontological claims. The way it does that is as follows.

The truth criterion of pragmatic perspectives is "successful working" and that requires the statement of an a priori goal so that the question can be answered: working toward what? The authors have done so. The need to state goals clearly in order to mount a pragmatic approach to truth, however, makes sense only if other goals could serve as a different analytic context, and thus that there may be other truths pragmatically speaking. Nothing in principle prevents these different truths from contradicting themselves. Let us provide an extended example of exactly that kind of situation in behavioral science.

Many forms of behavioral science test the truth of their theories by achieving the goal of prediction alone. If that is the goal, thoughts or emotions can be viewed as "causes" of behavior. Overt behavior, thoughts, and emotions are all dependent variables in psychology but they relate in orderly ways in some contexts, and prediction can be achieved even if the analysis

includes no independent variables. Many, many theories in psychology are of this kind. Trait-based theories of masculinity are a good example.

Other forms of behavioral science test the truth of their theories by achieving the goal of both predicting and influencing psychological events. If that is the goal, however, theories must specify events other than dependent variables. Thoughts and feelings can no longer be viewed as initiating "causes" of behavior, because you cannot manipulate such dependent variables directly to test their role in influencing psychological outcomes. The independent variables one can manipulate are aspects of the context of psychological events and thus adequate psychological theories must include contextual variables if prediction and influence is the scientific goal (Hayes & Brownstein, 1986). The perspective on masculinity presented in the target article is an example. This exemplifies how a theory that might be "true" given one goal, can be false given another.

Multiple truths and even contradictory truths are, thus, simultaneously possible within a functional pragmatic approach to science. This makes no sense if you take a traditional correspondence-based view of truth (i.e., that true statements correspond with reality). Reality, in the traditional view, is already organized into part, relations, and forces—it is merely our job as scientists to map them accurately. Reality does not change. In a pragmatic view, however, there can indeed be multiple truths and even contradictory truths because truth is a matter of achieving a goal, and that achievement says nothing about "reality." In other words, "successful working" is not merely a different test of whether statements correspond with what is real; it is the end point of an entirely different set of ontological and epistemological assumptions.

Workability cannot be reduced to correspondence-based truth because the inference of correspondence would have to be made after some degree of workability has been achieved. That final act of inference would add nothing other than a gratuitous reality claim to the experience of workability itself. From a pragmatic perspective it is dangerous and empty rhetoric to say "and furthermore the *reason* this works is *because* reality is organized in that exact way." What would be the truth criterion for such an

additional claim? It cannot be workability *per se* since that was already achieved to the degree that it was before the claim was made.

Permitting ontological claims would leave pragmatists with two truth criteria, not one, and incoherence would be the result. The same applies to *any* claim about reality, including claims that what was experienced was *not* because of the way reality is organized in an ontological sense. Thus, it is not possible to be a pragmatist and an idealist, because it would require treating the idea that the world is *not* real ontologically as well. A pragmatist can assume the “real world” if by that all that is meant is the “one world” but that is a world about which nothing can be said because even a single knowledge claim partitions the world into the claim and the known.

Our argument is that pragmatism is either incoherent or it is *entirely a-ontological*. It takes a firm grip on epistemology, asserting that we know that we know based on the consequences of knowing. That is the “successful working” truth criterion. In seeking such pragmatic truth, the contextualist must systematically eschew *any* interest in or statements about what is real in an elemental sense.

Normal language contains an ontological quality based on the common sense confusion between referring and referents, which is why a pragmatic perspective is often difficult to understand in a sophisticated way in the public square. The authors note this problem when they admit that attempts at “reclaiming “masculinity” from the public domain and metaphorically recasting it as a process that is socially learned, constructed, and socially situated, may be a task verging on the *sisyphsian*.”

### Possibilities in an A-Ontological Approach

Pragmatists have to be willing to live with ambiguity and uncertainty. It comes with the territory because an abandonment of ontology leaves behind that sense of certainty that apparent knowledge about the organization of reality provides other worldviews. What functional pragmatism fosters, however, is the ability to focus on what works in a flexible manner. This has at least three benefits. First, it is a lot easier to broadminded when “reality” does not keep getting in the way. Especially as scientists move into the public sphere, it is easy to be drawn into

an in an argument about reality: “Men are like this.” “No they aren’t.” Yes, they are.” This kind of interchange is as entangling as it is ultimately useless. Abandonment of ontology allows another conversation to be had that opens up new and potentially more effective avenues of approach. “Men are like this.” “And what does viewing it like that permit us to do?” or “And if they weren’t, then what would you like to see happen? Are there times or places where you already see more of what you want happening? How can we do more of that?” In other words, a pragmatic perspective allows scientists to let go of useless battles about who is right or what is real, and instead to stay focused on how people can develop more useful knowledge and move toward shared goals.

A second major benefit is that scientists can be more socially responsible if that is a goal. The target article asks scientists in the psychology of men to consider the practical ethics of their knowledge claims. That cannot occur except in a twisted way if these claims are viewed ontologically. If masculinity really is a trait (if that partitioning of the world maps onto what is real) then it is mere political correctness to point out how trait conceptions of masculinity forestall gender equity. If, however, knowledge is the achievement of a goal and promoting gender equity is one of the goals of knowledge in the psychology of men, then it is consistent to ask scientists to consider how their knowledge claims lead to prediction and influence over gendered social learning, including in those areas that lead to gender inequities.

A third major benefit is that scientist need not wait for “understanding” to happen before trying out new ways of influencing the world. Indeed, if we learn precisely and broadly applicable ways to influence it, that in itself is one of the most important kinds of understanding. Thus it is not by accident that the authors of the target article keep emphasizing possible interventions, and ways of altering the gendered landscape. As the authors have previously shown, the psychology of men has lead to very little in the way of interventions that make a difference, and if the goal of analysis is prediction *and* influence, this is unacceptable and inadequate.

It is worth noting that these benefits do not *justify* the a-ontological assumptions of contextualism. Assumptions are always preanalytic

and thus beyond empirical test. For those dedicated to social change, however, such benefits are a welcome side effect of the absolute disinterest in ontological claims that emerges from pragmatic epistemology.

There is still a challenge, however. Even when we learn more about how to predict and influence gendered social learning, we will need to speak about that process. Producers and consumers of pragmatic knowledge then need to find ways to continue to hold the knowledge that they develop lightly because it is very easy to repeat the entire process of cognitive entanglement wrapped in new cognitive clothing. It is easy to turn anything that one can describe into a *thing*. Pragmatic knowledge of how verbal behavior works might assist in avoiding this process, a topic to which we now turn.

### Implications of RFT and ACT for the Concept of Masculinity

The social learning model provided by the authors is well grounded in operant theory and does well to reorient the field to an approach whereby the prediction and influence of masculine behavior is possible. Their treatment of the subject specifies how masculine behaviors are shaped through operant conditioning wherein gender functions as a discriminative stimulus either materially, symbolically, or verbally.

As Addis and colleagues suggest, the correspondence between behaviors and masculinity may be further qualified by various discriminative stimuli such that the same behavior may be reinforced within one context and punished in another. Crying in the locker room may be reinforced by a reduction in aversive stimulation as teammates provide comfort to reduce psychological distress and yet the same behavior, crying, may be punished in another context as “the guys” ridicule a friend for crying on the diving board. The male in the latter situation may likely feel shame in addition to the initial fear.

A technical analysis of the symbolic and verbal levels is still needed, however, and may be important in this regard. RFT researchers have developed a body of evidence (Hayes et al., 2001) that shows the utility of casting symbolic and verbal behavior as a matter of a contextually situated and learned ability to relate events arbitrarily. As children become verbal, a wide

variety of verbal relations are trained such as similarity, opposition, distinction, or comparisons. These relations are applicable by social whim, rather than determined solely by the form of related events. For example, a nickel can be “smaller than” a dime because a relational context, not the events themselves, specifies nickels and dimes relate one to the other.

Once such relational abilities are established the verbal community can readily create relational networks that may be so extensive that they restrict behavioral repertoires and, thereby, promote negative psychological outcomes for the individual and society. A verbal rule such as “a man should be masculine” establishes a complex relational network that extends far beyond the relations in the sentence itself. For example, the verbally constructed coordination between manhood and “masculine behaviors” (e.g., emotional suppression, risk-taking) will very likely impact the listener’s views of women by derivation of the frames of opposition between manhood and “feminine behaviors” (e.g., emotional expression, help-seeking).

Consider, for example, how the rule, “a man should be masculine” may reduce behavioral variability or extend the rule beyond contexts in which such learning has occurred. The verbal community demands construction of a consistent self-concept from a history full of inconsistent behavior. The need to conform one’s behavior to this conceptualized self narrows the person’s behavioral repertoire and begins to exclude even behaviors that may be effective (e.g., help-seeking in the context of psychological distress). For example, if *help-seeking* is in a frame of coordination with *femininity*, and *maleness* and *femininity* are in a frame of opposition, the derived relation is that *help-seeking* is in a frame of opposition to *maleness*. It is easy to imagine how such verbal processes could pit, through derived relational responding, the biological fact of being a male in opposition to help-seeking. It is clearly absurd to state that men who seek help are not men in a biological sense, though this is exactly what normal verbal processes can lead toward.

An understanding of the verbal processes involved has several implications. Because verbal relations are historical, it may be relatively ineffective merely to provide alternative information or to challenge stereotypes. There is no process in learning called unlearning. Learned



behaviors are forever part of the learner in the sense that they are now permanently part of a person's history and even when extinguished they can be reacquired more readily. Thus, for example, direct challenge to stereotypes may be logically but not psychologically sound.

We need effective alternatives. If the goal is to alter masculine stereotypes, RFT suggests that it might be easier to ride the horse in the direction it is going by relating verbal feature of a desired goal to powerful and central aspects of the existing verbal network. Suppose the goal is to increase help-seeking among men. Help-seeking by men itself has strong verbal features: it is social, involves new learning, it is not avoidant, it requires the courage to look at hard things, and it requires the willingness to challenge stereotypes, to name a few. These can be empirically tested (e.g., by implicit cognitive measures, as the authors note), and central features could be related through media or other interventions to central features of the verbal construct of "masculinity" within the culture, such as strength, independence, or willingness to face challenges. In effect, the verbal processes that led to the excesses and narrowness of the concept of masculinity, can be used to expand that very concept within the social community.

Another avenue of approach is revealed by another aspect of an RFT approach. Whereas a relational context specifies how one event relates to another, a functional context selects what behavioral functions are currently relevant to that relation. Manipulation of the function context of stereotypes thus provides another avenue of approach. If the goal is to reduce the essentialism of concepts like "masculinity," RFT researchers have found that giving verbal events multiple and even contradictory functions broadens the flexibility of later responding to these verbal events (Roche, Melia, Kanter, Blackledge, & Dymond, under review). Like fighting a fire by creating back fires, behavioral scientists can fight the repertoire narrowing effects of verbal concepts by repeatedly giving them new meanings, thus altering the functional context of key terms.

Focusing on the functional context provides other ways to reduce the behavioral impact of verbal concepts. Consider the earlier example of a gendered self-concept. The problem may not be so much that one does not have the correct

rules but rather that fusion with *any* self-concept leads to behavioral inflexibility outside of that concept. Weakening fusion with verbal rules (what ACT researchers call "cognitive defusion") is a matter of substantial current research among those interested in acceptance and mindfulness (e.g., Hayes, Follette, & Linehan, 2004). A wide variety of mindfulness and acceptance techniques are now known to reduce the literal, problem-solving context of verbal rules (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006). Defusion methods help people look *at* concepts like masculinity and their utility, rather than looking only at the world as structured by these concepts, once it is assumed that they describe the world. In essence, the body of work on defusion shows that it is possible to reduce the impact of verbal categories themselves (Hayes et al., 2006).

For example, consider the impact of the rule "a man should be masculine" if it was sung aloud, said in Donald Duck's voice, or said extremely slowly. Would it have the same impact? How would "I should be masculine" work when written on a baby's T-shirt? ACT researchers have shown that defusion methods such as these can reduce the impact and believability of conditioned social stereotypes, even though the occurrence of such verbal rules may remain unchanged (e.g., Lillis & Hayes, 2007; Masuda et al., 2007).

Defusion methods work in part because they reduce the common sense ontology of everyday terms. To come back to our earlier point about the challenges and opportunities of an a-ontological position for scientists, defusion suggests one way that pragmatic scientists might do such interesting things as attempting to account for various senses of questions like "Is 'masculinity' a problem?" while at the same time not then creating yet another essentialist account. The key is to break through the common sense ontology even of scientific terms. In the end, the concept of masculinity is also just a concept, and any analysis is just useful or not. Scientific theory is not about how the world is organized in the abstract. Concepts and analyses are what they do for us—they are what we make of them—and what they do for us depends on the contexts in which they are used.

As Addis et al. note, we have lived too long inside an ontological perspective on "masculinity," and it has cost us all in the area of the

practical ethics of such terms. Contextually situated gendered social learning provides another and possibly more functional way forward, but only if we hold even that concept lightly enough for it to be purely functional, not ontological. In service of that end, we suggest that the target article and this response might best be printed on a T-shirt.

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