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Men and Masculinity: A Philosophical Dialogue Approach

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Introduction

This article describes a project where philosophical dialogue was introduced to male community leaders to support them in a critical reflection on the meaning of masculinity.
While it might seem unusual to apply an open-ended philosophical approach to a subject like masculinity, given its natural home in anthropological and sociological domains, this paper aims to show that the practice of philosophical dialogue provides a uniquely productive and fruitful way to engage men in discussion about masculinity.

Inviting men to philosophically examine ideas as *co-existential* inquirers is at the core of dialogic practice. In good dialogue, the important thing is to treat the other as a fully equal human being of action, thought, and responsibility. That is, to *listen* to what they have to say to us. Opening a space in which this ethical stance is adopted, while thoughtful and serious attention is given to important ideas, is what separates dialogue from other pedagogical interventions.

The project exists at the intersection of education, community engagement, and participatory democracy. In providing a safe framework for men to engage consciously with deeply-held, complex beliefs without fear of judgement or ridicule, philosophical dialogue can create possibilities for new ways of thinking about masculinity.

This article will outline the background context and structure of the project. It will explain the motivations and the values behind this approach. Finally, it will outline the themes that arose throughout the conversations, and how philosophical dialogue was suited to address them.

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'What Does He Need?'

'What Does He Need?' (WDHN) is a long-term community-based art project that seeks to "explore how men and boys are shaped by and influence the world in which they live"[1]. Developed by artist and writer Dr. Fiona Whelan, Rialto Youth Project (RYP)[2] and Brokentalkers[3], the project "operates at the intersection of collaborative arts practice, performance, qualitative research, and youth work"[1]. The aim of WDHN is to foster "significant public dialogue about the current state of masculinity"[4] and is particularly interested in "the plight of so many young men whose lives exist at the intersection of class oppression and dominant forms of masculinity".[5]

This project builds on historical work between Fiona and RYP that responds to "complex systemic power relations with young people and adults" and seeks to "highlight and unsettle power relations through collective processes."[6] The themes that came to shape the project were generated by the young boys and men that participated. Such themes included: male violence, male suicide, bullying, pornography, money, status, power, domination, search for dignity, suppression of vulnerability and so on.

When I met with Fiona, along with Dannielle McKenna and Jim Lawlor (current and former managers of RYP) WDHN had established a number of approaches for engaging people in community contexts in Dublin. Through a range of visual, performative, and pedagogical methods, WDHN developed strands to engage men and boys: immersive workshops, creative pedagogies, an animated film, a poem, a public poster project, an audio walk, a full theatrical

[1] F. Whelan, 'What Does He Need? Reflections on a cross-sectorial and transdisciplinary project unfolding in public' Art & the Public Sphere, Volume 9, Issue 1-2, Dec 2020, p. 85 - 96

[2] Rialto Youth Project mission statement: "In an age of inequality, where working class communities are oppressed, we are working towards bringing about social change, providing an integrated youth service based on the needs of young people and in particular those most at risk".

[3]Brokentalkers are an internationally renowned theatre company, based in Dublin, Ireland led by Co-Artistic Directors Feidlim Cannon and Gary Keegan with Creative Producer Rachel Bergin.

[4] F. Whelan, 'What Does He Need?' https://www.whatdoesheneed.com/, 2019, accessed in January 2023.
[5] F. Whelan, 'What Does He Need? Reflections on a cross-sectorial and transdisciplinary project unfolding in public' Art & the Public Sphere, Volume 9, Issue 1-2, Dec 2020, p. 85 - 96
[6] F. Whelan, 'What Does He Need? Reflections on a cross-sectorial and transdisciplinary project unfolding in public' Art & the Public Sphere, Volume 9, Issue 1-2, Dec 2020, p. 85 - 96

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production and more.[7] But there was interest in developing a more direct conversational engagement in a male-only space. And so I was invited to collaborate on developing a 'Philosophy with Men' strand.

Hear listen

I had been doing related work through my project, HearListen[8], developing philosophical communities in prisons, migrant centres, schools, arts groups, youth and homework clubs, with people of all ages, genders, and backgrounds. Part of this work was based in the Rialto Community where myself Dr. John Bissett and Senator Lynn Ruane had run a number of philosophy programs.

HearListen aims to bring philosophy into communities that might not have been exposed to this way of thinking. We wanted to engage people directly and dialogically in fundamental existential, epistemological, ethical, and metaphysical questions.

This impulse to bring philosophy into everyday life is not new. It is our nature as humans to question who we are and how we should live. We are, as Taylor puts it, self-interpreting animals.[9] Yet, the professionalisation of philosophy has seen it float into the rarefied air of elite academic institutions, alienating those not initiated into the literary canon of 'great works', or the opaque world of academic publishing.

We want to ignite people's pre-existing philosophical capacities, regardless of their literacy or academic abilities. We engage with the history of ideas, but do so through a radical commitment to equality of voice and equality of intelligence[10]. We operate on the assumption that all people, when properly listened to, have something worthwhile to say about philosophical questions. Our project subverts the traditional values of authoritative truth, clarity, and certainty, and instead fosters an attentive curiosity in the face of ambiguity, complexity, and uncertainty.

[7] F. Whelan, 'What Does He Need?' https://www.whatdoesheneed.com/, 2019, accessed in January 2023.
[8] R. Grant, Hearlisten http://hearlisten.ie/, 2019, accessed January 2023
[9] C. Taylor, 'Interpretations in the Sciences of Man', p48-65.
[10] J. Ranciere, 'The Ignorant Schoolmaster', p.9.

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Contemporary capitalist structures leave little time or space for this kind of practice. Yet, we maintain, it is essential groundwork for communities should they wish to become conscious of their beliefs, values, and attitudes, as well as the power structures that create their lived reality, all of which are pre-requisites for social and personal growth.

The project

Given the obvious resonance between the two projects – the focus on open dialogue, participant-led initiatives, and the power of listening in giving voice – bringing HearListen and WDHN together made sense.

We invited men who worked in the community sector. Their experience working with young men and boys would inform our dialogues, and perhaps the methodology could be integrated into their work going forward.

We ran four dialogues each with four different groups, keeping the maximum number of participants in each group to 12 (a number that allows each participant to have their voice heard while also drawing on a wide enough range of perspectives to allow for different – sometimes conflicting – perspectives.)[11]

We chose four philosophical themes: *Performativity, Vulnerability, Power,* and *Care*. Based on these themes, statements were developed that would form the focal point of each dialogue. They were:

1. 'To be a man is to act like a man' (performativity).
2. 'It is too risky for men to show weakness' (vulnerability)
3. 'Sometimes it's necessary for men to be aggressive' (power/domination)
4. 'Women are just better carers then men' (care).

A statement was shared prior to each session and participants were asked to consider whether they agree or disagree. This approach has its roots in the P4C methodology developed by

[11] Sessions were originally planned to be held in person in The LAB Gallery in Dublin City Centre to coincide with an exhibition from the What Does He Need? project, but due to COVID-19 we held the dialogues online.

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Matthew Lippman and Ann Margaret Sharp[12]. Philosophical statements are presented to a group to provoke discussion. It is important the statement has certain characteristics to ensure it is fit for philosophical dialogue: open-ended, not empirically verifiable, contentious, open to reasonable disagreement, and so on.

Purpose of the project

One of the first impulses guiding the project was to encourage men to talk to each other in a serious way about masculinity. This is not insignificant. Normative masculinities characterised by self-reliance, stoicism and restrictive emotionality often result in male peer groups avoiding conversations that might make them appear vulnerable.[13] The philosophical dialogue framework provided a safe space where questioning is encouraged rather than viewed with suspicion.

But there was more to this project than male-to-male conversation for its own sake.

Philosophical dialogue offers something different than some 'top-down' educational interventions or behaviour-change programs. Many educational interventions (traditional schooling, lecturing, instructing) begin from an inherently *unequal* relationship: a teacher with unique access to a set of truths explains these truths to students. The goal of such interventions is to *change* the student, from ignorant to knowledgeable, or, in the case of ideological emancipation, from unfree to free. Inequality is built into the relationship from the start.

When it comes to an issue as contentious as masculinity, the urge to 'emancipate' men in this sense is understandable. Hegemonic – or toxic – masculinity[14] is convincingly framed as a

[12] M. Lipman, A. M. Sharp, & F. Oscanyan, Philosophy in the classroom. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980.

[13] P. Sharp, et al, '"People say men don't talk, well that's bullshit": A focus group study exploring challenges and opportunities for men's mental health promotion'. PLoS One. 2022 Jan 21;17(1):e0261997.

[14] Influenced by Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony as an ideological practice that sustains and legitimizes the interests of the powerful in society within particular historical periods, hegemonic masculinity in Connell's terms has come to constitute the most dominant and most socially prized form of masculinity available to men. In Western societies the ideal hegemonic masculinity is assertive and aggressive, courageous, almost invulnerable to threats and problems, and stoic in the face of adversity. It is associated with behaviours that display courage and strength and that include refusal to acknowledge weakness or to be overcome by adverse events, while discouraging other behaviours such as the expression of emotions or the need to seek the help

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negative influence on society. Some traditional explicative approaches suggest that a way to solve this problem is to instruct, teach, or explain to men how they should think, act and behave to free themselves from this harmful ideology.

But, in dividing the world "into knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid"[15] what these approaches actually teach is that some people simply cannot know things *for themselves*, that they do not have the ability to see things as they are, and cannot trust or have confidence in their own abilities. Such approaches subordinate one intelligence to another, creating a belief in the inferiority of one's ability to understand the world and oneself. It leads to, as Rancière sees it, a dependency, an enforced stultification, rather than emancipation.

The philosophical dialogue methodology rejects this premise of hierarchical inequality as a starting point. Instead of beginning from the assumption that our participants are ignorant, mistaken, or wrong, we assumed they were intelligent articulate beings with sophisticated insights. Therefore, every dialogue becomes an experiment: what could be achieved when proper attention is paid to complex ideas by groups of equal thinkers?

Equality is not something to be attained at the end of the intervention, it is something to be *actively practised* throughout.

The outcome of this kind of process is unknown; the impact it has on participants is not guaranteed. This is the risk inherent in approaches based on equality, a risk that many educational institutions find intolerable, hence detailed curriculums and concrete learning outcomes.

In this way, philosophical dialogue must proceed with an "ironic awareness of its own impossibility"[16]. There is no goal, no agenda, but it is only with this orientation towards

of others. C. McVittie, J. Hepworth, K. Goodall, Chapter 4 'Masculinities and Health: Whose Identities, Whose Constructions?', Editor(s): M. Pilar Sánchez-López, R.M. Limiñana-Gras, The Psychology of Gender and Health, Academic Press, 2017, Pages 119-141.

[15] J. Ranciere, 'The Ignorant Schoolmaster', Stanford University Press, 1991, p.6
[16] G. Biesta, 'The Beautiful Risk of Education', Boulder, CO, Paradigm Publishers, 2013, 1982.

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openness that anything worthwhile *might* be achieved. Emancipation, as Rancière puts it, is always "emancipation seized, even against the scholars, when one teaches oneself"[17].

Listening and the role of the facilitator

Facilitation of this kind of co-existential, co-operative dialogue is a subtle skill. You are first and foremost an equal co-subject. But you are also responsible for gathering people together, laying a subject before the group, and inviting them to adopt a certain kind of attitude or posture: open, attentive, curious, present.

This cluster of ideas constellate around the idea of *listening*. From the outset, participants are asked to adopt a deep listening presence, as both an ethical stance towards one another, and intellectual stance towards ideas. This is an alternative to the typical focus on thinking skills, logical moves, and rational argumentation in philosophy. There is so much emphasis on how we speak, proclaim, and convince others, and so little on how we receive, take-in and understand.

Listening to someone is not just hearing the sounds they make with their voice; it is offering thoughtful directed attention to someone's attempt to express their inner-vision. It is a process of becoming attuned to another's claim on reality.

Not just in good dialogue, but in human relations generally the important things is, as Gadamer puts it, "to experience the Thou truly as a Thou", to not reduce the other to an "it". Proper listening allows for this Buberian I-Thou relationship to develop: "belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another"[18].

Philosophically, listening to ideas without attempting to subdue or control them creates a fertile emptiness in which complex thoughts can take shape: "anyone who listens is fundamentally open"[19]. An overemphasis on critical thinking in dialogue can obstruct this process. The adept

[17] J. Ranciere, 'The Ignorant Schoolmaster', Stanford University Press, 1991, p.99
[18] H. G. Gadamer, 'Truth and Method', London, Sheed and Ward, p. 324
[19] H. G. Gadamer, 'Truth and Method', London, Sheed and Ward, p. 324

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critical thinker listens only just enough to find fault or weakness so that ideas can be defended against or dismantled, but not necessarily understood in their fullness.

Instead of viewing the conceptual space as a territory to be colonised through forceful argumentation, in dialogue we dwell alongside others and bear witness to the unfolding of ideas in all their complexity. Considerable patience is required for this kind of practice, but it can mean that the "inner experience which is less suited to being spoken can be expressed"[20].

Themes in Masculinity

In order to maintain the privacy and authenticity of the dialogue space, no recordings were made. However, notes were taken both by myself and a male member of Brokentalkers (Gary Keegan) and fed back into the iterative nature of the project.

What follows is an exploration of some of the key themes that emerged, illustrating the challenges facing men from communities in Dublin. But it will also show how the philosophical dialogue methodology was embraced by the participants and allowed them to face toward difficult, sensitive ideas with openness, tolerance and rigour.

Sense of feeling trapped: oppressor and oppressed.

Many of the men who participated in the dialogues spoke of occupying a position that was "at the intersection of class oppression and dominant forms of masculinity"[21]. As the dialogue progressed, an awareness of the inherent privileges of being a white man emerged alongside an awareness of powerlessness experienced due to economic status as members of the working class in a capitalist society.

Several participants spoke of an 'awakening', where they became aware of these dynamics, often linked to the raising of public consciousness when it comes to women's issues and the voice of women in society.

[20] G. Corradi-Fiumara,'The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening', Oxon, Routledge, 1995, p. 98
[21] F. Whelan, 'What Does He Need? Reflections on a cross-sectorial and transdisciplinary project unfolding in public' Art & the Public Sphere, Volume 9, Issue 1-2, Dec 2020, p. 85 - 96

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One man spoke sensitively of a time he was obliviously walking behind a woman after getting off a bus at night. He noticed her speeding up to get away from him. He realised she was afraid of him. Not because of who he was, but because he was a man, it was night-time and she was alone. His first feeling was indignance: how dare she make him feel like a dangerous predator when he was just walking home. But a moment of self-reflection led to an understanding of the constant danger women must be aware of. This created feelings of guilt and frustration, but also awareness and responsibility.

These moments of tension between conflicting ideas can lead to philosophical insight. A good facilitator can spot this and ask the philosophical question: is it fair for an innocent man to be made to feel like a threat when he had no such intention? Do all men inherit the guilt from the historical forces of patriarchy? Can we be responsible for something we are not guilty of? These are not questions that can be settled purely by empirical evidence. They require philosophical investigation.

Public vs Private Masculinity

Another fertile philosophical theme was the tension between private and public senses of masculinity. When under the gaze of other men, there was pressure to live up to ideas of hegemonic masculinity: to be strong, independent, powerful, invulnerable and most importantly, not to appear in any way feminine (which incorrectly implies weakness, neediness, sensitivity, emotionality, etc.).

Yet in private, or with their partners, some men felt free to act in ways that might not be acceptable otherwise.

One man noticed this when he was hanging clothes on the washing line in the privacy of his garden. When he saw two of his male friends passing by, he felt ashamed and embarrassed for engaging in a supposedly feminine activity. And then doubly ashamed of the fact he felt ashamed.

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The cognitive dissonance created in otherwise self-assured men was striking. But the complex nature of 'the self' inspired philosophical reflection: are we always 'playing a role' for others? Is there a real or true self behind the masks we wear? Is the self a social construct?

This tension was also witnessed in community work. One community leader spoke about his experience in private one-to-one conversations with a young man, who would speak openly about his vulnerabilities and his innermost desires. But when he saw him again with his peer group, he changed dramatically, presenting as invulnerable, physically aggressive, and self-sufficient.

Seeing the universal theme in the personal story, and moving from anecdote to analysis is a part of good philosophical dialogue.

Humiliation as Policing

The use of 'humour' to assert dominance within male peer groups was a common theme. Humour is used to police and socialize men into acceptable outward displays of masculinity. These intricate group dynamics act as surveillance strategies to regulate the ways in which men should present themselves.

If someone did something deemed to be outside the narrow range of acceptable masculinity, they were often humiliated through 'slagging', 'jeering', 'putting down', and 'making fun of' in ways that could be misogynistic, homophobic or physical.[22]

Using the joke-form protects the power-holder, and allows them to avoid any overtly hostile reactions. The retort "Relax, I'm only joking around…only messing…don't be so sensitive…take it like a man" was a constant refrain. It's a way of saying something without saying it, thus preventing groups of male friends from confronting issues in a sincere way.

[22]B. Plester, ''Take it like a man!': Performing hegemonic masculinity through organizational humour', Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organisation, Volume 15(3): 537-559, 2015, Accessed January 2023 online at https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/2292/40572/Take%20it%20like%20a%20man.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

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Interestingly, some men found themselves unconsciously engaging in this activity in the dialogue group. In moments before the dialogue officially began, some men would engage in slagging and jeering with others they knew. Once acknowledged, the recursive self-reflective nature of the method allowed for this to be analysed.

Language as a shaping force/Fear of the feminine

A common thread between male-to-male insults is a connection to femininity and homosexuality. The feminine is consistently associated with weakness, vulnerability, sensitivity, a lack of independence: bi**h, pu**y, f*g, ho*o, sissy, and so on. Conversely, the language used to reinforce ideas of strength, power, and dominance was masculine: 'man-up', 'grow a pair of balls', 'take it like a man', 'be a man', and so on.

This way of speaking was so deeply ingrained in our linguistic habits that many of the men found it difficult to avoid, even in the dialogue itself.

Class differences in masculinity

The risks associated with departure from hegemonic masculinity are different in working-class-versus-middle-class society. For working class men, physical harm was always a threat if one did not adhere to the norms and codes associated with masculinity. In middle-class society these pressures certainly exist, but the risks are perhaps not as physically threatening. Participants talked of the very strong sense of hegemonic masculinity that existed in working class communities which led to a lot of male-on-male and male-on-female violence.

It was suggested that perhaps the sense of aggressive or dominant masculinity in these communities exists in order to make up for the disempowerment they are subject to economically and socially, and as a survival tactic in dangerous and stressful environments.

Once again, the dialogue space could hold these seemingly contradictory and complex ideas without choosing a side.

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Conclusion

What is evident from the themes outlined, and the feedback from participants, is that having a safe space for men to critically discuss masculinity is very much needed. The philosophical dialogue methodology provides a practice in which people can think together about difficult ideas while acknowledging the contradictions and complexities of our thought, without reducing these to over-simplified definitions. It does this while affirming and revealing the capacity of participants to 'think for themselves', and calling upon our ethical responsibility to each other: to listen to what others have to say to us, and to take responsibility in a face-to-face setting for our beliefs and opinions.

The What Does He Need? project is far from over. Its many strands continue to develop and expand across the city, while informing each other thematically and methodologically. The principles of open dialogue, a commitment to equality, a focus on listening as a radical act of engagement are all common threads between WDHN and the approach to philosophical dialogue outlined above. As it stands, it is the intention and hope that philosophical dialogue will have some role to play in how lead workers (community workers, educators, artists) are supported to engage with young boys and men in the What Does He Need? project's many creative processes exploring masculinity.

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