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Crumbling Rocks – Mindfulness Techniques for Awareness, Understanding and Ownership of Toxic Masculinity within Improvisation-Based Movement Training

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ABSTRACT

'Crumbling rocks' is an analogy for the process of encountering toxic masculinity within a movement improvisation setting. Traits of toxic masculinity were found to be cultivating forms of interruption to the flow of a given improvisation. It became clear that this field could be a useful device for discovering and unpicking traits of toxic masculinity. Through utilising mindfulness practices to observe key traits associated with hegemonic masculinity; the improvisation setting holds the potential to become an effective tool for uncovering, addressing, critiquing and undoing elements of toxic masculinity, through a broader mindful awareness of self, other performers, and audience.

Beginning research into the potential role mindfulness could play in cultivating awareness of toxic masculinity within an improvisation setting, it immediately became clear that this research could be approached from several methodologies and perspectives.

There is already a substantial body of research into the subject of toxic masculinity. Such research utilises feminist, post-structural, autobiographic, and auto-ethnographic methodologies to theorise the legitimacy of patriarchy and the effects of a patriarchal socio-cultural system.

Whilst remaining a contested subject, patriarchy is understood to be a socio-cultural systematic process that aids and benefits a small number of white, able-bodied, middle to upper class heterosexual men to the detriment of those who either do

not align with the system or actively choose not to conform and therefore deviate from the perceived heteronormative path. This work has been explored by gender scholars such as Michael Kaufman (1987), Arthur Brittan (1989), Judith Butler (1990, 1993), Mike Donaldson (1993) and Raewyn Connell (1995 and 1999).

The term *hegemonic masculinity* is used to describe an ever-changing form of patriarchy. Whilst the form of hegemonic masculinity is continuously evolving, its theoretical presence provides evidence that there are socio-systematic forces that play an influencing role on the formation of the identities of men. Hegemonic masculinity tends to be identified by the dominant heteronormative narrative that encourages men towards practices that involve power, dominance, control, strength, a limited emotional vocabulary and to understand how these factors can bring significant harm to those that both occupy the gendered position of hegemonic masculinity and those who do not or choose not to align the heteronormative narrative (Brittan 1989, Butler 1990 and 1993, Connell 1995 and 1999 and Donaldson 1993).

Additionally, as well as patriarchy being a question of gender and power, the emphasis on power means that philosophical works such as Foucault (2020) play a role in understanding how these systems of power function on both a societal and personal level. As wider socio-cultural definitions of masculine identity imprint their mark onto the individual leading to an active pursuit or favouring of some characteristic traits over others (toughness > emotional articulation).

On the other hand, within contem - porary dance improvisation fields such as contact improvisation or instant com-position, existing research utilises practice-

led methodologies to explore and encourage the benefits of cultivating mindfulness of characteristic traits through the utilisation of artistic practice, as seen in works such as that of Charles Genoud (2006). The application of mindfulness allows for our attention to be drawn to aspects of ourselves that are easily missed, overlooked or for personal reasons intentionally ignored or repressed. It is this ignorance or repression where a connection to traits and practices associated with toxic masculinity can be revealed. Mindfulness practices also tend to draw one's attention to a specific element of the practice as discussed in the writings of Lynne Anne Blom and Tarin Chaplin (1998), as well as Genoud (2006).

Breathwork and meditation draws attention not only to our physical tensions but, to the stream of thoughts/feelings within the mind, allowing the individual to acknowledge these features and begin to alter their relationship towards them (See: Headspace 2020). Sometimes, the objective is less to alter and is instead designed to cultivate an awareness of a specific element of the practice. If one were to provide a sweeping generalisation, a large number of mindfulness and improvisation-based practices are utilised to cultivate traits such as openness, availability, emotional articulation, connection, awareness and flow; and yet, all of these are approached from a number of different perspectives and methodologies including Greg Atkins (1994), Blom and Chaplin (1998), Genoud (2006), Keith Johnstone and Irving Wardle (2007), Rob Nairn, Chöden and Heather Regan-Addis (2019) and Yuasa Yuasa, Thomas Kasulis and Nagatomo Shigenori (1987).

These traits are regularly identified as missing, damaged or uncultivated in

some shape or form within identities that align with toxic masculinity. This can be seen in the artistic research of Grayson Perry (2016) (see: Channel 4 2016), John Ross (2020) and Jack Urwin (2017) who all tell narratives of men struggling with methodologies of emotional expression, connection, openness and awareness; largely as a result of their historical and socio-cultural experiences.

Therefore, from this observation, I began to formulate a question. Can mindfulness techniques be used as a device to uncover awareness, understanding and ownership of toxic masculinity within improvisation-based movement training? It became clear that there is growing potential here for a bridging to occur between occupying a position associated with toxic masculinity and utilising mindfulness-based improvisational practices to cultivate awareness, understanding and potentially ownership of toxic masculinity.

For this research, my gender identity combined with my artistic research practice allows me to function as both the researcher and the subject of the research. I am a multi-modal artist and researcher who has trained in acting, post-dramatic / post-modern theatre-making, live art, contemporary dance, contact improvisation, stage combat and martial arts. I sought to try and balance intensive practice with theoretical / philo-sophical critique and observation.

In doing so, I found a great deal of my research and artistic product became centred around the formation and the representation of the lived experience of toxic masculinities. As a white, able-bodied, male, who grew up on a working-class farm in West Yorkshire engaging in prolonged training processes in physical labour, mixed martial arts, stage combat and being

surrounded by an extensive amount of far right and 'lad culture' ideologies; I found myself with a plethora of sedimented toxic masculinity to unpack. As a result, in my art and research, I use myself and my body as the primary subject of inquiry. Applying a feminist / post-structural lens influenced by Butler (1990, 1993), Connell (1995, 1999) and Chris Weedon (1998), the practice-as-research guidance of Robert Nelson (2013), practice-led research of Hazel Smith and Roger Dean (2009), auto-biographic and auto-ethnographic methodologies of Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2000); I have been investigating how defining traits of toxic masculinity have bene formed upon myself through engaging in a practical version of Butler's (1990) theory of repeated activities designed to produce the appearance of gender substance upon the body.

Such a process requires a level of reflection and mindfulness to explore, recognise and unpack the formation and presence of toxic masculinity. Therefore, in the moment of practice, I chose to employ Donald Schon's (2011) model of reflective practice. *Knowing in action* is the moment I engage in an action of toxic masculinity, *reflection in action* is employed when I am witness to toxic masculinity in the space or observe it within myself. *Reflection on action* decides where I take the research next or alternatively, what performative material I craft in response to the first two principles. Utilising this technique, not only creates a constant feedback loop, but allows me to instigate an engagement in training processes to return from these definitions and practices of toxic masculinity. *Reflection on action* is especially crucial because it describes the role mindfulness / reflective practices play in

cultivating a change in method and intentions. *Reflection on action* functions as a form of intervention which allows the user to change their relationship to toxic masculinity, to (hopefully) snap out of a deep investment in the training protocols and begin to work on subverting what has been cultivated.

Lastly, within my research process I found this place of observation to be constantly remerging within movement improvisation spaces. For example, contact improvisation places emphasis on the delicate interaction and negotiation of bodies in a given live moment. Within such an interaction, several decisions are made. Some are beautiful, some are energetic, some are nuanced, and some can take the shape of actions that resemble gendered behaviour which, at a performative level, represent acts associated with patriarchy and toxic masculinity. A mover might find themselves engaging in overly forceful or aggressive movements with male movers and / or unnecessarily delicate and tentative movements with female movers. Also, actions might be sexualised in ways that do not fit the context of the improvisation. The mover could be overtly using their male gaze to dislodge a mover's own personal sense of agency and establish themes of dominance or power with the performance. Therefore, mindful improvisational practices hold a significant amount of potential for revealing actions that relate to toxic masculinity.

This article shall explore this understanding in three different sections influenced by Schon's (2011) mode of reflection. The first section, *Knowing Toxic Masculinity is in Action* explores my chasing after an ideal narrative of masculinity within the improvisation setting and comments on how the echoes of such a pursuit can cause

disruptions within the improvisation.

Section two, *Reflection of Toxic Masculinity in Action* seeks to better understand how what is happening relates to the wider narratives of toxic masculinity. Section three, *Actioning Toxic Masculinity* will address the philosophical implications of this research and work towards suggesting how the delicate coaxing (and no small amount of individual willingness to let go), within the movement improvisation environment can become an effective device for accessing and addressing traits of toxic masculinity.

Case Study: A Memory of Disruption

The improvisation has just fallen silent. Hesitation has gripped every performer in the space. The flow of the improvisation has been stopped and not a single performer knows how to begin again. The only option is to reset and begin anew.

Photo 1: In class with Josh Slater at Plymouth Conservatoire. Taken by Adam Read n.d)

Looking back, I recall this session was filled with a variety of first, second-and third-year undergraduate students, all from different backgrounds including dance, acting and theatre-making. As such, there was a sparse variety of ability and I was the only postgraduate student there at the time. In the first half of the session, we engaged in gathering and sending solo exercises and then later combining them into partnered exercises and then moving on to performing a synchronised sequence of movements in small groups as the musical vibrations of Makeba by Jain (2015) coursed through our bodies, influencing the energy of the space. In the second half of the class, we had

begun an open improvisation. The score that was set asked us to enter the space, improvise some movements learned from the first half of the class and then leave the space. The improvisation was flowing well and towards the end began to gather increasing momentum as each performer began to gain confidence with their newly discovered movement principles. Members of the group begin to enter and exit the space with increasing synchronicity and precision, our bodies still coursing with the rhythms and energy of Makeba (2015). We enter a phase that resembles the structure of a dance-off. One performer performs a series of quick movements and then just as swiftly exits the space, immediately followed by another performer. This process suddenly begins to escalate, the circle forms tighter, and all gazes fall upon the central performer and the more highly trained bodies in the room begin to present the fancier tricks in their repertoire. I lose focus on the objectives of the improvisation and make the decision to run out into the space and leaping, I execute a diving forward roll across the entire performance circle. I turn around—breathless—to see who has followed me, only to find that nobody has done so. I tune into the energy of the room and I discover that hesitation has become a dominant feeling within the space. Everyone has frozen, no one wants to make the next move. By the time the next performer gathers the courage to re-enter the space, it has become clear that what was crafted is now lost.

Knowing Toxic Masculinity in Action

This event happened to me in the early few months of my Research Masters. I had been shadowing Josh Slater whilst he taught a series of *Instant Composition* and *Flying-low and Passing Through* classes at

Plymouth Conservatoire. The classes were designed to work at improving energetic transitions between vertical and horizontal planes. David Zambrano (2016), one of the original developers of the technique, defines *Flying-low and Passing Through* as

> [s]imple movement patterns that involve breathing, speed and the release of energy throughout the body in order to activate the relationship between the center and the joints, moving in and out of the ground more efficiently by maintaining a centered state. (…) The class includes partnering work and movement phrases, which explore the primary laws of physics: cohesion and expansion. (Zambrano 2016)

Through the use of rhythmic and repetitive exercises, our attentions were drawn to how we could utilise our energy and our bodies to efficiently travel between vertical and horizontal positions and as such, we became intrinsically aware of our biomechanical abilities, as well as our energetic presence within the performance space.

Emphasis was also placed on the creative methodology of *Instant Composition* influenced by the writings and practice of Katy Duck (n.d). *Instant Composition's* choreographic methodology functions in opposition to more traditional / linear choreographic processes, favouring live choice over more planned choreographic decision making. As such, this creative methodology cultivates its choreography in the live moment, leaving the contents of the performance—to a certain extent—up to a degree of chance. As Duck (n.d) writes,

> They are not trying to make the composition happen by what they can see as potentially interesting, beautiful or right but are instead leaving the space for something to happen out of chance. Chance is the creation of space where something can happen (choice) versus (set choreography) making something happen and putting it in a space. (Duck n.d)

Therefore, *Instant Composition* consists of a series of improvised choices that form the

content of the improvisation that can be later refined into the final version of a performance. However, in these early creative / performer training phases, I kept discovering that some the choices made by myself and other performers aligned with subjects of toxic masculinity.

As Greg Atkins (1994) suggests, whilst engaging in improvisational practices, the performer can discover a host of useful characteristic tools when training in improvisation. These can include risk-taking (3), concentration (5), quick thinking (6), mental agility (6), three-dimensional thinking (7), spontaneity (8), empathy (13) and the ability to establish and maintain trust (31). These practices serve to cultivate and maintain the flow and organic nature of the improvisation.

Improvisational practices draw attention to these features, and yet, it is not always the absence or the presence of underdeveloped traits but, an overabundance which can also cause difficulties. What was once a useful and effective trait can become equally disruptive or destructive. For example, too much concentration can make the performer forget about the other performers in the space or even the audience, as they inwardly focus on their own decision making. An ‘over trusting’ performer might hurt themselves by relying too heavily on the awareness and readiness of their colleagues as can be experienced in trust / fall exercises where performers are asked to walk about the space and be ready at any moment to catch a performer who intentionally falls backwards. Inexperienced risk-taking can result in the performer hurting their fellow performers as they jump into a movement that requires delicate choreography and prolonged rehearsal to be both safe and successful. Similarly, the

diving forward roll could be seen as an improperly placed stage combat move within a movement improvisation.

However, it is important to look beyond problematic decision making and towards the wider socio-cultural forces that informed the decision to be made. An excessive risk-taking is one of the contributing factors that form the definition of toxic masculinity, as an abundance of taking risks affirms other ideologies equated with the norm such as fearlessness or bravery and can potentially cause harm (Sam de Bosie 2019, Connell 1999 and Donaldson 1993). Thus, we are provided with a further intersection between a performer training process and an affirmative moment of toxic masculinity for the performer. As the performer loses mindfulness of the objective of the improvisation, he affirms a toxic masculinity.

As Connell (1999) suggests, hegemonic masculinity is the 'configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy' (Connell 1999: 77). Though a disputed concept, it is suggested that there are a series of traits / narratives associated with hegemonic masculinity that carry an overbearing presence on predominantly western heteronormative men and these factors influence how men construct and perform their identities (Connell 1999 and Donaldson 1993). These gendered ideologies, better understood in their fully manifested form as 'toxic masculinity', hold the potential when enacted (or, alternatively, when a failure to enact is experienced) to bring harm to both the individual man and society as a whole (Bosie 2019). The developmental process of such a formation is less to do with a

biological origin and is instead, learned through engaging with the continued and overbearing presence of social agents. Examples include the media, film and television, parents, friends, role models and institutions, which all contribute to a complex web of ideological narratives that form a perceived truth of how men should construct and perform their gendered identities, as suggested by Shirley Weitz (1977). For those who grew up in conjunction with the traditional narrative of heteronormative masculinity, practices and displays equated with power, control, dominance, endurance, stoicism, sexual objectification, resistance to vulnerability and an engagement in homosocial behaviours were common occurrences (Donaldson 1993). However, the severity with which individual men choose to pursue and embody these traits also varies so, it is important to remember that we cannot speak of 'masculinity' in the singular, but of 'masculinities'. There is not a singular fixed version of masculinity but an ever-unfolding plethora of possibilities for the manifestation of masculine identity (Connell 1999). Due to the varying scale of severity with which toxic masculinity may become embodied (or, sedimented), it becomes difficult to identify a specific version of toxic masculinity. As such, it is easier to identify traits and practices equated with toxic masculinity, and not only its fully formed manifestation.

My research masters investigated the formation of violent toxic masculinities and towards the end of the research I concluded that the problem is less to do with the fully formed manifestation of hegemonic masculinity—for which there are notably very few examples—and more to do with the ever-failing, temporary pursuit to try and embody a specific ideology such as strength or power (Cornforth, 2021). By

executing this diving forward roll across the space—as if an action hero jumping out of the way of a barrage of bullets—I was acting upon an impulse to fulfil the narrative of my able body, related to a display of power, dominance, control, skill and precision; all of which form the defining traits of what might constitute hegemonic masculinity (Donaldson 1993). By engaging in such a narrative, I had lost awareness of the group and the objective of the improvisation.

The diving roll then was not an offering but an invitation for another able body to compete or even challenge my hegemonic masculinity. The key component of hegemonic masculinity might be described as an affirmation of status by an assertion of dominance through acts of competition observed by peers (Donaldson, 1993). Upon reflecting on this moment, it is becoming clear to me that my decision to execute a diving forward roll across the space created a form of disruption, stopping the improvisation, and this was caused by a loss of mindfulness on my part. I was not mindful of my gender narrative or the streams of thoughts and feelings that connect to my gender Identity at the time. By not being mindful of the elements of toxic masculinity within my identity, I had enacted a socio-cultural script.

Reflection of Toxic Masculinity in Action

Within my own research process (see: Cornforth 2021: 60 - 63), I observed that when journeying towards an understanding of toxic masculinity, I had transitioned from being a learner of the various behavioural protocols and had now become my own enforcer of hegemonic masculinities ideals upon myself. I observed that a form of rigorous internal punishment had emerged when I failed to align with expectations such as toughness or durability. I believe that this

transfer from external learning to internal enforcement is intimately related to my motivations behind engaging in the act of a diving forward roll across the space.

The work of Michel Foucault (2020) allows for the diving forward roll to be understood as the *microphysics of power* in action. A theory that power is not one entity but is instead everywhere, spread throughout many influencing factors in our lives. Foucault writes,

> [T]he body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. The political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination (2020: 25-26)

By looking at the work of Foucault and considering the presence of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1999), it becomes clear that micro imprints of power have attached to me and my body and as such, I have become actively caught up between an interplay of dominance and subjection.

Combined with the work of Judith Butler (1990), it becomes clear that as I engage in a specific activity, this activity produces a desired meaning for my gender identity, however, in the very same moment, this activity cultivates a micro-narrative of power in which one body is dominant and another is subverted. Thereby, my diving forward roll in the improvisation was a spectacular display of my dominance, and thus, aligning with the historic socio-cultural narrative of power that attaches itself to my body.

Furthermore, the work of Butler (1990), Connell (1999) and Foucault (2020) suggest that acts of toxic masculinity are regularly more complex than a diving forward roll across the space. For every

conscious act or observation of toxic masculinity, there are numerous other subconscious acts of toxic masculinity occurring that are much more difficult to recognise.

Therefore, the presence of toxic masculinity within an improvisation setting, unless manifested as an explicitly clear display such as an act of inter-masculine violence or sexual objectification, the problem of identification becomes intersectional, nuanced and multi-modal. The lines between what constitutes toxic masculinity become blurred amongst a plethora of other factors. As Ben Spatz (2015) observes,

> Gender is real not in spite of being learned and trained, but precisely because it is learned and trained in and as embodiment. By way of comparison, it is clear that years of training in ballet or martial arts can lead to an embodied state in which one "is" a practitioner of those forms in a way that goes far beyond conscious choice (or explicit identification). A ballet dancer can wake up one day and decide to stop performing, to stop practicing, and to stop identifying as a dancer—but the deep sedimentation of technique within that dancer's body is not thereby removed. (Spatz 2015: 198 - 199)

In this sense, a multi-faceted, multi-layered series of embodied gender techniques that may emerge temporarily and may be a result of toxic masculinity is a monumental task to untangle.

The study of identifying toxic masculinity begins to resemble Deleuze's (2020) *Rhizome* system of thought, which is understood to represent a lineage of thought. If you find the end of one specific root and then try to trace the root to its origin, you will find yourself becoming lost and entangled in thousands of other roots aiding the plant. As Deleuze and Guattari write: 'A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles' (2020:6). The contents of

identifying toxic masculinity become spread across a multiplicity of different avenues of thought including language, the body, gender, socio-systematic organisation, personal historicity, relations of power, institutional influence, interrelations between the internal to external and the cultivation of a series of phenomenological engagements.

As such, it is more appropriate to keep this line of thought in the territory of self-observation and address this problem in the context of the individual. This is where the role of mindfulness begins to become relevant within the improvisation space as it becomes the responsibility of the individual practitioner to become aware of and take action upon whatever aspects of toxic masculinity they may be negotiating.

Actioning Toxic Masculinity

The improvisation space can be used to acknowledge and reflect upon toxic masculinity and allow for work to begin on becoming aware of the relationship and perception of related thoughts, feelings and actions. As Rob Nairn, Choden and Heather Regan-Addis (2019) observe,

> [M]indfulness is based on the realization that the stream of thoughts, feelings, story lines, and images that flow through our minds do not define who we are. What is more important is the faculty of awareness that observes and reacts to this stream of thoughts and feelings because this faculty can be trained. We can learn to establish a different relationship with our inner experience. (9)

And so, mindfulness training can be incorporated into the improvisation space to allow for individuals to acknowledge and seek to alter their relationship to both their external and internal experience and understanding of toxic masculinity.

As the work of Butler (1990) suggests, it is the repetition of activities that produce a sense of meaning for the individual's gender identity and so, if

repetitive acts are repeatedly viewed within the improvisation, then it becomes possible to observe the pattern of activities to begin to understand what meaning these actions are producing. By directly engaging in research exploration of Butler's (1990) repetition of activities to understand how toxic masculinity forms, it becomes possible to develop a lens for identifying patterns in relation to the wider socio-cultural narrative of hegemonic masculinity.

Connell's (1999) system of hegemony suggests that performers are left with three options. The first is to directly challenge the power basis, by, say, executing a backflip across the stage and by doing so, could turn the improvisation into an engagement in hierarchical competition. The second option is complying with the act, by applauding it, affirming and supporting the power narrative. The third is to become subordinated by it. For example, one of the younger members may have begun to feel insecure about the credentials of their own masculinity. It is also important to present an additional fourth option, and that is Butler's (1990) suggestion to subvert the act. This might have involved intentionally executing a bad forward roll with comical timing, awareness and connection to the audience. Thus, undermining my display of power and in the same moment critiquing the decision made.

However, it is also worth consideration that these are just singular examples that align with the theoretical constructs of Butler (1990) and Connell (1999). In the lived experience of a movement improvisation the rules are much less fixed and spending a large amount of time trying to improvise in line with these protocols can further impede the organic nature of the improvisation.

It becomes clear that if the presence of toxic masculinity is felt, a subversive practice needs to be implemented in order to allow for a redirection to begin. A practice that functions in contradiction to the protocols of toxic masculinity. Contradictive explorations such as exploring softer, delicate movements over louder, energetic actions begin to draw the fixed nature of the individual's gendered protocols into question. By doing so, this might allow for the individual to explore other avenues and territories that do not align with the fixed heteronormative protocols of toxic masculinity and encourage a return towards the protocols desired for the specific improvisation.

Emphasis is placed on the importance for this process to be a gradual, nuanced change in direction, as too much of a sudden shift can bring about a number of different problems. For example, a dramatic shift in the social acceptability or internal capacity to perform and adhere to a specific rendition of masculine protocols can initiate the disputed idea of a *Crisis in Masculinity* (Connell 1999). This is a condition where the individual—for either personal, social, political, economic or environmental reasons—is no longer able to engage in the protocols of their masculine identity and as a result, this can cultivate a number of identity-based anxieties, depressions and existential problems (Connell,1999).

This process might be softened with an understanding of Nairn, Choden and Regan-Addis's (2019) concept of the *ego-centric preference system,* or EPS. The system functions as a secondary advisory voice in our heads that informs us how much we like or dislike a certain thought, feeling, event or action and regularly contradicts our more positive intentions. For

example, as soon as I personally declared that I was no longer going to engage in practices of toxic masculinity, my *ego-centric preference system* began enforcing hegemonic ideologies, telling me narratives such as “if I stop training in martial arts, I will become weak or lesser”. Therefore, it became clear that something internal wants to resist this transition as it fears the illusion of occupying a fixed gender position. As Nairn, Chöden and Regan-Addis (2019) observe:

> The undercurrent, which is carrying all the things that the EPS does not want to feel, is an effect rather than a cause, and it cannot be changed by direct intervention. Positive thinking does not take account of this—it works on the assumption that if we bury our head in the sand and only focus on the good and the positive, then negativity will go away. However, it fails to address the underlying cause, which is that negative experiences arise out of powerful habit patterns, rooted in past actions. When we try to superimpose a preferred alternative on what we are actually feeling, we are unwittingly attempting to suppress the content of the undercurrent. The sad news is that any attempt to suppress anything simply reinforces and strengthens it. (Nairn, Chöden and Regan-Addis, 2019: 87)

And so, the effort to ignore and try and push out, block or suppress the presence of toxic masculinity could be equally as damaging. The internal resistance that is felt by *EPS* can make a sustained engagement in subversive practice just as challenging. Therefore, a delicate balance between acknowledgement, acceptance and subversion is required.

For this process to begin, mindfulness practices need to be introduced into the space with a holistic approach. As Pip Waller observes:

> Holistic self-care is like gardening your life, to make an abundance of color and harvest from a compost heap. It brings increasing awareness of the inter-connectedness of everything (…). We become more centered, able to feel and choose what is beneficial and avoid less wholesome directions. (2018: XIII)

By entering into improvisation with a holistic approach, considerations of both the whole

and individual parts have to be considered. For example, this can begin with the act of rediscovery. A large number of the protocols of toxic masculinity function around ignoring aspects of health and wellbeing related to the body in order to achieve desired objectives such as wealth or social acceptance (Connell, 1999). And so, to take time to discover the body's active state of tensions is itself a subversive act because it accepts the fact that gendered behaviours are causing forms of damage.

Waller (2018) encourages us to understand how our external environment and lifestyle choices lead to the cultivation of bodily tensions and anxious breath. These mindful practices begin with rediscovering the current perceived state of mind and body. Waller (2018) suggests that this begins with regularly 'saying hello' to our bodies again (7 - 8).

Learning where our bodies and minds really are and not where we would like them to be is a critical objective as it realigns our focus and attentions away from less wholesome objectives centred around hegemony and towards the more beneficial objectives of improvisation as suggested by Atkins (1994). When one is asked to listen to breath or feel one's hands after years of unaddressed tensions and sometimes pain (both physical and emotional), the sharp alteration in self-perception can be a severely affective and nourishing process. It is this very place, the rediscovering of the relationship between the external and internal and the various bodily and behavioural tensions / practices that have emerged as a result of these lived experiences that can be discovered within the improvisation space.

Within my own research journey, I began utilising movement improvisation

training to explore how it could be used as a form of healing or undoing of the sedimented protocols that had been installed within my body and mind because of my engagement in toxic masculinity. A large amount of that process involved using movement improvisation to cultivate an awareness of such practices so that reflection and action may follow suit. Through a combination of movement and mindful practices, I have sought to shake off the restrictive shackles of toxic masculinity placed upon my body and to change my relationship to the principles with which I was identifying.

Keeping with the theme of practice-as-research, I found myself engaging in movement improvisation training classes with *Inter-Movement Research* in Plymouth. During the classes, I was encouraged to explore the tensions and restrictions that my body had cultivated through my martial arts training and to begin to learn how to push beyond what I perceived to be my possible range of movement. A large amount of the movement improvisation training focussed on establishing a connection and cultivating forms of opening, whether that was an opening of the hips or making attempts to remain aware and connected to partners and/or the audience when performing.

Taught by Lloyd Lovell, the session was broken down into two main sections. Firstly, Lloyd shared his training process with us as a desire to provide us with a tool kit to train ourselves independently of professional classes. We would engage in rotation and wave pattern exercises over long durations to release tensions and cultivate mobility. Secondly, we would explore different levels of tension and how far we could push, pull, extend, and open our bodies, utilizing partner work to encourage us beyond our known limits.

In these sessions, I remember regularly encountering moments where I met with my *ego-centric preference system* (Nairn 2019) activating my body to become defensive or guarded, cultivating further tension, and removing myself from the objective of the improvisation. A task would require me to connect deeper, be softer, be more sensitive or open and inviting and after continuous internal battles with my ego-centric preference system and a continuous engagement in the practice I found myself learning to identify these moments of resistance and give myself over to the practice's intentions, discovering a host of new thoughts, feelings and actionable abilities. For example, one night I was complaining of the tension I had cultivated in my body due to attending martial arts training.

In Lloyd's session, we were engaging in a partnered exercise where I had to remain neutral and my partner had to pull my arm until my body naturally followed. My partner and myself were experiencing difficulties because each time they pulled my arm, my bio-mechanical frames which had been cultivated in my martial arts training would activate and I would move towards them in an unnatural, tense fashion. I had been trained to anticipate the movement as a readiness to fight, rather than a connected improvisation. To subvert this principle, Lloyd brought us all together and asked that we find a position on the floor where we were to rest our body weight on the other members of the group. Resting there we focussed on our breathing and the feeling of the weight of our bodies coming into contact with the other mass of all our bodies. As we drew our attention to these aspects, we all began to shift and slowly melt into the floor. Afterwards, we tried the exercise a few more times, and I discovered

the tension was beginning to release with each new attempt. Lloyd approached us to assess what was occurring. He grabbed my arm and gently shook it, saying softly “you need to let go”. We tried the exercise one more time. I closed my eyes, inhaled deeply and tried to forget about anticipating when my partner would pull. Suddenly, my arm was pulled forward and a shockwave travelled up my arm, through my shoulder and neck and into the rest of my body. To which, my body relaxed and responded naturally, encouraging the rest of my body forward. In the next few moments, what I discovered is that this tension was not purely biological but, resulted in a form of emotional subjective affect. As Lloyd began to explain the next exercise, I began to cry uncontrollably. Eventually, I gathered myself and re-joined the class. I arrived just in time for the open movement improvisation where we were allowed to freely explore the movement ranges of our bodies and to travel around the space as we deemed appropriate.

That night, I felt like I had been born again, as if I had been reintroduced to myself. The hegemonic voices of the *egocentric preference system* had crumbled away, and I remember moving as I had never moved before – with ease, connection and freedom. Gliding around the space with free-flowing malleability, I softly transferred between levels of horizontal and vertical planes; meeting other individuals in the space and sharing long connected and sensitive moments of interaction where we both felt truly seen and understood and synchronised.

Through my experience at Inter-movement research, it became clear that the choices made within the improvisation could either promote reinforcement of toxic masculinity, (thus cultivating interruption to

the improvisation and a loss of mindfulness) or, the choices could work towards an undoing of toxic masculinity and begin to allow for an increase in offerings within the space and thus, allow for improved states of mindfulness and holism.

The work of Genoud (2006) and Waller (2018) allows us to see that rediscovering the body provides a pathway into discovering intimacy, cultivating awareness of our tensions, and discovering our relationship to these tensions. Genoud (2006) writes: '[w]hen we develop true intimacy with our body, we become intimate with ourselves. We learn to be present as a whole' (2006: 15). As such, tentative coaxing allows us to become connected to the whole picture of ourselves and become aware of aspects that we may be ignoring or repressing. The protocols of toxic masculinity teach the individual to ignore aspects of the body and mind, the aches, the tensions, the pains in both physical and emotional contexts. Movement training draws awareness to the tensions of the body, the tightness of the jaw, the reluctance of the shoulders to drop down the spine and through this, we can discover tension blocking pathways to new forms of subjective / emotional affection. Cultivating this kind of mindfulness of the traits of toxic masculinity is something that would not necessarily be acknowledged in, say, a martial arts environment.

Therefore, what I am suggesting is that movement improvisation functions as an effective site to begin identifying, unpacking and subverting toxic masculinity. I place more emphasis on the use of *instant composition* methodology because that allows for a direct link to be tied to the decision made and if several decisions made can be traced to features equated with toxic masculinity, then, such features

are brought into a position of visibility and thus can be pursued with more sincerity. Improvisational spaces function effectively for this task because of the attention placed on Atkins (1994) objectives. Engaging in an improvisational context and utilising a lens that focuses on cultivating the aforementioned traits allows for a clearer framing of visibility when the moment of toxic masculinity occurs, as opposed to other theatrical practices where individuals are able to mask themselves behind the guise of character.

Because gender is never fully realized, traditional and hegemonic masculinities position themselves within the illusion of security / stability when occupying a position of dominance within its socio-cultural contexts. And yet, the foundations that gender identity establishes itself upon are ever-shifting; the adherence, maintenance, or desperate repair of definitions of masculinity do so upon an ever-crumbling foundation. Movement improvisation cultivates mindfulness of the actions associated with toxic masculinity and through this, it has taught me to begin letting go of those narratives, accepting who I was in that moment and allowing me to flow and step between the falling rocks as the illusion of the seemingly solid ideas about my identity crumble before me.

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