

MASTER THESIS

**Positive Masculinity in a German Mythopoetic Men's Group: A Reflexive Thematic
Analysis**

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Abstract

The public and academic discourses about masculinity are dominated by negative narratives like “toxic masculinity”, which are stigmatizing and could interfere with the healthy development of boys and men. Therefore, in recent years a “positive masculinity” approach has been introduced that focuses on the healthy aspects of traditional masculinity. However, research on positive masculinity is rare and especially more empirical research is needed. The aim of the present study was to investigate the experiences of positive masculinity in actual practice and show the relationship between these experiences and the improvements in the participants’ well-being. This was achieved by conducting semi-structured interviews with eight members of a German men’s group called Eisenhans. The Eisenhans men’s group includes an annual gathering of 40 men, aimed at personality development. The research questions were about the construction and experiences of positive masculinity at the Eisenhans, the group characteristics that led to the development of positive masculinity and the relationship between positive masculinity and well-being. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, showing that the Eisenhans members constructed their masculinity by integrating positive variations of traditional masculinity like positive aggression, positive competition and positive dominance with traits that are considered feminine like vulnerability, self-compassion, tenderness and affection. Some participants referred to the feminine traits as “soft masculinity”. Furthermore, the participants reported a feeling of “natural masculine energy” when participating in group activities like warrior chants or wrestling. The group acknowledged that traditional masculinity and a gentle masculinity that involves feminine traits can co-exist and both are part of a “natural masculinity” according to the participants. The group atmosphere at the Eisenhans was characterized by acceptance and authenticity. Acceptance of the group and the authentic expression of masculinity was associated with the wellbeing outcomes of self-understanding, self-esteem, compassion for others, self-compassion, a positive body-image, and a stronger feeling of masculinity. The present study indicates that mythopoetic men’s groups like the Eisenhans support the development of positive masculinity and have a positive influence on men’s well-being. Similar men’s groups could be used to test and refine positive masculinity theories and to develop positive masculinity interventions.

Introduction

Masculinity is under societal pressure and some authors speak of a masculinity crisis in the western world (Levant, 1997). Compared to women, men across the world have a five- to six-years lower life expectancy, higher suicide rates, higher rates of addiction and higher rates of imprisonment (Seager & Barry, 2019). In Germany, the suicide rates of men are three times higher compared to those of women (Hurrelmann, 2010). The victimhood of heterosexual men is often invisible in the public and academic discourse, whereby this invisibility is referred to as the male “empathy gOMap” (Seager & Barry, 2019). For example, there is little research on the prevalence and risk factors of violence against men, even though the number of domestic violence cases against men in western societies seems to increase (Kolbe & Büttner, 2020). Men who are abused by their female partners make up to 20.3% of the total number of domestic violence cases (Kolbe & Büttner, 2020).

Voices in media and academia predominantly make traditional masculine role norms responsible for these problems (Seager & Barry, 2019). Negative narratives about traditional masculinity like toxic masculinity dominate the academic and public discourse (Seager & Barry, 2019; Wilson et al., 2021). Toxic masculinity can be defined as the overly rigid endorsement of traditional masculinity norms like competitiveness, stoicism, aggression, striving for status and toughness, and it is related to problematic attitudes and behaviors like violence, homophobia, detached fathering, a neglect of physical and mental health and misogyny (Englar-Carlson & Kiselica, 2013; Goldner, 2020).

While research on the dark side of masculinity is important, the strong focus on the negative aspects of masculinity and especially concepts like toxic masculinity could lead to the impression that men and masculinity are universally flawed (Seager & Barry, 2019; Wilson et al., 2021). In a study of 203 men and women, 92% of the men and 87% of the women believed that the concept of toxic masculinity changes the way in which society perceives all men in general (Barry et al., 2020). However, Isacco et al. (2012) highlighted that the restrictive and rigid endorsement of traditional masculine norms is related to problematic outcomes and not traditional masculinity itself. This is in line with Seager and Barry (2019), who state that specific behaviors of men and women are toxic, but not the male or female gender itself. Another critique is that the concept of toxic masculinity is often poorly defined and sometimes misused to oversimplify more complex phenomena (Harrington, 2020).

The overgeneralization of the term toxic masculinity is problematic because the term is stigmatizing and insulting, as it portrays boys and men almost universally as “violent, unemotional and non-nurturing” (Wilson et al., 2021, p. 5). This stigmatization could lead to

boys and men being less engaged with their mental health (Kiselica et al., 2016). Therefore, a positive vision of masculinity is needed to foster the healthy development of boys and men (Cole et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2021; Seager & Barry, 2019; Kiselica et al., 2016).

In recent years, a strength-based approach to the study of masculinity has developed, called “positive masculinity” (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010). Positive masculinity is informed by positive psychology and studies the positive and healthy qualities of boys and men (Kiselica et al., 2016). Research on the positive functioning of boys and men is underrepresented in academia (Cole et al., 2021). Between 2000 and 2018, only three out of 590 articles in the *Psychology of Men and Masculinities* (PMM) journal were about positive masculinity (Cole et al., 2021). This underrepresentation has resulted in a gap of knowledge about the understanding of positive emotions, cognitions and behaviors of boys and men (Cole et al., 2021). Furthermore, the concept of positive masculinity is still evolving, and more empirical research is needed to support the theoretical concepts.

So-called “men’s groups”, which are gatherings of men aimed at personality development, are uniquely suited to study the development and manifestation of positive masculinity in a real-life context. Men’s groups often contain elements that could promote positive masculinity; for example, campfire talks at which men express their vulnerability and emotions (Burke, 2010). For example, a recent study on an Australian outdoor education program for adolescents found that the program involves positive masculinity, even though the design of the program was not informed by the current theory on positive masculinity (Su et al., 2021).

Based on my experiences as a member of a German men’s group called Eisenhans, I assume that the group inherently displays and supports positive masculinity, similar to the Australian outdoor education program. The Eisenhans is an annual ten-day-long outdoor gathering of 40 men about masculinity and personality development that involves “mythopoetic” elements such as campfire talks, initiation rites and being in nature (Bliss, 1987). The aim of the present study is to expand the knowledge base on positive masculinity by using the Eisenhans men’s group as a case example. In the present study, I will analyze how the Eisenhans members have constructed and experienced positive masculinity at the Eisenhans and the group characteristics that have contributed to the development of positive masculinity. Furthermore, I will analyze how the positive masculinity experiences at the Eisenhans related to improvements in the participants’ well-being. In the following introduction, I will first outline a global definition of masculinity and then present the concept of positive masculinity. Afterward, I will provide an overview of mythopoetic men’s groups.

Defining masculinity

Masculinity can be defined as “the characteristics that are traditionally thought to be typical of or suitable for men” (dictionary.cambridge.org). This definition implies a social constructivist viewpoint, which sees masculinity as a construct that can be described with a specific set of attributes (Seager & Barry, 2019). While social constructivists think that gender and masculinity are narratives constructed by society and therefore arbitrary and changeable, authors who favor a biological approach to gender like Seager and Barry (2019) see masculinity as an “archetypal part of the human condition, rather than [...] a collection of stereotypes” (p. 119). The authors argue that while the expression of gender is shaped by culture and society, it ultimately springs from the person’s biological sex and human evolution and can be defined as an “instinctive and natural part of the human condition” (Seager & Barry, 2019, p. 115). The three proposed archetypal instincts are fight/win, provide/protect, and retain self-mastery/control of emotions (Seager & Barry, 2019).

These archetypal instincts or “gender scripts” do not define single individuals and an overly rigid endorsement of these norms could be damaging (Seager & Barry, 2019). However, gender scripts may help to explain universal differences between women and men in drives and life choices. The authors suggest that interventions that acknowledge biological gender differences may lead to increased motivation and adherence. For example, reframing help-seeking as a personal fight and a process of self-mastery addresses the underlying male archetype of fighting and winning and may reduce barriers for men who seek professional help (Seager & Barry, 2019).

Positive psychology and positive masculinity

Positive psychology developed as a response to the notion that psychology was primarily concerned with human suffering and neglected human flourishing. The aim of positive psychology is to shift the focus from “repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities” (Seligman & Ciskszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). These positive qualities include subjective experiences like wellbeing and hope, individual traits like courage and forgiveness, and at the group level civic virtues like altruism and responsibility (Seligman & Ciskszentmihalyi, 2010). Positive psychology is not restricted to the field of clinical psychology. For example, the research of Fredrickson (2013) has shown that positive emotions like happiness promote enhanced problem-solving, resilience and creativity.

Following the positive psychology perspective, positive masculinity studies the strengths and upsides of masculinity rather than its downsides, and it tries to include these healthy aspects into new conceptualizations of masculinity (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010).

The concept of positive masculinity is recent, evolving and not yet standardized (McDermott et al., 2019). Some authors define positive masculinity as the positive and healthy aspects of traditional masculinity (Isacco et al., 2012; Seager & Barry, 2019). However, positive psychology is not simply the opposite of toxic masculinity (McDermott et al., 2019).

The positive psychology positive masculinity paradigm (PPPM) defines positive masculinity in a more flexible way as “prosocial attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of boys and men that produce positive consequences for self and others” (Kiselica et al., 2016, p. 126). The PPPM currently proposes the following positive masculinity strengths: male ways of relating, generative fatherhood, male ways of caring, male self-reliance, the worker-provider tradition, male daring, courage and risk-taking, the group orientation of men, male humanitarian service organizations, male humor, and male heroism (Kiselica et al., 2016, p. 126). Like the archetypal gender scripts proposed by Seager and Barry (2019), the PPPM can help health professionals to better relate to male patients by addressing male strengths (Kiselica et al., 2016).

A common critique of the PPPM is that the proposed positive masculinity strengths can also be displayed by women. Addis (2018, as cited in Cole et al., 2021, p. 2) argued that it is unnecessary to attribute human strengths to the male gender and that it would be more appropriate to teach men to become “better humans” instead of “better men”. Partly based on this criticism, Wilson et al. (2021) suggested the “positive masculinity framework” for designing positive masculinity interventions for boys and young men. The positive masculinity framework involves a less static and more flexible positive masculinity conceptualization in which positive masculinity is defined as a “developmental process towards the embodiment of key human strengths by males, in particular male ways” (p. 5). These key human strengths are becoming connected, motivated and authentic. The formulation of “human strengths” enables integrating traits that are traditionally expected of women, such as fairness, affection, dependability and gratitude (McDermott et al., 2019). Research on men that integrate these feminine traits is rare and necessary according to Cole et al. (2021) and McDermott et al. (2019).

Proponents of positive masculinity assume that positive masculinity leads to positive health outcomes for boys and men such as increased resilience and better management of deficits (Cole et al., 2021). There is some empirical research indicating the health benefits of positive masculinity approaches. For example, Kiselica and Englar- Carlson (2010) applied the PPPM in a psychotherapeutic context and showed in a case example that their male patient benefited from the male strength-oriented language in comparison to his former non-gender-specific therapy. Another study found that the traditional masculine norms of risk-taking, dominance, the primacy of work and pursuit of status were associated with higher levels of

courage, autonomy and resilience (Hammer & Good, 2010). In line with the assumptions of positive masculinity that highlighting men's strengths and virtues may increase men's well-being and health, Barry et al. (2020) found that men who feel good about their traditional masculinity experience higher self-esteem and more mental positivity.

In a meta-analysis of 34 studies about depression in men, Krumm et al. (2017, as cited in Seager & Barry, 2019) found that moderate expression of traditional masculine traits can serve as a coping resource for men with depression. These resources were taking control by gathering information and mobilizing one's own resources, beating depression and gaining control by becoming independent of medication, "manly" physical activities like chopping wood, playing in a rock band, and motorbiking, reframing depression as a heroic struggle from which they emerged a stronger person and reframing help-seeking as an active, rational, responsible and independent action (p. 118).

Research on other cultural constructs of masculinity such as "caballerismo" and "machismo" revealed similar findings to the above-discussed relation between positive masculinity and toxic masculinity. In a study of Mexican men, Estrada and Arciniega (2015) found that men who endorse the archetype of "caballerismo" have higher well-being compared to men who endorse "machismo". The caballero represents "quiet strength" and involves nurturing characteristics like "family centeredness, social responsibility and emotional connectedness" (Estrada and Arciniega, 2015, p. 192). The machismo archetype on the other hand involves hypermasculine "violent strength", represented by dominance and power. Caballerismo can be seen as the positive masculinity version of machismo and it is associated with higher life satisfaction and a better social support system (Estrada & Arciniega, 2015).

Taken together, positive masculinity is a promising concept for fostering boys' and men's health and the first research results indicate a positive impact on well-being. However, the concept is not clearly conceptualized and both the PPPM and the positive masculinity framework of Wilson et al. (2021) need more empirical support. The Eisenhans men's group that is studied in the present research, emphasizes the free and authentic expression of one's inner self, it fosters a deep connection between the members and it encourages members to follow their intrinsic motivations. Therefore, the Eisenhans men's group matches well with the positive masculinity conceptualization of the positive masculinity framework (Wilson et al., 2021). Accordingly, in the present study, I argue that the Eisenhans men's group supports the development of positive masculinity.

Mythopoetic men's groups

Men's groups are organized gatherings of men that exist in many countries all over the world, and they support men to explore their inner world (Biddulph, 2010). Nowadays, many different men's groups exist, and research has shown that they offer various benefits, including a reduction in depression symptoms, less gender role conflict, better life satisfaction, more meaning in life, better general health, less loneliness, less suicide ideation, better physical fitness, and increased hope (Burke et al., 2010; Heisel et al., 2020; Crabtree et al., 2018).

In the early 1980s the "mythopoetic men's movement" emerged in the US, with the poet Robert Bly as its leading figure (Bliss, 1987). The mythopoetic approach focuses on old myths, metaphors, symbols and archetypal images of masculinity. These myths are studied to gain an understanding of the nature of the male psyche (Bliss, 1987). The mythopoetic men's movement stresses that men need male role models to learn healthy masculinity and enter the "deep masculine" (Bliss, 1987). The idea of the deep masculine refers to a natural and authentic way of being for men and it is comparable to what Seager and Barry (2019) describe as the instinctual and archetypal in masculinity.

Mythopoetic men's groups are often held in nature and contain elements such as storytelling, rituals, poetry, hiking, and campfires (Burke et al., 2010; Bliss, 1987). According to Bliss (1987), the main reasons why men join mythopoetic men's groups are to work on their father-son connections, form lasting male friendships, improve their general health, experience male intimacy, express their emotions and learn to be proud of their bodies. These goals fit well into current conceptualizations of positive masculinity because they are aimed at positive outcomes for the self and others and may lead to connectedness, motivation and authenticity (Kiselica et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2021).

Critics of the mythopoetic men's movement have argued that the movement almost entirely relies on archetypes that foster traditional masculinity like the king or warrior archetype, whereas gentle archetypes that promote vulnerability, empathy and emotions are missing (Enns, 1994). This criticism is not valid for the men's group of the present study, because the group highlights the importance of integrating gentle and tender characteristics into conceptualizations of masculinity. This integration is actively fostered during the camp, for example, by expressing affection and tenderness during campfire talks. The Eisenhans members often refer to this as "integrating two polarities" or "integrating hard and soft" masculinity. In the present study, I will analyze how the positive masculinity at the Eisenhans influenced the participants' well-being.

Well-being is a popular and widely-used concept in positive psychology. However, there is a lack of consensus on how it should be defined and measured (Sutton, 2020). Seligman (2002) Differentiates between hedonic well-being, which stands for pleasure and fun, and eudaimonic well-being, which is characterized by meaning and engagement. Hedonic and eudaimonic well-being are sometimes referred to as subjective well-being (SWB) and psychological well-being (PWB), respectively (Ménard & Brunet, 2011, as cited in Sutton, 2020). In the present study, I will investigate both SWB and PWB based on reflective, self-reported data of the participants. Therefore, I adopt a broad definition of well-being that captures SWB and PWB and defines well-being as the “subjective evaluation of one’s quality of life” (Sutton, 2020, p. 3).

Current study

Negative conceptualizations of masculinity such as toxic masculinity highlight masculinity’s downsides and this could inhibit healthy development and personal growth in boys and men (Cole et al., 2021). Interventions with a positive focus on masculinity can help boys and men to access positive masculine resources (Kiselica et al., 2016). However, there is little empirical research on positive masculinity in the current literature about men and masculinities (Cole et al., 2021). In the present study, I will address this research gap by studying positive masculinity in the Eisenhans group. I will analyze the construction of positive masculinity, the group characteristics that enable positive masculinity and the relation between positive masculinity and the participants’ well-being. Accordingly, I have formulated the following research questions:

How did the Eisenhans members construct and experience positive masculinity during the Eisenhans?

What characteristics of the Eisenhans group contributed to the development of positive masculinity?

How did the experiences of positive masculinity at the Eisenhans influence the well-being of the participants?

Methods

Participants

Among previous visitors of the Eisenhans gatherings, eight participants were recruited for the interviews. The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 55 years. The population was diverse in terms of educational level, income, sexual orientation and physical fitness. For example, some participants had a masculine appearance, expressed in prominent facial hair and a muscular body, while other participants were skinny and less muscular. One of the participants

was homosexual. The diversity of the sample allowed for different perspectives on the Eisenhans men's group.

Eisenhans

The Eisenhans [Iron John] is an annual, ten-day-long gathering of 40 men in a remote area in nature in Germany. It is named after the same-titled fairytale Eisenhans by the Brothers Grimm. The fairytale is about a young prince who meets the wild man from the woods. The wild man helps the prince in facing the challenges of real life outside the castle and to become independent of his mother. A German men's coach founded the Eisenhans about 10 years ago and it shares similarities with Bly's mythopoetic men's movement from the 1980s, as well as other movements from the mythopoetic spectrum like the mankind project.

I participated in the camp myself after being invited by a friend. On the first day of the Eisenhans, a tent was constructed where about 20 men slept for the next 10 days. The rest of the men slept in rooms in an abandoned elderly home. In that building, we also built a kitchen, a food storage and tool storage. Every day started with a walk to a nearby lake, where a warrior dance was performed, called the Haka. The Haka dance stems from the Māori people of New Zealand. The dance was performed naked, and it was intended to feel the masculine "warrior energy". During the day, the Eisenhans members offered workshops to each other; for example, about producing music, running a startup, doing yoga, photography, etc. Every evening there was the possibility to share personal experiences during the campfire talk, whereby it was common for participants to share intimate information, show feelings and sometimes cry in front of the group. Other members offered emotional support and some members would also exchange physical tenderness and affection in the form of cuddling.

Next to the daily routine, the Eisenhans involved special events that only took place once. One such event was the initiation rite. Initiation within a man's group traditionally means the transition from boy to man. The initiation took place at the lake, and it involved speaking the sentence: "I am (name) and I trust you". After that, the naked man was carried down to the water by 39 other naked men, lined up in a row. In the end, he was lowered into the water. Subsequently, he lined up and it was the next men's turn. With the statement "I trust you", the participant expressed his willingness to belong to the group and the group expressed its acceptance by carrying the man down to the water. Another special event was oil wrestling. It involved wrestling naked, covered in oil (to prevent injuries) until one person gave up or was held with his back on the ground for 3 seconds. Every Eisenhans member chose his fight partner, and during the fight, the other Eisenhans members were seated around the ring and made music and chants. It was stressed by the organizers, that participation in all events was

voluntary. Some people with preexisting health issues chose not to participate in physical activities like oil wrestling.

Procedure

All participants of the Eisenhans received an initial message that was sent to the Eisenhans WhatsApp group. The message contained information about the general topic of the study and how privacy would be handled. After the initial message, I contacted fifteen members who had shown an interest in the study via WhatsApp. I purposely selected those participants with whom I had previously connected with because they already trusted me. Out of the fifteen members, eight decided to take part in the present study.

The interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Zoom was easily accessible for the participants, and it offered video and audio recording. The interviews took about 60 minutes. Before the official part of the interview, I explained the purpose of the study. Subsequently, I asked for their informed consent and recorded it. The data were stored in a secure folder on my laptop. The interviews were transcribed by myself. In the final report, I anonymized the data by changing the names of the participants and not mentioning their specific ages. I also did not transcribe information that would make it possible to identify the participants, like their workplace, address, etc. Upon one participant's request, I cut out about two minutes of the interview.

Materials

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used to gather the interview data. The interview guide was developed in an iterative process by myself in consultation with my academic advisor. Based on the research questions, the interview guide covered three broad topics, namely the construction of masculinity at the Eisenhans, specific experiences of the participants at the Eisenhans and the changes in the participants' well-being during and after the Eisenhans.

After I obtained the participants verbal informed consent, the interview started with the following question: *What comes to your mind when you think about masculinity at the Eisenhans?* The participants responded with an analytical reflection on the key features of the masculinity at the Eisenhans; for example, "I think of men that have integrated their loving and their wild side..." or "The first thing that comes to my mind is love". When the participants gave long and complex answers, I summarized and paraphrased these parts to check whether I had understood the meaning correctly. When I found something interesting in the light of the research questions, I encouraged the participants to elaborate on specific parts; for example, I asked "Can you tell me more about this natural masculine energy? What did it feel like?"

To keep a natural conversational flow in the interviews, the order of the interview questions slightly varied. Further, the specific wording of the questions was adjusted to the flow of the interview and the participants' use of words. The second question usually was:

We have done many different activities at the Eisenhans, for example, campfire talks, the haka dance, initiation rites, naked swimming, oil wrestling, cuddling and many more. I would like to know what your top three most important Eisenhans moments were. How did you experience these moments? You can also mention things that I haven't mentioned before.

The participants responded to this question with rich descriptions of personal relevant events at the Eisenhans like the "haka dance" or "oil wrestling". Because I asked for the "most important" Eisenhans moments, the participants justified why they chose the specific moment, and they often reflected on the importance of the moment for their lives and well-being. In this way, the question generated data relevant to all three research questions. When participants talked about experiences that I was also involved in, I usually briefly shared my personal experience and insight to enhance trust and the friendship-based connection. After this, a question on positive masculinity followed, in which I asked for specific examples for positive masculinity based on the definition of positive masculinity as healthy variations of traditional masculinity. This question was important because it best reflects the initial core idea of positive masculinity to ascertain what is good and healthy about traditional masculinity. The question was:

Traditional masculinity is often described with the following attributes: dominance, competitiveness, aggression, control of emotions. Positive masculinity studies the positive sides of these attributes. Can you tell me about examples of positive masculinity that you have observed in yourself or others at the Eisenhans?

The final question was related to the third research question, namely the impact on the participants' well-being. Accordingly, the question was: "*I would like to know how the Eisenhans has impacted your well-being during and after the Eisenhans.*". To answer this question, the participants often referred to their most important experiences and their motivations for joining the Eisenhans in the first place and explained how the Eisenhans resolved past issues. After the interviews, I explained that the interviewees had space to share their feelings and their thoughts about the interview and the research. After that, I asked for the participant's feedback on the interview process and questions. The interview transcripts were analyzed with the software Atlas.ti.

Analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis (TA) was conducted to analyze the data (Clarke et al., 2019). The method supported the aim of the present study because the researcher chooses which theoretical underpinnings he/she uses for the analysis (Clarke et al., 2019). In line with the notions on masculine instincts of Seager and Barry (2019), my coding and analysis was driven by the assumption that there is some sort of essential masculine energy based on the male sex that manifests in different behaviors, shaped by culture. This viewpoint resembles the idea of the deep masculinity of the mythopoetic men's movement and matches the participants' beliefs about masculinity. Further, I coded the transcripts with a positive psychology and positive masculinity mindset. This subjectivity and personal reflection are seen as a resource in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019).

Reflexive TA is based on six steps. During the "familiarization" phase, I re-read the transcripts and watched the video recordings to become familiar and immersed with the data. I made initial notes about important aspects; for example, concepts that were often mentioned and appeared to be central. During this phase, I also studied additional literature. The second phase is called "coding". Coding is an iterative process in reflexive thematic analysis, whereby there is no predefined codebook or coding frame involved (Braun et al., 2019). This means that codes can be combined, separated or reworded during the process. When a piece of text appeared meaningful and relevant to one of the research questions, it was tagged as a code. The codes were formulated in a way that evokes meaningful associations about the data; for example, "overcome the fear of having conflicts". In reflexive thematic analysis, the coding is not about summarizing and counting the data, but rather to generate meaningful data fragments that are later combined to broader themes (Braun et al., 2019). The codes about positive masculinity were developed in a deductive way, while the codes about acceptance and authenticity were developed inductively. Reflexive TA further differentiates between semantic codes that describe meaning at face value and latent codes that describe deeper meaning (Braun et al., 2019). I have generated a list of 224 codes.

After the coding, the phase "generating initial themes" followed. Based on the codes, I developed broader patterns of shared meaning, called themes. 24 initial themes were generated. Following the instructions of Braun et al. (2019), I constructed the initial themes in two ways. The first one involved clustering codes with similar meaning and formulating the overarching meaning as a theme name; for example, the codes "you can be everything", "finding the true self" and "holistic expression of masculinity" were grouped together under the theme "acceptance and authenticity". The second way to produce themes is to promote a significant

code to a theme. The initial themes are not meant to be the final themes, but rather they work as prototypes.

In the fourth and fifth phase of “revising and defining themes”, I checked if the themes make sense in the light of the global data set and with respect to my research questions. I decided which of the 24 initial themes were the most central ones and combined them with themes with a similar content. This thought process was supported by drawing thematic maps, using pen and paper. According to Braun et al. (2019), the final themes must be able to answer the research questions and tell a coherent story about the data. After some alterations, I came up with a structure of three themes. In reflexive thematic analysis, it is often stressed that themes are actively constructed in a reflective thought process, informed by theory and the research aim and they do not “emerge” from the data (Braun et al., 2019). Accordingly, the themes often involve quotes from different interview questions and especially the second theme, which is about authenticity and acceptance, informs all three research questions. The three main themes involve most of the subthemes, while some irrelevant subthemes were discarded. I wrote down informative names and a short summary for each theme.

In the final “writing up” phase, the results were written down in a coherent story. In order to better grasp the meaning and intentions of the words of the participants, I conducted the analysis with the original German versions of the transcripts. The translation of the quotes from German to English was undertaken by myself.

Positionality and credibility

The personal epistemological and ontological beliefs of the author influence the research process, this is referred to as “positionality” (Holmes, 2020). In the following part, I have reflected on my positionality to enhance the transparency and trustworthiness of the present paper. I am a white, middle-class, cisgender, straight, man. With this background, I can relate to the experiences of men addressed in this paper. I have studied two years of medicine; I hold a bachelor’s degree in psychology and at the time of writing this paper I am finishing a master’s degree in positive and clinical psychology. My academic background makes me aware of the biological, social and cultural influences on human behavior and in line with Seager and Barry (2019), I believe that gender is rooted in biology and manifests in different ways based on culture. Furthermore, I have combined this viewpoint with a positive psychology approach. The positive psychology approach is reflected in the positive focus of the interview questions, for example when I asked for the most important experiences or positive examples of aggression.

I have participated in the same Eisenhans camp as the participants of the present study, which made me an insider researcher. The main advantage of being an insider researcher was the emotional intimacy between the participants and me. This made it easier for them to trust me and tell the truth (Unluer, 2012). Also, my insider role made it easy for me to relate to the experiences of the participants and to understand the culture at the Eisenhans (Unluer, 2012). Therefore, during the interviews, I positioned myself as an Eisenhans member and I kept my researcher role in the background.

My positive attitude towards the Eisenhans and its members also made me prone to bias. In this section, I will explain what actions I took to avoid bias. I was especially prone to confirmation bias like exaggerating research results in my favor and minimize contradictory results. To compensate for my positive preconceptions, I have addressed rivaling concepts in my paper as suggested by Patton (1999). These rivaling concepts were the concept of toxic masculinity, the main criticism on the positive masculinity positive psychology paradigm by Addis (2018, as cited in Cole et al., 2021) and the criticism of the mythopoetic men's movement (Enns, 1994).

Confirmation bias could have also led to so called "cherry-picking" in the analysis and results section. Cherry-picking means selecting data that best confirms the researcher's personal belief while neglecting ambiguous and contradictory data (Terry et al., 2017). Cherry-picking can occur, when the steps of reflexive thematic analysis are not followed correctly, for example when the researcher promotes an early familiarization note to a theme (Terry et al., 2017). However, if performed correctly, the method used in the present paper inherently involves rigor and protects against bias like cherry-picking. The themes I have developed are informed by different codes of all participants and represent shared meaning. For example, the theme "authenticity and acceptance" includes different viewpoints regarding oil wrestling and cuddling. For one participant oil wrestling was most important, for the other participant cuddling was most important. However, both participants acted in an authentic way and were accepted by the group, no matter if they were fighting or cuddling. Authenticity and acceptance represent the shared meaning of both participants.

Another potential source of bias involved the wording of the interview questions. Especially the question on positive masculinity was steering and could be prone to social desirability. Because the participants knew me personally, they could have answered in a way that supports my viewpoints. However, I encouraged the participants to speak freely and I reserved 15-30 minutes after each interview for feedback and critical remarks. Furthermore, to check if the participants feel adequately represented by the present study, I have implemented

member checking before submitting the final thesis (Norwell et al., 2017). I have sent the thesis to the participants and asked them if the quotes and my interpretations represent their ideas correctly. I have also encouraged them to mention criticism about positive masculinity, the Eisenhans or the study in general. The participants did identify with the quotes and the analysis. The participants did not mention any significant criticism about the Eisenhans or positive masculinity but gave some ideas for improvement of the study design. I have used some of the participant's feedback for writing suggestions in the limitations and future research section of the present paper.

Results

Theme 1: Constructing positive masculinity

This theme is related to the first research question: *How did the Eisenhans members construct and experience positive masculinity during the Eisenhans?* The results show the following positive sides of traditional masculinity characteristics, namely positive competition, positive aggression and positive dominance. Further, the participants reframed behaviors that are seen as weak or feminine in the light of traditional western masculinity. For example, speaking about one's insecurities was reframed as being courageous and responsible. Finally, I found examples of natural, instinctual, archetypal masculinity, which I will also describe in this theme.

Oil wrestling was mentioned as one of the most important experiences by all participants. It was an intense experience that involved fear and being exposed to one's insecurities. The fighting was a mental struggle with oneself. Everybody had to decide how far he wanted to push his body to win. The fighting was a form of personality development, and the opponent supported the development by fighting back, without causing serious harm. Jonas said that the competition is aimed at supporting the other persons and one's own development:

[...] no competition in the sense of I have to be stronger than you and bring you down.

But when we had a competition, it was always with respect and care and not with the intention to hurt the other person but to support his development.

Jonas described that this sort of competition as a natural part in the male development to explore one's strength:

[...] It is natural in the development from boy to men, to compete. Not in a destructive way, like I am going to break the other person, but just to find out: where are my limits? How strong is the other person? How strong am I? How can I develop and how can we support each other's development?

Nick acknowledged Veit's competitiveness as a sign of respect:

It was an incredible experience to feel his (Veit's) pure strength...I felt his energy on my body and how he gave everything to win...In hindsight, I could really appreciate that. During the fight, I didn't think about it. But in hindsight, I appreciate that he gave everything and didn't hold back. Because of that I felt acknowledged and accepted as a worthy opponent.

This positive competition with Veit led to a deeper bond between the two men:

When the fight was over, I have gained so much trust in him. [...] Maybe it is because I know when we argue, or something happens we can always bond again. [...] I think it is something like, a sense of basic trust because right after the fight he was very tender. We hugged each other and said: Everything is fine.

The quote shows how wild attributes like fighting are counterbalanced with tenderness. For Veit and Nick, this combination worked well, deepening their relationship. In line with the idea of positive competition, to lose is not per se proof of weakness. David learned that it is acceptable not to always win:

[...] That was an important experience for me. We had an equal fight and in the end I made the decision: It's fine now, I am completely done, and I decided to let go now and to let myself push down on the ground for 3 seconds. And I saw that I can make the decision not to try winning. I can let go of it. And I still saw the respect of my opponent, I could see the respect in his eyes.

Another example of positive masculinity as a positive variation of traditional masculinity was positive aggression. Veit uses positive aggression to push through personal obstacles. When engaging in positive aggression, Veit feels physical and mental energy and he refers to this as "Wutkraft" [anger energy].

I think there is a spectrum of anger. [...] Ehm when society thinks of anger, they think of the top 20 or 10 percent. That's when people snap and become violent, they lose themselves in that. Ehm, I find it interesting to look at 0% to 80%. Because...I think in the morning I need like 10% anger energy to get out of bed. I use this energy whenever I need to overcome my weaker self.

Veit explained how he tried to help the group by using his anger energy:

That one time, when one man did a talk and everybody listened, but for me his talk felt kind of odd...I felt like he was doing a show, he's faking. And then I just said it. And I had to take my courage in both hands because I was afraid that the other guys think I am stupid...But it was useful in the end because he reflected on it. And later that day we talked about it and developed a better bond.

In this example, Veit used anger energy to speak up against an authority figure and protect the group. Veit also displayed forms of positive dominance, as expressed in Nick's observations:

It is important in groups that there are dominant people in groups that can be extroverted. Otherwise, there would be no action, there would be only followers. But when there is no leader, in what direction should the followers go? And that's very important because some people just don't dare to say anything. For example, I would really like to go chopping wood, and there is an axe, and there are the woods, but I think: I can't, the group is not ready for that, and I just wait until another person suggests it. And then a dominant person comes along and says: "hey I want to go chopping wood, I need three men that can help me, who joins?", then I can say: "Oh shit, yes, I have waited for this for three days!"

Next to oil wrestling, all participants mentioned the campfire talks as one of their most important experiences. It is common in western traditional masculinity to hold back one's feelings, whereby this is referred to as stoicism. Showing vulnerability is sometimes framed as being weak and feminine. Gustav reframed showing insecurities as standing up for oneself:

[...] To stand up for yourself and say: Hey this is me and these insecurities belong to me. To be able to communicate transparently about what is going on inside and not having the feeling of pushing away something. This happened on many occasions at the Eisenhans. When men took a heart and openly shared what bothers them, especially at the fire talk, this is part of positive masculinity for me. To be able to see your weaknesses and insecurities and accept them, not denying them.

Peter also highlighted the importance of showing one's emotions, because for him it is a necessity to bond with a group. He told the group about his insecurities of being homosexual in a heterosexual group of men and the feeling of being an outsider:

At the campfire, I told everybody, in fact with all the embarrassing details. I afforded it to expose my feelings to the community and by that, I declared the community to be my safe space. And that helped me, I had the feeling to be a real part of the community, because I told everyone about my feeling of being excluded, my feeling of being different without any whitewashing. And in the end, there was nothing left of the bad feeling, instead, it was replaced by emotional security, because I have seen that I am still accepted, maybe even more than before.

Gustav and Peter spoke with pride and pathos about their ability to show vulnerability, highlighting the heroism involved. Malte reframed showing affection as a challenge that takes courage and practice. At the Eisenhans, it was common to hug other men from time to time; for

example, in the morning, or before going to sleep, or sometimes spontaneously to show affection. Malte is a very competition-oriented man and framed the emotional intimacy, associated with hugging as a challenge:

That's something new for me [...] and I have seen it as a challenge. [...] My way is humor to solve it (the inability to express affection during a hug). Having done it (hugging) two, three times in a row I needed less humor and could be more in the moment.

The physical intimacy in the form of hugging and cuddling was novel and challenging for most of the men, including myself. Many western men are reluctant to have physical contact with other men because they are afraid of being suspected of being homosexual and not conforming to the traditional cis-men norm, this is also referred to as “homohysteria” (McCormack and Anderson, 2014). However, contrary to the traditional stereotype, Peter, David and Jonas believe that there is a natural need for physical connection, independent of one's sexual orientation. David said: “It was completely new for me, that there can be physical contact between men, without any sexual connotation. It was very healing for me to let that happen.” Peter expressed something similar:

This was healing for me because I always have had a strong desire for manly affection. A sort of affection I wished my father would have given me, but I never got it. And I think it is not just me, I am talking about an affection that is not intellectual or cognitive, but directly noticeable via skin and body contact.

Jonas found the experience of sharing physical contact without sharing sexuality as liberating. He said: “Two humans or more, share contact, tenderness, touch, mindfulness, time, closeness and warmth, without any ulterior motives and that was extremely liberating.” Many of the participants also reported feeling a natural masculine energy. David tried to explain what this masculine energy feels like:

[...] When the naked bodies hit each other, there is something animalistic about it. Something primal. It's almost primitive. And primitive stems from primitivo, which means, back to the roots. And exactly that happened to me. It triggered a link to a primal force and masculinity within me [...]

When I asked David if he could describe the masculine energy, he referred to it as a stimulating, vital force.

Lebensenergie [Vital force]. But for me, it truly felt like a masculine vital force. As if it would flow from my balls through my spine. I cannot really describe it. And this energy was characterized by a gleam. [...] A gleam from the solar plexus, the heart chakra, neck chakra. Directed to the outside and resting in one's authenticity.

For some participants, this masculine energy was not initially there, but rather it developed after some days. For example, Nick did not enjoy the Haka at the beginning, although he noticed that after three days his feelings towards the haka changed and he spontaneously joined the dance:

In the beginning, on the first and second day, I felt very uncomfortable, because I am not a person that ehm is loud or pounds his chest and gets energy by screaming and being loud. So, it felt uncomfortable for me because it was not in my nature. Ehm, but on the third and fourth day, I just immersed myself with it, I thought” now I just do it, and then I give it all. Because of the experiences we already had during the first three days, my energy already had changed. And then I pounded on my chest, and it was awesome, I looked at the other men and it was just intense.

Theme 2: Acceptance and authenticity

This theme relates to the second research question and describes the characteristics of the Eisenhans group that led to positive masculinity and improvements in well-being. The concepts of acceptance and authenticity were central in all interviews and described as a prerequisite for positive masculinity and improvements in well-being. The accepting attitude at the Eisenhans allowed for free and authentic expression of the participants' masculinity, which resulted in new behaviors. Especially the tender and affectionate sides of masculinity were new to many men. When I asked the Eisenhans members “what is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think about masculinity at the Eisenhans?”, all participants referred to the supporting characteristics of the men community. Peter said:

The first thing that popped into my head was “community”. [...] The community that we had nurtured everybody in his own masculinity. This nurturing is not possible without the community. You can learn to love yourself, but the very essential element of being a man is “being man together” (in a community). And this was the first time in my life where I felt a part of a community of men. [...] being at home. I really have had the feeling that I have finally arrived and that was very healing for me.

The social reinforcement of masculinity that Peter refers to as “being man together” was strengthened by the initiation rite on the second day. The initiation rite involved standing naked in front of the men and declaring one's trust in the group by saying “I trust you”. Peter said that the initiation was “[...] an inclusion in the realm of men [...]” and that “[...]a boy becomes a man, by being accepted as a part of the group of men.”. Thus, for Peter “to be a man” essentially means being accepted by other men. This aspect of being accepted by other men was crucial in all interviews. At the Eisenhans, the group membership was not conditioned by adhering to social norms of masculinity. Gustav described this in his favorite quote on masculinity:

We often try to confirm certain attributes, that are portrayed in films. We as men think: We must be like this. But in truth, masculinity reflects your natural and authentic expression. And I think this quote gets the message across very well: Masculinity means to be human as a man. This quote gives ample scope for every possible masculinity. No matter what the ultimate manifestation looks like.

This flexibility in masculinity made it possible for Peter to immerse himself in the group and integrate his homosexual and his masculine identity: “I always have had the feeling of not-belonging because I was different. And here I experienced for the first time, that everyone is different and I ...so I also do not have to fit into traditional social patterns.”. The campfire talks were essential to build a trusting and accepting community. At these talks, everyone could share their vulnerability with the group:

[...] your vulnerability is accepted and not rejected and that creates an even deeper sense of community, compared to hiding your weakness. So, our community...I think our community got more intense and intimate and more bonded every day and the campfire talks were a very important element, maybe the most important. Because, when a man shows his vulnerability, these are moments where one can be deeply connected.

Nudity was an important factor in enhancing acceptance. Every morning the 40 naked men performed the haka together. In the beginning, the participants compared themselves with each other in terms of masculine attributes. This comparison was paired with insecurities, whereby some participants worried if they were muscular enough or if their penis was sufficiently large. However, the mutual acceptance in the group reduced these insecurities. David had felt inadequate in terms of muscle mass for many years and during the Eisenhans he learned to accept his body:

Just this casually and naturally being naked together, to see that I am like the others, that I do not have to be ashamed that I may have a smaller dick or that I am less muscular. Just experiencing this, not just thinking about it, but to authentically live it you know. Because of this (the experience of not judging each other's naked bodies) the feeling (of being accepted) could sink in much deeper.”. “[...] And it was not even hard to accept everyone, it happened just naturally. And why not you know? He looks like this, he looks like that, but I accept him anyway! It (the muscular body) was not relevant somehow.

The experience of body acceptance was also expressed by Peter in a similar way:

I always have had the hang-up that my penis is too small. And now I am naked with all the other men, and obviously, I have that thought again, that the other man may see that

my penis is too small. So, at this point you are completely exposed, and you are just who you are but then you see that it is o.k. I was completely welcomed and accepted and that was very relaxing.

The accepting community served as a safe space for free expressions and discovery of authentic masculinity. As Peter put it: “It is crucial to have a protective frame. So, the community, in which I can try things out [...]”. Jonas also explained that the accepting attitude at the camp allowed the Eisenhans members to be authentic: “The safe space we created together, where anybody could be himself and didn’t have to hold something back because of fear of rejection. [...] There was the possibility of being authentic.” The authentic expression of one’s self, resulted in different forms of masculinity. The Eisenhans members believed that both hard and soft masculinities are part of the natural expression of men. In the view of the Eisenhans members, hard masculinity stands for fighting, aggressive dancing, chopping wood, while soft masculinity involves behaviors and traits that are commonly viewed such as feminine as cuddling, tenderness, crying and showing vulnerability (McDemott et al., 2019). Peter stated that these two opposites or polarities, which are the tenderness and the wild, are natural parts of masculinity.

Well, basically we talked two times about this, to let something out, that is already in us. Now we have talked about aggression and prior to that I have talked about the emotional side and both aspects are welcomed at the Eisenhans. It can all be there.

Moreover, Malte expressed that the Eisenhans men incorporate both sides:

Affectionate and strong men, I have to say...who integrated these both sides...and who understood how imported and normal an emotional connection between humans is...And in this case between men. And how important it is, to just express and live it (the emotional connection).

For David, it was a novel experience to see that hard men can show their soft side. He was impressed by the amount of emotional warmth that was expressed at the Eisenhans and calls this the “heart feature”: “But also, that there was space for the heart, so not only the picture of the rough man, but also still strong masculine energy but combined with a soft side. The tender was allowed to be there too. I call it the “heart feature”.”

Theme 3: Well-being outcomes

This theme answers the third research question by showing how the experiences at the Eisenhans influenced the participants’ well-being. The accepting atmosphere at the Eisenhans allowed the participants to test their belief systems and experiment with alternative behaviors. The acceptance and authenticity at the Eisenhans led to an increase in self-knowledge and inner

peace, a more stable gender identity and higher self-esteem for the participants. Further, most participants described that they were able to better accept their bodies after the Eisenhans. Some participants also recognized changes in their body, like more facial and breast hair and an increased ability to gain muscle mass. Finally, the Eisenhans increased self-compassion and compassion for others.

During the Eisenhans, David learned to accept and to understand his need for physical intimacy with other men. These insights and the corresponding experiences gave him a feeling of inner peace and a stable gender identity:

I know there is a need for physical intimacy with other men, not in a sexual way. [...] And when I have this need it does not irritate me anymore, because I know what it means now. I can make sense of it now, so the Eisenhans gave me certainty and peace with respect to this topic. Stability. And a lot of authenticity. I stand up for myself a lot more, for what I am and what I need. And I can accept it and appreciate myself.”. “The issue of being a man is much less important. [...] I do not get lost in endless ruminations anymore, no more doubting of my identity, I can sort it now.

David and many other participants learned that they were not rejected or perceived as weak when sharing their vulnerabilities. Instead, they felt that being aware of their vulnerabilities and being able to express them made them stronger and increased their self-esteem:

I got from the Eisenhans that I can discuss sensitive topics like my sexuality more openly and I feel I am not that vulnerable anymore. When you talk openly about it, what can happen? You stand up for yourself. That’s the way you feel it and you stand your ground. [...] This reveals an energy of strengths and authenticity and I experience that energy as fundamentally masculine. I have developed this energy throughout the Eisenhans.

While some participants learned to accept and value their soft side, other members like Gustav learned to accept their wild masculinity:

[...] I like to play with men, to have fun and to be wild. There are people that would say: Oh, this is childish or not mature and aggression is bad. And I know it’s a part of me. And I enjoy letting it out and it feels good to me. I do not have to apologize if I want to do a sparring fight in kickboxing. I just like it and I like to watch MMA fights on TV from time to time.

The participants also learned to accept and appreciate their own bodies more and the concept of beauty lost its significance:

[...] At the Eisenhans I didn't know what I look like 9 out of 10 days. Because there was no mirror. And that was super interesting because I was used to asking myself things like: How do I look right now? Does my hair look well? Do I have a good facial expression? Yeah, this stuff, am I attractive? And at the Eisenhans I never questioned that. It was completely unimportant. Normally it is important for me, also with men, but (at the Eisenhans) it just wasn't. And on the ninth day, when we cleaned up the yard, I walked across a window, I went back, looked left, I took up my t-shirt, flexed my muscles and I thought: Wow, this is what I look like! This is the first time I thought about attractiveness again [...] And I thought: Oh my god, you look awesome! Very nice." And then I continued and didn't look at myself again.

Nick is still committed to fitness and his looks, albeit from a more compassionate standpoint:

[...] sometimes I still think about my looks, and I try to be attractive, but ehm, I am not so eager about it anymore. Now I look from a loving perspective, not from a frightened perspective. Because I knew: I am accepted by these men, no matter what I look like. [...] I accept my body more and more. I am happy about it. I see potential for improvement, for example: I like to have more muscle here and less fat there and a different haircut maybe...I think this, but I am still in the present moment, and I am completely satisfied with myself.

Jonas experienced something similar when he was fighting during oil wrestling:

[...] And I knew I was going to fight in the Ring and everybody else was standing or sitting around me, watching me fight naked and then I had the feeling "go for it", it is the right thing to do. And then the issue resolved because I learned to accept my body and to feel comfortable with who I am and to say: Hey, I am a sufficient man, I am good as I am. Everybody else is also manly, some have a big dick, some have a small dick and that's it. It's normal and fine.

Some participants also reported more muscle mass and body hair after the Eisenhans. For example, David said:

I appreciate my body a lot more. I never appreciated my body before. When I was a kid, I was the fat kid. After that I was the skinny guy, couldn't build any muscle...I always got inflammation of my joints [...] as if my body would say: as long as you do not believe that you are a man, you cannot express a masculine manifestation in your body. [...] I have more hair on my chest now and I can build muscle now. I am significantly more muscular than before, it works now. I go to Thai massage every 3 weeks for my

joints and I am still vulnerable to inflammation, but for the first time in my life, I can manifest this masculine image in my body. It was like someone flipped the switch. Most of the participants noted that women were more attracted to them after the Eisenhans. For example, Jonas said:

[...] The days and weeks after the Eisenhans I was impressed that women behaved much differently in my presence. They were much more relaxed and more attracted to me [...]. When I am more centered, I have a stronger personality, more charisma and that obviously has an impact on other humans [...].

Similarly, Nick noted: “[...] My girlfriend and her best friend were home...And the next few days and weeks they told me, oh Nick, you, appear so much more masculine! I think it was my charisma and determination.”

The compassionate attitude towards others also led to more self-compassion for many participants. For example, Malte learned to be more compassionate with himself:

[...] The eagerness took me and I didn't give up but...I can say that...At the same moment, after the fight, I felt sorrow for the first time, because I recognized: I just crossed borders and that was not necessary...in a physical sense, it was too much for my body. [...] And that (self-compassion) was the best insight I gained. That would not have been possible before the Eisenhans, but at the Eisenhans I have had many possibilities, to feel self-love and to learn how to be gentle with myself. And yeah, I think for me it was mostly to just let go and just let an emotional connection with other humans happen, without overthinking it.

Malte noted that many men were better at showing positive emotions towards each other. Moreover, instead of being overly disciplined, he showed compassion for himself:

Right, when I recognized that all the hugging is too much for me, I didn't blame myself. I knew, hey...hey, it is what it is. And I just go one step after the other in the right direction and that is all that I can do. I do not have to brutally stress myself out.

Before the Eisenhans, Malte used to perceive other men as threats. The Eisenhans taught him to be more compassionate towards others and view other men as potential friends and allies:

I looked at every face ...and judged them. I judged every person and thought: who could become a threat to me? Yes, who could be dangerous? [...] I was never able to get past the point of interpreting men that are like me as a hardcore threat... [...] And the Eisenhans showed me, that I do not need to do this, that ehm, I can trust. And that no matter how tough and extreme a man appears to be, we are somehow all the same, we are equal. We have a lot in common...This awareness got stronger. Now I can offer a

friendly connection to this man.”. I don’t need that anymore (to compete with others), because I know, I don’t need to be better than this person, I can be friends with him. And then it was easy to have a good time together and that is the most important thing. Yes, this is the most important thing that I have learned.

The ability to bond emotionally also prepared Malte for his role as a father:

[...] (Before the Eisenhans) I would not have been able to become a father. Because I think it takes two things to be a father: First a strong sense of responsibility, to be able to take responsibility, no matter what situation, no matter how much work it will take, no matter how exhausting...And of course: To establish the emotional connection to your daughter. And ehm, I think that it (the Eisenhans) helped a lot with that...And I think I have learned both qualities at the Eisenhans. Definitely.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to extend the body of literature on positive masculinity by analyzing real-life examples of positive masculinity in the Eisenhans men’s group. I have analyzed how the members constructed and experienced positive masculinity, which group factors supported the development of positive masculinity and how positive masculinity at the Eisenhans improved the participants’ well-being. To my knowledge, this is the first study to research positive masculinity and its influence on well-being in a mythopoetic men’s group.

The first research question answered how the Eisenhans members constructed and experienced positive masculinity during the Eisenhans. As expected, positive masculinity was present and encouraged at the Eisenhans. The Eisenhans members constructed positive masculinity by integrating traditional and archetypal/instinctual masculinity with gentle and feminine traits. The Eisenhans men called the traditional masculine traits “hard masculinity” and the feminine traits “soft masculinity”. Hard and soft, or masculine and feminine, were seen as complementary parts of a natural and authentic expression of the gender. This resulted in positive traditional masculinity like positive aggression, positive competition and positive dominance. Soft masculinity was characterized by tenderness, affection, and the willingness to show vulnerability. The Eisenhans members also reported a form of archetypal/instinctual masculinity, which was referred to as a feeling of natural masculine energy.

The second research question searched for the characteristics of the Eisenhans group that contributed to the development of positive masculinity. The Eisenhans was characterized by an atmosphere of acceptance and authenticity, which allowed the Eisenhans members to experiment with novel behaviors and freely express their masculinity in an authentic way. The accepting attitude was especially present in the initiation rite and the daily campfire talks in the

evenings. By sharing intimate personal stories, the trust between the members was increased. This contributed to the authentic expression of masculinity. The accepting attitude at the Eisenhans was very similar to the concept of unconditional positive regard (UPR) (Rogers, 1959, as cited in, Murphy, et al., 2020). UPR involves accepting the other person, believing in their potential and supporting the other person's growth. Being unconditionally accepted by the other Eisenhans members also enhances unconditional self-acceptance in the participants, which is very similar to unconditional positive self-regard (UPSR). UPSR and authenticity are both regarded as important determining factors for well-being (Murphy et al., 2017; Sutton, 2020). Acceptance and authenticity acted as the prerequisite for developing positive masculinity at the Eisenhans because the members were encouraged not to hide behind a rigid persona constructed of socially expected norms about masculinity, but rather to authentically express their real self. Indeed, this real self typically involved the positive masculinity discussed in the first research question.

The third research question was about the relationship between the experiences of positive masculinity at the Eisenhans and the participants' well-being. The participants reported the effects on their well-being of inner peace, self-knowledge, self-esteem, stable gender identity, self-compassion and compassion for others, body positivity, fitness and a more masculine appearance. Even though the Eisenhans was not an anti-toxic masculinity intervention, it relieved symptoms of toxic masculinity. This is in line with the basic assumption of the mythopoetic men's movement, that healthy and mature masculinities prevent the development of toxic masculinity (Bliss, 1987). The aspect of inner peace and a stable gender identity has also been shown in previous research on mythopoetic men's groups (Burke et al., 2010). More self-understanding as a result of campfire talks was also found in an Australian men's group (Reddin & Sonn, 2003). The Eisenhans has had a strong positive impact on the participants' body acceptance. This is in line with Bliss (1987), who suggested that mythopoetic men's groups teach the members to appreciate and be proud of their bodies.

Implications

The findings indicate that mythopoetic men's groups like the Eisenhans are suitable case examples for studying positive masculinity because these groups inherently display positive masculinity. Further, the present study shows the importance of balancing traditional masculinity with gentle and soft masculinity. Traditional traits like dominance, aggression and competition can have positive and healthy consequences. Negative consequences arise when these traditional conceptualizations are endorsed in an overly rigid way (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2013). I have shown that to be "less rigid" it is important that traditional masculinity

is accompanied by soft masculinity or femininity. When femininity in men is respected, men do not have to prove their hard side in order to be perceived as manly.

These soft masculinities are currently not integrated into conceptualizations of positive masculinity like the PPPM paradigm (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2016). For example, the PPPM includes the male strength of “male ways of caring” but it is about protection, fixing things and offering other practical solutions (Englar-Carlson & Kiselica, 2013). These are certainly noble aspects of traditional masculinity, but the present study indicates that caring in the form of emotional support and tenderness is also part of the natural masculine spectrum of behaviors. Furthermore, the definition of positive masculinity as positive variations of traditional masculinity does not allow for the integration of the novel, soft masculinity traits. Therefore, the more inclusive definition of positive masculinity as beliefs and attitudes that have positive and functional consequences for the individual and other people by Kiselica et al. (2016) should be adopted in research on positive masculinity.

Wilson et al. (2021) argue that positive masculinity leads to the development of key human strengths of authenticity, connectedness, and motivation. The present study supports this new approach on positive masculinity because I have also found that authenticity is essential for positive masculinity. However, the present study indicates that the direction of the relationship between the key human strengths and positive masculinity is the other way around. I have found that authenticity and acceptance, which have similarities with the concept of connectedness, are the prerequisites that foster positive masculinity. Accordingly, the current research indicates that the key human strengths of the positive masculinity framework by Wilson et al. (2021) are not the outcome of positive masculinity but the basis for the development of positive masculinity.

Furthermore, I have found that acceptance, which is essentially the same as the concept of unconditional positive regard, plays an essential role in the development of positive masculinity. The concepts of UPR and UPSR and the corresponding theories by Rogers (1959, as cited in Murphy et al., 2020) are currently not explicitly reflected in theories about positive masculinity and could be integrated into Wilson et al.’s (2021) positive masculinity framework. The gentle sides of masculinity like affection and tenderness can only manifest in an atmosphere that is high in acceptance or unconditional positive regard. Because this soft masculinity can be associated with femininity, it threatens rigid traditional western norms of masculinity and men who experiment with these behaviors need reassurance and a safe setting. Thus, when designing a men’s camp, there should be a focus on values like acceptance and authenticity.

A mythopoetic men's group like the Eisenhans could be a first step towards helping men who suffer from the masculinity crisis, because symptoms of the masculinity crisis like lower life expectancy, higher suicides rates, higher rates of addiction and imprisonment could be prevented by positive masculinity outcomes such as body positivity, showing vulnerability, being self-compassionate and more compassionate towards others.

Strengths and limitations

The main strength of the study was that I was a member of the Eisenhans camp myself, which made it easy to establish a trusting relationship and to relate to the experiences of the participants. Another strength of the study was that it was not restricted to a specific age group. Research on men's group often study a specific age group; for example, men who face retirement or young adolescents (Heise et al., 2020; Su et al., 2021). Furthermore, the qualitative approach to the research allowed to gain a thorough understanding of positive masculinity in a mythopoetic men's group and to vividly illustrate positive masculinity in action.

A limitation of the present study is that most participants of the group were highly motivated and had already practiced personality development before attending the group. Men who are less open to new experiences and less motivated for personality development will have adverse reactions towards soft masculinity, like hugging and cuddling at the Eisenhans.

Finally, I have not taken other important factors of the camp into account, such as being in nature for 10 days, or the absence of digital technology and social media. These factors also could have contributed to the participants' well-being. However, this limitation was counterbalanced by the high level of reflection of the participants. They have explained how the positive masculinity experiences at the Eisenhans have influenced their well-being in much detail. The findings can be used as a foundation for quantitative research on positive masculinity.

Recommendations for future research

Future research could examine the association between acceptance and authenticity and the development of positive masculinity using a correlational study design. Further, as positive masculinity is per definition not only about the individual but also the impact on society, future research could study the social environment of participants like friends and families and investigate how positive masculinity impacts them.

The participants of the present study probably displayed positive masculinity before attending the Eisenhans. Future research could investigate how positive masculinity develops in a group of men with no previous experience in men's groups. Also, it would be interesting

to investigate if men who display an exaggerated traditional masculinity change towards positive masculinity, when participating in a positive masculinity men's group.

To better conceptualize and understand the influence of the Eisenhans group on psychosomatic aspects like a better ability to gain muscle mass, future studies could measure testosterone levels before and after the camp. In this way, the concept of positive masculinity can also be related to biological/medical outcomes. The prominent increase in body positivity is interesting in the light of the mental disorder "muscle dysmorphia" (MD). It involves the strong belief of being not muscular enough and it is more present in men that rigidly endorse traditional western masculinity norms (Blashill et al., 2020). Future research could investigate the effectiveness of a positive masculinity men's group for treating conditions, like MD.

I want to end the discussion section with a quote of the feminist writer Starhawk. She expressed the ideal man as being natural masculine but with a prosocial counterbalancing that is "wild without being cruel, angry without being violent, sexual without being coercive, spiritual without being unsexed, and able to truly love" (Starhawk, 1979).

Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to expand the body of literature on positive masculinity. I have used the Eisenhans men's group as a case example and showed how the participants constructed and experienced positive masculinity as well as how this influenced their well-being. Positive masculinity was characterized by an integration of hard and soft masculinity and this free and authentic expression of masculinity was accompanied by a feeling of a natural masculine energy. An accepting atmosphere of unconditional positive regard was essential for fostering positive masculinity. Mythopoetic men's groups like the Eisenhans are important because they encourage a novel and positive masculinity that lines up with the current expectations of society towards men such as showing vulnerability and being emotionally expressive. The resulting positive masculinity archetypes like the gentle warrior or the caballero could be virtues role models that are worth striving for, as opposed to the toxic masculinity concept that boys and men try to escape from. The present findings indicate that mythopoetic men's groups like the Eisenhans promote well-being. Accordingly, mythopoetic men's groups like the Eisenhans may be a first step in enhancing positive masculinity and reducing negative symptoms of the masculinity crisis. Future studies could further investigate the relationships between positive masculinity, mythopoetic men's groups and well-being using quantitative means.

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