



### A Toolkit for Masculinity Scholarship

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3 A Toolkit for Masculinity Scholarship

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5 Review of *The Tough Standard: The Hard Truths about Masculinity and Violence*

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8 By Ronald F. Levant and Shana Pryor

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10 New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, 199 pp, \$27.95

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12 Reviewed by David J. Wimer, Penn State University

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17 “Females create life, males end it. War, crime and violence are primarily male franchises.”

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19 -George Carlin

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21 The above quote by the late comedian George Carlin is indeed correct if you look at the  
22 numbers: men commit approximately 87% of violent crime in the United States (U.S.

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24 Department of Justice, 2016). *The Tough Standard* by Levant and Pryor (2020) is a great  
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26 overview for anyone who wants to examine the many reasons why.

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29 In this review, I will start by relating a brief overview of the psychology of men and  
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31 masculinities (PMM) literature and its theoretical origins, followed by a discussion of how the  
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33 PMM literature is very much aligned with George Kelly’s (1955; 1963) theory of personal  
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35 constructs, and then I will provide a chapter-by-chapter synopsis of *The Tough Standard*.

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38 For approximately the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, the study of gender, and  
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40 masculinity in particular, was dominated by the now grossly outdated and even offensive gender  
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42 role identity paradigm (GRIP). This paradigm was derived from psychoanalysis and posited that  
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44 gender comes from within and it is up to boys and girls to develop an appropriate gender identity  
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46 or suffer various consequences. Thus, the GRIP was rather judgmental and characterized gender  
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48 development as a failure-prone process. However, landmark works in the 1970’s and 1980’s  
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50 such as *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority* by David and Brannon (1976) and *The Myth of*

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3 *Masculinity* by Joseph Pleck (1981) helped bring about a paradigm shift in the scholarship of  
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5 masculinity. Pleck (1981; 1995) challenged the GRIP and offered a new paradigm originally  
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7 known as the sex role strain paradigm but later changed to the gender role strain paradigm  
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9 (GRSP), and this paradigm is currently the major theoretical guidepost for research on men and  
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11 masculinities. The GRSP posits that gender roles are socially constructed and that masculinity  
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13 and femininity are scripts for the performance of gender, which is independent from biological  
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15 sex. The GRSP takes context into account and puts forth the idea that there is no single,  
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17 unwavering masculinity ideology. Instead, ideals of manhood likely differ for men from different  
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19 historical eras, life stages, sexual orientations, ethnic groups, social classes, and more. This is  
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21 why this area of research is now known as the psychology of men and masculinities, plural.  
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26       Research using the GRSP as a framework has shown that traditional masculinity ideology  
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28 (such as the cultural rule that men should never show vulnerability) is mostly harmful and  
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30 associated with a host of negative outcomes, including violence as detailed in *The Tough*  
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32 *Standard*. The “strain” part of the GRSP refers to dissonant feelings experienced by men and  
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34 women when faced with unhealthy and unattainable gender ideals imposed on them by culture  
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36 and society, such as a man feeling bad because he doesn’t “measure up” to (problematic) cultural  
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38 ideals of manhood. Pleck (1995) outlined three forms of gender role strain: discrepancy strain,  
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40 dysfunction strain, and trauma strain. *Discrepancy strain* results when someone feels a  
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42 discrepancy between how they are and some kind of ideal or standard, somewhat like the concept  
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44 of cognitive dissonance; an example of discrepancy strain would be a man feeling bad because  
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46 he’s not as muscular as he thinks he should be. *Dysfunction strain* involves experiencing  
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48 tangible, life functioning problems resulting from the gender role socialization process, such as a  
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50 man who dies from cancer because he refused to go to the doctor until it was too late. Finally,  
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3 *trauma strain* involves experiencing psychological problems stemming from the gender role  
4 socialization process, such as a man who becomes afflicted with PTSD after being hazed as part  
5 of a fraternity initiation.  
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10 The GRSP aligns with the same postmodern and Kantian philosophical underpinnings as  
11 Kelly's (1955; 1963) theory of personal constructs. Indeed, you could certainly view or  
12 conceptualize modern PMM research through a constructivist lens. PMM research indicates that  
13 masculinity is socially constructed via gender role socialization, and the gender socialization  
14 process actually influences how we perceive reality (Eagly, 1987). We all have our own unique  
15 constructs about ourselves as gendered beings. Many men's beliefs about manhood are derived  
16 from predominantly unhealthy and sometimes even deadly cultural narratives about how "real  
17 men" should be – and those beliefs guide their construal of and reactions to subsequent gender –  
18 related information and experiences, such as a father telling his son to not cry at a funeral. This  
19 reminds me of Kelly's (1955) *experience corollary*, which states that experience consists of the  
20 successive construing of events. Applying this to the previous example of the boy being told not  
21 to cry, the message from his father may become internalized for the boy and then affect how that  
22 boy perceives and reacts to future experiences, such as feeling shame about crying or actively  
23 suppressing emotions. Moreover, Kelly's (1970) conceptualization of *guilt*, that people feel  
24 guilty when they behave in ways incompatible with their sense of self, is quite a bit like Pleck's  
25 (1995) concept of discrepancy strain. In brief, there are many intersections between PMM and  
26 personal construct psychology, which is one reason why *The Tough Standard* may be of interest  
27 to readers of this journal.  
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51 Synopsis  
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3        *The Tough Standard* is a quick read at only 153 pages of text (the last 46 pages consist of  
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5 appendices, references, etc.), and it is impressive how the authors describe over thirty years of  
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7 research in such a succinct way.  
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10        The opening chapter (Chapter 1, Masculinity and the Present Cultural Moment)  
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12 introduces the concept of masculinity from an academic perspective. Levant and Pryor (2020)  
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14 use a prison metaphor to describe masculinity. Traditional masculinity essentially puts men and  
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16 boys in a cage by giving them limited ways they can think, feel, and behave. The authors give  
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18 the following definition of masculinity:  
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21           a set of thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and behaviors that are generally considered  
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23           appropriate for boys and men, against which it has drawn a bright line. It is often  
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25           considered to be a set of beliefs that individuals hold, which are based in socio-cultural  
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27           ideologies regarding gender. Masculinity is therefore a social construction distinct from  
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29           male biological sex. (Levant & Pryor, 2020, p. 3)  
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34        After conveying this definition, the authors state that their main goal is to free men from  
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36 the prison of masculinity to improve lives and benefit society (Levant & Pryor, 2020). One  
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38 impediment to this goal is how many people are highly threatened by the erosion of traditional  
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40 masculinity ideology. The first author (Dr. Ronald Levant) was involved in creating the  
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42 guidelines for psychological practice with boys and men (American Psychological Association,  
43  
44 2018) and after a tweet about the guidelines got picked up by conservative news outlets many  
45  
46 people who worked on the guidelines received hateful emails and threatening phone calls. On  
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48 page five, Dr. Levant presents a chilling death threat that he received from a Trump supporter.  
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50 The latter part of chapter 1 conveys some of the ways in which traditional masculinity ideology  
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55 can be problematic and some potential reasons why. I found the discussion on the common  
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3 misunderstandings of testosterone to be particularly interesting. For example, the authors discuss  
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5 a lack of clear correlation between the amount of testosterone and aggression, so more  
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7 testosterone does not necessarily equal more aggression which is different from what many  
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9 might expect.  
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12 Chapter 2 (Theories of Gender and How Masculinity is Measured) involves basic  
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14 information about masculinity such as the gender role strain paradigm mentioned earlier. The  
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16 chapter also has a concise overview of how researchers measure masculinity and some of the  
17  
18 most widely used measures such as the Gender Role Conflict Scale (GRCS; O'Neil, 2008). My  
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20 favorite part of this chapter is when the authors critique the use of the controversial, pop  
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22 psychology term "toxic masculinity". They relate eight vastly different definitions of the term  
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24 from eight different sources to drive home their point that the term is inexact, subjective, and  
25  
26 even unnecessary because masculinity is toxic to begin with without the specifier. This reminds  
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28 me of Kelly's (1963) concept of constructive alternativism because so many people have  
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30 radically different interpretations of the same term.  
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36 In chapter 3 (Consequences of Masculinity), the first author relates some of his  
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38 experiences from directing the Boston University Fatherhood Project from 1983 to 1988, and  
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40 later in the chapter the authors discuss various masculinity-related concepts such as masculine  
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42 depression and precarious manhood. Chapter 4 (Summaries of Research on Masculinity's  
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44 Harmful Linkages) begins with a more in-depth overview of masculinity measurement, the scale  
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46 construction process, and a summary of how the three most commonly used measures have  
47  
48 found links between masculinity and a host of mostly negative outcomes.  
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52 I consider chapter 5 (Masculinity's Role in Gun and Other Physical Violence) to be the  
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54 meat of the book and the book's major contribution. This topic is obviously timely because of  
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3 the recent proliferation of mass shootings and police brutality in the U.S. The authors argue that,  
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5 “masculinity’s role in violence has largely been unexamined in *serious* investigations of gun  
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7 violence” (Levant & Pryor, 2020, p. 62). They go on to present a robust amount of evidence  
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9 indicating that boys and men who endorse traditional masculinity ideology to a greater degree  
10  
11 are more likely to act violently. They convey research and risk factors related to mass shootings,  
12  
13 police brutality, intimate partner violence (IPV), and hate crimes (interestingly, the authors point  
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15 out that the FBI does not mention the sex of the perpetrator when recording hate crimes). I found  
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17 the authors’ analysis of a few well-known mass shooters to be one of the most interesting parts  
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19 of the book. Using the lens of PMM, they examine Elliot Rodger of the 2014 Isla Vista  
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21 Massacre, Seung Hui Cho from the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre, and then Eric Harris and  
22  
23 Dylan Klebold from the 1999 Columbine Massacre. I consider this section to be too short, and I  
24  
25 would have preferred for the authors to have examined more shooters in this way. Nevertheless,  
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27 Levant and Pryor (2020) demonstrate how the oft-overlooked factor of masculinity plays a major  
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29 role in the perpetuation of violence, and they provide a starting point for future researchers to  
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31 look more into this important topic.  
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38 Chapter 6 (Masculinity’s Role in Sexual Violence) is essentially an extension of Chapter  
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40 5 but with a focus on sexual violence. Levant and Pryor (2020) review research showing strong  
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42 positive associations between a higher reported degree of traditional masculinity ideology and  
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44 the perpetration of sexual assault. They also discuss how strongly endorsing avoidance of  
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46 femininity items on masculinity measures is a major risk factor for the perpetration of sexual  
47  
48 violence. I found their discussion on page 90 of the role that narcissism plays in rape to be  
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50 particularly interesting. Finally, the authors also write about the dangers of male privilege and  
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52 “aggrieved entitlement”, which is another timely topic very much in need of scholarly attention.  
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3 The next chapter (Chapter 7, Men's Health and Experiences of Trauma) examines  
4 masculinity's links with the physical and mental health problems of boys and men. Levant and  
5 Pryor (2020) break down how many aspects of traditional masculinity ideology are associated  
6 with health-harming behaviors and how many effective coping behaviors are off limits to men  
7 because of masculine norms. This chapter also has a section about male survivors of sexual  
8 trauma. I was particularly intrigued by the section on legal and administrative (LA) aggression,  
9 such as the threat to pursue sole custody of children. Finally, the authors conclude this chapter  
10 with the much needed statement that there is nothing inherently feminine about being a recipient  
11 of trauma or abuse.  
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24 Chapter 8 (Many Masculinities) is about how masculinity manifests differently in various  
25 countries such as China and Russia and how masculinity plays out differently among various  
26 racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. For example, Black men consider responsibility and  
27 accountability to be the most salient features of manhood (which differs from findings generated  
28 with mostly White samples). The take away message from this chapter is that context is crucial  
29 and should always be taken into account.  
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38 Finally, in the last chapter (Chapter 9, What Can Be Done?) Levant and Pryor (2020)  
39 relate an array of resources, strategies, and interventions that can potentially alleviate the harmful  
40 repercussions of traditional masculinity ideology for boys and men. There's too much  
41 information from this chapter to list it all here but I particularly liked the "thought experiments"  
42 on pages 136-137 that Dr. Levant uses with male clients (such as having them imagine that they  
43 could transcend masculinity norms without penalty and how they would change if that  
44 happened), and I could see myself adapting them in my own clinical work with men and boys. I  
45 was also intrigued by the concept of gender-neutral parenting on page 143. The book ends with a  
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3 Coda section in which the authors list the main points of the book; this is a very good idea that I  
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5 would like to see emulated in other academic works.  
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## 7 8 Conclusion

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10 *The Tough Standard* may be interesting or useful for many potential readers of this  
11  
12 journal including researchers, teachers, and clinicians. Below I will consider the value this book  
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14 may have for those three audiences.  
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### 16 17 Researchers

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19 Levant and Pryor (2020) discussed how there is an existing “toolkit” for conducting  
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21 research on PMM, and this book is an ideal way to initiate access to that toolkit for any scholars  
22  
23 who would like to study PMM (or study it further). The sections on psychometrics and  
24  
25 questionnaire design might be useful for researchers, as masculinity researchers tend to be  
26  
27 particularly adept with scale design. The concepts and subject matter throughout the book also  
28  
29 provide many potential jumping off points for future studies involving PMM.  
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### 32 33 Teachers

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35 I could see teachers assigning *The Tough Standard* or at least certain chapters from the  
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37 book to students in any gender-related class. Chapter 2 would be a good way to introduce  
38  
39 students to PMM and the GRSP, for example. As mentioned before I consider the chapter on  
40  
41 masculinity and gun violence (Chapter 5) to be the biggest contribution of this book and I might  
42  
43 assign that chapter myself in the senior seminar course that I teach on PMM. Finally, the succinct  
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45 nature of the book means that it could be a quick, relatively easy read for today’s students who  
46  
47 tend to have an aversion to excessive reading.  
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### 50 51 Clinicians

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3           *The Tough Standard* could certainly be helpful to clinicians who would like to be more  
4 adept at doing psychotherapy with men or who would like to have a more “man-friendly”  
5 practice. The book could also serve to heighten awareness of PMM-related issues tackled in the  
6 book such as masculine depression. This book may be helpful to clinicians working with male  
7 survivors of sexual trauma as well. Finally, Chapter 9, the appendices, and the reference section  
8 all contain many potentially useful resources for clinicians such as hotline numbers and a link to  
9 the APA’s (2018) guidelines for psychotherapy with boys and men.  
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### 19 Limitations

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21           This otherwise very good book does have some drawbacks. One drawback is the large  
22 number of typos and writing errors throughout the text, such as using quotation marks at the  
23 beginning of a quote but not including the closing quotation marks. When I agreed to write this  
24 review, I was mistakenly sent an older, un-edited version of the book and I did not realize that  
25 until I was almost finished reading it. So I re-read the book after receiving the finished product,  
26 and I was surprised that most of the typos and errors were still in the finished product, meaning  
27 that the book could have used a much greater degree of editorial scrutiny. The errors are so  
28 pervasive in certain chapters that they can be distracting. Moreover, sometimes the authors use  
29 acronyms without ever explaining what the letters stand for. For example, in Chapter 9 the  
30 authors mention “NGOs” and I had to look up what they are (non-governmental organizations).  
31  
32 Finally, as stated before, I would have liked the authors to go into more depth in the gun violence  
33 chapter, or maybe expand it into a few chapters. I believe that masculinity is a major culprit in  
34 the proliferation of gun violence in America and much more scholarly attention could be devoted  
35 to the subject than one brief chapter. However, despite these constructive criticisms, *The Tough*  
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3 *Standard* is an important and insightful book that would be a great place to start for professionals  
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5 seeking to delve into the PMM research literature.  
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8 In short, I would recommend *The Tough Standard* to anybody interested in exploring (or  
9  
10 further exploring) scholarly work on the psychology of men and masculinities and the socially  
11  
12 constructed nature of masculinity. The postmodern lens of the gender role strain paradigm should  
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14 appeal to readers of this journal.  
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