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SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The conceptual penis as a social construct

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Abstract: Anatomical penises may exist, but as pre-operative transgendered women also have anatomical penises, the penis *vis-à-vis* maleness is an incoherent construct. We argue that the conceptual penis is better understood not as an anatomical organ but as a social construct isomorphic to performative toxic masculinity. Through detailed poststructuralist discursive criticism and the example of climate change, this paper will challenge the prevailing and damaging social trope that penises are best understood as the male sexual organ and reassign it a more fitting role as a type of masculine performance.

Subjects: Gender Studies - Soc Sci; Postmodernism of Cultural Theory; Feminism

Keywords: penis; feminism; *machismo braggadocio*; masculinity; climate change

1. Introduction

The androcentric scientific and meta-scientific evidence that the penis is the male reproductive organ is considered overwhelming and largely uncontroversial. It is true that nearly all male-gendered persons who were also male at birth have a genital organ that, among other purposes, carries the duct for the transfer of sperm during copulation. This organ is usually identified as the penis, and for many “males” it serves the role of their reproductive organ. There are, however, many examples of persons with penises who will not reproduce, including those who have sustained injury, are unable to coerce a mate, are uninterested in producing offspring, are medically infertile, or identify as asexual. While these examples may still constitute “males,” it is distinctly fallacious to identify their penises as reproductive organs. Furthermore, there are many women who have penises. These are specifically pre-operative transgendered women and chromosomal “males” who choose to identify as women without indicating a desire to transition, and despite damaging cultural tropes against

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jamie Lindsay, PhD, and Peter Boyle, EdD, represent a dynamic team of independent researchers working for the Southeast Independent Social Research Group, whose mission is obvious in its name. While neither uses Twitter, both finding the platform overly reductive, they incorporate careful reading of the relevant academic literature with observations made by searching trending hashtags to derive important social truths with high impact. In this case, their particular fascination with penises and the ways in which penises are socially problematic, especially as a social construct known as a conceptual penis, have opened an avenue to a new frontier in gender and masculinities research that can transform our cultural geographies, mitigate climate change, and achieve social justice.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Penises are problematic, and we don't just mean medical issues like erectile dysfunction and crimes like sexual assault. As a result of our research into the essential concept of the penis and its exchanges with the social and material world, we conclude that penises are not best understood as the male sexual organ, or as a male reproductive organ, but instead as an enacted social construct that is both damaging and problematic for society and future generations. The conceptual penis presents significant problems for gender identity and reproductive identity within social and family dynamics, is exclusionary to disenfranchised communities based upon gender or reproductive identity, is an enduring source of abuse for women and other gender-marginalized groups and individuals, is the universal performative source of rape, and is the conceptual driver behind much of climate change.

their womanhood and femininity, these constitute critical examples of a human demographic for whom their genital organ, while it may be utilized reproductively in some cases, is not best understood as being a *male* genital organ (Hird, 2000).

In light of these important facts about the wide diversity of human expression, including when specified to those humans bearing a penile genital organ, conceptualizing the penis as a specifically male *anatomical* organ is highly problematic and in critical need of discursive revision. Indeed, the penis *vis-à-vis* maleness is an incoherent construct. We argue that the *conceptual penis* is better understood not as an anatomical organ but as a gender-performative, highly fluid social construct.

2. The conceptual penis

The *conceptual penis* is the operative representation of the penis in society as it obtains via a variety of performative acts and statements related to and concerning gender. Conceptualization is the best way to understand the penis, as the notion of “penis as a male anatomical organ” suffers typical androcentric and meta-scientific limitations and errors as it is both overly reductive, in failing to represent the full reality of penis-bearing human experiences, and incoherent, as the penis itself has little or nothing to do with gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Consequently, what coherent role can a monolithic concept like “the penis” hope either to achieve or to describe for pre-operative and non-operative male-to-female trans women and post-operative female-to-male trans men who choose to retain their identity as women? Likewise, what meaning can the anatomical penis as a male organ possibly hold for gender fluid individuals or certain other individuals within the queer community? In the paradigm of the dominant penis-centered narrative, we find these questions intrinsically unanswerable.

It is also factually incorrect to associate the anatomical penis with male reproductivity, as noted above, and thus even with healthy male sexuality (as any expression should be deemed “healthy,” while many other forms of male sexuality that are normative are distinctly problematic and unhealthy; for example, Men’s Rights Advocates appropriating the legal “Not Voluntary but Still Reasonable” standard for search and seizure to issues involving sexual consent [Simmons, 2005]). That is, the conceptual penis is a performative social construct, and it is one that is isomorphic to an especially toxic strain of masculinity.

Still, even as a social construct, the conceptual penis is hopelessly dominated by recalcitrant social constructions that favor hypermasculine interpretations of the penis as a notion unjustly associated with high male value (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001). Many cisgendered hypermasculine males, for instance, seem to identify those aspects of their masculinity upon which they most obviously depend with the notion that they carry their penis as a symbol of male power, domination, control, capability, desirability, and aggression (The National Coalition for Men “compile[d] a list of synonyms for the word penis [*sic*],” these include the terms “beaver basher,” “cranny axe,” “custard launcher,” “dagger,” “heat-seeking moisture missile,” “mayo shooting hotdog gun,” “pork sword,” and “yogurt shotgun” [2011]). Based upon an appreciable corpus of feminist literature on the penis, this troubling identification results in an effective isomorphism linking the conceptual penis with toxic hypermasculinity.

2.1. *Machismo braggadocio*

Inasmuch as masculinity is essentially performative, so too is the conceptual penis. The penis, in the words of Judith Butler, “can only be understood through reference to what is barred from the signifier within the domain of corporeal legibility” (Butler, 1993). The penis should not be understood as an honest expression of the performer’s intent should it be presented in a performance of masculinity or hypermasculinity. Thus, the isomorphism between the conceptual penis and what’s referred to throughout discursive feminist literature as “toxic hypermasculinity,” is one defined upon a vector of male cultural *machismo braggadocio*, with the conceptual penis playing the roles of subject, object, and verb of action. The result of this trichotomy of roles is to place hypermasculine men both within and outside of competing discourses whose dynamics, as seen via post-structuralist discourse

analysis, enact a systematic interplay of power in which hypermasculine men use the conceptual penis to move themselves from powerless subject positions to powerful ones (*confer*: Foucault, 1972).

Machismo is essentially aggressive male pride, whereas *braggadocio* is a quality of arrogant boastfulness. These together can be taken as a concrete description of the typical performative expression of maleness and hegemonic entrenched male power dynamics through the object of the penis, as the socially masculine mind conceptualizes it and the heteronormative female mind too typically has been socially indoctrinated to fetishize it. Through self-objectification in the conceptual penis, hypermasculinity, which abhors weakness in all its forms, seeks to reposition itself from a powerless subject position to a powerful one. Often, hypermasculine behavior therefore centers upon boasting, even if falsely, about size, potency, and desirability, and many socially problematic gender-demonstrative behaviors defining both toxic masculinity and rape culture emanate from the *machismo braggadocio* isomorphism as a form of social staging applied to the objective conceptual penis (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). These are precisely the “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” mentioned by Foucault’s first delineation of post-structuralist discursive analysis (Foucault, 1972).

Nowhere more does this problematic construction compare than with the “hegemonic masculinity and cultural construction” presented in the “essence of the hard-on” (Potts, 2000). Potts (2000) illustrates that the functioning (or lack thereof) of the [conceptual] penis “demonstrates the inscription on individual male bodies of a coital imperative: the surface of the male body interfuses with culture to produce the ‘fiction’ of a dysfunctional nonpenetrative male (hetero)sexuality.” This is clear power-dynamical repositioning to alleviate the internal psychological struggle of weakness via hypermasculinity and an essential fear of weakness that characterizes hypermasculinity itself. We therefore further agree with Potts that “by relinquishing the penis’s executive position in sex, male bodies might become differently inscribed, and coded for diverse pleasures beyond the phallus/penis,” and we insist that understanding the objective isomorphic mapping between phallus and (conceptual) penis is a necessary discursive element to changing the prevailing penile social paradigm. The constructed intersection of the anatomical penis and the performative conceptual penis defines the problematic relationship masculinity presents for male bodies and their impacts upon women in our pre-post-patriarchal societies.

In addition to self-objectification, the conceptual penis can, intrinsically to the *machismo braggadocio* isomorphic map, express itself as the *subject* of toxic masculinity. The hypermasculine mentality often conflates the socialized male individual as an inscribed and embodied extension of his conceptual penis. Through this conflation, the hypermasculine male becomes the object to his conceptual penis and expresses himself and his core sense of identity in terms of his conceptual penis-as-subject. Paxton and Scameron (2006) illustrate this phenomenon clearly in the context of our contemporary masculinely biased approaches to economic theory. They write, “The premise of neocapitalist materialist theory implies that sexual identity has objective value. Therefore, the premise of postcapitalist sublimation implies that sexuality serves to oppress the underprivileged. Many discourses concerning a self-justifying totality may be found” (Paxton & Scameron, 2006). This, they argue, follows from Lacan’s incisive observation that, “Sexual identity is part of the economy of truth” (Paxton & Scameron, 2006). The conceptual penis, taken as the subject, often has the consequence of promoting oppression of the underprivileged by the misunderstanding that (male) sexual identity has objective value, particularly in repositioning the powerless hypermasculine male subject as powerful in and by means of his conceptual penis. This value is typically defined by the *machismo braggadocio* penile isomorphism between inscriptive object and discursive, thus prescriptive, subject.

When hypermasculine males see themselves as potent, dominant, controlling, or desirable, it is often an artifact of the *machismo braggadocio* isomorphism acting to make the conceptual penis the subject of their performed sense of identity. Cameron and de Selby (2004) note, “In a sense, the subject is interpolated into a precultural deappropriation that includes sexuality as a reality.” This is

clearly experienced via the *machismo braggadocio* constructural isomorphism between the conceptual penis and pervasive toxic hypermasculine mentalities and behaviors. For example, this can be seen in male bragging about their sexual “conquests” and boasting about their sexual “performance,” but also in male language with speech acts like, “I gave it to her,” and “She couldn’t get enough of it” (In the latter cases, the noun “it” turns the objective conceptual penis into the perceived subject of female experience, further objectifying the conceptual penis *vis-à-vis* male gender performance). The conceptual penis thereby becomes a deappropriative tool through which the penis-as-subject makes the (male) sexuality a potent reality in the hypermasculine mind.

The ultimately performative nature of hypermasculinity via the *machismo braggadocio* isomorphism is most evident in “male” behaviors typical of many men to reject emotional expressions as feminine. For example, compassion is generally avoided under *machismo braggadocio* subject performances, as are emotional expressions other than dominant, aggressive ones like anger and irascibility (Ben-Zeev, Scharnetzki, Chan, & Dennehy, 2012). As Scheff (2006) points out, “The hypermasculine pattern leads to competition, rather than connection between persons.” The performative nature of male-on-male competition is reflected into the conceptual penis via the *machismo braggadocio* isomorphism not only through the behavior, but additionally in phrases regarding toxic hypermasculine competitiveness like “pissing contest,” in which winners are determined by which hypermasculine person is able to project a stream of urine the furthest, often from a height, and “dick-measuring contest,” which needs no elaboration to unveil the direct impact of performative *machismo braggadocio* competitiveness.

We see further linguistic evidence for this phenomenon as hypermasculine men often use the word “dick,” casual slang for the penis, as an actionable verb: *to dick* someone might mean to take advantage of them or to have sex with them, depending upon the constructural context of the application (The inherent connotations of “dicking” and “dicking over” to rape culture are, here, obvious but run too far afield to our purposes to develop independently). Hypermasculine tropes often take advantage of this penis-as-verb surjection to express themes of male power and dominant male sexuality (*confer*: the frequent use of the sexually objectifying hypermasculine phrase, “I dicked her good”), allowing hypermasculine males to intuit the interplay of various discourses behind their subject positions and to shift them accordingly within specific settings, especially imagined and real sexual encounters with real and virtual women (or other men, as applicable). This they also conflate with expressing power dynamics over other men, as exemplified in the phrase, “I dicked him over,” which presents iconic male hegemonic thinking, per Duncanson (2015).

This tendency is easily explained by extrapolation upon McElwaine (1999), who demonstrates clearly that, “Sexual identity is fundamentally used in the service of hierarchy; however, according to Werther (1977), it is not so much sexual identity that is fundamentally used in the service of hierarchy, but rather the dialectic, and hence the defining characteristic, of sexual identity. The subject is contextualised into a subcultural desituationism that includes sexuality as a reality.” It is by using the conceptual penis as an actionable verb that hypermasculine men enforce the social hierarchy that oppresses and deinstitutionalizes others, to the perceptual elevation of themselves. It is illustrated clearly by Kubrin and Weitzer (2009) in their analysis of misogyny in rap music, in which they observe, “Content analysis identified five gender-related themes in this body of music—themes that contain messages regarding ‘essential’ male and female characteristics and that espouse a set of conduct norms for men and women.” It is also observable in the hypermale-performative behavioral trope of “manspreading,” that is, inconsiderately spreading his legs too widely in public, for example on public transport such as planes, trains, and automobiles, especially subways and buses. The usual excuse given for manspreading is centered directly in the conceptual penis as a male social discourse: the (anatomical) penis and testicles are attributed as needing space in order to facilitate the male individual’s “comfort.” This behavior, seen from the perspective of the (conceptual) penis as a (performative) social construct, is clearly a dominating occupation of physical space, akin to raping the empty space around him, that is best understood via the *machismo braggadocio* isomorphism to toxic hypermasculinity (Perkins, 2015).

Machismo is the hypermasculine essence, and *braggadocio* is the hypermasculine expression. The penis as a conceptual element of contemporary thought is naturally isomorphic by notion of *machismo braggadocio* to the most toxic and problematic themes in hypermasculinity. It is important to be clear that none of these themes are applicable to the anatomical penis as they are incoherent to many gender identifications that happen to present a penis as a genital organ. Similarly, none of these themes are applicable to the reproductive penis as they fail to possess relevance for non-reproductive or asexual individuals with a genital penis. The penis in the present context is thus best understood as a constructed social object, a discursive conceptual penis, utilized for the enactment of prevailing masculine social tropes, and that concept is isomorphic via *machismo braggadocio* with many of the most problematic themes in toxic masculinity (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2009).

2.2. Climate change and the conceptual penis

Nowhere are the consequences of hypermasculine *machismo braggadocio* isomorphic identification with the conceptual penis more problematic than concerning the issue of climate change. Climate change is driven by nothing more than it is by certain damaging themes in hypermasculinity that can be best understood via the dominant rapacious approach to climate ecology identifiable with the conceptual penis. Our planet is rapidly approaching the much-warned-about 2°C climate change threshold, and due to patriarchal power dynamics that maintain present capitalist structures, especially with regard to the fossil fuel industry, the connection between hypermasculine dominance of scientific, political, and economic discourses and the irreparable damage to our ecosystem is made clear.

Destructive, unsustainable hegemonically male approaches to pressing environmental policy and action are the predictable results of a raping of nature by a male-dominated mindset. This mindset is best captured by recognizing the role of the conceptual penis holds over masculine psychology. When it is applied to our natural environment, especially virgin environments that can be cheaply despoiled for their material resources and left dilapidated and diminished when our patriarchal approaches to economic gain have stolen their inherent worth, the extrapolation of the rape culture inherent in the conceptual penis becomes clear. At best, climate change is genuinely an example of hyper-patriarchal society metaphorically manspreading into the global ecosystem.

The deep reason for this problematic trend is explained, in its essence, by McElwaine (1999), where he writes, “Pickett suggests that we have to choose between capitalist rationalism and cultural sub-capitalist theory” (Pickett, 1993). Contemporary capitalist theory, a.k.a. neocapitalist theory, derives its claim on rationalism directly from the hypermasculine focus in science and society that can best be accounted for by identification with the conceptual penis. Paxton and Scameron (2006) seem to agree, noting that, “neocapitalist materialist theory holds that reality comes from the collective unconscious, but only if the premise of dialectic objectivism is invalid; if that is not the case, sexuality has significance.” Toxic hypermasculinity derives its significance directly from the conceptual penis and applies itself to supporting neocapitalist materialism, which is a fundamental driver of climate change, especially in the rampant use of carbon-emitting fossil fuel technologies and careless domination of virgin natural environments. We need not delve deeply into criticisms of dialectic objectivism, or their relationships with masculine tropes like the conceptual penis to make effective criticism of (exclusionary) dialectic objectivism. All perspectives matter.

One practical recommendation that follows from this analysis is that climate change research would be better served by a change in how we engage in the discourses of politics and science, avoiding the hypermasculine penis-centric take whenever possible (Kaijser & Kronsell, 2013).

3. Conclusions

We conclude that penises are not best understood as the male sexual organ, or as a male reproductive organ, but instead as an enacted social construct that is both damaging and problematic for society and future generations. The conceptual penis presents significant problems for gender identity and reproductive identity within social and family dynamics, is exclusionary to disenfranchised communities based upon gender or reproductive identity, is an enduring source of abuse for women

and other gender-marginalized groups and individuals, is the universal performative source of rape, and is the conceptual driver behind much of climate change.

An explicit isomorphic relationship exists between the conceptual penis and the most problematic themes in toxic masculinity, and that relationship is mediated by the *machismo braggadocio* aspect of male hypermasculine thought and performance. A change in our discourses in science, technology, policy, economics, society, and various communities is needed to protect marginalized groups, promote the advancement of women, trans, and gender-queer individuals (including non-gendered and gender-skeptical people), and to remedy environmental impacts that follow from climate change driven by capitalist and neocapitalist overreliance on hypermasculine themes and exploitative utilization of fossil fuels.

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