

**FROM REPRODUCTION TO REFLECTION: MASCULINITIES AND ADVERSE
FAMILY LEGACIES**

**DA REPRODUÇÃO À REFLEXÃO: MASCULINIDADES E HERANÇAS FAMILIARES
ADVERSAS**

**DE LA REPRODUCCIÓN A LA REFLEXIÓN: MASCULINIDADES Y LEGADOS
FAMILIARES ADVERSOS**



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ABSTRACT: This qualitative study analyzed the impact of transgenerational patterns on the construction of meanings attributed to masculinities by cisgender adult men who experienced adverse childhood experiences. Data from individual semi-structured interviews and genograms were subjected to reflexive thematic analysis, yielding three themes: ambivalent masculine legacies; invisible loyalties and transgenerational repetition; and differentiation, rupture, and reflexive reconstruction. Masculinity was learned in contexts of emotional ambivalence, violence, parental alcoholism, and emotional absence, transmitted nonlinearly across generations. Male family figures simultaneously represented sources of care and suffering, shaping experiences of identification, rejection, and ambivalence. Therapy, fatherhood, spirituality, and psychological distress prompted processes of questioning, differentiation, and reconstruction in relation to inherited masculine references. Adverse family experiences do not linearly determine masculine identity but constitute a relational field in which each individual, using available resources, constructs personal and singular ways of understanding and living masculinity.

KEYWORDS: Masculinities. Adverse childhood experiences. Transgenerational transmission.

RESUMO: Este estudo qualitativo analisou o impacto de padrões transgeracionais na construção de significados atribuídos às masculinidades por homens adultos cisgênero que vivenciaram experiências adversas na infância. Dados de entrevistas semiestruturadas individuais e genogramas foram submetidos à análise temática reflexiva, da qual emergiram três temas: heranças masculinas ambivalentes; lealdades invisíveis e repetição transgeracional; e diferenciação, ruptura e reconstrução reflexiva. A masculinidade foi aprendida em contextos de ambivalência afetiva, violência, alcoolismo parental e ausência emocional, transmitidos de forma não linear entre gerações. Figuras masculinas familiares apareceram simultaneamente como fontes de cuidado e sofrimento, organizando experiências de identificação, rejeição e ambivalência. Terapia, paternidade, espiritualidade e sofrimento psíquico mobilizaram movimentos de questionamento, diferenciação e reconstrução diante das referências masculinas herdadas. As experiências adversas familiares não determinam linearmente a identidade masculina, mas constituem um campo relacional no qual cada sujeito constrói, com os recursos disponíveis, formas próprias e singulares de significar e viver a masculinidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Masculinidades. Experiências adversas na infância. Transmissão transgeracional.

RESUMEN: Este estudio cualitativo analizó el impacto de los patrones transgeneracionales en la construcción de significados atribuidos a las masculinidades por hombres adultos cisgénero que vivieron experiencias adversas durante la infancia. Los datos de entrevistas semiestructuradas individuales y genogramas fueron sometidos a un análisis temático reflexivo, del que surgieron tres temas: herencias masculinas ambivalentes; lealtades invisibles y repetición transgeneracional; y diferenciación, ruptura y reconstrucción reflexiva. La masculinidad fue aprendida en contextos de ambivalencia afectiva, violencia, alcoholismo parental y ausencia emocional, transmitidos de forma no lineal entre generaciones. Las figuras masculinas familiares aparecieron simultáneamente como fuentes de cuidado y sufrimiento, configurando experiencias de identificación, rechazo y ambivalencia. La terapia, la paternidad, la espiritualidad y el sufrimiento psíquico movilizaron procesos de cuestionamiento, diferenciación y reconstrucción frente a las referencias masculinas heredadas. Las experiencias familiares adversas no determinan linealmente la identidad masculina, sino que constituyen un campo relacional en el que cada sujeto construye formas propias y singulares de significar y vivir la masculinidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Masculinidades. Experiencias adversas en la infancia. Transmisión transgeneracional.

INTRODUCTION

Adverse childhood experiences have been widely associated with impairments in emotional, relational, and psychosocial development throughout the life cycle. Felitti et al. (1998) demonstrated that experiences related to violence, neglect, abuse, family alcoholism, parental psychological distress, and relational instability are significantly associated with different negative physical and mental health outcomes in adulthood. Since then, different studies have indicated that such experiences may influence attachment processes, emotional regulation, and relational organization, as well as the coping strategies developed during childhood and adolescence (Andrade et al., 2022; Kalmakis & Chandler, 2014; Kublikowski & Bianchi, 2025).

Understanding adverse childhood experiences requires considering the family not only as a biological nucleus or normative structure, but also as a relational field in which belonging, bonds, beliefs, silences, and forms of subjectivation are organized. Bianchi and Kublikowski (2022) view the family as a system of relationships of affection and belonging that perpetuates itself over time and seeks to ensure the biopsychosocial survival of its members. This perspective makes it possible to understand that relational patterns, ways of bonding, expectations, and forms of emotional organization may traverse different family generations, contributing to the maintenance of continuity and homeostasis within the family field (Bianchi, 2026). Experiences related to violence, alcoholism, emotional neglect, and affective rigidity can be understood not only as isolated events, but also as phenomena embedded in broader relational and transgenerational dynamics.

Different authors from systemic and transgenerational perspectives (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1983; Bowen, 1991) emphasize that families transmit not only histories and bonds of belonging, but also forms of emotional management, relational expectations, beliefs, and modes of family functioning that influence the subjective experience of their members. For Bowen (1991), human development occurs in a permanent tension between belonging and differentiation, so that individuals simultaneously seek to preserve family bonds and construct emotional autonomy. The notion of differentiation of self refers precisely to the capacity to maintain relative emotional and intellectual autonomy without severing affective bonds, allowing individuals to critically recognize family patterns without reproducing them automatically.

In addition to this perspective, Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1983) propose the concept of ‘invisible loyalties,’ which refers to ethical, emotional, and relational bonds that

connect family members across generations, organizing expectations of belonging, reciprocity, commitment, and relational obligation, often in an unconscious or unspoken manner. In this sense, certain forms of masculinity, emotional patterns, and ways of relating may be transmitted across generations not only through conscious identification, but also through bonds of loyalty and relational obligation that remain active even in the face of family experiences marked by suffering, violence, or affective ambivalence.

The forms of masculinity constructed throughout childhood and adolescence are also organized within this relational field. More than explicit discourses about what it means to 'be a man,' boys learn forms of emotional expression, ways of managing conflicts, modes of bonding, and strategies of belonging through the family and social relationships they experience (Connell, 2005; Connell et al., 2005). In contexts marked by violence, neglect, affective silencing, and relational rigidity, certain masculine practices may be transmitted and naturalized across generations, constituting significant references for the construction of masculine identity (Levell, 2020; Zaniewski et al., 2022; hooks³, 2025).

In the field of masculinity studies, Connell (2005) proposes understanding masculinities as configurations of practices historically produced in specific social contexts and permeated by relations of power, belonging, and recognition. This perspective departs from essentialist understandings of masculinity by recognizing the existence of multiple masculinities organized dynamically and relationally. In dialogue with this approach, Connell et al. (2005) emphasize that masculinities are social constructions continuously negotiated in everyday interactions, especially within family, community, and cultural relationships.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2013) deepen this argument by proposing that hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed character type, but a configuration of practices that legitimizes certain positions of power and subordinates other forms of masculinity, varying according to historical and cultural contexts. Thus, adverse family experiences not only produce emotional suffering, but may also participate in the constitution of specific forms of masculinity related to emotional control, affective rigidity, self-sufficiency, and difficulty recognizing vulnerability.

hooks (2025) offers a fundamental contribution to the field of masculinity studies by arguing that patriarchal culture imposes on men, from childhood onward, the suppression of vulnerability, affection, and the need for care as a condition for belonging to the male world. She considers that the central problem is not limited to the social structures that organize power relations between men and women, but also includes the way men themselves are taught from

³ The lowercase spelling advocated by bell hooks for her name was respected in this article.

an early age to deny essential aspects of their emotional lives, learning that loving, needing care, or showing fragility represent threats to masculine identity. This process of emotional suppression, learned within family relationships and reinforced through social interactions, not only generates psychological suffering, but also compromises the capacity to build consistent affective bonds and to recognize one's own vulnerability as a constitutive part of human experience. Transforming this situation, according to hooks (2025), requires men to be able to name and elaborate the ways in which they learned to suppress affection, a process that necessarily involves critically reviewing the masculine references received within the family.

Recent studies have indicated that men exposed to adverse childhood experiences often construct adaptive strategies associated with emotional toughness, relational hypervigilance, affective control, and silencing of suffering (Levell, 2020; Zaniewski et al., 2022). In many cases, such strategies appear linked to socially valued forms of male belonging and recognition, even though they produce psychological suffering and relational difficulties throughout adult life. At the same time, qualitative studies indicate that men exposed to violent or neglectful family contexts do not reproduce such experiences in a linear or automatic manner, often developing ambivalent movements of identification, criticism, resistance, and re-elaboration of the masculine references learned within the family context (Callaghan et al., 2025).

The present investigation arose from our observation that, despite the growth of research on adverse childhood experiences and masculinities, qualitative Brazilian studies focused on understanding the articulations among adverse family experiences, transgenerational transmission, and the construction of masculinity in adult men remain scarce. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the impact of transgenerational patterns on the construction of meanings attributed to masculinities by cisgender adult men who experienced adverse childhood experiences.

METHOD

A qualitative approach was adopted for the study, as it is appropriate for understanding phenomena in their contexts in order to investigate how individuals attribute meanings to lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). It is assumed that the perspective adopted by the researcher is articulated with the empirical material in a process of co-construction that sustains the researcher's subjectivity and excludes the possibility of a completely neutral and objective stance. In this sense, a narrative approach was adopted, understanding the self as a storyteller

who, by narrating experience, organizes it into identity and, through the meanings attributed to one's own actions, enables self-understanding and openness to the other (Kublikowski, 2023).

Participants

Ten Brazilian adult men selected intentionally, according to the assumptions of qualitative sampling (Yin, 2015), participated in the study.

The age range adopted considered that biological and psychosocial maturity tends to become more consolidated from the age of 30 onward (Rodrigues & Kublikowski, 2014). The upper limit of 59 years was defined in accordance with the World Health Organization classification for the beginning of old age and with current Brazilian legislation, particularly the National Policy for Older Adults (Brasil, 1994) and the Statute of the Older Person (Brasil, 2003), which establish 60 years as the legal threshold for being considered an older person.

Individuals were considered eligible if they were Brazilian nationals aged 30 to 59 years, self-identified as cisgender men, and reported significant family experiences related to the construction of their masculinities, including adverse experiences occurring within the family context during childhood and adolescence, regardless of marital status and sexual orientation. Individuals who did not meet at least one of these criteria were excluded.

The invitation for voluntary participation was disseminated within the researcher's contact network through direct approach and referrals by acquaintances, a strategy that made it possible to access participants compatible with the criteria established for the study.

The participants, aged 31 to 53 years, had a high level of education and presented diversity in color/ethnicity, sexual orientation, marital status, and profession (Table 1), a spectrum relevant to broadening the experiential heterogeneity of the sample and favoring the inclusion of different perspectives on masculinities, family relationships, and transgenerational trajectories in the context investigated.

Table 1.
Sociodemographic characteristics of participants

Participant	Age	Race/ethnicity	Marital status	Education	Field of work	Children	Sexual orientation
P1	39	White	Married	Complete higher education	Health	No	Heterosexual
P2	53	White	Divorced	Complete higher education	Technology	No	Heterosexual
P3	38	White	Stable union	Complete higher education	Legal	No	Heterosexual
P4	38	White	Married	Postgraduate	Economics	No	Heterosexual
P5	44	Black	Married	Complete higher education	Administrative	No	Heterosexual
P6	51	White	Married	Postgraduate	Design	No	Homosexual
P7	39	White	Married	Postgraduate	Finance	Yes	Heterosexual
P8	48	White	Married	Postgraduate	Health	Yes	Homosexual
P9	32	Brown	Separated	Complete high school	Transportation	No	Heterosexual
P10	31	Black	Married	Doctoral student	Academic	No	Homosexual

Note. Research data.

Semi-structured interview

The semi-structured interview was chosen as the main data collection strategy. This type of interview is characterized by the use of open-ended questions and by its conversational and relational nature, favoring participants' free expression and the emergence of unexpected and meaningful content for the investigation (Kvale, 1996). Although participants were free to develop the topics addressed, the interview was conducted in a way that sought to ensure that the topics relevant to the research objectives were covered.

Considering that issues related to gender norms can influence both male adherence to research and the depth of the responses offered (Souza, 2022), an effort was made to provide a welcoming and empathetic environment that fostered trust, emotional openness, and the sharing of more intimate experiences. Thus, the semi-structured interview made it possible not only to access participants' individual experiences, but also to understand the ways in which they constructed meanings about masculinity, family bonds, emotional suffering, and life trajectories.

Genogram

The genogram is defined by Krüger and Werlang (2008) as a graphic representation of family life that enables an approach to symbolic legacies transmitted and transformed within

families. The instrument has become established as a resource in qualitative research for investigating relational patterns, repetitions, bonds, ruptures, and forms of transgenerational organization.

In the context of this research, the genogram was used as an auxiliary instrument for organizing the transgenerational information present in the interviews, contributing to the identification of family patterns related to masculinities.

Reflexive thematic analysis

For data analysis, reflexive thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2016), was adopted. The method is oriented toward identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within a qualitative data set, recognizing the researcher's active and situated role in constructing these patterns. Unlike approaches that conceive themes as latent structures preexisting in the data, reflexive thematic analysis understands themes as products of an interpretive process shaped by the theoretical framework, research objectives, and the researcher's epistemological positioning (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2016). This perspective proved especially appropriate for the objectives of this study, which focused on understanding transgenerational patterns of masculinity in adverse family contexts.

The analytical process followed the phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) in a recursive and nonlinear manner. The interviews were fully transcribed and subjected to repeated readings, constituting the familiarization stage. Initial codes were then generated from the narratives and progressively grouped into candidate themes, which were reviewed for internal coherence and distinction from one another, and subsequently defined and named. The analytical report was produced by articulating the themes with one another and with the research question. In this study, each interview was analyzed together with its corresponding genogram, which made it possible to visualize and organize transgenerational information present in the narratives, repetitions of relational patterns, affective bonds, and male models transmitted across generations (McGoldrick et al., 2012). This articulation between the two instruments enriched the coding process and contributed to theme construction.

The researcher's reflexivity was present throughout all phases of the analytical process. The meanings gathered in the analysis are understood as co-constituted among the data, the study objectives, the theoretical framework, and the researcher's positioning, a dimension that does not represent a bias to be eliminated, but a constitutive condition of qualitative research that must be made explicit and rigorously considered (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytical

process included auxiliary support from the ChatGPT tool (GPT-4, OpenAI), used in a strictly delimited manner during the initial organization of the data and preliminary code generation. All material produced with the support of the tool was systematically reviewed and reinterpreted by the researcher, while epistemological responsibility for theme construction, data interpretation, and meaning production remained entirely with her (Turobov et al., 2024).

PROCEDURES AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical procedures followed the guidelines established in Law No. 14,874/2024 (Brasil, 2024), ensuring secrecy, confidentiality, and protection of the information shared. This article is part of a broader investigation approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (opinion No. 7,668,502, dated June 26, 2025), whose data were collected in a unified manner together with the other studies that make up the first author's doctoral thesis.

RESULTS

The joint analysis of the interviews and genograms made it possible to identify recurring patterns related to masculine experiences constructed throughout the participants' family trajectories. The narratives revealed that masculinity was frequently learned in contexts marked by affective ambivalence, emotional rigidity, violence, lack of emotional support, and contradictory models of masculinity. The genograms contributed to visualizing and organizing the transgenerational information present in the interviews, allowing the identification of repetitions of relational patterns, affective bonds, and male models transmitted across family generations (McGoldrick et al., 2012). At the same time, the accounts revealed movements of reflection, differentiation, and critical review of these family legacies in adulthood.

The themes presented below were not understood as fixed or universal categories, but as interpretive nuclei generated from recurrences, tensions, and shared meanings within the participants' narratives, in accordance with Braun and Clarke (2006), who state that themes represent relevant patterns of meaning in relation to the research question and are generated through an active and reflexive process of data interpretation.

The analysis enabled the emergence of three main themes: (1) ambivalent masculine legacies; (2) invisible loyalties and transgenerational repetition; and (3) differentiation, rupture, and reflective reconstruction. Although presented separately for analytical purposes, the themes

were deeply interconnected, composing dynamic subjective processes related to adverse childhood experiences, family transmission of male models, and ways of elaborating masculinity.

Ambivalent masculine legacies

The participants' narratives showed that their first references of masculinity were constructed in contexts marked by affective ambivalence, relational instability, and contradictions in family male models. Fathers, grandfathers, stepfathers, and other male figures appeared simultaneously associated with protection, responsibility, work, and care, but also with violence, alcoholism, emotional absence, affective rigidity, and unpredictability. In the accounts, admiration, resentment, identification, and rejection coexisted in an intertwined manner, composing masculine experiences marked by persistent affective tensions.

In different narratives, family male figures appeared simultaneously as sources of care and suffering. P1 describes having been "introduced to different masculinities," recognizing contradictory references between father and grandfather. While the father offered him the possibility of an affectionate masculinity: "My father allowed me to be an affectionate man ... a man does not need to be rude," the grandfather represented a model associated with traditional virility and male infidelity: "A man was supposed to be naughty, a man was supposed to be a womanizer." The ambivalence is summarized when the participant describes the grandfather as "an excellent grandfather" and, at the same time, "a terrible husband."

The coexistence of affective presence and emotional absence also permeated different accounts. P3 describes a family environment marked by adult fragility: "I look around and I don't see safety anywhere," but reports occasional encounters of intense affection with his father: "Every time we met, he was very affectionate." The expectation surrounding the father's arrival reveals a masculine experience constructed between momentary affection and structural absence. Similarly, P4 describes his father as someone he deeply admired: "My father was a guy I wanted to be," while simultaneously associating him with alcoholism, instability, and the inability to sustain bonds: "My father never finished anything he started; including, he never finished being a father." P4 also describes an intense but unpredictable father figure: "When he was there, he was an omnipresent figure, but many times he was not there."

P5's narrative reveals experiences marked by paternal absence and coexistence with contradictory male models: "I was basically raised without my father's presence. My father abandoned my mother when I was a baby and even tried to kill me." At the same time, he

describes his grandfather as an affectionate figure, but also associated with naturalized sexist practices: “My grandfather was much more affectionate, but looking at it through the lens of masculinity, he was the typical shameless old man.” The coexistence of care, domination, and violence appears recurrently in the narrative.

P6 describes family masculinity as marked by emotional disorganization and paternal alcoholism: “I realized how toxic most of the masculinities around me were,” describing a father who “went into heavier alcoholism” and who “could not demonstrate affection in an affectionate way.” The narrative suggests that the father’s physical presence coexisted with significant difficulties in affective expression and emotional care.

P7 describes masculine experiences strongly associated with violence and aggressiveness inherited as positive references. He reports growing up hearing stories about his father’s fights: “My father always told stories from when he was a teenager, when he was young and such, only fights; I thought that was amazing.” The paternal great-grandfather appears as an extreme figure within this legacy, a man who had killed people, whose stories the father told “in a certain way, with pride.” Throughout the interview, P7 recognizes having incorporated these values from an early age, describing a trajectory marked by recurrent episodes of violence that he considered natural, but only later began to question.

The fragmentation of masculine references also appeared as a recurring element. “I have three fathers: my father, my godfather, and my stepfather, but if you add them all up, they still don’t make one,” says P8, describing male figures perceived as insufficient and emotionally incomplete. In P9, ambivalence is condensed in a metaphor he himself constructed: “I was generated by a wolf and a snake.” The father is described simultaneously as protective and threatening: “My father was extremely angry. He was protective, but he was rigid.” The account associates masculinity, care, and fear within the same relational experience.

Finally, P10 describes an experience marked by contradictions between sensitivity and rigidity within family male models. He states that his father “was a very sensitive person, he was the man who cried; he was an empathetic person,” but also reproduced discourses associated with traditional masculinity, saying that “men don’t cry.”

The narratives therefore indicate that participants learned forms of masculinity in contexts in which care and violence, protection and fear, presence and absence were frequently associated. Rather than stable and coherent male models, the accounts describe experiences marked by contradictions, fragmentations, and affective ambiguities that traversed different family generations.

Invisible loyalties and transgenerational repetition

The narratives revealed the recurrent presence of masculine patterns transmitted across generations, especially those related to alcoholism, violence, affective absence, and emotional distancing. In many accounts, fathers, grandfathers, and other men in the family reproduced similar ways of dealing with suffering, authority, affection, and conflict, suggesting family continuities that crossed different generations. Participants frequently demonstrated recognition of these repetitions throughout their histories, although at different levels of awareness and elaboration.

Alcoholism constituted the most recurrent pattern in the narratives, but its presence assumed different forms according to each family trajectory. In some cases, it was possible to identify an explicit chain of transmission across generations. P4 describes that his grandfather and father shared the same pattern: “He and my father had the same alcoholism problem,” directly associating the deterioration of the family’s male trajectories with alcohol use across generations. In P6, the paternal grandfather and father drank simultaneously in the same house: the father “sometimes at nine-thirty in the morning, already had a *caipirinha* in his hand,” while the grandfather “would go drink at a bar nearby or buy a bottle of *cachaça* and hide it,” revealing that the pattern crossed two male generations within the same domestic space. P10’s paternal grandfather “also had problems with alcohol” and died young. The father followed a similar trajectory, abusing alcohol and also dying prematurely.

In the other participants, alcoholism did not constitute a direct chain of transmission, but appeared as a persistent adverse experience that organized suffering and subjectivity from childhood onward. P1 grew up living with his maternal grandfather’s alcoholism, who “drank, crashed the car, put himself in risky situations,” generating a domestic atmosphere of tension and unpredictability. P8 describes that “for a long time, the word that made me start crying was ‘last round,’” because his father remained for long periods at the bar, and that “there wasn’t money for several other things, but there was never a shortage of money for drinking”—a synthesis of a childhood marked by the centrality of alcohol in family organization. P9 reports that “my uncle drank so much, so much, that he died of cirrhosis,” associating alcoholism with the rigidity of his maternal grandparents and the mental health problems that spread through the family: “These are mental situations that I think were very much part of how my grandmother and grandfather treated them—anyway, the cycle.” In none of these cases did the participants reproduce the pattern of alcoholism in their own lives, but all carried the marks of

living with it, especially the affective unpredictability, emotional absence, and relational instability produced by abusive alcohol use in male reference figures.

The transmission of violent patterns of dealing with conflict and exercising authority presented a more explicit and direct intergenerational chain. P3 describes a genealogy of violence that goes back to his great-grandfather: “His father beat him, humiliated him, and he did that to my father,” revealing how aggressiveness and humiliation were transmitted from generation to generation, although transformed over time: P3’s father did not reproduce the physical violence he had received, but P3 recognizes that he inherited dysfunctional relational patterns that manifest more subtly in his affective relationships, which he actively seeks to change: “I don’t want to be that human being who does this to the person he loves most.”

In P7, the chain of violence is more direct and extensive. The maternal grandfather was a severe alcoholic and violent, “drank about three liters of cachaça a day” and “was arrested twice, once for beating my grandmother.” The father reproduced patterns of physical aggressiveness with his children. P7, in turn, recognizes having reproduced these patterns in his affective relationships: “I have committed a lot of psychological violence” and even defended violent practices in childrearing: “You have to give a few slaps, you have to hit them, because sometimes they become unbearable.” Awareness of this chain was what motivated him to seek therapy, “precisely to try to break this chain that has been dragging on in my family for a long time, the violence against children.” This participant was the one who most explicitly named transgenerational transmission as a problem to be interrupted.

In some narratives, transgenerational repetition was associated less with explicit violence or alcoholism and more with the transmission of forms of loneliness, self-sufficiency, and emotional distancing. P2 identifies this movement directly when stating that “the pattern repeats itself” and that “the strongest masculine legacy is rowing alone,” recognizing that he ended up reproducing his father’s mode of functioning: “I ended up rowing like him, like, alone.” In P6, the father’s emotional absence produced a family environment in which the mother assumed all responsibilities, while the father became functionally absent: “My mother taking care of the house, everyone, responsible for bringing in the money, organizing the finances, putting the house in order, and my father sometimes working, sometimes not working, drinking in this more disorganizing dynamic.” P6 recognizes having inherited from this environment a tendency toward excessive self-sufficiency that he later needed to learn to question.

The narratives also revealed repetitions related to paternal absence and difficulty sustaining family bonds across generations. P3 describes a chain of relational instability: “My parents separated when I was four, I had stepfathers, she stayed with my first stepfather until I was eleven, and then she already got into another one. But all these relationships were relationships that were not healthy,” adding that “my mother had three marriages and had a child with each one,” revealing that the difficulty of sustaining consistent affective bonds repeated from generation to generation without any male figure managing to interrupt the pattern. In P5, paternal absence became inscribed in everyday life in concrete and lasting ways: “He didn’t show up on my birthday, much less with the bicycle, so much so that I still don’t ride a bicycle today.” P9 describes perceiving in himself elements associated with the father figure, especially related to emotional explosiveness: “I was explosive and that scared me a lot,” recognizing that the rigidity inherited from the family environment had become installed in him before he was able to name it.

The narratives therefore indicate that transgenerational patterns are not reproduced in a linear or identical manner across generations. They transform, shift, and assume new forms, but maintain an underlying continuity that silently organizes participants’ relational and affective experiences. Alcoholism, violence, emotional absence, and self-sufficiency appeared as recurring elements of these family transmissions, although taking different configurations in each trajectory.

Differentiation, rupture, and reflective reconstruction

Despite the consistent presence of transgenerational patterns related to violence, alcoholism, emotional absence, and affective rigidity, the narratives also revealed movements of questioning, differentiation, and reconstruction in relation to the masculinities learned throughout childhood and adolescence. These movements appeared in different forms among participants, involving gradual processes of reviewing behaviors, affective relationships, ways of caring, and ways of understanding what it means to be a man.

In different accounts, differentiation appeared associated with the need to interrupt patterns perceived as producing suffering. P1 describes that “I needed to distance myself in order to get closer again,” referring to temporary distancing from parental figures as part of reorganizing family relationships. He also reports having sat “with each one separately to forgive them and ask for forgiveness,” and states that “spirituality helps me construct an identity, a meaning, a sense of why I live.” In P2, the movement of change appears more

gradual, related to the attempt to make more flexible forms of functioning marked by self-sufficiency and isolation: “I started molding myself, opening up more; I wanted to get closer to people.”

The narratives also revealed that awareness of inherited patterns did not necessarily mean immediate interruption of these behaviors. P3 declares: “I don’t want to be that human being who does this to the person he loves most,” while at the same time recognizing difficulties in modifying certain emotional and relational reactions. P4, in turn, describes a continuous process of review, stating that “I want to discover who I am” and that “if someone convinces me that I’m wrong, I change my mind,” indicating openness to revising consolidated positions. Similarly, P6 describes that, despite his efforts to differentiate himself from family models, “if I go on automatic, it catches me,” but also reports concrete movements of change, such as “being less self-sufficient all the time” and “counting on and accepting help from other people.” He defines masculinity as “an exercise that I am always doing.”

In several accounts, therapy was associated with processes of reviewing family masculine experiences. P7 states that the main reason he sought therapy was “precisely to understand my position in this relationship that I’m going to have with L. [daughter].” The birth of his daughter also appears as an important milestone in his process of reviewing his own masculine references, especially regarding forms of authority and care. He began to question “what kind of male presence I want to have,” differentiating between “the guy who commands respect” and “the guy who instills fear.” Fatherhood also appears in P8 as an element associated with interrupting family patterns related to alcoholism: “G. [son] arrived, I don’t drink anymore. I only drink non-alcoholic beer. G. is not going to go through what I went through.”

In P5 and P9, movements of reconstruction appear related to intense experiences of psychological suffering. P5 describes the suicide attempt as a milestone in reorganizing his own trajectory, later stating that “the person does not want to kill themselves; they want to get rid of the pain they are feeling” and that “I am not alive for nothing.” He also defines himself as a “man, sexist in deconstruction,” recognizing simultaneously the persistence and revision of certain learned patterns. P9, in turn, describes a path of differentiation from his own family experiences, reporting that “from two quarrelsome people, I chose peace – from two people who hit each other, I chose to intervene, from two people who insult each other, I chose calm.” He also states that “awareness was awakened from so much frustration, so much disappointment, so much anguish,” associating the process of change with the need to differentiate himself from the family experiences he had lived through.

In P10, movements of differentiation appear associated with sexuality, gender roles, and experiences of belonging. He describes that “today I no longer need to reaffirm this all the time,” referring to his relationship with his own masculinity, and adds that “I like to play with these gender roles.” He also reports that “we are in the adoption process,” indicating the construction of new forms of parenthood and care. At the end of the interview, he describes that “many things have converged for me to be doing well like this today.”

The narratives therefore indicate that participants did not describe the masculinities learned in childhood as fixed or immutable experiences. Although family patterns remained present in different ways, the accounts also revealed movements of review, questioning, and differentiation in relation to inherited masculine experiences. Therapy, fatherhood, affective relationships, spirituality, and experiences of suffering appeared, in different trajectories, associated with processes of reorganizing ways of living and understanding masculinity.

DISCUSSION

The results presented make it possible to understand how 10 adult men who experienced adverse childhood experiences construct meanings about their masculinities from family legacies marked by ambivalence, transgenerational repetition, and gradual movements of differentiation. The analysis of their narratives revealed that masculinity was not learned as a coherent and stable model, but as a field of tension in which care and violence, presence and absence, identification and rejection coexisted persistently. These findings dialogue with the literature on adverse childhood experiences, masculinities, and transgenerational transmission, pointing to the complexity of the processes through which men construct meanings about themselves from the family relationships within which they grew up.

The understanding of masculinities as configurations of practices historically produced in specific relational contexts, as proposed by Connell (2005) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2013), is directly supported by the findings of this study. In none of the narratives analyzed did masculinity emerge as a singular identity or linear inheritance; on the contrary, it appeared as the result of continuous negotiations among contradictory models, unspoken relational expectations, and affective bonds marked by suffering and ambivalence. This finding reinforces the perspective that masculinities are not transmitted as explicit content, but learned in the everyday practices of family relationships, in gestures, silences, absences, and ways of dealing with conflict and affection that the men around the participants demonstrated, or failed to

demonstrate. For Connell et al. (2005), masculinities are social constructions continuously negotiated in everyday interactions, especially within family relationships, and the narratives of the participants in this study illustrate this process precisely, revealing men who grew up immersed in plural masculinities, none of them coherent enough to offer a stable reference.

This ambivalence in male references is also supported by systemic and transgenerational perspectives. For Bowen (1991), subjective development occurs in a permanent tension between belonging and differentiation, a tension that is first organized within family relationships. The male figures described by participants, simultaneously objects of identification and rejection, constitute the relational field in which this tension is established from childhood onward. The fact that no participant received a coherent and stable male model suggests that ambivalence was not an individual accident in each trajectory, but a structural characteristic of the family field in which these men grew up. This finding is consistent with Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark's (1983) understanding of the family as a system of loyalties and relational obligations that organize subjective experience even when they are not consciously recognized: participants grew up linked to male models that generated suffering, but from which they could not simply detach themselves, because these models were also sources of belonging, identity, and family recognition.

The dimension of alcoholism, present in practically all narratives, deserves specific attention in this context. In different accounts, alcohol appeared not only as an individual behavioral pattern, but as an organizer of family dynamics, associated with affective unpredictability, deterioration of bonds, and deterioration of male trajectories across generations. Kalmakis and Chandler (2014) identify unpredictability as one of the most harmful dimensions of adverse childhood experiences, insofar as it compromises attachment and emotional regulation processes that develop within primary relationships. Felitti et al. (1998) also indicate that living with family alcoholism constitutes one of the adverse experiences most strongly associated with negative outcomes throughout the life cycle, a finding that directly resonates with the trajectories of participants in this study, in which alcoholism was associated not only with immediate suffering, but with the transgenerational transmission of patterns of emotional absence, violence, and relational instability.

It is precisely in this transgenerational dimension that the findings of this study resonate most strongly with the perspective of Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1983). The concept of invisible loyalties, ethical and relational bonds that connect family members across generations, organizing expectations of belonging and relational obligation often unconsciously, helps

explain why certain masculine patterns are reproduced even when participants themselves recognize them as sources of suffering. In different narratives, participants described simultaneous movements of recognition, criticism, and repetition of inherited patterns, reproducing in their own relationships forms of violence, emotional distancing, or self-sufficiency received from fathers and grandfathers, even without consciously intending to do so.

This phenomenon is consistent with what Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1983) describe as the organizing force of invisible loyalties: it is not conscious intentions that determine transmission, but bonds of belonging and obligation operating below the threshold of awareness. Bowen's (1991) notion of differentiation of self complements this understanding by indicating that interrupting these patterns requires not only intellectual recognition of the inheritance received, but a process of constructing emotional autonomy that allows the individual to position themselves critically in relation to family history without severing the bonds of belonging that sustain identity.

Recent studies have indicated that men exposed to adverse childhood experiences frequently construct adaptive strategies associated with emotional toughness, relational hypervigilance, and silencing of suffering (Levell, 2020; Zaniewski et al., 2022). The findings of this study confirm this pattern, but add a dimension that the literature does not always address with equal emphasis: participants' awareness of these patterns and the active efforts of transformation that many undertook throughout adult life. In this sense, the results dialogue with Callaghan et al. (2025), for whom men exposed to violent or neglectful family contexts do not reproduce such experiences linearly or automatically, but often develop ambivalent movements of identification, criticism, resistance, and re-elaboration of learned masculine references. The trajectories of P3 and P7, who sought therapy precisely to interrupt a chain of violence spanning generations, or P8, who stopped drinking with the arrival of his son, or P9, who constructed a path of radical differentiation through deliberate and solitary choices, are examples that illustrate this capacity for agency even in the face of dense and persistent legacies.

In this process of differentiation, several resources and experiences appeared in the narratives as organizing elements of transformation. Therapy, fatherhood, spirituality, intense psychological suffering, and significant affective relationships were mentioned by participants as milestones that precipitated or sustained movements of revising inherited masculinities. This diversity of paths is consistent with Bowen's (1991) perspective, according to which differentiation of self does not follow a single or predictable route, but is organized from the

specific relational and subjective conditions of each trajectory. Bianchi and Kublikowski (2022) and Bianchi (2026) reinforce this perspective by understanding the family as a system of affective relationships and belonging that perpetuates itself over time, ensuring its members not only biopsychosocial survival, but also conditions for transformation when individuals find resources to position themselves reflectively in relation to the inheritance received.

It is at this point that hooks' (2025) contribution becomes particularly relevant, as she argues that patriarchal culture imposes on men, from childhood onward, the suppression of vulnerability, affection, and the need for care as conditions for belonging to the male world. This process of suppression, learned in family relationships, reinforced in social interactions, and naturalized as an attribute of masculinity, is exactly what participants' narratives reveal: men who grew up in environments in which male affection was scarce, contradictory, or conditional, and who, throughout adult life, had to learn to recognize and name emotional needs that had been systematically silenced in their upbringing. For hooks (2025), transforming this condition does not involve denying masculinity, but constructing ways of being a man in which love, care, and vulnerability can be lived without threatening identity, which, to different degrees and in different forms, is precisely the project that participants in the present study describe themselves as constructing in their lives.

The findings therefore point to the need to understand the construction of masculinities in adverse contexts as a simultaneous process of transmission and transformation. Family legacies do not linearly determine masculine identities, but constitute the field of tension from which each individual constructs, with the resources available in their trajectory, their own ways of being a man. This understanding has relevant implications for clinical practice in psychology, especially in work with men seeking to elaborate adverse childhood experiences and re-signify the masculine references they received, opening space for more affective, reflective masculinities capable of sustaining bonds without resorting to violence, distancing, or the silencing of suffering.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study sought to understand the impact of transgenerational patterns on the construction of meanings attributed to masculinities by adult men who experienced adverse childhood experiences. The findings showed that masculinity was learned in contexts marked by affective ambivalence, transgenerational repetition, and gradual movements of

differentiation, processes that were deeply interconnected and cannot be understood in isolation.

The analysis of the narratives indicated that adverse childhood experiences do not linearly determine masculine identities, but constitute the relational field from which each individual constructs, with the resources available in their trajectory, their own ways of signifying and living masculinity. Alcoholism, violence, emotional absence, and affective rigidity appeared as patterns transmitted across generations, but also as experiences that, when reflectively elaborated, could become starting points for movements of transformation and differentiation.

These findings have relevant implications for clinical practice in psychology. Work with men who experienced adverse childhood experiences requires attention to the transgenerational legacies that silently organize their ways of relating, exercising authority, and dealing with suffering, dimensions that often do not arrive at the clinic already named, but manifest themselves in relational difficulties, affective rigidity, and the silencing of vulnerability. Understanding these patterns as products of family transmission, rather than as individual failures, opens space for more sensitive and effective interventions.

As a limitation, the sample consisted exclusively of Brazilian cisgender men, predominantly White and with higher education, which restricts the scope of the results. On the other hand, the processes described in this study may contribute to the construction of clinical spaces for reflexivity regarding masculine identities and the ways in which they are produced across family trajectories. Future studies may investigate the specificities of masculinities in contexts of greater social vulnerability. The inclusion of intersectional perspectives, articulating gender, color/ethnicity, and class, may significantly enrich the understanding of processes of transmission and transformation of masculinities in adverse contexts.

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