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## FROM TOXIC TO PRODUCTIVE MASCULINITY



The slap felt round the world.

That's how NEPC Fellow Shaun Harper of the University of Southern California [described](#) Will Smith's now infamous reaction to comedian Chris Rock after Rock made an insulting joke about Smith's wife Jada Pinkett Smith while hosting the 94<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards March 27<sup>th</sup>.

Unfortunately, in addition to providing fodder for countless (virtual and in-person) water cooler conversations, the Slap was also seen by teenagers and children. And therein lies the problem. Because, as Harper notes, the Slap was a textbook manifestation of “toxic masculinity.”

The slap is one that many men might have felt compelled to mete out—because boys and men aren't prepared to react differently.

Harper defines “toxic masculinity” as “demonstrations of boyhood and manhood that are harmful to oneself and others.” As he explained in the [Opinion section of the \*Los Angeles Times\*](#), toxic masculinity is “a cocktail of the worst behaviors and attitudes a dude can have. It causes him to act without self-control and to perform macho stereotypes.”

“But,” he asks, “what if slapping or fighting someone isn't what the disrespected person wants or needs? Or even if it is, and the person says so, why not take a moment to pursue a range of alternatives to violence?”

What if Smith had embraced “productive” rather than toxic masculinity? That alternative is developed in a 2013 [article](#) published in the peer-reviewed journal *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* and co-authored by Harper and Frank Harris III of San

Diego State University.

Their study was based on interviews with 50 undergraduate fraternity members who had expressed, via questionnaires developed to assess productive masculinities, high levels of concern when “brothers in their chapter behaved in ways that [were] inconsistent with the espoused principles and values of the fraternity, as well as when chapter members said or did something racist, sexist, and homophobic.”

These young men adopted a range of strategies to embrace productive masculinities, including challenging the behaviors of their fraternity brothers. In some cases, they had even pursued disciplinary measures against fellow fraternity members who behaved in a sexist, homophobic or racist manner. They had also, when recruiting new members, focused on diversity and personal values.

“Men in this study not only deemed it important to be good men themselves, but also assumed responsibility to help their fraternity brothers be the best men they could be,” Harris and Harper wrote. When their brothers said or did something racist, homophobic, or sexist, they did not sit there in silence. Nor did they use physical violence. Instead, they responded by modeling “productive masculinity.”

In the words of one interviewee:

I mean, there’s a way to do it. If someone says something wrong or says something bad, you don’t immediately just jump on their ass. I guess the respectful way to do it is pull them aside and kind of talk to them about it and ask them, ‘Hey, why did you say that? What made you say this? And why do you feel this way?’

How much heartbreak, harm, and bad behavior might be avoided if more boys and men were taught to use this type of approach, to embrace productive masculinity from the outset rather than spending their lives enacting or recovering from its toxic counterpart?

Harris and Harper found that conditions that encouraged productive masculinity included a willingness to authentically embrace positive values such as integrity and character, the availability of leadership experiences that foster personal growth, the presence of a critical mass of likeminded fraternity brothers, and the opportunity to interact with a diverse set of likeminded counterparts from outside their immediate orbits.

Educators, the researchers note, have a role to play in creating and fostering this type of environment. This may include using films and books that critically examine toxic masculinity to encourage conversation and reflection, providing carefully structured service learning opportunities, and partnering with role models who embrace productive masculinity.

After all, if K-12 and higher education had provided more of these experiences, the Slap might never have happened in the first place.

“It could have saved Smith from tarnishing one of the most rewarding nights of his career, as he won an Oscar for the first time. Now an unfortunate and avoidable cloud will forever shadow that moment,” Harper wrote.

## NEPC Resources on Gender Issues

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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