

Multiple Masculinities and the Schooling of Boys

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Many disciplines have discussed masculinity in often quite polarized discourses. Resulting theories and accounts fail to describe adequately its complex structure. One consequence is the lack of a suitable platform for studying masculinity in schools. Recent discussion of “multiple masculinities” bridges these discourses to present a pluralist interpretation of how boys and men construct and enact their masculinities. It provides an analytical tool for examining how masculinities are built in school and offers educators a three-level strategy for working with boys.

La masculinité fait l'objet de discours souvent très polarisés dans bien des disciplines. Les théories et les explications qui en résultent ne décrivent pas adéquatement sa structure complexe. L'une des conséquences est l'absence d'une plateforme convenable pour l'étude de la masculinité dans les écoles. L'examen récent de la question des « multiples masculinités » fait le lien entre ces discours afin de présenter une interprétation pluraliste de la manière dont les garçons et les hommes se forment et vivent leurs masculinités. Il fournit un outil analytique pour étudier comment les masculinités se construisent à l'école et propose aux éducateurs une stratégie tripartite dans leur travail auprès des garçons.

Recent attention to boys and their schooling is creating for educational researchers an unprecedented demand for information concerning adolescent masculinity. What do we have to offer? The cupboard appears relatively bare. Gender research in several disciplines over the past few decades has necessarily focused on women's issues. The resulting theories of masculinity have been limited in scope and, unfortunately, serve boys poorly. They developed as attendant information while researchers examined the situation of women in our society and schools and, for expedience, tend towards monolithic, categorical descriptions of men. They therefore fail to accommodate the complex range of masculinities in our schools, leaving boys' gender construction in education largely unknown.

Recently, one strand of discussion stemming from feminist and pro-feminist post-structural scholarship has attempted to pluralize gender. This strand offers informative analyses of boys' experiences in schools. I argue that a conception of *multiple masculinities* will yield realistic interpretations of boys' behaviours and that *boy-specific* research conducted

from this perspective will lead to successful strategies for gender-equal schooling. However, the dangers in past limited analyses of masculinity remain. Gender researchers need to stay focused on boy-specific research that examines the intricacies of *the methods boys use* to construct gender identities and avoid premature and counter-productive equality-of-opportunity workshops. The long-term benefits we seek for girls and boys will be achieved by changing many boys' behaviours and attitudes from *within* masculinity.

First, in a discussion of "What is Masculinity?" I argue that no one academic discipline provides us with a robust model of masculinity useable by those working with contemporary youth. Second, in "How is Masculinity Multiple?" I argue that recent pluralist interpretations of masculinity link features of these discipline approaches into a "middle ground" that focuses attention on boys without allowing such investigations to become a sophisticated way of ignoring girls' needs. Finally, in "Multiple Masculinities and Schooling" I comment on the strengths and weaknesses of some classroom strategies that have emerged from this approach and suggest key qualities that future strategies with boys should exhibit.

WHAT IS MASCULINITY?

Some psychologists would have us view masculinity as a generalized construct, applying characteristics specific to individuals to men generally. Terman and Miles (1936) identified a duality of masculine and feminine characteristics. For example, males' aggressiveness, strength, and competitiveness were balanced by females' compliance, nurturance, and cooperativeness. A generation later, Bem (1974) investigated the socialization processes surrounding these perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Men's *behaviour* was categorized into "gender personalities," a classic example being Brannon's (1976) "no sissy stuff," "the big wheel," "the sturdy oak," and "give 'em hell" — definable qualities characterizing how men behaved. And men's *attitudes* were catalogued as, for example, rational and linear, tough minded and analytical, and individualized and subjective (Collins, 1974). Sex-role theory facilitated significant feminist advances in education by providing a theoretical platform for exposing rampant sexism and gender stereotyping in schools, in texts (Brannon, 1976), through patterns of authority, in classroom interactions (Sears & Feldman, 1974), in curriculum, and through academic streaming (Sadker, Sadker, & Steindam, 1989). However, it also limited our understanding by implying that men lead pre-determined lives with little free agency. Men were "more like actors on a stage, playing out pre-scripted parts. To be a man was to play out a certain role. 'Masculinity' represented a set of lines

and stage direction which males had to learn to perform” (Edley & Wetherell, 1996, p. 100). Sex-role theory was inadequate to present masculinity as a set of cultural practices influenced by and influencing the social environment (Hearn, 1996).

Psychoanalysis typically viewed masculinity as the product of interplay between the unconscious and conscious. Sexuality and gender were co-constructed through a long process of conflict rather than being determined by nature. The unconscious and the conscious were gendered and exerted a powerful influence on men through timeless truths or archetypes. These ideas formed the nucleus of an influential genre of scholarship that critiqued education as symptomatic of society’s structure and predominantly concerned with the “regeneration” of male norms. Grumet (1988) described education as the process of “transference.” For her, it was a “symbolic, phallic order created by men,” and pedagogy reproduced the repression of women (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995, p. 378).

The flaw in this approach was viewing masculinity as embedded in the psyche and therefore somehow removed from men’s actual practices, which encouraged the articulation of atavistic definitions of masculinity. In an attempt to appeal to a timeless and essential quality of manliness, Bly (1990), for example, used metaphor and myth to characterize late-twentieth-century masculinity and tied modern “crises” of masculinity to the “wild man within” seeking identification. Boys and men, he argued, were victims of a society that no longer valued the essential characteristics of what it was to “be a man.” In the process, he ignored women and the need to link men’s “crises” with their role in creating the fundamental inequities suffered by women in contemporary society.

Some anthropologists studied masculinity from a cross-cultural perspective, highlighting its diverse representations and multiple meanings in non-Western cultures. Mead (1935) reported the diversity of interpretations of masculinity and femininity in South Pacific cultures, Herdt (1981) described ritualized homosexual practices that constituted a rite of passage towards manhood, and Meigs (1990) illustrated the existence of quite divergent masculinity practices among New Guinea cultures. Such studies demonstrate the futility of providing positivist theories of masculinity across cultures, suggest that the concept of “masculinity” is an “ethnocentric or even a Eurocentric notion” (Hearn, 1996, p. 209), and do much to question the existence of masculinity as “object.”

Whereas anthropological studies have highlighted cultural diversities in masculinity, historical studies have focused on its multiple representations over time, elaborating the *evolutionary* character of masculinity. Studies of historically changing conceptions of male roles have helped show the socially constructed origins of late-twentieth-century conceptions of mas-

culinity. There have never been “absolute” manly qualities; rather, these have evolved over time (see, for example, Seccombe, 1986, on the values associated with the concept of male bread winning, or Rutherford, 1996, on the role of fatherhood).

Some sociologists saw their discipline as best positioned to account for masculinity’s myriad representations racially, historically, culturally, and sexually. Connell (1995) argued for a view of masculinity as inherently patriarchal and hegemonic, continually in a state of development but always in conflict with (rather than in isolation from) femininity due to issues of power. While sexuality, race, and class created social hierarchies, men acted in concert to oppress women (Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 1996). Although, I will argue, sociological analyses of masculinity provide suitable theoretical foundations for studying boys, sociology’s attack on patriarchy was viewed as a “killer discourse” aimed at eradicating all that is masculine in society and thus limited in its ability to effect significant change with men in society and boys in schools (Tacey, 1997).

Psychology, anthropology, history, and sociology provide a complex web of knowledge about masculinity as a set of definable and measurable actions and attitudes, as innate qualities embedded in the psyche, and more recently as a complex set of behaviours with different meanings culturally and historically and regulated by interactions with other men, women, and power structures in society. Given these diverse accounts, it is unsurprising that there is no widely accepted definition of masculinity that helps to clarify its application in social settings such as schools. Is masculinity innate or a product of society? Is it predetermined or actively constructed? Is it an entity to be worn, like an overcoat, or is it embedded, through daily practices, in boys’ very “beings”? How can we, as educators, use such a range of theories to help us better understand boys’ issues in schools?

Attempts have been made to reify these disciplinary theories into readable images of masculinity. Unquestionably, feminism has succeeded in institutionalizing gender in sociological debate. Primarily concerned with the manifest inequities for women within society, feminists analyzed the gendered construction of society in two ways. Liberal feminism identified masculinity as the enactment of gender roles that limited girls’ and women’s access to all aspects of our society and culture, and it used sex-role theory to argue that sexism and gender stereotyping were rampant in schools. The aim was to achieve for women equity with men by legislating equality-of-opportunity strategies, applying androgyny theory (Bem, 1974), making all facets of education equally available to both sexes, and promoting gender-neutral schooling.

Radical feminism identified masculinity as the enactment of patriarchal, hegemonic values central to men’s very “beings,” values that intentionally

excluded women from practical and noetic power. It directly attacked masculinity as a patriarchy, questioned how it institutionalized and maintained hegemony, and focused on dismantling the power structures that maintained this patriarchy. For liberal feminists, sex-role theory was understood within a social-constructionist approach: Women and men were the same, gendered differences being engineered through social practices. Radical feminism's essentialist belief was that women have distinct qualities unavailable to men (Chodorow, 1978). It identified society as a masculine enterprise, dominated by a "masculine ethic of rationality." Men dominated the "public," the world of rationality, competitiveness, positivism, and linear thinking, while women occupied the "private," the world of mothering, emotion, expressiveness, and imagination.

Although feminism has contributed significantly to understanding the impact of masculine norms in our schools and society, it has had a mixed effect on our knowledge of masculinity as a concept. By critiquing masculinity as hegemonic, feminism assumed that men are universally privileged, giving little reason to problematize the construction of masculinity or explore its multi-layered structure. One legacy has been the perpetuation of a monolithic definition of masculinity — an image of a homogeneous and privileged entity. However, poststructural feminist explorations of gender that seek to unmask and deconstruct the "covert way of being" prevalent in a masculinized society have lately drawn attention to the social processes by which men marginalize women. This has led to critical examination of men's activities that, even if they are at odds with concepts and theories of masculinity, in fact cement power structures in society (Segal, 1997). Discussions of gender have, as a result, begun to explore multiple masculinities, both differences among men and the ways in which ideas of masculinity change according to time, the event, and the perspectives of those involved. Such analyses have encouraged some feminists and pro-feminists to question a "universal" interpretation of masculinity (Martino, 1995), to recognize that no definitive sets of male and female values exist, and to acknowledge that it may be necessary "to reconsider their [feminists'] most fundamental questions: who are the losers and who are the winners?" (Soerensen, 1992, p. 208).

Feminism has not been the only voice in the masculinity debate. Various men's movements have been represented for a considerable time. Messner (1997) attempted the difficult task of mapping this political landscape. He identified 11 men's movements occupying three polarized terrains he called the "anti-feminist," the "anti-patriarchal," and the "racial and sexual."¹ Many of these movements, having social-activist rationales, represented the overtly political in masculinity discussion. However, Messner's "mapping" can be applied to education: A number of these political

movements also provide theoretical platforms for educational positions. The rationales behind, for example, all-boy schools (Hawley, 1991), “feminized” schools (Podles, 1995), equality-of-opportunity measures (Kenway & Willis, 1997), and antihomophobia schooling (Redman, 1996) map neatly and remind us that masculinity issues in education are widely varied and deeply rooted in social politics.

Pro-feminist scholarship has become the predominant vehicle for elaborating contemporary sociological theories of gender. In Messner’s (1997) mapping, it occupies a critical fourth terrain, creating a middle ground by appropriating and synthesizing some key ideologies from the other terrains. Occupied principally by social feminist men (and in academe, pro-feminist men) and lying between the essentialist defensiveness of “mythopoetical” theorists, antifeminist masculinity politics, and antipatriarchal radical feminist politics, it articulates a pluralistic vision of masculinity. Pro-feminism has two dominant characteristics: It recognizes power as the central function of masculinity and masculinity as a complex social hierarchy. Pro-feminism has its roots in sociology, in seeking to elaborate a cultural (rather than sex-role or psychoanalytical) construction of gender theory, and in feminism, in acknowledging the centrality of patriarchy and power in gender issues. Pro-feminist authors such as Hearn (1996), Connell (1987, 1995), and Mac an Ghail (1994, 1996) have used feminist power theories in constructing theories of masculinity to explain the marginalizing not only of women but also of men on the basis of class, sexuality, and race. Their work has helped build an image of masculinity as a varied and varying complex of values and beliefs underlying men’s practices, not a set of characteristics shared by all men. This multiple-masculinities approach is, I believe, the seed from which much significant work with boys in schools will grow during the next decade.

The academic disciplines present confusing rationales for studying boys. Jungian theory explains some boys’ poor behaviour and sexist beliefs as the product of repressed archetypes; therefore, Podles (1995) would argue, we must examine boys from the perspective that they are confused and misbehave because they no longer have clear masculine roles. Sex-role theory qualifies and quantifies masculinity as a set of attitudes and behaviour; therefore, we must examine boys from the perspective that their sexist preference for school subjects, their tendency to discredit things deemed feminine (Thompson, 1986), and their propensity for violence (Skelton, 1996), among other things, are the enactment of gender roles. Sociological theories present masculinity as an investment in male-dominated historical and cultural social power structures and boys’ behaviour as defending that system. Therefore, we must examine boys in order to understand men’s aggressive oppression of women (Connell, 1995).

Common to this literature is a negativity about boys: It has presumed a mandate to identify what is wrong with masculinity, ignoring the possibilities that many boys are “okay” and that certain schools and curricula encourage boys to develop egalitarian concepts of gender. Few researchers have looked for what is good in boys’ actions in schools. Three assumptions in the current literature limit this research.

The first is essentialist thinking which assumes that masculinity is unchanging and common to all men. Essentialist thinking supposes that masculinity is an innate and inseparable part of men’s psyches. A monolithic view of men as privileged, women as oppressed, requires gender to be a static, pre-determined system of sex-role enactment. The genders, however, do not form harmonious wholes; they are not pre-determined entities constructed of particular behaviours, actions, and beliefs that are automatically adopted according to sex. Consequently, this binary structure of gender precludes investigating the complex structure of masculinity and has largely ignored problematizing men as part of the *solution* to gender problems.

Second, this shared essence is assumed to manifest itself in precisely the same way in all boys. The “essential” characteristics of gender just discussed are useful as theoretical distinctions in academic debate but often inaccurate and lacking in scope when applied to specific boys. To relax in the assumption that boys exhibit identical gender characteristics is to create monolithic stereotypes applicable to very few individuals. Such categories are of very little practical use when dealing with boys in schools on a day-to-day basis and extremely difficult to apply in research in schools on actual boys. But they are widespread, and the accompanying value assumption can be quite damaging in peoples’ lives (Connell, 1989; Jackson & Salisbury, 1996).

Third, contemporary masculinity discourses have largely failed by constructing images of masculinity that are removed from men’s actual practices. Hegemonic patriarchal theory is effective for explaining the oppressed status of women, and men “on the street” may perhaps acknowledge hegemony over women in theory. But few would agree that they live it. This makes the theory difficult to use in ethnographic research because it diverges from participants’ perceptions. Men’s movements have also created images of masculine behaviour that are idealistic, focus dangerously on men’s issues in isolation from women, and are removed from what men actually do. This is apparent in the Jungian stereotypes of an archetypal male, in mythopoetic movements’ search for an inner essence or deep manliness, and in the espousing by single-sex boys’ schools of a formula for schooling “the man” (Hawley, 1991). These are not informative

interpretations of masculinity but abstractions from practical reality — or, at times, quite simply political manoeuvrings.

In these theories and discourses, no definitive account of masculinity is apparent, and no one approach readily addresses current problems of masculinity in schools. Contemporary research into boys' schooling requires not clinical or psychological abstraction but a *theoretical orientation that recognizes masculinity as the embodiment of boys' actions and beliefs*. It demands recognition that boys inhabit a variety of masculinities rather than one and that boys actively negotiate individual interpretations of masculinity and do not passively accept their gender as a set of pre-determined roles. Thus, *research must work from the basis that each boy's masculinity is unique and his actions are responsible for its structure*.

HOW IS MASCULINITY MULTIPLE?

The multiple-masculinities approach has four key characteristics. First, masculinity is a multiple entity. It is not homogeneous or reducible to a set of simple characteristics. Second, gender is constructed by individuals as well as by societal forces. Individuals do not automatically adopt pre-determined gender roles; they are continually active in building, negotiating, and maintaining perceptions of their gender. Third, gender is a relational construct. Boys and men do not construct their versions of masculinity apart from the influences of femininity or other men. Fourth, multiple masculinities diversify hegemonic power structures, rendering them more accessible to rehabilitation.

This approach provides a promising environment for analyzing masculinity, and it provides a framework for interpreting the interactions of men with men, men with women, and men with society. Whereas some past studies lacked credibility because they treated men as a unitary, homogeneous body (for example, Skelton, 1994), this approach frees boys from a limited definition of gender and gives credit to their attempts to negotiate individual versions of "manliness."

But the conception of masculinity as multiple has limitations. First, theorizing does not encompass nearly the range of masculinities that may exist, as masculinities are flexible and continually changing. One current limitation is, therefore, *a lack of ethnographic data to further our understanding of the concept*.

A second limitation is (illogically) a current tendency to treat individual males as having or enacting a single masculinity. Overly influenced perhaps by feminist hegemonic theory (see, for example, the categorizing of male teachers in Mac an Ghail, 1994), the field has fixed on hierarchies

of masculinities, creating an extraordinarily limited view of a complex social phenomenon. Such a hierarchical approach does little to recognize male mobility between masculinities at different times and places in reaction to varying stimuli. In short, *multiple masculinity theory currently lacks an account of intramascularity mobility.*

In effect, the approach creates the monolithic category it is trying to refute. Pro-feminist masculinist theory, which portrays all boys as participating in hegemony, should be challenged. Many boys construct versions of masculinity that recognize girls and women as their equals. Many react strongly to incidents of both masculinist and feminist oppressive behaviour. To classify them as part of a hegemonic order oversimplifies the structure of contemporary society and fails to acknowledge a powerful force within masculinity working *against* oppression and domination.

Pro-feminist masculinity theory needs to explore mobility between masculinities. The tensions among men's ideas and values, far from being the enactment of hegemonic masculinity, might become the basis for mediation among masculinities and make possible men's acceptance of "the other." It opens the door too to studies of how the epistemology and pedagogy of specific school subjects might facilitate antihegemonic practices.

MULTIPLE MASCULINITIES AND SCHOOLING

What are the practical implications of a multiple masculinities approach? How can it help a researcher understand and interpret boys' construction, maintenance, and mediation of masculinity in school? In a few instances it has been used as a basis for pedagogical gender strategies. Martino (1995) challenged students to explore gendered subjectivities in their responses to English texts. The students reified their own beliefs about sexuality, masculinity, and femininity through responses to characters portrayed in the stories. Some boys took overtly hegemonic stances, others had "atypical" gender attitudes. Nilan (1995) examined male and female students' constructions of gendered identities. By constructing characters and then analyzing them, the students explored how popular culture demarcates a unitary femininity and a unitary masculinity. Nilan concluded that interjecting feminist principles into such classrooms, though intended to multiply gender constructs, was likely to provoke outright rejection because it was perceived as imposed. Jackson and Salisbury (1996) explored the construction of sexual identities and their effects on boys' relationships with other boys and with girls. In role play, boys put themselves (as women) in the position of someone who is sexually intimidated in a variety of settings. They faced the feelings caused by such harassment, the injustice

of the situation, and the power of gendered identities to perpetuate such behaviours. Smith (1995) used “life histories” of a group of young male preservice social science teachers to explore how masculine identities were created and maintained in each student’s upbringing. One result was an awareness (identified in follow-up interviews) of the difference between the debilitating and limited nature of unitary masculinity and the freedom afforded by accepting a variety of masculinities.

The scarcity of such studies indicates that although schools and curriculum have been the sites and subjects of numerous gender studies, the multiplicity of masculinities has rarely been given specific attention. Perhaps due to the infancy of the idea of multiple masculinities, studies using a pluralist approach to masculinity have been limited by centring on identifying and elaborating characteristic behaviours and attitudes deemed to perpetuate oppression of women. They have focused on deconstructing and reconstructing masculinity in the classroom.

Three recent publications emphasize this point. Kenway and Willis (1997) summarize the structure and success of equality-of-opportunity programs in Australian schools. Working within an agenda of “gender reform,” the programs they cite had mixed success, the principal criterion appearing to be whether boys and male teachers accepted the feminist ideology of the projects. Despite noble aims, these strategies were meaningless to many boys, and many boys rejected a program that asked a lot in terms of rebuilding their social mores but offered little (other than a lightening of the burden of guilt) in return. The programs had unrealistic expectations and continued the error of pursuing an alternative masculinity with little relevance to boys’ actual experiences. In a similar vein, the “boy-strategies” reported by Browne and Fletcher (1995) assumed that boys were in some way a homogeneous group. Their defensiveness when faced with gender-equality programs was attributed to their “fragile” masculinity, poor self-esteem, and inability to construct relationships not based on power. We need to recognize that these attempts operate within a quite limiting structure — the assumption that all boys exhibit and enact a single homophobic, sexist, hegemonic masculinity, that they are young patriarchs in the making. There is little acknowledgment of males who do not fit this mould. In contrast, Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) offer a more sympathetic view of masculinity. They stress the difference between boys’ practices that represent multiple masculinities and the “cultural repertoire” of behaviours that men use to oppress women, thus recognizing that not all boys act alike.

One can sense the confusion of many boys who are led to confess their guilt for being partners in hegemony, homophobic, or potential sexual predators, when their lives never encompassed these experiences. These

approaches avoid the reality of multi-layered masculinities and the possibility that some young men enact masculinities that reject theoretical hegemonic norms. And such studies have not all come to grips with the debilitating — even marginalizing — effects on boys of diatribes that treat them as somehow incurably toxic.

Future research must not focus exclusively on the rehabilitation of masculinity. It should attempt to broaden current perceptions of masculinity to recognize the range of masculinities represented in schools. It should question the necessity of confession and attempt instead to focus debate on strategies that serve to strengthen the elements of curriculum that help boys reject hegemony.

Connell (1996) describes some boy-centred programs currently operating in Germany, England, and Australia and identifies three common aims. The first is to find strategies that focus on boys' relationships. Fostering competitiveness and the culture of school sports, for example, can work against this aim. Allowing for the development of a range of relationships in school provides the opportunity to explore and mediate differences on common ground, within defined parameters, and builds communication and conflict-resolution skills — all attributes that can certainly be to boys' advantage. The second aim is to concentrate on developing boys' levels of knowledge. Connell identifies the academic as only one form of knowledge to be addressed. Of equal importance is cultural knowledge, that is, recognizing alternative forms of representing truth and understanding cultural phenomena from the perspectives of others. The third aim concerns justice. Programs need to recognize that hegemonic practices of masculinity exert pressure on boys through marginalization ("othering" some boys' experiences), oppression (restricting some boys' opportunities for self-expression), and domination (restricting some boys' participation) to such an extent that young males often act in ways that do not represent their true attitudes and beliefs.

Connell's work maps relevant areas of concentration for masculinity strategies in schools. Research should focus on building theories of masculinity based on what boys see, say, and think every day and avoid being overly deterministic. It should look for "goodness" in boys' actions as well as hegemony and should identify instances of recognizing "the other," the acceptance of other representations of masculinity as equal. It should attempt to document equality in boys' relationships with other students. It should document boys' willingness to talk and to be accountable for their actions and personal epistemologies. It should search for and document actions that indicate boys' wishes for broader interpretations of academic and cultural knowledge.

Nothing less is at stake than the social and educational variables that encourage boys to determine *for themselves* the personal qualities that create fair and just gender identities. It is the immediate task of educational researchers to identify and examine how schools can help boys develop such identities. We must capture a view of young men that has somehow, so far, evaded our critical gaze.

NOTE

1. In Messner's metaphorical landscape, an organization's political ideology defines its terrain. For example, promise keepers and advocates of men's rights represent an anti-feminist backlash, radical feminist men are anti-patriarchal, and proponents of radicalized masculinity and gay liberation focus on racial and sexual identity.

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