



Why Study Men and Masculinities?

A Theorized Research Review

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ABSTRACT: Feminist scholars have long made the important and valid critique that nearly all knowledge production not explicitly labeled feminist has implicitly studied men. Nonetheless, feminist scholars and activists are increasingly recognizing the importance of explicitly investigating men as gendered beings. This paper argues that gender-aware studies of men and masculinities are in fact necessary for an intersectional analysis of gender relations, and that a better understanding of masculinity is necessary to reduce men's perpetration of violence and increase support for gender justice. It provides five mutually reliant reasons why studies of men and masculinities are necessary for understanding gender relations and beneficial for feminist projects for gender justice: that superordinate categories tend to go unmarked and thereby uncritiqued; that gender is relational; that investigating the social construction of masculinity calls men's superordinate status into question; that masculinity is one of the primary social forces currently stalling egalitarian social change; and that investigating masculinity highlights contradictions and cleavages where masculinity can be most effectively attacked.

KEYWORDS: men and masculinities, gender, superordinates, theory

American social science has historically tended to study “down,” investigating subordinated and oppressed groups (e.g. Liebow 1967; Whyte 1943); feminist sociology especially focuses on the lives and experiences of subordinated groups in the gender hierarchy, women and transgendered people. Because men are at the top



of the gender hierarchy in the United States, benefitting from the subordination of women and people of other genders, studying men and masculinity is “studying up.” Studying up began, in sociology, with investigations of class conflict, notably Marx’s *Capital* (1987) and C. Wright Mills’ *The Power Elite* (1956). The popularity of William Domhoff’s *Who Rules America*, (1967, 1983, 2006, 2009) and Shamus Khan’s *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School* (2012) show that studying up is still considered a pressing and valid area for class research.

Studying up in gender research – that is, studying the superordinate category “men” – is still occasionally met with resistance. Feminist scholars have long made the important and valid critique that nearly all knowledge production not explicitly labeled feminist has implicitly studied men. Some argued that studying subordinated groups is necessary for working towards equality and human liberation, while studying men re-centers men’s experiences, draws attention and resources away from women, and thereby supports the male supremacist status quo. Nonetheless, feminist scholars and activists are increasingly recognizing the importance of addressing or including men (Casey & Smith 2010; Connell 1987, 2000, 2005; England 2010; Esplen 2006; Gardiner 2002; Messner, Greenberg, and Peretz 2015; Pascoe 2007; Schilt 2006, 2010; White 2008; White & Peretz 2010). A better understanding of masculinity is necessary to reduce men’s perpetration of violence and increase support for gender justice, but no research-informed enumeration of the overarching theoretical reasons to study men and masculinities currently exists. In this essay, I argue that gender-aware studies of men and masculinities are in fact necessary for an intersectional analysis of gender relations, and beneficial for feminist projects for gender justice.

I provide five mutually reliant rationales for why studying men is worthwhile and important, not only for academic interest and “balance,” or even for accuracy, but indeed to strengthen feminist research and social change projects. The first is that superordinate categories like men and masculinities tend to go unmarked (Butler 1990; De Beauvoir 1975; Kimmel 1997; Kimmel and Messner 2009; Salzinger 2004), and correcting this oversight by making men and masculinities objects of study is crucial in making change possible. Secondly, gender is a relational social structure embedded in an intersectional matrix of domination, and therefore information about one part of the structure informs our knowledge about the rest of it: even a feminism that is totally and completely about women’s experiences

should investigate “how men gain, maintain, and use power to subordinate women” (Collins 1990, 2004; Hanmer 1990, p. 37; Salzinger 2004; Stansell 2010; Thorne 1993). Thirdly, investigating the social construction of masculinity denaturalizes both its form and its superiority, calling men’s superordinate social status into question, disputing the naturalness of hierarchical and dominance-based social structures, and illuminating the possibility of change. Fourth, recent research suggests that the social forces currently stalling gender-egalitarian social change have more to do with ideas about masculinity than femininity (England 2010; Messner 2009; Risman 2004). Finally, investigating masculinity provides valuable information for feminist projects, advancing “the goal of revealing and demystifying the mechanisms of power, identifying their internal contradictions and cleavages so as to inform movements for change” (Messner 1996, p. 222). Therefore, investigations of superordinates, their interests, and their access to power are effective and necessary ways for research to reveal the places where social change can most effectively be encouraged.

Masculinities as Unmarked

A key finding in early studies of men and masculinity was “the initial insight that masculinity, too, is a gender and therefore that men as well as women have undergone historical and cultural processes of gender formation that distribute power and privilege unevenly” (Gardiner, 2002, p. 11). Previous to this, masculinity tended to go unmarked and assumed, as is most easily evidenced in the ways the English language uses masculine pronouns for all groups, thus making women’s presence in these groups invisible (Butler 1990; De Beauvoir 1975). Puri’s recent account of sexual violence in India found that masculinity is “unmarked precisely as a factor of its privilege,” and that the unmarked nature of masculinity (in this case, upper-class Hindu masculinity) facilitates sexual assault against women (2006, p. 146). By becoming simultaneously universal and invisible, masculinity is no longer open for challenge; femininity becomes the Other, questioned and marginalized.

In a fascinating account of the process of research, Salzinger (2004) makes very clear the unmarked nature of masculinities, which obscured this insight for so long. During interviews and participant observation in globalizing industries, Salzinger found that while most *maquilas* in Juarez, Mexico were explicitly marked

as female, one in particular was not. She first concluded that this one maquila was “ungendered,” then later realized that in fact it was gendered masculine, but as such was rarely ever marked as gendered at all: “masculinity is taken for granted, and hence not spoken, whereas femininity is the always-articulated modification of that assumed norm” (p. 14). This error not only illustrates how the absence of femininity can be mistakenly assumed to mean gender is not situationally relevant (crucial for gender research in male-dominated domains like war, international politics, and prisons), but also illustrates how masculinity is taken for granted in social institutions, thus reinforcing men’s power and privilege in these settings.

This institutionalized assumption of masculinity and the attendant othering and subordination of femininity are key in maintaining the group boundaries upon which unequal power relations rely. An analogous situation is remarked upon by Baca Zinn and Thorton Dill with regards to race: “[w]hite women ... must be reconceptualized as a category that is multiply defined by race, class and other differences ... even those [experiences] that appear neutral, are, in fact, racialized” (1996, p. 329). This is equally true with regards to men, for whom “gender might become salient only as a supervenient category, a category following upon or expressed in conjunction with another category” (Brod 1988, p. 6). Ignoring the gendering of (especially white, heterosexual) men is tantamount to yielding them the unmarked, socially central position. What this means then is that the onus for any gendered social change implicitly falls to others – women and trans people, and to a lesser extent gay men and men of color – who are seen as “possessing” or “owning” gender. Researchers who balk at studying and critiquing the superordinate category of men risk effectively promoting a “deviance model” that assumes the neutrality and normalcy of the superordinate and only scrutinizes the subordinate categories (Messner 1996, p. 83). This sort of research on men and masculinity is allied with multiracial feminism’s commitment to centering the experiences of women of color, because both critique the implicit centering of white, heterosexual men’s experiences.

Masculinities Stalling Social Change

A second important reason for including men in studies that aim to understand or encourage change in the gender order is that ideas about masculinity are cur-

rently a primary force in stalling social change. While women made gains in arenas like employment, educational attainment, and representations in political office in the 1970's and 1980's, and on some measures into the 1990's, these gains have flat lined in the last two decades (England 2010). The primary obstacle to further gains is men, and "unless men's practices, attitudes, and relations change, efforts to promote gender equality will face an uphill struggle" (Ruxton, 2004, p. 5).

As a direct consequence of feminism, employment and educational majors have substantially desegregated, with more women moving into highly valued, well-paid, and previously male-dominated fields (Charles and Grusky 2004). Nearly no desegregation has occurred in the other direction, however, because "men lose money and suffer cultural disapproval when they choose traditionally female-dominated fields; they have little incentive to transgress gender boundaries . . . , there is little incentive for voluntary movement in this direction, making desegregation a largely one-way street" (England 2010, p. 155). Variables with no easily recognized, concrete gain for women – dating and mating behavior, leisure activities, and personal appearance items like clothing and makeup, for example – seem to have shifted even less, and the changes that have taken place are similarly one-directional, because "when boys and men take on 'female' activities, they often suffer disrespect, but under some circumstances, girls and women gain respect for taking on 'male' activities" (ibid, p. 156).

Messner's "It's All For The Kids" (2009), a study of parental participation in youth sports, is especially clear in tracing the ways essentialist beliefs about masculinity impede egalitarian changes, and pointing out that there need be no intentional anti-feminist impetus involved in the process. Messner coins the term "soft essentialism" to describe how individuals struggling to uphold conflicting beliefs in equality and natural difference tend to hold boys and men more strictly accountable to outmoded ideas about proper gender performance, while allowing women and girls greater leeway because of the recognition that maintaining strict gender enforcement for them is tantamount to overt sexism. Because of the institutionalized relationships between genders, soft essentialism still affects women and girls negatively despite allowing them more leeway in their own lives. The demanding and thankless position of "team parent," for example, invariably goes to women, because no men will volunteer for the feminized role.

This dynamic is also found in other arenas. International development ex-

perts find that projects “which aim to improve women’s employment and income generating opportunities..are likely to compound women’s heavy work burdens unless efforts are made to encourage men to take greater responsibility for child care and domestic chores” (Esplen 2006, p. 1). Bridges (2010) found that feminism itself has been gender-typed as feminine, and that men are therefore hesitant to engage in marches protesting violence against women without making some sort of qualifiers that reconfirm their masculinity. In all of the above examples, men’s reluctance to revise masculinity norms limit the opportunities for women to improve their lives; without studying men and masculinity, these roadblocks cannot be adequately understood or effectively overcome.

Masculinities as Relational

Masculinities do not constitute a stable object of knowledge, but are historical projects that function as part of a gender order; masculinities are always defined in relation to femininities, and dominant masculinities are also defined in relation to subordinated masculinities (Connell 2005). These relations mean that women’s social existence is affected by the place of men and masculinities in society. Thinking intersectionally, for example, racialized ideas about masculinity also impinge on women’s lives: when Black boys are defined as “pathological,” “troublemakers” and “bad boys,” Black women are consequently blamed and pathologized as inadequate mothers (Ferguson 2000).

Understanding gender as relational emphasizes the importance of inter-group relationships and illustrates how we can better understand the experiences of oppressed groups by drawing on knowledge about their oppressors: “when we think about gender in terms of power relations, it becomes necessary to study the powerful (men)” (Messerschmidt, 2000, p. 2–3). If masculinities are defined in part by their difference from and purported superiority to femininities, then the interpersonal interactions that reproduce and reify masculine norms form a significant part of the oppression and subordination women experience (Messner 2002).

Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980) is an early but thorough example of the project of understanding how men’s power over women is maintained. She argues that the socially enforced system of heterosexuality invalidates women’s existence *for themselves*, valuing them only for

their ability to produce or give pleasure to men. Empirical investigation shows how masculinities defined in relation to femininity and subordinated masculinities cause anxiety and lead young men to perpetrate sexual violence (Messerschmidt 2000). Using life histories from interviews with five sexually violent boys, five boys who engage in assaultive but non-sexual violence, and five non-violent boys, Messerschmidt finds that the violent boys all viewed violence as a crucial characteristic of masculinity, and used it as a “masculine resource” when their masculinity is challenged and other avenues to reaffirm it are denied. In both cases, we gain a more complete knowledge about women’s experiences of sexuality and sexual violence through the addition of knowledge gained by studying up, because the definition of masculinity as opposed to and superior to femininity drives men’s negative treatment of women and women’s negative self-perceptions.

Masculinities as Socially Constructed

Perhaps the most frequently confirmed tenet of masculinities research is that masculinities are socially constructed. Tracing this process and drawing attention to the substantial changes in masculine ideals over time highlights the manufactured, power-embedded character of both the superordinate group and of the hierarchy they dominate, thus undermining claims to naturalness. Similar analytical strategies have been very effective in research around other social hierarchies. Critical race theorists have had significant success in deconstructing whiteness (i.e. Frankenberg 1993; Harris 1993; Jacobson 1999; Lipsitz 1998). An especially effective example in studies of sexuality is Katz’s “The Invention of Heterosexuality” (1995), which not only shows that heterosexuality is a relatively recent social construct, but that bounding it and defining it as “normal” required significant effort over time by doctors, sexologists, and journalists.

Early research on men and masculinities aimed “to understand that the construction of masculinity contains a political dynamic, a dynamic of power, by which ‘the other’ is created and subordinated,” (Kimmel 1990, p. 96) and many resulting publications focused on the construction of masculinities and their links to power. Messner’s “Power at Play” (1995) shows how masculinity is constructed by power relationships in institutionalized sport, and the effects this has on men’s bodies, lives and relationships. Pascoe’s “Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in

High School” (2007) exposes the construction of heterosexual, dominance-based masculinity in American high schools through sexual boasting, harassment, the rejection of the abject “fag” identity, and the disparagement of girls and women. Schilt’s research on transgender men and employment (2006, 2010) illustrates how power and privilege comes to men in interactions, even in cases where an individual was previously known as a woman. By showing that these benefits accrue to individuals as they move through across genders, Schilt convincingly argues that they originate from the socially constructed category “men,” not from anything about the individuals themselves. These examples offer effective rejoinders to the common claim that gender inequality is inevitable because of some natural differences between the sexes by challenging the naturalization of hierarchy and dominance.

Cleavages and Contradictions in Masculine Power

Men’s power and privilege in society is far from complete; indeed, the very existence of feminism evinces both the vulnerability of masculine power and the effectiveness of women’s challenges to date. A better understanding of men’s power can provide scholars and liberatory movements with valuable information on how to best direct future efforts, by pointing out the places where such efforts will be most effective.

Much research on men and masculinities has taken this as its goal. Goode’s “Why Men Resist” (1982), for example, not only describes the reasons and cases in which men resist gender-egalitarian social change, but also gives hints as to how, why, and when men might be more open to such progress, and which men might be less inclined to defend gendered hierarchies and male dominance. Kimmel’s (1987) description of the three ways men react to women’s calls for equality can help us predict both many men’s regressive reactions in defense of the status quo and some men’s pro-feminist impulses.

Knowledge about men who work for gender justice provides important information about possible feminist strategies, and this project has accordingly been undertaken (Christian 1994; Kimmel and Mosmiller 1992; Messner 1997; Messner, Greenberg, and Peretz 2015; Stansell 2010; White 2008; White and Peretz 2010). Investigating the reasons for men’s engagement improves the possibility of encouraging more men to support social change. Kaufman concludes that although

men's social power provides privilege, it also becomes "the source of the individual experience of pain and alienation. That pain can become the impetus for the individual reproduction ... of men's individual and collective power. Alternatively, it can be an impetus for change" (1994, p. 142–143). Empirical research has used interviews to map the longitudinal process of men's engagement with gender justice work, which involves sensitizing experiences, multiple opportunities to get involved, and the creation of new ways of making meaning about gender, violence, and efficacy around the issue (Casey and Smith 2010). Intersectional identity is important here, as men who are marginalized due to some other intersectional identity (Black, Jewish, Gay, etc.) may be more likely to have a critical view of hierarchy and dominance systems and to support gender justice (Brod 1988; Messner, Greenberg, and Peretz 2015; Shiffman 1987; White 2008; White and Peretz 2010).

Connell's work¹ is especially useful in understanding where men's power within the gender order is vulnerable to change (1987; 2000; 2002; 2005). She argues that "There are some cases ... where patterns of masculinity are tough and resistant to change. There are other situations where they are unstable, or where commitment to a gender position is negotiable ... Investigating the circumstances where gender patterns are less or more open to change seems an important task for research" (2002, p. 23). Paying attention to the divisions within masculinity reveals multiple masculinities, including subordinated, marginalized, and complicit masculinities; this is a key site for intersectional analysis, and has been elaborated by many other researchers (e.g. Espiritu 2004; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 1994; Majors and Billson 1992; White 2008). This area of research also helps us understand why so many men (and women) support the hegemonic ideals even though the idealized form does "not correspond at all closely to the actual personalities of the majority of men, and despite not sharing equally in the patriarchal dividend (Connell, 1987, p. 184–5). Connell argues that tensions intrinsic to masculine ideals, across institutions, and within the gender order more generally can be used to create progressive change.

Conclusion

A thorough understanding of the theoretical reasons underlying the study of men and masculinities shows the importance of these studies for gender-egalitarian

social change projects as well as for an accurate intersectional understanding of gender. Such an understanding also counters concerns about re-centering men and undermining the scholarship of marginalized women. Studying up is really about studying the social construction of inequality. Contemporary scholarship on men and masculinities provides a good example of this conceptualization of studying up, engaging in what Messner calls “strategic deconstruction ... of the dominant end of binary categories” (2010, p. 83). While some early work (especially under the rubric of men’s studies) tended to equalize men’s and women’s experiences and posit that men are equally victimized in gendered ways (i.e. Farrell 1974, Goldberg 1976, discussed in Messner 1998), masculinities theory provides a new paradigm that is in alliance² with other progressive projects that aim to transform society. These studies are not liberationist, but transformationist; that is, instead of working to provide men new rights and possibilities within the current social structure (already biased in their favor), they aim to critique and transform the social structure so that men and women both have a new set of opportunities and responsibilities which are much more similar and provide for a more equitable structure overall (Hanmer 1990).

Endnotes

- ¹ Although Connell’s work encompasses a complete structural theory of gender orders and is most fully elaborated in texts that are not strictly “studying up,” (1987, 2002) it also runs through “Masculinities” (2005) and “The Men and the Boys,” (2000) and has been used extensively by researchers whose work is clearly within the “studying up” frame. The focus of this structural framework on historicity and practice also shows the fluidity of masculinities and denaturalizes them, as discussed above.
- ² This alliance is also clearly visible on the ground: NOMAS-Boston, an activist group that draws significantly on the ideas of men and masculinity research in their work, has this alliance written into their tenets as “Pro-feminist – LGBT Equality – Racial Justice – Enhancing Men’s Lives.”

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