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ACTIVITIES
for TEACHING
GENDER and
SEXUALITY in
the UNIVERSITY
CLASSROOM

Edited by

Michael J. Murphy

and Elizabeth N. Ribarsky

Activities for Teaching Gender and Sexuality in the University Classroom

Edited by Michael J. Murphy, PhD, and Elizabeth N. Ribarsky, PhD

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19. Being a Man:

Challenging or Reinforcing Embodied

Masculinities in the University Classroom

Jessica J. Eckstein, PhD (Western Connecticut State University)

Appropriate Course(s) and Level

Any level interpersonal, relational, family, popular culture or gender communication course.

Appropriate Class Size

Easily adaptable for large and small classes (10-50+ students).

Learning Goals

- To become aware of dominant cultural narratives related to diverse masculinities.
- To be able to identify masculinity as operating at macro, societal levels.
- To recognize one's own role in supporting masculinities as interpersonal constructions.

Estimated Time Required

Assigned homework in preparation, and then 30-40 minutes in a single class period.

Required Materials

- Means to affix magazine pictures to front of classroom (tape, pins, etc.).
- Magazines or access to ads via internet.

Rationale

In a 2006 issue of *Esquire* magazine devoted to the American man, a professor detailed his concerns surrounding a recent gendered shift in academia:

I watched as my colleagues expressed an increasing disdain for men in the classroom . . . I went to faculty lunches dealing with disruptive students, only to realize that what we were talking about was primarily male behavior, that men themselves were in some fashion perceived to be the disruption . . . I watched as nearly every significant social problem was laid at the feet of the male student population . . . Everything about them that is male—their physicality, their hunger for stimulation, their propensity to argue—seemed clipped by the academic world I lived in. I was not waiting for the birth of a men's movement so much as I was looking for a little discussion, a chance to engage boys in the same way women engaged girls forty years ago. What did my university do in the face of these problems? It formed a task force on the status of women. (Chiarella, 2006, p. 96)

The above lament represents one perspective concerning the role of males and masculinity as addressed within academia. As Palmer-Mehta (2006) noted, “While traditionally it was femininity that was seen as inherently weak and pathological, today . . . it is masculinity that is regarded as the troubled gender” (p. 182). A contrasting perspective is that 20 years of progress for women has done little to erase hundreds of years of male-dominated academia. Additionally, many believe universities, as social institutions, have a responsibility to nurture a female-oriented perspective in the individuals they turn out into a male-oriented world-at-large. A final dominant rhetoric insists that inequality—whether for men or women—does not exist in *their* academic world.

There exist a myriad of approaches to dealing with gender in the university classroom. In many cases, however, instructors have adopted their own comfort-level-driven approach to discussions about gender. They may be unknowingly reinforcing their own larger cultural stereotypes (simply because it's what they were taught), or many may unconsciously reinforce the biases their students bring into the classroom. Even educated, “forward-thinking” instructors may be subject to their own biases, as both media and social interactions involve gender-persuasion/enforcement that “recycle[s] gender ideology rather than minimizing or challenging gender stereotyping” (Johnson & Young, 2002, p. 477). A failure to scrutinize masculinities (as well as femininities) implies belief structures are “norms” that need no further examination. Indeed, not including activities on masculinities (while conducting them in regard to women and femininity) may indicate to students that masculinity and possible hegemonic norms are the standard by which to view the world—in other words, thinking we only study femininity because *it* is the anomalous societal form. Activities treating masculinities as separate entities—types of gender (just like femininities) that are enacted through various forms—can challenge the perception of masculinity as the norm (for both students and instructors).

Current gender scholars who theorize and measure these two gender constructs tend to find they are more orthogonal (i.e., simultaneously co-occurring) than polarized in nature (Brems & Johnson, 1990). In other words, one individual can embody both masculinity and femininity. Further, masculinity and femininity are each multidimensional

constructs, with diverse representations in larger culture and situated in interpersonal relationships (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1996). By looking at images as cultural artifacts representing embedded belief structures, this classroom activity addresses the larger nature of gender as socially constructed (and assigned to particularly sexed bodies) in specific cultures. The activity problematizes masculinity on two fronts: as produced by mainstream narratives at a macro level and as idealized by individual students on an individual, micro level.

Preparing for the Activity

1. I recommend first preparing and providing a lecture prior to this activity to introduce (at a minimum) the following ideas:
 - Sex (biological physiology; e.g., male, female) as distinct from gender (bodily, personality, and communication enactment; e.g., masculine, feminine).
 - There is not one masculinity; there are many forms. Most often attributed to Connell (1995), one dominant classification of masculinity types includes hegemonic, complicit/accommodating, subordinate, and protest manifestations.
 - All gender enactments are based not only on historical relationships between the sexes but also on ongoing interpersonal, social relationships between them. Media persuasion, in particular, is viewed by many scholars as a cultural reinforcement of gender identities and subsequent roles enacted (Palmer-Mehta, 2006). However, this is only half the story. Masculinities are tied to both macro- and micro-level relationships across time and cultures. Embracing the perspective of many communication scholars, Johnson and Young (2002) noted that personal traits may be learned in the process of an individual becoming a gendered participant in their culture.
 - All genders are performative—a negotiated outcome, as well as a negotiating tool in personal interactions (Palmer-Mehta, 2006). Personal, and in many cases biological, appearance has been argued as important to the behavioral and identity roles enacted by individuals (Connell, 1995).
 - There are both positive and negative psychological and sociological outcomes of communicating different types of masculinity. Kimmel (1996; 2008) provided both historical and current sociological accounts of these processes in regard to American men.
2. After introducing students to these basic ideas of gender relationships and embodiment, I introduce the following as take-home work:
 - Think about two of your ideal men in popular culture today; ones to whom you are personally attracted or who represent your ideals of what an attractive man “should be.” For the instructor: “attractiveness” is a term used because of its vagueness and adaptability; it maximizes students’ interpretations of a multi-faceted construct.
 - One of these men must be stereotypically masculine and attractive, as agreed upon culturally.
 - One of these men must be someone who most people in your culture would *not* agree is ideally attractive.
 - Bring in a large (preferably color) picture of each of these men.

- Do not label or otherwise identify yourself on the front of these pictures.
- Although all pictures will be viewed in class, picture providers will remain anonymous.

Facilitating the Activity

1. On the day of the activity, as students enter the classroom, instruct them to place their pictures face-down in a pile by the door. Make certain that no student's name is on any of the images to protect student privacy.
2. Once all students have entered, mix/shuffle the pictures to increase the anonymity of the activity.
3. Have students assist in taping or otherwise affixing pictures to the front of the room to maximize visibility. It is important that the pictures not be classified in any particular order.
4. After providing an opportunity to view the images, identify, with class help, any of the men who are not obviously apparent (usually less popular actors/musicians and some sports figures).
5. Then ask each person to silently ask, Which of these men is most attractive "as a man" to me (e.g., "Pick your top 5")? Have them write this list in their notes.
6. I continually remind students that our ideas of masculinities are heavily tied to sexuality (e.g., hegemonic males cannot be homosexual). Thus I reiterate that I have intentionally forced both the men and women in the class to choose their attractive preferences in *men*; this also allows students to begin connecting their own "attractions" to concepts of cultural normativity in a hegemonic context. After we have concluded the debate surrounding the different men posted at the front, I remind the class that individuals learning and maintaining (i.e., enacting) their gender are thought to be influenced by cultural surroundings, whether through positive imagery (possibly in media) or through negative reinforcement (possibly from peers). As a result, it is important for us to continually be aware of the ways in which we are influenced by others.

Discussion Questions

- Which men—from those posted at the front—do you feel are most unattractive?
- Which men are—in your opinion—the obviously not culturally-agreed-upon attractive men?
- How do the culturally-agreed-upon attractive men differ physically (e.g., hair, dress, attitude, physical profession) from your idiosyncratic preferences?
- What about your specific upbringing, subculture (e.g., religious, rural/urban, personal style), and experiences may have shaped what you see as attractive/unattractive in men? Which of the images you chose is similar to or different from the concepts of manhood you experienced as "ideal" when you were growing up?
- How does seeing men in contrast to other men—both culturally ideal and not-ideal—shape the way we saw the men posted at the front?
- How do your ideas of attractive masculinity for pop culture icons differ from your assessments of individual men in your life?

- Identify obvious examples of Connell's (1995) masculinity types. (There typically are a diversity of masculine types/masculinities, but also, we are usually unable to identify a truly "hegemonic" man: attention to fashionable dress, hair style, or hygiene are feminine attributes; careers involving artistry, music, or acting involve high levels of emotional expression; and anything other than normative heterosexuality eliminates one from mainstream "values." As argued by Connell (1995) and others (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Kimmel, 1996), the masculinity (i.e., hegemonic) to which academics typically attribute society's "evils" rarely exists in any individual man.)

Typical Results

- I have implemented this activity in both urban and rural settings, at community colleges and universities, with male and female students, in the Midwest and on the East Coast, in courses devoted to gender and more general communication classes. This activity is highly adaptable because the students bring in their own pictures; therefore, the activity remains culturally relevant over time.
- Usually a major outcome of this activity is the class's recognition that the men found to be most culturally attractive are the most "objectively" plain in appearance, accomplishments, and profession. In contrast to the idiosyncratic preferences, there is often little that is exceptional about the most "masculinely" attractive man. The attractive-to-me-but-not-to-the-culture men are typically effeminate in some way (e.g., in appearance, behavior, sexuality). This is important to note because whereas everyone brought an image of the latter man to class, the class largely converges on its recognition that their idiosyncratic preferences are not the larger culture's. Depending on the level of traditionalism in students, there may be little overlap between the two.
- The goal here is to illustrate and problematize the taken-for-granted of both hegemonic normativity *and* the socially constructed nature of masculinity (as not necessarily tied to biological imperatives). When students begin to see the diversity (or lack thereof) of images chosen by their male and female (inevitably possessed of diverse sexualities) classmates, they begin to see the ways in which their classmates are equally (or perhaps not) influenced by larger, macro-level constructions of masculinity, as demonstrated through media representations *and* interpersonal experiences. Constructions of "ideal men" (as exhibited in bodily form) may or may not be diverse, but inevitably this discussion reveals that the men were chosen for their "attractiveness" according to very different means. For example, in past iterations of this activity, when asked to explain why they chose particular men (and those specific images/planned representations of them), both men and women began to reference nonphysical aspects of those individuals (e.g., "He's really good at this, so he's cool" or "Just the way he acts" or "He dates so-and-so"). This is another opportunity to raise the issue of embodiment as extending beyond physical, bodily features.
- Inevitably, issues of sexuality will arise in the discussion. This allows the activity also to touch on the ways that physical embodiment (and behaviors *and* communication) shapes our perceptions of masculinity. Students can get extremely specific with the physical analyses at this point.

- Following this activity, in general classes (where masculinity is not the focus of the course), my students consistently express a desire to learn *more* about the specifics of masculinities—in terms of cultural expectations, communication of this gender type by individuals and larger cultural structures, and psycho-social outcomes and antecedents of different masculinities for both men and women who enact and interact with them. This demonstrates the extent to which students (both men and women) respond positively to masculinities as an area of inquiry—when not taught from a masculinity-as-inherently-negative approach.

Limitations and Cautionary Advice

- The nature of this activity is such that it requires an instructor who can effectively manage side-conversations (by bringing them in to the main discussion), who can quickly and appropriately address insensitive (or outright prejudicial) comments, and who is able to rein in students to the main Discussion Questions after the picture analyses have concluded. If these skills are not possessed by the instructor, the activity runs the potential of merely reinforcing students' dominant and hurtful gender attitudes and beliefs.
- On the other hand, instructors should consistently be challenging their own gender prejudices. Too often students are alienated by the belief that anyone teaching a university-level gender activity is already biased against men. Of course, this activity could be adapted to incorporate female images, but students have heard endless stories of the ways “women in the media” are portrayed bodily; a mistake would be to have this activity merely “flip the coin” by putting men in a scopophilic-object light. Instead, this activity challenges us to look closer at the ways embodiment operates, how a “mere image” is associated with expectations and normative behaviors in our lives, and why/how our socially ingrained notions of masculinity are influenced by our own relational experiences and sexual proclivities. We all have biases, and it is important to contemplate these before beginning this activity. Often, I have shared some of my previous preconceptions with the students as a way to show that no one is perfect or ideal in their sex-gender beliefs—that would be largely impossible in our society. Rather, the goal (for instructors and students) should be to continue questioning our assumptions about men, women, and their various genders.

Alternative Uses

- This activity can easily be adapted to address issues of race, power, age, etc.
- The Discussion Questions could be assigned as a take-home, reflective assignment; however, the in-class discussion remains important to examining the diversity of opinions.

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of experience teaching German language, literature, and culture at the high-school and college levels.

Elizabeth Currans is an assistant professor of women's and gender studies at Eastern Michigan University. She is working on a book, provisionally titled *'Protests are the Activists' Prom': Gender, Sexuality, and Counterpublic World-Making in Women's Public Demonstrations*. The book explores how participants in public protests in the contemporary United States coordinated and attended primarily by women claim and remake public spaces, and the ways that gender, sexuality, and race influence our understanding of public space. Her article, "Claiming Deviance and Honoring Community: Creating Resistant Spaces in U.S. Dyke Marches," appeared in *Feminist Formations*. Her research and teaching interests include public protest; grassroots activism; cultural geography and explorations of public space; feminist, queer, and critical race theory; and the intersections of gender, sexuality, and race in cultural life.

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