

# **Feminist Theorizing of Men and Masculinity: Applying Feminist Perspectives to Advance College Men and Masculinities Praxis**

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## ***Abstract***

*Since the emergence of feminist scholarship, feminist theorists have advanced diverse perspectives regarding the role of examining men and masculinity to advance gender equity. These contributions, however, are often marginalized and selectively applied in men and masculinities scholarship and praxis. This article provides an in-depth overview of foundational feminist perspectives that underpin men and masculinities praxis, specifically within a higher education context. As men and masculinities praxis continues to gain traction on college campuses through coursework, programmatic initiatives, and institutional policies, the authors present opportunities, limitations, and complexities of various feminist perspectives and approaches to the work, calling upon practitioners to critically engage in a grounded feminist praxis that emphasizes systemic transformation.*

***Keywords:*** *feminist theory, men and masculinities, higher education*

Developed out of the U.S. women's liberation movement in the early 1970s, feminist scholarship emerged with the intent to understand the causes and impact of gender inequity by applying the concepts of domination, oppression, and exploitation to women's experiences and advancing anti-sexist theories and methods (Gardiner, 2005; Hanmer, 1990). As scholars worked to deconstruct the category 'woman' and develop more nuanced understandings of sexism and gender (Hill, 2003), they also "have become increasingly wary of yet again preserving 'man' as an ostensibly ungendered subject" (Shapiro, 1994, p. 11). Feminist theorists, therefore, sought to expose and problematize the construction and role of masculinity as part of understanding patriarchy and the dominant positioning of men. These strands of feminist thought played a critical role in the subsequent surfacing of masculinity studies in the academy nearly a decade later. In fact, Gardiner (2005) asserted, "Feminist thinking has been fundamental to the formation of contemporary men's and masculinity studies as intellectual endeavors, academic subjects, and social movements" (p. 36).

As the study of masculinity continues to grow, as evidenced by its expanding presence in college courses, academic journals, books, and professional associations and conferences (Gardiner, 2002), there has been much debate among feminist scholars regarding the role, risks, and meaning of the scholarship. Among the critiques of masculinity studies, a predominant concern is that its scholars do not "explicitly address as a main theoretical priority how feminist theory is used, cited, and analyzed within masculinity theory" (Robinson, 2003, p. 130). Not only does masculinity studies scholarship lack sufficient engagement with the complexities and contradictions of feminism, but many texts fail to even acknowledge feminist theory at all (McMahon, 1993; Ramazanoglu, 1992). Contemporary writing on masculinity has provided emergent examples of

a more thoughtful engagement with feminist theory, yet these approaches remain overwhelmingly limited and selective (Berggren, 2014; McCarry, 2007; O’Neill, 2015). For instance, engagement with feminism is often reduced to “one to two feminists who represent only one strand within a particular perspective” (Robinson, 2003, p. 132), generally acknowledging those perceived to be sympathetic to men’s issues. Further, masculinity studies scholars often “mention feminism, without citation, and move on in the usual way to cite another man whose work is as intellectually a derivative of these origins as his own” (Hanmer, 1990, p. 444). By leaving feminist theory critically unexamined, these scholars seem to suggest that feminist scholarship has not yet theorized masculinity (McMahon, 1993), thus elevating masculinity studies to the forefront of the intellectual project. However, the examination of men and masculinity has always been present in feminist theory (Hanmer, 1990; Robinson, 2003), and feminist scholars feel strongly that the study of masculinity would not have developed without feminism’s direct contributions (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985; Gardiner, 2005). Hanmer (1990) wrote, “To reduce women’s studies to the study of women and the differences between us is to deny [its] origins” (p. 446) within the women’s liberation movement and its critiques of patriarchal constructions of masculinity. To advance goals of gender equity, feminist scholars have taken varied and contested approaches to addressing masculinity, patriarchal power, and the potential for the structural transformation of gender (Gardiner, 2005; Ramazanoglu, 1992).

In this article, we strive to make explicit the feminist theoretical approaches to men and masculinities that lie not only between the lines of masculinity studies scholarship, but also in the praxis it informs. Our interest in understanding feminist theorizing of men and masculinity stems from our personal experiences developing spaces for those who identify as men to engage in dialogue and self-reflection about masculinity, gender, and power. While working on a university campus, Ashley helped design a six-week men and masculinities program, and Khaled served as one of the first facilitators. Khaled has since expanded his masculinity consciousness-raising work off-campus, offering four-hour workshops to interested men in the broader community. While much of our work was directly informed by masculinity studies literature, there were times we experienced feelings of dissonance in our practice and thinking. How, for example, can we hold space for the ways in which men feel harmed by expectations of hegemonic masculinity *and* center the role cisgender men must play in disrupting gendered oppression? How can we acknowledge intersecting identities that shape men’s experiences and access to power through a social justice framework? What can we learn from feminist theorizing to understand the opportunities and potential risks of men and masculinities praxis as an approach to advancing gender equity? Through examining various strands of feminist theory, we hoped to find guidance to address our assumptions, intentions, and approaches. In this paper, we looked to liberal, radical, psychoanalytic, multidimensional, postmodern, and poststructuralist feminist theories and their relevant critiques to present varying approaches to examining men and masculinities. We then analyzed the ways in which feminist theories map onto current men and masculinities praxis in higher education, demonstrating how these initiatives can unintentionally ground their approaches in reductive ways. To conclude, we argue for practitioners’ recognition of the nuances, limitations, and opportunities that strands of feminist theory present for college men and masculinities praxis and call for their critical application.

## **Liberal Feminisms**

Liberal feminism came out of 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment thought and its associated ideals of liberty and equal rights (Mann & Patterson, 2016). “In reacting to claims that women were irrational, weak, vicious, and sinful, the early defenders of women repeated a number of strategies,” including claiming women as equal or superior to men or launching into an inquiry about the meaning of equality (Gardiner, 2005, p. 36). Mary Wollstonecraft (2001), for example, criticized the “disorderly kind of education” (p. 15) directed at rendering women pleasing; she argued that education must help woman exercise her mind so that she can “become the friend, and not the humble dependent of her husband” (p. 22). Liberal feminist approaches were mainly defensive, and feminist authors of this era alternated between strategies that imitated and critiqued men as they sought equality with men’s power and rights (Gardiner, 2005).

One of the most important contributions of liberal feminism was highlighting the distinction between sex and socially learned gender to demonstrate that “gender roles could be socially transformed through conscious social and political action to foster a more egalitarian society” (Mann & Patterson, 2016, p. 49). The sex-role theoretical approach espoused by liberal feminism describes women’s oppression as a result of socialized gender role expectations that place men in a dominant position (Pease, 2000). Thus, to advance gender equity, liberal feminist theories contend that changing laws; rethinking childhood socialization; examining the gendering of the media, the state, and professions; as well as fostering education against prejudice could remedy gender oppression (Gardiner, 2005; Pease, 2000). Margaret Mead (1935) appealed to shifting the ways in which children are socialized, for instance, by arguing that “girls can be trained exactly as boys are trained; taught the same code, the same forms of expression, the same occupations” (p. 79).

Because of its focus on social reform politics, critiques of liberal feminism note its lack of historical analysis and under-emphasis of the economic and political power that men exercise over women (Pease, 2000). Critics claim that liberal feminism merely seeks “women’s inclusion in current, male-dominated institutions, accepting a restrictively narrow model of equality without questioning the masculine norms” (Gardiner, 2005, p. 37-38). Further, liberal feminism is critiqued for implying that men can disrupt gender socialization and individually transform themselves through consciousness-raising activities without addressing the wider, patriarchal structures at play (Pease, 2000). Liberal feminist theorizing of men and masculinity often prioritizes reform over revolution, thus ignoring the centrality of patriarchal dominance across institutions in the oppression of women (Mann & Patterson, 2016; Pease, 2000). Radical feminist theories, however, present a more pointed critique of men’s power, defining masculinity as oppressive by nature and placing men’s violence at the center of gender analyses (McCarry, 2007; Robinson, 2003).

## **Radical Feminisms**

Radical feminist theories challenge the centrality of men’s power and its overarching oppression of women. Appealing to the interconnected nature of women’s oppression, radical feminists confront issues related to biological reproduction, sexuality, labor, rape, domestic violence, and sexual harassment and call for the transformation of social structures and individuals for women’s liberation (Ashe, 2007; Robinson, 2003). Strands of radical feminist theory specifically demand the dramatic transformation of men and masculinity. Viewing “men’s power over women ... as the most basic and important organizing principle of social life” (Pease, 2000, p. 13) and most pervasive of all oppressions, these theories portray men as oppressors of women and masculinity

“as both an instrument and sign of their power” (Gardiner, 2002, p. 3). The Redstockings (1969), for instance, “identify the agents of [women’s] oppression as men...All power structures throughout history have been male-dominated and male-oriented. *All men* receive economic, sexual, and psychological benefits from male supremacy. *All men* have oppressed women” (p. 100). Not only does radical feminist thinking argue for disrupting male-dominated institutions, but scholars also challenge the ways in which men maintain power through their individual practices.

Across radical feminist theory, the gendered practice of men’s violence serves as a primary focus of analysis and, in some cases, is even characterized as the very definition of masculinity (Gardiner, 2005). These feminists have taken up the theorizing of men and masculinity because “violence and its reduction cannot be adequately understood without an in-depth understanding of masculinities” (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2005, p. 363). Theorizing masculinity from a radical feminist lens provides space for scholars to critically examine and analyze men’s material practices to deconstruct their power (McCarry, 2007). By centering men’s use of violence against women, radical feminism not only reveals its pervasive role in gender inequity but also creates a platform that necessitates men’s transformation. The Redstockings (1969) echoed this sentiment, stating, “We do not need to change ourselves, but to change men” (p. 100).

While radical feminist theorizing of masculinity plays a pivotal role in centering men’s power in the oppression of women, these theories have also spurred debate among feminist scholars. A common critique is that radical feminism subscribes to essentialism by casting femininity and masculinity as traits to female and male bodies, respectively. As part of this assessment, some radical feminists are accused of gendering perpetrators of violence as male and, thus, alleging that “all men are immutably violent simply because they are men” (McCarry, 2007, p. 405-406). In essentializing both women and men, radical theorists are also heavily scrutinized for ignoring issues related to race, class, and global location by using a sisterhood framework to embody all women (Gardiner, 2005; Mann & Patterson, 2016; Segal, 1990). Other feminist scholars challenge radical feminism for expressing anti-male sentiments and, thus, harming feminist aims for gender equity. Segal (1987), for example, expressed concern that radical feminist thought castigates men for innate rapacity and violence; she argued that radical feminism, by centering male violence, is giving up on men as they increasingly demonstrate the willingness to embrace feminist ideologies. Similarly, hooks (1998) asserted that the separatism espoused by radical feminism problematically excludes men from the movement. Reuther (1992) agreed that the movement to dismantle patriarchal power must include men, so long as they are able to “acknowledge the injustice of their own historical privileges as males and to recognize the ongoing ideologies and economic, political, and social structures that keep such privilege in place” (p. 17). It is evident that radical feminist theorizing is rife with varying perspectives regarding men’s oppression of women and effective approaches for disrupting men’s violence. While radical feminist theories problematically presume an absolute gender and sex binary, it is important to also acknowledge their contributions to uncovering masculine dominance in practices and institutions that had been previously deemed natural or commonplace (Gardiner, 2005). Psychoanalytic feminist theories broaden this examination of women’s oppression by delving into the internalization of dominance in the unconscious mind.

### **Psychoanalytic Feminisms**

Claiming that ending women’s oppression cannot come from sociological factors alone (Mitchell, 1975), some feminist theorists turned to psychoanalytic thought to examine the unconscious formation of masculinity and its impact on both women and men. Mitchell (1975) explained

this turn as rooted in the notion that dominant ideologies are so deeply embedded in women's unconscious that psychoanalytic approaches are necessary to understanding how these ideologies are internalized. Rose (1983) similarly asserted that it is in "the dialogue between feminism and psychoanalysis...[that] the full complexity of the 'personal' and 'sexuality' can be grasped" (p. 19).

Seeking to explain men's dominance of women and even other men, most psychoanalytic feminist analyses are grounded in object-relations theory. Chodorow's (1978) application of this school of thought is understood to be the most influential development of psychoanalytic feminism. Examining the formation of masculinity in men's development, Chodorow (1978) argued that the experience of being cared for by mothers leads to a psychology of masculine dominance and feelings of superiority to women (Connell, 1994; Pease, 2000). As boys experience the disruption from seeing their mothers as primary love objects, the insecure, "defensive and compensatory" construction of masculinity begins to develop from their need to reject her (Connell, 1994; McMahan, 1993; Gardiner, 2005, p. 42). Dinnerstein (1976) argued that this rejection of femininity serves as the basis for men's hatred of and violence towards women. Rubin (1985) further contended that this strand of thought can connect men's violence with their "inability to 'express emotions' and to meet the 'intimacy needs' of women" (as cited in McMahan, 1993, p. 677). Feminist scholars also confront men's dominance in the school of psychoanalytic thought itself. Irigaray (1985) specifically challenged the phallogocentric nature of Freud's concept of penis envy by, instead, developing the theory of castration anxiety to define masculinity "as a condition of lack, vulnerability, and weakness" (in Gardiner, 2005, p. 38). Psychoanalytic feminist theories not only advance our understandings of men's desire to subvert women through emphasizing men's insecurities and fears of femininity, but Cornell (1998) provided an analysis of the ways in which men are also impacted by the construction of masculinity. Arguing that masculinity sets impossible standards which men will always fail to meet, Cornell (1998) believed men will see the value of aligning with feminism in order to seek liberation from such restrictive expectations.

The engagement of psychoanalytic approaches to understanding men and masculinity has divided feminist scholars. Radical feminists, in particular, have opposed this theoretical strand for serving as an ideological tool to manipulate women and uphold patriarchy and heterosexuality (Gardiner, 1992). Dworkin (1987), for example, referred to Freud as a pornographer, while Daly challenged psychoanalyst theories for placing blame on mothers and women (Gardiner, 1992). Brittan (1989) agreed that psychoanalytic theories can "let men off the hook" (as cited in Pease, 2000, p. 195) by focusing on women's role in reproducing the gender system. While psychoanalytic theorists agree with claims that Freud was a sexist product of his time (Gardiner, 1992), they hold steadfast to the influence of psychoanalysis on feminist thought. Chodorow (1989) argued, "Until we have another theory which can tell us about unconscious mental processes, conflict, and relations of gender, sexuality, and self, we had best take psychoanalysis for what it does include and can tell us" (p. 4).

Psychoanalytic feminist theories also receive criticism for failing to address the multifaceted realities of social structures. Object-relations theory, for instance, centers the role of childhood socialization in boys' internalization of masculine dominance without attending to theories of power (Ramazanoglu, 1992). The theoretical strand "ignores the multiplicity of social practices which separate boys from girls...and under-emphasizes the importance of social and ideological structures outside the family...[It also] fails to take class and race differences into account" (Pease, 2000, p 22). Furthermore, unlike liberal and radical theoretical perspectives, psychoanalytic feminist theories do not offer any strategies for social transformation (Sprengnether, 1990). These

critiques highlight how psychoanalytic approaches can deflect from men's practices and their responsibility for creating social change. By presenting the "male psyche as damaged, wounded, [and] in need of repair," psychoanalytic feminist theories can make it possible to view men in a tragic light (McMahon, 1993, p. 687). Further, through exploring how constructions of masculinity invoke men's compensatory behaviors rooted in insecurity and the inability to express emotion, McMahon (1993) contended it becomes possible to think of men as psychologically disadvantaged when compared to women.

Liberal, radical, and psychoanalytic approaches predominantly present ahistorical and binary understandings of masculinity and patriarchy. As a result, men's dominance is understood to be unchanging, fixed, and even rooted in biological determinism, thus oversimplifying structures of gender and power (Connell, 1994; Rowbotham, 1981). Multidimensional theories respond to these monolithic understandings. By situating masculinity in power matrixes (Wright, 2005), multidimensional perspectives explore a hierarchy of masculinities in which men hold varying levels of access to power.

### **Multidimensional Feminist Theories**

Since the emergence of feminist discourse, feminists of color and those influenced by Marxism have challenged the ways in which feminism perpetuates white, middle-class perspectives of women's experiences and excludes voices of women on the margins (Gardiner, 2005). Multidimensional theories of feminism, viewed from lenses such as Black feminist thought, U.S. third-world feminism, and *mestiza* consciousness (Anzaldúa, 1987), acknowledge the interconnectedness of women's oppression due to social location. Through centering race, Black feminists have also paved the way to complicating perspectives on men and patriarchal power.

Just as Black feminist theorists have challenged how whiteness works to essentialize the experiences of women, they also asserted that

a monolithic understanding of men avoids the violence and discriminatory implications of White racial supremacy, displacing both White women's complicity with men of their own racial group and antiracist bonding across gender...[S]ome men are, in fact, oppressed by women of the prevailing class. (Wiegman, 2002, p. 35)

Instead of viewing men as wielding universal dominance, this theoretical strand acknowledges a plurality of masculinities where "different masculinities stand in different relationships to power" (Ramazanoglu, 1992, p. 342). By examining the experiences of Black men, these theories articulate the shared oppression of Black men and women within white supremacist structures while also grappling with the tensions between them. Combahee River Collective (1977) stated,

We feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism. (p. 249)

hooks (1998) similarly criticized the separatism of radical feminism, stating that Women of Color, and poor and working-class women have more in common with men within their marginalized racial or class group than with “bourgeois, White women” (p. 266). In claiming solidarity with Black men, Black feminists advance the notion that men can also be oppressed. By identifying Black masculinity (Ramazanoglu, 1992) and balancing both sympathy and critique for Black men, Black feminist theorists situate constructions of gender within the history of U.S. racism to “critically examine the difficulties that men of color face in achieving mainstream versions of masculinity,” “critique those forms of masculinity that depend on sexism and male supremacy” (Gardiner, 2005, p. 43), and invite Black men to join them in creating a more just world.

Other U.S. feminists of colors and global feminists have extended perspectives on historically and culturally situated masculinities. To challenge dominant, white, Western culture, these feminist theorists call upon men within their communities to collaboratively seek liberation from their shared struggles (Gardiner, 2005). The contributions of Black feminists and other feminists of colors disrupt previous theorizing of masculinity and have inspired further exploration of how men access differential power through the examination of race, class, sexuality, and other social identities. Ramazanoglu (1992) posited that the notion of multiple and hierarchical masculinities has informed three theoretical directions in feminist thought: deconstructing how masculinity is practiced, seeing men as both oppressors and oppressed, and recognizing the ways in which men exercise power over one another.

Connell (2005) united these theoretical directions in her theorizing of men and masculinities. Arguing that recognizing more than one kind of masculinity is only a first step, Connell examined the power hierarchies between men through the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity.’ Hegemonic masculinity describes dominant gendered practices that embody the legitimacy of patriarchy and the privileging of white, heterosexual, able-bodied, wealthy, cisgender men (Jourian, 2018; Smirnova, 2018). By positioning hegemonic masculinity as dominant and ascendant, Connell described how it obscures femininity as well as ‘subordinate’ and ‘marginalized’ forms of masculinity which are often rooted in their relation to sexuality, race, ethnicity, and/or class (Howson, 2006). For instance, “masculinity in a straight, White man and masculinity in a gay, Black man are differently valued, reminding us that the relationship between sex, gender, and social power is less fixed than we might often think” (Cox, Johnson, Newitz, & Sandell, 1997, p. 178). Connell, like the aforementioned Black feminist theorists, worked to strike a balance in understanding men as both oppressors and oppressed. Her understanding of hegemonic masculinity “underscores the plurality of hierarchized masculinities and the complicity of all men, even those who enjoy a lesser share of the patriarchal dividend, in maintaining regimes of masculine privilege” (Williams, 2013, p. 163).

The responses to multidimensional notions of masculinity and gendered power are just as nuanced as the theories themselves. While this theoretical shift is embraced as more critical and inclusive, feminists also offer important critiques to the broader conversation. For instance, there has been significant debate related to the use of Crenshaw’s (1989) theory of intersectionality when analyzing men and masculinity. Crenshaw’s analysis centered the erasure and exclusion of Black women in legal policy, specifically. Because she developed the theory when studying Black women experiencing multiple forms of oppression, “some have questioned its appropriateness as a method for understanding the condition of men” (Williams, 2013, p. 165) who, even if socially subordinated, may also hold gender privilege. For Mutua (2013), however, the critique is that intersectionality theory does not adequately capture the complexity of the lives of Men of Color. Mutua pointed to the ways in which Crenshaw’s (1989) theory of intersectionality frames much

of Black feminist thought on men and masculinity. As noted in the excerpt from the Combahee River Collective, when applied to Black men, Mutua (2013) argued that intersectionality allows for an analysis of how Black men are privileged by gender and subordinated by race. Through using the example of racial profiling, however, Mutua demonstrated that Black men experience gendered racism, thus complicating the notion of men's universal dominance. She consequently argued that an "assumed privileged gender position of men in the context of people of color is not always accurate" (Mutua, 2013, p. 347). As a result, Mutua (2013) called for a theory of multidimensionality to better understand men's experiences in complex hierarchical systems.

Questions also surfaced regarding the impact of conceptualizing multiple masculinities. In one way, understanding masculinities as multidimensional provided space for feminists to claim political solidarity with men in their shared struggle for liberation. hooks (2015) wrote, "To a grave extent, the feminist movement failed to attract a large body of females and males because our theory did not effectively address the issue of not just what males might do to be antisexist but also what an alternative masculinity might look like" (p. 70). She (1998) also asserted that without men as 'comrades in struggle,' the feminist movement will not progress. A feminism inclusive of men, however, may complicate the fight for ending gendered oppression. Through the historically-situated frame of positioning men as both oppressors and oppressed, there is a risk that the focus of gender analysis moves to the individual rather than the structures that maintain social inequities (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2012). As many feminist theorists believe all men benefit from the current gender order (Bridges, 2008), they may have concerns about a shift that deflects from men's access to power. Even hooks, who argued that feminism should recognize that men can suffer under patriarchy, believes a multidimensional approach must not fail to place responsibility on men for gendered oppression. "Since men are the primary agents maintaining and supporting sexism and sexist oppression, they can only be successfully eradicated if men are compelled to assume responsibility for transforming their consciousness" (hooks, 1998, p. 278).

Across the literature are varying perspectives regarding the role of multidimensionality in understanding constructions of masculinity and dominance. Berggren (2014) explained that these challenges stem from "reconciling an attempt to capture historical variability with the presumption of a transhistorical structural notion of men's power over women" (p. 234). While Williams (2013) argued that theories of multiple masculinities have worked to destabilize essentialized gender ideas by highlighting the "contingent relationship between masculine privilege and male bodies," (p. 175), Whitehead (2002) believed that the concept of hegemonic masculinity, despite its efforts to acknowledge different forms of masculinity, still reinforces a dominant and "fixed (male) structure" (p. 94). Multidimensional approaches, along with liberal, radical, and psychoanalytic feminist theories, depict the difficult task of theorizing masculinity without insisting upon binary and biological notions of gender. Even when multidimensional theories question essentialist categories of 'men' for ignoring experiences influenced by race and sexuality, many still rely upon group concepts such as Black men and Men of Color. Peterson (2003) contended that the "specific historical and social constructions of masculinity cannot be dissociated from constructions of femininity" and terms such as 'male,' 'men,' 'female,' and 'women' (p. 58). In response, postmodern and poststructuralist feminist theories strive to dismantle the very concept of gender and the binary to achieve liberation.



## Postmodern and Poststructuralist Feminisms

Emerging in the 1980s and 1990s, postmodern and poststructuralist feminism offer new methods for conceptualizing and analyzing gender. Theorists work to identify what has been neglected, silenced, or taken for granted about gender (Hare-Mustin, 2004) to deconstruct dualistic and essentialist thinking and concepts that “serve to regulate behavior and exclude others” (Mann & Patterson, 2016, p. 301). In fact, instead of providing direct critiques of men, masculinity, and patriarchal power, postmodern and poststructuralist feminist theories name the consequences of investing in gender and assert that the dismantling of gender itself is the only way to eliminate gendered oppression. Postmodernism and poststructuralism theorize gender as socially constructed, discourse-dependent, fluid, negotiable, and created through repeated performances (Gardiner, 2005; Mann & Patterson, 2016). To effectively challenge the heterosexist power structures of gender, theorists critically examine how concepts, categories, and ideologies have been discursively fabricated (Peterson, 2003). In other words, postmodern and poststructuralist feminist theorists strive to denaturalize sex and gender (Peterson, 2003) and decouple gender identity from sexual identity (Gardiner, 2005) to imagine a new social order that previously seemed impossible. Anne Fausto Sterling (2000), for example, wrote *Should There be Only Two Sexes?* to demonstrate how the social construction of the male and female binary precludes us from acknowledging alternatives, such as people of ambiguous or multiple sexes. Lorber (1994) similarly argued that gender is used as a form of social control and calls for the validation of many forms of sexuality.

Butler (1990, 2004), a prominent figure in postmodern and poststructuralist thought, scrutinized the ways in which gender is categorized and essentialized. Butler (2004) specifically argued that “discourse insists on binary of man and woman as an exclusive way to understand gender...[and] forecloses the thinkability of its disruption” (p. 43). Working to reveal the artificiality of conventional gender norms, Butler (1990, 2004) theorized that gender is produced through performance and discourse. Foucault’s conceptualization of discourse also underpins much of postmodern and poststructuralist feminist theory. Connecting knowledge with power, discourse analysis provides a tool for examining how “essentialism and dualistic distinctions are embedded in the categories and concepts that they employ” (Peterson, 2003, p. 56), including ‘men’ and ‘masculinity.’ For instance, men become materially produced subjects through their participation within networks of power and discourse (Heller, 2009). Even if men attempted to reject normative identities, poststructuralist thought would say that they cannot because their normative identities are “still engulfed in power” (Butler, 1990 as cited in Heller, 2009, p 584).

In an effort to decouple the concept of ‘masculinity’ from ‘men,’ postmodern and poststructuralist theorists also acknowledge alternative masculinities. Sedgwick (1985) developed the concept of homosociality to deconstruct the “divisive system of sexual categorization” and demonstrate how homosexuality and masculinity are interdependent (as cited in Edwards, 2005, p. 61). Sedgwick’s (1985) research framed her later argument that masculinity does not solely relate to men. Halberstam (1998) similarly stated that it is possible to study masculinity without men. Arguing that masculinity is most complicated and transgressive when not tied to the male body, Halberstam (1998) believed masculinity cannot be fully understood unless female masculinity is also acknowledged. Halberstam’s theorizing of female masculinity is part of the larger postmodern and poststructuralist project to disrupt gender and sexual categories that fail to address diverse and alternative arrangements of identity.

In calling for the disruption of binary thinking about gender, postmodern and poststructuralist feminist theories have caused concern. Some feminist theorists believe that “postmodernism

is a ruse by which dominant groups once again rob women of a voice, this time by doing away with a category like Woman, or the reality of women's lived experience" (Hare-Mustin, 2004, p. 17). By challenging identity categories, postmodern and poststructuralist theories are believed to make feminist political action impossible by centering individualism and delegitimizing organized communities (Pease, 2000). Feminist theorists also argue that postmodernism and poststructuralism fail to interrogate the ways in which patriarchy and masculinity are structurally reinforced (Edwards, 2005). While some contemporary feminist theorists support the postmodern agenda in rejecting essentialist gender categories, they also recognize the need to occasionally employ essentialism for strategic purposes, also known as strategic essentialism (Sayer, 1997; Spivac, 1988).

### **Mapping Feminist Theories onto College Men and Masculinities Praxis**

Since the emergence of feminist scholarship, feminist theorists have advanced critical and diverse perspectives regarding the role of examining men and masculinity in the struggle for gender equity. In masculinity studies scholarship, however, these foundational contributions have been utilized in narrow and limiting ways, ultimately impacting the praxis it informs. Men and masculinities praxis in higher education, which includes faculty or staff-led programmatic and educational initiatives primarily geared towards college men and the examination of masculinities, often draw from various strands of feminist theory, even if these theoretical influences are not explicitly named. In this section, we will draw connections between feminist theories and college men and masculinities praxis to explore the implications of varying approaches to the work.

Across college men and masculinities praxis, radical feminist perspectives are prominent in violence prevention initiatives and other interventions. Aiming to disrupt men's violence and other harmful behaviors, campuses have developed peer education opportunities, credit-bearing courses, judicial interventions, and dialogue programs to engage college men in conversations about their personal responsibility as men to transform both themselves and the broader campus culture. The radical-orientation of these initiatives is evident in their intention to "redefine traditional male behavior" (Harper, Harris, & Mmeje, 2005, p. 580). Through providing developmental opportunities for men to explore examples of positive masculinity (Harper, Harris, & Mmeje, 2005); reflect upon issues related to misogyny, sexism, and homophobia (Harris, Palmer, & Struve, 2011); and gain skills to challenge other men and intervene in potential sexual assault situations (Barone, Wolgemuth, Linder, 2007), these examples of men and masculinities praxis work to "reduce the frequency of alcohol-related incidents, physical and sexual assaults, and other unwanted behaviors disproportionately committed by male students" (Harper, Harris, & Mmeje, 2005, p. 583) on campus. These types of practical interventions employ a radical feminist perspective that centers men's material practices and aims to disrupt their gendered power to create change. As feminist theorists have indicated, however, applications of radical feminist theory present a serious risk of reinforcing biological essentialism, heterosexism, and fixed, binary understandings of gender (McCarry, 2007).

While radical feminist perspectives are present in violence prevention and other programmatic interventions, examples of liberal and psychoanalytic feminist approaches are evident in the many types of college men and masculinities praxis that center men's personal growth and their individual responsibility to develop critical consciousness. Through dialogue programs, themed living-learning communities, workshops, health and wellness initiatives, and mentorship initiatives, to name a few, campuses provide opportunities for men to engage in critical reflection and dialogue to redefine masculinity and embrace a wider range of healthier, more authentic ways of

being (Edwards & Jones, 2009; Harris & Harper, 2008; Harris, 2010). Such approaches to college men and masculinities praxis can play a pivotal role in transforming individual men's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors related to gender. However, these practical interventions problematically rely upon liberal and psychoanalytic strands of thought that serve to keep dominant structures intact in a number of ways. Liberal approaches to college men and masculinities praxes, for instance, emphasize individual men's consciousness-raising and transformation. The primary pedagogical approach from this perspective relies on the assumption that if we support men in rethinking childhood socialization, unpacking current manifestations of gendered learning and gender role expectations, and learning about discrimination and oppression, then violence and harm, particularly against women, will be reduced. The core limitation of this approach is its focus on reforming individual actors without also working to dismantle oppressive patriarchal and other structures (Pease, 2000). In many ways, this dynamic reduces men's responsibility to their own individual transformation and the transformation of those immediately within their locus of influence, rather than focusing energy on shifting structures of power and privilege, changing policies and laws, or redistributing resources, for example.

Psychoanalytic feminist frameworks are similarly found in individual-centered praxis. By grounding the work in the notion that the gendered construction of masculinity and manhood, as well as the operating norms of patriarchy and gender-based oppression, negatively impact the well-being of men, practitioners rely upon psychoanalytic perspectives. Instead of engaging men and masculinities praxis grounded in moral responsibility, the entry point becomes that of men's own liberation from restrictive and harmful expectations of hegemonic masculinity. A prominent example of this tension in practice is the screening of the documentary *The Mask You Live In* (2015) on numerous college campuses across the country. A synopsis of the documentary explains:

The Mask You Live In follows boys and young men as they struggle to stay true to themselves while negotiating America's narrow definition of masculinity...[O]ur protagonists confront messages encouraging them to disconnect from their emotions, devalue authentic friendships, objectify and degrade women, and resolve conflicts through violence...creating a maze of identity issues boys and young men must navigate to become "real" men. Experts in neuroscience, psychology, sociology, sports, education, and media also weigh in, offering empirical evidence of the "boy crisis" and tactics to combat it. (The Mask You Live In, 2015, "Synopsis", para. 1-3)

Screenings of this documentary can provide effective entry point approaches for men to understand and engage in gender equity work; however, these types of approaches run the risk of overemphasizing the impact of patriarchy on boys and men in a manner that then deflects from the ways that men's socialization, and the systems that enable it, are in place to maintain patriarchy and dominance.

This dynamic can be further examined through the lens of psychoanalytic object-relations theory. Object-relations theory, perceived as an approach that is sympathetic to the ways in which men are also harmed by patriarchal structures, has analytical utility for engaging men in supporting gender liberation while striving to simultaneously free themselves from restrictive gender roles (Ashe, 2007). Many scholars and practitioners, for instance, focused their critiques of patriarchy on the emotional cost of masculinity to men (Messner, 1998). This preoccupation with men's victimization is referred to as 'masculinity in crisis,' a belief that "manhood as we know it...requires such a self-destructive identity, a deeply masochistic self-denial, a shrinkage of the self...that the

man who obeys the demands of masculinity has become only half human” (Horrocks, 1994, p. 25; Traister, 2000). Often serving as an underlying principle to college men and masculinities praxis, ‘masculinity in crisis’ proposes that dominant masculinity is an abstract concept that, in reality, serves very few individual men (Robinson, 2002). Through relying on object-relations theory, these types of initiatives may unintentionally promote men’s engagement in feminism through self-interest, consequently denying their agency in the maintenance of patriarchy and disruption of gendered oppression (McMahon, 1993; O’Neill, 2015; Stoltenberg, 1977).

Multidimensional feminist perspectives also ground varying approaches to college men and masculinities praxis. Intended to provide various types of support for men holding marginalized identities, these programs acknowledge the plurality of masculinities and their differing relationships to power. For instance, many of these initiatives take the approach of supporting men of color in navigating systems of racial oppression. Recognizing the need to improve the retention and graduation rates of Black men, for instance, some programs provide opportunities for Black men to explore alternative definitions of masculinity through mentorship, dialogue, and relationship-building (Harper, 2004). Pelzer (2016) argued that these spaces must continue to emerge in higher education to examine the intersections of Black men’s experiences and create an “environment where Black men feel supported to expect more of themselves, are asked to achieve higher standards, and are comfortable voicing their lived experiences” (p. 22). Similar initiatives continue to emerge that engage Black and Latino men, as well as Men of Color more broadly to improve retention and academic outcomes and foster a sense of belonging on campus (Brooms, 2016; Harris & Wood, 2013; Saenz et al., 2015). Researchers have also called for increased multidimensional approaches across other social identities (Berila, 2011; Chan, 2017; Gerschick, 2011; Longwood, Muesse, & Schipper, 2004). Aiming to better support gay men on campus, for example, Anderson-Martinez and Vianden (2014) stated,

[A]cademic courses and co-curricular activities should be inclusive of gay men’s identity development...[S]exual assault prevention efforts must be inclusive of gay men...services for LGBT students should actively seek to encourage gay men’s gender identity development, particularly in engaging them in conversations about gender performance, concealing sexual orientation, peer relations, and campus climate. (p. 295)

A multidimensional framework for men and masculinities praxis provides the critical opportunity to work with men within their communities to collaboratively seek liberation. By focusing on the ways in which men might experience oppression in their intersecting identities, however, it becomes possible to divert attention from their responsibility to dismantle gendered oppression.

Postmodern and poststructuralist feminist approaches to college men and masculinities praxis have attempted to engage diverse masculine embodiments. These types of initiatives work to disrupt binary and restrictive understandings of gender to “push for the reconstruction and transformation of all masculinities...and [allow] for a broader range of gender expression and identities to exist” (Jourian, 2018, p. 5). The utilization of these approaches is limited on college campuses, and, in response, several scholars offer recommendations for pushing this theoretical direction forward. Catalano and Jourian (2018), for example, called upon LGBTQ center practitioners to utilize strategies that disrupt normative understandings of gender; they argued that LGBTQ centers can create dialogue spaces focused on how “gay men and trans\* men inhabit and perform hegemonic masculinity or how queer women may reinforce hegemonic masculine norms” (p. 45). Using a similar framework, Kupo and Castellon (2018) argued that women’s centers need to continue

engaging in more complex and expansive understandings of gender. For instance, they point to how some women's centers now have critically moved beyond the binary to include trans\*, non-binary, and masculine-of-center experiences. Additionally, some centers "recognize that masculinities apply to more than cisgender men and are actively attempting to demystify the mission of women's centers by educating and complicating notions of gender" (Kupo & Castellon, 2018, p. 20). Postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives attempt to assess local power relations rather than large, abstract social structures (Anyon, 1994) and often view identity, gender specifically, as constructed through performance (Butler, 2004). Understanding power relations and performance in the context of men and masculinities praxis is necessary for disentangling cisgender men from masculinity and for moving beyond essentialist understandings of gender, sex, and the body. Still, feminist scholars have debated the utility and practicality of postmodern and poststructuralist approaches in working towards gender liberation, particularly when attention and analysis is diverted from the institutional manifestations of patriarchy to individual power relations (Bhavani & Coulson, 2003; Currie, 1992).

This analysis, through drawing connections between feminist theoretical perspectives and college men and masculinities praxis, provides critical insight on the limitations of narrow or oversimplified approaches to the work. To move this work forward, practitioners must better understand and apply diverse feminist perspectives related to men, masculinity, and power. Doing so will provide practitioners with the opportunity to critically reflect upon the opportunities and risks of their approaches to engaging topics related to men and masculinities. Specifically, practitioners must call into question the theoretical underpinning of their approaches, understand the purpose and limitations associated with them, and interrogate how their programs or initiatives work to unsettle systems that have maintained dominance over women, trans\*, queer, and non-binary people on college campuses and beyond.

### **Application of Feminist Theoretical Perspectives**

Men and masculinities practitioners must go beyond just understanding and acknowledging critical theoretical perspectives, they must also apply them in praxis. This process requires practitioners to examine "whether and how...frameworks of contemporary masculinity theory are being challenged and changed by a thorough incorporation of different feminist stances" (Robinson, 2003, p. 134). Applications of nuanced and sometimes at-odds theories related to disrupting the gender binary; analyzing the roles of individual, institutional, and systemic power; and recognizing the interconnectedness of oppressions through multidimensional frameworks offer liberatory possibilities for men and masculinities praxis that reductive, selective, and uninformed approaches cannot. To conclude, we offer a starting point for practitioners to critically consider and apply feminist perspectives to their praxis.

Like masculinity studies scholarship, men and masculinities praxis in higher education often fails to engage in balanced analyses of gender and power. Jourian (2017, 2018) called attention to the exclusion of critical theoretical perspectives in men and masculinities scholarship, and arguably the praxis it informs, by examining the ways in which current approaches reify hegemonic masculinity, genderism, and whiteness. For instance, Jourian (2017) demonstrated that "masculinities continue to be theorized as exclusively shaped and embodied by [white, heterosexual,] cisgender men" (p. 245) and argued that utilizing post-intentional, queer perspectives, Women of Color feminism, and critical trans politics in men and masculinities scholarship and practice can offer "liberatory potentials for everyone, including cis men and women, and trans\*people" (p 246).

Through applying critical theories to the examination of men and masculinities, Jourian (2017, 2018) challenged taken-for-granted assumptions about gender and urges practitioners to engage diverse masculine people and embodiments in their praxes.

Catalano, Wagner, and Davis (2018) similarly called upon practitioners to apply critical and expansive understandings of gender in men and masculinities praxis. As evident from previously explored examples, men and masculinities initiatives often express aims of awareness, analysis, and action while overlooking the focus on “understanding our responsibilities to others for our actions, contributions, collusion, and absences” (Catalano, Wagner, and Davis, 2018, p. 15). Drawing from Barbara Love’s (2013) model for liberatory consciousness, the authors developed a gender-aware framework that demonstrates that awareness, analysis, and action must be coupled with accountability. Through offering a gender-aware approach based on multidimensional theoretical perspectives, Catalano, Wagner, and Davis (2018) urged practitioners to not only engage others in understanding how masculinity informs interactions and sense of self, but also analyzing the role of gender and masculinity as organizers of social relations. Gender-aware practice offers a both/and approach that men and masculinities scholarship and praxis, particularly approaches relying on the ‘masculinity in crisis’ narrative, must utilize.

To critically apply strands of feminist thought, we offer the following questions to prompt reflection and action for college men and masculinities program design or evaluation:

- What is the purpose/intention of the initiative? How did the initiative emerge on campus?
- Which feminist theoretical perspectives predominantly inform the initiative’s current intention, approach, and aims?
- In what ways do these theoretical perspectives offer opportunities for supporting gender equity rooted in systemic transformation? How do you know? How might they be better integrated into your praxis?
- How does the initiative include gendered experiences as they intersect with other social identities (race, sexuality, class, ability, etc.)?
- What limitations and potential harms exist? What is missing? How can you draw from feminist theoretical perspectives to directly address these limitations in your praxis?

We hope these questions can serve as a starting point to support how we, as a practitioner community, hold the nuances, contradictions, limitations and opportunities that the evolution of feminist theories offers to men and masculinities praxis.

Feminist theories are complex, ever-evolving, and not without limitations, providing multiple approaches and perspectives to advancing gender equity. Instead of strategically relying upon the feminist theoretical frameworks that are most friendly to the aims of our initiatives, we must challenge ourselves to learn and critically apply diverse feminist perspectives in advancing gender equity work. As an example, the narrative of ‘masculinity in crisis’ that has undergirded much of men and masculinities praxis de-centers the conversation from those who are primarily harmed by gender-based violence and oppression, instead focusing the call to action for men’s investment in gender-equity as a self-serving project. Programs also overwhelmingly engage men’s understandings and tensions with masculinity by using the constructs of ‘men,’ ‘male,’ and ‘masculinities’ interchangeably and solely restricting masculinities to “men’s experiences, all of whom are assumed to be or are cis men” (Jourian, 2017, p. 245). While understanding the negative impact of gender socialization on cisgender men can serve as an initial approach to inviting them into the

conversation, initiatives must examine how gender socialization is a systematic process through which power is maintained and reproduced over women, queer, trans\*, and gender nonconforming people. It is therefore critical to recognize the feminist theoretical approaches that are often overlooked in praxis, particularly postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives that disrupt normative, binary understandings of gender. Through engaging men and masculinities in a grounded, feminist praxis, practitioners can facilitate opportunities for critical gender consciousness-raising while simultaneously naming the impacts of patriarchy and multiple systems of oppression on all people without creating false equivalencies or symmetries.

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