Engaging Men in Difficult Dialogues about Privilege

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Male privilege is one aspect of social inequality that underlies much of the oppression and violence that occurs on college campuses. Mad Skills, a program addressing power and privilege with college men, is described along with general recommendations about how to engage men in difficult dialogues. The PIE Model is used to describe defensive behavior observed in college males.

Male power and privilege underlie many problems on campus, and student affairs professionals must engage men in dialogues about these issues. Although masculinity encompasses positive, neutral and negative traits, some aspects of male socialization intersect with the unequal social distribution of power and privilege. This intersection can result in men's negative behaviors including oppression, interpersonal violence, and devaluing others (Kaufman, 2001; Sanday, 1990). Yet male power and privilege go largely unaddressed. Among men, lack of awareness about their power may generate resistance when they are asked to engage in conversations about power and privilege (Watt, 2007). Therefore, to make such conversations successful, we must understand and address the interaction of male power, socialization, and men's behavior. Similar to insight about other developmental processes (e.g., racial identity development), student affairs professionals can use this understanding to develop empathy, contextualize behavior, and embed dialogues in the language of the target audience. Professionals can then design and implement more effective interventions to deepen men's engagement in difficult dialogues. Our approach is centered on the premise that men are inherently good and well intended. We believe college men are more open to being held accountable for their behavior if they are approached in accepting, non-shaming ways that acknowledge their socialization.

In this article, we use the term *difficult dialogues* (Watt, 2007) to include dialogues with male students designed to develop or enhance their awareness of the impact of male power and privilege. As Watt suggested, difficult dialogues are

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contextualized by a range of (a) internal and external challenges experienced by practitioners (e.g., discomfort, stress, and legitimacy concerns) when raising issues of privilege with students and (b) student and colleague defensive reactions to the dialogues. We recognize that individuals possess multiple aspects of identity (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class). For example, men from different backgrounds have different experiences of power and privilege (Kaufman, 1994). Despite these discrepancies, we focus our attention in this article on dialogues with men and male privilege. Rather than thinking of masculinity as a factor that is the same for men from all different backgrounds, we urge practitioners to conceptualize masculinity as one of many intersecting aspects of identity to be considered when working with an individual or group of students.

In the following pages, we provide an overview of male socialization and its impact on college men's behaviors, attitudes and beliefs. We describe how understanding male socialization can help (a) demystify men's defensiveness or withdrawal from dialogues, and (b) identify ways to address privilege while positively engaging men in difficult dialogues. We use Watt's PIE model (2007) as a framework for conceptualizing men's reactions to difficult dialogues. Finally, we provide an example and share recommendations from our conversations with men.

Male Socialization

Although men's socialization experiences differ on the basis of individual, family, cultural, racial/ethnic, sexual orientation, socioeconomic, and other factors, many similarities exist. The gender socialization process in which boys and girls are treated differently by family, peers, and society starts at birth and continues throughout one's lifetime (Fagot, Rogers, & Leinbach, 2000). Boys are socialized to adopt a code of behavior that includes independence, aggression, confidence, emotional inhibition, and avoidance of any behaviors that might be considered "feminine" (David & Brannon, 1975; Mahalik, Good, & Englar-Carlson, 2003; O'Neil, Helms, & Wrightsman, 1986). As a result, many young men struggle with expressing feelings of hurt, loss, sadness, or fear (Davies et al., 2000) without being able to ask for help. For many men, anger, violence or withdrawal seem to be the only acceptable forms of emotional expression (Courtenay, 1998).

During the socialization process, young boys are rewarded for aggressive and competitive behavior while girls are rewarded for passive and or cooperative behavior (Kaufman, 1994). This system of rewards sustains the unobtainable masculine ideal of the "rugged individualist" who doesn't need help, and thus perpetuates the myth that males are the "stronger" gender (Kaufman, 1994).

Most men have felt shame and/or inadequacy when unable to achieve "ideal" masculine behavior (Bergman, 1995). Unfortunately, while the intent of men's behavior is often to prove, preserve, or protect their own masculinity, their actions may impact the campus community in an oppressive and/or violent manner. Some men respond to this feeling of inadequacy by attempting to prove their masculinity through risky behavior (e.g., drug and alcohol abuse) or restricting, violating or devaluing themselves or others (e.g., interpersonal violence, sexual assault, harassment, homophobia [Blazina & Watkins, 1996; O'Neil et al., 1986; O'Neil, Good, & Holmes, 1995]).

Such findings substantiate the need to help college men develop healthy ways to resolve such conflicts and cease activities devaluing self or others by engaging them in dialogues about male power and privilege. Unfortunately, many men tend to avoid participation or become defensive in interactions about these issues based on negative experiences with such conversations.

Demystifying Defensiveness

In our experience, when men enter difficult dialogues they anticipate that their experiences as men will not be understood, accepted or validated. Researchers have found that expectations of being (a) subordinated (e.g., Blazina & Watkins, 1996; Robertson & Fitzgerald, 1992), (b) asked to express emotions (Good et al., 2005), and (c) shamed (Osherson & Krugman, 1990) all discline men to invest in helping relationships. Other aspects of identity complicate interactions. For example, Euro-American men may expect to be perceived as privileged and blamed for sexual assault and/or the effects of racism, whereas men of color may have an additional fear that negative stereotypes of male behavior will intersect with racial/ethnic stereotypes. Practitioners may have preexisting assumptions about men that make developing and maintaining empathy for men difficult (Good et al., 2005; Laker, 2005).

Although male privilege exists, most individual men do not feel powerful (Kaufman, 1994). Discussions that focus on an individual's power and privilege may contravene his feelings of inadequacy for failing to meet the standards of masculinity, and may bewilder or further shame him. The use of shame in gender socialization has heightened men's sensitivity to such experiences; when men feel shamed, they frequently become defensive and/or withdrawn (Bergman, 1995). If a practitioner does not attend to a student's internal feelings of powerlessness before asking him to acknowledge his power and privilege, that student may believe that the practitioner does not understand what it is like to be male on campus.

Addressing Privilege

Understanding the impact of men's socialization and expectations of interactions may help contextualize some defensive reactions described by Watt (2007) and help professionals develop empathy for college men. Based on our clinical experiences, we believe that Watt et al.'s (In Process) findings from heterosexual, Euro-American females may generalize to college men. For example, we have seen men rationalize (cite logical reasons for inequality) and deflect (change the topic of inequality to one that is less threatening) the dialogue in conversations about sexual assault prevention.

To be effective, interventionists must incorporate their knowledge of male socialization and empathy for college men into interventions and understand men's defensiveness as a reaction to the content and process of the conversation. We suggest cultivating a safe and supportive environment in which men feel acknowledged and understood. Knowledge of male socialization may help professionals deliver unconditional positive regard for men while challenging their behavior. We encourage professionals to examine whatever biases or assumptions they may have about men. As part of the content of interventions, professionals can affirm men's strengths (Shay, 1996), create opportunities to help other men (Addis & Mahalik, 2003), use humor and self-disclosure, and focus on male socialization (Robertson & Fitzgerald, 1992). The following is an example of a program based on these ideals.

Programming Example: Mad Skills

Mad Skills is a series of classes for men who violate the conduct code at the University of Oregon. The series involves collaboration among the Men's Center, the Counseling and Testing Center, and the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards. It is important to note that the *Mad Skills* program also demonstrates the power of cross-campus collaboration. This series enhances beneficial aspects of group work through emphases on reciprocity, skill building, and connection. The series is guided by assumptions that (a) many men violate the conduct code because of depleted problem-solving skills, and (b) information about links between male socialization and problematic behavior will help men recognize differences between their intent and the impact of their behavior as well as develop effective problem-solving skills.

Mad Skills I is a psycho-educational discussion group that uses readings, film clips, and facilitated discussions to help college men explore and challenge notions of masculinity. *Mad Skills II* adds Aikido principles to emphasize emotional regulation skills and make connections among mind, body and

emotions. During both classes men enhance help-seeking, communication, and problem solving skills.

The *Mad Skills* intervention utilizes multiple strategies to facilitate difficult dialogues. First, through our collaboration we share resources and knowledge about student life and the university community. Second, the focus on male socialization raises students' consciousness about the roots and impacts of their behavior. As they broaden their perspectives, students develop tools for more effective problem solving and communication.

We work to develop a supportive environment to facilitate change through a variety of approaches. Unearthing the principles of masculinity as a societal phenomenon encourages dialogues about power and privilege by moving the focus (and potential feelings of being targeted or shamed) from the individual person to a less threatening discussion about how society can influence people. Once a relationship has been developed, practitioners can encourage individuals to consider the impact of their actions on the community. Instructors use self-disclosure as a means to engage the audience and to normalize struggles to accept one's own power and privilege. Each class is based on the principles of reciprocity and mutual learning. Although instructors are prepared with knowledge about male socialization messages and societal reinforcement, the environment is constructed collaboratively. The psycho-educational format allows men to work together to understand the mechanisms of masculinity and to strategize about behavior change.

Recommendations for Practice

We encourage practitioners to develop ways to have discussions with men about power and privilege. To successfully conduct these dialogues, professionals need to develop attitudes, knowledge and skills about male socialization and negotiating male defensiveness. Awareness of one's attitudes toward men is crucial in developing the safety required to engage in these difficult dialogues. We encourage professionals to study male socialization and use existing models for understanding and responding to defensive reactions such as Watt's (2007) PIE model. Below are specific recommendations for practice:

1. Create a safe, supportive atmosphere. Do not blame or shame men. Engage men with a less threatening introduction and gradually move to conversation that directly involves the individual. Focus on how men can create change. If participants are responding defensively or with powerful emotions such as anger, assume they are not feeling safe

and possibly feeling shamed. Help defuse the environment through increased self-disclosure.

2. Attend to your own internalized gender messages. How might your biases make it difficult to create a safe, supportive atmosphere? Do you struggle to feel empathy for college men? How do you react when a male student challenges you? How can you use your knowledge of male socialization to connect with that student?

3. Think positively and creatively. Don't be afraid to make mistakes. Include ways in which men can help each other and create reciprocal relationships. Include men from the target audience in the planning and presentation process. Experiment by presenting to all male audiences.

4. Remember that men have multiple aspects of identity (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation) that cause them to understand power and privilege in a variety of ways.

5. Acknowledge and honor men's defensiveness about privilege. Many men do not feel privileged or powerful, particularly when attending a mandatory workshop. Understanding this fact and using creative ways to include men's defensiveness can keep the dialogue useful and relevant. Accept that you will probably not change men's views in one sitting but that you may "plant a seed" for future growth. Some men may feel more comfortable sharing concerns on an individual basis after the program. Allow time and opportunities for men to talk individually away from the peer pressure that may inhibit them.

Conclusion

Male socialization impedes men's engagement in thoughtful, complex dialogues about social, political and economic contexts of inequality and oppression. Knowledge of these processes can help practitioners move beyond hostile confrontations and/or staid conversations with reluctant males, and move toward engaging them in dynamic difficult dialogues. This knowledge helps us contextualize men's defensiveness and address it directly. By learning more about men's behaviors and reactions, practitioners can develop new and effective ways of engaging men in difficult dialogues. Without understanding the contexts in which men develop, professionals and students alike risk missing a number of positive and productive encounters in which we could move as communities toward greater understanding.

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