
REACTION TO R. W. CONNELL'S
*UNDERSTANDING MEN: GENDER
SOCIOLOGY AND THE NEW INTERNATIONAL
RESEARCH ON MASCULINITIES*

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As a doctoral student in the Sociology program at the University of Kansas, I have been privy to several lectures and panel discussions by leading scholars in my field. The 2001 Clark Lecture (*Social Thought & Research*, 2002, Vol. 24, 1 & 2) was no exception to this trend. For the first time in my life, I was able to listen to a presentation given by one of my scholarly heroes, Robert Connell. Based on this lecture given by such a prominent scholar in the field of gender, I now have the distinct privilege—or harrowing curse, depending on how you look at it—of composing a reaction piece based on Connell's lecture, *Understanding Men: Gender Sociology and the New International Research on Masculinities*.

Connell's lecture focused on recent research on issues concerning men and boys, with an emphasis on patterns of masculinity that are constantly in transition due to globalization and increasingly fluid patterns of gender. Men's positions, according to Connell, are "under challenge," and underlying assumptions of male power must be "rethought" (14). While I certainly agree with the need for a re-examination of structures of male power, I wonder if this can happen on a widespread basis in the United States. Who holds enough influence to effectively challenge male hegemonic power in a society that seems willing to let gendered social structures continue to thrive? While I can only hope that gendered social structures will one day be "shaken up" so to speak, I hold little faith that the society in which I

live, a society which refuses to pass the Equal Rights Amendment, will be willing to compromise male domination for female equality.

The idea of multiple masculinities was an important concept within Connell's lecture, with an emphasis on different ways of "doing" masculinity, ala West and Zimmerman's "Doing Gender" (1987). Masculinity is constantly constructed and maintained through our everyday social patterns and institutions. According to Connell, one of the ways masculinity is constructed is through the structure of organized sports; he asserts that these competitions, based on whether the athlete wins or loses, create a form of "aggressive" masculinity (18). I wonder if Connell considers male gymnasts or figure skaters as examples of this "aggressive" masculinity. Perhaps the label of "aggressive" masculinity can only be applied to contact sports.

Connell's view on masculinities is that they may be composed and decomposed based on the politics of gender in our everyday lives. Because of the vast array of masculinities in different cultures, he claims, "we can deduce that masculinities are able to change" (19). But just how fluid and elastic are different types of masculinities? Even if different forms of masculinity are evolving and changing, how do they benefit women and the goal of gender equality? While I completely agree with Connell that we must recognize that what we think of as "masculinity" comes in diverse forms, I'm also well aware that a universal hegemonic "masculinity" permeates our culture and social structures, continuing to control women—and men who are on the lower end of the "masculinity" hierarchy—and their bodies while sustaining a hierarchy of power in our everyday lives.

Globalization and capitalism also define masculinity in terms of inequality and labor. Connell refers to a South African study based on unequal racial relations between the Black male labor force and White supervisors. He states that the "old pattern of black masculinity" was replaced by a more "European-derived masculinity," which is "vehemently heterosexual, more open to violence" (24). This brings about an interesting point. In the United States, an "old

pattern" of Black masculinity based on something other than a sexually-charged, violent masculinity has never existed (see Nagel 2000; Wiegman 1993; Collins 1990). Since the importation of slaves into the United States, Black men and their masculinity have always been privy to stereotypes that have been nearly impossible to shake, regardless of accomplishments and achievements. When a Black man walks into a room, do we as a society see his gender first, or do we see his skin color? What is more important, the fact that he is a man or that he is Black?

This omission of differences in masculinity based on race or ethnicity is perhaps my primary criticism of Connell's lecture. While I agree with Connell that there are different forms of masculinity that are constantly shifting and evolving, I believe that in the United States, race and ethnicity have played an extremely important and often turbulent role in the hierarchy of masculinities. This is what makes the study of masculinities so very important; while gender inequality remains a constant struggle between men and women, underlying factors of race, ethnicity, and class also divide men into different categories of what is considered "masculine."

However, the mere fact that this journal issue has an entire section devoted to gender issues, and containing articles on different forms of masculinity must mean that Connell's contributions to this area have influenced many scholars. I commend Connell for attempting to unearth these mysterious layers surrounding masculinity, and continuing to inspire new generations of gender scholars who seek to make the world a gender equal place.

Collins, P. 1990. *Black feminist thought*. New York: Routledge.

Nagel, J. 2000 (a). Ethnicity and sexuality. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 107-133.

West, C. & D. Zimmerman. 1987. Doing gender. *Gender & Society* 1: 125-151.

Wiegman, R. 1993. The anatomy of lynching. *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3 (3): 445-467.