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# Surfacing the Structures of Patriarchy: Teaching and Learning Threshold Concepts in Women's Studies\*

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## Surfacing the Structures of Patriarchy: Teaching and Learning Threshold Concepts in Women's Studies\*

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### Abstract

Patriarchy is a threshold concept in women's studies—a significant, defining concept that transforms students' understanding of the discipline. This article reviews our design, implementation, and findings of a lesson study crafted to teach women's studies students the complex idea of patriarchy as a social system. We analyze the lesson using both quantitative and qualitative analysis, in keeping with the ideals of feminist pedagogy, suggesting a new model of SoTL research for the women's studies field.

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### Introduction

*"Patriarchy does not refer to any man or collection of men, but to a kind of society in which men and women participate...A society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered. It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women...."*

Allan Johnson, *The Gender Knot: Unraveling our Patriarchal Legacy*

Patriarchy can be understood as a threshold concept in any women's studies course—a core disciplinary concept that is particularly troublesome and transformative for students (Meyer and Land). Central to the definition of threshold concept is the belief that the concept is integrative, and that when students finally grasp the concept, "the hidden interrelatedness" of various disciplinary concepts becomes apparent (Cousin, 2006, p. 4). Understanding patriarchy as a social structure and not simply the specific actions of one man or a group of men is not only central to the women's studies classroom but also deeply transformative to students' learning experiences. In this article, we will review the design and findings of a lesson study crafted to teach women's studies students the threshold concept of patriarchy.<sup>1</sup> As teachers across disciplines know, threshold concepts are critical to a student's developing understanding of the field; our work here is intended to demonstrate the successes and flaws of a lesson designed to help students

understand a social construct, or an abstract concept that frames their particular, experiential understanding of more practical set of experiences.

Kathleen McKinney and Nancy Chick (2010) observe in their *IJSOTL* article "SoTL As Women's Work: What Do Existing Data Tell us?" that despite the dominance of women in SoTL work, there is a "relative lack of SoTL that engages feminist theories" and they conclude that "the presence of more women [in SoTL] doesn't necessarily mean attention to issues of sex, gender, equity, and the like" (p. 9). Our current project responds both to the lack of systematic assessment of student learning in women's studies courses and to the specific problem our lesson study aimed to tackle, student understanding of the threshold concept of patriarchy. We know that instructors working with diversity in their courses (particularly helping students develop a critical framework toward understanding overarching concepts like institutional racism, race/gender/class privilege, or intersectionality) are looking to develop an understanding of the barriers that keep students from making the transition from an individual to a structural understanding of social inequality. We hope our lesson can provide a model for moving students toward this goal.

### Literature Review and Background

Feminist scholars have, since the advent of women's studies in the early 1970s as an academic branch of the more politically-oriented feminist movement, investigated and theorized about educational practices that are consistent with the epistemologies and value systems of feminisms. Scholarly work on feminist pedagogy (not specific, necessarily, to courses in women's studies) is prolific, and there is an exhaustive body of scholarship on teaching in women's studies. What is missing, we assert, however, is significant investigation into teaching and learning in women's studies, particularly research emerging out of the growing scholarship of teaching and learning model (SoTL). Our purpose here is to model this kind of SoTL work that our field has yet to substantively undertake. But first, we want to distinguish between SoTL in women's studies and the already-published research on teaching and learning in a feminist classroom.

Scholarly work on feminist teaching falls into three broad categories: reflective work or "best practice" publications that are teaching-focused and identify strategies, reflect on classroom experiences, or promote particular strategies for feminist teaching; writing that theorizes about or defines feminist pedagogy; and empirical assessments of teaching and learning in women's studies, primarily using sociological methodologies and focusing on attitudinal or cognitive shifts over the course of a semester. By contrast, SoTL aims to apply the same rigorous methods and models used by faculty within their disciplinary research to the teaching and learning in that discipline. Women's studies has been woefully underrepresented in this type of research.

Though practitioners within women's studies have been for decades actively documenting and defining the features, principles, and values of feminist pedagogy, few works take a careful look at teaching and learning in the field of women's studies. For example, as a field, we have clearly established (through a long tradition of theory-driven or extended definition) what makes a classroom "feminist" and what pedagogical techniques create it (see Maher, 1987; Shrewsbury, 1993; or Crawley, et al, 2008 for some of the most useful work distilling feminist pedagogy). A more common approach is the reflective narrative or "best practice" piece, particularly—but not exclusively--those published in the peer-reviewed journal *Feminist Teacher* in which feminist instructors describe a particular technique, problem, or approach on using feminist methods in the classroom, in teaching women's studies, or in working with particular kinds of students. <sup>ii</sup> Though all of the published research identifies the problem that the authors propose to address, few of

them incorporate the systematic assessment of how the proposed strategy, solution, or recommendation impacts student learning—whether it is effective. Does it work?

In order to answer this question, some research has used the “hypothesis-experiment-findings-discussion” model that many social science researchers are more familiar with. Both Case (2007) and Stake, Sevelius, and Hanly (2008) are researchers who are interested in the impact of particular pedagogies or courses on students' attitudes. Case examines the development of student awareness of male privilege, feminist identity, and gender attitudes in students taking gender and multiculturalism-focused courses, while Stake, Sevelius, and Hanly use end-of-class and early-class questionnaires to assess students' gender attitudes, relationships with classmates and the instructor, and emotional reactions to the study of gender and race. Markowitz (2005) examines the relationships between use of feminist/alternative pedagogies and the development of increasingly less dualistic cognitive attitudes in her study. Duncan and Stasio, less focused on learning than teaching, report in *Feminist Teacher* in 2001 on their study using a survey of faculty to assess the impact of feminist pedagogy on student perception of instructor authority.

What distinguishes SoTL in the disciplines from these approaches –and in this case, the specific field of women’s studies—is the intensity of its analysis and the attention to student learning, as well as the adherence to discipline-specific methods such as critical discourse analysis. Pat Hutchings has identified four types of SoTL projects in her book *Opening Lines: Approaches to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (2000): 1. What works? 2. What is? 3. What’s possible? and 4. Formulating a new conceptual framework (pp. 4-5). Our current project falls into categories 1 and 4—we identified what we saw as a critical learning need in the women’s studies classroom, designed a lesson intended to address that need, and assessed its effectiveness. Out of this work arose some conclusions about conceptual models and practices for helping students develop the mindset, values, and disposition that are central to women’s studies as a field.

### **The Project and The Problem**

The study we describe here emerged as an institutional assessment project designed to better understand student learning of core concepts in our women’s studies classrooms. We selected lesson study as our mode of investigation for the particular reason that it allows for detailed focus on student learning *in situ*; lesson study is a model in which teachers jointly plan, teach, observe, revise, and then re-teach a lesson (for more on lesson study see Catherine Lewis, *Lesson study: A Handbook of Teacher-Led Instructional Change*, 2002) or the work of Bill Cerbin, including the forthcoming *Using Lesson Study Inquiry to Improve Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* [Stylus, 2011]).<sup>iii</sup> Central to lesson study is the belief that the concentrated work of devising and studying one lesson -- rather than an entire course -- allows us to gain detailed knowledge about how students learn while also creating a specific tool that can be shared used by colleagues. The initial step in designing a lesson study is to designate a learning goal and then design the lesson around that goal. For us, the teaching and learning problem that presented the greatest challenge in women’s studies courses is students’ development of an understanding of gender as a social construct—that is, their individual choices and behaviors as framed within a social structure, particularly patriarchy.

Our first step in lesson design was the establishment of our learning goal: *After taking any course in women’s studies, students will be able to identify ways that patriarchal values are reinforced or challenged in the dominant culture.* We also established a working definition of patriarchy. Sociologist Allan Johnson’s (2005) definition of patriarchy requires that learners are able to understand social structures as distinct from individual action and behavior, a particular challenge

for students who are new to the academic study of gender and gender systems.<sup>iv</sup> Johnson carefully and thoroughly defines patriarchy as a system of male privilege operating around four core values. *Male dominance* means that “positions of authority are generally reserved for men” (p. 5), while *male identified* is “that core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable, or normal are associated with how we think about men and masculinity” (p. 6). *Male centeredness* “means that the focus of attention is primarily on men and what they do,” (p. 10) and *obsession with control*, particularly male control, which functions to preserve male privilege “by controlling women and anyone else who might threaten it” (p. 5). One of the main features of patriarchy, and the workings of these four values, is “the oppression of women” (p. 5). Johnson’s definition, which he elaborates on in the early chapters of his book, is clearly tagged with these values. Significantly, Johnson focuses on the systemic nature of patriarchy, showcasing how everyone participates in this system, regardless of their gender, rather than focusing on actions or beliefs exhibited only by males. This important distinction provides a complex definition for students that moves them beyond exploring male attitudes and actions, and encourages them to see how patriarchy infuses all of our lives. Between unpacking the idea of patriarchy as a system and focusing on these four core values, we hoped that students would be challenged to understand, process, and synthesize a complex idea. From the outset we perceived that the complexity of patriarchy as a threshold concept would necessitate a multi-part lesson that would introduce, review, and then ask students to apply the new concept.

We scheduled this lesson for early in the semester—during the third week of class—in order to introduce students to the threshold concept of patriarchy as soon as possible. We also wanted to model the kind of careful, close, and critical analysis students would be practicing throughout the semester. This early lesson linked the theoretical concept of patriarchy with the practice of unpacking it, both significant learning outcomes for the entire course. Although the lesson day was the day of the semester most focused on defining patriarchy, consequent class sessions and assessment exercises asked students to continue to apply the lesson’s concepts and skills of identifying and analyzing patriarchy in other cultural artifacts. Similarly, the practice of artifact analysis remained an important skill through the entire semester. Therefore, students would continually practice the lesson, hopefully further strengthening their understanding of the threshold concept by the end of the course.

We conducted two lesson study iterations. In the first iteration, students read the first two chapters of Johnson’s book *The Gender Knot: Unraveling our Patriarchal Legacy*, and were asked to complete a pre-class reading quiz online using our course management software. The lesson consisted of a brief instructor lecture, a small group artifact analysis activity, and a post-class homework assignment. Lesson instruction was observed and documented. We evaluated student learning through the observer reports and through an evaluation of three student-produced artifacts: the pre-lesson quiz, an in-class group worksheet, and a short paper analysis of an artifact of the student’s choice completed as homework. We made revisions to our lesson to account for responses from observers and students that the lesson moved too quickly. The second iteration adopted several changes, including spreading the lesson over two class periods rather than a single day, scaling back the reading assignment, adding a “model” artifact analysis as a whole class (a country music video by Trace Adkins), and redesigning the small group work to focus on a single artifact (an episode of the reality show *Toddlers and Tiaras*) with each group focusing on one of the four core values.

In post-lesson meetings, we normed our evaluation of student performance on the quiz, the group worksheet, and the homework. We ultimately decided to eliminate the worksheet produced by the in-class groups as they were very difficult to assess; in the first iteration there was one worksheet per group, which we found did not accurately reflect the discussions recorded by our observers and

seemed to be the work of one diligent student assigned to be the “scribe.” In the second iteration, every student was responsible for completing a worksheet, and most students just jotted down brief notes that did not provide an elaboration of the ideas or concepts actually addressed in the discussion or fully reflect their understanding of the material.

In contrast to the absence of meaningful data found in the group worksheet, we found the homework to be particularly meaningful. This assignment asked that students find their own popular cultural artifact and then analyze it in terms of the four core values. These short papers were, as a whole, interesting and insightful. They provided a rich opportunity to gauge individual student comprehension of the concept of patriarchy, often making clear the specific concept(s) with which a student was struggling.

### **Findings**

Our goal in assessing the effectiveness of the lesson was to bridge the quantitative, social sciences model of analyzing data (gathered from the students’ various assignments) with the qualitative, feminist model of analyzing anecdotes (also gathered from the assignments)—to synthesize both the personal and the academic. In doing so, we aimed to model an approach to SoTL research that uses the specific values of the women’s studies field to assess the efficacy of our lesson. As seen below, we first assessed the pre-class quiz and post-class homework using a traditional, rubric driven quantitative analysis. Then, we looked for evidence of personal experience, emotional investment, and intellectual questioning in student assignments, anecdotes, comments, and conversation. Women’s studies, by its interdisciplinary nature, offers the possibility of a relatively new kind of SoTL research that relies on multiple measures, including this more traditional quantitative data analysis and the often less privileged qualitative anecdotal evidence. The findings below focus on the more quantitative data, while we further develop the students’ stories, and assess their learning process as individuals and group members in the subsequent sections.

After the first iteration, we applied the rubric below to a pre-class quiz and a post-class homework assignment. Students took a five question quiz through our online course management software, which asked them to respond to the reading in several ways: describe Johnson’s four core values, explain how both men and women participate in the patriarchal system, describe how individual behavior is related to the patriarchal system, note the clearest and muddiest points of the chapter. After the lesson, they applied Johnson’s article to a popular culture artifact of their choosing.

The findings for the quiz and homework of the first iteration demonstrated that, after simply reading the article for comprehension, a relatively equal number of students exceeded and failed to meet expectations for the learning goal, with a smaller number of students demonstrating the ability to recognize and provide a specific example of patriarchal values within the assigned artifact.

	<b>A student who <u>exceeds</u> expectations</b>	<b>A student who <u>meets</u> expectations</b>	<b>A student who <u>fails to meet</u> expectations</b>
	Can explain and provide specific examples of the values of patriarchy as evident in multiple artifacts of popular culture.	Can recognize and provide a specific example of the values of patriarchy as evident in one or more artifacts of popular culture.	Does not recognize the values of patriarchy as evident in artifacts of popular culture.
	<b># of students who exceed expectations</b>	<b># of students who meets expectations</b>	<b># of students who fails to meet expectations</b>
Quiz (20)	7/35%	5/25%	8/40%
Post-class (18)	6/33.3%	8/44.5%	4/22.2%

As the significant increase in the percentage of students able to meet expectation from the quiz to the homework (from 25% to 44.5%) shows, students struggled with the reading quiz and improved by the time they completed the homework. We were concerned about the online quiz as a true judge of students' knowledge of patriarchy, as they could easily list the qualities of patriarchy without actually understanding them. However, we were also troubled by the number of students who failed to meet expectations on the homework; nearly a quarter of students persisted with misunderstanding *after* a course reading, a comprehension quiz, an in-class discussion, group work, and a homework assignment; in our opinion, this is an unacceptably high percentage of students continuing to lack a very basic grasp of this "threshold concept." Clearly, students still struggled to understand Johnson's definition of patriarchy, and synthesize the definition with artifact analysis. Though we admitted that full understanding by all students would evolve over the course of the semester—recognizing the limits of what students can do in this short period—we wanted to see if revising the lesson could increase the number of students who at least had a basic grasp of the concept. We assumed that the in-class modeling of artifact analysis would translate into higher student success.

In re-assessing the lesson in light of this unacceptable level of misunderstanding, we conducted our second, revised iteration of the lesson several months later with a different lead instructor. Evaluated in terms of exceeds, meets or fails to meet, the second iteration had the following outcome:

	<b>A student who <u>exceeds</u> expectations</b>	<b>A student who <u>meets</u> expectations</b>	<b>A student who <u>fails to meet</u> expectations</b>
	can accurately recognize and explain the four core values of patriarchy in an artifact of popular culture.	can accurately recognize and explain at least one core value of patriarchy in an artifact of popular culture.	cannot recognize and explain one core values of patriarchy in an artifact of popular culture.



	<b># of students who exceed expectations</b>	<b># of students who meets expectations</b>	<b># of students who fails to meet expectations</b>
Quiz (28)	9/32%	15/54%	4/14%
Post-class (33)	11/ 33%	21/ 64%	1/3%

With the revised lesson model, students clearly improved on both the pre-class and post-class activities in iteration two. Streamlining and focusing the tasks, as well as providing students with more background on the definition of and features of patriarchy helped them better apply the core values of patriarchy to their chosen artifact. Modeling an analysis with the entire class on day one—the Trace Adkins video—and then having students participate in a small group analysis of another artifact increased their understanding of the synthesis of ideas.<sup>v</sup> We also saw an enhanced depth of learning reflected in the post-class homework where far fewer students failed to meet the expectations for the assignment.

### **Students and Patriarchy as a System**

We concluded that the revised lesson led to a significant shift in learning – far more students met the learning goals while far fewer students failed to meet (the exceeds category remained largely the same). We see this as evidence that the second iteration was successful at increasing student achievement of the lesson’s learning goal described above. While, in the second iteration, many students' remained in the same category (E,M,F) from quiz to homework, this actually marks significant learning because the task is more challenging and requires a more advanced understanding of the material. Further, students must complete a more complex cognitive task in applying the ideas to a self-selected artifact independently.

The quantitative data is valuable to us because it documents the overall effectiveness of the lesson. Nonetheless, a detailed examination of the kinds of learning that this particular approach can promote is even more consistent with the humanities and social science values that frame much of teaching and learning in women’s studies. A careful scrutiny of the progress individual students made through the course of this lesson demonstrates its effectiveness in a richer and more fully textured way. Below we document the learning process of several students whose intellectual gains were notable and oftentimes complicated as they developed an understanding of patriarchy as a system.

Melanie<sup>vi</sup> came to WOM 203 having completed Women’s Studies 101; since the Popular Culture course does not have 101 as a prerequisite, key disciplinary concepts are also introduced in 203. Melanie, like many of the students who had taken WOM 101, had the advantage of having already been exposed to the concept of patriarchy as a system. Melanie's quietness as a student and her interest in vocational rather than liberal arts education (she intended to go on to become a dental hygienist) might suggest on the surface that she was only marginally interested in the material in women’s studies courses; however, Melanie was a conscientious student with an emerging feminist sensibility despite a lack of exposure to feminist ways of thinking prior to her recent courses.

Melanie's pre-class quiz showed a developing understanding of the concepts of patriarchy as a system, even though she had at least encountered the idea in WOM 101 the previous semester

(gesturing toward the critical, yet challenging, nature of this threshold concept). Her responses either simply regurgitated the text or misunderstood Johnson's arguments, for example, simply listing the four core values in response to the "describe" prompt, and stating that "men maintain their image by controlling women" in response to the prompt to discuss how both men and women participate in a patriarchal system. She also incorrectly assessed her own learning in question four, "What points in this chapter are most clear?": "I now understand what the difference between male identified and male centered is. Male identified are the cultural ideas that are 'considered' good. This is why women are told that their man has to be dark tall and handsome to be desirable. While male centered is about what men do and women are just put on the back burner." Though she clearly understand Johnson's arguments about male-centeredness, Melanie, like many students (discussed later) struggle to gain a clear sense of the abstract idea of "male identification." However, Melanie's question in regard to the "muddiest point" demonstrate her consideration of the chapter concepts: "I think to me the most 'muddy' part of this chapter was the Deep Structures and the Way Out, I understood the deep structures but where is the way out? How can women get the role in the world that we need to be equal?"

Though the in-class worksheet did not always provide meaningful evidence for analyzing students learning, in Melanie's case, the worksheet did reveal some important examples of student learning. In the in-class exercise, Melanie's group examined how the value of "male identification" was manifested in the "Toddlers and Tiaras" excerpt, only partly grasping Johnson's argument that a patriarchal culture is male-identified in the sense that the cultural values with the highest status are those associated with men and masculinity. Melanie wrote "controlled by an ideal of what a beauty pageant is supposed to look like. Rinstones [sic], tans, makeup, fake hair and eyelashes are all considered the 'image' of what a 'beautiful' girl is suppose [sic] to look like. So at a young age these children are taught that this is the way women are suppose [sic] to look, and even the one girl said that she wanted her baby to be in pagents [sic]."<sup>vii</sup> In this way, Melanie's group seemed to latch on inappropriately to Johnson's concession that "femaleness isn't devalued entirely. Women are often prized for their beauty as objects of male sexual desire, for example, but as such they are often possessed and controlled in ways that ultimately devalue them" (p. 7).

To be fair, the exercise we asked students to undertake demands much from students in their ability to understand abstract concepts such as gender systems, male privilege, and gender norms; Melanie was working toward understanding Johnson's notion that cultural values with high status are associated with masculinity, and applying this concept to a pop culture artifact focused on women presented a challenge to our student groups and to Melanie. Melanie was only slightly more successful in understanding male identification in her application assignment, even though she did select a challenging text--the film *Amelia*, about the life of Amelia Earhart--and made a number of trenchant insights that accurately applied Johnson's ideas. For example, in discussing male-centeredness and an obsession with control, Melanie writes "Many people would say that there is no way that Amelia Earhart's story is male centered and control obsessed. But in the movie they did a bad job at making Amelia the hero, which Johnson talks about also in his text saying that when you here [sic] the words courageous or endurance they are usually followed by a man. Surprisingly this movie was as much about Amelia as it was about her agent and then husband, George Putnam." In our estimation, Melanie's ability to take a text focused on women's experiences and place it in the context of Johnson's framework of patriarchy as a system demonstrates command of the learning goal for the lesson.

Unlike Melanie, Kelly came to Women's Studies 203 without the benefit of a previous course in women's studies, like many students at an open-admission, two-year campus who have limited time in their curriculum and a number of general education requirements to meet. A motivated and conscientious student, Kelly's pre-class quiz documents a middle-range understanding of the

material. Though like many students she simply "listed" rather than described the four core values, she demonstrated a basic level of understanding of system-level thinking, observing that "Our behaviors in life reflect what the patriarchal system is and even though we don't feel it is right, we still do it and don't change our lifestyles." Although perhaps Kelly grants an overly generous level of autonomy to participants in a patriarchal system, she acknowledges in ways that many students do not that participation isn't always necessarily deliberate or aware. She also, in her response to a question on "muddiest" points in the chapter, demonstrates an emerging understanding of intersectionality in honing in on the observation by Johnson that not all men are powerful in a patriarchal society—Kelly wonders, "The whole concept on men being dominant but then not all men are dominant because they have higher men than themselves who take control of them. It sort of gets confusing to me as to who is really dominant then."

Though Kelly still conceptualized gender as acts of individuals or groups rather than as a system (evidenced in her observation that men and women both participate in patriarchy because "Men are the dominant ones in the patriarchal system and then women basically just do what the men want"), the lesson helped her to move her thinking along a spectrum to a more theoretical understanding that required abstract thinking. For example, though Kelly still understood patriarchy at the level of individual action, she also recognized in her analysis of the film *Cinderella* that both men and women could participate in patriarchal society, and she was able to identify three of Johnson's core values--obsession with control, male dominance, and male centeredness, writing "patriarchy is also male-centered meaning that the main focus in our society is the man what he does. Even though the movie is called Cinderella [sic], the main focus of the movie is for the Prince to find his bride. There is a big emphasis on her and her life, but in the end it's all about finding the 'prince charming' and having her happy ever after. This again also relates back to vision [sic] of what a heterosexual man in life might be looking for in a woman." She also identifies male dominance in the film by noting that the film centers on the Prince's ball intended to choose a new wife and the patriarchal authority reinforced by the King's insistence on the ball and the marriage.

Susan, a traditional-age student preparing for transfer to the flagship university in our system the following semester, had no previous women's studies course experience but demonstrated significant growth in her understanding of patriarchy as a system over the course of the three parts of the lesson. Her pre-class quiz demonstrated an average command of the learning goal with some confusion evident. For example, though she only listed the four core values rather than described them, she was able to relate individual behavior to overall patterns by focusing on the concept of male dominance, writing "Individual behavior, such as control, is related to a males [sic] need to masculine [sic] and show his dominance [sic] in the household and society." Simultaneously, some of her other responses are unclear if not incoherent, either reflecting a lack of understanding or care, such as her assertion that men and women participate in a patriarchal system because "They both have different roles in society few times the female roll [sic] can go along with the male roll [sic] just at [sic] CEO's." Despite this lack of effort or understanding, Susan's understanding progressed significantly by the time she completed the in-class worksheet and the application assignment. For example, she was able to note that, in analyzing the clip from *Toddlers and Tiaras*, that the girls were "made to live up to male-identified standards" and possibly the "provocative moves [were] to please men."

Susan's final piece in the lesson, an analysis of the four core values in the TV series *Lost*, demonstrates a remarkable level of insight in identifying how the show fits Johnson's definition of patriarchy. Susan is able to identify that "the appointed 'leader' of the group that has survived is Jack. He's a doctor that was on the plane. Because he has that title, people in the group never though [sic] twice about appointing him as the decision maker," as a way of discussing male

dominance and that even though the character of Kate who "knew what she was doing, not only on surviving but on tracking, hunting, and knowledge of how to use a gun," Jack exerts control over her, illustrating Johnson's principle of "obsession with control." Unlike many students who struggled to find examples of male identification, Susan successfully identifies that "Male identification is shown in LOST however, only in the sense that the men on the island are the ones that assigned the roles of hunter, doctor, and mediator," and also points out that the character of Charlie, who cares for a new baby on the island, challenges the value. Susan also humorously illustrates the male-centeredness of the show by pointing out "The male centeredness of this show was pronounced very well. I'm pretty sure the statement of "where's Jack?" was in every episode about 3 to 4 times. More times than none, everyone was looking for one of the men on the island. Rarely did we [sic] the women being looked for or wondered about."

At the same time, certainly some students struggled to move their thinking from individualistic to systematic. Jade is an excellent example of this. A motivated, hard-working nontraditional student, Jade returned to college and became active in the campus community as a student ambassador, involvement in student government, and working on campus at the Student Union. Jade's overall successes academically and her completion of women's studies 101 the previous semester with a high grade did not necessarily translate into a complex or abstract understanding of patriarchy as a system. Even over the course of the lesson and the semester, Jade struggled to see gender as part of a system rather than a series of individual, independent choices. For example, Jade's responses to the first two questions summarized the reading by merely listing; in response to the question "Describe Johnson's four core values of patriarchy," she listed the four categories rather than offering any elaboration ("Male Dominance, Male Identification, Male Centeredness, Male Control"). Her response to the second quiz question, "According to Allan Johnson, how do both women and men participate in the patriarchal system" was brief: "A society in which men [sic] and women participate," suggesting that Jade was not able to understand the reading or the question at a level sufficient to concretely articulate how men and women participate in the patriarchal system. Other questions asked students to think about the relationship of individual behavior to overall patterns and which points in the reading were clear or muddled. Jade's responses, like many students', showed a readiness to understand the very specific ways that gendered behavior manifests itself but not necessarily the ability to connect that individual behavior to larger patterns of privilege and oppression. For example, Jade wrote in her quiz that "Patriarchy was passed down to another male in the family if one would die, then usually a son was appointed to take over," identifying patrilinealism or very specific examples of patriarchal behaviors within kinship units rather than how patriarchal values suffuse institutions.

In the second phase of the lesson, Jade struggled, like many novice students, to understand how a female-dominated cultural artifact could participate in or support patriarchy, writing on her in-class worksheet "I do not think this is male dominated more of a women-dominated." Jade continued to retain a focus on the gendered individual rather than a system in her application of the concept to a selected artifact. She chose Mary Kay Ash, founder of Mary Kay cosmetics, as an example of challenging patriarchal values, writing "Mary Kay stands for independence" and "Mary Kay Cosmetics would challenge Johnson's thoughts on Patriarchy. Mary Kay became a success in her cosmetic line....Johnson would say, that Mary Kay is not about male centeredness, it has nothing to do with male dominance." As many students intuitively do, Jade identifies Mary Kay as challenging patriarchy because she is successful within a male-dominated institution--business and economics--despite her participation in supporting and reinforcing patriarchal values in other, significant ways.

### Male Identification: The Most Troublesome Concept

The most challenging concept in the lesson for students to grasp is Johnson's notion of male identification as a feature of a patriarchal culture. Students struggled to recognize this value within their pop culture artifacts, confirming the deep cultural inscription of male identification as "core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable, or normal" (p. 6). The entrenchment – and students' subsequent resistance to detection – of male identification is linked to its pervasiveness in our culture and its relative invisibility in the very language we use. Johnson notes "the still widespread use of male pronouns and nouns to represent people in general" (p. 6). Johnson continues, describing how these masculine pronouns and nouns "construct a symbolic world in which men are in the foreground and women are in the background, marginalized as outsiders and exceptions to the rule" (pp. 6-7). It's conceivable that the power of the symbolic world being figured as male makes it harder for students to adequately deconstruct the norm of male experience as human experience for what it is: a core value of patriarchy.

Students who were able to otherwise grasp three of the core values were simply unable to accurately apply male-identification. For example, one student, Molly, analyzing the remake of the film *Stepford Wives* writes "This movie is male-identified because of the fact that the whole town is made to please and represent males. The robot wives take care of the kids, keep the house clean, make the meals, go grocery shopping and dress up beautiful for the men to show off at the town ball and fair. The way the wives act is defined by their husbands." Another student, Todd, who was otherwise able to astutely analyze a reality TV show called "Tough Love," wrote in his section on male identification "Male identity [sic] on 'Tough Love' portrays itself in the challenges the women are put through. One particular challenge puts the women and their potential matches through the scenario of having children. In the challenge the women were to entertain and care for a child, most of which were girls. It was obvious that the males were watching for the females [sic] motherly instincts. After which, if a woman was not doing things right or even saying the wrong things the male would reject them with sometimes brutal honesty." Here Todd seems to be conflating male dominance with male-identification in that he incorrectly mistakes male authority--more correctly identified as male dominance--with male identification.

At least one student, Erin, was able to correctly identify male identification in her artifact, *Cosmopolitan*, by pointing out a story on "6 Tricks for Getting Your Way at Work." She writes that "the first tip is to 'ace a meeting.' The writer tells the reader to choose a seat next to your boss, because it will immediately make HIM feel more connected to you. The third tip is how to shut up an annoying co-worker. All of this advice refers to this annoying coworker as a 'she', because apparently annoying co-worker [sic] would not be male." Here, Erin is able to accurately identify the patriarchal value of male-identification at work here, with positions of authority and authoritative roles identified with men/masculinity and feminized qualities identified with a hypothetical female coworker. By focusing on the literal language and the gendered implications, Erin ably reads the male identification implicit in the symbolic language.

Although not all students progressed and improved their understanding of the threshold concept of patriarchy through the lesson, our evidence of student learning, suggest that many did, and that the process of grappling with these concepts repeatedly, in different ways (reading, quiz, class discussion, group work, and homework) challenged students' understanding and led to moments of further questioning and attempts at identifying patriarchal values. We remind ourselves here as teachers and researchers not to be disappointed that our lesson was not universally achieved for all students in their development; returning to Meyer and Land's definition, a disciplinary threshold concept is both "troublesome" and "transformative" and we continued to see students grapple to achieve an expert understanding beyond this lesson. At the same time, to echo the language on

our pre-class reading quiz, the threshold concept of patriarchy became less muddy, if not crystal clear, for most students.

### The Dynamics of Group Work

Though the lesson study was helpful in giving us a systematic way to assess student understanding of the threshold concept, it also gave us some insight into the pedagogical complexities of using group work to advance student understanding of content in women's studies courses. This is significant because of the emphasis on student-centered learning, interaction, and student voices within a feminist pedagogical framework that is central to teaching and learning in women's studies. In both iterations, groups were observed where one vocal student argued against an accurate application of the core values and convinced the group to follow her reading.

The power of one vocal student to redirect the group understanding can be best illustrated in the second iteration of the lesson when groups examined the reality TV show "Toddlers in Tiaras." The observer report from the group working on Johnson's core value of male-identification illustrates this challenge. In this case, Allison used anecdotes and personal experiences throughout the discussion to assert that patriarchy is natural and inevitable. Another student, described by the observer as quiet, challenged these assumptions, only to be countered with another anecdote from Allison. Met with such opposition, the quiet student, according to one of the observer reports, "shifted her comments toward challenging how much their individual [experiences] could be generalized to the functioning of patriarchy on a national or international scale." Other group members seemed to agree with this statement, but Allison reasserted her original opinions, and no one in the group challenged her final conclusions.

The experience of a group being redirected by one vocal participant shows how much individual student personalities can shape the conversation even within structured group work focused on a specific task—and in the most problematic of circumstances, reinforce misconceptions and misunderstandings. Allison's personality and dominating style took precedence over the actual texts and questions the students were charged with exploring. The observer noted that the students did not consult the Johnson article, and "they never once mentioned the term [patriarchy] or tried to use it as an analytical tool without naming it." Condemnation of those involved in the video clip and personal anecdotes, primarily Allison's, became the evidence used to connect with the *Toddlers and Tiaras* excerpt. This suggested to us the need for instructors to monitor group work, spend time in class redirecting the group findings where necessary, and model productive modes of dissenting opinions within groups. We struggled with this finding, since group work is an essential component of feminist pedagogy, and the process of shared discovery is also a significant way of creating meaning in a feminist class. Here the role of the instructor is crucial to help students learning difficult concepts like patriarchy (see Puncochar and Fox, 2004, for a discussion of the trade-offs between accuracy and confidence judgments when students work individually and in groups).

In contrast to groups mis-directed by one vocal student, another group, working on the value of male-centeredness, fully grasped their value and the concept of patriarchy; they also collaborated effectively, illustrating the benefits of small group work in sorting through the challenging and abstract concepts so prevalent in women's studies courses and how it can be productively part of a feminist pedagogical approach. For example, although the students in this small group initially struggled with the idea that patriarchy could be applied to a mostly-female event, the lesson ultimately challenged them to confront the idea of patriarchy as a system instead of the product of individual (male) action. Student resistance to these abstract ideas of patriarchy as a system led numerous student small groups, including this one, to manufacture hypothetical men (e.g. funders,

husbands, judges) on whom they could hang the "blame" for what they largely saw as the poor moral judgment of forcing 3-year-olds to tan, wear wigs, and dance seductively in front of a crowd. One observer's report in particular showed evidence that students were able to articulate complex ideas in the group work:

Initially, the group struggled with the idea that beauty pageants are male-centered because almost all of the video subjects were women. One student then suggested that the judges were probably male and the pageant moms were doing what the judges want. Other students questioned this idea, and one student stated that beauty pageants are based on "what we [women] think guys want." As a group, they eventually developed the idea that the gender roles in the film were not reinforced by men but by a society that has traditionally favored men.

The initial struggle in applying male-centeredness to a video clip that included only one man required that students dig deeper to figure out how the video was male centered. This group worked through this conundrum and discovered the *systemic* male-centeredness that undergirds the entire pageant structure. Furthermore, they used the group structure to discuss how "beauty pageants are based on what the participants (or in this case their mothers) think is sexually desirable and not necessarily what all men want." Three students offered this understanding, and two other group members agreed. The observer noted that by the end of the activity, "all six students made comments that suggested at least a basic understanding of patriarchy as a social construct."

Like the group discussion of male identification, the male-centeredness conversation focused on reactions to the video and personal anecdotes. By contrast, however, this group seemed to work well together, sharing ideas and reaching consensus. The observer notes in several places that individual students would raise ideas that others would question and they would work through the issue together:

At multiple points during the discussion, group members had alternative interpretations of examples from the video. For the most part, they used differing perspectives to help the entire group change perspectives on the topic [. . .] As a whole, the group changed their interpretations frequently throughout the discussion in response to comments from other group members.

This process of open discussion and talking through differing perspectives seemed to build a stronger consensus, and, in the case of this group, led the students in the right direction. In doing so, they were able to connect the video to the value of male-centeredness.

Most interesting about the male-centeredness group, however, was a brief but noticeable meta-awareness about the nature of their assignment. One student "specifically asked whether their own discussion was challenging patriarchal values." Unfortunately, the group did not discuss this point further, but rather used this statement to discuss whether *Toddlers and Tiaras* challenges patriarchal values. However, this brief comment suggests the potential of group work itself as a disruptive force. The consensus-building and questioning evidenced in this group does seem to challenge patriarchal values of order, control, and hierarchy--values that were all too present in groups where one student is able to impose her or his own will over the rest of the group. The observer further notes that students used personal examples to illustrate their points, and also notably used "I" language--"I feel"--to differentiate between a personal opinion and the opinion of the group. This awareness of the individual and the group as different entities with perhaps

differing views contributed to the overall success of the group, and suggests a more feminist model.

This unexpected discovery about the challenges of group work suggests the great importance of the instructor in both framing and monitoring group work, stressing the collaborative nature of the assignment and also creating a structure for sharing differing opinions within a group. Contrary to conventional wisdom and practice, moving away from a single scribe or spokesperson is one way of decentering the group authority and diminishing the power of one outspoken group member. More work needs to be done to explore the consequences of group work, particularly within the context of a women's studies classroom where feminist pedagogy is practiced. Such questions, while important, go beyond the scope of this lesson study project.

### **Future Research**

While clearly there are limits to what can be discovered about student learning in one carefully crafted lesson, we are convinced that this lesson – requiring that students grapple seriously with patriarchy as a social structure early in the semester — is an important model for teaching and learning in women's studies. This lesson reflects the current scholarly understanding of women's studies as a field, invites students to do both critical and personal analysis, and maintains academic rigor. This lesson structure allows for the consideration of personal experience and anecdotal knowledge while asking students to engage in a conversation about the deep structures, and ultimately allows for a profound analysis. Spending time with the deep analysis of patriarchy creates a space for students to thoughtfully engage these issues. Further, by participating in this lesson early in the semester, students have a foundational understanding of patriarchy as a reference point for the rest of the semester. We were most interested in crafting a contained lesson that forced students to engage with a complex, difficult concept, and apply it almost immediately to a text of their choosing. Since patriarchy is such a defining and difficult concept, we wanted to measure our success in a single lesson as our unit of study, realizing, however, that most students would continue to deepen their understanding of the concept throughout the semester. Future assignments can integrate the language of Johnson's article and perform the close cultural, textual analysis on other texts later in the semester. To more fully study the outcomes of this lesson, we could more formally assess student understanding of patriarchy at the end of the course in similar cultural analysis assignments.

This assignment also offers a departure point for discussing various feminist responses to patriarchy by giving students a critical framework that helps students understand the possibility of change (and a history of change). We discussed the results of the lesson study as an assessment exercise with women's studies colleagues, who expressed concern that focusing so heavily on patriarchy further mires women's studies as just a response to male dominated/centered culture; expanding the lesson to include a parallel exercise examining feminist cultural artifacts would extend student understanding of these fundamental concepts in women's studies.

Ultimately, this lesson study created the classroom time and space to grapple with the complex, multi-faceted definition of patriarchy in a way that we believe led to significant learning and introduced a threshold concept of women's studies in a transparent, deliberate way. While not all students improved their comprehension of patriarchy from the pre-lesson quiz to the post-lesson homework, many students did. And, based on the categorization of patriarchy as a threshold concept, we know and should expect that this learning is – among other things – transformative, troublesome, and integrative. The students who began to grasp the concept of patriarchy through this lesson leave with an emergent understanding of the systematic structure of patriarchy while



also possessing an enhanced ability to integrate their prior and future learning through a women's studies lens.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Lesson Plan: Iteration 2**

#### **WOM 203 Lesson Study: Patriarchy and Pop Culture**

**Our working definition of Patriarchy:** "Patriarchy does not refer to any man or collection of men, but to a kind of society in which men and women participate." Furthermore, according to Allan Johnson's book, *The Gender Knot*, "A society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being *male-dominated, male-identified, male-centered, and obsessed with control and the oppression of women*. It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women." Johnson is careful to note that "Patriarchy does not refer to any man or collection of men, but to a kind of society in which men and women participate" (5)

**Learning goal:** after this lesson, students will recognize the ways that patriarchal values are reinforced or challenged in an artifact of popular culture.

Pre-lesson:

- Students will read Chapters 1 of Allan Johnson's *The Gender Knot*
- They will complete a short D2L quiz prior to coming to class (written artifact #1)
- Students will attend Thursday's class
  - Instructor will lead a clear points/muddy points discussion on Chapter 1
  - Instructor will present a brief mini-lecture on Chapter 2 of the book in order to introduce the concept of "patriarchy as a system."
  - The class will engage in a collective analysis of the Trace Adkins video, "Ladies Love Country Boys", using provided worksheet.

Lesson:

- Students will be assigned a single, shared artifact (a short clip from "Toddlers in Tiaras"). Groups will be assigned roles (reporter, facilitator, note-taker, text manager) and a worksheet (the same one used collectively on Thursday) will be distributed to each group for the purposes of note-taking (written artifact #2)
- The class will be divided into 4-8 groups. Each group should focus on ONE of the four core values (male-dominated, male-centered, male-identified, obsession with control and oppression of women but may discuss the others if they have time), identifying specific

textual examples from Johnson's chapter that illustrate their analysis and considering a larger, core question? (30-35 minutes)

- We will reconvene as a class and each group will report back. They will be asked to share the most interesting point of analysis, including the ways the artifact reinforced or challenged the core value they were assigned

Post-Lesson:

- Students will be asked to find another artifact and write about how it fits with the two from Thursday and the one explored in class Thursday.

Post-lesson (2)

- Observers will submit their observer reports to the research team

### **Appendix B** **Pre-lesson quiz: Iteration 2**

1. List and explain Johnson's four core values of patriarchy.
2. According to Allan Johnson, how do both women and men participate in the patriarchal system?
3. How is individual behavior related to overall patterns that are created by the patriarchal system?
4. What points in this chapter are clear?
5. What points in this chapter are "muddy"?

### **Appendix C** **Shared Artifact Analysis: Iteration 2**

**WOM 203**  
**February 2010**

**Artifact Analysis Worksheet**

**Ladies Love Country Boys lyrics**  
**(Trace Adkins)**

*She grew up in the city in a little subdivision  
Her daddy wore a tie, mama never fried a chicken  
Ballet, straight-As, most likely to succeed  
They bought her a car after graduation  
Sent her down South for some higher education  
Put her on the fast track to a law degree  
Now she's coming home to visit  
Holding the hand of a wild-eyed boy*

*With a farmers tan*

*She's riding in the middle of his pickup truck  
Blaring Charlie Daniels, yelling, Turn it up!  
They raised her up a lady but there's one thing  
They couldn't avoid  
Ladies love country boys (cont...)*

In what way does this artifact demonstrate some or all of the core values of patriarchy described in Allan Johnson's *The Gender Knot*? Be as specific as possible in your connection of specific parts of the artifact to the value when appropriate, make a connection to Johnson's text. Are there any ways that your artifacts challenges the assigned core value of patriarchy? If so, note those as well, using evidence to support your observation. Jot down your observations on this worksheet.

### **Appendix D Assessment Rubric: Iteration 2**

**Learning goal:** after this lesson, students will recognize the ways that patriarchal values are reinforced or challenged in an artifact of popular culture.

**Our working definition of Patriarchy:** "Patriarchy does not refer to any man or collection of men, but to a kind of society in which men and women participate." Furthermore, according to Allan Johnson's book, *The Gender Knot*, "A society is patriarchal to the degree that it promotes male privilege by being *male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered*. It is also organized around an obsession with control and involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women." Johnson is careful to note that "Patriarchy does not refer to any man or collection of men, but to a kind of society in which men and women participate" (5)

<b>A student who <u>exceeds</u> expectations</b>	<b>A student who <u>meets</u> expectations</b>	<b>A student who <u>fails to meet</u> expectations</b>
<b>can accurately recognize and explain the four core values of patriarchy in an artifact of popular culture.</b>	<b>can accurately recognize and explain at least one core value of patriarchy in an artifact of popular culture.</b>	<b>cannot recognize and explain one core values of patriarchy in an artifact of popular culture.</b>
<b># of students who exceed expectations</b>	<b># of students who meets expectations</b>	<b># of students who fails to meet expectations</b>

\*We are grateful to the UW Colleges Lesson study Assessment Grant and a UW System SoTL Leadership Site Threshold concepts grant for supporting our work on this project.

<sup>i</sup> Our team of three faculty conducted this study in two sections of a sophomore-level course, "Women in Popular Culture," during the 2009-2010 academic year.

<sup>ii</sup> For example, Ropers-Huilman (1999) describes the tensions between caring and power, and Chandler (2005) explores the use of reflective talk in the women's studies classroom while Copp and Kleinman propose strategies for discussing sexism

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(2008). Crawley (2008), Seymour (2007), White, Wright-Soika, and Russell (2007) and Bailey (2008), for example, take up particular methods in their pieces ranging from initiating a feminist environment, using techniques like "question-driven lecture," epistolary assignments, or writing-to-teach critical thinking, while Chick and Hassel (2009) have recently outlined how to adapt feminist pedagogical techniques to online settings.

iii University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Columbia Teachers' College, and Mills College also all have excellent websites introducing readers to the lesson study model, its practices and values.

iv Indeed, individual exceptionalism -- the idea that one is exempt from social structures and systems -- is a broader American cultural phenomenon. In his 2007 book *Media Literacy Art* Silverblatt demonstrates this point by citing a study that found that 80% of respondents believed the media influences people, while only 12% believed that they were personally influenced by the media. This statistic highlights the significant challenge in convincing students that they as individuals are NOT exempt from the workings of social structures, and a gender system in particular (3).

v As a research team, we also reworded the rubric between the first and second iterations, focusing on recognizing and explaining the core values, and carefully delineating that students who can recognize and explain at least one core value meet expectations in order to more accurately reflect the demonstrated skill we were hoping students would develop over the course of the lesson.

<sup>vi</sup> All student participant names are pseudonyms, and all student participants signed informed consent forms approved by the UW Colleges Institutional Review Board.

<sup>vii</sup> We recognize that the practice of using students' names (even pseudonyms), their verbatim citations, and the subsequent notation "[sic]" is not unproblematic. We do not mean to draw attention to the students' grammar mistakes, but rather we want to bring their written words to the printed page. However, academic convention, intended at being precise, leads to an awkward and imperfect system.