

# **Female Graduate Students on Masculinity: “His girly characteristics worried me and my husband”**

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This paper explores the masculinity discourses appearing in an internet discussion forum in a graduate class. The discussion forum itself is a part of a course related to contemporary issues, media, and identity in literature for children and young adults. In the forum the students are required to respond to the weekly readings, especially the ones related to children and young adult literature. This study is aimed at understanding how masculinity discourses are presented by the members of the forum. There are two main thematic discourses found in the discussion forum. The first one is the dominant discourses of masculinity in which boys should be boys by showing their macho sides. The second one is the subordinate discourse of masculinity—the feminine sides of men. Beyond the texts and academic discussions, these findings show that the hegemonic masculinity persists and unconsciously has influenced many members of the forum.

**Keywords:** masculinity, children literature, readers' response, discussion forum

## **Introduction**

*Welcome to the Guys Read Virtual Vault of Good Books. This is the place to come if you're looking for something to get a guy reading. We've collected recommendations from teachers, librarians, booksellers, publishers, parents, and guys themselves. These are the books that guys have said they like. We've gathered and grouped them to make them easier to find. So check out the categories below or type something—a title, an author, or a subject you're interested in—over there on the left. (<http://www.guysread.com/books/>)*

I am intrigued by the introduction given in the web page of GuysRead (<http://www.guysread.com/books/>). In the quotation above, the underlying assumptions about boys are those of the mainstream in which boys and girls have a different spectrum of interests and in which boys will not read books for girls. This is a kind of manifesto that enhances the stereotyping of boys—the dominant discourse of masculinity in which boys are expected to be brave, active, athletic, dominant, and aggressive. The quotation also suggests that today's classroom readings in the U.S. and many other countries, including Indonesia, are highly effeminate. Consequently, the books that serve boys' interests are underrepresented. That is why the website suggests what books are of boys' interests. However, the reading list they suggest for boys might fail those who are not in the mainstream. There are boys who are not athletic, who do not like sports, who do not fit into the mainstream views of being boys. In addition, this web site can be a part of the publishing companies' effort to market their books and dictate their interests, as suggested by Sekeres (2009).

The view of masculinity presented in the website has drawn my attention and it has made me think about masculinity. At the time of this research I was enrolling in a graduate class, in which I was the only man in the classroom. Interestingly, I found in the syllabus a very interesting topic: discussing masculinity. In discussing masculinity, all members of the class should read the assigned reading: Yoo's *A Fistful Fist of Feather*, a short story found in *Guys Read: Funny Business*, edited by John Scieszka (2010) and "*Us Boys Like to Read Football and Boy Stuff*": *Reading Masculinities, Performing Boyhood*, written by Dutro (2002).

In Yoo's *A Fistful Fist of Feather*, Sam is described as a kind of effeminate boy with no interests in many boys' activities. Realizing this situation, his father wants to make him a real man by asking him to take care of the Thanksgiving turkey. This turkey, Travis, turns out to be his competitor in winning his father's attention. Sam sees the turkey as threatening his life. Challenged by a survival struggle, he makes a scheme to trap the turkey so that he can win his parents' attention. Indeed, in the short story Sam proves that he is a real man. Finally, he is the one who carves and eats the turkey in the Thanksgiving dinner.

Another reading for the class in the week was an article written by Dutro (2002). The article is a research report that views masculinity as socially constructed and gender roles as constructed in performative social acts. The article explores how masculinity is enacted and performed in a school context. Indeed, the masculinity enacted here could reflect the hegemonic nature of masculinity. Those who have more power tend to have more freedom in enacting different types of masculine identities.

Based on those two readings, the members of the class had to start discussion threads in an online forum. The discussion threads are my main interest that I explore in this paper. The main question that leads my exploration to understand masculine identities is 'how are discourses of masculinity presented by the female members of the class constructed?' This main question leads me to the following specific questions:

1. What types of masculinity discourses are represented in the forum by female graduate students?
2. How do the female graduate students perceive the idea of masculinity?

By exploring the answers of those questions in the discussion threads, I hope that the findings could shed light on how female graduate students in my class perceive masculinity. This exploration, then, hopefully can be a reflective tool on how we enacted our gender perspective in the field of education either as teachers or as researchers.

### **Literature Review**

Being the only man in a graduate classroom discussing young adult literature, I was drawn by the idea to understand more about masculinity. In exploring the discourse of masculinity in the threaded discussion, I reviewed readers' response theory and the theory of masculinity. In doing so, I would like to see the threaded discussion as readers' responses. At a different level, the masculinity theory can tie all the knots of the emergence themes of the masculinity discourses found in the discussion forum.

### **Readers' Response Theory**

In outlining the readers' response theory, I would like to discuss the work of Sipe (1999) and an article written by Galda and Beach (2001). Many readers' response theories are usually based on Rosenblatt's transactional theory (Sipe, 1999). In her theory, the basic tenet is that "reading is a transaction, a two-way process involving a reader and a text at a particular time under particular circumstances" (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 268). Based on this basic tenet of reading as transactional in nature, I discuss two articles: (1) Sipe (1999) and (2) Galda and Beach (2001), both of which are similar in many ways, especially in seeing readers' response as not only a response to a text, but also a response to text, authors, contexts, and the readers themselves.

Readers' response theory can be understood as responses to the author, the text, and the context. Sipe (1999) views the roles of author, text and context in a more historical perspective in literature studies. First, reading literature used to be understood as understanding the author's messages or meanings. However, contemporary theories of reading consider that once readers lay an eye on a literary work, there is no author anymore. Quoting Barthes (1977), Sipe (1999) is in the same wagon proclaiming "the death of the author" (p. 120). In this assertion, literary meanings could be understood from the readers' experience, not the author's intended messages. However, related to readers' responses, one often finds students questioning the author. Sipe (1999) also claims that he has documented numerous questioning related to authors and illustrators—in the case of picture books. Typical questions such as "I wonder why the author ends the story this way" or "I wonder why the illustrators chose to use this color for the endpages," (p. 121) exemplify how readers ask question related to the author. These questions—though they could not be answered in just reading the books without communicating with the author—are very useful for the readers to construct their own experiences in reading the texts. Therefore, in many ways, reading experiences can also be influenced by the authors' stances on societal norms and ideologies.

Citing Sutherland (1985), Sipe (1999) suggests three stances of the authors: "the politics of assent, the politics of advocacy, or the politics of attack" (p. 121). The first one reflects the authors' position in agreeing with the existing norms and politics while the second and the third stances reflect the position of the authors as promoters or as critics of "particular social practices." (p. 121)

Second, focusing on texts, Sipe (1999) discusses different responses of students when they read different versions of texts. Beside the literary structure and components inherent in the texts, such as plot, genre, and characterization, a text can be experienced differently by readers. In this context he suggests two different types of texts: readerly texts and writerly texts. "A readerly text is one that a reader may consume almost passively and in which information is transmitted, whereas a writerly text is produced actively by readers who must put the text together for themselves." (p. 122)

Third, when Sipe (1999) discusses readers, he discusses readers' stances—an individual style responses. Readers' responses can be understood in a continuum from getting the facts (the efferent stance) to "immersing oneself in the story (the aesthetic stance). In understanding readers' stances, he also contrasts them with the authors' stances. Thus,

“readers may accept a text, actively embrace it, or vehemently resist it for one reason or another” (p. 123).

The purpose of Sipe’s article (1999) is reviewing readers’ response theories and brings the contemporary views into consideration when researchers conduct research on readers’ responses. This discussion, in many ways, is similar to what is done by Galda and Beach (2001) when they propose that readers’ response to literature is a cultural activity.

According to Galda and Beach (2001) the development of readers’ response theory begins with the study of texts. Following the study of texts, readers’ response theory explores the readers as the central point in understanding the response. Further development brings the readers’ response theory into exploration of contexts. In their words, they say that “studies have focused on (a) text, or how various texts affect response; (b) readers, or how experiences and attitudes situated in readers affect response; and (c) the context in which response is generated.” (p. 64)

When researchers focus on texts, they explore “primarily of content and literary analyses, including attention to the author in terms of authenticity or stance.” (p. 64). In this way, the readers’ response theory could respond on the characterization, plots, and the literary structure. In addition, research on texts can also involve in responding to the author’s stances. Readers, then, could challenge and question the stances. In discussing the aspect of research on text, Galda and Beach (2001) collapse the author and the text as unity—which does not clarify the whole idea they suggest. The distinction of author’s meanings and the text will be useful as suggested by Sipe (1999).

Focusing on the progress in research on readers, they also make a remark, which is in line with Sipe (1999). “Research on readers has evolved in much the same fashion as research on text. Early research looked at expectations, attitudes and practices of readers with little or no regard of how they were developed through participation in communities of practice.” (p. 65) Readers’ expectations include the expectations related to the characters and their actions. In the past decade, however, the studies on readers and texts are drawn on the sociocultural perspectives in which “texts, readers, and contexts, each inseparable from the other, are also inseparable from the larger contexts in which they are enacted.” (p. 66)

In short, Galda and Beach (2001) suggest that the development of research on readers’ response reflects the importance of three factors: (1) texts, (2) readers, and (3) contexts. Incorporating all the three factors, they promote the idea of blurring the boundaries of the three dimensions in readers’ response theory by exploring the socio-cultural perspectives of the three aspects.

### **Gender and Masculinity**

The study of masculinity is in line with the study of femininity in that the two fields develop as a response to changing gender roles. In this line of development, the two opposite gender roles are often best understood as relational. The roles of men and women, then, can be traced on the basis of biological sex, which interprets different sexes as having different social roles. In most cases, the interpretations are in line with the traditional gender stereotypes in which women are considered domestic creatures and men active and aggressive ones. This biological basis in the early gender studies is clearly stated by Marshal (2004) when he says that “liberal feminisms theorize gender through the lens of sex-role

theory, a paradigm rooted in humanistic discourses in which social roles are allocated to men and to women on the basis of biological sex.” (p. 256)

The recent studies of gender and masculinity, however, are signified by the poststructuralists’ and postmodernists’ points of view that put the emphasis on imbalanced power relations and that problematize traditional norms, which are based on the humanist perspectives (Marshal, 2004). In this postmodernist framework, a more radical perspective sees that gender relations are oppressive and that men and women’s relations need to be radically changed. A more moderate view, however, also emerges in the development of gender roles. It presents the changes in a more asymmetrical way as suggested by Diekman and Murnen (2004). “The roles of women have changed more than the roles of men.” (p. 274)

Thus, the definition of masculinity can be seen from biological perspectives and from sociocultural perspectives. The biological perspectives bring the humanists’ views of gender roles where there are different domains and interests for each sex. On the other hand, the sociocultural perspectives views gender as socially constructed and enacted in social performances such as reflected in Dutro’s study (2002).

### **Masculinity in Children Literature**

A classic study on gender in children literature was conducted by Hillman (1974). She analyzed 120 books that represent two periods of time from 1930s to 1970s. The purpose of her meta-analysis was to understand the gender roles represented in literary works in the periods. She found that the occupation for males were much broader than that for females. Another interesting finding is that “males were shown to be physically aggressive and competent in both periods and females retained the characteristics of affiliation/dependence and sadness” (p. 84). Therefore, the literary works in those two periods show the prevalent stereotype for both male and female characters.

However, Hillman (1974) also notes the changes in gender roles in more recent literature books. Children and young adult books at that time were more varied and female characters were well represented. Consequently, children and young adults could easily access “more females in their books, slightly more occupational diversity for females, and a greater variety of behaviors and emotions expressed by males and females.” (p. 86)

From the study, finally Hillman (1974) concludes that “there seems to have been a movement toward a broadening of sex role standards over the three decades” (p. 86) in which females have undergone significant changes in their roles as women and those changes are reflected in their broader occupations and their behavior profiles—which crossed the boundary of males’ territories.

A more recent study conducted by Diekman and Murnen (2004) support Hillman’s conclusion related to the gender role changes. The changes in women’s roles have been pervasive and much more extensive compared to men’s roles. They show that the changes in gender role between men and women are generally asymmetric. “The roles of women have changed more than the roles of men.” (p. 274)

While the classic studies of gender in literature usually focus on representations and characteristics, contemporary studies on gender in children literature cover various topics, from gender representations (Marshal, 2004) to gender advocacies and emancipations (Diekman & Murnen, 2004). Many studies are rooted in the idea of feminism in which they

explore the feminists' point view in the discourse of girls and female bodies such as in the article written by Cherland (2008), who explores the female characters in *Harry Potter*. In understanding the female characters, she contrasts the humanist views with the postmodernist ones.

Related to the conception of masculinity, Grant (2004) explores masculinity in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The historical accounts on this topic are very interesting and enlightening in that they could shed light on the emergence of different conceptions of masculinity. She is especially interested in the conceptions of the sissy boy—which is not only a psychological challenge, but also a social challenge for those who are stigmatized as sissy.

... the "sissy," a term that had emerged out of the boy culture of mid-nineteenth century America, increasingly became not only an epithet hurled by school yard bullies but a clinical term suggestive of psychological pathology and sexual inversion. While effeminate or unmanly boys were not artifacts of the twentieth century, the meaning attached to them shifted in conjunction with the politics of masculinity and transformations in child rearing, gender socialization, and the new sciences of human development. (p. 829)

Comparing 19<sup>th</sup> century sissies with those of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Grant (2004) highlights the different pressures those sissies suffer. The 19<sup>th</sup> century sissies are generally rebuked and bullied by their peers but the 20<sup>th</sup> century sissies are clinically and socially stigmatized. In her own words she explains that “nineteenth-century sissies were castigated by their peers, but twentieth-century sissies bore a clinical as well as a social stigma.” (p. 829)

Therefore, masculinity discourse is stereotypically identical with male standard normalcy that has not changed for decades. The socialization shown in children literature and at schools engages boys to be normal boys who are active, sporty, dominant, and aggressive. In this way, “the code of boyhood became increasingly central to establishing the normalcy of boys' personalities and behaviors.” (p. 829)

### **Hegemonic Masculinity**

Dutro (2002) takes the hegemonic masculinity theory to see the masculine identity performed at school. Selecting black male students for her study, she explores the performative identities in terms of the power relations among the boys. Quoting Bourdieu (1977), she suggests that “it was clear that certain boys – those performing the dominant hegemonic masculinity – held more “social capital” (p. 471)

Reviewing the development and criticisms of the hegemonic masculinity theory, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that the theory is still relevant and important in understanding sociocultural phenomena of gender. In their paper, the authors first explore the origin of the theory and make a historical timeline of its emergence. Second, they present the development of the concept and its underlying philosophy. Third, the applications of the concept in various fields are drawn to show how the concept has influenced a wide range of recent research in social studies and education. Finally, the authors review the criticisms against the concepts since 1980 and suggest what should be retained from the concept and what should be discarded to lay out a path for developing future research related to gender studies and masculinity.

The hegemonic masculinity theory is derived from diverse concepts of masculinities which are linked by the nature of power relations. The term hegemonic itself shows the imbalanced nature of power relations between men and women and men and other men. “Hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue.” (p. 832). In short, the concepts of hegemonic masculinity can be subsumed in terms of patriarchy—in which men dominate women and other men. This hegemonic masculinity, then, “is not assumed to be normal” (p. 833). Only a minority of men can enact this hegemonic role. It is different from other types of subordinated masculinities. In this way, it dominates and colors the whole masculinity discourses.

The application of the concepts of hegemonic masculinity is highly productive in educational research and other social studies. In classroom research, this concept has been used to understand the bullying phenomenon, and in wider social contexts it has been used to understand crimes and other forms of male violence. Other fields that have applied this concept are sports, media representations and literature.

Five major critics are reviewed by the authors: (1) the underlying concepts of masculinity, which is criticized by positivists and postmodernists, (2) the ambiguity and overlap of the concepts, (3) the problem of reification, (4) masculine subject theory—which is based on the unsatisfactory theory of the subjects, and (5) the pattern of gender relations.

From those critics, the authors argue that there are two features of the concepts which are essential and important to be retained: (1) the plurality of masculinities and (2) the hierarchy of masculinity. These two concepts have been proved useful and enlightening in previous research and studies. In this case, the hegemonic masculinity “presumes the subordination of non- hegemonic masculinities.” (p. 846)

On the other hand, there are also two concepts related to hegemonic masculinity that should be rejected: (1) the model of the social relations surrounding hegemonic masculinities—which is often characterized as too simple and inaccurately describes the complex gender relations and (2) the notion of masculinity as an assemblage of traits—which is a static description of masculinity from the psychological perspective.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In exploring the discourses of masculinity I would like to employ two levels of analysis in this study. First, I would like to see the data from readers’ response perspectives, and second, from the competing discourses as suggested by Gee (2001). In terms of readers’ responses, I would like to employ the framework suggested by Sipe (1999) and Golda and Beach (2001). In this way, the responses will be seen as readers’ stances. The responses could reflect the readers’ views on the authors, the texts, and the contexts.

From the discourse perspective, I would like to explore and understand the discourses of masculinity presented in the discussion forum. In understanding the discourses, Gee’s idea (2001) of competing discourses frames the analysis and the discussion. The theory put the emphasis that there are dominant discourses and subordinate discourses of masculinity. Both types of discourses assume the imbalanced power relations and structural hierarchy in the society related to gender role enactments. In addition to the discourse perspective, the hegemonic masculinity theory that has been developed especially by Connell and

Messerschmidt (2005) will also be a part of the framework to shed light on the masculinity discourses presented in the forum.

### **Methods**

This study is a qualitative study aimed at exploring the discourse of masculinity found in the threaded discussion forum in a graduate students' class. The threaded discussions taken as the primary data were one week's threaded discussion responding to two assigned readings. The assigned reading texts were a short story written by Yoo, "The Fistful Fist of Feather" and an academic article discussing masculinity written by Dutro (2002), "'Us Boys Like to Read Football and Boy Stuff': Reading Masculinities, Performing Boyhood."

The guiding question for this study is how discourses of masculinity are constructed by female students in the graduate classroom internet forum. The forum itself was part of the classroom meeting held in Spring Semester 2011. The classroom was a three credit course exploring children and young adult literature and the new media. The three-credit course had one classroom meeting every Tuesday. Before the classroom meetings, the students were required to post their responses on the readings assigned for the weeks in the classroom online forum. Since it was a part of a course, it was a closed forum, in which only the members of the class could post and give comments on their peers' responses. To keep the privacy of the members of the forum, names appearing in this paper are pseudonyms.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

For this study, the data were gathered in the form of written postings of the members of the class. Since I was also a member and I was the only male in the class, I excluded my own postings for the analysis. All in all, the data came from the written postings of eight female graduate students. The postings were copied and pasted in Word documents for coding and further analysis.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

Since there were two different types of reading assigned for the week, the first step for data analysis was coding and classifying all the responses based on the two assigned readings. Responses could address (1) Yoo's short story, (2) Dutro's article, or (3) both readings. Distinguishing these types of responses was very useful for further analysis of masculinity discourse.

The second step was identifying the emerging themes related to masculinity. These were then coded and classified into two big categories, the dominant themes and the subordinate themes. Upon completing the coding, the emerging themes for each category were classified further for interpretations and conceptualizations of masculinity. In this way, masculinity discourses among the female students could be reconstructed and analyzed from the perspective of competing discourses and from the point of view of the hegemonic masculinity theory.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

As suggested by the discourse theory (Gee, 2001) and of the theory of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), there are multiple discourses of masculinity circulated and negotiated in society. First, the acceptable and expected masculinity identities are the enactments and performances which are considered normal. Out of the normalcy



standards, the enactments and performances can be considered deviant and stigmatized. Second, the hegemonic masculinity also assumes the hierarchy of the discourses. In this framework, the enactments of masculine identities are also influenced by the power held by those who enact the identity performances. While being sissy is usually stigmatized and a child who performs that way might be bullied, a popular singer who performs in a similar way might be well accepted and hailed.

From the data analysis, there are two major themes of masculinity found in the threaded discussion. The first theme presented and discussed in this section is the dominant discourse of masculine identity and the reactions of the forum discussion participants on this kind of discourses. Second, the subordinate discourses of masculinity—the less dominant discourse that emerges in the discussion forum.

**Dominant discourse: “*This is going to make him a man*”**

In Yoo’s short story, “The Fistful Fist of Feather,” Sam’s father expects his son to be manlier and by letting him to take care of Travis, the thanksgiving turkey, he expects Sam to become a real man. This expectation clearly represents the society’s norms and the dominant discourse of masculinity. Being masculine means courageous, active, and possibly aggressive. In responding to the story, in general the members of the forum perceive the dominant masculinity discourse as unfavorable. However, this dominant discourse is also very difficult for them to reject because even in their daily life and experience, such as in school and in the family, the expectation for boys to become manly is the norm.

One student, Helena, responds to the story by sharing her experience as a teacher. As an elementary school teacher, she is surprised that an act of bullying is considered an act of masculinity that could teach other boys (the sissy ones) to be tougher.

Yoo's story about his "brother" Travis is not so different from what many boys experience. During discussions with my first graders while reading *Oliver Button Is A Sissy* and *The Sissy Duckling*, my students shared many stories about parents saying these very things to them. One little boy insisted that the bullies in the book weren't doing anything wrong because they were helping to "make him tough" and shared that his dad had said that to him. (Helena)

Personal experience as a mother also supports the existence of dominant masculine discourses, which are pervasive and very difficult to resist. Another student, Judith, expresses her experience as a mother and how difficult it is not to follow the mainstream masculinity discourses when she has to raise her son.

While reading this short story, I was very sad because the characters reflected my family. The way Sam’s dad and mom teach is very similar with me and my husband. Sam is very similar with my son who is very soft and amicable, and who prefers playing with dolls and music instruments to playing sports, especially team sports needing intense competition like basketball or soccer. His girly characteristics worried me and my husband a lot, so we tried to change his girly quality in various ways. However, the trials tended to bring about negative results. For example, when he was 6 years old, we wanted to teach him how to survive or to win through competition, which, we thought, was necessary to be a strong man. To achieve the aim, we put him in a basketball club. Because he was not interested in basketball, very tough sports having many tussles for a ball, and requiring good skills to get deeply involved in playing a game, he hardly learned the basketball skills, resulting in

no one in his team passed a ball to him during games. In the middle of a game, he was usually playing with a boy in an opposite team who had similar personality like my son, with no concerns about the victory of the game or other players in his team. After 3 months of his enrollment in the team, one night, he cried and said he didn't want to go to the basketball club anymore because he felt every kid in the team ostracized him from the group. The real problem of this terrible experience is that he thought the feeling of an outcast was because the team members hated him, not because he was not good at basketball, which negatively affected his self-esteem. Now, I cannot even tell him to join a team sports due to his awful memory. (Judith)

Society's pressure to conform to masculinity norms is experienced by most of the forum members and they express this pressure in their responses. The pressure is in the form of expectations of being in their own gender roles. Linda, who is of Korean descent, acknowledges how society often imposes expectations to conform to certain gender roles.

I heard that the expectation of man and woman is different. For women, she wants to be rescued by prince charming (a man with competence) in somewhere deep in mind. For men, he needs to rescue a woman who is in a trouble and make her comfortable. Maybe 20 years ago!! But next moment, I tried to look (at) myself, (at) my mind objectively. Do I? Don't I want to admit that? The answer is 'I don't know.' I was raised and trained (in a) Confucian family and (in) Korean society. Even though I have hated that environment and social norms, I had to preserve those social norms not to lose my parent's face and sometimes myself. (Linda)

What happens when the expectations are not met? The deviant behaviors and identities might bring about identity crisis in both males and females. In crossing the gender boundary as dictated by the dominant discourse, the consequences might be asymmetrical, just like the asymmetrically changed roles in the last century as suggested by Hillman (1974) and Diekmann and Murnen (2004). The expanding female roles are more acceptable than the changes in male roles. In the forum, this idea is clearly expressed by Lori.

When woman are more masculine, that typically means they are tougher, stronger, and more powerful. However, when men are viewed more feminine, they are seen as being weaker and more fragile. (Lori)

While many members of the forum share their own experiences related to the dominant discourse of masculinity, Rani interprets Yoo's short story by connecting it with Dutro's article (2002), in which she highlights the act of hegemonic masculinity conducted by Travis, the thanksgiving turkey. This interpretation is very interesting in that the masculine identities enacted by Travis could suppress and at the same time challenge Sam.

Having [been] accepted more and more by Mom and Dad as a member of family (featured in the family photo and spent more time inside the house), Travis becomes a threat to Sam. Travis performs 'the dominant hegemonic masculinity' as the second son who satisfies demand for a manly son; and this makes Sam play a subordinated role. (Rani)

From the responses above, it is clear that the dominant discourses of masculinity are perceived as not favorable by all the forum members. However, their perceptions are expressed in various ways. In general they agree that the society is still dominated by the traditional discourses of masculinity, which are oppressive but in many ways unavoidable. The power of the discourse is proliferated through discourses in the family domain, school

domain, and in a wider domain of society. Borrowing Dutro (2002) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), the dominant discourse of masculinity is hegemonic and hierarchically structured. It is hegemonic in that it involves power in its enactments. It is hierarchical in that performances of masculinity are influenced by the contexts and power relations. In the hierarchical structure, certain people and persons could have the power to act and cross the borders of their own identity without any problem of being bashed or being ridiculed. In the school domain, the dominant discourses are enacted like what has been experienced by Helena: the student considers bullying as an act of helping the sissy boy to be stronger and tougher. Quoting Yoo in “The Fistful Fist of Feather,” “this is going to make him a man.” (p. 135)

**Other Discourses of Masculinity: “If he wants *Hello Kitty* socks, then we'll let him wear *Hello Kitty* socks”**

According to Dutro (2002) and Connell & Messerschmidt (2005), masculinity is multiple. Beside the dominant discourses, there are subordinate discourses of masculinity which are circulated and enacted in society. While the mainstream discourses related to masculinity might dictate how we treat and raise boys and girls, such as the color of their clothes and the games they are supposed to play, the subordinate discourses might be enacted in a very different way.

While many of the forum members acknowledge that their behavior and their ways to raise their children are basically following the mainstream discourses of gender roles, one student clearly shows her rejection to the dominant culture. In her response she writes:

We have never discouraged him from loving and doing whatever he wanted to love or do. If he wants Hello Kitty socks, then we'll let him [wear] Hello Kitty socks. Who are we to tell him what he "can" and "can't" do just so that he falls in line with the social norms? (Christy)

This perspective, which is different from the mainstream, could represent the subordinate discourse that is actually performed in our daily life. In the case of Sam, his father and Travis, the dominant discourse and the subordinate discourse compete with each other in such interplay. At the beginning, Sam performs the subordinate masculine identity while his father and the turkey perform the dominant masculine identity. At the end of the story, however, Sam seems to perform the expected performance, while his father goes on the opposite pole of masculine identity.

The complexity and the interplay between discourses of masculinity could bring about questions and a reflection about the nature of gender and gender roles. One of the participants, Amanda, even problematizes the duality of gender. Upon pondering on Sam, his father, and Travis the turkey, she thinks that a third gender identity might be needed considering the complexity and interplay of gender identity performances.

Are there third spaces where gender identification and characteristics can exist without being attributed to one side or another? For example, Sam's dad feels that creativity is not masculine, an idea that is well-supported in the media as creative males are considered feminine and often to be homosexual – in short, non-mainstream male. Is there a way to trouble this, where the characteristic of “creativity” can exist outside of a gender dichotomy? In bringing a philosophical question down to a more practical level, what might that look like in a 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom? (Amanda)

Reflecting upon the short story, another student, Diana, responds to the story by raising the question of the nature of masculinity and femininity. Indeed, often the gendered term is understood in relational position. Aggressiveness, for example, might not only qualify for masculine identity. Even women can be aggressive when they face a threat or when they protect their children. This is a kind of motherly aggressiveness.

Think about mothers (human and animal) and how protective they get over their children. Women will do whatever it takes to protect their children, even if that means killing some one or some thing. Women can be just as aggressive as males, if not even more. Ever seen a cat fight between two girls? (Diana)

These subordinate voices in the discussion of masculinity indeed show the multiple discourses of masculinity. The subordinate discourses found in the forum, interestingly, are related to family. In one case, the discourses of masculinity highlight how children should be raised such as what is expressed by Christy: “*If he wants Hello Kitty socks, then we'll let him [wear] Hello Kitty socks.*” This view is off the mainstream view of how to raise boys and girls in the family. Another voice is that a mother may act aggressively in defending her family and her children such as what is suggested by Diana. The family perspective in seeing and understanding masculinity is pervasive in the responses from the members of the forum. Do these family perspective voices appear on the surface because the voices are from women? Indeed, the members of the forum are women and many of them are mothers or aspiring mothers. Probably this influences how they see and understand masculinity.

### Conclusion

Discourses of masculinity appearing in the discussion forum show how the complexities of the idea of masculinity are perceived by the members of the forums from various aspects. Indeed, the dominant discourses which are pervasive in our daily life still persist. Even responding to the short story and to Dutro’s article (2002) could make them aware how they have just embraced what the dominant discourses of masculinity dictate. This kind of response is reflected in Judith’s response. Referring to her son, Judith says, “*his girly characteristics worried me and my husband ...*” This response echoes in many parts of responses found in the forum.

Beside responses that reflect the dominant discourse, there are also responses that could reflect other masculinity discourses circulating in society. The rejection of the dominating discourses could also be seen in the responses. This subordinate discourse suggests another way of raising boys and girls in the family. Raising boys and girls should not necessarily follow the mainstream. There are other ways, which is also legitimate from a different perspective. Thus, Christy’s assertion that “*if he [her son] wants Hello Kitty socks, then we'll let him [wear] Hello Kitty socks*” is off the mainstream idea of raising a boy. These subordinate discourses survive under the more dominant discourses—creating subordinate discourses of masculinity. Therefore, masculinity is enacted and negotiated in multiple discourses.

What is interestingly found in the discussion forum is that the responses reflect the female graduate students’ perspectives on masculinity. The emphasis on the femaleness of the members qualifies for further question: how is masculinity perceived by female graduate students? The answer of this question cannot be straightforward. From the responses, it is

clear that there are multiple perspectives. However, being female is definitely significant in perceiving the idea of masculinity. The students have acquired the discourses of being female in society because they have been immersed and engaged in such discourses, as suggested by Gee (2001). In consequence, their perspectives are rich with the discussions related to family and child rearing. This shows how the hegemonic masculinity discourses affect the members of the discussion forum.

From the findings, it is important for graduate students who want to be teachers or researchers to be aware of their own perspectives on gender roles and identities. This awareness can be useful for them to be more critical with the imbalanced power related to gender relations. In this way, they could enact their agency for equality and empowerment.

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**Short Story Cited**

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