

**Book Review:****MEN's LIVES (8<sup>th</sup> Edition) <sup>1</sup>**Rich Furman <sup>2</sup>

Economists, policy analysts, and other development experts have long understood the importance of gender to social and economic development. Many fine publications have explored how gender is implicated in our understanding, and the perpetration of, violence, poverty and other global, social problems. We have come to understand how patriarchy keeps women disproportionality poor and oppressed, and how an understanding of gender can help us create policies and practices to help empower women. The insights from gender studies have helped us understand the nature of power, and how coercive power is structurally situated within dominant institutional structures, and how social relationships and discourses must be deconstructed, challenged, and ultimately reconstructed. From gender studies and feminist theory we have learned that gender free policies do not exist; economists, policy analysts, and others concerned with macro level social interventions must adopt a gendered lens if they are to help resolve the world's most intractable problems. Through gender studies and feminism, we have given voice to the experiences and lives of women who have heretofore been unheard, and have connected these voices to public policies and social discourses and practices; this has been nothing but a positive step toward the amelioration of social injustice.

Yet, as Correia and Bannon (2006) have noted, attending to the experiences of woman addresses only one half of gender. Gender is also about the ways in which some men have power over other men, and the ways in which gender orders influence the lives of not only women and children, but of men themselves. We must understand the other half of gender.

Similarly, Greig, Kimmel, and Lang (20002) contend that:

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<sup>1</sup> Kimmel, M.S., & Messner, M.A. (eds.). (2012). Men's Lives (8<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

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Examining masculinity and the role it plays in the development process is not simply an analytical exercise, but has widespread implications for the effectiveness of programmes that seek to improve the economic and social outcomes in virtually every country.” (p.2)

Men are also greatly impacted by the processes of gendering. Men experience most of the social and personal maladies that women do, yet may experience them differently. Too often, we assume that since men are disproportionately the direct causes of many of their own problems (not to mention the problems of women, children and the environment), that they are not as worthy of help and support as are women and children. However, policy analysts, economists and other social change agents have an ethical obligation toward all those suffering from the structural roots of inequity; these include the most vulnerable men at risk, regardless of how implicated they may or may not be in the perpetuation of social problems (Furman, 201). So too, given that men and women are inextricably connected through our various systems and social ecologies, practitioners and academics must understand this other aspect of gender should they wish to create lasting systems change.

While many wonderful books exist on exploring the issues of men and masculinities in a globalizing world, many professionals and scholars would be well served by learning the fundamental issues of masculinities studies. As an extension of feminist analysis and a relatively new sub-discipline of gender studies, masculinities studies provides a rich array of analytical frameworks and conceptual tools that can help policy analysts understand the full scope of gender. By delving into a basic text, scholars unfamiliar with the concepts of masculinities studies can develop a strong base through which to explore the lives of men.

Toward that aim, no better text exists than Michelle Kimmel's and Michel Messner's *Men's Lives*. *Men's Lives* is an exciting edited book consisting of chapters by some of the most important and influential thinkers in gender and masculinities studies. It is the perfect text for English as Second Language Scholars, as it is written for American college students and not academics; the writing is clear and readable without ever compromising conceptual depth and rigor.

The introduction to the book begins with an outstanding introduction to masculinities studies. It centers the discipline as a natural outgrowth of recent developments in feminist theory. The authors strongly and convincingly demonstrate that while the vast majority of social theory and text have been written by, for, and about men, little has been written about men as men. That is,

little scholarship had been written prior to the last two decades that explore men are gendered beings. Individual men are heavily impacted by patriarchy, not only in terms of possessing power and privilege, but in terms of risk. The authors contend that it is only through helping men develop their own understanding of how they live and perform their own masculinities can true changes in the gender order be achieved. Men then, must learn that their masculinities are not the product of their own biology, but mostly of their own socialization. By so doing, men can be afforded the opportunity to understand and ultimate change their own conceptions of their masculine selves. So too, men who live and preform masculinities which are not accepted can learn to understand the powerful social forces that have led to their own marginalization. In their introduction, which is much reading for any gender studies scholar or general social scientist, the authors deftly explore the key premise of masculinities studies, that men are born male, but learn to become men.

The next section of the book, Part 1, consists of three chapters that explore various conceptions of masculinities. The first chapter presents a powerful exploration of how the now accepted notion of the social construction of masculinities has been contested and challenged in the media through a privileging of the concepts of evolutionary biology. “Caveman Masculinities: Finding an Ethnicity in Evolutionary Science explores how the media ‘normalizes’ conservative and often unfounded notions from evolutionary biology which essentialize some of the most toxic aspects of masculinities. The authors show how media subtly promulgates the contention that “boys will be boys.” The author of the chapter deconstructs medias attempts at conflating psycho-scientific findings that normalize, excuse and make seemingly inevitable problems such as domestic violence and the sexualization of women. The chapter’s author contends that:

The caveman story can become man’s practical sense of who he is and what he desires. This is so because masculinity is a dimension of embodied and performative practical sensibility because carry themselves within a bodily comportment suggestive of their position as the dominant gender, and they invest themselves in particular lifestyle practices, consumptions patterns, attire, and bodily comportment (p.9).

In other words, the author demonstrates how men believe that their more regressive, aggressive behaviors and attitudes are natural and normal because they feel them so deeply and preform them frequently. Therefore, through media representations, men come to accept their aggressive behavior as predetermined.

This notion is explored throughout many of the rest of the book, and has important implications for those engaging in policy advocacy with men. Since men so strongly believe their the more aggressive aspects of their masculinity to be normal and natural, and since the media reenforces these portrayals, policy advocates and others must find ways of engaging men in dialogue and discussion over the nature of and source of these constructions. To challenge them directly and to portray them as pathological will merely serve to alienate men from the process of engaging; indeed, if these are natural aspects to who they are, why should they be challenged? Instead, men must be engaged in an exploration of the consequences of these aspects of masculinities on their own lives. They must be given reason for and investment in changing.

Numerous chapter in the book move toward this aim. For instance, Part five consist of an exploration of men and health. Article 20, Masculinities and Men's Health: Moving Toward Post-superman Era Prevention explores the ways in which various aspects of men's masculinity lead to health issues and early death. In the four chapters of Part Six, Men and Relationships, we come to understand the isolation and pain that men feel through the fracturing of their relationships, and through their over reliance on ridged definitions of how men should and must preform in relation to others.

In part 11, five chapters present an exploration of what is possible for men, through men's movements and groups that challenge toxic masculinities. In these chapters, we are challenged to seek new ways of exploring who and what men are and can be. The orientation of this chapter moves from a past and present to a future orientation.

As good as the text is, it is not without flaws. Most centrally, the book is weak in exploring the various conceptions for contested masculinities, such as toxic masculinities (Kupers, 2005), hyper masculinity (Pitt and Sanders 2010) and most importantly, hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). A chapter addressing the utility of and implications of each of these ways of conceptualizing masculinities would be an invaluable addition in future revisions. The notion of hegemonic masculinities is so central to masculinities studies that it not being addressed directly and early in the text leaves an important whole.

Messerschmidt (2010) observed that hegemonic masculinity, the socially sanctioned and powered relationship forms of masculinity that exist within each society and often globally, is implicated in most forms of personal and institutional violence. The work of R. W. Connell (2000),

who helps us understand the ways in which hegemonic or dominant forms of masculinities are socially constructed and supported by dominant power structures, should be addressed.

The book also is short, at times, on macro and social solutions to the problems of individual men. This is where policy advocates, analysts and economists can contribute to the growing body of literature on men and masculinities. By educating themselves on this “other half of gender,” these professionals can develop policies and practices to help men, women, and children alike.

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