Starting with Men: Emancipatory Possibilities for Higher Education Praxis

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STARTING WITH GENDER IN INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

CONCEPTUAL DEBATES AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Emancipatory Possibilities for Higher Education Praxis

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Introduction

The important fact of men’s lives is not that they are biological males, but that they become men. Our sex may be male, but our identity as men is developed through a complex process of interaction with the culture...

—(Kimmel & Messner, 2010, p. xvii)

In many pieces of scholarship on men and masculinities, the above quotation from Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner, well-known and oft-cited scholars of men’s lives, is frequently referenced as a way to frame the complexities involved in the social construction of what it means to be a man. An important contribution of this quotation is that it does offer a deliberate distinction between sex (e.g., male) and gender (e.g., men). Additionally, the focus on the complexities which exist in and among men understanding themselves through their interactions within the culture is significant, as it is essential to note that the cultural understandings of men and masculinities are not monolithic, and are in fact nuanced based upon various cultures and environments. Yet, a major critique of this statement is the fact the definition of men relies on biological ‘essential’ truth, which erases the real lives of transgender men for whom sex assigned at birth should not deny their existence, identification and/or expression with the category of men.

The aforementioned critique provides an illustrative example of the shortcomings of language. We offer the critique that often the language used by researchers is imprecise and essentializing; this creates challenges and problems in fully articulating the true complexity involved in the holistic identities of men. When we, as collaborators, came together to begin thinking about even how to address “starting with men,” we grappled with the inherent difficulties of what that phrase even meant. As researchers engaging in research on “starting with men,” are we really talking about men or males? Are we focusing on gender or sex or perhaps
both? Are we focused on patriarchy and the systems that reify privilege and enforce oppression? In this chapter, we as authors negotiate those questions from a place of desiring to problematize and contextualize the idea of “starting with men” in research in higher education, understanding that how one understands this needs to be situated within one’s own societal context.

Over the past 15 years, scholars have paid increasing attention to men who are enrolled as students in higher education institutions (known in the U.S. as college men), and their development (Davis, 2002; Davis & Laker, 2004; Edwards & Jones, 2009; Harper & Harris III, 2010b; Kimmel, 2008; Laker & Davis, 2011; Phipps, 2017; Rogers, 2008). This body of research has been important in examining the development of college men, using the lens of gender, to understand the socialization of masculinity and its effect on these men’s lives (Harper & Harris III, 2010a). Yet, a critique of this body of work is that men are often viewed in the aggregate as a monolithic category, which represents dangerous and often misleading assumptions (see also “Starting with LGB(T),” Woodford, Joslin, & Marshall, 2019). This has led to a centering of Western perspectives that have largely focused on conceptions of men and masculinity that are foregrounded in heterosexual, cisgender, White, middle-class perspectives, which is problematic. Fortunately, an increasing number of scholars have recently engaged in research that broadens the study of college men and their masculinities (Catalano, 2015a, 2015b, 2017; Jourian, 2015, 2016, 2017; McGowan, 2016; Phipps, 2017; Rogers, 2008; Shek, 2007; Singh, 2016; Tillapaugh, 2012, 2016a, 2016b; Wagner, 2011, 2015).

In this chapter, our aim is to interrogate what “starting with men” actually means. As three researchers who come from distinct vantage points studying subgroups of men in higher education, we have endeavored to be clear about the multiple complexities of men’s lives and experiences within the context of higher education, and the ways in which we think, study and write about men in higher education. Within this chapter, we outline our conversations and dialogue with one another, engaging in collaborative autoethnography as a means of “starting with men.”

From Men to Masculinity-As-Variable

A comprehensive discussion of gender as a construct, performance, regime and/or organizer of social relations is taken up elsewhere in this edited collection and is beyond the scope of this chapter (see also “Starting with Gender,” Henderson, 2019, and “Starting with Women,” Jónas, 2019). However, throughout our dialogues, we discerned that four suppositions regarding gender in research circumscribed our approach. Before briefly reviewing the higher education literature on men and masculinities, we would like to elucidate the conceptual field. Firstly, a wealth of literature
exists to explore, disentangle and disrupt the binary essentialism of the sex binary (female/male) with the gender binary (woman/man) (Browne, 2004; Hale, 1998; Hird, 2000; Lorber, 1996). The assumptions of two distinct sexes within Western culture are more reflective of heterosexual coupling and procreation (Hubbard, 1996). Still many cultures operate under the assumption of two sex categories when there are a multiplicity of sex categories that are oversimplified using genital and chromosomal configurations (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Kessler, 2002). Yet, when conducting research, the language of gender might be best utilized as an “emergent property of social situations” (West & Fenstermaker, 1995, p. 9). Instead of determining sex from gender, it might be most useful to consider gender as different from sex and treating gender as part of a social relationship to biological sex (Stryker, 2008). If researchers use gender (i.e., men) as a variable, they must situate how they are defining men and its characteristics/dimensions.

Secondly, for at least 30 years, gender has been defined as a social construction in the literature; that is, gender is something you do rather than something you have (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Researchers need to acknowledge this construction and consider its implications, particularly in methods that involve interviewing people about or observing their behaviors; procedures need to reflect the doing of gender.

Thirdly, gender exists in a field of power. Hegemonic masculinity functions to secure men’s dominance over women and people whose identities transcend and transgress the gender binary (Connell, 2005). Furthermore, gender is one social location that is mediated by other social locations or intersections, (see also “Starting with Intersectionality,” Calitz, 2019), so its performance is raced, classed, etc., and its markers serve a system of dominance and oppression (e.g., sexism, trans oppression; Bell, 2016) that is in turn supported and maintained by other systems of dominance and oppression (e.g., racism, ableism, classism; Crenshaw, 1989, 1993).

Finally, how men understand their gender and what attributions of their daily experience they attach to their gender identity is understudied and underconceptualized (Capraro, 1994; Harris III & Edwards, 2010). Furthermore, daily life situates hegemonic ideologies as culturally normative, so cisgender men have not often encountered the necessary dissonance to think about themselves as men (Davis & Wagner, 2005).

Research on the gendered experiences of college men is relatively recent (Kimmel & Messner, 2010). Much of the gendered research in higher education in the United States prior to the last 15 years has centered the experiences of women, and it has done so as a response to how gender inequities for women are historically situated and structurally organized (Harper & Harris, 2010b). As a result, empirical literature in higher education that includes men as a variable tends to describe gender differences. For instance, Dehdarirad, Villarroya, and Barrios (2014)
mapped gender differences in higher education and science using a dataset comprised of 652 articles published between 1991 and 2012. Another prominent example of research that describes differences between men and women's experiences and outcomes in post-secondary education, Sax's (2008) examination of gender differences is sourced from thirty years of data from the Cooperative Institute Research Program's Freshman Survey and College Student Survey.

More recently, an emerging area of scholarship has chronicled the experiences of college men, particularly, their gender-related experiences and challenges, including those related to: problem alcohol use (Capraro, 2000), identity development (Dancy II, 2010, 2011; Davis, 2002; Edwards & Jones, 2009), sexual assault offending (McDermott, Kilmarin, McKelvey, & Kridel, 2015), engagement in benevolent and hostile sexism (Lemus, Navarro, J Velásquez, Ryan, & Megías, 2014), sexual assault prevention (Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenbach, & Stark, 2003), committing campus policy violations and violence (Harper, Harris III, & Mmeje, 2005; Laker, 2009) and underengagement in educationally purposeful co-curricular experiences (Kellom, 2004; Laker, 2009).

However, as Harris and Edwards (2010) have noted, this body of literature tends to focus on destructive behavior such as men's internalization of hegemonic masculinity and its concomitant implications such as rape myth acceptance or overrepresentation in campus judicial proceedings. Similar themes emerge in scholarship in the UK that has addressed “laddish” culture in higher education (see for instance, Dempster, 2009, 2011; Jackson & Dempster, 2009; Phipps & Young, 2013).

A smaller but important thread of research has chronicled positive aspects related to men and masculinities in college. For instance, Harper (2004) conducted an inquiry of high-achieving African American male collegians. Other notable research that has explored prosocial aspects of college men with a masculinities lens includes men’s experiences in diversity education (Wagner, 2015), and intersections between spirituality and gender in the development of authentic masculinity (Wilcox Elliott, 2012).

Far less scholarship on the gendered experiences of college men and/or masculinities interrogates assumptions of a gender binary or includes trans* students in research calls, though a few scholars have sought to disrupt the binary essentialism that characterizes gendered higher education research on men (Catalano, 2015a, 2015b, 2017; Jourian, 2016, 2017; Tillapaugh, 2016a, 2016b, 2017). Pulsford (2014) noted, however, that “the way we research men and masculinities will reflect the way we currently see and delineate the possibilities enabled for us to see men and masculinities” (p. 216). Failure to consider who fits the category of men, and constructing research that precludes inclusion of all possible men and masculinities, actively harms existing community members through erasure and invisibility and prevents the flourishing of emancipatory gendered futures.
Starting with Men Through Collaborative Autoethnography

We engaged in a collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012) to examine the connection between concept and methodology in higher education research on men. Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is defined as “a qualitative research method in which researchers work in community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in their autobiographical data” (ibid., p. 24). Through individual journaling and dialogic engagements, we examined conceptual boundaries of men and/or masculinities in gender research, considered what researching men means, explored tensions of how men and masculinities are simultaneously narrowly circumscribed and fluid, and interrogated methodological considerations we enacted in our research on men. As higher education scholars, we used the multiple gender-based research studies we have conducted to ground our dialogue, and briefly describe these studies throughout the chapter.

A primary benefit of CAE is the richness in dataset and analysis. By situating the researcher as participant and data source, the methodology accesses a depth of personal meaning and experience. Thus, the positionalities of the authors play an essential role in exposing the tensions that arise about masculinities and “male bodies.” Our researcher positionalities, specifically our various genders as a cisgender woman (Rachel), cisgender man (Dan) and trans man (Chase), also informed our viewpoints as we examined hegemonic gender norms and how they influenced our work in higher education. The collaborative aspect provides a collective mechanism for inquiry and examination that can act to curtail self-absorption or singular perspectives. Like autoethnography, CAE was a strategic choice for this exploration as it provides a vehicle for considering how sociocultural contexts have informed researcher perspectives and decisions.

The Relationship Between Concept and Methodology in Higher Education Research on Men: Four Themes

We identified four common themes in examining the relationship between concept and methodology in higher education research on men. These commonalities included (i) considering the specificity of language and its implications for the topic under study, (ii) practicing social location reflexivity as a researcher, (iii) applying critical analytical lenses to participants’ uncritical or non-existent reflections on gender and (iv) acknowledging the frequency, intensity, impact, and ubiquity of hegemonic conceptualizations of masculinity. These themes informed the content of our data collection as higher education and masculinities researchers, but
also surface standpoints that must be made explicit within conceptual and theoretical frameworks to increase the rigor and credibility of the research. We begin with the question of defining what we mean by men.

**Specificity of Language**

One of our earliest and most salient themes through our conversations was the use of language in our work, and the seemingly wide acceptance of the word, category and language of “men.” We explored how specificity of language translated into how sex and gender are (dis)entangled, awareness of systems of power within language and claims on men as flat. The distinctions between sex and gender are muddled in higher education research in ways that conflate sex and gender. More often than not we are talking about gender, but sometimes we’re using sex terms. For us, the interchange of language was problematic as it limits and confuses the focus of research that does not unpack the language of gender. What does it mean to do higher education research with the focus on men? For Chase, it was a question of purpose:

> Are researchers willing to excavate all the potentials for who may show up in the category of men? If not, then I have some concerns. I am often bothered by the wholesale acceptance that there is a category as simple as ‘men,’ so when researchers begin with an expected premise I am wary of their intentions. Even when researchers look at men at the intersections (race and gender, class and gender) I find there is a simplification of the categories for which they study.

Literally and figuratively, language acts as a means for constructing all parts of research, from research questions to implications. Lack of attention to the specificity of language can compromise the research and thereby the impact it has on the field of higher education—and the way this field is understood. When new identity categories are explored, then research must take the time to define terms, concepts and experiences, even if such elucidations still unintentionally hide complications and nuances (Catalano, 2017). The idea that ‘men’ is recognized as a monolithic identity category causes faulty assumptions, oversimplifications, and excludes potential participants, all of which have an impact on the outcomes of research.

For us, focusing higher education research on men demands that we acknowledge systems of power embedded in gendered language related to programming, student development, student outcomes, policy and governance. Social justice as a framework requires “listening to the voices of those at the margins and following their lead” (Bell, 2016, p. 21). Without an understanding of intersections of identity and intersectionality, starting with men might seem counter to following the lead of those in the margins (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). Starting research
with men means acknowledging the existence of male and masculine domination, as well as how sexism upholds other forms of oppression on college campuses. The framework of the research must acknowledge sexism, and name how gender is a variable in the research and connected to the framework. Rachel asserted,

If we’re talking about the variable [of gender] devoid of an Acknowledgment of how the variable is situated in a field of power, that sets up a system of domination of women, and then it’s problematic for me.

In higher education research, when we use gender as a variable, we tend to describe differences instead of the historical and structural realities of oppression and domination that constitute those differences. In our discussions we made a distinction between centering men’s experiences and, as Rachel put it, ignoring

ways in which [we] inscribe, socialize, produce, reproduce [male domination], and how that could help people think about some of the ethics and philosophical implications of their research when men or masculinity are a variable of our work.

In terms of language, we also question higher education research that provides any statements about men as a foreclosed, and too often essentialized, category; that is, men as flat. Dan noted,

If I am reading a piece and it’s using ‘men’ right? And all it says is, ‘men do X, Y, and Z,’ then automatically as the reader I am reading that as cisgender, white, middle class, Christian men often [at least in the U.S. context]. I don’t believe that it’s at all men. And so, I don’t know... that, that’s sort of the issue of the language that bothers me... there’s not a lot of specificity in a lot of ways that I think are important.

This can create circumstances where researchers obscure power, overgeneralize or conduct murky research. He went on to explain how language of gender and sex must be aligned to the purpose of a study, in part, to clarify what is being studied, but also to open up the possibilities of who is invited into the research.

Man, woman are gendered terms. Male/female sex terms. And if I am studying gender, I am not studying sex. And so that, I think, is the distinction for me. I just think that that’s super limiting, and I don’t want to use male as a descriptor because I think that man is actually much more broad... I think it’s much more open for interpretation, and it includes more people. Whereas I think ‘male’ limits identity in key ways.

(Dan)
The focus on biological/assigned sex in research signifies a particular embodiment and chromosomal definition that does not apply to gender. There are plenty of men who are not biologically male. Connell (2005) reminds us that gender “is a social practice that constantly refers to bodies and what bodies do. It is not a social practice reduced to the body” (p. 71). Therefore, not all men are males. Dan argued,

If we are starting with men, well are we really starting with men or are we starting with males? And let’s have that conversation... I just don’t think scholars and researchers are being thoughtful enough.

There may be times that research with participants who identify as males is appropriate; for instance, Dan was intentional about using ‘male’ in a call that examined male survivors of sexual assault on college campuses.

Unfortunately, the balance of previous and current literature on males, men and masculinities in higher education fails to distinguish between sex and gender in terms of descriptive language used for participants (male versus men). Males and men are used interchangeably, and this is not only inaccurate, but it obscures whole populations of men. Moreover, we are concerned about research that chooses the signifier ‘men,’ when in reality, researchers are often studying cisgender, white (in the Global North), able-bodied, heterosexual men and failing to be precise. Precision is important when generalized language obscures the unmarked center. However, we recommend that scholars and practitioners carefully consider what they are studying, and what possibilities exist to be more inclusive rather than less.

**Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is a practice that refers to “the importance of self-awareness, political/cultural consciousness, and ownership of one’s own perspective” (Patton, 2015, p. 381) in the research process. Throughout our written and in-person conversations, each researcher wrestled with how we understood our own gender, how our gender is situated within social systems and dominant ideologies, and what meaning this had for our research. We explored how other’s research informs our self-understanding and reminds us to consider research as a site for discerning and contesting our own social location(s).

Rachel’s 16 years as a university administrator working in student housing shaped her research interests: “sexism was so normalized in my environment that I failed to notice its implications long after I identified as a feminist.” For example, Rachel shared frequent instances of being talked over in meetings. Additionally, on multiple occasions when doing collaborative work or presenting at conferences, an individual
man became so frustrated at her commentary that he approached her with voice raised—or in one memorable instance, fist raised—as other colleagues looked on. These experiences demanded that Rachel understand the conditions that emboldened men to respond this way and discouraged colleagues from interceding. Furthermore, her experiences with crisis response on four different campuses left a lasting impression and inspired her to address the hegemony of masculinity, sexism and misogyny:

I have multiple stories from practices of women being terrorized by groups of young men who are not exceptional, but the all-too-expected products of the culture we have created which is deeply misogynistic, sexist and embracing of rape, violence and power over women. I started a research agenda on men and masculinities because I wanted to be able to understand the conditions that allow and facilitate the everyday, business as usual abuse, manipulation and objectification of women.

Rachel’s approach to her research was grounded in a desire to address the everyday harmful impacts of masculinities that allow them to go unnoticed as an inevitability. As a researcher, her reflexivity, critical analysis, and naming of hegemonic masculine norms demonstrates the diligence required to begin research that “starts with men.”

Chase also reflected on his social location in higher education and how that contributed to his impetus for studying the experiences of trans men. He elaborated, “I was seeking to understand how to make my own meaning of my experiences as a trans man . . . I led with my own trans subjectivity.” His research focuses on higher education as the context for understanding the experiences of trans men collegians, how they navigate and negotiate their trans-ness in context of campus experiences. Similarly, our understanding of ourselves as researchers, and what motivated our research, was about understanding the complexities of our social identities. The work of a research study begins prior to the data collection, as Dan reflected,

I think people don’t think about who they are and how their worldview, based upon their multiple social identities, and also their lived experiences have informed the ways in which they look at the world and then they look at their research.

Who we are and how we understand ourselves informs our research, and lack of attention to such an impact will not interrupt systems of oppression, but only perpetuate the systems of oppression that operate to silence gender variation and intersections of identities. We all use higher
education as the site for our research, which allows for an analysis that attends to the specificity of higher education cultures.

Researcher reflexivity is critical to signal intentions and messages based on the specific language we choose to use, particularly around the distinctions of gender and sex. For example, Dan was studying high-achieving males who were the first in their families to attend college, focusing on the factors that helped these students succeed at their respective universities. When writing up his data and sending a manuscript out for review, Dan received feedback that encouraged him to change the use of ‘male’ to ‘men’. He understood the editor making an ostensible effort for inclusion, but missed Dan’s intentional language choice. Because Dan was focused on sex rather than gender for this study, he was frustrated by feedback,

and I was like, but the study criteria was that they all had to identify as males. As a male. That’s what the study criteria was. Those two things are different and that’s why I am doing this.

Dan’s experience points to how hegemonic academic notions of inclusion, presumed as the ‘right way’ to talk about gender and sex, miss attention to explicit language choices. Far too often, scholars, particularly those studying higher education, continue to conflate sex and gender terms regularly in their work (see also “Starting with Sexuality,” Castro Samayoa, 2019), as if they were interchangeable rather than unique terms (cf Dancy II, 2010; Harper, 2004; Jackson & Dempster, 2009). We argue that this nuance of language and the ‘right way’ is deeply embedded in higher education, particularly when thinking about the ways that higher education systems, including our institutions as well as our publications, uphold particular notions of cisgendered and patriarchy.

**Critical Research Lenses**

Throughout our conversation, we surfaced research decisions to critically interpret experiences differently than the participants’ explanations. Taking a critical approach to the analysis of participants’ interpretations requires addressing issues of power and perception. Our CAE led us to unpack how our understandings of research require us to notice larger institutional and cultural dynamics (Abes & Hernández, 2016). We explored how qualitative methods allow for expansive narratives that may demonstrate how participants are self-aware and also lack awareness of their own gender socialization.

Dan shared a story from his study on college men who experienced sexual assault that exemplifies the difficulty of one participant’s interpretation of dynamics, versus Dan’s interpretation. Dan struggled with
how the participant declared a rejection of masculinity, but still upheld hegemonic notions of blame and self-incrimination for violence:

The ways that he talks about the violence that he incurred and then . . . his interactions post-trauma with the perpetrator is so deeply entrenched in . . . self-blame, shame . . .

Dan recounted his struggle to balance honoring the participants' declaration of rejecting masculinity, and what Dan heard as hegemonic masculine notions of worthlessness for victimization. While the participant might feel he is rejecting masculinity, Dan was unable to fully agree with such a rejection when held up against the normative notion that "masculinity is violence" (Dan).

Rachel had a similar encounter with the pervasive conflation of masculinity with violence while interviewing college men about both their experiences in diversity education and how they conceptualized masculinity. One participant described how he spent a painful year of school before the age of ten being singled out and physically attacked by a taller and stronger boy during tackle football games that occurred during gym class, "with adults supervising, being normalized into accepting pain as a way to learn." When young men are socialized to expect and accept violence, this has ramifications for their willingness to inflict violence on others.

Violence as an educational tool of masculinity was both acknowledged and rejected by participants. Within systems of higher education, research indicates that colleges and universities are a major institution of socialization around masculinity (Davis & Laker, 2004; Dempster, 2009; Harper & Harris III, 2010b; Kimmel, 2008; Laker & Davis, 2011; Phipps & Young, 2013). As Kimmel (2008) has stated, young men often perform dangerous, high risk practices to prove their masculinity to other men, often through violent means. Yet, in our own work, we have found that the socialization of masculinity does not always have to be understood as violence in traditional (i.e., physical) means. As previously mentioned, our collective studies have vibrant examples of men suppressing their emotions or only being able to express particular emotions (e.g., anger or rage); exhibiting a tension between rejecting masculinity, yet often wanting to still be perceived by others as masculine; and displaying a sense of policing one's peers around gender roles and expectations. We argue that each of these actions serve as a form of violence that many college men inflict upon themselves through a vicious cycle of socialization, learning from their peers, families and institutions and then replicating these actions throughout their lives. As researchers, we grappled with how to navigate presenting data that can both affirm participant's self-awareness and provide a critical analysis of how they were unable to see the impact of masculinity as violence in the context of higher education.
**Hegemonic Masculinity and Its Consequences**

Connell (2005) explained that hegemonic masculinity was a constellation of gendered practices that responded to questions of the legitimacy of patriarchy. Essentially, what are the gendered acts and “dispositions” that explain the normalcy and legitimacy of men’s domination? Scholars have offered different organizers to characterize patterns of hegemonic masculinity (Brannon, 1976; Brod, 1994; Kimmel, 2008; O’Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightsman, 1986), but masculinity as characterized by physical strength, sexual prowess, emotional stoicism, competitive impulses and willingness to commit and endure violence is fairly standard. While a discussion of the myriad ways that themes of hegemonic masculinity manifested in our respective studies is beyond the scope of this chapter, we give attention to one specific theme, masculinity as violence, as a useful reminder to researchers of why theorizing gender is essential to critically interpreting data. The intensity of hegemonic masculinity, and systems of domination, reflect how our research exposed constant lack of confidence in meeting masculine standards. Violence was “framed it as if it’s an inevitability” (Rachel).

Consent, as an understudied and undertheorized concept and practice in higher education settings, serves to interrupt assumptions about sexual norms in an effort to increase communication and decrease sexual violence (Beres, 2007). Given the great deal of attention being paid to sexual violence in higher education worldwide, particularly in the United States (see also, regarding India, “Starting with Sexual Harassment,” Sinha, 2019), the confluence of sexuality and masculinity is an important connection to examine. In Dan’s research on college men who experienced sexual violence (Tillapaugh, 2016b, 2017), he noticed that “[s]exual norms among gay men are completely influenced and reinforced around masculine norms informed by hypersexuality, that’s beyond consent. And that is an act of violence. Right?” Dan found that many of the queer or trans-identified men with whom he spoke experienced coercive behaviors with other sexual minority men, particularly when in LGBTQ+ public spaces, such as bars, dance clubs or community events. For example, participants in his study named being groped or “felt up” by others without providing consent, but others validating that experience or telling them that was a normal part of sexuality within the community (see “Starting with Community/ies,” Simmons & Jourian, 2019, for a critical discussion of the term ‘community’). When gay sexuality is framed as hypersexual, obtaining consent in a heteronormative paradigm lacks meaning. Yet, the intensity of hegemonic notions of masculinity, even as it may exclude sexual minority men, also impacts sexual minority men. Queer sexualities may be marginalized in a hegemonic view, yet still be influenced by hegemonic ideologies. As Rachel pointed out, one can see the effects of internalized masculinity and gender role conflict with “how
closely socialization into manhood is connected to accepting and being willing to enact violence.” Domination as expressed through sexual violence-as-masculinity is concerning, particularly if it is literally a product of cultural programming, an artifact of men’s socialization.

For the trans men in Chase’s research, there was an uncomfortable tension between ideas of being “trans enough” with feeling both a part of and apart from the category of men (Catalano, 2015b). As Chase articulated, for the trans men in his study, “Masculinity (in the normative sense) was elusive and unattainable, a cautionary tale and a wish never fulfilled.” Research that assumes specific truths about the category of men can erase the complexity of masculinity, gender and sex and projects a limited understanding of who “counts” as a man (see also “Starting With Trans*,” Nicolazzo, 2019). As a collective, we also explored whether cisgender men spent as much time wondering about, as Chase put it, the “subtle nuances of conversation, interactions, expectations, scripts, behaviors, etc. [that] were frustrating, confusing, tiring, overwhelming, numbing, and many other emotions [for trans men].” Not often explored is how language of men and masculinities is assumed to be stable by those who are marginalized by hegemonic notions, without realizing the fissures and instability their multiple identities expose in the categories of men and masculinities. Participants see the ill-fittedness and blame themselves, not the system. As Dan succinctly stated, “[I]t’s always that connection to imposter syndrome of masculinity.” Gender research that describes and thus disrupts the fault lines of hegemonic masculinity offers interesting and emancipatory possibilities for the field of higher education studies.

Implications for Research on Men, Gender and Higher Education

In thinking across our collective work, key implications emerge for research on men that stem from the four commonalities documented here (utilization of specificity of language, engagement in researcher reflexivity, application of critical lenses and acknowledgment of hegemonic conceptualizations of masculinity). These implications play a critical role in encouraging researchers to consider the dynamic nature of what it means to “start with men.”

Backward Thinking

The very question of research that “starts with men” requires researchers to begin defining what is meant by that phrase. We encourage researchers to consider the ways that one’s gender is deeply connected to other intersections of identities, both personal and social, and how this may have an effect on the larger research design, data obtained and analysis
of that data. Tillapaugh and Nicolazzo (2014) offer the idea of backward thinking in terms of research design, which is

[t]he idea that one not only needs to leverage intersectionality with participants and in data analysis but also prior to seeking participants, specifically in terms of one's epistemology, reflexivity, and overall research design.

(p. 112)

We encourage researchers to consider the ways in which they align their research paradigm with their study designs, and then their reflexive analytical approaches, to create meaningful, rich understandings on men and their lived experiences.

Defining Your Terms

As we have outlined in this chapter, the definition of terms is a powerful and essential aspect to the work on “starting with men.” So-called gender research that uses male and men interchangeably or assumes that the category men connotes a monolithic experience is not just imprecise scholarship, it does nothing to unbalance social inequities; sex and gender are not the same thing and using language interchangeably misrepresents this and leads to conflation. Such research also fails to expose, subvert, and transform historic and structured power inequities that organize gender and the language we use to name it.

Research that Increases Gender Consciousness

In discussing language, Chase raised a powerful point about the ways in which dominance and social location can play a role in the questions we ask as researchers, but also the ways in which we think about those answers for ourselves:

So, I had to start from the beginning. What does it mean to be trans? When did you know you were trans? What the fuck does that even mean? I don’t know. When did you know you were a woman? When did you know you were a man? Why do we [researchers] ask that of people [participants] for whom they only have marginalized or minoritized identities? And what I think your research [Rachel] and your research [Dan] gets at is that we should start asking other people, not just trans folks.

As researchers engaging in gender scholarship in higher education, we advocate that individuals take the time to consider asking key questions of participants that illuminate more critical thinking about their
self-identities. How are participants' genders supported, reinforced, questioned or rendered unintelligible by programs, practices and policies on campus? By framing with specificity around whom we are asking and what our focus should be, we engage in raising the consciousness of our participants around their identities, but also what their identities mean in their lives. Researchers must be aware of this in their design and consider how the research process itself can further gender justice and liberation by naming masculinity and encouraging cisgender men to reflect on themselves as gendered and gendering beings.

**Interrogating Power and Social Location**

Throughout this chapter, we have argued that power, social location, and dominance play a significant role in the lives of college men. The interlocking power structures within much of our global society have created and reinforced systems of patriarchal dominance for men. Yet, we need researchers to interrogate power and issues of social location, specifically within the context of higher education, to understand the nuances that exist among different subgroups of men and the ways in which they use (or perhaps disrupt) these concepts. We want to call attention to research about higher education that explores men and masculinities within collegiate environments (from student organizations to analysis of functional areas to issues of power about facets within and across institutions). Particularly important for researchers doing work on collegiate men is to engage in that social location reflexivity for themselves. Which biases, stereotypes or assumptions does one have as a researcher doing research on men that are created by one's own lived experiences around gender? How do these biases, stereotypes and assumptions show up in the ways in which we look at the world and our own gender performance? How will those lenses affect the ways we seek to understand the data we have? These questions are essential to interrogating our broader understanding of research on men, and researchers of all paradigms need to be proactively engaging in deep work on this.

**Engaging in Inner Work**

Throughout our collective work together, we began to address key areas of our research practice that are connected methodologically to understanding men. Yet our conversations, both through our individual journaling and larger dialoguing, resulted in powerful transformative moments of learning. As researchers who are deeply committed to justice work, we have spent a great deal of time understanding the connection between our social locations through a reflexive process. In coming together and engaging in dialogues around our research practices and the ways in which we
begin to understand the nuances of our work, we gained new perspectives and understandings of how we frame our meanings around research on men as well as increased perspective on issues of power, privilege and difference. This work reinforces to us the collective benefits of being in community with others to continually engage in critical self-reflection, but also the critical nature of consciousness-raising through research. It is our belief that researchers must be engaging in an ongoing process of inner work to examine their biases, stereotypes and assumptions and question the ways these play a role in their larger work.

Conclusion

“Starting with men” has the potential to make a vital contribution to literature and scholarship on gender and higher education, and more importantly to transform gendered realities and emancipate us from essentialist gender systems. This cannot be undertaken, however, without attention to and reflection upon our own social locations and investments in gender systems; it cannot be done with imprecise language and under-conceptualized research designs. Through this CAE, we have endeavored to be clear about the multiple complexities of men’s identities and experiences within post-secondary contexts and the ways in which we think, study and write about men in higher education. We invite our fellow researchers to engage that complexity with the rigor, care and expansive sensibilities that engender conditions for emancipation.

References


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