Man of Multiple Identities: Complex Individuality and Identity Intersectionality among College Men

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Complex Individuality and Identity Intersectionality among College Men

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A man who graduates from college without having benefitted from a well-guided exploration of his gender identity is likely to find himself stranded on a destructive pathway of confusion and self-doubt... Those who work at colleges and universities have a professional responsibility to aid women and men alike in productively resolving identity conflicts and transitioning into a version of adulthood where patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, misogyny, misandry, sexual harassment, and all forms of abuse and oppression ends with them.

(Harper & Harris, 2010, p. 10)

In their book, College Men and Masculinities, Shaun R. Harper and Frank Harris III (2010) challenge educators and administrators to respond more purposefully to the developmental and educational challenges faced by undergraduate men. Doing so requires moving beyond what they have termed “the model gender majority myth”—a common misconception that all men similarly benefit from the power and privilege historically and contemporarily conferred to men because of their gender. Also necessary, Harper and Harris argue, is a more complete understanding of college men as men with gender-specific needs and
often unresolved identity issues. Other scholars have noted the various ways in which young men experience conflict around gendered norms regarding the performance of their masculinities in college environments (Davis, 2002; Edwards & Jones, 2009; Harper, Harris, & Mmeje, 2005; Harris & Harper, 2008; O’Neil, Helms, Gable, David, & Wrightman, 1986).

On its own, Male Gender Role Conflict (MGRC) is extremely complex and multifaceted. However, an erroneous assumption could be made that healthy identities are achieved once men resolve the various aspects of gender role conflict that have been described in the literature. But what about those who are simultaneously experiencing dissonance concerning their class and racial identities alongside fear of femininity, restrictive emotionality, and other behavioral manifestations of MGRC? The point here is that men are not just gendered beings with unidimensional needs and patterns of identity development. Several students experience additional conflict, subordination, stereotyping, and differential treatment on college campuses because they are not White, middle class, strictly heterosexual, and so on.

In an attempt to more accurately capture the complexity of identity development, Judith Butler (2004) illustrates how gender is performative. She notes that there are numerous socially constructed expectations concerning how women and men act, how they talk, what they do, and the intimacy with which they interact that compel them to think and behave in certain manners. The same could be said about the social construction of race—Blacks, for example, are often stereotyped and expected to behave in particular ways that often wrongly renders them a homogeneous group (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Smith & Moore, 2000; White, 1998). Those who decide to concurrently perform race and gender in unanticipated ways rarely do so without conflict or consequence. College students, therefore, must negotiate the multiple dimensions of their identities; some of them are men.

Recent higher education and student affairs literature on identity intersectionality has focused mostly on women (e.g., Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2003; Patton & Simmons, 2009; Robinson & Howard–Hamilton, 2000). With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Edwards & Jones, 2009; Harris & Harper, 2008), comparatively less has been written about the complex convergence of masculinities with other aspects of men’s social identities. Harris and Harper considered gender plus one other dimension of identity (e.g., plus class identity, plus sexual identity) among four male students attending community colleges. Their “two-at-a-time” approach, while in some ways helpful, neglected to consider more complex identity intersections (e.g., masculine plus gay, Native American, low-income, and deeply spiritual, all at the same time). Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) offer an example of a gay male student who is also Jewish. Concerning the intersection of his gender, sexual orientation, and religious identities, the authors maintain “he cannot separate these [three] interlocking identities, but worries he may be forced to live an incongruent life separating and hiding his identities at different times” (p. 247).

Ways in which masculinity intersects with other dimensions of identity are explored and discussed in this chapter. Our major argument is that college students are complex individuals. Thus, understanding the complexities of individuality is essential for those who aim to construct educational environments and conditions that foster productive developmental change in students. Because so little has been written about identity intersectionality among college men, we use this as an occasion to juxtapose existing research with an example of a real-life college student. In the next section we review some of the published literature on undergraduate students and multiple dimensions of identity. We then introduce Tyson, an actual undergraduate student with a multilayered identity, as a case example. Although a pseudonym is used in lieu of Tyson’s real name, nothing described in his case is fictitious. The chapter concludes with implications for postsecondary educators and administrators.

Multiple Dimensions of Identity among College Students

Much foundational literature and many developmental theories concerning various components of students’ social identities (e.g., sexual orientation and gender) focus on individual aspects of personhood. Rather than seeking to understand how students simultaneously make sense of themselves as raced, gendered, or classed individuals, identity development theorists tend to concentrate on only one dimension at a time (Torres, Howard–Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003). Researchers have recently incorporated Feminist, postmodern, and queer theories into studies of college student development, and employed concepts such as intersectionality, performativity, and liminality to represent students as they see themselves (Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes et al., 2007; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2003; Patton & Simmons, 2008; Renn, 2007; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005; Reynolds & Pope, 1991; Robinson & Howard–Hamilton, 2000; Stewart, 2008, 2009; Stewart & Lozano, 2009; Torres & Hernandez, 2007; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009).

Emphasizing the ways in which identities intersect and intrasex complicates static or essentialized perceptions that educators may hold about students. By considering multiple dimensions of an individual’s identity, researchers are explicitly acknowledging the fluid and context-specific nature of how students view themselves and make sense of their own development. Moreover, challenged by postmodern queer conceptualizations of identity, scholars continue to explore the balance between core selves and other distinguishable dimensions (e.g., sexual orientation and class) and the reality that there are no clear boundaries for demarcation (Abes et al., 2007).

Two models and one concept that are particularly informative for framing the case we later present in this chapter are: The original and reconceptualized
versions of the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) (Jones & McEwen, 2000; Abes et al., 2007); Wijeyesinghe's (2001) Factor Model of Multiracial Identity (FMRI); and Abes and Kasch's (2007) Developmental Concept of Queer-Authorship. Susan R. Jones and Marylu K. McEwen's original MMDI reflects a student's constructed identity at a particular time and in a particular context. The individual is visually represented (through the model) as both a core self and a set of external identities. The external identities are those that are socially constructed (e.g., race, gender, and class), while the core is said to consist of personal attributes, values, and characteristics. The model considers how important each external identity is to the individual. Thus, the closer to the core, the greater salience the external identity holds. As contexts (or college environments) change, so too can the salience of particular external identities, and as such, the model captures the fluid and constantly changing nature of students' identities.

The Abes et al. (2007) reconceptualized MMDI includes meaning-making as essential in representing ways in which students filter social contexts to inform how they perceive themselves. Accordingly, complex meaning-making filters enable researchers and others to more carefully parse contextual factors and perceptions of identity. Consistent with the original MMDI, an internal core self (a set of personal characteristics, values, and attributes) and external identities (socially constructed identities, such as religion) are represented. Thus, in adding the filter, Abes et al. recognize how and to what degree students' identities are shaped by contextual influences.

Wijeyesinghe's (2001) FMRI is also useful in explaining the case example presented later in this chapter. Based on a qualitative study of African American/European American adults who self-identified in different ways (e.g., White, Multiracial), the FMRI consists of eight factors that affect choice of racial identity by multiracial persons: racial ancestry, cultural attachment, early experience and socialization, political awareness and orientation, spirituality, other social identities, social and historical context, and physical appearance. A multiracial person may choose her or his identity based on a combination of these factors, but typically not all. Although Wijeyesinghe presents these factors as distinct, she states that many are interrelated. For example, physical appearance is often directly linked to racial ancestry. Hence, any attempt to understand who multiracial students are must take into account the factors that shape their identities. The same could be said for students who bring with them to college a varied combination of identities.

Last, Abes and Kasch's (2007) concept of queer-authorship provides substantive content for understanding how a gay, multiracial, male student like Tyson may construct his identity in resistance to heteronormative social structures. Abes and Kasch describe queer-authorship as "the necessary deconstruction of heteronormativity that enables lesbian students to change the dominant social order in order to redefine the meaning of their multiple identities and the contexts in which their lives are situated." (p. 630). This idea employs a form of self-authorship that includes a social change component; meaning the individual is influenced by and influences her or his environment. As such, students are given greater agency in not only determining to what extent they will filter contextual factors, but also complicating and disrupting previously rigid notions of gender, race, spirituality, class, and other social identities.

As these frameworks demonstrate, researchers and educators must take more seriously the complexities of individuality, as many students come to college with multilayered identities and prior socialization experiences that compel them to rank order certain dimensions of identity above others. Exclusively accounting for a single dimension of identity, without responding to other aspects, can potentially lead to misguided programming and counseling approaches. The following case is illustrative of the nuanced process of identity development among an individual college student whom we have named Tyson.

Identity Intersections: The Case of Tyson

In this section we introduce Tyson, a biracial, gay, male student with salient academic and spiritual identities who straddles two socioeconomic statuses. Described herein are his prior racial socialization experiences, conflicts that ensue because of the duality of his socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as strategies he employs to negotiate friendships in a heteronormative college fraternity house. Tyson, an actual 20-year-old undergraduate student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), represents the multilayered individuality with which many students enter college and universities. We conclude this section by explaining what is problematic about expecting a student like Tyson to rank order the multiple dimensions of his identity.

Developing a Biracial Identity

Growing up in a family with an African American father and a Caucasian mother, the concept of race was explicitly introduced and discussed with Tyson. From an early age, he was aware that he was biracial and often took pride in proclaiming his multiracial heritage, following his older sister's example. Since race was often talked about in his home, Tyson does not recollect any specific experiences of feeling unaware that he was biracial or primarily identifying with one single race over the other.

Tyson's first realization of his unique racial identity came at the early age of 5 years old. Having attended elementary schools in Puerto Rico, Missouri, and Maryland, he had the opportunity to witness three drastically different schooling environments. In Puerto Rico, he noticed that many of his peers were similar in racial appearance (in that they were light-skinned), but there were very few White or Black students. In Missouri, he was the only non-White
that engendered racial conflict. UNC offers incoming first-year students from underrepresented populations (namely, African Americans, Native Americans, and Latino Americans) the opportunity to have a Minority Advisor. This mentoring program affords new students various benefits such as tutoring from peers who have taken the same classes and companionship during the transition from high school to college. Rather than asking if he would like to participate in this program, Tyson was automatically assigned a Minority Advisor. Although he appreciated the positive and endearing invitations from his assigned mentor, Tyson was quite comfortable during his college transition, and thus did not feel the need to take advantage of this program. For the first semester of college, he harbored feelings of angst and disappointment because it was presumed he was African American and therefore needed and wanted to participate in this program.

**Duality of Class Identity**

Tyson's parents divorced when he was 3 years old and custody of him and his older sister was given to his biological mother. Having lived with his mother until he was 7 years old, he believed she was more financially stable than his father because she was taking care of him. At the time, his mother worked two jobs. Although they did not have much, Tyson understood and appreciated how hard his mother worked for their family. Despite this realization, he remained unaware of how poor his living conditions actually were.

Midway through his second-grade year, Tyson moved to Maryland to live with his father and stepmother due to his mother's financial hardships. The transition from Kansas City to suburban Baltimore was quite difficult. Rather than living in a one-bedroom apartment, Tyson now resided in a four-bedroom house. Instead of arriving home alone, his stepmom and older sister now picked him up from the bus stop each day. And as opposed to aimlessly lounging around the house, he now had daily chores and responsibilities. As a result of this new lifestyle, Tyson slowly began to notice himself straddled between two disparate socioeconomic statuses.

The summer heading into his eighth-grade year, Tyson's father and stepmother earned promotions that drastically increased their salaries. Subsequently, their family moved into an upscale neighborhood that was fundamentally different from any other environment Tyson had previously experienced. This transition marked the first time he felt unsure of his class identity. On one hand, he was proud of his parents' hard work and success, but on the other hand, he felt uncomfortable with the stigma of "being rich," as denoted by his peers and others.

Throughout high school, Tyson struggled to make sense of his class identity. While he lived comfortably with his father and stepmom, he never associated or felt comfortable with his affluent neighborhood peers. He was the only
teenager in his neighborhood who worked throughout high school, something that caused him to actually identify more with his lower-income mother. Although Tyson never embraced being "middle class," he also did not feel comfortable disclosing his mother's financial hardships. He knew his mother proudly worked at Wal-Mart where she earned minimum wage, but would often lie about her employment to prevent his friends from knowing she was low-income. When Tyson lied about his mother's job, he often felt ashamed of himself, thus exacerbating his struggles with the duality of his class identity—it seemed as if he actually preferred the (mis)perception that he was at all times middle class.

As a financially independent college student, Tyson feels more comfortable negotiating situations that drastically differ along socioeconomic lines. Because he is solely responsible for paying tuition and his own college expenses, Tyson no longer feels it is necessary to identify financially with one side of his family more so than the other. Being active in an almost exclusively White social fraternity, he is constantly surrounded by students who come from wealthy families. Of his 60 fraternity brothers, Tyson is one of only four men who are solely responsible for paying their own fraternities dues. Though Tyson sometimes feels frustrated with how privileged most of his brothers are, he is simultaneously proud of his ability to pay for this experience. Because of Tyson's financial situation, he also is one of only three brothers in his chapter with jobs. Due to his work schedule, sometimes he has to forego participation in certain fraternity events and other campus activities, something that was initially disappointing.

Looking to the future, Tyson plans to earn a Ph.D. in education from a prestigious university. While this career path would predictably secure his position in the middle class, Tyson does not feel he will ever shed his low-income identity. He appreciates this aspect of his identity because he values and respects the work ethic and perseverance of certain low-income individuals, particularly his mother. Regardless of Tyson's future financial standing, he feels he will always have a bifurcated class identity because of the socially constructed stigmas associated with being rich or poor.

*Juxtaposing Masculine and Gay Identities*

Tyson has lived in his college fraternity house for 2 years. During the rush and pledging process, he had no intentions of disclosing his sexual orientation to any of his brothers until after graduation. While Tyson never feared that his brothers would alienate or ostracize him for being gay, he was hesitant in revealing his sexual identity, as he did not want to jeopardize the reputation of his fraternity. During the pledging process, he deliberately sought to befriend each individual fraternity brother in an attempt to establish relationships predicated on similar interests, character, and personality. Therefore, if he were to ever disclose his sexuality, the friendships would be cemented in substantive prior experiences and interactions.

The summer leading into his junior year, Tyson came out to his family and five of his closest fraternity brothers. After revealing his sexual orientation, his brothers were very open, accepting, and curious about why he had not told them sooner. Although they had some speculation, these men were proud that he felt at ease enough to share something so taboo in fraternity culture. Living in a house with 28 guys and sharing communal showers, Tyson never feels worried. However, the thought of bringing potential romantic interests to the house continues to incite anxiety for him. His chapter brothers welcomed and have even encouraged him to do so, yet Tyson continues to feel uncomfortable having his same-sex dates come to such a heteronormative space.

Tyson's room is typically filled with chapter brothers and friends from outside the organization, including women and men. As a strategic move, he usually keeps his door open with music playing to facilitate a comfortable and inviting environment. He accurately predicted that his maintenance of a clean, open, and fun room would ease any feelings of discomfort or resistance that may have been felt by his heterosexual brothers. Because Tyson did not come out until his junior year, he feels that he was able to foster meaningful friendships predicated on his character and personality rather than his sexual orientation. Among his fraternity brothers, Tyson is known for coordinating pickup basketball games, holding leadership in numerous campus organizations, and always being willing to help out anyone in need. As a result of his positive reputation in the chapter, he was elected to his fraternity's executive board for 2 consecutive years.

Beyond his extracurricular involvement and seemingly masculine hobbies, Tyson believes his heterosexual brothers feel comfortable with him because he does not perform stereotypes that are commonly ascribed to gay men. Because he plays sports and hangs out mostly with heterosexual women and men (as opposed to other queer students), many of Tyson's fraternity brothers have joked that he is "not really gay." They believe "normal" gay men are usually into fashion, romantic movies, and doing non-romantic feminine things with women. Although Tyson finds satisfaction in being "one of the guys," he hopes to reach a level of comfort where he can actively and publicly date men, while more aggressively disrupting universal misperceptions of who gay men are and what they do. Tyson realizes that his situation is unique because he performs a version of masculinity that is perceivably atypical. He recognizes that if the behavioral manifestation of his masculine and sexual identity convergence were different, so too would be his experiences in a heteronormative residential fraternity environment.

*Academic and Spiritual Dimensions of Identity*

In addition to being biracial, masculine, gay, and situated within two socioeconomic statuses, Tyson also possesses what he would characterize pervasive
more aligned with their identity group; and his fraternity brothers sometimes expect him to relax his academic identity in exchange for social activities that facilitate homosocial bonding.

Because Tyson has encountered these pressures from his peers and family members for most of his life, he commonly employs two response strategies. First, he unabashedly acknowledges the various intersections of his identity. Tyson feels no shame with his multifarious self and often takes pride in the fact that he can relate to so many different populations. He openly celebrates and makes known his complex individuality. The second response involves what Tyson calls "playing to situational expectations," a technique he started using in high school. This entails performing the identity that he believes an individual person or social group expects of him at a given time and in a particular context. He developed this approach as a response to individuals who wish to ascribe to him a dominant or one-dimensional identity. Tyson knows that simply playing to their expectations sometimes helps reinforce negative or widely accepted stereotypes. Although these assumptions disturb him and he does not understand why one identity has to be more salient than the others, Tyson recognizes the importance our society places on identity categorization. He is often left with the task of reflecting on and performing all his identities to his own satisfaction, while also managing the performative expectations of others he encounters. Clearly, this is a lot for a 20-year-old college student to manage by himself.

Implications for Educational Practice

At the beginning of this chapter, we offered an overview of research and theoretical/conceptual models that have been developed to explore the multiple dimensions of college students' identities. Offered in this section are what we hope are thought-provoking implications for faculty and administrators who endeavor to respond effectively to students with multilayered identities, as well as colleagues who are specifically charged with developing gender-specific programs for college men. We begin to frame our discussion with a pair of quotes from Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989), an acclaimed critical race theorist who has written much about identity intersectionality, particularly among Black women:

Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to White women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double discrimination—the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women.
Neither Black liberalisationist politics nor feminist theory can ignore the intersectional experiences of those who the movements claim as their respective constituents. In order to include Black women, both movements must distance themselves from earlier approaches in which experiences are only relevant when they are related to certain identifiable causes.

(p. 166)

Although this chapter is about identity intersectionality among men in college, much about Crenshaw’s perspectives on Black women is relevant. For example, students with intersecting identities sometimes experience college environments (classrooms, social settings, residence halls, etc.) in ways that engender situational feelings of marginalization. That is, being the only man in an elementary education major may bring about alienation because of gender underrepresentation, whereas being the only Latino student in a residence hall floor may evoke similar feelings—this Latino male elementary education major who lives in Wiley Hall could be the same person who experiences these settings differently because of the multiplicity of his identities. Or sometimes he could encounter racist stereotypes (e.g., assumptions that he might be dangerous or was previously in a gang) because he is a Latino man.

Crenshaw’s point about feminist and Black liberalisationist movements can also be used to critique the “one-identity-at-a-time” approach employed by most college and university administrators, especially those who work in student affairs and multicultural affairs. Black culture centers, many of which emerged from civil rights activism, have done much to make campuses more welcoming for Black students and to affirm their Black identities (Patton, 2006, 2010). Likewise, there has been a recent call for increased gender-specific programming for male undergraduates, such as men’s centers and men’s health campaigns (see Kellom, 2004; Harper & Harris, 2010). Jason A. Laker, Tracy L. Davis, Chuck Eberly, Rachel Wagner, Frank Harris III, Brian D. Reed, Ryan Barone, Keith Edwards, Shaun R. Harper, and a few others have worked collaboratively over the past several years on a movement to bring men’s studies to student affairs. So far, their efforts have led to several publications and presentations, and the initiation of several men’s programs and centers on campuses across the United States and Canada. Problematic, though, is the compartmentalization of race- and gender-specific programming and services that typically occurs at postsecondary institutions. Where would a student like Tyson go for support and the simultaneous exploration of his multiple identities? In most places, he would have to go to the Black culture center for matters pertaining to his Blackness, to a discussion series for men to explore his masculine identity, to the LGBT Center to connect with other non-heterosexual students, and so on. In this way, most institutions of higher education are ill-structured and thus underprepared to meet the developmental needs of students whose identities are as complex as Tyson’s.

Any Black liberalisationist-type movement on a campus would be insufficient if it failed to include an emphasis on the particular gendered realities of women and men, Black heterosexuals and LGBT persons, multiracial students whose ethnic identities are variability Black, and those who come from myriad socioeconomic backgrounds (from deeply impoverished to filthy rich). Likewise, a movement intended to improve men’s educational outcomes must be inclusive of all men and simultaneously responsive to their masculinities and other dimensions of identity. There are undergraduates like Tyson who are left to negotiate the complexities of self without effective support from educators who supposedly specialize in student development. We deem this bad educational practice.

Conversely, good practice rests upon an understanding of what we have termed in this chapter complex individuality. Individuals and the nuanced aspects of their identities are often lost when student activities offices, for example, attempt to sponsor as many programs as possible that will appeal to the masses. Or when a professor endeavors to treat all students the same, despite developmental differences among them. Complex individuality entails understanding who individual students are, where they are developmentally, and what they need to resolve identity conflicts, amass portfolios of desired educational experiences and outcomes, and transition into productive lives and careers after college. Tyson, for sure, is a complex individual, but he is not alone; there are thousands, if not millions, of others like him who are men and many other things all at the same time.

Scholars, particularly Kristen A. Renn (2000, 2003, 2004, 2008), have written much in recent years about the complex identities of multiracial college students. Tyson is an example of a student who is not only biracial, but also concurrently possesses and performs numerous other social identities. Postsecondary educators, even at large universities like UNC, must reorganize their work in ways that enable them to spend more time with individual students to understand their complex individuality. Consistent with participants in Renn’s research, Tyson continues to encounter expectations that he choose sides in his racial identification. Would it not be helpful for him to have routine interactions with educators and administrators who not only understand the complexities of being biracial, but are also able to process with him the duality of his socioeconomic status and other dimensions of his identity? What we are advocating here is counterbalancing wide-sweeping educational interventions with increased attention to students as individuals.

Understandably, being responsive to complex individuality is extremely difficult in most educational contexts—the larger the institution, the more unrealistic it may seem. However, large-scale programming could be reconceptualized to include an emphasis on intersecting identities; educators could commit themselves to using time they already spend with students to more deeply explore identities that may be less obvious than their gender or
race; and classrooms could be used as sites where readings, discussions, and assignments focus more on multiple dimensions of identity (e.g., a men’s studies class that includes a discussion on lower-income gay men of color). Patton and Harper (2009) make a persuasive case for using theory to guide educational practice. Among the examples they offer is a director of an LGBT center who reads Jones and McEwen (2000), Abes et al. (2007), and Stewart (2008, 2009) to better understand why racial minority students might feel the center insufficiently meets their needs. Efforts such as these are necessary for making offices, programs, and curricula more responsive to the complexities that individual students bring to college environments.

Conclusion

Patrick G. Love and his colleagues (Love, Bock, Janmrone, & Richardson, 2005) conducted a study that explored the intersections of sexual and religious identities among seven lesbian and five gay male undergraduate students. The authors concluded:

For most of them, these stories involved sharing pain, struggle, and frustration. For some of them, the struggles have resulted in significant growth and a reconciliation of their sexual and spiritual identities. Most continue to struggle. Each of their stories reinforces the complexity of the issue of identity interaction in general and the additional complexity of the interaction between spirituality and sexuality.

(p. 208)

Similarly, Tyson’s story is one mostly of reconciliation and effective strategy. That is, he has learned how to negotiate the complexities of his identities in a range of social contexts and situations at UNC. On the one hand, his case is effective for illustrating our concept of complex individuality. But on the other hand, we doubt that every college student would be as successful as Tyson in negotiating the multiple dimensions of her or his identity, or willing to perform those identities in the same ways Tyson does. Thus, as educators and administrators begin to necessarily offer gender-specific programs, resources, and curricula focused on college men, there must also be much consideration for the intersection of masculinity with race, class, religious, and sexual identities.

References


