



Men: ♂ n Campus

Boys Career Day

Research BRIEF

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**What is it about being a man today that is so mystifying
that a person living that experience would defer to another?**

The following brief is a narrative from the opening from my dissertation about the socialization of new professionals in Student Affairs and how they make meaning of male students.

I was recently contacted by a male colleague who had received a call from a woman working for the local school district. The district was planning a "boys' career day" and wanted to know if he knew of someone who could speak to a group of boys between the ages of eleven and thirteen about what it means to be a man today. When the woman contacted him, he said that he immediately thought of me and wondered if I would do it. I was struck by the strange irony associated with a woman calling a man for this purpose, and his referring her to another man. What is it about being a man today that is so mystifying that a person living that experience would defer to another?

The event, which was organized by the public school district, took place in the community room of a church, which had been sectioned off into smaller rooms by moveable walls, and which had a very large cross and Bible verses posted on its walls. I remember wondering why an organization that owns so many buildings (which were not in session that day due to teacher in-service training) would choose such a venue. After I checked in and affixed my name tag, I was directed to an area of the main section where the boys were making crafts and playing games. Several of the speakers were either setting up displays or mingling. One man was setting up a display about the Financial Services industry, and another was a military recruiter who was preparing to show a video about being a soldier. Still another man was preparing to discuss being a mechanic.

I poured myself some coffee and went over to a couple of men who were standing quietly in a corner. One of them was a tall, beefy guy with a jacket embossed with the name of a gym where he was employed. I introduced myself and asked him what he was speaking about, to which he replied, "the Health and Wellness Services field." I found myself puzzled by this. I couldn't help but wonder how those words could be represented by the large musculature of his frame and the ways in which similar images have been used to create a stereotypical male ideal. "Healthy" and "well" just didn't fit for me as authentic descriptors for this kind of masculinity. The other man was employed by the local community college, and he was there to talk about their vocational and technical programs.

More deeply, he was announcing his heterosexuality, asserting and re-inscribing his dominance within a patriarchal hierarchy, denigrating women, and denouncing men (including me) who did not fit within the hegemonic masculine paradigm

It has been my experience that when I meet a man, the first thing I get asked after my name is "what do you do?" This, of course, is an inquiry about my employment, but it is also a tool to determine my place in a hierarchy that can be felt but is rarely discussed. I generally make it a point to avoid the question, change the subject, or to give a vague answer. I also try not to ask other people (regardless of gender) this question, since I do not want to be complicit in legitimizing this sizing up process. When the Health and Wellness guy asked me the question, I simply told him that I worked at Saint John's (the private, Catholic, liberal arts, university where I am the Dean of Campus Life). He pressed further, "oh, what do you do there?" I told him that I work with student housing and discipline, and that I do a little teaching there and at Saint Cloud State (a comprehensive public institution). He asked what I teach, and I said mainly Women's Studies courses. He got a conspiratorial look on his face, with one eyebrow arched, leaned in slightly, and, with a little snicker said, "I went to Saint Cloud State, and I took a Women's Studies class, but it didn't turn out to be what I thought it was." Then, proud of his joke, he stood back up straight. In this "joke," he was basically suggesting that he thought Women's Studies courses would be a great place "to pick up chicks," so to speak, but it had not worked out that way. More deeply, he was announcing his heterosexuality, asserting and re-inscribing his dominance within a patriarchal hierarchy, denigrating women, and denouncing men (including me) who did not fit within the hegemonic masculine paradigm-not too shabby to accomplish this so early in the morning. He was, of course, not consciously aware that he had done all of this with one "little" comment. I suspect, though, that he was viscerally aware.

As the time approached to begin the event, I was directed to a large, round table where I would have my "life station." There were laser-printed signs above the different tables with brief descriptors of the topics, "A Military Career," or "Financial Services," etc. My table didn't have a sign, which was an apparent oversight, but I thought apt since one is not supposed to examine what it means to be a man. This reminded me very much of the movie, *Fight Club*, in which the narrator, Jack, played by Ed Norton, and his flamboyant alter ego, Tyler Durden, played by Brad Pitt, establish an underground organization that encourages men to beat each other up, and whose first two rules are "You do not talk about Fight Club." Nonetheless, after inquiring about this, a woman hastily prepared a handwritten sign with a pen and note paper which read, "What does it mean to be a man today?"

Groups of 8-10 adolescent boys would soon arrive at each table for a 25-minute presentation, and this would happen twice before speakers were free to go. The sociological complexity of the phenomenon of being asked to tell these boys what it means to be a man in 25-minutes cannot be overstated. In any event, I had decided that instead of ME telling THEM, I would instead ask THEM to tell ME.

So it was that little boys with awkward confusion on their faces shuffled through, looking for their life station. Soon I had 8 of them sitting at my table. Since they didn't all know each other, we did brief introductions. As we began, I asked them why they chose this particular table, and determined that they were in fact all assigned to it because their first choices were full.

"What does it mean to be a man today?"

I asked them, "what do you think it means to be a man today?"

"Strong"

"Provider"

"Wife", "have kids"

"Make a lot of money"

Pressing on, I asked them, "what do you think it means to be a man today?" Sheepishly, one of the boys said, "provider," and like dominoes, several of the others chimed in, "good job," "wife," "have kids," "make a lot of money," "strong," and variations on these themes. I then read the entire list back to them and asked how they felt about doing all the items on the list, and one pudgy little boy said, "overwhelmed," and then immediately looked embarrassed at having been the only one to say anything—perhaps especially at revealing a vulnerability. But, several boys nodded in agreement. I asked them what they thought about the fact that they had all given similar responses for the list—how did they think that happened? In our conversation, several of the boys talked about how different sources such as TV, friends, parents, school, church, and others each gave them a little bit of this list. I then inquired whether any of them had ever been picked on for not being manly in the way their list described. All of them raised their hands. I asked one of them to say more, and he told a brief story of being teased by another boy because he was hanging around with a particular girl—and so other boys called her his girlfriend and made fun of him. (Here is an instructive story about how boys and men are encouraged or even coerced into proving their heterosexual masculinity by having sexual relations with women, and at the same time being ashamed of, and hostile toward anything and anyone who is deemed feminine). Several of the boys shared similar stories of teasing, except for one very attractive blonde-haired and blue-eyed boy wearing fashionable clothes and a sterling silver chain on his neck. He said this kind of thing hadn't happened much to him in recent memory. I suspected that he was quite popular. He was the tallest, and he carried himself with more confidence than the assortment of boys with shorter, and/or fatter bodies and less pristine skin sitting around the table.

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I then shared a personal story about how I felt similarly (with the exception of the one boy who I just described) to them as a boy. I told them that they should not forget the reasons why they had similar items to put on the list, that there is a script we are not usually aware of, but that forces us to act in ways that don't feel real. And, I reminded them that the things each of them shared shows that they are not alone in their experience and it's just that we are taught not to talk about it—so it doesn't change. I asked them if they would be willing to not tease other boys about not being manly enough. They said they would agree to that. I asked if they could remember to try to do what their heart says they should instead of trying to fit someone else's script. They said they would try to do that. Finally, I asked how many of them had ever had a conversation like this, and none of them had. Then, it was time for them to go.

The next group was the same.

I wonder what these boys will be like if and when they get to college. I wonder if anyone else will take 25 minutes to find out.

Finally, I asked how many of them had ever had a conversation like this, and none of them had. Then, it was time for them to go.

For more information about this story, Men and masculinity, or my dissertation, please feel free to contact me.

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