

Book Review

Reviewed in this article

Haywood, C. & Mac an Ghail, M. (2003). Men and masculinities: Theory, research and social practice. Buckingham: Open University Press. Paperback 190 pages

\$78.00

Pease, B. (2002). Men and gender relations. Crydon, Australia: Tertiary Press. Paperback 216 pages AU\$34

Whitehead, S. M. (2002). Men and masculinities: Key themes and new directions.

Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. Hardcover 278 pages \$36.95

Whithead, S. M. & Barrett, J. (Eds.). (2001). The masculinities reader. Cambridge, UK:

Polity Press. Paperback 388 pages \$31.95

In 1892 William James concluded the shorter version of his masterwork Principles of Psychology with the observation that despite the volume of research that defined the New Psychology, the field was still little more than “a string of raw facts; a little gossip and wrangle about opinions; a little classification and generalization on the mere descriptive level; ... but not a single law in the sense in which physics shows us laws, not a single proposition from which any consequence can causally be deducted.” “This is no science,” he concluded; “it is only the hope of a science.”

One might well conclude after reading the books under review in this article that the objective study of men and masculinity at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is in a similar stage of development. There is certainly enormous potential for the study of men and masculinity to enlighten and enrich the lives of the human race, but the Science of

the thing remains, at best, premature. In reality the simple fact of owning any of these books, let alone assigning them to students, would probably be seen by an unfriendly colleague as a political statement.

The scholarship represented in these books rests on a number of assumptions that may or may not withstand close scrutiny. Foremost among these is that academic feminism has identified pretty much all the vital core issues, questions, and challenges that confront men, and the study of men, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. A second and closely related assumption is that the study of men and masculinity is ipso facto the study of hegemonic power held and exercised by and for privileged white men. A third assumption is that various challenges to this male hegemony have resulted in a wide-spread “crisis” of masculinity, the response to which has been either regressive academic, economic, religious and political reaction and resistance; or progressive profeminist “working for change” in every aspect of modern life, both public and private. An additional assumption, one which may specifically reflect the British and Australian academic cultures that these authors have in common, is that a proper analysis and understanding of the “discontinuity, fragmentation, and uncertainty” (Haywood & Mac an Ghail, p. 146) of contemporary gender in general and masculinity in particular can best be analyzed and codified from a postmodern and post-structuralist perspective.

It may well be the case that most scholars actively working in the field of gender studies and men’s studies will be quite comfortable with all of these assumptions. As a psychologist and a practicing clinician, however, I had some problems accepting any of them at face value. I find that I require at least some minimal recognition of the contribution of biology in the creation of gender, and a generous nod to the importance of

developmental psychology in accounting for the way gender roles are adopted and internalized. My own work with young men leads me more and more to shift the focus of my analysis to the vicissitudes of the developing [masculine] self, in the creation of which society and cultural play a pervasive but hardly absolute role.

Thus when Bob Pease boldly asserts in Men and Gender Relations that “Masculinity is associated only with heterosexuality.” (p. 123), I am not at all sure with what authority he is speaking. My fear is that his argument is so deeply grounded in the requirements of postmodern and post-structuralist theory that he may be incapable of taking meaningful account of individual lives that defy dominant cultural stereotypes. The result is that the hegemony of the patriarchal system appears to be reified by the very scholars who are going about the business of deconstructing it. Presumably if a scholar with this perspective encountered men who enacted hegemonic masculine rituals within an exclusively homosexual context, there would be little choice but to brand such men as deviant – and little effort made to expand or challenge social science’s prevailing construction of contemporary masculinity. All of the works under review would, it seems to me, have similar problems making sense of men in equalitarian relationships with female partners, a male sexuality grounded in eros and intimacy, the friendships of men who demonstrate a willingness to “take the hand grenade” for their buddy, and men who “drive Volvos, sip lattes, read the New York Times, and grow organic vegetables in Vermont” (to paraphrase a Republican attack ad against Howard Dean’s 2004 presidential candidacy.)

I am certainly not arguing that the books under review should not be read. But I did find their collective definition of masculinity confining; and I did come away with the

strong impression that Theory was by and large more important than Data in the construction of much of the argument. I must also confess that I therefore found much of the content of these books somewhat discouraging, if not downright depressing. I felt the way Marx and Freud made me feel years ago as an undergraduate – so much Struggle and Conflict; so little Compassion and Growth; so little chance for Doing It Differently. Could it be really true, as Whitehead & Barrett argue in their Introduction that NONE of the gains by women over the past half a century are the direct result of men changing? This assertion seems profoundly contradicted by the lives being led by many of the young men, the gay men, the older men, the corporate men, and, yes, even the religious men I see around me. Decide for yourself.

Bob Pease has written a very brief introductory textbook that is significantly broader in scope than you might think from its title, Men and Gender Relations. He takes a fairly traditional path through his material and seems willing to raise many more questions than he answers. A brief section on masculinity among aboriginal men in Australia is particularly interesting, and one hopes might be expanded into a full-length monograph. Pease adopts a solidly pro-feminist approach which gives the book good coherence, but leads him to tiptoe around sensitive topics like the challenge of countering homophobia among heterosexual feminists. I was disappointed not to see a broader examination of the importance of sport in the Australian construction of masculinity, since my limited exposure to Australian culture suggests to me that blokes down-under are obsessed with every form of athletic competition – among men.

Chris Haywood and Máirtín Mac an Ghail (Men and Masculinities) have written a slim but compact overview of the sociology of men and masculinity that is thoroughly

researched and gracefully written. They write that their scholarship “builds on feminist, gay/lesbian and queer scholarship and activism, contributing to the political deconstruction and reconstruction of masculinities (and femininities)” (p. 150) which will not be everyone’s cup of tea, but they make a strong case for studying gender from the perspective of power relations. Chapter 4, subtitled *Emerging Representations of Global Masculinities*, takes in a wide range of experiences, from Masai warriors to the New World Order gender politics of the first Gulf War. Mac an Ghail’s original research on the role of schools in shaping youthful masculinities is an especially valuable aspect of this text.

Stephen Whitehead’s *Men and Masculinities* is a masterwork by a first-rate social theorist whose profeminist perspective provides a comprehensive account of gender, from the male perspective. Whitehead does not attempt to raise many questions or challenge many assertions; his goal seems to be to have been to write a thoroughly integrated philosophical account of the prevailing scholarship of the sociology of masculinity. If you are ready to tackle rhetorical flourishes that assert “hegemonic masculinity may be considered a dominant discourse” and that “men’s desire and ability to accommodate feminist discourse within their subjectivity has, to date, proved quite varied” you will appreciate this work. For me this is the sort of book to keep close at hand before attending talks by young feminist scholars who are describing their dissertation research.

Whitehead has teamed with Frank Barrett (an American) to edit *The Masculinities Reader*, a 21-article compendium of essays that closely parallel and support the arguments and positions in Whitehead’s text. A great deal of the material is devoted to

exploring issues related to power, position, and politics. There is less interest in issues of role enactment, gender role socialization, fathering, etc. than can be found in other collections. I suspect that a wider range of students and instructors exploring issues of men and masculinity would find more material of interest in Kimmel & Messner's Men's Lives (the sixth edition was released in 2004). But The Masculinities Reader pulls no punches in its selections – from Lynne Segal's now famous *The Belly of the Beast: Sex as Male Domination?* to Richard Majors' *Cool Pose: Black Masculinity and Sports*, and David Gutterman's *Postmodernism and the Interrogation of Masculinity*.

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