

Three and a Half Things Men Have Learned from Feminist Scholarship

Feminist scholarship has inspired me. Indeed, it rebooted my professional career away from an investigation of seventeenth-century French tax policies (the subject, I promise, of my PhD dissertation) and toward both helping to build a new subfield of gender studies centered on the critical investigation of men and masculinities and participating in that investigation myself through my research, mentoring, and writing.

Here are several axiomatic statements about what I think we've learned so far:

1. Gender matters. Before the advent of feminist scholarship, gender was largely invisible: women were excluded, written out, and men were the generic, the universal. I often tell a story about how I gave a guest lecture in a course taught by a female colleague, and when I entered the class, one student looked up and said "Oh, finally, an objective opinion!" Women were biased; men were objective. By making women visible, feminist scholarship also made gender visible—and made visible the privilege men experienced that enabled us to believe we somehow embodied objectivity.

2. Gender is diverse. No sooner did feminist women make gender visible than we also had to understand that it is diverse. Not all men and not all women are similarly situated. Other master statuses—race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, age, religion, disability status—shape and construct our sense of ourselves as men and women. Men are not from Mars, women are not from Venus. Indeed, the differences among men and among women are far greater than any small mean differences one might find between women and men. I often ask my students to imagine two American men: one is black, 77 years old, gay, Catholic, and lives in Chicago, and the other is white, 19, heterosexual, evangelical, and lives on a farm 100 miles outside Chicago. Wouldn't they have some different ideas about what it means to be a man? And, wouldn't they have some similar ideas as well? Inspired by these insights, we use the plural term "masculinities" in our research to indicate the horizontal plane along which different men are differently situated.

3. Gender is about power. Just because we understand gender to be plural and diverse does not mean that we ignore the hierarchies. Gender is horizontal and vertical: different masculinities (based on race, class, sexuality, and so on) are hierarchically arranged. Gender is about the power that men as a group may have over women as a group, but it is also about the power that some men have over other men. All axes of privilege and inequality complicate and undermine efforts to establish a fixity of positions. Those two hypothetical men mentioned above would slip between center and margin along a variety of dimensions.

3 1/2. Feminism is about men. This is only one-half, because, obviously, feminism is about women, for women. And feminist scholarship is also for women. But it would be both intellectually and politically mistaken to assume, therefore, that feminism had little to do with men. Feminism demands nothing less

than a renegotiation of the political arrangements between women and men at every level—political, institutional, and personal. And this renegotiation both invites and insists on challenging traditional notions of masculinity that left many men emotionally shut down, suppressing their capacity to love and nurture children, to be passionately caring and empathic friends, partners, and husbands, and to be supportive colleagues and coworkers. As Greenwich Village writer Floyd Dell wrote in an article entitled “Feminism for Men,” in 1916, on the eve of one of the great suffrage parades (in which Dell would march with the Men’s League for Woman Suffrage): “Feminism will make it possible for the first time for men to be free.”

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