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### ***Masculinities in Higher Education: Theoretical and Practical Considerations* by Jason A. Laker & Tracy Davis (Eds.)**

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## Book Review

### *Masculinities in Higher Education: Theoretical and Practical Considerations*

by Jason A. Laker & Tracy Davis (Eds.). (2011). New York, NY: Routledge. 248 pp. ISBN 978-0415874649. (paperback)

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Feminism's endowment to the academy has inarguably been fearless examination of the costs of socially inscribed power and dogged persistence in the work of reinvention. In *Masculinities in Higher Education: Theoretical and Practical Considerations*, editors Laker and Tracy Davis have taken that legacy a step further, assembling a stimulating collection of thinkers exploring current theory and practice in understanding negative and fomenting positive masculinities with college men. Asserting that “ignoring the influence that sex role socialization has on men's development undermines professional effectiveness with male students and serves to reify systematic patriarchy” (p. xi), the book aims both to inform and to engage the reader in participating in new ways of thinking about men and masculinity, summoning our integrity as educators to accompany current practices for the empowerment of women with efforts to support men in becoming men. Through both articulating data-driven theories and by providing practical strategies for addressing the lack of men's development programs and services, this volume makes a compelling case for, and maps a path toward, deeper and more fruitful work in the service of enabling healthier masculinities to emerge.

In the first section, “Theoretical and Historical Perspectives,” Michael Kimmel and Tracy Davis take us to guyland—the dominant cultural context in which young men today learn the rules (and the associated rewards and sanctions) of manhood, a framework often called *hegemonic masculinity*. In the next chapter, James O'Neil and Bryce Crapser's analysis of the ways that participation in hegemonic masculinity compromises men's healthy development in college across a variety of social, psychological, and interpersonal domains is an excellent (and heretofore absent) synthesis of the costs of hegemony for col-

lege men. By linking the analysis concretely with Chickering's vectors, they offer a common language for understanding the student development impact of these practices. In Chapter 3, Frank Harris III and Ryan P. Barone introduce the complexities of masculinities in college, and the hazards of conceptualizing college men as a monolithic group, reinforcing (among others) the marginalization of Men of Color, queer men, and students identifying on the spectrum of trans masculinity. In conclusion to this first section, coeditor Laker's contribution vividly narrates his efforts to engage boys in talking about hegemonic masculinity, from which he develops five pedagogical stances to effectively invite college-age men into the work of reconstructing their lives.

Where the first section endeavors to lay a groundwork of common thinking about men's developmental challenges, the second seeks to build on the premise advanced by Frank Harris III and Barone that diversity within the category of *men and masculinities* is vital to unpack and understand. In Chapter 5, Shaun Harper, Cameron Wardell, and Keon Maguire's examination of one man's complex identities with respect to race, class, spirituality, and sexuality, demonstrates the value (and difficulty) of conceiving men's development as multiply constructed and embodied. In the chapters rounding out this section, Beth Berila, Brian D. Reed, and Thomas J. Gerschick examine the unique positionality of men who identify as queer; who come to higher education from lower socioeconomic statuses; and who live with disabilities, respectively, and infuse consideration of their experiences with both theoretical and structural propositions that would enhance these men's opportunities to participate fully in the project of redefining manhood in college.

Following this exploration of concepts and categories, the third section provides strategic (and tested) interventions that reimagine and reinterpret masculinities. Tracy Davis, James LaPrad, and Sean Dixon (Chapter 9) discuss their work facilitating men's groups, where the declared focus is "dialogue about how one becomes a man, how one can choose to construct relationships with those around him, the responsibilities to his community and . . . challenging hegemony to construct a more self-authored identity" (p. 153). Social norms theorist Alan Berkowitz (Chapter 10) espouses a mask-removal process of revealing truths to men about themselves, then "telling them the truth about each other" (p. 171), toward the end goal of capitalizing on men's socially sanctioned urge to do as other men do, but in less personally negative ways. Normalizing men's bodies and shifting men's relationship to help-seeking is the focus of Will Courtenay's treatise on improving men's health practices in Chapter 11. Randall Ludeman (Chapter 12) considers the opportunity in what is often viewed as the end game—disciplinary sanctions for egregious

manifestations of masculinity. Ludeman offers thinking for reconstructing judicial conversation with consciousness about masculinity. This section is deftly concluded with Rachel Wagner's reflections on women in student affairs' roles with and for men in higher education, and provides experientially derived ideas for negotiating the nuances of power, responsibility, and alliance that such work necessarily entails.

Consciously integrating data, theory, and strategy, Laker and Davis's volume picks up and thoughtfully extends where many conversations about men and masculinities in higher education leave off: viewing men and masculinities primarily through the lens of dysfunction and damage. While radical in its assertion that men also function as gendered beings, the literature of the last two decades mostly defined and described the costs, rather than sussing out the complexities, of masculinities in college. In contrast, this book joins works such as Shaun Harper and Frank Harris III's (2010) *College Men and Masculinities: Theory, Research, and Implications for Practice* in broadening the scope of thinking about men, both as instigators and victims of sexist practice. Without adopting the hand-wringing stance of apologist, the authors seek to push the boundaries of our ethical, collegial, and practical responsibility to model and teach alternative ways of relating to college-age men. And without question, the book's theorists owe the genesis of their thinking to fifty years of feminist organizing in higher education.

While the need for both de- and re-constructing masculinity is cogently argued for in this volume, particular realities about understanding and supporting men's development are less well-developed (or are notably absent) in the text's discourses as well. First, while the central premise of the book is that hegemonic masculinity is not inherent, is essentially broken, and in its current socially sanctioned state is not tenable for the future of civil society, it does not address the specifics of the scaffolding which uphold it on campus: the dominant practices in higher education that vaunt traditional masculine norms. These include overinvestment in men's athletics, the prioritizing of resources and scholarly acclaim to the hard sciences, and the overrepresentation of men in the highest leadership roles in academe. The book lacks attention to the structures and values espoused by the higher education institutions in which many men come to manhood, and which strongly serve to reify hegemonic masculinity. The volume also operates from a presumption of coherence of male with masculine; and it would benefit from a chapter investigating the costs and benefits inherent in our deep cultural investment in these and other gender categories, reflecting the courageous lives and revolutionary thought of trans activist-scholars whose work confronts the power (and safety) of the gender binary.

Additionally, the book's structure and level of sophistication implies that the work of upending masculinity demands a working knowledge of and facility with particular terms and concepts—such as hegemony, patriarchy, gender performance, and gender role conflict—that may be unfamiliar, skeptically perceived, and even threatening to practitioners engaged in work with men. Thus, a baseline of comprehension of (and sympathy with) gender and developmental theory and their correlative practices is essential for engaging with this material.

Ideas for strategic deployment of masculinity presented in this book, while creative and diverse, reveal a lingering anxiety about what may be considered the most appropriate approach from which to work with college men. Simply put, do we reclaim and reinforce that which is valued about manhood—strength, resilience, and taking charge—as suggested by some in this volume; or as others propose, should we advance a revision of masculinity where vulnerability, connection, and care are at the center? Arguably, doing both equally is not possible, and while the book raises questions about which theoretical approach is more sustainable, it does not attempt to answer them. Inclusion of consideration of the successes and lessons of men's centers, and evidence from longstanding feminist efforts to liberate college women from their collusion with patriarchy, may begin to settle that debate.

While these unresolved issues are real and beg further exploration in subsequent volumes, they do not significantly detract from the overall contribution of this substantial and invigorating work. Arguing neither from sentimentality nor defensiveness, the book's contributors advance provocative thinking and pragmatic action for our work with men, paying rigorous attention to data, theory, and tested practices. Practitioners of all stripes, equipped with a more sophisticated understanding of the nuances of men's behavior and norm-setting on campus, can adapt current practices presented in this book and develop new ones to “effectively re-envision masculinities” (p. 147). Perhaps most significantly, the consciousness espoused in the book persuasively implicates the profession of student affairs in living up to its stated values of advancing social justice for all. As Jane Fried argues in the foreword—and as echoed throughout this remarkable and provocative book—we can get there by embracing “notions of balance, dialogue, efficacy and equity” (p. x), to create healthier and more equitable masculinities with men in college.

## Reference

Harper, S. R., & Harris III, F. (2010). *College men and masculinities: Theory, research, and implications for practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.