

BOOK REVIEW

Reading Masculinities

***Exploring Masculinities: Identity, Inequality, Continuity, and Change.* Edited by C. J. Pascoe and Tristan Bridges, New York, Oxford University Press, 2016. \$54.95 (Paper), ISBN: 9780199315673**

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Do not judge a book by its cover. Pascoe and Bridges have compiled a keen, comprehensive, informative book for classroom use that includes 32 carefully selected, occasionally edited (or condensed) articles to explore the fields of masculinities, as the title promises. The book contains a general introduction, four sections, and a conclusion; each section includes a critical, well-crafted introduction and 7–9 worthy readings. Collectively, the introductions and readings explicitly focus on masculinities as gender practices and as embodied discourses, thus the book is only indirectly about boys and men. It unambiguously contributes to the study of masculinities. It explicitly interrogates the fluidity of masculinities—how they transform over history, differ across contexts and groups, compel individuals and groups to navigate the nested systems of dominance underpinning “established” gender practices, and how they are discursive and symbolic. Pascoe and Bridges’ introduction offers a concise, good review of many earlier theories of gender (and masculinities) that were eventually set aside as a result of Raewyn Connell’s theory (1987, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) of hegemonic masculinity, emphasized femininity, and hierachal gender relations.

Employing Connell’s conceptual architecture throughout the initial three sections of the book, Pascoe and Bridges initially historicize masculinities, emphasizing how transformations in national economies and political orders shaped gender relations and restructure “masculinity” to have different meanings across time and cultures. Anthony Rotundo’s essay on the lost patterns of intimacy and friendship once available to nineteenth century

middle class youth, or the excepted chapter by Barbara Ehrenreich on men’s mid-twentieth century failing capability to embody the archetype “breadwinner role,” are rich examples within the historicizing masculinities tradition.

The editors next turned attention to the different configurations of gender practices—the model of multiple masculinities—that exist within any historical time. Nearly equally addressed in the section is the vast scholarship on the different “types” of masculinities, the principal criticism of how this trajectory of work often loses sight of the power dynamics between masculinities, and the emerging scholarship on intersecting forms of inequality that buttress different gender relations and practices. This section begins with Connell’s (1995) crucial chapter from *Masculinities* on the social organization of masculinities. Several of the readings that follow revisit, extend, and/or critically reconsider the viability of hegemonic masculinity theory to understand “frontier masculinity,” or the Promise Keepers’ effort to reclaim men’s leadership in families. Eric Anderson’s analysis (Reading 12) of how the gender practices of a team (in particular a high school cross country team in the summer of 2013) failed to make sense, if singularly frame by Connell’s theory, is a pivot essay in this section and an important contribution to the book. It is followed by the set of readings that are critical of the early work inspired by the multiple masculinities model.

Third is a section on “navigating masculinities.” This is a fine addition. On the surface, it extends the prior section on “multiplying masculinities” by examining how different demographics of men (as groups)—Latino boys, black hip-hop artists, goths, conservative Christians, hair salon clients, young straight White men—may be marginalized on one axis of power but aim to retain their share of the patriarchal dividend as a result of other intersecting systems of power. Mark Anthony Neal, for example, theorizes black masculinities and how Jay-Z’s “off stage” cosmopolitan life is impossible to

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read given his “on stage” persona. One reading by Amy Wilkins examined the intersectionality of age, race, and sexuality. She questioned how young, heterosexual Christian men discursively manage being abstinent. The strength of this section, however, is Pascoe and Bridges’s purposeful decision to draw together readings that rely on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu and his conceptual architecture, which interrogates fields, capital, and habitus. The introduction to the section provides a nice, succinct synopsis of Bourdieu’s largely unfamiliar theory of practice and reproduction of (class) inequalities. The five concluding readings of the section all theorize how different fields—hair solons, rural life, life in a correctional facility, or aging—are subfields of hegemonic masculinity and (re)produce field-specific dominant masculinities. These readings are particularly valuable for newer generations of masculinities scholars because, despite Bourdieu’s theoretical density, his theorizing of inequalities within and across men’s lives is near-intuitively understandable. This is clearly exemplified by the inclusion of Matthew Desmond’s discussion of a “country-masculine habitus” and thus how growing up in rural communities preps some men’s “taste” for becoming wildland firefighters.

The final section involves another conceptual turn (further away from the hegemony of Connell’s theorizing). Too few books for sociology, social work, and psychology students studying gender, men, or masculinities include attention to how poststructuralism and queer theory tender new discourses on masculinities. Pascoe and Bridges have added this vital contribution, and their short introduction to the section will aid new scholars to easily understand how, within contexts, women do masculinity and that masculinity can be imagined as a contextual accomplishment or performance. The context may be women athletes because no longer is women’s basketball restricted to three steps before the requirement to pass the ball to a teammate; no longer is being a sexual minority limited to the comfortable anonymity of urban spaces; no longer is gender nonconformity (or “gender-bending”) limited to the tropes of costume and fashion or artistic freedom; no longer is

cisgender “something” outside the study of masculinities. What might first seem out of place within this section is Miriam Abelson’s essay on negotiating vulnerability and fear of violence, but she too illustrates how interrogating context affects homophobia and transphobia and how fear and vulnerability re-inscribe inequalities.

Depicted on the book’s cover is an illustration of a twenties- or thirties-something very fit White man wearing blue high-waist underpants (or a 1950s swimming suit); his back is to the observer, his head is turned just enough to see his high cheek bone and firm jaw; he is posed with his large biceps and thigh muscles firmly flexed; his back and shoulder muscles ripped; he is by himself, standing alone, a “sturdy oak.” He stylishly symbolizes the hegemonic masculinities of the last 50 years of more, embodied by the most culturally exalted men as a group: White, young enough, able-bodied, fit, and likely heterosexual and prosperous. This man symbolizes one emphasis of the book: that the radicalized, ageist, heteronormative power dynamics within gender relations that erect “symbolic boundaries” to position (some) men like this at the top of gender hierarchies where cultural capital and power amass. But Pascoe and Bridges purposefully spotlight the “other” masculinities and “others” who are held at arms length from the center. The book’s cover is not at all representative of the depth of exploring masculinities that takes place inside the cover. *Exploring Masculinities* will be a great supplement to undergraduate and graduate courses examining gender relations, as well as courses on masculinities.

References

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