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4 Decades After Its Founding, Men's Studies Struggles to Define Itself

By Tom Bartlett
Tacoma, Wash.

A dozen or so men—and one woman—bemoaned the state of men's studies on an appropriately gray, damp day here. One complained about the "lack of space to interrogate masculinity" on the American college campus. Another cited widespread "blind hatred" of the idea. Several others offered anecdotes of their colleagues' skepticism toward the annual conference of the American Men's Studies Association, where this session was held. "People think it's a men's retreat where we're going to share feelings and engage in illicit activities," said Nicholas P. Marino, a graduate student in rhetoric and composition at Purdue University. "Do you guys know what I mean?"

Nods all around.

Feelings were indeed shared at the conference (whether illicit activities occurred is beyond the scope of this article). One of those feelings was frustration. Even though the association has been around for 22 years, and even though men's studies dates back to at least the 1970s, outsiders still tend to greet it with derision or disbelief. Why study men? As the joke goes, we already have men's studies: It's called history.

Part of the problem is that men's studies is hard to define. It's easier to start with what it's not. Men's studies is not men's rights, which advocates for changes in, for example, child-custody laws. It is not the mythopoetic men's movement of the 1990s, though influences from that movement linger. And it is certainly not male studies, a fledgling academic offshoot created by critics who see men's studies, which is heavily influenced by feminist work on gender and power, as insufficiently pro men.

Fine, so what exactly is it?

The collection of researchers is highly interdisciplinary: anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, professors of medieval literature, along with therapists and residence-life staff members. The topics they study include the very general, like "What Do Men Really Want in Their Lives," and the very specific, like "Diaspora in a Gendered Sport: a Study on Chinese Gay Amateur Volleyball Players."

Men's studies tends to be light on hard science. If you're eager to learn something about the inverse relationship between cortisol and testosterone, or about gender differences in episodic memory, you should look elsewhere. If you want a genuinely interesting analysis of male chastity in the *Twilight* series of books and how that compares with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, you've come to the right place. Likewise, if you want to discuss the performative aspects of men's restrooms, others will gladly join in.

The Richness of Backsides

It can seem like men's studies is divided into two camps. One camp wishes to put masculinity under a microscope. The other wishes to give men a big hug and ask what's wrong. For example, the conference included a session on "Masculinity as Cruel Optimism," in which Jonathan A. Allan, a lecturer in gender and women's studies at Brandon University, in Manitoba, argued that cultural theorists underemphasize the importance of the male backside and that society needs to set aside its shame and accept the symbolic richness of our hindquarters. "I believe the ass is more important than we admit," Mr. Allan said, in a witty presentation. "The anus is full of meaning."

In the next room, the discussion was about what draws men to a group called the ManKind Project, in which they gather in the wilderness to find their manhood and give each other animal nicknames (like Gentle Wolf or Joyous Opossum). They also experience something referred to as the Ordeal. Much of the philosophy of the group is rooted in the 1990 best seller *Iron John*, by the poet Robert Bly, an engagingly cryptic book that inspired a thousand drum circles and countless manly embraces.

In those cases, the topic is clearly masculinity. Other speakers explained how Chinese women over 30 are considered "left over"

or pointed out that we think of terrorists as religiously motivated and lone shooters as mentally ill. Intriguing ideas, for sure, though you had to squint to see how they applied to the study of men and masculinity.

The big tent of men's studies is often pitched as its strength: Let every idea bloom, see what happens when sociologists rub shoulders with literature professors, don't put a fence around such a robust and boundless enterprise. Less charitably, one might interpret the variety as incoherence, a failure to figure out what they're trying to figure out.

Several scholars at the meeting remembered the excitement they felt in the early days of men's studies. But "I've been saying the same things for 25 years, and people think it's new," said Robert N. Minor, an emeritus professor of religious studies at the University of Kansas, who has written about the straitjacket of society's gender norms. "There is a certain sadness to that."

Robert Heasley is a past president of the association and a professor of sociology at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He became interested in men's studies in the early 1970s while working through issues he had with his father. So did he imagine, several decades later, that the field would be further along?

"Of course!" Mr. Heasley said, though he believes men's studies has always faced an uphill struggle. "It's a hard sell to challenge the dominant paradigm," he said. "We're only 30 years in, so maybe we're not doing so bad."

Don Conway-Long is another men's-studies veteran, coming on board in the late 1970s. Back then the discussion was mostly about male violence toward women, which remains a frequent subject. Like Mr. Heasley, Mr. Long, an associate professor of anthropology at Webster University, is disappointed that men's studies hasn't made more progress, chalking it up to a lack of money and the misperception that if you want to study men you must be against feminism somehow. "I don't think we've gained the respect yet that we deserve," Mr. Long said.

In Women's Studies, a Home

Not that the outlook is entirely glum. In the last 20 years, women's-studies programs around the country have expanded to include research on gender more generally, a move that, in theory anyway, creates a space for men's studies.

The biggest news in the field is the opening last fall of the Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Michael Kimmel, executive director of the center, is the author of the best seller *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (Harper, 2008), and arguably the field's most prominent scholar.

Mr. Kimmel has a more sanguine view of the field's progress than most. "The way to measure its success is not the separate programs for men's studies but the integration of men and masculinity into women's studies," he said.

Still, he acknowledges that the term "men's studies" still elicits negative reactions. "I don't call what I do men's studies. What I do is actually gender studies, but the gender I hope to talk about the most is men," Mr. Kimmel said.

The announcement of his center's opening was met with some ridicule, mostly from critics who thought women like Gloria Steinem and Jane Fonda shouldn't be on the board of directors of a center dedicated to the study of men. A particularly scathing column in *FrontPage* magazine, an aggressively conservative publication run by David Horowitz, cited their selection as evidence of the "feckless, fatuous way in which today's academy pretends to study maleness."

Then again, there's nothing that says women can't have insights about men. As it happens, the current president of the men's studies association, Daphne Watkins, an assistant professor of social work at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, is the first woman (as well as the first person of color) to serve in that role. She wants the organization to concentrate on reaching a wider audience.


"I want to turn our voices outward," she said. "I think we've talked to ourselves long enough."

What, exactly, those voices will have to say isn't clear, a fact that Ms. Watkins realizes as well. As she puts it: "We have to unpack what this men's studies thing is."

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 **aloofbooks** • 1 day ago

This is a field that deserves more attention.

5 x v • Reply • Share

 **seniorprof** • 15 days ago


First, a little vignette from the past. Several years ago, the Organization of American Historians held its annual meeting in this city. I went, primarily to see friends and visit book stalls. On the program was a round-table discussion about current research in men's history. There were about 12 people around the conference table. Only two were men -- myself, who isn't in the field of gender studies, and another scholar who had published well-known books in men's studies.

I think this illustrates one of the main reasons why men's studies can't define itself: it has always been seen as a less-worthy subset of women's studies. There is also the fact that as women's studies grew, its name evolved into "gender studies," in part to raise its status but also to ensure that courses on men would likely be housed in an existing department dominated by women.

There is also the desire of students to have some professors who "look like me," which is clearly a factor in hiring in the various ethnic studies departments. European-American faculty teaching Chicano Studies would raise eyebrows on many campuses. So would men teaching courses on women's studies. And what about male students in courses in women's studies? They are comfortable in those courses as long as there is no male-bashing by the instructor, which unfortunately still happens.

We cannot, of course, specify a preferred gender in a hiring announcement, but on many campuses the unwritten rule is that, all other things being equal, a female candidate will be preferred for an opening in "gender studies." Will the same "look like me" principle be applied when staffing courses in "Men's Studies"?


18 x v • Reply • Share

 **chuckle** ↔ **seniorprof** • 13 days ago

"... its name evolved into "gender studies," in part to raise its status but also to ensure that courses on men would likely be housed in an existing department dominated by women." Diabolically clever, these women!

Seniorprof doesn't seem to have gotten the memo about the difference between sex and gender.


3 x v • Reply • Share

 **labronx** ↔ **chuckle** • 12 days ago

Seniorprof

Chuckles knows the difference. But Chuckles is neuter.

1 x v • Reply • Share

 **chuckle** • 12 days ago

Curious the silence on this topic from the usual suspects (like labronx) in CHE comments who love to attack all "studies" programs and anything with a trace of