

Masculinity at the Intersections: An Exploration of Hegemony, Oppression, Performance, and Self-Authorship

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Much of the scholarship devoted to college-aged men explores the influence of society on masculinity. For example, gender role conflict, a cornerstone concept in this literature, describes how men are socialized into restrictive roles, often prescribing one narrow way to be a man (Pollack, 1998; O'Neil, 1990). Congruently, socially prescribed masculinity has been depicted as a "mask" which illustrates how men hide their true selves in order to live up to society's expectations (Pollack, 1998; Edwards & Jones, 2009). Research has also described how men's fear of femininity is a central to the social construction of men's identity, and how student affairs professionals can use this knowledge to foster men's development and the development of social justice attitudes (Davis, 2002; Davis & Wagner, 2005).

Studying men and masculinities fits within a larger umbrella of identity development research. Identity development has received significant attention in recent Student Affairs literature. This scholarship paints a picture of a fluid, multidimensional process that respects the complex interaction of social context and internal processes (Jones & McKwen, 2000; Weber, 2005). This research also asserts that individual identity dimensions must be understood in conjunction with one another, not as disjointed entities. For example, in their study of 10 college women, Jones and McEwen write "for all the participants, gender was an identity dimension to which they all related. However, the description of what being female meant to them was quickly connected with other dimensions (e.g. Jewish woman, Black woman, lesbian, Indian woman)" (p. 410). Other literature has explored a continuum of self-authorship that describes a journey toward understanding knowledge as uncertain, developing the ability to analyze and interpret

information in light of context, and making decisions based on this analysis in conjunction with internalized values (Kegan 1982, 1994; Baxter Magolda, 1992, 2001).

The Cutting Edge

Because much of the literature on college men focuses on the impact and influence of society on men, it appears natural to explore the space between the individual and society, especially in light of the meaning making style of self authorship. Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) added a filter to the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity, which represents how individuals making meaning of contextual influences. In this reconceptualized model, the greater an individual's cognitive complexity, the more sophisticated the cognitive filter, and vice versa. This model is helpful in conceptualizing the internalization of socialized or otherwise contextual influences. However, there are relatively few studies that explore the reciprocal negotiation of the internal and external influences of identity related to performance.

Recently, Jones (2009) published an article that begins to illuminate this phenomenon. Jones' participants noted a distinction between a more *internally* driven process of "identity negotiation" and a more *externally* driven process of "managing the perceptions of others" (p. 298). Individuals engaging in an "inside out" process of constructing who they are based on experiences and analysis of context are engaging in a process of identity negotiation. Individuals engaging in a more "outside in" process of analyzing perceived perceptions of others and determining how they will present themselves based on that analysis are engaging in a managing perceptions process. One of Jones' participants said: "I don't know if my identity necessarily changes depending on where I am but the person I present or chose to present may shift" (p. 299). This quote highlights the complex relationship between negotiating identity and managing the perceptions of others. An individual may have gone through extensive identity negotiation, yet may present (or

perform) themselves based on perceptions of the context. The context may, for example, shift identity salience and/or behavior based on experiences of privilege and/or oppression. Jones found differences in how individuals with privileged identity dimensions (e.g. White) and individuals with targeted identity dimensions experienced these processes. Jones writes:

Individuals from more privileged identities (e.g. White) are able to more closely connect to the internal process of negotiating their social identities and sense of self, where as participants of color were expressing the need to manage the perceptions of others – presumably because of how they are treated by others and the realities of the external contexts they must negotiate (p. 299).

This finding further advances our understanding of how privilege and oppression impact how individuals develop and perform identity (i.e. negotiate identity with context).

In light of the reality of identity performance, it is reasonable to question current conceptualizations of self-authorship. Kegan (1982, 1994) and Baxter Magolda (1992, 2001, Baxter Magolda & King, 2004, 2007) have done significant work exploring the concept of self-authorship. Kegan (1994) defines a self-authoring individual as one who operates under the assumption that knowledge is uncertain and has the ability to analyze and interpret information in light of context. Self-authored individuals, therefore, can make determinations based on this analysis and internally constructed values and beliefs. Baxter Magolda (2001, Baxter Magolda & King, 2004, 2007) has utilized this concept to promote understanding of how college students make meaning and become self-authored. The research has gained utility for promoting learning in higher education. However, if performance demands in the environment, particularly those related to targeted dimensions of identity, influence one's ability to self-author, what does that mean for identity theory and student affairs practice? Baxter Magolda and King (2007) write:

Self authored personas have the ability to explore and reflect on, and internally choose enduring values to form their identities rather than doing so by simply assimilating expectations of others (Kegan, 1994). They

use the internal identity to interpret and guide their experiences and actions. This internal identity that is not overly dependent on others is a crucial aspect of standing up for one's beliefs (an aspect of cognitive maturity) (p. 492).

Jones' (2009) findings and the preliminary findings of our study challenge any conceptualization of self-authorship that does not account for identity performance based on privileged and targeted dimensions which are always contextually situated. Jones argues that individuals of marginalized (i.e. targeted) identities may be forced to negotiate their internal identity based on the context. She wrote: "the identity (re)construction process involved both internal foundation and external formulas, and the powerful influence changing contexts determined what it meant to be 'true to [our]selves'" (p.301). This statement suggests that individuals should not be seen as more or less cognitively mature or self-authored independent of reading a person's behavior in context; rather, the identity processes and self-authorship needs to be seen as continually being reconstructed. What it means to be true to ones' self is therefore relative and may be easily misjudged.

Concurring Findings

Preliminary results from an ongoing qualitative inquiry of a similar topic involving men of targeted identity dimensions yield concurrent findings to those of Jones' (2009) study. Specifically, initial analysis expands upon Jones' perception management concept. Preliminary themes that appear to be congruent with the perception management concept include *The Chameleon* and *Pressure to Break Stereotypes*.

The Chameleon

We found that the participants in our study had to navigate context and negotiate their performance accordingly in order to avoid paying the penalties of oppression. Part of this negotiation, at times, included engaging in activities in which they were not interested or did not enjoy. For example, one participant, Tom, who identifies as African American said: "I feel like I can get along with anybody because

it's like [I'm] a chameleon. I can easily, I don't like being in uncomfortable situations so that means that I have to be interested in something I'm not necessarily interested by nature to make someone feel comfortable" (Davis & Klobassa, 2009). The use of a chameleon as a metaphor for this concept is very fitting. A chameleon will shift its color in order to blend in with its environment. This can serve as a defense mechanism for chameleons to avoid predators. In much the same fashion, individuals of targeted identities find themselves in situations where they are required to negotiate their identity based on the context in order to avoid paying the penalties of oppression. The point of avoiding the penalties was expressed by Tom as he continued, saying "I'm trying to get them to see past that I'm Black. You know, I want them to see that I'm just [me]. I am an African American, but I automatically avoid anything that I can do that would cause me to segregate myself from them" (Davis & Klobassa, 2009). This quote emphasizes what Tom's ideal situation would be, others seeing him for who he is, as well as his reality – that he must negotiate his identity and performance in order to avoid "segregating" himself from others.

Another participant, Michael, who identifies as gay, said: "I guess it could be as simple as watching a sports game with a bunch of guys, and like, I'm not really into sports, but I would rather not be singled out as – you're the only guy not watching the sports game" (Davis & Klobassa, 2009). Both Tom and Michael found themselves in situations that required them to engage in activities that were of no interest to them in order to avoid paying the penalties of oppression, which, in these cases, were the awkwardness of discomfort and being singled out as a non-participant. While we do not know the specific context to which Tom was referring, Michael's situation is a product of hegemonic masculinity. The pressure to conform in this situation comes from the hegemonic assumption that in order to be a man, one must be interested in sports. In order to live up to this standard, we see Michael negotiating his performance by watching the sports game, thus avoiding the penalty of being singled out and possibly seen as less masculine.

Pressure to Break Stereotypes

Preliminary results from this qualitative inquiry found that participants were reading perceptions of others and negotiating their performance in order to disprove stereotypes. Tom spoke to this in a discussion about his experience on a primarily White residence hall floor: "I was like their first Black friend... their perception of Blackness was typical hip hop, do rag, you know I speak like this son... what's up... why do you go, you know that type of thing. So they thought, you know, that that's Black identity, which I had to break that stereotype." This quote illustrates the perception management concept, as well as the effect oppression has on the process. In this case, Tom reads a perception of a stereotypical understanding of what it means to be Black in this context and proceeds to engage in a perception management process by taking on the obligation of disproving this stereotype. Similarly, in Michael's discussion of watching sports games in order to avoid having his masculinity be questioned, he continued by saying: "I don't know, so I'm kind of proving that stereotype wrong. In an ideal situation it would be a big deal if I was not [into sports]." This part of Michael's discussion indicates a second motive for watching sports – disproving stereotypes. During the perception management process, Michael is not only negotiating his context in order to avoid negative perceptions for not being into sports, but he also feels added pressure to watch sports in order to disprove stereotypes.

Discussion

Examining data from this ongoing qualitative inquiry in conjunction with Jones' (2009) recent article further illuminates a story where hegemony, oppression, performance, and self-authorship are at the center. Jones' article reiterated the important influence that society and context plays in identity construction and reconstruction. The voices of Tom and Michael in our study tell a story of the powerful influence of hegemonic masculinity. A seemingly simple task of "staying true to one's self" becomes exponentially more complex when the societal norm, the standard by which one is perceived, judged, and in which one is required to operate, is so contradictory to the internal sense of self.

It became apparent that Tom and Michael are constantly confronted with situations where they must negotiate their identities with the context based on a process of perception management. This process appears to be important because they seem to be continually confronting the reinforced barriers of hegemonic masculinity – the unreasonable and unhealthy standards our society sets for manhood. To combat these barriers, Tom and Michael found themselves trying to disprove stereotypes, and in the process, engaging in performances of their identities that are not “true” to who they are – and in ways that call into question our ability to clearly witness self-authorship. This begs the question – does our current understanding of the self-authoring process speak to the experiences of *all* our students?

Further exploration of the self-authoring process and the space between the individual and society is necessary. More specific to men and masculinities, research is needed that explores masculinity at the intersections of identity dimensions. How does hegemonic masculinity affect the self-authoring process? Would research on men of privilege be consistent with Jones’ findings; would identity negotiation come more naturally or would findings indicate that hegemonic masculinity impedes this process? How can we more effectively begin to break the cycle of hegemonic masculinity that keeps self-authorship at bay in favor of adhering to externally driven demands? Understanding the answers to these questions could lead to developmental strategies that help students become critical consumers of the messages they receive and ultimately to healthier conceptions of self.

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