

# From Intervention to Inspiration: Academic leadership in progressive change for men

A presentation to the American Men's Studies Association annual  
conference in Kansas City Missouri, April 2011.

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## *Abstract*

This 20 minute talk posits that masculinity scholars can also be leaders of progressive change among men by using analysis and synthesis to develop inspiring ideas and stories about what is possible and what changes can be made. As an example I offer a new analysis of the notion of equality to suggest that women and other marginalised groups enact a new formulation of equality-as-inclusion, which is more complex and more accepting than the modern era's equality-as-sameness which is implicit in the modern notion of masculinity. Equality-as-sameness, although once radical, now acts as a constraint on men, pressuring men to stay the same as each other and restricting more variety in men's self-expression, most clearly visible in the range of men's clothes. There is thus an opportunity for men to benefit by adopting the more recent equality-as-inclusion, and claiming acceptance for and enactment of more choices for men. Academics can and should play an active inspirational role in fostering such change through how we ourselves do the business of 'being men'. (I gave the talk wearing my formal outfit: business shirt, tie, waistcoat and full-length skirt.)

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To give you the background to this talk, after recently completed PhD on theories of masculinity, I am traveling in North America getting a feel for the current state of men and masculinity research. Earlier this month I attended a masculinity studies conference in Quebec City,. And in this talk today I want to develop a new theme which I felt was absent from the Quebec conference but one which I feel is of vital importance – that of academic leadership in change.

A major theme in the academic study of men is achieving gender justice or gender equality – the need for men's involvement in improving the legitimization of women in society, and the need for change in masculinity in order to create a more gender equitable society.

While gender equality is of course a major issue which must be addressed, the emphasis on achieving gender equality means that often we are casting men as creating problems for women and for society – men are dominating, violent, or dangerous. Even though there's been a recent emergence of more men-centred issues such as men's health and fathering, there still remains a negative paradigm: men are ill, damaged, emotionally stunted, etc. In other words men are a problem which requires intervention.

Intervention is overall effective; it produces evidence-based programs, it develops formal 'knowledge', and it keeps attention directed towards gender equality issues. And

academics play an important role in the intervention cycle, in research, analysis and program development.

But there's another crucial role that academics play in modern-era progressive social change – as passionate leaders, visionary thinkers, and inspirational communicators. For example in the field of gender, nearly all of the big names of second wave feminism – Millett, Firestone, Daly, Greer, Friedan, were academics, although we seldom think of them as academics.

And so it is a constant disappointment to me that men's studies scholars by and large do not see the potential to create inspiring stories - not just of what is wrong with men but also what useful aspects in theory and in current social life can be synthesized into empowering narratives which expand the range of legitimated choices for men.

I see the potential for men's studies scholars to be doing far more than trying to push men into better behaviours and more constructive masculinities via interventions based in the pathologizing approach to men, or what I call bad man theory. Rather I see the potential to lead men into expansive new social formations which are attractive to men (and beneficial to women) and portray men as being part of global changes in which gender is only one aspect.

So today I'll give you an example of inspirational analysis, by exploring this notion of equality, which is of such central concern in the study of gender and men.

A principal feminist claim, well supported by evidence, is that women have not enjoyed equality – formal equality in their legal status, nor informal equality in areas such as political or corporate leadership. Basically feminism has revealed that women are of lesser value in society than men.

Accordingly, women have fought for and claimed equality. But by the early 1980s feminists ran into a tricky problem. Women wanted to be incorporated into the equality that men shared – that is they wanted to be treated the same as men. But women also started to realize that they couldn't ever be entirely the same as men, and in fact they didn't want to be the same as men. So feminists have developed a claim for equality not only on the basis of sameness - that women should be valued the same as men, but ALSO on the basis of difference – that although women are, like men, valid members of society, women are inevitably different to men in certain fundamental ways and thus have some experiences unavailable to men. And further – those experiences unavailable to men are of enormous value to society even though society hasn't so far valued them much, for example bearing and raising children.

Equality-as-sameness has been the major formulation in the modern era – the idea that we all should be valued the same because we are all the same. The archetypal ideal of person who now automatically enjoys equality in the West is the white heterosexual middle class male – that is, what Connell calls hegemonic masculinity. This means that obviously non-white people, non-male people, non-straight people, less-than-abled people simply do not, will not and cannot fit this picture.

So all these marginalized groups are claiming equality-as-sameness as a starting point or bottom line claim, but they are actually enacting an equality which is more complex than

sameness. They are demanding respect as equals, but they are also claiming that their uniquely different perspective is a valid and valuable contribution to social life which others who are not in their position cannot contribute.

There is thus a different formulation of equality emerging – an equality-as-inclusion based not in sameness but based simply in the obvious reality that we are all here. We are all part of the community, part of society, part of the social polity – not at all because we are all the same but rather simply because we are present in events and so we are affected by events.

And this is not something which is occurring only at the personal level. There is a profound social-level shift occurring at the same time. Stepping to the larger frame of social theory for a moment, there is an inevitable link between a society and the individuals who make up that society. Social norms such as equality and democracy permeate a whole society but at the same time those same norms must somehow ‘get in’ to the personhood of those who make up that society so that people will enact the society’s norms.

The new formulation of equality brought about by feminism is thus enabling Western women to enact a more complex equality, and a more complex personhood – and importantly this is an entirely novel development which can be enormously beneficial for men. The pathway to equality for men historically has been a matter of those lower down a hierarchy moving up to higher rungs of the hierarchy on the basis that equality means we are all the same, but importantly that we are all the same as those at the top. But because many marginalised groups can never be the same as those at the top, somewhere during the latter half of the twentieth century this formulation of equality has ceased to be the only definition of equality in Western democracies. Hierarchies of course still exist, and equality-as-sameness is still a powerful and cogent principle. But increasingly with the emergence of the multiple rights movements since WWII there is an emerging acceptance of difference within populations. This new form of equality-as-inclusion has not yet been widely articulated as a principle, and certainly has never been seriously examined for what it offers men.

Conventional hegemonic masculinity has provided a stable anchor for most of the largest social developments in the modern era. But the ingredients now associated with straight white men are little different to 50 years ago or even 200 years ago. As the West moves beyond modernity into a globalizing and complexifying world, what was the most socially valued identity in the Western nations is rapidly becoming, for most men, an increasingly precarious and vulnerable anchor of identity precisely because it does not effectively engage with those globalizing and complexifying changes.

This is precisely where the opportunity for men lies. The conventional masculine formulations of identity are certainly workable in themselves – but if that is all men have, if that is men’s sole anchor of identity, then such men are increasingly vulnerable because they are less and less able to be full participants in the post-modern West.

A more complex anchor of identity is not merely a defensive move to reduce the negatives of globalization. There are huge drawbacks for men in the linkage between hegemonic masculinity and equality-as-sameness. This pressures men to be like

standardized cogs in the machine – interchangeable units which are severely restricted in their individuality. This is seen commonly in the astonishing standardisation amongst men's clothing, and in how men often speak of themselves in the third person – “you come home from work after a hard day, and all you want to do is relax and have a beer”.

And there are enormous and vividly experienced satisfactions potentially available when men assemble their identity using ingredients which include a more loving relationship with their body, affectionate relationships with other men, women and children, and an increased repertoire of emotional expression and indeed personal expression of all sorts. Incorporating these sorts of elements into identity means that men are much less reliant for their personal stability and sense of self on practices of external control and impersonal large-scale systems.

This is not to recommend a replacement of one set of elements with another – after all, every person needs to be able to successfully engage and traverse economic and political systems. Rather, it is a program of de-centring the elements of economic and political control in men's identity by broadening the range of elements which make up their identity – a program of identity enrichment rather than identity replacement.

The successful spread of enriched identities for men inevitably involves public political action in order to claim broad social acceptance of these new identities. A relevant example available to us right now is the matter of men's clothing. We are simply unaccustomed to associating garments such as skirts and dresses with the visible spectacle of male authority figures, with the male body of hegemonic masculinity. But clothing is an immediately accessible way in which any man can easily disrupt conventional formulations of masculinity and demand the acceptance of new formulations. When worn with intention, backed by thorough political analysis, and done collectively, new forms of clothing speak eloquently and immediately of new forms of both social inclusion and personal identity. Clothing has long been used as a major political strategy, for example the development of the 3 piece suit in the 17th and 18th centuries as part of instituting equality among men, and later, at the end of the 19th century, the expansion in the palette of female attire in instituting equality for women.

But clothing is only one example of what is possible. New society-wide configurations are crucial so that when individual men enrich their personal identity, their enactment of that identity in social life is recognized as legitimate and accepted – this person is male and they are doing their identity in this way. When men simply do unusual things as an individual expression, it is too easy for those individuals to be marginalized. But simple repetition contributes to acceptance – seeing the same new thing thousands of times. Thus we see unfamiliar bodies as heads of state – black people, female people, gay people as presidents and prime ministers, and we get used to associating those bodies with those socially meaningful elements. An example with men which is starting to gain acceptance is men with babies and strollers, which we are now seeing more and more often. While not yet entirely taken-for-granted, there is increasing institutional support for this in the form of unisex public parents rooms, post-natal and early childhood support services for fathers, and so on. No doubt, as the number of engaged fathers rises, the commercial world will get on board as well, with advertising, products and magazines aimed at the 'new dad'. In my opinion, the commercialization of new identity elements is a very

tangible indicator that these new elements are indeed considered legitimate for men. But in order to get to that legitimation, the boundaries of current conventions must be challenged via activism, an activism driven by inspiring stories about what is sensible, and practical.

The role of intellectuals and academics in all this is to provide the broad context – an understanding of the historical situation, a working model of what is currently going on, how it can be changed, and discussion about the obstacles encountered and strategies to move beyond them. Here the intervention model can be extremely effective and supportive – but it cannot remain the only model for academic engagement. Like our inspirational feminist predecessors, we need to be using disciplined methodologies and our analytic skills to provide leadership, to create new stories about what is possible for men in the current social moment, how men can participate in current and emerging social forces to gain personal benefits, and how going through the pain of change can result in men leading richer and more fulfilling lives.

And like our feminist predecessors, men's studies academics also need to demonstrate new ways of being in ourselves. We need to walk the talk ourselves, and through that means communicate not only our ideas about life but also how those ideas can be enacted in new ways of being academic, new forms of intervention, and new ways of legitimately being male.