

Men organizing to disrupt the reproduction of patriarchy: the societal reproduction of masculine patriarchal performance and some thoughts about how to build a politics of opposition and transformation

by Charles Knight, July 2020 (adapted from a letter to Micahel Flood, July 2020, followed by quotes from others)

Gender identity, for the most part, is a social construction which relies in turn on the construction and reproduction of what has been called the 'gender binary.' The gender binary is foundational to the 'othering' of women which is essential to the relationship of dominance. Both men and women can be taught to teach and enforce patriarchy, consciously or unconsciously.

I am exploring the deepening of an understanding of that process and, then, imagining/developing a politics that includes as many male-identified persons as possible in the work of dismantling of the structures of patriarchy in favor of a society of much greater equality across the many expressions of gender, presently being liberated.

Conventional binary identities are taught children very early. In adolescence both adults and peers teach boys (often employing extreme methods) that certain performances of gender are socially acceptable and that others are not. Normative enforcement takes many forms, including selective violence, other forms of punishment, repeated sadistic shaming, etc. Much of this is quite harmful, sometimes traumatic, to the individual boy, but is broadly sanctioned in the name of maintaining the binary identities that underlie patriarchy.

The way in which individual boys react to binary gender enforcement varies. Some react to the hurt by joining the opposition to male dominance. Likely a greater number seek to learn the methods of dominance and seek to avoid the shame and hurt of being the target of abuse by finding a 'safe' role for themselves in the hierarchies of dominance which include class, economic position, race, and gender.

Many young men react in opposition to some male dominance behaviors and also learn and employ other male dominance behaviors in their complex efforts to navigate a satisfactory life for themselves. Many spend their lives in both great emotional confusion and internalized oppression/repression of aspects of themselves which they can not integrate into their lives while caught up in the gender binary they have internalized.

I believe that there is the potential to organize a significant minority of males to join the opposition to male dominance and become impassioned 'co-conspirators' (a term a feminist friend of my mine prefers to 'allies') in work against societal domination of 'others.' The hurt and anger some men are in touch with regarding the enforcement of gender conformity that they are/were subject to can be mobilized to oppose 'reproduction strategies' such as shaming of boys (joining women activists in opposing similar shaming of girls) and, of course, oppose peer and adult violence against boys (again, as part of broad movement against gender-based

violence.)

I see signs that there is great potential in the younger generations of men who are much more sophisticated in their understanding of gender dynamics than, say, my generation (brought up in the '60s.)

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from Michael Flood "Engaging Men and Boys"

P 108: "We must appeal to and intensify men's reconstructed, emancipatory, or anti-patriarchal interests, while continuing to assert the ethical or political basis of a profeminist politics as primary. Indeed, we need to know much more about how and why some men come to anti-patriarchal identities and relations: why some men are resistant to patriarchal masculinities, others condone them, while others are their shock troops. We need to know much more about how we shift men's sense of their interests, and how men's interests can and do change."

[Harry] "Brod (1998, p. 199) argues, 'self-sacrificing altruism is insufficient as the basis for a political movement' and there is 'a moral imperative to go beyond mere moral imperatives'. Thus, efforts to involve men in ending men's violence against women also should articulate how this is in what Brod (1998) calls men's 'long-term enlightened self-interest'."

from Michael Kaufman "'Men, Feminism, and Men's Contradictory Experiences of Power,' 1994 (1999)

"We must appeal to men's enlightened self-interest. This means not just supporting the efforts of women, but exploring and discovering ways that our interests truly coincide. Unless men organize to reach other men, men as a group will never stop propping up and perpetuating the patriarchal order. Why? Because, for the majority of men, it is the definition of masculinity by other men that matters more than anything. Part of the pathway of change is for men to act as examples and models for other men about how we can be fully male – that is, simply biological creatures who are male – without being masculinist. And in this project, in this celebration of maleness, straight men have a lot to learn from gay and bisexual men."

"The notion of contradictory experiences of power, in the plural, provides an analytical tool for integrating issues of race, class, age, and ethnicity into the heart of pro-feminist men's organizing. It allows us to sympathetically relate to a range of men's experiences, to understand that men's power is non-linear and subject to a variety of social and psychological forces. It suggests forms of analysis and action that understands that the behavior of any group of men is the result of an often contradictory insertion into various hierarchies of power. It belies any notion that our identities and experiences as men can be separated from our identities and experiences based on the color of our skin or our class background. It therefore suggests that struggling against racism, antisemitism, and class privilege, for example, are integral to a struggle to transform contemporary gender relations."

"There is, indeed, a basis for men to organize as men and to organize on our own. This would be as part of a broader anti-patriarchal movement. It would be an anti-masculinist movement of men that goes hand-in-hand with feminism, but that has its own raison d'être and its own clear issues and priorities."

from bell hooks, "The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love"

"The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women, [but rather] acts of psychic self-mutilation, [killing] off the emotional parts of themselves. If an individual is not successful in emotionally crippling himself, he can count on patriarchal men to enact rituals of power that will assault his self-esteem."

"...they never answer the question of what motivates males in a patriarchal culture who have been taught that to love emasculates them to change, to choose love, when the choice means that they must stand against patriarchy... We cannot change men but we can encourage, implore, and affirm their will to change. We can respect the truth of their inner being, a truth they may be unable to speak: that they long to connect, to love, to be loved."

hooks quotes James Garbarino: "...neglect is more common than abuse: more kids are emotionally abandoned than are directly attacked, physically and emotionally."

"Dominant culture teaches all of us that the core of our identity is defined by the will to dominate and control others... dominant culture teaches us that we are all natural-born killers but that males are more able to realize the predator role. In the dominant model the pursuit of external power, the ability to manipulate and control others, is what matters most. When culture is based on a dominant model, not only will it be violent but it will frame all relationships as power struggles."