



Young Men, Masculinities and Spirituality: An Introduction to a Special Issue of *JMMS*

Yasemin Besen

Young men have emerged as an important topic of inquiry in the past few decades in understanding masculinities. As Anoop Nayak and Mary Jane Kehily (2008) argue, exploring young men's gender identities and performances "can be seen as a site of fissure with the past while simultaneously holding onto many issues of continuity" (p. 37). Young men, hence young masculinities, are characterized as "in crisis" or "in transition" from old masculinities to new, modern masculinities and gender identities. Young men, therefore, offer an extraordinary area of inquiry in understanding this crisis of masculinity.

This special issue focuses exclusively on young men and explores their masculinities, particularly in conjunction with spirituality. This is a truly interdisciplinary collection, bringing together scholars from a wide range of social sciences including sociology, political science, history and anthropology. Scholars from around the world, working on men and masculinities share their unique perspectives, theories and methods of studying young men.

Overview of the articles

The papers in this special issue all focus on young men, their masculine identities and spirituality. While the topics they focus on, the literature they borrow from and the theorists they build on show similarities, their approaches and tools differ inordinately. They all focus on young men, masculinity and spirituality, however the ways they define these terms differ greatly. Especially in defining spirituality, while some focus on the role of religions in shaping these masculine identities, others focus on the performative and ritual aspects of spirituality. Similarly, they employ a wide range of methods, both qualitative and quantitative, in studying young men. However, all papers in this special issue express interdisciplinary, comparative sensibilities in varying degrees in understanding young men.

The first paper, "Changing the Subject: Abortion and Symbolic Masculinities among Young Evangelicals" approaches the question of young men's masculinities from a quantitative perspective. Daniel R. Cassino looks at the political views of young evangelical Christian men, particularly towards abortion. R. W. Connell shows that when hegemonic masculinity is threatened by rigorous attempts to achieve gender equality, it often results in a crisis of masculinity. Borrowing from R. W. Connell, Cassino argues that for evangelical Christian men, this crisis of masculinity is reflected in the area of politics. He argues that young men employ symbolic tropes in challenging hegemonic masculinities, particularly political ones, in recapturing their masculine identities. He focuses, particularly, on their attitudes towards abortion, in reconstructing their threatened masculine identities.

The second article focuses on an important part of young men's lives – male initiation rituals – in understanding young men and masculinities. In “Male Initiation: Imagining Ritual Necessity” Diederik F. Janssen, explores the multi-faceted role of male initiation rituals and draws attention to its political and anthropological formulations. He identifies male initiation rituals as an important entry point in understanding the complex interplay surrounding masculinity.

In the third paper, “The Homosexual Subject: Coming-Out as a Political Act,” the author, Yong Wang, focuses on another important issue for young masculinities – the coming out process for homosexual young men. Homosexuality and coming out are important issues that concern not only young men's masculine identities, but also religions as well. Using in-depth narratives describing the coming out experiences of homosexual youth, Wang explores the construction of masculine identity drawing on the work of Lacan. While both Janssen and Wang employ Lacan's work in understanding young men and masculinities, the ways in which they use the Lacanian framework differ greatly.

The fourth paper also focuses on homosexuality. However, while Wang focuses on the coming out process and the construction of masculine identity among homosexual young men, Besen and Zicklin focus on the attitudes towards homosexuality among young men. In “Young Men, Religion and Attitudes towards Homosexuality,” the authors offer a quantitative survey of young men's attitudes towards homosexuality in the United States and they explore the role of religion in determining and shaping these attitudes.

In addition to the four articles, the special issue includes two book reviews. These two recent books focusing specifically on young men and masculinities offer unique perspectives and are timely additions to our issue. First, historian Stephen Patnode, of State University of New York at Stony Brook, reviews *Young Men and Masculinities: Global Cultures and Intimate Lives* by Victor J. Seidler. Second, Andrew Singleton, of Monash University's School of Political and Social Inquiry, offers us insight into Gary Barker's *Dying to Be Men: Youth, Masculinity and Social Exclusion*.

Overall, I am honored to have worked with such a diverse group of extraordinary scholars, who have offered their unique perspectives on young men and masculinities, and I would like to thank the authors for their hard work and dedication as well as the anonymous reviewers who have provided insightful comments. I hope readers enjoy this interdisciplinary issue on young men.

References

Nayak, A., & Kehily, M. J. (2008). *Gender, youth and culture: Young masculinities and femininities*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Yasemin Besen, Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology, Montclair State University/USA
e: beseny@mail.montclair.edu