



Review of Victor J. Seidler, *Young Men and Masculinities: Global Cultures and Intimate Lives* (London: Zed Books, 2006), 205 pp.

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This book raises important questions about how to renew links between researchers and activists in the area of men's studies. In *Young Men and Masculinities*, the prolific Seidler revisits some familiar territory from his previous work, but focuses on the issue of young men and masculinities as a possible means to bridge the gap that has opened up between the political and therapeutic points of view within the profeminist men's movement. Building on some of the ideas laid out in earlier works such as *Transforming Masculinities* (2006) and *Unreasonable Men* (1994), Seidler uses *Young Men and Masculinities* to bring theories of masculinities – particularly the work of R. W. Connell – to task for discounting the emotional and sexual experiences of men, and young men in particular. Though at times this volume is provocative without necessarily being prescriptive, it represents an important step toward reassessing the severed connections between researchers and activists.

The book contains fifteen chapters that range widely over a variety of topics. One recurring theme is Seidler's pointed critique of Connell's work. In particular, Seidler takes exception to Connell's model of hegemonic masculinities, which focuses on patriarchy and power relations to the exclusion of personal feelings: "The distinction Connell draws between, on the one hand, emotional life as 'therapeutic' and, on the other, 'politics' conceived exclusively in structural terms works readily to disdain the voices of men he would otherwise want to listen to" (p. 13). According to Seidler, this focus on the structure of patriarchy leads Connell to discount the notion that patriarchy also constrains the emotional lives of men. The resulting rejection of young men's inner pain leaves no room for activists or researchers to connect with their emotional and sexual lives.

According to Seidler, part of the problem for scholars working with young men is that these researchers unwittingly rely on rationalist assumptions implicit in the Enlightenment tradition that informs the social sciences. Consequently, researchers make a positivist assumption that adulthood is good, while "adolescence" is bad. Seidler elaborates, "As adults we can assume that 'adolescence' is a problem that needs to be solved" (p. 110). This tendency can be particularly problematic when trying to address an issue such as young men who engage in risky behavior. Traditional methodologies in the social sciences encode masculine assumptions, thus turning young men into objects of study and stifling their subjectivity. Seidler argues that researchers must take the emotional lives of young men seriously. This deceptively simple observation can lead to quite challenging and potentially messy reevaluations, such as this observation from a discussion of domestic violence during pregnancies: "There is a danger of creating a fixed category of 'abusing men,' rather than learning how pregnancy invokes unresolved emotional feelings in men" (p. 172).

Seidler asserts that another problem with Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinities is that it is too universalist, assuming that the structure of patriarchy looks the same everywhere. Seidler offers loosely comparative observations about masculinities in different parts of the world in order to complicate Connell's model. The best example is a discussion of the continued influence of religion on self-identified secular societies, specifically contrasting the impact of Catholicism in Latin America with the effect of Protestantism in Northern Europe and the United States. In Latin America (particularly Mexico), Catholicism has contributed to a significant separation between the public and private spheres. Therefore, Latin cultures place greater emphasis on public behavior and the appearance of behaving correctly toward others. Seidler concludes, "This might make it easier, for instance, for men to have affairs as long as they do not draw it to the attention of their partners" (p. 37). On the other hand, Protestant cultures place more emphasis on maintaining consistency between the public and private spheres, along with taking greater responsibility for personal actions.

Another intriguing theme in the book is Seidler's argument that globalization has created a tectonic generational shift, accelerated by the Internet and new technologies, which has reordered gender relations for young people across social classes in a variety of global cultures. Young men can use the Internet as a space to explore feelings they might otherwise feel uncomfortable discussing. These feelings could relate to their sexuality, or gender identity. Generational differences result from developments in the "real" world, too. The greater gender equality that has developed in the United States and Northern Europe has changed the way some young men feel about themselves and their partners, particularly in relation to parenting. Whereas an earlier generation of men attempted to remain emotionally aloof from their families, a younger generation of men feels differently. If younger men grew up in a setting with larger gender equality, they may wish to share more of their inner experiences with their families. Indeed, Seidler makes the point explicitly toward the end of the book that activists can sometimes have an easier time reaching young men as they prepare for fatherhood (p. 196).

In all, this volume is sure to provoke lively debates between academics and activists. By challenging some of the theoretical underpinnings of many researchers involved in the field of masculinities studies, Seidler raises important questions about their work. Seidler's objective is not merely to incite, however, but to renew the link between researchers and activists.

References

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