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Masculinity in the quad

The dominant forms of masculinity are about power and fear, write Michael Kaufman and Jason Laker, and young men are muddling through uncertain gender terrain. But universities can help them



- Two young men go to the movies together and ensure there is an empty seat between them. But the same two will give each other a boisterous hug from time to time.
- A gay man lives in a campus residence, enjoying his experience with straight roommates and floormates without harassment.
- Friends of a male student chide him for refusing to drink a fourth shot, calling him “little girl” and “Mary.”
- A male student is berated by some male and female friends for refusing to wear a white ribbon on December 6.

It is a complex and contradictory time to be a guy on a university campus. Almost 40 years since the modern wave of feminism first arrived on Canadian campuses, the shift has been remarkable: in the ratio of male and female students (and, increasingly, faculty), in the range of courses in women’s and gender studies (and the inclusion of much more content within many disciplines), and in the attention given to issues such as violence against women.

Men arriving on a campus come into an environment where there is an assumption of women’s equality, even if reality doesn’t always match. These men also know they can’t rely on the 8,000-year-old affirmative action policy that once determined they wouldn’t have to compete for jobs with the female half of the planet. These men also tend to have very different expectations about their own career paths compared to a couple of generations ago, in particular, in striking a balance between work and family life. Most enter relationships and will eventually leave university with an assumption they will someday be taking on significant responsibilities (and, in some cases, even primary responsibility) as parents and as individuals who share domestic work.

And yet, for all these changes, a significant minority of male students engage in a range of violent behaviours, including sexual

assault and physical violence of a girlfriend; many more engage in forms of controlling behaviour. Far too many young men will not feel comfortable interrupting a misogynist comment or saying something to a friend who is joking about rape. In spite of an acceptance of sexual diversity, homophobia (often in disguised forms) remains alive. In the movies and TV shows they see, in the music they listen to, in the video games they play, there remains a vast edifice of images that celebrate traditional definitions of masculine power and domination. And yet these are images that are constantly contested around them.

Perhaps it’s true of all people, but many men traditionally learned to thrive in patriarchal cultures where their roles and gender relations were clearly defined, and they could focus on working hard to master them. Of course, even when this role was rigidly defined, it wasn’t actually achievable, and it had costs not only to women but, paradoxically, to men as well (in spite of the privileges men enjoyed). Now, there are multiple roles that men can take on, multiple demands, changing expectations, and rules that sometimes seem to change moment to moment.

Even fellow men, and indeed women, differ in how they validate or criticize any given choice or behaviour made by a man. Sadly, it is still a minority of male students who consciously explore this context of meanings or consciously question the meanings of being male. And yet, part of what is going on all around them, and part of what they are engaging in, is this very challenge. Those young men who do make an effort to confront sexism receive both compliments and criticisms from other men and from women. For many young men we talk to, there is a feeling they just can’t win.

What lies underneath the reluctance to consciously challenge the remaining edifice of oppressive gender relations or to consciously question their own take on masculinity? What gets in the way of challenging sexist words and behaviour? In part, it is the



privileges men still enjoy in a male-dominated society: why buck what seems to work for your half of humanity? But it's much more, and it is the story of what one of us has described as "men's contradictory experiences of power." As much as anything else, it is fear. Fear of not being one of the boys. Fear of breaking what are assumed to be the norms in what men believe. Fear of being ridiculed. Fear of not being a real man. Fear of other men, mediated within all-male environments. Fear that is a constituent part of our dominant forms of masculinity.

Our institutions can play a positive role in helping young men understand, negotiate, and embrace gender equality

This fear explains many of the paradoxes we witness. In spite of the presence of women students as academic equals, in spite of a 40-year-old discourse on women's equality, in spite of the expressed belief among most men that women should be and are equal, in spite of the breakdown of some of the physical taboos among men, many young men still haven't figured out how to shed their armour. They are too scared to take the risk of being genuine with each other. When this does happen, when our brothers are genuine with us, we often miss an opportunity by changing the subject or teasing them. We continue to be afraid of each other, despite wanting—sometimes desperately—to be close. If our fellow men get too close, perhaps they will see through this armour, and we will be exposed as a fraud. The dominant forms of masculinity are about power and fear.

Critiques (by both women and men) of sexist behaviours and oppressive gender relations called on men to question essentialist

notions of masculinity. Such notions influenced us in ways that hurt women through the acceptance of violence, systematic exclusion, and belittling treatment. While giving men comparative advantages and not, in the same sense, being oppressive to men, these notions robbed us of elements of our own humanity as well. Today, young men come to campus with conflicting demands and ideas about masculinity—the new meeting the old. They get confused but still have precious little permission to admit to that confusion. More senior men, whether professors or staff, are not always ready to engage in thoughtful discussion about this topic, having their own confusion to deal with. (Or, where faculty and staff will deal with sexism, such discussions can be abstracted from the lived realities of their lives: while they may well agree that "the personal is political," discussing their own personal engagement and struggles may well seem off limit in an academic context.)

Young men muddle through uncertain times. Faculty and staff can lend a helping hand:

- Those working in student services, residence life, sports, health services, and as academic mentors do well to acknowledge that what passes for certainty among young men is more often a defense against a fear of not making the grade as a man. We must support and encourage the creation of spaces for young men to gain awareness and to learn to challenge both their unacknowledged fears and the extant privileges of males.
- Male professors can learn to take some of the same personal risks as a previous generation of women academics did by finding appropriate ways to be open about our own experiences as men. This can help create safety for male students to explore their own realities.
- Male and female faculty and staff can encourage male students to become active in issues promoting gender equality, challenging homophobia, and challenging men's violence against women. Our point is simple: while most of our male students are not responsible for committing acts of violence or promoting homophobia, we need to encourage all men to take responsibility for ending these affronts to basic human rights, safety, and dignity.
- Male and female professors can encourage and validate the exploration of issues concerning men and masculinity as a valid part of research, not only within gender studies per se, but also as a dimension of all social relations and part of what informs our approaches to a wide range of disciplines, including the natural and applied sciences.

On campuses across Canada, as in communities around the world, the fantastic changes in gender relations can be difficult to negotiate. But more and more men are struggling with these changes. Our institutions can play a positive role in helping young men understand, negotiate, and embrace gender equality and equity, but also embrace changes that will improve not only the lives of women, but will improve their lives as well. **AM**

Michael Kaufman, founder of the White Ribbon Campaign, works internationally as an educator and policy advisor promoting gender equality and working to end violence against women. Jason Laker is associate vice-principal and dean of student affairs at Queen's University, and holds a cross-appointment in women's studies.