Liberating Men: Empowering Men to Engage Freedom Work
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Abstract

This paper explores the endeavor of educating and engaging men in liberative work that aims to free the self internally, in relation to others, and in social institutions. While feminist studies rightly argue that men hold a large advantage in social power and privilege, Men's Studies scholars (Boyd, 1997; Connell, 1995; Kimmel & Messner, 1998), also note that most men do not live fully liberated lives but hold their privilege in such a way that oppresses women, other men, and their own selves (Kaufman, 1998). The first part of the paper uses critical feminist theories to lay a framework to probe issues of masculinity and power; semi-structured interviews with fifteen men supplement these theories. The second part introduces a spiritual formation project the author has conducted with men at a church over the last four years that uses transformative pedagogies to reframe religious education for the purposes of engaging men in liberative work.

Introduction

To some, it may come as a surprise that some men are fragile, particularly in light of feminist theory that argues that with the exception of a few tribes and cultures, the social world is largely patriarchal. Systems and structures reflect an embedded bias towards men, witnessed in modern society as men control much of the public sphere holding positions of authority and power (e.g., all U.S. presidents have been male) at significantly higher levels than women. There are advantages for men who live in societies such as these including the ability to determine the norm, something Carol Gilligan refuted with her colleague Lawrence Kohlberg.[1] Men hold privilege as they can offer their viewpoint as the standard while not having to socially locate their own selves in their research and writing. They do not have to be aware that their experiences and reasoning are not the same as others.[2] It behooves men, therefore, to perpetuate this system. Yet, an inability or an unwillingness to see these patriarchal structures becomes a conceptual trap that eventually takes its toll on all of society.[3]

Patriarchy and Hegemonic Masculinity is Violent…for Men

While patriarchy extends a gross advantage to men, Michael Kaufman argues that patriarchy, untended, leads to three kinds of violence for men and society.[4] He contends that patriarchy is a matter of social power that leads to violence towards women, other men, and one's own self. Kaufman asserts that the rape of a woman is more about issues of power, and less

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[1] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[2] Elizabeth Dodson Gray, *Patriarchy as a Conceptual Trap* (Wellesley, MA: Roundtable Press, 1982), 47-77.

[3] ibid.

[4] Michael Kaufman, "The Construction of Masculinity and the Triad of Men's Violence," in *Men's Lives*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), 4-17.

about the playing out of sexual fantasy. Having analyzed various testimonies of rapists, Kaufman notes that many of these men who feel socially powerless are drawn to physical violence as a way to demonstrate their power, as they attain some measure of control and authority. "Violence against women can become a means of trying to affirm [a man's] personal power"[5] in an ideological structure that differentiates masculine from feminine qualities and castigates those men who do not exhibit these traits to the degree that is socially acceptable. Thus the act of violence towards women is concurrently an attempt at social empowerment, and a demonstration of the fragility of masculinity. However, when men feel socially disempowered, they may revert to uses of violence and aggression as ultimate tools for self-assertiveness.[6]

Men, however, also commit violence towards other men. If social power for men is positional, that is, one's identity as a man is defined in relation to other persons, particularly men, then the potential for competition and posturing increases.[7] If a man can prove himself 'masculine' then other men become potential contributors to this project whether by group approval or by defeat. I become a man either through your approval, by overcoming you, or both. To overcome another man is to prove one's potency. This is witnessed daily at the local gym when strangers and friends get together to play a game of pick-up basketball and 'one-up' each other, trying to make the other look bad in front of other athletes and spectators. Empowerment, however, that comes through approval is not necessarily destructive. Support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous assist persons, in part, because they connect the person in need with a supportive community. However, when the approval comes as a result of harm done to others such as fraternal endorsement of a brother who 'hooks up,' 'gets some,' or 'hits that,'[8] with a woman at a party, it reinforces a patriarchal system that engenders various forms of violence and views towards women.[9]

By committing these various forms of violence towards others, men ironically, commit acts of self-violence. This third form of violence is the result of living in a society that privileges hegemonic masculinity and sets up a destructive sex-gender system that leaves men feeling inadequate and isolated when they do not meet this script. A person born a male is to become a man, a tough, unemotional, virile, and rational individual.[10] Moreover, when he does not meet this standard, he is considered abnormal or deficient.

The Image of the Masculine and Men of Color

This script of hegemonic masculinity becomes problematic for communities of color when one considers the structures built upon racial and gender constructions that continue to

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[5] Kaufman, "Construction," 9.

[6] Suzanne E. Hatty, *Masculinities, Violence, and Culture* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000), 6.

[7] Michael A Messner, *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 32.

[8] These terms are not only contemporary colloquialisms for sexual intercourse, they also suggest a measure of triumph, often at the cost of women and those with less physical and social power.

[9] A. Ayres Boswell and Joan Z. Spade, "Fraternities and Collegiate Rape Culture: Why are Some Fraternities More Dangerous Places for Women?," in *Men's Lives*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998).

[10] Robert Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

impede an empowering of men in those communities.[11] Though the notion of "alpha male" is pervasive throughout the U.S. and captures the imagination of boys at an early age, interpreting men of color's experiences through a theory of intersectionality[12] exposes a deep chasm between that which is seen, and that which is attainable socially for males of color. Asian American men, for instance, intuitively, if not explicitly, understand the script of hegemonic masculinity. Yet in desiring to attain this image, society has historically scripted racial and gender stereotypes for Asian American men that leave them disempowered through a construct that further marginalizes them from a normative account of the masculine.[13] Asian American men have often been emasculated and feminized, thus taking a considerable part of the normative script from these men. Furthermore, cultural expectations of filial piety and self-abnegation contribute to additional feelings of disempowerment.[14] A cultural script that informs an Asian American man that he is to sacrifice all for the sake of his parents and do it humbly, sometimes to the point of self-loathing, does little to help his sense of agency and self-worth.

Consequently, if one feels powerless in an ideological structure that supposes one's ascent to privilege and power, regardless the appropriateness of that structure, the one who falls short of that normative script looks for it through other avenues. The author contends that for Korean American men, this occurs primarily in the private sphere but also in the public, cultural, and social spheres (i.e. Korean American in/formal organizations) where a Confucian belief system based upon the privileging of male over female and older over younger, provides an option to the scripts they are often funneled into "playing" in their workplaces and society. Subsequently, when there is lack of agency, the bodies of women[15] and of men—both their own

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[11] Ross Runfola, "The Black Athlete as Super-Machismo Symbol," in *Jock: Sports and Male Identity*, ed. Donald F. Sabo and Ross Runfola (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1980); Richard Majors, "Cool Pose: Black Masculinity and Sports," in *Sport, Men, and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Michael Messner and Donald F. Sabo (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Books, 1990).

[12] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Maxine Baca Zinn, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Michael A. Messner, eds., *Gender through the Prism of Difference*, 2nd ed. (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2000).

[13] Jachinson Chan, *Chinese American Masculinities: From Fu Manchu to Bruce Lee* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Cliff Cheng, ""We Choose Not to Compete": The "Merit" Discourse in the Selection Process, and Asian and Asian American Men and Their Masculinity," in *Masculinities in Organizations*, ed. Cliff Cheng (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996); ———, "Marginalized Masculinities and Hegemonic Masculinity: An Introduction," *Journal of Men's Studies* 7, no. 3 (1999); Yen Le Espiritu, "All Men are Not Created Equal: Asian Men in U.S. History," in *Men's Lives*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998).

[14] William M. Liu, "Exploring the Lives of Asian American Men: Racial Identity, Male Role Norms, Gender Role Conflict, and Prejudicial Attitudes," in *College Men and Masculinities: Theory, Research, and Implications for Practice*, ed. Shaun R. Harper and Frank Harris III (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 415-33.

[15] Hee-Kyu Park, "The Silver Dagger in Evangelical Korean American Women's Lives: Exploring the Cultural, Religious and Psychological Hybridity of Korean American Woman's

and others'—become sites of control. As patriarchy distorts the relationality of human beings, preventing women from self-actualization, it too disfigures the humanity of men and their ability to become self-acting agents.[16]

Korean American Men and Masculinity

In interviews the author conducted with fifteen second-generation Korean American men, the underlying issues of masculinity had much to do with social power and self-agency. These men confront a double burden as they pursue their image of masculinity, but as racialized men. On the one hand, socially-constructed gender roles provide images of the ideal man. The author asked the men to bring a symbol that answers the question, "What does it mean to be a man?" A variety of answers pointed to the qualities of strength and provision. That is, they felt a man is someone who exhibits great physical and inner strength and can provide for one's family. Eric[17] brought a hammer to demonstrate its strong and unbending properties:

> It creates an imprint on something else. It exercises its influence through violence, through contact and by molding other objects. It makes other things fit together when things don't naturally fit. It in itself…quite remarkably isn't actually warped, distorted, or changed by its work….The hammer is never itself traumatized or fundamentally changed in its shape or function.

On the other hand, while the majority of these men hold hegemonic masculine images, they face, on account of race, many limitations in achieving this image. Several share how they do not receive in social and professional arenas the validation that they too belong among the tapestry of normative masculinity as do their racial counterparts. Michael, a former Fortune 500 employee, comments about his work experiences:

> I think a Korean-American male working in Corporate America…[has] to prove [himself] even more than a white person, a white male….I don't think they respect you as much if you're Asian….You know I noticed [who the partners and executives were] and it did impact my work life. Sometimes you feel like it's unfair. You're doing just as much as another person is but he or she is getting the promotion and you don't.

Charles, a director at a Fortune 500 company, notes that he works against stereotypes that depict him as the hard worker who doesn't "rock the boat" and is not the "finance guy." He feels he needs to go as far as making jokes about Asians to break the stereotype his colleagues hold so that it helps to make them more comfortable and relaxed around his presence.

With social dating, several men point to how interpersonal relationships offer a social barometer. For these men, dating a white woman socially validates who they are as men in a society that constructs the Asian American male as geeky, impotent, and a "goof." Dating a white woman, who, herself is constructed as the "trophy girlfriend" and the "Holy Grail," affirms

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Premarital Sexuality," in *American Academy of Religion Western Region* (Whittier, CAMarch 27, 2011).

[16] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 178.

[17] All names have been changed.

their ability to have socially overcome these stereotypes.[18] When a white woman passes on "frat boys or other guys she's used to growing up and seeing" in order to date a non-"whitewashed" Asian American man, it raises one's social status.[19] Ken and Charles both mention that dating white women validates how they are seen through society's eyes. While Ken holds the notion that his race inhibits his appeal to white woman, Charles admits that growing up, he would intentionally try and date non-Koreans, most notably white women, as a way to distinguish himself socially both as manly, and as having the ability to do what other Korean men could not.[20]

Engaging and Transforming Men

In order to address issues related to men, the author initiated a men's spiritual formation project five years ago at a Protestant church consisting mostly of second-generation Korean Americans, but inclusive of other ethnicities and races. The impetus of the project lay in the author's observations that many men who are confessing and practicing Christians, can recite the technicalities of the faith, and yet, live with little change in their lives. Faith had become a belief system with minor impact upon their lived realities. As a critical profeminist, the author was further intrigued by the social construction of Korean American men and their disempowerment.

A group of six men, including the author, gathered initially for four weeks to discuss the question, "What does it mean to be a man?" One goal of the project was to not only probe this question, but to do so with pedagogy different from that to which they were accustomed. For these men, participating in a men's small group or accountability group usually consisted of an authority figure telling them how they are to live according to scriptures, or to gather to confess one's sins from the previous week. While these more familiar facets did become a part of the methodology, the overarching goal was to engage men in honest sharing at a vulnerable level while learning how to live more interdependently. The author observed that the men of the church are impacted by disconnectedness, isolation, and a lack of communication and commitment. Yet, when traditional men's groups are formed, there is little to sustain them over the long haul. The author gathers that this is due to an inability to connect faith matters with life matters; Christian formation becomes a banking method of religious education.[21] Therefore, the author decided to use ordinary activities familiar to the men as entry points into their spiritual exploration. For instance, the first night, the group played basketball for an hour, ate dinner, and later discussed the question posed above. The author raised critical reflection through the question, "When John tries to cross you over and make you look bad, what does that do to you? What do you want to do in response?" A robust discussion ensued on being "one-upped" among their peers and "feeling like a man." The second week, the group watched the film, *My Life,* a story about a dying expectant father whose sickness is the result of much anger and bitterness (what Park describes as *han*)[22] that stems from an estranged relationship with his own father.

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[18] Mark Chung Hearn, "Men and Spirituality: A Study on Gender and Spirituality among Second-Generation Korean Americans" (Dissertation, Claremont School of Theology, 2011), 83.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid., 84-86.

[21] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000).

[22] Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

Following the viewing of this movie, several of these men shared that the most unfulfilled relationship in their lives is that with their fathers. This would be affirmed in the majority of the men in the groups to follow.

The initial group of six has grown to a group of thirty, and the four weeks has evolved into twelve-week sessions. The leadership of the group has expanded to a core of five and continues to develop others in their leadership capacities. Commitment and honest sharing have become the core ethos of the group. The men understand that in order to live transformed, they need to be unafraid and unashamed to address any issue in their lives, and need to address these in community.

Considerations in Working with Men

Though this is a brief introduction to the men's project, a few considerations are in order. First, pedagogically, consider using routine life practices that help bring *conscientization* to one's realities.[23] While the hope is to articulate one's own story, how this connects to other's stories, and eventually, to the biblical story,[24] the author finds that in working with men, entry points into issues must not be limited to what has always been. Traditional forms of small groups have ceased to become life-giving for these men.

Second, consider intimacy through processing as a goal to achieve. For these men, who have ideals of the unexpressive man, the author finds that many are unaware of how to be close to others without having to compete against them. Moreover, on account of the social construction and disempowerment that occurs upon these men, the need to prove one's masculinity often comes at the expense of being isolated and unable to engage that which is internally unarticulated.

Third, men need to be validated in their personhood. Much of the healing work occurs when men feel validated in who they are. As Boyd discusses, many of these men end up feeling fragmented and worthless because they are conditioned to compete against each other instead of collaborate with one another.[25]

Similarly, for those who teach in a religious context, particularly one that emphasizes the fall of humanity, consider the psychological implications of homiletical and theological approaches that accentuate the unworthiness of persons. The author has found that a shift to "image of God" language and the Creation narrative in the first chapter of Genesis (i.e., "You are really good!") helps to heal fragile men whose sense of their own selves is damaged.[26]

Lastly, consider initiation, not as a return to earlier the mythopoetic movement, nor in the vein of the modern fraternity, but as a rite of passage into adulthood. For a majority of these men, while they perform as adults such as having to financially care for their aging parent(s) on account of filial piety, they remain largely invalidated in their adulthood by those they view as

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[23] Freire, *Pedagogy*.

[24] Anne Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994); Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980).

[25] Stephen B. Boyd, *The Men We Long to Be: Beyond Lonely Warriors and Desperate Lovers* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997).

[26] W. Sibley Towner, "Clones of God," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 59, no. 4 (2005).

authoritative. Speaking with them as peers, handing them some decision-making power, and giving them adult responsibilities are a few ways to initiate.

While men have largely been privileged in society, it has left many men disconnected and alone. This project is one attempt to address these issues.[27]

Boswell, A. Ayres, and Joan Z. Spade. "Fraternities and Collegiate Rape Culture: Why Are Some Fraternities More Dangerous Places for Women?" In *Men's Lives*, edited by Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner, 182-93. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998.

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[27] Hearn, "Men and Spirituality: A Study on Gender and Spirituality among Second-Generation Korean Americans." See Chapter 5 for a fuller discussion of the men's project.

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