

Editor's Introduction to this Special Volume on the Theme of "Constructing Masculinities"

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Masculinity suggests a range of qualities and characteristics commonly associated with ideal male behaviour. Such characteristics include: strength (mental and physical), self-confidence, courage, etc. It is often linked to virility – which technically means able to reproduce, but is used as well to signify vigour, activity and spirit. Men who do not conform to such norms are described using the binary oppositions of unmanly or even effeminate.

Since the 1980s, feminist critiques of "femininity" as little other than a cultural construct in which traits commonly associated with women were used to control and limit them to an inferior, passive status in society, began to be extended for the same reasons to "masculinity". Both terms are increasingly linked today to the social construct of gender and gendered roles. In his book *Masculinities*, R.W. Connell refers to the imposition of specific ideas about male-appropriate behaviour as "hegemonic masculinity": "Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women." Increasingly, studies have suggested that the internalization of such prescribed "norms" of masculinity are having a detrimental effect on young men, who are feeling pressurized to conform to unrealistic levels of physical fitness, sexual conquests and career success.

A dominant theme in Gender Studies since the 1990s has been that "masculinity is in crisis" (Anthony Clare, *On Men*). Research indicates the increasing marginalization of many young people, particularly socially disadvantaged young men. Changes in employment contexts appear to have had a disproportionate impact on this group's prospects for social mobility. In addition, changing social norms around gender relations, in particular sexuality and family formations, appear to have destabilized long-standing assumptions about masculine identities and behaviours. The role played by social media sites in articulating often unrealistic expectations about men's bodies and sexual practices is linked by many experts to deteriorating mental and physical health. On the other hand, the aggressive, entitled behaviour and sexist attitudes promoted by sports stars and other influential role models perpetuate a brand of hypermasculinity that caricatures traditional male identities and role. There is also a strong sense that while women confronted and challenged their objectification and repression by society as a group (through feminism and other support networks), men do not have the same sense of solidarity nor support structures in place.

The Department of Humanities, in conjunction with The Humanities Research Group, hosted a symposium on the topic of "Constructing Masculinities" in April 2019. This symposium aimed to facilitate an interdisciplinary conversation about contemporary constructions of masculinity, assessing both the continuation of traditional hegemonic models and the challenges to this by newer, more flexible and transformative gender identities. Presentations reflected both on the pressures imposed on men to conform to traditionally accepted signifiers of masculinity and theorized about newly evolving models of male behaviour, both positive and negative. Education emerges as a key weapon in the fight for a more equal world, with several of the case studies directed at the role cultural texts and practices can play in facilitating inclusive, nuanced conversations about sex, gender, sexuality and social roles.

We are also delighted to include three undergraduate dissertations which reflect the excellent research skills and sustained critical perspectives achieved by students within the Department of Humanities.

Works Cited:

Clare, Anthony (2001). *On Men: Masculinity in Crisis*.

Connell, R.W. (2005). *Masculinities*,